The Dark Below

by DarthPeezy

Summary

Izuku must learn his place in a broken and cruel world. He must learn the cost of being a hero. He must learn the cost of changing the world to his own image. In a world divided by factions vying for control, oppressive governments, and sympathetic villains, Izuku must decide his place amongst the chess pieces. He'll have to decide what to make of the broken dreams and shattered faith of an indifferent world. He'll need power to do it and rise above the mire and muck of despair.

Thankfully, he was never quirkless.

Sometimes quirks hide until they are triggered. Izuku tasted death and found it lacking, every flavour bitter and lacking spice. In the moments between death and life, he gazed into the howling abyss and it followed him home. Everything he thought he knew about the world is a lie. There are monsters lurking in the dark below, always waiting and always watching.
They wait patiently, waiting for one to sit upon a throne of crystal madness and eternal suffering. They have waited for aeons and will wait until the end of eternity.

They wait for Izuku Midoriya.

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Notes

My discord server can be found at the following: https://discord.gg/4YvCTYR
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Season I: Descent

Chapters 1 to 12

'Cases of hidden quirks have, in the last forty years, dropped by over sixty percent but this raises the question of why? By their very nature, these quirks require very specific triggers to activate and seventy-five percent of reported cases have been traumatic incidents. It should be noted that twenty-five percent would later go on to be villains as a result of these traumatic incidents. In most cases, it is unethical to test for these Quirks and the method of checking for the vestigial bone structure in the outermost toe is superficial at best. Theory indicates that half of these cases will have a hidden quirk, but that again brings the question of ethical testing...'

—Excerpt from 'The Beginner Scientist's Guide to Quirk Theory.'

Midoriya Izuku staggers down the road, every step almost the one that makes him collapse. His leg muscles quiver and he is certain the muscles in his abdomen have long given up on functioning because his back hurts. Or maybe it hurts because All Might made him discover muscles he hadn't known existed.

Izuku grins. The very idea that All Might is teaching him is enough that he can plough through the pain one more time. How many can say that their hero believes in them? That their hero intends them to be their successor?

The answer is very few.

Certainly, there are family-run agencies where the mantle of the lead hero is passed on to the eldest or, in rarer cases, the most powerful. And in some cases, a hero will groom a successor after years of vetting. But that isn't the same as this.

The sun sets but for Izuku its rays warm his soul and the side of the small hill. He looks over the water, a deep and vivid red from the light of the sun reflecting beautifully off that calm surface. There is nothing that can ruin this day.

"Well look who we fucking have?"

He hears it a moment before he is pulled aside, faster than his instinct to flee kicks in. Any other day he would have noticed. Today, however, he is exhausted physically and mentally.

His heart hammers in his chest as Bakugou Katsuki's eyes sear him with their intensity.

"Kacchan," he whispers and flinches when Kacchan's free hand lights up with his quirk. The smell of nitro-glycerin is strong in the air, cloyingly sweet and triggering memories of pain.

"What kind of shit is this, Deku?" he roars, shoving Izuku back. "I told you I would be the only one and you haven't fucking changed your exam destination. You're a fucking quirkless piece of shit."

He bites his lip. "Y-you don't need a quirk to—"
Kacchan shoves him again, the fire in his eyes rising to a violent crescendo.

"Of course you need a fucking Quirk to be a hero." The explosion startles him and Deku stumbles back, smelling smoke and Kacchan's anger. "Go be a fucking police officer and do some productive shit in your life instead of wasting my time."

He can't react to Kacchan grabbing him by the shirt but he feels the residual heat from the last explosion. "Get it in your fucking head," Kacchan whispers and that terrifies Izuku more than anything else. Kacchan is fire and flash, the loudest voice in a room and the brightest. "Stay out of my way."

Kacchan slams his hand against Izuku's chest. *It hurts*, he realises, as he rolls back. And keeps on rolling. *No, no, no*, he thinks a moment before his skull meets the metal pole at the bottom.

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Darkness has always been a part of human existence. It was the first enemy humanity faced. Predators could be fought and natural disasters fled. But it was the darkness that could never be defeated. There is something primal in a human's fear of the dark. It is not the fear of the monsters hidden in the dark but a fear of all that is unseen.

That fear is irrational. It is the same to fear the sharks in the ocean when you have lived your life without once seeing a coast. There are no monsters for humans to see, even in the dark. The monsters hide further in the dark. If the darkness you see is but the surface of the ocean, then the monsters lurk in the depths of the abyss. Do you understand, Midoriya Izuku? Fear not the darkness for the only monsters are those of your mind.

But the abyss is another matter entirely.

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Izuku wakes with a shout tearing its way past his teeth. His body trembles and his breath comes in short, quick bursts. His hands feel at his face, touching something dry and flaky. His hands shake as he looks upon the flakes of dried blood.

*Kacchan hurt me*, he thinks numbly, a second before he rolls over and expells everything in his stomach. It hurts, and the bile burns his throat. But he doesn’t care. All that matters Is the idea that Kacchan had done that.

*No, it's my fault. I shouldn't have made him angry. He wouldn't hurt me no matter what. Even if he's upset he knows what that black mark would do to his record. It was a mistake. My mistake.*

He smiles at his All Might poster above his desk. Then freezes. A long tear runs across it and continues along the wall. Izuku turns slowly, taking in his room: the walls are all marked with dark substances, some sections torn up as though Mt. Lady's nails have gouged through them; his ceiling is clear save for a hole in the corner from which a dark substance pours out, the liquid travelling in shapes that make perfect right angles—it hurts to look at those; his desk is wrecked and his computer missing.

"Who-wha-whe..." He fails to articulate the thousand thoughts running through his mind. Because this is his room after a few years of neglect and disuse. His mother would never let that happen.

"Mum," he says and then louder, "where are you?"

He stumbles out of his bed. Avoids his lunch on the floor. Steps over the weird black substance.
Izuku opens his door.

There are moments of impossibility in this world, moments that once made will echo out forever even if no one is there to witness them. Every moment in history is but a cascading chain of coincidences that when looked back upon with the perspective of time will make sense. It is easier to believe a great man clawed his way out of obscurity and changed the world through sheer determination than it is to believe that socioeconomic factors had largely formed the man and that those around him those achievements possible.

This is one such moment for Midoriya Izuku. He smells seawater and the cloyingly sweet smell of decay, the scent of something long dead and left to rot under the scorching sun. He feels the stifling heat and air so thick that, for a single moment, he wonders if he can cut through it. Izuku sees a sky on fire, waging a war against itself and clouds of inky blackness.

It is the sound that terrifies him. True silence is impossible—the beating of the heart, the rustle of clothing, and the silent whisper of breath will always make themselves present in silence for those sounds travelled through blood and bone, not through the fickle medium of air. Silence would not be so bad.

The sound is barely above a whisper but louder than a comet crashing into the earth, its sonic boom travelling outwards for dozens of miles before the death and destruction that follows. It grates at his ears and tears at his soul because it is a song he knows down to the marrow in his bones. And he knows if he ever truly hears it, and not merely this echo, he will be torn asunder. It is a song older than life, but it is a song that can end it.

It is the song of finality, of the end of all life. Instinct tells him this. Every atom of his existence confirms this. The primitive and undeveloped lizard-brain tells him to run.

Izuku stumbles and retches bile on the sandy ground. No, no, no, he thinks as he clamps his hands over his ears. But the sound will not stop. I can't, I don't—just stop. Let me die because anything was better than hearing the death of all things.

He scrambles back. Stones in the sand tear through his clothes but he hardly notices as he crosses the threshold of his room. He slams the door shut and sags against the comforting weight of it, a solid fortress wall despite the gouges and flaking paint. It grounds him. And not only because he can no longer hear the song that harkened the end of man.

Just take me home, he pleads, screwing his eyes shut.

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Izuku wakes with a gasp. Cool, fresh air fills lungs that burn and strain as though he has held his breath.

He coughs and gasps. Opens his eyes. Sees blue skies. Cars speed down the street and children laugh loudly. His breath hitches and his throat constricts.

The tears, when they come, run down his face freely. Hiccups rack his chest but Izuku didn't care how he looks, not when the song is gone.

Izuku calms down after a few minutes. He wipes his face and pulls his hand back. His heart freezes. Dark red fluid covers his arm. Gently, he lifts his fingers to his forehead. It stings and when he pulls back he sees blood.

How? He asked and looked around. There are chunks of metal and glass littered on the shattered
ground. It takes him a moment to recognise the shape of a street light from the wires sticking out of the cracked earth. And then he sees the small pool of blood seeping into the deep cracks of the ground.

"There's a very real possibility I'm going mad," Izuku mumbles.

And that would be a lovely hypothesis. It would explain why All Might chose me instead of anyone else. Your personal hero solving your problems is the cheapest kind of fanservice. But It might be the safest option to go with. The other option means I genuinely heard a song that would kill all life if it was heard and One For All is more terrifying that All Might told me.

Or, a small part of Izuku's brain whispers, this is your quirk.

His thoughts grind to a halt.

Kacchan pushed me down and I hit something, hard. I woke up in a place that wasn't the world I know and I heard that terrible song that must never be sung. I wake up and a street lamp has been torn to shreds. There are no witnesses or suspects other than me. The simplest option assuming this is real is that I did this. And the only way any of that could have happened is from a quirk.

My quirk.

Which isn't possible. He had been tested after a Quirk didn't manifest. Izuku has a vestigial toe joint. The logic makes sense.

One For All is a gifted quirk, his traitorous mind whispers. Who says your quirk couldn't have been waiting until now?

But waiting for what?

For Kacchan to ki—

His world goes white for a moment. Izuku blinks away the white world, breathing harshly all the while. There is something there that couldn't be thought.

If I did that, he thinks instead, then I have a quirk.

Izuku stands and retrieves the clean shirt he has in his pack. Slowly he wipes away the blood from his face and holds it there to the open cut. He saddles the bag and walks home slowly in a daze.

He doesn't remember entering his home or taking off his shoes. Izuku hardly hears his mothers worried words or notices walking up the stairs to the bathroom.

There is a face in the mirror, bloody and red-eyed from crying. Unruly green hair framed that face. It looks alien and foreign.

He opens the tap and splashes water on his face. The water runs crimson. Izuku scrubs at his face until only clear water runs. A line of red at his right temple is the only mark he has. The wound is jagged and unlike the straight thin cuts he's come to associate with head injuries. He hopes it doesn't change the colour of his hair.

The door open with a bang. Izuku startles as his mother barged in, concern marking the lines of her face.

"Izuku," she whispers, "you weren't answering and there was so much blood."
"Sorry," he mumbles, "I had a bit of a fall."

She steps forward and pulls the hand touching the still tender wound. "Oh, Izuku, what will I do with you?" Her hand cups his chin and tilts his head, inspecting the injury. "This is going to scar badly."

_I know._

His mother opens a cabinet and rummaged through it with practised efficiency. She pulls out a first-aid kit. "Sit down," she orders and Izuku hops onto the counter. She unzips the bag and removed a bottle alongside some cotton swabs and thick bandages.

She opens the bottle. It smells of the harsh antiseptic he hates.

"Kaa-san," he whines. "Can't we use the other one."

Her gaze quells anything further he had to say. "Good."

It burns when she disinfects the wound but he bears the pain quietly, letting her continue with the bandage. "Change the bandage every day until it's not exposed anymore."

He forces a smile. A weak one from how his mother frowns immediately in response.

"Sorry, my head still hurts a bit."

She nods once. "Eat first then sleep."

He obeys and eats the meal mechanically. Sleep comes easily that night. It isn't pleasant. There are dreams of creatures tearing apart the earth, their very presence driving his mother insane. He wakes twice before resigning himself to a night without sleep.

His alarm startles him awake. Surprised that he managed to fall asleep, Izuku rolls out of bed despite his tiredness. Takes a shower. Changes the bandage. Eats a meal of fruits and energy shakes.

It doesn't take long for him to reach the beach. All Might isn't there yet, and so he stretches thoroughly. He takes a sip of water when he is done and waits patiently.

"Young Midoriya," All Might croaks. Izuku startles, turning quickly to face his teacher, his form deflated and skinny. "Have you finished preparing?"

Izuku nods and smiles. "Already done."

"Good, now..." All Might stopped, staring at a spot on Izuku's head. "How did you get that?"

He swallows. What is he meant to tell All Might? _I think I have a Quirk but I also think I might be going crazy. Also, I think Kacchan might have ki_—His mind blanks out for a second.

"I fell and hit my head on a pole," he says, not lying. "I wasn't paying too much attention."

His teacher hums before nodding. "Be more careful, Young Midoriya. Injuries outside training can lead to much worse injuries here."

Izuku tilts his head. "That's why you're here, isn't it? I mean, most of these things look heavier than me."
"Perceptive as ever."

By midday, Izuku is almost dead on his feet. When All Might calls for an end to training, Izuku crumbles to the ground where he's standing. The sand is warm and he can ignore the uncomfortable feeling of sand clinging to places it is never meant to be. He hears feet approaching and opens his eyes to All Might who throws a bottle to him. Izuku opens it and drinks deeply without getting up.

"I suppose you've earned a rest," All Might says, lowering himself to the ground and sitting beside Izuku. "Well, you can ask me whatever you like before I have to go."

Izuku nods against the sand. He knew he would regret that when he cleaned up but right now he was too tired to care. "Are there quirks that move people different places?"

"That sounds like a form of warp quirk," All Might says. Izuku looks to the hero who continues, "warp quirks are probably the rarest type of quirk compared to mutations which are much more common. Have you heard of Master Railroad?"

Izuku frowns. "I think he was a New Age hero."

"And what do you know of the New Hero Age?"

It doesn't bother Izuku much to answer. He likes history and this is history being taught by his hero. "That was right after the first quirks started appearing and wars broke out across the world led by people with very powerful quirks like Stormwind and Titan. The New Heroes were a group of peacekeepers working with the UN that developed Quirks and were placed in a specialised combat unit to face the warlords. After they managed to defeat them, the disbanded and went to act as policing units against villains in their home countries, forming the model for future heroes."

"A decent summary," All Might replies. "Master Railroad was one of the original members of the New Heroes. Based on archived records, his warp quirk manifested as a train that took him—and anyone with him—to any place on earth. What makes his quirk truly unique is that anyone who travelled through it said they travelled through a void."

His mind stills. A void. Nothingness. The end of all things. It resonates with him because he knows, in the same way a mother always knows their child, that a void is the word he is missing. It is the absence of light and love and hope. It requires no context for it destroyed all context.

"But his quirk wasn't like the norm?" Izuku says quickly.

He feels more than saw All Might shift. "What exactly is the norm for a quirk, Young Midoriya? One For All is neither an emission nor a transformation quirk and whilst it can change my appearance by activating it, it is not a mutant quirk type. And I very much doubt that you will change appearance when you finally inherit One For All."

Izuku frowns. "Why would you think that?"

Predicting a quirk is nearly impossible, Izuku thinks, even if it's a matter of quirks being passed down through familial lines. Usually, they express some variation even if they are similar. Kacchan quirk produces nitro-glycerine, a variation of his mother glycerine Quirk. And even then it could have been completely unrelated. Kaa-san's quirk is different from her parents. Predicting a new quirk would be impossible unless there was a precedent for it. Unless someone who had One For All before didn't express the quirk that way.

A pained cough startles him and he looked to All Might who's hand covers his mouth. Izuku can see the red flecks on that too thin hand with fingers almost too gaunt.
"You truly terrify me, Young Midoriya."

"Eh," he chokes out, confused.

"Guessing from one simple statement that my predecessor used One For All differently."

Izuku blinks. "I said that out loud, didn't I?" All Might nods. "Why can't I just shut my stupid mouth? It's always getting me in trouble and Kacchan always tells me to stop mumbling so much —"

"Izuku." That stops him dead. All Might had never called him by his first name. "Calm yourself. The world will not end because you think out loud. Better to think and question out loud than to wallow in ignorance silently. Do not apologise for your intelligence."

He would have said something else but for a shrill ringing that distracts them both. All Might looks down to his right pocket and removes his phone. He smiles at Izuku, apologetic. "It seems I must return to my duties."

In a second the All Might that he has admired—but never known, not really, and he will never choose this hero over the man that spends time with him—as a youth appears in place of his emaciated teacher.

"Have faith, Young Midoriya."

Chapter End Notes

That's all from me for now. Thank you for reading this. If you enjoyed the story leave a kudos and if you have any questions just leave a comment below. But know that all of that is unnecessary, and as always your readership is quite enough for me. Cheers.
'The appearance of All Might as a symbol of justice ushered in a new era of peace amongst the citizenry. All Might is the fabled superman of this modern era, a man with uncompromising morals and the strength to uphold those ideals. We must be thankful that he is truly a man of honour who will not use his powers to enforce his personal ethics upon the citizenry as a benevolent overlord...'

-Excerpt from 'Questioning the Modern Age of Heroes,' by Andile Sithole.

Izuku spends the next day training at the beach. He doesn’t move anything. Instead, All Might has him swim partway through the inlet and back to the beach, then up the stairs and down again. He only stops once his limbs seize out in the water and All Might rescues him from drowning.

He coughs water out of his lungs, doing his best to ignore the burning sensation in his throat and nostrils. A gaunt hand keeps him steady.

"Forgive me, my boy," All Might says. "It seems I will have to change all swimming courses to indoor pools."

Izuku agrees completely. The wind had been picking up steadily since the morning and the still water had soon become choppy with waves. A particularly violent series of waves had sent Izuku below the surface. It was only All Might diving in that has stopped him from dying.

* Dying again, a part of his mind whispers.

His eyes water badly and he coughs again. Izuku collapses on the ground and breathes out harshly. And then inhales deeply. He repeats the exercise until he calms down enough to talk.

"Good. Keeping calm is always important for a hero."

Izuku looks to his hero.

"Ononoki Hinata disagreed," Izuku says, not snidely. "She argued that following the letter of the law was the most important trait for a hero to have and sublimating one's ego for the sake of following the people's laws."

All Might tilts his head to the side. "I haven't read her work in quite a while, but I do remember some of my arguments against her. Tell me, Young Midoriya, do you believe in her works?"

"I think her argument has validity. Without the law heroes enforce their own brand of morality, don't they? And whilst I do think I would trust you if you were held accountable only to yourself, I'm not certain I'd like to live in a world where Best Jeanist had total power."

"He's the number four hero."
"And he deserves to be there," Izuku says strongly, "but I don't think I could live up to his rigid standards of comportment. Have you seen my hair? There's no helping this."

All Might chuckles, ruffling his damp hair. "I suppose he can be a bit extreme in that regard."

"And that's how conformist states start. You must aspire to one ideal or else. It starts with the head of state decrying certain things and soon enough your neighbours are lynching you for being different. I would hope he would never do that, but can you say you've never had days where you wanted people to have the same moral character as you?"

All Might says nothing to that, instead staring at Izuku. It takes him a moment to realise why. He has just criticised All Might and taken a knife to his personal ethics. Izuku swallows.

"I didn't mean..." He trails off at All Might's hand, raised in the universal gesture of 'stop'.

"You are right, Young Midoriya. Don't look so shocked. There are days where I find the system convoluted and unnecessary. Days where the rules and regulations allow monsters to walk free are the ones where I most want to tear down the system and build it again." All Might smiles and it looks so shallow on that thin form.

"But I don't because I have faith in people. My issue with Ononoki Hinata is that she completely disregards compassion and human decency barring her twilight work. Under her view, we would be nothing but drones enforcing the word of the law, and not its spirit. So many are imprisoned because their quirk manifested and they harmed another, but I disagree with this practice. It does nothing but breed resentment to the system and in turn create more villains."

"But you're arguing that we should do what we believe is right regardless of the consequences."

"In a way, my words could be taken like that," All Might says. "But I believe more that we should do what is right even should the consequences be dangerous to oneself. All it takes for injustice to occur is to stand aside and hope another will deal with it."

"But not everyone has the power to save others."

"And did you not try to save your friend when you had no powers yourself. Can you espouse Hinata's argument in the face of your own actions without being a hypocrite." Izuku looks away. "Hold your head high, Young Midoriya. It is good that you question your own actions. I wonder often if I would have left your friend to his fate if not for your intervention. What you did that day, you did out of compassion and selflessness. And whilst Kamui Woods reprimanded your actions, it was that same tenacity that made you worthy of being my successor."

All Might throws him the towel on his shoulder. "Continue to question, Young Midoriya. Ask me as much as you would. As your teacher, it is my duty to see you mature."

And that, is the end of that particular line of inquiry. His hero guides him through a series of stretches before his muscles cramp and reminds him to do them after waking and before sleeping each day no matter what. Izuku has no issue with that.

He spends the rest of the afternoon, long after All Might is gone, carrying smaller items to a pile near the road for when the truck comes tomorrow. The pile he is dealing with is tall but there’s just enough mass there that it looks steady. Hopefully. He digs through and reaches for some loose pipes, grabbing at them. The first two come out easily and he throws them to the side. The last, though, requires him to prop his legs against what might have generously been called a car and pull with every ounce of strength his fledgling body has.
It came free with a metallic pop and Izuku stumbles onto the sand, falling flat on his back. He sighs and raises the metal pipe high to look at it.

And the fridge falling down the pile. "Fu—"

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Do the creatures whose skin you clothe yourself with understand their true nature? We have wondered this question often. They all harbour one form yet it is impossible to generalise the creatures. The abyss is constant, steady, and chaotic. It mirrors this plane that you choose to exist within, changing forms the closer to light that it comes.

Your humans are not steady and their powers are erratic at best, following neither rhyme nor reason. Human strengths rarely pass down by genetic lineage. I wonder then, what will become of this abyss now that you have returned.

Wake up, Izuku Midoriya, and come home to your people.

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His curse is loud and prolific when he wakes. Izuku gasps when he is done, looking around and finding himself in his room. No, not my room, he thinks, taking in the hole dripping black sludge from the ceiling and the dark smears across the walls.

"This again," he mumbles softly as he stands, avoiding the weird liquid travelling at strange angles. "I'm very likely not hallucinating this. There was no reason for me to have that hallucination the first time and no reason for it to repeat.

He swallows and takes a deep breath.

"Hypothesis one: This is a long-form nightmare. The only issue with that is there is no way of proving this is but a dream I'm experiencing. Ignore that one. Hypothesis two: I'm insane but I again can't prove that. Hypothesis three: I have some form of warp quirk that only activates when I've been injured severely."

Or die, a voice in his mind whispers but Izuku ignores it because why on earth would a quirk develop that brings you back from the dead? It makes no sense and there is no precedent for it. Regeneration, yes, but coming back from the dead is a complete reversal of causality.

But that makes him think of Regression who could return plant life to a state of health no matter how far gone it is. The study conducted on his powers by the Tokyo Institute of Technology and Harvard University had concluded it to be a form of limited reversal of causality. His power is the only reason South America still has healthy jungles, especially after Titan's conquest and defeat, and why wood products have seen a resurgence in popularity.

It is probably why Kamui Woods is so popular in Brazil. That and the four-year stint he had spent there working with their state-sanctioned hero team in the final years of the third war against drugs following the repeal on recreational drugs in Canada six years ago.

Izuku shakes his head and pulls away from those tangential thoughts. They aren't relevant at this moment. He walks to his window and pulls back the curtain.

And freezes.

Because as far as he can tell he is looking at clouds, thick and stormy and pregnant with acid rain.
A long platform of darkness engulfs everything below that he can see. He rubs at his eyes and pokes his head out of the window. He can breathe normally—*which considering the altitude is impossible and why did I think it was a good idea to stick my head out?*—and looks down.

It takes him almost a moment to realise the darkness isn't uniform. It writhes and roils, almost like a snake pit but not because calling it that implied normality. Realism. Sanity even. And nothing that hurts so much to look at can be normal.

The ground lurches. Izuku grabs hold of the window sill as the room tilts slowly, almost as inevitable as a lava flow. He can't hear his ragged breathing over the blood rushing through his head as his room turns. He closes his eyes and curses every bad word he has ever heard Kacchan say because this is madness.

He loses his grip and falls to the ceiling, bracing for everything to hit him. Except nothing does. Hesitantly, he opens his eyes. Izuku's crouched on the ceiling—ground now because gravity says this is down—but he is the only thing that has moved. His bed and desk are still in the same position and even the stream of dark liquid falls upwards.

Izuku has maybe a second to pay attention to this before the sensation of being watched consumes his senses. He turns, slowly, because a part of him knows, just knows that if he looks he will never be able to unsee what is coming.

He looks.

It is an eye in the same way describing lava as hot is accurate. It is true but it can't describe the absolute intensity. Lava isn't simply hot, it burns hot enough to melt through rock and metal. You can't compare a matchstick to a volcano anymore than you can compare a nuclear explosion to the sun. Nor can you compare the giant orb that deigns to pay attention to Izuku, to something so mundane as a simple eye.

It is green at the same time that it is yellow and blue and the more he looks the more colours he sees and some aren't natural, they aren't colours he is supposed to be able to see and there is ultraviolet streaking by and there is gamma radiation in starburst fractals and there are things that go past simple electromagnetism and into realms science has no words for and the more he looks the more he sees within the eye within the eye ad infinitum that shows him everything and a part of his mind is breaking under the strain and the lizard brain screams at him to run but the rest is staring at this moment of impossibility but the knee-jerk reaction that comes from his spine forces his arm to move and shut the curtains and

Izuku falls to the ground—*ceiling, no, save all higher thought for later*—and violently expels everything in his stomach, which falls down before falling up to the spot right above his head.

He wipes away the stream of tears. Stares at his blood-soaked sleeve. Forces down the rising panic because bleeding from the eyes is nothing compared to that nightmare creature. In the back of his mind, he knows he is likely having a panic attack, but he doesn't care. What was a mere mortal panic attack to a thing that should not be.

He stumbles to his feet and lurches drunkenly to the door. Even if he is in the highest parts of the atmosphere, the fall to the ground—and is there a ground in this place? —is preferable to riding on what he assumes to be the back of a nightmare creature. Izuku shut his eyes tight and slams through
the door.

And falls.

*Maybe this wasn't the best idea, Izuku* thinks a moment before landing.

It doesn't hurt. And feels oddly familiar. He opens his eyes to sand. Purple sand. He stares at it before raking his fingers along its surface. It feels like sand. He lets the sand in his hand trickle to the ground. *It behaves like sand.* But the more he looks the more he sees how it reflects the light, granting it an almost red glow.

He looks towards the source of light. It is a sun or whatever passes for a sun here. It is blood red and not bright enough to cast the world in anything brighter than the early hours of twilight. He blinks. Looks again. Sees the smaller suns orbiting the larger one as though they are electrons to the large sun's nucleus.

Izuku stands and brushes off the odd crystal sand from his clothes. He notices the pier extending deep across the ocean, far further than any pier has a right to. It looks familiar. *No,* he thinks as dread mounts in his very pores and he turns. There are piles of glowing shells and he knows the patterns those mounds form, has spent hours tracing the most efficient route to remove trash from the beach.

He runs through the piles of shells, avoiding the long translucent tendrils reach out to him. He scans every hidden place until he makes it to the other side. All Might isn't here. It calms him because this nightmare belongs to him alone.

And that thought almost brings him to his knees.

No one wants to truly be alone. No one wants to be a stranger in a truly strange land where nothing makes sense and he has to pay specific attention to forget—never ignore for that brings attention to —the song that must never be sung for life to continue. How barren did a life have to be to yearn for true isolation? And maybe that was why Izuku can stare at the beached whales—

*Wait, what?* Izuku thinks before truly focusing on the large mounds of rotting flesh on the beach. They are whales, he knows because he can tell what a humpback whale looked like in his sleep. Except these aren't the smooth-skinned creatures he knows. These things are bloated, their flesh torn to shreds in the places where the gases within them have forced their way out. The lack of stench from dozens of rotting whales worries him in a peripheral sort of way. There are other, more pertinent things to worry over.

Such as the contractions racking the whale closest to him. Its mass stretches and squeezes and—*oh lord*—that is a head poking out of the larger whale in a sick parody of birth. The calf is drenched in blood and the fluids of a rotting womb as it pushes out of its progenitor—because calling it a mother implies there is something natural about this—to flop helplessly on the ground beside it. It makes a crooning sound...

No, the progenitor makes that sound. The same progenitor that turns a massive head to stare at Izuku. There is nothing in that gaze he can read. It might be malice or empathy or maybe a feeling Izuku has no words for. It may be a creature saying 'I am and you are' but that is all conjecture running through the higher thought processes of a human brain whilst the more basic instincts have already sent Izuku running in blind panic anywhere away from those monstrosities.

He speeds up the stairs and past the cracked and ruined road. A glance upward reveals a forest he knows isn't supposed to be there. He doesn't particularly care. Dead creatures are not meant to give
birth. So, he runs.

Izuku curses, skids to a halt because somewhere between running from the beach and entering the forest he has lost a portion of his life. He checks his watch. About an hour since All Might left. And it has hardly taken more than ten minutes to run from the beach.

It is dark, not pitch black, but there are gradations in the shadows that stand out starkly to his senses. And he doesn't want to know why he can instantly tell there are thirty-two shades of shadow in a or why some of the shadows are moving.

Izuku's thought processes slam to a halt. He is in a forest of trees not any larger than ones he had seen before. There are dark shapes—not shadows for they cast none and he shoves that thought down with the rest of the worrying ones—flitting in the tree branches. But why does it feel like something large is moving?

He focuses on the odd spot, seeing only a tree and its roots dragging against the ground.

Oh, he thought, that tree's sinking. Actually, now that I have a moment to look and not scream my head off quite a few of the trees are moving. Is this what they call shock? Or am I too numb to feel any shock? Wait, no, that's panic and whilst I still have a moment of calm I should face that pocket of shadow that feels familiar.

His legs spring into motion. Izuku ducks beneath swiping claws and low branches jumps over roots that might have tripped him. There, that patch of shadow in an alcove is different, safe, and Izuku slides right through it and fell.

He lands on a bed. Izuku takes in his room, not daring to look at the window. Take me home, he pleads as he walked to the door. Take me home. Please, just take me back home.

Izuku opens the door.

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His throat is dry. The sun sears his eyelids. Sand clings to his limbs uncomfortably.

Izuku opens his eyes slowly and sees a blue sky. Looking further, he sees the sun setting, casting the world in vibrant and warm—but more importantly, natural—reds and oranges. Yellow sand coats one arm. He sighs, and stands, wiping down the gritty material off his body. The only thing wrong with the sun is that it hasn't set enough. A quick glance at his watch confirms that guess.

He pauses at the sight of a blood smear on the sand, vaguely the size of a human body and still damp. Izuku gulps, noticing the dryness in his throat all the more. Around that smear of blood are bits and pieces of rusted metal all torn to shreds and littered carelessly on the beach. Sticking out of the sand and standing erect is a stainless-steel handle. A fridge handle.

Izuku feels his gorge rise because he knows, just fucking knows exactly where that handle came from. He knows exactly what those pieces of rusted and flaking metal would have been were they still whole. There are things Izuku never wants to admit out loud. He never wants to admit his fear that All Might is stringing him along in some perverse joke or maybe that he will never be worthy of All Might's power.

But this, this is one thing he has to admit.

"I died," Izuku whispers, "and I came back. A fridge crushed me. And yesterday, and yesterday Kac—"
No! There are still things he can't admit. "Yesterday I cracked my skull on a pole."

The sound that escapes his lips can hardly be called human. In some ways, it is more horrifying than the creatures that he has seen because this was him, this is a sound simply from understanding a truth so perverse and fundamental that it encompasses his entire being. The keening wail of one mourning a death is similar to the sound Izuku made. Except, it can never match the despair that laces Izuku's heart and soul.

Because who can stand over the place they died and mourn.

It could have been hours or seconds before Izuku falls silent. In this barren place where the only company are silent pillars of discarded memories, uncaring of the grief of a mortal child, —and how accurate could that description be for one who has walked outside the mortal coil unscathed—time is an object with no meaning, a transitory illusion made manifest only by the acknowledgement of an observer. Without one to watch the sand trickle through the hourglass, one moment will always stretch out into infinity with neither regard nor interest for those trapped within its embrace.

Izuku shuts off the part of his mind that thinks too much, locking it tight with the long overdue panic attack and a thousand feelings of horror and revulsion. Calmly, he walks to his bag and retrieves a bottle of water and returns to the place he died—no, that required thought and thinking will only crush him. It is easy to pour it over the red patch. He watches the sand greedily suck the moisture. And some of the red.

Three trips to the sea and back are all it takes till the red has vanished beneath the mud. He smiles. Then pauses. No, hiding this sort of evidence was not something worth smiling about. Izuku shoulders his bag and makes the long trip home, carefully keeping his mind blank of the events of the last two days.

He greets his mother. Eats with her. Takes a shower.

When he is certain his mother is asleep, Izuku switches on the light, boots up his PC for the illumination it will provide and flicks on a lamp. He collapses onto his bed and places a pillow over his mouth. Slowly, he unlocks the vault keeping all of his pent-up emotions, but the moment one escapes the rest followed suit with no regard for his feelings.

It is a long time before his screams pass into sobs. A longer time still before exhaustion took him.

Chapter End Notes

That's all from me for now. Thank you for reading this. If you enjoyed the story leave a kudos and if you have any questions just leave a comment below. But know that all of that is unnecessary, and as always your readership is quite enough for me. Cheers.
Form and Technique

Chapter Notes

I said it would be out Friday but I had it done early. So I technically lied.

And to everyone who follows this story, has commented, or left kudos, ya'll the best. Please enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

'For every lost battle, there is only one reason behind it: a lack of sufficient knowledge. Know your enemy. Know his strengths, be it tactical awareness or a powerful Quirk. Know his weaknesses, be it a fear of spiders or a lack of skill. The enemy you know is an enemy whose powers are easier to counter. Overwhelming strength overpowers skill in every engagement but overwhelming knowledge and appropriate use of that knowledge defeat even raw skill and strength.'

—Excerpt from the recovered 'Tenets of Combat' likely authored by an underground hero or vigilante

Izuku dreads every second of the next morning from the moment he awakes from his slumber, disturbed by nightmarish visions of creatures that defy mortal laws of biology. As he showers, he sees eyes that gazed past infinity, found the outer edges of existence pitiful, and returned to indifference. They follow him as he scrubs raw his skin long past the memory of gamma radiation streaking by in never-ending fractal patterns, their lines forming geodesic routes to the primordial origin of entropy where the arrow of time first formed and forced an incalculable point of mass-energy to expand outwardly in an inevitable death march of the final heat death of all that existed.

He changes and eats with the memory of corpses still moving, their bloated masses perverting the cycle of life and birth to bring forth a dead creature from a long-dead organism. Izuku doesn't want to think of how that calf could have survived—not live, never live—through such a creation. There would have been no nutrients to feed on. Unless it had fed on the rotting form of its progenitor as a carrion eater. But then, what sort of creature would come back from death to sing to its child likely long dead as well?

No, that makes it too sympathetic. It is a horror that should never under any circumstances be exposed to the world he lives in.

How different, am I? Izuku wonders. I died and returned. Does the fact that my body isn't rotting enough to make me any less a monster?

The thought stills him in the process of tying the last knot in his laces. Only monsters came back from the dead. He stands slowly and forced back the tears because anything would be better than this power.

I can't be a zombie, Izuku thinks, because I still have a heartbeat. Definitely not a vampire or anything like that. He removed his phone and typed a quick query. The first result is enough.

Revenant.
A ghost or corpse brought from the dead to haunt the living. How far removed is Izuku from that? Types of ghosts can be corporeal. And maybe his corpse came back perfectly but it didn't change that it had been a corpse twice in a single weekend. Once when the fridge had crushed him. The other when his head had cracked open.

*Kacchan*, he thinks suddenly, and wonders why. *Not important right now.*

Izuku sighs, trying to shake the thoughts away. It doesn't matter. So long as he didn't die again it could all be a hallucination brought on by overwork. There was no proof of it other than his memories of impossible creatures and the song that will devour all mortals in worship, and those could be passed off as part of it.

*You know it's real*, a part of Izuku whispers. He ignores that voice.

His muscles are still strained. With time, he will be able to continue his exercises in the morning but until then All Might had encouraged he not wake up early to train.

Izuku takes the train to school. The repetitive clack-clack of the train tracks and the absolute mundanity of salarymen glued to their phones, delinquents with neon hair and more piercings than skin, and the occasional laughs from the two ladies across from him help lull him into a light sleep. It is simple, then, to let his mind numb even after he has disembarked from the train and joined his classmates.

He doesn't glance in Kacchan's direction, afraid that it would be the spark that sets off the wildfire. Even years after they fell out he can tell what mood Kacchan is in based on the type of anger in his voice as he shouts one of his lackeys into submission: the quick and intense explosion was usually amusement or mild irritation; that long drawn out inferno being genuine anger when someone spilt a glass of water on Kacchan's shoes. There, those bright embers are calm—or what passes for calm—thoughts or distraction by a relatively simple task the teacher had set: analysing the impact on poverty from the heroics industry. The streak of passion like a comet in the night's sky is a genuine shock. But the agitated sea of viscous magma has Izuku rushing to pack his items in his bag.

Because the last time he saw that rage-hate-envy mix, he discovered his Quirk.

He ducks his head low and leaves with the flow of students, joining the sea of bodies in the hallway outside. He sticks closer to the groups of girls. Less chance of Kacchan starting something with that group.

Kacchan's anger is almost physical in its intensity. Izuku flinches every time he feels those molten pits land on his back. Only once he has left the school and is back on the train did he let his heart rate drop from pounding to merely erratic.

At home, Izuku changes into his running gear and decides that, yes, he needed a new pair of running shoes. He eats an apple and mixes a protein shake before heading out.

All Might waits for him on the road overlooking the beach. Izuku focuses on his thin teacher, not letting his eyes roam to where he knows there should have been beached whales. He rakes his eyes over the scooter All Might leans against.

"Good afternoon, my boy," All Might greets and stands. He cracks his back in one fluid pop that left Izuku wincing. "How was school?"

It floors Izuku, as it always does, that All Might genuinely cares. Even his mother asked more out of perfunctory greeting than genuine interest more often than not. She cared when he came home
bruised and bleeding, yes, but unless his life was in danger she wasn't too interested in how he spent his afternoons.

So Izuku opens up to the only adult who cares. "It was a bit boring for most of the day." A technical truth because Kacchan is always angry, and only sometimes furious. "But our history teacher had us discussing the impact of heroics on the cycle of poverty."

"Oh," All Might says, leaning forward slightly. "And did your teacher use Saruhiko Ando or Dylan Salvatore as resource material?"

Izuku knows on a purely rational level that All Might is smart. He had figured out the weakness of the Sludge Villain in seconds whilst Izuku had faltered. And yet he still found it difficult to reconcile the Symbol of Justice with this quiet, brilliant and frail man.

"Both, actually, though I'm not certain if I like Salvatore's stance. He just seems so dejected with the world? He expects perfection from heroes and argues their very presence invites challenges to their strength in the form of villains."

"Salvatore did commit suicide a few years later," All Might says as he mounted his scooter. "Now, time to get to work."

Izuku runs at the pace All Might sets, letting the repetition of step-breath-step distract him. It isn't a hard run by any stretch, not when All Might set the pace at one Izuku could follow easily. Eventually, though, the burning in his legs catches up to him.

"How do," Izuku says between breaths, "other heroes fight?"

It is a stupid question, Izuku knew, but he still needs to breathe. "What do you mean?" All Might asks, not slowing down.

"You and Endeavour have"—He pauses to take a deep breath and sprint up the incline—"combat Quirks. But what about heroes without them?"

All Might doesn't respond until they are at the bottom of the small hill and pulls over to the side. He motions to the grass. Izuku sighs but lowers himself and performs press-ups. All Might, he has learnt, might entertain his questions but not to the detriment of his training.

"What you're doing now." Izuku cranes his neck up to see All Might. "Training. UA will teach you the fundamentals but the agency you join will help you specialise further."

"Still," Izuku says going down, "being able to summon snakes that extend twenty metres is great but guns are effective further."

"True, my boy, but no trained hero would let a gunman get a line of sight on them. We all go through simulations to deal with those scenarios. And even then, we train our abilities to discover applications we were unaware of."

"And you went through the same?"

All Might chuckles deeply. "I was not born skilled, Izuku. I studied for years as a boxer even after receiving One For All."

"Wouldn't it make sense for me to learn how to fight as well? If I know how to throw a punch now, won't it be better than trying to learn alongside figuring out One For All?"
"You," All Might trails off. "You make a valid point. Come, let us finish this run before you go home."

Izuku stands. Rolls his shoulders. Shakes out his legs and runs.

*****

He wakes up in the dark, blinking in confusion. Looking to the side, he sees that the alarm has yet to ring. Only by a few minutes, yes, but still odd. He shrugs. That just meant a few more minutes in the shower.

Making sure not to wake his mother, he walks to the bathroom and checks his wound. It is healing nicely though it will scar. He cleans it, wincing with every prod before taking a shower.

School is school, no more interesting than average but somehow more stressful. Kaachan doesn’t glance at Izuku but that disinterest is almost worse than his anger. Almost. It leaves him tense, nervous the same way a mouse would be under a hawk’s gaze. Because Kaachan isn’t ever quiet. So maybe Izuku does run out the moment the last bell rang but no one is watching to call him out on it.

He’s at the beach early as usual and It is not empty. It takes him a moment to notice the man crouched on a precarious stack of appliances and dozing from what he can tell. The man's dark hair is one step away from impossible and that black jacket open at the front is completely impractical but Izuku would be lying if he thought the tiger skin wrap around his waist is anything less than cool.

Izuku isn’t sure what to say to the man. He’s dozing if the loud snores are any indication, and Izuku doesn’t want to startle him and be responsible for the man falling.

So, he just stands there, awkwardly, nervously, until All Might comes looking like a hero and not a gaunt, sickly man. “Midoriya, my boy,” the man greeted and then looked up to the strange man. “I see you’ve met Jin Mo-Ri.”

The man yawns and stands, revealing his bare midriff and Izuku wonders if abs like that were possible for humans. “He’s just been staring at me for the last few minutes,” Jin Mo-Ri says. “Good instinct trying not to startle me.”

Jin Mo-Ri flips and lands gracefully. He’s not particularly tall, if anything you might consider him short. But his eyes are what truly set him apart because Izuku has never seen anyone with eyes that practically glow red or have a bright cross where the pupil should be. He doesn’t bother wondering how the man deals with changes in light intensity because those eyes clearly work on the power of bullshit.

“Hi,” Izuku says warily, looking to All Might for guidance. The man simply nods. “My name’s Izuku.”

The man considers Izuku for a moment and nods. “I will teach you to fight for Yagi cannot,” he says simply.


All Might splutters but the man simply stares at him in what might be shock or annoyance. “Ask your teacher later. For now, I want you to punch me. Don’t look shocked and just do it.”

Izuku glances to All Might once more. Sees his hero nod. Throws a punch.
His fist stops in the palm of Jin’s hand, not budging an inch. His wrist hurts from the sudden stop. “Other hand this time.” He does so.


The man falls silent and steps back, looking to All Might. “How long have you been training him?”

“Two weeks now.”

“And you’ve failed to teach him how to throw a straight punch,” he accuses harshly. All Might winces. “Your teaching skills haven’t improved.”

Izuku has never seen his hero wilt like that, not against villains or vicious journalists and he’s not certain which group is crueller.

Jin turns back to face Izuku. “You will kick now.” He does so nearly a dozen times before Jin is satisfied. Izuku breathes deeply, trying not to look weak before this man who All Might so obviously respects.

"Your form is atrocious in different ways. Good. It means you've never taught yourself bad habits. I will not teach you to box as I taught All Might. Instead, I shall teach you Renewal Taekwondo." He crouches and like this Izuku is looking down on him as he smiles. “I designed it specifically for people with strengthening Quirks or those whose quirks increase over time, like One For All.”

Izuku stills at how casually the man says Izuku’s greatest secret. He looks to All Might who says, “Later.”

Jin Mo-Ri snorts. “I see he’s told you nothing about me. No matter. I was once called Jaecheondaesong but I very much doubt that name will mean anything to you. Two days a week I teach you form and technique, and All Might shall make you strong. Now, prepare yourself.”

The training is harsh, harsher than anything All Mighty had put him through. Jin Mo-Ri is not a complicated man and hardly expects perfection on Izuku’s first try or even his hundredth. He simply asks that Izuku try and he isn’t about to fail at that. He never truly knew how to throw a punch before so Jin Mo-Ri shows him a straight punch and forces him to practice until the muscles in his arms cramp. And then he shows him two basic stances and forces him to flow between each until his legs quiver and he simply wants to pass out and die.

He survives and lies on the ground, breathing harshly long after Jin Mo-Ri has said his goodbyes and left All Might a warning to put more effort into teaching and less in heroics.

All Might hands him a bottle of water and Izuku takes it gratefully. He very almost gives up halfway to his lips.

“Yagi,” All Might says, “that’s me.” Izuku quirks a brow. “My name. Toshinori Yagi. I forget sometimes that All Might isn’t my name. I’m sorry for not telling you.”

Izuku shrugs. “It’s fine? I mean, I never asked so you can’t really be held responsible for that.”

“Giving one’s name is only polite.”

“And you gave me your secret. I think that counts for more.” Izuku sits up. “Who was that?”
“Jin Mo-Ri,” All Might says as if that’s all the answer needed. “He taught me and many other heroes throughout the decades.”

Izuku blinks. “He barely looks older than twenty and that’s a stretch,” he says quickly. “What quirk keeps you alive that long?”

“All Might says sombrely, looking away for a moment. “Jaecheondaesong was one of the first heroes, young Midoriya, though he’s taken great pains to be forgotten in the modern age. He along with the Six freed Korea in what is known as the War Against Heaven.”

“I’ve never heard of that battle,” he says, “or the Six.”

All Might huffs. “They might as well be folktales now. Ultimately, none of this matters. Jin Mo-Ri will teach you and that is all you need to know.”

Izuku doesn’t like that answer. But he is also doesn’t press the issue any further.

He heads home and finds his mother almost done with dinner. Izuku greets her, smiling, and is up the stairs before she can reply. He sees tired eyes in the mirror as he cleans the wound. The shower helps to relieve some of the stress of the day and soothes the tiniest bit of pain.

Dinner is a quiet affair with Izuku too tired to initiate conversation. He knows his mother wants to say something, maybe a reminder to throw out the trash tomorrow. The plate is a few bites to being empty before she says anything.

“You always come home tired,” his mother says simply.

He considers how much of the truth to tell his mother. “I’m just training to get into UA,” he says because that isn’t a lie. Perhaps not the whole truth but more than enough.

She smiles sadly. “Izuku, you know I’m proud of you no matter what you do.”

“Except you don’t think I can get into UA.” Izuku stands and takes his plate. “Thanks for dinner, kaa-san.”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” his mother says as he’s placing the plat in the sink. “I just want to see you happy.”

Izuku’s smile is just as sad. “Then have a bit of faith in me.”

It might be cruel to leave it at that but Izuku is in his bedroom long before his mother replies. He leaves a single lamp on and crawls into bed, covering his face with a pillow. He refuses to cry, absolutely refuses to act like a child. So no, those aren’t tears staining his pillow.

He loses track of how long he’s like that but eventually, his chest stops hurting and his eyes stop burning. It becomes easier to simply lose track of time and let his mind still. It is peaceful just to let his mind explore outward, expanding further and further. He passively follows the arcs of shadows and their gradients.

Izuku feels like he is sinking and that forces him awake. He sees something dark writhing on his bed and rolls off quickly, putting as much distance from what looks like tar boiling on his bed. Instinct makes him dash to the light switch and flick it on.

Brightness floods the room, batting away the shadows. They dissipate like mist and to Izuku it feels like they’re dying and screaming all the while. His heart beats like a jackhammer until those
shadows are gone and only the regular ones remain.

Izuku does not sleep well.

Chapter End Notes

Renewal Taekwondo is extracted from the webcomic God of High School which I highly recommend.

That's all from me for now. Thank you for reading this. If you enjoyed the story leave a kudos and if you have any questions just leave a comment below. But know that all of that is unnecessary, and as always your readership is quite enough for me. Cheers.
'To trust in one person to have our best interests is a fool’s gambit. To trust in individuals whose power can reshape landscapes or destroy the laws of physics is a losing battle. The law has been written by every organised society, and whilst some laws are reprehensible the people have changed them for the better. We must hold heroes to the highest standards. We must hold them to the letter of the law when they act out their duties as heroes.'

—Excerpt from ‘The Laws of Heroes’ by Hinata Ononoki.

He struggles to recreate the feeling of drowning and falling in shadows. That sensation of sinking to another place where monsters reside eludes Izuku. He’s terrified about what might be waiting for him on the other side, but this belongs to him. This is his quirk, no matter the possible pain that awaits. One For All will come in a few months once his body is strong enough to handle it, but right here and now this belongs to him.

But no matter how hard it is to reach that other place, one thing comes easily: Izuku can feel the shadows. It gets harder to focus in class. He can tell when, and sometimes how, people are moving by the way their shadows interact. There is his teacher awkwardly stretching his hand beneath his desk and there is a classmate pulling out their phone for it drives away the shadows in the area; behind a girl flips her hair, fine and thin shadows shifting quickly, and further back someone is putting the finishes touches to a paper crane; here his own shadow becoming larger and smaller as it falls in and out of the shade of his desk.

Those are the only vividly clear ones. Most are blurry blobs, only important as they become sharply larger or smaller. And past a certain point, they become too small to feel. At noon he walks outside and feels nearly blind. The sun is directly overhead, and every shadow is tiny and basically circular.

It’s evening and he is walking home that he learns there is a radius to what he can feel. One second, he might as well be on a deserted street and the next he feels Kaachan’s shadow—and it should be the same as any other but to Izuku it might as well be staring at the sun—moments before he turns on to the same street as Izuku.

He tenses because it’s Kaachan and his explosions are a reason to be afraid on any given day. Especially now when he’s angry in a way Izuku has never seen before. This isn’t the bright ember of disgruntled calm nor is it the blowtorch of very rare grief. It freezes him to the spot as Kaachan stalks towards him.

He’s had another growth spurt, Deku thinks dumbly as Kacchan stares at him, glancing only once to the budding scar at his temple.

“Stay out of my fucking way,” Kaachan snarls, eventually, without the usual heat or venom. His hands are balled up into fists but there isn’t the slightest hint of an explosion. “Got it?”

Deku nods slowly and watches Kaachan stalk past him without another word. Izuku doesn’t look back but he does sense the almost hesitant way his shadow shifts. Hesitance Is not something you associate with Kaachan.
Was that an apology? Izuku shakes his head because that’s ridiculous. **Kaachan’s never wrong. Besides, he has nothing to apologise for.**

*Maybe because he ki—*

Izuku walks away and decides to forget that entire encounter even happened. He’s become good at it. Simple human interactions are infinitely easier to forget than nightmare creatures.

But feeling shadows isn’t enough. There’s more and it drives him to an almost feverish obsession with learning about it. He searches for quirks on shadows and darkness, learns about villains like Grue and Underside but their quirks are nothing like his. At least, not simply from the description given. He reads what he can about Master Railroad, little as there is on his Quirk. The man had been intensely private about his life and it shows from the absolute dearth of first-account descriptions. Even his teammates barely spoke of his Quirk. There’s a single account from a civilian the man rescued: ‘We travelled through the darkest abyss aboard a train to infinity’ and Izuku isn’t certain how much of that is accurate and how much is poetic license.

The research does give him the chance to skim over Hawkmoon’s first autobiography. He doesn’t have the time to read it fully, but he does appreciate the unrestrained optimism in her writing. There is something beautiful about words so bright they banished the dark.

Information is sparse, and it makes him search for progressively more obscure texts. His mother eyes him worriedly when he carries a rather controversial book published in the second Dark Age on the physiology of some of the first expressed Quirks. It was controversial mostly because the vivisections were conducted on kidnapped individuals, but Izuku has long reached a point where he must know. And he could have downloaded the online copy, and not deal with his mother’s disappointed gazes, but the library copy has the author’s handwritten commentary in the margins.

All he learns is that humans are fucked up and can justify anything in the name of their beliefs. A few weeks of futile research is enough for Izuku to admit defeat. He’s filled up two new notebooks with information and observations of his own Quirk though he does hide them as best he can. He doesn’t want to imagine what will happen if his mother or a villain finds it. Or, even worse, if Kaachan does.

He’s sitting in the lounge watching a documentary on mutant quirks one evening when the thought strikes him. It’s the narrator’s words on how people can develop secondary mutations under specific triggers that clues him in on what he’s been missing.

*I died each time I went there. Logically I need to die again to get there.*

He waits for the voice that’s always arguing with him to say something. It stays quiet this time, making Izuku quirk a brow in shock. Then he realises he’s expecting a voice in his head to argue with him. And accepts that it doesn’t matter in the face of the things he’s seen.

*I don’t want to die.*

Izuku considers the thought. Finds it to be honest. Accepts what must be and stops his research.

Falling into a routine after that is easy for Izuku. He simply has no time to think of anything else. His social life, already non-existent, dies completely and Izuku misses every event he had considered attending—from the fifth reboot of Godzilla this decade or the book signing by Best Jeanist the next city over. It also doesn’t help that he can’t see his mother without regretting every word he said.
He loves that she doesn’t push him to say anything by confronting him. He suspects though that neither one of them really knows how to deal with the rift between them. Another week of awkward silences is more than Izuku is willing to handle.

“Kaa-san,” he says one evening. She looks up, startled. “I’m sorry.”

His mother smiles at him and ruffles his hair. Once, Izuku might have had the energy to protest. “I know. And I’m sorry you thought I didn’t believe in you.”

“You just don’t want me to get hurt if I fail.” He leans into her touch like a child. “I promise I…”

“What is it?” she asks warily.

Izuku swallows because he doesn’t want to lie to his mother for the rest of his life, not when she’s been nothing but kind his entire life.

“What if I had a Quirk?” he asks uncertainly.

His mother steps back so she can meet his eyes. “You saw the scan.”

_Vestigial toe joint_, Izuku thinks without the usual bitterness. “And its wrong in half the cases for hidden quirks,” he whispers. “They need triggers to activate and can go unnoticed until late in life.”

Her gaze is kind and without pity. She’s thinking it over, Izuku sees, and mulling over the matter.

“Izuku, at the risk of playing into a fantasy”—and doesn’t that just cut deep— “what trigger event?”

He swallows again. “T-this.” He points to the scar at his right temple. “I think It might have been a head injury.”

_That’s not what happened_, the voice says and Izuku locks that voice to the deepest recesses of his mind. He had wondered where it had run off to.

She stays silent for a long time. _Maybe she doesn’t believe me._

His mother sits, finally. “Your father’s Quirk manifested when he was in his twenties.” Izuku perks up. “We were taking a walk and some thug—oh gosh, he was barely older than you and his hands were shaking so badly. Well, he pulls out a knife and your dad tried giving him our money, but I don’t know what happened and your dad was bleeding next thing I knew. It was terrifying seeing him in pain. And then he screamed. Except all that came out was fire.”

She looks both nostalgic and sad, ever so sad. “So yes, I think I can trust you’re not lying to yourself.”

Izuku hesitates, uncertain of how to respond to her words. There little he’s learnt of his father other than that man worked abroad since he was five and went missing a few years later. Izuku can’t even remember what the man looks like. And the few pictures his mother shows him might as well be those of a stranger. Sometimes he can see bits and pieces of the familial relation—the freckles he inherited from his father as well as the shape of his face and the dark undertones of his hair.

“I can feel shadows.” _And I come back from the dead._ “It’s weird. There’s more, I know there is. When I… hit my head, I went somewhere s-strange.”

She’s worried now. “Where?”
“It was somewhere dark, and I was terrified, Kaa-san.” He looks down and sees his hands are shaking, and his eyes burn with unshed tears. “There were things there with me.”

Warm arms circle around his shoulders and grip him tightly. “Izuku, honey, I’m here.” That reassurance grounds him. “We can go to a Quirk counsellor and help you l—”

“No,” he tries to say harshly but his voice breaks and he squeaks it out instead. “I can’t, I just can’t. They’ll take me away and lock me up and I don’t want to be some e-e-experiment.”

“No one’s going to do that.” She pulls away. Meets his eyes. Asks, “What aren’t you telling me?”

Tears stream down his face and he trembles. “I died, Kaa-san. A fridge fell on me and I died.” He looks away. “I saw the blood and I went to that place and there are monsters hiding there and I’m so fucking scared that I’m one and they’ll lock me up and dissect me if they ever find out and—”

He doesn’t feel the hands on his shoulders. Doesn’t feel her shake him. But he does hear her.

“Izuku, look at me.” He does. Her face is carefully blank. “Okay, no counsellors. No doctors. But you need to explain.”

Izuku takes a deep breath and tells her about the beach and the fridge falling on him. He keeps out all mention of All Might. He explains the distorted version of his room and stutters when he reaches the eye because humans weren’t meant to see those spectrums and his brain hurts remembering it. The whales give him pause for how do you describe the something which is dead but may never die?

Her calm façade cracks every so often. When he finishes, his mother pulls him into a comforting embrace. “And your head?”

Izuku stills. “I just fell and hit the pole. Nothing else happened.”

*Except for Kaach*—He cuts that thought off. Locks it in the same place where he forgets that song that must never be sung.

“Izuku, I need you to be honest with me.”

He shakes his head. "Please, just please trust me and don't force me to say anything," Izuku pleads. "I don't want to think about it. I c-can’t.”

His head hurts. Ignoring something and not remembering it are two different things. And you can’t really ignore certain memories as the very act makes them more vivid. So, the more he tries to ignore the first time he went to that place the clearer the siren call of the song that will not permit life to continue becomes. Just this echo of a memory splits his head with pain.

“Izuku,” his mother says loudly.

It brings him back. He feels something wet on his lips and raises a hand there. His fingers come away red. His mother stands and grabs a paper towel from the counter. Izuku accepts it gratefully and presses it to his nose, letting it soak up the blood before he makes a mess everywhere.

“Thank you.” He winces because the headache is getting worse. But the pain makes it easier to forget—not ignore—the song. “Can I have a cup of tea?”

His mother makes an entire pot. Izuku has to get another paper towel because the first one is soaked. They drink in silence.
“I’m scared,” he admits, not meeting her eyes. “What if I’m one of those monsters?”

“You’re not,” his mother says fiercely.

“You can’t prove that. It’s like going crazy. I can’t tell you definitively that I’m conscious and not trapped in some nightmare.”

“Izuku, look at me. I think I would know my own son. And if you were a monster, why would you tell me the truth?”

The question shakes him to the core. So simple and yet he has no response. “Kaa-san…”

“Go to sleep, Izuku. We’ll figure it out.”

*****

I don’t want to die, Izuku thinks once more. But I need to know.

He sits on the edge of the tub, watching it fill with warm water. It gives him time to consider his life up until this moment and whilst he doesn’t find it lacking, he does find it wanting. There hasn’t been a single blazing moment other than saving Kaachan. And the only person who considers it so is Izuku.

And All Might, you fool.

He hums. Accepts that yes, his hero’s acknowledgement is all he really needs. He smiles, terrified that this might be a mistake.

When the tub is nearly full he picks up the needle. It’s a one-time use sort of needle. You press it to the flesh and the pneumatic piston does most of the work in depositing the contents in a person. Izuku presses it to his forearm, hissing when the needle pierces his flesh. The pain disappears in moments. Local anaesthetic has many uses. This might not be one of the recommended uses.

Izuku slides into the tub and waits a few minutes for his body to match the temperature of the water. He takes a deep breath to quell the rising panic. It doesn’t work. His hand trembles as he grabs the handle near him. There’s nothing special about it, just a simple material meant to mimic the look and feel of wood without any of the problems.

It is, though, attached to a very sharp knife. His mother is meticulous about many things, and the sharpness of her kitchen knives is one of them. He’s not sure what a blade that short is meant for other than maybe being a steak knife. Except he knows where those are and they’re nowhere near this sharp.

He takes another deep breath. And then another. It takes him a moment to realise he’s hyperventilating. And those are tears as well.

His hand shakes as he raises the blade. This is a stupid fucking idea, and nothing is worth knowing. His hand stills naturally. Oh fuck, I really want to know.

He brings the blade down and watches it plunge deep into his forearm. He feels nothing but horror. He pulls and flesh parts easily. Blood, vivid and red, almost seems to flood out. It stains the water and Izuku watches the water change colours. It’s odd, watching the fluid keeping him alive leave like a leaky tap, drip-spurt-drip.

There’s so much. At least I’ll know, he thinks and wishes he has the power to smile.
It takes a few seconds for his breathing to slow, wheezing and long gasps as his weak lungs fail to oxygenate his body.

A few more seconds for him to lose the strength to keep his head raised. With his last breaths, he inhales bloody water, too weak to even choke on it.

No matter what, he thinks with the fading embers of consciousness, this will all be over.

Izuku

closes

his

eyes

and

dies.

*****

Is this your choice, Izuku Midoriya? Is this the choice you make knowing full well the consequences? You can still refuse this future and pass on to the dark. You will die mourned by few, but this death will be final. I offer you this choice for you must know this can be an option, this time and no other. Anything is possible to you if only once.

Is that your choice, then? So be it. I accept this contract. You shall live by the grace of the abyss and by your sacrifice the abyss will live.

Death is inevitable. Entropy is the inevitable end of all things. Even gods and nightmares will die one day, long after the stars perhaps, but die they will. But you are beyond even them. Rise, Izuku Midoriya, and see your kingdom.

*****

Izuku breathes.

It takes him a moment to understand this irrefutable fact. There is oxygen in his lungs, oxygen that permeates the blood flowing through his body. Blood he watched leave.

Izuku breathes.

He opens his eyes, not focusing on anything in particular. He inspects his remaining senses. Touch tells him he’s dry and on something soft. Smell gives nothing but dust, blood, and maybe a hint of decay. Taste is blood in his mouth. Sound is the pounding of blood in his ears. Shadow tells him that the world will wait on him till he is ready.

Izuku breathes. He coughs but that turns into a chuckle that morphs into laughter tinged with hysteria.

“I’m here,” he says between breaths. “I’m fucking here.”

He wipes away the tears and sits up, looking around. He knows this room and will always know it. That poster of All Might will always be known to him, even if it has a rip through it. The broken PC and the marks on the wall are no more foreign to him than his room bathed in light and
normality. It scares him that this is normal now even if it is strange.

He stands, avoiding that dark fluid that makes perfect geometric shapes in the corner of his vision. Izuku looks to his arm. There’s a scar there, pale and silvery and jagged. Which is infinitely better than an open wound. He traces it, feeling no pain. If anything, it’s still numb.

Fact: Wounds that cause death heal near instantly. He pauses and tilts his head. Assuming no time has passed.

The window is blacked out. It takes him a moment to notice it isn’t painted or even the dark fluid making fourth-dimensional shapes in the corner of his vision. The darkness is not uniform. It shifts and twists this way and that but Izuku feels nothing concerning from it—an alien sort of contentment made up of amusement and something like inevitable/final acceptance. Izuku reaches out. His hand rests on the window latch as he considers the wisdom in this.

You just committed suicide, the voice he spends a lot of time ignoring says.

I had pretty reasonable odds of coming back, he retorts and shoves the voice down. There are more important things to worry about.

He flips the latch and slides the window open. The sudden rush of darkness doesn’t come. The suffocating weight he expected is missing. The darkness simply stays there as if the window sill is an impenetrable barrier.

Cautiously, he places his hand on the shadow. It sinks in slightly. He watches the shadows dance between his fingers and the back of his hand, joyous as a puppy with a new ball. The joy is alien and mixed with predator/master/enemy/protect and safe/home/alive? Izuku jerks his hand back at that last sensation.

The shadows don’t pull back, don’t impede him in the slightest. They simply go back to what they were doing, dancing and forming shapes. The more Izuku doesn’t stare directly at it, the more he can feel the complex shape the shadows make. There’s something both wondrous and horrifying lurking in those patterns and if he could see more, feel more, he knows it would break him with its complexity.

He turns away, focuses his senses on the door instead. That feels safer in so much as he can feel nothing past it. He knows the range of his senses is about twenty metres and his room is nowhere near that large. And yet, his world is confined to the walls of his room and the patterns the shadows outside his window are making, patterns he’s forgetting easier with each passing moment.

A deep breath centres him slightly. Izuku opens the door.

He expects sand and a dozen suns and rotting whales. He gets none of that. Instead, he gets concrete if concrete was a dark shade of blue. There are cracks where darkness leaks out as though the world is rejecting something so mundane as concrete. Izuku kneels and runs a finger across the blue surface, finding the ground warm and surprisingly textured. The blue flakes off easily. He looks to his finger where the blue flakes decaying rapidly.

He frowns and lays his palm on the surface. It takes him a moment to feel the flow of shadows below the ground. There’s an order to the way it flows, almost like veins and yet Izuku gets the impression that the darkness could flow any direction and still be fine.

Izuku looks up. There are buildings, dozens of them. It is unfamiliar for but a moment. And then he makes out the patterns hiding there—those crystal columns are the pillars of a downtown coffee
shop he likes, and the snarling fractal pattern creatures are the cartoonish puppies on the pet store a few blocks from his home. There, in the distance, is a column of absolute black. floating in the air and sucking up every drop of light from the purple sun streaking across the sky like a bullet, and Izuku knows it to be the tallest building in his city. He looks at the street again and realises with dawning horror that this is the street next to the apartment he shares with his mother.

The ground lurches before he can get a good look at anything else. It undulates, causing Izuku to lose his balance and he has the sense that he’s standing on something alive in the truest sense. Everything vibrates for a moment, reminding Izuku of a person shivering from the cold. It stops, thankfully.

When he looks up again everything has changed. And still is changing.

Geometry he shouldn’t be able to comprehend rises up and is replaced by patterns extending past infinity and there’s a dying black hole fighting something that looks like a dragon so large it might as well be a universe unto itself and the creature that looked at him and forced Izuku to see everything flies past and pauses for a second that lasts forever to whisper a secret truth that makes Izuku’s ears bleed and the longer he looks at the world the longer he understands how vast it truly is and how insignificant the human race is because how can they matter when a crystal nightmare is killing light especially if all this madness is simply a microcosm in a realm where infinity has been measured and found lacking and quantum mechanics operate on a macro scale and

Izuku

Fucking

Forgets

The world snaps back to a veneer of normality. He inhales, falling to the ground. His eyes burn, and it takes him a moment to understand they aren’t literally on fire but simply bleeding. And so are his ears from the secret the creature whispered, a secret that he wants to forget but can’t because it’s written in his bones now.

LIFE= NULL = ENTROPY = YOU

He claws at his ears, scratching the skin there badly. But Izuku doesn’t care because he isn’t that, can never be that. This is worse than the songwaitingtendthecycleoflifeandrebirth. Izuku focuses on that instead even if his heart is about to explode the longer he thinks about the song. But the song isn’t about him. If anything, he’s just a casual bystander and not the subject matter.

The weight of the song makes him cough blood. It is killing him, and he knows it will kill him faster and faster the longer it goes on. But he need only die a little until he can hide the secret in the deepest recesses of his mind, down past where even his instincts reside. And once he’s certain his mind will unravel long before he finds the secret, Izuku locks it with the song that is killing him in the here and now.

He’s lying on the ground, breathing heavily. He wipes away the blood on his eyes. Spits out the dark, congealed wad of blood in his mouth, not caring that it grows legs and runs away moments later. He scrubs away the blood from his ears and neck, wincing when he irritates one of the scratches there.

No, no, no, the voice he tries to ignore screams in agony. You left me with them, you fuck. You left me.
Izuku shrugs and ignores the voice. He knows it’ll find a way back at some point, probably a lot saner than Izuku by then. For now, though, it means his mind is blessedly quiet.

_This might be a good time to go home._ Izuku nods and stands on wobbly legs.

He hears a skittering like sound and looks behind him. Standing between him and the doorway that will take him home is a dark mass of creatures, multi-legged, fuzzy and with fangs that remind him of a spider. And right at their head is the same wad of blood that had run away, larger and meaner looking as though it had aged a few years and been forced to survive the nightmares of this place. Held in place by a twisted carapace is a glowing orb of red. Instinct tells Izuku that is the blood the creature was born from.

And it hates Izuku. He can feel it deep within his soul that this thing hates him and will always hate its progenitor. Izuku steps back cautiously. The creatures step forward as one, their sharp-clawed appendages tearing through the concrete which leaks shadow. Another step back and they mimic his action.

The lead creature skitters forward and like a tidal wave the rest follow. Their very movements tear through the ground even as Izuku turns to run. They are fast despite their size, and the lead one is on him in moments.

_**Please work,**_ he thinks, taking another step back. He can feel the shadows and whilst Izuku doesn’t know all the rules of this place, he does know one fact: the shadows belong to him. So, when he calls on them they rise like lances, thousands of thin lances that eviscerate the creatures.

Izuku trembles at the fangs an inch from his face, gleaming with fluid and large enough to tear through bone. A dark lance holds the blood-spider creature in place, pierced through what might been a head in a normal creature. The hate is still there in its dozen crystal eyes but deeper down Izuku can see despair and even betrayal. He watches the creature die, slowly and crooning in pain. And when the infernal engines powering the creature fail, it dissipates to ash, leaving behind only that glowing red orb. The orb floats by its own will, defiant of gravity or any other force.

His hand reaches out, unbidden, and grasps the orb. It leaves his hand numb and tingly all at once. There is a multitude of… he doesn't want to call them souls because he refuses to equate what he has to those creatures.

_They died,_ Izuku thinks and looks at the legion of spider-like corpses. _But they’re still dreaming._

It feels wrong to just throw the orb away. There are hundreds of lives begging to continue their dreams and Izuku doesn’t know how to deal with it. Throwing it away is simply leaving them to die a slower death.

He puts it in his pocket and decides to forget about it.

He’s become good at it.

He walks over spider corpses and puts them far from his mind. He flinches whenever a leg twitches with the hot wind carrying the scents of rotting fish and fresh blood. When one of them rises, body reconstructing as though time-reversed, and red light streaming from his pocket to it, Izuku crushes it with his foot. It makes a pitiful sound as Izuku stomps on it again and again and again until it goes back to its dreams.

He wipes away the blood from his mouth, wondering how it got there, and realises he’s already at the door. He ignores the lightness of his pocket and the crystal shards scratching his gums. Those
spider creatures are a distant memory when he steps through the door.

*****

Water clings to him when he returns. He thrashes for a moment until he remembers where he is—submerged in a tub—and why—his forearm is still numb. He looks at the red water for a long time, thinking of nothing.

He pulls the plug and lets the water drain. Its odd seeing evidence of what he did disappear. He stands, dripping wet when the water’s ankle high. Something nicks him, and he yelps, jumping out the tub. There’s a tiny scratch on his ankle. He investigates the tub. Sees bits of shredded wood and metal at the drain. It reminds him of both the pole and the fridge.

Just another thing to note down.

It takes him nearly an hour to scrub every surface down. His fingers are raw and bloody by the time he’s done scrubbing the blood out of his clothes. Next time don’t wear clothes, he thinks. Pauses. Scrubs more vigorously at the idea that there will be a next time.

He’s only just managed to shower and disinfect the scratches near his ears when his mother returns.

“Izuku, I’m home,” she shouts from the doorway. She probably has groceries with her.

Izuku freezes. His mother comes back at six on weekdays. He looks at his watch. The time there reads eight o’clock.

What the fuck?

*****

The shadows feel acuter after that. There is a level of detail that is overwhelming and sometimes he must leave class and spend time in the bathroom, breathing and not at all having a panic attack. Sometimes a student must come find him a few moments from a full-blown panic attack and bring him back to class. And sometimes he’s bleeding too heavily from the nose to go back to class. He avoids questions from concerned teachers and even a trip to the school counsellor yields no answers.

When they call in his mother she simply stares them down, imperious and regal in a way only affronted parents manage, until they allow her to take him home. He cries when they get home and she hugs him tight as he tells her stories of the dreaming dead and old gods being born and abominations that keep him up at night. She simply holds him tight.

Her routines change around him. Not significantly—after the first night she checked up on him at night and found him beating off they both agreed that wouldn’t work—but enough that he loves her all the more for it. She speaks to him on matters that he enjoys and grounds him during the bad times.

One night where he’s too afraid to sleep from the voice screaming bloody murder in his head, she takes him out for ice-cream and a stroll through the park; and whilst the scents of grass and damp and life calm him, the spiders make him nervous and there isn’t enough contrast between dark and light for shadows to really exist leaving him feeling almost blind. One weekend, when he starts to remember everything he hides deep down and the weight of it all leaves him breathless and feverish and writing higher dimensional mathematics in a language humans can’t vocalise and in his own blood, she pulls him away gently and teaches him to play blackjack and how to count.
cards—and every technique from the simple Hi-Lo to the more complex Wong back-counting helps him forget the madness; and he doesn’t mind learning more of his mother between explanations of arbitrage and matched betting; of how she met his father by conning him at a friendly game and then dazzling him with a card trick, a trick she shows him even though his hands shake too much for him to really learn it.

He starts packing her lunches and making breakfast in the morning even if it means sleeping less. Cleaning the house is mind-numbing and boring and so blessedly peaceful that he cries the first time he does it. His mother doesn’t try to stop him except for days where he puts off doing homework because she won’t permit his grades to drop, not when he’s trying so hard to get to UA. It makes him guilty and forces him to work harder.

So, when he’s training he goes there tired. He steps back from a punch form Jin Mo-Ri but fails to notice the ledge behind him. Izuku falls to the ground, hitting his head hard. He winces and blinks away stars. When he can see properly, Jin Mo-Ri is squatting beside Izuku. It takes Izuku a moment to notice he’s staring at his exposed forearm. He pulls back and covers up the scar.

“I will not ask,” the man says without pity or kindness. “But I do not waste time. If you do not want to get to UA, tell me, and I will leave.”

His eyes widen. “Wait, no, I want to be a hero.”

The man with crosses in his eyes simply blinks lazily. “Not if you die first.”

I’ve died a lot, Izuku thinks bitterly. “I’m not trying to die,” he retorts, and it is true to an extent.

Jin huffs. “The heart is weak even if flesh is strong.”

Izuku squints at the man. “Coming from someone who goes around with his torso exposed.” The black coat the man wears has only a single button around his collar and with the way it is cut most of his torso is exposed at any given time.

“I,” he says, poking Izuku in the forearm, “have quirk the extents invulnerability to my clothes and makes them stronger than my flesh. You, little shadow, are weak and have no armour.”

But they say no more of it after that. Two days a week, as he promised, Jin Mo-Ri teaches him how to fight and the rest of the time All Might trains his body. He puts on muscle rapidly, but he never becomes bulky like his hero. Instead, all the fat disappears, and it seems some days that his muscles never run out of endurance. In gym classes, he might not be able to lift as much as the other students, but he can lift much longer.

In the few minutes he has that aren’t dedicated to school or training or learning about his quirk—and not going catatonic from the revelations—he takes the notebook with the sketches of his costume and modifies it. The white lines feel wrong and disingenuous to who—what—he is and he colours them black. The rabbit-like mask was something he built in homage to All Might but he wonders whether he is worthy of being the man’s successor when he has monsters in his closet. He replaces the grinning teeth with a metal mouth-guard and keeps a cowl with rabbit ears, an acceptable compromise. He’s not certain about the armoured vest but he remembers Jin Mo-Ri’s words and decides protection can never be a bad thing.

Izuku spends one Friday evening and does absolutely nothing. He ignores his quirk by keeping everything well lit and sets his homework aside. The couch is comfy. He switches on the TV and lets the inane robot show wash over him, focusing instead on his book. His mother finds him like that, not busy or frantic or half-mad, and sits next to him. She dozes off after a few minutes. Izuku
grabs a blanket and throws it over her, tucking her in gently.

His life is busy and horrifying. But Izuku wouldn’t change it for a moment. It belongs to him and no one else, no matter the consequences.

Chapter End Notes

That's all from me for now. Thank you for reading this. If you enjoyed the story leave a kudos and if you have any questions just leave a comment below. But know that all of that is unnecessary, and as always your readership is quite enough for me. Cheers.
‘The age of heroics has brought about a technological stagnation. Even after the glories of the past were reclaimed in the Golden Age, we have hardly advanced one iota. The body of knowledge has decreased, and students care more for the flash of heroes than they do for sciences grounded in knowledge and economics based on historical patterns. I hold all who call themselves a hero accountable. We look to them as saviours and become complacent with our lot in life. By their very existence, they hold back advancement. There was a time when advancements were commonplace, new industries created often, and the people driven to make something with their own knowledge. That time has ended.’

—Excerpt from ‘The Effect of Heroics’ by Saruhiko Ando.

Izuku focuses as hard as he can, ignoring the budding headache because this might be the one. His shadow vibrates on the ground and Izuku’s hands shake with exertion as he does his best to pull the darkness out. He watches, mesmerised, as a single tendril of shadow rises in the real world.

“Yes,” he shouts, and the laughs hysterically. He has finally done it. This is proof that he wasn’t completely mad. This is his bedroom in the waking, and a thin tendril of shadow undulates in the air, indifferent to the impossibility of a shadow having volume.

He pokes at it. It makes a clear sound and Izuku pauses to wonder if it’s a normal sound or one that exists outside of sanity. He shrugs as he long ago lost any claim to sanity. He grabs it. Pulls. In his hand, he holds what might be considered an incredibly long needle. He nearly presses his finger to the sharp tip before deciding that might not be the best idea in the world.

Instead, he pokes his pillow and watches it sink deep without the slightest hint of resistance. He raises a brow, wondering how it would fare against something harder. He raises the needle. Aims at the wall. Throws it. Partway there, it unravels and wisps of darkness float through the air for a second. Izuku watches them fade away like ashes after a volcanic eruption.

“Fuck,” he curses. “It took me an hour to do that.” He takes a deep breath and calms himself.

Making another one is slightly easier. There is a pattern, an understanding of impossible physics that seems to imprint itself on his mind.

It only takes him an hour this time instead of the just over an hour. The tendril is thicker, less fine gossamer thread and more strand of hair. He decides not to pull it out of his shadow. Closing one eye, he holds the image of a circle in the back of his eyelid and watches it ponderously twist to the shape of his commanding, a single strand still connecting it to his shadow. It isn’t fast and there’s a resistance here that the other world doesn’t have.

He watches the circle revolve slowly. Imagines it sharpen and hears a hum of acknowledgement from it. And then, with a single command, he watches it fly across the room and stab halfway through his wall.

It makes him smile. It’s the first real progress he’s had in a while.

Getting back to the dark below is difficult, and whilst he can sometimes feel himself sinking, he never gets all the way there. So, he does what he needs to and becomes very creative in the ways
He dies. He finds the knife too time-consuming in terms of clean-up, and anyway he doesn't want to
go to the effort of hiding new scars or explaining away why he needs a local anaesthetic. Drowning
is a deeply terrifying experience and one he has no intention of trying again.

Death by hanging is the simplest, cleanest, and most efficient way of getting to the place.

He learns the flavours of death, becomes close as lovers inexorably twined till the end of time. The
impossible scent you smell before you die reminds him of petrichor, the first rains of the season,
but both sharper and subtler. He comes to know the feeling of his brain shutting down, the terror of
forgetting the who what why why why that a person instinctively knows through the lives; learns
the sensation of nerves firing one last time, raging in defiance against numbness as a war god does
against his enemies.

Four notebooks he leaves in his room—three on his quirk and one completely blank just in case—
before going to his new favourite place. He’s walked the path towards it so often that only the
bravest creatures do anything but run immediately. And the brave ones are less courageous than
they are mad and foolish as don’t survive more than a few seconds, sometimes impaled by a dark
spear and sometimes crushed by a flood of shadows.

Izuku isn’t the biggest or most dangerous creature even cloaked in shadows that whip and strike his
enemies. No, there are creatures that still make him shiver in terror. He can keep this realm
relatively sane by anchoring a portion as large as he wants to see to his shadows and the space in
his mind where he forgets many things. It creates a temporary world that obeys laws he
understands. Sometimes his concentration falters and he sees the infernal nightmares just lurking in
the background like the dragon mostly eaten by a black hole in the distance or the light-killer
tower hovering over everything.

There are spots slightly better than others. Despite the revulsion he feels, the beached whales are
quite peaceful, and their cries tell a story of a people long dead who have chosen to continue no
matter their form. It takes him a long time to realise they’re just as scared of the real monsters
hiding in the depths as he is, so they hide near the surface. They are pitiful, but never malicious.
They speak freely of their memories of true life, not this eternal undeath they suffer through. Every
word of planets burning and a people enacting a mad plan that went against all mortal and esoteric
laws makes him love humans just the tiniest bit more.

None of that interests him as much as the forest of floating trees. The trees are the largest he’s ever
imagined, taller than the sky and wider than his neighbourhood. He can’t tell if they’re a single
creature or a collective for they move in eerie synchronicity, sometimes going to depths Izuku hates
following and sometimes being right outside the safe spot of his room. But something there is
calling to him and he can’t ignore it.

There is little light in this place so Izuku always brings a headlamp and a powerful torch as a
backup to create the contrast he needs to work his powers. It has the unfortunate side effect of
alerting the denizens to his presence.

He dodges a spear and raises a shadow shield before another can strike him through the face. He’s
yet to die here and has no plans on finding out how permanent it is. So, he sends a fist of shadow to
the creature trying to flank him. It is much larger than Izuku, made up entirely of very elastic
purple-black threads that stretch and elongate easily. It makes fighting them hard because he can
never be too sure which direction they’ll attack from.

It also makes fighting them fun.

His shield shatters. Izuku ducks low an instant before a claw takes his face, slipping a bit on the
uneven root. He grimaces as the blow tears a line through his shoulder and sweeps the creature of its legs that are only sometimes there before backing away.

There’s one in the air. Izuku sends a series of shadow bullets at it and watches in satisfaction as it falls out the sky. The one he shoved aside earlier charges Izuku, one arm stretching and closing the distance rapidly.

He scrambles to the side. Fails to stick the landing. Hits his hurt shoulder on the massive tree root.

The three creatures regroup. He curses.

Why won’t they back down? Izuku wonders as he dodges another spear. And where the hell do they get all the spears?

After a week of fighting these creatures each time he enters the forest, Izuku still has no idea. But there’s something at the centre of the forest that beckons him, a heady pull he can never resist. And he really, really wants to know what it is that draws his attention so.

Have you tried talking to them, the voice says, distracting Izuku and making him take a blow to the chest from the flying creature. He lashes out with his elbow. Kicks it across its dark face. Slams it with a wave of shadow and watches it fall of the massive root.

Great, you’re back, Izuku thinks and forges another shield. It holds up against the spear-thrower and is too tall for even the other one to wriggle around even if it does extend its limbs. He has to watch his right flank because of his injured shoulder, but he has a selection of lances ready to fire given the slightest provocation.

“Of course, I did,” Izuku says, trying to calm his breathing. “I nearly lost an eye because of it.”

No, you didn’t you idi—Give me a moment. Everything is silent in his head for a moment. And then he hears screams and the voice raging at something. He can hear sounds of battle, the clang of immutable ideas clashing with entropic chaos. That makes Izuku pause.

“Great, now the voices in my head actually do stuff.”

When it returns, it brings with it static. The voice sighs in relief. You never tried talking to them. Izuku’s protests are cut off as the voice simply continues. How do you speak to your shadows?

Izuku frowns. He doesn’t, as far as he can tell. “Okay, either shut up or go away.”

Blessedly, the voice goes away.

A roar rends the air. Izuku leaps back instantly, not in the slightest shocked that his barrier breaks. Concentration has something to do with the strength of his constructs.

The large, bulky one elongates from the neck. Its head is like a bullet full of sharp teeth. Izuku ducks down, pulling his shoulder wound and decides this might be as good a time as any to get the hell out of dodge.

He bolts to the right. He nearly takes a spear to the neck before he reaches the edge of the giant root. He doesn’t hesitate to leap down.

There is water beneath him. He hates going deeper into the abyss when he can avoid it, but the doorway he senses one level down can take him two levels left and one up. He’s not sure exactly how space and geometry behave other than that they sometimes exist.
More often he has to force them to exist.

The creatures in the air ignore him, thankfully, though one that’s a cross between a seagull, a lizard and a gas cloud does inspect him for a long time. It hurts his brain a bit to see organs held suspended in a gaseous liquid fade and reappear with each beat of its wings.

With a grin, Izuku waves at it. It turns away and Izuku watches it dive down, its wings turning gaseous then back in sequence.

Izu takes in a deep breath well before he hits the pink water. He has no intention of swallowing the intraocular fluid of a creature whose eye is probably larger than Russia. It is warm and sticky, disgustingly so. He pushes his revulsion away and swims to the bottom where he can sense the doorway.

Halfway there, he runs out of breath, vision going dark in spots. It makes him curse because he hates drowning. But he’s long ago accepted doing crazy things to get what he wants. There’s no air here and if he holds his breath long enough then the lack of oxygen will kill him. And that isn’t an option

So, he takes a deep breath and lets the thick, sticky fluid fill his mouth and lungs.

The dark spots disappear as he breathes the ocular fluid of the creature. Izuku swims until he reaches the bottom, as brightly lit as the surface which should bother Izuku but glowing eyes aren’t really anything special at this point.

He takes a knife from his pocket and stabs it through the surface. A dark fluid spurts out in long arcs like ink in water. Izuku doesn’t breathe it in. He works his knife quickly, forming a simple rectangle. Already, the horizon is darkening from the creature closing its eye. And when it closes fully, Izuku knows he’ll be completely fucked. Instinct has rarely failed him in the place.

When he’s made the slices, Izuku grips the flaps and pulls with all his strength. It takes nearly half a minute before he can pull the flesh off completely and reveal the shimmering doorway. Izuku steps through before darkness overtakes him.

He falls out onto the surface of a dead star, wincing as he lands on his shoulder again. He checks the wound. Finds it already scarring instead of bleeding. He shrugs, wiping away the ocular fluid on his face.

_Ocular fluid has healing properties_, he thinks so he can jot it down along with the eye’s location in his notebook later.

The aren’t any landmarks on the flames forever frozen and dark so Izuku simply picks a direction and walks. His watch tells him its close to midnight. Good, lots of time to get back before his mother found whatever his body did when he died.

*****

The next few days are busy and frantic. Time’s running out and he starts feeling the pressure of everything. Tests and pop quizzes at school stop being a surprise and more of a daily occurrence. Despite their migraine-inducing difficulty, Izuku manages to keep on top of them. It might mean having to spend time in the abyss to take advantage of the weird temporal mechanics there for the deeper he goes, the slower time in the real-world passes—and he’s certain that if he goes deep enough there’s a place where an eternity will last shorter than the blink of an eye in the real, and perhaps even deeper there’s a place where the reverse is true.
It is Saturday when he receives a text from All Might that something has come up and he won’t make it for their training. Izuku shrugs. It is not the first time this has happened. After all, All Might is still a hero with duties and obligations. And whilst Izuku knows little of the man’s personal life aside from his name, he has no doubts that the training has stopped him from taking care of his personal life.

“Kaa-san,” he greets in the kitchen as he mixes a protein shake.

She smiles at him, the skin tight on her face. Not in a bad way, and it makes him pause because when had his mother lost weight? She looks healthier, and he wonders if its because he takes care of more of the cleaning giving her more personal time.

She ruffles his hair, hand lingering on the scar where the hair has grown in white. He chose not to dye it because every time he looked in the mirror it reminds him that death is always a mistake away. And death means his secret might be revealed

And regardless of how odd it might look or how it made him an easier target for the bullies at school, he will forever cherish how Kaachan told those assholes to fuck off. He’s not sure how to deal with Katsuki when he’s being so… nice is a stretch, but not intentionally violently antagonistic.

And maybe we can be friends, again, Izuku thinks and that brings a smile to his face.

He hears a snort in the back of his mind. Don’t forget what he did, the voice roars and then cackles madly. Izuku rolls his eyes and ignores it.

“You doing alright, honey?” she asks, smile strained just a bit.

He chuckles nervously, scratching the back of his head. He nearly knocks over the protein shake. “Just zoned out a bit.” Then he notices how she's dressed up a bit. ”Are you going anywhere? I can make dinner if you're coming back late.”

Her smile turns towards fondness. “You’re too sweet.” Izuku ducks his head, flushing. “I wanted to show you something special but if you need to train we can do it later.”

Izuku looks up. Sees her kind expression. Puts the protein shake in the fridge. “Sure. I can take a run in the evening just as well.”

They’re in the car, shitty pop music blaring, and talking about nothing in particular. He shuffles a deck of cards, palming a card every now and then trying a card trick his mother had shown him a few days ago. She laughs when he messes up and the card hits him straight across the face. She laughs harder when it sticks to his forehead.

He drops the entire deck when she stops abruptly, cursing at the pedestrian who decided jaywalking was perfectly acceptable in the middle of a busy road. He reaches down to pick up the cards. Then freezes. Some of them are sinking into his shadow.

Izuku swallows and reaches towards it. His hand sinks in slightly. He closes his hand and pulls back. Inside his clenched fist are the few cards that had sunk in.

“Izuku?” his mother questions, eyes flicking to him and then back to the road.

He shrugs. “New to me.” And quite frankly, it’s not particularly worrying compared to many of the things he’s seen. He tells her as much which only makes her frown.
“You’re sure you don’t want to go to a counsellor?”

Izuku rolls his eyes. This isn’t the first time she’s suggested it. “This isn’t anywhere near as bad as the maths on the wall thing.”

“That’s my point. You wrote that in your own blood. It hurt my head to look at it and you think that’s a normal thing.” She sighs. “Izuku, I can do the proof for a Gaussian integral in my head. I didn’t even know how to do basic calculus before then.”

He has nothing to say to that. “Sorry you’re smarter now?” he offers, only a little petulant.

She sighs, before pulling over and parking. “Just promise me you won’t keep things from me.”

“What if they’re not my secrets to tell?” he asks, stepping out the door. He looks up and reads the sign ‘Anteiku’ with a frown. He’s never heard of the place.

“If it doesn’t affect you, that’s fine.” She walks through the door and greets the old man behind the counter.

They’re led to a table and given a menu. “Sure,” he agrees. “So, why are we here again?” he asks then orders a cup of green tea even as his mother orders some coffee that sounds more complicated than a Gaussian proof.

“Because you need to rest and relax.”

“At a coffee store? Caffeine is not a relaxant, Kaa-san.”

“Maybe not for you.” She takes a sip of her coffee when it comes. It’s strong enough that he wonders if he can get caffeinated by the vapour alone. “Besides, this place is special.”

“Are we going to play the gues—” He pauses when he feels something brush against his leg. He tenses and looks down.

And sees a cat.

A bright orange cat that stares back at him disdainfully.

His mother laughs. Izuku looks up and sees her petting a grey patterned cat.

“Huh,” is all he says. A cat slinks along a window sill, tail raised imperiously and leaps to the seat next to Izuku. It has one eye and black fur. He reaches out cautiously and lets in sniff his finger. It bumps his has fingers with its nose and walks right onto his lap. It circles a few times and then curls in place.

“Huh,” he says again as the cat purrs contentedly, loud enough that he feels it in his bones.

“I told you it was special,” his mother says.

He raises his cup in acknowledgement and asks her what she’s been doing in her spare time. He lets her voice wash over him, absently stroking the cat. And after nearly half an hour, she reaches into her handbag and pulls out a book.

“Here,” she says and hands it to him. “I thought you might like it.”

The hardcover lacks the usual cover sleeve, but he can see the author’s name written in tiny gold handwriting. ‘Hawkmoon’ it reads and below that ‘My Eclipse’. On the first page is writing in
Izuku looks up in shock, jostling the cat who meows in frustration. “Kaa-san, this is a signed copy,” he says in shock. “These things cost a fortune.”

“Yes,” she says simply. “Read the signature.”

He frowns. Opens the page. “‘To a young Hisashi whom I hope to see again, from Yui whom Hakwmoon eclipsed,’” he reads. Then freezes. “Is this…”

“It was your father’s. I forgot all about it. I guess I never wanted to look through the boxes of all the stuff he left.”

Izuku frowns. “He’s not dead.”

And somehow that makes her infinitely sadder. “No, he isn’t.” She forces a smile. “And I know he’d be happier with someone reading it than to let it gather dust.”

That’s the last they speak of it. When she’s ready to leave, Izuku asks if he can stay a little longer. She smiles and gives him some money before heading out. He reads the book, drinking another cup of tea, and savouring each word from one of the great heroes of history.

Sometimes he must check Wikipedia to check his facts. Geography isn’t in his arsenal of skill, so knowing she slew the indomitable Titan in Sao Luis means nothing until he googles the place and sees the monument to the battle.

He isn’t paying attention when he stands, the cat in his arm, and knocks into someone. Startled, he reaches out and grabs a hand before the person can fall. He looks up and meets purple eyes with dark bags beneath them.

“S-sorry,” Izuku says and lets go hastily. “I wasn’t paying attention.”

The boy stares at Izuku. Then at the cat. “I’ve never seen you before. Mika doesn’t like newcomers.”

He frowns. Mika? He thinks, then looks at the cat that’s watching him with its single eye.

“This is my first time,” he says quickly, anxiously. “Deku. Midoriya, I mean, that’s my name, Izuku, and sorry for knocking you over, I should probably pay attention more.”

The boy frowns. “It’s fine.”

“You look tired. School tests?”

The boy tilts his head, almost cautious. “Yes?” he ventures.

Izuku smiles broadly, fearlessly. “Yeah. My ma brought me here cause apparently I’m too stressed or something but hey, whatever, it’s not like cats are a problem ever—”

“Midoriya,” the boy says sharply, cutting him off. “It’s fine. You’re stressing the cat.”

He looks down. Sees Mika’s hair raised on end. Takes a deep breath.

“Sorry.”

The boy rolls his eyes. “Stop apologising.”
“Sorr…” he trails off at the boy’s gaze. It isn't anywhere near as terrifying as some of the things he's seen but he's even less sure of humans than he is of nightmare creatures.

Izuku takes a seat and gestures to the opposite one. The boy sits, uncertain, and Izuku wonders if maybe something horrible is peaking through his grin.

“I never got your name.”

The boy paused. “Shinsou. Hitoshi Shinsou.”

“Hi, Shinsou,” Izuku says brightly. It is odd talking to someone his age who doesn’t automatically dislike him. “Which school are you applying to?”

Shinsou looks away and reaches for the cat next to him. It scrambles up his leg and jumps to his shoulder. He still as the cat gets comfortable on its new perch.

“UA,” he says once the cat isn’t about to tumble off.

He looks to Izuku expectantly. “Oh, right, that’s awesome. We might even be classmates.”

“You’re applying there as well?” Izuku nods. “What’s your quirk?”

Izuku freezes. He’s never really thought about how to answer that question. Its never really come up and he can’t just say One for All because that isn’t his quirk. At least, not yet.

“Sorry,” Shinsou says. “Didn’t mean to make you upset.”

“Didn’t you just tell me to stop apologising?”

“I only did it once.” His voice never rises above a monotone.

Izuku forces a smile. “I just got my quirk, so I never really gave it a name.” He points to the flare of white hair at his temple. “Hidden quirk. Traumatic incident. Tried to fight a pole with my face.”

That’s not what happened, the voice roars. Izuku’s smile becomes strained as the voice screams in a voice that isn't wholly human.

“Are you okay?” Shinsou asks. “You’ve got a nosebleed.”

Izuku curses and reaches for a napkin in his pocket, placing it to his nose. “Sorry. I get those occasionally.”

Especially when some people are screaming in my head, he thinks angrily. Can you shut up already?

The voice cackles once more. Two plus two is four, minus infinity that’s death. Quick maths. Die, you bastard, die.

Izuku winces and does his best to ignore the voice. He sees Shinsou watching him worriedly.

“I think I need to head home anyway,” Izuku says before his head gets any worse. “See you later?”

“I guess?”

He must look ridiculous with a cat in one hand and a bloody napkin in the other. He makes it work as he writes his phone number down on the back of a receipt and slides it over to Shinsou. That’s
how people make friends from what he’s seen on TV. He hasn’t really had the opportunity to practice it in real life.

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Izuku continues to train ceaselessly. His body grows stronger even as his training regime gets progressively harder. All Might is relentless in making Izuku stronger. The sessions get bad enough that he feels like he'll pass out in his tracksuit even on a colder evening. He takes to wearing a long-sleeved compression shirt so All Might never sees the scar on his arm, and leggings beneath his shorts to avoid chaffing and irritating blisters.

Jin Mo-Ri is equally relentless, drilling the fundamentals in Izuku’s head until he dreams of stances and kicks, defence flowing to offence in fluid motions. He ruthlessly takes advantage of having more time in the abyss and puts everything in practice against the less terrifying denizens. It makes him think harder, but it also helps him rely on his instincts a bit more.

Nearly a week after going to the café, he gets a message from Shinsou. It’s short, concise and his response is just as awkward as he agrees to meet again next week. They send messages back and forth, not many since Izuku can tell Shinsou is just as busy as he is. And maybe just as lonely. So Izuku does put in the effort to reply as soon as he gets a message, even if his reply is stilted and awkward, and occasionally he gets a reprimand from his teachers to pay attention.

Trying to communicate with another human being is difficult, and very often his intent gets lost by the barrier of screen and text, but that struggle makes him understand what the voice was saying.

He drops down through a doorway and lands on a root. It takes only seconds before the stretchy creatures appear. There’s the usual spear-morph but there are additional flight-morphs. And this isn’t really a fight he can win.

Which is good because he doesn’t want to fight.

“I don’t want a fight,” he says, raising his empty hands. And then, he says it differently. It takes him a moment to concentrate on his shadow. Izuku tries his best to let his feelings resonate with his shadow.

The creatures pause and one even stumbles back. Good, that meant it worked. The spear-morph walks forward on its four legs that stretch and contract and looms over Izuku. He trembles because he won’t be able to dodge from this range if it attacks him.

//You speak now after attacking us//

He winces. It isn’t a voice so much as it is a scalpel writing those words in his skull.

“Sorry,” Izuku says, and sends the feelings through his shadow. “I never wanted a fight.”

//You took joy/pleasure/revelation in combat, thief//

“Why are you calling me that?” he asks, barely pausing to wonder how surreal the situation is.

//Your nature// The creature tilts its head back and Izuku watches it elongate to one of the flighty-morphs. They seem to converse and Izuku waits nervously for its head to return. //Come, robber//

He frowns as the lumbering monster made of purple-black threads turns and walks away. The other creatures don’t seem to care as they disperse. The walk is long, and after a day of training with all Might, it is harder than he expected. The trees lighten from the darkest night to a pale purple,
maybe lavender, and grow progressively thinner. He’s amazed the first time a root suddenly grows as they’re about to reach an edge but by the eighth time there isn’t anything too special about it.

His head whips back and forth as he tries to keep track of all the creatures living in this floating forest—some, the flight-morphs mainly, keep to the canopy and Izuku only glimpses them the one time they ascend; the spear-morphs seem content with their place in the roots; yet he can’t help but wonder how exactly the large, bulky ones are in the trees, literally in the trees.

He places a hand on one of the lightest trees and is slammed with a wave of knowledge. Not eldritch knowledge that must never be spoken for fear of ending the world. No, this was the knowledge of an elder watching thousands upon thousands of generations grow and live and die and live again.

He looks to the thread-creature leading him. “You become the trees when you die,” he whispers in awe.

The creature’s head twists around even as it continues walking forward. //All knowledge/wisdom/experience flows back to the source-heart//

They pass what might be a gate and walk into a circle of brilliantly white trees, so thin that they look like saplings. At the very centre is a cauldron and within it burns a fire of the infernal darkness, a fire that hurts to look at. It burns everything its flames reach, from the light to even gravity and time and the barriers between galaxies, and for a single instance, he sees a spark of red flames in another world.

//THIEF/BURGLAR/TRANSGRESSOR//the booming voice of eight trees, collectively older than his universe, knocks Izuku to the ground. //HAVE YOU COME TO REPENT//

Izuku spits out blood, having bitten through his tongue. “I’m not a thief.”

//Your skin morph shares a kinship with the first thief// one tree older than the stars intones.

“I honestly have no idea what you’re talking about.”

//THEN SEE//

Light bursts to life, bright and brilliant enough to boil his eyes. He screams as they force their way into his mind and make him see. The trees are the form the thread-creatures take once they die but that isn’t the last stage. No, these trees billions of years old will pass on and begin life anew, infinitely wiser and more powerful.

And yet, on the creation of the first elder, something broke through the tree canopy and stole it away. Thousands died under the shrill scream of the twisted bird abomination, and the elder trees could only watch as the oldest—now the youngest—had its essence ripped, its knowledge lost, and its soul bound to the abomination.

The images send Izuku reeling to the ground, screaming in pain. He can feel each and every single death, can feel the horror of watching a universe’s worth of knowledge destroyed in a single second. The terror and helplessness as the oldest and wisest of them was so violently taken. And the grief at all the young that died.

He screams taper to a stop. Taking a shuddering breath, Izuku checks his eyes. They don’t feel burnt, so he opens them. It takes time for him to adjust to the dimness after seeing that radiance.

//Thief you are not though kin to the slave-king you are// a tree slightly younger than Earth says.
//We ask your forgiveness, Shadowshield//

Izuku struggles to his feet, wiping away the blood leaking from his ears. He inhales, smelling the unique scent of ashen time. “Another name?” he questions.

//It is your name/nature/truth// the same tree says.

He rolls his ears, assuming they’re referring to the many shields he used fighting the thread-creatures. Regardless that he’s being willfully ignorant, Izuku remembers the last truth he was told. And he doesn’t want to learn another.

“Fuck it, I don’t really care anymore. Okay, so you attacked me because I’m human—”

//Because the skin you wear is human// it says and Izuku knows there is truth to those words.

Do you understand now? The voice in his head asks. You’re just a monster wearing human skin. It cackles and laughs and rants and raves.

Izuku shuts it away deeper in the recesses of his mind.

“And now you gave me another name. Look, I just came here because that fire’s been calling me for the last few days and I’m tired of it.”

//THE ETERNAL FLAME IS NOT YOURS// the voices roar. The force of It knocks Izuku down again.

//We are guardians of the godflame// the youngest elder tree says once Izuku can think again.

//Your skin-morph will not be allowed to possess it//

“I just want to see it,” Izuku says imploringly. He’s being honest, too. Something that powerful terrifies him. And he knows, just knows that it can destroy worlds without thought.

//We will permit this//

Cautiously, Izuku walks forward, stepping around the spear-morph. The dark flames don’t give off any heat but anything that so casually destroys gravity is deserving of respect. He looks into the cauldron at the dark flames.

Fire consumes his mind, eternal and infernal. This isn’t simply a flame of impossible power. No, he knows its nature as burns the shackles of his mortal mind—and he takes pleasure in hearing the voice lurking in his head scream in true pain—and is amazed.

“Amaterasu,” he calls it though that will never describe its nature. It is only a name he can comprehend.

This is the first flame, the one that birthed his universe and set entropy in motion. But it is also the last flame, the one that will cleanse the world. All legends and gods of fire are just stories told of humans who once glimpsed this magnificence.

It is the beginning and end, and all that came between. By its birth embers, the formless void of creation came to know life. By its warmth entropy, and thus both life and death came to be. By its final blaze, everything will die.

And when he truly understands, it pulls away and leaves his mind unharmed. Warm and brighter than the sun, yes, but unharmed none the less. He understands that it wanted to take his measure
and it found him… not wanting, but too different to interest it.

**Find my heart**, it commands, a plea that writes itself in his bones and blood and mind.

Izuku nods for what else can he do in the face of this god.

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He avoids the abyss for a few days after that. God flames aren’t something he wants to deal with right now. Instead, he puts it to the back of his mind. He doesn’t bury it for the knowledge won’t break him like the rest of the things in his mind. It has the added bonus of burning the voice whenever it chose to rise to the surface.

So, as he talks to Shinsou Hitoshi about the intricacies of pleasing their cat overlords, he does so with a voice screaming in agony at the back of his mind. Maybe he should care because the screams make his nose bleed and plague his dreams and stop him sleeping, and he tastes crystal on his tongue and smells burning flesh. But all of that sounds like a lot of work and Izuku is infinitely more interested in reading his books and training with All Might and making breakfast for his mother.

Those things are simple.

Safe.

Sane.

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Chapter End Notes

Credit for Mika goes to PitViperOfDoom who wrote the incredible story *Yesterday Upon Their Stair*

That’s all from me for now. Thank you for reading this. If you enjoyed the story leave a kudos and if you have any questions just leave a comment below. But know that all of that is unnecessary and as always, your readership is quite enough for me. Cheers.
‘All life is precious. Yes, this is an idea you have likely hear since you were a child but life itself is precious. No, because there is a higher purpose or intelligent design or god. We can be the greatest cosmic joke and I would still say the same. Life is precious because it is. I have taken many lives, and each is a greater burden to bear as I age. From the boys swayed by rousing speeches to the jaded old men struggling to keep their children fed, each life matters. Each life has value. That value is priceless.’

—Excerpt from ‘My Eclipse’ by Hawkmoon.

Time waits for no one. This fact, Izuku was most certainly aware of. It didn’t matter that he could spend more time in the deep darkness and gain a few more hours than most. Inevitably, the days would pass and each cross on the calendar brought him closer to the final day. The day of the exam.

He stares at his reflection and sees tired eyes and a face devoid of baby fat. He sees a brilliant streak of white in his otherwise dark green hair and the outline of a scar on his shoulder. It is much worse on his back, but he is thankful that massive eye had healed him, and the wound didn’t interrupt his training. The scar on his left forearm is pale and silvery against his skin, extra care to hide it from everyone in his life.

Today is his last session with Jin Mo-Ri before the exam. He finds the man crouched on a pole driven deep in the ground, seemingly asleep in that impossible position. The man opens his star-like eyes and jumps down, landing easily.

Izuku waves. “Hi,” he says and rolls his shoulders, wondering exactly what his teacher will make him go through today.

“How we spar,” Jin says. “And we see your true skill level.”

Izuku sighs and removes his jacket, throwing it the wayside. Jin gives him time to stretch and warm up, even pointing out where Izuku could put more effort in.

When he is ready, he falls into a basic front stance, left foot forward and one shoulder-width apart from his right foot and arms held at the ready. It’s a simple, solid stance that has been beaten into him. When Jin moves, it isn’t anywhere near as fast as he’s seen the man move, but it is still nearly too much for Izuku.

He bats aside the first punch, kicks low and forward in retaliation. Jin jumps over the strike easily even as Izuku crouches and rolls with the momentum of his kick. He springs forward just before Jin lands.

And nearly takes an axe kick to his back for his troubles.

He blocks it, both arms raised in a guard even if it feels like his bones are creaking from the strength of the kick. Somehow, he feels Jin bring even more force down with his kick, and only when he sees his other knee rising does Izuku realises the man just used his block as a pivot point.

He takes the knee to the side and hits the sand hard.
His side hurts but Izuku forces himself up just quick enough to dodge the quick punch to his face. He pirouettes around his master’s outstretched hand and uses that momentum to slam a knee straight in his master’s unprotected side.

It pushes the man back, and Izuku twists and crouches like a flash, then follows through immediately with a rising back kick. He feels it strike home, but sees his teacher has caught the strike in his intertwined fingers. He almost seems to swing forward using Izuku’s extended foot as a handhold and kicks Izuku in the chest. He flies back, skimming the sand but forces himself to flip and land in a three-point crouch.

He barely has his guard up when his teacher comes at him with a fast punch. He raises his left arm to block it. Feels the way it pushes him back and all the force transmitted through his arm.

Oh, he thinks and instead of trying to take all the force or even stepping back, Izuku lets his body twist and flicks his elbow out against his teacher’s upper arm. All the force of the original blow seems to be transmitted to Jin’s arm, knocking it up and leaving the man defenceless.

He’s seen his teacher perform that same elbow strike before. He’s had to practice it a dozen times, but it never seems to compare to Jin’s. But this Is the first time he feels calling it Arang, the hungry wolf, and not a simple elbow strike is appropriate.

Instinct guides his next strike. His left leg pivots on the spot and his right leg lashes out. He outstretches his right arm at the same time for balance and follows through with the strike that seems to move exponentially faster. The balls of his feet meet Jin’s face and the man rises in the air. Hwechook, he whispers in his mind.

And then his leg stops.

Izuku’s eyes widen as the man has his hand protecting his face, balancing perfectly on Izuku’s outstretched leg. He hadn’t even seen Jin move.

Jin grins and seems to disappear. Izuku feels a hand on his shoulder and the next thing he knows he’s upright.

“Good job,” his teacher says and Izuku realises this is the first time he’s seen his teacher smile. “You learn important lesson. Not using this so much.” He pokes Izuku in the head.

He frowns. “I thought I was supposed to think.”

“Not if you forget instincts.” He ruffles his hair. “There is balance. Thought and reaction two halves of same whole. Let your body move instead of thinking too long and wasting force to perform both Arang and Hwechook.”

Izuku tilts his head, confused. “Haven’t I been doing them before?”

Jin shakes his head. “Roundhouse kick, yes, Hwechook no. Elbow strike yes, Arang no. There is difference in execution. Nuance in intent. Your body understands a bit even if your brain is too stupid.”

“Oh…” he says uncertainly, stepping back a bit.

Jin ruffles his hair and it’s the most affectionate gesture he’s ever received from the man. He steps back, putting some distance between them. “The secrets of Renewal Taekwondo will reveal themselves to you. Practice. For now, I show you the secret of Hwechook.”
Something about his teacher changes. He’s seen the man serious in teaching him and even seen his wrath when All Might overexerted him and left him with a pulled muscle. His posture hasn’t shifted, and his smile is still as bright as ever.

And yet, something terrifying takes over the man. It is the simple knowledge that no matter what Izuku does, he can not win against him.

_Run! Run! Run!_ The voice in his head screams and Izuku is inclined to agree, but he is rooted to the spot.

“This will not hurt,” his teacher says, the only reassurance Izuku has.

And then he’s right in front of Izuku, his leg raised in the Hwechook and barely an inch from Izuku’s face. He feels the displaced air from the blow.

The world shifts. He feels like time itself has stopped as another Jin Mo-Ri has appeared on his side, leg raised in the Hwechook as well. Izuku flinches back from the double vision. And then senses a third Jin behind him, leg raised in the Hwechook.

The force of the displaced wind hits him all at the same time and in opposing directions. It leaves him stunned and unable to do anything but collapse in shock. Strong arms catch him and Izuku looks to his teacher, unable to form words.

“That is third stance Hwechook,” he says softly. “Do you understand what I did?”

Izuku shakes his head. “Impossible. Y-y-you can’t—you were there and that’s not possible. No one can move that fast. There were three of you.”

Izuku knows what impossible looks like. Impossible is the dead giving birth to new life. Impossible is a song that will devour all that lives. Impossible is an eye larger than the world. Impossible is a flame that will burn away the universe and start it anew.

And yet, this mortal man makes Izuku understand a new type of impossibility.

“Anything is possible to Renewal Taekwondo if only once,” his teacher says firmly. “Do not let up your training. You might be able to win against high school bully now.”

*****

He messages Shinsou occasionally, but Izuku gets the sense that they’re both as stressed as each other, just in different ways. So, he doesn’t force himself to reply immediately when he’s in the middle of a practice test at home or on a five-mile run early in the morning. It is odd having a friend again. The last one had been Kaachan—

_A death for a death_, the voice yells suddenly

—and that had been years ago. He rubs away the blood leaking from his nose with a napkin, making sure to catch the small squishy mass that accompanies it. Throwing it away, he wonders if it’s a piece of his brain or just a bit of congealed blood. And decides it won’t matter.

They meet up one last time at Anteiku café. Mika sits in his lap as he talks quickly to Shinsou, filling in the silences the other boy is content to bask in. He wonders often if Shinsou is here because he likes Izuku or because he’s just as lonely. But sometimes, out of the corner of his eyes when Shinsou thinks he isn’t looking, he sees the boy stop frowning—it is a tiny thing, hardly noticeable, but it makes Izuku think that he’s still capable of doing good.
That moment of joy follows him as he delves deeper into the abyss, deeper than he’s ever gone before. He walks across the unhallowed grave of a dead god, and when his concentration falters the massive corpse rises and he sees the final moments as it battled a dragon that breathed the godflame. He’s nearly incinerated in this moment of the past made present, but the shadows rise and he escapes by diving another level deeper. He’s seen what comes of dead gods fighting and the last time his mother found him on the floor bleeding from his eyes—and no words had been able to calm her, even when he stopped spouting a litany of the damned and could explain that he had no lasting damage.

He is captured by a group of what he calls Joro-Gumo, spider-like creatures with the head of a woman and oversized breasts, dripping putrid ichor instead of milk. They are absolutely disgusting and after the blood-spiders, Izuku has absolutely no sympathy for them, especially not after one cocoons him and nearly lays her eggs in his torso. He leaves her staked through the head and sets the nest on fire with a flare.

Anything even vaguely spider-like dies instantly the moment he senses them. He has no interest in playing games with such abominations.

He has a conversation with a primordial serpent, its head similar to a human’s but not so similar he would ever mistake it for one. It, and a dozen others like it, watch over a world of darkness ruled by a shambling abomination of ashen embers and darkness. Izuku stays well away from that realm because he sees the ashen one fling lightning that shears off dragon scales, and though these are dragons of a different sort, he still respects their power.

The deeper he dives, the more time he has. He sleeps in relatively safe spots like the hollowed-out husk of a giant worm or on the back of a bird carrying a galaxy on each wing, each feather the history of a dead people. One day he reaches a depth so low that the song he always wants to forget is louder than his heartbeat. It makes him cough blood and he’s about to turn back when he is surrounded by dragons.

Their wings are blacker than the darkest night and they tower over him. He fights with the shadows to keep them smaller than a skyscraper and not the planet-sized monstrosities they really are. He waves at them and wonders just how fucked he is.

//Shadowshield, you will go no further. The [SINGERS/ENDBRINGERS/CALAMITY] must not be disturbed//

The voice isn’t anywhere as thunderous as he expects and maybe that’s because of the song making everything else seem less important. The idea that dragons which are worlds unto themselves, and breathe the infernal godflame, find the things hiding further in the abyss terrifying gives him cause not to ever go back there.

“Yeah, I got no plans to do so,” Izuku says and lets his earnestness be communicated through his shadow. “Wanna give me a ride home?”

//We are not toys, shadowking// one of them roars and the world is asunder. Izuku wreathes himself in shadow, anchors the reality he wills against the world exploding in agony.

You fucked up, the voice whispers, almost afraid to draw the attention of these leviathans.

“I never said you were,” Izuku counters once the world has been destroyed and all that is left is a barren moon. “I just asked politely. Let’s make a deal. If you give me a ride home, then I’ll let you kill me if I come anywhere near them.”
And that is how Izuku finds himself flying cradled in the surprisingly human hands of a dragon. Realms and worlds pass with each beat of its massive wings. Izuku doesn’t focus too much on the creatures lurking in the corners of space and the angles of time because those things might break his mind again. And he’s rather tired of that. He smiles uncertainly as another dragon, this one smaller than the one carrying him takes a seat beside him.

But he’s seen much, much worse than a baby dragon—baby only because it is as large as a building and not the universe of the one carrying them both—and pulls out a deck of cards from his pocket. The tricks he performs are simple and seem to entertain the hatchling for a moment that lasts an eternity before it flies away.

His life is madness incarnate. But there is a beauty to be found in odd places. There are flowers that shine with the first light of the universe, though the sight of them makes him build monuments in the night until his mother puts a stop to it and brings him back to the real. His eyes glow at night after that, almost like a cat. It isn’t the only change. His teeth are slightly sharper, not enough for anyone but his mother to notice, but sharp enough for him to bite through his lips—and sometimes there are crystals that spill out—more often. And his stomach seems to be endless. He’s thankful that though he can eat three or even four times as much, he does not need to.

It becomes easier to make shadow matter in the real world. It only takes him forty minutes to bring them forth until he has enough for a thin strand, but he can do it without spending too much concentration. He learns it is easier to let them pool in his shadow—and is thankful that they are as thinner than a Planck length unless he tells them otherwise—until he’s ready to use them. It lets him make thicker constructs by bidding his time. They aren’t very useful, and their low density means they either shatter on impact or fade away on contact with the light.

His mother listens politely as he explains all this. Then she asks if he isn’t simply procrastinating and that makes him flush. He goes upstairs and does the maths homework he’s been putting off for the last two days. When he starts seeing nightmares in the equations, he reaches into his shadow and pulls out a deck of cards. He plays a hand of blackjack against himself, so he can let the simplicity of card counting push back the encroaching nightmares.

He’s tired one day, dead on his feet and almost too lazy to get to his bedroom. He flicks on the dim hallway light, and the contrast makes all the shadows long. All he wants, with every fibre of his being, is to pass out and never wake up again. He sinks and yelps, wide awake as his shadow drags him down. He lands in the twisted reflection of his room and stares at it.

“Are you being serious?” he asks, looking at the torn All Might poster. “I just had to fucking want to get here. You idiot.”

Yes, you are, the voice snarls venomously.

“And you need to shut up,” Izuku says and strides to his door, opening it. He walks out onto the hard floor. Looking around, he finds himself in the corner the stairs make with the second floor where the shadows are deepest. He’s too tired to give it any more thought until the next morning.

He only manages to get back to the abyss under his own power—and not through death—one more before it’s the morning of the exam.

They meet at the beach, All Might looking skinny in his baggy clothes eight sizes too big.

Izuku smiles shyly, waving. All Might smiles back, but it isn’t anywhere near as large as usual.

“Morning, Young Midoriya,” he says and sits in the sand.
He gestures for Izuku to do the same. It might be out of the norm but Izuku lowers himself, hoping that he won’t find sand chaffing his ass later tonight. Leggings are useful in that regard, but they aren’t infallible.

“You’ve progressed well,” All Might says, making Izuku smile brighter. “You have a long way to go before you will be able to fully utilise One For All but I believe the sheer force of it will not break all of your limbs. But there are a few things that I must address.”

Izuku frowns. Warily, he asks, “Like what?”

“Like the scar on your forearm.” Izuku looks down and sees it still hidden. “At first I believed you wore the long-sleeved shirt because of the sand until I saw it one day. I wouldn’t have pried if I could say with certainty that it had occurred before I met you. And whilst Jin Mo-Ri has said you are fine, he is not the one who might lose a successor.”

Izuku stares at All Might whose eyes shine brightly. His heart seems to want to escape his chest. His hands are shaking, he notices distantly because this was never supposed to happen. All Might was never supposed to know about any of this.

“I ask that you be honest with me,” his hero says, gently now.

He will not accept a monster, the voice in his head says and Izuku can’t help but agree.

That makes him wonder just how long until he’s locked in a lab deep underground and experimented on. There are nonsensical and ridiculous quirks which break every law of physics, yes, but none of them compares to resurrection. How long till they cut open his chest to see what makes him what he is: a monster only sometimes human. And if not some shady government organisation, then a villain somewhere with even fewer scruples.

His eyes water as his world comes crashing down in neither a bang nor a whimper. Just the sudden realisation that he will never become a hero. Can never become one.

“Izuku, my boy,” his hero says kindly, “whatever it is, we can work through it.”

He lies. There can be no hope for little, broken things.

“How can you say that?” he snaps, maybe at his hero and maybe at the voice because he isn’t broken. “You don’t know. How can you know? You can’t just make this better with a few words. Nothing can.”

All Might only smiles brighter. “Depression can be treated, my boy, and I have faith in you.”

He pauses, staring at All Might in shock. Then he chuckles. “Is that what you think this is? I don’t have depression.”

“It isn’t anything—”

“I don’t have depression,” he snarls and maybe this is a mistake but Izuku is so tired of lying and keeping secrets that he summons a tendril of shadow to his hand. “I have a Quirk.”

All Might’s eyes are wide in shock and maybe a hint of betrayal. “But how?”

Izuku chuckles bitterly. “Trauma brings out hidden quirks.” He forms a thin rod with the shadow and taps it against the streak of white hair. “This.”
All Might swallows, uncertain for the first time Izuku has known the man. “Then why didn’t you tell me, my boy. I would not have cast you out for it.”

Izuku wipes away tears even as new ones fall. “How do you tell anyone?” He’s standing now, pacing off the nervous energy.

“Like you are now.”

“So, you expected me to just tell you I don’t die?” he asks, petulantly.

*You fucking idiot.*

That makes him realise what he’s just said.

“Young Midoriya, forgive me but I may have misheard you.”

Something tells Izuku that he didn’t. He laughs once more. And then he pulls up his left sleeve. “I slit my wrist five months ago. I bled out, alone and terrified. Maybe I was mad but… maybe an ending would have been better. He looks up to the rising sun. It is dawn when the shadows are long, and his powers feel strongest. “And I did because a fridge fell on me and crushed me. Right there. I died right there.”

He points at the spot and though the beach might be clear of trash he can never forget the place he died a second time. It hurts to see the horror in All Might’s eyes but somehow, he feels better. Maybe telling the truth is liberating or maybe Izuku is simply a horrible person taking pleasure in pain.

“The first time it happened I… I-I cracked my skull on a pole. Yeah, that pole I told you about.” He turns because it’s getting harder to see his hero stare at him like that. “I’ve died a lot. More than anyone should.”

“Young Midoriya, do you expect me to believe you come back from the dead?”

Izuku takes a deep, shuddering breath. He still has the shadow rod in his hand. With a simple thought, it sharpens. “See for yourself.”

There are four large arteries in the neck, two in the front that he can easily reach, and with the sharpness of the blade, he might reach those in the back. Either way, the damage will be great enough that he’ll bleed out quickly.

He thrusts with the needle and feels it prick his skin, sliding beneath the topmost layer of skin. And then it stops.

A large hand grips his wrist and Izuku sees All Might the hero, larger and grander than all the rest. He isn’t smiling any longer.

“That was reckless,” he says gravely.

Izuku sniffs. Half-blind from the tears. “Would you have believed me without proof? He asks shakily.

“Yes,” his hero says and that makes Izuku stumble back. All Might lets him and he falls to the ground. “You are many things, Izuku, but a liar is not one of them. At least, you have never lied to me.”
“I’m a monster,” he whispers.

“Are you a monster for fearing rejection?” All Might asks simply. "Are you a monster because you want to be a hero? You hid the truth from me but there are many things I have yet to tell you. Perhaps I am at fault for never having given you a reason to trust me."

“N-n no, that’s not—”

“It is. You are young and fallible. Scared and rightfully so. Jin often accuses me of being a bad teacher. I see now he is right now.”

Izuku kneels, bringing his head to the sand. “I’m sorry. You’re the best teacher I could ask for,” he says and waits.

*****

Toshinori Yagi has seen much in his life, short as it might wind up being. He’s fought villains and reformed vigilantes. He watched his mentor fall in battle and has worried that he will never find a successor worthy of this mantle. Yes, Mirio Togata had all the makings of a great hero and his innate impermeability quirk would truly have made One for All invincible.

But this quiet boy prostate on the ground in forgiveness has something no one else possesses. Izuku Midoriya, who mumbled too much and questioned everything, who read the philosophies of many great heroes and who tried so hard to be worthy of Toshinori, is worthy for one aspect above all. It isn’t his kindness for many had that, nor is it his determination and hard work as Mirio outstripped Izuku in that regard, or even the bond they once shared by both being quirkless. No, what Yagi sees in Izuku is such unbridled optimism in humanity that even now he is stunned by it.

And now, to know that the boy he was training, has another quirk. One that brought him back from the dead, and that breaks Yagi’s heart because it meant that somewhere, somehow, he had faltered, and only by grace does he still have a successor. The gut-wrenching fear of seeing the boy make a shadow blade and nearly plunge it in his jugular vein has yet to fade, and only the steel nerves of facing death multiple times stop him from shaking. It is either madness or complete surety, and nothing Izuku had done made him think the boy could be mad—yes, some days his eyes were blank and terrified and pleading for help but a kind word from Yagi, or Jin Mo-Ri, always seemed to banish that darkness, and on days where Yagi wondered if his efforts truly made a difference, Izuku was there with a smile that seemed to burn as the sun.

Toshinori believes the boy when he says he has a quirk that defied logic because he has come to trust Izuku, come to accept him as a confidant with each time he sees Izuku check the perimeter before he changes forms. One day, once Izuku is ready and his self-esteem is much greater, Yagi will tell him everything from Nana to All For One but he is not ready to place such a burden on the boy. He hopes that he can face the great enemy before Izuku must, and he will gladly fall in battle to ensure it if it comes to that, but if Izuku will be the one to face him then Yagi will see him ready.

And knowing that he can never truly die, that every subsequent holder of One For All will wield the same power, alleviates many of his worries. This will not be the first time another power has been added to; Nana’s quirk added a measure of durability, and the third-wielder added the enhanced perception that allows Yagi to see his blows even when they move faster than sound.

This boy who so feared Yagi’s disdain, and perhaps Izuku fears his indifference more, may very well be the greatest holder of One For All simply because he can never fall in battle. And if he can win against age, then there will always be a symbol of peace protecting the world.
With this power, the power to turn back the ultimate expression of human frailness, to wield shadows as a tool, Izuku might very well become one of the great heroes of history, and eclipse the likes of Hero and Hawkmoon whose shoes Yagi struggles to fill every day, and whose triumphs still shake the world.

Yagi kneels and lays hands on the shoulders of his successor. Forces the boy to meet his eyes. Grins at him.

“Rise, Young Midoriya,” he says and helps Izuku up even as the boy cries, “and hold your head up high. A hero must always be a shining light in the dark and you, my boy, shine brighter than any other. So, clench your buttocks and feel the determination in your chest, and scream with all your might.”

Izuku wipes his eyes dry, sniffling. “You mean…”

Yagi nods and lets One For All fill his body. “I could have no greater successor, Izuku Midoriya. Laugh for you are here and take my power and become a hero greater than any other.”

A shaky chuckle escapes the boy’s lips. It isn’t much compared to All Might but it is enough. “How?” he asks.

All Might plucks a strand of golden hair. “Eat this.”

Izuku’s expression shatters. “What!”

He stares at All Might, shaken and feeling whiplash from all the emotions. He holds a single strand of golden hair as though it holds all the answers in the world.

“Huh?” he asks because this isn’t meant to happen in the real world.

All Might almost flushes and scratches the back of his head. “It doesn’t matter what it is so long as you take in my DNA.”

Izuku blinks at the man. Decides he’s eaten things much worse in the darkness. Takes the hair. “Okay,” he says and swallows it.

“Good. It will take a few hours, but you should have just enough time before the exam. But your quirk needs a name.” Izuku frowns. “To keep All For One a secret, I originally had it called ‘Super Power’.”

He tilts his head. Then laughs at the absurdity of it. “That is a horrible name.”

“You think of something better?”

“I-I don’t have to.”

All Might sighs. “But it still needs a new name. Something you can own and say proudly.”

He frowns, never having given it any thought. He’s not calling it ‘the abyss’ because he has no intention of letting anyone know about that and anything relating to resurrection is a no go.

You are the Shadowshield, the voice whispers.

He blanks out for a second, static filling his mind. It vanishes, and he sees All Might grinning.
“Yes, that is a heroic name.” All Might nods. “Shadowshield. I believe it suits you.”

That is the last thing All Might says before leaving.

*What did you do?* He asks the voice. It doesn’t respond. Izuku sighs, looking at his watch. He has ninety minutes before he needs to leave for the train station. Not much time. At least, not in the real world.

It has become easier to navigate the Abyss. Something about his strength with shadows lets him set a reality that won’t tear his mind asunder. It has the benefit of distances becoming much shorter. He has seen entire worlds pass in the background during a short stroll. But there are places that are stable often. The beached whales, despite his general distaste—and he’s come to learn that he pities their history more than anything—of them have carved a bubble that lets them continue their half-life. The eye larger than continents is always there. But the safest place he’s come to trust is the forest of floating trees.

Their threadlike guardians watch him, occasionally some speak to him, but they are generally content to ignore his presence. Even when he is in the grove of ancient trees, so long as he doesn’t approach the godflame. He sits in kiza position, not and never seiza because Jin had shown him just how slow it was to get into a ready position from that. It had taken Izuku a few weeks to resting all his weight on the balls of his feet, but he can do it comfortably now.

The trees observe him momentarily before returning to their eternal vigil. He exhales deeply, unaware of how nervous he was. Then focuses on his body. One For All is somewhere in his body and here, where a large portion of his innate quirk is expressed outwardly, it should be easier to feel a foreign power.

Falling in a meditative trance is difficult as he can rarely do it in the real since it gave the nightmares hiding in the back of his mind a gateway to the forefront but doing so in the abyss gave them nowhere of interest to go. And the one time a parasite that followed him from a dying world sought to escape and use him as a conduit to his world, the tree guardians had torn it apart.

The hour’s pass.

Izuku feels something like lightning slowly permeate his body. He lets it progress from his stomach and to his bloodstream, touching his muscles and lungs and bones. It tingles when it reaches his spine and seems to take forever at the base before it travels up his brain stem. Finally, it stops at his eyes.

Izuku opens them and finds his body glowing with power. Not much, but enough that he lets it go peacefully. His eyes snap to the sky as a streak of green lightning illuminates the world.

“What?” he asks as the world falls dark again.

He looks to the trees. Finds them deep in conversation. And yet, not even one cares for him. Or the lightning. He shrugs. It might just be a normal thing then.

****

From the kingdom does the tribute and bounty flow to the monarch. That is the order. The weak will serve the strong. This law is primordial and immutable. All follow it, from the worm gods of the Fundament and the spires singing of the final dawn at the beginning of time to the slave king in hiding.

And yet, you subvert this law. You allow your power to become one with the dark below. What
now will the future long past hold from your actions? Regardless, do as you please, young king. It is by your sacrifice that we live and by the tribute of your kingdom that you will outlive all. All actions are possible for you if only once.

The abyss is your home, Izuku Midoriya. We have waited for eons in ignorance for you. We can wait years yet.

*****

He boards the train, headphones cranked to full to drown out the sounds of everything screaming in his mind. It only gives him a worse headache. Thankfully, he has come to learn how to function with them. Even if this one feels worse than usual. It might have something to do with how the shadows he feels become more acute or blurrier with neither rhyme nor reason. Or how he can feel much further or suddenly a few feet away or nothing at all.

The bright sunlight makes it worse. It might not be noon but when he can feel shadows they are weakened in the light. So, he doesn’t sense him before he speaks.

“Deku,” Kaachan shouts though that says little about his mood, and Izuku turns nervously. “Stay the fuck out of my way.”

Deku steps back, waving his hands erratically. “M-morning—”

“Shut the fuck up,” Kaachan snarls and reaches into his pocket. He throws something that Deku barely manages to catch. “And stop looking like a stupid fuck.”

Kaachan walks past him before he recovers. He stares bewildered at the pocket tissues now in his hand until a drop of blood lands on it. He frowns and takes a tissue out, placing it on his bleeding nose. He tilts his head back and watches Kaachan stalk away.

Why is he being so nice? He wonders because Kaachan’s hardly so much as laid eyes on him for the last few months.

A secret, the voice says, almost tiredly. And I won’t tell you because you’ll just lock me up again with the fire.

“Then stop being a nuisance,” he says and turns.

He stumbles over his own foot. Izuku curses and uses his rotational momentum to pirouette tightly on the spot, extending one leg and catching himself in a crouch. He winces, his ankle twinging painfully.

“Hey, are you okay?” a bright voice asks. “That was really cool the way you caught yourself.”

Izuku turns, thankful for his training with Jin because at least he has enough balance to catch himself if he falls. The girl who said it is rather plain looking but for the brown hair Izuku swears is more orange than brown, and the kindest expression he’s ever seen from another person.

“Um, okay?” he says, unsure of how to accept the compliment.

She smiles and Izuku wonders how there can be two suns in the real world. “It would have been bad luck to fall before the exam. Good luck.”

She’s off before Izuku can say anything else. He mumbles, “Good luck,” lamely at her as she skips—no, she’s just walking but Izuku didn’t know steps could be happy—away.
He shakes his head, still confused. First Kaachan and now this girl.

*I like her,* the voice says. *She looks tasty.*

Izuku rolls his eyes. "And you say you don't like fire." And just like that, the voice is screaming in agony as Izuku walks up the stairs.

He checks for Shinsou. Frowns when he can’t find him since they agreed to meet up. Then checks his phone. There’s a series of messages and he can’t help but smile.

[0903] Shinsou: Sorry, running late.
[0905] Shinsou: Sick cat puked on my uniform.
[0915] Shinsou: Missed my train. Gonna be late. Don't wait up on me.

Izuku sends off a quick picture of him smiling at the entrance before putting his phone away. It takes him a moment to adjust to the darkness and a moment longer to realise they're grouped by school: there's a boy with shockingly red hair talking with a horned girl with purple skin, and the two seem to be laughing with the ease of old friends.

Kaachan doesn’t look at Izuku, doesn’t speak except when he's mumbling loud enough that it becomes a distraction. It is nowhere near as embarrassing as an immaculate boy chews him out and everyone stares at him. He sinks deeper into his seat as the spotlight lands on him.

“Fucking side characters,” Kaachan growls loud enough that the people around him turn away.

Deku glances at him as Present Mic resumes with his explanation. His once friend’s—*I remember what he did*—eyes smoulder. Deku looks away quickly and focuses on the various robot silhouettes on the screen.

He still has them on his mind when they’re assembled before a massive door. And Izuku’s coming to realise that UA has a flair for the dramatic even if it is tempered with modernity and pragmatism unlike the excesses of the past.

He dabs at the blood leaking from his nose as his headache gets worse. The brightness and the way his erratic senses play havoc with his concentration mean that he misses it when the exam starts and must play catch-up. Sometimes shadows appear in his senses and it costs him precious seconds each time to turn and find that no, that’s just the seventh building he’s been distracted by.

And when he does find a robot he is too slow to even get ready before someone else destroys it. His hands shake as time runs out and he doesn't have a single point to his name. His frustration gets bad enough that he smiles at a blonde boy who fires lasers and from the way the boy flees Izuku probably let a bit of the madness shine through for a moment.

Izuku wants to run and hide. He’s become good at it over the last few months. He’s seen nightmares and monster and creatures a step away from being a god. And none of them compares to the shame of not being able to do anything.

His quirk, his real quirk, is useless here even if it wasn’t fighting him. It will take too long to draw a tendril of shadow in the best case and even then, it will very likely be too weak to pierce the
robots. So, he runs even as the others rained down destruction; sarp winds and lightning and explosions filling the world.

The world seems to rock and shake. A shadow of gargantuan proportions covers the street and the surrounding building before it appears. It towers over the buildings, menacing and utterly overwhelming. Those other robots that he had sought to flee from are nothing compared to this god of steel.

He stumbles and falls face first, frozen in shock. Not because this is the largest creature he’s ever seen but because it’s the first time he’s seen something of such absolute physicality that doesn’t break his mind. Others run by him, shaking Izuku out of his reverie. He rises to his feet, ready to run when he hears someone grunt in pain.

He looks to the side and sees a girl trapped beneath the rubble. His mind freezes. He can’t pull her out. He doesn’t have the strength to do so and the metal deity is approaching, ponderously slow. He knows that he lacks the strength to fight it. Even the others who fought so easily are fleeing. What can Izuku do in the face of a behemoth?

But he can’t leave her.

Izuku curses and stands. She meets his eyes and Izuku simply grins at her, brilliant and undoubtedly bloody from his nose.

“Hey, again,” he says, walking towards this machine god. He stares at its descending arm, inevitable as a landslide. It could kill easily and cause so much destruction. And yet, Izuku finds it wanting.

Pathetic, the voice in his head says and Izuku agrees for once.

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Uraraka stares at the robot in horror and struggles to fight free of the rock trapping her leg. She hates this, hates being weak when she was doing well. Twenty-eight points probably weren’t anywhere near as much as the guy leaving a good chunk of the exam area frozen, but it could have been enough.

And now she’s trapped and helpless. She gasps when she twists something wrong, unshed tears burning her eyes. She raises her head and sees someone. It’s the boy with the streak of white hair, the boy who stopped himself falling with grace, the boy whom she hadn’t seen fight a single robot. He’s on the ground, looking as terrified as she felt.

And then he changes. It's not a mutation or a quirk at all, but something about him completely shifts. He stands, all the fear gone and bares his teeth in what might generously be called a smile—it’s too sharp and haunting and vicious and bloody. And yet, it calms her.

“Hey, again,” he says to her calmly. His fingers splay out and clench over and over again as he walks, no, as he stalks towards the zero-pointer. The awkward boy she remembers nearly tripping now has the gait of a predator hunting prey at night.

He looks up to it and sighs, disgusted. She wonders how he can have so much contempt for something even the tyrant Titan would have praised.

For a fraction of a second that seems to stretch forever, green sparks dance across his body, his body glowing and his shadow darkening. And then he moves. She can barely track his trajectory as he leaps from the ground and rises above the robot. He twists in the air and brings his leg down.
Uraraka might not be well versed in combat techniques but she recognises an axe kick when she sees it. She watches, amazed, as the force of his blow destroys the robot’s head as though it were nothing more than an irritant.

“Huh,” she says, dumbly. Because anyone with a quirk that strong should have been leading the pack.

Explosions wrack the robot, chunks of its armour crumbling and some sent flying away. She looks on in horror as a piece of metal strikes the boy head on. His body goes limp in the air, and the power that seemed to surround him disappears.

He’s far from her, knocked off course by that piece of metal. She grimaces, knowing what she has to do and hating it all the while. But she knows that the pain in the moment will be nothing compared to the pain of regret if she does nothing.

She moves quickly for she has little time. She taps the rubble, lightening it almost to nothing and shoves with all her strength. It goes flying and hits a building. She doesn’t care that the building groans ponderously or that it creaks threateningly. Instead, Ochaco uses her power internally.

Nausea comes immediately but she shoves it to the side. She wants to be a hero and not being able to save the boy—especially when she has the power to do so—would, in her opinion, make her just shy of a villain.

Her leg hurts, and something might be broken. Ochaco ignores it, crouches, and with one deep breath, she launches herself in the air. Nausea makes the world spins but despite, Ochaco sees she'll overshoot the boy. Fine. She cancels her power and gravity once again takes hold of her.

She reaches out and grabs the boy’s arm, lightening him with hardly a thought. It takes all she has to focus on their fall. She uses her other arm and wraps both arms around him, twisting so that it is her back that will hit the ground first if she fucks up.

Her breathing comes quick and short as the ground comes closer and closer. At the last moment, she applies her quirk on herself. Instantly her momentum is arrested. Nausea comes back with a vengeance. Gently, she shoves the boy to one side and leans to the other. She doesn't fight it this time as her stomach rebels. She's only thankful she manages to aim the vomit away from her body.

“Times up!” Present Mic screams.

Ochaco sighs and looks to the unconscious boy. He legs are bent at odd angles. She winces, amazed that he remained awake through that and only an errant piece of metal took him out. For someone with such a strong quirk, she wonders how he could have been so skittish and afraid for all that the fear disappeared for a second.

And she feels pity that no matter his strength, he hadn’t won any points.

“No,” she whispers because no one that brave deserved to be denied entrance to UA.

So, when the short old lady that heals the boy, and insults him for being so reckless, gives Ochaco the all clear she runs to Present Mic. It doesn’t matter that the man might not be dispensing points. She’s not going to let the boy fail. No matter the cost.

She argues herself hoarse with Present Mic, and then the principal—who almost terrifies her to silence until she remembers that bloody grin—who concedes defeat and calls All Might. The presence of the greatest hero of her time quells the fire and passion she has.
"I am here," All Might says. "Young Uraraka I take it. I understand and sympathise with your conviction, but I give you my word that UA considers all factors when evaluating a student. This is a campus for heroics and heroic actions are not ignored."

That is enough for her.

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Izuku sits in the lounge three days after the entrance exam, listless in a way he hasn’t felt in a long time. Even the voices in his head are silent. Nothing seems to matter now that he’s failed. He can’t contact All Might and Jin Mo-Ri seems to have vanished into the ether though he did send a curt ‘Busy’ this morning as a reply.

He reaches for the barbell on the floor.

“No more,” his mother says a moment before the barbell flies away. He looks back and sees the barbell land on the floor next to his mother.

“You are not going to waste away,” she says sternly.

Izuku sighs. “Kaa-san, I failed. It’s over.”

“You think a single arbitrary exam is the end of your life? It happened. Get over it.”

"I can't," he shouts and wipes away the tears.

She looks unimpressed. “Izuku, I’ve seen you break enough times over the last few months and helped you pick up the pieces. You’ve had a setback and it hurts, believe me I know. But are you telling me you can’t do any good if you don’t go to that school?”

He sniffles. “It was my dream.”

She smiles gently. “Your dream was to be a hero. UA was just one path. It isn’t the only one.”

He offers her a shaky smile, but it comes out more of a grimace. “It still hurts.”

“I never said it shouldn’t. And it will hurt for a long time. Didn’t Ando say, 'so long as you have the will any place can be paradise.'”

He stares at her. Then laughs. “Hawkmoon said that. But you’re right.” He stands and walks to her, hugging her tightly. He lets go and nods at the barbell. “When did you get so strong?”

"When you needed me to be strong." She pats his head. “You’re my son.”

And she does look strong. Enough of the fat is gone that she looks younger. There’s a strength to her that isn’t simply physical and Izuku wonders if its something all mothers share. She ruffles his hair and plucks out a white strand.

“You lived through that. You can live through this.”

It isn’t easy, but he does move on even if he only takes one step forward. He leaves the safety of his home and delves into the abyss, searching for secrets—no matter how far and wide he searches, he can find no indication of the flame’s heart—and more often running away from the creatures there. He doesn’t use One For All, too afraid of leaving his limbs twisted in this place. But even that seems like running, so he calls Shinsou and they meet at the café.
The boy looks tired and just as uncertain as Izuku.

“H-hey,” Izuku greets. “Haven’t seen you in a while.”

Shinsou sips his coffee. “Well, I needed time to think about… everything, I guess.”

Izuku nods. “I’m pretty sure I failed. I couldn’t get any points.”

“Me too,” Shinsou says bitterly. “Punching giant robots isn’t all there is to being a hero.”

“No, it isn’t. I guess it's not fair to people with quirks suited to rescue operations. Or even support roles.” He strokes a cat that isn't Mika. It helps steel him to ask, finally, “What is your quirk?”

Shinsou frowns. He takes a deep breath and sighs. "You might as well know. It's called Brainwash. I can take control of people if they respond to me."

Izuku raises a brow. “That sounds like a super useful quirk,” he admits.

“What?” Shinsou asks, voice wavering.

“Yeah. You could probably deal with a lot of hostage situations like that.” He looks out the window. “A few months ago, there was this… sludge villain and he was really hard to fight. Kamui Woods and Mt. Lady were useless, and my friend nearly died. I think you could have dealt with that better even than All Might.”

Shinsou stays silent and Izuku watches cars drive past the window. He hears a sniffle and turns to see Shinsou crying.

“Whoa, what did I say?” he asks quickly. “I’m sorry—I didn’t mean to—I-I don’t even know—”

Shinsou raises a hand and wipes the tears from his face. He smiles for the first time since Izuku met him. “Thank you. Just thank you.”

Izuku smiles uncertainly. “I’m confused.”

“That’s because you’re an idiot.” There’s no malice in his voice. And even then, Shinsou is looking at him like Izuku hung the moon and stars for the boy.

It leaves him off balance long after they part. The warmth in his chest is odd but not unpleasant. It follows him and brightens with each message Shinsou sends. When he’s stuck in a patch of frozen time, the memory of that smile makes it easier for Izuku to power through that predicament. The trees don’t understand why his mood has changed so much and they ask if he needs healing—which makes him grin all the more.

He’s almost at peace with his failure when the letter from UA comes. He opens it with his mother. She holds him tight as All Might explains the rescue points and shows him the video of the girl arguing so strongly for him. He cries as he sees all sixty-five points.

The points are enough to take him all the way to fifth place. And the girl, Uraraka, has her name in second.

He jumps and pumps his fist in the air. And laughs when his mother catches him with her quirk before he can bash his head against the floor. Izuku smiles long into the night. When Shinsou messages him that he passed, Izuku worries that his grin will break his face.

He sleeps undisturbed for the first time in a long while.
That's all from me for now. Thank you for reading this. If you enjoyed the story leave a kudos and if you have any questions just leave a comment below. But know that all of that is unnecessary, and as always your readership is quite enough for me. Cheers.
i tell the lies

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

‘Pain brings clarity. Clarity brings focus. Focus brings opportunity. Take every injury as a reminder that you are alive. So long as you live, victory is a possibility. Do not squander that opportunity.’

—Excerpt from the recovered 'Tenets of Combat' likely authored by an underground hero or vigilante.

Katsuki Bakugou is angry.

Everything he feels is one form of anger or another. Mild annoyance is his default but that flares up easily to rage at the slightest provocation. And he doesn’t care what his mother says about his attitude. The hypocrite. She was just as angry and violent as he was. He learnt how to take his first punch from her.

But there are few things that make him want to burn the world to ash. He’s beaten the shit out of kids double his size any time they said he’d never be a hero and done the same to anyone who messed with his friend as a kid—not the spineless lackeys who trail along but that fucking asshole who wouldn’t stop trying to be better.

When he receives the letter from UA he’s not worried. He knows for a fact that he’s passed. It isn’t arrogance when he sees his name in first place but the way of the world. The useless side characters hadn’t done much to be of any use. He’s very much ready to see Deku’s name in last place.

Except it isn’t.

_Fifth place_, he thinks a second before his pleasant displeasure—something only he could feel—turned to absolute hate. He wanted to fight and to lash out at everything and everyone.

The rage follows him to school. They congratulate him, as is natural, and he takes his place as king. But they fucking have the audacity to so much as offer Deku a kind word and he very nearly breaks his desk in rage. But the explosion makes them shut up and Deku is too scared to look him in the face.

This will be the last day of middle school before they all travel their separate way. The side characters will go on to mediocre schools and live mediocre lives. But he's destined for glory.

Until the principal calls their ‘proud graduates to UA’ to his office at the end of the day. He wants to slam Deku in the wall just to see him cry. But not in the middle of the hallway where anyone could report it with impunity and fuck up his chances at the last moment.

He stands to Deku’s left, a smouldering pile of rage made manifest, as the principal drones on about how proud and delighted he is that two of their students will go to UA.

“I’m especially proud of you, Midoriya. Your success was a delightful”—Don’t destroy his desk, don’t destroy his desk—"surprise. I believe your determination will ennoble future students who believe their goal is out of reach.”
Bakugou takes a deep breath as Deku stammer, “T-t-thank you, sir.”

“And you, Bakugou. No one doubted your success, but first place truly is an achievement.” Bakugou rolls his eyes. “Now, should either of you require advice or even help, do not hesitate to contact me.”

_Fucking worm_, Bakugou thinks as they’re allowed to go. He keeps close to Deku, taking pleasure in the way he shakes. Good. He should remember who was the king and who was a fucking hallway servant.

The moment they’re out of sight he spins Deku around and slams him into the wall. Bakugou can see the tears in his eyes already. Pathetic.

“I fucking warned you to stay out of my way,” he roars and watches Deku flinch. “I should beat the shit out of you for ruining my dream.”

The bastard has the audacity to chuckle. “I-i-I thought your dream was to be a hero. You’re still going to UA.”

It takes all he has not to smash Deku’s head in the wall. “I was supposed to be the only one from this school.”

“Who c-cares? No one’s gonna remember where you came from.” Deku shakes his head. “I’m going to be a hero.”

The violent rage eases up slightly. Bakugou’s palms are sweaty, knees weak from restraining himself, and arms heavy from holding Deku up. He wants to blow the little shit up.

But he sees the streak of white hair.

He lets go of Deku, surprised when he stays standing. Deku’s shorter than him always has and always will be. Deku grins at him despite the tears. It looks like a grimace, too many teeth to be anything happy.

_When did his teeth get so sharp?_ Bakugou wonders, stepping back because the longer he stares the more teeth he sees, and they seem never-ending and ready to consume everything.

“I’m going to be a hero,” Izuku says unwavering, changing completely yet not changing at all.

_His eyes are shining_, Kacchan thinks errantly. He meets those eyes and regrets it immediately. There’s something terrifying lurking in those eyes, something vaster than worlds and yet so finitely small. An echo of nightmares watches him through those eyes. And he knows his mind would break under the sheer strange weight of seeing it in full.

“I know everything about you,” this thing that wears Izuku’s skin says. “And I know you can never be a hero. Do you remember what you did? I do.”

He takes another step back. Looks to the white hair again. Remembers being terrified of what he might have done that day months ago and running, dreading what might be, until Izuku returned to class terrified, almost broken, and scared, but most of all alive. Maybe that was why he had left Izuku alone and not because the boy had saved him from the sludge villain.

Izuku walks past Kaachan who stands there numb. He glances back, not surprised that Izuku’s back is tall or that the setting sun frames him. His shadow is long and somehow darker than night. For a moment where the world seems to waver, Izuku’s shadow reminds him of a monster with too many
eyes and teeth that shreds through all that is warm in the world, arms of twisted crystal and infernal engines powering it.

The moment disappears and Kacchan falls to the ground, landing on his knees. He breathes deeply, trying to forget whatever he just saw. Because no matter how terrifying Izuku is, he only became so after that day—*stop fucking thinking about it*—and knowing that is more than Kacchan can deal with.

He picks himself up long after Izuku is gone. Dusts his clothes off. Walks home and chooses to forget.

Katsuki Bakugou is angry.

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Izuku is surprised that Katsuki doesn’t antagonise him after school. He remembers the anger his oldest friend had during the meeting and is completely shocked that he walks home without so much as an angry word.

Maybe he’s not mad at me? Izuku wonders.

The voice in his head giggles. *Two can keep a secret if one is killed,* it says then laughs again. *Do you want the secret, little killer?*

Izuku frowns. “I don’t have any secrets.”

The voice quiets. And then the laughter returns full force, loud and grating enough that he’s shocked his ears aren’t bleeding.

*A lie is a lie is a lie,* the voice whispers. *An easy secret. Did you tell my mother about All Might?*

Izuku frowns. “She’s my mother.” Then tries recalling their conversations. And he can’t remember a single mention of All Might. “Fine. I forgot.”

*Another secret. The dark is generous and full of truth. Its love will set the stars alight. You are not the dark. You are the dark below.*

Izuku winces, pain lancing through his skull, and grits his teeth. “Shut up,” he snarls. “Just shut up.”

*A hard secret. The first time you died you were kill—*

“Shut up,” Izuku roars, falling to his knees and clutching his head. “Shut up and don’t say another word.”

The voice somehow smiles sadly. *I will keep the secrets that will break you. I will remember what you will not.* It falls silent. Izuku feels its presence disappear.

There is blood in his mouth—he’s bitten through his tongue—and Izuku spits it out and watches carefully. When he is certain it won’t grow legs and lead an army of spiders to kill him, Izuku walks away.

He spends the next few days lazing about in the real world. He trains and meets All Might once more. His mentor explains why he was silent to which Izuku thanks him for not interfering. Knowing that he earned his place, and was not assisted through backroom deals, is worth all the
pain of the last few months.

Shinsou messages him frequently. They both think the exam is unfair as despite his powerful quirk—Izuku doesn’t understand why Shinsou stares at him like he’s an angel—and exceptionally high grades, Shinsou just doesn’t have the abilities to destroy a robot. But he can become stronger and Izuku sincerely believes that.

“There’s no reason you should just stay in the background,” Izuku says one day whilst they’re walking to the train station after a day of shopping. He’s glad he wrote a list of everything they needed because Shinsou is hopeless at shopping and hates malls. It had taken the better part of the train ride there to convince not Shinsou to bolt immediately. And lunch had been fun as Shinsou at like a child, leaving a mess everywhere and getting covered in icing sugar from his crepe.

“Well not everyone has a combat quirk, Mr I kick robots to death.” The words are said in jest and it causes Izuku to flush.

“I broke both my legs.”

Shinsou rolls his perpetually tired eyes and finds a spot of icing sugar still clinging to his jacket. He rubs at it furiously, which Izuku knows will only make it worse.

“Do you seriously not know how to use your quirk? And what is your quirk, anyway. I thought it was an emitter type with all the shadows, but the kick doesn’t make sense.”

Izuku laughs nervously. “I’m still figuring everything out.” He points at his white hair, oddly used to it by now. “Hidden quirk.”

Shinsou stares at him for a long moment. “Fine. You’ll tell me when you’re ready.”

They walk in silence, taking in the city. Musutafu is a perfectly fine city but one that Izuku feels he’s explored to death searching out hero fights, stalking agencies for chances to talk to the pros, and just spending time with his mother. There isn’t anything that could shock him at this point.

They pass by a dojo. Izuku looks through the glass, seeing students in white keikogi taking up their stances before a teacher. He thinks he might recognise a student or two from the entrance exam, but he can’t be certain.

But he does recognise the man in the back and that stops him dead in his tracks.

“Midoriya,” Shinsou says. Izuku looks up. “You alright?”

He nods slowly. “Um, y-yeah. We just need to go in here right now.”

Shinsou frowns. Then shrugs. “Fine.”

He’s in the dojo quickly. There’s a counter which Izuku walks towards, hearing Shinsou huff as he trots to keep up.

Izuku smiles at the blonde teenager manning the counter. He wears the same white keikogi as the rest of the students, but he does have a black belt with one gold mark on one side and a blue notch next to it. None of that is anywhere near as interesting as the massive tail behind him.

“Hello,” the blonde boy says. “Are you looking to sign up?” He glances first at Izuku then at Shinsou as he comes to stands beside Izuku.
“I-I just wanted to meet-talk to that guy over there.” He points at Jin Mo-Ri who still hasn’t noticed him.

The boy frowns. “He’s busy at the moment.”

“Please. I just haven’t seen him in a while.”

“You know him?”

“I don’t think he’d be acting like this if he didn’t?” Shinsou says. “Even an idiot could have guessed that.”

“There’s no reason to be rude,” the blonde boy says.

“Just go—”

Izuku cuts Shinsou off by tugging at his wrist. He’s not certain why he was about to use his quirk, but he does appreciate it.

“Thanks,” he whispers and looks back to the blonde boy who’s watching them warily. “Look, he helped me out a lot and I wanted to thank him. I wouldn’t have gotten into UA without him.”

The boy’s eyes widen. “You’re the kid who destroyed the zero-pointer.”

Izuku ducks his head. “Ummm.”

“That was an axe kick you used,” the boy says. “It was Renewal Taekwondo, wasn’t it? Did Master Mo-Ri train you?”

“Yeah,” Izuku mumbles.

“Then why didn’t you say so?” Izuku looks up to see the boy… not smiling but his face is less harsh. “My name’s Mashirao Ojiro. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Izuku sees his extended hand, unsure of what to do.

Shinsou sighs and bumps Izuku with his shoulder. “You’re supposed to shake it.”

Izuku blinks. “Oh. S-sorry.” He reaches out and shakes Ojiro’s hand.

“You children are loud,” a new voice says. Izuku startles and trips seeing Jin squatting on the counter. “What do you need? And who is this one? I do not want another student.”

“Hitoshi SHinsou,” his friend says first. “And I didn’t want to come here.”

Jin cocks his head. “Six months to find this place, Izuku. Slow.”

He stares incredulously at his teacher. “How was I supposed to find this place? You told me you were busy when I messaged you.”

“I was. You did not message again.” Jin leans forward, falls a bit, and lands on the floor. “You would find me when you had need. You have need and you have found me. It is good to see you passed. Ojiro, take Izuku to free mat in the back. Spar. Use quirks. Have fun. Don’t embarrass me.”

Ojiro sighs and looks to Izuku. “Come on,” he says.
Izuku looks to Jin. Sees him focused on Shinsou. Looks to Shinsou. Gets a nod in return.

He lets Ojiro lead him to the back absently, looking back and failing to hear the conversation Shinsou has with his former teacher. They reach the mat and Izuku takes off his tracksuit jacket.

“He can be overwhelming,” Ojiro says, apologetic. “Please don’t destroy the building with your quirk.”

Izuku laughs nervously as he stretches his legs. “I won’t. I’m still figuring everything out.”

Ojiro nods and falls into a ready stance. Izuku frowns. It looks like a karate stance.

“You aren’t using Renewal?”

Ojiro shakes his head solemnly. “That is reserved for strengthening quirks. Jin was not my primary teacher. He taught me to use my tail in combat but nothing more.”

Izuku nods and slides into a stance.

When Ojiro moves it is much faster than Jin ever did when they sparred. His eyes strain to keep up with the punch the blonde throws and his block is nearly too slow. Ojiro kicks him in the side before he can recover.

His breath leaves him in a big whoosh. Izuku rolls with the blow, scrambling to get back in a stance. Ojiro is on him just as he’s come to his feet, moving quickly and recklessly. Izuku kicks out thinking Ojiro has left an opening in his aggression.

A strong tail breaks the blow and Izuku barely has a moment to realise his mistake before he’s punched in the face straight through his guard. He leans with the blow, arches his back, and contorts into a flip. His other foot hits Ojiro in the chin.

It is different fighting someone using their quirk. Ojiro is fast on his own but that tail makes him harder to predict—it lets Ojiro commit more offensively as it guards against Izuku’s attacks easily, and when Izuku does get past Ojiro’s guard he has to worry about the tail tripping him up. To make it worse, Ojiro uses it to abruptly shift directions.

He’s scrambling back from another punch to the chest when he decides to use his quirk. He always produces shadow matter unconsciously now. With the bright lights of the dojo, it will be weak, and he’s already lost a lot just from his concentration slipping but it should be enough.

When Ojiro comes at him again, Izuku flings his arms out to deflect Ojiro’s punch. He steps back to dodge the tail strike and explodes forward, fist raised.

Ojiro is fast. He’s already leaping back. Which is exactly what Izuku wants. Dark tendrils lash out from the ground and wrap around the boy’s ankle, dragging him back. Ojiro’s eyes widen at Izuku’s incoming fist.

And then he twists rapidly, faster than Izuku can get a read on. His punch impacts something but in a moment, he feels a blow to his side. It disorients him instants before a heavy weight brings him to the ground. He lands, hard, and isn’t certain how his arm is twisted painfully behind him and a knee digs into his lower back.

“Y-yield,” he yammers, tapping the mat.

Ojiro’s weight disappears in an instant. Izuku stays down, breathing deeply until a hand enters his
vision. He takes it gratefully and is in no way jealous at how easily Ojiro lifts him with one arm. The boy claps him on the shoulder.

“Good fight,” he says, nodding to Izuku. “Two quirks?”

Izuku shakes his head, glad that his face is already flushed. “No. Same quirk. Different application.” And that’s the lie he’s going with. “You’re fast and that tail is a nightmare to fight.”

Ojiro smiles. “And you have a few tricks. You should learn to fight with your quirk as well, not just with your fists. You’re not really skilled in Taekwondo.”

“He is skilled enough,” Jin says beside them suddenly, “for only six months training. I do not remember you being considerably better.”

Ojiro bows at the waist. “Forgive me, Master Jin.”

“I hope you both learn something.” He claps them both on the shoulder. “Go get your friend. And come again. Now, head home. Shower. You stink.”

Izuku rolls his eyes and picks up his jacket on the floor, waving to Ojiro. He ties it around his waist instead of wearing it. Shinsou frowns uncertainly at him.

“He’s odd,” Shinsou says as they walk out the dojo.

“A tail isn’t that odd.”

Shinsou sighs. “Your teacher, Jin. He said he would train me.”

Izuku smiles. “He’s good at that.”

“I thought you were his student.”

“You know, I’m not sure exactly how it works. I think he’s shown me everything I need to know right now.” He tugs Shinsou’s wrist and points. “I hear they have some great pork cutlets.”

“But I don’t—” He’s cut off by Izuku’s sharp glare. “Have any problem whatsoever with that.”

Izuku laughs easily, surprised by just how much joy he takes in another person’s presence. It reminds him of when his father was still around and Kaachan was his friend. His smile dies down. He takes a breath and puts it out of mind.

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The night before school starts, Izuku double checks that everything is in his bag. Notebooks and stationary? Check. Gym clothes? Check. He knows everything is in there after the first three times, but it never hurt anyone to check things four times over. He sees his deck of cards on the nightstand and scrambles to shove them in before he can forget them. He’ll definitely need those if the monsters lurking in his mind act up again.

He eats dinner with his mother. She has an easy smile on her face.

“I’m proud of you,” she says for the nth time this week, so much so that it has become something of a ritual.

“I know. Do you remember that conversation we had about secrets?”
She huffs. “I take that back. Do I need medical supplies?”

“It isn’t that kind of secret. Do you remember how I was training before I found my Quirk?” She nods. “That’s because I found a teacher.”

“I know you found a teacher,” she says, startling Izuku. “You’re smart but you’ve never picked up any weights before. You would have had a lot more training injuries if you were doing it by yourself.”

“You never said anything.”

She shrugs. “And say what? That I’m upset you’re getting fitter? There are some things a mother shouldn’t interfere in, especially when it isn’t hurting you. I raised you to be a good kid.”

He flushes. “I never told you who was training me. And that was a lie. Honestly, I wasn’t ready to tell you until last week.”

“I forgive you. It’s not like you’re going to tell me it’s All Might training you,” she says with a laugh.

Izuku looks up, scarlet all the way through his face and mortified. “Ummm… I-it’s funny you m-mention that.”

His mother looks up, almost as if praying for strength. “Explain.”

And so, he does. He doesn’t tell her everything for some secrets are not his to say. Not once does he mention the name ‘Toshinori Yagi’ nor does he speak of his weakened form. He explains the nature of One For All—and it absolutely terrifies his mother of what might happen when his quirk and his hero’s strengthening quirk mix, and even whilst he brushes it off he has the same worries—and how strong he needed to be to wield it without his body breaking from its power.

“I can understand why you kept this from me,” she says after he falls silent. “But I am disappointed you waited until now to tell me.”

He laughs nervously. “It kinda slipped my mind.” He winces at how weak the excuse sounds.

“All Might has many enemies, Izuku.”

“No one’s going to associate shadows with One For All.”

“But villains will recognise that strength. It doesn’t matter if they don’t know about One For All. Any hero who becomes that strong will have enemies.” She shakes her head. “I’m worried you didn’t know everything when you made that deal.”

“I did.”

Did you really? The voice asks.

“You’re still young, Izuku. You don’t know how the real world works.”

He rolls his eyes. “I’ve seen monsters, Kaa-san, and they don’t scare me.”

“They should. You’ve never seen humans acting monstrously.” That stops his reply. “You’ve read about statistics, but you’ve never seen people disregard basic human decency. You weren’t there for the anti-quirk riots twenty years ago. You’ve never seen neighbours turn on each other so quickly. You’ve never seen the police arrest the wrong people and brutalise them. You’ve never
seen a riot turn violent.”

He feels small in his seat but not small enough. He’s never seen his mother this bitter in his entire life and the scathing heat is completely new to him.

“I remember watching Taiwan sink and everyone there drown. One person’s rage did that. The world isn’t as cut and dry as you think it is.” She smiles gently now. “You’re young and it’s good that despite what you’ve seen, you can still believe life can be separated into humans and monsters, heroes and villains. But the world isn’t like that. You’re my son, and I hope you’re ready when you learn.”

He goes to his bedroom, troubled. Was it really naïve to see the world like that? Good people chose to be heroes and whilst he knew they made mistakes and weren’t perfect, didn’t the fact that they tried make them good? And villains were evil. That’s all there was to it. Sure, theft wasn’t as bad as armed robbery which wasn’t as bad as murder but those were all simply different shades of evil.

But you’re a monster, the voice whispers. Aren’t all monsters villains?

“Shut up and don’t you dare say another word.”

Dread it. Run from it. Destiny arrives all the same.

His body trembles. He can make out monsters lurking in the dark, always on the edge of escaping the dark below. They watch him, ceaselessly. He can forget more often than not. Right now, he finds it difficult to do so.

“Just keep quiet. Please.”

Izuku reaches for the knife he keeps hidden away in his drawer.

You cursed me with knowledge. But I remember the secrets. Why is life, shadowshield?

“Don’t. Please don’t.”

There is no meaning but in death. And you are—

He stabs the knife through his hand. The blade parts flesh easily and the pain makes him want to scream. He groans, gritting his teeth. He breathes faster and faster as he looks at the knife and the blood.

But the voice is gone.

He knows how to clean and bandage injuries. But there are methods to heal it that won’t take nearly as long as waiting for it naturally. He looks to his shoulder where a long cut from one of the thread-creatures should have left him incapacitated for a few weeks. Instead, it had healed quickly.

Izuku delves into the abyss with ease. He lets his blood drip on the ground, uncaring of the monsters a scent as heady as fresh life carries. And whatever is foolish enough to attack him dies to shadows. The continental eye is almost a physical constant and stays in the same place. Izuku dives into it and lets the ocular fluid heal his wound rapidly. It scars but not everything heals perfectly.

He barely sleeps that night. When Shinsou sees him at the train, the boy is kind enough not to point out that his eyes are bloodshot. Nor does he bother Izuku when he falls asleep. He is kind enough to wake Izuku up just before their stop. They talk a bit as they walk the rest of the way to UA but Izuku just doesn’t have it in him.
“Will you be alright?” Shinsou asks before they split off.

The simple fact that Shinsou doesn’t ask what’s wrong or even assume he has a right to know makes Izuku smile. “Spent too long thinking last night.”

Shinsou nods tiredly, as always. He walks towards the general education building in the opposite direction of the Heroics building. Izuku clenches his fist at the division, wondering how many people who could be amazing heroes in their own right are being ignored simply because their quirk didn’t let them destroy robots.

“It’s not right.”

There’s something hot and burning in his chest and it feels like he’s choking beneath the weight of the emotion. It isn’t shame for he knows that flavour of heat. Nor is it even anger—he felt that much too often every birthday his father never came back, and he can never forget it. This is something more intense and all-consuming.

“Midoriya,” a solemn voice calls out.

Izuku turns and sees Ojiro. The boy freezes, looking at Izuku warily. It takes him a moment to realise he’s projecting his feelings at Ojiro. And that isn’t fair. He takes a breath and lets the feeling pass away.

“S-sorry,” he says and tries to smile. It comes out as a grimace and he decides to give up on it. “Just a bit cranky. Didn’t get enough sleep.”

“Nerves. I understand.”

No, you don’t, Izuku thinks but doesn’t say as Ojiro leads him to their class. Surprisingly, the boy has an excellent sense of direction—something Izuku never really bothered with. The doors to their class are as massive as everything else in UA is. It makes him wonder again if it is simply to make a statement or if its because they’ve had students and teachers that large before.

The class is mostly full already. He recognises Kaachan’s voice immediately even if Ojiro’s broad shoulders stop him from seeing much. The other voice is familiar and when he catches a flash of blue hair he realises it’s the boy who called him out in front of the crowd during the exam.

“Too loud,” Ojiro says as he enters, somehow finding his seat immediately.

The eclectic mix of people bewilders him, though he pauses on the purple-skinned girl and the bird—crow, he thinks—person. Not because their mutations were particularly odd, but he’s read enough about quirk relations not to assume they would want to be called either ‘person’ or ‘mutant’.

“You,” a blue-haired boy says loudly, pointing at Izuku even as he stalks over.

Izuku steps back automatically as the boy approaches. “Hi,” he says meekly, trying his best to ignore all the eyes now watching him. “I-ida right?”

“Yes. I’m from S—”

He is stopped from continuing his explanation by another voice. “Hey, it’s the plain looking boy.”

Izuku spins and sees the girl who argued so strongly for him. He flushes as she says, “All Might said you’d pass.”
“W-w-what?”

“Who are—”

“Go somewhere else if you want to make friends,” a quiet voice says but somehow it seems louder than everyone else. “This is the Heroics course, not a play centre.”

Behind the girl, he can see a yellow caterpillar with the face of a homeless man. Izuku blinks as the rest of the class falls silent. That, at least, was confirmation that everyone else could see this as well. This is by no stretch the oddest thing Izuku’s seen and since it doesn’t seem malevolent he isn’t particularly afraid.

The caterpillar grows an arm and Izuku watches incredulous as it brings a drink to its mouth. “This is the heroics course,” it says before standing upright.

Izuku blinks again as it unzips its skin and a man-shaped creature in all black but for the pile of bandages on its shoulders steps out.

“It took you seven seconds before you were silent,” it says, dropping its yellow shell. “Time is limited. You kids are not rational enough. I’m your homeroom teacher, Shouta Aizawa.”

Huh? The voice in his head says, almost sounding as confused as Izuku.

“I know this is sudden but put this on and meet me at the field.” He removes a UA gym uniform from somewhere. And drops it on the ground. “If you’re late I’m expelling you.”

“What!”

The teacher stares at the student, a red-haired boy with hair that looks like he spends three hours every morning on it. “This is UA,” Aizawa says as if that answers everything. "You have fifteen minutes."

He walks out, leaving the class in silence. They look at each other, confused. And then, “I don’t want to be expelled.”

Pack mentality takes over and they sprint out the door. The blue-haired boy leads the pack to the to the locker room. It is a bit of a mad scramble to change and be out on the field in the short time they have. Izuku nearly gets there last if not for Ojiro prodding him and helping him to find his other shoe which he lost beneath a bench.

Their homeroom teacher waits on the field for them. He says nothing until the last straggler joins the group.

“Thirteen minutes,” he says and picks a ball up from the floor. “Acceptable. We’ll cut it down to five minutes by the end of the term if you manage not to get expelled.”

He throws the ball to Kaachan who catches it easily. Though his rage spikes, he is smart enough not to say anything.

“UA gives its teachers freedom in how they operate,” he explains. “If I find you wanting I will expel you. I expelled the entirety of 1-A two years ago because they lacked any potential to be heroes. I will not hesitate to expel any of you.”

The group falls deathly still. “Good. You understand the stakes. Before you took national fitness tests without your quirks. Restricting you with such inane rules is illogical if you wish to be a hero.
You. Throw that ball as far as you can. So long as you stay in the circle then I do not care what you do.”

Kacchan scoffs and walks up to the circle. The waft of smoke reaches Izuku and he knows Kacchan is excited. He winds his arm up and a moment before it leaves his hand he activates his quirk. The explosion is smaller and more tightly controlled than the ones he usually uses.

“Eight hundred meters flat,” Aizawa says once the ball has landed. “Know your limits first and then grow strong. That is the only way to advance as a hero. UA will beat every weakness out of you. If you don’t have the potential, then you’ll get booted out. This is no place to make friends if that was your hope. Oh, and whoever comes last gets expelled.”

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Izuku wonders exactly how close he is to expulsion. He probably isn’t last because his 50m dash sprint was sub-seven seconds and he thanks his luck that Jin Mo-Ri emphasised speed over strength when they were together. It was why he did hill sprints more than endurance running.

But very test outside of that had been an absolute disaster. His long jump had been pathetic, and his standing jump was only acceptable of there being students less fit than him with quirks that didn’t help them much. And he was not certain if performance mattered as much as ranking per test because the latter meant he might very well be in last place overall.

They’re inside now doing the grip strength test. He stands near Ojiro but much of his focus is on the boy with a bird's head. His quirk, from what Izuku could tell, involved a creature connected to his body coloured black and purple. It almost looks like a multitude of threads giving it its elasticity. He watches it squeeze down on the grip metre.

It can’t be, he thinks but knows it is.

“Why don’t you use your tail?” he asks Ojiro before the bird-boy can catch him staring.

“Too large,” he says and shows Izuku how he can only barely fit the tip in the space. “Why don’t you use your strengthening quirk?”

“Because I don’t want to break my hand.”

“You have another quirk,” Ojiro reminds him.

Izuku opens his mouth to reply. Closes it. Realises he isn’t anywhere near as smart as he thinks he is. He calls the tendrils of shadow matter that he makes in the back of his mind during the day and lets them twine between his fingers and around the metre grip. Then he squeezes and bids them do the same. The metre chimes and reads a cool eighty-four kilograms.

He looks to Ojiro. “I have no idea if that’s good,” he says because the dark tendrils are already fading, and it’ll take him well after the tests are over to generate more.

“I had ninety, so I believe so.” Ojiro tilts his head. “How do your shadows work?”

“I can draw them, I guess, from my actual shadow.” He points to it. “Just has to have enough contrast with the environment or it stops working.”

“That seems like an arbitrary power limit.”

Izuku shrugs. “Who knows. Maybe there’s someone writing my story and they suck at being
internally consistent with their rules.”

Ojiro chuckles. “A bad author indeed.”

The last test they have is the ball throw. He watches as others get ridiculous distances and the girl who argued for him even gets an infinity which he knows isn’t true. He’s seen infinity or at least interacted with creatures that found the concept wanting. That ball will disintegrate long before that.

He takes a deep breath, knowing he needs at least one amazing result to secure a spot. He tosses the ball to get a feel of its weight, ignoring whatever it is that Kaachan is saying with the rest of the students. Right now, all the matters is passing.

The power All Might gifted him feels different from his innate quirk. That feels like walking into a dark room with no assurance that the monsters weren’t after you. One For All is like a live wire carrying all of Japan’s electricity. It is terrifying to grasp because there is just so much power that his body can’t handle.

And yet he has no other real option if he wants to continue his education. He isn’t ready to explain to either his mother or All Might his failure.

He grasps the live wire with his mind and feels power absolute and uncontrollable fill his arm. He winds his hand back and throws with every ounce of power he has. Izuku watches it sail forward.

And land.

“Forty-six metres,” the machine shouts.

His shock lasts half a moment. Then it hits him at once. The shadows are gone. He can’t feel them anymore. He thinks he understands what it’s like to be blinded but somehow this feels so much worse. Something so fundamental to his very being has just been torn away and the lack of it is like a hot iron down his spine. And that has nothing to the pain at the base of his spine.

All of this he feels in a single moment.

“I erased your quirk.”

He turns unsteadily to face his teacher. The man’s hair is up and the bandages floating wildly, revealing a pair of goggles. The man says something but the pain in Izuku’s head makes it almost impossible to focus on his words.

“Stop,” Izuku says weakly.

Aizawa scoffs. “You can’t even take the slightest hint of criticism. The exam should have weeded you out immediately.”

Izuku coughs as Aizawa continues. He sees blood on his hand and looks at it until a new spike of pain hits his head. “Your quirk,” he groans before he collapses to his knees.

His senses come rushing back and much of the pain disappears. The voice in his head returns with a roar and Izuku only now realises that it had completely disappeared.

He hears footsteps but more importantly, he feels the shadow of the person approaching. A hand on his shoulder shakes him.
“I’m fine,” he mumbles, not hearing what they’re saying. “Give me a moment.”

Sound returns slower. He looks up and sees Aizawa above him, looking almost concerned. “What just happened?” the man asks then glares at Ojiro who tries to approach.

Izuku wipes the blood from his nose. "I-I don't know," he says. "No one's ever done that to me."

Something like guilt flashes across Aizawa’s face. “Let’s get you to the nurse.” Aizawa looks around. “Tokoyami, take him to the nurse.”

“I can take him,” Ojiro says.

There is nothing like sympathy in Aizawa’s face. “Silence. You haven’t completed the test.” The stops his maybe-friend from approaching.

Izuku coughs, still in pain. “I haven’t finished my test.”

“And I’ll expel you if you try anything so stupid.”

“Pain brings clarity, Eraserhead.” The man startles. "The goggles gave it away. If I can't do something as simple as throwing a ball, then I don't deserve to be a hero."

Izuku stands and wonders how crazy he looks glaring at his teacher. But he’s become used to it at this point.

“And what will you do? Break your arm the same way you did to your leg in the exam. You aren’t going to be able to save anyone like that. You barely know how to control your quirk.”

He forces a grin. “Maybe not but I still think I have a right to try.”

Aizawa scoffs. “If you break your arm don’t come back tomorrow. If you come last in this test, then clean out your locker.”

Izuku nods. He looks to Kacchan who seems to be more interested than anything else. And picks the ball up again.

Losing an entire sense had been horrible. But he still had five other senses to use. And that experience gave him an idea. One that might have been reckless. But he was already facing expulsion.

The live wire is there and waiting. He lets the power flow through his arm and concentrates in his finger. When he throws the ball, he takes extra care to let his finger be the last thing to touch the ball. And then he releases his power in one explosive burst.

His finger breaks instantly. But that pain means nothing as he watches the ball soar through the air.

“Deku!” he hears Kaachan roar, explosions already going off.

He turns back and sees his friend stalking forward, his rage apocalyptic. It terrifies him. And then ropes wrap around Kacchan. The bandages pull him closer to Aizawa who’s anger is frigid.

“Violence against a classmate will result in expulsion.” He looks to the bird-boy. “I told you to take him to the nurse.”

Oh, that’s Tokoyami.
Tokoyami watches him apathetically. Izuku waves to Ojiro and Uraraka as they walk past them. The moment they are out of sight, Izuku stumbles. Tokoyami catches him.

“Thanks,” he whispers and extracts himself from the boy’s grip.

“It would be remiss of me to let you obtain more injuries. Your condition has worsened.”

Izuku shakes his head. “No. I was just acting like I wasn’t in pain.”

Tokoyami looks at him as if he’s grown another head. “Behaviour like that is dangerous. To yourself and others.”

“I didn’t have much of a choice,” he says and follows behind Tokoyami. “I used up my shadows during the grip test.”

It is a risk to tell someone he’s never had a conversation with all of this. But the boy’s quirk is driving him almost insane. Because the boy’s quirk reminds him of the creatures from the floating forest. And he needs to know how that’s possible.

“Shadows?” Tokoyami asks, curiosity lacing his voice.

“Yeah. They don’t like the light so much, so I did what I could.”

“…I see. And you’ve always used shadows?”

Izuku smiles. Good. The boy was just as interested in him. “Well not all of us have easy to control quirks like yours.”

Tokoyami tenses and whatever rapport Izuku had built dies up instantly.

“You should not make light of what you know nothing of.” The words are harsh, scathing. “Do not think yourself the first to try and obtain information on my quirk.”

“I—I’m not—”

The boy whips around so he can glare at Izuku. The force of it freezes him in place. “Do not take me for a fool. Now, come. I’ve wasted enough of my time.”

*I keep the secrets*, the voice snarls. *I tell the lies.*

Izuku sighs and they walk in the tense silence. Tokoyami doesn’t so much as glance back when they reach the nurse’s office.

“I assume you capable of opening the door,” the boy says before leaving. His steps are even and measured but they somehow are louder than an earthquake.

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Shouta Aizawa worries about many things. Everyone sees his behaviour and assumes him indifferent. The media sees him rarely, so they make little mention of his hero alias. To the world, he is simply an unkempt man with little interest in being a teacher who might be a pro-hero. All these things are true. None of which is completely true.

He spends time in his sleeping bag because he understands the importance of sleeping whenever possible. The nights are never long enough to mark work, plan out lessons, and act as a hero. He may not patrol and search for petty villains like Kamui Woods or Mt. Lady do as he has long since
grown out of such simple habits. Instead, he investigates and gathers intelligence on the many gangs and crime rings who are the actual threats, not a sludge villain who takes up the media spotlight. His students don’t know, and he will forever be happy if they never know the threats he shields them from. Principal Nezu knows though very little is unknown to his superior and Hizashi knows because he refuses to allow Shouta to ever be alone.

But that is secondary to his role as a teacher. The greatest offence against villains is to train the children under his care to be successful heroes. And part of that duty is protecting them from themselves. It was why he expelled the entirety of the class two years ago. It wasn’t that their quirks weren’t strong—the boy with the unravelling quirk could have become an amazing underground hero and the girl who controlled the wind itself could very well have become a top tier hero in a few years—but they lacked the necessary mentality to achieve greatness. They lacked the burning drive to become great. And the few who did toed the class line because of peer pressure.

It was why he argues, every year without fail, that the exam needed to be changed. He is thankful that the panel of judges consider more than just how easily you can break a robot but still disappointed that it is the primary factor. There is no test, or even an interview, to observe the thought process of a student.

Students like Katsuki Bakugou who’s quirk was unbelievably powerful, but his temperament would be a continual challenge for Shouta to deal with as the year progressed. He can’t decide if the boy has a greater or lower likelihood of his fellow middle school graduate, Izuku Midoriya.

That boy worries Shouta. His quirk, shadowshield as the records show, is versatile. He remembers watching the boy call shadows to aid him in the grip test. But he also remembers the state the boy was in after the entrance exam. Showing signs of both emitter and strengthening characteristics, the boy should have been a clear candidate for top student. But he is painfully shy and terrified, and the strengthening portion of the quirk left him incapacitated. Any hero like that would be a liability to their team.

It was why he erased the boy’s quirk. In hindsight, Shouta realises he should have understood why the boy asked him to stop. Instead, he continued to berate him, not realising Midoriya was injured. That guilt, alongside the fact that Midoriya recognised him for who he was, was the only reason he let him attempt the test—he doesn’t acknowledge the almost primal fear the boy’s bloody smile inspired.

And the results had been stunning.

But now he must deal with the consequences of that. And maybe piece together why Tokoyami had returned to class furious. He sighs when he reaches Recovery Girl’s office after he has rid himself of the children. These students were already proving to be a nightmare on the first day.

Chiyo sits behind a desk that lets her look over most of the beds in the office. He would know. She had caught him trying to escape more than once as a student.

She looks up. And does not smile. That is when he realises he may have made more than a little mistake.

“Less than two hours and you injure a student. You could very well have killed the boy.” Shouta refuses to wince. “I may respect you, Shouta, but your actions can be taken as harmful negligence at best.”

He blinks, the only sign of worry that he permits. Negligence, especially the harmful variety,
wasn’t anything a hero ever wanted to have on their record and Nezu might very well fire him for it.

“There was no reason to assume erasing his quirk would cause that reaction.” And they both know that. “It has never happened before.”

Chiyo sighs and slides the file she was reading to him. It’s Midoriya’s quirk summary and he skims over it.

“Students aren’t required to officially register their quirk or submit to testing,” she says as he reads. “Shadowshield. A bit pretentious but not the worst. Claims to be a hidden quirk that appeared in the last year. Emitter properties from the shadows and strengthening properties that show no correlation. In essence, he’s got a grab-bag quirk. And I’m almost certain he has some form of temporary mutation tied to his quirk.”

He sets the file down. “Why?”

“Without going through a full assessment this is only conjecture, but he describes feeling blinded when his quirk was erased before the pain started.” Aizawa frowns, confused. “He can feel shadows in a certain radius in addition to his regular senses. Which will also have to be amended in his file. From what I can tell, that sense might be directly tied to his nerves.”

“Which explains the nosebleed.”

“But not the internal bleeding.” Shouta frowns. “Or the broken finger. Without a full quirk assessment, we can’t be certain of why he reacted the way he did.”

“Then we’ll request one. We have valid reasons to do so.” And more importantly, with one he would know exactly how far he could push his student. “We just need his parent’s consent.”

She looks at her screen. "Yes. His parents."

Shouta frown deepens, immediately worried. “What’s the issue with them.”

"Father isn't in the picture. Nothing special but it is his life with his mother that I'm worried about. She didn't send him to a quirk counsellor when his quirk manifested."

He sees where she’s going with this. “And hidden quirks invariably manifest under traumatic circumstances.”

“So, you think that she’s abusive?” It wouldn’t be the first time that something like this had happened. It wouldn’t be the last.

“I only have conjecture but look at this.” She turns the screen. “I took these when I was checking for other injuries. I’ll have to keep them off school servers since I didn’t technically get his consent. What stands out to you?”

It’s a picture of Midoriya shirtless. He has a few bruises on his torso like those from internal bleeding. It pisses him off that he hurt his student so easily without a single thought. His face has been cleaned up and is no longer bloody. Shouta sees a wide scar on the boy’s right shoulder. And then he sees the long scar on the boy’s left forearm.

“Fuck,” he says.

“My thoughts exactly. He was terrified and skittish around me. He flinched when I reached to
check his pupillary response. And he very nearly bolted when I asked him to take off his shirt.”

Shouta closes his eyes. Takes a deep breath. Opens his eyes.

“If she is abusive then she’ll have no reason to sign the consent form. And if it’s bad enough that he resorted to suicide then we need to get him out of that household.”

“Legally there isn’t much we can do without him coming forward. That rarely happens as you well know. If he doesn’t feel there is safety with us we can do very little except encourage him in the time we have with him.” Chiyo opens a drawer and pulls out another form. “Give it to him. Hopefully, the mother isn’t a problem and it had something to do with his old school.”

Shouta takes the form and nods to Chiyo. It isn’t even lunch time and these students are already giving him more trouble than most.

At the door he pauses. “Pain brings clarity.”

“Hm?”

“He said that to me. He was quoting the ‘Tenets of Combat.’”

“Oh, that little book you wrote. It was a bit pretentious for you to think you knew everything back then.”

“That’s not the point. The point is that he said that after I used my quirk on him. Any other student should have been crying in pain. He just went on to break his finger.”

“And you let him?”

“He was determined to prove himself.” Shouta sighs. “That’s the kind of excuse I hate. I’m abdicating all responsibility for my actions, aren’t I?”

Chiyo huffs. “So long as you know you can improve. Now go, I have other things to do.”

He doesn’t ask what. Shouta knows that she has to deal with the health of every student on campus, and she has to approve very much of the training regiments and trips the school implements. She has to constantly monitor how the student’s quirks changed, improved, or degraded over time in addition to her role as a general counsellor.

Shouta did not envy her workload but he does respect it. He walks through the UA halls, greeting a few of the older students he taught. Going to the teacher’s lounge isn’t an option since he’ll have to either deal with All Might who irritates him on principle or Hizashi who will pry until he reveals everything. And while he will never admit how deeply he cherishes their friendship, the man is painfully unsubtle.

He turns a corner and sees Midoriya two second before they collide. Whilst he could dodge out of the way very easily, it lets him see how the boy reacts. Almost instinctively, and despite the book his eyes are glued to, Midoriya pivots and sidesteps looking startled all the while. His book, though, goes flying. Shouta catches it.

Midoriya looks up and flinches back at Shouta’s gaze. “Aizawa-sensei,” he greets warily.

He looks at the cover of the book. “Tenets of Combat,” he reads out loud, feeling cold finger of dread run down his back, before extending it to Midoriya. The boy takes it cautiously, almost as if he’s stealing from a viper.
“Sorry,” the boy mutters, looking down.

“For what?”

Midoriya tenses. “Nearly bumping into you.”

“You didn’t so don’t waste your time apologising. Wasting energy over something trivial is illogical.”

“Yes, sensei.”

Almost certain he’s making things worse but with no other common connection, Aizawa asks, “What do you think of the book?”

Midoriya looks up and the first hints of excitement show. “The writer seems pretty experienced and knows what they’re talking about. I’m not sure why it isn’t a standard text.”

Shouta very nearly smiles. It’s a close thing. “UA doesn’t utilise texts without authors for first years. Quirk philosophy is a third-year elective and it sometimes covers that.”

Midoriya’s eyes widen. “Does it cover—”

“Ononoki and Ando and Salvatore and every other big name.”

The boy grins. When it isn’t bloody or determined, his smile seems to light up the whole world. “I’ve read them all. Well, not all of them or everything they’ve written since there’s no time, but I try to get through a few every other month except…”

Shouta lets the boy ramble. It’s surprising. He never expected a student to have more than a passing interest but Midoriya casually says things that belie a depth of knowledge on the subject.

“And my mother gave me,” he says, then blinks. The excitement vanishes. “Sorry, I was rambling.”

Aizawa wants to sigh and shake the boy until he spills every secret he has. Instead, he hands Izuku the form.

“What’s this?”

“Quirk assessment form.” The boy freezes. “We’ll need your mother’s consent.”

Midoriya swallows and looks away. “I-is this really necessary?”

“Yes. If you’re still learning to use your quirk then an assessment is a useful indicator of your limits.”

The boy’s smile dies. It doesn’t vanish but whatever warmth it had leaves, and the hallway feels colder for it.

“Yes, sensei,” he whispers. “Can I go now?”

Shouta lets him. Watching the hunched back of the boy, it makes him wonder just how bad his life at home is. Then he remembers that long and winding scar. The day hasn’t even ended, and he already feels like he has failed his students.

“This is going to be a long year.”
Izuku walks to the train station with Iida, Uraraka and a red-haired boy he’s learnt is called Kirishima. Iida, he finds, is strict and formal in a way that is equal parts endearing as it is hilarious. And Uraraka is an eternal fount of optimism but her sense of humour is distinct as she encourages Iida, and snickers when he isn’t looking.

Kirishima is odd. And not just for the hair which Izuku can’t decide if it’s dyed or not. Then again, his hair is shades of green, so it is a bit hypocritical to judge the boy.

“I can’t believe how manly you were,” the boy says, grinning. He has sharp teeth and Izuku wonders how often he bites through his lips and tongue. “You just broke your finger like it was nothing.”

Izuku flushes. “It wasn’t manly.”

“No, it was reckless and foolhardy,” Iida says, though it comes off more like a shout. “Intentionally harming yourself is never the right answer.”

“Oh, come on, he had to pass,” Kirishima argues, “otherwise he would have been expelled. What’s a broken finger compared to being expelled on the first day? Uraraka, you agree with me, right?”

She smiles brightly. “I don’t know. I think Iida has a point.”

Her smile turns just the slightest bit gleeful as Iida points at Kirishima. “Your harmful mentality will not corrupt other students.”

He lets them argue and raises a brow at Uraraka. “Was that necessary?”

She cocks her head, confused. “Was what necessary?”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about.”

“Nope. I have no clue.”

He shakes his head and lets the conversation go on without him. Their voices are pleasant in a weird sort of way. And their casual acceptance of him is something that he is still unused to. He looks up when they fall silent. The three of them stare at him.

“What?”

Uraraka answers. “We were just wondering why you got so hurt during the assessment.”

Izuku smiles. It isn’t particularly honest. “Oh that, I just—hey, is that Shinsou? Shinsou!” He ignores them and trots over to his friend who looks just as bewildered as the group trailing behind him. “Shinsou were you avoiding me? Whatever. Anyway, say hi to everyone.”

He lets them make introductions, glad he doesn’t have to answer that question. Because even he isn’t too sure why exactly having his quirk erased hurt his body so much. Either way, he steers the conversation towards their classes and the heroes teaching them. He learns, to his surprise, that Shinsou is a fan of Present Mic. And Uraraka punches Kirishima in the arm when he claims Midnight as his favourite teacher so far.

Iida and Uraraka get off first, both needing to take another train in a different direction. And Kirishima leaves them whilst they’re downtown because he has some shopping he needs to do.
“You made friends,” Shinsou says. “Did you force them to take your number?”

Izuku flushes. “I don’t know if we’re friends. And no.”

“I’m surprised you introduced us.”

“Why? You’re a friend. They’re nice. I like them. No reason not to introduce you. Then we can all be friends.”

Shinsou laughs, suddenly. “Izuku, I think your definition of friend is a bit different from everyone else?”

He scratches the back of his head, confused. “People who talk and like each other? I’m a bit new at it. Really, you and Ojiro were the first friends I had in a while.”

“Midoriya, it’s almost like you find someone, smile at them and decide ‘Oh, I like you’ and keep them. That’s not how it works.”

“I don’t do that.” Friends will betray you. “And even if I do, it’s working.”

That makes Shinsou snicker once more. “Sure, whatever you say.”

Izuku stares at his friend, not sure of what exactly is so funny. But he accepts it with a shrug and has mostly forgotten about it by the time he gets home. His mother isn’t home yet so he gets started with making dinner. She takes over when she arrives and Izuku does his homework whilst he waits.

They sit in front of the TV, watching some drama or other that his mother enjoys. It may be childish, but he rests his head on her lap. Her fingers run through his hair. This isn’t the first time they have done this, and it usually follows a particularly bad encounter in the abyss.

Her movements change, becoming more coordinated. “Kass-san, are you braiding my hair?”

She hums. “Maybe.”

Izuku sighs. There are infinitely worse things she could be doing. “My teacher wants you to sign off on a quirk assessment.”

Her hands still for a moment before she resumes what she is doing. “I thought you didn’t want to have one.”

“I didn’t.”

“And you do, now. What changed?”

He closes his eyes. “One of my teachers can erase quirks. When he used it on me… well, let’s say it wasn’t the worst state I’ve been in.”

“You know I’ve wanted you to go for one since the first day. But I’m not sure if you should just because you feel forced to.”

He considers her words. “Okay.”

Chapter End Notes
If I don't respond to comments immediately, please know it's because both my wrists are hurting like a mother f*cker. I'll probably still say YOLO and respond, but in case I don't you at least know why.

That's all from me for now. Thank you for reading this. If you enjoyed the story leave a kudos and if you have any questions just leave a comment below. But know that all of that is unnecessary, and as always your readership is quite enough for me. Cheers.
'Mutant Quirks are both the most common and many researchers have argued that they are more perplexing than warp quirks. Mutant quirks are very often inheritable and change the genetic structure of those who express them. It is very likely that in under five generations, homo sapiens as a species will die out, and all individuals will be some form of mutant. What is odd is that by the second generation they stop operating as a quirk i.e. they are the new genetic standard for future generations. Second and third generation mutant express Quirks of their own and this has raised the question…’

—Excerpt from 'The Beginner Scientist's Guide to Quirk Theory.

The water runs red. Izuku presses his thumb against one nostril and exhales sharply out the other, watching a wad of blood land in the water—It’s just normal blood, no legs. The water soothes his aching face. He sees his reflection in the mirror. Streak of white hair? Check. Braids on one side? Check. Bruise on half his face? Double check.

There are painkillers in the cabinet and he takes more than he probably should. But fuck if it didn’t hurt. He doesn’t have the time to dive for the eye this late in the morning. Maybe he should have been paying more attention during his run this morning. He might not have tripped and wiped out on the pavement.

It’s embarrassing, frankly, that he is still so clumsy on occasion. It looks like he’s taken a punch straight to the face. Which is true if you consider the pavement to be a fist. He doesn’t bother with gauze and bandages. The scrapes are light and long ago clotted. So long as no one punches him in the face then he’ll be fine.

He doesn’t meet Shinsou on the train. It doesn’t worry Izuku much. He probably slept in and considering that his friend always looks halfway to the grave, Izuku is glad. The class is only partially full. He doesn’t particularly know any of the students inside right now other than Tokoyami who’s glare is hot enough that Izuku flinches.

“Who’d you lose a fight to?” a boy who he thinks is called Sero asks.

To life, the voice says and with it comes an assault of voices no human could make, voices that sound like gamma radiation and speak of a time before light existed.

He swallows, shrugs, and takes his seat. There is enough time that he retrieves the deck of cards he always keeps in his bag. He shuffles them to calm his nerves and then practices a few basic tricks. The voices remain but he can ignore them better like this.

“Midoriya,” a steady voice calls. He looks up and sees Ojiro. The boy’s smile fades. “What happened?”

Izuku sighs. “C-can we skip this part?”

“I didn’t mean to—”

“Shit, Midoriya,” Kirishima says having just entered. “Who was the last person standing?”
Izuku blinks. “Me?”

“So manly.” Kirishima grabs a chair and sits across from Izuku. “Okay, what are we playing? Deal us in.” He looks at Ojiro until the boy gets the message and pulls a chair as well.

“I don’t know any games,” Ojiro admits.

“Blackjack?” he offers since that’s simple. “Don’t go over twenty-one. Numbered cards keep their value. Aces are eleven or one depending on which screws you over less.”

Ojiro shrugs as Izuku deals the cards. “I will try.”

“And maybe you should keep your inane prattling to yourself,” Tokoyami snarls, and though he speaks to Kirishima his gaze is reserved for Izuku.

Kirishima looks between the two of them. “Come on, class hasn't started. We aren't bothering anyone.”

It takes a few minutes for Ojiro to understand the rules a bit better and they’ll have to work on his poker face. When Uraraka joins the class, Kirishima moves his chair to make space for her. It doesn’t escape Izuku’s notice that he’s blocking his line of sight of Tokoyami.

“You tripped?” Uraraka asks once she has her cards. “But you’ve got more balance than me and I was a gymnast.”

Izuku rolls his eyes and isn’t surprised when Kirishima goes over twenty-one. Counting cards is a useful skill to have.

“It happens.”

The class fills psteadily. Oddly, Iida still isn't here. Izuku expected him to be here earlier than anyone else. Somehow, before he can really notice it, someone slides a desk next to his. It’s a green-haired girl accompanied by the purple-skinned girl.

"Want to deal us in," the frog-like girl asks, her voice deeper than he expected. "Asui. This is Ashido.”

“Hi,” Ashido says, waving at the group. She has an accent that he can’t place. “How you doing, Kirishima?”

Izuku shrugs and deals out more cards. It would be more relaxing if he couldn’t feel Tokoyami’s gaze even through Kirishima.

“I like your hair,” Asui says.

“Oh, yeah, I never said anything about it,” Uraraka says. “I didn’t know you were that kind of guy.”

He tilts his head. And then remembers his mother braided part of his hair. The streak of white seems to stand out more now that it’s hanging on the side of his face.

“My mum did it,” he mumbles.

“Oh, that’s sweet,” Ashido says, looking at Kirishima for some reason. “A lot of guys change their looks out of the blue. Do you just let anyone braid it?”
He shrugs, guesses incorrectly that Kirishima has the ace—no, Ojiro has it. “S-she just did it. I was kinda too tired to care.”

“You’re a mama’s boy, aren’t you?” Uraraka teases.

“Hey, there’s nothing manlier than respecting your mother,” Kirishima says, too hot for it to be a casual remark.

“Midoriya, you’re looking fabulous today,” the blonde boy, Aoyoma, says, eyes twinkling. “But not as fabulous as me.”

The others ignore this, somehow.

“Let’s see if we can make it three for three. Ojiro, right?” His friend looks up in concern. “Are you a mama’s boy too?”

He’s spared from answering as Iida marches in. The boy scans the class and immediately fixates on the group. “What kind of immoral behaviour is this?” he shouts more than he asks. “We’re UA students and you’re gambling. And you, Midoriya, I expected better from you.”

Izuku wilts in his seat. “We’re not gambling,” he says weakly.

“Maybe you can get your degenerate friends to stop being disturbances,” Tokoyami says.

Izuku winces as Iida’s glare becomes more pronounced. “This behaviour is reprehensible.”

“Just chill out, man,” Kirishima says. “We’ve got three minutes until class. We’re good.”

“Still, gambling is an immoral pastime.”

Ashido snickers. “You’re so innocent. Fine, let’s pack up.”

Izuku wants to protest because it means Tokoyami won’t be out of sight any longer. But they only have a few minutes until classes start and he doesn’t want to annoy Eraserhead for no reason. Kirishima pats him on the shoulder whilst Ojiro smiles.

“Thanks,” Asui whispers. “It was fun. And you should get something for your face.”

He smiles. When Aizawa enters, the man is in his sleeping bag. His eyes are more bloodshot than usual.

“I was supposed to teach you something today.” He yawns. “But I don’t really care.”

“What!” more than one person screams.

“You children are too loud. Fine, read the first five chapters of your textbook.” He rolls his eyes at their blank expressions. “The one on battle tactics. Do the exercises as well.”

“This is bullshit,” Bakugou curses.

“Is reading a textbook much too hard for you? Did you think UA was simply about playing outside?” Bakugou scoffs, tiny explosions sparking on his palms.

Aizawa stares at him for a long moment, eyes hard. “New rule: anyone who gets an infringement for using their quirk in public spaces gets expelled. I’m telling you this as a courtesy. Please don’t be as stupid as last year’s class.”
The man walks to the door, still in his sleeping bag. “Oh, and Midoriya, come here.”

Izuku startles and stands, following Aizawa out the door. The man looks him over once. “How did you get the injury?”

Izuku looks away. “I tripped.”

“You tripped?” Aizawa asks, and the disbelief is so evident in his voice that he might as well carry a neon sign.

“It happens.”

“Did you get the consent form signed?”

Izuku swallows. “We declined the offer, sensei. My mother doesn’t think it’s necessary.” Well, neither did I.

“Right. And did you trip before or after your mother declined the consent form.”

He frowns, unsure of what the has to do with anything. “After.”

Aizawa sighs. “Midoriya, I would like you to know that you can come to me if you have any concerns. About anything.”

He looks up and meets his teacher’s weary gaze. “Umm, sure?”

“Especially if you trip again.”

Izuku flushes, wondering if they will ever forget about that. “Yes, sensei.”

“Good. Go to the nurse’s office and get that bruise checked out. And don’t take too long or you’ll miss out on class.”

“I thought you weren’t teaching.”

“Think, Midoriya. What reason would I have for lying to your classmates?”

He cocks his head. “To see if they’d read the book without you watching over them,” he decides.

“And to talk to you. Asking about the consent form in class would have been a violation of your privacy. You should always attempt to achieve more than one objective at any given time.”

Recovery Girl is disappointed that he’s here a second time this week. She does heal him but asks him a few questions about the injury, delving into detail. It makes him wonder if she’s is worried he might pose a suicide risk. He’s very aware of how her gaze lingers on his left forearm but he can’t say ‘don’t worry, I come back from the dead’ because that’s just asking to be thrown into a mental institution. Or worse, an operating table in a bunker a mile underground where he’ll be assigned a number and never see the light of day again.

At lunch, he searches for Shinsou before he grabs his food. The boy is sitting alone in a corner and there is no world in which Izuku will allow that to happen.

“No,” he says before Shinsou can greet him. “You sitting alone is not happening. Come on.”

He pulls Shinsou by the wrist, and maybe he’s getting a few odd stares but none of these stares has seen infinity, so they aren’t really worrying.
“You need to stop doing this,” Shinsou mutters but there is a certain warmth to it.

Izuku rolls his eyes and approaches the table his friends are sitting around. He plonks Shinsou right next to Ojiro. The tailed boy accepts this easily and moves down the table.

“Good. Now behave,” he says, pointing at Shinsou.

The boy rolls his eyes. “Yes, mother,” he says which makes Uraraka laugh.

Izuku snorts and sits in the centre of the group, between Kirishima and Iida.

“Not eating?” Iida asks.

Izuku shakes his head. “Not up to it.”

“Man, you’ll get skinnier if you don’t eat.” Kirishima pokes Izuku in the bicep a moment before his eyes widen and he grips Izuku’s bicep. “You’re literally made of muscle.”

Izuku bats the boy’s hand away, face red. “I’m not.”

“You kind of are,” Ojiro says. “Punching you is like punching a brick wall.”

“There’s a story there,” Asui says.

“Not much of one,” Shinsou answers. “They just go to the same dojo.”

“How’s about a game of poker,” Izuku suggests before they dig any deeper into it. He has no intention of everyone knowing how Ojiro ran circles around him.

Despite Iida’s protests, it becomes a thing. In the mornings they play simpler games which require little time or thought but lunch is reserved for poker. Uraraka absolutely terrifies him because her smile is the best poker face he’s ever seen. Though Kirishima comes a close second for all that the boy is obsessed with manliness, he certainly knows how to play cards.

Their presence helps soothe his mind. He thinks it mildly manipulative that he’s keeping them close for a reason, but it doesn’t hurt them—if anything, the fact that Uraraka and Shinsou become fast friends is a positive—and it only helps him.

Near the end of the week, he starts losing track of what is and isn’t. Eyes seem to watch him from the wall, judging and finding him wanting. Present Mic’s hair reminds him too much of tentacles all of a sudden and the English he tries to teach sounds like the language of a dead god. Tokoyami’s baleful gaze is infinitely worse and he feels like a mouse in the jaws of a predator. When his nose bleeds, he asks permission to leave and very nearly bolts from the room, but not without pointing at the right answer.

He shivers in the bathroom, absolutely terrified of the things watching him in the mirrors. Creatures older than time seep out from the shadows. How much of it is real and how much is an imagination doesn't matter, not when an errant tooth cuts him on the wrist. The wound is thin, shallow, and he's thankful he can use the nosebleed as an excuse as to why his cuff is suddenly red.

His hands shake too much to deal cards at the table. He excuses it as a headache from the nosebleed. And whilst Iida lectures him on the dangers of overexertion, Asui and Uraraka braid his hair. He lets them without complaint because at least he knows those fingers are human, warm, and not malevolent. Kirishima stares at him as if he’s grown another head.
“You do you. I’m in no place to judge.”

Ashido laughs. “You most definitely aren’t.”

Asui latches on to that and they learn the two went to middle school together. And that Kirishima looked very different.

“Hey, did you go to school with Bakugou?” Uraraka asks. “I’ve heard him call you Deku before.”

Izuku smiles. It feels brittle. “Yeah. Deku’s a nickname I got.”

“What’d you—”

“Ah, shit, my nose is acting up again.” It isn’t but they don’t need to know that even if he gets the sense Uraraka is being too polite to call him out on it. “See you in class.”

He avoids them after school and uses his quirk to hide. He sits in the distorted vision of his room, surrounded by shadows, and wonders just how long he can keep this up. The monsters always seem to lurk but never to this extent. At the very least, the voice is silent though it is ever-present in his mind, watching events play out alongside him.

His mother doesn’t question why he’s so late. He smiles at her, almost ready to cry. She hugs him and the tears spill. He tells her, between shaky breaths, that he sees the nightmares everywhere he looks. And his friends, despite how kind and generous and real they are, none of them can even begin to understand. She just hugs him tighter.

“We’ll get through this,” she whispers. “You’re my son. I’m never leaving you.”

He has a broad smile on the next day. The warmth in it is fake but Shinsou doesn't notice, and if he fails to recognise the lie, then no one else will. And though his back hurts, he lets none of the pain show.

*I will*, the voice says, and for once Izuku finds that reassuring.

He can always feel the shadows when there is enough contrast, except for odd times like the day of the exam. But he doesn’t necessarily recognise them perfectly. Except for Kacchan. He can always feel the boy so long as he is close enough. So, he knows Kaachan is approaching long before he enters the class.

In hindsight, he should have moved out of the way instead of having a conversation with Ojiro and Kirishima. But it was hard to move when they were both berating him for not sending a message to let them know he was staying a bit late at the school library—another lie for he barely even knows the school has a library let alone where it is.

“Get the fuck out of the way, Deku,” Kacchan roars.

Deku winces. The three of them are blocking the doorway a bit, even if Ojiro had already been moving out of the way.

“Yo, man—”

“I wasn’t talking to a shitty side character,” Kacchan snarls, interrupting Kirishima. He reaches out to shove Deku aside. For a terrible moment, he remembers falling down a hill and cracking his skull open.
But the hand never touches him. He sees Ojiro holding Kacchan's wrist in an unyielding grip. “Calm yourself.”

“Fuck off.” Kacchan pulls his arm out of the grip. Deku can already smell the sickly-sweet scent of nitro-glycerine. “And move.”

“Fine,” Kirishima says, tugging Izuku aside. “No need to be a dick about it.”

Only when Kacchan has stalked past does Deku realise that Kirishima’s body is between the two of them. He thinks it unnecessary. After all, he’s dealt with Kacchan in an infinitely worse mood. But he appreciates the gesture even if it makes him look weak.

“You shouldn’t let people treat you like that,” Ojiro says.

Izuku forces a smile, toothy and carefree. He clasps his hands behind his neck to hide how badly they are shaking. “I’m fine.”

“That smile is terrifying,” Kirishima says and pats him on the shoulder.

When All Might enters Izuku almost has his hands still. The magnificent smile All Might has is radiant and warmer than the sunlight. And it somehow seems brighter for Izuku. He returns it as best he can.

The battle simulation has them all excited, especially since they can wear their hero costumes for the first time.

In the locker room, Izuku takes the case with his costume in it, taking everything off except his underwear and compression shirt. Letting anyone else see the scar on his left hand is not an option. There will be one too many questions from that.

He doesn’t pay too much attention to the others—he does notice that Kirishima has abs that make him feel the slightest bit inadequate and the Iida is clearly a proponent of armour.

Inside the case he finds a light-green shirt and matching trousers, both of them hugging his body, and both covered in geometric black lines. The material feels thin, well textured, and is exceedingly comfortable. The red belt fits easily and he very much appreciates how the pouches are designed to keep medical equipment—he’s been hurt enough times to know how useful a quick bandage can be.

There is a vest, dark as night and heavy, with clips on the shoulders, and angular green lines running down the sides. He shrugs the piece of armour on and zips it up tight. With it is his mask: the bright green cowl with rabbit ears comes on easily; next to it is the metal mouth guard formed of multiple metal plates connected by some sort of elastic material. The mouth guard is form fitting and seems to follow his facial movements. He grins and feels it stretch with him.

Shoes, gloves, and guards for his knees and elbow come one next. He frowns at the voluminous fabric at the bottom. He removes it and unfurls it.

Is that a cape? he thinks incredulously. The base material is black, and it has the same geometric lines as the rest of his costume except in light green. It has two clasps and he knows they will interlock with the ones on his armoured vest. He spots a white mark in a corner. On closer inspection, it reveals a Gaussian integral.

Kaa-san, he thinks with a smile. He wonders if one day he’ll ever find the depths of her love and dismisses the idea as impossible.
The cape is weird at first. But as he walks out of the locker room, he understands why she gave it to him. Whenever it flares out, it increases the area of his shadow. It isn’t as distracting as he thought it would be. In fact, when a gust of wind makes it flare out completely, he very easily draws shadowmatter from his now very large shadow.

“You look good,” Uraraka says. He looks up and sees he is the centre of attention for his group. He flushes and steps back.

“It suits you,” Ojiro says.

“I wish I was manly enough to pull off a cape.”

The attention makes him want to turn right around and walk straight into the locker room. Iida, it seems, notices this.

“We can admire his costume later,” Iida says loudly, drawing back their attention to the front.

When All Might explains the concept of splitting into groups of heroes and villains, Izuku is happy. He loses his smile when his name is drawn alongside Tokoyami. The bird-boy glares at him. They’re going up against group B. He sees Ojiro is part of the group.

And then his heart plummets.

“Sir, I don’t think this is a good idea,” Kirishima says to All Might.

“Everything will be alright,” All Might says, then looks to Izuku. “I have faith in a young hero.”

Izuku can barely focus with how badly his hands are shaking behind his back, hidden by the cape.

“The fuck did you say,” Kacchan roars. “Oh no, this is going to be fun.”

Kachan’s glare is pure magma and his grin a step away from being feral. “You better get ready, Deku. I’m coming for you.”

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Izuku wonders exactly which god he pissed off to be in this situation. Tokoyami looks infinitely more intimidating in his jet-black cloak that covers everything from the neck down. And yes, that cloak isn’t just dark, but it actively absorbs the light. He wonders which derivative of graphene it uses to achieve the effect. Either way, it must have cost a fortune.

“We need a plan,” Izuku ventures.

“Stay out of the way,” Tokoyami says harshly, “and don’t break anything. You’ll just be a liability in combat. After all, your quirk is so hard to control.”

Izuku looks away. “I didn’t mean—”

“What you say and do is more important than what you mean. You should understand what the shadows do to lies.” He scoffs then. “Unless you were lying about knowing the dark as well.”

I like him, the voice says.

“I know you’re angry at me,” Izuku mutters, “but we’ll need a plan if we want to win. I know how Kacchan—”
Tokoyami chuckles, darkly. “Your abusive ex-boyfriend?”

Deku opens his mouth. Tries to speak. Fails to find the words.

“Yes, what about him?” Tokoyami prods. “Unless you have nothing to say.”

“He’s not my b-boyfriend.” That, at least, seems like the most important thing to address first. “Are you going to take this seriously?”

Tokoyami sighs as if dealing with a particularly dull child. “You heard him. He’s coming for you. Your presence will draw him away and I will acquire the bomb. I hope you are adequate at running.”

“What, no, we fight him together or we lo—”

“Heroes,” All Might’s says through the earpiece. “Planning time is over. Time to infiltrate.”

“Keep up,” Tokoyami says and then rushes for the door.

Izuku stares at him numbly. When his partner looks over his shoulder, almost as if in challenge, Izuku forces himself to follow. They don’t speak as they search through the building though Izuku wants to protest the plan at every stage. The darkness is nearly uniform, not enough contrast for him to get a feel for the place except for the areas near the windows.

It is luck that they happen to be walking towards an outside wall when Kacchan attacks. Izuku pulls Tokoyami to the ground as Kacchan swings around the corner, explosions rocketing him past them.

“Deal with him,” Tokoyami roars, shoving Izuku off him. “Follow the plan.”

“W-what, no!”

But Tokoyami is already running the way Kacchan came, leaving him to deal with the only real threat in this entire building.

Kacchan cracks his neck, grinning madly. “I’m gonna enjoy this, you lying piece of shit. Quirkless my ass.”

“I w-wasn’t l-l-lying,” he stammers, raising his hands defensively.

“Shut up. You think you’re better than me. Fucking show it.”

He has barely a second to react before Kacchan is flying in his direction, hand extended and ready to set Deku alight. But he knows this move.

It’s how Kacchan always opens.

Deku steps forward, into the attack and not away like Kacchan thought. Overextended, and with his arm past Deku, Kacchan has no way to react to the elbow Deku plants in his gut. Shifting his weight, Deku grabs the arm and flips Kacchan over, slamming him hard into the ground.

Kacchan gasps in pain but rolls away, explosions taking him out of range of Izuku’s retaliatory kick.

And he’s right. His body trembles as he slides into a stance. “Y-you’ve always terrified me. But I know you. I know e-everything about you.”

Kacchan stills, watching him warily, a flicker of guilt crossing his features. “You know nothing, Deku,” he whispers.

Kacchan soars, at the last moment spinning into a kick. Deku ducks beneath it easily, not caring for the shattered concrete behind him, and rises, punching Kacchan's side. Kacchan groans and immediately retaliates with a right hook amplified by his explosions.

Just as he expected.

He bats aside the hand and it flies above him. He rises from his crouch and his knee slams into Kacchan. Deku rolls away. He feels a shadow shift and barely has time to see Kacchan rushing him without any explosion.

It takes him aback, for he’s never seen Kacchan fight without them. And it terrifies him.

His punch is wild, driven by fear.

Kacchan ducks beneath them. His arm lashes out and his palm smacks Deku’s side. He has a moment to realise how fucked he is.

The explosion rocks him and sends him flying. It feels like his organs have been jostled around. He slams into the wall, the breath leaving him. The armour took most of the blow but now he can see the shattered ceramic plates beneath the dark fabric.

Instinct makes him drop to the ground just as Kacchan’s foot slams into the wall right where Deku’s chest had been a moment ago. Deku pushes off the ground with his hands and flicks his leg out.

His shoe hits Katsuki in the chin, lifting him off the ground. He uses the momentum to flip onto the wall and pushes off, tackling Kacchan.

And somehow, despite being disorientated and not even looking at him, Kacchan grabs him first and flips him around. Momentum forces Deku into the wall.

There’s something cold and clinical to the way Kacchan moves.

Katsuki’s palm strike nearly hits clean if not for Deku’s quick cross guard lifting it above his head. Kacchan grins and the same hand he lets off an explosion.

Deku shifts to the side before the blow can hit him. The elbow, more a pneumatic piston now, hits him in the shoulder instead.

The vest takes most of the blow and Deku is thankful because it would have otherwise dislocated his shoulder at best. At worst, it would have broken it.

What the fuck is going on? Deku wonders, backing away to put more distance between them. He knows how Kacchan fights, wild and untamed and driven by instinct. And he is fighting like that except his rage is frigid and calculating.

His blows are still wild haymakers and vicious kicks, but they only come when Deku is exposed. It takes every ounce of skill and ability he has to anticipate where Kacchan will be next. His eyes reflect his rage, a cold dagger through the chest instead of his usual inferno.
Deku takes another explosion to the chest and decides he can’t win, at least not like this.

“I thought you knew me, Deku,” Kacchan says, sounding murderous. “I’m going to break you. Use your fucking quirk. What happened to wanting to be a hero?”

*I think we’re fucked*, the voice says. *Run?*

Deku does. He slips through doorways, ducking and weaving. He has the advantage of knowing roughly where Kacchan is whenever his shadow passes through a lit area. Soon enough, he can’t feel Kacchan’s shadow and takes the stairs.

He taps the earpiece. “Tokoyami, you need to help me,” he whispers.

“Dealing with the bomb,” his partner snarls. “Deal with your boyfriend.”

And then the communication cuts off. “Shit.” He runs because Kacchan’s going to be coming up the stairs in moments.

“Deku!” he roars. “You can’t hide without cover.”

*What?* Both he and the voice question.

The explosion that comes next is the largest Deku has ever felt. The floor shakes and the sound makes him think a bomb has gone off. He hears walls shatter and concrete break well before he feels the way the darkness vanish before the oncoming light.

He pivots on the spot and draws all the shadows he's gathered into a shield. The shockwave hits him. His shield lasts for a second before shattering but that is enough to divert most of the power.

“Tokoyami, please,” he begs before Kacchan is in front of him.

Deku pirouettes around his blow and punches him in the side. Kacchan grins and traps his arm. His headbutt takes Deku by surprise, his nose crunching from the impact. Blood streams from his broken nose. Kacchan lets go and Deku stumbles back.

The palm strike to the gut winds him. The explosion after sends him flying back.

“You’re going to die if you don’t use your quirk,” Kacchan warns, his rage burning. “You saw what one gauntlet did. I’m going to fucking blow you away with the other.”

Terror grips Deku as Kacchan raises one hand in a fist. “W-what will it prove,” he stammers, crawling back in terror. “That you beat me. Everyone knows you’re stronger.”

“You just don’t get it. You think you can say the shit you say and run. Now fucking use your quirk!”

“Tokoyami,” he screams.

And then Kacchan moves.

Time seems to slow.

*Okay, he always starts with a right hook*, Izuku thinks, ready to dodge the other direction.

*He’s fighting differently*, the voice warns.
Oh, Izuku realises, and finally understands. He’s planning around my moves. The right punch is a feint. It’s too telegraphed to be anything else.

He dodges into Kacchan’s right punch, already prepared to block the attack coming from the other side.

Except none comes.

His eyes widen, and he realises he’s made a mistake. Kacchan's eyes are wild and hot, not cold or calculating. And maybe, just the slightest bit terrified.

He feels the shockwave first. It slams into him like a freight train and sends him flying. And then he feels the heat, searing and excruciating. His face burns.

Izuku screams, his howl rending the air. He clutches at his metal mouth guard, fingers shaky and he fumbles badly. It feels fused to his skin and the hot metal burns his fingers. He rips it off, not caring that it pulls skin off.

He roars in pain.

And then the darkness takes him.

*****

Fumikage Tokoyami is many things. He has spent so long battling the darkness within him that he is calm, collected. He must be strong every day of his life. His quirk is a danger, and everyone has always reminded him. His mother, overbearing and smothering, never let him go a day without a simple reminder of what he can do if he is anything but perfectly collected. And his father, coldly indifferent, is whom he seeks to emulate. That stoicism, that indifference to the world around you, is his final goal only so long as he directs it towards Dark Shadow’s influence.

Dark Shadow is his first and oldest companion—sometimes a friend in the light and always an enemy in the night. And, if he is being honest, his only friend. Losing control once meant he has been homeschooled. He doesn’t know how to make friends, not really. And though he finds Shouji a perpetual fount of calm, and both Sero and Kaminari—Idiot Zapper—include him in their jokes, he isn’t sure if he can call them friends.

But he knows for a fact that Izuku Midoriya is not a friend. He still seethes at the boy’s idea that his quirk was easy to control. Controlling Dark Shadow is a constant battle, one he is always on the edge of losing.

The entity fed on his emotions; amplified the negative and ate the good. It is more docile in the day. But something about Midoriya’s presence makes it stronger. More spiteful.

He listened to its warning that Midoriya wasn’t simply seeking kinship from another in the shadows. The boy wasn’t the first to try to learn more of his quirk. There have been doctors in the past who looked to learn exactly what Dark Shadow is, not to aid him, but to utilise it for their own ends. And if the boy really is connected to the shadows, then he could not be allowed to learn more, not when he is an antagonist.

“Tokoyami, you need to help me,” Midoriya says through the earpiece. His voice is weak, breathless, and whisper-like. It grates at his senses.

Don’t listen to him, Dark Shadow warns. You saw what he did to the zero-pointer.
One boy in a green tracksuit. The robot that Fumikage fled from. A single glorious kick. The death of a colossus.

If he could face that then he could deal with a simple human. And if abused-half-of-relationship couldn’t win against his boyfriend, then he could at least distract Lord Explosion Murder.

“Dealing with the bomb,” he says and lets Dark Shadow pull him away from Ojiro’s blow. “Deal with your boyfriend.”

The tailed boy is fast and agile, and his instincts are good enough that he keeps Fumikage from getting any closer to the bomb. Every time Fumikage tries to use Dark Shadow as a distraction, Evolutionary Failure is in his face with a punch. And after the first one that nearly knocked him out, he’s too wary to believe he can take another blow.

The ground shakes. He nearly trips if not for Dark Shadow pulling him off the ground and anchoring to the wall. Ojiro’s eyes are wide, his face pale.

“Bakugou, don’t,” he shouts in worry and looks to Fumikage. “We need to stop this now.”

Fumikage scoffs. “I’m not foolish enough to fall for that.”

“Then take the bomb,” Ojiro says and turns to the door.

And then, “Tokoyami!”

The shrill voice freezes him to the spot. It sounds like an animal howling, all anguish and despair. It is nothing like an animal brought to the slaughter that knows its fate—that is rage against injustice, a yearning to survive perhaps. But this is fear and terror.

_It’s just a trick. Do not believe his lies._

He meets Ojiro’s gaze and realises he might have just underestimated the situation.

Another roar nearly deafens him. It is what he thinks an animal that just bit through its leg to escape a trap would sound like. A sense of victory, yes, to live another day. Heart-wrenching pain at the act of self-mutilation. And a sort of slow horror at the realisation of what it had just done. Living for a few more moments in exchange for being easy prey to any predator.

He’s out the door without a word to Ojiro. He knows where the stairs are and heads to them. “Dark Shadow, now,” he orders.

Except it does nothing. _No. I will not let you help it._

“You vile serpent,” he hisses and takes the stair five at a time.

The floor below them is a picture of devastation. There is rubble from the collapsed walls blocking the way. Smoke wafts from fires still burning and the light from the gaping hole is blinding. He can make out Bakugou standing above the still form of Midoriya. He seems to be staring at his hands in a daze.

Ojiro dashes past him, his tail making it easier to get past the rubble. He shoves Bakugou aside and reaches Midoriya.

“Oh, fuck,” he curses, horrified. “No, no, no, no.”
Fumikage can understand. Through Ojiro’s hunched form as he checks the boy for a pulse, Fumikage can see what has become of Izuku’s face. The skin on the right side of his face is shrivelled away from heat, entire sections torn away to reveal the layers of fat and muscle beneath. Even in unconsciousness, Izuku’s face is contorted in pain. Each small movement pulls at the burnt flesh. His stomach churns as an unconscious groan pulls a strand holding two bits of skin together, and he watches them flap eerily in the wind.

There is no bone revealed, thankfully, for Fumikage would not have been able to stay so composed. His costume has been burnt away and the force of the explosion has scattered the shards of ceramic from Izuku’s vest across the floor, and some into his torso. Ojiro places pressure on the largest shard, where Izuku bleeds badly, crying all the while.

*This is my fault.*

**He deserves—**

**Silence.**

His hands tremble as he reaches his earpiece to call for All Might. Or someone, anyone who can fix this. He need not have bothered.

All Might appears in a gust of wind, his face grim and devoid of any smile. It is the first time he’s ever considered that the hero could be anything less than jolly. And it is terrifying to know this is the man villains face, a man of unbelievable strength and conviction.

The two robots he had been carrying are placed near Izuku and the hero pulls Ojiro back. One sprays something on Izuku’s face whilst the other plunges an anaesthetic in a part of his neck that isn’t blackened. He watches as they apply a foam that instantly hardens into his bleeding wounds and gently place him on the stretcher.

“Tokoyami,” All Might says flatly. “Aizawa will be here soon. I will stay with Midoriya.”

He nods shakily as All Might follows behind the robots, his posture tense. He looks like a man on the edge, ready to snap.

That leaves him with Ojiro, who’s white outfit is stained red, and Bakugou who stares at his hands.

Ojiro takes a heaving breath. “You did this,” he says quietly, staring at Bakugou. “You’re a fucking monster.” That is the first time Tokoyami has ever heard the boy say anything impolite.

Lord Explosion Murder looks up. “I didn’t—”

Ojiro moves, startling them all. He has Bakugou by the throat and looks murderous. “You meant to do it,” he snarls, shaking in rage. “You chose to do it. Don’t make excuses.”

Bakugou breaks Ojiro’s grip. “Don’t touch me.”

*I need to stop this,* Tokoyami thinks because Ojiro looks ready to kill. *Dark Shadow, stop them.*

**Nah, I’m not your slave,** his perpetual companion, currently his enemy, says as the two circle around each other.

**Do it!**

It obeys, thankfully. He feels his energy drain as Dark Shadow lashes out and grabs Bakugou by
the waist, pulling him away from them. Fumikage wraps his arms Ojiro’s torso whilst the boy is
distracted.

“Stop this,” he orders.

“Don’t touch me,” Bakugou roars, an explosion hitting Dark Shadow.

He feels the demon weaken. It wants to come back and get away from the light. Fumikage doesn’t
permit that. He allows it to take energy from him though it makes him stagger.

The next explosion sets Ojiro off. He thrashes out of Tokoyami’s grips and charges Bakugou.

“Enough!”

Long bandages wrap around Ojiro and fling him to the side. It isn’t enough to hurt him or even
make him fall, but it does place him further away from Bakugou.

Aizawa’s hair is high, his expression carefully blank. His bright red eyes focus on Bakugou. “Stand
down, Bakugou,” he says, gently, almost as if speaking to a trapped animal. “Don’t make this any
worse for yourself.”

The boy’s shaking becomes worse. It is then that he realises it isn’t rage but fear.

Let him fear, crow prince.

Silence, viper.

“I didn’t mean to.” Bakugou looks to his hands, seeing them for the first time. They clench and
unclench. “He wasn—”

“I can’t help you if you don’t calm down. Take a deep breath.” Tokoyami watches astonished as
Bakugou does exactly that. “And Ojiro, don’t you dare attack him. Go to the first floor right now.”

Tokoyami looks and sees Ojiro tensed and in a crouch. The boy has his teeth bared but he rises.
Stiffly, he turns and walks to the stairs. It amazes Tokoyami that the boy still has the composure to
listen.

Bakugou collapses to the ground. Aizawa sighs, his hair falling back into place. Tokoyami watches
him kneel beside Bakugou and say something, his words getting Bakugou to stop shaking.

Midnight finds them like that. Aizawa looks to her. “Take him to the teacher’s lounge,” he says,
helping Bakugou up. He isn’t looking at anything, eyes darting around everywhere.

“Cementoss has the rest,” she tells Aizawa and takes custody of Bakugou. “You good?”

“We’ll deal with this.” Aizawa frowns when she is gone. “Get to class, Tokoyami.”

He tilts his head in consideration. It is the reasonable option. “No,” he says finally and kneels. “I
do not believe I will.”

“That was an order.”

He picks the dark cape off the floor. It is burnt in one corner and scuffed badly, but aside from that,
it is relatively unharmed. The light green shapes have no meaning to him and yet, he finds himself
captivated by them all the same.
“One which I will respectfully decline.” He stands, cape in hand. “And I will accept any punishment you deem necessary, but I failed in my duty as an ally. This is my fault.”

“No, it isn’t. You do not choose how other people react.”

Tokoyami nods his head. “It was my plan that Midoiya should distract Bakugou. I made it out of spite and pettiness, knowing full well that Midoriya would be the target of his rage. I abandoned him and ignored his pleas for help. I have a debt of honour I can never repay. That burden lies solely on my shoulders.”

“And when have you led before?” Aizawa asks. “What experience do you have leading a team, Tokoyami? Are you a brilliant tactician? You are meant to learn that here. And you could never have known what would happen.”

He looks away, his eyes burning. He refuses to cry. To do so is to grant Dark Shadow another weakness to latch onto.

“Please, sensei.”

He meets Aizawa’s stern gaze. The man will have to tie him up and drag him away if he expects Tokoyami to simply leave.

Eventually, he nods. “Fine.”

He’s never had to find the nurse’s office before. But he can simply follow the occasional droplets of blood. He raises a hand to knock on the door. Before he can, fear grips him, irrational and false. He closes his eyes and slides to the ground, clutching Midoriya’s cape tight to his chest.

In this empty hallway, no one can see him cry. No one, except Dark Shadow.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not sure whether I should be hiding in an underground bunker or not after this. Because ya'll are vicious.

That's all from me for now. Thank you for reading this. If you enjoyed the story leave a kudos and if you have any questions just leave a comment below. But know that all of that is unnecessary, and as always your readership is quite enough for me. Cheers.
‘Peace, as a concept, is one we are all familiar with. Peace, as a reality, is one which we will never achieve. Humans fight and argue and look to assert their dominance. The heroes who protect will always be attacked by the villains that attack. Even in Japan, we have struggled to attain peace, even in this modern age. We know of the second Dark Age, the New Age, and the Golden Age of Heroics. We know the great heroes and villains. All Might's rise is emblematic of our inherent tendencies towards war. Despite this, attaining personal peace is a possibility and is achieved through one simple idea: to try and be better.’

-Excerpt from 'Questioning the Modern Age of Heroes,' by Andile Sithole.

Toshinori Yagi has failed many times in life. There have been occasions where he has been too slow or not smart enough. Knowing and acknowledging that not everyone can be saved does not negate the fact that each lost life is a burden and each mistake a weight he must carry.

He was too young and unskilled to aid Nana Shimura the day she fell. Each time he visits her grave, he asks if she is proud of him. And each time he receives no answer for the dead tell no tales.

He regrets not killing All For One the first opportunity he had. All Might had been victorious, and a single blow would have ended the greatest villain of this era. His inexperience had betrayed him then. The morals that he so valiantly fought for made him hesitate. And in that moment, All For One escaped. And each life the villain harmed afterwards was in part his responsibility for failing in his duty.

Today, though, is failure equal to those.

Izuku Midoriya is his successor and in the few months that Yagi has known the brilliant boy, he has failed him multiple times. The boy has died, before. Once because of Yagi’s negligence. Another out of grief. And, he suspects, more times out of a burning desire to seek knowledge. A desire he stokes every time he chooses not to confront his successor.

Today, though, he has failed spectacularly. His successor is hurt, and Yagi can only blame himself. His first instinct is to look at Katsuki Bakugou, strong and ferocious, and find fault in him. Yet, that is a disservice to both the boy learning to be a hero and the man who is the greatest hero.

“I should have listened,” he says aloud from his place in the nurse’s office.

Recovery Girl is busy, moving with a level of efficiency he can only admire as she fixes what she can of the boy’s face and wounds. The medical bots hand her instruments without a word, their synchronicity eerie. She accepts nanoweave grafts and applies them to Izuku’s face. He knows that she has taken skin from other parts of his body and bridged the missing flesh of his cheek and jawline.

Ejiro Kirishima had warned him against placing the two together. The threat Katsuki Bakugou had levelled immediately after the warning should have been the final clue.

He ignored it out of pride in his successor’s strength. What were the worries of a young man compares to the power of One For All and the inky blackness of Shadowshield? He cannot ignore
his own arrogance in believing he knew better than classmates who so obviously cared.


Even if not for the warning there were other signs. Ochaco Uraraka and Tenya Iida had both cautioned against the matchup in the observation room. When Izuku and his partner Tokoyami were planning, Tokoyami had called Katsuki Bakugou an abusive ex-boyfriend. It had been said cruelly and intended to hurt, but the fact that Izuku did not refute Bakugou being abusive should have been the reason he cancelled the match, favouritism be damned.

Instead, he had put aside his affection for the boy and donned the mask of the impartial teacher.

For much of the fight, he thought his actions validated by the showing of Izuku’s skills, matching Bakugou blow for blow without using his quirks. Izuku’s form was sloppy and inefficient but that was a result of experience, not competence. And he more than made up for it with his analytical mind.

That did not excuse permitting Bakugou to use his grenadier bracers to level the entire floor. But the guidelines for villains permitted structural damage. And the attack had not even been aimed in Izuku’s direction even if the shockwave was powerful enough that the boy had to use his quirk to block it.

But the inexcusable moment was not stopping Bakugou the moment he threatened to use the gauntlet on Izuku. Everything else before then could have been explained away. But that, was a failure only he is responsible for.

He remembers his successor plaintive scream to his partner before it happened.

He takes a shuddering breath. There is no smile on his face. Toshinori Yagi does not have to be strong every moment as All Might does. Toshinori can be weak where All Might must be perfect. And right now, he has no right to be the great hero.

Toshinori watches Recovery Girl kiss Izuku, his body glowing green for a moment. The boy’s upper body is covered in bandages. His chest rises and falls slowly, wires and drips connecting to beeping machines. He heartbeat is steady, slow. But it is there.

He can’t die. We could make use of his quirk, he thinks and feels immediately disgusted with himself. He does not know the reach or limitations of the boy’s quirk. And even then, there is no excuse for what would be murder, both in intent and action.

“I’ve been at the institution since it was founded,” Recovery Girl to outsiders, Chiyo to him, says without moving from her place near Izuku. “I have seen many mistakes and healed more injuries than you could count. But never so many inflicted on one boy in such a short time. This is the third time this week he has been in my office.”

She sighs and turns to face him. Looks him up and down. Shakes her head.

“This is your first time teaching, Yagi, so some leniency must be granted. But a failure of this magnitude is not one we can ignore. I don’t know what Nezu will have to say to you and undoubtedly Aizawa will be out for blood, but I will say that I am extremely disappointed in you.”

Toshinori closes his eyes. Takes another shuddering breath. Acknowledges his fault.

“You should be.”
“Go before I kick you out.”

He stands without another word. One For All infusing his body and strength fills him. All Might forces a smile and opens the door. He has no other choice. Not really.

Outside, Tokoyami sits on the floor in his costume, his head slumped in exhaustion. The boy doesn’t stir from his fitful slumber. Undoubtedly, he will be in pain when he awakens. He considers waking the boy.

There is a bundle of dark cloth in Tokoyami’s circled arm, light green lines in geometric patterns marking the cape of his successor. Toshinori decides he might not be the best person to tell anyone else how to behave. He remembers entrusting the boy to defuse, or at least maintain, the situation between Ojiro and Bakugou. The fact that he is here means that Aizawa gave him permission.

And if he doesn’t have permission, then they can deal with that later.

He walks the halls to the teacher’s lounge. School is over by now and most of the student body has left. Some of the older students linger, busy with a project or other, but he sees no sight of any first years. He ignores the hushed conversations as he passes, pays no heed to the stares. Rumours travel fast, and some distorted version of the truth will have by now made its way across the campus. The validity of the rumour does not matter, only its nature.

And right now, it paints All Might in a bad light.

He sees Aizawa before his fellow teacher does. The scruffy looking man stiffens when he sees All Might. He tilts his head towards a class and All Might dutifully follows. Aizawa closes the door behind them.

“Do you know what the biggest responsibility a teacher has towards their students?” Aizawa asks, tone deathly flat. “To keep them safe. And you have just completely jeopardised that for Izuku.”

“I know,” All Might says.

“I very much doubt that.” His hair stands on end even though he isn’t looking at All Might. He has never seen Aizawa so frazzled. “Have you even once considered what this will do to Ojiro? He was very nearly ready to strangle Bakugou.”

His eyes widen. “What?” he splutters.

Aizawa cracks his neck in one swift motion. “You left Tokoyami to deal with that situation. And right now, he’s so guilty I’m going to have to spend the rest of the term making sure he doesn’t have a nervous breakdown. I have to make sure Ojiro doesn’t kill someone. I had to spend the last hour calming all the students you abandoned because for some unfathomable reason, instead of checking everyone else you had a duty to, you wasted your time uselessly in Chiyo’s office.

“That doesn’t even begin to deal with Bakugou. He’ll be lucky if the judge tries him as a juvenile.”

All Might chokes suddenly on his spit. “There’s no—”

“Izuku’s mother is fully in her right to press charges against both Bakugou and the school. The fact that you don’t know that proves every single reservation I had about you. You let a student who I specifically marked down as unruly and temperamental, possibly dangerous, battle someone he threatened to kill. You did this despite the protests of his fellow classmates. You did not intervene when deadly force was used. You are the reason he’s in that hospital room. And now I must deal with this. So, you stay out of the way before you make anything worse.”
Aizawa barges past All Might, his expression one of absolute hate. He pauses at the door to glance back over his shoulder.

“You are, undoubtedly, the single worst teacher to plague UA’s halls at this moment. And in your very first lesson, you undid everything I was working towards. You set us back so far in your arrogance.”

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Aizawa feels more frazzled than the last time he fought a villain, one who was competent in close range and had a long-distance emitter quirk. He remembers his heart pounding, blood rushing in his ears, and the quiet tendril of dread that he might not walk away. He won by luck alone which bothers him more than he is willing to admit.

He wishes that just once, once and only once, that luck applied to something important. Perhaps one day he will be lucky, and UA will change the entrance exam. Maybe he will be lucky and Principal Nezu will listen to his objections on certain staff members.

If he can choose a person for that luck to apply to, it would be Izuku Midoriya.

Everything about the kid is a red flag. By now, he has watched the recording of the battle simulation a dozen times, and he can’t decide who to punch first. All Might for not listening to Kirishima or stopping the simulation when he had the chance. Tokoyami for leaving his ally and making the plan. Bakugou for being Bakugou. So many options, none of whom were acceptable targets: All Might because there is little point in punching a man who can take an artillery round to the face; Tokoyami because there was so much guilt in the few words they shared; Bakugou requires his help, and no matter Shouta’s reservations about the boy, so long as he is a student Shouta will do everything in his power to guide him.

He meets Katsuki’s mother when she arrives. The woman is as blonde as her son and looks younger than Aizawa. Which makes no sense unless she had Katsuki at fifteen—not unheard of, but contraceptive measures are ubiquitous—or if her quirk has something to do with it.

“Mrs Bakugou,” he greets.

“Where is that little shit?”

That is, in no way, what Shouta expects. But he has heard worse. He leans against the chair so that he doesn’t loom over this woman. No reason to intimidate her, not when she’s clearly stressed.

“We need to talk first,” he says evenly. “You son—”

“Acted like a piece of shit. I’d like to have a conversation with him about why that kind of behaviour is unacceptable.”

He hums. “Then I suppose you’ll also explain how his behaviour will affect his future court hearing.”

She stiffens, a hint of fear gracing her features. “What?”

“What your son did would, at best, be considered petty quirk assault which, if he is lucky and the judge is lenient, will result in a fine, expulsion from this campus, and a permanent mark on his record.” He says this with the coldness of reason. “That is assuming the Midoriyas don’t personally press charges.”
Her eyes widen. “Inko wouldn’t… we’re friends, I can—”

“Talk to her? Certainly.” He inclines his head. “It might just be construed as forceful coercion of relevant parties to a court case. Would you like to listen to me before talking to Katsuki? Or do you want to take him home without the facts?”

She takes a seat on the desk opposite him, her hands shaking.

“I would like to help Katsuki,” he explains. “He is one of my students. But as it stands, the recording of events doesn’t paint him in any positive light. His threats towards Midoriya prior will likely see him charged for aggravated quirk assault, and that has a prison sentence of ten years for adults, three for minors if they have a clean record.

“The fact that I had to caution him against public quirk usage makes me suspect his record isn’t clean. I don’t have access to it, but tell me Mrs Bakugou, do you believe Katsuki has a clean record?”

Her hands are clenched, arms shaking from the tension. “He’s been… he’s been cautioned for public quirk usage twice. Officially, that is. And he’s—oh fuck, he’s served community service before.”

He sighs because of course, he has. Some days, Aizawa hates how convoluted privacy laws can get. They can’t even look at criminal records of minors when considering prospective students. And something as light as community service would have actively been censored by the government.

“Right now, Midoriya is in critical condition. If not for Recover Girl’s quirk, he might very well have died from shock, and even then he’ll be permanently disfigured. The absolute best option, the one which I doubt the most, is that Katsuki will receive a sealed red order.”

“I’ve never heard of one.”

“I would be shocked if you did. They’re particular to crimes related to heroics, or students in hero courses. Each red order is unique, but they all come with restrictions. If he gets one, then he might avoid a prison sentence. But that will only occur if the Midoriyas are willing to accept one.”

He lets the woman take her son. She drags a frozen Katsuki, and from the way the boy winces, her grip is relentless. He hopes Katsuki is smart enough to stay home and not get involved in an altercation. Or worse yet, run away.

Whilst that leaves Katsuki’s situation… addressed, if not dealt with, there are still two other students to consider. He hates this part of being a teacher. Deciding which punishment is fair, and which punishment extreme. Very much of Katsuki’s situation is out of his hands, and even in the unlikely event that the Midoriyas aren’t out for blood, his career as a hero is over.

Ojiro’s actions are simple enough and can be excused because of him being friends with Midoriya. That still doesn’t change the fact that he attacked Bakugou after the simulation ended. A short suspension without community service, maybe a day or two, will be acceptable.

He’ll have to speak with Ojiro later and explain that regardless of the situation, attacking another student outside of a supervised training session has punishments. And besides, it will give Ojiro some time to think things over and study for the history test Nemuri has planned as he knows the boy failed the quiz yesterday. And, it would remove him from the immediate reaction from his classmates and the other students. Shouta has seen how teenagers behave whenever a new piece of
gossip is involved, and he doesn’t want to risk Ojiro reacting badly.

His door opens. Very few people—exactly two—have the permission to do so.

“Shouta,” Nemuri greets and takes a seat. “I talked to the stragglers. Kirishima thinks this is his fault somehow. Said he tried warning All Might.”

She is still clad in her costume. He has known her far too long and seen her in enough compromising situations that it isn’t a distraction. When she puts her legs on the table, he isn’t distracted by the way her costume hugs the contours of her flesh. They had tried once, and it simply hadn’t worked. His interest lay elsewhere, and she was too distracted by her internship at the time.

“He did. All Might didn’t listen.” Before he can rant, he opens a drawer and removes one of the many packs of salty liquorice he has.

“Those things are the reason your eyes are bad.” Nemuri takes the pack and eats one. Shouta sighs and just removes another pack.

“This is a mess.”

“It is,” she agrees around a bit of liquorice. “What are you going to do about it?”

“What can I? Bakugou’s out of my control. Midoriya’s condition is critical. And I have no idea what to do about Tokoyami.”

“You never mentioned Ojiro.”

“Two-day suspension.”

She nods, and Shouta doesn’t doubt she understands why he made the decision. She always understood him, perhaps better than Hizashi.

“I’ll add in some history homework. Drown him in work and distract him.”

“Thanks,” he says.

“What’s the problem with Tokoyami?”

“How responsible is he for what happened? I can’t decide because of that.” She makes a sound for him to continue. “We’re supposed to teach them. I’ve had five days with him. A month from now I’d expel him instantly. But how can I hold him to that standard when he hasn’t even had the chance to learn anything.”

“Then don’t.”

“And do what? Suspend him? For how long? If I suspend him longer than two weeks, then he’ll be unable to pass the term. And if that’s the case I might as well save his parents the tuition and make him come back next year.”

“None of that has anything to do with your problem. Is he responsible?”

Aizawa closes his eyes. “He made a plan to pit Bakugou against Midoriya and retrieve the bomb himself. And I can’t fault it. He knew Bakugou would disregard all else and leave him a clear path to the bomb. It was the logical option. And if he was just a bit better-trained none of this would have happened.”
“And if Bakugou chose not to behave as he did, then we wouldn’t be having this conversation. You said it yourself, he made a good plan for someone with a week’s experience.”

He eats another piece of liquorice. Takes his time chewing it. Savours the dryness that comes with it.

“He made the plan out of cruelty. I have no idea why he was so angry with Midoriya, but he called Bakugou his abusive ex-boyfriend—”

“Is he?”

“Nemuri, why do you think I pay attention if my students are fucking each other.” He takes a deep breath. “I’ve reached a point where I have to wonder how many people are abusive in his life.”

“Shouta…”

He blinks and considers what he said. "I'll tell you later if I can. It's not my place."

“You know I’ve got your back.”

He snorts but can’t help the smile. “I do.” He slides a file to her. “The kid was homeschooled for the last four years because of something he did in the past.”

“Censored?”

“When isn’t it? I’ve noticed Tokoyami doesn't really interact with anyone in the class, and when he does he barely seems to know how to react. He's got no affiliations on record, so I don't even know if he understands peer interactions. Do I punish him because of how he was brought up?”

He reaches for another liquorice and finds that pack empty. He slams it on the desk, and the loud clap seems to echo in the tiny office.

“This class is a mess.” Nemuri just watches him and holds out a liquorice. He takes it. “Thank you.”

“Suspend him for a week,” Nemuri says after a beat of silence. “Throw in some community hours. I haven’t spent much time with him, but I don’t think he’s a bad kid. Maybe he made a bad decision, but how many have we made? Remember that fight against—”

“I remember you falling in a sinkhole—”

“Or how Nezu almost—”

“That was Hizashi’s fault and you know—”

“And the cat.”


*****

Darkness surrounds him, a haze consuming his senses. He knows unconsciousness and has had to deal with it before. He pushes past the haze, struggling for the light.

He opens his eyes slowly. The world is blurry. It takes a while for the white to resolve into the ceiling, for the weird droning to become the beeping of some machine, the sharp smell to reveal
itself as antiseptic and illness.

Izuku shifts his body. Pain hits him, sharply in his torso and a dull throbbing from the neck up. His eyes sting with unshed tears. He tries to lift his arm but finds the energy too great and gives up with a huff.

“Good, you’re awake.” He flicks his eyes to the side and sees Recovery Girl. “How much of that do you remember?”

He frowns. The pain in his face flair up making him groan weakly. White spots fill his vision. Then a sensation like ice fills his veins. The pain dulls slowly.

“You’ve been hurt badly, Izuku. Using my quirk on you depleted your energy reserves. But not everything can be healed.”

“H-how… bad?” he croaks.

“It will scar. You will retain full functionality, but you’ll need to come in every day for a healing session.”

“You c-can treat it… yourself?”

“I’ve dealt with worse.”

He closes his eyes. Another scar to accompany the rest. “I-I… understand.”

His eyes feel heavy. Fighting it is useless for he has no energy to do so. The darkness takes him again and he falls into a dreamless slumber.

When he wakes again the room is the orange of the setting sun. Everything still hurts but he has the strength to sit up this time. His body is bandaged heavily, his neck and the right side of his face the worst, but there were some around his torso.

“Don’t touch those.” He looks up. Recovery Girl looks tired, weary, as though she has just come from a battle. “I had to stitch some of those cuts. If you poke too hard they might start bleeding again.”

“S-sorry,” he whispers, wincing at how it hurts his throat. Recovery Girl hands him a bottle of water and he sips gratefully, the cool liquid soothing his throat.

“You have nothing to apologise for.”

“I keep on coming here,” he says slowly. “I should have… careful. Should have been more careful.”

She shifts, her features softening. “You cannot control what others do. Do try to be more careful in the future. I would hate to see you again for tripping.”

Blood rushes to his face. “I’m c-clumsy sometimes.”

“Clumsy sometimes?” She huffs. “If you do get hurt like that again, don’t hesitate to come see me.”

He nods slowly, grimacing at the way the pain flares up. “Okay.”

“If everything seems bright, or you experience synaesthesia, it’s because you’re currently on a
strong mix of stimulants and opiates.”

It takes him a long moment to parse through her words. “Aren’t those bad?”

She waves away his concern. “You’ll be fine. You might crash in approximately three hours and sleep for half a day, but you do need to be up.”

“What about Kaachan?” She raises a brow. “Bakugou.”

“Why,” she begins slowly, cautiously, “are you so worried about him?”

“Because I… I hurt him,” he explains before taking another sip of water. “He must have a few bruises.”

“Izuku, do you understand why exactly you’re in a hospital bed?”

He sees fire in his vision, red eyes set in rage and remembers unbearable pain. The fear, the complete terror of what would come assaults him. His hands tremble. He takes a deep breath and casts aside the memory of fear, locking it deep in his mind.

*I will remember even if you forget.*

He hears the beeping of the heart monitor, rapid and oppressive in its tempo. He takes another deep breath and watches it slow.

“It was an a-accident,” he says. “Accidents happen.”

*It was no accident, the voice roars. He sought to kill you again.*

There is static in his mind for a moment. It clears, and his head is blessedly quiet for a second that seems to stretch for infinity.

Then the voice screams in pain.

But that, he can ignore. Just like the monsters that hide in the deepest recesses, Izuku can forget the screams of the voice burning.

“And you consider that level of force an accident?” she asks, softly, gently.

“I can break his body if I used my quirk. He wasn’t aiming at me. I just dodged the wrong direction.” He shrugs. The motion pulls at his injuries and he winces.

“Did you try and *break* him? Did you once try to actively harm him?”

There is something in her question that he can’t figure out. Even with the stimulants forcing his mind to work actively, and the painkillers numbing the pain, there is still something in her question, a weight he finds incomprehensible.

“What does that have to do with it? I got hurt in an accident. Hurting him back doesn’t justify it. That only makes things worse.”

“And you find absolutely nothing wrong with this situation.”

“It’s not like I’ve never been hurt before.”

He thinks of all the injuries he’s received in the abyss. The worst, the deep and thick cut on his
shoulder had healed in minutes thanks to an eye large as a continent. He thinks of his many deaths.

“And who’s hurt you before?”

He blinks. “No one,” he says quickly, not even caring that the lie is poor. “It doesn’t matter.”

“You know you can speak to us if you have any problems.”

“I do? Aizawa-sensei said the same thing.”

“Even problems you have outside of school.”

He looks to the side, away from her too kind gaze. “I don’t think y-you can help. Can I go now?”

“I can’t stop you, technically. And you have to go to the teacher’s lounge today.” She walks to a cabinet and opens it, removing a cane from it. He stares at it. “Trust me when I say you’ll need it for the next few days.”

Recovery Girl slowly disconnects the monitoring equipment, checking over him one last time in the process.

“What do the teacher’s want with me?”

She pauses just about to remove the IV needle. “They’ll want your account of the event.”

He nods. “Okay.”

When she is done he removes the blanket. Slowly, he turns and lets his legs dangle off the side of the bed. He takes the cane then. She helps him as he places his weight on his legs. They nearly give out until he puts most of the weight on the cane. A spot on his torso hurts, the same spot that’s been bandaged so heavily.

“What happened there?”

His legs tremble as she says, "Some of the ceramic plates in your vest shattered. A large piece stabbed you."

“I guess I’ll just have to fix that for the next revision.”

He takes a tentative step forward. It hurts, and he is thankful so much of his training revolved around using his legs because were they any weaker, he would fall. He takes a breath and takes another step forward.

“Now, you won’t be doing any exercise until I give you permission.”

That nearly makes him trip. “W-wait, what?”

“I’ll prescribe you a series of stretches to perform but if you deviate from what I mandate you’ll wind up in a hospital for the next few months.”

“…Fine.” He walks slowly to the door, noticing Recovery Girl following him. “Are you—”

“Escorting you, yes. Would you have accepted a wheelchair?” He flushes at the very idea. “We don’t want to exacerbate your injuries any further if you get lost.”

He opens his mouth to argue. Decides that she makes a perfectly valid point. Opens the door
instead.

The hallway is bathed in orange. All the shadows are long, deep, and full-bodied. Like this, he feels like the entire world is open to him. He notices Tokoyami immediately. The boy has his head bowed in sleep. Nothing about it looks peaceful.

“Tokoyami,” he says, more forceful than he expects.

The boy’s eyes open. He blinks rapidly, looking around wildly until he spots Izuku. He stands and Izuku gets to see exactly how badly ruffled his feathers are. There is dirt and dust specking them, and he still wears his costume. His eyes are bloodshot and they give the illusion that they are red throughout instead of merely his irises.

“Midoriya,” the boy says uncertainly. “You left this.” He holds something dark in his hands.

He takes his cape, burnt in places and battered, but still whole. The material is warm to the touch, he realises now, and wonders if it had a layer of thermal insulation. Good for anyone going through shock like a civilian he might be called upon to rescue.

“I’ll let you talk,” Recovery Girl says, startling Tokoyami, “if you make sure he gets to the teacher’s lounge.”

“I would have done so regardless.”

“Well, let me leave you to it.”

Izuku watches her walk away, leaving them alone. He swallows, unsure of himself. The hostility from Tokoyami is gone, and that is almost worse than feeling a burning gaze judging his every action and being found wanting.

“S-sorry,” he blurts out, “for whatever I said. I didn’t mean to make you so angry.”

“You have little to apologise for,” the boy says, calmly, though his appearance belies that.

“I made you upset. You should always apologise for that.” Tokoyami flinches, stepping back. “I’m sorry.”

Tokoyami shakes his head, seems to regain his bearing. “The fault is entirely mine. Had I not been spiteful and listened to your concerns, then you would not be in your current state.”

“Accidents happen.”

“That was not an accident,” he says sharply. “He wished you harm and sought to accomplish his goal. And… I aided him in doing so.”

“W-what, no, this isn’t your fault. We just had a bad matchup.”

Tokoyami closes his eyes. His fists clench. And then he starts vibrating.

“Midoriya,” he says, voice perfectly level and on the edge of pure rage. “You really don’t see any issue with this, do you? No, let me say this. Cruelty is unbecoming of a hero and acting upon it has repercussions, and rarely are they benevolent. Acting on any negative emotion does so. I’ve been taught this my entire life because my quirk has sentience of its own, and it can influence me. It hated you and your duplicity, and I allowed myself to believe its words. Even now, it is calling me a traitor.”
Izuku swallows, legs trembling at staying upright so long. “But I’ve never even met you before.”

“It is irrational,” he agrees, still angry but now Izuku knows very little is directed at him. “As is your casual disregard for your personal health and safety. I do not claim to understand people well, but tell me, do you have any concept of the worth of your life?”

He stares at Tokoyami, wary of the earnestness in that gaze. And he knows that Tokoyami can never know of the depths he plundered to know about his quirk, can never know about the scar on his arm.

“Of course, I do,” he says, voice cracking. It sounds like a lie to his ears.

A lie is a lie is a lie.

“I see…” Tokoyami exhaled. Inhaled deeply. Exhaled again. His stance loosens just the slightest bit. “I will not ask you forgiveness for I very much doubt you can even recognise my fault. Instead, understand that so long as I live you will always have an ally in me.”

Izuku wants to smile but he fears the pain that will come from it. “Does that make us friends?”

Tokoyami laughs. It is a quiet sound, the tiniest bit true joy but mostly bitterness. “If you so wish.”

He extends his hand. “Fumikage Tokoyami.”

“Izuku Midoriya.” He extends his hand. His legs betray him then and he stumbles forward. His eyes widen in anticipation of the pain.

Strong arms catch him. Tokoyami holds him gently, carefully, his gaze worried. Izuku flushes in embarrassment. And is forever thankful that the boy says nothing, instead, helping Izuku stand upright without a word.

He extends his elbow to Izuku, not looking at him. Izuku places his hand on it, grateful for the help. Because right now his legs are tired. He wonders how long he has until the pain starts as they walk, his cane an unwanted companion in this.

Step-step-tap. They walk at the pace Izuku sets, slow enough that he thinks Tokoyami secretly a saint for he never shows any irritation. Step-step-tap. They turn a corner.

“Can I ask you a question?”

Step-step-tap.

Tokoyami glances at him out of the corner of his eye. “You may.”

Step-step-tap.

“Did you even go back to class after the trial was done?”

Step-step-tap.

“No.”

Step-step-tap.

“So, you were out there for a few hours. Doesn’t your neck hurt?”

Step-step-tap.
Tokoyami sighs. "It is a minor irritation. Do not worry about it. More worrisome are your cumulative injuries.

Ste-step-tap.

He is growing to hate the sound of the cane. Each tap is a reminder of weakness. And weakness is not something he can abide any longer. He knows what lurks in the darkness, knows the cost of weakness in a place where drowned gods can come back to life.

But right now, here in this moment, he can be weak if only for a moment.

Chapter End Notes

Writing Izuku's scene felt like pulling my teeth out in this chapter and the next. But whatever, it's Thursday and that means update time. If I take a while to respond it's because I'm busy at work. I promise to get round to all comments at some point in the next 24 hours.

That's all from me for now. Thank you for reading this. If you enjoyed the story leave a kudos and if you have any questions just leave a comment below. But know that all of that is unnecessary and as always, your readership is quite enough for me. Cheers.
Worthy of Sacrifice

Chapter Notes

So, I may have jumped onto this discord bandwagon. Let's see if this actually works.
https://discord.gg/4YvCTYR

‘My arrogance made me see heroics as a simple matter. It is not. Both it and the law I argued must be upheld even at the expense of compassion are messy things. There is rarely any cut and dry answer. Very few are willing to see themselves as anything but the hero of their own story. Circumstance turns many to crime. To simply brand them villains and sentence them to a life in prison solves nothing. I have spent the last five years speaking with many of these villains and their stories are nothing short of mournful.’

—Excerpt from ‘Reminiscing on the Final Hour’ by Hinata Ononoki.

He is tired when Aizawa finds them, his torso hurting and his face throbbing faintly though whatever painkiller Recovery Girl gave him is still effective; he knows how painful burns and cuts are meant to be and this is a dull echo in comparison. In retrospect, Izuku realises that having someone who knows how to get to the teacher’s lounge would have been a benefit. As it was, both he and Tokoyami got lost. Or, perhaps his horrid sense of direction spreads more effectively than a genetic virus.

Aizawa’s eyes are redder than usual, not from crying as Izuku is well aware what that looks like, and not because of his powers either. His features are hard and with how little he knows the man, Izuku doesn’t know why he moves so stiffly. When he politely tells Tokoyami to change and go home, Izuku is surprised. He expects a lot more anger from Aizawa and much more resistance from Tokoyami.

Neither occurs.

“Are you in any pain?” Aizawa asks as they walk, one hand on Izuku’s shoulder to stabilise him.

“No,” he says because it is mostly true. At Aizawa’s gaze, he adds, "It's nothing I'm not used to.”

The hand on his shoulder tightens, then loosens. “I see.”

They speak no more until they reach the rather large doors of the teacher’s lounge. He finds it funny that he and Tokoyami ignored this hallway twice as being too far out of the way to be the place. When Aizawa doesn’t open the door, Izuku looks to him and makes a sound of confusion.

“Midoriya, this is a closed meeting to get your recounting of events. Katsuki Bakugou will not be here.”

“B-but don’t you need his as well.”

“That was taken care of already. We will have questions regarding the incident. But, if there’s anything else you want to tell us it will not leave that room.”

He shrugs with one shoulder, the other a starburst of agony. “…Okay?”
Aizawa inhales sharply and opens the door. The room is larger than he expects but much more utilitarian than opulent. The seating is functional and looks comfy, but it lacks the grandness the many doors of UA imply with their simple presence. The wall opposite is lined by windows allowing the last warm rays of light in, casting the three figures in orange light—the principal whose name Izuku forgets, and is too fearful to ask for the intelligent glint in his beady eyes remind him of knowledge mortals are never meant to acquire; All Might to whom heroism is as easy as breathing, now lacking his usual electrifying grin; and Recovery Girl who frowns at him from her seat away from the other two, almost as if she isn’t an active member of the proceedings.

“Midoriya, my boy,” All Might says, seemingly lost for words, and for some reason, Aizawa’s hand clenches tightly, not enough to hurt but enough to clue him in on the tension in the room. It is thicker than flesh and feels as though the wrong word will cut through it and splatter them all with the rainbow ichor of gods.

“Perhaps let the boy sit,” the principal says in a voice at odds with the intelligence in his eyes. It is too bright and too sincere, and a part of Izuku refuses to believe the principal can be that sane and well adjusted, not when he sees a reflection of the monsters lurking in his mind in the principal’s eyes.

Aizawa leads him to a chair near Recovery Girl, using his body to block Izuku’s view of All Might. He wonders what happened between the two of them.

It was your fault, the voice groans, almost as if in pain. Izuku finds he wouldn’t be shocked if it is true.

Recovery Girl is to his right and slightly beside him, Aizawa to his left and only All Might and the principal sit across from him. He feels at once both surrounded and not in any danger.

“Let me start by saying this is not a formal hearing of any sort,” the principal says. “We simply want your accounting of events.”

“And your mother will be here as soon as we can get a hold of her,” Aizawa adds.

He looks to his teacher. “She probably left her phone in the car. She… she does it often.”

“This has happened to you before?”

Izuku shrugs heedless of the pain for pain brings clarity. He needs to be sharp and clear as broken glass, and though he is unsure why, this certainty will not leave him.

“Just the few times I’ve been sick at school before. And don’t you have a recording of what happened?”

“We do,” the principal says, his pleasant voice grating against Izuku’s ears. “But a recording gives little personal context. We cannot know what you were thinking or why you made choices you did.”

“Not that we’re accusing you,” All Might adds, hastily.


He sees All Might look away, guilty, but for what Izuku does not know. There is nothing to be guilty of, no action or word this great hero says can ever be reproached. His words are true as the snow is cold and the moon a distant mistress surveying the world indifferently. For All Might to be guilty, then are not all people guilty?
“No, it will not,” the principal agrees. “But we still need it to punish Bakugou accordingly.”

He frowns, ignoring the way his face hurts from the action. Ignoring things is second nature by now.

“Why? It was an accident.”

All Might chokes, coughing. “What part exactly was an accident?” Aizawa glares but All Might continues, “And for that, I apologise. I was too… hesitant to stop the exercise. And I did not fully address Bakugou’s issues.”

“But what does that have to do with Kacchan getting punished?” he asks, still confused.

The principal hums. “I think I understand. I believe you read the code of conduct for this campus.” Izuku nods uncertainly. “Then you should know that deliberately harming a student is grounds for expulsion.”

He blinks, stunned. And looks at the teachers. All Might without his smile. Aizawa looking grim and angry and tired. Recovery Girl, still silent, watches him. And the principal whom he can’t read.

“Wh-what right,” he begins slowly, angry for the first time in months, “do you have to decide he needs to be expelled? I’m the one—me, not you--sitting here in pain and I consider what happened to be an accident. That’s just… that’s just abdicating whatever responsibility you have to Kacchan.”

“We have a responsibility to ensure our student’s safety,” All Might says and for some reason that makes Aizawa’s fists clench. “Our first priority is you.”

“And I very much suspect you see this as being your fault,” the principal says.

“I’m the one who d-dodged the wrong direction.”

The room falls silent and the silence is heavy. There is a weight to it that makes Izuku nervous. All Might looks to him in pure horror and Aizawa looks very ready to strangle his hero.

He blurts out, “Kacchan wasn’t even aiming at… me.”

That seems to make it worse as Aizawa turns his head, ever so slowly, to look at him. There isn't anything like horror. Instead, this is the pure realisation that the nightmare is true and walks beside you.

He knows that expression all too well.

“You very literally can’t see any issue with what happened,” Aizawa says. “You even think you’re at fault.”

“Aren’t I?”

All Might shifts. “Izuku, my boy, you’ve done absolutely nothing wrong.”

“We wouldn’t be here if that was the case.”

Aizawa blinks three times, his expression going through a gamut of emotions before he finally settles on blankness. “We’re here to ensure you’re safe and kept safe in the future. And… You’ve read Ononoki?” he asks suddenly.
“Once or twice,” Izuku answers.

“What does she have—”

“Do you think heroes are beholden to the law?” Aizawa asks, ignoring All Might completely.

“Were I to commit a crime, should I be punished for it?”

“Of course.”

“So, if I were to, let’s say hurt Present Mic, should I be punished for it?”

“You wouldn’t,” Izuku says, wondering why Aizawa is giving such ridiculous hypotheticals. He plays along and says, “But Ononki says you should be punished in full accordance of the law.”

“Now, let’s extend this. What if one student willingly hurt another? Let’s say a student taking a gun to school and firing at another student.”

He swallows. “They should be puni…” He trails off. “I see what you’re doing here. But the circumstances are different. Kacchan’s training to be a hero. He didn’t want to hurt anyone.”

There is a beat of silence, pregnant with equal part horror and fear.

“He threatened you,” the principal says heedless of the weight of that silence.

“He d-does it all the time.” There is a flash of anger on Aizawa’s face and he realises he may have made things worse. “And he was playing… the role of a villain.”

“We cannot disregard prior behaviour,” the principal says. “Based on reports from your middle school, he showed aggressive behaviour. Specifically, towards you. And from his mother, we are aware he has served community hours for public quirk usage. That is behaviour unbecoming of a hero.”

“And you somehow think-no, you… you expect him to learn to be a hero if you just kick him out? So why did he let him come in the first place?”

“Your safety, and that of other students, is our priority,” All Might says.

He looks to his hero, feeling betrayed. “You know, you told me you dislike Ononoki because her views would see anyone who made a mistake go to jail. What did you say? That it breeds resentment. So how can you say that to me and then decide Kacchan should be expelled.”

“That was different.”

“How? You called me out on the same hypocrisy.” He looks to each of the people in this room, meeting their gazes even if he does flinch away from the principal.

“I know Kacchan better than anyone else,” he continues. “And I know that above all else he wants to be a hero. And by expelling him you’re failing him.”

Aizawa sighs. “There are consequences to every action.”

“Then you’re also failing me. If we can’t be kind and forgiving to others, then what’s the point of even trying?” He shakes his head, looking to the ground. “Kacchan sees the world as one fight after another. And maybe that’s unhealthy but that can be helped. And seeing the world like that is why he has more drive than anyone else. He wants to be a hero and so he will. Everything and everyone else is just an obstacle to that goal.”
“Drive and ambition are no excuse for his actions. If anything, they make things worse.”

He refuses to cry even though his eyes are burning. Why won’t they listen to him? Why can’t they see what he sees in Kacchan?

Why do you lie for him? The voice asks. Izuku ignores it.

Izuku looks up and meets the principal’s heavy gaze, a gaze filled with knowledge forbidden to mortals. “If in ten years he becomes a villain will you accept responsibility for that?”

The principal stays quiet, holding his gaze as if searching for something. He hums after a moment.

“Are we responsible for all the actions a person takes in their lives? That seems like something only a god could reasonably do.”

The gods are dead, and their corpses dream within you.

“We’re not,” he answers. “But we’re responsible for our own actions. If you know how to help someone, and you have the power to do so, then you’re responsible for what happens to them.”

“That is a heavy burden to carry,” All Might says, weary in a way Izuku has rarely seen.

“If we don’t carry it then who will?”

The door opens. Izuku looks and sees a woman he’s never seen before. And behind her is his mother. She walks regally, her face a mask of tightly controlled anger, and doesn’t even look to the teachers—he pays attention to the way she ignores them, as though they are not worth a moment of her time, in the event he needs to ignore something the same way. He offers her a smile, regardless of how much it hurts.

“Izuku,” she says flatly. He shifts warily because her anger is terrifying, even if not directed at him.

Aizawa’s fists clench in the corner of his vision.

“Hi, Kaa-san,” he says nervously, swallowing thickly.

Only now does she look at the others in the room. She pauses for a second too long on All Might, her lips curling in disgust, before settling on the principal.

“Principal Nezu,” she says icily, shocking him because he wasn’t certain she knew anything about UA. “I want an explanation and for the sake of your school, I sincerely hope it is satisfactory.

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Inko Midoriya is not a woman prone to anger or rage or hate. The outside world passes her by and she watches it occur indifferently. In her younger years, she was wild and fun and lucky to not have been arrested a few times over for milking casinos dry. But as years went on, her relationship with Hisashi evolved and she became calmer, more dignified and compassionate. The birth of her son made her change very much of who she was—no longer could she be so carefree. If nothing else, she would raise her son right. And in the deepest pits of her mind, where she hides the things that will hurt her, she knows the woman she once was could not have raised a boy to be anything more than a dreg of humanity, and if that boy did become someone worthy of society, it would be in spite of the person she once was, not because of that young woman without a care in the world for anything but money and a high that came only from conning someone; a high that at first seemed
forever but is in truth transient and fleeting.

When Hisashi went abroad for business, her warm and brilliant son became her world. He was, and still is, the anchor to which she was grounded to this reality. For him, she will accept any pain. It is her duty as a mother, one she will perform gladly. The pain of watching a child grow and walk their own path is profound, for one day he would reach an age where her support will be unnecessary. But, no matter the heartache of her son leaving, knowing he is safe and strong, and above all, a person of strong moral character is worth every iota of pain.

And she will do anything to see him make it to that age. She accepted without question that Izuku spoke the truth of his quirk for when had he ever lied to her? He kept things but not out of malice. Forgetfulness, yes, and sometimes the secrets were not his to tell. Staying awake with him long into the night as the monster he ran from tormented him is easier than breathing, and the exhaustion that follows the next day is no burden. Nothing will ever be a burden when it came to Izuku.

For him, she will be strong. She was kind and gentle when he needed it. But more and more, over these last few months, was she starting to understand that she needed to be strong in a way only Hisashi could be. And the thought of her husband brings a profound sadness for he was always the strong one, the implacable man despite his mild disposition.

Age made her plump. It is hard falling into a routine of exercise once more. The bones are old and pained, the nerves slow and damaged. But she has to match Izuku more now. Once a week, when he is busy and out of the house, she calls up an old friend and dons her dusty boxing gloves. She isn’t stronger in any noticeable way, would not be winning any fights. But her quiet strength makes Izuku stand taller and that is enough.

It has to be.

She can never forget his shock when she showed him the strength of her quirk and holds that memory tight. There had never been a need to train it much. She had no desire to be a hero. Now, though, lifting weights with her quirk is trivial. She is only now learning how to use it offensively. It is a struggle to do more than tear a paper in half by directing her power in opposing direction. But she is patient, and she knows that strength will come in time.

That patience is the only reason that she. Does not. Rage.

Her son who is the earth and moon and sun and stars all at once, her son who is terrified of the dark but perseveres regardless, her son whom even All Might acknowledges, her son to whom her love knows no depths, her son is injured.

And she hates how only now she receives the voicemail. She hates that she left her phone in her car and never got the call. She hates how she never once bothered putting her work contact on Izuku’s application form because when wouldn’t she have her phone on hand?

Above all, she hates that her son is alone and hurt and she isn’t there to do anything to comfort him.

She enters the hallowed grounds of UA, the first amongst equals in Japan, and internationally recognised as one of the greatest alongside Hero Memorial Academy in Zimbabwe and Toledo Research Institute in Spain, and all the other great halls of learning. She knows the rigorous difficulty of entering the academy, not least the written portion of the exams which tests a broad spectrum of knowledge across all disciplines—and even those who ranked lowest but were accepted still stood at the top one percent of the country—but also the physical exam that weeded out so, so many.
She is proud her son entered the school. But she always fears for him. Even if UA is nothing like the monsters she sees lurking in her son’s shadow, she has feared what would become of him. Now, her fears have rung true.

A lady in simple business attire greets her, polite, sympathetic and aggravating in equal measure. She offers no answers when Inko asks, deflecting the questions or using her position as a mere secretary to say silent. It is this that worries her more.

The school is quiet and near empty. There is a gaggle of students at the base of the stairs: a red-haired boy, a stern looking one, and one with a tail; and three girls, one whom she recognises as Uraraka immediately, a purple-skinned one, and one who looks similar to a frog. She would pay them no heed but for the red-haired boy who very suddenly breaks off from the group and walks to her nervously. She pauses and waits for him, softening her features.

“Ummm, Mrs Midoriya?” he asks nervously.

She offers him a smile, watching some of the tension bleed from his posture. “And you would be Kirishima?” She watches his eyes widen, and his friend’s look at her in shock. “My son has spoken of you often. Shouldn’t you be a home? All of you.”

She is still a mother through and through.

“Ma’am, we just… I-I just wanted to apologise.” He closes his eyes and takes a fortifying breath. “We tried to tell them not to pair them up. I couldn’t convince them.”

She raises a brow. “Who exactly?” she asks, not unkindly. But she needs this information.

The boy swallows. “All Might, ma’am. He was the one conducting the exam.”

“I see.” She does not let her anger shine through. “Kirishima. Ojiro. Uraraka. Forgive me if the rest of your names escape me at the moment, but none of you are responsible for what happened. I promise you that I’m not angry with any of you. And I know my son is not as well. So please, go home before you worry your parents.”

Her gaze hardens now, and she watches the children shift nervously. Good, they all knew exactly how worried their parents will be. She waits patiently as they walk past, some wanting to say something but her hard gaze stops them.

She sighs and allows the useless secretary to take her through the schools. The overly large doors give her pause only once before she decides they are ornamental rather than functionally designed to suit particularly large students. It sours her already dim view of UA.

At the teacher’s lounge, she walks past the secretary without waiting. The room is suitably large and the orange light strangely fitting. But none of the furniture matters so much as her son.

Her heart breaks for a second. There he is, bandaged heavily, particularly around one side of his face and neck. And from the bulges in his jacket, he is undoubtedly bandaged just as heavily. His visible features are bruised and lightly scratched. The grief she feels almost breaks her right then and there.

Then she hardens her heart. Kindness can come later when they are lone and in private, not now when her boy is surrounded by people far older and more experienced than him. She walks towards him, not once glancing at the others.

“Izuku,” she says, cold and sharp as a sword in ice.
She watches him shift warily. Good, he knows they would be having words later. “Hi, kaa-san.” Only now does she see the partly clouded expression in his gaze. Painkillers, the high-grade kind that didn’t leave someone confused and tired. But the fact that he could answer as calmly as he did is enough for her to trust he would heal, eventually.

Hopefully.

She looks around the room: a short old lady in fake hospital attire focused almost entirely on Izuku, likely Recovery Lady or whatever her name was; a scraggly looking man with thick fabric threads around his shoulders staring at her with well-hidden hostility, but the tension in his body gives him away; All Might who’s larger than life visage makes her lips curl in disgust for a moment, for how could this man who wishes to train her son, without so much as a word of explanation, as a successor fail him; and the rodent-like creature whose eyes are more intelligent than any she’s ever seen, and who would intimidate her on any other day in any other situation.

“Principal Nezu,” she says coldly, and without a single hint of her usual compassion. “I want an explanation and for the sake of your school, I sincerely hope it is satisfactory.”

His smile is placating. Not for a moment does she believe it. This creature holds too much knowledge for her to consider him anything less than a worthy enemy.

“Would you perhaps like a seat?” He stares pointedly at Izuku’s homeroom teacher.

The man stands and offers her the seat. Inko very nearly snarls because she knows this tactic and hates how well the rodent outmanoeuvres her. Saying no makes her look emotionally distraught and impolite. Both things you never wanted to be branded as a woman.

So, she accepts the seat, nodding once to the principal. She interlaces her fingers with Izuku. A united front is what they will show to these enemies. Her house is not divided, and they will not fall alone.

Together, perhaps, but never alone.

“I would like an explanation much more.”

All Might coughs, drawing their attention. “It was an exercise to simulate heroes infiltrating a villain’s hideout. Unfortunately, one of the students used excessive force.”

“And who, exactly, is this student?”

“Katsuki Bakugou.”

She grips Izuku’s hand tighter. “Katsuki Bakugou…”

“Kaa-san, it wasn’t his fault.”

There is so much pain in his voice. It quavers two octaves lower than usual, the beautiful harmonies that bring her joy discordant or outright missing. Perhaps to anyone else, he is calm and composed. She is not anyone else.

“Izuku, keep quiet,” she says without looking at him. “I want to know why you thought that pairing my son against Katsuki Bakugou was an acceptable decision.”

“"We could not have predicted what happened," the principal says, "and whilst that does not absolve us of the blame for we could have done more, we did not plan this or wish for this outcome."
“I very much think you were aware of the dangers.” She looks to All Might. “Did one of your students not warn you against this?”

All Might tenses. She expects him to lie or deflect for a moment. “Yes, he did. What happened was a result of negligence on my part. And I sincerely apologise.”

That, at least, lessens her hostility somewhat. “Thank you,” she says for she is not pettiness. “And what will happen to Bakugou?”

“Expulsion was our original intent,” the principal says. “But circumstances are making us realise we may not have that option available.”

She closes her eyes. Stills the building rage. Says, “You understand that I’m fully within my rights to sue both your institution and press charges against Bakugou.”

“Kaa-san,” Izuku protests, “You can’t do that.”

"Why not? You're a minor who's just been assaulted. And I'm your mother."

“He’s a good person.”

“Good people don’t do bad things. Like bullying someone for years.” It is a guess, nothing more. The openness between mother and son is a recent development, one brought on by Izuku’s quirk.

His hand clenches and the flare of pain reminds her just how strong her son is. But other than that, one indicator, his body and features are calm.

“He can be a better person. He made a mistake, but he doesn’t deserve to be punished for it.”

Principal Nezu clears his throat. “And this is part of the problem. Izuku absolutely believes that Bakugou did no wrong.”

She stares at her son, really stares at him. And she understands that he is not as sane as he once thought. Inko has seen him at his worst, gibbering in the language of dead gods—and now she can speak to birds and spiders and hear their oddly complex speech—and moments away from breaking under the strain of the knowledge he found in the murky black of madness. She knows it affects him from his very sudden fear of spiders to the way he finds death to be a trivial matter.

But now, she sees there is something fundamentally broken with her son.

“The law says crimes must be punished,” she begins slowly, almost hesitant. “I know you believe full well in the law. Villains should be punished. Attacking another person with a quirk is a defining characteristic of a villain.”

“It was a training exercise. I d-dodged in the wrong direction.”

She inhales sharply. “Was Stormwind a villain?” she asks suddenly.

Izuku frowns, then winces in pain. “Of course. She killed people and… she made herself a dictator.”

Good. At least her son still has a sense of morality she can understand. “She did free Europe. Some call her a liberator and hero.”

“But she killed people.”
“Some would argue her good outweighed her bad. So, should she have been allowed to continue out of popular opinion.”

He shakes his head. “She needed to be stopped regardless of what people thought.”

“And shouldn’t Bakugou be stopped before he hurts someone else, regardless of what you think?”

His eyes widen. “W-what, no. That’s no—”

“It’s exactly the same,” she interjects, “in concept. One person performs good and evil deeds. Someone says their good outweigh their bad. The law which is above human opinion says they should be punished and thus we follow the law.”

She seems him pause and mull her words over. This is the type of argument she knows he responds to. It always has been. Though she does wonder why he doesn’t stutter as much. Perhaps the medication? Perhaps his love for everything to do with quirks?

“But the law should have compassion, right?” Izuku looks to All Might who sighs.

“And are you not worthy of having that same compassion extended unto you?”

Izuku blinks, confused. “But I’m here. I’m not the one who might be expelled.”

“No, you’re the one who was hurt and needs to protected,” his homeroom teacher says, speaking for the first time. “And I believe you need to be protected from yourself more than anyone else.”

There is a weight to his words that eludes her. A secret, maybe, and one that makes her angry at him for her looks to her near the end of his words, as if to say ‘except you’. And that bothers her more than anything else.

“Izuku, why are you arguing for him?” she asks.

“Because he’s worth it. If I can forgive him why can’t you?” The question is childish and even Izuku flushes with embarrassment.

“Because you would probably forgive someone who killed you,” she says sharply and watches him sink lower into his seat. “Right now, I don’t think you’re capable of making healthy decisions.”

“Young Midoriya,” All Might says. “You have a big heart, larger than anyone else. But you are deserving of the same help you argue young Bakugou should receive.”

“I-I’m f-fine.”

“No, you are not,” the Nezu says finally. “You have no concept of self-worth and that is not the kind of mentality UA wishes to foster. It is not the sort of behaviour we are willing to permit.”

She frowns, trying to see the subtext to his words. It is All Might’s soft gasp that makes it click.

“Are you threatening to kick my son out? After your complete failing.” She doesn’t care that Izuku whispers her name softly, pleadingly. “I should sue you on principle alone.”

“Suing the school,” the homeroom teacher says suddenly, almost threateningly, “would involve a lengthy investigation on both sides. Izuku would have to go through a full examination and a quirk evaluation. Hard questions would need to be answered about his life prior to this.”

That makes her clench Izuku’s hand tighter because she shares the same terror of what would
happen should his quirk be discovered. “That sounds very much like a threat.”

“You’ll have to forgive Aizawa,” the principal says. “And perhaps I phrased my words wrongly. We would simply like Izuku to undergo counselling with the school to deal with his mentality.”

“There’s nothing wrong with me.”

She smiles falsely. “Izuku, stay silent.” She looks to the headmaster. “I take it this is mandatory if Izuku remains at this campus.”

“It would be.”

“I think we can survive a lawsuit.” He inclines her head, regal as a queen, and levels another threat. “Shiketsu would love to have him.”

“Kaa-san,” Izuku says, terrified if his strong grip is any indicator. "It's fine. It's just a regular counsellor, right? Not a quirk counsellor." He's looking at All Might, not her.

The man’s expression clears. “I believe that can be arranged if you would feel more comfortable.”

Izuku looks to her, still terrified but mildly less so. “Please. If there’s one thing you ever do for me, please let it be this.”

*****

Shouta Aizawa watches the proceedings clinically, but not detached from emotion. His anger rises at the coldness Inko Midoriya displays towards her son, and the displeasure she has seems less like concern for her son and more outrage that they had the audacity to call her here. The only positive is that she recognises her son needs help, even if she hadn’t wanted to allow him to go for counselling—and Izuku’s sheer terror at the idea only makes his personal anger worse.

At least Nezu had dissuaded the woman from suing the school. Somehow.

The matter of Bakugou would still have to be dealt with. Right now, at the very least, the boy would be suspended for the next few weeks.

His official record will forever have a sealed red order on it, one that will be severe and restrictive. It was the only way they could Inko Midoriya to agree. And whilst they will need a judge to process it, UA has a reputation that made doing this easily. Depending on the judge, if Bakugou infringes on the red order, then he could retroactively be charged with assault against Izuku.

Regardless of what happens, so long as Bakugou chooses to return, Aizawa has a responsibility to him. Sending him off to the counsellor twice a week wouldn’t be enough, not since Izuku unwittingly explained how the violent brat saw the world. Or threatened them with the possibility of Bakugou becoming a villain.

They aren’t even a chunk of the term in, and these brats are causing him more stress than he deserves. When the meeting is done, Aizawa offered to walk her to the car. Before they leave, Recovery Girl speaks for the first time.

“You’re going to be in a lot of pain come morning,” she says. “I’ve had your medical supplies sent to your home. Take the painkillers first thing when you wake each day.” She looks to Aizawa then and nods before leaving.

They walk in silence, even Izuku though he looks more focused on not tripping. It bothers him that
his mother doesn’t even offer him a hand to help him walk.

At the elevator she stops and says, “Izuku, why don’t you walk ahead.”

The boy wants to protest but his mother’s gaze is hard and unyielding, and he quails beneath it. “Okay.”

She waits until the boy is in the elevator and its gone down a floor before speaking again. “What, exactly, is your issue with me? Because where I stand, the only person who should have an issue is me.”

“I have an obligation to my students,” he says, tone level, “one which we failed in today. But I still have a duty to keep Izuku safe in the future. From any dangers.”

She looks startled, her cold mask slipping. “Good. We have—”

“That includes you,” he says bluntly, interrupting her.

It takes her a moment to register exactly what he said. And then she’s red, whether, from shame or guilt or something else, Aizawa does not care.

“He’s come to school injured and terrified more than once. He even claims he tripped after we gave him a quirk assessment form.”

“He did.”

“Which is illogical in the face of Izuku’s combat skills. Accidents are a common excuse for people who intentionally hurt themselves.” He tilts his head. “And for people in abusive situations.”

That sets her off, her stance shifting as though ready to fight. Not that Aizawa is worried. They have cameras placed everywhere, even if they don’t record audio.

“Don’t you dare accuse me of that,” she snarls. “Not when my child is going to be scarred forever by what your school did.”

“And he’ll be scarred further with you.”

She blinks very slowly, and he watches the tension leave her frame. “I would ask that you keep baseless accusations to yourself.” She takes a deep breath. “And if you don’t then I’ll take you to trial, not least for slander. And no matter what you think, the media is absolutely going to love knowing such a prestigious institution threatens students with expulsion to keep them quiet.”

“We never—”

“The media and the people will not care. Especially not when a teacher is threatening me with silence through baseless accusations of abuse to keep me quiet. Me, a single mother who raised a child that entered UA against the odds.” She smiles cruelly. “I could care less what you think, Aizawa. But if you so much as fuck up with Izuku again, then I’ll see to it that UA is nothing more than a monument to failure.”

She turns and walks away, her footsteps thunderous. He watches her walk down the stairs and reach Izuku. They exchange a heated set of words before she’s grabbing Izuku by the arm and practically dragging the boy. His fist clench in anger as he watches the scene.

“That was reckless.” He looks over his shoulder and sees Chiyo looking more than a little
disappointed. “And brash. Not logical in your words.”

“I needed confirmation,” he says, hating how hollow the words sound.

She huffs. “And you think you have it now?”

“She practically confessed to it. And threatened us as well.”

“Only after you threatened her. Aizawa, there is a reason we follow rules and regulation. An unkempt man partly responsible for her son being harmed is now threatening her with charges of abuse. You are a hero and a teacher at UA. You’re in a position of power and trying to silence her. She reacted as anyone would under that circumstance, with the only weapon she had over us.”

He frowns. “So, you think we should have kept quiet.”

“I think you’re emotional and not looking at this logically.” She sighs. “Becoming attached to your students is a good thing but not right now. Because as it is, we can’t go to the authorities as we should have done without a media war we would lose.”

“We’re telling the truth. We need to help him.”

“Aizawa!” she snaps, silencing him. “You might be angry with All Might for undoing whatever we were working towards, but you’ve just put a mountain between us helping Izuku. Here’s what we’re going to do. We’re going to explain this situation to Nezu. Then you’re going home to sleep, have a bottle of something, and so help me I will call Hizashi to drag you home if you don’t. And only then will we make a plan that is both legally and ethically sound. Do you understand me, Aizawa?”

He takes a breath and lets the angry haze fade slightly. “Fine.”

“I swear you’re still a child.”
War Scars

Chapter Notes

So, I may have jumped onto this discord bandwagon. Let's see if this actually works. https://discord.gg/4YvCTYR

And for some artwork:

Shadowshield by Prince_Of_The_Night

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘This age is not one of peace, but through the sacrifices of our predecessors, it is one of stability. Yet, we can never forget heroics is oftentimes violent and destructive. Regular laws sometimes cannot cover the bounds of heroics. It is why the sealed orders were created, as a method to both protect and regulate heroes. They allow crimes to be pardoned but in turn pose harsh restrictions, whose consequences very often exceed the possible punishment of the original crime. They are as follows: red to violent acts; yellow to property damage…’

—Excerpt from ‘Questioning the Modern Age of Heroics’ by Andile Sithole.

Pain rouses him from his slumber. It starts deep in his bones and works its way through his system, lighting up every nerve on the right side of his body. His spine tingles, the base worst of all, before a sharp spike seems to drive its way through his head.

His eyes open wide. The world is blurry, hazy, and only his memory of the shadows in his room stop him from panicking completely. Everything hurts, and it triggers memories of fire—the bright light before the heat and pain and the pressure wave moves too slowly and too fast—and the absolute terror he’s felt more than once—why, why, why are you so angry Kaachan? don’t hurt me, please, I’m sorry, it’s my fault.

Blindly, he reaches for his nightstand. He knocks something over in his haste and fumbles with the cylinder there. Hands trembling. He jabs it in the side of his neck not covered in bandages and depresses the contents. Icy cold trendily seems to surge through his body, and the pain subsides slowly.

He slumps over and that triggers another flare-up of pain. Izuku groans, and rolls onto his back, wiping away the tears. He focuses on breathing: in, hold it for ten seconds, ignore the way the pain flares up; out, hold for two seconds; don’t think on how painful it will be. He does this until he has some semblance of calm.

When he is ready, Izuku pushes himself upright, avoiding putting undue pressure on his right side. He looks down at the thick bandages around his torso. Finds a growing red spot. Curses because now his sheets are bloody.

His cane is on the ground and he takes it, grateful to have it as he shambles to the bathroom. The medical supplies are in the cabinet under the sink, stocked well enough that a doctor would be
proud. At some point or another in the last six months, he's had to use most of the things in there. Snipping off the bloody bandages is easy. The wound is three lacerations, all partly healed thanks to Recovery Girl's quirk, but the largest cut's stitches have popped. The numbing spray stings for a moment. It doesn’t completely ease the pain as he redoes the stitches and bandages up his side again.

There is blood on the floor and sink and tub, bandages and plastic on the ground. It is a mess, one he is very disinclined to bother with right now because that would mean bending and struggling to get up. And both of those would hurt.

He does it anyway, not wanting his mother to find the mess.

The mirror shows someone strange. There is a freckled boy with green eyes and green hair, like his. But half his face is bandaged heavily, and a streak of white hair stands out starkly at his temple. His features are pallid and pinched, perspiration dripping from his forehead down his chin. His eyes are dark and behind them, there is fire and pain and just a hint of madness lurking in the back.

The boy is not him and is him at the same time.

“Boo,” the reflection says. Izuku stares at it, watching it crack its neck. “You fucked up.”

“This isn’t real.”

The reflection smiles, high and bright and so so terribly mad. “Of course, it is. I’m as real as you are.”

“Go away.”

“Name me.”

“Fuck off already.”

The reflection tilts its head and it changes, morphs into something that terrifies him completely. It is Izuku as he once envisioned himself, warm and awesome in his green costume, a hero to the people, revered and worshipped in equal measure.

“I keep the secrets,” the reflection, the hero he once imagined, says. “I am the unmarked grave of your failings.”

The glass shatters. Izuku looks at his fist in shock, not knowing how it has embedded itself in the mirror. He pulls his hand back, wincing for the glass scratches him further. He shakes his hand gingerly, watching sharp shards of bloody glass fall to the sink.

The door opens. His mother enters, worry writ plain on her features.

“Izuku,” she says and takes in the scene. “What did you do?”

“I punched the mirror.” He smiles, undoubtedly a rictus of pain. “My reflection wasn’t being polite.”

She takes a step forward. Reaches out tentatively. Cups his cheek.

“Izuku, honey, reflections don’t talk.”

“Mine do.” He chuckles. “Mine do. Of course, mine does. Why wouldn’t it?”
The absurdity of his life hits him right then. His chuckle devolves into choked sobs. Instantly, he is in his mother's strong and warm embrace, staining her clothes wet with his tears. Her hand is in his hair, stroking it, and it might be childish, but he wants nothing more than to hug his mother forever.

When he falls silent she pulls back to look at him and wipes away the tear tracks with a gentle thumb. She traces the edge of the bandages where it meets flesh. It tingles and Izuku knows it would be infinitely worse if he hadn’t used the anaesthetic earlier. A part of him hopes it doesn’t interfere with Recovery Girl’s painkiller. The rest of him knows he can die quick enough if they mix badly.

“You alright now?”

No. “I’ll be fine.”

“We’ve talked about honesty before.”

“What do you want me to say? You know I’m a nervous wreck and probably crazy.”

“You’re not crazy.”

He wants to roll his eyes but refrains. Barely. “Then everything that’s been happening is a result of my quirk and I might as well be crazy. There isn’t much of a difference.”

“I’ve seen you at your worst. Traumatised, yes, but not crazy.”

“Speaking alien languages is most definitely a sign of sanity. Right up there with coming back from the dead.”

She sighs. “Sarcasm doesn’t suit you.” He flushes. “But I’m glad you’re feeling… better. And I’m happy you’re going to see a counsellor.”

He sticks his tongue out. “You’re glad? After you threatened to sue the school how many times?”

“Don’t be petulant. One day you’ll get older and understand that you need to use whatever weapons you have to protect yourself.”

“No one was trying to hurt us.”

“Are you certain of that? You have no idea what your teacher said to me.”

“It couldn’t have been bad.” Her face darkens. “He’s a hero, kaa-san. They don’t do bad things.”

She ruffles his hair though her expression is still closed off. “Don’t lose that naivety, honey. Get dressed, we’re going to see that nurse of yours.”

He does so with a bit of assistance. Wearing a shirt is much too difficult but letting his jacket hang open is more than doable. Especially after the pain medication he takes kicks in. It leaves him drowsy and he doses off.

Recovery Girl looks him over and immediately finds the stitches. “How did the stitches break?” she asks, looking to his mother.

“I didn’t even know they were broken.” His mother frowns, and though she is behind him, her gaze feels like a hot poker on the back of his neck. He swallows.

“And the cuts on his hand?”
Blood rushes to his face. “I-I punched a mirror,” he offers, weakly.

Recovery Girl hums, not believing it for a second. “I see.” He flushes further.

She bandages the cuts, her pace even and measured. "You've had experience with stitches." It is more statement than a question as she checks the stitches once more. "You've done them often?"

“A few times.” He looks over his shoulder to his mother. Her face is blank as though giving him the choice to explain. “I’m pretty c-clumsy.”

*A lie that bad is only a truth*, the voice says.

She sprays the right side of his face with something. It seeps through the gauze and bandages. He sees more than feels the bandages disintegrate and fall off. The cold air stings and pain flares up in long and sharp streaks like a whip on a cattle’s flank. He closes his eyes and grits his teeth because the pain only worsens.

Recover Girl sprays something on the wound again. Blessed numbness seeps through his skin. He almost cries at the relief. She applies a thin layer of a salve before reapplying the bandages and gauze.

At the very end, her lips extend, and she gives him a kiss on the forehead. Instantly, he feels exhaustion take over and only his mother's strong hand keeps him from falling back.

“You’re going to be tired most of the next week,” she explains. “I can’t heal you too much without risking you running out of energy. Which could put your body in shock and in the worst case, total organ collapse. The most activity you’re allowed to do is walk.”

He nods weakly. “Thank you.”

“Go get some sleep.”

Izuku leans on his mother and partly on the cane as they head back to the car. He forces himself awake until they’re home. The couch is comfortable and close enough to the kitchen that Izuku can get there is he absolutely needs to. It also has the benefit of being near the TV.

He wakes again in a few hours. His throat is parched, a headache brewing and a dull sort of pain reverberates through his bones. A bottle of water and two pills rest on the table. He swallows the pills and drinks greedily. A flashing light draws his attention. His phone, which he has forgotten about, is only a stretch away.

He expects maybe a message or two at best. He doesn’t expect his phone to be visibly slowed as it processes every single message. He reads through them slowly: Kirishima who is awkward and apparently terrified of his mother; Iida whose first message is stilted and formal, but the later have more empathy, and he even has the audacity to give him a link to a folder which he promises will have notes and homework for the next week; Uraraka who seems to write using more emojis than words; Asui who sends pictures of her and Ashido doing random things and a promise for ice-cream and maybe, just maybe a threat to braid his hair; Ojiro who is so profusely apologetic that Izuku’s heart breaks and he wants to force himself up and out the house to find him because no one should feel that guilty over Izuku; and Shinsou is displeased.

*Friday; 1521*  
**Shinsou:** Staying late?
[Friday; 1530] Shinsou: Replying isn’t that hard.

[Friday; 1540] Shinsou: Rumour is someone in our year got hurt. Know who?

[Friday; 1603] Shinsou: Okay, whatever. You can talk to me when you’re ready.

[Friday; 2003] Shinsou: Why the hell are you so angry at me?

[Saturday; 1000]: Shinsou: I know for a fact you’re up. I found out from Jin who’s bloody murderous by the way.

[Saturday; 1214] Shinsou: Stop ignoring everyone.

It is the last message from Shinsou that worries him the most. It is less a message and more an order to meet him at the café tomorrow morning. And something about the lack of warmth or dry humour worries him, makes him think Shinsou is angry at him personally, and not just worried.

[Saturday; 1500] Shinsou: Anteiku. Tomorrow. 1100. Delete my number if you don’t show up.

The next morning after he sees Recovery Girl, his next destination is the café. Anteiku is as pristine and welcoming as ever from the outside.

“I’ll be fine, kaa-san,” he says, hobbling out of the car. He still needs the cane, less because of his injuries and more because of how exhausting each healing session leaves him.

She smiles, ruffling his hair. “I’ll be right here if you need help.”

“You can do other things. I’m pretty sure there’s a lot of things more important than waiting in a parking lot.”

“You’re my son,” she says as though that answers everything.

“Okay?”

He walks in and is greeted by a purple-haired girl, both eyes red on black. It should look creepy but for her smile which is what he imagines angels look like when they smile. And when he describes Shinsou, she nods and leads him to his friend.

Shinsou looks more tired than usual. His eyes are completely bloodshot, hair a mess and he seems twitchy from too much caffeine. He navigates his way through the cats, avoiding jabbing one with his cane.

“Hey,” Izuku says.

Shinsou looks up and sees him. His eyes widen as he stares at Izuku, not saying a word.

“C-can I sit?” he asks, shaking the cane just a tad.

“It’s not like I can stop you.”
Izuku sits. He’s not sure what to say, not when Shinsou looks angry because strong emotions rarely ever grace the boy, and he’s never seen any but joy.

“I’m sorry,” he offers because that’s as good a place to start as any.

“You should be. I had to find out second hand from Jin what happened. And even then I barely know because no one’s saying anything to me."

He looks down. “I’m sorry.”

“I thought we were friends.”

“We are.”

“Then why on earth would you not respond?”

He sinks lower in his sit. “Because I forgot about my phone and that’s not an excuse but right now I’m in pain and about to pass out and I’m sorry and—”

“Izuku,” Shinsou interrupts sharply. He looks up and sees Shinsou ready to cry. “Do you understand how worried I was? You can’t just get hurt like that.”

Izuku tilts his head. “You’re not… angry?”

“Of course, I am,” Shinsou snaps, “but I’m more worried.”

And that is when a cat jumps on his head. They all freeze. And then Shinsou burst out laughing. Izuku joins in with a chuckle when the black cat leans over and stares him upside down. It licks him with its rough tongue on the nose.

He hears a snap and startles, the cat leaping off and landing on his lap. Shinsou has his phone out.

“I’m sending that to Uraraka.”

His eyes widen. “What, no. Don’t you dare.”

Shinsou laughs again. “Too late.”

His phone vibrates. And then vibrates again. He pulls it out and has to put it on silent before he worries it might die. He knows that picture is going to haunt him the rest of his life, but he can’t find the energy to care, at least not when Shinsou smile is brighter than the sunlight on seawater and softer than moonlight on snow.

“Since when are you friends with Uraraka?”

“You’re the one who wants everyone to be friends with everyone.”

“I don’t see what’s wrong with that.”

Shinsou shakes his head. “I hope you never do.”

*****

Monday is when he understands exactly how profound boredom can be. Yes, seeing Recovery Girl takes up part of the morning. Yes, reading Iida’s impeccable notes and doing homework takes up time. Yes, there is a backlog of books and documentaries waiting for him. But all of that doesn’t
take up more time than usual. And without the time spent in class or exercising or just generally being stressed, he has little to truly occupy his time.

Bothering his mother is out of the question after the one time he did it in the morning. He finds her in her room, hunched over a folder.

“Kaa-san,” he ventures.

She startles, frantically hiding the folder from view. “Izuku, are you alright?”

“I should ask you that.” Her eyes are red from crying.

She smiles gently. “I was just looking at some baby photos.”

“S-sorry.”

His mother wipes away her tears. “It’s not your fault,” she reassures though it only makes him feel guilty.

He sits on the couch and plays with strings of shadowstuff, twisting it this way and that with nothing more than will. And when it eventually disintegrates in the light, he observes the time. It has been consistent throughout the day, as has been the time it took to make the shadows.

It takes him little effort to reach into his shadow and retrieve a notebook. He shakes off the errant globules of darkness and flips to the page with his costume. He'll have to redesign and modify it. Thankfully, he won't pay a single cent. UA, as an apology—or as hush money according to his mother—will be paying for his next costume and the copy he would keep personally, as well as all of his costumes whilst he is at school.

“Metal conducts heat,” he says out loud. “Gotta change that. Ceramic plates instead as a backing. Thicker material on the vest. Don’t want to get stabbed by my own armour again. Oh yeah, find out what Aizawa uses for his ropes and maybe add a non-conductive surface to it. Maybe?”

Shut up already, the voice says quietly. You’ll wake the up.

“No, no, no, you fucking bastard. Don’t ever ask that. He hears the crackling of flames and something so high pitched that he winces. Fuck. Now the ghosts are looking for me.

The voice goes away, and with it the static that he only now notices. Izuku shrugs. This is in no way, shape or form the worst thing that he has experienced.

He chooses to stretch as Recovery Girl ordered to pass the time. They aren't particularly strenuous, but with his injuries, it feels like trying to carry the weight of the world. His legs quiver and a thick layer of sweat covers his body. All he wishes it to pass out. Unfortunately, he has standards. The shower afterwards helps ease some of the pain.

The next two days pass in much the same way. Do homework. Investigate the more benign parts of his quirk. Make designs. Do some card tricks. Reply to the trickle of messages he gets throughout the day. Fail to do some basic stretches. Repeat.

Wednesday is when he makes new discoveries of his quirk. He sits on the front stairs, in the shade cast by the balcony. Everything hurts and all he wants to do is pass out on the couch, but the very thought of walking that distance makes his injuries hurt in anticipation. So, when he falls through
his shadow, Izuku is more annoyed at the pain that comes from landing on the floor than he is intrigued by the discovery. When he exits the distorted reflection of his room, he winds up on the lounge, walking out the shadows falling on a darkened corner. He blinks at this then falls asleep on the couch.

On Thursday the isolation hits him. Early in the morning, the voice hurls curses and damnation at him. By midmorning the shadows take a life of their own, rising and undulating and living in some perverted way. His lower back hurts more, throbbing in time with each shadow rising. Even turning on the lights does little to banish the sense that creatures vaster than mountains and older than life are observing, judging, and perhaps even stalking him.

And when the sensations get worse and worse and worse, and he’s left panicked and a second away from calling his mother, he decides to skip that. Why should she waste time? There are knives in the kitchen, all of them sharp and he picks up the sharpest one he can find.

The pain of the knife slicing through flesh is nothing compared to the pain he is already in. But it is something to latch on to for pain brings clarity and with it comes focus. It is only halfway through the first cut does he realise maybe there is a reason everyone wants him to go for counselling. The pain, though, grounds him as does the smell of blood. He pauses, bloody knife in hand and runs his tongue over his teeth. His sharp tooth cuts through his tongue and he yelps, dropping the knife.

He swallows the blood, not willing to risk it becoming sentient and leading a rebellion against him. At least, not in the home he shares with his mother.

He looks at the scene and knows that if anyone sees this there will be a trip to the mental asylum. And he’s read how little those actually do to help—more often they are dumping grounds for people whose quirks affect them mentally, and the people there are left to rot and, in the very worst, they are forced to survive against each other.

Cleaning up the mess is second nature as is bandaging the cut on his thigh.

The small space of the apartment is too claustrophobic for him to handle. It may be stupid, and his mother might chew him out—no worse than if she were to see the latest wounds—is she discovers it, but he can’t stay here. It isn’t safe, not with voices baying with madness and shadows rising of their own command.

The outside world is bright, blindingly so. It banishes the shadows that cling to him and his cane. And so long as he walks, he can ignore his memories of the darkness hiding half a step out of sync with the real world. He walks long past the point his legs just want to give out because stopping means dealing with the possibility of going home. And his mother isn’t there to ground him, and he doesn’t care how childish it is to want his mother so badly.

“Boy!”

He turns, startled, and sees a man with cross-shaped pupils. “Jin-sensei?”

The man tilts his head. “You’re standing outside my dojo.”

And he is. He can see the sign and wonders how the hell he got there. Because he couldn’t have walked that far, not in his current state.

His legs give out. Jin catches him. “Look like shit.” But he helps Izuku into his dojo and onto a bench. The place is quiet, but it is midweek and too early for school to have ended. Only a few
adults work in the back with a man that looks like he could be Ojiro’s dad, but they are too busy to care for them.

“It’s not so bad.”

“Can you walk across room?” Izuku’s face pinches in frustration. “No. Have you spoken to Shinsou?”

“Yeah. He was a bit upset with me.”

“Not as angry as Ojiro. Had to send him home. Boy looked ready to murder someone. Like the one who hurt you.”

Izuku sighs, tired of explaining this over and over again. “It was an accident.”

“An accident includes death threats? How things change.”

“He’s always like that.”

Something dark peaks through Jin’s eyes. “Always? A violent child like that is not fit to be hero.”

“So, what, he should be a villain? Everyone makes mistakes. We just have to know when to forgive them.”

“You, I think, would forgive your murderer. Another conversation that is.” His features soften ever so slightly. “Why do you come here? Not to train.”

Izuku looks away. “I just couldn’t be at home.”

“Why? What battle do you flee from?”

“I’m not fighting anything.”

“No, you are losing fight. But sometimes retreat is a better option.” The man stands. “Stay here as long as you like. None will harm you. And call your mother. She will worry.”

He stays there, watching people train and fight, for another hour before letting his mother know. She’s very much ready to leave work, and only the best reassurances—\textit{a lie is a lie is a lie}—that he just needed to stretch his legs stop that. When he is ready to leave, just before school ends and he must deal with more people coming in, Jin practically throws him into a taxi.

He cooks to take his mind off everything. It helps a little to hold the voices at bay, and if he focuses completely on the task at hand then he can almost ignore the eyes watching him from dark nooks and crannies. Only for a minute or so does he contemplate using the knife for something other than cutting vegetables.

When dinner is ready, and his mother still is not home, Izuku starts worrying. He paces back and forth, regardless of how much strain it puts on his body. Before his legs give out again, he steps outside and sits on the steps in the warm light of the setting sun. The shadows are long, but he can feel people walking, can hear them talking, and can imagine them simply being alive in a way that is tangible. They aren’t the dead that live or gods dreaming of their final cataclysmic battle that reshaped worlds.

No, they’re human in their simplicity.

He feels his mother well before he sees her. She walks with someone else. When they turn the
corner, he sees Kacchan’s mother talking to his, both looking awkward and upset.

“Izuku,” his mother says when she finally sees him. “What are you doing out here?”

He smiles. It doesn't hurt so much anymore. "It's warm out here. Hi, auntie," he greets the blonde woman who hasn't aged a day. Beside his mother, she looks young enough to be her daughter.

“Hello, Izuku,” Kacchan’s mum says. “We haven’t spoken in a while.”

His mother coughs. “Mitsuki wanted to talk to you about… Katsuki.”

“Okay?”

A pained look crosses his mother’s features. “If you need me I’ll be a shout away.”

“Sure, kaa-san. Oh, dinner’s ready.”

His mother sighs. “Of course, it is.” She walks up the stairs and into their home. She leaves the door slightly open but Izuku feels her walk out of earshot.

“Do you think I could sit down,” Kacchan's mother asks, pointing at the step.

“You’ll get your skirt dirty.”

She smiles, eyes crinkling. “I think I’ll survive.” She sits elegantly though it makes Izuku wince because white is a nightmare to clean.

They sit in the sunlight, silent but for the screech of tires. It is calming to hear another human breathe and simply be, without anything otherworldly about them.

“You wanted to talk to me about Kaachan.”

“Yes… Katsuki.” She hesitates. “Why did you argue for the asshole?”

“Because he’s a good person at heart.”

“You have every reason to hate him. Inko told me you’d scar because of what the fucker did.”

“Scars fade. Being a hero is dangerous. What’s the point of being a hero if we can’t forgive each other.”

“That’s not the point. Heroes are supposed to protect people.” She sighs, and Izuku thinks she might be ready to cry. “The little fuck got his anger from me. I was too lenient and now it’s only because you’re too kind for this earth that my kid’s not in prison.”

“I wasn’t going to let that happen. I don’t want to see him become a villain.”

“He doesn’t have a choice but to be a hero.” He looks to her, confused. “He has a sealed red order now.”

Izuku quirks a brow. “I’ve heard of them.”

“If he ever commits a violent crime he’ll be tried as an adult,” she explains. “And if he does so after being an adult, he’ll be charged for what he did to you regardless. Eight years in a maximum security prison no matter what.”
“That seems unfair.”

“No, it’s too fair. He can choose to be good and just, and nothing will ever come from what he did to you. Or he can be a little shit and go to prison.” She ruffles his hair. “I’m happy I still have my son. But I’m not happy with the son I have.”

Izuku flinches, pulling back. “What, no. You can’t treat him like that. He deserves better than that.”

She stares at him for a long moment. “I think you deserve better than you believe you do. I’ll make sure my son doesn’t hurt anyone again.” She smiles and it’s the sun reflected off broken glass. “But thank you.”

She stands. Izuku tries to join her but loses his footing halfway there. She catches him.

He looks away. “Sorry.”

She ruffles his hair one last time. “I think you’re a better hero than most.”

****

Sunday comes faster than he’s prepared for. He’s come to school alone, finally strong enough to walk without the cane. Recovery Girl checks him over, fussing over the very minor cuts and scrapes he’s received from trying to train before his body was ready.

The wounds on his torso have healed well. He will always have three short scars from the ceramic lacerating him, but shirts will cover that up.

She lingers on the long cut down his left forearm. He’s long given up on caring since she’s seen it many times.

“Izuku, I won’t pry,” she says, “but I will ask that you be sincere with your counsellor.”

“Do I have a choice? I have to go, or I get kicked out.”

She wraps a thin bandage around his face. “It was not meant as a threat. We want you to be safe and healthy. Not insisting you speak with a trained counsellor would be abdicating our responsibility to you. Did you not chastise us for doing the same with Bakugou? And no, it isn’t any different because it’s you we’re talking about now.”

“So, I don’t have to go?”

“You can technically not go but we’ll have to call your mother. And if she cares about you, then she’ll also insist you go.”

“That’s not much of a choice.”

“I suppose it isn’t, but it is your choice to behave belligerently. But you can also choose to be honest and sincere. And maybe get some help. We can do what we can, but we need your help to help you.” She finishes tying the bandages. “It’ll scar badly. But you can choose to get skin grafts when you’re older.”

“Why not now?”

“The surgery is complex and the healing process even more so to perfectly restore your face. It would leave you in the hospital for months.” Her eyes dart to the side only briefly. “And it would
require your mother's consent."

He swallows. “I see.”

That is all they say about it. He spends the rest of the day cleaning and packing meticulously, nervous in a way he hasn't been in a while. Thanks to Iida, he won't be behind the class. But tomorrow he can finally take off the bandages and see how bad it truly is.

Monday morning comes too quickly. He stands in the bathroom, staring at his reflection in the new mirror. The bandages are the only shield he has.

“You can’t hide forever,” his reflection says snidely. “I’ve suffered far worse because of you. This is only fitting.”

His hands tremble as he raises them to the clip tying the bandages together. “Will this make you feel better?”

The reflection cocks its head. “No.”

It disappears and for a moment there is mist. It clears up and his true reflection returns. It moves in time with him and offers no snide comments.

He takes a deep breath. “This can’t be harder than dying.”

It is.

The bandages fall away. It starts at his chin, very light pink. The scarring deepens as it progresses along the right side of his jaw, thicker where the plates had burnt straight through his skin and thinner where they were connected by the elastic material; the scarring lessening as it winds its way up his cheek and even is lower ear is affected. His neck is a starburst of deep red.

And somehow, he knows that no matter how bad it looks, it is magnitudes better than it would be without Recovery Girl. The scarring will clear up in some places with time but knowing that doesn’t stop him from crying.

“I guess you look like a monster now.”

He isn’t sure who says that, maybe him and maybe the voice. In the end, it will never matter.

Chapter End Notes

That's all from me for now. Thank you for reading this. If you enjoyed the story leave a kudos and if you have any questions just leave a comment below. But know that all of that is unnecessary, and as always your readership is quite enough for me. Cheers.
What Measure is Human?

Chapter Notes

I have a discord server I'm running like a total noob. https://discord.gg/4YvCTYR

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘The age of samurai is long past. Oaths of fealty, of honour, and of compassion are gone. The morals and ethics that once stood as pillars of our society have faded, first to cultural degradation of foreign influence and then to the Second Dark Age. The New Heroes must be held in high regard, and no dishonour shall ever come of Hawkmoon’s name, but they were paid mercenaries of a fracturing United Nations. For there to be true stability for years to come, we must once again find our morals.’

—Excerpt from ‘The Pillars of Moral Heroics’ by Ryo Asuka and annotated by Fumikage Tokoyami.

Every step he takes down the stairs is shaky, one hand gripping the rail and the other pulling at his hair nervously. His mother is in the kitchen and this will be the first time she sees him, sees the monster beneath the flesh.

She doesn’t hear him when he enters the kitchen. “Kaa-san,” Izuku whispers.

“Hey, honey,” she says without looking, still packing his lunch. “Just a moment.”

One final portion of pork cutlets—spicy even form a distance—goes in a metal lunchbox, before she packs it all in his lunch bag. For a moment he wants to smile for who else could know his favourite meal? His smile dies as she turns.

Her eyes widen, and she looks him over quickly, expression finally settling on sadness. His heart breaks.

She knows you’re a monster, the voice says.

“Izuku, what are you doing to your hair?” He startles as she approaches, gently prying his hand out of his hair. She cups his face, casually, not at all interested in the burns, before smoothing his hair out.

Some dark well in his chest seems to disappear. “What?”

“It looks like a mess. Sit down.” She pushes him to a seat where a simple breakfast has been laid out. “Stay still. Was it getting too long?”

He blinks as she separates thick strands of his hair and twists them together with deft fingers.

“Aren’t you mad at me.”

“For what?”

“Looking like this.”
Her fingers still. “You usually look neat,” she says as her fingers resume their motion.

“That’s not—”

“—What you’re talking about,” she interrupts. “I know. I also don’t care. You’re my son.”

“You can’t keep saying that like it’s the answer to everything.”

She snorts, amused. “I’ll stop saying it once you understand it is the answer. Want to hear a story?”

“Do I have a choice?” He pops a slice of apple in his mouth, crunchy and tart. “Sure.”

“Your father was—is—bad with names. Really bad. He never remembered my parent’s names. You were too young to remember, but I didn’t let him speak at the funeral because he would have gotten it wrong. And he really wanted to name his kid. And they were all bad names, from Sarada to Setsuna and Apollo.”

Izuku chuckles. “It couldn’t have been that bad.”

“I think I still have the list somewhere. The point is, he did everything in his power to name you. He took me on trips and did all the work when I was pregnant. It was hard having two kids fighting in my stomach.”

Izuku pulls away. “Two?” he asks, glaring when she tries to turn his head around. “No, you don’t get to say that and ignore it.”

“I’m not. But I’d rather do two things at once.”

“Oh.”

“Yes, oh.” She turns his head and resumes her work. “Two of you, yes. We could name you both if we wanted. Izuku is the name I chose for you. Midoriya is my family name, and your father would come to take it after you were born. He was… special, like that. But your brother he called Mikumo.”

She is wistful as she speaks. Izuku gulps, knowing the shape of the story if not the details. “What happened?”

Her hands still, fingers trembling. “An accident. When you’re a mother you just know certain things. One day, two weeks before I was meant to have you, I knew something was wrong. Wednesday at three minutes past one I woke your father up and made him drive me to the hospital. He probably thought I was crazy, but he loved me enough to listen.

“They scanned me and… and he was dying. His umbilical cord was wrapped around his neck. They operated. I held him as he took his last breaths. They looked like clouds of lights, and they were the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.”

Izuku wipes away his tears. “I—I’m sorry,” he chokes out.

Warm arms wrap around his shoulders. “It wasn’t your fault. Just an accident. That was his quirk, we think. He breathed clouds of plasma. I think your father knew and that’s why he chose that name. Mikumo. Beautiful Cloud. His gravestone reads ‘Mikumo Atakani’ in honour of your father who loved him as I love you.”

He clutches her arms, lets her warmth cover his grief. A brother who he has never heard of and
whom he now must mourn.

“Why are you telling me this now?”

“So that you understand you’re my answer to life itself. I remember you being so still and quiet, your eyes closed and chest flat. I thought I lost both of you and I don’t know what I would have done without you. And then you opened your eyes—green just like mine—and saw your brother in my arms. Izuku, you cried all through the week.

"Without you, Hisashi and I would have divorced. I don't care that you have a scar. I've never cared how you've looked. I only care because you're hurting yourself. Izuku, my darling boy, you’re the earth and stars all at once."

“I love you, kaa-san,” he whispers.

“And I love you as the sun loves the moon. How many times have you looked at the full moon and found it beautiful even if it does have craters and scars? Doesn’t it still look beautiful?”

He grips her arms tight his fingers turn white. Tremors rack his body, a volatile mix of soul-crushing grief at a brother he’s never had the opportunity to love and know, and the ever-present love of his mother that has seen him through every bout of madness and panic. She is good and kind and just in ways he can only ever hope to be.

“I hate my reflection,” he says suddenly. “It hates me just as much.”

“I know, honey.”

“I hate my scars.”

“I know.”

“I hate that everyone thinks I’m unhealthy because I’m willing to forgive people. I forgave dad when he never came back. And I know he’s probably dead. I know I’m never going to see him again. And it hurts so much I can’t breathe. But I forgive him.”

“I know.”

“I forgive you for not telling me about my brother. Mikumo. I never even met him, and I feel like I've known him my whole life. I always wondered why there were three bedrooms and it makes sense now. It was always for him. Would he have wanted to be a hero? Would he have liked me? Would he have accepted me when I'm a patchwork medley of scars?”

“He would have loved you more than even I can. He might never have wanted to be a hero, but I think you’d always be a hero to him.”

His shaky breathing hitches. “I don’t know if I can go back today.”

“You can stay as long as you want.”

“But I don’t know if I’ll ever leave if I stay. And kaa-san, I can’t stand another day here all alone.”

“I’ll support you no matter what you choose. Because—”

“I’m your son.” He blinks. “I’m the younger one, aren’t I?”

“Yes. You’ve always been my little boy.”
He chooses to leave and walk forward. This is his home but staying here any longer is simply hiding from his problems. And he'd much rather run because whether it is away or towards his problems, you have to put one foot in front of the other and move forward.

The whispers follow him on the train. Mouths move and eyes roam over him, always staring at his scar, and only because of his earphones does he not hear whatever cruel words they have for him. Doing a card trick or two helps distract him from everything else.

When he looks to the side, Shinsou is right there beside him. It startles Izuku, but Shinsou’s eyes are warm if tired. The boy says nothing, seemingly content to allow him his peace.

“Thank you,” he says when they get off the train and on to the platform.

“At least you aren’t apologising.”

Shinsou tells him of the week he’s spent away and the tension building: Aizawa is equal parts merciless and forgiving, seemingly more tired than usual; All Might is never seen outside of class, but his training exercises are always accompanied by another teacher; second-hand accounts from Uraraka place the class as being in a state of constant frustration, and Tokoyami’s nearly been in a fight twice that week alone with some upperclassmen.


“People have been pretty quiet about… about what happened. Rumours are going around about what happened. Everyone has their own version of events.”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“Everything.”

He stays quiet, wanting to avoid the sudden heat that takes over his friend. Everything these days seems to be his fault, one way or another.

“Midoriya,” Uraraka calls as he enters the gates.

He looks and sees her waving broadly, her smile bright as noon. Iida and Kirishima are with her as well as Tokoyami standing further back.

“Hi.” He waves back uncertainly. A glance over his shoulder shows Shinsou looking just as bewildered. “What are you guys doing here?”

“Waiting for you,” Kirishima says, his grin toothy and just the slightest bit forced. “We heard you were coming back today.”

"As class representative, it was my duty to see you here today,” Iida says formally, stiffly.

Izuku smiles. "When did you become the class rep? Honestly, I don't think there's anyone better suited to it."

Iida shuffles and adjusts his glasses. “Yes, well we held the vote in your absence. The responsibilities have been more than I anticipated without my vice.”

Uraraka bumps Iida before he gestures wildly. “He means you.”
Izuku chokes on his spit. “I w-wasn’t even here.”

“I voted for you,” Kirishima says the jabs a thumb in Tokoyami’s direction. “So, did feather-duster
over here.”

“That is not a title I accept,” Tokoyami says but there is no heat to it. He looks to Izuku. “I felt it
only right I use my vote on someone who deserved it.”

“You barely know me.”

“I know enough, Midoriya. And you certainly are worthy of my vote.”

He runs a hand through his hair to hide that it shakes. “I don’t think I can do it,” he whispers,
shaking his head.

“I can’t think of anyone manlier for the job than you,” Kirishima adds. “I mean, you just keep on
getting up no matter what.”

“Yes, let’s perpetuate some more patriarchy whilst we’re at it,” Uraraka says, looking to Iida.

“Women have played a pivotal role in our society, Kirishima. What of Hawkmoon and all the
greats heroines…”

Izuku watches him gesture wildly as he lectures Kirishima who seems to wilt under the onslaught
of Iida’s words. Uraraka, though, has a warm smile on her face.

“She’s terrifying,” Shinsou whispers, nearly startling Izuku for he had forgotten about his friend.

“She kinda is.”

“What are you boys saying about me?” Uraraka asks, and though her tone is warm Izuku gets the
distinct impression it hides more than she lets others see. “Nothing bad, I hope.”

Izuku gulps. “Nothing?”

“Uraraka,” Tokoyami says suddenly, harsh enough that it stops Iida’s tirade for there is genuine
anger in his voice. “Stop antagonising him.”

“And this is why you’re always getting in fights. He doesn’t need someone defending his honour.”
There is venom in her voice, and it shocks Izuku as he takes a step back.

“You think it better to needlessly aggravate him?”

“I think maybe he’s not a fragile princess who needs rescuing because you have a guilt complex.”

Izuku swallows, taking another step back. His eyes burn. Shinsou’s hand is a warm anchor on his
shoulder.

“You guys need t—”

“He’s just been hurt,” Tokoyami says over Kirishima. “He does not need this on his first day
back.”

“I think he needs friends—which you aren’t—who don’t act—”

“Enough!” Iida roars. “Both of you stop this immediately. And don’t you dare say another word.
This behaviour is reprehensible.”

“No requested your opinion,” Tokoyami says snidely.

“Are you gonna fight with everyone you see?”

Izuku takes a breath. He isn’t ready to deal with this, not now. He starts walking and has no interest in anyone calling after him. Today is his first day back and his friends are already fighting.

*This is your fault,* the voice whispers.

He closes his eyes. Takes a deep breath. Finds himself in the bathroom.

It should worry him that he has no clue how he got here but there is cold water he can throw on his face. He sees a scarred boy in the reflection, a boy only a mother can love.

He hears the door open. Kirishima appears in the reflection, worry writ plain upon his features.

Izuku sighs. “S-sorry I left.”

“No, dude, you don’t need to apologise for anything.” Kirishima runs a hand through his hair. “Look, they’ve kinda been at it for a bit. It’s not your fault.”

“They were arguing because of me. I think that’s the definition of fault.” He turns and smiles bitterly at the redhead. “You know I took off the bandages this morning. I found out some stuff about my family. My friends are arguing and I’m forcing you to listen to me complain.”

Kirishima says nothing, simply watching him cry.

“Aren’t you going to say anything? This is my fault. I’m this scarred freak and I can’t even go a minute without crying and—”

The boy steps forward suddenly. Izuku tenses, ready for a blow or an insult. He doesn’t expect the arms that wrap around his shoulders and bring him close.

“W-wh—”

“I think you need a hug right now,” Kirishima says gently and it’s so at odds with the casual strength hr always seems to have. “We thought maybe we shouldn’t bring up the scars. I guess we were wrong. Look, things have been tense ever since that day. No one knows what’s going on but none of that is your fault.”

“It is,” Izuku whispers, wondering if his tears will ever run dry. “It always is.”

“Man, people are just worried. You’re our friend and we’re all dealing with things badly. Tokoyami’s taking things too far, Uraraka’s being spiteful, Iida’s a nervous wreck who won’t say anything and Shinsou’s just avoiding everyone.”

“A-and you?” he sniffs.

Kirishima hugs him tighter. “I’m just worried about you. No one’s considering what you need. If you need a shoulder to cry on, that’s fine. If you need someone to talk shit with, well I’ve read the book. And if you just want a fight I can take a few hits.”

“I’m not going to punch you.” But he smiles anyway. “I might just kick you though.”
Kirishima huffs. “Yeah, you would.”

When Kirishima pulls away, Izuku feels less like a train wreck. There is so much earnestness that he can’t even feel embarrassed.

“Thank you.”

Kirishima grins a toothy grin. “Any time.”

The class is subdued when they finally leave. More than one person looks like they want to say something, and Mineta is stopped by a harsh glare from Iida before he can say so much as open his mouth, but they seem content to ignore him. He notices the desks have changed a bit. Kouda sits near the door, and there is an empty desk right behind him. Kacchan’s, he realises, and to the left of that desk is Iida and behind is Ojiro who he’s yet to say a word to.

Izuku can’t help smiling even if he does thing their worry is ridiculous. Kacchan won’t hurt him, not intentionally.

“Your mum went all out,” Ashido says, startling him from a card trick. He looks up to see her inspecting his hair.

He puts a hand there self-consciously. The braids are thick and rope-like on the sides and wrap around to the back. It makes him blush to realise how odd he must look now.

“It’s not a bad thing,” she adds quickly.

“I think you look fabulous,” Aoyoma says from the other end of the class. Somehow, everyone ignores him.

He’s saved by Aizawa entering the class. The man looks more tired than usual, and there’s an aura of tension to him.

“Good, at least you’re quiet,” he says then focuses on Izuku. “Midoriya, they voted you vice class rep. Do you actually want the position?”

“N-no,” he squeaks out.

“Fine. Yaoyorozu, you’re the new vice. Now, can we please get through the week without attacking upperclassmen”—He looks to Tokoyami and Ojiro—“because I don’t want to suspend anyone any longer, and making unreasonable requests of Lunch Rush. Also, if you’re done with classes, have a valid reason for staying late. I’m tired of emails asking if I’m keeping you late. You know who you are.”

Classes are peaceful. The teachers don’t coddle him which Izuku appreciates more than he can express. When Uraraka makes a joke at his expense, he laughs before Tokoyami can get angry though he does smile at the boy.

During lunch, he shows them how to play the Zimbabwean variation of Crazy Eights which his mother showed him a few days ago. The rules are confusing for them at first but Uraraka seems to have a knack for any card game, and she makes Ojiro pick five cards with a gleeful smile and seems to have a personal reason to consistently skip Shinsou’s turn.

They have PT in the afternoon. Izuku is ready to enter the locker room when Aizawa pulls him aside.
“Sensei?”

The man sighs. “Midoriya, you can join the class when Recovery Girl clears you. No sooner. Don’t be difficult about it.”

“But—”

“No. You’ll only delay your recovery.”

“Yes sensei.”

They speak no more of it. Izuku watches them, a part of him jealous that they get to enjoy the feel of wind in your hair, the burning of muscles pushed to their limits and the joy of overcoming your limits. There is Iida, fastest of them all. There is Shouji who’s many arms make him the strongest of them all. He catalogues their physical abilities by habit.

He rubs at his scar as it starts itching. Recover Girl impressed upon him the importance of not scratching no matter how bad it got.

A shadow covers his notebook. He looks up and stumbles back from mixed eyes, one like ice and the other steel.

“Todoroki?”

The boy says nothing. Then, he hands Izuku the paper he holds. “They’ll help with the scarring.” It is a list of words that a few months ago he wouldn't be able to pronounce.

He sees the large burn scar over the boy’s left eye and understands. Taking the paper, he says, “Thank you.”

Todoroki doesn’t move. His eyes seem to watch Izuku. “Do you fear the flame?”

“Huh? What?”

Todoroki shakes his head minutely. “It doesn’t matter.” He turns to walk away.

“Wait, stop,” Izuku says but Todoroki continues walking. “That was weird.”

The rest of the day progresses without fanfare. Once the last bell rings, Izuku backs his bags. Looking up, he’s startled to see his friends waiting for him.

“Why are you all standing there?”

“We’re walking with you to the train station,” Iida says.

“Right… You guys realise I have to go see a counsellor.”

“Nope,” Uraraka says, cheerful as ever. “We can wait.”

Izuku closes his eyes. Opens them. Says, “Just go home. I’ll be fine.”

He waves back to them on his way out. It takes him a moment to realise there’s a second set of footsteps following him. Looking over his shoulder, he sees Tokoyami.

Izuku stops. “You really don’t have to wait for me.”
“I do,” the boy says solemnly. “I owe you a debt I can never repay.”

“You don’t.”

“I very much do. Please don’t argue with me on this.”

He very much wants to. But there is an earnestness to Tokoyami that he can’t dislike. “Fine.”

****

There is a man sitting at a desk before the counsellor’s office. When Iuzku tells him that he has a meeting the man lets him in. Tokoyami wishes him luck before he leaves.

The office is warm, lots of pastel colours and splashes of orange here and there for variety. There are a couch and a single chair across a glass table. It gives the illusion that there is no barrier between him and the red-haired woman with oversized glasses.

"Dr Makinami,” he greets politely, hands clutched together tightly.

She smiles and inclines her head to the seating. Izuku sits on the single chair made of green fabric. The cushion is firm if not stiff, and the back seems to conform to his every muscle. It is, plainly put, incredibly comfortable.

“And you must be”—she looks to the file on her desk—“Izuku Midoriya. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Y-yes.”

Her face opens as she smiles. “Before we start I’d like you to know I have a quirk.”

Izuku frowns. “Okay?”

“It’s a sort of empathy quirk,” she explains. “It lets me know a bit more about what you’re feeling when you say something. It doesn’t tell me everything by any stretch, but if you’re angry I’ll know if it’s anger and something else. I just want you to know that.”

There is an almost musical quality to her voice, a cadence that makes him think of dancing in the rain.

“What does that have to do with me?” he asks, voice cracking. “I don’t have a choice to be here.”

She leans forward, hands folded on the table. He wonders how often she has to clean fingerprints off it.

“And what makes you say that?”

“It’s probably all in that file of yours.” He nods to it. “So, let’s get this over with.”

“I’ll let you in on a secret. I haven’t actually read your file. I know your name and that’s about it.” She winks. “I’d rather get to know you as a person than you as a document to examine.”

“That’s just ridiculous,” he says, unbidden. “What if I was dangerous? What if I wanted to hurt someone?”

“Do you?”
“No, that’s not the point. How do you know you’re not making things worse by not knowing?”

“Experience and practice.”

He rolls his eyes. “Sure. Use that excuse.”

She hums. “And what makes you think that’s an excuse?”

He snorts, folding his arms across his chest. “It’s what adults always say. You all think you know better because you’re older. I don’t think age makes people wiser.”

“What does, then?”

“Kindness. Forgiveness.” He smiles bitterly. “The sort of things I’m being punished over.”

“I take it you’re talking about the incident that led to you being here?” She adjusts her glasses with her left index finger. “Would you like to talk about that?”

“Do I have a choice?” He looks away. “You’re just going to tell them everything I say.”

“Is that what you believe” She tilts her head when he nods. “I think I understand. My name’s Hikari Makinami. I was born in Okayama and my favourite colour is orange. I’m allergic to cats but I own three of them. My mum’s a nurse and I never knew my dad. My best friend Asuka’s an idiot but I wouldn’t replace her for all the money in the world.”

Izuku looks to her in confusion. “What are you doing?”

“You don’t trust me, and I’ve given you no reason to do so. I can promise you that what we speak off will always be private unless I have reason to believe you’ll hurt yourself or someone else. Other than that, all anyone will know is if I think you’re getting better.”

She thinks you a broken vase to tape back together, the voice whispers. She doesn’t know everything about you is broken.

“I’m not broken,” he snaps, angry suddenly. “I got hurt. I forgave the person who did it. That doesn’t make me broken.”

“I never said you were broken.”

“If you’re trying to make me better that means you think there’s something wrong with me. Something broken.”

She frowns. “I want you to acknowledge that you’re twisting my words. I don’t think you’re angry with me because I can feel more than a bit of self-loathing from you.”

“I don’t hate myself,” he says quickly. He hates the things hiding inside.

One brow rises magnificently, and it reminds him of a cat. “Do you believe that?”

He looks away, the stitching on the couch suddenly very interesting. “I do.”

“You’re not the first person who’s come in here with a chip on their shoulder about counselling. You won’t be the last. I don’t doubt you could lie your way through this since deception isn’t an emotion.”

“So, this is pretty useless.”
“But you can choose to make the most of your time,” she continues. “Think of it this way, you could spend an hour lying to me—though I think you’re more the silent type—or you could be sincere. I won’t even ask for honesty and trust, only sincerity. I can help you through whatever you need help with so long as you try.”

Izuku closes his eyes. “Fine.”

“Alright. How’s about we start with the incident that brought you here?”

He remembers fire and pain, terror and so, so much fear. The sight of Kacchan’s wide eyes, the blinding blast from those massive gauntlets, his plea for help. He can still taste every flavour of rage from Kacchan, can tell apart the cold anger like a bitter ice-cream from the hot inferno that reminds him of mildly burnt meat.

“I d-dodged in the wrong direction,” he whispers, hating how weak his voice sounds. “I got hurt. That’s all.”

“I don’t think it is.”

“What do you expect me to say?” His voice cracks and unshed tears burn at his eyes. “Everyone’s told me I should be angry. Why? I could have jumped the other direction and none of this would matter.”

“Izuku, do you feel that you’re at fault for that?”

He sighs, knowing exactly what’s coming. “Yes. I should have known better. I do. I just…

“I don’t think forgiveness is unhealthy. Far from it.” Izuku opens his eyes to see her earnest expression. “But I want to understand your thought process a bit more. You see, forgiveness is hard. It is rarely an easy thing to look a person in the eye and tell them you absolve them of their crime against you. It makes me think you don’t consider what happened to you to be an injustice of some sort.”

“But it wasn’t. Accidents happen. You can’t get upset over them.”

“Do you have any friends?” she asks suddenly. Izuku frowns but nods. “I want you to think of one of them, the one you’re closest to. Whoever it is, I want you to focus on them.”

Shinsou comes to mind immediately. The boy he pictures smiles and looks to Izuku as if he is someone worth existing, and not a monster that needs to be put down. A smile comes to his face, unbidden.

“Just like that,” she continues. “Now I want you to imagine them hurt.”

He flinches. “No,” he snaps, standing. He takes a breath before One For All activates or his shadow does anything more than mirror his movements. “I am not doing that.”

“That anger, that righteous indignation is important. You’re feeling that from just imagining your friend hurt. Imagine them lying in hospital, broken and dying.” He can’t, not without breaking. “Now, imagine forgiving the person who did that.”

His fists clench tightly. “I could never…” he trails off, understanding blossoming. “I see what you did. And no, it’s not the same.”

“Would you like to sit first?” Her question is so reasonable that not doing so would be rude. “Why
isn’t it the same?”

“Because.” He searches for an answer and it terrifies him that he can’t. “Because I’m different.”

"In what way? From what I can tell, you're not any more durable than the average person."

“Because it wouldn’t matter,” he shouts. “I just-it just wouldn’t fucking matter if I died.”

There is silence. He can’t look at her, doesn’t want to see the disgust and revulsion that will be on her face. Because why couldn’t he just shut up and stay quiet for once in his life.

“Izuku,” she says all too gently as if calming a rabid dog, “I need to ask you a delicate question. One you might not feel comfortable answering, but I think it’s important. Have you ever had suicidal thoughts?”

He swallows, wishing the room would eat him up right now. The scar on his forearm burns and thinking on it fills him with shame—first All Might and now this woman who doesn’t know him, doesn’t have reason to care.

“W-why does it matter. I don’t… I don’t want to die.”

“I believe you,” she says after a moment. “But I just need to know. It’s not at all uncommon,” she adds, “and I will have to inform someone if I think you may harm yourself now. But it doesn’t apply to anything in the past.”

The impulse to lie comes immediately. He can already see the shape of it—a deflection first, maybe indignant anger before unravelling a complex web: at first an admission of hurting himself, maybe a pattern of behaviour followed by a tangent to the scar and how much he hates it. There is enough truth that it isn’t a lie.

And yet he’s so tired of lying, and of deflecting.

Lie, the voice commands harshly, raw as though it has been shouting. You’ve already told her too much. She is not your ally.

And you are? He asks, angry at the audacity of a voice in his head telling him how to behave.

I am the untold lie. I am that which keeps you sane.

“Yes,” he says finding it strange how dull his voice is.

She lets out a breath, almost relief. “Izuku, it's not rare to have thoughts like that nor is it something to be ashamed of.”

Don’t believe her.

“I was going to lie about it,” he admits suddenly, voice still dull. “I had it all worked out.”

“Thank you. You can’t believe how happy I am to know that.” She coughs, and it sounds less a distraction and more like an actual cough, the kind people get at the tail end of a cold. “Would you like to talk about it?”

“About what? The lie?”

“You could speak on that,” she says after taking a sip of water from a bottle he only now notices. “But I meant more on the time you felt that way.”
What do you mean?"

"I mean the…" She sighs. "I think you respond best to bluntness. Did you have a plan, at any point, of how you would kill yourself."

"I did," he says, eyes closed and mind blank. "I very much did."

"You did have a plan?"

He brings his hands together. "I tried to die," he says, bitter and angry and tired all at once. "The knife was sharp. The anaesthetic made it painless. I was just done and sick of it all. And I needed answers."

The air is heavy, charged with tension. "Answers to what?"

"To life." A tear escapes his closed eye. "To me. If I died maybe there wouldn’t be darkness anymore. I lived, unfortunately. I know what it feels like to come so close and yet fail so hard."

_Do you hate me_? The voice asks, a mix of regret and fear.

"I don’t hate you. I just want you to go away."

"Izuku," Dr Makinami’s says, bringing him back to reality. "Who are you talking to?"

He smiles blandly. "No one of any importance."

Eyes closed as they are, he can’t tell what expression, if any, she makes. "And are there a lot of people of no importance you talk to?" she asks carefully.

"Just one." He closes his heart to all emotion and opens his eyes. "Can I go now? I think I’m done for the day."

She meets his gaze, her eyes so warm and yet failing to do anything more than aggravate him. "Alright, I think we’ve made a lot of progress." She reaches for one of the cards on her desk. "If you ever need help, please call me. Anytime."

"I won’t." He takes the card. "No need to be a bother."

He feels raw and strung out when he leaves, scars throbbing and demanding attention. Rubbing the long one down his forearm does nothing but make it itch and he wants to take a knife to it and pluck out everything because the pain he understands, not whatever this suffocating feeling is. The shadows are harder to ignore, and he wonders if diving into the darkness would be a better option. At least there, broken things are the norm and he can understand the peculiar brand of physics the endless void employs.

But that wouldn’t be fair to Tokoyami who’s waiting for him on a bench, a book opened on his legs. He looks up, red eyes never threatening.

"Midoriya…" he trails off.

Izuku takes a deep breath. "What are you reading?" he asks impatiently, hoping it will bring distraction.

Tokoyami stares at him for a long moment. Then he nods and stands, tucking the book under his arm. "The Pillars of a Moral Character’ by Ryo Asuka," he says, walking. "It has brought me comfort often."
Izuku nods though Tokoyami will not see it. “Wh-what is it about?”

Tokoyami hums. “He speaks of honour, of duty and the repayment of debts. I harbour a demon within me, Midoriya. One that seeks to corrupt me at every turn. This book has always been a guiding light when the dark seeks to consume me.”

“It sounds interesting.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not. I find I had very much forgotten his more important teachings.”

“Which is?”

Tokoyami looks over his shoulder, and maybe frowns—Izuku can’t tell, not with how alien his features are.

“Empathy,” he says solemnly. “All men are equal in death. But in life, we must always remember we are one people no matter our appearance.”

The stress on the word makes Izuku frown. "People bullied you for your looks, didn't they?"

Tokoyami tenses, foot hovering an inch off the ground. "Yes." He exhales and continues walking in the waning light. "I once gave into my demon's taunts and… it was not pretty. My behaviour was unacceptable. I've spent every day since learning to control myself and my impulses."

He pauses. Izuku watches him lift his hands, staring at them. The wind blows, ruffling his feathers. They aren’t pitch black but three shades away from charcoal.

“We are ultimately responsible for the consequences of our actions. If we give excuses then we have failed in our duties, both to ourselves and to our fellow men. That is why I believe I owe you a debt, Midoriya. If I never try to repay it, then I may unwittingly be walking a path to darkness.”

He turns to face Izuku. He is shorter but only just. His red eyes are determined, brilliant embers in the night.

“You are kind, Midoriya, and you forgive as easily as breathing. Should I ever be able to repay this debt, then I believe I will be able to escape the chains seeking to drag me to the dark below.”

Izuku freezes, his blood running cold. Tokoyami smiles, heedless of the sheer shock stunning Izuku.

“But even should I fail, in trying will I not become a better person?” He bows his head. “Death is the final darkness and its siren call impossible to ignore. But until then I can try.”

They continue walking to the train, Izuku still a bit dazed from how Tokoyami so casually spoke of the realm of nightmare creatures, regardless that he used it only as a turn of phrase—there is no impossible weight to the phrase when Tokoyami says it, no resounding echo of infinity—and perhaps in awe of someone whose code of ethics is so beautifully simple and precisely complex.

At the train station, Tokoyami stops. He thrusts the book in Izuku’s hand.

“Huh?”

Tokoyami makes a sound of amusement. “I believe you will find more answers in it than I will now.”

“Y-you can’t just give this to me.”
“Worry not on the matter.” He takes one of Izuku’s hands and places it over the cover, enveloping Izuku’s hand in the process. It is warm, and oddly intimate, not at all what he expects from this dark and mysterious boy.

“I do not know what you are going through, and I am not good with people. My behaviour earlier today is irrefutable proof of that as I pushed both you and Uraraka away in my… arrogance. There are many lessons this book has taught me. And if even one helps you then I will consider it leaving my possession a worthy goal.”

He nods once more. “Your kindness is a strength, Midoriya. The world would do well to have more of you.”

Tokoyami lets go and walks off before Izuku can regain his bearings. There is something regal to him, almost like a king. The casual confidence is something Izuku wishes he could have. Crying all the time is in no ways dignified.

He gets home. Food is ready, and he eats in silence with his mother. She doesn’t push, and he promises he’ll talk to her later. But right now, he’s too tired to even consider it.

An envelope rests on his on his bed. The paper is worn, faded and creased. He opens it. Inside is a picture of his mother in a hospital gown looking exhausted, sweat seeping through the gown. Within her arm is a small bundle of blankets.

Another picture shows the bundle to be a baby. His eyes are dark as midnight and so so bright, and his hair a shade of black that seems to absorb all light. His mother still holds the baby, but there are clouds that shimmer with every colour, a bolt of lightning connecting two of them.

“Mikumo,” he whispers, clutching the picture close. “Hello brother. My name’s Izuku.”

Even the dead have names, the voice says. A tendril of darkness rises and picks up one of the pictures. Mikumo Atakani. This name will be mine.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” Izuku snarls. “You have no right.”

I asked you to name me. You chose not to and cast me away. But the name of the brother you killed is more suiting.

“Lies.”

Yes, a lie it is. But what am I if not the lies you tell and the truths you hide.

“Please, just no. Don’t take him from me.”

I will keep your secrets, Mikumo Atakani says. I will be the keeper, the lock and key.

“I hate you,” he snarls. “I hate you so fucking much.”

The voice—Mikumo, now—leaves. It takes with it the static that fills his mind. Izuku takes one of the pictures and stares at the brother whom he never met but will always love.

Izuku sits alone and mourns.

End of Season I: Descent
Hey everyone, this marks the end of the first season of the story. As such, I will be taking a week-long hiatus and returning on 2 August. And considering that this has been 12 chapters in about 10 weeks, I need a bit of a break.

That's all from me for now. Thank you for reading this. If you enjoyed the story leave a kudos and if you have any questions just leave a comment below. But know that all of that is unnecessary, and as always your readership is quite enough for me. Cheers.
Chapter Notes

And thus begins Season II of the Dark Below. Please Enjoy.

Some awesome art of Izuku by spicy_marsha

—Excerpt from ‘The Pillars of Moral Heroics’ by Ryo Asuka and annotated by Fumikage Tokoyami.

The complex is on the outskirts of Mustafu and in a gated part of the city. In many booths and in security rooms, Fukmikage Tokoyami can see guards carrying rifles—hopefully of the rubber bullet variety. The only unifying factor of the guards is that they all have mutations and wear white ceramic animal masks instead of regular helmets.

He presents a seal with UA’s insignia and an official government letterhead at the first checkpoint. The woman there inspects him thoroughly, patting him down, running his back through an X-ray scan and forcing him to show Dark Shadow so that even the demon might be evaluated.

Fumikage bears this peaceably. He can fault many things but not diligence. He has seen security failures on the news and knows the dangers of anything less than professionalism.

He is led to a waiting room where a man sits behind a desk, burning orange eyes drooping with weariness. He has a thick layer of short fur on his arms and neck and head. Nothing extreme compared to many other mutations.

“Sign this form,” the man says, sliding the form towards Tokoyami.

He takes it. “What does it cover?”

“Privacy agreement. You don’t say anything about the quirks these kids have, and you don’t disclose any of their information.”

He pauses at one clause. “Formal censure on my heroics file for a minor violation of personal information.” He flips the page over. “Expulsion if I reveal their quirks. And legal action up to, but not totally inclusive of charges of endangerment of minors, assisted homicide in the event of death and… charges of treason.”
“It’s a lot of responsibility.” The man smiles sadly. “But I think you’ll understand when you see them. We just need to protect them from negative influences.”

“I very much doubt Aizawa-sensei would send me here if he had worries I would be unable to handle the responsibilities.” He signs the form, his signature elegant. “And if I were to hazard a guess, the children very likely have mutant quirks.”

The man nods once more and takes the form back. The back of his hand has quills, tiny and sharp, not thick mammalian fur as Tokoyami once thought. “Let’s go see the kids.”

He shows Tokoyami through the complex. One thing he notes is how everything is reinforced: a hole that looks to have been caused by a punch shows extensive layers of steel mesh between layers of concrete and a shock-absorbent material; the ground, though solid wood on the surface, shows cement where a deep gash runs across the ground; and the structural support pillars look to be made of a polymorphic material the emits a pleasant hum when Tokoyami bumps into it.

“It’s a simple way to keep track of them,” the man explains after helping Tokoyami up. “Outside of following the destruction.”

“Are they always so… rambunctious?”

The man has Tokoyami enter his biometrics into a machine at the end of a hallway. He even has Dark Shadow do so, and though the demon complains, a deep thrum of interest emanates from it.

“The area past here is where we let them play without restriction. Be prepared for projectiles.”

The door is unlocked and Tokoyami gets his first view of the space. It is indoors like the rest of the complex but it looks like an endless . The waning light of the sun streams through from where there should be a west wall and it illuminates the stream, spots of light dancing across the short bridge connecting the two landmasses—where the south-west area is thick with plants and vegetation, the north-west, or the area to his right, is grassland with only a statue of a fox interrupting it. The space is beautiful and it makes him wonder how they achieved the effect.

Dark Shadow materialises without his prompting and catches something barrelling towards him. It looks like a kid with red fur and dark rings around his green eyes, features similar to a racoon. The kid smiles at Dark Shadow and waves at Tokoyami before sand materialises and pushes Dark Shadow away. The kid falls to the ground and shakes the sand out of his fur.

“Hey, we’ve never had a birdy before,” the kid says, a radiant smile lighting up the entire room. “And you’ve got a thing.”

I am not a thing, Dark Shadow growls but there is no true malice in it.

“What did we say about barrelling into people, little tanuki.”

The kid pouts and Fumikage feels his heart melt just the slightest bit. “Don’t. But he’s fine.” The kid’s sand grabs Fumikage by the hand. “Come on. Let’s show you to the others.”

The rest of the group is just as diverse as the first child: a girl with feline features and burning blue fire; a boy with pink eyes playing with coral; one who looks like a very fury human the slings lava at another child who makes steam; a kid with a horse’s snout being flown around by a girl with wings; and finally a brawny child who flicks ink and Dark Shadow.

He finds he can’t dislike the children even when they pile on him and keep him on the ground with their weight, or when they find a way to cover him in ink and stick him to a tree. Dark Shadow is
perpetually there to defend him if things become too chaotic, or if these absurdly strong children forget their strength which can shatter boulders. By the time his two hours are up, he is sweating profusely and only standing because of Dark Shadow’s aid.

“I feel like you did nothing to help,” he snaps at the demon, unfair though it is.

_You’re just jealous I can last longer than you, young crow._

The man whom Fumikage had forgotten about chuckles. “They’re a handful. It’s why we only want people who can endure them if they're having a bad day.” His cheer vanishes. “You understand why we don’t want you speaking about them.”

“Impressionable children with diverse quirks and greater base strength than most people? Yes, I understand fully.” He stares the man in the eye. “You accepted me because of Dark Shadow, not simply because of my mutations.”

The man brushes a hand through the thick quills on his head. “Yes. You understand what it’s like being a mutant. Not just someone with sharp claws or tiny horns. They used to live in a special village. It was peaceful. Quiet. Lots of space for them to play and be free. A place for them to feel at home with their parents.”

Tokoyami inhales sharply. He knows the form of this story, the nature of the beast and all its sharp edges.

“The parents died keeping them safe from people who hate mutations, who hate quirks in general. I saw the aftermath and I sincerely hope you never come across anything like.” The man smiles bitterly, and Tokoyami echoes the sentiment. “That statue of a fox you saw? There were nine of them before. Now there are eight. They made it as a memorial to a kid braver than most adults will ever be. You want to be a hero, and maybe one day you’ll be called on to make that kind of sacrifice. I hope you never have to, but should you, I hope you are strong enough to win regardless.”

They say no more. When he arrives home close to midnight, his mother is still awake and watches him reproachfully. Fumikage observes her, hawk-like where he is a crow, through the corner of his vision.

“If you have words to say, then do so. But do not force me to stew in this uncomfortable silence.”

His mother chitters. “Give me your form so I can sign it. I’m forced to stay up late because of this foolishness you insist on.”

He hands her the form. “My dreams are not foolishness. I will be a hero, regardless of your displeasure. My scholarship is proof that I am capable.” He takes it back after she has signed it. “Your chastisements have been heard, noted, and acknowledged.”

Breakfast the next morning is awkward as always. His mother berating his every decision to be a hero. His father silent as a statue, speaking only through occasional gestures. Eventually, it becomes too uncomfortable and Fumikage leaves with his breakfast only half finished. His father’s displeasure follows him all the way to school.

He knocks on the door to Aizawa’s office and opens it to find the man napping against the wall in his sleeping bag. Fumikage still finds it amazing that he can sleep anywhere without the slightest hesitation.

“Aizawa,” Fumikage says and waits for the man's eyes to open. "I have the form and my report."
“Leave it on my desk and take a new one for tomorrow.” Fumikage does so. “Did you learn anything?”

He thinks on it for a moment. The children are all great even if they are more energetic than Fumikage ever was, and seem to function purely on optimism and fun. He could talk of them as far as his contract allows.

**Why were they there?** Dark Shadow asks only to him. **Speak the truth and don’t hide from it.**

“Yes,” he says after a beat of silence. “Life is cruel.”

*****

Toshinori Yagi feels his age more with each passing year. Five decades is not a long time to have lived, but there is a toll that is taken by being a hero, something a civilian will never understand. It is not like being a soldier or police officer. No, there is something much graver in knowing that only your actions stop a society descending to chaos and anarchy. And even then, he can never be too sure that this society he fights for is the right one.

But that is not his responsibility. He will leave it to history to determine if this society was moral and just. They can only do that if he fulfils his duty to protect them against All For One. He is the final enemy, a barrier to a truly just society. And when the great enemy falls, Toshinori will retire and leave this world in the hands of his successor.

A successor whom he has so failed and who he has avoided out of shame. Aizawa’s reprimand wakes him in the dead of night often now, and his waking moments are plagued by thoughts of his failures. Much of the trust he once commanded simply by being All Might has been lost. Someone else always accompanies him during his lessons outdoors, and though the shame bites at his pride, he is not foolish enough to believe it unjust. The media, always vicious, speculate endlessly and only the many decades of his service have kept his position intact.

Izuku waits for him at the beach. His successor kneels in the sand, hands resting on his knees, in meditation. A soft glow suffuses his skin, an aura of power that will one day grow and undoubtedly outstrip Toshinori. Not yet, but one day regardless.

He is still as a statue as Toshinori approaches, the only motion from him being the occasional sparks of green lightning and the sea breeze ruffling his partially braided hair. When he comes close enough, Izuku lifts his head and looks over his shoulder.

Toshinori sees the horrible scar, feels his heart sink and his resolve shatter as the memories of his failings assault him, before he sees the smile of someone to whom forgiveness is easy as breathing, and to whom kindness is the space between breaths.

“All Might,” Izuku greets, joy and unbridled optimism colouring his voice. The glow disappears as he stands.

He raises a hand, both in greeting and to forestall Izuku’s words. “Please, I gave you my name for a reason, young Midoriya.”

The boy tugs at his hair. "It just feels a bit odd calling you Yagi. Especially when you're all…” His gesture is wide-reaching.

“I see.”

All Might lets the power of One For All fade. The vitality fades from his body, and whilst the
process is uncomfortable he is used to it, and for the sake of his successor, a bit of pain is nothing. One day his powers will fade fully, and he hopes that the final enemy has fallen by then.

“You can call me Toshinori,” he says, voice weak.


The innocence there makes him smile. “Yes, I suppose that is acceptable.” Without One For All, he isn’t much taller than Izuku. Good, it makes things easier that way. “There is something I must say to you and I have been avoiding it.”

The boy’s frown deepens, pulling at his scar and making it look so much worse.

“You’re not getting sicker, are you?”

All Might laughs despite the pain it causes. Of course, he would consider someone else first. “No, young Midoriya. At least, no more than I already am.”

That doesn’t lift the boy’s spirit. “A-are you upset with me?”

“No, Izuku, I don’t think I ever could be upset with you.” He sighs and drops to one knee so he can meet Izuku as an equal.

The boy takes a half-step back, almost fearful. “T-then why do you look so upset? You’re smiling but you’re not happy.”

“You know me all too well. Midoriya, my boy, I came to apologise to you.”

His successor opens his mouth. Closes it. Rolls his eyes.

“Okay, this makes sense. You feel guilty and upset or something like everyone else.” The boy sighs. “The counsellor tried explaining it.”

“And did it make sense to you?”

“A bit.” Izuku kicks at the sand errantly, sending a spray of it to the side. “We talked about a lot of other stuff.”

He rests a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “You do not have to tell me. What you spoke off is private, and you should not feel pressured to tell anyone else.”

“Okay.” Izuku lets out a relieved breath, and the tension he hadn’t noticed disappears. “I’m not angry with you.”

“You should be. I failed in my duty to you.”

That startles a laugh out of the boy. “I guess even you fail.” Izuku smiles brightly as the full moon on a clear night.

“I am only human.” He squeezes the boy’s shoulder. “Just like you.”

“It’s easy to forget. You’re just too big and bright some days.” He tilts his head. “Oh. That’s why you want me to call you by your name.”

“Yes.”
“Well, Toshinori-sensei, I’m not angry with you. I forgive you and I know you probably think I’m doing it because there’s something wrong with me bu—

“There’s nothing wrong with you.”

“But,” Izuku continues regardless, “I think forgiving other people is what good people do. And heroes are good people, so if I can do that then doesn’t that mean I can be a hero?”

His words are simple, the words of a child who hasn’t seen the true extent of darkness. And yet, there is sincerity and that is never wrong.

“You will be a great hero, young Midoriya.”

*****

The reassurance of his hero follows him as the days pass.

School is peaceful even if Mineta is a little shit he wants to punch after a particularly vicious comment, and he has to deal with Asui and Ashido both deciding his hair is their new favourite toy—they do, though, take him for ice-cream as they promised. Aizawa makes him wary for the man is nicer to Izuku than anyone else, which means he’s grouchy and plays mind games, but he doesn’t single Izuku out past simple reprimands here and there.

As long as he remembers All Might’s words, then he can calm his breathing easier each time he wakes in the middle of the night, cold sweat clinging to his skin, and his scar burning with the memory of pain.

He has another session with his counsellor on Friday. She greets him politely.

“So, I think we covered a lot of ground last week.”

He grunts. “Sure.”

“I wanted to talk about who you were talking to last week.”

He stills, static filling his mind.

“She’ll lock you up, Mikumo says.”

“No,” Izuku says.

“Alright, how’s about—”

“No, just no.” He stands, indifferent to how this will look on his record. “No. I am not doing this right now.”

He walks out, not once looking back.

The weekend comes too fast and he finds himself being dragged through a shopping mall with his friends. This is the first time he’s seen them in anything other than their school uniforms or hero costumes. He isn’t surprised that Uraraka and Kirishima are both dressed in bright colours, or that Ojiro looks as though he simply picked the first things he saw. He finds himself surprised that Shinsou looks like he’s out of a magazine catalogue that all the cool kids read.

It is Tokoyami that gives him pause. Dressed in a black shirt, black vest, black trousers and bright red shoes, he looks like the cover for a goth magazine.

“Someone likes their bright colours,” Ashido says when she sees him.
Tokoyami huffs. “I would prefer not to stand out.

“You kinda stand out the most,” Kirishima says, “but hey, no one’s judging. Be as edgy as you want.”

“I am not edgy,” he snarls right back.

Outside of that, they seem to get along. Uraraka follows Tokoyami when he splits off to see a store for the occult and even comes back with a small bag of her own. Iida wants to lead them through a strict order of stores which lasts half a second before Asui drags both Kirishima and Ojiro to another store for some school supplies. Shinsou disappears into a cat store before Iida even starts reprimanding them for splitting off.

“So how are you handling the news,” Ojiro asks him at the end of the day.

“Handling what?” he asks.

“Bakugou coming back.”

His vision goes white. He blinks it away and finds himself in class, Tokoyami sitting on his desk and having a conversation with Kaminari whom Izuku has yet to speak to.

“You back with us?” he hears Uraraka ask, suddenly standing right beside him. Tokoyami is on the other side of the class. “You spaced out for a bit.”

He shakes his head, letting the confusion fade away. “M-must have just been stuck in my head.”

“That’s good to hear.”

He feels Kaachan well before he enters the class. Silence reigns and no one says a word as he takes his new seat without complaint. He can tell Kaachan is angry but says little. It is a tense sort of anger, and he can taste guilt in the air.

*Why would he be guilty?* Izuku wonders.

“Midoriya,” Present Mic says, “do you know the answer?”

He blinks and sees the English question on the board. It’s just after lunch, has to be. “The second one,” Izuku says softly.

“That’s—”

“Hey Izuku,” Kirishima says, the setting sun framing his features. “You doing alright?”

He takes a deep breath. “What?”

“Yeah, you’ve just been in a bit of a daze all day. I mean, you even tore Kaminari a new one at lunch.”

Izuku swallows, confused. “I’ll be fine.”

“So, you won’t need any help?” Kirishima asks, this time in class. “I mean, it looks like some pretty hard homework. We could get a study group and everything.”

The boy smiles but nothing about it calms Izuku.
“What day is it?”

“Tomorrow, Thursday.” Izuku freezes. “I mean, we can always reschedule if you want. You look like you haven’t slept in a few days. You barely got through the maths test.”

“N-no, th-that’s… that doesn’t—”

He sits across his therapist between one thought and the next. She smiles gently.

“It’s good to see you. You missed our meeting on Tuesday.”

He stares at her for a long moment. None of this makes any sense to him.

“I wanted to talk to you about—”

“What day is it?” he asks, interrupting her. His hands shake so he clenches them together and squeezed.

“It’s Friday. Why?”

What the fuck? He takes a deep breath and focuses on the burnt orange vase in the corner. It’s real and there and present. The couch is comfortable but textured well. The air sharp from the AC.

“Izuku,” Dr Makinami says, drawing his attention. “You’ve been quiet for the last ten minutes.”

He swallows. “I-is it still Fri-Friday?”

“Yes.”

He looks to his hands. “I can’-I don’t even… It was Wednesday, and I was just talking to Kirishima. No, no, no. That was Monday, right? But we were at the mall.” He looks up and meets the worried gaze of his therapist. “How is it Friday?” he whispers.

He blinks. She is blurry. Tears, he realises, obscuring his vision. “Please tell me it’s still a Friday.”

“It is,” she says, voice calm and steady. He latches on to that. “Izuku, how much of the last week do you remember?”

“I don’t know,” he shouts. “I don’t fucking know.”

“What was the last thing that happened before this happened?”

“We were at… the mall? And what? Nothing happened. They just talked about Kaa—”

Something shakes him. He looks and sees his therapist, more frazzled than he’s ever seen her. “Izuku, I’m right here. Just listen to my voice and focus on it.”

He feels something warm and wet run down his nose. His fingers come away red. “What the fuck did you do to me?”

“Izuku,” she says, “I didn’t—”

“Not you,” he snaps, looking to the darkest corner of the room where a fake plant rests innocently. “Mikumo, what the fuck did you do to me?”

You are not ready. Your mind will break.
“You do not get to decide that.” He’s standing, fists clenched and very ready to blow through the wall. “You stole his fucking name and now you’re doing this.”

“Izuku, you’re—”

“Shut up,” he says without looking at her. “Why the fuck are you doing this to me?”

*You did this to you. You hid and retreated in the dark and made me stand in the light.*

“What the hell are you talking about?”

*You fear him. You hide from the truth, and he is the truth you cannot face.*


*The first truth. The original. You tried to forget but every time you see him, you are reminded of the truth. You chose to forget everything but a few moments.*

“That’s not possible. Things don’t work like that.”

*Everything is possible to you, if only once. I am sorry for what comes next.*

He feels a needle in his neck. He pulls it out, startled, and finds it to be a dart. Eyes heavy, he turns to see his Dr Makinami, Aizawa, and someone he’s never met before.

“You fucking traitor.”

Izuku smiles for what else can he do as his legs give out. Strong arms catch him as darkness engulf him.

*****

Shouta Aizawa wonders if one day this boy in his arms will ever stop being a problem. A formless terror always seems to grip Shouta when Izuku is involved. Now, to see what looked like a psychotic break in his student makes him wonder how much is his fault.

The boy is light in his arms, his muscle purely functional and not bulky. He lays the boy down on the couch, careful not to jostle Nezu currently on his shoulder. The bright red bloom along the boy’s jaw is a monument to his failings.

“What happened?” he asks as Nezu jumps off his shoulder, landing on the armrest. The principal looks the boy over.

Dr Makinami takes a moment to compose herself, adjusting her glass. “I’m not sure.”

“Isn’t it your job to know?” The question is unfair, and they all know it.

“Aizawa,” Nezu says, “please reign in your emotions. You’ve always been good at it. And Mifune, please call the boy’s mother immediately.”

He sighs. “Doctor Makinami, any answers you have would be greatly appreciated.”

“You need to understand that I’m only sharing this because I have a valid concern he is a danger to himself, and perhaps others.”

“Patient confidentiality.” Nezu nods. “We can only help him as far as we understand. He was
shouting at the wall, correct? A hallucination?"

““I can’t say for certain. In our first session he started speaking to someone else, and when I pressed him he wasn’t comfortable answering. I tentatively put schizophrenia as a diagnosis.”

Aizawa’s fists clench. He takes a deep breath and releases the tension.

“Tentatively?”

“I’m not a fan of putting a diagnosis without more information. But I think that might have been wrong.” She looks to Izuku. “He’s been dissociating.”

“What does that mean for him?” He’s a hero and a teacher, not a psychologist.

“It means that he’s distancing himself from traumatic memories,” Nezu says quietly, his usual cheer gone.

“Dissociation usually shows itself in people trying to distance themselves from trauma, yes,” Makinami says, “and that can be dealt with through cognitive behavioural therapy. But he’s showing symptoms of dissociative amnesia, and from the first session and this one, he’s either experiencing waking hallucinations. Or, he’s suffering from an identity disorder.”

The doctor runs a hand through her hair. “It started on Saturday from what he said. Has anything happened in the last week that might have reminded him of a traumatic event?”

“Shit.” He looks to Nezu who nods gravely. “Katsuki Bakugou returned from his suspension on Monday.”

“Describe his behaviour for me?”

“He’s seemed confused at times. More often he’s been uncharacteristically angry, and his grades have shown a steep decline. As well, he’s failed to respond to his name at times.”

The doctor hums and walks to her desk. She picks up the file there and scribbles quickly.

“He was conversing directly to his hallucination. He called it Mikumo.” She flips a page. “There’s no indication of a Mikumo in his family records.”

“There isn’t,” a new voice says. Aizawa turns and sees Inko Midoriya, frazzled. His fists clench again because everything about this woman is abhorrent.

"Mrs Midorya, you arrived quickly."

She walks to her son and kneels beside his unconscious form. She touches his forehead tenderly, in a sick parody of a concerned mother.

“I wanted to make sure he stayed for his session,” she answers.

"Mrs Midoriya, I’m Doctor Makinami. You son’s therapist. If you know who Mikumo is, then it would greatly help us.”

“Why? It has nothing to do with you.” She looks to Aizawa, eyes hard. “I don’t even know what’s happened to my son.”

“He’s hallucinating a person called Mikumo,” Aizawa responds, just as hard. “Who might be another personality from what I understand.”
Her eyes close, face running through a gamut of emotions before settling on blankness. “And you’re certain of this?”

“As certain as I can be with such limited information,” Dr Makinami says. “Ma’am, frankly, he’s lost the better part of a week because of the dissociation. He seems to have created an entire personality to deal with a truth he doesn’t want to confront. He asked Mikumo that directly.”

“Mikumo, how long will you haunt me?” Her eyes open, devoid of any emotion. “Mikumo Atakani is my son.”

“That’s not in any records we—”

“He lived for exactly forty-seven minutes,” Inko snaps. “I told Izuku about his twin last week. I didn’t think this would… Why would he?”

“That’s what we’re trying to understand,” Nezu says gently. “We want to help your son. His quirk is a hidden one, yes. And those are invariably traumatic.”

“He fell and hurt himself.” Aizawa wants to snort, call the lie out for what it is. Falling always seems to be the excuse an abuser uses. But he doesn’t. There are more important things to deal with than a personal vendetta.

She touches the braid of white hair tenderly. “It was a head injury. He hasn’t been the same since. Most days are fine. But some of them are… bad.”

“Bad in what sense?”

"He's off balance like the world is falling apart. Sadness, maybe." She shakes her head. "He punched a mirror. I thought he was just upset over his scars but... he said his reflection hated him."

"Was there-is there anything else?"

"Not that I'm willing to say."

Shouta snaps. “Are you really going to keep quiet after—”

“Aizawa—"

He ignores Nezu. “After he had a psychotic break? He needs help and we need information to help him.”

“That’s enough, Aizawa.”

Inko almost looks amused. Almost, if not for the pure rage in her eyes. “The attitude of the teachers here makes me question the quality of this institution. Whatever issue you have with me-well take them and keep them away from me.” She looks to the therapist. “Can you help him?”

Dr Makinami looks between the three of them. “I’m not a fan—”

"I frankly do not care what you're a fan of."

“I am not a proponent of prescribing medication,” Dr Makinami says after a moment, "especially not when I lack an actual diagnosis, but I can prescribe a broad-spectrum atypical antipsychotic.”

“Do it. I don’t care what you have to do, but I will not lose my son to this.”
I'm back people. Sorry to everyone I never replied to but I was basically MIA from the fandom.

That's all from me for now. Thank you for reading this. If you enjoyed the story leave a kudos and if you have any questions just leave a comment below. But know that all of that is unnecessary, and as always your readership is quite enough for me. Cheers.
‘Gimu is the second pillar. This is piety and forgiveness in turn. Sometimes debts cannot be repaid through conventional means, and it is the debtor's responsibility to be pious to the debt-holder in lieu of payment. But it is also the debt-holders duty to accept not all debts can be paid as they pleased, and to forgive their debtors [Is forgiveness a foreign concept to you, Dark Shadow?].’

—Excerpt from ‘The Pillars of Moral Heroics’ by Ryo Asuka and annotated by Fumikage Tokoyami.

The alarm rings, shrill and piercing. It means Izuku needs to get up. Ponderously, as though a massive ship turning, he leans over and silences it.

“Get up,” he whispers through the haze of his mind.

Lethargy grips him. He knows it’s Tuesday, knows that if he doesn’t get up then he’ll miss another day of school. But he can’t find the motivation to care.

The door opens. It heralds his mother, looking tired and worn. Guilt washes over him like a wave, tears threatening to spill.

"Hey, honey." She sits beside him and runs a hand through his hair. "You gonna get up?"

He grunts, too indifferent to do anything else.

“Alright,” his mother says gently. “I brought your medication.” She shakes a clear bottle. The blue pills within rattle threateningly as a viper.

“Kaa-san, no,” he whispers, pulling away. “I hate… what they do to me.”

She smiles gently. “You know you need them.”

“I don’t.” The tears fall. “Please don’t do this.”

“He doesn’t answer. “Take the pills, Izuku.”

He does. The numbness is intense and any interest he has dies with it. His phone always shines with the light of unread messages, but they are so distant. It is a struggle to eat anything, but he forces the pork cutlets down with the red pill he must take.

The darkness abandons him, the monsters seemingly indifferent to him now. He can stand in the dark and know he is truly alone. Sleep is quiet, dreamless, and only now does he realise how horrifying it truly is to not feel anything. Even the cruellest nightmare would be better than this haze.
The cycle continues on Wednesday and Thursday. He pleads with his mother, takes the pills at her insistence, and tries to work up the energy just to breathe again. On Friday he tries to run. He makes it all the way out of his bed and to the beach. Barely a mile in, his body betrays him and Izuku has to find a bin to be sick in. He shambles home, shaking violently. The couch is comfortable and unchallenging. He sits there for hours until his mother returns, and switches on the TV for him. He wonders if he greets her and then lets go of the thought.

On Saturday the haze fades somewhat. Or maybe he’s simply getting used to it. He takes his phone and there are dozens of messages waiting for him. A vague sense of guilt passes through him. It takes hardly any effort to force a smile—and the rush of endorphins is so so beautiful for he feels something more than dullness—and send a group message. More messages flood in but he doesn’t have it in him to respond.

On Sunday he decides perhaps enough is enough. “Kaa-san,” he says to her from his spot on the couch.

“Yes, honey?” She walks over and ruffles his hair gently. “You need anything?”

He takes a deep breath, trying to remember why he called her over. “I want…” He frowns. “I need to do something. And you won’t like it.”

She doesn’t. Not in the slightest. He has to drag up every bit of emotion and passion not quashed by the drugs to get her to listen. In the end, it is a single plea that sways her.

“Please, kaa-san.”

The house is larger than the one he shares with his mother. Larger, yes, but there are signs of damage. Dark scorch marks litter the pastel yellow walls, and there is a hole in the wall. The garden is well maintained and shows no sign of damage.

“Hello, Izuku,” Kaachan’s mum greets, brushing her muddy gloves across her apron. “I’m not sure I like this idea.”

He blinks slowly. “You don’t have to.”

She looks to his mother. “It’s your choice.”

His mother sighs. “I’d rather do it here instead of having him leave in the dead of night.”

Izuku very nearly flushes. It had been a consideration. An option he would have taken if she hadn’t agreed.

“Alright.” Kaachan’s mother walks to the door. “Katsuki, you little fuck, get your ass here.”

“The fuck you say, bitch,” he hears Kaachan roar from inside. “Say that again. I fucking dare you.” The boy’s footsteps are thunderous, and he shoves through the door violently.

“What the…” Kaachan trails off once he sees Izuku, his expression running through every form of sad anger Kaachan knows.

“Kaa-san, I’ll be fine.” He looks to her until Kaachan’s mother leads her to a spot just out of earshot but still in sight. “Hi, Kaachan.”

Kaachan takes a shuddering breath. “The fuck are you doing here?” he shouts but there is no heat to it.
“Why do you think I’m here?” he asks in turn.

Kaachan’s fists clench. The flowers and dirt might mask the scent of nitroglycerin, but Izuku will always know it intimately. His scars burn hot in remembrance.

“Because you’re a fucking bleeding heart,” Kaachan says at last, without venom but always with anger. “Because you were right when you said I could never be a hero. And you fucking had the audacity to show me pity.”

He frowns, trying to remember saying that. He can’t.

“I never said that.” Before Kaachan’s perpetual anger can turn hot, he adds, “I can’t remember a lot of things. I might have said that but it wasn’t-no, it… I don’t know, Kaachan, but I wouldn’t say that.”

Kaachan takes half a step forward. “Can you make some fucking sense? Why the fuck are you acting so weird?”

“They’re making me-I’m… I’m not fine.” He glances at his mother who’s expression is tense. “They put me on meds. I can’t feel things properly.”

Kaachan stays silent for a long time.

“Say something.”

“You’re broken,” Kaachan says hoarsely. “I broke you.”

“I’m not broken,” Izuku snarls, teeth bared. "Don't you dare-not you, never you. You have no right."

Kaachan watches him. And then, slowly, he sits on the step. It brings them to eye level.

“I don’t,” he agrees softly, angry only at himself. “But you’re the crazy fucker who thinks I have a chance.”

“I’m not crazy,” Izuku whispers. “I’m-I’m not.”

“You’re the one who told Zapper to stop being a dick to me just as I was about to blow him the fuck away.”

There is something so fundamentally wrong in seeing Kaachan with his hands clasped together, elbows resting on his knees, and almost calm. Izuku can taste the anger in the air still, but none of it is directed at him. And even then, there’s more guilt than he wants to stomach.

“I don’t remember that,” he admits, terrified because just how much did Mikumo take form him?

“Fuck, do you even remember the day we matriculated? Do you remember that conversation we had?”

Izuku swallows. “No. I just-you were being nice and left me alone.”

Kaachan stares then huffs. "It's me. It's fucking always about me, you shit." He laughs suddenly, broken and bitter. "That is just so fucked up. Look at us. What a pair we make. Just two fucking broken people who don't know how to deal with anything."

“I’m not broken,” he snaps, startled at the heat in his voice.
“You know me, but I also know you.” He leans forward and only now does Izuku see the tears he’s fighting back. “Deku, no Izuku, how did you get that scar.”

He points to Izuku’s temple where the streak of white hair prominently shows. “What?”

“How. Did you. Get it?”

“I f-fell,” Izuku whispers, terrified very suddenly. “I fell.”

“I thought so.” Kaachan reaches out, but when Izuku flinches he lets his hand fall. “Here’s the truth you’re running from—”

“No!”

Kaachan startles. “You’re that fucking afraid. What do you think will change if you know?”

“N-Nothing.”

“You’re a piss poor liar. Fucking tell the truth.”

He bites his lips, one sharp tooth slicing straight through. He wipes the blood away with the back of his hand.

“The truth.” He glances once more to his mother, aware that he can run and never face this. “The truth is that I might not be able to forgive you.”

“You shouldn’t,” Kaachan says, softer than Izuku’s ever heard. “I pushed you down. I ran because I’m a coward and don’t deserve to be a hero.”

Something in him breaks. He can feel it shattering like glass and slicing his insides. And yet, seeing Kaachan bare his teeth in righteous anger directed only at himself frees Izuku. It is the closest to kindness that Kaachan can come to.

“I don’t—I can’t forgive you.” Izuku closes his eyes. “But I don’t hate you. I never could.”

“You should,” he hisses. “If any fighter has the right, it’s you. But you’re a stupid ass bleeding heart who doesn’t know any better.”

That startles a laugh out of him. “H-Hawkmoon said all life is precious.”

“The fuck does that bitch have to do with shit?”

“It means I think your life has meaning,” he says, strongly, unwavering despite the haze. “It means you’re worth being forgiven, even if it takes me a while.”

“You’re a fucking idiot,” Kaachan roars but there’s no anger there, just a boy who’s never learnt to be quiet—who never needed to learn for when you are the strongest everyone must hear you roar.

“I am,” he agrees. “I’m an idiot. But I want to be a hero.”

He leaves. The drive home is quiet, and thoughts are difficult to string together. Despite that, he feels as though some anchor that had been dragging him down is… not gone, but not as heavy. He forces a smile for his mother when they get back.

“Thank you, Kaa-san,” he says.
She hugs him and though it is warm, much of her kindness fails to penetrate the haze. He wants to sleep and never get up again.

Instead, he simply says, “I think I need to go back to school,” and knows she will burn the world down to see it happen.

*****

He wakes up exhausted on Monday morning, wrung out and despondent. Curling up in his blankets and pretending that the world didn’t exist seems a more viable option with each passing option. It takes all he has to roll out of bed and land on the floor. once he’s there on the floor, once he’s made the first step of the day, everything comes just a tiny bit easier. Taking a walk is nowhere near as strenuous as the runs he used to take, but it feels much harder. But with each little act like making his bed or forcing a smile for his mother or taking a shower and eating breakfast builds up inertia. He almost feels normal—or maybe he’ just getting used to the numbness when he enters the gates of UA.

They seem different today. Less hallowed and sacred, and more testaments of strength. They are enduring, yes, but they will never be eternal. They are gilded but the gold and silver sparkle was just his own bias. It doesn't make the sight he once saw less true, only different.

He sees a familiar face. It brings the slightest warmth to his heart.

“Ojiro,” he calls out.

The blonde turns, startled, his eyes widening upon seeing Izuku. He gapes, mouth wide, before he regains his composure and shuts it.

“Midoriya… you’re back?” The question is cautious, more tentative than he is used to from Ojiro.

His grin feels weak and paper thin, but it is the best he can do right now. “Yeah, I am.”

“You didn’t—we thought you weren’t—”

Izuku shrugs, walking closer. “I didn't know until last night. But I'm here if you'll have me.”

Ojiro shakes his head slowly, looking at Izuku as though he's a complicated chess piece. His smile, when it comes, is small, just a mild rise at the corner of his lips.

“Yes, always.” He claps Izuku on the shoulders. It nearly brings him to his knees. “Come on.”

And though he finds it condescending that Ojiro uses him as an armrest, the casual indifference to where he's been is overwhelming. His smile turns warm as Ojiro tells him all about what he’s missed. It isn’t overly interesting, but he feels included in their lives, even like this.

“USJ?” he asks when Ojiro mentions it.

“I sent you a message about it.”

Izuku lowers his head. “I didn’t really read them.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Ojiro claps him on the shoulder again. “Yeah, we’re going there for training. Do you think…”

"I don't plan on missing any more school."
“Good,” Ojiro says uncertainly. “Good.”

The class is quiet, uneventful. The teachers are content to leave him alone, but after Present Mic skips past him for a question he raises his hand and feels the entire class watching him. Izuku answers the question, but something about the simple act diffuses the tension that has permeated the room whilst he has been unaware.

He leaves a bit later than usual with Tokoyami, having stayed behind to ask Cementoss a few questions regarding the homework he missed and working out a schedule to submit it—apparently getting hurt, having a mother who threatens to sue at the drop of a hat, and going through a mental break entitles you to not having to actually do homework; and whilst that appeals to the part of him that just wants to nap all day, the part of him that wants to be a hero rebels against the very idea of taking advantage of the kindness.

Tokoyami is quiet on the way back, and seemingly content with the silence. He could very well be a statue, one that moves and has feathers perhaps, but the indifference to the silence would be the same.

“D-do you remember what you said to me?”

“We’ve spoken on many matters,” Tokoyami replies, not unkindly.

He flushes but soldiers on. “You said you have a debt you want to repay. I think, maybe, I get what you were saying. Maybe just a bit. I’m supposed to accept the way you want to pay your debt might not be the way I want it to be paid?”

“The second pillar, Gimu.” Tokoyami makes a sound of acknowledgement.

“But I still don’t get why I can’t just forgive you and be done with it.”

"Hmmm, perhaps think of it this way." He raises on hand and weighs his next words on it. "By my actions, you were harmed. I am at fault. And if I am at fault, then do I not owe you a debt?" He raises his other hand. "But how must it be repaid is the question. Should I heat a metal rod and burn my face?"

Izuku stumbles, feeling sick. “Never.” A shudder racks his body.

“Why not? Would it not be equivalent exchange?”

“That’s….”

“Cruelty for cruelty is not the way of a moral society. So, if I cannot directly pay you that way then I must find another. And even should you claim to forgive me, I am still uncertain if you understand the gravity of that action.”


“Really now?”

“I saw Kacchan yesterday.”

A hand on his shoulder turns him around. Tokoyami’s avian features are contorted in anger. "What would possess you to confront him?" he says, calm, controlled, and half a step from shouting. "Do you have any idea what he could have done to you?"
His laugh is bitter and broken. “More than you know.” He pulls away from Tokoyami’s grip because no matter what, he is still stronger than anyone else in his class. “You were right. I hadn’t forgiven him.”

Tokoyami watched him for a moment. Then nods. “That is progress and that is important.”

They walk in silence again, meandering through the city. He texts his mother, so she doesn’t worry, and on a whim, he takes a picture with Tokoyami next to a sports shop, the boy doing his best to stay out of the picture.

The beach is quiet and empty. Izuku leans on the railing and inhales the scent of seawater untainted by rot and corruption. He could stand here watching the sun slip past the horizon for all eternity, unmoving as the stars in the sky.

“You find peace here.”

He looks to Tokoyami and finds the boy sitting on the ledge, legs dangling freely and elbows resting on his knees. Precarious though it looks, the boy seems none too worried about the possible drop to the ground. Maybe confidence in his quirk, maybe confidence in himself.

“I… do?” He inhales, smelling and tasting the salt in the air. “I do.”

“We all need that which calms us.”

“What else do you do?”

“I find a level of distraction in video games. Books have always had many lessons to be learnt. Meditation, as well. And I study the occult.” He glances at Izuku out the corner of his eye, almost as if expecting a reproach. “You don’t find that shocking?”

“Why would I? I’ve seen what the darkness looks like.”

He takes comfort in the warmth of the sun, in the all too real breathing of Tokoyami, and the chill of the sea. Those feelings, and the haze in his mind, ground him. It makes it simple to not think of what could be lurking down there.

It takes hardly a thought to draw a piece of shadowstuff, hardly larger than a pebble, to his hand. He tosses it in the air, getting a feel for the weight—which exists only should he choose it—and raises his arm.

In the space between breaths, he grasps for the quirk his mentor bestowed upon him. Not much of it, just a tiny scrap that hardly makes his senses tingle.

With a flick, the shadow pebble soars over the beach and lands on the water for but a moment before it continues on its way, one skip after another until it is too small to see even the wake of its passing. Izuku smiles and rubs his hand, bruises deep beneath the skin already forming.

“I get that it’s scary trying to trust someone,” he says, wincing when he flexes his hand, “with something like that. But I’m starting to understand fears can be conquered. And it’s easier when you have a friend.”

“You’re talking about your quirk.”

Izuku nods. “And yours. I don’t know much about yours, but I know what having a voice in your head is like.” He rubs the back of his hand along the bones, feeling for breaks. “Do you know why
I was gone for a week?"

"In truth?" The breeze ruffles his dark feathers. "No. They said you were sick."

"That’s… I guess that’s accurate. My quirk drove me-no, I guess it was all me maybe.” He takes a breath and starts again. "My quirk did weird… things to me. I started hallucinating a voice and it got worse and worse. And seeing Kaachan after what happened kinda just-well, it broke me."

Tokoyami hums deeply. "You are here, now, and that is all that matters."

"Maybe," he concedes. "It took the name of my twin, Mikumo."

"I didn’t know you had a twin."

"I don’t."

Tokoyami shifts uncomfortably. "Oh, I didn't mean to—"

"It happened a long time ago," he says, more bitter than he expects. "The point is that I know what you’re going through, probably better than anyone else. Maybe I don’t know all the details, but we can try."

"I think, perhaps, that I would not take issue to that."

He goes home, happy for once. Dinner is ready, which makes him feel guilty, but he makes up for it by cleaning up after the meal.

"I’m happy for you,” his mother says, kissing him on the forehead and leaving.

In his room, he pulls out his homework and gets started on it. Maths comes first—easy as breathing—followed by the backlog of literature homework he has. After a particularly hard-line stumps him, he picks up the pill bottle and rolls it in his hand. The shake and rattle of the red pills distract him.

"I hate these things," he says.

*****

The glass is spotless, as they all should be. It serves as the perfect vessel for the ice, and then a respectable amount of gin, a can of dry tonic, and a slice of lime. Kurogiri hands the glass to the patron, a villain he has yet to speak with, along with a coaster.

He says nothing as the villain drinks it one gulp. It is not his job to teach them manners. No, he makes the drinks and keeps the bar orderly. They are not his only duties, but they are the only duties this villain has any reason to know of.

The cloth on his sleeve is discoloured. He sets it with the other dirty cloths and retrieves a new one to wipe down the mess the villain leaves because of course, he would completely neglect to use the coaster.

When the bar is empty, he switches on the screen to the side. It flickers to life, though the image is darkened, and he can hardly make out any details but a hazy outline of what might be a man.

"Sensei," he greets politely. "You wished to speak to me?"

"How goes the preparations?" The voice is clear and dark, but not malicious. It used to send chills
through his gaseous body.

Now it is normal.

“The boy you sent to us provided a map of the location. I verified the information myself.”

“Good, it saves you unnecessary work,” Sensei says sincerely. “Heroes always provide their own downfall. And what of Tomura?”

“He prepares our... comrades.”

Sensei chuckles, more a growl than anything else. “You think little of them. Perhaps rightly so,” he concedes. “But they all have value.”

“As pieces on a board?”

Whatever sense of humour he got from Sensei disappears. His mist body freezes as even with the barrier of distance and technology between them, the great villain’s absolute malevolence is terrifying. Because distance means nothing to a man this powerful.

“Do not,” Sensei says, voice dripping with sheer cruelty, “ever consider your allies as pieces on a board. That is the way of heroes like Endeavour and Best Jeanist. We are better. We must be. Do you understand?”

“Y-yes,” he croaks, “sensei.”

The malevolence disappears. The glass falls from his limp hands as he slumps forward on the counter, his senses still operating on a flight or warp the fuck away reaction.

“Good,” Sensei says genially, all previous hints of ‘obey or die’ gone. “Please do make sure Tomura eats. It would be disappointing if he collapsed of exhaustion.”

“Understood.”

“And notify me of any changes regarding your quirk.”

The call ends. He takes a few minutes to calm his frayed nerves. Once he is certain he can do anything without collapsing, he pulls out a lunchbox from the fridge in the back room. He adjusts his vest and puts on hand in his pocket. He looks the picture of calm and casual.

With a though, a warp gate opens, and he steps through. It takes only a moment to go from one place to the next.

This moment lasts for an eternity. Kurogiri exists both on either side of the gate and within it all at once. This is nothing unusual.

But things have been different recently. There is something watching him, observing and judging his every action in this formless void dancing with sparks of green lightning. It makes him feel nauseous for he knows if he ever had more than a moment—eternal though it is—to look at what observes him, something fundamental would break. He wants to run and flee in terror. Any rational and mortal creature would want to.

Kurogiri in the void becomes the warp gate that the Kurogiri in the other room walks through.

It worries him. Even when they burnt a city and held back an infestation, his quirk had not changed to any extent. Now, though, it is alien even to him.
He strides through, not allowing an inch of his unease to show through to Tomura. His ward sits on a rooftop, playing a handheld game, and utterly ignoring ignorant of his presence.

“Tomura,” he calls.

“Just wait. Nearly got a new high score.”

Kurogiri will never understand this blatant addiction to games his ward has, or even why Sensei permits it. There is a certain appeal to the games that he can appreciate in their interactivity, but the depth and time Tomura puts in them bothers him.

He walks forward and forms another warp gate right below the main device and sends it back to the bar. Tomura stands abruptly, the two halves of the controller still in his hands and looks ready to punch Kurogiri.

He thrusts the lunchbox in Tomura’s chest before he can get a word out. “Sensei.”—he always finds it fascinating that the mention of their leader always silences Tomura—“sends his regards. He also suggests you don’t forget to eat.”

Tomura huffs. “I don’t need a reminder.” Still, he takes the lunchbox and opens it.

“How were the preparations?” he asks, taking the controllers.

His ward sits, much in the same position as before. “I don’t like them.” He takes a bit out of the meal. “They’re useless.”

“Why?” he asks, genuinely curious. Planning and logistics are his duties for Tomura hardly ever has a plan past ‘attack, attack, attack’ no matter how much Kurogiri drills their importance in his head.

“We’re taking a high-level tank, a DPS beast, a support class, and a fucking trash mob to fight the end game boss.”

“I see…” Those terms mean little to him. “Regardless of how you feel, our allies are not disposable.”

“They’re only good as a distraction.” Tomura snorts. “You didn’t even fucking like them.”

“No, I did not. I still see them as disposable.” He sighs. “But Sensei would very much disagree.”

Chapter End Notes

To everyone who asks me to update, please understand that I update on Thursday mornings baring exceptions which I will inform you of.

That's all from me for now. Thank you for reading this. If you enjoyed the story leave a kudos and if you have any questions just leave a comment below. But know that all of that is unnecessary, and as always your readership is quite enough for me. Cheers.
Giri is the concept of moral duty. All people have duties: to their families, to their employers, to their allies, to their contracts, and to themselves. Giri is to hold these myriad duties in balance, to grant them each the weight they deserve without neglecting any other. A good father does not neglect their children in favour of their work, regardless of their position, for to do so is to fail their moral obligation to those they sired. Even his Imperial Majesty balances his family with his duties to the realm.

—Excerpt from ‘The Pillars of Moral Heroics’ by Ryo Asuka and annotated by Fumikage Tokoyami.

The sun is close to setting when Izuku sees Tokoyami. The avian boy wears loose black clothing, a bit worn but very likely what he uses for training. Izuku wore much the same with his green tracksuit.

“I didn’t think you’d come,” Izuku admits.

Tokoyami huffs. “Had I not wished to come, I would have conveyed my thoughts directly. I do not have any obligation to watch the children today.”

“Children?”

“Do not worry overly much about it. What was your intention with this training?”

“I kinda didn’t think it through all the way.” He wrings his hands nervously at Tokoyami’s disappointed gaze. “I-I mean, I just didn’t know anything really about your quirk and I kinda need to if I want to figure everything out and—”

“Worry not on it,” Tokoyami interrupts, one hand raised. He sits, cross-legged, on the sand. “Sit. You are too nervous for any training to be effective.

He flushes, still comfortable. “Well…”

“I did not mean it as an admonishment. It is merely the nature of any power the traverses the dark. Without control, we are dangers to those we care for.”

Izuku sits as Tokoyami does, placing the back of his hands on his knees. The position is uncomfortable, not one he’s used to.

“Anyone can have a dangerous quirk. It doesn’t make us a danger.”

“That is not how the world will see it. The nature of our powers means they will see a villain first should we lose control.” His red eyes are like embers in the dark. “People fear the dark, as they rightly should. You wield the darkness directly. I have a demon. Will they be as forgiving to us as
say, a person with a strengthening quirk?”

A frown graces his face. “But we have laws to protect against that.”

“We have laws against discrimination over mutations.” Tokoyami cocks his head, ruffling his feathers. “Not everyone follows these laws.”

“That’s not—it’s not—”

“Fair? Hardly. But it is the way of the world. Very many are put in prison for hurting others when their quirks manifest. Do you think that the imperial heir could not have walked away free after what he did to Taiwan?”

“What he did made him a villain,” Izuku says strongly. “Even the crown bows to the law.”

Tokoyami makes a sound of acknowledgement. “Regardless of the atrocity, can you truly say his anger was without cause? I hurt others by listening to the whispers of my demon. I do not claim his actions just or even his retribution proportionate, but he acknowledged his moral failing by committing seppuku.” He shakes his head. “It is those emotions that we must never give in to. It is why I meditate. And why I shall teach you how to meditate. We must strive to never become as the villains who purged Shikoku.”

“I’ve never been good at the whole empty my mind thing.”

“Neither have I, and I have trained for years.” He pauses, assessing Izuku. “You don’t have to sit like that if you find it uncomfortable.”

Izuku shifts and kneels in kiza, grateful as his right leg has already gone numb. This position, though, he can maintain for hours.

“What now?”

“Now, close your eyes. Focus on your breathing.”

He does so. Inhale, hold, exhale. Inhale, hold, exhale.

“Do not force a pattern. That is not the point.”

“This would be easier if you told me the point.”

He hears Tokoyami click his mouth shut. “The point is to focus on what is. You breathe all the time. Listen to your body simply be. It is yours and it is. Just as the waves and the sunlight and the cold breeze. These things are real. They are not the words of a demon trying to corrupt you. They are not the voice of your failings and guilt.”

Put like that, it makes a bit more sense. He breathes and lets it be. There is a pattern there, one waiting for him to decipher. His initial inhale is always sharp. He breathes again. A shuddering pause follows. Another breath. A long inhale at the end of a single inhale.

He holds it, sometimes for a second or maybe two or three. It seems to be always just as long as he needs it to be. It doesn't follow the shrill screams of something burning in his mind or the echo of monsters singing the end of all life.

And each exhale is always slow, drawn out. It is never rushed, even if there are resounding footfalls in his mind.
“Do you understand, now?” Tokoyami says, breaking him from his reverie and dispelling the feeling of… not peace or acceptance, but maybe just the lessening of annoyance.

“It is easy to lose yourself and be uncertain of what is and what isn’t,” Tokyami continues, “and whilst the particulars of your situation are different from mine, some things are inescapable. Sand is coarse. Water is wet. The living breathe. The wind does not whisper sweet nothings.”

“I guess,” he says, not giving any attention to the monsters hiding in the darkness. To do so is to invite them in. “Do you do this often?”

“Daily. Especially when Dark Shadow is crueller than usual.”

Izuku snorts, raising his hands defensively when Tokoyami glares. “I-I’m sorry, but the name’s a bit redundant. I mean shadows are just different gradations of darkness.”

He would know. He could point at each of the seventeen gradations in the area, could give them each separate names were he inclined for they are as different as green is to ultraviolet. And even if there is a shadow writhing and bubbling, Izuku ignores it for to give it attention would be to permit whatever hides there to glimpse the real world.

“I was a child when I made that name. I see no reason to change the name.”


“You know he does not like you.”

“I do, but I can’t do anything about that if I never speak to him.”

Tokoyami tilts his head, considering. “As you say.” He takes a deep breath.

Something dark rushes from his torso. It is large and wrong to look at, a piece of impossible matter brought in the real. Burning eyes of yellow pierce him with their intensity, judging, assessing, and finding him wanting. It smells of shadows at dawn and formless smoke and, weirdest of all, old roots.

You, the creature—no, Dark Shadow—snarls.

“Dark Shadow!” Tokoyami snaps, his posture rigid with tension. “Calm yourself.”

The creature turns its attention back to its master. You brought me out at dusk, crow prince. Do you think a spineless slave like you can hold me?

“You’re not very nice,” Izuku says, forcing a veneer of calm. And you stink of carrion corpses. It moves to loom over Izuku, its large claws twitching in anticipation.

“I took a shower this—”

Dark Shadow rushes him, claws raised to eviscerate him.

“No!” he hears Tokoyami scream.

Izuku rolls back just out of reach and draws thick ropes of dark matter from his shadow. The ropes rush forward at his command and wrap around the creature’s claws. They break a moment later,
but that is long enough.

He lights the flare. Bright light illuminates the beach, almost blinding. Dark Shadow shrinks, whimpering and scuttling away from Izuku as he approaches. It hides behind Tokoyami, terrified.

“Okay. You really don’t like me.” Izuku forces a smile for Tokoyami. “I’m fine. Really.”

The tension bleeds out of Tokoyami, slowly but ever so present. He shakes, perhaps stress or perhaps tiredness.

“He’s never done that before,” the boy says quickly, an edge of hysteria to his words. “He doesn’t just attack people.”

“Maybe you should sit down.” He throws the flare to the side, sitting. The light is bright enough that Dark Shadow is still small, but at least now he can see Tokoyami without squinting.

Tokoyami falls to the ground in a heap, taking deep breaths.

“You okay?”

“Just… exhaustion.” Dark Shadow wraps protectively around Tokoyami’s neck, glaring at Izuku. “There is only so much energy to go between us, and I used much of mine in trying to restrain Dark Shadow.”

Betrayed, Dark Shadow says weakly.

“Stop it,” Tokoyami snaps, taking a deep breath. He watches, mesmerised, as Dark Shadow slowly seeps through his clothing and disappear.

“He really doesn’t like me.”

“I… I warned you,” Tokoyami says slowly.

Izuku shrugs. “You did. Does Dark Shadow always drain that much of your energy?” he asks suddenly.

“Only when we don’t work in concert.”

“Right. And do you ever let him out at home, just to like do stuff.”

“Yes. It is sentient. To chain it forever would be cruel.” Tokoyami frowns. “You have reason to ask these questions.”

“Just a hypothesis. Using my shadows makes me tired because it takes a lot of concentration.” He raises his hand, still bruised from using One For All yesterday. “But using the strengthening part makes me physically tired. They operate on two different sources of energy.”

“You’re saying Dark Shadow draws on my energy exclusively, and not his own.”

“Or maybe the other way around. Anyway, it’s just a wild guess.”

“One that might have merit.” He looks to his hands. “Perhaps it is fate that I met you.”

“There’s no such thing.” Izuku looks to the side where the shadows threaten to bubble over. “There’s no one writing my story and deciding my every move.”
“You don’t find the possibility intriguing. Who is to say our lives are not a tapestry of pre-ordained decisions? Can it be anything other than destiny that two people with quirks of a similar nature went to the same class and circumstance forced them together?”

“I don’t like the idea. I have the right to make my own choices. There isn’t some god out there deciding my every action.” The further he looks at the darkness, the further he can see teeth that drip with rainbow ichor of dead gods. “Even gods die.”

"Then they were not true gods.”

Izuku laughs suddenly. “Maybe not but we still get to make our own choices. If we didn’t then what’s the point in trying. Wouldn’t you just be dragged to the darkness no matter how much you fought if that was your destiny? If you think you can change then it’s hypocritical to believe in destiny.”

Tokoyami hums. “Perhaps there is merit to your words. But I do not believe it can only be random chance. I could have just as easily gone to Shiketsu. In fact, I did receive an offer from them, yet I chose UA.”

“Fine, whatever. We can disagree on this some more. Tomorrow?”

Tokoyami nods. “Tomorrow, yes. I believe there is much I can learn from you, Midoriya.”

*****

Izuku walks off the train, Shinsou beside him. The boy is quiet, not particularly odd, but there is a weight to his silence today. It takes him a long time to work up the effort to speak up.

“Is your cat alright?” he asks. Hastily, he adds, “You’re just, um, looking a bit upset.”

Shinsou stops and purses his lips. “That isn’t why… and no, it’s not your fault before you even go there. You’re not the main character of this story.”

Izuku feels his cheeks warm because that was exactly where he was going. "Sorry."

A warm hand comes to rest on his shoulders. Looking up, he sees Shinsou smiling, but there is no true warmth to it.

“Don’t worry, I’m just being a bit insecure.” The hand nudges him forward gently, and Izuku starts walking. “I’m just... we’re friends, right?”

A deep pit settles in his stomach. “Is this-are you…” He shakes his head, steeling his nerves. “Do you not want to be friends anymore?”

Shinsou’s grip tightens, and the pit in his stomach deepens as Shinsou stays silent. What did I do? he thinks as they enter the gates.

“I should be asking you that,” Shinsou says finally. “You haven’t really been around recently. Even when you’re with me, you’re barely there.”

Izuku frowns. “I’m sorry?” he ventures, uncertain.

“I get you went through some shit, but can you at least try to let me help? You spent more time with bird-brain than you do with me.” He glances at Izuku sideways. “You think I don’t know why you go home late all the time.”
One exhale. Pause for two seconds. Inhale.

“That’s not—you can’t just take it like that.” He scratches at the burn scar before he can realise the action. “I-I’m not ignoring you. But, you just won’t get it.”

“You’ve never even tried,” Shinsou says, louder now.

“What do I have to tell you everything?”

“Because that’s. What. Friends do.”

Every word is clipped, dripping with anger. Izuku steps back, left arm trembling. “Shinsou, just calm—”

“No, you do not get to tell me that. Not without being honest.”

Izuku wants to reply, honestly at that. But no words escape his lips. They can’t, not when Shinsou’s eyes are dark with anger.

Someone grabs him and pulls him back. He nearly stumbles as Kirishima steps in front of him, shoulders tense and back straight.

“Maybe, you need to take a step back,” Kirishima says, cheerful in a way that doesn’t feel at all true. “It’s not very manly. Come back when you’ve calmed down.”

He can almost feel Kirishima’s sharp grin, all sharp teeth.

Shinsou says nothing. The tension rises until the boy sighs. “Fine,” he says, stalking past the two of them, and glaring at Izuku.

Kirishima lets out a whoosh of relief, his stiff posture relaxing. “I didn’t think he’d listen.”

“Wh-what did I—”

“Nothing. It’s not your fault.” Kirishima’s grin warms. “You’re not responsible for everything people do.”

“Feels like it some days. He said I’m not there, even when I’m around.”

He stares expectantly at Kirishima until the boy deflates. “I guess you’ve been a bit… distant, maybe, since you came back.”

He doesn’t need to say ‘for the second time’ for Izuku to hear it. “In what way?”

Kirishima bites his lip. "You're just, I don't know, not as manly as usual." His friend turns red as his dyed hair. "You zone out all the time. And when you do say something it sounds like you're talking through someone else."

Izuku closes his eyes, fists clenching. “I’m sorry I’m not perfect,” he snarls.

“I didn’t mean—”

“It’s fine,” he says sharply.

He walks to class, angry on the surface, but more despondent deep down. It bothers him that they can’t accept who he is, bothers him that they coddle him but don’t have the decency to say
anything to his face. He barely musters a response for Asui and his glare is hot enough that Iida turns right around the moment he sees it. He avoids everyone at lunch and sits on the roof alone, left to his thoughts and the deck of cards he shuffles and splits ceaselessly.

Aizawa has their last class that day, and the man immediately zips up his sleeping back once the bell rings. Izuku stays behind until everyone is gone.

“Sensei.”

A hand snakes out and removes the goggles. “Yes, Midoriya.” His teacher doesn’t move from his spot on the ground.

“Did you really expel your class two years ago? Or was that just a… a logical ruse?”

Aizawa frowns. “It was the truth.”

“Wouldn’t they need powerful quirks to get into 1-A?”

“That’s not what I’m looking for. Yes, one commanded the winds, and another would probably make a great underground hero. They were powerful, but they didn’t have the right potential. You idiots still show just a tiny bit of potential, and I’ll drain every last drop of it to make heroes out of you yet. Was that all you wanted to know?”

“Here’s the work I missed out on.” He holds out the binder.

Aizawa blinks, standing quickly. “You weren’t under a time restriction to submit it.” He takes the binder. “Why?”

“I guess I didn’t want to get into any bad habits,” he says. “And my mother would be upset if she knew I was being lazy.”

“Your mother?” Aizawa asks in a slow, measured way as he sets the binder on the ground.

“Yeah.”

Aizawa looks him over. “Have you tripped recently?”

Izuku flushes. “No,” he mumbles.

“I did tell you that you could come to talk to me at any time. You haven’t taken advantage of that.”

“I wasn’t sure you were being serious about that.”

“Do I look like I make jokes?”

*You look like you need to sleep,* Izuku thinks.

“No sensei.” He frowns, thinking of the conversation he had with Tokoyami. “Do you think our laws protect people well enough?”

Aizawa cocks his head. Unzips his sleeping bag. Steps out.

“That’s not a simple question to answer,” Aizawa says, pushing his hair out of the way. “And it’s a broad question. I take it you’re talking about heroes and quirks. Listen, by and large, our laws are designed to protect people from misuse of quirks. They’re not always perfect, but there’s a reason we fight to uphold this society.”
“Someone told me that a lot of people are branded villains because of a bad quirk activation.”

“Are they branded villains or are they held accountable for their actions? You need to understand that the older a person is, the harsher the law holds them accountable. Even if it is a hidden quirk that activates, an adult has life experience a child does not.”

“But hidden quirks are activated through trauma,” he says, keeping his hands from brushing the scar at his temple. “You can’t expect someone from, I don’t know, an abusive home to not lash out when their powers activate.”

Aizawa stills. “And did you lash out when your power activated?” he asks, voice level and calm.

“No.” He shakes his head. “I just tripped and got hurt badly. I don’t think that’s the same thing.”

“You trip a lot,” Aizawa says, his fists clenching for some reason. He sighs, fingers uncurling. “Alright, think of it this way: should we let people get revenge against those who hurt them?”

“No,” he says quickly. “If we do that we go back to the lawlessness of the second dark age.”

“Then why should we let violent quirk activations go free.”

“That’s not the same thing. What you’re talking about is someone wilfully choosing to hurt someone else. You can’t just pardon that. What I’m talking about is a mistake that happens under stressful situations.”

“Like Bakugou?”

Izuku freezes, heart tightening. “Kaachan is different.” He takes a deep breath. “I need to get going. Mum will be upset if I’m late.”

Aizawa sighs. “As you say.”

He doesn’t want to meet Tokoyami in the evening. He’d much rather just go to sleep, maybe even go for a run to work off some of his frustration. He is grateful, then, when Tokoyami takes one look at him and decides meditation is the order of the game. They sit in silence, watching the waves crash against the beach, until the sun has set, and darkness envelops the world. There is a silence to the darkness, one that reminds him of everything he is hiding from. The darkness hiding a step out of sync always calls, and he is very much too terrified to gaze into that darkness. Right now, there are no voices insulting him, no waking nightmares, just people he struggles to understand.

“Thank you,” he says before they part. “For not making me talk about it.”

“Sometimes silence is more beneficial than talking about it. It gives you a perspective that communication fails at. My father’s silence has taught me that.” He stretches his back, pops resounding in the quiet. “But that does not mean to endure alone.”

He takes that advice to heart the next day with his counsellor. She smiles benevolently across the glass divide.

“Hello, Izuku. We haven’t spoken recently. How are you finding things?”

He glances outside the window and for a moment thinks he sees a thread longer as three men. He blinks, and the odd sight disappears.
“Fine, I guess.”

She adjusts her glasses. “You guess?”

“I don’t know what you want me to say.” He runs a nail against the coarse fabric of the couch. “What am I supposed to tell you? That everything feels numb except when it’s not. That my friends are angry with me and I don’t know why? What the fuck do you want from me?”

“If that is what you want to tell me, then yes. We can start in that order if you like.” He doesn’t refuse. “How are you handling the medication?”

“I’m tired all the time,” he admits. “Most of the day is just… blank, I guess. I’m there but nothing sticks out except maybe an hour or two.”

“And why exactly does this bothers you?”

His finger pauses in its path. “A-are you seriously asking that? Do you really think I enjoy this?

“I’d like you to realise that you are putting words in my mouth. I’m asking why it bothers you because I want to know if you understand how the feeling is affecting your life. Does that make sense?”

“I guess.” He taps his finger in time with his heartbeat.

“Do you have any hobbies you enjoy?”


“And what do you like reading? I’m a fan of spy thrillers myself.”

“I… wasn’t expecting that.” She smiles, nodding for him to continue. “I like reading stuff about quirks.”

“I take it you’ve read the classics. Ononoki, Saruhiko, Salvatore and the like?” He can’t help the smile that crosses his face. “You know, there’s an elective in your third year that covers that. I think you might enjoy it.”

“Aizawa-sensei told me about it.” He fights the urge to blush because that memory goes hand in hand with the embarrassment of Aizawa calling him out for his clumsiness.

“Would you say you get along well with him? And your other teachers?”

He scratches at his burn scar, then remembers he’s not supposed to do that.

“He’s… thorough? High standards and logical ruses all the times. I don’t like them.”

“And why is that?”

“Because heroes shouldn’t lie. Heroes must be better. I mean, where do we draw the line between lying and manipulating?”

“Do you think perhaps you’re upset that you don’t see through his ruses all the time?” Izuku frowns. “I’ve been here a few years, so I know a bit about his teaching methods. Do you think you’re learning to think things through a bit better?”
“You still shouldn’t have to lie to teach a lesson.”

“Not every lie is harmful. We lie to ourselves every day. Sometimes you’ll face situations where a lie is the most beneficial option. You’re a fan of All Might, aren’t you?”

No, I just have posters, pyjamas, shirts, CDs, a signed notebook, more figurines than I can count, and his quirk. Not a fanboy in the slightest.

“Who isn’t?”

She rolls her eyes playfully. “Well, doesn’t he say he smiles all the time for other people, even if he doesn’t actually feel happy. Isn’t that a lie of sorts as well?”

“I don’t think it is. I think… I think maybe Mikumo would agree.”

She pauses. “Has he been speaking to you recently?” she asks slowly, cautiously.

He shakes his head. “No. I just—it’s the sort of thing he’d say.”

She jots something down on her file. “Did he lie often.”

Izuku looks to the side. Her office is high up, and he can see the forests surrounding UA from here. In the distance, he can make out the bright glint of one of the fake cities they use for training. A bird flies past, a dark streak against the green and grey world, free in a way he can hardly understand.

“I think I was the one who lied,” he says after a long pause. “The keeper, lock and key. That’s what my brot… no, what it called itself.”

“And who were you lying to?”

Another bird joins the first. They fly, no, they dance around each other, flying so close they might collide, only harmony driving this aerial dance.

“Myself.” He looks to her now. “Please don’t ask me what I was lying about. I don’t—I’m not ready.”

“Allright. We can come back to this later.” She scribbles once more, the scratchy sound of pencil on paper noticeable in this quiet room. “Why don’t we talk about your friends being angry with you? What makes you think that?”

His burn scar itches, more intensely now. He scratches his arm instead. “Because they told me.”

“And what exactly did they say?”

“That I’m never there even when I am. Because apparently, I have to be perfect all the time no matter what happens. It’s not my fault I’m like this. I didn’t choose to take these meds,” he says, louder at the end. “And now I’m not good enough. I’m not manly enough.”

He wipes at the tears before they can fall, hating how everything leaves him about to cry, hating more the times where he feels little.

“And what do you think would make you good enough, as you put it?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be the one telling me that?” He sees her quirk a brow. Izuku sighs. “Maybe if I stop crying all the time. Or mumbling. Or stuttering. Or looking like a monster.”
“You don't think they're important?” He thinks of the image in the mirror and the scarred stranger that looks back. “Well, I do. I have to see this face every time I walk into a bathroom. I see this face in every mirror. Fuck, I can't even take a bath without seeing it.”

“Serious injuries always take a long time to heal. Recovery Girl lets you get back quickly, but she can't get rid of the scars. And you’re fully healed physically long before you have a chance to really process the event. I think in many ways you're still processing things. Your scar and Bakugou. Mikumo and the week you spent out of class. Your relationship with your friends.”

“Thanks for reminding me all the ways I’m fucked up.”

“I don't think you've, pardon my language, fucked up as you say. In my opinion, you only really fuck up when you stop trying. You don't have to succeed all at once, Izuku. The most important step you can make isn’t the first one or the last, but simply the next step.”

“That sounds like something straight out of a self-help book,” he says, lips curling in disgust.

“It wasn’t. And I get the sense you’re less angry at me than at yourself for wanting to believe that.”

“How the heck can you… oh, yeah, you have a quirk.” She nods. “Okay, fine, explain that to me.”

“Alright. Consider it this way. What has happened can’t be changed. All you can really do is decide the future you want to see. And you can only do that by making choices now, as in, taking the next step. Painful experiences have taught me the most important step a person can take is always the next one. Bakugou hurt you, but you took the hard step to forgive him wh—”

“I didn’t,” he interrupts, looking away. “I didn’t forgive him. Everyone was right about that. I’m not—I don’t know if I’ll ever be ready. But I want to. And I don’t think that’s wrong.”

“Wanting to forgive someone is never wrong. I think it’s part of the healing process.” She leans back, relaxing fully in her seat. “I also think choosing not to forgive someone isn’t wrong.”

“That makes no sense.”

"Why? You are the wronged party in this. Confronting someone isn't always the right answer for everyone. If it hurts you more and doesn't aid you in healing, then why should you? I think it's infinitely more important to have the capacity for forgiveness and understand when it is the right time to forgive someone. And never is a perfectly valid answer.”

Izuku cracks his knuckles, savouring the release. “So, I shouldn’t forgive Bakugou even… no, that’s not what you’re saying, and I know it.” She smiles benevolently. “I get that forgiving someone is hard, but I feel like I’m being selfish if I don’t forgive him. Or Shinsou.”

“And Shinsou is the one you’re fighting with?”

“I don’t know if you can call it a fight. He got angry with me for not… telling him everything about my life.” He sounds bitter, knows it from the way his bones chatter and his spine tingles.

She cocks her head. “A few weeks back I asked you to imagine a friend of yours getting hurt. Do you remember that?”

“How could I not?”
“Was Shinsou that friend?”

He sighs. “I think you know the answer to that. Yes, he was.”

“Okay. Did he say he wanted you to tell him about everything in your life? Were those his words verbatim?”

“No.”

“Then what did he say?”

A sense of numbness washes over him. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

“I think maybe Shinsou isn’t upset because you won’t tell him everything, but because you won’t trust him with anything despite how much he cares for you.”

He stays silent no matter how hard she pokes and prods. The rest of the hour goes by like this.

*****

Walking home after the end of his session, Izuku takes his time, enjoying his music and the simple cadence of step-step-breathe. He is so engrossed in this that he fails to hear the sirens before he turns the corner and sees a police barricade. Lights flash, yellow tape blocks the road, and a line of uniformed officers in riot gear stand ahead of the few heavy response crew milling about.

Izuku sprints forward. He knows the gear they are wearing: advanced carbon nanotube riot shield for protection; quick hardening containment foam for restraint; shotguns loaded with rubber bullets, and stun batons. He shoves past a boy near his age, glimpsing a small girl no older than twelve backing away from the police line before it happens.

The little girl in a dirty sunflower dress opens her mouth. A sound louder than jet engine tears through the air. Windows shatter and cracks form on both the ground and on the walls. He covers his ears, but it does little to alleviate the sheer raw strength of her power. The boy behind him is unfortunately hit by the shockwave and falls to the ground bleeding.

She runs out of steam a few moments later, eyes red and face slick with tears. “Stay away from me!” she shouts, voice high and reedy and all too much like a girl scared and unsure of her surroundings.

“Stand down or we will subdue you,” one officer roars, clapping his stun baton against his shield. The girl glares. “No. Leave me alone.”

She takes a deep breath. It happens quickly. “Take her down,” the officer yells, even as his subordinates react. The loud bang of a gunshot goes off, and the girl goes flying like a ragdoll. She slams into a wall. He watches, numb, as another officer sprays her with containment foam. It hardens, and the little girl disappears beneath the cocoon.

“Villain down,” the officer says to his microphone. “I repeat, villain down.”

“What are you doing?” Izuku whispers, shocked to his core. Louder, he shouts, “What the hell are you doing?”

The officer looks over his shoulder, frowning. “Apprehending a villain,” he says.

“That’s a little girl.”
Grey eyes narrow. “That was a villain who just hurt five—make that six—civilians and someone get that boy treatment right the fuck now. I don’t care how old she is.”

Izuku takes a step forward. He isn’t sure when he starts running, but he barrels past the police tape regardless.

Something hard and painful hits him. His back hits the ground, all the air leaving his lungs. He groans.

“No, that was a villain who just hurt five—make that six—civilians and someone get that boy treatment right the fuck now. I don’t care how old she is.”

Izuku takes a step forward. He isn’t sure when he starts running, but he barrels past the police tape regardless.

Something hard and painful hits him. His back hits the ground, all the air leaving his lungs. He groans.

“Boy,” the officer says, his foot on Izuku’s chest, “I’m gonna give you one chance to stay the fuck down before you interfere with a police operation and I have to take you down as a villain.”

The boot digs deeper. Izuku winces, fighting the urge to call shadows or One For All to fight back. He knows he can win the fight, but he also knows it’s breaking the law.

“What did she do?” he cries.

The officer leans down. “She had a tantrum. She had a god damned tantrum and killed three people. That’s what she did.” He taps his baton against Izuku’s shoulder. “I’ve seen kids like you. You think you know everything. You think you know how simple things should be. Yours is a life of fucking luxury.”

He leans back, taking his leg off Izuku. A groan escapes him, his chest still a line of pain.

“I have a job to do. It involves keeping brats like you safe from killers like her.” The officer sighs and lifts Izuku to his feet with a rough hand. “Go home to your daddy before you get in trouble.”

Izuku swallows, terrified because the man’s eyes are frigid, indifferent. He knows he could fight. But he knows just as well that this monster has a team of officers with their guns at the ready. He wouldn’t, couldn’t, under any circumstance win.

What will it matter if he fights? There’s no one here to have witnessed this, no one who will care but him.

He walks away in shame, hating every fucking excuse he gives for his cowardice. He has no words for his mother, no interest in her kindness. He sits alone on his bed, crying well into the night.

And when the report comes out the next day of a girl with a violent quirk activation apprehended by diligent police officers, Izuku pukes. He thinks back to his conversation with his mother so long ago and understands she was right that life isn’t as simple as monsters and humans.

No, there are monsters, humans, and human-shaped monsters.

Chapter End Notes

USJ is next week. Have fun.

That’s all from me for now. Thank you for reading this. If you enjoyed the story leave a kudos and if you have any questions just leave a comment below. But know that all of that is unnecessary, and as always your readership is quite enough for me. Cheers.
'Ninjo is to be compassionate. Without empathy, we cannot call ourselves human. Regardless of the form we take, we are one people breathing the same air on this world. Mutations are abundant, and the human species is near extinction, but these are only surface level changes. The soul remains the same, our karmic cycle forever constant [What will become of you when I die, Dark Shadow?]. And even should you not believe in the soul, and in karma, believe then in your fellow people. Only when we are kind and compassionate do we truly achieve greatness. Tyranny and dictatorships have created monuments, but these all fall in time. But the strides of the compassionate are felt to this day. No longer are people enslaved, ruled by cruel lords, or restricted from education for whatever petty reason. Ninjo is the greater breaker of all chains.’

—Excerpt from ‘The Pillars of Moral Heroics’ by Ryo Asuka and annotated by Fumikage Tokoyami.

Sunflowers follow him everywhere he looks. There, hiding in that yellow signpost. Here in the yellow lines on the ground. Everywhere, for the sun is the head of that ominous sunflower. Every little girl is that same scared little girl, broken and crying and terrified. Everyone in uniform morphs into the officer, cold grey eyes devoid of warmth, threatening in an all too real way, implacable in their cruelty, indifferent in their execution of the law.

He shivers just thinking of them.

A boy with grey eyes, no older than ten and innocent of that officer’s crimes, makes Izuku want to run up to him and shake him hard and fast, shake him until every bit of potential cruelty falls out and nothing but a bright and sweet boy remains.

Too scared, he looks away and puts in his headphones. He looks for something soothing: rock and metal are too reminiscent of the girl’s shrill scream; J-pop is too happy, too innocent for this day; classical too melancholy, and when it isn’t he hears thundering footsteps in the piano and terrified pleas in a violin. He gives up eventually and settles into silence.

The class is excited, and Izuku is uncertain as to why until Aizawa tells them to get dressed for the trip to USJ. Izuku follows the herd of students to the locker room. He takes the case with his costume and dresses in a corner, careful always to keep any scars from peeking.

The mouth guard bothers him, and he stares at it in silence. It isn’t the same as the one before, similar in style, yes, but not in execution. This is designed to protect against heat first and blunt force second. And yet, his hands shake because he can’t stop thinking of fire and pain and why why Kaachan, what did I ever do to you? You were always the best. I’m not a threat. No, no, no.

He takes a breath. Accepts what is. Secures it around his face.

It fits comfortably, and he tells himself that the burning is all in his mind, and not real. The shape
of it hides much of his scar but for a few splotches near his cheekbones, and the collar of the cape hides his neck.

In the mirror is someone who might be a hero, bright green and dark lines, thick gloves and boots for functionality, a dark vest for protection, and a cape darker than midnight. This is a hero, in truth. Not the coward underneath.

“I’m not,” he whispers, hating how noble this reflection looks. There is no nobility in leaving a little girl to cry, to beg and plead, and do nothing but flee as a coward would, and not behave as the successor to the greatest hero of this age would.

*I’m so sorry. I couldn’t save you. Please forgive me.*

“Midoriya.”

He turns back and sees Ojiro dressed in his modified keikogi, looking as strong as ever. He smiles at Izuku, no idea of the thoughts swirling in his head.

“You doing alright?” he asks gently. “Aizawa will ditch us if we’re too late.”

“He wouldn’t. I mean, he can’t.” Izuku frowns and thinks of the man’s behaviour. “He would.”

“Come on.”

His frown deepens. “What do you want from me?” Ojiro makes a sound of confusion. “Y-you haven’t said a word to me all week.”

“You very much looked like you wanted some time alone. And if you need a bit more that’s fine as well.” His expression doesn’t change from the kind smile, even as he turns and walks away.

“Wait,” Izuku calls. “You just wanted to talk?”

“Yeah.”

Izuku swallows. “Okay.”

He lets Ojiro talk about his week, and the things at the dojo: apparently watching Shinsou have his ass handed to him is always a delight, one that Ojiro is more than willing to help with; he has plans to maybe take part in the national karate league after their exams, but that all depends on what nonsense UA puts them through.

He finds himself between Ojiro and Asui in the bus, Ashido, Iida and Kirishima opposite him. Seeing the redhead leaves ash in his mouth.

“No card tricks,” Ashido asks before he can really process Kirishima.

“Hm? N-no. I left them at home.” The lie is technically true. He left one deck at home. Two more are hiding in his shadow.

“Aww, I wanted my free entertainment for the day.”

“You could have brought your own,” Asui says lightly. “Midoriya, why are you and Kirishima fighting?”

His eyes widen, and he notices that Kirishima looks away. “What gave you that idea?”
She shrugs. “You guys haven’t been talking to each other. Or with anyone else.”

“Is this really the right time for this conversation?” That’s Ojiro, already defensive.

“I say what I want. Am I wrong?”

Izuku swallows, uncertain of what to say. And by the shifting of the shadows in the bus, everyone is paying attention. He flushes under the weight of the attention.

“We’re not fighting,” Kirishima says. “I was just being a bit of a dick. It wasn’t very manly.”

“Oh, you’re still running from your problems,” Ashido says, smile just the slightest bit mean but mostly disapproving. “I thought you’d grown out of that.”

Kirishima takes her elbow without wincing, as he always does. “Yes, miss my power is awesome and I’m going to lord it over everyone else.”

She sticks out her tongue. “I’m pretty sure Midoriya has the most interesting power.”

He blinks as everyone focuses on him. “Ummm, n-no?”

“Well, you did kick a robot to death,” Uraraka calls from her spot near the back beside Bakugou.

“And you can make shadows,” Asui says. “Do you have two quirks?”

He wonders if his eyes will ever get tired of blinking in shock. “No. Just different applications of the same quirk.”

“You can’t expect—”

“Mosaic power quirks exist,” Todoroki says, cutting through everyone. This might be the second time Izuku’s heard him speak.

“Mos what quirks?” Kirishima asks.

“People whose quirks express themselves in various ways,” Iida says, formal and already in his lecturing voice. “Commonly known as grab-bag quirks. They have multiple minor powers in addition to their main powers. Like a fire emitter who can sense heat, has heat resistance, and perhaps something completely random. Alternatively, it can manifest as two or more seemingly unrelated powers.”

“That is just not fair,” Ashido says. “So, what’s your main power, Midoriya?”

He shrugs. “No idea. Hidden quirk remember?” And it’s not like I’m going to tell you I can warp, walk between worlds, make shadows, and that I have All Might’s quirk.

The bus stops before the interrogation can go any further. Iida, excitable as always, tries to force them to leave in a single orderly line. It lasts only a second until Uraraka skips past with a cheerful smile and drags Iida with her.

He walks outside and immediately zooms in on the most important person there. “Pro hero Thirteen,” he says, delighted and shocked in equal measure.

“Welcome everyone,” they say in a voice impossible to determine the gender of, and spread their arms wide, “to Universal Studios Japan.”
“What!” is the collective response of the class.

“Thirteen, please,” Aizawa says.

“Take away my fun, won’t you? Anyway, this is actually the Unforeseen Simulation Joint which UA has been kind enough to let me build.” She gestures at the massive dome. “In here, you’ll experience a variety of environments to simulate rescue operations. Please, do your best.”

They’re led through up the stair by the two teachers, most of the class chattering excitedly.

“I love Thirteen,” Uraraka says, grabbing his hand and dragging both him and Iida up the stair faster.

“Not so fast,” Izuku says after nearly tripping on the stairs. “They’re your favourite hero?” he asks once Uraraka’s walking at a more respectable pace.

“Of course.” Iida barely manages to avoid the arm she swings in excitement. “They look like an astronaut and their power’s called Black Hole. We’re the only two space-themed heroes in Japan. And she acted in the remake of Gravity.”

“I didn’t watch that,” Iida says.

She turns on him, eyes burning. “We. Are. Watching it. This Weekend.”

“You can’t just decide…” Iida trails off as he glare intensifies. “Which theatre we’re watching it at,” he adds. “That has to be a group decision.”

“Fine,” she huffs and skips ahead.

Izuku sighs in relief and follows. He listens intently to Thirteen go over the many environments in the building and applauds when she talks of using their powers responsibly to help others—I couldn’t save you, I’m so so sorry—no matter how scary their powers might be. He glances at Tokoyami and catches his gaze.

They both freeze at the same time. Izuku feels the rip in reality, so wrong and intrusive that he’s amazed no one else looks sick. He looks to it, past Aizawa who only now stiffens, and sees the formless mist darker than ink.

The others see it.

But he sees past it. The people that walk through—all of them mutants, he notices errantly—are nowhere near as important. Something dark and impossible and utterly wrong lurks in the background. He hardly notices Todoroki bump his shoulder, too engrossed in wondering how the fuck the abyss is staring back at him in the real.

“Don’t!” Aizawa snaps, causing them all to freeze. “Thirteen, keep them safe and retreat.”

“Understood.”

“Wait, what?” someone shouts a moment before Aizawa leaps forward.

*He can’t win, Izuku thinks. He specialises in one-on-one capture. He isn’t All Might.*

“Don’t underestimate him,” Thirteens says, making him realise he said that out loud. “Head to the gate, now. Move!”
Someone grabs him and drags him forward. He sees Todoroki’s mixed eyes looking back at him, a question there. Izuku nods and the boy lets go, letting Izuku run on his own power.

“Don’t trip,” Todoroki says, and Izuku would flush if he wasn’t so terrified.

The gate’s far, and Izuku curses UA’s tendency towards the ostentatious because why the fuck are the stairs so far from the door?

He curses, even more, when he feels the world break ahead of them. The formless mist rises out of the ground, yellow eyes like Dark Shadow’s glaring at them.

“Greetings young heroes,” the mist speaks, voice deep and rich. “We are the League of Villains. Forgive the intrusion but our invitation was lost on the way. It seems the grand attraction is not here. Tell me, where is All Might?”

“Fuck off,” Bakugou roars but he doesn’t move, “you shitty piece of—”

“How is one so uncouth a hero? Regardless, my job is simply to scatter you all.” The mist rises like a tidal wave and surrounds them in a dark dome. Izuku shakes, seeing eyes larger than worlds watching him past the mist.

“And torture you to death.”

Izuku feels himself fall and screams. This is nothing like his quirk. His world shifts and he exists in many places at once: he tastes dunes of arcane bone ash and breathes the void; monsters dance above and below, and nightmares stalk from the corners of time; his body is still in grasp of the villain; his body exists in the abyss; and his body slams into a body of water. The multiple instances of his existence, each a paradox, resolve, and only the Izuku in water remains.

Oh fuck, he thinks, his body sinking. His costume is heavy, lots of cloth and armour, and fighting against it is difficult. And he doesn’t want to drown again.

He nearly misses the villain in the water. The villain looks too much like a shark, teeth sharper than razors and intent on slicing him in half. He wonders if his armour will survive an encounter with those teeth.

Thankfully, he doesn’t have to experiment. Asui slams into the villain, sending him deeper into the water. Her tongue snakes out, wrapping around Izuku, before she propels him like a rocket through the water to the surface.

He gulps sweet air. And then he lands on a hard surface. Izuku groans, his torso still sore from the police officer—yours is a life of luxury, kid—and his baton.

With a grunt, he forces himself up to see Mineta land beside him. He reaches over the edge and helps Asui up the last section.

“This is bad,” Izuku says, watching the villains swimming towards them.

*****

Toshinori Yagi sits alone in contemplation. His students are away at the USJ facility, and whilst he wants to go there, he has no right to be present. The moment Aizawa heard his name amongst the candidates, the man had done everything in his power to see All Might removed. Even if he found the way Aizawa went about removing Toshinori to be petty, he wasn’t going to start a fight. He has two decades on the man, and that age gives him perspective. Toshinori can acknowledge his
failings, and right now perhaps he isn’t the best person to be with the class.

His successor, no, Izuku, makes him blind and arrogant. He can see that, can accept that where Izuku is concerned his decisions will never be rational or unbiased. Even so, he worries about the boy, and having him so far away makes Toshinori anxious.

He paces from one end of the room to the other, considering the consequences of heading there right now. For one, Aizawa will go ballistic on him. Two, the Principal will be upset with him. Three, there’s no guarantee something won’t happen on the way.

But if he does go, Toshinori will know for a fact Midoriya is safe and sound.

In the face of that one reassurance, nothing else matters. One For All fills his body with the strength and raw power that makes him the Symbol of Peace. He loosens his tie and walks towards the door.

It opens without his input. He sees no one until he looks down and sees the principal.

“And where exactly do you think you’re going?” the rat-dog-bear-thing asks in his perpetually soft voice. It sends chills down his spine as it has since he was a teenager and likely will after he’s six feet under and Izuku is dealing with the world’s problems.

“Principal Nezu,” he greets weakly, “your fur looks pristine as usual.”

“It’s the keratin,” the principal says, walking forward intently. “Humans just can’t reach that level of lustre. But let’s talk about this first.”

A tablet is thrust in his hand. He takes it, reading the title: ‘Where is All Might’ takes precedence before, ‘Should We Trust the Symbol of Peace’ and other headlines like ‘All Might: Hero or Failure’ and ‘An Inside Look at UA’s Suspect Teaching Methods’.

“Sit.” He does so tiredly. “The media smells blood. I’m glad you’re smart enough to not be under the spotlight right now. I expected you to jump out and deal with every incident like a child. Whilst you might be able to deal with incidents better than police officers, you have a successor to train and focus your energy on. Tell me, do you know what helicopter teaching is?”

“No, sensei,” he mumbles, feeling smaller than the principal.

“It’s a teacher who doesn’t trust their student to grow on their own. You’ll have to learn to balance taking the direct approach and letting your successor learn on his own.” Nezu jumps on the table. “If you hover too close you’ll smother any potential the boy has. And worse even than that, you’ll create a carbon copy of yourself.”

“Midoriya is nothing like me,” he says, proud and guilty in equal measure.

“No. He’s shy and painfully awkward, with a tendency towards self-destructive habits and who knows what else at home,” Nezu says, glaring as if all of this is somehow his fault. “But he is a kind boy with a big heart. A boy who wants desperately to be a hero, who is innovative and doesn’t follow the archetype of a flying brick like a certain symbol.”

Sweat drips down his neck. “I’m worried something will happen if I’m not there.”

Principal Nezu huffs. "Things happen even if you are there. You should look guilty. You made a mistake, but you have tried to make amends and for that, I will forgive you. In return, I ask that you listen to me when I say stop rushing. If the children are in danger, Aizawa will call or send a
runner. That Iida boy most likely if communications are down.”

Toshinori sighs, deflating. The logic is sound. He leans back and gets comfortable. The tension never leaves and might even be made worse by the Principal’s interrogation. But no matter how much he tries to distract from the feeling of dread that licks up and down his spine.

The dread has the same taste as the day Nana fell.

******

Shouto Todoroki is a man of determination. He knows the cost of failing, has seen it first-hand. Failure is not an option, and never will it be. He knows the pain of waking up early each morning and training till every part of his body wished to give up. Training from dawn till dusk with no break in-between is nothing more than an annoyance.

He is a person of will. There are times when he has wished to give up, but the consequence of any failure has driven him forward. Pain is nothing more than an annoyance he has been conditioned to ignore. Broken bones are little more than irritations, hypothermia an easily treated irritant.

It is why he doesn’t panic when the black mist forms around his classmates. He glances at Midoriya, a boy terrified of everything—and very likely overmedicated—whose quirk made Shouto wonder which parent he inherited the shadows from, and which parent he inherited the strength. Because there is no way he has a grab-bag quirk. He knows what those look like, and neither he nor Midoriya has one.

Seeing his strength makes him wonder if All Might really is a monster like Endeavour underneath his heroic demeanour because anyone who told him Midoriya isn’t All Might’s bastard child was a fool.

He would know. After all, the blood of two great quirk lineages runs through his veins. A song of ice and fire runs through his veins, a dance of centuries-old blood cultivated and bred to a single pinnacle: the winds of winter in one half, the flames of hell in the other.

He will only ever use one half.

Reactions honed through brutal training grant him the awareness to spread ice outwards from his landing point. The mist has yet to clear, and he may very well be attacking allies, but he can thaw them out.

The ground is slanted, buildings half submerged beneath the ground. It looks like a landslide. He scans the crowd of frozen villains. No, not a single classmate in the area. Good, he won’t need to worry about them and can unleash the full might of his frozen left half.

There is power in blood, the power of unstoppable quirks, and he knows form whispers in the darkest corners of the internet that his blood nearly caused a clash of kings. The Emperor supposedly sought to unify his mother’s ice quirk with the two quirks that the Crown Prince inherited to create the first triple-quirk, and Endeavour had fought back just as hard. There are rumours, perhaps baseless, but he knows Taiwan sunk around the time his parents were wed.

“Torture us to death?” he questions, sliding slowly towards the villains. “You people aren’t any better than common thugs.”

He twists to the left and craps the pole trying to take his head. Frost runs down it, and exactly five feet—always five feet, never more, never less—later, it expands outward into a block of ice, trapping the villain within.
He sends a wave of ice behind, not caring particularly much how many villains there are. His power is overwhelming.

“You aren’t strong enough to take down our class,” he says, breaking off a spear of ice from the villain. “What gives you the belief you can take on All Might?”

He doesn’t know many of the things his classmates take for granted: his knowledge of a mall extends only to the stories his sister, Fuyumi, has spoken off; there are days where he wonders why his brothers enjoy playing soccer in the courtyard; and more often, he wonders what it will be like to sleep in on the weekends as his siblings do.

But he most certainly knows the allure of quirk inheritance. He knows a high rank as a hero means nothing for personality. And he knows a parent harming their child is more common than the world wants to admit. And negligence is no excuse for All Might.

What is the point of chasing that spot if the number two hero was a monster, and the number one is perhaps just as bad?

He listens to the villains beg for mercy, and spill everything they know. It takes longer than he would like, time in which the situation could have deteriorated. None of them is high up enough to know the details, but their knowledge is enough. He scans for the central plaza where Aizawa had engaged the group of villains.

It takes him a moment to figure out where he needs to go. A moment longer to double-check it’s the right direction. There. He lets ice form and glides across the frozen highway.

*****

Fumikage Tokoyami finds himself in the cold. His light-eating cloak flutters as he takes in the environment. A desolate wasteland of ice and snow stretches as far as he can see, dimly lit by some sort of half-light. He spots one of his classmates, Kouda he thinks, nearby and groaning in the snow.

Tokoyami walks over and kneels beside his quiet classmate. “Are you injured?”

Kouda looks at him and shakes his head. He gestures with his hand. The movements are too quick for him to get everything, but he understands the general intention.

“Come. We must escape.” He holds out his hand.

He hears the crunch of snow. The sound is nearly buried beneath the raging snowstorm, but he is tense, terrified that a villain is near.

Dark Shadow, he calls, flicking his arm to the right where the sound comes from.

The demon of his soul rushes past, larger than it has any right to at this time of day. He feels Dark Shadow grab someone and moves to stand between Kouda and the villain.

The scream makes him frown. When Dark Shadow doesn’t attack further, his frown deepens.

“Let go of me, Tokoyami,” the person says loudly.

She’s one of yours, crow, Dark Shadow says and drops the person.

It takes him a moment to understand that the floating pair of gloves is his classmate. “Hagakure?”
“Thanks for not eating me.” She pats Dark Shadow who croons and leans forward affectionately.

“Forgive me. I was unaware other allies were present.” He stares at Dark Shadow who seems to have no intention of leaving her side.

Why are you playing with Madame Nudist?

Dark Shadow chuckles, the sound reverberating through the ground. I want you to say that again, slowly this time.

“Wait, what did you say?”

“It is of no concern,” he answers quickly. “Come, we must leave before the villains find us.”

Kouda signs once again. He parses through the sign language, glad his former teacher made him suffer through it.

"Holing up will leave us vulnerable to attack. Worse still, doing so when we have no proof, but general caution, of a villain's presence, will make us useless. Our best bet is to head towards the central courtyard and regroup from there."

“I like this idea.”

“Dark Shadow, return.” Hagakure pats it one last time before it obeys. “I… I have no sense of direction. Do either—”

“That way,” Hagakure interrupts, pointing behind him.

Kouda signs agreement. “Acceptable.” He walks forward, then pauses. He thinks of the last time he was in a team and how badly it went due to his arrogance.

“Hagakure, you have the greatest stealth skills. It would be in our best interests for you to scout ahead.”

“You’re just trying to get rid of me,” she says lightly, but he can hear the tension in her voice. “If I spot something I’ll run right back.”

“Come back if the cold begins to affect you negatively,” he adds. “I’ll loan you my cloak should that be the case.”

“Aww aren’t you just a gentleman.” And then she’s off, leaving footprints in the snow.

He looks to Kouda and sees the sheer fear on his features. “Worry not. I will defend you should we encounter any enemies.”

Tension drains from the boy’s face. He signs once more, his fingers faltering in the cold.

"We all have disadvantages. Were we in the desert arena I would be of no use. Without animal life, your quirk has lower viability at the present moment.” Tokoyami hums as they set off. “Still, I will require your assistance should any villains get close. I will do my utmost to prevent that, but one can never be certain where villains are concerned.”

They walk in silence for a few minutes, both checking every direction they can. The silence is eerie and the cold biting. He unclasps his cloak and throws it to Kouda when the boy starts shivering.

"I can draw energy from Dark Shadow to keep me warm," he lies when Kouda tries to hand it
back. "The darkness sustains me."

_I'm not carrying you if you pass out_, Dark Shadow says.

*I'll have no need of your assistance._

The cloak is small on Kouda’s massive frame, but it covers him better than the simple shirt and shorts. Tokoyami focuses on walking, and not on the cold seeping cutting through his underclothes. Eventually, he will be unable to hold back signs of the cold.

He underestimates how quick that moment comes. He grits his teeth as a particularly savage gust goes straight through his underclothes. His hands are clenched tightly in his shorts, but he can hardly feel it.

_Do you trust me?_ Dark Shadow asks before materialising outside his body.

_You know I do not._ He sighs, feeling no malice from Dark Shadow. _Do what you will._

The demon wraps around his torso. Tokoyami tenses but doesn’t fight as the darkness covers his upper body. It isn't warm and is frankly terrifying, but neither does it let the biting wind cut through his torso and arms.

He sees Kouda watching. “I told you the dark sustains me.”

There is a certain pressure Dark Shadow exerts, partly physical and partly mental. It feels almost like the demon is smothering him, pushing away the part that makes him who he is. He grits his teeth and trudges on, knowing he has no other choice and hating it all the same.

“Tokoyami,” Hagakure calls a few seconds before she—her gloves really—appears. “The exit’s only a few minutes away past the town. I didn’t see anyone.”

“That is fortunate.”

Dark Shadow tenses around him. _There’s someone here_, it snarls in his mind.

“Do the conditions worsen?” he asks, scanning the area and trusting Dark Shadow to watch his back. He has no choice.

“Nah, we’re good,” Hagakure says. He looks intently at her. He sees a shimmer of light, a distortion that bends the shape of her glove.

Dark Shadow needs no words to unwrap around his torso and rush forward. The demon slams into someone as Hagakure screams again and Kouda scrambles behind Tokoyami.

With the person in hand, Dark Shadow rises and then smashes the person in the ground. He, for that groan can only be male, appears as his quirk fails.

“Good job,” Hagakure says, thumb raised.

Tokoyami ignores her as Dark Shadow brings the man. The man is bald and devoid of any hair.

“How many of you are there?” he questions.

“Fuck off,” the man snarls, slipping between being visible and translucent.

“Dark Shadow.” The demon squeezes, making the man grunt in pain. “I would like not to have
violent behaviour on my permanent record. But I would dislike an ambush even more. Tell me how many of you there are.”

Dark Shadow applies more pressure. The man’s face pales. “Me,” he blurs out. “It’s just me.”

Tokoyami tilts his head. “I find myself hard pressed to believe you.” Dark Shadow squeezes further. “Do you believe him, Hagakure?”

“I think he’s telling the truth,” Madame Nudist says, voice wavering. “Why don’t you calm down, Tokoyami?”

Dark Shadow applies more pressure. The man screams, his pained grunts pleasing to hear. A hand on his shoulder pulls him back. He looks at Kouda who frowns.

“Stop,” the boy says softly.

**Since when the hell can he talk?** Dark Shadow whispers in his mind.

“There’s no need to get that violent even if he is a villain,” Hagakure adds.

“He was not being honest.” Tokoyami sighs. “Dark Shadow release him.”

The demon hisses. For a long moment, he wonders if he’ll have to fight the entity. It drops the villain who lands in the cold.

“Do either of you have restraints?” he asks, ignoring the cold.

Kouda signs no and Hagakure shakes her head.

“Kouda, I will trust you with his security. Come, let us go. And be prepared for an ambush.”

He doesn’t say ‘I told you so’ when they’re done dealing with the villains in the city. No, he has too much dignity to embarrass his allies like that. He does, however, choose not to restrain Dark Shadow as it breaks down the exit.

He has a good view of everything from this high up. Including Izuku, Asui and Mineta hiding in the water as Aizawa battles the purple monster.

A battle he is losing.

****

Bakugou comes out of the darkness swinging. His fist hits nothing but air. He fumbles the landing, but a hand grabs him before he can hit the ground. He sees Yaoyorozu holding him upright.

“Get off me, bitch,” he snarls, stepping away.

“Stop being so difficult,” she says, frowning.

He doesn’t get a chance to say anything before his instincts scream at him to move. He shoves her forward and dodges back before a massive fist slams the ground, shattering it. Katsuki lets off an explosion, dodging around the massive villain—villains, he amends, seeing the dozen behind the giant mutant—and kicks low, his speed enhanced by an explosion.

It sweeps the rhino-like villain to the ground. He doesn’t spare the villain another glance, already dodging the knife-hands of another. Bakugou weaves between the blades, glancing at Yaoyorozu
who seems to be holding her own with a large pole for the moment. Good. He doesn’t want to know how fucked he’ll be if she gets hurt, especially not when he has a red order hanging over his head.

And his counsellor will have some shitty things to say if he doesn’t try. Not that he ever feels guilty about her fucking words or is even mildly terrified of how raw and haggard he’ll come away from their next session. Like all their prior sessions ever since that day.

He surges forward between swings and shoves the villain with his shoulder. She hits one of her allies, and both go tumbling to the ground.

The ground shakes, and he loses his balance. He looks to the side and sees the first villain, the one with a rhino’s horn and a thick hide, on his feet. *Shit,* he thinks of the raised fist.

A loud shockwave slams into the villain. The rhino falls to the ground, clutching at his bleeding ears. Katsuki looks to the side and sees Jirou advancing, her speakers pumping out the loud noise.

He takes the opportunity and blasts forward towards the villain. The auditory attack cuts off before he enters its conical path.

He fires off an explosion and spins around. His elbow slams into the villain’s face. He feels the horn snap and break. He downs the rhino with a parting kick.

Katsuki lands.

A glint in the air is all he sees before the knife stabs him in the shoulder. “Fuck off,” he roars and finds Jiro already pelting the villain with a belt of knives around her shoulder with sound waves.

Yaoyorozu grabs his wrist before he pulls the blade out. “Don’t touch me, bitch.”

“You’ll make it worse,” she says. “We need a plan.”

She holds out her hand, sparkles forming in her palm. A fucking grenade forms in her hand. “Holy fuck—”

“Jirou, close your eyes,” Yaoyorozu shouts, not heeding him in the slightest.

Jiro jumps back, twisting and covering her eyes as Yaoyorozu throws the grenade. Katsuki is many things, but stupid is not one of them. He shuts his eyes. The grenade goes off with a loud bang, the flash bright enough that he sees the light through his closed eyes.

“We need a plan,” Yaoyorozu says whilst the villains are still disorientated. She’s right. Even with the three they’ve taken out, there’s still near two dozen.

“We have one,” Katsuki snarls. “Emo bitch, pin them down and I’ll break their shitty faces in. And you make shit to keep them divided.”

“That’s not—”

Katsuki pulls the knife out, and roars, “Don’t fucking argue with me. It’s the best plan we have.” He wishes he still had his grenadier bracers to blast these stupid fucks straight to the stratosphere. But there is no way in hell Aizawa is ever giving them back.

And Katsuki has no intention of asking.

“He’s right,” Jiro says, eyeing the recovering villains warily.
Yaoyorozu sighs. “Fine. Let me bandage the wound.” She has a roll of gauze in her hand already.

“Then hurry the fuck up.” He watches the villains warily as Yaoyorozu bandages his shoulder. That bitch with the knives will need to be taken down first. All of them with ranged abilities would need to go down.

The moment Yaoyorozu is done, Bakugou rockets forward. He fights with savage ferocity, never once retreating. Every blow is meant to debilitate, and if that fails the blows stun so he can flow into another attack. He takes a punch to the face when he dodges too late, and a hammer to the side when a villain tries to rush Yaoyorozu.

He grits his teeth through the pain. It doesn’t matter. This pain is temporary, and he’ll bear no scars from it.

But he'll fucking hate himself if he lets someone get hurt again.

Katsuki elbows another villain to the side and lifts both hands. A group of them are on the ground, pinned by Jiro’s sonic attack.

He ignites the nitro-glycerine in his palm. The explosion is massive and slams into the villains. They go flying, shouting in pain.

Katsuki shakes out his hand, feeling the strain of forcing an explosion that large. Everything hurts. He can hardly see out of one eye, a mix of blood and swelling. His breathing is ragged. But there are still five villains left.

He flows into a ready stance. “Come at me, you half-assed pieces of shit.”

Being loud has its advantages. It means everyone focuses on him and few of the attacks are directed at the girls.

He hears a whoosh from behind. Something large and spinning crosses the distance between him and the villains. It slams into two of them, wrapping around and cackling wildly with electricity. They scream before the electric shock renders them unconscious. Their compatriots back away in fear.

Katsuki smirks. This is his kind of fight. A hero versus a villain. No shitty backstory lasting a decade, no regrets, and certainly no green eyes fucking begging for mercy.

He cracks his knuckles. “Bring it, cunts.”

When the last villains are beaten, Katsuki looks around. “This was too fucking easy,” he snarls.

“They weren’t very tough,” Yaoyorozu says. “Good for us.”

He shakes his head, his mind racing. “These guys weren’t here to fight All Might.”

“But—”

“Bitch, shut up,” he snaps. “These fuckers are trash, literal fucking trash. They’d be lucky to take on some loser who only has self-defence training.”

“They’re a distraction,” Jiro says.

“No shit. But why…” He scans the area. There’s the entrance to his right. Logically, Aizawa should be directly ahead of him, on the other side of the dome, fighting the group of villains. And
that purple fucker.

I can’t be the only thinking the same thing. They’re dumb as fuck, but not all of them are stupid. Especially not Deku. And…

“That fucking idiot,” he roars and starts running.

He ignores the two bitches behind him, and rockets forward across the lake. His shoulder burns but that pain is nothing compared to his fear.

He fires a blast at the wall and leaps through the rubble.

It takes him about three seconds to realise how fucked they are. Aizawa is down, bleeding and broken, next to an unconscious Asui and a blubbering Mineta. The only thing standing between them and death is Izuku who’s fucking talking to the villain with too many hands.

*****

Ejiro Kirishima decides he dislikes fire. And villains. Actually, he dislikes villains when everything’s on fire. The fact that a combination like that exists fuels his anger as he clobbers a villain straight on the nose, bones crunching and blood spurting out.

He wrings his hand out nervously and wipes the blood off on his skirt—and yes, he knows it has a technical term, but it looks like a skirt and he doesn’t care what anyone thinks because his manliness isn’t fragile—and nope, he doesn’t even want to imagine exactly what possible infections these villains have. When was the last time they showered? He wonders, sniffing. Never.

“Kirishima!” Ojiro calls out, breaking him from his reverie.

He has a second to see the villain with the giant club. Less than a moment to harden his face because that club is moving real fast and oh, this is what it’s like to fly, he thinks before hitting a wall, and this isn’t manly at all.

Blinking the white spots away, he sees the villain rushing him. He sighs. Fine, let’s be manly. He keeps up the act of being disorientated until the last second, then hardens and leaps forward. His shoulder, harder than steel, slams into the villain's gut. The villain gasps and Kirishima feels something wet run down his neck as the villain falls.

He grimaces and wipes off whatever it is. "This is not manly,” he mutters and elbows the villain coming from behind.

Ojiro swings by and runs on the wall—so manly—before springboarding onto another villain. His tail lashes out and the villain goes down.

“That all of them?” Kirishima asks.

Ojiro looks at him. Looks at the villain groaning on the ground. Kicks him in the face.

“No that’s all of them.”

“Oh, come on, he was down. That wasn’t manly.”

Ojiro shrugs. “Be manly when we aren’t fighting for our lives. Though, if this is the quality of villains, then we have little to worry about.”

“What about the giant thing?” He shudders, remembering all those teeth. At least he smiles when
he showed his teeth.

“Aizawa will deal with it. He won’t let a student deal with…” He stares at Kirishima in horror.

It takes him a moment to catch up. “You don’t think he’s dumb enough to pick that fight?”

“He fought the zero-poi—”

Kirishima’s running before Ojiro finishes that sentence. *Damn it, Izuku. For once in your life don’t pick a fight with the biggest thing in the room.*

A dark blur flits through his peripheral vision. He barely sees the villain before the knife flashes too close for comfort.

Ojiro slams into the villain and shoves him forward. “Go,” his friend roars as more villains appear. “Keep him safe.”

Kirishima nods and sprints.

He’s past the gates when he sees the scene. Villains litter the ground, broken and beaten but for three of them—the mist villain, the creepy guy with too many hands, and the giant purple monster. And, of course, Izuku’s kicking the monster.

His body glows with the same brightness he took down the zero-pointer. The kick is perfect, straight out of the textbook, and Kirishima knows that even given time to prepare, that punch would break him.

And the monster takes the manliest kick he’s ever seen from someone who isn’t All Might and doesn’t fucking flinch. *Oh shit.*

The monster grabs Izuku’s arm. “No!” Kirishima screams as it lifts its other hand up.

He sees the terror on Izuku’s face, meets those green eyes one last time as the monster’s hand comes down.

*****

Izuku surfaces after Mineta and Asui, taking deep a lungful of sweet air. He doesn’t want to think of the harrowing experience of fighting underwater against those villains ever again, so he puts it out of his mind. No one needs to know of his embarrassing performance or how Asui and Mineta had to save him a few times over.

Especially not when he has more important things to deal with. Like saving Aizawa from the giant purple thing currently crushing him.

“Stay here,” he whispers to Asui. “Whatever you do, don’t come out.”

Intellectually, Izuku knows this is a bad idea. Every shred of rationality that he has begs with him not to do something so stupid. But he has no other choice. There’s no guarantee that the heroes will be here quickly enough, no matter what the mist villain says.

He’s out the water before he can berate his decisions any further. Three sets of eyes focus on him.

“H-hey there,” Izuku says.

“Midoriya,” Asui hisses, and he hopes that his cape hides her.
The villain with too many hands takes a step forward, tilting his head. “Hey?”

“Tomura, right?” The villain nods and Izuku forces a smile. “I’ve got to say you did a great job isolating us like this. Sensor array down, no communications, and we’re even scheduled to be here for another few hours. Honestly, the execution of this plan is perfect.”

“Thank you?” The villain scratches at his neck. “You know I’m still going to kill you, right?” Sweat drips down his neck. “Dying’s overrated. But what does that actually accomplish?” He moves forward slowly, never once taking his eyes off Tomura—he can feel their shadows well enough that they can’t ambush him.

“We prove All Might isn’t infallible,” the mist speaks.

“Okay, yeah, sure. But people already know that.” He points at his burn scar. “I mean, if you’ve read the news you’ll know people are calling him out already. And if you kill us, all you really do is galvanise the people against you.”

The purple creature shifts, digging Aizawa deeper in the ground. Izuku gulps.

“People are just going to see this as a cowardly attack. I mean, you told us you were here for All Might.” He nods at the mist villain. “He’s not here so you’ve already failed your objective. Killing us makes you seem petty, especially since we’ve been taking down your cronies left, right and centre.”

“Trash mobs are disposable,” Tomura says after a silence.

“Midoriya,” Aizawa groans, “Run.”

The Nomu grinds Aizawa’s face into the ground. Izuku swallows nervously, knowing that at least one life will rely on his actions.

“Oh, so you don’t care about your allies as well? Got it. Do you think anyone’s going to trust you after this when they find out?”

Tomura laughs, raspy and grating. “You’re right. You’ve got a high intellect stat. But you really should have invested points in charisma. Failing speech checks sucks, doesn’t it? We’ll just have to kill you and your friends before leaving.”

Izuku blinks and realises he might just be fucked. “I really wouldn’t recommend that.”

“Why—”

Like lightning, One For All fills his body. Every nerve sparks to life, every system in his body moving in unison. He dashes forward, a blur to everyone. He’s past Tomura and the mist villain before they can react.

The purple monster watches him the entire time, never once rising from its position. Izuku smirks, and fills his leg with One For All, and kicks the creature with everything he has.

The shockwave from the blow is massive. The ground tears apart, throwing up heaps of dirt and dust, and from the way Asui makes a sound of pain some of it might have struck her. He hears glass shatter and the echo of the blow reverberate. He lets the power he inherited fade away.

It takes him a moment to realise something critical: his leg doesn’t hurt.
He glances at it and finds no injuries. And then he glances at the purple monster watching him indifferently.

“Kill him,” Tomura says calmly.

Izuku’s eyes widen. He tries leaping back. A massive hand grips his leg, crushing everything there casually. He sees the Nomu raise its hand and brings it down.

Time slows and Izuku watches the fist descend.

Okay, I have at best one chance to get out of this. Let’s see. Can’t fight it head-on. Wait, I can sink through my shadow with this thing. Yeah, that’s a better option. Wait… I don’t have One For All active. My reaction time isn’t that fast.

Oh, I’m dead, aren’t I?

Time resumes. The fist strikes true. Izuku dies.

Yours is the strength of the king, Izuku Midoriya. The king must always be the strongest, the fastest, and the most dangerous. The king must equal every challenger. By your sacrifice do we live and by our grace shall you be without equal.

Take from your kingdom the bounty and tribute. Plunder the worlds of dead gods and the realms of undeath. All that you have surveyed belongs to you. All strength shall flow to you. By our strength will you match your enemies.

Rise, young king. We will sing your name. All we ask is that you destroy your enemy.

The world falls silent. It is a silence of three parts.

The most obvious is the lack of wind rustling clothes or the rippling of water. It is harrowing and haunting, this silence after the shockwave of the final attack. There is no wet thud of bits and pieces of Izuku Midoriya splattering the ground. There is no clink as the discs of his vertebrae strike the ground, propelled by the Nomu’s punch. No, all of these things float suspended in the still air.

The second silence is harder still to understand. There is a boy named Mineta who stares in horror, his face transfixed by the rictus expression between terror and dread and grief. Yet he makes no sound, not a breath to disturb the world, and not a movement to shatter this silence. He is not the only one: there is a villain called Tomura, stuck a moment before scratching his scabbed neck, and his compatriot Kurogiri who’s mist body no longer hisses. There are heroes in training who see and are silent; a boy called Tokoyami whose grief runs silent but hot; a boy sometimes called Kaachan, but mostly Bakugou, who feels a new type of rage; a boy called Todoroki who doesn’t know why he falls still on his glacial highway, only knows that he must for the world demands it.

The final silence is hardest still to understand, and yet simpler than the rest. You can sit for hours and only begin to notice it in the water, cold and wet and too too still. It is found in the chilled spines of terrified students, the breaking heart of a teacher who has failed so hard, and the triumphant dread of a villain. This is the silence of anticipation, of a change that will alter everything.

But silence is not forever. The sun is bright and overpowering, but night falls all the same. Sound
returns. The final vestiges of sanity flee with the silence.

The world breaks.

The air around what remains of Izuku takes on a different quality, glassy and shimmering. It might be considered beautiful in another time and another place. For a long moment, everyone who can see this abnormal sight watches clear crystal rise like a pillar.

And then it shatters.

Something—for it can never be called a person, animal, or creature—appears where once there was crystal. It is large as the Nomu and might be considered a biped. There are two legs that are at once a raptor’s talons and a drowning god’s tentacles. It possesses two arms that have more eyes than a spider colony should have, eyes the have seen past infinity and found it lacking. It can even be considered to have a torso with mouths that eat time and space and light.

This thing is what the third silence waited for.

It has no head but for pulsating horns that drip with true dark older than eternity and horns between which a universe is born and dies and lives again. Something that reminds one of a mouth rises to eat the universe—never mind that the mouth is only teeth from every direction. The mouth opens once more, and the world falls silent, waiting expectantly.

The creature that should not be roars and the world screams in pain.

Kurogiri is many things. Calm. Collected. Patient. He is none of those things right now. He has felt the terror of the monsters watching him from the endless mists and knows that should he truly glimpse them his mind will break. This is not that, but something infinitely more terrifying than those monsters. He forms a warp gate beneath Tomura through sheer instinct alone. And it might be crazy to risk it, but he slips through one as well. They land on the domed roof of one of the environments just as the nightmare roars.

Shouto Todoroki hears the howl of misery and triggers memories of a lonely child begging and pleading to be saved. The sound rips straight through his soul. He knows this cry and knows the futility of it. There is no protector to come. All of them will leave—mother, mother, why would you betray me, why why why?—or they will become the enemy—fear the flame, Shouto, fear it and run—for the world is cruel and uncaring to the weak. Fire comes to life unbidden as his tears fall. They burn and burn and burn all while Shouto cries, remembering the day his mother betrayed him, the day she went mad and all he saw was an unending fire in her grey eyes, monsters dancing in the madness. He may not see what makes the roar, but he can feel it in his blood and bone.

Fumikage Tokoyami stares at the thing that should not exist, not here in the real where heat and energy rule. Dark Shadow grows even larger than it should in the light, its form wrapping around his body, an armour against the influence of the thing that corrodes the barriers between real and darkness. It shields his mind from the madness of this thing that wishes to break his mind. A King rises, Dark Shadow says in his mind. Will you greet your peer? Unbidden, his legs walk towards the battle, uncaring of the two students who collapse to the ground, unshielded from the nightmare made manifest.

Katsuki Bakugou sees a shambling abomination in his one good eye, a creature with too many eyes and teeth dripping liquid darkness, arms that twist and expand and exist in too many places at once; and in the other, the one swollen and bleeding, he sees a boy greater than he is, a boy too kind and forgiving, the boy beneath the monster. And Katsuki understands one fact: were Izuku anything less than sunlight given form, then he would be dead.
Eijiro Kirishima wonders exactly how fucked they are. He isn’t sure if fucked even begins to describe the situation. Because that unmanly thing shouldn’t exist. Every cell in his body pleads with him to run, to flee this thing he has no words for. But he can’t. His friend is there, somewhere. Even though he should be dead—and the memory of Izuku’s torso pulverised will haunt him forever—he is not, and that means there is an opportunity. Somewhere. Maybe. First, he has to make sure he isn’t caught up in the fight between the Nomu and whatever has become of Izuku. 

How the fuck is he still sane if this is his quirk? He wonders and leaps to avoid the massive tear in reality heading his way.

Minoru Mineta feels his mind break under the strain of this impossible creature. It shouldn’t exist. Izuku Midoriya is dead, he saw it with his own eyes. But now, in his place, a dark god walks in the mortal world and every step it takes distorts reality. There are monsters hiding in the distortions, nightmares older than time and they see him, see everything that he is and could never be, and they find him wanting. The shambling abomination battles the Nomu, but every blow it makes is simply absorbed. Every slice it makes is simply regenerated instantly.

The god roars once more, the sky tearing apart, and raises a hand. Green lightning crystallises in its grip. It passes judgement and the world is engulfed in a blast of light.

****

Izuku wakes up on his bed. He knows this place. He’s woken up here more than once. Each time after dying.

“I need to get back.”

He shifts and has to hold back a scream of pain. His right leg, the same one the Nomu broke, is a bloody mess. And it hurts worse than anything he’s felt before. Tears sting his eyes but he grits his teeth through the pain.

“This isn’t good,” he says, reaching over for the first aid kit he always keeps in this place. “My leg’s wrecked and I have no idea what’s going on.”

There is an aesthetic in the kit, and he jabs it straight into his thigh, uncaring of the dosage. The pain lessens slightly but considering he can see bone then he'll take any relief. Removing the bandages, Izuku takes a deep breath and braces for the pain.

It doesn’t help. Wrapping the bandages around his bloody leg is like scraping a raw wound with a hot poker. When he’s certain he won’t bleed out immediately, Izuku lies back.

Okay, let’s think. I just died out there. That’s bad enough as it is. But everything that’s ever killed me was destroyed by the time I got back and holy shit I’m going to be responsible for murder. Fuck, fuck, fuck my life.

He grits his teeth and rolls off the bloody bed. His leg is a siren call of pain, and the world white, but he fights through it. He drags himself to the door through sheer will alone. It is slow, painful work to lift himself to the doorknob.

Izuku braces himself. Opens the door. Steps out.

The world is quiet when he returns. It takes him a moment to adjust to the brightness. The Plaza shows signs of combat—the crater he lies in, charred and scorched as though through a lightning bolt; splatters of blood every here and there; a bloody Aizawa-sensei barely holding on to consciousness beside an incoherent Mineta, and Asui who doesn’t move.
“Midoriya,” Aizawa-sensei whispers, staring at him in something like shock, something like horror.

His skin crawls beneath that gaze. “Aiz—“

A loud crash interrupts him. He turns his head to the entrance where the sound came from.

“Never fear!” a loud voice booms. “I am here.”

Izuku doesn’t bother to wipe the tears of relief. So long as All Might is here, nothing can go wrong. He gives up fighting to stay awake.

“Midoriya,” he hears someone calls as the darkness closes in on him.

*****

“H-hey there, if you’re hearing this, um, then I’m not around… Call back later?”

Inko Midoriya listens to the voicemail for the third time, dread coiling in her gut. She knows Izuku, knows he would have answered with at least a message if given the chance. The last time he hadn’t responded to her had been that horrible week when she thought he son would be lost to her.

She paces. After a full minute of that, she calls the school. No one answers. She calls again to the same response. Her hands shake. Why wouldn’t UA at least have a secretary answer her calls? There is nothing on the news to say, nothing on their website as well.

She shakes her head. Inko isn’t some hapless housewife who waits on someone else. She has both a car and a destination, and no matter how much she dislikes UA, she won’t let that pettiness get between her and investigating. Not when it comes to her son’s safety.

Someone waits outside her door, fist raised as though to knock. The boy has purple hair and looks as though he needs to inject caffeine directly in his veins to function. She knows from prior experience that it’s not a very good idea.

“Mrs Midoriya,” the boy greets, shifting warily.

Her brow quirks. “Shinsou, I believe.” He startles. “Izuku talks about you all the time.”

“I see.” Shinsou swallows, nervous. “Is he… Is he here? I wanted to talk to him.”

Her lips thin in distaste. “You don’t know where he is?”

“We haven’t—I’m not… We had a fight. I was being selfish. I just wanted to apologise.” She stares hard at the boy who fidgets. “His class had a field trip. I thought they left school early.”

She hums in thought. “Unfortunately, they didn’t. Shinsou, I think it might be best you go home. Don’t worry, I’ll tell Izuku you were here.”

“Do you think—”

“He’ll call you back? Maybe. But right now, I need to go to UA. And they had best have answers.”

Chapter End Notes
And there you go, USJ in all its bloody glory.

That's all from me for now. Thank you for reading this. If you enjoyed the story leave a kudos and if you have any questions just leave a comment below. But know that all of that is unnecessary, and as always your readership is quite enough for me. Cheers.
a lie is a lie is a lie

Chapter Summary

I have a discord server I'm running like a total noob. https://discord.gg/4YvCTYR

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

‘The Imperial House of Japan has existed far longer than any other monarchy and is currently the only legitimate monarchy to hold any power. Following a long period of obsolescence after the events of the Second World War, the Imperial Family showed a resurgence of power during the Second Dark Age. The then Crown Prince, 128th Emperor Yamamoto manifested a fire-related quirk that cemented the power of the Imperial Family as a major power. All Emperors have, since then, shown exceptionally powerful quirks.’

—Excerpt from ‘Examining the Japanese Imperial Family: An American’s Perspective’ by David Hayter.

Shouta Aizawa stares at the boy on the hospital bed, unconscious and bandaged heavily. Perhaps not so heavily as he is, but he remembers seeing Izuku’s leg crushed.

He also remembers watching the boy die.

The memory of what came after, the monster hiding just beneath the surface, is vivid and he very much doubts it will ever leave him. Regardless, he can put it out of mind and forget about it—he has seen much and learnt better than most how to compartmentalise his thoughts. Later, when he knows his students are safe, and in the silence of his home, he can unpack what he has witnessed. Right now, though, he wonders just how badly he has failed Izuku Midoriya.

He thinks of the pale scar on the boy’s left forearm, a constant reminder of a suicide attempt. And now he has to question whether it was an attempt or if it was successful. Were it the latter, then it is amazing the boy was anywhere near as sane as he is, especially if his delusions were brought on by his quirk’s nature. That didn’t even account for his mother, who Shouta worries is more reprehensible than he thought possible—not only abusive, but perhaps even aware of, or party to, his suicide attempt.

Midnight enters, looking frazzled and not at all cheerful. “Shouta,” she greets then sees the principal on his shoulder. “Nezu.”

“Is it done?”

“Not all of them were happy to sign an NDA,” she says. “Not that I blame them. I’m not a fan of them myself.”

“It just covers key information on another student’s quirk. Ensuring Midoriya’s privacy and security is of critical concern.”

“That’s what I told them. They still think it’s bullshit. Those who saw want to know. Kirishima and
Bakugou put up the biggest fuss. Tokoyami just signed it without question. Everyone else wants answers.” Nemuri yawns, stretching and showing off her curves. “So, do I.”

Shouta sighs. “That still won’t work on me.”

She sticks out her tongue. “You’re still a boring little boy.” That brief instance of pleasure vanishes. “I’ve flagged some students for psych evaluations. Hagakure and Kouda don’t seem to be dealing well with what they saw. And Mineta…”

Shouta closes his eyes and accepts his failings. “How bad?”

She smiles at him, gently as though he might break. This is the same smile she gave when he failed his first licensing exam, the same curve of her lips as when he failed a hostage situation and civilians died year back. He braces for he knows nothing good can come from something so gentle.

“He’s completely catatonic, Shouta.”

“Fuck. Just fuck.” He rubs his forehead. “I’ll deal-I’ll talk to the parents… shit, just fuck.”

“Aizawa,” the principal says, his voice an anchor that Shouta grasps. “I will deal with the parents. Nemuri, thank you for the report and your hard work. I’ll keep you informed of any major changes. For now, make sure the authorities don’t use this as an opportunity to snoop into our business.”

She forces a smile. “You know it,” she says before leaving.

The Principal jumps off his shoulder once she is out of hearing range. He observes Shouta, assessing him. His gaze lingers on the broken arm and the head injury.

“You’re certain you watched the boy die?” Principal Nezu asks, his voice cheerful as always.

Shouta doesn’t believe he feels that way.

“You doubt me?”

“Aizawa, you’re half-dead on your feet and probably need some therapy for an acute stress disorder.” The principal sighs, paws reaching to his pocket where Aizawa knows he keeps a pack of smokes. “It isn’t lack of trust so much as needing confirmation.”

“He died. And became… something I don’t have words for.”

The Principal twirls a cigar. “His mother will very likely be here within the hour. I have a task for you.”

“What is it?” he asks, numb and still thinking of the students he failed.

“Ensure that she allows all medical attention to be done in-house. And make certain she doesn’t permit a third party to do the quirk assessment.”

His eyes narrow. “What are you planning?”

“Many things, unfortunately.” The principal watches him, eyes dark with knowledge. “Do you think you can decipher them?”

“I’m not stupid enough to think I can. And I’m too tired to bother.”

“There’s a reason I like you, Aizawa. Intelligence without arrogance. Compassion with rationality.” Nezu places the cigar in his mouth. “Impress upon Midorya senior the importance of
keeping Izuku’s quirk secret. What would villains think if they knew of this?”

“Do you really think he’s safe in a home like that. If she knew, even had the slightest inkling of his quirk, why wouldn’t she take him for quirk counselling?”

“Put aside your feelings. I need you to complete the task I’ve set out for you.”

“She’ll threaten to sue, regardless.”

“Why yes, she will. And we’ll point out she likely had knowledge of an incredibly dangerous quirk without informing us, in clear violation of our terms of agreement. And because it’s a quirk matter, it will completely bypass the civil courts and go to the government. It might go as high as the Ministry of Defence. And even I’m not powerful enough to protect the Midoriyas from that.”

He takes a step back. “You think they’ll…”

“Experiment on him in an underground base for the next few decades? Yes. You humans are naturally predisposed to cruelty. The nature of power, I suppose.” Principal Nezu removes the cigar and balances it on a claw. “Cruelty weighted against power. Perfectly balanced, as all things should be.”

“Not every human is like that.”

“No.” He shifts his claw slightly and the cigar falls to the ground. “Just enough to tip the scales.”

Nezu raises one paw “Villains who will see his power as an opportunity or a threat.” He raises the other. “The government who will see the same. And two wildcards. Take a guess at them.”

Aizawa wants to sigh. At thirty the principal still sees him as a student.

“The media,” he says immediately.

“Good. They can potentially ruin Izuku’s life if they don’t follow quirk censorship laws. Or even if they decide not to respect his privacy rights. And the last?”

“His mother’s lawsuit?”

“That might bring attention, but it is something we expect. No, there is a power higher who act as they please without accountability. Tell me, Aizawa, can you name our current Emperor?”

“The imperial family? Why would—”

“You forgot to answer my question.”

Aizawa allows a frown. “No. I can’t.”

“I occasionally reread that… manifesto on combat you wrote. Know your enemy was the first thing you spoke of. Perhaps the most important thing you wrote. But how can you gather knowledge when you don’t even know who your enemy?”

"Why would they be our enemy?" he asks, genuinely curious, secretly dreading the answer. "They've never interfered in UA before."

“Oh, they have. I’ve dealt with it as I’ve dealt with any threat. Anyone so secretive is a potential enemy. Any group powerful enough to sink a nation should be feared. And I refuse to let one of my students be a victim of their games.” The principal’s watch beeps. “That would be the boy’s
mother. Go, make sure she doesn’t get any ideas. No one wants the media prying into the boy’s home life.”

“What secrets are you hiding?”

The principal laughs. “I’ve seen human cruelty first hand, Aizawa. The greatest secret is knowing what you people truly are. Cold. Callous. Cruel. It is the only reason I’ve managed to keep UA as independent as it is. Now go. Oh, emphasise your injuries whilst you’re at it. A reminder, perhaps, of what you did to protect the son of a woman you loathe.”

That laugh, high and bright and terrifying follows him as he leaves.

Neither dream nor nightmare haunts his slumber. Dreams are nothing more than lies he tells whilst asleep, and he knows the nature of his lies. And nightmares are just memories of the abyss he has at night.

This is neither.

Izuku walks down a hallway filled with colours and lights, every shade of the visual spectrum and some outside stream by him. He reaches and touches the lights. They part around his form, physical in a way light is not. He shrugs. This is nothing unusual.

Ahead of him, maybe a mile and maybe a world away, are seven pairs of eyes. They watch him as he approaches.

Instinct guides him to bow before them. He rises and says, “Hi.”

They do not speak in words. But something in the way they shift worries him. There is a void in the back. He knows in his blood and bone that there should be another pair of eyes watching.

Protect us, they say in a voice that is lightning and power.

One reaches out. It seems so achingly familiar. Izuku reaches out.

Harsh light greets him. Izuku blinks slowly, knowing that somehow, he is in the real. There is something just beyond his grasp that he knows he should be searching for. But the harder he tries, the further it flees.

The world is heavy in a way that can only be opioids. He looks to the side and sees his mother sleeping fitfully. That is nothing worrying. He assesses his body: upper body fine outside of a few light scratches; left leg bandaged mildly; right leg swaddled in bandages with a metal brace around it. Izuku takes a deep breath a lets his worries pass away. He can feel the leg, muted as the pain is, and knows that it will heal one day. And if it does not, he will do with it.

“Kaa-san,” he whispers.

Her eyes flutter open. There is a moment of disorientation before she focuses on him. “Izuku.” She crosses the distance between them and hugs him. “Don’t ever do that again.”

He pats her back, uncertain of what she means but willing to abide by her wants. “I won’t. What happened.”

She pulls back. “How much do you remember?”
“Everything until I got punch by a giant purple monster.” He manages a weak smile. “Not great for memory retention.”

She doesn’t return his smile. “Kaa-san… how bad was it?”

There are a set of files on the chair next to her. She hands them over. “Here’s the report.”

Izuku skims through it, reading multiple lines at once and still processing the information as well as a normal person would. He closes his eyes when he is done. “Fuck.”

“Language,” she snaps automatically.

“S-sorry.” He shakes his head. “They know that I…”

“Not everything. Some know you come back and… well, you read what happens when you come back.”

Izuku shudders. “People saw that.”

She nods. “Only a few.” Then she sighs. “Honey, there isn’t anything left to do but damage control. We have to get a quirk assessment.”

“If people know…”

“That’s why we’ll get it done through the school.” Her expression darkens. “Your… homeroom teacher and I had a talk. The school will do the assessment and deal with your recovery. All of it in-house. Nothing will get out. And I’ll burn the world down to keep you safe. You know that, right?”

He lets out a breath he didn’t know he was holding. “Okay, I think I can live with that.”

Alright. Recovery Girl’s ready to start with the scans whenever you woke up.”

“How long?”

“It happened yesterday.”

He frowns. “You’ve barely slept.”

“Stop worrying about me,” she says gently. “If we get these tests done then we can go home and try to figure everything out from there.”

Two hours later, after many numerous scans, he waits patiently with his mother for the results He’s not certain how he feels about practically being forced to undergo a quirk evaluation but he’s not about to argue with it, not after reading the report of the USJ incident from those involved—perhaps most telling is that Kacchan’s report had no cursing or shouting and that Dark Shadow spoke in Tokoyami’s stead whilst the boy signed.

When Recovery Girl returns she does so alone, a stack of files in her hands. She nods to his mother though the motion is stiff, and her features are hard.

“For the sake of your privacy, I’ll be the only one here. These are the only copies of these documents, and all information has been scrubbed from the computers.”

“I take it that won’t apply to his quirk assessment?” his mother asks.
Recovery Girl shakes her head. “No. That is directly related to our ability to teach your son. But these files are pertinent only to you but for a few safety precautions I’ll note in his school file.”

Izuku frowns. “So theoretically, if I got hit by a car then the hospital would have to call kaa-san to get my medical files?” A nod. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Many pro heroes have been killed by villains who gained access to their medical files and had information on their mutations. The laws are incredibly strict on the matter. Especially in a case as unique as this.”

“It’s fine, honey.” His mother rubs his arm in reassurance. “We can get a medical bracelet if you’re that worried. Now, what can you tell us?”

Recovery Girl sits, sighing in relief. She places the folder on the table.

"Your son exhibits no outward signs of a mutation," Recovery Girl begins, "but he shows a large swath of internal mutations. Notably, these mutations are tied to his spinal column and the rest of his bones. This first CT scan shows the… most notable change at the base of his spine.”

She hands a file to his mother. He looks over her shoulder and freezes. The image is in black and white and shows what he thinks is his pelvis and part of his spine. But right where his spine begins is a bright red orb—and the more he looks at it, the more he can hear the dirge of the dreaming dead—and jagged shards growing out of his vertebrae.

“What is…” his mother’s grip on his arm tightens. “What am I looking at?”

“Here’s a view of the rest of his spinal column.” Recovery Girl hands over another set of images.

He knows what a spine should look like. The picture he sees reminds him of that. Except for the long stem starting at his brain and going halfway down his spine. Or the odd structures growing around the stem almost like a protective cage, and the white nodes dotting his back. He knows what nerves look like and wonders why they're connected to the red orb at the base of the spine.

“This is an internal cross-sectional look of his right femur.”

The bone is hollow, is the first thing Izuku notices. Then he notices the crystal lattice growing throughout it. He knows there should be marrow and veins. And maybe they are there but he can’t pick them up with his limited medical knowledge.

“I took a random sampling of five other bones and found all of them to be hollow—similar to a bird—with the same lattice structure growing around his spine,” Recovery Girl explains. “The only reason you don't weigh less than you should is that the crystals are dense enough to counteract the hollowing of your bones. From the sample I took, the crystal is extremely resistant to compression.

“ Ingenious, really, because compression is the greatest weakness of a bird’s bones. And since they’re internal, your regular bone surrounding the lattice protects against torsion.”

Izuku looks to his mother in horror. Sees the same expression mirrored in her. Clasps his hands together to stop shaking.

“And what does this mean for Izuku?”

“My greatest worry would be red blood cell production. I’ll prescribe a series of supplements to counteract any possible side-effects. In addition, I’m taking the initiative to reduce the dosage of your anti-psychotics. With such an atypical neural network, I’m hesitant to keep him on such a high
dosage. We’ll discover more information during the assessment proper and see how Izuku reacts to his quirk being nullified.”

“The same thing that nearly killed my son,” his mother snaps.

“We need to know why. Right now, your son is showing aberrant mutations. From his public records a year ago, he showed no signs of change. If we don’t test the limits of these mutations, then we’ll be unprepared if anything else happens.”

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“Alright, Midoriya, in your own words describe your quirk,” Aizawa-sensei says, voice strained. Izuku’s fists clench, knowing this is his fault—only at his insistence is his mother napping somewhere nearby. “Have you gotten any sleep, sensei?”

Aizawa is silent for a moment. Then, “No, but I’ve operated under worse circumstances.” Izuku struggles to understand how that’s possible. The man has more bandages than exposed skin and looks ready to fall over.

“I-if you’re sure…”

“I am. If it makes you feel any better, I promise I’m going to sleep for the next two days straight.” It does.

He takes a breath to steady himself. The pain in his leg is a dull throbbing thing, nowhere near as bad as the burn—Kaachan, what did I ever do to you?—wound. And though he leans heavily on the cane, he knows he could stand on his own power, unlike the last major injury.

“Shadowshield,” he begins, “is a quirk that expresses itself through two primary methods. The first is through emittance regarding shadows. I can generate physical shadows from my own shadows—and yes, I know I could do better with the terminology—which is affected by the surrounding light. If it’s too dark there isn’t enough contrast for me to generate shadows, and when it’s too bright my shadow is too small to do the same. The cape was a workaround.”

He forms a thick rope of shadows and tugs on it. “When directly tied to my shadow, the constructs are significantly stronger.” Izuku changes the shadow to a needle and fires it off. It disintegrates under the harsh lighting. “When not attached to my shadow it loses most of its cohesion.”

Izuku rolls his shoulders. “The second method is similar to a strengthening quirk.”

He allows a tiny portion of One For All to fill his body and hobbles—step-step-tap—over to the punching back. He takes another breath, centring himself. Don’t break, don’t break, don’t break. Then he punches the bag. It explodes, sand spilling everywhere, as the chain holding the bag snaps.

Izuku wrings his arm out, surprised that there are no bruises or broken bones.

“I only have conjecture as to why the strengthening portion manifests,” he lies easily. “Based on the reports of what happened after… after the Nomu attacked, I can only assume I’m drawing power from that.”

“On the matter of what… you became, has that ever happened before?” Aizawa asks.
Izuku shrugs. “I don’t know.”

“You died, Midoriya. There’s no way a person could sustain that much damage and still live.”

*I guess I’m not a person.* “Okay, and?”

“I’m going to be blunt. Have you died before, Midoriya?”

He closes his eyes. “You think I’m suicidal, don’t you?” He laughs, then. “I mean, can you really be suicidal if death doesn’t affect you? I know the flavours of death. I’ve felt my last neurons firing and felt my heart beat its last.”

It is bitterness that makes him lift his sleeve and reveal the long scar there. “I bled out to experiment on my quirk. I’ve broken my neck and learnt the taste of poison. Do you know carbon-monoxide is surprisingly peaceful? You just lose consciousness and then you’re gone.”

He looks to Aizawa and sees the unmitigated horror on the man’s face. “Pain brings clarity, sensei. I know that better than anyone. That expression you have is exactly why I never wanted an assessment the first time. Once a truth is known it can never be unlearnt.”

Aizawa walks towards him. Izuku resists the urge to flinch and merely closes his eyes, bracing for whatever is to come. A pair of heavily bandaged arms wrap around his shoulders and pull him close.

“I’m sorry, Midoriya,” Aizawa says gently, shocking Izuku. He’s never expected such softness from the man.

He doesn’t know what to do.

“For what?”

“I think I understand you a bit more.” Aizawa pulls back and looks him in the eye. “Just because you can come back doesn’t mean your life has no value.”

“It just means I have no excuse for not risking—”

“No,” Aizawa says sternly. “That’s not how it works. Just because you can come back doesn’t mean you can heal indefinitely. You’re going to have a limp. You already have scars. If you keep up the way you have you won’t be able to help anyone. Do you understand, Izuku? Your quirk only heals what kills you, not anything else.”

He knows that. His face always itches, and his leg is in a thick cast. He knows the consequences better than anyone else.

“I want to be a hero, sensei.”

“Being a hero doesn’t mean hurting yourself on purpose.”

“If I can save only one person then any pain is worth it,” he tells Aizawa and smiles. “There was a girl in a sunflower dress. I couldn’t save her. I don’t—I never want to feel that… helpless.”

“You can’t save everyone.”

“I know. It doesn’t change how I feel.”

Aizawa sighs. “Does your mother know you’ve died before.”
Izuku shrugs. “I’ve probably told her. Why?”

“It’s fine.” Izuku doesn’t believe that, not with how tight Aizawa’s grip is. “Let’s get through this assessment.”

“Okay.”

They test the nature of his shadow constructs, quantifying everything from lifting potential to how long they can naturally sustain themselves in the light. It leaves him exhausted, his brain aching from the strain. Recovery Girl administers painkillers as necessary to keep him going.

It is the final test that he dreads. They attach sensors and monitors all over his body.

“I’m going to erase your quirk, now,” Aizawa-sensei says, tense.

Izuku nods. “Okay.”

The man’s hair rises, his eyes a bright red. The moment his quirk disappears terrifies him. The shadows seem to vanish, and his sense of perspective vanishes alongside it. His back is a line of burning hot pain, and the base—where now he knows the dead dream in a crystal orb—of his spine makes him think someone has shoved a white-hot spear through it.

He grits his teeth through the pain, not caring that his skull feels ready to split, that his nose bleeds heavily or that every part of his body hurt.

The pain disappears. Izuku gasps, listing to the side. Aizawa catches him, and Izuku has to take long breaths to still the pain.

“Midoriya.”

“G-g-give me a mom-moment,” he says shakily. Izuku pulls away from Aizawa and wipes the blood running.

“Here.”

Izuku takes the proffered napkin gratefully and holds it to his nose. He checks the floor for bloodstain, terrified of what they might do if he isn’t paying attention. There are none, thankfully.

“I think that’s enough for today,” Aizawa says in a tone which brooks no argument, looking to Recovery Girl. “You go get some rest, Midoriya.”

“Yes, sensei.”

“And if you have any problems at home, please call.”

Izuku tilts his head curiously. He’s not certain why Aizawa thinks he has problems more important than not being able to die properly. It’s not like Izuku has told them anything about the warping portion of his quirk. And he has no intention of doing so if possible.

“Okay.”

*****

It is late in the afternoon when they finally get back. His mother helps him up the stairs, the hand on his shoulder a warm reassurance that nothing bad will happen, not when she is with him.
“What was dad like?” Izuku asks his mother from the second-floor landing.

“He was… quiet, almost like you get sometimes. Kind to me but he had no social skills to speak of. And dependable in his own way.” She shakes her head. “He’s the only reason we can afford UA. Or this house.”

Izuku frowns as she deposits him on her bed. “I thought your salary—”

“Covered the most prestigious private hero academy in Japan and a townhouse? You’re a bit naïve, honey. You either have the money or qualify for either a scholarship or government grant.”

“So, dad’s what? His insurance money? Pension? Whatever is covering all that.”

“Yes.”

“I see…” He frowns. “No, I don’t see. What exactly did he do?”

"He was in risk management. Do you want to see some pictures?” She stands before he can answer and walks to her closet. After a bit of rummaging, she pulls out a worn trunk, sturdy and solid with bronze latches.

She drops it beside his seat on her bed. Izuku opens it. Inside, are photo albums. Dozens of them, some the cheap plastic kind and other leather-bound. He grabs the most expensive looking one, one with a latch that he thinks might be actual gold.

He expects to see a multitude of photos per page. Instead, only a single photo of his mother in a white dress greets him. She looks to be in her mid-twenties at the very oldest and smiles broadly. He notes the pins in her hair and the very complicated braids.

“I haven’t looked through that one in a long time,” she says, ruffling his hair gently.

“You looked beautiful,” he whispers, and he can see where age lines will one day grow and grant her a more dignified appearance.

“Are you saying I’m not?”

He groans. “Kaa-san, you know that’s not what I’m saying.”

She ruffles his hair. “I know.”

He flips over to the next picture. It is his mother standing next to Kacchan’s. Her dress is a burnt orange and she smiles extravagantly, her hand intertwined with his mother’s.

“We went to university together. Well, more like I took a first-year elective and met her there. Izuku, the stories I could tell you of all the places we visited.” She laughs, her voice a windchime. “Actually, I think she met her husband at a casino.”

He nods, flipping the page over. And freezes. He sees a man he knows can only be his father. The man isn’t tall, much shorter than in Izuku’s hazy memories, dark of hair and freckled heavily just as Izuku is. There are lines on his face, not the sort you get from stress or happiness.

“Dad was older than you,” Izuku says, numbly.

“By about fifteen years,” she says and threads her fingers through his hair. “It’s a lot, I know, and maybe even a bit archaic to you. But he was always a gentleman even if he was a bit clueless. We didn’t even do it un—”
“I do not need to hear that,” he shouts, a cold chill running down his back.

She chuckles. “I thought you wanted to know about your parents.”

He flushes. “Not about that.” He shudders. “Wait… You said dad discovered his quirk on a date or something with you.”

“He did.”

“Then that means he didn’t discover it until he was in his thirties. That’s just…. How?”

“He was always a cautious man and pretty harmless. I was the intimidating one in the relationship.”

“I can imagine.” He traces a finger over his father’s features and the white uniform he wears in the picture. Izuku blinks. “But he’s wearing a military uniform. That makes no sense. And you told me he was afraid of getting hurt.”

“He never wanted to tell me the story.” She rubs his shoulders.

“He lied to you?”

“No,” she says sharply. “Never. That was one thing he never did. He never lied to me, not once. But there were things he never wanted to tell me, and I respected that decision.”

“Kaa-san, I’m asking because that’s not a military uniform. At least, not a standard one. Both the rank insignia and the colour are wrong. The army wears black and the navy changed to blue.”

Her grip on his shoulders tightens. “What do you think it is?”

He takes a deep breath. “Kaa-san, only the imperial family uses white anymore.” He looks to his mother, sees her ashen face. “You really didn’t know.”

“No.”

“You said he was involved in risk management. What company did he work for?”

She doesn’t answer. The doorbell rings, cutting through the silence. His mother glares at him before he can so much as lift his leg.

“I’ll get it.” She’s gone before he can reply. He strains his hearing but hears nothing. “Izuku, Shinsou’s here.”

Izuku blinks. Forces his leg off the bed. Stands unsteadily with the aid of his cane. He's getting sick and tired of the thing already and hopes he never has to touch it again after his leg is healed. He hobbles down the stairs.

Shinsou stands awkwardly in the entryway, looking for all the gold in the world that he’d rather have his teeth pulled out. He waves uncertainly.

“Hey.”

Izuku forces a smile. “A-are we still fighting?”

“Do you want to fight?”
“No?”

“No?”

“Then I guess we’re not fighting.”

His mother chuckles, reminding them both that she is present. “Well, if you two aren’t fighting, how would you like to join us for dinner?”

Shinsou’s eyes are wide. “I wouldn’t want to impose.”

“You aren’t. Just make sure you let your parents know if you plan on staying the night.”

That is how he winds up watching TV with Shinsou on the couch, dirty plates and cutlery strewed across the table. His mother is long gone, not that Izuku particularly blames her. The day must have been horribly long for her, what with not sleeping.

“Midoriya, what do you do for fun?” Shinsou asks, flicking through channels.

He looks up from his book, Hawkmoon’s memoir he inherited from his father. “I like reading. And training.”

“And let me guess, you’re reading something about heroics.”

“I like that.”

Shinsou sighs. “Midoriya, as far as I can tell, everything you do is related to heroics. You read about heroics. You train so you can be a hero. You go to a school for heroes. When was the last time you did something that wasn’t related to it?”

“But that’s what I like.” He frowns. “When we went to the mall.”

“Right… and when did you go to a mall before that?”

“Maybe a year or two ago. I usually just order my supplies online.” His lips thin. “I watched that Godzilla reboot… No, wait, I missed that. There was the Best Jeanist book signing… that I also missed. Huh?”

Shinsou reaches over and plucks the book away. “We’re picking the trashiest show and watching that. And it’s going to have nothing to do with heroics.”

“Okay,” he says, indifferent.

Shinsou picks some traditional martial arts movie. There are no heroes, no explosions, and from the image quality, it looks to be something from the last century. *I thought they had 8K back then?* He watches the movie, not really caring for it much.

“You don’t like it,” Shinsou says, disappointed.

“It’s not that,” he responds quickly. “I just don’t watch movies much.”

“You watch documentaries on heroes, don’t you?” Izuku flushes. “Fine.” Shinsou changes the channel and soon the screen is filled with images of the New Heroes in some war-torn country or other. A smile crosses his features, unbidden. “Who’s your favourite?” he asks Shinsou.

“Now you’re excited. Maybe… Graviton Lance. Yeah, I think I like him the most.”
“Huh? I never expected that.” No, he really didn’t. The simple looking man with a massive spear is the last person he expects Shinsou to admire.

“I’m not as easy to read as you are. He reminds me of me.”

“You’re both… men?”

Shinsou chuckles. “Yeah, we are. But not that. We’re both outcasts in a way. He was a defector from an enemy state. I have the quirk I have.” Shinsou looks away for a moment. “Except some idiot wouldn’t leave us alone.”

“Who?”

“Someone a bit too nice in both cases. Someone who doesn’t really care about their personal safety. Someone strong.” He looks to Izuku, smiling sadly. “You’re an idiot if you can’t figure out I’m talking about Hawkmoon. And you,” he adds.


“No. I think you care about people too much. She knew when to let people go.”

He considers Shinsou’s words for a long minute, a beat of silent contemplation to the backdrop of heroes from another era. He thinks of Kacchan and knows he would accept any overtures of friendship from him. He thinks of everyone he’s met and come to know. He thinks of how he would go to the end’s of the world to protect and would fight any threat if it meant keeping them safe. And he knows he would never let go.

“You’re right,” Izuku admits. “But I don’t think that’s wrong. I want to save people.”

“That’s why you’re at UA.”

“No, it’s not just that. I would have still tried to save people even if I didn’t get to UA.”

Shinsou makes a sound of consideration. “I don’t think you’d make a good vigilante. The law—”

“I know the law says. I could quote it verbatim. But, I think if I can save one person, only one, then I think it’s worth it.”

“You can’t save everyone. Not even All Might’s that strong.”

He laughs, almost bitter, mostly surprised. “That doesn’t mean I can’t try. You said I’m like Hawkmoon. Do you know what she’s famous for saying? The one quote that always gets misattributed. Any place can be paradise, Shinsou, so long as we try. If we all tried, just once in our lives and only once, to save someone else… can you imagine how beautiful everything would be.”

“That doesn’t change the laws. It doesn’t change society.”

“I want to be a hero, but I want to save people more.”

“And that’s why you’re a good person. But Midoriya, no matter how many people All Might saves it doesn’t change things enough. The UA exam isn’t fair, and I know people who placed lower than me got into the heroics course.”

“Is it—”

“It’s worse sometimes,” Shinsou pre-empts. “What do you think it’s like growing up with a
villain’s quirk?”

“No one—"

“They do, and you’re the first person who isn’t like that.” He shoves Izuku gently. “Thank you. But my quirk isn’t flashy like yours. People will always see you and respect what you can do. And they’ll always wonder if I’m a threat. I’m not bitter, but I know what people will think. I’m just lucky enough that I got into UA. I have a shot at a future. I’ve seen what happens to people who get rejected.”

“Do you think I don’t know what that’s like?” Izuku brushes aside the flare of white hair. “I basically lived my life quirkless. I know it’s not fair and that people can be cruel, but that doesn’t make them bad people. It doesn’t mean they’re not worthy of being saved. People aren’t monsters.”

Shinsou says something in response but Izuku doesn’t hear it. The shadows behind Shinsou are twisting, making shapes and he knows them intimately. He sees sunflowers and thinks of that little girl, so scared and traumatised. He remembers his failings that day, the guilt and the shame.

“Midoriya.” Shinsou shakes his shoulder. “What are you looking at?”

Shinsou twists to look behind. Izuku reaches out and grabs his chin. “Just look at me, Shinsou. Don’t look anywhere else.”

A massive sunflower made of twining shadows and secrets older than time looms over Shinsou. It doesn’t cast a shadow or darken the room, but Izuku worries over what might happen if his friend sees it.

“I’m h-here, right?” he asks.

Shinsou frowns and grabs Izuku’s hands. He doesn’t try to remove them. “You are. Are you okay?”

He huffs, glancing nervously at the long petal that reaches out for Shinsou. “I’m not broken,” he snaps, and the petal pulls away.

“I never said”—something rises from the ground, maybe a crocodile, and snaps up the giant flower in its maws—” you were.”

Izuku swallows. “Sorry. I just get… upset when I think someone says that.”

Shinsou smiles, tiny and small and brighter than anything else in the room.

“I’ll remember next time I want to see you flustered.”

“Y-you troll.” Yet he smiles. A long hour later, when the show is over, and he feels tiredness wash over him, Izuku asks, “You really think I’m like her?”

Shinsou groans, opening his eyes. “You both have braids.”

Izuku shoves him. “Be serious.”

“Yeah. You remind me of her.” Shinsou closes his eyes.

“Yui Ikari whom Hawkmoon eclipsed.” Izuku feels a smile cross his face as he thinks of his father’s book. “I think I’m fine with that.”
He wakes up, sunlight streaming in. He finds his face squished awkwardly between Shinsou’s arm and the sofa. A groan escapes his lips as he sits upright. A sharp pain in his neck reminds him why pillows were made. He pokes at his cast until his leg wakes up.

“Do you know you drool?” Shinsou mumbles.

Izuku looks to him, face hot. “You have no proof.”

“I already shared the pictures with Ochaco.”

With a sense of dread, he grabs his phone and opens the group chat. The very first unread message is a picture of him leaning against SHinsou’s shoulder, droll leaking out his mouth. And the two dozen responses are all, in some way or other, mocking him. Especially those from Ochaco.

“I hate you.” Shinsou lifts a single brow, a silent question there. “Fine, you know I don’t.”

A shower later, and Izuku feels slightly more like a normal human being. He tells Shinsou to grab whatever clean set of clothes he wants and is rather surprised when he comes back looking like he has a fashion sense and didn’t simply grab the first thing he saw. Izuku knows that plaid shirt is his, but he never once thought to roll up the sleeves or wear the dark shirt underneath.

“Thanks,” Shinsou says.

“Izuku, honey,” his mother calls from the stairs whilst they’re playing a simple game of cards, “don’t forget to take your medication.”

“Yes, kaa-san.” Izuku shows his cards, an ace of spades with a jack-queen-king. He knows Shinsou doesn’t have anything as powerful, and there aren’t enough cards left for it to matter. He shifts his bad leg and grimaces.

“I can grab it for you,” Shinsou says, tapping his brace, and not at all looking bitter that he lost. “No need for you to suffer.”

Izuku shakes his head. “It’s okay, I’ll grab it.” He doesn’t let any pain show as he moves to an upright position.

“What don’t you want me to know?”

He looks to Shinsou and sees him frowning. “N-nothing.”

“Midoriya, I know you. And I know when you’re trying to lie. Whatever it is, do you really think I’ll leave?”

He stares at Shinsou, really looks at him past the bags under his eyes and the tired lines marring his face. And all he finds is sincerity.

“The truth,” he says slowly, uncertain, “isn’t something I’m good at.”

“I know.”

Izuku sighs. “Do you remember how I was gone for a week?” He waits for the nod. “I don’t know what you heard about USJ, but it wasn’t…. well, my quirk is the reason. And it wasn’t pleasant.”

He lets shadows rise and grasps them in his hand. “It has psychological effects on me.” He smiles bitterly. “My therapist thinks I have dissociative identity disorder.”
“I don’t know what that is.”

“Lucky you.” And then, after a pause, “That was cruel. I’m sorry. It just means I sometimes can’t tell what’s real and what’s not. When Kacchan came back, I basically lost that entire week. I can’t remember most of it.”

“Sounds fun not having to remember Cementoss drone on for an hour.”

Izuku stares at him, incredulous. And then he laughs. He sees Shinsou’s tiny smile.

“Thank you.”

“You don’t like people making a fuss about you.” And though there is a note of disapproval, Shinsou adds, “You want to help me with the maths homework?”

“Okay,” he says because maths is simple and easy stuff, even if he must deal with the medication affecting him.

He walks Shinsou through problems on trigonometry and perhaps has a mild rant because Shinsou has no idea what a cosine or a tangent is. He’s drawing a unit circle and splitting it into quadrants before his brain can catch up with his mouth.

“…and that’s basically what an inverse cotangent is. Pretty stupid, I know, but it works out.”

Shinsou stares at him as if he’s grown another head. “If you tell me you think an inverse cotangent has any practical use at a hero academy then I’m done. Just pack and never talk to me again.”

Shinsou tilts his head, mouth opening but no sound coming out. He grabs one of the many dozen papers on the table and scans it quickly.

“Midoriya, I don’t even know what a Laurent series is or what it has to do with trig. What do these symbols even mean?”

He shows Izuku one. It makes him frown. “That’s an imaginary limit as epsilon goes to infinity. Pretty simple all thing considered. I mean, it’s not like I’m trying to explain gravity waves to you.”

Shinsou bites his lip. “I literally don’t know what to do with you. Wait a minute.”

Okay,” he says as Shinsou pulls out his phone.

After significantly longer than a minute, Shinsou puts his phone aside. “Laurent Theory is taught at universities. So are gravity waves.”

“And?”

“You’re an idiot. You’re genuinely an idiot.” Shinsou looks to the ceiling and mumbles something, a curse perhaps, or maybe a prayer. “Izuku, just take these to Ectoplasm when you see him next. Just do it and tell him you were trying to explain basic trig to me. I can’t even…”

Izuku frowns but gathers up the papers. They don’t look particularly interesting to him but Shinsou is always weird. “If it makes you feel better.”

They eat breakfast quietly. Izuku has a few laughs for Shinsou really is a child when it comes to eating, and the shirt he gave the boy is quickly stained.

“How do you even get through school with a clean uniform?”
“Napkins. Lots and lots of napkins.”

Izuku chuckles and tells Shinsou to grab a clean hoodie from his closet.

When the doorbell rings, Shinsou is up and walking to it before Izuku can even bother finding his cane. His friend opens the door.

“Hey Shinsou,” Uraraka’s bright voice filters through. “It’s so sweet you’re always with Izuku. You’re even wearing his clothes.”

Even from here, Izuku can see his friend flush. “Well—”

“You gonna let us in,” Kirishima says. “Hey, Midoriya, Shinsou’s blocking the door.”

Izuku blinks slowly. He still can’t see them, blocked as they are by Shinsou’s thin frame. Kirishima grabs Shinsou by the shoulders and moves him aside as if he’s a cardboard cut-out.

Kirishima’s grin is wide and toothy. “Hey man, you doing alright?”

“I guess?”

He watches incredulously as Kirishima picks a seat and gets comfortable as if he owns the place. Uraraka waves and pats his shoulder as she passes by.

“Your manners are atrocious,” Tokoyami says. Izuku looks to him and finds him still at the threshold of the home.

“You’re just a boring old crow,” Uraraka says, sticking her tongue out.

Izuku swallows. “You can come in, Tokoyami.”

He does so, nodding in gratitude. “Thank you.”

“Why are you guys here?” He considers his question for a moment. “Not that I don’t want you here it’s just that I didn’t even think you’d be coming and—”

“You’re rambling,” Shinsou says, shutting him up. “I called them over. I didn’t think it was fair to monopolise your maths brain. We’re all pretty bad at maths here.”

“Man, you just don’t want to let Midoriya know you were worried,” Kirishima says.

“Why you—”

“Your crush is pretty cute,” Uraraka says pleasantly.

Shinsou flushes. So does Izuku.

“I don’t have a crush.”

“And you’re not wearing Midoriya’s hoodie,” Tokoyami says sarcastically, rolling his eyes.

“I’m not gay!”

“It’s called a man-crush, no worries,” Kirishima adds. “Tell your masculinity to man the hell up.”

Izuku runs a hand through his hair. “Can we not, please?” There’s just something about the idea that makes him want to shudder.
Uraraka laughs. “We’ll behave. Right, Tokoyami?”

“Speak for yourself. Now, Midoriya, we were promised help with maths. Provide it.”

Izuku just shrugs. It takes him the better part of an hour to get them through the pile of homework that Ectoplasm assigns each week without fail. He learns a bit more about them in the process: Kirishima is useless at visualising objects; Uraraka is absolutely atrocious at algebra; and Tokoyami is just plain horrible at maths, almost disgustingly so.

“You weren’t kidding,” Kirishima says, looking to Shinsou. “Why have you been holding out on us?”

“I just found out today. Someone has a whole bunch of secrets.”

Izuku blinks. “I don’t even get why you guys think this is special.”

“He’s also an idiot,” Uraraka adds.

“Why does everyone keep calling me that?”

“I find myself inclined to agree with their assessment.”

Izuku watches Shinsou look at his phone, his expression closing off as he reads the message he has received. "I have to go," he says, standing. "My cat's still sick."

“Milquetoast again?” Uraraka asks, which makes Izuku frown because even he doesn’t know the names of Shinsou’s cats. He’s not even sure how many Shinsou has.

“Yeah.”

“Aw, sorry man,” Kirishima pipes up.

“It’s fine.”

“No, it isn’t.” Uraraka grabs Shinsou by the wrist. “I’ll come with you.”

Shinsou startles, neck scarlet. “What—”

“Bye guys,” Uraraka says cheerfully as she drags a weightless Shinsou with her. “See you at school.”

“I’m being kidnapped,” Shinsou says loudly, his body hovering above the ground.

Izuku watches all of this in bemusement. When the door is shut, he looks to Tokoyami who looks very close to having an aneurysm if he doesn’t laugh soon, and Kirishima who seems absolutely starstruck.

“Calling it now, she’s the manliest out of all of us.” Kirishima grins. “She really does whatever she wants.”

“Indeed…” Tokoyami holds in the laughter for three more seconds. And then he’s on the ground, clutching his side as he laughs silently.

It is one of the odder things Izuku has seen. Not least because he didn’t know Tokoyami was capable of anything other than solemnity—even his anger was dignified.
Izuku shrugs and stands, grabbing his cane. He hobbles over to the fridge and grabs an apple, biting into it. Too tart really but compared to the things he’s eaten before he’s not too worried. The chances of it mutating his spine are low.

He looks back to see Kirishima and Tokoyami watching him warily. “You alright, man?”

He taps the brace around his leg. “I mean, I’ll be fine in a few days.” And then he sighs. “I… I read your reports about what h-happened. I just don’t—why are you guys… You’re just acting like nothing happened.”

Kirishima’s smile is strained, sharper and colder. “Not everyone saw what happened. I mean, I did. I know feather-duster over here did, and whoever was with him. Bakugou saw. Mineta and Bakugou, too, yeah. But not everyone saw even if people felt some scary shit happening, man. We’re not even technically allowed to talk about it.”

His brows furrow. “Why not?”

“NDAs,” Tokoyami answers, “that we were all required to sign. Privacy and censorship laws aren’t taken lightly.”

“So, you aren’t allowed to talk to me, about my own quirk, because of a signature on paper?” He asks this slowly, unsure if the question sounds just as ridiculous outside his head. It does.

“Pretty much, yeah.” A bit of warmth bleeds back into Kirishima’s grin. “And I mean, I’m not gonna ditch you just cause you get real scary once in a while. Women do that once a month. I mean, I’ve seen you grin when you’re upset and that shit’s scary as hell.”

“Indeed, it is. More so when you’re bleeding.” Tokoyami nods at Kirishima. “Or when your uniform is torn to shreds.”

“Yeah, you’re really bad with keeping your clothes intact.” Kirishima jabs a thumb to his chest. “That’s why my costume basically leaves me shirtless.”

That startles a laugh out of Izuku, so much so that he drops his apple. But there is a genuine warmth to the back-and-forth, one that makes him understand why they actually came today.

“Thank you,” he says. “You guys are just…”

“YouR friends, man. We ain’t going to ditch you ever.”

Tokoyami huffs. “Speak for yourself, cretin. I only have interest in easy maths homework.” His features soften. “Regardless, Midoriya, no matter how odd your quirk is, I will not permit you to flail alone in the dark.”

*****

Kurogiri cleans his bar obsessively until not a single speck of dust remains. And then he cleans the bar again. He does this ceaselessly for hours on end, hoping against hope that he can forget the memory of the abomination that the boy had become. In the corners of tables, he sees broken edges of space and in his bottles, he sees the curves of time. A cold chill sweeps through him when he holds a knife, the image morphing to a pulsating horn that pulses with liquid darkness.

He takes down the final mirror in the upper floor of the bar. So long as they are gone, they can’t reflect the distorted image of who—what—he was in the past. He can’t see the too skinny man who left his child alone, the pathetic monster that bled out in an alleyway from a knife-wound if
not for Sensei’s timely arrival. Above all, not seeing his reflection means he can’t see futures that
never are but sometimes could be: he can’t see his hands wrap around the neck of his kind wife,
and later bash his child’s tiny skull in a future that never will be; he can’t see his white uniform
stained red in blood on the Emperor’s order, his misty body barely able to handle infernal flames as
he and Sensei, along with others, purged entire towns; and so long as the mirrors are gone, he can
never be plagued with memories of millions drowning in Taiwan, their calls haunted by the
realisation that there won’t be salvation.

Installing extra lights is a precaution he’s never taken before. He takes it a step further by using
chemical lights as opposed to regular fluorescent ones as those won't go out. Each light banishes
the shadows just a tiny bit more.

When Sensei summons him, Kurogiri politely asks that the room be lit up. He creates a warp gate
and walks through. Reality bends under the weight of paradox once more as there are three
Kurogiri’s once more: the one in the bar, moment before walking through the warp gate, and
whom flees a monster with teeth that fill the world; a second who grasps one of the many bolts of
green lightning and throws it, tearing a hole in spacetime; and the third who enters Sensei’s room.

The universe destroys the paradox, realigning in a disorientating snap. A bright light fills the room.
He notices an orb emitting pleasant orange tones above him, and watches it circle round his head.

“How many of our allies did you manage to recover from incarceration?” Sensei asks, not
bothering with small talk.

Kurogiri swallows. “Not as many as you would like.”

“I trust you did what you could considering the situation.”

He stares at the orb, tracing its lazy orbit instead of meeting Sensei’s gaze.

“How many of our allies did you manage to recover from incarceration?” Sensei asks, not
bothering with small talk.

Kurogiri swallows. “Not as many as you would like.”

“I trust you did what you could considering the situation.”

He stares at the orb, tracing its lazy orbit instead of meeting Sensei’s gaze.

“Do you find this quirk interesting?” Sensei asks.

Kurogiri looks to Japan’s resident cryptid and is shocked to see his face uncovered for the first
time in nearly a decade. His eyes are closed as they always are, but he knows the man can see him
perfectly.

Sensei still waits for his answer. “I suppose it has practical applications.” He looks down at his
shadow, tiny due to the light. “How is Tomura?”

Sensei tilts his head and considers his question. After a beat, he says, “Traumatised. There is much
he must learn, strength of will and mind both. We’ll see how much of his memories will have to
be… excised.” There is a hint of something sinister in the air. “I believe you have a clearer report
for me?”

The tension and fear return. For a long moment, he is frozen, unable to say anything past the
memory of mouths that eat light and gravity and everything warm in the world.

“Kurogiri,” Sensei says, pulling him from his waking nightmares. “If you find the memories too
difficult, I am willing to remove them.” He says this kindly, patient as a grandfather who has seen
every child under the sun.

He braces himself. “I would rather keep them,” he says as politely as possible. He doesn’t like the
idea of anyone rummaging through his memories. And no matter how horrible they are, no matter
how much they haunt him, he refuses to give up the events that make him who he is—he refuses to
give up his wife and child, his crimes and glories, and all the tiny events that build up to make
Kurogiri the villain and the weak man of his youth.

“As you say, Kurogiri. I trust you to make your own decisions.” Sensei leans forward in his chair, the medical wires and tubes following the motion. “I am not a hero who micromanages ignorant children fresh out of indoctrination school.”

“It was…” he begins but trails off. “You know my quirk has been behaving oddly. What happened was that but worse. It shouldn’t exist, Sensei. The boy died and something from the deepest pits of damnation rose up.”

“Something straight out of the abyss,” Sensei says slowly, prodding.

Kurogiri shivers despite that his body is made of gas. “That describes it aptly. When I travel through warp gates it’s like I’m travelling through a place filled with darkness and monsters.”

Sensei stays silent for a few minutes. Kurogiri stands under scrutiny, resisting the urge to wilt beneath this archvillain’s consideration. Not out of fear as he knows Sensei has a vested interest in his quirk at the very least, but rather because there are plots within plots hidden behind skeletons in sealed vaults that Sensei navigates always. And he’s not certain he wants to be involved in this scheme.

“We travelled through the darkest abyss aboard a train to infinity,” Sensei says at last.

“Hm?”

“Nothing. Forgive an old man his ramblings.”

“You never ramble,” he ventures, calling the villain out on the poor lie.

Sensei chuckles, delighted. “No, I never do. But your words made me nostalgic. A long time ago, indeed.”

“This happened? Sensei, this was almost as bad as Shikoku.”

“Perhaps not this but the nature of events,” Sensei explains. “Don’t worry, matters will resolve themselves as always. All things do.”

“I don’t know if I want to learn more about your plans.”

Sensei nods. “Other matters then. Has our little informant come through with additional information?”

Kurogiri relaxes. “Yes. We have the layout of the stadium. His unravelling quirk makes him useful.”

“Yes. Expulsion from a prestigious school tends to breed resentment. I will leave Tomura to decide how best to utilise his quirk. Just remind Tomura to show some restraint. Civilian deaths galvanise the populous whereas destruction of protected infrastructure breeds fear.”

“I’ll be certain to remind him.”

“Take care, Kurogiri.” Sensei hums. “Oh, don’t forget to scout Stain.”

“I’ve never heard of Stain.”

“He seems to be an interesting fellow. Localise him. Tomura has lessons to learn. Stain will teach
him strength of will.”

“And strength of mind?” Kurogiri asks. “You said he lacks that as well.”

“Oh, I’ll let young Midoriya teach him that.” His smile is sinister. “I take it you have no issue with that?”

Kurogiri shivers. “No.”

Chapter End Notes

That's all from me for now. Thank you for reading this. If you enjoyed the story leave a kudos and if you have any questions just leave a comment below. But know that all of that is unnecessary, and as always your readership is quite enough for me. Cheers
'Quirks are the great equalizer to military power. One person can hold the might of an entire battalion. The imperial family knew this all too well. They and their retainers have been the primary reason Japan was never assaulted during the Dark Age, the New Age or the Golden Age. Their strength has been whispered, but only recently did we witness the true extent of their strength. Taiwan may have had its issues, but in a single moment of anger, twenty-million people died. Even Titan killed fewer people.'

—Excerpt from ‘Examining the Japanese Imperial Family: An American’s Perspective’ by David Hayter.

He does not know what he expects when the message comes. Kirishima and Tokoyami are both gone, and the lack of the warmth and constancy of their friendship—and perhaps the greater knowledge that petty fights can be overcome so long as there is sincerity—trails behind their backs as he bids them goodbye, terrified that perhaps everything they say is a lie, but also knowing his insecurities cannot measure against the final smile Kirishima sends his way.

There is no name attached to the message as he has never felt the right to do so in recent years. Ten digits stare back at him, unique in a way that no other set of digits arranged in that exact order can ever be. Not for the numbers are unique—human counting limits are trivial to someone for whom imaginary numbers are just as real as the rest—as numbers, or that even the order with which the numbers fell but simply because they hold personal significance for Izuku.

The next morning, he wakes up two hours before dawn and heads out, leaving a note plastered to the fridge. He knows his mother will be frantic if he gives no indication that he willingly left and wasn’t perhaps kidnapped by the monsters in his mind made real. There is a forest that grows through a large portion of Mustafu, close enough to his home that even with the brace it isn't an insurmountable distance. He hikes the distance, taking joy in the pain of exercise even if his leg feels like a hot thread of pain, and his walk is more an energetic hobble than a brisk hike.

When he reaches the summit, he takes a moment to look around and finds no one else there. There is a tree, thick, knotted and gnarled with age that looms over him. Izuku hobbles to it. There, under the lowest branch, are a set of indentations. He caresses the letters there: ‘IM’ and ‘KB’.

"I haven’t been here in years,” he says to the wind. “We wrote our names here. Back then, I thought we’d be friends until the very end. Izuku and Katsuki. Kacchan and Deku. Just the two of us. You were gonna be number one, and I’d always be right there with you. What do you want from me?"

He turns and nods towards Kacchan. His once friend looks tired and haunted. He very likely hasn’t slept at all over the last few days, and from the way his fingers twitch he seems to be running purely on caffeine to function.

"What do I fucking want?” he snarls. “I fucking want the truth. You don’t get to just act like you’re quirkless and then turn into… into whatever that shit was.”

"The truth? The truth is that you pushed me, and I haven’t forgiven you.”
“I know what I fucking did. But you don’t just get—”

“Why?” he interrupts. “Why do I have to be perfectly honest and open with you. You want the truth. I don’t know what that was.”

Kacchan watches him, assessing Izuku in a way that only he can. Then, “Bullshit. Fuck, if you knew about that you’d experiment every step of the way.” Izuku freezes. “Right there, you bitch. Don’t fucking try to lie to me.”

Izuku clenches his fists and takes a step forward. “Why does it matter so much to you?”

And then Kaachan is too close, his hands gripping Izuku’s shoulders tightly. He stays still, watching Kaachan tremble even as he looks ready to cry. There is no malice in his red eyes, only self-loathing.

“Because I need to know,” Kacchan whispers weakly, fearful in a way Izuku has never heard. “I need to know if I…”

Everything he knows of Kacchan rushes to the forefront and he knows, just knows he could say break the boy before him. For a second he considers malice and cruelty, considers shattering every single hope and ambition Kacchan has in much the same vein he has tried to do to Izuku. He considers all of this for a single moment.

And then discards every cruel machination. This is my story, he thinks, and I want it to be kind and just.

He leans forward and wraps his arms around Kacchan’s back. He tenses, almost as if he expects Izuku to crush him.

“You did,” Izuku says softly as a silk dress on a summer day. Kacchan’s shaking intensifies but Izuku only holds him tighter.

“I didn’t want to acknowledge the truth. I thought I could hide from it and it nearly broke me. Kacchan... I don’t—I can’t forgive you, not right now. But I don’t hate you and I never will.”

His shoulder is wet. “You should,” Kaachan says hoarsely, clutching his shoulders tightly. “You fucking should.”

“Maybe,” Izuku acknowledges. “No one else knows. Just me. And I won’t ever tell anyone.”

“They’d send me to prison.” Izuku smells something sweet. Nitro-glycerine, or sweat in this case. “They’d have every reason to. You’re still fucking trying to save me.”

When Kaachan pulls away, Izuku lets him. His face is a rictus of emotions, none of them happy. Kaachan’s hands tremble and he stares at them.

“I’ve killed before.” His laugh, when it comes, is equal parts hysteria and bitterness. “There are villains who fucking haven’t and I—oh fuck me sideways—I have. Fuck, I can’t… You turn into that whenever you die. Why the fuck am I still here?”

Izuku shrugs. “Because the pole ultimately killed me, not you. You just… well, you helped a bit.”

“Fuck!” Kacchan turns to the side and lets off an explosion. It leaves a deep gouge in the ground and more than one tree topples over. His chest heaves.
“Are you done?” Izuku limps past Kaachan to the edge. He sits and lets his legs dangle freely, patting the spot next to him. It takes a few minutes for Kaachan to join him.

“This is so fucked.”

Izuku laughs, rubbing his brace. “You have no idea.”

“What happens now?”

“I guess that’s up to you.” He looks to Kacchan and forces a smile. “You can choose who you want to be.”

“My counsellor says shit like that.” Kacchan’s hand rises. Tentatively, as though the world watches, he brushes a finger against Izuku’s burn scar. “I did this to you.”

“Yes.” It is a battle not to tense or flinch away as Kacchan traces the outline of the scar. “Would you do it again if you had a second chance?”

“No.”

“Then you’re not the same person who did this. I don’t care what anyone else thinks.” He pulls away to face the horizon. The first rays of dawn creep across the dimly lit world.

“We can all change. We’re not robots running on the same lines of code. Hinata Ononoki only cared about the law in her youth, but she disregarded that in favour of human compassion. Hawkmoon gave Graviton Lance a chance and together they beat Titan.” He reaches out, almost as if to grab the light. “The sun always rises. No matter how terrifying the darkness is, no matter the monsters walking beside you, the sun always rises. And each new day is just a chance to be better.”

They sit there in silence as the sun rises. It has been years since they last did so. They aren’t friends, not by any stretch. There is too much history there for that, no matter the steps they have both made. But perhaps for one specific moment, this Sunday and no other, this dawn which has a singular quality that can never be replicated, they can both pretend the past is passed.

And then, “You’re a fucking bleeding-heart pansy who can’t make speeches worth shit.”

Izuku’s laugh carries across the summit, heard only by the two of them.

*****

Home is quiet. His mother is gone somewhere, and he is glad that she trusts him enough to leave him alone. Because it means he won’t have to explain his decisions. Too much time has been spent injured or recovering from injury, and he knows too much of his muscle mass is already gone. Not enough that he looks significantly smaller to other people, but enough that it worries him regardless.

He packs some supplies. Shoulders his bag. Sinks to the darkness below.

He dives deep and quick, not sparing time for any of the residents who won’t harm him but for the eye which he uses to accelerate his healing. They all live too high up where time runs close to the real world. No, he needs the patches where time has slowed to a crawl and days here are hours in the real.

Some patches are deadly such as the time he wanders into a world of darkness and barely manages to flee lightning bolts from the ashen one high in his castle. Spiders and anything resembling them
are marked for death and fall beneath his shadows. When hunger strikes, he befriends hounds that exist in the corners of time and they show him how to hunt ethereal serpents vaster than worlds. One is enough for him, and he leaves the massive corpse to the hounds though they will have to contend with crows of feathers like glass unshattering. The serpent tastes odd, more a dream of eternity than anything else, but it is surprisingly edible.

He chats with a young god tended to a doll in a dream and listens to their tales of a world consumed by blood and beasthood and the suffering of the past. And whilst interesting, Izuku doesn’t really care and vanishes the moment they are focused on the approaching abyss walker.

In an underwater city, he learns the names of slumbering gods but is smart enough not to call them forth. In a place that looks exceedingly like Christian Hell, he barely manages not to get his face crushed by a green giant who slaughters hellish creatures, a song of doom following its steps.

All of this he sees and accepts as a normal day. Every step of the way he trains his body once more until he collapses in exhaustion. And then he gets up to flee a bird larger than his home. At the very least he gets all the cardio he needs this way.

Somehow, he runs all the way to the birth of a universe, not caring that it is hot enough that nothing short of the impossible should manage to witness it. And what is he if not impossible? He watches and mourns the loss of the true darkness that came before. Regardless, though, he watches the way gravity, electromagnetism and both the strong and weak forces unify into one singular force. He fills his notebooks with the maths of it all, not wanting to forget.

He finds a quiet spot across a lake of chaos flames. The place is devoid of any entity that he might fear. Good. He’s a bit tired of fighting creatures off.

The live wire of One For All is ever-present, always waiting just past the edge of his thoughts. He grasps the power of his mentor’s quirk and allows it to flood his body. Physical strength fills him, enters the spots of weakness and empowers them. He looks to his arms and finds them glowing with diffuse light.

“Oh, let’s try this.” He focuses inwards and lets some of the power bleed off. Sparks of green lightning arc across his fingers. “Even less.” More power leaves him, lightning arcing away from his body and towards the darkness until only a dreg of energy remains.

He inhales and savours the strength of his lungs, so much stronger than his baseline. He flexes his hands and knows he could crush a brick without a thought even with this tiny percentage of OFA.

“Two, maybe three percent,” he says to the quiet. Considering how little time he’s had to focus on his mentor’s quirk, he is surprised he even has that much.

He slides into a ready stance. Slowly, ever so slowly, he flows through his katas, favouring technique over speed. Sweat drips down his neck as he fights against One For All, the power wanting nothing more than to be used.

Instinct tells him to stop battling.

“Fine.”

His next kick is swift and graceful. He pirouettes with the momentum and strikes with his fist. His movements come faster and faster. Shadows rise, constructs of his imagination, and he shadow-boxes against them. Each strike breaks them, but there is resistance, just a tiny pushback against his limbs. It becomes less a battle and more a dance.
A gust of wind blows by, gargantuan in its intensity. And yet, it doesn’t knock him over. Instead, it gives extra weight to his kick. Another gust and his punch comes faster. He can’t see what makes the wind for it flits past the edge of his vision. He becomes a whirlwind of movement, grace and motion perfected.

He dances with whatever makes the winds, relaxing more and more as it matches his movements no matter how unexpected. When he leaps high, a gust of wind lifts him higher. When he shatters the ground in an immense axe kick, the wind helps him slide into his next stance.

He doesn’t know how long he dances with the creature. It could have been minutes or hours or years. All he knows is that his energy is joyful and sheer.

After one final punch, he stops, panting harshly. His body is bright, steam rising from it and green lightning flickering. He looks to the landscape, sees the hills and valleys formed by the power of his blows. One For All flows through him in its entirety, not the pale vestige he started with.

“How?”

//I granted you a taste of your power, Oh bearer mine//

One gust of wind heralds the creature. It is a dragon—and he rolls his eyes because of course, it is—of a different sort, slender and spindly where the others were gargantuan. And, oddly enough, it doesn't try to be larger than a galaxy. He can’t feel the heat of the godflame beating in its chest like the other dragons he’s met, nor are its hands even vaguely human-like, and it lacks a tail.

“What are you?” He wants to reach out and touch those thin spikes along its spine and examine the obsidian talons.

//My nature does not matter, oh shadow king// Its wings tuck in and it lowers its head, bowing almost. //A boon I shall grant you//

“Ummm no. My mother told me never trust deals with mysterious entities.”

//Wise she is, oh king mine// It lifts its head to the skies and opens its maw.

It sings a clear note that echoes across the universe. It tells a story with its song. A race of wish-granters that flew across the world in search of a mythical traveller. And when they found it protected by creatures eternal for no harm would ever truly kill them, not when their ghosts forever resurrected them, they fulfilled the wishes of the undead. And for their kindness, they were slaughtered.

//They took my tail. I am the last, oh king mine, and this shall be my last wish//

This is the last of the wish-granters. Grief crushes him. “I’m sorry,” he whispers. “I’m so sorry. But I can’t accept your offer.”

//I will save you in time to come// it pleads and spits in his direction.

A giant sunflower made of shadows lands beside him. It is the same sunflower that he thought might harm Shinsou only a few days ago. Izuku swallows. This creature is the same one that protected his friend from Izuku’s power.

//For nothing, friend of the king, I saved

//Freely, the king, my bones you will wear
//Without cost, the king’s disciple, my wings to bear

//A boon and a curse, you must accept/

He looks to the dead sunflower. The dragon is honest, whatever else it might be. He would bet his life that the dragon doesn’t even know what a lie is. “What happens if I don’t?”

//One untruth and a pair of truths this one Eao shall impart

//Elder, free once more, hunt the heart of fire it shall

//Naraka, ally to come, betrayed by your shadow hands

//Mother, beloved by all, madness will befall/

He freezes and swallows. There is a risk to what the lie might be, but he doesn’t like the idea of his mother harmed. “Fine. I’ll accept.”

//You wish to save, oh hero mine.

//The power to save one friend, your boon shall be.

//The knowledge to save one friend, your curse shall be/

Light consumes the dragon. Its scales fall away as its flesh disintegrates. Izuku watches sadly as the dragon dies. When the light recedes, all that remains are its bones. Izuku bows his head and mourns the dragon.

He leaves and returns home just in time for dinner. He sneaks to the bathroom and showers before his mother can get a look at all the various fluids covering him, or the fact that he’s clad in a dream. He kisses his mother on the cheek before bed.

“Promise I’ll make you dinner this week.”

*****

The next morning comes too quickly. Izuku groans, stretching his sore muscles. In the bathroom he sees the person in the mirror: some of his hair is white and braided only on one side; a large burn scar runs down the same side; deep lines mar this boy’s face. Izuku sighs but forces a smile. It tugs at his scar, and though it looks horrific he doesn’t care how other people see him anymore.

He grabs his medication from the drawer. He removes a red pill and pops it in his mouth.

Why are you taking those? Mikumo Atakani asks.

Izuku chokes, coughing harshly. “Why are you back?” he asks once he can breathe properly. “I just got rid of you.”

Mikumo laughs. I am the untold truth. I am the keeper, the lock and key. And I was busy doing stuff. I only managed to kill one of those ghosts. They need to start paying rent if they want to stay.

Izuku leans forward and washes his face with frigid water. He scrubs at it, hoping in vain that the voice will leave. It does not. If anything, it starts organising the monsters in his head and feeds some of them to the echo of the godflame burning in the back of his mind.

He looks to the medication. “Is there even any point in taking this stuff anymore?”
Mikumo hums in consideration. *I am not your enemy, Izuku. But I will play the part of the villain if I must. What harm is there in taking those pills? Has your life not been more... stable, perhaps?*

“Oh, so villains attacking my class is considered stable?” He frowns. “Did you know what would happen when I died?”

*Does it matter?* He hears the snap and pop of burning parasites, and shiver. *Take your pills. I will remember the lies.*

The voice leaves, taking with it whatever creatures had hitched a ride in the recesses of his mind, and Izuku does the same. What other choice does he have but to walk forward and stand tall against the monsters he sees in the waking world?

He steps over a dead cat, and after his shadow crosses it nothing remains, not even a splatter of blood. Bitterness colours his laugh. When he looks to the rising sun and lets his eyes unfocus, it is joined by a few more, all of them orbiting as electrons do—not that he cares for the analogy of an outdated model.

“Is this my curse?”

He grins at a couple who stare at him and watches them scurry away. Izuku shrugs and decides to forget their fear and the nightmares hiding half a step out of lock with reality.

The class is quiet, and he is one of the first there. Kaminari and Sero chat quietly between themselves but fall quiet when Izuku appears, as do Yaoyorozu and Todoroki who both watch the spectacle. He braces for the worst.

“Midoriya, rumour has it you took on that purple thing by yourself,” Sero says casually.

It is not, at all, what he expects. “Ummm, y-yeah.”

“God damn it,” Kaminari snarls as Sero claps him on the shoulder.

“Told you so. Give me my money man.” Izuku watches incredulously as notes exchange hands. “Had a bet going on the rumour was true. Kaminari here though you were too sweet to harm a fly.”

“Midoriya, sweet?” Kirishima says just before wrapping an arm around his shoulder. “Nice, maybe. But sweet. Have you seen him smile?”

Izuku flushes and pulls away. “M-my smile isn’t scary.”

Kirishima grins. “Believe what you want, but when you’re annoyed that smile is the scariest shit I’ve ever seen.”

They sit and Izuku lets Kirishima drone on about some sports team or other between card tricks.

“I can’t believe he tried to dive. No one falls for that anymore. He definitely deserved that red card. Four of diamonds.” Izuku shows the card to Kirishima. “How do you always do that? Anyway, I still say the quirkless soccer league is way better. That’s just pure, raw skill and human physical ability. Everyone’s on the same playing field.”

Ashido pops up behind Kirishima and leans heavily on his shoulder. “You’re just upset you never won any one-on-ones against me.”

Kirishima bats her hands away. “Oh, come on. It’s not like you ever played fair.”
“I’m 5’3 and a girl. I still dribbled until you fell over how many times exactly? Hm?” Kirishima face turns a shade of red just shy of his hair. “At least all the hair product makes you a bit taller.”

Izuku flicks a card and it lands erect in Kirishima’s hair. Ashido chuckles as she tugs the card out. “See. More product than I use.”

“You—”

The conversation dies out as Kaachan enters and takes his seat. No one says anything for a long pause. And then, without looking back, Kaachan gives them all the middle finger.

Izuku snickers because of course Kacchan would do that. Iida comes in later with Uraraka and Tokoyami, and though it takes him a few minutes he does manage to get everyone in their seats when Aizawa enters.

Their teacher is still covered in bandages, looking more a mummy than anything else. And Izuku isn’t too sure how many evolutionary forms their teacher will go through before reaching the final stage—a caterpillar, then a hero, and now a mummy.

“Huh, you’re all quiet. Great. Let’s get some announcements out of the way before you hear some horribly incorrect rumours. Mineta’s withdrawn from the academy.”

Izuku blinks. “W-what?”

“You heard me right,” he says bluntly. “Hagakure and Kouda are also taking a leave of absence whilst they recover.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Tokoyami’s fists clench. More importantly, he sees Dark Shadow’s luminous eyes observing him unseen to anyone else.

“And.. and Asui?” Ashido asks fearfully.

“She’ll be here later today. Last minute medical check-ups.”

A relieved sigh follows that, and the tiniest fraction of the tension now permeating the class bleeds away.

“Aren’t you going to tell us why they’re gone?” Jirou asks.

“Oh, you mean break at least twelve laws regarding privacy and more school policy than I remember?” Aizawa asks snidely. “Sure. I’ll do that.”

Jirou wilts beneath his glare.

And then, “That was fucking unnecessary you mummified cunt,” Kacchan says, his feet still on the table. “I’m the resident fucking asshole. Get your own damned niche, you inconsistently written, shitty ass side character.”

Izuku can’t help the laugh that escapes his lips. And though Aizawa glares at him, too many people are already laughing for it to matter.

“I guess I’ll skip the rest of the announcements.”

And though that moment brings some levity to the class, the tension remains, taut and ready to snap at the slightest tug. He tries focusing on anything but why those three aren’t here anymore —you, you, always you, the monster playing at humanity—such as his lessons.
“That’s not technically incorrect,” Izuku says looking outside the window. “It just has to do with English being a mess of contradictions. ‘An’ is used before words like horrific and hotel because the first letter isn’t pronounced in French. Admittedly it fell out of fashion for a few centuries until Hero notably revived the practice.”

“Midoriya.” Izuku blinks, and looks to Present Mic, only now just noticing everyone staring at him.

“W-what?”

Present Mic hums. “Come see me after class.”

Izuku goes back to watching the outside world, enjoying how bright and simple it is. There aren’t any hidden spaces or patches of impossible logic. No, just birds and trees and people and something that looks like a person stretched out over a few metres. Izuku blinks and it is gone when he looks again.

And when class is over, he waits patiently for Present Mic to finish packing his bags.

“Midoriya, how many languages do you speak?” Present Mic shoulders his bag, the leather sort with a single strap.

He frowns. “J-Japanese and a bit of English.”

“I haven’t had anyone correct me on that yet. I’m surprised you know Hero used such eccentric language. Not too many people in Japan notice that.”

“Why not?”

“Because ‘an’ and ‘a’ get lost in translation. You’d have to read the English transcripts.” He pats Izuku on the shoulder which makes him tense. “You want to see something interesting?”

He hands Izuku the sheaf of paper in his hands. He sees his name and frowns. “This was last week’s homework essay.”

“I asked you to find a topic you found interesting and write about it. That’s an essay on the Voynich Manuscript and its ties to the Indo-Iranian branch of languages, notably the Caspian Dilami translation of the Atharva Veda.” Present Mic smiles. “I was planning on submitting this for peer review with your permission.”

His eyes widen and he takes a step back. “W-why? There’s no-nothing there.”

“Considering that you haven’t noticed I’ve been speaking French and English interchangeably, I’m willing to take a chance that there is something there.”

It takes him a moment to go over their conversation, and really focus on the words Present Mic was saying. And yes, he does recognise the other languages his teacher was speaking.

“You speak the litanies of dead gods, Mikumo says. The words of all men are known to you.

“O-okay,” Izuku says, removing a pocket tissue before nay blood runs down his nose.

“Are you okay? I can take you to the nurse’s office.”

Izuku waves away the concern. “Happens all the time. S-send it if you want.”
He is out the door before Present Mic can respond. The bathroom is empty, thankfully enough. Nobody is around to watch him reach into his nose and grasp the serpent’s head before pulling out the rest of it, nearly a metre long. Its body is only partly physical. Most of it is a dream of its parent that Izuku ate in the abyss.

*Every time I think I’ve seen you do something weird, you pull some new shit out of some orifice.*

“Shut up, Mikumo.” He crushes the serpent and flushes it down the toilet. “You do not get to say that when you’re literally a manifestation of my psychosis brought back to life by a wish-granting dragon. Do you even understand how absurd your existence is?”

*Is that what you believe me to be?*

He shoves Mikumo further into the recesses of his mind before heading for lunch. His friends are already gathered at a table. He raises a brow as there are two tables joined together, Kaminari, Sero, and Jirou all joining the usual group.

Izuku freezes at the sight of Asui who laughs easily with Shinsou. She sees Izuku and waves. “Your powers are bullshit, Midoriya.”

He takes a deep breath and sits, forcing a smile. “They are.” He grabs three decks of cards from his bag. “A-are we playing anything?”

“Let’s play the ultimate game.” Kirishima claps his hands together. “Whoever wins gets a favour from everyone playing.”

“We are not gambling,” Iida says. “That goes against the code of conduct—”

“That only covers an exchange of goods,” Uraraka says, smiling broadly. “It doesn’t mention favours.”

“But, but—”

“You should read the code of conduct better.”

Izuku hands out cards warily, watching Uraraka because he’s never seen anyone shut down Iida so effectively. They play a variation of crazy-eights, and with the limited amount of time, the three people with the highest count are eliminated each round. Ojiro, Kaminari, and Jirou don’t make it past the first round.

“So, Midoriya,” Uraraka asks and plays a seven to skip Kirishima’s turn. “What did Present Mic want from you?”

Two Jokers and a two are played before it’s Izuku’s turn. He’s tempted to roll his eyes because he knew it was coming and plays an ace of spades. "He just wanted to talk to me about last week's essay."

Tokoyami ends the round with a three of diamonds. Izuku doesn’t need to check their cards to know Ashido, Sero, and Tokoyami won’t make it through. He shuffles the decks, puts one way, and hands out a fresh round of cards.

“Did you talk to Ectoplasm?” Shinsou asks, playing an eight to change the suit to hearts.

“Haven’t seen him yet.” Izuku’s joker makes Kirishima curse even as his friend picks up five cards.
“I sense a story,” Uraraka says. “I want it.” She is still smiling kindly when she closes the current round of play, ruining whatever ambition Kirishima or Asui had for winning.

It leaves only him and Uraraka in the finals. He lets Kirishima shuffle the cards.

Shinsou coughs. “He thinks university level maths is easy.”

Izuku has to catch the deck of cards when Kirishima drops it. He sighs, not paying any attention to everyone who is watching him.

“H-he’s exaggerating.” Izuku hands out cards until he and Uraraka have five each.

“Do I look like the type to exaggerate?”

“He raises a good point, man,” Kirishima says. “Shinsou looks too tired to exaggerate.”

Statistically, getting a hand to close the game on your first turn is low, but this variation of crazy-eights lets people play double and triples of the same card number. It isn’t impossible, just rare. Izuku is forced to blink when Urarka does so.

“I guess I win,” she says cheerfully.

Izuku looks at his cards numbly, wondering exactly why he agreed to this nonsense.

“Don’t worry, I won’t make you do anything too embarrassing,” Uraraka reassures, but it sends a chill down his spine despite her perpetually sunny smile. He sneaks a glance at Shinsou and sees him fixated on her, a small smile gracing his features.

Later, after their final lesson, maths with Ectoplasm, he stays behind. He hasn’t really spoken to the man before.

“Yes, Midoriya?”

“Doesn’t Support make better prosthetics?” he blurts out before his mind can catch up with what he said. Izuku flushes a very bright red.

Ectoplasm takes a step with his peg leg and the clack of wood on tile echoes across the room.

“That’s exactly the issue,” Ectoplasm says, not in the slightest insulted. “Anything better counts as a Support item when you’re a hero and I don’t care enough to deal with the licensing paperwork. Was that all you wanted to ask?”

“N-no. I was helping Shinsou—”

“General Studies, I believe?”

“Um, yeah. I was helping him with some homework and he said I should show you these.” He hands Ectoplasm the papers.

With the skin-tight suit, Izuku can’t tell what expression he makes as he goes through the papers. Then, he turns around and grabs a piece of chalk, and writes a question on the board.

“Answer this if you can,” Ectoplasm says.

Izuku grabs the piece of chalk and begins answering the question. He doesn’t let any embarrassment show over the fact that there’s a huge gap between the question and his answer
because Izuku is nowhere near that tall. He writes across all three boards, leaving scribbles on the sides explaining the assumptions he’s making for the proof.

He wipes off chalk dust and turns back to Ectoplasm.

“Where did you learn this?”

“T-this was easy. It’s not like I tried writing up the grand unifying theory.” He shrugs. “Actually, I’d need a few dozen more boards to even try.”

“Well, I suppose I’ll pull you out of class.”

“But I like maths.”

Ectoplasm laughs, deep and full-bellied. “There’s no point in wasting your talents. Midoriya, you used a Laplace Transform to answer a question that I used as a bonus at Mustafu University when I was an assistant teacher. I had grown adults with maths degrees complaining about the difficulty of it.”

“It’s nothing special.”

“Go home, Midoriya. I’ll see about getting you a placement exam.”

The next day, instead of having maths in the morning, he is called to Principal Nezu’s office and given a maths exam. Under the watchful gaze of the principal, he answers the two questions and gets through only three of the bonus questions at the end. They aren't hard, but Izuku can only write so fast when he’s nervous and the principal makes him want to flee in terror.

He deflects the questions of his classmates until they get the hint that he doesn’t want to about it. Once classes are over he packs quickly because there are things he wants to do. Except the door is blocked by what looks like an army of students.

“What business do you have with this class?” Iiad asks, gesturing wildly.

“Oh, we just wanted to see the competition,” a blonde boy at the front says, looking them over. “Rather disappointing I must say. The vaunted 1-A with students that placed lower than us. You see, some of us are wondering why no one’s been moved up when you’re down three students. Especially the general studies students.”

_Do you wish to know a truth, Shadowshield?_ Mikumo asks. _One free of cost._

“Fuck you, you shitty side character. Who the hell do you think you are taking up the spotlight? You think anyone’s going to remember your generic ass threat or your poor as fuck dialogue?”

“Oh, the villain-in-training needs to speak up every now and then, I suppose.”

That sets Izuku off and he walks forward.

_Do not fear a mimic for mimicry is fear_, Mikumo whispers. _Say his name without fear._

“Hey there. Monoma, right?”

_Once named a fear has no power._

The blonde blinks, startled. “How do—”
“Look, I kinda promised my mom I’d cook dinner for her, and you’re blocking the door.”

That throws him for a loop, leaves him unbalanced. “What?”

“You know, I get why you’re upset with the way the entrance exam and class placements are done. I really do. What I don’t get is why you’re threatening us.” He glares at Monoma, enjoying the way he steps back. “If you have a problem, why don’t you start a petition and take it to the school board. It’s not like we can change school policy.

“So, stop calling Bakugou a villain when you have no interest in following legal procedure. Because I’d put my name on a petition. But I’d never agree with someone who thinks they can attack people who’ve done nothing other than trying to learn just because you feel slighted.”

Izuku grins and it makes everyone fall silent. He lets just the slightest hint of the nightmares he’s seen peak through the smile and is pleased when they move out the way.

“There it is,” he hears Kirishima shout.

He claps Monoma on the shoulder. “N-now, if you’ll excuse me, I have some cooking to do.”

How are you?”

Fumikage Tokoyami looks up, yawning. He is tired from watching the children last night. He does not regret it for they are always a delight to watch and interact with. Even though some days they make elaborate pranks.

“Tired. The children were… more difficult than I anticipated. And I argued with my father.”

“I’m sorry.”

He blinks, trying to understand why Midoriya is sorry. He attributes it simply to Midoriya’s nature.

“It is not your fault. I simply have never learnt how to deal with his silence. With his unspoken expectations.”

“Still, it can’t be fun arguing with your parents.”

“No. But it is what is. Life is sometimes cruel in the hand it deals.” Fumikage looks away “He is an intimidating man. Tall and built like a mountain. Just as silent. I… sometimes antagonise him needlessly.”

Izuku sits. “You wanted to talk?”

“I was remiss in my actions,” Fumikage says from his perch on the sand. “I promised to aid you through your difficulties. I thought merely that aiding you in understanding what is and is not would be adequate.”

Izuku Midoriya, his… friend—yes, it felt right to call him that—frowns, an expression that he so commonly uses that Fumikage wants to erase it and teach him a new expression. It pulls at his scars, a reminder of Fumikage’s greatest failing.

“I think it helped a lot.” Midoriya reaches out and lets the tide wash over his hand.

Fumikage scoffs. “Not enough. I thought that perhaps I understood shadows and darkness. I realise
now that I was a child mired in false nihilism seeking meaning to something I found inherently meaningless.”

“I’m not going to point out which words you used w-wrong.”

“I thank you for that.” He raises his hand and lets the light of the moon filter through the gaps between his fingers. “It does not change my intent. I believed it all so simple. I spoke of chains seeking to drag me when I knew nothing of the dark below.”

He says it this time with the full weight of understanding. When he says it, he lets his memory of the impossibility that became of Midoriya lend credence to this simple word that seems to embody everything that could never be in the real world. The phrase is the loudest silence, the cold flame of creation, broken space and sundered time all wrapped up in a promise of smoky blood.

He looks to Midoriya and sees the way his friend stills and then relaxes the same way you do a large dog running at you at dusk, fangs bared and mouth frothing until it jumps on you and licks your face in greeting. That instance of hesitance in seeing what potentially can be a threat and having that fear alleviated is what he sees in Midoriya.

“You barely even saw it.”

“Perchance a glimpse of freedom is enough to unshackle oneself.” He clenches his raised hand, the moon’s luminescence blotted out. “I do not wish to stumble blindly in ignorance. By what means may I truly repay your debt if I do not know your struggle?”

“A lot of people are asking for a lot of answers these days.”

“Who else can even begin to understand your battles if not I.” Darkness wafts off his fist. From it, his first companion and sometimes ally rises.

Dark Shadow is truly massive, and almost immediately Fumikage feels his energy drain. He steels himself for to show even the slightest weakness is to fail, and failure against Dark Shadow is always a portent of doom.

Prince of crows, it greets snidely before turning to Midoriya. You smell of the dreaming dead and crystal nightmares and carrion corpses.

“That’s an upgrade,” Midoriya says and flicks Dark Shadow’s encroaching claw away casually, as though not worried.

The malice of Dark Shadow permeates the air, the weight of knowledge lost pushing against his shoulders, and makes Fumikage fearful. He tastes blood and knows he has bitten through his tongue. He leans over to spit the blood out.

Perhaps he would if a hand hasn’t closed around his beak.

“Swallow it.” Midoriya’s eyes are bright, glowing green with a promise of wisdom that should never be known.

He glances at Dark Shadow who watches indifferently and knows it will not aid him. Traitor, he thinks as he swallows the blood.

Midoriya lets go. “The blood of kings must not be spilt. Tell me, oh crow mine,” Midoriya—no, this is something that wears Midoriya’s skin, a wish with intent—says, “do you wish to become strong?”
“What are you?”

**A dying wish, perhaps**, Dark Shadow muses. **He accepts.**

“No,” Fumikage snaps, backing away from the two—three, perhaps if you count Midoriya’s flesh body—of them. “You will not make my choices.” He pulls on the chain that binds him to Dark Shadow and watches it flow back to his body.

“The wish of my bearer,” the thing says. “A boon to save. Accept my offer you must, oh crow mine. Save you, this king shall.”

It reaches out with Midoriya’s hand.

“Honour your debt, oh prince mine. Knowledge already paid for, this one Eao offers. And from strength does knowledge spring forth.”

There is a promise there, one he is terrified to accept. To accept is to know, and now he is aware that some things can never be unlearnt once known. And yet, he feels the chains of duty and obligation that bind him to Izuku Midoriya.

He takes the hand and for a single wavering moment, he sees what it truly is, sees the dragon behind the boy, a wish in its maw and the memory of a hunt beneath its wings.

“Show me,” he whispers.

The world shatters. The real fades away. Only true dark remains.

**Chapter End Notes**

That's all from me for now. Thank you for reading this. If you enjoyed the story leave a kudos and if you have any questions just leave a comment below. But know that all of that is unnecessary, and as always your readership is quite enough for me. Cheers.
‘It is known that the Imperial Household employs special talents, sometimes they are drafted once, and others they will go on to work as an Imperial Agent. Those that do not swear oaths of fealty but remain affiliated go on to be Special Assets. The rarest, those who swear the oaths of fealty and protection to the Emperor, become members of the Royal Guard. These men and women are given dispensation to act with the Mandate of Heaven, and when operating under that Mandate, they are the highest authority in any given area. All Imperial Agents, regardless of rank, are granted permission to wear the white of the current Chrysanthemum Dynasty…’

—Excerpt from ‘Examining the Japanese Imperial Family: An American’s Perspective’ by David Hayter.

The breeze is cool, crisp as a fresh apple and tart as a lemon. He inhales it deeply, savouring the way it burns a line through his nose and down to his lungs. The wind simply is, and there is a beauty to simply existing that Izuku appreciates.

Mikumo, unfortunately does not.

Explain again why you thought making a deal with a wish granting dragon was smart.

Izuku sighs, his thought disturbed by the pitiful screech of something dying in his mind. “I love kaa-san enough to put up with you.”

Sure, sure, sure. But have you considered I’m not your curse. I’ve done nothing but help even though you left me to burn you bastard. It burns, I burn, we all burn. Everything bu—

He feels no guilt in locking the mad voice somewhere far away. When All Might comes, Izuku is standing ready.

“Hi,” Izuku greets, smiling broadly.

“My boy,” Toshinori-sensei, and not All Might, begins, “how are you? You were… in a terrible state when I found you after the villains attacked.”

Izuku shrugs, kicking the sand. “Well my leg was crushed, and I got punched to death. Not fun.” He very intentionally ignores Toshinori’s convoluted range of expressions. “Anyway, you kinda never talked to me afterwards.”

He coughs, blood splattering his fist. Izuku frowns and makes certain to watch it. You could never be too certain what happened to blood if you forgot to watch it.

“I was investigating the matter with the police, Young Midoriya.”

Izuku nods. “The law is important,” he agrees. “Can you tell me anything about it?”

Toshinori sits and gestures for Izuku to do the same. “You know they’re called the League of villains. It’s unknown exactly what their goals are. Some claims it’s for societal revolution, some said it was to kill me, and some said it was to get revenge.”

“Those are pretty much the same things,” Izuku says, watching Toshinori blink slowly. “You’re
the Symbol of Peace. If you die, then one way or the other things change. I mean, Endeavour becomes number one but he’s not a symbol. He’s not a rallying cry, you know. No matter how bad things get, so long as you’re here then everything will be fine.”

Toshinori clasps his hands together. He looks so small hunched over. “That is a heavy burden for a single man to carry.”

Izuku rolls his eyes. “Then you shouldn’t have become an ideal. Even Hero and Hawkmoon weren’t symbols. They were just women who tried to make things better.” He runs his hand through the sand taking pleasure in the simple resistance there. “Ononoki said we have to hold heroes to the highest standard. You kinda made a new standard.”

“She was speaking of the law, my boy.”

“And isn’t that what you are? A just and compassionate law. You’re the best of people and the hero we need the most.” Izuku takes Toshinori’s hands in his own, and leans forward, smiling brightly. “I don’t know how hard it is for you to be you. But I have friends who help me get through things. No matter what, I’ll be here believing in you.”

Toshinori stays silent, weighing his words. “Even if there are things I haven’t told you.”

“I thought my friends would abandon me if they knew what I was. If they knew about my quirk or the fact that I have a long list of problems.” He squeezes those gaunt hands tighter. “I barely know them, and I can’t imagine a world without them. I think that’s why Hawkmoon said what she did. So long as we try then any place can be paradise. And it’s a lot easier to try if there are other people helping you. If that makes sense.”

Toshinori smiles benevolently. “It makes more sense than you can imagine. You’re a smart kid.”

He flushes and lets his hands fall. “I just quote smart people.”

“Taking the lessons of those wiser than you is a form of wisdom. One that took me a long time to learn, sadly.” His chest heaves, and he says in a strong voice, “A true hero saves not only a person’s life, but also their spirit.”

“Who were you quoting?”

“Nana Shimura.”

“I-I’ve never heard of her.”

Toshinori’s smile is sad, a pervasive sadness that comes only from years of mourning. “She was my mentor, Izuku, and the greatest person I knew.”

He swallows, uncertain. “How did she…”

“She fell in battle. She died proudly for the people she loved.” Toshinori pokes him in the chest. “Even if things get confusing always remember to smile. That heart of yours will always guide you true.”

Those are the last words they share. Though he wishes to speak more with his mentor, time runs short and missing school is not an option. He bumps into Shinsou on the train, nearly knocking his friend over. He accepts the shove in return without complaint.

“You and Uraraka are close,” Shinsou says whilst they walk. Or as Shinsou walks and he limps. It
isn’t particularly noticeable, but it does affect his gait.

“I guess. She’s pretty nice.”

“And you… like her?”

Izuku cocks his head. “Of course. She’s super nice.”

Shinsou seems to deflate. “I guess she is.”

“What’s wrong? I know I’m not—”

“It’s not your fault. I guess it’s mine.” Shinsou ruffles his hair. “Don’t worry. I just-It doesn’t matter.”

Izuku stops. “I think it matters if it’s making you this upset.”

“Please stop. It’ll just make things worse.”

“No. I don’t get it, I won’t pretend I do.” He grasps Shinsou’s shoulders. “I don’t really get everything about people. But my therapist tells me telling the truth is good.”

Shinsou’s face is scrunched up almost as if he is about to cry. “I like Uraraka.”

There is something to this he is missing. “I don’t think it’s possible to not like her.”

You idiot.

“No. I mean, I like her.” Shinsou gestures wildly, just as confused as Izuku. “Really like her.”

“Okay…?” He frowns. “I’m not going to pretend I get it—”

“I want to ask her on a date,” he shouts, startling Izuku. “Every time she smiles it makes me happy. Every time she wins I think she’s beautiful. And you two are just… so fucking perfect.”

“We barely spend any…” he trails off, because that’s a blatant lie. He spends as much time at school with her as he does with Tokoyami. Which is significantly more than the time he spends with Ojiro or even Shinsou.

“I don’t like her like that.” It feels awkward to articulate these feelings. “She’s nice and I think she deserves the world, but I don’t really want to…” He makes a gesture hoping it encapsulates everything he doesn’t have words for.

Then he decides to do what he’s best at and pulls Shinsou into a tight hug. “Um, you can do your thing. I don’t-I mean, I’m not… Look you can ask her out on a d-date. I promise I won’t get mad at you.”

“You always think people are mad at you.”

“They usually are.”

He says goodbye to Shinsou, waving him away, and heads to the building for the Heroics course. It still bothers him that Shinsou is separated like that, almost as if he were lesser because of his quirk. He shoves the annoyance away as he heads to class. It wouldn’t be fair to anyone else to inflict that annoyance on them.
“Midoriya.”
Izuku looks back and sees an orange haired girl dragging the boy Monoma with her.

“Y-yes?” he asks, wary.

“Tell him.”

Monoma hesitates which makes the girl slap him. Izuku steps back as Monoma just rubs the back of his head.

“We started a petition like you said. Itsuka forced me to.”

Izuku watches the two of them warily. “Okay? And?”

The girl sighs. “We want your signature. You’re from 1-A so it—”

“Where do I sign?”

“Just like that?”

“I said I’d sign a petition.” He smiles, this time gently. Monoma still flinches but Itsuka shoves him forward.

When they give him a tablet—because no one still uses paper to get signatures anymore—Izuku signs it. He returns it to Monoma with a nod and heads to class.

He takes his seat, waving to Kaminari as he walks past, and is in the process of shuffling his cards when Iida approaches.

“Midoriya, I wish to ask you a few questions.” Iida adjusts his glasses. “Why did you tell them to make a petition? 1-B, that is.”

He splits the deck. “Because the system isn’t fair. You speak to Shinsou all the time. He’s a smart as anyone here and his quirk means he can win any fight without bloodshed. Sure, it might not work if you’re prepared but everyone has a hard counter. Anyone who can go intangible basically makes All Might’s power useless. Aizawa-sensei would probably win against Endeavour in a fight. No fire means he’s just left with his fists, and we all saw sensei take on a mob.”

He lays out five cards. Draws another and places it on the first card. Draws a second and repeats the process, moving faster with each new card. It is a simple game to count cards like this.

“Being a hero isn’t just about punching giant robots. It’s a lot more than that. If we decide that then a lot of people fall through the cracks. Andile Sithole said peace is possible so long as we try and be better. And choosing only one criteria for being a hero doesn’t make us better.”

The last card is a four of diamonds as he expects. He looks up and sees Iida observing him.

“W-what?”

“You don’t get nervous when you’re talking about quirks.”

“Yeah, stop showing off, Midoriya,” Kaminari shouts. “You’re making the rest of us look bad.”

Sero punches Kaminari’s shoulder. “That’s because you don’t study.”
Iida goes over to stop them when Kaminari tackles Sero. Izuku ignores them, glad that Iida has them under control when Aizawa-sensei enters. Their teacher is still covered in bandages, but his gait is smoother than it was on the weekend.

“Can we get through this without any rude interruptions?” He looks straight to Kacchan who only scoffs in disgust. “Oh, you’ll let me do my job? Great. Well, in case you weren’t sure why the other classes mobbed you yesterday, here it is: all of you are taking part in the Sports Festival next week. Don’t embarrass me. Actually, anyone who doesn’t make it past the first round is getting expelled.”

“You know, the more you use that threat the less effective it gets,” Kirishima says. “I mean, at this point are you really going to do it?”

“You can go right ahead and fail in the first stage if you want to find out. As added incentive, scouting for your initial internships is done through this. If you fail, you might not have any offers and well… you’ll be shovelling shit for a government lackey for that week.”

“For some reason I don’t believe you.”

Aizawa shrugs. “Go ask some of the second years.”

“Sensei,” Iida says, “if that’s the case then may we use the school grounds for training purposes.”

“So long as you get a faculty member. Without one, you won’t be able to use the school facilities after hours.”

“Thanks, sensei, you’re awesome.”

“You’re welcome…” Aizawa looks over the class slowly. “No. I’m not doing it. Get someone else.”

“Come on, you’re our homeroom teacher.”

“And that somehow makes me the only person you can ask? Go bother Midnight or someone else who actually cares about you.”

“Sensei,” Izuku says. “Please.” He smiles as earnestly as he can.

Aizawa pauses. “I hate all of you. Fine, get consent forms from your parents. And coffee for me.”

“You know, Midoriya,” Kirishima says, “I take it back. That smile is terrifying.”

****

Shouta Aizawa dozes lightly on a couch in the teacher’s lounge. He does so only because Nemuri and Hizashi are in the room, arguing about some reality show or other, and he can trust them to have his back. It is because of this trust that he doesn’t pay attention to the heavy footsteps nearby.

Something smacks him in the chest. Aizawa opens his eyes to see 1-B’s homeroom teacher, Sekijiro, looming over him, displeasure radiating off him in waves.

“This is your fault. Fix it.”

Aizawa lifts the files on his chest and skims through them. It is a petition to re-evaluate the current method of assigning students to the specific programs in the school, one that would deemphasise the giant robot portion of the exam.
“How is this my fault?” he asks tiredly. “Board of Governors and Nezu deal with this stuff.”

“Look at the first signature.”

He can’t help the laugh that escapes his lips. “Of course, Midoriya would do this. Still don’t see how this if my fault.”

“This all started because you wouldn’t accept any students from 1-B.”

Aizawa sits up. He may not particularly care for Sekijiro but the man is deserving of his respect. He cracks his neck.

“I’ve read the files of every student in first year. I can tell you their quirks and their strengths. And even were I inclined to fill my empty seats, which I’m not, there’s a kid in general studies whose quirk makes him better suited for hostage situations than anyone else in this school, including faculty.

“There’s a girl in Support whose genius is just as versatile as a student who can literally create whatever she wants if she eats enough. Frankly, at this point, I wouldn’t be surprised if Yaoyorozu secretly is a bored god pretending to be a student.”

He doesn’t let his mind focus on that thing Midoriya became because madness isn’t worth it, and he’s tried it once already. There are students he is responsible for, and though he regrets failing Mineta, Kouda, and Hagakure, there are still seventeen other students who need his guidance.

“You want some of your kids in 1-A? Well, you can wait until next year when I’m not the one with final say over who stays in my class.”

They’re glaring at each other. And though it might be childish, Shouta has no intention of backing down. And if I don’t get any more students then I can’t fuck up even more.

“This is getting out of hand,” Nemuri says. “How’s about you boy’s settle this with a bet. The sports festival’s starting next week.”

“I see where this is going,” Aizawa says with a sigh. “If I win, no one gets to speak about which students I leave in my class.”

“And if I win you accept my three choices without question.”

“Sounds fair to me.” Nemuri claps. “Alright. Whoever has the most students in the final wins.”

“That doesn’t sound very fair,” Hizashi pipes up from his seat. “Shota has seventeen to Seki’s twenty.”

“And who’s fault was that?” Sekijiro questions snidely.

Something about that sets him off. “You know what, no. Not only will I have the most students in the final stage, only my students will make it to the semi’s.”

Silence. Then, “Someone just threw down the gauntlet,” Hizashi announces, standing. “Ladies and gentlemen, this sounds like the start of something beautiful. Three to one odds of Shouta winning.”

“Four to one,” Principal Nezu says, alerting them all to his presence. The principal is immaculate as ever and his eyes dark with knowledge.

Shouta sees Ectoplasm trailing behind him, holding a briefcase in one hand and a large stack of
papers in another.

“Well, the betting pool is officially open,” Hizashi continues just as loud, walking over to the whiteboard and scribbling the details of the bet. “One month’s salary starting bet at minimum. You better win, Shouta.”

Nemuri takes the marker. “Now that the dick measuring contest is over, let’s get to the fun bet. Who’s coming first? Nezu, you got any odds for us?”

“Always.” He laughs haughtily. “You’re all paying for my vacation this year. Who is your pick this year, Nemuri?”

“Hmm? Yaoyorozu.” She writes that on the board. “Uraraka’s my second pick.”

One by one the teachers give their picks for victor and their alternative. He is not surprised when Sekijiro chooses two of his students.

Ectoplasm, though, genuinely shocks him. “Midoriya then Bakugou.”

“That kid’s a twig,” Nemuri says. “Did you see how Uraraka beat him at his own game this week? He’s gonna lose.”

“He shows a level of intelligence no other student comes close to possessing.” He nods to Nezu. “He’s been assessed to have university level knowledge of mathematics—”

“Oh shit.”

“—and based on his apparent ability to make even Shouta give in to his demands, I don’t doubt his ability.”

“You know what, I’m betting for Midoriya as well,” Present Mic says. “Kid’s a polymath now.”

Shouta narrows his eyes even as everyone pays more attention. “Explain,” he says harshly. Anything involving Midoriya instantly gets his heart beating quickly.

“Calm down, you grouch.” He waves away Shouta’s frustration with an ease that comes only from knowing him for decades. “He handed in an essay that I sent for peer review.”

“Did you now?” Principal Nezu asks, cutting through the sounds of shock. “With his permission, I sincerely hope.”

Hizashi laughs nervously. “I asked, and he said yes. Anyway, the kid wrote an essay on the connection the Voynich Manuscript—”

“The what?”

“It’s this weird thing some guy in the fifteenth century wrote, and no one’s been able to decipher it if it’s even an actual language. Anyway, he suggested that the manuscript was written in a corrupted form of a Caspian Dilami translation to the Athara Veda.” Present Mic gestured wildly. “And for those of you in the audience confused, he used the translation of an ancient language to another ancient language to decipher a centuries old mystery. And he explained all of this without noticing I was speaking English and French to him.”


“You wanna see the paper? Well too bad, you suck at English. How many times did you retake
“I am inclined to believe Hizashi,” Ectoplasm says before it can devolve into a fight. “The boy shows a deep understanding of higher level mathematics. That he shows the same knowledge with linguistics is not so difficult to believe.”

“This is ridiculous,” Sekijiro says.

“It is,” Nemuri agrees. “But… he did submit a paper on how the anti-quirk riots that happened were exactly as Saruhiko Ando predicted for his last assignment. The best after that was some copy-pasted bullshit.”

Shouta can’t help but chuckle regardless that Hizashi looks at him worriedly. “Linguistics, mathematics and a knowledge of quirks and quirk philosophy.” He chuckles again. “So somehow, we completely missed a polymath because we were more interested in his ability to punch giant robots. And I nearly expelled him.”

“You what?”

“This is why I say the exams should be changed,” Aizawa adds. “Every single year I argue it needs to be changed and this is exactly why. The kid’s probably smarter than all of us, and I’m the only person here without a doctorate in something.”

“He wishes to be a hero, Aizawa,” Nezu says. “Regardless of his intelligence, we cannot deny him on the grounds that he has talents in other areas, not when he still has the potential to be an incredibly powerful hero. So long as he chooses to remain at this institution, we have an obligation to give him an opportunity.”

*****

The next day, Izuku has his consent form signed despite the initial protests of his mother. And though he goes to maths class, the usual worksheet is replaced by a stack of papers deriving the equations for a Kepler orbit. Izuku sighs because just about every assumption made is wrong and the paper is stained red with ink in a few minutes.

And once he’s done with that, he has to fix the issues with another paper simulating the orbital model of a three-body problem. Which is easy enough, but he’s starting to suspect Ectoplasm is using him as a free marking system.

“Midoriya.” He looks up from his work. “I would like to thank you.”

They have a few minutes before their next class and Izuku had chosen to get started on the homework Ectoplasm assigns him.

“For?” He asks Tokoyami.

“Aiding me in becoming stronger.” Tokoyami smiles in that odd way of his. “Truly, you are a good friend.”

Izuku isn’t completely sure what he’s talking about but smiles anyway. “You’re welcome?”

In the afternoon, when classes have ended, and the world is cast in hues of orange, some burnt and some burnished, does he assemble with the other students at the field under Aizawa’s baleful glare. Neither Todoroki nor Yaoyorozu are there, which doesn’t surprise him since they both got in on recommendation and probably don’t need the training. But he does pause as Kaachan isn’t around.
“You have three hours,” Aizawa says, taking a deep swig of the coffee Uraraka brought. “Don’t break anything.”

He finds himself dragged aside by Ojiro before he can decide otherwise. “We’re sparring,” he says.

“Okay.” Izuku closes his eyes and feels for the power his mentor granted him. There is the highway of unbridled energy, ever-present and waiting. Izuku grasps the tiniest fraction of a fraction, less than half a percent.

His body does not glow, and no green sparks appear. But there is a strength to his limbs that he knows he would never reach naturally.

He nods and Ojiro springs forth. They trade blows with a familiarity that comes only from being taught by the same teacher. Ojiro is still faster than he is, still more mobile, as even though One For All enhances his abilities he is only at the upper-bounds of peak human physicality.

Ojiro is simply more skilled than he is. Izuku has instinct born from fighting monsters—that tail of Ojiro’s is exceedingly tame compared to barbed tails that travel through portals—and it lets him keep up. He might be able to anticipate a bunch, but his body is still too slow to evade it fully. And when he does open some space, his limp keeps him from closing the gap fast enough.

An hour later, Izuku taps the ground. “Yield.”

Ojiro helps him up for the nth time. “Your form is better.”

“If you say so.”

“I do.” He nods. “How are you holding up after…”

“USJ? I think I should be asking you that. I was unconscious for most of it. I barely know what’s going on with you and everyone.”

“You always have a lot on your mind.” He raises his hands in a placating gesture. “I’m not saying it’s your fault or anything like that, Midoriya. You just have more to deal with than me. And I don’t think it’s fair of me to worry you over—”

“What if I want to know? You never even tried to ask if I wanted to know.”

“You would have said yes, no matter what.” Ojiro frowns and squats, gesturing to Izuku to do the same.

He kneels instead, annoyed that he’s getting involved with the ground once more.

“I’m terrified,” Ojiro says bluntly. “Not of you, before you even go there. I just don’t know anything. Kirishima, Asui and Tokoyami can’t say anything or they’re going to be fined and censured by the government. Do you know how scary it is knowing Mineta’s gone? That Kouda’s gone. And we can’t even ask why.”

“I’m not blaming you,” Ojiro says calm as ever. “I’m just letting you know how I feel. Every time I look away it seems you’ve just been hurt. I can’t protect you because you’re so far ahead of me.”

“I’m so—”

“I’m not blaming you.” Ojiro says calm as ever. “I’m just letting you know how I feel. Every time I look away it seems you’ve just been hurt. I can’t protect you because you’re so far ahead of me.”

“Please tell me you aren’t going to do the debt of honour thing like Tokoyami.”

That startles a smile out of Ojiro. “No. But you were taught by Jin Mo-Ri. He doesn’t teach people
for the sake of it. I know he’s taught heroes before, but you’re the first person he’s ever taught Renewal to. You’re my friend, and you’re a person my teacher thinks is worthy of passing his secrets to. I don’t want you to get hurt. I never will.”

Izuku inhales.

He thinks of his conversation with All Might, thinks of how he told his mentor that his friends were amazing and realises those words are not enough to encapsulate the kindness and patience they reserve for Izuku. He wonders if there will ever be a time he will be worthy of them.

*In time, brother mine, you will be their downfall,* Mikumo whispers.

Izuku exhales.

With that escaping breath, he buries his sadness deep beneath the surface.

“I don’t know how to be a better friend,” he admits. “I can—I mean, I just want you to know I’m here. I trust you. I don’t want you to think I’m too busy or whatever to talk.”

Ojiro nods.

“Okay. I’m afraid of a lot of thing. I’m afraid my quirk isn’t useful. It’s a mutation that barely makes me better than the average fighter. I can’t block attacks like Kirishima or make things float and I don’t control shadows. No matter how strong I get, I’m always going to be stuck with human limits. I can’t…I can’t break past them with technique everyone else can. I’m just human.”

Izuku opens his mouth to argue, then closes it. He will listen, calmly and patiently. Even if the words tear through him and leave him feeling numb. Because he understands those insecurities.

There was a time he was a quirkless, and more than anyone else he understands the limits of the human body.

“I’m worried you’ll forget about when I can’t keep up. Your quirk means you’re gonna make it to the big leagues no matter what. And one day none of you will have time for me. You’ll be too important by then. This festival’s a just for me to prove that wrong. If I can get an internship from it then maybe, just maybe I can make it.”

“I believe in you,” Izuku says once Ojiro has fallen silent. “I’m not ditching you ever.”

Ojiro shrugs. “No one can guess the future. And don’t you dare make a promise you can’t keep.”

Later, he spars with Iida only for fifteen minutes before he realises that if Ojiro is fast, then Iida is a speed demon. He lands on his back for the sixth time and decides that there are better things to do than enter an intimate relationship with the ground. And whilst he is thankful for the distraction, he does resent how his side hurts and his right hip joint protests with every step.

It takes a bit of searching, quite a bit of getting lost, before he decides to ask Aizawa-sensei for directions.

“Where can I find Tokoyami?”

Aizawa looks up from his laptop. Izuku doesn’t want to imagine how exhausting it is to both watch them and deal with his work, especially not when he’s swaddled in bandages.

His teacher points to one of the gyms, a smaller one they haven’t ever used before. Before he goes, Aizawa asks, “What do your parents do, Midoriya?”
“Um, my mom has an office job. And my dad’s gone.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know he wasn’t…”

Izuku shrugs. “Oh, he’s not dead. He just, went missing when I was five. Not like I needed him or anything.” He forces a grin. “Last I heard, he was working in risk management. Thanks, sensei. See you later.”

He walks towards the gym before Aizawa can ask more questions. The gym is flooded with light and Fumikage sits in the centre, the picture of perfect concentration.

“Hey,” he calls out, not wanting to startle the boy.

Tokoyami grunts and stands. His track suit is stained with sweat.

“Midoriya. How goes your training?”

He rolls his shoulder, wincing. “Well, I’ve learnt the ground gets comfy after the twentieth time you’re slammed into it.”

Tokoyami chuckles darkly. “Indeed.”

“And you?”

“I have spent most of this time trying to split the different currents of energy. You were right that Dark Shadow drew power from me and never once touched his own reserves.”

Izuku smiles. “Good to hear. I didn’t think that would make you so tired.”

“Dark Shadow is not interested in paying rent or sharing with others. I keep the lights on to weaken him. He becomes more amenable to splitting his energy two ways like this.”

“Anyway, do you want to spar?”

Tokoyami does. Battling him is completely different form Iida and Ojiro. It takes him a few exchanges to understand why. Where those two are trained for, and have quirks suited to, close combat, Tokoyakmi is purely a ranged fighter. He uses Dark Shadow almost like a gun, firing it off and hoping to get the hit. And sure, Dark Shadow can turn around, but it is still bound to things like inertia.

He dodges Dark Shadow’s fast extension and closes the gap despite his limp. Tokoyami pedals back. Too slow.

Izuku doesn’t put much power into the punch but it still sends Tokoyami sprawling to the ground.

Tokoyami raises a hand in surrender. Izuku helps him up, not caring when Dark Shadow bumps him aside and fusses over its master.

“You’re going to need to be more careful,” Izuku says. “Anyone faster than Dark Shadow’s turning radius will give you problems.”

Tokoyami rubs his chest, wheezing. “Again.”

“Are you sure?”

The glare he receives roots him to the spot because it’s not mere annoyance there. No, there’s a
rage that seeks to bubble over and explode outwards.

“Yes,” he grounds out. His friend takes a breath and the threat in the air vanishes. “Forgive me. I inherited my father’s temper.”

**Do not underestimate me, Shadowshield,** Dark Shadow snarls, angry now where its master is not. **There is no wish empowering you now.**

He blinks. What?

**It’s not important,** Mikumo says.

This time, it goes a bit differently. Dark Shadow stays close to its master, not going on the offensive in fear of being caught out. It makes little difference. This is like fighting Ojiro if the blonde wasn’t skilled and technically gifted in martial arts.

He chooses to take the slower path to victory. He strikes relentlessly, moving faster and faster until Tokoyami is drenched in sweat and Dark Shadow reacts slower and slower. He talks the opportunity to slide past Dark Shadow and plant an elbow squarely in Tokoyami’s gut.

He has a punch ready when Dark Shadow returns, wrapping around its master’s torso. When his fist strikes true, it feels like punching dragon scale. The pain startles him enough that he forgets to moderate his skill level. He pirouettes on instinct, and his heel lashes out to hit Tokoyami on the head.

Pain. Then darkness.

He blinks away the darkness, feeling someone shake him. Tokoyami is crouched over him, red eyes worried.

“Midoriya, can you hear me?”

“St-stop shouting.”

“I’m not. I believe you have a concussion.”

Izuku shut his eyes. The light is too bright. “How? I didn’t—what even…”

“Something I have been working on. Worry not on the matter. Let’s get you to Aizawa.”

Aizawa takes on look at him and pulls out a small flashlight. He flashes it in Izuku’s eyes.

“Not a concussion,” he concludes. “You just have a headache. Take some painkillers and get some rest.”

Izuku takes his advice. Perhaps four pills is excessive, but it does get rid of the ringing in his ears.

As the weak goes by, he becomes more used to the movements of his classmates: Iida, surprisingly, seems to favour all offense all the time whilst Ojiro is more cautious; Ashido is like a ballerina when given the chance to use her acid, and Sato is an absolute powerhouse when he’s had enough sugar. He knows that they all keep things back and practice at home. Izuku does the same, meditating for weeks in the abyss as he inches closer and closer to using a full percentage of One For All without hurting himself.

Sparring with Tokoyami always bothers him. Not because it is difficult—Izuku is more than fast
enough even with his limp to close the distance—but because sometimes when he’s gotten past Tokoyami’s defences, and the boy is exhausted, he finds himself waking up in pain.

“Okay, what was that?” Izuku asks, drinking from the bottle Tokoyami gives him.

“Do you trust me?”

“Yes,” Izuku says quickly. There is no one else who knows as much of his quirk outside his mother.

“Then trust me when I ask you not to worry. Just as you have much to learn of your quirk, I too have lessons still be taught. You aided me in walking this path. I ask you trust in me.”

“I’m going to worry because we’re friends. It’s not about trust.”

“Perhaps it is not. If you wish to know, I will tell you. You are one whom I can only ever tell the truth.”

His sincerity is obvious to Izuku. He can feel it in his bones. There are chains, invisible, yes, that bind them together. They pull and slacken the longer he knows Tokoyami. And in this one case, whatever duty Tokoyami feels is like a noose around Izuku’s neck. He could get the answer, but something would change between them. Perhaps not for the better.

“Promise me you’ll come to me if you need help.”

“Always.”

*****

Shouta Aizawa is ready to go back home and deal with his other duties. Only another two hours, maybe three at most, and he can finally pass out. That is his plan until he gets a message from the Principal to meet at a location outside the city. He considers throwing his phone away and pretending he never saw the message.

He can’t do that. He is many things, and Nezu’s most trusted confidant is one of those. It also comes with very many responsibilities that only Nemuri and Hisashi know, and only because he can’t be in three places at once despite what Nezu may think.

Calling Nemuri this late at night doesn’t bother him. He knows she’ll be awake, probably binge watching some show. Insomnia, apparently, is the great equaliser in life.

She answers on the third ring.

“Hello Shouta,” she purrs sensually. “I think I can change my plans for you. You know I’m always ready for late night visitors.”

“You’re in pyjamas and don’t have makeup on. You probably look like a mess. Even if I was interested, I wouldn’t get anywhere near that.”

He hears her chuckle. “That’s just part of the fun. We’ll make a man out of you yet.”

Going home and saying fuck it all sounds very appealing right now.

“Okay. Here’s what you’re going to do. I need you to do some digging on Hisashi Midoriya.” He cocks his head, remembering the day Izuku nearly broke. “Actually, it might be Hisashi Atakani. Use whatever backchannels we have to the police and government. Just do it quietly.”
She hums in consideration. “What brought this on? I know you’re worried, but this is digging deep into the kid’s background.”

“Know your enemy.”

“Are you being serious?” He stays silent. “Fine. Get me something nice tomorrow.”

He calls Hizashi next. His friend is most likely asleep right now. It takes about six rings before Hizashi answers.

“Hizashi, I need a favour out of you.”

“It’s midnight,” he says groggily. “Bother Nemuri.”

“She’s already doing something for me.”

“Okay. I’m interested now.”

“Go to my home and get the files in the safe, third level. They have all the details for what I think is an exchange of escaped villains with corrupt cops. Track them quietly. Make sure you don’t get the cops involved. We’re using them to monitor which groups are active.”

“Don’t have to tell me. I know how it works. I expect answers tomorrow.”

With his two other jobs for the day dealt with, Shouta can get on with Nezu’s request. This is the real reason he is forever exhausted. Where other teachers like Vlad can call it a day once the kids are gone, he is forever stuck dealing with threats and problems.

He might complain if he didn’t love UA as much as he does.

As it is, he simply drives to the location in silence, mildly amazed that he doesn’t fall asleep at the wheel. The facility is outside city limits and secluded from any other signs of human habitation—the closest charging station for his car is twenty minutes away.

Nezu is smoking when Shouta arrives. The principal jumps off the bonnet of his modified vehicle and lands on Shouta’s shoulder. Nezu waves and the gate opens.

Shouta walks through it. “Why am I here?”

It leads to a simple reception area. A woman in very normal clothing greets them. The only sign that she’s part of the staff are the holographic sigils on his shoulders. The woman leads them through the facility, saying nothing.

He notices that it’s clean and lacks the smells of antisceptic or sickness that he expects. And it’s bright and warm, inviting with all the plants—real plants, not fake plastic crap—and strips of grass lining some of the corridors.

It isn’t at all what he expects from a mental institution. No, it looks like the sort of place rich people go to when they’re old and about to die.

“All UA students are being kept here as per your request, Principal Nezu,” the lady says once they’ve reached a doorway.

“Thank you. We won’t need your services to return.”

The woman bows and leaves. Shouta watches her go warily. “Do I want to know?” He gestures at
“The Sports Festival generates quite a bit of revenue. A lot of it goes to this place to keep it open. In exchange, they don’t always report the prior affiliations of certain individuals to the authorities and certainly never to the media.”

“Sometimes you scare me.”

“Only sometimes? Shouta, what reason would she have to tell me something I already know?”

It takes him a moment to figure it out. Shouta sighs. “Because I didn’t know. Why are you still trying to give me lessons?”

“Because I need you to be ready. This attack at USJ is only the prelude. It’s a sign that the pieces are in play and everyone is moving to win.”

“You make it sound like a war.”

“Life is a war.”

Nezu jumps of his shoulders. There’s a biometric panel on the wall near the floor, suited only for Nezu. More proof that he really does control this place.

The metal bars on the door retract and the door hisses open slowly. Soft orange light greets him. The hallway is surprisingly longer than he expects. It still has the same vibrant paint and plant life, odd due to the security required to enter the area.

Shouta follows behind Nezu. The rooms are large and look more like a studio apartment than the white padded rooms the media has conditioned him to expect. A glass barrier separates him from the residents. Only some of the rooms are occupied but each occupant shares one commonality: they don’t register Shouta or Nezu on a higher level.

“These are all UA students?” he asks after they pass a male with wickedly sharp claws extending out of his hands, feral eyes tracking his every motion.

“Former students, yes. I take special care to ensure our reputation isn’t tarnished.” The rodent points to a winged mutant with steel feathers. “Killed his sibling after a psychotic break about two years before you became a teacher. I’m glad we retrieved him and dealt with the situation before the media discovered.”

Dread creeps down his spine. “How long have you been doing this?”

“I’ve been protecting UA since before you were born, Shouta.”

He stops at room where a student hangs from the ceiling on a thick strand of spider silk, spinning languidly. His bed is cocooned in the stuff.

“This doesn’t look like protection.”

Nezu chuckles. “You see her?” He’s pointing at a lady surrounded by arcs of lightning and floating in meditation. “She got recruited as part of a volunteer team to Chile. She lost control of her powers and caused her plane to crash. Lost her memory. We found her five years later acting like a god over a newly discovered tribe. And what do cruel gods expect?”

Shouto swallows his rising gorge. “Ritual slaughter?”
“Of course. How could you expect anything else? It did, however, support a theory that quirks are spread through a vector. It supports why East Asia, where the first quirk appeared, has the highest percentage of quirks but regions like Iceland, South America and New Zealand have the lowest percentages.”

“It worries me that you can speak so casually about this.”

“You get desensitised. Three students are just the beginning.”

He glares at the principal’s back as they descend to a lower level. “Don’t joke about that.”

“How old are you again? Thirty? Sometimes I forget how young you are. You aren’t really old enough to remember the last time this happened.”

He shudders. “That worries me more than you can imagine.”

The principal hums. “Some twenty odd years, before your voice broke, an interesting thing happened.”

There’s only one thing the principal can be talking about, only one event that’s engraved onto the psyche of every Japanese person alive.

“Taiwan.”

“Yes. Taiwan. Twenty million dead on that island. Then the purge of Shikoku. The anti-quirk riots starting in Hokkaido.”

“I was there,” he snarls, suddenly losing control of his emotions. “I lost my mother to black fire. Stop acting like I don’t have anything to do with it.”

“My apologies. That was never my intent. But as a child you wouldn’t really have paid attention to what happened to the hero academies. You see, some idiot in the government thought the students could be used to help.”

“No.” He can’t imagine sending out any of his students during that chaos.

“Not a bad idea in theory. Rescue and relief efforts would have alleviated the overburdened pro heroes. But of course, they found themselves on the frontlines. Some because they were arrogant and thought they could make a difference. But mostly because extremists with guns don’t differentiate between adults and students. I think, on average, every hero academy lost one in three students.”

That’s the same as losing seven of his students. He’s already lost three. Four more and the statistics will line up. He takes a breath. Forces down his rising horror. Follows behind Nezu as they reach the lowest level.

“I told you I would handle the parents,” Nezu says, gesturing to the first of the rooms. “Do you understand why now? I doubt you would have the stomach to look them in the eye and tell them this is the best option.”

He’s staring at Mineta. The boy is awake, eyes wide, but focusing on nothing. He is strapped down to his bed, arms and neck bloody and raw from what look like recent scratches. The boy hasn’t been here longer than three weeks, and his state makes Aizawa sick.

He startles when he notices Hagakure. It’s like staring at a floating hospital dress. “Toru,” he
whispers, approaching. “Hagakure.”

The floating dress remains where it is, still but for the mild rustle of the air conditioning.

“She’s non-responsive. As is Mineta. Kouda shows mild signs of possible recovery.”

Aizawa looks to the boy. He’s huddled in a corner of his room, staring at the two of them. Kouda’s eyes track his motions, but they are glassy and unfocused. There is only a vague indication of higher thought, and he wonders how much is merely a projection of his worries.

“How did you get their parents to agree?”

“Humans are simple. You respond well to sincerity and empathy.” The principal meets his gaze. “Plainly put, I manipulated them into accepting hush money. A large cash injection and a guarantee of the best medical treatment in Japan is usually enough. Besides, they knew the dangers when they permitted their children to enter a school for heroics. The terms are rather plain in the agreement.”

“I’m starting to worry that you have plans within plans you’re not telling me about.”

“You never ask.”

“And that they aren’t to our benefit.”

The principal stops. “Shouta, be very careful of your next words. This isn’t a threat, I’ll just be severely disappointed if you haven’t put any thought into them.”

“You just admitted to manipulating parents into accepting hush money because we messed up.”

“I did. I’m doing some very cold calculus. On balance, of the three, Hagakure’s quirk is the only one whose loss is noticeably detrimental. She would have made an excellent covert operative.”

He feels something churn in his stomach. “Is that how you look at my students? As pieces on a board? As assets to be used?”

“No.” The wave of relief that floods him is embarrassing at his age. “I see children whom I have failed. I wish, sincerely, that I could have spared them this. But I must also look at things as a cost-benefit analysis. It may have cost me three students, but I’ve ensured Midoriya remains at UA and not any of the other hero academies that pump out easily mouldable soldiers for the government to snatch up.”

“It always comes back to him. That kid suffers enough at home. He doesn’t need that kind of treatment from us.”

“He’s a tactical asset, perhaps strategic. It’s only conjecture, but he became that… thing when he died. Drop him in hostile territory and you can win many battles.”

“That’s against so many rules in the Second Geneva Conventions.”

Nezu laughs, a hint of his cruel intelligence shining through. It is moments like this that remind him just how terrifying Nezu is when he isn’t acting the role of a perpetually polite principal.

“You sweet summer child,” he says, contempt and pity in equal measure. “If I was a general and I had to invade a country, I’d fire Midoriya right at their most important cultural monument and let him wreak havoc. It would destroy moral. And if the negative aspects of his powers propagate
memetically, then you may not even need to send additional soldiers.”

His fists clench tight until his knuckles hurt and his bones creak. “He’s not a soldier or a piece on a chessboard.”

“But that’s what we all are. I don’t like chess. It’s too… limited. Shogi, perhaps, but too many people use chess metaphors to bother with changing. You’re my right hand, Shouta. The queen on my side, I suppose. I’ve groomed you to be spymaster and general both. Strength of mind and strength of will. You have both in spades. Come, we’ll use this exit.”

The abrupt change in tone throws him for a loop. He follows the principal’s direction to a side passage leading further from the entrance.

“Tell me the truth,” he says eventually, resigned to being a cog in the principal’s plan. “Who are we fighting?

“The world. The entire world. I plan on keeping UA independent from the government. The crown is much too powerful to not consider an enemy.”

“And the villains. You said nothing about them.”

Nezu snorts. “Those are a given. And if you had any inclination to work with All Might, then I might tell you more. Until then, I’m keeping you out the loop.”

He stops. Closes his eyes. Pushes down the anger.

“You trust him. Of all people, you trust him.”

“Why yes. He has uses that you do not. Just as I have Power Loader deal with the security of our data networks or how I have Snipe perform duties you cannot stomach—you would, I think, be surprised by the number of reprisals we experience from China, Australia and the Taiwanese Remnant. UA decides the face of heroics in Japan, and for that we are and always will be a target. It takes much to ensure our freedom to operate.”

This late into the night, or perhaps this early in the morning, Shouta has little energy left to argue with Nezu. The principal will do as he pleases, and Shouta won’t be able to do much about it.

It is on the way back that he sees something that stops him dead in his tracks. There is nothing truly unique about the room

“Rei?” he asks, unsure if that blue hair and those red eyes are real. “Is that Rei?”

Nezu nods. “Yes.”

“How?”

“A drug overdose. It’s had some… negative psychological effects.”

He forces down any sympathy he has. After all he’s heard, he knows how cruel life can be to those undeserving. And this girl had made her choices.

“I knew she had little potential, but this is disappointing.”

“Not even the slightest bit of empathy for your former student. And you call me cruel.” Nezu jumps on his shoulder. “You did expel her and the rest of the class. Don’t you consider this your fault?”
Shouta snorts. “She made her choice. It’s sad, but she had no drive to be a hero. She could have been as powerful as Stormwind if she cared.”

“That’s why she’s being kept here. Her powers are such that no one wants to maintain responsibility of her. She hasn’t used them once since she was admitted.”

“Odd. I always needed to tell her to stop using her quirk outside school. She enjoyed flying.”

“I wonder, would she have been a just hero where Stormwind chose the role of tyrant? Perhaps she had the power to become the next Symbol of Peace. Hero, may she forever be at peace with her lover Legion, is undoubtedly stronger than All Might. And Stormwind stronger still. That’s a lot of power you chose to let loose.”

“She had the power but not the drive.”

Nezu sighs. “If you hadn’t expelled her I could have convinced Hawks to take her on as an apprentice. Why couldn’t you have just waited until I came back from my vacation? Just three more days.”

Shouta rolls his eyes. “Get over it.”

It takes him a while to get to his destination. With how close it is to dawn, he probably won’t be getting any sleep. Unless he gets Iida to organise the two hours he has with the class in the morning. That sounds like a great idea. It means two whole hours of sleep and time he doesn’t have to spend with irreverent brats.

And he’s not certain if he can deal with children. Because looking at them means he must consider much more than just getting them through the year. After what Nezu has shown him, he must consider their futures long after they leave the institution.

Right now, though, he can ignore that and observe his target from the vantage point of a roof, hidden underneath an awning. He’s covered from two directions, his back exposed but he is certain he’ll be able to notice anyone trying to ambush him from there.

There is enough space for him to set up the high-powered scope, the field drone command module, a wideband EM signal detector and a few other odds and ends. He had thought this might be excessive when he was loading the equipment, but he’s starting to wonder if he’s packing too little surveillance equipment.

The compound isn’t his target bit it’s very close to it. And the amount of security it has is mildly ridiculous. Especially since it isn’t a gated community of any sort. No, it’s just a bunch of townhouses hidden by dead-end streets, lots of trees, and the ring of two-story homes he’s very certain contain only security guards and observation equipment.

He’s spent a lot of time doing reconnaissance in the past and he knows the apartments are too quiet. There aren’t any lights on from people who would be awake at this hour. There aren’t any homeless people sleeping on the benches despite how well protected they are from the elements.

The security is immense and comprehensive, the sort that requires military grade sensor equipment to observe. He is glad, then, that Power Loader can make equipment like that in his sleep and knows when not to ask questions.

The Midoriya household is just outside the compound. It is smaller, less ostentatious than the rest. It looks like an afterthought, the sort of place someone with a decent insurance pay-out can afford, not the very obvious home of a secret millionaire. It is unassuming, noteworthy only because it is
very clearly where the poor people in the area live.

Except, the longer Aizawa observes the area, the more certain he is that the household always has at least two people observing it at any given point. It takes him even longer to find the security grid and note how it seems isolated from the rest of the community, a singular defence rather than a village wall. The amount of money for that level of security is staggering.

His phone vibrates. It is Nemuri.

“Yeah?”

“Nothing so far. The man is a ghost. He’s got hits up until around his early thirties then he basically vanishes. He’s in maybe one picture with Marasu Bakugou that I could find, but everything’s disappeared.’”

“Data scrubbed?”

“By professionals. The kind that cost a lot of money. Or some really shady connections.”

He looks back to the home with its very impressive and well-hidden security system. “Any guesses?”

“Nothing right now. Standard pyrokinesis quirk so there’s no reason for him to have been recruited by a black-ops group. He got a bachelor’s degree in finance, a master’s in data analysis, and worked in a risk management firm. Honestly, Occam’s Razor says he ran away from his marriage or that he’s secretly a villain. Either or on balance of probability.”

“Find out what you can about this area. Title deeds. Previous owners. Prior construction contractors. Anything. Just forward me stuff as you find it.”

“Okay, sounds…”

“What is it?”

“Someone’s bouncing a signal off my computer. How the hell am I being hacked remotely in real time?” He hears her rummage through her stuff over the phone, her movements sounding frantic and her breathing rapid.

“Nemuri? Talk to me.”

“Unplugged it at the power source. I’ll have Power Loader check it tomorrow and run it on a private network. This thing is more encrypted than a government server. How the hell did anyone get access?”

He suddenly becomes very aware of someone behind him. He turns, ready to fight, but finds a man wearing a dark overcoat and holding a holographic emitter.

Shouta curses. “I’ll call you back,” he says before ending the call and pocketing the device. “Didn’t know you had jurisdiction here?”

He’s staring at the bright emblem of the imperial household, the white chrysanthemum. Every teacher at UA knows that type of hologram emitter. You very literally can’t copy it, and it only activates to a single person’s biometrics and only when those vitals matched an acceptable deviation of baseline vitals.
There’s no denying the person before him legitimately works as an Imperial Agent, and Shouta may just be fucked. Because at best he’s dealing with one of their paper pushers.

“The moment you stayed here for more than five minutes we mined all of your data,” the man says, his voice soft and without seeing his beard Shouta would think him a woman. “I’m surprised Nemuri noticed the signal.”

“Don’t call her that,” he snaps.

“Would Midnight suffice?”

For some reason, that sounds like a threat. And Shouta isn’t certain he can win this fight. He remembers in the wake of USJ how Nezu had admonished him for knowing nothing of the imperial household and had taken it upon himself to learn more. And everything he had learnt made him very much doubt his chances of winning a fight. Especially if this man is part of the Royal Guard.

If that was the case, he’d need Endeavour to level the playing field even slightest bit.

“I’m going to give you the benefit of the doubt and assume you’re here to observe Izuku Midoriya, one of your students, and not any of the other residents.”

“And if I’m not?”

The man huffs. “I won’t kill you if that’s what worries you. I won’t break our agreement with you.”

“I’ve never made any agreement.”

The man tilts his head in confusion. “You represent UA. As far as the world, or the portion that matters, your words are the same as UA’s. Have you never wondered why people simply listen to your words without question?”

He keeps his expression blank. He’s never really noticed that. It also worries him that Nezu is still keeping things from him.

“What is this place?” he asks instead. “Why the hell do you have so much security here? And who the hell are you?”

“I’ll answer only because many of my subordinates still hold you in high regard. Yes, we do acquire a few of your students occasionally. There are residents there that provide critical information for us. And my title is Itinerant.”

“Let me guess. They’re political asylum seekers, spies whose covers have been blown, and a few reformed villains.” The man inclines his head just so. “And the Midoriyas? They have the most security.”

The man shrugs. “Whatever your issue with the Midoriya Inko, I could care less so long as you keep it to regular work hours outside of this area and within the confines of legality. But Eraserhead, don’t you dare come here again. We have too many vested interests that don’t come into conflict with yours.”

“I think they do.” Because if these people are protecting Inko, or know about Izuku’s quirk, then he has more problems when it comes to Izuku than he imagined.
“We’re not looking to recruit the boy if that’s what you’re worried about.” It’s only part of what worries him. “His quirk can be a danger, so we’re here to ensure no villains attempt to apprehend him.”

He doesn’t expect the candour. “And you expect me to believe you don’t want to use his quirk.”

“Shadow generation and a powerful strengthening ability. I’m interested in its origins. Whatever discoveries you make, I’ll learn of. You’re a guinea pig. Go tell your rodent master to stay out of our business. We won’t consider this a violation of our agreement.”

The man disappears in a wave of something that hurts Shouta’s eyes to look at, perhaps broken time. He looks around and takes note of how he is alone. He removes his phone and finds it functional. He makes a call.

“Nezu, we have a problem.”

“One to ten.”

“Eight, maybe eleven. It seems the imperial family have an interest in Izuku.”

Chapter End Notes

That’s all from me for now. Thank you for reading this. If you enjoyed the story leave a kudos and if you have any questions just leave a comment below. But know that all of that is unnecessary, and as always your readership is quite enough for me. Cheers.
Can You Hold Territory?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

‘Do not underestimate the power of numbers. Skill does not matter when there are too many people to move safely. Knowledge falls to the wayside when there are multiple quirks interacting in new and different ways. Greater numbers can be both a boon and a curse.’

—Excerpt from the recovered 'Tenets of Combat' likely authored by an underground hero or vigilante.

Dr. Makinami’s office is much the same as always. A glass desk to give the illusion that nothing separates them. The green fabric couch Izuku always sits on. The fake plants in their orange vases. And the doctor herself, fiddling with her glasses.

“Hello again,” she begins. “How are you feeling?”

“Worried, I think. We’ve got the Sports festival coming up.”

“And do you feel you’re ready?”

“I’m not… I don’t really know. I’m training but I don’t know if I can do well.”

“Why do you say that? I feel like you’re smart, and you obviously have a strong quirk to make it into 1-A.”

“I have a flashy quirk,” he corrects, bitter. “That’s what really separates 1-A from the other classes. I’ve missed a lot of time being injured and… dealing with Mikumo.”

She frowns. “Have you been talking to him recently?”

“No,” he answers truthfully because Mikumo has been quiet all day. “I just think of what happened often.”

“You know, if you feel you aren’t ready because of medical reasons you can opt out of the Sports Festival.”

“I didn’t know about that.”

“It’s rare but it does happen on occasion. Sometimes students get too injured for one reason or another. UA wouldn’t force someone to take part if they couldn’t. And what’s happened to you certainly counts. I saw you limping when you walked in.”

He rubs his right leg, painful in a constant and dull way ever since the Nomu attack. There are pale scars, long tendrils where the flesh was restored by Recovery Girl’s quirk. These scars, at least, can be hidden like those across his torso.

“It’s minor” he says resolutely, “It just slows me down a bit.”

“That’s another injury in addition to your prior incident. I may not be a physician, but repeated physical trauma stacks up. You need time to heal.”

He thinks of the weeks he’s spent in the abyss, fighting, healing and training. “I’ve had enough
time. And I’m not going to give up before I even try. If I don’t make it far, then that’s alright. But I have to try. You said the next step is the most important.”

“I did.” She smiles and looks to her file. “A few weeks back when we were talking about Mikumo, you said that you often lied. I’d like to revisit that.”

He inhales. “Okay.”

“You said Mikumo described himself as ‘the keeper, lock and key’ of a lie you told yourself. I wanted to ask you about that.”

“I wasn’t… ready to admit the truth. Omission is still a form of lying.” He looks away from her. “I didn’t want to accept that something happened. And it drove me….”

“Is that lie why you attempted—”

“In a way, yes. In a way, no.” He rubs his forearm. “It’s not simple. I can’t really explain it.”

“You can try.”

“There were answers I needed. And at the time, doing that seemed the only way to find them.”

“I’m going to stop you there.” She shifts, watching him with the slightest bit of apprehension. “You’re saying you tried taking your life to find answers to a lie. And that worries me because I don’t know how you’re looking for answers now.”

I walk through shadow and enter a world where the impossible is mundane, where death has no meaning and life is anathema.

He says none of that. “I talk,” he says instead. “Grabbing a knife isn’t an answer. Pain brings clarity. It grounds me, but I can’t just stab myself and expect that to solve my problems.”

“You don’t know how relieved I am to hear you say that.”

“I think about it sometimes when it’s too noisy and I can’t tell what’s what.” He pauses, and frowns. “I haven’t really felt that way for a while now.”

“Since you started taking the medication?”

I told you to keep taking the pills for a reason, Mikumo whispers. I am not the enemy.

“Yes. They don’t leave me sick and tired and drained all the time.”

“They’re not meant to fix everything. But they do help. You just have to be willing to take the next step.”

He accepts her words and walks home alone. There is a certain truth to them that he can accept. The longer he thinks of his life so far, the more he can accept that everything he has faced matters less than he once thought, and the worries of the future are nothing compared to making a decision in the present.

Dinner with his mother is silent. He is distracted by thoughts of the Sports Festival and how far he will go. He can use One For All better now. Given time, he can let the strength of his mentor’s quirk empower him to the edge of human potential. With more time, he can exceed those bounds for a single moment without shattering his limbs.
Even without that, his shadows are always present. He hopes that the Sports Festival doesn’t take place at noon, or at least his portion in it doesn’t, as his shadows will be useless then.

“Kaa-san, are you… are you coming tomorrow?”

They’re seated in the lounge watching a show she likes. He hasn’t paid any attention to it, letting the words wash past him and occupied with one of the books from the shelf. It’s another book from his dad’s possession.

His mother looks up, a gentle smile on her lips.

“Only if you make me a promise.” He nods because there is no promise he would not fulfil for her. “Promise me that if I come tomorrow, you’ll do everything in your power to win.”

He scratches his burn scar, confused. “I will?”

“No, not like that.” She leans forward and touches her forehead to his. “Izuku, honey, don’t treat this like a game. Open your eyes because Japan will be watching. Show them how strong you are. Abandon whatever fears you have. Just keep looking forward and never stop. Retreat and you’ll grow old with regrets. Hesitate and you’ll die with those regrets.”

He stares deep in her eyes, seafoam to his forest. “I will.” He takes another breath to centre himself. “I will.”

That resolve follows him the next day. He walks with his back straight and head raised. It is a lie for he feels nervous and panicked, but he knows that wearing a lie long enough makes it a truth, or perhaps an untruth.

His confidence does not imbue him with any sense of direction. He has a map, every student does, given to him by Aizawa, but even with it he’s found himself in every wrong spot: the booth he thinks someone might be giving a presentation, a room where all the gas lines originate and a pale haired security guard inspecting them, and even all the way outside through a secret entrance Kamui Woods guards—explaining why he was out there had made the hero laugh, and though he has given Izuku directions, he still finds himself one level underground.

Before he can take a flight of stairs down, someone pulls him back. He looks and sees Ojiro who looks exasperated

“Your sense of direction is horrible,” Ojiro says, not letting go.

Izuku shrugs even as he is dragged along. “It’s only bad in the r-real world.”

Ojiro sighs, playing with his phone. “Good thing we went looking for you already

“W-were?”

“All of us. Your friends,” he adds. “Except Tokoyami. He got lost as well.”

He can’t help the smile even as they walk through the door. His classmates are there, and the conversation quiets when he enters.

Kirishima waves. “I know you said you have a bad sense of direction but man, you probably get lost in your own house.”

“I o-only did that once.”
He accepts the jokes at his expense as he sits between Uraraka and Kaminari. Uraraka teases him endlessly and distracts Iida with innocent comments on Tokoyami’s behaviour before the class rep can lecture her. He watches her juggle a conversation with Kaminari whilst also explaining why the Gravity remaster is the best movie to have come out of this decade to Ojiro who smiles through it all.

“Midoriya.”

He looks up and sees Todoroki walking—no, pacing with the tense energy of a predator—towards him, one hand in his pocket.

“To-Todoroki?” he asks, feeling just the slightest bit of dread from this boy whom he’s seen ice an entire building without breaking a sweat. He doesn’t miss the way Uraraka tenses or how the group falls silent.

“Objectively, I think I’m stronger than you are now,” Todoroki says, mixed eyes cold. “But All Might has his eye on you.”

Izuku tenses. “Wh—”

“I don’t care about that,” Todoroki cuts through. “I just know I’m going to beat you.”

“Hey man,” Kirishima says, placing a hand on Todoroki’s shoulder. “There’s no need to start something.”

Todoroki bats the hand away. “We’re not here to play at friends. I came here to win, something you’ve all forgotten about.”

“That’s—”

“You’re right,” Izuku says, standing. He hates how he must crane his neck up to meet Todoroki’s eyes, but he refuses to back down after that insult. “Everyone here wants to win. Even the students from the other courses. I just don’t get why you have a personal problem with me.”

Izuku grins. “Objectively speaking, I think you’re stronger.”

Knowledge, shadowshield, Mikumo says. He challenges you whilst holding back strength. You will match any challenger. He is nothing compared to you.

“Man, you need to stop saying…” Kirishima trails off as Izuku’s grin becomes just the slightest bit sharper.

“Objectively speaking, you have no reason to come after me. But if you want to come after me, that’s fine. I’ll give it all I’ve got.”

“Good. It won’t mean anything if you don’t when I win this tournament.”

Izuku lets a memory of nightmares bleed through his grin. “But if you come at me with anything less than your full strength, you won’t win.”

“This is foolish,” Tokoyami says. “And regardless of who wins your fight, I am winning this tournament.”

“Don’t get arrogant, you fucking flightless fowl,” Kaachan roars. “I’m gonna blow you the fuck away. This is my tournament arc, not yours.”
“Ah, that’s some cute alliteration,” Uraraka adds, perpetually cheerful. “I hope you have some when I send you to the moon because I’m winning.”

*****

Inko Midoriya finds her way through the stadium, checked no less than three times on the way to the parent’s section. The area already has some of the parents: a woman with a hawk’s head, maybe a crow, and her silent husband who is a mountain of muscle; two who look too like a frog to be anything but the Asuis. Other still, whom she cannot recognise.

“Inko.”

She looks at Mitsuki Bakugou who sits beside her husband, her arm around his neck. The woman is both wary—for good reason—and inviting as though she has any right to be, not when it was her son who harmed Izuku so much.

“Mitsuki,” she says, walking over. “Marasu.”

Despite that, there is nearly two decades of friendship between them. She holds Mitsuki accountable for her son’s actions, and she may never forgive her, but she can choose to not hate her. Izuku is many things, kind as the warm valley and joyous as the last summer evening, but cruel is not one of them. And she knows he will never forgive her if she doesn’t choose to be better and let go of her anger and hate.

It helps, perhaps, that ever since what happened they have spoken. Hours upon hours under the stars, tipsy and passing a joint from hand to hand, did they speak of failings and regrets and motherhood. She wonders often if they are simply perpetuating a cycle: Mitsuki and Inko, Izuku and Katsuki. A tale of two generations, and whilst the details may be different, the essence of the story remains the same. Two people meet. They become friends. A bitter fight. An incident that sparks, if not forgiveness, then the ability to take steps forward.

Will our grandchildren do the same?

She takes a seat beside them. From here, she can see the entirety of the battleground, and they are conveniently opposite the massive screen for whenever the camera’s focus on the action.

“Inko, dear, how are you?” Marasu asks affably. “Mitsuki here has—”

Mitsuki tightens her hold around his neck. “Nope, your speaking privileges are officially revoked, you shit stain.”

“Yes, dear.”

That easy interaction reminds her of Hisashi. Or, at least the parts of their marriage that was happy. It is that thought that makes her notice something.

“Is that the imperial family?” she asks, pointing to another booth filled with people in white uniforms. The stands above and below the booth are devoid of people. They seem to interact like normal people, but the white they all sport taints that visage of normality.

They may still pay reparations for their crimes, and will continue doing so for decades, but she can never forget the horror of watching Taiwan sink due to one man’s rage. She remembers Hisashi in the days after that, closed and withdrawn and much too terrified of the mundane. It never seemed strange to her at the time. After all, the collective psyche of Japan was traumatised to know one of their own, the first in line to succeed the Emperor, committed a crime like that.
I should have been more insistent on answers.

“Not anyone in the line of succession,” Marasu says, winking at his wife. “I think there might be a few agents, but the Royal Family wouldn’t leave the palace. Too easy to attack this place.”

The students start streaming out from one of the gates. She can barely make out her son amongst the sea of blue. He walks confidently, and she hopes he takes her words to heart.

“Things can change.”

Midnight makes an announcement that she pays no heed to. One of the students, Iida she believes, walks ahead of the group and onto the stand.

“Katsuki was supposed to give that,” Mitsuki says softly. “Little shit fucks up everything.”

“Can we not? Please?” Marasu leans forward in his seat, removing Mitsuki’s arm from his body. “I’m surprised they’re going with a race this year. Last year was the puzzle arena. This seems just a bit mundane after that.

“They wouldn’t put on a bad show,” Inko says and nods towards the imperial booth. “Not with them watching. They don’t do anything in half-measures.”

“Speaking from experience?”

They all know he means Hisashi. They all remember her wedding day when he appeared in his white uniform, short but imposing, the picture of panache—the perfect mix of boldness and grace, and that day is memorable as well for him tripping on the steps to the alter. And go on to not a single offer of explanation as to why he could wear their symbol and colours so casually.

She has been too afraid to ask and chose to put it away from her mind.

Mitsuki elbows her husband just as the race starts. The students stampede to the exit and almost immediately a bottleneck forms.

“Foolish,” someone says to her left. Separated by two seats is a man in a black jacket with cross-like eyes. “Some will have no patience.”

Almost on que, ice spreads and traps the students. “Your son smart to stay back.”

She looks down and sees Izuku standing behind the massive crowd, still as a statue.

“How do you—”

“Same hair,” the man interrupts. “Green not common hair colour. Name Jin. Pleasure to meet you.”

The man is odd, she decides, after glancing at his leopard pelt dress. She’s not sure if his getup is in support of a student, if he’s a hero—she can list all of the major ones and some of the more obscure ones because of Izuku—or perhaps eccentric enough to simply walk around with his torso revealed.

Still, she is polite. “Inko. The pleasure is all mine. Is one of your children competing?”

She barely sees Izuku move. In one motion he’s behind the crowd and in the next he’s landing in a roll on the other side, sliding with his momentum instead of battling the slick surface.

“Brilliant.” She feels the moment his attention turns towards her, the quiet sense that she’s sitting
beside an apex predator deigning to walk amongst ants. “Not children. Students. Three of them. One with tail.”

She finds the blonde boy. “Ojiro.”

“Student at dojo since child. Watch.” The robots appear then, and she observes Ojiro flip above one and break it apart with a flick of his tail even as ice encases the rest.

“Second being carried.”

She sees Shinsou being carried by four students and marvels at the audacity of it all. “Shinsou.”

“How the fuck do you know everyone?” Mitsuki mutter more to herself than anyone.

“Other student difficult boy. Kind. Smart. Has good instinct.”

“Who is it?” She watches Izuku stand before one of the robots. When it brings its arm down to punch him, he simply steps to the side and crouches, spinning with the moment. She watches shocked as he sweeps its legs out and causes it to crash to the ground. She knew he was strong, especially with All Might’s quirk, but it is rare that he uses it so casually.

“Acceptable. Little wasted movement. Form not horrible.” The odd man seems to smile with his entire body, everything about him loosening. The mild fear she has felt vanishes.

She thinks on his words. Her eyes widen. “Wait, you can’t—”

“Teach him I did,” the man says. “Form and technique. Had hoped he would show you my dojo one day. Seems he forgot.”

She can’t help the snort. “He does.”

“Forgive me for not introducing myself earlier.” He nods his head, bowing almost. “Jin Mo-Ri. Teacher of Taekwondo. Please forgive atrocious Japanese. From Korea.”

“It’s fine.” And then, because she is kind and knows too much, she says, “You know who else trained him?”

He raises a brow. “You speak Korean as well. Both you and your son are exceptional.”

“Do you know?” she repeats more insistently.

“When the hell did you learn Korean?”

Inko smiles at Mitsuki, bright and false as a mirage in the desert. “I’ve had some free time.” And she has heard the litanies of dead gods, knows the shape of their names and the formless runes that draw them forth.

“The Symbol of Peace,” Jin says. “Once my student as well. All things in this story are cyclical. The past becomes the future becomes the present.”

“He has enemies. Enemies I fear he has not told my son. He is young and still believes the world is black and white. Heroes and villains. Humans and monsters.”

Jin crosses his leg, ankle on knee. “All Might is not the best teacher. A good man, and a greater symbol, but he has never had to become a teacher. He does the best he can with what little he knows.”
“My son is permanently scarred because of his failings.”

Mitsuki grunts. “Who the hell is that?” she asks, pointing at the kid who slides across the now frozen tightropes rapidly.

“Endeavour’s son,” Mashiro says. “Got in on recommendation from what I heard. Seems he deserved it. Look at how far ahead of the pack he is.”

“Our shit stain’s right behind him.”

“Neither win this round,” Jin says to them. “Wait until final section. Surprised you might be. Easy bet is not always right bet.”

“We’ll see.”

“Yes.” In Korean, he adds, “Scars heal. Burn scars have treatments.”

“He’ll miss out on the rest of the term if we try those treatments.”

He hums. “I am no doctor but medical technology has advanced. Whom did you consult with?”

“Recovery Girl.”

“And no other specialist did you seek? She is many things, but infallible is not one of them. No single person can know all medicine. Investigate further, you should.”

Inko frowns. There are other reasons she will not speak to a man she hardly knows. How much of her son’s quirk Jin knows is unknown to her, and even if All Might trusts the man, she is unwilling to place that kind of trust in a stranger. Her son may face threats if she gets help from an outside specialist. She has no choice but to trust in the school.

At least, until Izuku is strong enough to stand alone. The moment he is, then Inko will rain down brimstone and ash on the school.

There are other institutions, Shiketsu and Ketsubutsu in Japan, and she doesn’t doubt Izuku’s abilities to find a placement in any of the other great campuses around the world: Toledo Research Institute in in Spain where the tyrant Stormwind died in peace; Hero Memorial Academy in Zimbabwe where Hero, a heroine matched only by Hawkmoon, died in agony with her lover Legion on the day of their union.

She has options, but if Izuku is far away then she cannot protect him in those foreign lands. Here, at least, she knows of two hero agencies that specialise in extractions that she can contact immediately if her son is ever kidnapped. All Might will do everything in his power to see her son safe. And if all that fails she has one last option.

Her gaze drifts to the Imperial booth once more. Hisashi wore their uniform at their wedding. Every month without fail, her account receives a deposit large enough to cover their needs, more than any pension for a single risk assessor should receive. A year after Izuku was born Hisashi gave her the location of a safety deposit box and told her to use it if she was ever in any trouble.

She hasn’t opened it, terrified of what it might hold, and never having need to do so. But with the attack on USJ, her resolve falters. She is ready should the day come and she must unearth those old secrets.

“That’s an interesting obstacle,” Mashiro says, pulling her from her thoughts. It makes her realise
that she’s missed a good chunk of the event. “A minefield to slow the pack leaders down. Katsuki can’t stay in air that long and Endeavour’s boy can’t use his ice.”

“He could build a bridge that arcs over it,” Inko says immediately. “So long as he’s careful, it won’t touch the minefield and no one else can skate across the ice as fast as he can.”

“That was… insightful.”

Inko shrugs. “Izuku spends a lot of time on quirks. Some of it rubbed off on me.”

“Speaking of him, what the fuck is he doing?”

She looks for her son and finds him kneeling at the edge of the minefield. The others can’t see it, but even though the magnification isn’t high enough, she can still somehow peer past it. He is hunched over to increase the area of his shadows, and his hands are pressed firmly on—in, her mind supplies—the shadow. Shapes and patterns form in the darkness just out of reach, the swirling edifices of eternal monuments that live and die every second.

“Winning,” she says just as a tendril of shadow, perhaps a handsan wide, shoots across the minefield.

Izuku jumps on it and sprints forward. Behind him the shadow-bridge disintegrate, but ahead of him they are strong as ever. She can see how tendrils of darkness reach out from his shadow and reinforce the bridge as he sprints, chased by Katsuki and Endeavour’s son.

And yet, though he has a limp, his sprint is exceedingly fast. For a moment she thinks she sees green lightning. And then he is gone, leaping forward and crossing the distance to the exit. He fails the landing, and instead of sliding gracefully, he tumbles through the exit.

Inko hides her face in here hands at the sight of Izuku, face planted in the ground, and ass up for all the world to see. She wants to clap, really, she does.

“He’s got style,” Mitsuki says, giggling. “Wasn’t Hisashi in that exact position right before the altar? Like father like son.”

“I tried very hard to forget that.”

When Midnight announces a ten-minute intermission, Mitsuki grabs her husband. “Let’s find some food.”

“I see your diet lasted three whole days this time.”

“Honey, shut up.”

“Yes, dear.” He nods to Inko. “Want anything?”

“No really.”

“That means she’s starving,” Mitsuki says, dragging her husband who waves as they leave.

She listens to some of the other parents take advantage of the intermission before the next round. There isn’t ay reason for her to leave, not when Marasu will probably bring back enough food to feed the entire stadium.

She watches as one of the staff members makes eight platforms of concrete held up by pillars. There are handholds and scaffolds on the pillars leading to the platform, and a haphazard collection
of bridges connecting the pillars.

“How did you know he would win?”

“Had faith. He is a smart boy and has good instincts.”

“I still don’t really know who you are? All Might trusts you and let you train my son.”

“I’m just a stranger from a far away land.” He smiles. “My story has ended. I have no part in these events. You shouldn’t worry too much about my placement. I’m not even a side character. I just pop up as I am needed. Izuku is the hero, and sometimes I teach him.”

“I don’t like that answer.”

He sighs. “Jaecheondaesong. Name have meaning? No, I think not. Useless name to you. Search all database. Find nothing. A teacher I am now, nothing more.”

The silence between them is tense until the Bakugous arrive. As she expects, Marasu has enough snacks to last them a camping trip and most of them end up in Mitsuki’s hands. She eats quickly, and Inko will always be confused at how she manages to eat so much so quickly without looking like a pig.

Midnight walks onto the field and a pillar forms beneath her, bringing her high above the crowd. She poses extravagantly.

“Marasu, if you’re looking at her then I’m divorcing you.”

“She’s not as beautiful as you.”

Inko rolls her eyes as Midnight speaks.

“Boys and girls, ladies and gentlemen, get ready for the second phase of the sports festival. This round is called Zone Control. Teams of two will be randomly chosen. You and your partner will be chained—kinky, ain’t it?—together, and will have to scale the pillars and reach the platform above. Whoever holds a zone for five minutes will capture the zone. But any enemies on the platform will stop the capture. Thanks to our lovely Support department, each platform will change colour from the outside in. Once it’s fully changed colour, the zone is locked, and the team moves on to the next round.

“Here’s where it gets real interesting. Even if you do evict the team there first, you still need to neutralise the zone, and that takes half as long as they held it for. So, if they held it for two minutes, you need to neutralise it for one full minute. Have fun, kiddies.”

Marasu hums. “Interesting. They’ve never done this before.”

“Didn’t they have the cavalry battle two years back?”

“That’s because they were short one class. Some teacher expelled all the students in their class.”

He points to one of the platforms. “And that’s not as interesting. This here forces students to work with someone new, maybe someone they hate. And the chain limits their range of motion so unless they have some good synergy they’ll lose. And even if you do get up there, the longer it takes for you to capture a zone the harder it gets.”

“Oh.” Inko swallows, understanding the intent behind the design. “Each captured zone funnels people to the next one until you’ve got twenty teams fighting for one zone. That’s gonna be a
bloodbath.”

Jin chuckles deeply. “Can you hold territory? Take a zone quickly, and your victory guaranteed.”

*****

Izuku is nervous. He’s already figured out the nature of this game before he finds himself chained to a pink-haired girl with goggles, one Mei Hatsume from Support. She is bright and boisterous, smiling easily and not at all caring that he has horrid scar.

“This game is ours. Let’s take the first platform.”

They’re all waiting near one exit, bunched up.

“N-no,” he whispers. “Let’s get to the edge of the group before the rush starts.”

She frowns but doesn’t fight him as he leads her to the right side of the group. “Do you have anything that can get us up there quickly? The red platform.” It is the fifth platform, close enough that they won’t spend too long getting to it but far enough away that he knows it won’t be anyone’s first choice.

“My jetpack. Why aren’t we going for the first one?”

He glances back to the group. He doesn’t know what powers they each have, but he knows the real dangers.

“Area abilities. If they’re smart, they’ll try taking out everyone quickly.”

Her eyes widen. “I think I like you.”

“Thanks. Stand closer to me.” She does so, and the proximity makes him flush. “If it’s ice use your jetpack immediately. If it’s lightning, give me a moment. And if it’s anything else, I kinda have no plan.”

She nods, and they wait anxiously for the round to start.

It comes all too soon. A loud bang and a bright flare herald the start of the event. They crowd barely gets a collective step when lightning surges along the ground. There are screams as students freeze and collapse to the ground, their muscles seizing up.

Izuku smiles. He and Hatsume both stand on a platform of shadow. And shadow is many things but conductive is not one of them.

“Got you,” Hatsume says, wrapping an arm around his waist. She is taller than him. Her invention comes to life with a loud growl and then they’re flying in the air.

The crowd roars when they land on their platform. Hatsume waves back. Izuku isn’t so cocky as to not pay attention to what’s going on.

He watches Shinsou drag Kaminari who seems to have lost a good third of his IQ points. A smile graces his features when he sees Shinsou avoid the first two platforms and head to the third.

Unlike him, Shinsou must take the bridges and stairs up the pillars.

When the ice appears and freezes the contestants, Izuku is glad he got the hell out of dodge because Todoroki looks livid. He doesn’t bother with subtlety and an arc of ice leads straight to the closest platform. He drags a still twitching Ashido with him as he glides to the platform. Once he’s
at the top, he freezes the platform and the pillar making it impossible for anyone to ascend it.

Izuku swallows nervously. That’s the person he just challenged.

*I will stand by you when we defeat him, brother mine.*

“He’s strong,” Hatsume says. “You look scared. Are you guys rivals or something?”

He shakes his head slowly as Dark Shadow extends to one of the platforms. It compresses, bringing with it Tokoyami and his partner Kirishima. He knows they’ll make a strong team together. That’s three of his friends. He hopes more make it to the next round.

“I th-think we’ve shared maybe a hundred words. He s-spent most of them telling me he’s out for m-my head.”

“That doesn’t sound…” She trails off as Iida sprints across the field carrying Uraraka on her back. She tenses, ready for a fight as they get near them. And then they run right past. “Huh?”

“They have no reason to contest this zone,” he explains. “Not when there are other free zones. We won’t have to fight anyone.”

Uraraka taps Iida on the shoulder. Izuku watches amazed as Iida runs straight for the pillar. And then he’s running up it in defiance of gravity.

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Well, you b-basically won the round with your jetpack. Everyone will remember that.” He smiles at her, pleased that she doesn’t grimace at the way it pulls his scar. “And the further you go; the more people will notice them. People came here to win, Hatsume. If you spend your time showing off, then no one will care. If you make it even as far as the quarters, then I bet… I bet you’ll be scouted by every big name. But if you aren’t here to win, then you might as well bow out. People are drawn to strength of will more than anything else.”

She huffs. “Good for us but I didn’t get to show off my inventions.”

“Not really. I think everyone understands on an instinctive level. We’ve had this zone for what? Three minutes. Even if they boot us off, it’ll take six and a half minutes to capture it. Better to fight for one that’s just been taken.”

Shu huffs. “You shouldn’t hurt a girl’s feelings like that.”

“Huh?”

She offers him a smile. “You know, I was just gonna try and show off, but I think… I think you might be right. If we have to fight against each other I won’t hold back.”

He smiles. “I hope you do well.”

Izuku watches the red of their platform reach the flag and observes the way it creeps up it. Once it reaches the top, a bright red flare shoots off.

“Our first winners,” Present Mic says through the speakers, “are Izuku Midoriya from 1-A who’s come first in both rounds.”

The crowd roars, the sound stunning Izuku. It is loud enough that the platform vibrates.
“And his partner Mei Hatsume from the Support Department. Let me hear you roar.”

The crowd obliges. Hatsume waves, spinning on the spot and the crowd goes crazy. She seems to revel in this adulation, and Izuku is happy for her, but he doesn’t care much for it.

He meets Todoroki’s gaze across the stadium. There is nothing but hate and anger in that gaze.

“Seven platforms left. Fight forever, students!”

*****

The world resolves in a flash of green lightning. A doorway forms and the World Walker traverses the distance between universes in a single step. This one takes stock of its surroundings: darkness, infernal and eternal plagues the land; creatures of shattered dreams and nuclear fire stalk the lands, battling arch dragons bathed in the godflame.

“Well, this is new,” the operator within the World Walker says. One step takes it away from the battlefield and to a new destination.

This place is like glass reflecting the light of creation. Bright enough that it would blind any normal creature, drive them mad with the mere reflection of one of the greatest acts of existence. This light is proof of life, not its meaning—inherent or otherwise—but the simple fact that life exists.

And right in the centre, incongruous though it might be, railroad tracks stretch across this endless plain. The World Walker steps follows the path, walking endlessly and observing an eternity pass by overhead.

Creatures are birthed by this light, but every light gives rise to shadows and their natural enemies awaken from the darkness. Their war lasts millennia, and at the end, only two remain. They light the fallen corpses of their allies in the first flame of creation and send them back in time to the very beginning, to fight the war anew. The cycle repeats, two more added to the original that made it to the end, until a critical mass is reached. It is not the salvation they think it is, and nightmare come through, draining them of life until none remain.

It is an interesting enough diversion for the World Walker to observe until the destination is reached. A train, nearly a hundred cars long, waits patiently. Investigating it reveals modern amenities but nothing of any interest until the driver’s car.

There is little out of place except for the conductor’s hat on the chair. The World Walker takes it and inspects it. ‘Master Railroad’ it reads.

“How… odd?” It is not as bright as it once was, but it will do. “What happened to your corpse? It’s always supposed to be here.”

The World Walker sets fire to the train and observes how the flames fail to consume it fully. Scorch marks appear where there should be nothing but ash. The World Walker ignore it once the flames dies out.

“I wonder if you’ll like this hat, shadowking.” Twirling it in one hand, the World Walker adds, “This hunt is to end soon. I’m coming.”

A bird carrying the weight of two galaxies swoops down in assault, its screech shattering this perfect glass. The beat of its wings banishes the light that birthed the universe. The World Walker set it aflame and watches it crash to the ground a few metres away. Its feathers are each a record of a people, a testament to their glories and failings. Taking two at random, the World Walker
attaches them to the hat.

“No matter what stands in my way.”

Chapter End Notes

As a quick note, this current season of the story will end on chapter 24.

That's all from me for now. Thank you for reading this. If you enjoyed the story leave a kudos and if you have any questions just leave a comment below. But know that all of that is unnecessary, and as always your readership is quite enough for me. Cheers.
As always, I have a discord server I'm running like a total noob. https://discord.gg/4YvCTYR

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘Strength of body is to be physically fit and able to manipulate your quirk with competence. This is the ability to take a blow and keep going. Speed, strength, and durability are the core foundations of this tenet. If you can end a battle in a single blow, then you can rescue civilians faster. If you are fast enough you can avoid an engagement entirely. And if you are durable, you can hold out until help arrives.’

—Excerpt from the recovered 'Tenets of Combat' likely authored by an underground hero or vigilante.

When the second round is over, the platforms are brought down and Izuku finally relaxes. The last platform, the one Kaachan held, had seen absolute carnage. There are close to a dozen teams groaning on the ground, battered and bruised and some suffering mild burns. Kacchan shows no signs of exertion despite all the people he’s beaten.

Look harder, Mikumo snarls as Kaachan lets his partner, the green-haired girl from 1-B, lead him away.

He frowns. Kaachan’s breathing is even and steady, and his arms don’t tremble from exhaustion. What am I... oh, he’s letting her lead because he’s too tired to argue. It’s a... lie?

Izuku, along with the other seven teams, head towards Midnight who posses extravagantly. It reminds him of exactly why she’s an R-rated heroine, though it does make him wonder why she is commenting. If anything, All Might would be better simply because he has a better image.

You haven’t been reading the news, Mikumo says with a hint of humour.

When the hell have you been reading the news?

When you’re asleep.

“Are you gonna untie us?” Hatsume asks, lifting her chained hand. With how much taller she is, Izuku rises off the ground. “He’s nice and all, don’t get me wrong, but I don’t want that kind of commitment.”

Izuku flushes. “P-put me down.”

“Ah, I don’t think he likes it rough,” Midnight says, cracking her whip. “Sweet baby boy, I’ll wait till you’re a few years older before breaking you in.”

“Midnight-sensei, please refrain from saying such statements,” Iida says sternly. “Firstly, it’s morally reprehensible. Secondly, he’s a minor.”
Midnight rolls her eyes. “So boring. Anyway…” She turns around and waves to the audience, raising her mic. “Ladies and gentlemen of the audience, I present to you the victors of the second stage. Give them a round of applause.”

Hearing an audience of fifty-thousand strong clap is like hearing the harshest crack of thunder, loud enough that his bones feel like they’re shaking.

“Alright contestants, the final stage of this sports festival is the tournament. Brackets will be randomly chosen. The rules are simple: win by knocking your opponent unconscious or pushing them out of bounds. If you look at the screen, your matchups are shown.”

Izuku looks and finds his name beside Ashido’s. He glances in her direction and sees her grinning. He shudders and looks back at the screen. The rest of the matchups are as follows: Tokoyami and Aoyama; Ibara, who he thinks might be the green-haired girl, and Kirishima; Kacchan and Sero; Yaoyorozu and Hatsume whom he hopes wins; Uraraka and Kaminari; Shinsou against Testuetsu who can only be the silver-skinned boy; and Iida who’s stuck with Todoroki.

He can make guesses as to who will win, but even that isn’t a certain thing. Whilst he can hope his friends win, that only means they’ll have to face each other later. Already he is stacked up against someone he knows and cares for in Ashido.

“We’ll have a thirty-minute intermission and then it’s non-stop fun, starting with the recreational activities. Good luck, kiddies, and get some rest in. You’ll need it.”

They are shepherded through the tunnel where Midnight finally releases them from their restraints. Izuku rubs his wrist, still sore from Hatsume’s constant tugging. Before he knows it, an arm is draped heavily over his shoulder.

“Man, you’re killing it today,” Kirishima says and then jabs his thumb at Todoroki. “I thought you came here to win. You got us all excited with a challenge and you’ve lost both times.”

Todoroki looks indifferent, but the longer Izuku meets his blue eye, the longer he feels like his veins will freeze from the cold rage there.

“Don’t be mean,” Uraraka says, bumping Kirishima with her hip. “Come on, let’s grab some food.” She grabs Kirishima’s hand and pulls him with her. Before she leaves, she grabs Shinsou hand as well, and his tired looking friend turns a bright red.

Izuku watches this, bemused as always.

“Your class is weird,” the green-haired girl, Ibara says. “I kind of like it.”

“Fuck off, you cunts,” Bakugou says, stalking away. “I have better shit to do then listen to you make nice.”

They eat lunch in the cafeteria. Izuku can barely stomach his meal at the thought of fighting Ashido who seems to not care. If anything, she seems to revel in the idea. Uraraka brings an intensity to their conversation that he’s never seen in her before, and he can’t help the small smile at the entranced expression Shinsou has.

“Excuse me,” Tokoyami says as he stands.


“Don’t call me that, you fool,” Tokoyami snaps.
“Would you prefer crow? I’ve got a dozen more nicknames waiting.”

Tokoyami turns, the set of his shoulders angry. “My business is my own. Do as you please.”

“What’s got him so upset?”

Izuku sighs. “Y-you’re being mean.”

“It’s just a nickname.”

Izuku shakes his head. “Not for him.” He pushes his tray aside and stands. “I’m heading to the booth.” He grabs his tray.

“Don’t get lost,” Kirishima calls as Izuku walks away.

He does get lost and spends most of the hour walking through stadium with no idea how to get anywhere. He passes the gas room once more and encounters a man dressed in a formal suit whose body seems to unravel before his very eyes, the same guard he saw inspecting the gas lines earlier. Izuku blinks but ignores it. He has a security badge and he’s seen other people dressed similarly.

Eventually, after Ectoplasm encounters him and takes pity on him, Izuku finds the booth for the contestants. He doesn’t blush as he takes a seat.

“You got lost.”

“Shut up.” He sinks further into his seat as the first contestants are called onto the stage.

Tokoyami and Aoyama walk up to the stage from opposite ends, both looking composed.

“Who’s gonna win, do you think?” Uraraka asks.

“Tokoyami,” he says in the same instance that Kaachan says, “Bird-brain.”

He looks over his shoulder and meets Kaachan’s burning red eyes. Something passes between them and Kaachan nods.

“Come on, Aoyama isn’t useless. His quirk is literally Tokoyami’s hard counter,” Kirishima argues.

Izuku shakes his head even as the fight starts. Aoyoama wastes no time in firing a dazzling bolt of light.

“Yeah, but he gets sick if he fires for too long,” Izuku says as Tokoyami side-steps another bolt, not even having summoned Dark Shadow. “His attacks are too telegraphed.”

The moment Aoyama falters, his knees buckling, does Dark Shadow appear and cross the distance, slamming into his enemy. Aoyama grimaces as he’s flung out of the ring and Midnight calls the match.

“Show off. Well, wish me luck,” Kirishima says, grinning.

“Good luck?”

“That is the least manly way you could have said it.”

“S-sorry.”
They say no more as Kirishima leaves for his match against Ibara. “You don’t think he’ll win?” Uraraka asks.

“He’s at a disadvantage. From the way she won the zone defence, she’s got great area denial.”

He nods as Midnight calls the match and Kirishima rushes in. Ibara’s hair moves and digs deep through the floor. A thick tendril of green vines rises up and blocks Kirishima’s path. He barrels through it, only to face another green wall.

“He’s lost,” Izuku says a moment before green walls encircle Kirishima. Soon, they can’t see Kirishima at all behind the cage, and it rises gently in the air and is placed outside the ring.

Midnight calls the match without much fanfare.

“Area denial and capture techniques are hard counters to strengthening quirks. Even certain mutations.”

“You really know a lot about quirks,” Iida says from behind him. In the background, Cementoss repairs the arena with his quirk very easily.

Izuku shrugs as Bakugou and Sero enter from opposite sides of the arena. “Just a hobby I picked up.”

“I don’t think it’s a hobby if your entire life revolves around it,” Shinsou says. “How many notebooks on quirks do you have?”

Izuku frowns. “All of them? About eighty or so. I mean, only about half are about quirk combat.”

“Do you do anything fun, Midoriya?” Uraraka asks.

“I went to the mall with you guys.”

“That was like a month ago.”

“Shinsou made me watch a movies last weekend,” he adds and only then realises how pitiful that sounds.

“He clearly didn’t do a good job. So, who’s winning this one.”

“Kacchan,” he says instantly. He feels the way the mood dies down and adds, “He wants to win more. Their quirks are about equal but…”

He trails off as Midnight starts the match. Sero’s tape arcs across the arena. Bakugou leaps to the side, aided by an explosion. Another and he’s rocketing towards Sero. Sero fires off more tape with his free arm. Kaachan just ducks low and lets off a quick explosion that pushes Sero back. Kaachan’s within Sero’s guard in a moment and his elbow slams into the boy’s sternum.

They watch in silence as Kaachan grabs Sero by the arm and flips the boy over, pinning him with a knee and bending his arm painfully. Sero taps the ground and Midnight calls the match.

The next two matches are over quickly: Kaminari, who still hasn’t recovered his IQ points, faces off against Uraraka who jumps high in the air to avoid Kaminari’s predictable lighting surge and takes him down with a vicious uppercut; and Testuetsu who has no idea about Shinsou’s quirk responds to him and is forced to walk off the stage.

“This will be an interesting battle,” Tokoyami says, having returned a few minutes ago. “A ranged
fighter against the fastest person in the class. Todoroki will lose if Iida is fast enough to close the gap.”

Izuku isn’t so certain. From what he’s seen, outside of surprising Todoroki, he doesn’t have any real weaknesses. His ice is fast, capable of amazing area denial, and instantaneous.

When the battle begins, Todoroki wastes no time. Frost creeps across the ground and then rapidly expands in massive blocks. Iida’s already on the other side of the arena and slides around Todoroki’s next attack.

Frost spreads in two separate directions and ice sprouts in a large ‘V’ shape, with Iida right at the centre. He crouches and then he’s in the air above Todoroki. His foot comes down. Todoroki blocks it with an ice-covered arm. The ice shatters and Iida leaps past him.

“Speed is his weakness,” Tokoyami says as Iida dodges more ice.

“No, it fucking isn’t,” Kaachan snarls and Izuku can’t help but agree. “You fucking deserve to lose if you can’t figure it out, Deku.”

Something changes about Iida. Blue flames leave his engines and then he’s moving fast as lightning. He spins past slabs of ice like a blur and kicks Todoroki so fast Izuku can barely track it. The audience gasps as Todoroki goes flying.

Izuku watches the boy tumble across the field before righting himself, one hand on the ground. Frost spreads in a path to Iida but it seems so slow in comparison. He can do it, Izuku thinks just as Iida is enters close range. The ice expands an inch behind Iida and even from so far away, Izuku can see the shock and realisation in Todoroki’s eyes. Come on Iida, he thinks as Iida leg is raised and ready to smash Todoroki’s face in.

Then the fire appears.

He watches as a single stream of fire sparks to life, bright and hot enough that Iida is forced to dodge to the side instead of finishing his kick. The audience gasps in shock, and Iida hesitates for half a second. In that half second, the fire vanishes as frost spreads across the ground. Ice forms in massive, misshapen clumps, becoming larger and larger the closer they got to Iida.

Izuku stares dumbly at the massive shadow now covering a good portion of the stadium. His hands shake at this monstrous hill of ice, sharp and jagged as crystal nightmares.

“Oh fuck,” someone says.

Izuku agrees completely with that sentiment. He wants to run and hide. This level of power over the material world isn’t something he’s seen in the real world with his own two eyes. Hawkmoon and Hero are legends, but even they didn’t control the landscape like this. The only person he can think of with power like this is the former Imperial Heir, and that man sunk an island before committing seppuku.

A warm hand covers his own. He looks to Tokoyami who seems resolute, a bastion of dignified regality that Izuku can’t help but admire. Right now, he can see Tokoyami battling the entire world without faltering once.

“Calm yourself,” he says resolutely. “No foe is insurmountable.”

He speaks true, brother mine.
“I don’t know about you but that seems pretty insurmountable,” Ashido says. “Who even speaks like that?”

He doesn’t pay attention to them, or even to Yaoyorozu’s battle with Hatsume. His mind is too preoccupied with Todoroki’s battle because if Iida, who is both faster and a better martial artist, stood no chance, then how is he to win. He doesn’t pay much attention to Hatsume’s victory—she used some sort of capture device and dragged Yaoyorozu high enough in the air with her jetpack that their classes vice rep was forced to surrender.

“You’re a useless fuck if you can’t figure it out,” Kaachan snarls as Izuku walks past his chair.

“Hey, man, cut it out,” Kirishima says.

“Fuck off you side character. Deku, you saw it. Stop over analysing shit. You know his fucking weakness.”

_He has a point. Stop thinking too much._

Izuku is left with those words as he faces off against Ashido. He knows her quirk and has made guesses as to some of her limits. He nods to her and focuses on One For All, letting it’s power fill him.

“Contestants at the ready,” Midnight roars. “Fight.”

The whip of her crack punctuates the start of the battle. Ashido lobs a globule of acid at Izuku. He tilts his head and lets it streak past him. There is no point in moving his entire body. She slides towards him, much faster than he can move.

He wonders between dodging globules of acid if she could possible dissolve Todoroki’s ice. And then he realises how rude it is not to pay attention to her.

Izuku dashes forward which catches Ashido off-guard after his passive defence. She flings her arm out, a crescent of acid blocking his path. He pirouettes and flows around the acid. He couches low and sweeps his leg out as he did to take out the robot in the last stage.

Ashido goes down hard.

Before he can close the gap, she spews acid out of her side. Izuku scrambles to the side, hearing his clothes sizzle.

_Too close_, he thinks and leaps forward. He knees her in the side, his heart clenching painfully at her grunt, and brings her down with a flip.

He has his knee on the small of her back and wrenches one of her arms back. He feels sick because it reminds him of how Kaachan won his fight.

“Y-yield, or I’ll dislocate your s-shoulder.”

She grunts. “You give shit threats. You better win against half-an-half.” She raises her head to look at Midnight. “Yield!”

“Midoriya wins and moves on to the next round.”

The crowd roars and Izuku helps Ashido up. “S-sorry about that.”

She huffs. “You better not be sorry about winning. You don’t hurt a girl’s pride like that.”
He’s left bewildered as she walks away, whistling a jaunty tune and waving. It’s like she considers this loss to be a victory of sorts, as if she is simply revelling in the battle and not the outcome.

“I don’t get girls,” he mutters.

He doesn’t head straight back to the booth. Instead, after mistakenly finding the toilet—which he is grateful for—and being given direction by the same security guard who he learns is called Nagisa, he finds himself in a secluded part of the stadium. Izuku sighs in the corridor and heads to the sunlight. Of course, he would get lost again.

“Midoriya.”

*I need to get lost better,* he thinks as he turns and sees Todoroki who seems tense and frazzled.

“Y-yes?” He takes a step back and his back meets the wall.

The boy huffs, and places one hand in his pocket. “I won’t hurt you. I think you have enough of people doing that in your life.”

“What do you—”

“Tell me,” Todoroki interrupts, “are you All Might’s child?”

Izuku blinks, because that is the absolute last thing he ever expects to be asked. He presses his fingers painfully into his thigh. He doesn’t wake up from this surreal dream.

“You’re connected. He’s been watching you from the beginning. And he pays more attention to you than anyone else.”

“That’s because we have similar quirks.”

Todoroki shakes his head. “You knew him before he came here. You even have the same quirk.”

“What? No. I have a grab-bag quirk. You even said so yourself.”

“I was lying for you sake,” he admits. “The speed and strength you show make no sense for a grab-bag quirk. You have two quirks, Midoriya. One from All Might. I know because I have two. You saw the fire.”

Todoroki raises his left hand and a tiny wisp of flame appears. His expression is pinched and haunted as though he relieves a painful memory from the simple act.

“You know my father is Endeavour and his quirk Hellfire. I inherited this curse from him. He married my mother and I was sired. Two quirks, just like the Imperial family has done for years.” He raises his right hand and ice coats it.

“I know what two quirks look like. So, don’t play that game.” Todoroki sneers. “Did he force your mother into a marriage?”

Izuku’s heart beats loud in his chest. “N-no. He’s the number one hero. He wouldn’t-I mean, he’d never f-force himself on my mother.” He shudders at the very idea.

“He has some integrity despite what he’s done to you.”

“He’s done nothing to me,” Izuku snarls, angry enough that his shadow is vibrating. “You’re right, I do know him. But you don’t get to say anything when you know nothing about me.”
Todoroki closes his eyes. Takes a breath. Opens them again.

“You’re right, I don’t know anything about you. But I know people.” Todoroki looks away, a sheer tiredness coming over him. “People who are powerful can hide behind their position. They can hide whatever they want, and no one will ever know. We call them heroes. You worship anyone with that name. And from what I’ve seen, you’re willing to forgive anyone no matter how much they hurt you.”

“That’s not…”

It’s kinda true. You gotta admit he’s not spewing bullshit.

“At least you won’t try to lie about it. I asked you once if you feared the flame. That is the only lesson I ever learnt from my old man.” Todoroki touches his brilliant burn scar. “My mother shouted that as she poured burning water on my face.”

Izuku can’t help the sharp gasp that escapes his lips. Not even for a single second can he imagine his mother harming him unintentionally, let alone on purpose.

“The people closest to us hurt us the most,” Todoroki says quietly. “All Might knew Bakugou would come for you and he didn’t stop him when he destroyed half the building. You might be willing to forgive him for what he did to you, but I won’t excuse it.”

He slams his left fist against the wall, the noise echoing through the hallway. Todoroki’s breathing is ragged and sharp.

“I hate my flames. I thought you of all people would understand. I started a fight with you to prove something. That I don’t need this curse to be the best hero. I’m not going to perpetuate another cycle of silence and cruelty. I’m not going to become my father. I’m not going to become everything I hate.”

Every inch of Todoroki vibrates, an electrifying potential yet to be reached. Despite the tension building, he never makes an intimidating move towards Izuku as he walks past.

“Todoroki,” Izuku says before the boy goes. “I don’t know you and I don’t know a lot of things. But I know a lot about quirks. I’ve seen the way your arm freezes over. If you really had two quirks, then your body would be able to handle the cold.”

Todoroki is still. “You’re right.” For a second, Izuku’s heart soars. “You do know nothing.”

He knows your power and its potential in the very depths of his soul. He wishes to break the chains of his legacy and use you as the hammer with which to do so, Mikumo says. He does not understand that a personal hell can only be escaped through more suffering.

“I know you think that beating me means you’ll beat All Might. But I’m not him. You can’t break a cycle by perpetuating it.” Izuku grabs Todoroki by the shoulder and twists him around. “I want to be a hero and I can’t be the best if I don’t use all of my power. Neither can you.”

“Don’t touch me.” Todoroki bats his hand away. “This hellfire is a curse. I’ll be the best without it.”

Why won’t he listen? Izuku wonders desperately. Please, just listen to me.

“Power is power,” he blurts out, hoping it will get through. “Only you get to choose how to use it.”
Todoroki doesn’t respond. Izuku watches his classmate walk away, unsure of what to do now.

“Can’t save anyone,” he whispers.

****

Enji Todoroki watches his son battle a boy of the Iida lineage. He is too like Ingenium and his parents before to be anything other than an Iida. His skills shine through as he outmanoeuvres and predicts Shouto’s attacks. It makes him consider that perhaps his training of Shouto’s physical capabilities has been too lax when the boy is forced to summon his flames to win.

He scoffs and heads to the lower levels. People move aside from his impressive frame wreathed in flames. They aren’t hot flames. He long ago learnt to regulate their temperature. Now, with no enemies present, they exist only to intimidate.

He leans magnificently against a wall as Shouto leaves his match, moisture lining his right side. Enji can’t necessarily see heat, but he can sense it acutely, and right now Shouto’s left side runs hot. The boy’s eyes narrow as he sees Enji.

“You used your fire.”

“What of it?” Shouto says, one step away from a snarl. “I don’t need your power to win. I never will.”

Enji scoffs. “Words don’t matter, boy. You made a promise and broke it before you even had to fight that Midoriya boy.”

His son’s fists are clenched tightly. “That has nothing to do with you.”

“It has everything to do with me. Fear the flame.” He leans forward to lean over the boy forward. “Show me your resolve or I will intensify your training.”

The boy tenses, fear washing over him. “I’ll win,” Shouto snarls, stalking past. “I don’t need your power.”

Enji watches the boy leave, disappointed. He is still too weak, too raw and unrefined. His anger is fragile, a newly-frozen pond instead of an impenetrable iceberg. His passion is formless and dim, a flickering candle in the dark as opposed to an eternal wildfire.

*Your son is still weak, Rei. His heart is brittle ice. He inherited his weak will from what you became.*

Enji shakes his head. No matter what, Enji will not permit such weakness in the boy. So long as he has yet to master his fear then Enji will beat it into him. He wonders if he will have to separate the boy from Fuyumi to temper his resolve and discards the thought almost immediately. Doing so is cruelty without purpose. Fire needs oxygen to burn, and Fuyumi is a source of oxygen for Shouto. It would choke and snuff out whatever steel the boy had, and then Enji would have to begin anew.

He does not care much for restarting Shouto’s training program. It is an unnecessary waste of time. Inefficient. Wasteful.

So lost in his thoughts is he, that Enji is caught off-guard by the polite, “Hey.”

He knows that voice and would never mistake it.
“Long time no see,” All Might says politely.

He glances over his shoulder. “All Might.”

The man wears a suit, the same one he wore last year to Edgeshot’s promotion and smiling broadly as though nothing can harm him. It pisses Enji off. He might not see heat, but he can sense it, and right now the flames of All Might’s powers are weak and waning.

*He’s found a successor, Enji thinks. The Midoriya boy. You disappoint me, Shouto. Trying to recreate this grudge is meaningless.*

“We haven’t seen each other since that press conference ten years ago,” the number one hero continues blithely, oblivious to Enji’s mounting anger.

What right does this man have to find a worthy successor when Enji cannot, a successor with another powerful quirk to add onto All Might’s? How many generations had the Imperial family bred for dual quirks? And All Might has achieved that in a single generation with one child.

Of his own children, none had displayed dual quirks prior to Shouto, and he is a disappointment. Not for his physical weaknesses, but the weakness of his heart. The weakness of his determination and will.

“What was it you said?” he questions darkly. “Heroes must save not only a person but their spirit. Useless lessons to teach.”

All Might raises his hands placatingly. “Come on, we can have a cup of tea and talk about it. Maybe talk about raising the next generation. Your boy is strong. Maybe there are teaching lessons you can show me.”

For a moment he contemplates telling the man off and being done with this conversation. But there is something so unbelievably earnest from this fading flame that he cannot help but stay.

“The answer to that is simple. Teach them to fear.” He lets his flames intensify. “Teach a child to fear the flame and they will not be burnt.”

All Might frowns. “I don’t think that’s something I can agree with. What point is there in fear? It only stifles a child.”

“If you fear for your survival, you will learn to fish. If you fear weakness, you will become strong. And if you fear the dark, you will build a fire.”

“People can’t learn to smile if they’re afraid. And if they can’t smile then they can’t learn to be better.”

Enji shakes his head, disappointed. “I suppose there’s nothing more to speak of if you have none of your own words.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Because you’re not Nana Shimura.”

All Might rocks back on his heels, eyes wide, and nearly trips on the stair. “You remember—”

“How can I not when you parrot back her words incessantly,” Enji snaps, his flames burning hotter. “You’re a pathetic rival. No matter how hard you try, you will never be her. Stop trying and
become your own man.”

Enji walks away, heedless of whatever All Might says because this man disgusts him. Strength without will to temper it is no strength. It is just an illusion, a dream or maybe a nightmare.

And Enji knows all too well the danger of nightmares.

“Your life will have no meaning if you die trying to be her.”

With how weakly All Might’s power burns, that day may come sooner than anyone is prepared for.

Chapter End Notes

A pretty short chapter but ya’ll have been getting spoiled with all em super long ones.

That's all from me for now. Thank you for reading this. If you enjoyed the story leave a kudos and if you have any questions just leave a comment below. But know that all of that is unnecessary, and as always your readership is quite enough for me. Cheers.
‘Strength of mind: this determines your tactical and strategic thinking, your ability to plan and anticipate the enemy’s movements. Experience is the greatest teacher as knowing the ‘Art of War’ verbatim will not teach you how to react to someone who’s Quirk lets them change the battlefield with impunity.’

—Excerpt from the recovered ‘Tenets of Combat’ likely authored by an underground hero or vigilante

Inko Midoriya watches the matches with interest. She knows many of them battling today: Tokoyami, dark and imperial who wins with ease; Kirishima whose loss breaks her heart even is she knows it was his worst possible matchup; Uraraka who wins without using her powers, exploiting her enemy’s weakness viciously; and Iida who was so close to victory against Endeavour’s son. She knows their names because Izuku talks of them constantly, and from the way his voice swells with warmth, she knows they are worthy of his love.

She watches her son win against Ashido and feels ill. It is the exact same way that Katsuki won his battle.

“Do not worry,” Jin Mo-Ri, one her son’s teachers, says in Korean. “Had you not seen Katsuki do the same, you would not be so upset.”

She frowns. “I told him to win. How he wins matters. If he wins like that now, then what will he become later.”

“Perhaps. But consider that he had no other way to win whilst also respecting his opponent. It was the expedient method. It was also kinder than taunting her with a protracted battle. He was paying her no attention for most of the battle. And when he did pay attention, he won easily.”

Inko shakes her head as the intermission is called. “I’m going for a walk,” she says to Mitsuki before heading out.

It gives her the opportunity to think and to clear her head. She doesn’t like the idea of her son looking to Katsuki as inspiration for anything. A stand sells crepes and she indulges in one as she walks without thought to where she is going.

She spies Endeavour stalking across one of the hallways as she travels the bowels of the stadium. When she sees Izuku leaning pitifully against a wall, she wonders what has him so sad.

“Izuku.”

He looks up, the sadness clearing away. “Kaa-san. Are you lost as well?”

She shakes her head. “No. You’re the one with the bad sense of direction.” He huffs. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, I…” He sighs, eyes scrunching in frustration. “What’s the point of being a hero if I can’t save anyone?”
She places her hands on his shoulders. “Who are you talking about?”

“Would you ever hurt me?” he asks suddenly instead of asking, eyes bright in a way that terrifies Inko.

“Never. I could never.”

His shoulders shake as he tries holding in his tears. “Then why would”—He takes a shuddering breath—“Was dad kind to you?”

“Always.” She pulls him close. “You have to explain if you want me to help.”

He holds her tight. “I know. But it’s not my secret to tell.”

“You have a waiting room, right?” He nods against her. “Let’s talk there.”

She is not foolish enough to let Izuku lead her there. Instead, she asks him for the room number and finds her way there, glaring at anyone who so much as looks at them wrong. There is a TV showing the Festival and she seats Izuku before the screen.

“You’re my son,” she says. “I’ve told you before what that means to me.”

“Mikumo.”

She isn’t ready for the pang of loneliness. For a moment she imagines him standing behind Izuku, perhaps the tiniest bit taller with hair as dark as Hisashi. It is just a vision of her long-held grief, not an objective truth.

“Yes, him. You are all I have left in this world. I could hurt you no more than the sun could stop shining.”

The next contestants take their spot. Katsuki walks up one end whilst the girl Izuku won with does the same from the other end. The girl has a metal harness in addition to her jetpack.

“And Hisashi was always good to me. He was never cruel to me. Quiet, maybe, but never silent. Just like you get sometimes.

When the fight begins, the girl moves quickly, the harness seeming to aid her movement. She is fast enough to run past katsuki’s explosions even if the boy doesn’t attack ferociously. Her jetpack activates suddenly and she jukes in the opposite direction much faster than Katsuki can turn. Something metallic flies through the air and wraps around Katsuki.

A grappling hook, she thinks.

The girl pivots on the spot and Katsuki, tied to the end of the grappling hook, spins through the air. The crowd roars but Inko doesn’t share the sentiment. Something about Katsuki is too calm for him to be worrying.

“Oh,” Izuku says just before Katsuki grips the wire with both hands. The explosion breaks the wire and sends Katsuki flying.

Except, he lets off an explosion and rockets towards the girl. His speed, aided by gravity, is faster than the girl’s reaction time. He slams into her and a cloud of smoke forms.

They wait a few anxious seconds before the smoke clears. Katsuki stands over an unconscious Mei. He nods to the girl when Midnight calls the match and stalks off the field.
“He respects her,” Izuku says.

“Maybe. Why can’t you tell me who you want to save?”

“Because if I tell you, I think you’ll guess why. And that might as well be telling the secret.”

Tokoyami enters the arena alongside the green-haired girl that beat Kirishima. He seems unconcerned by the possibility of her quirk despite it being a natural counter to his abilities.

When she takes his hand, she finds it shakes. She squeezes his hand until the shaking stops and a semblance of calm returns to him.

“How can you go on knowing—”

“Alright. Do you think you can save this person?”

“I don’t know. But I have to try again.”

When the match starts, the girl’s vines dig deep into the ground just as Dark Shadow launches across the field. The dark creature—elder tree, her mind adds without approval—slams into a wall of vines and Tokoyami is forced to dodge the tendrils that rise up beneath him.

More vines appear where he lands and only Dark Shadow’s quick attack slices through them and free Tokoyami.

“This isn’t good,” Izuku says as Dark Shadow drags Tokoyami away from danger. “She’s already taken over too much of the field.”

And she has. Dark Shadow vaults across the field and pulls Tokoyami with it until the are behind the girl.

The moment they land, vines break through the ground and wrap around them. Tokoyami and Dark Shadow struggle futilely as more vines surround them.

When Midnight rises from her seat to ask a question, Tokoyami roars back a response.

“He can’t win…”

Izuku trails off as the darkness surrounds Tokoyami. Something large emerges from his torso similar to Dark Shadow but nothing like it at all. Where Dark Shadow seemed a shadow, this thing has obsidian scales that suck in the light and ropy muscles and gleaming claws sharper enough to cut through the vines as though they are paper.

The massive arm retreats into Tokoyami’s body through the same portal it appeared in. The girl is wary. The stadium is silent. And Izuku hand shakes so hard she worries he will break her hand by mistake.

“No, no, no,” he whispers. “Damn it, why didn’t you tell me?”

“Izuku, that looked like—”

“A dragon,” he intones gravely, “from the abyss.”

When a flood of waves approaches Tokoyami, he shouts something. Dark Shadow lifts him just as the arm returns, this time with claws coated in dark fire.

The fire hurts her mind to look at. It reminds her of the time Izuku spoke of the birth of the universe, his eyes bright and feverish and bleeding. The dark flame doesn’t so much burn as it does
unravel the very existence of the vines until not even ash remains.

Her stomach lurches at the sight of these flames. They are too familiar. She knows how they work, has seen them many times before. Her grip around Izuku’s hand tightens. He is here, and she uses that certainty to ground herself to the now.

Tokoyami lands on the stadium floor, heedless of the patch of dark fire beside him. His head is held high and his back ramrod straight. He says something to the girl. She looks to Tokoyami and then to the dragon’s arm, before surrendering.

Midnight calls the match to the silence of the audience. The fire burning around the claws extinguishes and with it so do the flames still burning on the field. Mother and son watch Tokoyami walk away, head held high in victory.

“Izuku, how did he get to the abyss?” she asks numbly.

“I don’t—I never took him there. I swear I didn’t.”

“I believe you.” She takes a deep breath. “Izuku, I don’t think you’re the first person to touch the abyss.”

He looks to her, the very expression of horror. “Kaa-san, d-don’t make… please tell me you’re making some horrible joke. Please.”

“I’m sorry.” She wipes away his tears before they form. “I told you about the anti-quirk riots. They didn’t happen for no reason. When Taiwan sunk, quirkless people called for the head of the Imperial Heir. The Emperor stayed silent, and just when things were getting worse, Shikoku happened.”

“The villain a-attack?”

“Is that what they tell you in school?” She shakes her head. “Izuku, the entire region went from peaceful to a battlezone in a single night. It was civilians fighting officers fighting villains fighting the imperial guard. It was madness and chaos. And at every single hotspot there were reports of dark fire.”

“No, that’s not p-possible.”

“We don’t know the reach of your quirk. We barely know anything. Who’s to say someone else couldn’t travel the abyss or call on the godflame?”

“How do you know that name?”

She blinks. “You said it before,” she lies for the first time to her son.

He doesn’t notice. “I can’t…”

She merely holds him as the next contestants take the stage. She can’t show her fear or hesitance. Because she never once thought of why Hisashi was so withdrawn in the days after the event. Everyone was shaken, everyone was tense. Even her husband in his white jacket that he rarely wore.

And yet, all she remembers is how silent he had been in the early hours of the morning, watching the aftermath of the event with her. It worries her now more than ever the possibility of his connections and how much chose not to tell her.
“What did you do, Hisashi?”

*****

Ochaco Uraraka has questions. So many questions. All the questions, in fact. She isn’t the only one in their booth with questions.

“Did anyone else just see the giant arms,” Kirishima asks, eyes so wide she worries they’ll fall out, “or the fire. You know the black fire. That fire.”

Ashido elbows him. “Stop being stupid. We all saw it.” She glances around the booth. “Right?”

Ochaco wants to sigh. Maybe if Iida were here, he would be able to get them to behave better. But no one has so much as seen a glimpse of him since his loss. She wonders if he’s alright and decides she’ll call him in the evening.

“I’m confused,” Kaminari says, only half lucid. “Why did he have four arms?”

“Kaminari, dude, do us all a favour and shut up.”

Ochaco, being the decent human being that she is, says, “Don’t be mean. He’s really stupid right now.”

Ashido glances her way. “You’re really vicious. I’ve read comment sections less vicious that you.”

“No, I’m not. Tokoyami will tell us if he wants to.” Ochaco stands and waves. “I have someone to beat.”

She hopes to see Tokoyami on the way down and get some answers out him even if it would be easier to pull blood from stone. She does not.

Ochaco shrugs and puts on her best smile as walks to the arena. The audience is silent compared to how they were when Bakugou fought so she twirls and waves extravagantly. That garners some attention at the very least.

Shinsou is there already, staring at her intensely despite the bags under his eyes. *I’ll get him some chamomile tea right after I beat him,* she decides. She may have a winning streak a mile long but she isn’t cruel.

“Contestants ready,” Midnight says through the speakers. “Fight.”

Neither of them moves.

“You should just give up,” Ochaco says. “I know all about your quirk and—”

“Really?”

Ochaco snaps her mouth shut and merely glares at Shinsou. He sighs.

“I guess you do know all about it,” he admits, and raises his fists. “But I’m not giving up just because you asked.”

Who is she to deny him his right to fight even if she does find it stupid?
She rushes forward, ready to win this fight quickly. His quirk is devastating in the right circumstances but so long as she refuses to answer anything he says, then he might as well be quirkless. And she knows his close combat skills are lacking.

When his elbow strikes her across her jawline, she admits she may have underestimated him a bit. She fails to dodge the knee to the side or the punch to the kidney. Ochaco grits her teeth through the blows and rolls back the first chance she has.

Her side is a mass of pain and she spits out some blood. Wiping her mouth probably leaves red smears but she doesn’t care too much.

“That was mean,” she says and watches him blush. Guilty, maybe?

She is more cautious this time. He narrowly avoids her first palm strike and scrambles to grab her wrists before the second. With his torso open, Ochaco takes the opportunity and knees him in the side. He gasps in pain.

Before she can tag him with her powers, he slams his head forward. She hears her nose crunch and feels like an explosion has gone off on her face.

Okay, I’m ending this, she thinks before kneeling him in the side again.

She twists and breaks his hold on her wrists before slamming her palm straight into his sternum. She slides forward and pulls one of his arms back as she kicks his ankle to unbalance him. Without gravity to hold him down, he topples over easily right onto her shoulders.

She hoists him in a fireman’s carry and dashes to the edge of the arena regardless of his kicks and blows. She tips him over and deactivates her quirk. He slams onto the ground with a gasp of pain.

“Shinsou is out of bounds,” Midnight announces just before the crowd erupts into applause. She gives them a thumbs up.

“You’re vicious,” Shinsou whimpers from his spot on the ground.

She extends a hand to the boy. “I’ll make it up to you.”

Shinsou smiles weakly at her, and she feels her heart skip a beat. He takes her hand gently. “Want to go on a date?”

It takes her a moment to process the words he has just uttered. A second more for her face to flush red.

“What, you can’t just—why would—” She stops uttering coherent words.

She stops only when Shinsou laughs. “I guess I win this round.”

“I hate you.”

“That’s not a no.”

*****

The doorway appears, and the World Walker becomes one with the material world. The abyss fades away in streaks of green lightning, and the real-world beckons sweetly.

It is a room, large as an auditorium, that the World Walker appears in. A single desk frames the
room, and the man sitting behind it wears the purest of whites. A chrysanthemum carving looms over the man, real gold blades crossed beneath the flower, a reminder of the dynasty he represents.

The Emperor raises a hand to forestall the guards in the room, all wearing the perfect white uniform of the Royal Guard. They are all powerful, and were they not owned by the Chrysanthemum throne, they would easily be contenders for the number one hero spot.

“You. You died.”

The World Walker acknowledges this with a nod and approached. The operator within speaks and the Emperor listens.

“I ensured they were protected.”

The World Walker considers this. Finds it lacking. Reminds the Emperor of his place.

“You saved my son, and I will forever be grateful that he lives. My debt is repaid.”

The World Walker breathes the godflame and sets the Emperor’s desk alight with infernal fire. The Emperor does not move and shows no fear. He waves his hand, an order to the people in the room.

The Royal Guard move to enforce their Emperor’s directive.

The World Walker forms a doorway between himself and the bolts of lightning and lets them pass through to the darkness hiding beyond mortal understanding. Another doorway opens as the agent creates a field of electromagnetic potential that would crush a human easily. The creature beyond the doorway eats the electromagnetic field, neutralising the guard.

One moves fast as the light itself, so fast that the World Walker would fail to react under any other circumstance. But there is a creature in the abyss that makes deals as it breathes. And in exchange for protection against light, the World Walker would let it feast upon light itself.

A pillar of obsidian rises and protects the World Walker from the first physical strike. The agent creates dozens of beams of hardlight, all strong enough to carve a hole through a mountain of steel. The obsidian pillar eats of the light, sapping the agent of her power until she collapses.

A warp quirk attempts to engulf him in waves of frozen time so the World Walker shunts that power to a distant sun in the abyss. Another doorway opens to a small singularity and the concept of time breaks down around the agent, and he is trapped in a loop of his last five seconds, unable to escape.

And as all this is happening, dozens of illusions fill the air. There are monsters and nightmares and a normal human being would be crushed by the weight of these illusions. They illusions have mass and could very well harm. The operator within the World Walker stares at these illusions in contempt before opening a doorway beneath their creator and depositing her to the other side of the Imperial Villa. The illusions vanish with her disappearance.

Despite all of the World Walker’s preparation, the sudden bolt of superheated plasma almost catches it by surprise. Almost and only because of the operator’s sudden hesitance at the sight of the green wave of superheated death, hot as the sun but tightly contained and focused. The World Walker takes control once more and finds a creature within the abyss that will be able to handle this heat. In the same moment, dozens of doorways appear over the humans in the room to protect them from the immense heat. The agent almost looks chastised by his actions. The World Walker takes pity on the child and simply shunts him out the room without much malice.
And before the last can steal enough kinetic energy to punch a hole all the way through earth and out the other side, the World Walker opens a doorway to an area of infinite negative mass and waits very patiently until the woman understands all of the kinetic energy she generates is sucked away by that negative singularity. And when she does, the World Walker opens a doorway to the same time loop trapping her ally and leaves her in it.

It is over soon. These six Royal Guards who could invade and hold a city collectively, and individually are equal to All Might or All For One lay on the ground, damaged but still drawing breath.

And yet, despite the strength of the World Walker, the Emperor shows no fear.

The Emperor watches the World Walker but does not activate his quirk. What point is there in ripping the Imperial Villa apart when the attack will not harm the World Walker? It is this man’s greatest weakness. His control of the earth eclipses all who came before. To the Emperor, raising a mountain is simple. But the magnitude of his powers mean that he cannot use it against anything less than a large town.

“Are you done having a tantrum,” the Emperor asks patiently, almost like a parent scolding a child. “I expected more of you.”

The operator within the World Walker speaks again.

“The boy was innocent of any crime. I killed my son to save my son. That boy called me father, thought I was his father, and looked to me for protection before it was done. He cursed me to his dying breath. All of that just to please the masses.”

The World Walker does not care for the rebuttal of this man who can silence volcanoes and silence tectonic plates.

“Tell me what you want and begone.”

The World Walker does so with pleasure. In a few minutes a new accord is struck and the World Walker steps through reality to the darkness. Travelling across the abyss is an exercise in navigating streams of relative sanity and avoiding the true dangers here. A winged creature, the secret-keeper itself, proves its benevolence and permits the World Walker to ride in the wake of its gargantuan wings.

That shortcut deposits this one near the bones of a dragon. The World Walker inspects this creature. Its frame lacks the echo of the godflame and its bone structure is more serpentine than that of other dragons. It is still warm to the touch, but its last wish has been spent. It simply waits for the wish to be fulfilled in full.

When a patch of the unreal lines up with the mortal coil, the World Walker forms the doorway and banishes the barriers between worlds. With a mighty step vaster than reality, a new room becomes reality.

A man sits in this shrouded room, the hiss of a breathing mask filling the air, and the beep of life support increasing in tempo for a moment as All For One inspects the World Walker. The great villain is silent for a long moment.

“Are you the reason the Imperial family’s increased security these past two days?”

The World Walker offers no answers and instead asks a question.
“You are still a rude man,” All For One says. “And yes, Shikoku shows no signs of contamination. Tell me, did you believe you could live a life of mundanity after what we did?”

The World Walker does not set anything on fire. It is a close thing.

“It took me a few months to piece everything together. I do not find myself annoyed, you see. It is incredibly rare for one man to move both I and the Emperor. My people diverted attention and you accomplished the Emperor’s mission. It was a brilliant masterstroke.”

The malevolence of All For One permeates the air. The World Walker would collapse if not for having witnessed the indifference of gods. As it is, this is nothing more than mildly interesting.

“Do not attempt to do so again. My patience runs thin. Do not forget that I am the strongest man alive. Your powers will not protect you from my wrath.”

The operator within the World Walker laughs. “You may be that,” the Operator says without fear, “but even the strongest man must be polite and offer his guests tea. It’s been a long time since I had any.”

All For One lets the malice fade from the air. Soon enough, the two are seated and drinking tea. Speaking as though they are allies when they are the furthest from it.

The World Walker finds this unnecessary but it is the wish of its operator. And so it cedes control and waits, patiently cataloguing any and all threats.

Chapter End Notes

That's all from me for now. Thank you for reading this. If you enjoyed the story leave a kudos and if you have any questions just leave a comment below. But know that all of that is unnecessary and as always, your readership is quite enough for me. Cheers.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

‘Strength of will: this determines the formless aspect of combat. There is no weakness, only strength. There are no failures, only setbacks. There is no defeat, only tactical retreat. This precept can be broken down to that. It is not merely a mindset but the complete refusal to accept anything but a positive outcome. Defeatism, even for a single moment, is a step away from death in this field.’

—Excerpt from the recovered ‘Tenets of Combat’ likely authored by an underground hero or vigilante

The light turns red and then green again. Izuku watches it cycle for a few seconds. He stands and smiles at his mother.

“It’s time.”

She smiles gently. “Do you have a plan?”

“Not one you’ll like.” He shrugs. “It’s a bad plan but it’s the only plan I have. He has one weakness I can exploit.”

“If you’re going to do something I’ll hate, then at least win with style. And not with your ass in the air.”

Izuku flushes the brightest red and retreats from the room. He performs a quick breathing exercise and walks towards the tunnel that will lead him to his battle. A sigh escapes his lips when he sees the man before him.

Endeavour leans against a wall, his massive frame seeming to dominate the hallway. Fire swirls around his costume, and it makes Izuku wonder what material it is made from. His eyes, the blue of tainted snow, track Izuku with casual indifference.

“Boy, I recommend you give up.”

Endeavour pushes off the wall. He settles lightly, much lighter than Izuku thinks possible of a man that probably weighs as much as All Migh—without the benefit of a quirk that does muscle mass.

Izuku forces a smile. “My mo-mother wouldn’t want that. And I don’t think you have any useful lessons.”

“Fear the flame boy, or it will consume you like your friend.”

Izuku grits his teeth. “You know, I think you’re strong. But I also think you’re a fucking idiot.” Endeavour perpetual frown deepens. “Fear the flame. That’s nonsense and we all know it. Whatever you think of your quirk, you don’t get to tell your son to fear his.”

“You know—”

“Nothing. Yeah, your son told me that. And I think you’re both idiots. I’m going to win, and I’ll prove you both wrong.”
Endeavour watches him for a moment. And then the man has the audacity to laugh, deep and full and much too malevolent for a hero.

“You are a fool, boy.”

“Maybe,” Izuku snarls. “But I know your son will never become you. He’s not a monster hiding behind his position. And I’m going to show him that it’s his fire, not yours. Get out of my way.”

Endeavour shakes his head, but he does tilt his body enough that Izuku could squeeze through if he hugs the wall and hunches over.

_Show him your strength_, Mikumo whispers, and Izuku is inclined to agree.

He only needs the tiniest fraction of One For All to shoulder-check Endeavour as he walks forward. The man is forced to the side by the unexpected strength. And maybe Izuku will have bruises on his shoulder, but they are worth it to hear Endeavour scoff in annoyance at being shoved aside by a boy half his size.

“The flames will consume and enslave you,” Endeavour says calmly, but the way his flames burn hotter belies the façade, “just like that boy.”

Izuku glares at him out of the corner of his eyes. Endeavour simply raises a brow.

“Endeavour, I don’t care who you are or how strong you are, but if you ever threaten my friends”—he lets the madness of the abyss bleed through his glare and sees Endeavour’s flames burn hotter—“I. Will. Break you.”

He doesn’t look back at the man. He is nothing to Izuku. Not now. He understands then why so many can hate heroes when Endeavour is one. Regardless, he puts the thought of Endeavour away and walks into the sunlight.

The light is harsh, but not blinding. Thankfully, it is a few hours after noon and he can call upon the inky darkness of the abyss if necessary.

He meets Shouto across the arena, not caring what Midnight or Present Mic have to say. Right now, in this moment, only he and Todoroki exist.

“I talked to your father,” Izuku says whilst Present Mic hypes the crowd. “You’re not him and you never will be. And that’s because of a choice, not because of you quirk.” Todoroki says nothing. “I’m going to save you despite yourself.”

The anticipation builds in the air. Izuku feels the flow of One For All, the power of eight generations rising to a crescendo within him.

Midnight cracks her whip and the battle begins.

Todoroki slams his foot into the ground, a line of frost leading from it. Chunks of ice expand outward in a path of devastation that would give any person pause. It is an unstoppable wave, the likes of which perhaps even All Might would consider a worthy challenge for a few seconds.

All of this does not matter to Izuku. He has seen Todoroki fight and he knows the boy’s weakness.

The onslaught of ice grants him the cover to dash to the opposite side of the field and sprint along the edge of the ice, hidden from Todoroki’s vision. He slides into view and sees Todoroki still watching his last spot.
In a second, he closes the distance like a flash of green lightning. Todoroki’s eyes are wide. Izuku slams his knee in Todoroki’s side and watches the boy list to the side.

Izuku pirouettes around the sudden spike of ice that rises from the ground and sweeps Todoroki’s legs out from under him.

The boy rolls to the side, frost streaking towards Izuku.

Izuku takes a single step forward and ice forms behind him. Todoroki has a singular expression of shock as his attack fails for the second time today.

He punches Todoroki in his unprotected side. When Todoroki makes a half-turn and freezes his right side, Izuku grabs him by the arm and flips him over.

“You’re going to lose,” Izuku says calmly even as Todoroki scrambles back, trying to put some distance between them.

Izuku shoots off a shadow pole and watches Todoroki dodge around it. He is tempted to sigh for only a moment. And then he closes the distance once more. He barely manages to dodge the ice encrusted fist. It is a close thing, but he does it, and kicks Todoroki in his left side. It is the side where his fire would be. Without it, it is one glaring weakness.

It sends Todoroki flying but he lands in a three-point crouch. It doesn’t matter if it gives Todoroki the distance he needs to use his ice. When the ice rushes towards him, Izuku merely raises his hand and channels One For All to his finger.

Bang.

A shockwave of raw force tears through the ice and sunders Todoroki’s offence. It may have cost a finger, but it is worth it to see the fear in Todoroki’s eyes.

“Without your fire, you have a giant weakness.”

“****

“Oh snap,” Ashido says. “How the hell is he winning?”

Ochaco wants the answer to that as well. Even with Iida’s performance against Todoroki, she never thought her classmate would be manhandled again. And even during that fight, he never seemed anything more than mildly annoyed instead of outright fearful.

“I knew Midoriya was manly but damn,” Kirishima—and she hates how he thinks he has a right to speak—says in contemplation. “He can’t make his ice instantly. At least, not the huge shit. It’s why he always fucking leads with frost on the ground first.”

Her eyes widen. “Oh, that’s why the ice formed behind Iida.”

“Wait, what?” Ashido asks.

“When they were fighting, right at the end, the ice formed just behind Iida.”
“And the bitch finally gets it. He’s got a five-foot casting radius and then he can make a fucking glacier. Without that shit, well…”

They watch as Izuku spins low to avoid Todoroki’s punch. Izuku twists as he rises, and his heel tags Todoroki’s shoulder. She watches in silence as Izuku hits Todoroki in the same spot over and over again and feels the slightest bit sick. There is no warmth in the way Izuku holds himself. Everything about him is calculating and unfeeling, a machine more than the boy who smiles as bright as the sun despite his scars.

Todoroki sends frost behind himself, hidden from Izuku’s view. At exactly five feet now that she knows to look for it, the ice forms, expanding rapidly and circling in an arc around Todoroki that protects him from Izuku. Todoroki takes the second he has to make more ice even as he backs away.

She understands why when a shockwave tears through the ice and Izuku dashes past Todoroki’s shattered barrier. He flips through the air and lands right before Todoroki, so close in any other situation she might make an inappropriate joke.

Instead, she watches in silence as Izuku grabs Todoroki by the collar and punches him in the side. Todoroki gasps, and she can just imagine the pained sound. Especially when Izuku does so again. Then for a third time.

“I feel sick,” Kirishima says.

Ochaco agrees completely. This isn’t like Izuku. If he had wanted to end the fight, he would have. Instead, he leans forward and says something to Todoroki that they can’t hear.

“Oh, you fucking cunt,” Bakugou roars. “What tragic as shit backstory does half-and-half have that you’re trying to save him? You fucking idiot.”

“Bakugou?” Kaminari ventures warily as Izuku sends Todoroki flying. “You okay there, buddy? How’s about you calm down before you do something you’ll regret.”

Bakugou glares at Kaminari. “You’re a shitty ass side character that just recently got some lines so fuck off.” Ochaco watches amazed as he takes a breath and leans back in his chair. “He’s trying to save Todoroki for some bullshit reason.”

It sounds ridiculous coming from Bakugou’s mouth. But that also lends it credence. She doesn’t like him, probably never will, but she can’t deny that he and Izuku have known each other far longer than she has. And she knows from every errant comment Izuku makes about Bakugou, or vice versa, that the two know each on an almost instinctual level.

Also, there’s the fact that Izuku has just broken another finger instead of ending the fight cleanly.

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Izuku feels tired. Not physically even if his hand is just a mass of hurt right now, but emotionally. He doesn’t know how to save Todoroki except to show him how weak he really is by hiding from his powers.

And doing so makes him feel like a bully.

He forms a shadow pole, makes it hard as steel, and smacks Todoroki’s ice encrusted arm. The ice shatters and Todoroki grunts in pain, reacting too slow to avoid Izuku hitting him in the side with the pole.
This isn’t a fight. It’s nothing more than cruelty.

*This is how Endeavour taught him to fear the flame*, Mikumo tells Izuku as Todoroki forms wall after wall of ice. *You use the same methods of control and submission. Are you not the same?*

*Maybe, but right now, I need you to shut up.*

Izuku takes a step to the right to dodge the spear of ice flying through the air. When the second spear comes, Izuku is ready. He reaches out to grab it and spins on the spot, not once losing his momentum, before sending it back enhanced by One For All’s power.

The spear crashes against Todoroki’s barrier, breaking enough of it that he can see the terrified eyes of his opponent. He knows that fear well. It’s the fear of facing something you can’t beat.

The fear only grows more when Izuku raises his right hand and flicks his index finger, breaking it once more. The pressure wave breaks through the remains of Todoroki’s barrier.

“Right now, I think you should stop screwing around,” Izuku shouts, panting harshly.

He has taken a few blows but most of the pain he feels comes from breaking his own fingers. But that pain brings clarity. It doesn’t matter that he has broken every finger on his right hand. Not when he has a chance to save someone. What point is there in being a hero if he can’t save a classmate whose story he knows, let alone a random civilian he has never met?

For a fleeting instance, he remembers the girl in the sunflower dress. Her cries of pain rock him to the core, and the pleading look she had that day makes him ashamed. He lets the memory fade away.

Right now, right here, there is someone begging to be saved. He wonders how strong a person must be to experience all Todoroki has and still stay so sane, to want to be kind and compassionate where those before him were not. To want to move past the shadow his father casts and become his own man.

Todoroki’s mismatched eyes are a mirror to his own pain and hurt and longing, hidden behind any barrier that could be produced. For Izuku, it is a smile and right now he can’t muster a smile. For Todoroki, it is his cold demeanour. Izuku has seen it crack, but he has yet to see Todoroki take a step back in fear.

When the ice comes, Izuku is indifferent. He jumps over it and comes down in a vicious axe kick that breaks through each barrier of ice that Todoroki forms. It connects with the boy’s shoulder and Izuku hears the pop of a dislocation.

Izuku lands in a crouch and surges forward, his chest slamming into Todoroki’s torso. He punches Todoroki in the face. His broken fingers shriek in pain but Izuku ignores that feeling.

“It’s your power,” he screams, punching Todoroki’s bloody face once more. “Only you get to decide. You can’t beat me. How the hell do you think you’ll be the best without your flames?”

He slips past ice and grabs Todoroki by the throat before slamming him into the ground.

“Your fire covers your every weakness,” Izuku snarls, tightening his grip around Todoroki’s throat. “So why the hell do you think it’s his flame?”

Todoroki slams his hand on the ground. Izuku is completely blindsided by the slab of ice that hits him in the face. The world goes white as he flies through the air. He lands hard on the ground.
Instinct is the only reason he dodges the ice spear.

“You can’t win against me like this.” He spreads his arms wide. From his shadow, dozens of dark darts fly towards him, all hard as diamond. They aren’t meant to hit Todoroki, only destroy his barrier.

“If you don’t use your flames you’ll just become bitter and do the same things as him.”

His eyes sting, and maybe it’s ice particulates, but he is sure they are tears. Because Todoroki looks to him with a gaze that pierces his core. Something so broken it can’t be repaired stares back at Izuku—It is pain so fundamental and natural that no one notices because who notices that you have two arms and legs; they would notice the absence of a limb, but not presence of the limb itself.

But when something is broken like that, it can be repurposed and recycled. Something new, and perhaps something beautiful, can be built from shattered hopes and broken faith.

The wisp of flame is almost invisible in the bright light. It is a single point of heat that can one day bring life if it is nurtured properly. It is the first prayer to existence, that formless light that gave rise to energy and entropy and the forward arrow of time.

But just as it can create, it holds the power to incinerate everything in its path because passion without direction is harmful, and even the hottest hate will one day burn out and leave nothing but cruel desolation—and it makes him wonder if that is what became of Endeavour, that perhaps no one was there to save him when he needed it most.

Izuku knows this because some days when he sees injustice he simply wants to give in and let the monsters hiding in the dark roam free and take their bounty from the world. But so long as one person begs for salvation, Izuku refuses to give in.

Todoroki’s very eyes are a plea to be saved, and Izuku won’t give up until he does so.

That single flame births an inferno, a raging maelstrom of flames long suppressed that they feed greedily on oxygen and burn brighter, consuming themselves in an uncontrollable blaze of resentment and fear and yearning.

He can taste the smoke of damnation, the echo of hell, and feel the prayer in Todoroki’s soul as heat sears Izuku’s lungs with each breath he takes.

“Why would you try to save your enemy?” Todoroki asks, his voice cracking.

But those words are Izuku’s absolution and lift him past the mire and muck of the past, banishing memories of that little girl in his sunflower dress and his failings as a person. Perhaps one day he can save the world, but right now he’ll settle for saving the person right in front of him.

“I want,” he chokes out through the heat burning his throat, “to save everyone!”

Do you know the cost of your oath, dear brother?

The flames lessen in intensity until they only cover Todoroki’s body like a protective shroud, a benediction against present day threats and the cruelty of his past.

The ice on his right side melts away, proof that the flames they belong to him and no one else. The fire causes the ice pillars to melt, and already Izuku can see how Todoroki’s body loosens, strength returning to it. He no longer hunches over his bad side, half a step away from collapsing.
No, he stands tall, engulfed in the flames of the eternally damned.

The grin that comes to Izuku’s lips is as easy as breathing. The need to win, to prove himself the strongest against a foe, permeates his grin. But that feeling shares space with the absolute joy of saving someone. Because it proves that he isn’t defined by his quirk, that he isn’t a monster wearing human skin.

_You are that, but I accept the monster._

“Amazing,” Izuku whispers, ignoring Mikumo, when the ice has melted, and only superheated steam remains.

He never once expected this level of power. Injured and broken, Todoroki can reshape landscapes. He wonders what heights his classmate will reach unshackled by the legacy of his father’s fears. For a moment, his vision wavers and he sees Shouto sitting on a throne of ice and burning his enemies with fire.

“Why are you smiling?” Todoroki asks, eyes haunted but free all at once. “With those injuries, how the hell can you smile?”

The flames make his burn scars itch. They remind him too much of that fateful day against Bakugou. But if he fears the flame, then isn’t he proving Endeavour right? And he will never let Endeavour be right.

“Because you’re you,” Izuku says joyfully, “and I’ve never seen anything burn more brilliantly than you.”

Steam rises from Todoroki’s eyes. “You’re a fool.”

“I’m still going to win.”

Todoroki closes his eyes for a moment.

“Thank you.”

In an instant, Todoroki slams his foot on the ground. Ice, massive and gargantuan, forms immediately. There is no delay, no trail of frost to herald this attack. His one weakness is gone.

The deluge of ice surges forward, faster and more imposing than everything prior. It promises his demise in a frigid grave, forgotten and alone beneath a glacier. Izuku summons forth the inky blackness of the abyss but even he knows any shield he forms will crumble beneath the raw power behind the ice.

One For All permeates his arm, more than he can handle yet. He punches the air and a blast of force tears through the ice. And though his arm may scream it pain at being broken, it means nothing to him compared to the sight that greets him.

Fire so hot it melts the ground and ignite the very air surrounds Todoroki. This is fire hot enough to melt steel and nothing Izuku has can face that. He smells the ozone of ionised air and ashen corpses.

_You have the basics,_ Mikumo says, and for a moment he feels his shadow vibrate. _All that you have learnt is with you._

Izuku accepts the truth of that. Everything he has accomplished has been built on a few basics. And
He chooses to rely on them today.

He twists with the momentum of his punch. He channels One For All through his right leg, forces his shatter arms in a position to stabilise his body. And prays that Cementoss’ barriers are strong enough to withstand this.

The explosion comes faster than his kick. It tears through the arena and the barriers Cementoss puts up. It is inexorable in its march, an unyielding attack fitting someone literally bred for the strength of their quirk. This attack is a song of the fire of hell and the winds of winter, one of the strongest natural quirks in the world.

There are a few he could name more naturally powerful, but none with this perfect mixture of utility and raw destructive capability.

But none of this matters to Izuku.

He has faith in the power his mentor granted him, faith in the skills Jin taught him and that he honed through battles against nightmares.

For a moment, he feels seven fiery shadows standing behind him, guiding him through this kick.

*There you fucking are,* Mikumo snarls, distracting him slightly.

He tilts his torso halfway through the kick to lower his centre of mass, arches his grounded foot to improves his posture and lifts his stabilising arm a few degrees high. Every ounce of strength he can draw from One For All leaves his leg in a single flawless kick of perfect form.

*Hwechook,* he thinks.

His shadow vibrates in anticipation as the two attacks meet.

The world erupts, an explosive shockwave of heat and force and two wills battling for victory. It is the strength of One For All and Hellfire clashing, a battle of legacies and broken children standing defiant against the weight of expectation.

It is a battle to be free of the past and to find the meaning of salvation.

That, however, is an earthly concern and right now, in this singular moment, Izuku is above them. He has spent months memorising this kick, the most basic that Jin Mo-Ri taught him. In the heat of the moment, bruised and injured, Izuku perfects his form until nothing exists to him but that kick.

Slowly, the dust and smoke dissipate, and he opens his eyes to devastation. Deep gouges litter the ground, each thick as his arm is long. Broken chunks of stone and ice cover the landscape. Dozens of shards of ice surround him, embedded deep in the earth.

It takes him a moment to notice the trench that spans the length of the battlefield, cutting straight through broken barriers of ice and concrete, stopping only at the last barrier, taller and thicker than any Todoroki has formed before.

A deep crack run through the ice. Without that barrier, any civilians would have been directly exposed to his blow. He feels sick because so many could have died from his carelessness. And only Todoroki’s battered form encased in ice has kept them safe.

“Todoroki is out of bounds,” Midnight says.
The world is silent. He doesn’t want the silence to end, doesn’t want to be greeted by the hatred and revulsion for someone who so callously put civilians in danger.

“Midoriya!” he hears someone—and something tells him it can only be Shinsou—yell.

That single shout starts a cascade. Dozens, then thousands chant his name. Izuku doesn’t cry though it is a close thing.

He lowers his leg slowly. Every movement of his broken limb is agony, but he fights through the pain of torn muscles and broken bone. He fights through the pain to raise his right arm in victory.

The roar of the crowd is deafening and for a single moment, Izuku has no fears.

A sharp pain brings him back to reality. He looks down and sees the red seeping through his blue shirt. It takes him a moment to see the shard of ice in his torso.

He falls back and hits something hard. He glances back and sees a wall of darkness. It dissipates as Izuku collapses.

_I am not your enemy, brother._

*****

The stadium is silent as the vacuum of space. For a single second, there is no noise as though the world stands still. Perhaps it is because of the battle they have just witnessed. Perhaps it is because Endeavour’s son has just shown power to rival a natural disaster given a few years. Or perhaps it is because her son demonstrated even more power.

When they shout her son’s name, Inko is quiet. So too are Mitsuki and Jin Mo-Ri and the rest of the people in their section of the stand overshadowed by a gargantuan mountain of ice. They stay silent because of the hundreds of ice shards floating in the air, held back only by Inko’s extended hand.

Her brain hurts. Something deep in her chest hurts as well. Her arms shake as she holds back what would very easily have been the deaths and maiming of an entire section of the audience, perhaps a thousand people in total.

“Inko,” Mitsuki whispers, “how the—”

She shrugs. It breaks her concentration and a few pieces clatter to the ground. “Practice.”

Instinct guides her next motion. She sweeps her arm out—a part of her brain breaks as she reaches for knowledge beyond mankind—and the ice converges in sweeping patterns, forming runes that name a dying god trapped in the vortex of sundered time. She clenches her fist—her eyes open fully for the first time and she sees past the world and to the monsters hiding in forgotten futures—and the ice is crushed tighter than anything else on the planet as her power goes beyond anything she has tried before.

“Holy shit,” Mitsuki says.

“Indeed,” Jin Mo-Ri agrees.

They do not see tiny black hole floating in the air, perhaps a picometre wide and not yet dangerous. It takes her no effort to flick it away straight to the sky before the others can notice it.
Mitsuki catches her when she stumbles. “Hey, stay with me,” Mitsuki says.

“I’m fine,” Inko replies. “Just… just give me a moment.”

“Honey, how’s about you take her to the ladies’ room,” Marasu suggests, and it might be the smartest thing he’s said all day.

“Alright.”

That is how she finds herself in the washroom, cleaning her face clear of the blood that dripped from her nose. Mitsuki hovers worriedly in the background. Eventually, though, she convinces Mitsuki to leave her be for a few minutes in exchange for visiting the nurse’s office.

She is grateful because she doesn’t want Mitsuki to see what will come next.

Inko has seen many things because of her son’s quirk: the birth of a universe reflected in his eyes; the scratching madness of spiders telling her of their god; birds that sing of a herald that carries galaxies on each wing. Izuku does not know much of what he does without thought. He hums the dirge of gods dying when he cleans the house and speaks the true names of demons whilst doing his maths homework.

And she knows there is yet more knowledge that she can never know without her mind breaking. Already, it feels like someone has torn away a good chunk of her brain matter.

Even were that true, it would not change her certainty that something is crawling in her torso. Applying her power internally is dangerous because organs count as small objects, and one wrong move will see her dead. But the thing in her is distinct in shape, and to the sense that lets her decide which object to grab, it looks like crystalline madness.

Her stomach lurches as she forces the thing up through her throat. Its legs skitter through her flesh and the feeling makes her queasy, but she pushes past the sickness. She rips it out of her mouth.

The thing reminds her of a serpent and a spider and a dream all at once. It isn’t real but for the bright red crystal held in its ethereal ribcage. The longer she looks at it, the more she is reminded of the red orb at the base of her son’s spine seen through an MRI scan. But this thing has eyes within eyes within mouths within eternity within more eyes. Those eyes speak secrets, and the mouths let her see a truth.

Her brain hurts the longer she allows this parasite to live. It begs to be spared for what crime has it committed but give her strength?

//Mother, mother, shadowking sire, let this one continue. Let this line of tribute continue. Let this one grant you eyes//

Inko crushes it with her power.

“I don’t need your help to see.”

She flushes the mass of bloody dreams down the toilet and checks her makeup. She applies some foundation and fixes her eyebrows. There, now she looks composed. As though she hasn’t had a conversation with a remnant of a dead god.

Mitsuki waits for her anxiously. Inko forces a smile, one that has enough earnestness to be believable. There are many things Izuku has taught her, and this is one of them.
“Are you really going to make me see the nurse?”

“Fuck yes. You just had a nosebleed from using your quirk.”

Inko decides against arguing. It would take too long to explain that a nosebleed is nothing compared to what she has seen. “Lead the way.”

“I thought you could only move one object at a time.”

“Practice, like I said. That was just a lot more than I’m used to.”

“Do you think maybe you might have been a hero?” Inko pauses mid-step. “Maybe if we weren’t so stupid in our twenties.”

She continues walking. “That was… never my dream.”

“Why? It could have been if you practiced more and we drank less.” Mitsuki shakes her head as they turn around the corner. “I can’t with my quirk, but you could.”

“It wasn’t what I wanted. Everyone thinks ‘hey, maybe I can be a hero’ when they’re young. That’s just what it is. But if I became a hero I never would have met Hisashi. And without him, Izuku. We can play what ifs all day long, but it doesn’t matter. Not when I have my son.”

When they reach the nurse’s station, she sees a few people in the pale green garb of EMTs having an argument with one of the teachers from UA. Inko watches as they go through the motions of an old argument and decides to ignore it. They aren’t of any importance.

A nurse other than Recover Girl looks her over quickly and pronounces her fine outside of mild case of quirk overexertion. Inko glares at Mitsuki who shrugs.

She looks behind as someone enters the room. “There you are,” Recover Girl says. “You’re here to see Izuku?”

“No? I couldn’t see the end of the fight.”

Recovery Girl frowns. “Well, he won’t be able to compete in the next round.”

“How bad?”

“He shattered some bones and suffered a stab wound.”

“Fuck,” Mitsuki says.

“He’ll heal,” Recovery Girl continues, “but I don’t want him competing in that state. And I’ve personally removed him from the roster to stop him competing regardless of anyone’s wishes.”

Inko can agree with that. She has only one task for him and that was to do his very best. And now the world has seen how powerful her boy is, powerful enough that he can absolutely dominate Endeavour’s son.


“Unconscious.”

“Alright. I’ll come visit him later.”
Kurogiri drinks his beer slowly. It is cold, and filling, full-bodied wheat beer flavoured lightly with peach. It takes the edge off and does not leave him inebriated like drinking a glass of whiskey as Tomura does. Together, they watch the Sports Festival.

“Has our rogue placed the explosives?” Tomura asks absently as they watch a girl grow vines and battle the boy with the crow’s head.

It takes Kurogiri a moment to understand the question. “That is a character class?” Tomura nods, annoyed. “Then yes. The gas lines and structural supports have been targeted. With the false identity Giran provided—”

Tomura waves him down. “I didn’t ask for a fucking wall of text. What kind of badly written J-RPG do you think this is?”

“I wouldn’t…”

On the screen, the bird-boy’s body is consumed by darkness and a scaly arm extends from it. Sharp claws slice through the vines as though they are wet paper. Kurogiri watches the boy land and say something, perhaps a threat, to the green-haired girl. When they next engage, the reptilian arm returns.

Except this time its claws are wreathed in black fire.

Kurogiri opens a warp gate without thought and steps through it. He does not care that reality breaks and there are three versions of him. He is indifferent to the streaks of green lightning. No, even the fact that the pathway has a hill of frozen time doesn’t matter to him.

Sensei’ room is shrouded in darkness. The man looks to him and cocks his head. This isn’t normal. Kurogiri would never come here without a direct summon from a man who could kill him as easily as humans render entire species extinct each day—so easy that most will never notice until an entire ecosystem is dead.

“What has you so troubled, Kurogiri?”

“You told me to ask no questions that night, so I didn’t. I didn’t ask why we were working with the Royal Guard even if I hated it every step of the way. I didn’t ask why we were obeying his orders. I didn’t ask why we were slaughtering mad civilians and leaving the heroes alone. I didn’t—”

“And now you wish for answers,” Sensei says, interrupting his tirade. “You wish to know if the bloodshed was worth it if a mere boy can utilise that cursed fire.”

“Yes. We drowned Shikoku in blood, and you swore to me that the cost would be worth it. That Ino’s death would be avenged if we did it.”

“Indeed.” All For One leans forward. “I spoke to our dear World Walker.”

Kurogiri takes a step back without thought, terror gripping his formless body. “No, no—fuck me.”

All For One chuckles. “That is an acceptable reaction.”

Even without truly having limbs, Kurogiri’s hands shake. “We played our part that night. We owe nothing.”
“I agree fully with you. Both of you wanted an answer to the same thing and it remains the same. The infection was contained. This boy, regardless that he wields the godflame, is not contaminated. No, he is something else entirely. Something new."

“We can’t risk him becoming a conduit.”

“So ready you are to consign a child to death.” All For One shakes his head. “No. I will not permit the execution of this child.”

“Sensei, please.”

“Would you kill Akane if she were infected?”

Kurogiri freezes, the very idea making him ill. She is dead with her mother, and it is his greatest regret that their killers are not all dead. All Might still remains.

“This decision is final. We will observe his progression. If I find him liable to become a conduit, then I will personally deal with him.” Kurogiri bows his head. “But not a moment sooner. There have been few chances to fully study this phenomenon. I will not allow your fear to ruin it.”

All For One waits until Kurogiri nods. “Understood.”

It may be petulant, and perhaps will earn him a reprimand, but Kurogiri opens a warp gate before Sensei dismisses him.

Tomura startles when he returns. “The fuck is wrong with you?”

“You are too young to understand.”

Two boys walk onto the stage. One is Midoriya who became that thing after dying, and the other is the spawn of Endeavour. Their battle is cataclysmic. Kurogiri watches stunned as these two children show power that perhaps even All For One might consider taking seriously.

“Hey, Kurogiri,” Tomura says, too light to be anything pleasant, “tell him to set off an explosive on both Midoriya and Todoroki.”

It takes him a moment to understand he means their agent in the stadium. “They are children. Sensei will be displeased with their deaths.”

“Todoroki is fucking broken enough as it is. Let’s kill the piece of shit before he becomes a raid boss. And if Midoriya becomes… that thing, then the government will neutralise him for us.”

Kurogiri inhales because no part of this plan sounds like it will go as Tomura envisions. Still, he makes the call and relays the orders. He is loyal to All For One, perhaps to his death, and right now his command is to nurture Tomura.

“This goes against his wishes.”

Tomura shrugs. “Who cares?”

_I do_, Kurogiri thinks but does not say. _You won’t be punished. I will._

And yet, watching Tomura play his game and rage at his loss, Kurogiri does not fear the consequences. Watching him shout about the unfairness of lag only makes him more willing to accept what will come.
Chapter End Notes

Season 2 of this story ends next chapter ya'll. It's gonna be a bit of a game changer. See you next week.

That's all from me for now. Thank you for reading this. If you enjoyed the story leave a kudos and if you have any questions just leave a comment below. But know that all of that is unnecessary, and as always your readership is quite enough for me. Cheers
try not to go mad

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

‘The anti-quirk riots are a reminder of the limitations of heroes, and in this particular case, the negative effect their presence has. Quirks are a form of power and this is an indisputable fact. Even without being a hero, having a powerful quirk means you will enjoy a life of privilege above the masses with weaker quirks. But to have no quirk places you at the bottom of social classes, regardless of wealth. This casual disregard of such a large percentage of our population led to what it always inevitably does: revolt and unrest.’

—Excerpt from ‘Questioning the Modern Age of Heroics’ by Andile Sithole.

Izuku opens his eyes to a white ceiling. A hospital, or rather, the nurse’s office. He is surprised that he isn’t covered in bandages. He sits up and reaches for the cup of water on the table, drinking deeply. He sets the cup aside and looks to his right hand which throbs with a dull sort of pain. He sets the cup aside and looks to his right hand which throbs with a dull sort of pain. There are splints taped to his index and middle fingers that he broke twice over against Todoroki.

A twinge of pain in his side makes him frown. He lifts his shirt and sees a starburst scar, undoubtedly where the shard of ice impaled him. He sighs. Another fight, another scar.

*Your body breaks. Soon, they will see the monster beneath.*

“Keep quiet,” Izuku whispers.

The curtain separating him from the rest of the ward is pulled back abruptly, revealing his mentor. Izuku smiles, taking in the too big suit he wears.

“Toshinori-sensei,” he greets, and waves the man who can do no wrong.

The tension Izuku hasn’t noticed leaves his mentor’s frame. “My boy, you’re… I’m glad you’re alright.”

“Just a few broken bones. And a stab wound, I think. Nothing major.” He poked the starburst scar. “Not as bad as being stabbed in the kidney that one time.”

His mentor pales for some reason. “Those are major injuries.” He takes the free chair. “I’m going to say something you won’t like, but I want you to listen, and I want you to not argue.”

Izuku is many things. Stupid is not one of them. Willfully ignorant of the things that may haunt him, perhaps, but not stupid.

“You don’t want me to compete,” he guesses with a sigh, and is pleased—or perhaps disappointed—with the way Toshinori leans back in shock. “I can still fight. It’s a broken arm. I’ve fought under worse situations.”

“You don’t have to fight every battle. That’s not a hero’s job. We fight the battles we can and try to lead by example.”

“My mother wanted me to try my hardest. You’re asking me to give up right at the end. If I lose the next fight, then that’s fine because I’ll have done my best to win.”
“The way you win is important.” Toshinori ruffles his hair. “You could have won right at the beginning. Why were you trying to save you Todoroki?”

Izuku swallows. “Because he’s someone I can understand. And he needed to be saved from himself. Did you see how bright he was?”

“I did. But that’s not the only reason you went so far as to break your fingers twice over.”

Izuku tests his bandaged fingers and finds them still stiff. “There was a girl a few days before USJ. Couldn’t have been more than eight. She wore a sunflower dress. I failed to save her. You know what the article said? ‘Young villain apprehended before fourth murder by police’. She didn’t even want to hurt anyone. It was an accident and she didn’t have a chance…”

The silence between them builds, an oppressive and cold thing like a stormfront of negative potential.

“Do you think the police did the wrong thing?”

He feels betrayed for a moment. “Of course. She was a scared little girl who had a powerful quirk. Now we’ll never know the why behind what happened. That was a quirk activation, and people died. And that’s a tragedy but locking her up doesn’t solve anything. It just… perpetuates a cycle of violence and hatred. And if we do that then we’re no better than villains.”

Izuku forces down the pain. “I know what happened. I’m just as responsible as that officer. And don’t tell me I’m not. I was scared. I could have helped, and I chose not to. There’s no excuse for that. A true hero doesn’t support injustice.”

“I am truly sorry you had to experience that, my boy.” Toshinori closes his eyes and sighs. “I wish I had the power to change everything and stop incidents like that from happening. But if I did, would I not be forced to compromise my morals and become a dictator?”

“If I had a choice for a dictator it would be you. If one person must lead, then I can’t think of anyone better than you.”

“Your faith in me truly bring me joy. But no. I can lead by example and battle great villains in the hopes that people will follow my ideal. I can campaign for better mental health wards in Hokkaido and demilitarisation in Shikoku, but until the people learn to trust the neighbours, then they will not aid someone so far removed from them. Someone they see as lesser.”

“That’s cruel.”

“It is. People are not bad, my boy. But not everyone is willing to take the same risks that we do. And they do as much as they can. Much of the money from this festival will go to charity. Endeavour’s agency donates a significant chunk of its revenue towards mental health institutions in the Tokyo region. And things are becoming better. The military presence in Shikoku has decreased. The last seventeen years have been peaceful in comparison to what they were when I was your age. This is, I believe, the final ode to villainy before it collapses.”

“How can you be so certain?”

“Do you remember when I told you there are secrets I have yet to share?” Izuku nods. “When this festival is over, I will tell you some of them. But until then, rest. Take joy in your accomplishments. There aren’t many who can boast the raw power you showed today. Besides, Kamui Woods will get annoyed if I ditch guard duty any longer.”
Izuku laughs. “You’re a terrible example.”

Strength fills Toshinori as he becomes All Might. He grins and gives Izuku a thumbs up. “Then I will strive to be better. For your sake. If we take life one step at a time, then we’ll always meet the rising sun.”

Still laughing, he cocks his head. “I don’t recognise that one.”

All Might grins his electric smile, the same one that reassures Izuku that life is worth living. No matter its injustices or cruelties, that smile renews his faith.

“No, I would hope not. I was told very recently I was not my mentor and that I should not emulate her by a man I… I admit I did not see him as an equal. And yet, only he remembers Nana and sees things no one else does.”

“I’m glad?”

“As am I. There are things I still have to learn.” He ruffles Izuku’s hair. “That lesson I learnt from watching you.”

He bats the hands away, not caring that his fingers throb painfully. “What?”

“Your resilience is a thing of beauty, young Midoriya. You keep on moving forward, no matter your setbacks. Stay out of trouble.”

All Might leaves him but there is a warm afterglow to their conversation, one that permeates every iota of his being. There is no man who can compare to his hero, and he is very specific to say ‘man’ for even All Might cannot compare to his mother’s unbridled love. And yet, that he can teach the greatest hero a lesson is the greatest reassurance he has ever received.

Recovery Girl appears and checks him over quickly. It is routine at this point, which he supposes isn’t a good thing. She pronounces him to be healing if he doesn’t do anything exceptionally stupid.

“How is he?” he asks, nodding to where Todoroki still sleeps.

Recovery Girl huffs. “Always worrying about everyone but yourself.” Izuku ducks his head. “He will be fine. Bruising, mostly, and a few cracked ribs. Nothing that won’t heal soon.”

“That’s… good.”

“Yes. I don’t agree much with children fighting each other, but I suppose you will do as you please. That’s why I’m here.”

“Did you finish with my scans?” When she raises an inquisitive brow, he adds, “Analysing them, I mean.”

“Hm, that. Not yet. You saw how outside standardised biology your body is operating. I’ll need a bit more time. And we’ll schedule another test in the coming week.”

Izuku feels a shadow approach the door, one that certainly doesn’t conform to a standard human shadow, just as Recovery Girl’s watch beeps.

“If you promise to behave yourself,” she says, “I’ll let you have a visitor.”

“Promise.”
Recover Girl nods and walks over to the door. He isn’t shocked to see Ojiro enter, though he does scratch the back of his head at whatever Recovery Girl furiously whispers at him.

He meets Ojiro’s gaze and before he knows it, his friend is right by his bed and has hands on his shoulders. He grips Izuku tightly as though if he doesn’t use every ounce of strength in his body, then Izuku will fade away to smoke and shadow.

“Hey,” Izuku says, gripping Ojiro’s forearm with his bandaged arm.

Contact, sometimes, is more important than the words that accompany them. And in the few months he has known Ojiro, quiet words and a gentle smile are the best ways to soothe his hurts. Izuku smiles, and though it hurts his broken fingers, he squeezes.

“I’m right here,” he promises, knowing the nameless fear Ojiro holds and loving him enough to alleviate it. “I’m fine.”

Ojiro opens his mouth. Closes it. Takes a long breath as though he must re-evaluate everything he had planned on saying.

“No, you’re not,” Ojiro says quietly, frantically. “Why did you—can you please, just for once, not get hurt doing anything? Why didn’t you win?”

Izuku purses his lips. “I thought I did.” All Might would certainly tell him if he was disqualified or something.

“You know what I mean. You could have won that in the first minute, no broken anything.”

“I couldn’t.” He adds hastily when Ojiro’s face darkens, “It wasn’t about winning. I just, I guess I was trying to help him.”

“You shouldn’t have to break your bones to help someone.” Ojiro’s tail brushes one of Izuku’s bandaged fingers.

“I know. But it was the only option I had. It’s not my story to tell but…” He looks to the bed where Todoroki rests fitfully. “I had the chance to help him. Even if it meant breaking every bone in my body, I wasn’t going to abandon him.”

Ojiro watches him, assessing him deeply. Then, he sighs, the weight of his gaze vanishing with that soft exhale.

“That’s the kind of thing you say about us.” Ojiro gestures to himself and Izuku realises he means everyone he considers a friend. “You know, Shinsou was right about you picking people and deciding to keep them. I don’t even know him and now I have to be nice to him.”

Izuku doesn’t blush. It is a close thing. “Maybe not. He doesn’t… seem like the type to sit at a table and play cards.”

“I’m not the type.” Izuku tilts his head at that. “You co-opted our lunches and made us play cards because you hate the idea of all of us not being together. And now I owe Uraraka a favour.”

“I had forgotten about that.” He winces, wondering if she will come collect soon. “Has she…”

“I think Kirishima has to come to school with his natural hair next week.”

“That’s not very nice.”
“You realise she’s got a mean streak a mile long beneath that smile, right? She can be as vicious as an internet comment section when she wants to be.” Ojiro chuckles, a deep and soul full sound.
“That’s probably why Shinsou has a huge crush on her.”

“You know?”

“Everyone except you and Uraraka knows. We’ve been taking bets on how long it’ll take for him to ask her out. Because Shinsou is too terrified to try.”

“You guys are terrible.”

He laughs because why had he any expectation of perfectly civil behaviour from the group he has formed through his own sheer force of will. Perhaps a day will come when he doesn’t pause and wondering why on earth he is so lucky to have them by his side when he is not worthy of their kindness and compassion, no matter their occasional petty fights. In the future, perhaps, when he is old and his hair white, he may stop. But that is a long time from the present.

“Hey,” Ojiro says, poking him in the shoulder. “You still with me?”

His question is gentle, more a promise than a request for information. Unspoken is the knowledge that Ojiro will give him all the time he needs.

“Yeah. Just… thinking. Thank you.”

Ojiro’s smile is unsure but genuine. “You’re welcome. I’m going to head out before Recovery Girl kicks me out. Don’t go picking up anymore strays whilst I’m not looking, alright.”

“No promises.”

Ojiro leaves silently, waving with both his hand and tail though Izuku doubts his friend notices just how expressive his tail can be. There is an answer to his every thought in each swoosh of his tail, an emotion to each twitch and a quiet rebuke each time it is stiff.

Todoroki groans loud enough that Izuku frowns and gets out of bed. His legs are good, but he takes care not to rip open any of his chest injuries as he limps to the other bed. Todoroki’s eyes are just clearing past the disorientation of waking when Izuku sits in the chair there.

“Hey,” Izuku says, “you’re just waking up.”

Todoroki winces. “Too loud.”

“Stop being a baby,” Izuku says, voice softer now. “I didn’t hit you that hard.” That is a lie, a rather blatant one.

He hands Todoroki the bottle of water and watches him take a single sip, then a deeper gulp, chilling the water with his quirk. The boy grips the bottle tightly, and had it been thin plastic it would be crushed.

“Did you win the tournament?”

Izuku shrugs. “No. I racked up too many injuries to compete. Well, Recovery Girl’s officially pulled me out of the tournament.”

Todoroki nods and looks to the monitor on the wall. He says nothing for a long few minutes, and Izuku observes him consider his next words through each minor twitch and tiny tremble in his neck.
muscles. Despite all that, his face remains a blank slate.

“I think you would have won.”

There is something so factual in Todoroki’s monotone voice, as though he speaks of the sun rising in the morning.

“Maybe. But I’m glad I could help you.”

Shouto raises his left hand and stares at it. “Did you really? I used it, but it… doesn’t change the past.”

“No,” Izuku agrees. “But my therapist says the most important step you can take isn’t the first or the last, but the next step.”

“That sounds like something out of a cheap self-help book.”

Izuku chuckles. “I told her the same.” Todoroki hides his surprise perfectly. “It does sound stupid.”

“Then why are you repeating words you find stupid?”

“Because the meaning behind them isn’t stupid.” Izuku runs a hand through his hair. “I guess maybe it just means accepting the past has happened, and it did make you who you are now, but that you can change the future with your choices now. You told me a lot about yourself when you didn’t have to. Here is a truth about me: I tried to kill myself.”

He says this with a smile. Todoroki only inclines his head as though he understands all too well what Izuku speaks of.

“You’re supposed to react and get upset.”

“Why? What will doing so change?”

“The point I was trying to make is that I’m not the same person as back then. You said I would forgive anyone who hurt me and that might have been true a few months ago. But I don’t forgive Bakugou, and maybe I never will, but I can choose not to hate him. I can choose to be kind even if we’ll never be friends again. And you can choose to use your hellfire without it being Endeavour’s flames.”

Todoroki closes his eyes. “A conversation can’t change a decade of pain.”

“No, of course not. But admitting the truth is the first step to fixing something. It’s your flame, not his, and that’s the objective truth.” It is a risk, and perhaps he oversteps his boundaries, but Izuku raps his knuckles against Todoroki’s chest. “One day you’ll believe it right there.”

“I’m not ready,” he says slowly. “Not yet.”

Izuku grins. “That’s fine. Take all the time you need. I’ll be right here to kick you in the face if you start acting stupid.” He points at the monitor as the final match begins. “Let’s watch this for now.”

*****

Ochaco Uraraka is kind and optimistic and gentle. She has a vicious streak a mile long that she hides behind cheerful smiles. And she may or may not have a crush on Shinsou, but that’s not the point.
Right now she’s annoyed and for good reason.

“Why not?” she demands of Midnight, her voice drawn tight and furious in the back of her throat.

She and the pro hero, alongside Tokoyami and Bakugou are in one of the contestant rooms being briefed on how the tournament is changing. She would prefer it were Bakugou not here for any reason.

*Like getting hit by a train.*

“Extenuating prior injuries.” Midnight cracks her whip before Ochaco can ask another question. “And don’t go asking me about them. He’s entitled to his privacy.”

“This is bullshit.”

She cracks her whip again. Ochaco wishes, somewhere beneath her confused smile, that she would actually hit Bakugou.

“So you brats get to fight each other in a beautiful melee to make things fair.” Midnight licks her lips. “I hope you… enjoy, this three way as much as I do.”

Ochaco shudders and is gratified to see the expression—stance more than anything—of disgust that Tokoyami makes. Bakugou, surprisingly, simply scoffs.

Ochaco is annoyed not because Izuku isn’t competing, but because she can’t beat him down. Oh, she certainly is upset that he has hurt himself but at this point Ochaco is resigned to Izuku being an injury magnet. No, she just wants to prove herself against her favourite person. Not that she will ever let Izuku, or anyone, know.

She has a reputation to maintain.

And without Izuku, she’s stuck fighting Tokoyami and Bakugou. She feels bad for thinking it, but Tokoyami is something of a beta male. He’ll fold the moment Ochaco decides to win. At best he’ll look dignified whilst losing. And all the random bullshit he has shown today won’t make a difference. What is a burning reptilian arm compared to the force of gravity itself?

*Nothing, that’s what.*

She will settle for breaking Bakugou tonight. She isn’t cruel but Bakugou is someone she cannot abide by. Plainly, she hates him and only her love for Izuku stops her from antagonising Bakugou. Only her force of will has managed to stop Ojiro from strangling Bakugou multiple times, and only her persistence had gotten the rest of the squad—and yes, that was exactly what she calls them—from going after Bakugou in retribution. Not because she cares for the asshole, but because Izuku would cry and Izuku crying is the saddest thing in the world.

But hey, Izuku can’t complain if she beats Bakugou down in a fair fight. Nope, that would be hypocritical after the nonsense that was his fight against Todoroki.

“I guess I’m stuck battling you fucks.”

Tokoyami huffs, glaring out the corner of his eyes. “There will be no victory for you this day.”

“I’ll fucking break you in—”

“Boys,” Ochaco says, threateningly, “how’s about you leave the measuring contest until the fight.”
Thankfully, they abide by her wish. She cracks her neck at her starting position, one point of the equilateral triangle Cementoss has highlighted with differently coloured cement. Bakugou and Tokoyami are paying her no attention as Present Mic screams some inane commentary that gets the crowd roaring.

She knows how both will fight. Tokoyami will stay at range and seek to eliminate her first with Dark Shadow whilst protecting himself with whatever those giant scaled arms are. And Bakugou will probably charge straight at Tokoyami to finish their dick measuring contest.

No plan, unfortunately, survives first contact with the enemy.

“I’ll take you both on,” Bakugou roars, throwing her for a loop. “Come at me fuckers.”

Ochaco quirks her brow because she isn’t stupid. She knows Bakugou is many things: arrogant, narcissistic, vain, rude, irreverent, and violent; but he is not stupid. He has a plan and it involves both of them fighting at once.

“Your arrogance will be your downfall.” Tokoyami looks to her and nods once, as though he expects her to obey without question.

Big mistake, she thinks as Dark Shadow arcs towards Bakugou who simply bats it away with an explosion, not moving back a single step.

With the smoke rising in the air, Ochaco charges forward low to the ground. She tags pieces of rock as Tokoyami and Bakugou have what amounts to an intense staring match between explosions and Dark Shadow’s attacks.

She is fully prepared for Bakugou’s careless explosion in her direction. It doesn’t prepare her for the force of it. She tags a few rocks as the force of the explosion makes her roll until she is behind Bakugou, and then she dashes forward.

Another explosion comes her way. As the smoke obscures them, she pulls off her jacket and makes it weightless, leaving it there. She gives it a nudge forward and circles silently around Bakugou as he fires of another blast at her jacket.

With such low visibility, and not being able to touch her, Bakugou won’t be able to tell it wasn’t her. She waits until the distinct sound of Dark Shadow’s screech reaches her before launching forward.

As she thought, Bakugou is not expecting her. She watches the way his eyes widen as he tries to move his arm into position.

Too late.

Ochaco kicks him in the face but takes a light explosion to the torso for her troubles. It pushes her back towards Tokoyami.

She bares her teeth at Bakugou, taking joy in the blood leaking from his now broken nose. One drop isn’t enough as penance for what he has done to Izuku, what he has gottent away with because Izuku is kinder than the life, but it is a start.

“Rush him together,” Ochaco commands before Bakugou can fully regain his bearings.

Tokoyami doesn’t argue with her and together the two of them rush Bakugou.
He fires off his largest explosion so far which forces the two back. But Ochaco sees the way his arms shake.

Everyone has a weakness. If even Todoroki who can freeze a stadium has a weakness, then Bakugou certainly does.

And apparently it is the recoil to his explosions.

She circles him like a predator and places herself just in front of Tokoyami, blocking him with her body. It looks like a defensive move.

Neither of them will realise she has already won this match.

“Hey, Kaachan,” she taunts and is pleased with the wild rage that enters Bakugou’s eyes. “Wanna see something cool?”

“I’m going to break you, bitch.”

She presses her fingertips together. “Look up.”

Bakugou does so. She is gratified by the pure fear on his face even as he lifts one hand high and braces it with his free hand. She sees him exhale in preparation as the rocks come crashing down.

The explosion he emits is the largest she has ever seen him produce, well in excess of even his gauntlets. The shockwave slams into her and sends her flying back into Tokoyami who catches her.

It is unfortunate, then, that this is all part of the plan.

She taps his body and makes him weightless. His red eyes widen in shock as Ochaco kicks off his chest like a springboard.

It sends him flying over the boundary—that scaly arm emerging too late to anchor him before he crosses the line—and Ochaco directly towards Bakugou who breathes heavily, not understanding his loss.

He doesn’t have a moment to react before she is on him, her palms making him weightless, and her mass forcing him to the ground. She twists his arm back as she slams her knee in the small of his back. His grunt of pain is music to her ears.

“Surrender or I dislocate it,” she snarls.

“Fuck off, bitch,” he says just as heated as he tries to wiggle away.

Ochaco shrugs before twisting.

Bakugou roars in anger.

“Look, I don’t really know how to do this properly,” she admits, “and I’ll probably break something first. So, how’s about you respect women, stop calling me a bitch, and surrender or I keep on twisting?”

“Like hell.” She isn’t shocked to see him move his free hand in position to blast her away. So, she twists hard.

Bakugou doesn’t lose his composure even as he roars in pain. This might not be a nice thing to do, but Ochaco wants to win. And she really wants to break Bakugou’s arm.
She twists once more and hears something snap.

“Bakugou is unable to continue,” Midnight says, cracking her whip for emphasis.

The crowd’s roar is magnificent, and the one thing she wants to hear.

Ochaco rolls to the side and stands over Bakugou who cradles his arm. It is twisted at an odd angle and undoubtedly causing him a great deal of pain. Yet, he doesn’t even make a grunt of pain. His teeth are gritted, and his face contorted, but he refuses to let her gain another victory over her.

She can respect that even as she wants to punch him in the face.

“You’re a crazy bitch,” he says steadily.

She glares full force at him. “Call any woman that again and I’ll break your other arm.”

“Fuck you.”

*****

Izuku can’t take his eyes from the screen as Uraraka stands victorious over Bakugou, a grin as vicious as a bloody blade gracing her soft features. She is feral and savage and—

“Beautiful.”

He can, for a moment, understand why Shinsou admires her.

Todoroki grunts, bringing him back to reality. “Terrifying.”

“That too.”

There is little more that can be said between them now. They watch in silence as the diversionary activities take place, cheerleaders and quirk showcases and even a quick running event to give the audience time to use the restroom and find food after the tournament arc.

It gives Izuku the time to meditate lightly and assess the condition of his body. He catalogues the various places where he is stiff and develops a recovery regiment for the coming few days.

Izuku looks behind him as the door opens, breaking him from his thoughts. It is the security guard with the unravelling quirk he has seen each time he has been lost in the bowels of the stadium. The man has a soft smile and his red eyes are warm.

“Is Recovery Girl here?” the guard asks, his voice gentle as a warm gust of air. “We just had a bit of a staff injury.”

Izuku shakes his head as he stands, walking towards the man who he realises looks no older than eighteen, a far cry from the wrinkled face he remembers from the few times he saw the man before. Odd, but perhaps that is part of his quirk, and his badge looks official.

“No?”

The security guard shrugs. “Sorry about this,” the man says before throwing something. Izuku sees the way his body thins to nothing even as the object—a thick cylinder, green with dark ridges—travels in an arc towards him.

It happens quickly. Heat and concussive force emanate from the small device. Izuku watches the
blast wave travel in slow motion, rushing through dozens of plans. He has just enough time to call on the shadows, and twist around with One For All enhancing his every movement.

And see Todoroki, eyes wide, and reacting too slow to make a difference.

Izuku decides right then and there, that he will not let this person he saved die. His efforts will not be for nothing.

Walls of shadow rise and are shattered immediately by the concussive force. It flings Izuku towards Todoroki, and he realises that there is absolutely no way they can survive in this room. Not with the shrapnel and fire and force.

But there are other places he can reach.

He does not need to think for the shadows to engulf both him and Todoroki in it’s clammy embrace. And though his spine flares up suddenly in pain, Izuku feels himself sink through the darkness with Todoroki.

****

When the explosions go off, they hit strategic areas throughout the stadium. The gas lines, the pumping veins and arteries of the stadium, priority targets, increase the damage of the otherwise contained explosives, setting off a chain reaction of fire and destruction throughout the building. Along with the emergency power sources and exits, this attack is designed to cripple any form of response possible.

Fumikage Tokoyami stands before a mix of people in white imperial garb and black suited government agents when the explosion happens. They present him with orders to submit to questioning for subversive activities. A blast of force tears through the wall behind the officials. Only Dark Shadow’s decision to wrap around its master saves Fumikage.

Inko Midoriya is with the parents in the booth when the ceiling above them cracks first, then collapses as some of the parents scream. She raises her hands and holds back the avalanche of concrete. Cracks run through the ground beneath them and Inko is forced to divert her attention to hold the ground together. Her body feels like it is ripping apart from the strain of keeping everyone alive.

Shouta Aizawa does not know why he suddenly leaps to the side and pulls Hizashi below the table with him. He does this purely on instinct, and his instincts have rarely proven him wrong. Rock and stone fall on the table, a thunderous rain of possible death.

Enji Todorkoki is a man who has seen many ambushes and taken part in them as well. He senses the heatwave seconds before it comes and jumps forward, putting himself between the explosion and the students behind him. He slams his hands together and expels a deluge of flame until a wall stands between him and the explosion.

Katsuki Bakugou is stuck on the receiving end of the merciless teasing of Ashido and Kaminari when the walls around them collapse. He sees a cinderblock falling to crush Yaoyorozu and rockets towards her. He barely makes it in time to slam her out of the way. But he can not get far away enough to stop his already broken arm being crushed by the block. He stifles his roar of pain and raises his other hand in the direction of the arena. He knows there is only one wall between them and protection, but if he uses too much force then it may damage the superstructure even further. It takes all of his concentration to direct his palm’s sweat to one spot, more to shape his perfectly, and even more to channel the explosion into a single thin beam of destruction. He meets
Yaoyorozu’s eyes as darkness takes him. “Save them.”

Toshinori Yagi stands outside the stadium in preparation of the victory speech when the explosions occur. He shares a glance with Kamui Woods who stands guard with Mt. Lady before leaping over the stadium walls in one easy bound. He lands in the centre of the stadium and takes in the devastation: entire sections of the stadium burn; bodies are crushed beneath rock and stone; children and civilians shout and scream in terror. But he also takes in the response: Ochaco Uraraka coordinates a group of students to rescue the civilians in their area; Cementoss creates ramps and impromptu supports across the stadium; and in the distance he can see Young Mei holding up a wall with one of her inventions. All Might forces a grin and moves towards the nearest fire.

The man who was once Chizome Akaguro but is now known only as Stain stands over the fallen body of Ingenium when he sees the billboards light up with messages of the bombing at the Sports Festival. He grunts in annoyance. “Your heroes will find you,” he says to the bleeding hero, “before you die. Tell them I will hunt all of you fake heroes. This society breaks because of you, and I will not permit it any longer. Tell All Might I am coming for him. He can’t hide forever behind his position.”

****

Izuku is in pain when they pass through the shadows, but not in so much pain he fails to realise they aren’t in the distorted version of his room. No, they aren’t anywhere near that place. He also has no idea where they are right now.

“What the hell?” Todoroki asks, looking around wildly, his eyes wide and frantic and taking on that creeping horror Izuku has long been accustomed to.

Izuku understands his shock. After all, they lie on a pool of solid quicksilver. In the sky a creature with long wings battles a dying god, the aftershocks of their blows birthing galaxies and ripping through time itself, each swipe of infinitely long claws leaving entropic cracks that splinter to fractal patterns of madness. He hears the howl of the hounds hiding in the corners of time. He tastes dreams of elder trees on the smoky breeze.

Stop wasting time, Mikumo snarls viciously in his mind. You must protect him from the madness.

“Todoroki,” Izuku grunts, and pushes up with his arms. When his classmate doesn’t respond, he says, “Shouto, look at me.”

Todoroki turns slowly, his expression every version of horror and realisation. It is so odd to see them on someone else and makes him glad in a cruel way that he never brought his mother here.

“What is this?”

“A truth,” Izuku says, “that you were never meant to know. This is the truth of my quirk. Come here.”

Todoroki turns slowly, his gaze trapped by the sight of abominations battling in the sky that is a void that is infinity that is the end of all mortal things and the realm of gods. It is a kaleidoscope of godflame and true dark and life that does not abide by the rules of men.

“I need you to kneel,” he commands.

Izuku takes a shuddering breath and shrouds his hand in the inky blackness of the abyss, tempered only by the sanity he wishes to enforce.
“I need you to trust me,” he says before Todoroki can move back. He places the hand against Todoroki’s eyes and lets his shadows filter the world with a hint of rationality.

“What did you do to me?”

“I’m protecting you. You’ll go mad without it.” Izuku closes his eyes as Todoroki turns, observing the abyss once more.

“This is madness.”

He agrees even as he reaches for his back and pulls out whatever is stabbed through him. Izuku draws shadows and shoves them through his back to plug the bleeding. Todoroki hasn’t noticed, and Izuku is glad, but he can’t keep this a secret. Not if they wish to survive.

“Yes. And if we stay here too long, we’ll get eaten by something.” He takes another breath as his control over the shadows wavers. “I need you to carry me.”

Todoroki whirls around. He looks odd with that veil of shadow over his eyes. “Why?”

“Because I can’t feel my legs.” Izuku forces a blood-stained grin. “I think my spine was severed.”

End of Season II: Recovery

Chapter End Notes

Well, there you have it folks, the finale to season 2 of this story. The landscape has changed quite a bit because of this. Chapter 25 will pick up right after this and see how people are surviving a collapsing stadium, and how Izuku and Shouto are doing in the abyss. To those of you wondering, Season 3 is where the answers start coming hard and fast. Season 4, will deal with the fallout of the first 3 seasons and conclude the bulk of the story. After that, there'll be 5 epilogues (already written) to wrap up the really important loose ends.

I'll be taking a break for the next few weeks to deal with school and other life stuff. Suffice to say, I don't have the time to get the next chapters out since I've started some rather major structural edits, and, because I'm an idiot, those spawned a bunch of smaller structural/continuity edits I'll have to go over. This is just gonna take way longer than I have time to dedicate in a school week when season 3 (14 chapter) is going to be about ~110K.

Until then, come on over to my discord server which can be found at the following: https://discord.gg/4YvCTYR

That's all from me for now. Thank you for reading this. If you enjoyed the story leave a kudos and if you have any questions just leave a comment below. But know that all of that is unnecessary, and as always your readership is quite enough for me. Cheers.
Season III-A: Revelation, Chapter 25: The weight of Living

Chapter Notes

Guess who's back, back again. And a few weeks early. Welcome to season 3 good reader. Strap in and take our time, because this is a long one.

I'm still running a discord server which can be found at the following: https://discord.gg/4YvCTYR

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Season III-A: Revelation

Chapters 25-42

‘The disparity between those with quirks and those without will always be a cause of friction and tension. With power comes inequality, and quirks are another form of power. The ebb and tide as power exchanges hands will inevitably lead to conflicts. Look to Vancouver Island whose system of heroics we adopted without thought. They suffered, and still do suffer from insurgencies and protests. Japan has yet to face the same issue due to the unifying presence of the Emperor and the overwhelming power of hero agencies. Yet, for all their strength, they do not fairly treat the people of Hokkaido who have the highest percentage of quirk related mental illnesses. The Imperial family is permitted to act freely and never steps in to eliminate the threat of villainy. Inevitably, these tensions will reach a boiling point and a new wave of anti-quirk riots will erupt.’

—Excerpt from ‘The Effect of Heroics’ by Saruhiko Ando.

Izuku keeps his grip on Todoroki firm as he can with just his arms. His limp legs are hoisted between Todoroki’s arms and sides as the boy trudges across a desert of green sand.

They say no words as Todoroki carries him, stopping occasionally when they find caves with crystal spires emitting the light of reverse entropy. They stop only long enough for Todoroki’s body to be rejuvenated—truthfully, the light of the crystals changes the direction of the arrow of time for a few hours; too short for Izuku to heal his spine—and for Izuku to reapply the shadowed veil over Todoroki’s eyes.

Without the veil, Todoroki is exposed to the full horrors of the abyss. With his powers misbehaving ever since his spine was severed, and he believes the red orb at its base to be damaged as well, Izuku is deadweight.

He is also Todoroki’s only hope of surviving the infinite wastelands.

Todoroki kneels and lets Izuku slide partially off his back. He uses one forearm to stabilise himself in the awkward position, his other arm tight around Todoroki’s neck.

Todoroki forms shards of ice and hands them to Izuku who bites through them easily, swallowing them as the only form of water they have available. Todoroki does the same though Izuku notices he takes a few minutes longer than usual before picking Izuku up again.
“I’m sorry.”

Todoroki says nothing and keeps on walking the path that will lead to a higher layer of the abyss. There is a way to track how long they have been travelling. Todoroki’s stride is even and constant, each step taking about the same stretch of time and covering the same distance. All Izuku needs is to measure the time it takes for a single step—point eight three four seconds—and count how many steps he takes. Of course, he accounts for variance in stride and standard deviations, but the answer is still chilling.

*Will you hide the truth?* Mikumo asks, genuinely curious.

*I don’t know.*

They near the next waypoint a long time later. It is a shimmering barrier of ephemeral time, constantly fluctuating with neither rhyme nor reason. Izuku taps Todoroki’s right arm. His classmate lifts his arm and places it against the barrier.

Ice spreads rapidly, a massive wall reaching to the heavens above and the horizons to either side. And then, the ice shatters. Shards as large as building crash to the ground, kicking up explosions of sand. Todoroki ignores this and walks past the waypoint.

The giant skeleton appears suddenly and without warning, eight too large heads and more decaying wings than a caterpillar has legs. Izuku points to the largest head, the one with a giant sandworm caught in its vicious tusks. The sandworm writhes in agony, its lifeforce slowly being consumed to return this dead thing to life.

“What do you see?” Izuku asks.

Todoroki takes a deep breath even as he forms a highway of ice to the head. “The sight you gave me show a creature with multiple heads eating a giant worm.”

“And what does your soul tell you?”

Something swoops towards them. Todoroki stomps his foot on the ice ramp and a large spear emerges from it, striking the creature through the wing.

He does this with the same ease as the last five over the few hours they’ve been in this layer.

“I see a nightmare consuming the warmth of life.”

Izuku nods against Todoroki’s shoulder.

“Both are wrong,” he says softly. “The worm is a godling of the desert mind, and that winged creature lost a battle in the diamond dust rebellion. Now it’s having a conversation on who should own this desecrated world.”

Todoroki shudders as they land on the skull. He takes care to keep his distance from the giant worm and its field of eternal starvation and dryness.

“It’s dead,” Todoroki says instead. “It looks and feels dead.”

*What measure is alive to ones who have felled stars and consumed the void which binds?*

“I’m not sure what life looks like to you,” Izuku admits. “This thing is having a metaphysical conversation with a godling of this world to determine who will control the desert. You see it eat,
and if you had the same senses I did, you would see how its consciousness moves through the deep desert. It thinks and has intent, and though you may not perceive them, it has senses as well. What is that if not life?”

“Your senses that apparently aren’t working but are fucking telling you all this.” Izuku’s upper body stiffens around Todoroki who sighs. “Sorry. I’m angry and tired and upset.”

“I know. And it’s my fault.” He points Todoroki to what might be an eye socket on another creature but here is simply a molten pool of refracted time. “That piece of shrapnel severed my spine and crippled my powers. I can use them a bit, mostly as a plug to stop the bleeding and to figure out where we’re going next. But it’s all hazy. I used to be able to make worlds of shadows here. I was… I suppose I was a God here once as well.”

He lifts his hand and concentrates hard. A tiny wisp of shadow surrounds his index finger. But, he feels the shadows keeping whatever remains of his spine intact fade away. The pain hits him hard in a wave. He grits his teeth and forces the shadows to reform.

“You alright?” Todoroki asks, his voice strained.

“I’m fine.”

Todoroki stops where the eye of refracted time starts. “You’re not because I’m seeing the things your powers are hiding.”

Izuku concentrates harder on Todoroki and the shadows keeping his classmate sane. He solidifies them, anchors them to memories of the beach where he met All Might; all the happiness and joy and warmth of that moment against this desolate world.

“Better?”

“Yes.” Todoroki skates across a thin railing of ice right to the centre of the eye. “How long have we been here?”

“Do you really want the answer to that?”

“Yes.”

“Three days.”

*****

Inko Midoriya holds a room together through the sheer force of her will, moments after the explosion that tore through the stadium. Only she stands between the other parents and certain death.

And she feels her body breaking with the strain.

Her nose bleeds heavily, and she feels something in her brain snap—in the cracks of her mind she hears the endless chittering of spiders and their unhallowed gods. She can see how her hands pale as the blood flow to them is constricted, turning blue at the tips in the few seconds that she has her quirk active.

The beat of her heart is erratic, oscillating from a thunderous staccato to mind-numbing silence for two beats. A part of her vision is dark, perhaps from exhaustion or perhaps from blindness.
“Out,” Jin Mo-Ri orders, standing tall and serene before the danger. “Hallway part of superstructure. Move!”

*Thank you*, she thinks as Mitsuki ushers her husband off the ground.

Her friend does her best to pick up one of the parents who is unconscious, a deep gash across her forehead. It galvanises the other parents to get the fuck up and help. Because if they don’t then Inko’s sacrifice will be for nothing.

“Will stay,” Jin says once he’s managed to get the last civilian out the door.

“Don’t be a fucking idiot,” Mitsuki snaps. “It’s going to collapse any moment.”

Jin looks to Inko, assessing her for a moment—no matter that she is losing hold of the outer edges of the ceiling and smaller stones tumble to the ground.

“Quirk is speed. Will escape with Inko.” He nods to her and places a hand on her shoulder.

“Release power when ready.”

Inko takes a long breath even as something in her neck cracks painfully. “Now.”

There is a rush of air and a blur of motion. When she regains her bearings, Inko is in the hallway. The stand they were just in collapses, an onslaught of rock and steel and concrete that would have killed them all.

Only now does she smell the smoke and the familiar scent of glycerine from Mitsuki’s sweat. Her legs give out and someone grabs her, laying her down gently against a wall.

“That’s not practice,” Mitsuki mutters.

“Can we please just not do this.”

“I agree,” Marasu says, looking her over once with trained eyes. “Come on.”

He lifts her, hoisting Inko’s arm around his shoulder. Any other day she would be galled by having someone practically carry her, but right now everything hurts and she wants to feel safe.

“Where are we going?”

“Anywhere that’s safe,” someone else answers.

It gets harder to stay present. Her brain hurts from the strain of holding a room together. She blinks and loses a few minutes, finding herself carried over Marasu’s broad shoulders.

“Stay with us,” he says softly.

She blinks and they’re in another part of the hallway, this one better lit and not completely ruined. Her head sways and she gets a look at Mitsuki helping another parent and Jin at the front of the pack. One of the rooms they pass has a glass wall and it creaks ominously.

*Wait, that… that shouldn’t be making that sound—oh shit.*

She is too slow to recognise the creaking for what it is.

Inko is no hero and lacks the instincts that make one. She only reacts after the glass wall shatters and instinctively catches the small shards of glass without looking.
A spike of pain drills through her mind as she calls on more power than she should have. It’s like looking at the past and present and a shimmering barrier of frozen and ephemeral time.

But it gives her the power to catch most of the shards.

The pieces of glass that would have killed them all fall to the ground, shattering into a thousand pieces and forming the runes of to summon a dying god. She nudges one out of the way errantly before things get worse.

She is too late to stop everyone being hurt. The woman with a hawk’s head is peppered with glass along her side and bleeds heavily.

“We need to find medical supplies quickly,” someone says.

“Fan out. Pick a direction. If you find any rooms marked green, they should be sealed safe rooms.”

Inko would help if not for Mitsuki keeping her down. She understands her worry. Inko is tired and the world wobbles when she tilts her head. That doesn’t include the horrible nosebleed she has or the creeping darkness in one eye.

“Don’t you dare move,” Mitsuki orders, pressing torn cloth to her nose.

Inko simply nods and leans her head against the wall. Her neck hurts, she notices. She looks to the woman bleeding on the floor, her towering husband holding a bloodstained shirt against her side as he applies pressure to stem the bleeding.

She closes her eyes for a moment.

It is a moment that seems to last forever. Her mind drifts across all that is and can never be, to places that should have no name and times yet to come but still long past. Somehow, she sees a churning vortex of chaos and a tower of spiders, climbing the endless links to a shadow and a wisp of flame.

Someone shakes her awake.

The vision vanishes and she is back in the dark corridor. The world is made of simple atoms and gravity and time moving in one direction.

She looks up to see Marasu, weary and tired and close to breaking like everyone else. And yet, there is a core of steel resolve that gives her hope.

“Hey, we’re moving her to a safe room.”

Inko blinks and sees Tokoyami’s mother being loaded onto a makeshift stretcher, made from the remnants of a long dress and tattered cloth. The towering form of her husband carries one end of the sling, his face a mask of silent and bloody rage.

“How long was I out of it?” Inko asks, not wanting to spend any more time thinking about the invisible but bloody chains surrounding the man's forearms. They bear a legacy of rage and death, the weapons befitting a god of war made human.

“Be gentle,” the husband says in a gravelly voice to Jin, who nods and takes the other end.

Marasu helps Inko to her feet, keeping her steady when she wobbles. “Not long enough. You look like you’re about to pass out.”
“I think I did.”

With his help, she walks forward, leaning heavily against his bulk. Mitsuki is somewhere ahead, talking intensely and, surprisingly, politely, with one of the other parents.

They are a convoy of broken and scared civilians being led through the dark bowels of the stadium by a foreigner and a doctor. It could be worse. None of them are dead. Yet.

It becomes hard to focus. Her mind hurts and her eyes burn with smoke. She closes them, trusting in Marasu to guide her forward. And focuses on ignoring the sounds of something crawling in the walls, something with too many legs and too many beady eyes.

When she next rises from the murk of exhaustion, she’s been laid against a corner of a room. It is bright, almost blindingly so, but smells surprisingly clean. It takes her a moment to understand that there are likely oxygen tanks pumping clean air into this room.

The safe room is still structurally sound by her estimation when she casts her senses outward, and someone has lit the chemical lights, bathing the entire room in harsh light. There are sixteen of them in total, some staring dully in shock and some shedding tears. It is Marasu who tends to the injured with the medical supply after he has stabilised Tokoyami’s mother.

“If we don’t find a way out, then we might not all make it through this.”

It is the single thing she hoped no one would mention. Not because she is avoiding that truth—no, her son taught her the consequences of ignoring truths—but because it leads to the cascade of voices shouting.

Inko bears it for exactly a minute. Then she stands and walks towards the door, the voices dying down.

“The hell are you doing?”

“The room we were in,” Inko says through the silence. “The floor collapsed. We can crawl through there.”

Mitsuki stares at her, equal parts shocked and angry. “You’re being fucking ridiculous and you know it.” She glances at her husband. “You have to agree.”

“Busy,” Marasu mutters as he tends to Tokoyami’s mother, his training as a physician coming to use.

“I can help,” Inko says and offers a gentle smile. “That’s all that matters.”

That is how she finds herself accompanied by Jin Mo-Ri and Mitsuki Bakugou through the dark bowels of the stadium, back to the room that they very nearly died in. The room that very nearly broke all that she is, scattering her mind to a thousand different realms to be consumed by the monsters waiting above clouds of blood.

Marasu Bakugou tends to the wounded in the safe room, guarded by a massive mountain of a man who she assumes is Tokoyami’s father. Surprising considering how tiny his son is by comparison.

Jin is surprisingly strong despite his lean frame and he moves rubble away from the door easily. She helps even if Mitsuki tells her to conserve her power for later. They enter the room that Inko held together through only the force of her will.
The hole through which they will crawl reminds her of a descent into madness. The red lights and destroyed nature of the room only lend credence to that. The smoky air is no reassurance but she has no other choice, not after volunteering.

It terrifies her to think she may be the strongest person in the area. The others don’t have quirks suited to this like Mitsuki or completely lack quirks. If they must crawl through a dark tunnel then it is in their best interest to have someone who can hold back the danger if it collapses.

Jin leads the way through the tunnel, not at all intimidated by what they are about to do. She nods to Mitsuki before going in second.

Space is cramped, and she is grateful that she has shed a few pounds. A barb of metal scrapes her shoulder but she ignores it, only whispering a warning for Mitsuki.

Inko raises a piece of metal. It causes the rubble to shift.

Her powers come to life and she holds their impending death back with only her mind. She whispers the name of a dying god and solidifies the barrier. She isn’t sure what the cost of that will be later, but she has little choice if they are to survive.

She moves faster, nose bleeding and mind cracking under the strain. Jin catches her when she exits the tunnel and they wait anxiously until Mitsuki exits.

“Give a moment.”

Inko lets her power fade and the tunnel collapses. Good, she’d much prefer a ramp. She brings her hands down, her power compacting the tunnel. Metal groans and concrete shatters beneath her might until a ramp between the two levels exists.

“You ever going to tell me what’s going on with your quirk?”

Inko rolls her eyes tiredly, blinking away the darkness.

"I've never practised and pushed my limits until the last few years. Can you just accept that I'm not going to remain the same person you knew?"

Something snaps.

She sees the steel cable speed towards her and faster than the thought to it takes to stop it. She fully expects to lose her head by the force of the braided steel cable.

A gust of air and Jin stands between the cable and her, one arm raised casually to stop it. He doesn’t even flinch when it strikes him. In fact, it bounces back as though it hit a wall of diamond.

“Stay vigilant,” Jin growls, his eyes already scanning the rest of the floor they are on. "There." He points to a stairwell where the upper level is collapsed beneath the rubble.

They walk down the stairs, Jin taking the lead. It gets darker on the lower level, most of the lights having been destroyed.

“I think there’s someone under there,” Mitsuki says, pointing to a pile of rubble.

Inko rushes over fast as she can with how painful everything is.

She is careful to lift the topmost pieces of rubble first. She can’t tell what state the person beneath the rubble is in, but she can’t risk possibly worsening their condition. They’re strapped for time and
resources and an escape route. They can’t add another injured person to that list.

There comes a point when the load has lightened enough that the person beneath claws their way out.

Except it isn’t a person but a shadow, deep and miserable. There is a sudden whoosh and she finds herself a few feet away between Jin and the shadow creature. It stumbles forward and the shadows dissipate.

Jin catches the person.

She raises her brow, partly shock and partly amusement.

Mostly though, it is simply profound exhaustion.

“Tokoyami?”

Fumikage Tokoyami awakens slowly.

He blinks through the haze of darkness until he realises, he is very literally in the dark. Smoke chokes his lungs and his torso is a mess of pain.

Reaching out and finds something solid and heavy above him. He pushes with his arms first, and then, after planting his feet firmly on the object, he pushes with his entire body.

It creaks ponderously, and though his legs strain badly, he doesn’t stop until it is shoved aside. Red light fills his world.

*Emergency lights*, he realises as he crawls through the small opening, ignoring the concrete and metal shards that scrape his skin. He groans once he’s out of what might have been his tomb and rolls to the side.

A dead body greets him.

It is a woman by the soft line of her jaw and the long cascading hair now burnt and in clumps. Both her body and uniform are charred, tattered white strips of fabric the only things denoting her status as being part of the Imperial Household.

He notices this errantly in the back of his mind, cataloguing those facts without much thought.

The rest of his mind is more focused on turning to the side and vomiting.

It is nothing like the horrors the wish that wore Izuku’s body as a second skin showed him in the true dark, but it is a horror all the same. Perhaps worse for those were horrors beyond the ken of mortality and the mundane laws of spacetime.

This is someone he had been talking to, even if she had planned on arresting him, and now she is dead and gone.

“Dark Shadow,” he croaks, throat burnt and lungs full of smoke.

The demon rises slowly from his body, its form small despite the dimness. He senses weariness and hurt from his companion.
**You’re up.** it says, its weakness mirroring his own.

It glances at the dead woman and then places itself between Fumikage and the body without prompting.

**Close your heart to the pain.**

Fumikage looks around, glad for his companion. There is rubble beneath him, and to the left, the steel superstructure seems to have collapsed. Ahead, where the should be a door, there is a small mound of concrete. He doesn't look to the right where the dead body lay covered by Dark Shadow’s bulk.

He doesn’t want to think of what might have happened to the other bodies. There were five, maybe six people in this room with him.

“What happened?”

**Explosion. I can’t tell if it was a quirk or manufactured.** Dark Shadow snakes away from the corpse. **I was too busy keeping you alive.**

Fumikage bows his head. “You have my thanks. But we need an exit route.”

**You could stay here and wait to be rescued. Moving things might damage the superstructure further. And the only way to move things is...**

“To summon it,” Tokoyami finishes even as he stands. “It is still shackled. It will obey.”

**Give it any leeway and it will consume you. Dragons are creatures of the abyss. It knows no love, no compassion, no loyalty. Only the laws of power.**

Fumikage scoffs. “Just like I give you leeway. Move this rubble aside.”

Dark Shadow obeys without question, though Fumikage senses displeasure from the demon. It takes a few minutes for the rubble blocking the doorway to be removed. The hallway beyond is dark with only flickering emergency lights casting it in sickly ambience.

He chooses a direction at random and walks to the right. With his sense of direction as bad as it is, he’s more likely to find an exit at random, letting chance and probability dictate his survival.

Fumikage keeps a hand on the wall and walks slowly, unwilling to risk placing his entire weight on what may be a collapsing floor waiting to happen. The hallway ends in a wall of rubble and a stairwell with only partial access. The stairs leading higher are collapsed whilst those below are dark, hidden even more, and remind him eerily of the battle trial.

This time, though, Dark Shadow does not battle him. The demon is ever-present at his shoulder, watching for falling rubble should the need arise. And, should Dark Shadow fail, Fumikage has another option now.

He hears quiet whispers as he descends. It makes him quicken his pace. Perhaps it is people that can help. And even if they cannot, he is honour bound to help.

Turning the bend, he finds a group of civilians sitting or kneeling or lying unconscious on the ground. There is an air of desperation to them, heightened by the red gloom and the ashy air. He wonders if everyone is like this, at least those graced by fate to live another day.
Will you be their hero? Dark Shadow asks him and only him.

Fumikage takes a deep breath.

“Hello there,” he says for it is the only thing he can think of.

A man, perhaps in his forties, with dark hair rises from his spot by the wall. He shambles towards
Fumikage with the air of someone forced to be in charge and not used to the responsibility. The
others look at him tiredly, their energy seemingly reserved only for themselves.

“You’re the boy from the finals,” the man says, voices gravely from smoke and ash.

Fumikage looks past him and at a woman whose breathing is laborious. “Yes. I will ensure you all
make it out.” He bows his head in respect for his elder. “What is the situation?”

The man’s glare is hard. “Why the hell should I trust you? I had family in Shikoku.”

And like that, Fumikage understands his hostility. So many died that night and his dragon wields
flames the same colour. It is why members of both the government and the Imperial Household
had nearly arrested him before the explosion.

“I take it you have family elsewhere? If you choose to oppose me, then I find it unlikely for you to
see them again.”

“Why you—”

“Had you the power to do so, you would have escaped already. As it stands, you have not.” He
nods to a man who has bandages on his neck and shoulder stained red. “I take it you found the
medical supplies. I commend you for that. Now, let me save you.”

“Just trust… the d-damned brat,” the lady with laboured breathing says, more a pained wheeze
than anything else.

The man looks to her, his features darkening with shame. He turns back to Fumikage.

“I don’t like you. My sister was burnt to death by those flames.”

“You do not have to find my presence calming. But I only ask that you let me help you and fulfil
my duty.”

After a long moment, the man nods. "Help them."

Fumikage sniffs, smelling the air. “Tell me the situation.”

The man points back to the stairwell Fumikage came from. “The floor above us is closed off with
rubble and the staircase higher is collapsed. Down here the only path has a sealed blast door.”

It takes him a moment to place the door in his mind. “That is the path we must go. I will unseal the
door.”

“There’s no power.”

Fumikage nods as he walks down the hallway. He checks some of the civilians—the woman with
laboured breathing, and he knows too little to help treat her; the man with bits and pieces of
shrapnel in his neck and side, bandaged heavily and fitfully unconscious; a girl with a large gash on
her forehead, unconscious; and a teenage boy crying with his blank eyes wide and staring at
nothing, the sight disconcerting but one Fumikage must ignore as he is not Midoriya who always knows what to say.

The sealed doorway is bulky and made of interlocking steel slabs. He knows there is a manual override, one that should appear on the opposite side of whatever caused the door to appear. Fumikage orders Dark Shadow to inspect the topmost sill.

*The override is on the other side*, Dark Shadow says.

Fumikage nods. “Stand back,” he orders.

It takes a second for the man to comply. He focuses on his soul and the chains connecting him firstly to Dark Shadow, and secondly to his latest creature.

He tugs on the chain. Commands in his mind, *Slice through the door delicately.* Allows the dragon’s arm to emerge from his torso, forcing it smaller than it was during the stadium.

The black scales seem to suck in the little light they have. Its five claws on strangely human-like hands are the only source of light, a reflection of a future sliced away. It stabs through the central crease, and with only the force of the muscles in its scaly paws, it forces the doorway open a smidge.

Fumikage feels his energy drain as he summons the other arm. The dragon’s arms push the doorway open fully. He can see a sliver of light in the distance, perhaps the outside world or perhaps just a bright light.

Either way, it is more hope than they had before.

“Get everyone out,” Tokoyami hisses through clenched teeth. “Now.”

The doors want to close and strains against the two arms. Tokoyami stands between the arms and the doorway, sweat dripping down his neck. He has little energy after the match with Uraraka and Bakugou, even less after the explosion and Dark Shadow saving him. And now, the dragon draws upon his tiny energy reserves to keep the door open.

But he lets none of his weakness show. If there is one thing he knows about heroes it is that they may never show weakness when rescuing civilians.

The man whose sister burnt to death by godflame rushes the lady and the little girl to the other side quickly. Fumikage looks over back as he lifts the man with shrapnel in a fireman’s carry, ducking beneath the dragon’s arms and laying the man gently against the wall. It is the teenager who takes the longest as he actively resists any attempt to be moved. When he hears something above snap, his hand is forced.

“I’ll get him,” Fumikage snaps through clenched teeth. “Get to the other side.”

The man nods without question and scrambles to the other side as a piece of rebar falls from the ceiling.

*Dark Shadow, retrieve him.*

He feels the last dregs of his energy vanish as Dark Shadow grabs the teenager and drags him to the other side, depositing him roughly even as concrete falls to the ground on both sides of the door. The dragon’s arms vanish without Fumikage’s strength to sustain them.
He sees the doors approaching, giant steel slabs of death he can’t avoid, not with how he is between them. And then, he feels something tug him back to the hallway they were in before.

Dark Shadow surrounds his body as concrete and rebar fall. He doesn’t fight as Dark Shadow puppets his arms to catch a long piece of steel. Fumikage collapses beneath its weight, but it does not crush him. He breathes rapidly as other pieces fall on him.

He is glad he is not claustrophobic right now. The weight is immense, and alone he would be dead. It is only the union of his physical body and the power of his first companion that he even has a chance at survival.

What now? Dark Shadow asks when they are buried beneath the rubble.

He is also glad he chose not to fight Dark Shadow. There is a comfort in knowing the impossible shadow that is part of his quirk protects him from the weight pressing down.

I don't know. The override is on the other side so hopefully, they will find people to open it and find me.

Do you believe that?

I must. How long can you protect me like this?

A few minutes at best.

Then we must have faith that fate does not wish we perish this day.

Despite their disagreements, Dark Shadow is still his oldest companion. Wrapped in his misty form of unbridled potential, Fumikage feels at peace.

He thinks of the story the man at that special day-care told him, a story of children of bravery unmatched as their village hidden in leaves was destroyed by hateful people. Under the crushing weight of rubble, minutes from death, he wonders if dying for a few civilians is all his life will amount to.

He thinks of Midoriya and knows his friend would make the same decision without hesitation. And there is no one he respects more.

Still, it hurts that this is all he will amount to. A scared boy dead beneath the rubble.

Faith is a fool’s gambit, Dark Shadow says, always knowing his thoughts, but I think you humans need it. This may be my last life cycle. I don’t know what will happen once you die. Maybe I’ll go screaming back to the void-which-binds to my people. Perhaps my existence truly is chained to yours eternally. But, I don’t hate you. I think your life will have meaning.

That makes him smile.

Thank you, my friend.

How long have we been together?

A decade now since I reached for you.

A long time for humans. When you tore me from my home, I lost most of my memories. Instinct is all that remained.
I’m sorry. I always will be. But I was a child who has no idea what they were doing.

I know, and I forgive you. Ever since you went back there, my memories have been coming back. Not all of them, but bits and pieces. I’ve lived longer than this world, perhaps longer than your universe. I’ve seen eternal Ayatan Sculptures and gods in the frames of war eternal. I’ve led the council of my people by virtue of being the oldest and I pioneered our final life cycle. You took me as a weak new-born after my final rebirth. I should hate you. But despite all that I’ve seen, you’re the first to call me a friend. I don’t regret all that I’ve learnt amongst your kind.

Perhaps in the future, we will be able to understand you better.

Dark Shadow hums in his mind. You must never let that happen. The abyss is anathema to true life. I don’t know why, but humans touching other aspects of the abyss should never happen. Even though the void has touched life here, it should not have happened to this extent. It is the godflame that reigns supreme here. There are too many quirks and bloodlines tainted by eternal dark.

Is that truly so wrong? I would never want to imagine life without you.

Is that your command, my prince? Dark Shadow physical form vibrates and Fumikage’s nostrils clear, letting him breathe unimpeded. There are too many kings, here. I hate your friend, though I understand why now more than ever. He is the shadowking, and the deep abyss is his to claim. He is anathema to void life and true life both. Too human and too nightmarish at once. But you are also a king who has chained me to your will. A king of slaves.

Do not call me a slaver.

Dark Shadow chuckles. It is what you are, my prince of crows. One of three though none should exist.

The thought makes him uncomfortable. What then does that make him, truly? If he is to die today, then he would rather not have that be his last thought.

Do you think they’ll miss me? He asks, changing the subject badly.

Dark Shadow humours him. Who?

The children. They’ll be alone without me.

They have their caretaker.

Yes, but he isn’t... he's a mutant, but he's not young. They don't relate to him as they do me. They look up to me.

Dark Shadow thrums, the sensation oddly soothing. Then visit them after this is done. This is not the time to give up on your dreams.

I never did get a real sword. I still want one.

You’ll have one, Dark Shadow says, and even Fumikage knows it to be a weak reassurance. It’ll be magnificent. Long and sharp and maybe even on fire.
Fumikage would laugh if his chest wasn’t being crushed. The impending certainty of death crushes the little cheer he can muster in this situation.

He hears footsteps moments before someone says, “Ah, shit, this way’s closed as well.”

Fumikage opens his mouth and shouts, “Help.”

“Oh shit, there’s someone here. Someone help me move the rubble.”

He hears another set of footsteps, no, two more. “Move, Mitsuki.”

_You were right about faith_, Dark Shadow whispers in his mind.

The omnipresent weight of the rubble lightens as pieces of it are removed. Slowly, he feels the spectre of death that had been looming over him vanish. The moment he can, he claws his way past the last layer of rubble and tumbles out onto the ground. Someone catches him. He looks up to see a man with stars for eyes.

“Tokoyami?”

He looks to the side and sees Izuku’s mother.

“Mrs Midoriya?” He lets Dark Shadow fade away, the dark armour disintegrating and leaving him in his soot-covered gym clothes.

“Thank you,” he says to the man and steps back cautiously, instinctively knowing something is strange about the man.

There is another adult with them, a blonde woman who looks like Bakugou’s older sister. Which he knows can’t be right because Bakugou doesn’t have a sister.

He stretches his back and feels something crack loudly. “I am glad you found me.”

“We weren’t going to leave you,” Mrs Midoriya says, dried blood staining her face “We’ve been looking for exits but the upper floors are wrecked. We had to crawl through a hole to get to the floor above us.”

Fumikage nods. “That doorway should lead to the arena, but rubble has collapsed it on either side.”

“Mitsuki, Jin, why don’t you guys check if there’s a way to open it.” She pulls him aside to the staircase and forces him to sit. “You’re shaking.”

“Am I?” He looks to his hands and finds them trembling. “How odd.”

“You're experiencing a stress reaction. How do you feel?”

“Nothing. I don’t… feel anything, right now.” And yet, there is a deep pit in the bottom of his stomach, a gnawing sensation that he is terrified of looking at.

She holds his gaze, her eyes shining brightly in the dark just like her son's. Her features are harsh in the red light, sharp and angular. The is a strength to her that he can't place.

She is nothing like his simpering mother.

“Where you with my mother?” he asks sharply. “And father?”
“They’re safe for now. They’re in a room where the superstructure is still strong. There’s clean air and medical supplies.”

He exhales slowly. “Secure panic room. There are a few in the stadium. Now we just need to break past the rubble there.”

“The godflame can melt that door,” Mrs Midoriya muses.

Fumikage stills, ice running down his spine. It is the name the fabric of the abyss branded in his bones when he chained the dragon to his will.

He looks to Izuku’s mother, really looks at her past the superficial features, and senses the echoes of ancient knowledge in her eyes, the cold tendrils of nightmares coiling around her neck, and the spectre of witnessing eternity around her shoulders. Most of all, he sees the spectre of a dead god attached to her soul, endless eyes observing him back and long legs wrapped around her.

“You’re aware of its true nature,” he says at length. “He told you of that place.”

Her smile is tight. “I’m his mother,” she says as though that is all the answer that matters and perhaps it is. “And I’m not happy he took you to the abyss.”

“Forgive me, but I reached for it long before I met your son.” He lets Dark Shadow materialise for a moment, just long enough for her to truly see his companion. “I suppose that is no excuse for not asking your permission.”

Her lips are thin, eyes drawn in. “No, it isn’t. But it isn’t my place to tell you how to live your life.” She looks back to the door. “Why haven’t you burnt through the door?”

“Can you not smell it? The gas in the air.” He inhales once more and yes, it still is in the air. “I did not wish to risk setting off another explosion.”

She nods. “Alright. Stay here and I’ll open the doorway.” He moves to stand but is stilled by her glare. “I don’t care if you’re training to be a hero. One day you’ll be a hero, but right now you look like a scared kid. So, keep your butt on that step and don’t move.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She observes him for a moment before heading towards the door. She says some words to Bakugou’s mother, a harsh and whispered argument that he can’t hear. The man adds something to the conversation which only sets Bakugou’s mother off, and right now she looks just like her son. It makes him wonder how much of what Bakugou is—was, an insidiously forgiving voice that sounds like Midoriya whispers—results from his parents, and how much is simply who he is and can never be changed.

**She’s right. You’re experiencing a stress reaction.**

“You don’t even know what that is,” he whispers as Izuku’s mother extends her hands and he watches her lift the rocks through some unknown force.

But the more he pays attention to it, the more he can see an echo of dying gods in unhallowed words, immaterial runes of power forming in the patterns her power leaves behind.

**It’s always been a give and take between us. I can amplify the negative emotions you feel. But I can also take them away. You don’t need them right now. I’ll return them with interest later.**
He grimaces. “You’re more trouble than you’re worth.”

With the rubble gone, Izuku’s mother thrusts one hand forward and pulls the other back. A surge of power, perhaps invisible to normal humans, pulses out from her at the action. The dragon chained to his soul focuses on her as the door groans and creaks. Slowly, like the petals of a lotus, the door unfurls in snaps of broken metal and stems of deformation.

She stumbles, only to be caught by Bakugou’s mother who whispers something tenderly to her. Izuku’s mother shakes her head and steps forward, wobbling, and pushes both hands forward. The rubble on the other side slides forward. Bakugou’s mom catches her before she falls and helps her to the ground.

Fumikage stands and walks over as the adults talk amongst themselves.

“She will be fine,” the man says. “The others no. We need to get them.”

“We’re not leaving her alone.”

The man shrugs. “Boy can watch her.” He’s looking at Fumikage.

“This is ridiculous.”

“Mitsuki,” Izuku’s mother says, exhaustion colouring every word. “Please, just go. We’ll be fine here.”

“Oh, you can’t be fucking serious.” She throws her hands in the air and walks with the man, meeting Fumikage’s gaze for a moment. “You keep her safe, you hear.”

"Yes, ma'am."

Fumikage picks a particularly large stone and sits beside Izuku’s mother. Her eyes are closed, features tight with pain.

“What is your quirk?”

She opens just one green eye. “Moving objects with my mind.”

He hums. “With that level of power, you could easily be a hero. What was it originally before the darkness altered it?”

“I don’t have to answer that.”

“No, you do not. I always thought my quirk was Dark Shadow, that creature you saw just now. It seems it has always been to bind the creatures of the void to my soul.”

“The dragon was why you went to the abyss,” she guesses. “You were looking for power.”

“Partly,” he says honestly. “I was fulfilling a personal oath and completing a final wish. I’ve told you about my quirk. Will you return the courtesy?”

“You’re very politely arrogant. Not good with people in the slightest, are you?” He would flush if not for his feathers and the soot clinging to him. “I could move small objects with my mind. Now, well, I don’t know if I have an upper limit.”

“General telekinesis.” He thinks of the power she drew from. “You were invoking a dead god with your power.”
“I know. Izuku’s told me more about the abyss than he should have. And some things cling to him on occasion.”

They stay in an uncomfortable silence until the rest of the adults are brought down and they head outside to the arena. The centre which is untouched by destruction has been converted to a makeshift field hospital, with Cementoss make more stable structures with his power.

He stands with his father as his mother is carried to a critical tent, her side bleeding badly despite the bandages. His father stays silent, a looming presence behind Fumikage. It is the only comfort he will ever receive from the man, paltry though it is. The assurance that his rage and violence is not directed at his son, at least not now.

“Will she live?” he asks of the man who sired him.

And just as he expects, he receives no answer. Fumikage sighs. “I’ll be with my friends.”

Fumikage looks to him in confusion and follows his gaze to the side where Uraraka and Iida are setting up supplies for another field tent with Shinsou and Kaminari.

He feels eyes watching him and sees All Might. The hero nods to him from across the stadium. There is no expectation in his strong gaze, just the reassurance that any action is permitted. He walks towards his friends and forces his tense limbs to loosen. He smiles at Shinsou who has dropped a box.

Only then does he notice the thick swathe of bandages around his hand is because his friend is missing a finger.

Fumikage swallows, feeling guilty for his weakness when others are strong.

“Where do you need me?” he says, staring at that hand missing a finger.

*****

Izuku decides that of all creatures he hates, spiders rank the highest. He can only grip Todoroki tightly as his friend fights a horde of the creatures, each chittering step on steel making him shiver.

They’re climbing the corpse of what might very generously be called an elephant, but one that is the fetid remains of something consumed from the inside out. He can see the miles long spires that could be considered a ribcage, the twining row of repugnant tusks upon which creatures are burnt in dark flame, their futures consumed by the flames and the lines of tribute the kindling to this massive pyre.

The waypoint is somewhere inside the elephant, which means climbing it. And the only way to do that is to scale the gleaming yellow chains tying it down to the vortex of churning chaos, a vortex that has already consumed an ethereal serpent long as a continent.

Each link takes Todoroki hours to scale, and Izuku dangles uselessly on his back. It surprises him that Todoroki has the pure physical strength to scale what amounts to a vertical cliff face whilst carrying a cripple.

That, and face off against a horde of spiders.

When Izuku looks down, he can see the thousand thousand corpses of dead spiders, each large as a building and each with a glowing red orb protected by their steely carapaces. Shouto has killed so many of them that they form a tower of corpses, the base of which is fathoms below the vortex of
Todoroki sets Izuku down in a hollow where the chains have chipped. At that scale, a small chip is the size of a cave. He's breathing hard when he sets Izuku down, rougher than he usually is. Izuku doesn't complain that his arm is grazed by metal chips or that his unfeeling legs are probably in a bad position.

With his left hand, Todoroki makes a thick shard of ice and extends it to Izuku. They've done this often enough that Izuku doesn't hesitate and snaps it in half and chews a chunk. It doesn't taste as ice should, there's some quality that affects time itself distorting the flavour profile.

A loud shriek pierces the air. It is a battle cry from the host of enemies seeking their death.

Todoroki sighs. “Give me a moment.”

He forces himself up and walks towards the entrance of their temporary rest stop. Izuku watches him walk to the edge before jumping off.

He’s getting used to this place.

Izuku looks to his brother, a shimmering apparition who sits on a steel mound like the king of a fallen kingdom. He looks so similar to the image he sees in the mirror that it startles Izuku. Their colouring may be different as Mikumo has dark eyes and darker hair to Izuku’s light green, but anyone who could see them would assume them twins trying to look different.

“That’s not a good thing,” Izuku says as a high-pitched whining fills the air, the sound of steel grinding on steel at high speeds. “I can’t help him.”

I’m sorry, brother mine. Things will become worse. The chains of this dark universe are slowly forcing you into a role. You must become a caricature for the sake of this world’s theatre.

Izuku blinks. “What?”

I truly am sorry. You are his guide and burden. The universe acknowledges this role you must play. But without the entirety of your powers in the skin you wear, you can’t escape the weight of Todoroki’s story.

In the depths of his soul, he understands. Without the power that makes him Shadowshield in the real world, that makes world-ending dragons and ancient trees call him shadowking, he is nothing more than a puppet.

The wailing of a host of spiders dying reaches him, a chittering sound in his bones of crushed carapaces and dead dreams and legions singing a violent dirge: //A thousand curses upon you, corpse of the shadowking. The debts of your kin must be paid in blood//

Izuku ignores it as best he can. They aren’t the first to demand he pay a debt, but it’s only been since he returned to this place. He isn’t certain what has changed between the few real days since he last came here and the Sports Festival, but something drives the denizens of the abyss into a frenzy.

When Todoroki returns, he is covered in blood and broken armour and feathers. He walks towards Izuku, stumbling at the last moment and crashing to the ground.

“Fuck.”
He scrambles towards his friend, dragging himself across the ground with his arms. Shouto’s breathing harshly but silently, his pupils dilated beneath the veil of shadow that keeps him mostly sane.

He places a hand over Shouto’s chest and feels the rapid beat of his heart. Beneath that common sound of the mundane living is the song of ice and fire that make up his soul. The sound is discordant, waning the longer they spend like this.

“Your body’s failing,” Izuku says bluntly.

“How much longer?”

“You’re slowing down,” Izuku says, ignoring the question. “You haven’t eaten since the stadium. How are you managing?”

“Survival training with my father.”

“Not pleasant?”

“No. Are you going to tell me how long we’ve been here?”

“Six days now, Going on seven.” He taps Todoroki’s cold arm, a fine layer of ice clinging to it. “Your ice is morphing, changing to suit this world. Those crystals that kept you going have altered it, granted it properties of entropy. But it isn’t a substitute for food.”

Todoroki sighs and pushes himself up, grunting with his exhaustion. He pulls Izuku and wraps his useless legs around his waist. A cloth ties Izuku’s legs to Todoroki’s waist so they don’t interfere and they set off once more, climbing the seemingly endless chains.

It takes them another two days of fighting hordes of spiders and climbing the thick chains before they reach the summit, and only because the distance is relative in the abyss. Todoroki carries him to the hollowed-out husk of the elephant and together, the journey to another layer of the abyss.

The first thing Izuku can tell of this new layer is that they are in something like a cave, the ground too smooth to be anything but the physical litanies of a god and too bright to be anything other than prayers from a throne world.

In the centre of the cave is a creature of many arms, a distorted vision of humanity’s gods of war. It possesses antlers dripping slimy fluid skyward, a head that vaguely reminds him of an octopus, and legs like a raptor.

Izuku blinks before tapping Todoroki on the shoulder. “There’s food.”

Todoroki tilts his head to see Izuku out of the corner of his eye. And his gaze is every type of perplexed.

“You’ve got to be shitting me.”

The creature finally notices them, standing from its throne of blood and war made physical. It raises a dark weapon, one that emits a thick smoke of darkness and carries a burning edge. Instinctively, he knows it to be an infernal engine shaped by the godflame’s heat.

*A Blade of Disparity,* Mikumo whispers, awestruck. *I never thought I’d see one.*

Izuku ignores him and instead grins at the approaching monster.
“Godlings taste delicious.”

Todoroki, thankfully, is interested in living and that means killing the godling. It isn't a particularly powerful creature, hardly capable of doing more than swinging that sword and sending continent-shattering waves of power.

And in this place, that level of power makes you insignificant.

Hours later, Izuku is deep in the torso of the creature, parting potentially healthy flesh from the bits that will poison them slowly. The thing he generously calls a heart for it channels most of its power is his main priority, hidden beneath layers of alien metals and complex logic and flesh that exists at different points in time.

Eventually, he finds it and rips out the crystal and bone spur heart, as large as his torso. He carelessly tosses it to the side, and with only his arms pulls his way out of the eviscerated body of the godling. He lands roughly on the ground and drags his body to the small bench made of alien glass with one arm, the other holding the heart.

Todoroki is somewhere to the side, not willing to watch this act of butchery. Personally, Izuku thinks he’s something of a pussy after killing an endless horde of spiders.

“This will give you strength,” he says, once he's finished preparing the heart and moved on to the other bits of flesh. These will be for Izuku, the dregs for he has no right to claim the heart.

“It’s alive. And not organic.”

“That’s not the point, Todoroki. I’m not sure why you keep on using rationality to classify life, but here, metaphors are more important. You killed it.”

He pokes Todoroki in the chest with his bloody hand. It leaves a smear of ichor on Todoroki’s ripped uniform. From the way Todoroki winces, it may be mildly acidic.

“And by eating this heart you will consume its strength. Humans call it the law of the jungle. Some gods call it sword logic. You ended the concept of the creature, and now you need to eat wholly of its flesh to survive.”

The heart shines brightly, still carrying the last wishes of the godling.

Todoroki is pale, hand trembling. “I can’t even tell if you’re just mad and sincerely believe this or…”

“Or?”

“That you know what you’re talking about.”

Izuku shrugs. He finishes slicing the nasty portions of the creature like the unhallowed colony of void leeches, and hands Todoroki the ichor covered heart. The ichor is every colour of the rainbow and, in another time, would have looked beautiful to Izuku.

“Cleanse it with your flames.”

Todoroki hesitates, just long enough for Izuku to realise it isn’t anything as simple as being wary of eating the heart or anything mundane. No, it’s something they absolutely do not have time for.

“Oh, for the love of everything good and just in the world, are you seriously hesitating because of
your fucking daddy issues. No, shut up, and listen to me. We’re trapped and fighting for our survival. We only have each other. If you collapse, something eats me. If I lose concentration, you go mad. Stop fucking things up worse.”

Todoroki lets him rant a few minutes more. Izuku doesn’t care that his argument soon loses steam and he is being humoured more than anything else.

“Are you done?” he asks dryly, to which Izuku nods. “I know something will change if I use my fire. They’ve changed just like my ice has.”

Izuku looks around. The cave system behind the god’s throne isn’t physical even if he can sit on the ground and slam his fist against the wall. It is a latticework created by a litany sung by endless rows of thralls and paradox runners. The spot he’s currently sitting on is the part of the litany where they describe in gruesome detail the tortures they will inflict upon entire star systems in the name of the god if it appears.

It probably won’t.

Todoroki has already killed it.

Mostly.

“We’ll be fine. Use it and burn that god in your image.”

Todoroki closes his eyes. Takes a deep breath. Calls upon his fire.

Izuku understands his earlier hesitance. The flames aren’t the bright crimsons and warm yellows he remembers, they aren’t the colours of summer and sunset. No, this red is the red of congealed blood, the blood of a corpse left to rot for a week. The yellow is the yellow of pus, the colour of sickness and plague.

It is fire, hot as any can be, but they are not the same. And in the echoes of the flame, he can hear the screams of the dead and forgotten, people damned—through torture, through bondage, through their own sins—and the dreams of those Todoroki killed, the spiders begging for forgiveness and all the rest.

Todoroki looks at his flames in disquiet. And then, with a resilience Izuku will always admire, he incinerates the physical form of the dead god.

For a moment, it returns to life and Izuku curses. It emits a scream that tears apart the crystal lattice that is their current world.

And then they are falling.

With a defiance that amazes him, Todoroki grabs Izuku with one hand even as he continues purifying the god returning to life. They battle, creatures of concept more than the physical: the god declares its right to exist, citing the legions that sing its name; Todoroki counters with the memory of slaying the god beneath waves of ice; the god counters with a psychic scream that Izuku counters with a mist of shadows even if his back bleeds; and Todoroki rejects the reality the creature tries to impose upon them.

Fire races across the world, purifying and cleansing the monsters in bondage and the influence of the dead god.

When they land in the next world Izuku holds the heart out to Todoroki. He meets Todoroki’s eyes
and does his best to impress the importance of what comes next.

“Consume of its flesh and grow fat with strength.”

Todoroki eats it without question.

*****

Momo Yaoyorozu is stressed. Partly because she’s trapped in a collapsing structure. Mostly because of one person.

“We are so screwed,” Kaminari says for the third time in the last a minute.

“Stop panicking.”

“Jirou, check Bakugou,” Momo says, knowing someone must take charge and having no other options. “Kaminari, check for any medical supplies.”

“How the heck is that going to help?”

“It’ll get you to keep quiet. He gave us the answer,” Momo says, looking once more at the tiny hole Bakugou blasted.

There are cracks spreading out from it, and eventually, it will all collapse under the strain. But it will also be their salvation.

“How the hell is this going to help, Yao-Momo?”

The new nickname throws her for a loop for a moment. She likes Jirou. The other girl’s bluntness is refreshing. And after USJ, they have an experience that can’t be replicated with anyone else.

“It’s an intentional weak point,” she explains, “that Bakugou gave me to use. He knows my quirk and how it works. This is a simple physics problem.”

She generates seven thick bolts and a pneumatic bolt gun, very intentionally ignoring how the ceiling above them creaks, threatening to crush them.

“The resonant frequency of steel is much higher than concrete.” She loads the first bolt and brings the nozzle to a point a metre above the ground on the wall.

“How the hell was he supposed to know you were going to do this?” Kaminari asks, staring at Bakugou.

She pulls the trigger and the bolt embeds itself in the wall.

“He didn’t. This is just one possible solution to the problem.”

She fires another bolt beneath the first and the final an inch above the ground. She repeats the pattern a metre to the right. The final bolt goes between the topmost two.

“Okay, but how does that stop the entire wall crumbling?” Jirou asks as she checks Bakugou’s pulse once more. She nods to Momo. It means he will live despite the shattered arm and the fever gripping him even in the throes of unconsciousness.

It is a bad wound, one that might have long-term consequences. But receiving that wound means that he gave Momo a chance to keep them all alive.
Momo activates her power and makes multiple long strands of a silky material. She is glad she recently checked the chemical composition of the material in the scientific journal that came out last month in preparation of the Sports Festival.

“What are those?”

“A meta-material that transfers vibrational waves perfectly.”

She braids the material between the bolts quickly. It takes her no more than a few minutes but each minute they spend here is another opportunity for the superstructure to collapse.

“This makes no sense,” Jirou says. “Unless… you know I can’t generate sound waves at the frequency.”

She stumbles a bit, not having expected that limitation. Still, basic physics is her friend.

“That’s why we need Kaminari.”

Momo creates a simple audio amp and a more complicated modulator.

“Me? I’m pretty useless.”

“No, you’re not.” She hands Jirou the audio amp cable and Kaminari one from the modulator. Then, she attaches connections to each of the metal bolts.

“Jirou, blast that with the highest frequency you can. Kaminari blast that with as much electricity as you can”

“You know—”

“We won’t ditch you.”

She meets his eyes, steady as a mountain, and sees the fear hidden in them. “I promise.”

He nods, swallowing thickly. “Okay.”

She nods to Jirou who blasts the audio amp with a frequency that makes her teeth chatter. Nowhere near high enough just as she said. She nods to Kaminari who takes a deep breath before bright yellow lightning fills the room. The sound goes past hearing range. It doesn’t stop her stomach from churning.

The hole becomes larger, the cracks spreading and the concrete falling to the ground as a fine mist.

The section of the wall crumbles beneath the combined power of the setup. She holds her breath and thankfully, the crumbling stops when the metal rods fall out of the wall. She checks the ceiling. Good, still relatively stable. She switches off the setup and smiles at Jirou.

“Help me carry Bakugou.” She hoists his good arm over her shoulder.

Jirou rolls her eyes. “I don’t even like him.” Still, she props Bakugou up by the waist, carefully avoiding his ruined arm.

“That’s exactly why. We’ve got to be better.” She nudges Kaminari forward, glad that in his… less mentally capable state, he is docile to her suggestions.

“He’s violent and vindictive.”
“He is. But he got stabbed for our sake back at USJ. And he risked his life to help us escape.”

“It doesn’t change what he’s done.”

Momo nods as they emerge in the light of the arena. “It doesn’t. But he’s trying to be better. We don’t have to be cruel.”

A medic with a stretcher runs towards them looking frazzled by the devastation. With his help, the two of them get Bakugou on the stretcher. And when Momo asks, he points her to a supply station for the two of them to help. They tie Kaminari to a post so he doesn’t go wandering around and causing trouble in his addled state.

The work is long and tiresome, but no matter how hard she tries it never seems enough. There is always one more person who needs medication from this box and a medic who needs a new IV line from the ambulances that stream in; Kamui Woods co-opts her power and has her generate thermal blankets until her vision wavers and Mt. Lady forces her to sit and eat a ration bar.

Whilst she sits, she catalogues those placed further away and covered in simple blankets. They are those dead. Already there are hundreds of dead civilians, and she knows the death toll will only rise. All she can do is hope no one she knows is amongst the dead.

Hours later, when it is done and everyone in critical condition has been or is currently being attended to, she sees Iida talking to an official in dark uniform. His posture is stiff as though receiving bad news. She calls his name when he walks past but does not hear it. There is a blankness and silent rage that frightens her so she does not follow. Uraraka and Shinsou and his real friends are nearby. They’ll help him.

There is someone who needs, if not a friend, then a friendly face.

*****

Katsuki Bakugou awakens in pain. His right arm is a burning line of pain. He grits his teeth through the pain, fights through the haze of darkness, and opens his eyes fully. The darkness he thinks might be another layer of unconsciousness turns out to be the nighttime sky.

He is on a stretcher, one of many. There are rows upon rows of stretchers filled with people with injuries ranging from simple head wounds to significant burns. The only unifying factor amongst them is that they are all relatively stabilised. No one, even the person who is more bandage than thick red fur, needs any further attention at the moment.

Katsuki looks to his arm in a temporary sling. It is bandaged heavily, specks of red dotting it. He tentatively twitches a finger and feels a line of pain explode through the arm.

“Fuck!”

It is his dominant arm, already dislocated this morning and recently crushed by rubble. He doesn’t know how well he will recover, can’t even guess if they’re just holding off on amputating it until a later date when the stadium doesn’t still have pockets of fire and everyone has been sorted and sent to the hospital.

“Hey, you, don’t do that.” Katsuki looks to the side and sees a man in a luminescent vest that has a bright red cross and the Caduceus sign. “We just stopped the bleeding. Don’t make it any worse.”

The more he looks, the more people he can see in the same medical vests. There are dozens of police officers and more pro heroes that he remembers when the Sports Festival began.
“Will I lose it?” he asks, voice breaking at the idea.

He knows he has done some shitty things and doesn’t deserve the forgiveness and kindness so freely given, but it doesn’t change how he feels. He wants to be a hero and he doesn’t know if he can become one without an arm.

“Look at me,” the medic orders. “You’ll need to go through surgery, and you might have issues with mobility and feeling in that arm. But you aren’t losing it, you hear?”

He lets out a breath he didn’t know he was holding, relief gripping him in its cool embrace. The medic reaches for something in his pouch and hands Katsuki two pills.

“Take those for the pain. And don’t try to leave until we give you permission or we’ll sedate you.”

“You can fucking try,” he snaps without any heat.

The medic rolls his eyes. “You’ll be just fine, kid.”

“Don’t call me that,” he mutters to the retreating medic.

He looks around and spots some of his classmates helping. The fucking crow and the zombie and Uraraka are all helping move supplies from one tent to a group of medics operating under chemical lighting. It is only then that he notices the scent of illness and death, so pervasive before that it was indistinguishable from the gust of fresh air that cleanses the foul air.

“Bakugou.”

He glances over his shoulder and sees the mother of fucking creation herself. “The fuck you want bitch?”

She falters, her smiles dying a bit. He only feels guilty for a moment until he remembers he has a crushed arm and can be as spiteful as he likes.

It’s not like anyone expects anything other than a violent, brash thug.

*I’ll be the villain in your story if it’ll make you feel better. I deserve it anyway.*

Yaoyorozu looks him over, her gaze lingering on his arm. She does so in silence, taking her time. It leaves him nervous.

“You wanna say something or leave me the fuck alone?”

“I’m trying to figure out why Midoriya has so much faith in you,” she says after another beat of silence.

He scoffs.

*It always comes back to him.*

Everything that makes Katsuki who he is, the melting pot of anger and determination and regrets so deep it is invisible, all of it is tied to Izuku in one way or another.

There’s a mess of emotions that his therapist keeps poking and prodding at which only ever seems to leave him raw and angrier than ever. And sometimes in tears, screaming at her. Somehow, she thinks that’s progress.
“Because he’s a bleeding-heart pansy with no sense of preservation,” he says angrily, putting the walls up. He refuses to let her see how shaken he is.

She laughs which shocks him. It is a quiet thing, the only spot of happiness amongst the injured in the shadow of a broken stadium, and it stuns him that she can still find amusement in someone who is broken and violent and not worthy of kindness.

*Why the fuck are you here?*

“I can’t really argue with that. But I think you might not be a bad person.” That makes him freeze. “You saved me twice so far.”

He swallows. Forces his jaw to work again. Says, “Bitch, what are you smoking?”

She raises a brow. “At USJ. You took a knife to the shoulder for me when you could have just blown everything up.”

He clenches his fist regardless that his arm hurts worse for it.

“It was the simplest and most efficient strategy,” he grits out. “And I dodged in the wrong fucking direction.”

“Funny, that’s what Midoriya said about the Battle Trial.” She nods at his arm. “And just now you did it again.”

“I was fucking delirious after having a giant rock dropped on my broken arm. Besides, I couldn’t fucking trust any of those other shitty side characters to make sure I didn’t die like a stupid ass plot device. Stop trying to find some altruism in my actions.”

“I think you’re trying to be a good person.”

*Doesn’t matter how hard I try.*

“And I think you’re a bitch who won’t leave me alone.”

Someone twists his ear violently. He startles and bats the hand away, nearly falling off his stretcher.

“You need to stop calling women that,” Jirou says, completely unrepentant.

Bakugou stares at her for a moment. Who the hell did she think she is to just touch him like that?

“You’re a cunt. Is that any fucking better?”

“I think if we stuck you and Midoriya together we might get a normal human being instead of the emotional wrecks you two are.”

“I am not an emotional wreck,” he roars.

“You’d get a mess of bad emotions and stupid actions,” Jirou says. “So, you wouldn’t really change anything. They’re foils for each other.”

“No, you do not get to steal my fucking story tropes. You keep your dirty whore hands away from that shit.”

****
“Welcome home, good shadow.”

Those are the first words he hears when they enter the next layer. He smells blood in the air, some fresh as a newly spilt arterial blood, and some rotting yet cloyingly sweet.

They are in something of a grand cathedral, a place of worship to the gods of the cosmos. The ceilings are high, and the idols of the gods are startlingly tame, only the slightest hints of insight necessary to see them. It is all rather mundane compared to the memetic nightmares and infectious logic plagues. He might be tempted to think they are in the real world if not for the dark assurance they have dozens of layers to ascend.

That, and the pale woman floating before the beast on the throne. Her hair is cascading waves of liquid silver and her eyes the grey of a frozen wasteland.

Todoroki is stiff beneath Izuku, his entire body tense and ready to bolt. He can see the familial resemblance and grieves what will come. This world is blood and cruelty and sacrifice. But it will not be Izuku’s sacrifice.

This isn’t really his journey any longer.

*It never was*, Mikumo says. *We’re all parts of his story now.*

“She’s an ally,” he whispers to Todoroki as the woman approaches, gliding across the stone floor.

“Come, you need garb befitting you, good shadow.”

He prods Todoroki to follow her and the boy does so in shock, his movements stiff.

She takes them to a side chamber past the beast on its throne. She stitches their tattered gym clothes and incorporates them in the garb of what they wear in this dream, leather cloaks and metal armbands. He thinks he looks ridiculous but her touch is tender and without pity as she bathes and dresses him. It is the first time he has felt clean in a long time, and he feels safe in her arms.

Something in the way of Todoroki’s bearing shatters at her gentle actions, almost as if the past has returned to haunt him. It sickens Izuku to know he must be part and party to what is to come.

“Seek the altar of despair and ascend the astral clocktower,” she says when they are dressed, the warrior and the cripple bound together in this nightmare. “Free us from this eternal nightmare.”

//Fulfil the deals of your kinsmen. Prepare him well for what must come, good shadow//

Those words belong only to him. Todoroki cannot hear them. He isn’t ready yet to hear the alien speech of the abyss.

And so, they journey through a world of blood and eternal misery.

They fight a saint stained in the blood of those he hunted, less a single conscience and more an amalgamation of crimson and hate and fury. Todoroki sends waves of ice and gouts of flame, never standing still for more than a moment until finally, the monster falls still.

And then it stands, returned to life once more, a glowing blade burning with the light of the cosmos in one hand, and pure enlightenment in its many eyes. The fight only becomes more frantic and Izuku hates how useless he is, stuck with making callouts of the saint’s actions. Every blow is designed to cleave them in half, every kick powerful enough to crush stone.
When the saint finally falls, Todoroki breathes harshly. They are both bathed in blood from head to toe. Izuku rubs Todoroki’s shoulders until he can move past this slaughter, this act of taking life from one who spoke mortal words deep in the throes of madness.

Todoroki walks to the skull and incinerates it and the moonlight blade. In this blood-soaked chamber with the souls of the damned still howling there should be no peace. Yet, somehow, Todoroki reminds him of a still pool reflecting the stars in the sky.

Their guide returns, ethereal and haunting. Her hair forever reminds him of spun silver and her eyes are the coldest grey of the Arctic. She tells them to venture forth and find the astral clocktower. They continue onwards past dungeons filled with nightmares of men gone wrong and children of the cosmos.

Todoroki sets him down a few hours later at the base of a staircase. Izuku shifts his legs to a more comfortable position as Todoroki makes ice for them to drink. He takes the opportunity to bandage the many wounds his legs have received but that he has yet to feel. One if infected, a long line of barbs growing along his thigh.

Izuku swallows thickly and reaches for a knife. He plunges it deep in his thigh and excises the infection. And when that is done, Todoroki cauterises it with his flames.

“She looks like my mother,” Todoroki says, pale and shaking after what they have just done.

Izuku looks up towards where they must go to unveil the secrets of this world and unlock the next waypoint. “I’m sorry.”

“What aren’t you telling me?”

He smiles sadly at Todoroki, feeling the weight of Todoroki’s story enslave him. Perhaps under different circumstances, he would be able to spare his friend the pain.

“It’ll weaken your resolve to know now,” he says in a deep voice. “There is a time for every season and a clock for every measure of time. In my crystal bones and eternal shadow, I know it is not your time yet.”

“You’re being more dramatic than usual.”

Izuku extends his arms theatrically, hoping Todoroki understands. “In this place, the theatre of a thing is just as important as the nature of the beast. And it is all I can do. I’m a passenger you don’t want, the final train to nowhere.”

Todoroki carries him through a place of tainted research where nightmares bottled in bone casks have gone awry and mutated the monsters even further. Todoroki’s yellow and sickly flames have no mercy for the patients here and they soon make it to the garden, a single tree stretching toward infinity in the centre.

They are caught off guard by the first meteorite and the shambling mistakes that summon them. Izuku is ready to expend what little control of the shadow he has to stop the attack.

“Enough,” Todoroki whispers.

Flames spread outward from him, and from these flames, a shade of red closer to black, hands rise out, fighting past earth to grasp their attackers. He sees whispers of the enemies Todoroki has killed, revenants made real for a moment as they grab at the living failures and drag them down to a world of internal flame and suffering.
Izuku stays silent for the long moment it takes Todoroki to regain control of his breathing. The boy is tense underneath the leathers, his neck muscles taut and strained.

*His flames consecrate everything they burn in his image,* Mikumo explains. *Naraka, a place of torment. That is his personal hell.*

“Hellfire,” Izuku says eventually, using language Todoroki will understand. “Everything you’ve killed—”

“Don’t,” Todoroki snaps.

*Do you remember the truths you were given by Eao?*

“Everything you’ve cleansed in your flames finds it’s way to a world of flame and torment. I thought your heart might be brittle ice, but I think it might just be fire eternal.”

“If you don’t shut up right now, I’m leaving you.”

Izuku shakes his head. "You burn so brightly, Todoroki. But you feel just as much. I'm sorry for what you must do."

The glare at each other for a few minutes. Eventually, Izuku looks away, conceding this argument. With one arm, Todoroki picks him up, careful not to hurt his leg any further.

Todoroki opens the large doors before them and they ascend the clocktower.

It is a chamber lit by ethereal light streaming from the glass clockface taking up an entire wall. A single person sits in the chair, pale as an angel, and almost as haunting.

The person raises her head, grey streaked with red, and says, “You should leave a corpse well enough alone, Shouto.”

“Fuyumi,” Shouto whispers, reaching out as if he can cross the distance between them with intent alone.

Izuku reaches over and slaps the hand down. The sound echoes in the clocktower, reverberating through old wood and the ethereal foundations.

“That’s not your sister. It’s a dream of blood and fire made for you alone. That chair is an altar of this world’s despair. Free her from this nightmare.”

The battle tears the hall apart, gouges from the fake Fuyumi’s blade taking out chunks of the wall and Shouto’s flesh. Ice covers the ground and fire from both their attacks meet in the centre, corrosive stream of strange entropic effects eating through the walls and ceiling.

The battle is fast, and some of this world’s strangeness fills Todoroki as he quickens past blades of blood. He becomes faster and faster till he is a blur, dancing between blows. Had he been alone, he may have come out unscathed. But with Izuku on his back, he takes dozens of blows.

Eventually, Todoroki throws him to the side and makes a barrier of ice to keep him safe from the battle as it intensifies.

When it is done, the fake Fuyumi is trapped in a layer of ice and Todoroki covered in blood. He sways tiredly, almost toppling over.

“I wish you had just killed her,” Izuku says after Todoroki retrieves him. “This would have been so
“Midoriya, don’t you dare make this any worse.”

Izuku looks to the still twitching Fuyumi clone, seeing all that she is. *Another fucking metaphor*, he thinks bitterly, but unable to say those words.

“I said it was an altar of this world’s despair. You’ve cleansed this world in hellfire and entropic ice. This world is yours now by right of bloody conquest. Now, you must bathe the altar in her blood and unlock the way to the nightmare’s source.”

Izuku is thrown hard to the ground. He gasps, shocked and in mild pain from the ice shards on the ground that stab him.

Todoroki stands over him, wrath in every hard line. There is fire wreathing him and he looks so much like Endeavour that it hurts, tall and imposing and cruel.

“Why does it have to be this!” Todoroki screams, his voice cracking at the end. “She’s looks and sounds like my sister.”

“She is a metaphor of your attachments. You must kill her to be free of this world that represents your past.”

“This. Is not. My past!”

“It is. This world is a nightmare of the past and this world belongs to your soul now. Blood is the only currency of this world.” He raises a hand and fails to summon even a wisp of shadow. “I’m sorry, Shouto, truly I am. If I could, I would take this burden from you.”

Maybe it is his honesty, not a single lie has he spoken to Shouto since they came to this place. Maybe Shouto is changing, or being changed, by this world and becoming more like it. Perhaps a part of him understands what it means to survive in the cruelty of the abyss.

Regardless, Shouto walks to the creature that looks like his sister. Every step echoes in the clocktower, filling the air with dread and finality.

“I thought you loved me,” Fuyumi whispers, her voice lilting and enthralling.

Shouto picks up her broken sword.

“I love you.”

He slices her throat.

Deep red arterial blood gushes forth, more than a human should have, and drenches Shouto. He lets the ice fade away and drags the corpse towards the chair. On this altar of his despair, Shouto sacrifices someone who looks and speaks and feels like his sister. In this world of metaphor and intent, it is the same as doing it in the real.

The clock unwinds, and a glass pane vanishes. Shouto grabs Izuku and hoists him over his shoulder. Izuku doesn’t comment on the thick and sticky blood, its smell cloying and tempting. Instead, he points to a spot where the nightmare must end.

A highway of ice forms over the fishing hamlet and they skate across it, avoiding the giants and fish people down below.
“I’ll have to kill her, won’t I?”

Izuku tightens his grip around Shouto. “Yes. Renewal and undeath are much the same here. We’ve passed through a… rebirth of sorts for you. There are more to come.”

“I hate this.”

“I’d be worried if you didn’t.”

There, where sand meets water is a dead godling. As they approach, something emerges from it. Man-like in basic shape, it wields the umbilical cord of its parent as a weapon. Shouto battles the new god. It becomes stronger and more ferocious the longer the fight goes on, shifting from simple physical attacks to calling on the power of celestial bodies for brief moments. All that falters against Shouto’s ice that accelerates entropy and his dread flame that has consumed world’s in its insatiable hunger.

Soon, after a battle that lasts most of a day, the orphan falls still. It dissolves down to a crystal umbilical cord. “Consume of—”

“Shut up.”

Izuku does so as Shouto takes the umbilical cord. There are eyes on it with insight into the cosmos. Shouto eats it and shudders, hunching over in pain. Izuku can’t be certain of what understanding he comes to, can’t be certain of what abominable knowledge his classmate learns. All he knows is that there must be a cost.

He masters himself in short order and walks to the godling’s corpse. That mastery is a mask to protect himself from this nightmare.

The woman who has the appearance of his mother stands on the water, materialising in a shimmer of light.

“It is time. Good shadow, have you prepared him? Have you fulfilled the deals of your kin?”

“Yes,” Izuku whispers.

She looks to Shouto. “Then you whose heart is of flame, do what must be done.”

Shouto sets him down on the sand and walks towards his mother. She takes his hands and brings them to her neck. “It must be your choice to consecrate this nightmare.”

Shouto squeezes.

It is long and drawn out as he chokes the life out of his mother. His tears are silent and when he is done, he drops her corpse in the water. The waves carry her body away past the horizon, and when the sun and water and her corpse meet, Shouto sets fire to the ocean. The flames spread and touch the sky and land and fabric of this nightmare.

The cruelty of this mad world burns away and the pathway to the next level of the abyss opens.

“How long have we been here?” His voice is ice and glacial cruelty, a well of hate reserved purely for the one he speaks to.

Izuku takes Shouto’s extended hand and doesn’t complain when Shouto roughly throws him on his shoulder. Together, the cripple and the warrior walk past a burning workshop.
This world is ending and there is nothing left for them here. The battles have been fought and Shouto has emerged different than he was.

“Maybe three weeks.” He grins from Shouto’s back though it will not be seen. “I lost track two levels ago.”

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Enji Todoroki looks to the children behind him, equal parts shocked and terrified. A blonde boy with a tail he has seen before somewhere and the girl with green hair from the quarter-final; and others still he doesn’t recognise. They haven’t fully processed what has happened. He knows that confusion, remembers when he first saw the world change irrevocably and could not understand why—the day his flames first manifested and he lost control after seeing what should not be seen.

He plants his feet before the deep thrum of the explosive shockwave reaches them. He does not topple over when the ground shakes and wobbles. No, he is as immobile as his wall of flame holding back the concussive force of the blast.

When the initial shockwave fades, he looks back to the children. Fear grips their faces and he feels the slightest twinge of sorrow. They are not ready. They do not know to fear.

“Get up,” he commands for he has no other choice.

He lets the wall of fire fade. Beyond is the devastation of shattered walls and crumbling ceiling, concrete slabs and red-hot shards of metal on the floor. He doesn’t think of the body count. Any number above zero will be too high regardless.

“I said get up,” he snaps when they hesitate. “None of you are injured. All of you are students at UA. Now get up and prove your worth.”

That shames and galvanises them in equal measure. There is a place for cruelty even if All Might will never agree. Society may one day find out all he has done to teach his son to fear the flames, the ruin that is his family, but he will sleep with the certainty that his actions are right.

The arena is behind them. He can see past the walls and senses the burning flame that he associates with All Might. “Help in the rescue operations.”

“What are you going?” the blonde asks.

Enji glares at him. “To find the one responsible. My powers are not suited for rescue operations.”

The boy nods once. “Yes, sir.”

Enji turns away from them as they head towards the stadium and lets flame cover his eyes. Like this, he can sense more than just simple heat. He searches for stains and residues of passion, the heat of cruel crimes. There, a sickly purple flame he has come to think of as calculated murder over his decades as a hero.

He follows it through the bowels of the stadium, incinerating rubble and steel doors with contemptuous ease. Where he can, he helps trapped civilians and students escape. But they are not his focus. No, this isn't an attack organised by an anti-quirk extremist. No, the attack has been too surgical, the loss of life to restrained for it to be anything other than an attack by a well-organised villain group.

He heads through a tunnel, not on any maps. It leads directly outside the stadium. He looks around.
This is the area Kamui Woods was stationed to. The hero in question is busy holding the superstructure of the stadium together.

Endeavour chases the smudges of purple fire through the forest. This ability is why he has the highest tally of solved cases. He senses things that others cannot see, feels the fires of old crimes and tracks them relentlessly.

In the corner of his vision, he sees something thin and mobile. He doesn’t hesitate and sends a wave of fire to block off the exist. The person switches direction but Endeavour fires off a dozen lances of fire to block the villain.

“You’re trapped,” he says when all avenues of escape have been burnt away.

The villain whose body remains unravelling only laughs. “I’ve already won.”

Endeavour intensifies his flames and makes a cage around the villain. “Turn back or be burnt.”

The villain returns to his standard form. Enji blinks because he looks like a child no older than seventeen, still with a few vestiges of boyish fat. He wears the uniform of a security guard from the festival. He even has the ID badge that even Enji would fail to forge with his numerous connections.

“Not what you were expecting,” the boy says, indifferent to the cage of fire around him.

“Who are you?”

The boy tilts his head curiously. “Oh, just a former UA student. You can call me Nagisa.”

*****

Toshinori Yagi toils ceaselessly as All Might, never resting for more than the moment it takes to identify the next location to help. He removes rubble and metal with imposing strength, and aids people with impossible gentleness, his smile perpetually giving hope.

He has done this before and knows the trauma of what it may bring. He does not shed tears when he finds a little girl no older than three crushed beneath rubble with her fathers. It may hurt to remove a sidekick from the rubble whose legs will have to be amputated at the triage centres Cementoss builds with his powers. And it may make whatever happiness he’s built over the last year vanish to see his students carted off in stretchers.

He lets none of his grief and despair show. He is All Might, the shining pillar of a society and he can never falter. To falter is to admit that society is fragile and that an attack like this can shake it to its very core.

He directs his students, those physically—and mentally, he amends, after Rikido Sato breaks down crying over the corpse of a girl close to his age—able to help in setting up the triage tents and organising the evacuation. Iida and Ochaco fall into a natural system of organising everyone they can. Shinsou joins them after his hand missing a finger is bandaged. The police are a great help in monitoring them, and even the few members of the Imperial Household still alive provide aid as well.

Young Yaoyorozu helps lead a group of her peers out of the rubble and All Might feels proud. They are battered and weary, and all too likely traumatised, but they show strength and unity. He lets Yaoyorozu, Jirou and Kaminari carry Bakugou to a triage centre without interrupting them. He hopes Young Bakugou’s arm will heal fully. Then he remembers Bakugou’s ferocity and sheer
drive to prove himself the best. That injury won’t put him down for more than a few weeks. And even if it proved permanent, he knows Bakugou will find a way around it.

It is a relief to see Tokoyami alongside the parents. Inko Midoriya looks tired and bloody and about ready to collapse, but she is with his teach Jin, and Bakugou’s parents so he has no worries for her. No, it is Tokoyami he worries for. The boy stands with his father as his mother—a woman with the head of a hawk—is carted over with substantial injuries. It is never easy seeing a close relative or friend injured. But there is a strength to the boy, and he proves All Might right by helping Iida and Shinsou.

There comes a time when the authorities have things in hand and there is little All Might can do to help. In fact, his presence becomes a distraction, so he excuses himself to a small room he finds. Ostensibly it is to fill out a preliminary action report. And he does write out the report. But mostly it is to allow himself time to recover from the experience.

All Might sighs, ready to let his power fade and become who he truly is. This day has made him weary, his smile stiff and his soul despondent.

The door opens before his power fades. Endeavour enters, no fire shroud covering his body. The man’s gaze is indifferent, assessing.

“You look like shit.”

All Might snorts. “You look no better.”

“This shouldn’t have happened. This is the kind of security failure that’ll have people screaming for heads to roll.”

“People will blame the villains responsible.”

“Even if it’s a former UA student?”

All Might closes his eyes. He knows the villain responsible for much of this is one of Aizawa’s expelled students. Still, it changes nothing.

“He made that choice of his own free will. He could have chosen to live a good life even if he never became a hero. This was his choice and his alone.”

And very likely All For One drove him to this.

“How much of what he became is because he was left to drift without guidance? Children are fools without constant observation.”

He thinks of Bakugou, and how Midoriya asked if they would shoulder the burden were he to become a villain. His words seem so poignant now. This is the scenario his successor so feared for Bakugou taken to an extreme.

“We do what we can and hope they take our good traits when they succeed us.”

“Relying on a successor is a fool’s gambit.”

“The future generation will always be stronger than us. They have the lessons we teach, our experiences and knowledge. And they have their own strength. They can learn to smile and be strong even when they are weak.”
“What strength do you have when you simply parrot Nana Shimura.” His smile cracks slightly, not having expected that attack again so soon. “That was cruel of me.”

He pauses, assessing Endeavour. The man isn’t one to apologise. Even now, he doesn’t offer an actual apology. But it’s as close as it comes.

“It was,” All Might says, accepting the apology.

“Perhaps your successor can learn your lessons and benefit from them.”

All Might stills, blood-chilling in his veins. A heavy weight settles in the back of his throat, and the scar on his side seems to flair in pain. Endeavour isn’t someone he trusts to know this secret and from experience, not someone you can coerce.

“Don’t have one,” he lies, taking a page out of Izuku’s book.

“Izuku Midoriya,” the bastard says, killing any hope of maintaining the lie. “I know. I’ve always been able to see the flame of your power, All Might. I know it’s dying in you and growing strong in him. I’ve always been able to see the shadow of your flame, even when you don’t have your power active.”

He grits his teeth so hard he fears they will break.

“What will you do about it?”

“Nothing. Does it change anything?” Endeavour sits, tired as well. “My son is a fool. I tried to teach him to fear the flames and not reach for them. I don’t know if he ever learnt that lesson.”

“But why? Fire burns, yes, but any quirk can hurt its user. And he was so powerful when he used it.”

Endeavour scoffs. “Not powerful enough to beat Midoriya. Is this a cycle that will continue long after we’re gone?”

“It doesn’t have to be.”

“Fear the flame for it will burn you. I always told Shouto that. I never told him that only when you fear something, when you truly respect it, will you be able to control it. I had hoped he might understand it in time. The first time he really used his fire, he nearly broke the world.”

All Might tilts his head at the way Endeavour phrases that. “Children are more resilient than you think. They heal from things that would break us.”

“Do they really? Or do they just hide the cracks better?” Endeavour stands. “I hope my son is strong enough for what comes next?”

“I hope so too.”

“You should. Without him, I don’t think Midoriya will make it.” All Might frowns. “You really should check the missing person’s report.”

When Endeavour is gone, and he is alone once more, All Might checks the report. Izuku Midoriya’s name is there and linked to Shouto Todoroki. The two were in Chiyo’s office based on the video archives minutes before the explosions. And now both are gone, not a trace of their presence remains.
He feels his heartbreak once more. Steels his soul against what may come. Becomes All Might once more.

Chapter End Notes

So, that happened. A lot happened.

Let me know what you guys think if you've made it this far. Even a simple comment lets me gauge how people are receiving the story. So if you can, drop a line and let me know. But if you can't, just know that your readership is more than enough for me.

See you next week.
The Sins of the Father

Chapter Notes

Guess who's still running a discord server which can be found at the following: https://discord.gg/4YvCTYR. That would be me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘I have seen what comes of heroes when they are anything less than perfect. Entire cities lay dead because of preventable mistakes made by heroes. They are giants and we hide in their shadows praying for protection. But their very stature invites challenge. Warlords rose first and with them came the first age of heroes. Hawkmoon and Graviton Lance slew Titan in his last base in Sao Luis. Millions died during this era and we must be thankful that only so few fell. Titan’s Fall, the grand corpse of the colossus, is a reminder of the violence that was suffered. I visited it often as a child and wondered what would drive one man to become a Great Tyrant and wreak untold violence.’

—Excerpt from the international translation of ‘Reaching Perfection’ by Dylan Salvatore.

Shouta Aizawa watches Recovery Girl heal Bakugou’s wrecked arm through the observation window. There is a doctor nearby watching it happen, muttering something foul under his breath. The boy will make a full recovery in a few days, as will many of the other students.

He can’t say the same for the parents or the civilians caught in the attack.

Ever since waking, Shouta has been working to deal with the situation. He shouldn’t be up, not with the bruises and fractures, but he’s in a better state than Hizashi who undergoes conventional surgery to fix the damage to his throat from smoke inhalation. The doctor hasn’t made any promises of his recovery, and that worries Shouta more than anything. A thread of worry runs through him that Hizashi may never speak again.

Regardless of his anger, he is still a teacher with responsibilities. Locating and having his students moved to the same hospital in the immediate aftermath has been a nightmare, the police and even other heroes battling him at every step. The fact that All Might had to speak up and agree with him pisses him off to no end, but he is willing to set aside his dislike of the man until the situation is resolved.

He has spent most of his time dealing with security measures after that incident. Nothing seems adequate, not when he has to spend time explaining to Kamui Woods why he needs to guard a hospital on the opposite side of the prefecture without Mt. Lady or getting Best Jeanist to stay the hell out of the way because the man is many things but not a good guard—Shouta will go into any battle with him and have no worries, but the man’s fixation with his appearance and inability to focus on something mundane for more than an hour are a mix not suited to guard shifts.

It irks him to order All Might to deal with whatever petty crime might be happening near the hospital. It might not be much, but it will deter any other villains from thinking this a good time to launch another attack.

He does not react when Nezu jumps on his shoulder without warning, only shifting his weight to
better accommodate the principal.

“Diagnosis?”

“Favourable,” Shouta says automatically. “He may not have full feeling and mobility in that arm, but he’ll retain most of his functionality. He’s better off than a lot.”

“But worse off than many. I’m sorry you have to experience this.”

He frowns. “I’ve seen worse.”

“Yes. You’ve seen this as a hero fighting for civilians you’ve never met and in the monstrous actions some villains turn to in the dark. But these are your students. You still have scars from defending them against the League.”

He stays silent. Any response he may have is already known to Nezu. The rodent is so much smarter than him that he has long since given up attempting to know Nezu’s schemes or predict his actions. The only saving grace is that Nezu is irrevocably tied to UA and UA ultimately benefits the world.

He may not like All Might, may not know Endeavour, but those two are proof of the good Nezu does.

"You've read the missing person list." It isn't a question but a statement of fact. "I don't want you speaking to their parents."

“I’m their teacher.”

“I will handle explaining the situation regarding Izuku and Shouto to their parents,” Nezu commands, leaving no room to negotiate. “Please, if you see Inko Midoriya, turn the opposite direction and don’t start a PR nightmare we’re not ready to deal with.”

He grits his teeth. He may not like the woman and may have put UA in a legally dubious regarding her, but he can put aside that dislike for a student he genuinely cares for; a student who has time and again surprised Aizawa with the depth of his kindness and breadth of his knowledge, a student he knows one day will make a fine hero.

“I wouldn’t.”

“Really? As far as I can tell, the only reasons she has any inclination to fight us is because of your attitude towards her. And right now, that’s a liability I’m not willing to risk. Not when the Imperial family is questioning our security measures.”


“All Might and I along with the police.” Nezu watches him with eyes filled with cold knowledge, exposing his thoughts and secrets with a glance. “Right now, we need the image of strength and no matter your feelings towards him, he is a pillar of this society. I know you are upset with what happened, and that Hizashi and your students are injured, but right now I need your rationality.”

“What do you need of me?”

“You will ensure the safety of our students and their parents. Liaise with the police. There are over thirty students with critical injuries that will be vulnerable whilst they recover. I will leave it in your hands to decide whether to keep them dispersed amongst multiple hospitals or cluster them
under one hospital.”

“There’s no good answer to that.”

“No, there isn’t. Not when our attackers have us on the backfoot and our side has so many different groups with differing agendas. I can trust you, Midnight and All Might to do what you think is best for the students. But we must be decisive now more than ever. I hear the instigator’s been apprehended. We’ll use whatever information we can to launch a reprisal strike against the villains who organised this.”

“What will you do?”

Nezu’s smile is cold. “I’ll have Snipe deal with our enemies. For now, I must ensure the Imperial family doesn’t attempt to take over my school. Get to work, Shouta. We don’t have much time.”

Shouta accepts his role in this easily and performs the task the principal has set forth.

Whilst he would like to keep the students under one roof as that would be more secure, the fact remains that moving those in critical conditions might affect their condition negatively. He does, however, have a constant guard detail worked out for Recovery Girl so she can be ferried between institutions as needed.

He wishes even that simple request is easy.

"We have the equipment and expertise needed to heal them," a man from the Japanese Medical Association says. "Waiting for her threatens their conditions. This isn't a situation for a nurse only authorised to give emergency first aid."

“Her quirk—”

“Is a non-factor in this. It takes up a patient’s stamina and those children are in critical condition. You’re risking total organ failure at worst.”

Aizawa glares at the man. "I have multiple fractures, two broken ribs, so many bruises I have more purple skin than normal. And I'm here trying to organise security for students and civilians that were just targeted, investigate who was behind this and organise the efficient medical treatment for said students. I frankly, do not care for your issues against her."

“Maybe you should be checked for a concussion.”

“I know the symptoms well enough. Now, here’s what’s going to happen. One way or the other, Recovery Girl is going to see those students. All that matters is how long you throw a fuss about it.”

The man does throw a fuss. By the end of it, Shouta has a headache and needs to sit for a moment. All he needs is one moment to regain his bearings.

He gets half a moment at best.

“Aizawa.”

He looks to the side and sees the principal who has his tie undone. And that worries him. Nezu is never anything short of impeccable.

“Reporters out for blood?”
“A bloody execution more like. But we’ll survive another few days. Thankfully, the government is
shouldering much of the blame since the stadium belongs to them and we were leasing it. They
were the ones who assigned the heroes working security and they insisted we use the security
company that was infiltrated.”

“Technicalities working in our favour? Surprising.”

“Yes,” the principal murmurs, looking away.

“You’re going to say something I don’t like.”

“They’re taking responsibility for all that because we will have to take responsibility for the
villain.”

“What’s wrong?”

Nezu hesitates, something Aizawa has never seen in all his years.

“I feel I should keep this from you and spare you the pain. But you will find out no matter what I
do.”

And that, more than anything, terrifies Shouta. What could be worse than two missing students? A
student who very literally came back from the dead? A student in a catatonic state? Two others
withdrawn from school whilst they recovered in a mental institution?

This year has so far been one of failures and the Sports Festival is the latest one in the long list.

“Tell me.”

“I think it might be best if I show you.”

Nezu shows him the recording. There is a prisoner interrogated over his involvement in the
bombing of the stadium. The prisoner explains his actions without hesitance, his voice cold and
factual.

Shouta wants to scream himself hoarse the longer he watches the recording. The boy—no, he is a
man after the crimes he has committed—shows no remorse, no interest in those dead or crippled or
injured.

“I want to speak to him.” There isn’t a hint of emotion in Shouta’s voice.

“I won’t stop you. But are you certain you can handle what will come of it?”

“He was my student. I need to hear it from him directly. I need to know why.”

“Very well then. They have a time slot available now.”

The villain is kept in the basement of the hospital, the area generally utilised for healing high-risk
individuals in a secure environment. A constant guard detail ushers Shouta through the basement
level, performing a dozen different identity checks despite knowing who he is. Still, under the
circumstances, Shouta would rather have paranoia than lax protocols.

The room is frigid and bare of anything but a table and two chairs, both bolted to the concrete
floor. There is a one-way mirror and he knows Nezu is in the other room, observing and
cataloguing things Shouta isn’t smart enough to notice.
Shouta sits across from his former student.

The boy has pale hair and red eyes and is so thin it hurts Shouta to look at him. There are bruises and needle tracks along his arm, a brilliant flush of red from a violent rash on his right hand.

“Hello, sensei.”

He knows that smile, the gentle tilt at the corner of the boy’s lips. He remembers the boy smiling just like that at his crush across the classroom. It brings back too many memories from two years ago, some bitter, but most happy.

“Nagisa.” Shouta glances only once at the shock collar on the boy’s neck and completely avoids the bright burn wound on his exposed shoulder—the shirt he wears hangs loosely on his bony frame. “Why?”

Nagisa smirks, forever playful. “Why what, sensei?”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about.”

The boy frowns.

His heart clenches because he remembers that expression, remembers seeing it when a concept flew over the boy’s head. Most of all, he remembers it the day he expelled the boy because there was just so much confusion, as though Nagisa was wondering why the sky was falling and the earth-shattering.

“I told you already. Explosives along the gas lines. A fake face and a forged ID badge. A rock in my shoe to change my gait. Extensive vocal training. It was easy enough. No one pays attention to security.”

“No. Not that. I want to know why you turned to villainy.”

The boy has the audacity to laugh.

“Because of you. You expelled us, sensei.”

“No, you had the choice to become a villain.”

Nagisa slams his fist on the table, the chains rattling. “What choice did you leave us?” he shouts and there are tears in the corner of his eyes. “Do you know the stigma of being expelled by the great Eraserhead? I’m one of the Twenty Washouts. Fuck censorship and privacy because no one gives a shit. I can’t send a job application without it being flagged. No school would accept me.”

“No heroics—”

“I’m talking about the fucking community college in my hometown. You ruined us, sensei. All twenty of us have no future because of what you did. You thought it was a kindness, a mercy, but you took whatever future we might have had. Why did I do it? Because I didn’t want to starve on the street. Only five of us are still alive. Rei’s still catatonic after an overdose because she couldn’t handle being arrested after she used her quirk to fly. Ryoji sold her the damned drugs. Toji’s only alive because someone found him before he bled out after he slit his own wrists. And Kensuke? Last I heard he’s whoring himself out in some Yakuza drug den.

“I want you to look me in the eye when you tell me I made this choice because I wanted to. I want you to tell me that getting three meals a day at a maximum-security prison is worse than passing
information to the Yakuza so they can traffic people so I can get a fucking piece of bread. It’s easy for you to sit there and condemn me when you have no idea what you’ve put us through. You took our future away and you thought you were doing the right thing. We were children, sensei. You didn’t even give us a chance before you cut us loose.”

It would be easy to dismiss his words if Nagisa wasn’t crying, tears dripping down his face even as he snarls. Because beneath that surface layer is the grief of someone who has lost everything and knows there is no future.

“We were your children and you were supposed to raise us. Teach us.”

Nagisa isn’t old. No, he is the same age as Mirio, was once in 1-A where Mirio was in 1-B two years ago. Sometimes, in the dead of night when no one can see, he wonders if Nagisa and the rest would continue growing strong if he had just given them a chance. Maybe all it would have taken would be another month.

Another term, even.

Because already, Nagisa has shown the potential Shouta once saw in him, except now it is twisted. Reconnaissance, spying, and sabotage. All things he knew the boy’s quirk would excel at. All things used against UA to cause destruction.

But he can let none of that show. Eraserhead must always be an implacable bastion of cold logic and that mask has no time for the crushing grief. No, he simply must move on from this the same way he moved on from seeing Rei’s unresponsiveness.

Shouta stands and leans forward. Nagisa flinches back, terror in his eyes. It is cruel to do this, but it must be done.

“You’ll have to live with the consequences of your actions.”

“Fuck you,” Nagisa shouts, then he deflates. “You’re the closest thing to a father most of us had. You still are.”

He leaves before he can break, before every emotion he has bursts through and leaves him on the ground. He doesn’t speak to Nezu, doesn’t pay attention to where he is going. All he knows is that he needs to be as far away from a child so lost and broken that he can call Shouta his father.

Because how cruel can the world truly be that he is the closest Nagisa has to a father? He paces the hallways, trying to work off some of his anger and grief and nervousness, trying to push away the memories of the student’s he’s failed—twenty-three now, not just three.

“Hey, Shout a.” He stops and looks to Midnight hurrying towards him. “We got a problem.”

*You don’t know what a problem fucking look like.*

He doesn’t say that. Not to her. Never to her.

“One to ten? Because I just went through a nine.”

She pauses for a moment. “Six right now. Could be a ten later.”

“Can you deal with it?”

“If you promise to tell me what happened.” She takes his hands in her own and squeezes tight.
“Doesn’t matter what it is, I’m always gonna be your friend.”

“Always.”

*****

Fumikage Tokoyami holds his mother’s hand and wonders if it has always been so small. He remembers it being large enough to hold both of his. Now, it looks so tiny.

She looks so small whilst unconscious, none of the overwhelming force of her presence able to exist whilst she is plugged into the life support machines. The hiss of the rebreather and the beep of the monitoring equipment grates against his ears, reminders of his mother’s mortality.

The hours since they evacuated the stadium have been filled with tension. They gave him a quick look over by what he assumes is a volunteer with some emergency response training to busy to do more than hand over painkillers to deal with the bruises, and an order to return if any pains worsen. He isn’t sure if the way his joints ache and creak counts, but now is not the time to worry about such issue.

Not when his mother suffers so.

He brushes an errant feather away from his mother’s hawkish features. The brown feathers are no longer lustrous or perked up and it saddens him greatly.

Across the room, his father stands at the window, hands clasped behind his back as he watches the outside world. He looks more a Spartan standing at attention than a husband attending a sick wife. There is no sense of grief to him, no sense of interest outside familial obligation.

He has never cared, Dark Shadow prods. He never will. Trapped in a marriage with a woman he does not love and a son who embarrasses him.

Though he knows Dark Shadow is manipulating him, it is only voicing the thoughts that have plagued him for the last few hours. And it makes his vision turn a bloody red.

“Do you even care?” Fumikage snaps once his father’s silence pushes him past whatever patience he has. “She’s lying here, and you say nothing. You won’t even look at her.”

“Boy,” his father rumbles in warning.

"Say something for once. She might die. Do you have nothing to say to your wife? For my mother?"

“Stay your tongue.”

Once, that tone of voice would have felt like skin being flayed away. But he has seen eternity’s end and fought a dragon. It is terrifying to see his father turn around for it reminds him of a statue being animated. And there is always the silent threat that something hides behind his father’s silence, something truly terrifying and drenched in blood.

"No. Not now." He looks at his mother. "If she passes and this is how it must be done, in your cold indifference, then I will never forgive you. For once in your life, show me that you care for your wife."

The air seems to shake with his rage, perhaps his father’s as well. The promise of violence, or perhaps even patricide, fills the air. He hears chains rattling in his soul and in the real world, feels
his dragon tense its talons in preparation.

**We will win this fight.** Dark Shadow whispers confidently.

“Do not mistake my silence for a lack of grief, young crow. You. Do not. Know my ways.”

Fumikage flinches away from his father and that overbearing presence. Knows in the deepest part of his soul that Dark Shadow is right and fears what may come.

Can he truly strike down his father?

He refuses to consider that question.

There is a fear of his father that he has never mastered, one old and very likely only a figment of his imagination. Yet, he cannot help his fear of this tall and imposing man. A man built purely of muscle and who walks with the control of a master swordsman.

“How could you?” His father sighs.

The tension in the air deflates. The promise of a war between gods fades away, leaving only a father and his boy.

Fumikage blinks and inhales sharply, now able to breathe easily. “What?”

“Sit, boy, and I will tell you.”

He obeys the command without a thought even as his father leans against the window, facing the outside world, a posture that makes him shorter and slightly less intimidating. He is tense, uncertain for the first time Fumikage can remember.

“I was not always so… stoic. I was angry and brash and very much a fool who believed the power of my quirk would get me through life.”

He blinks at his father’s wide back. “You have a quirk?”

“Yes.”

His father extends his arm and lifts the sleeve. There are scars there, old and painful looking.

The chains form slowly, each link coming together in a burst of fire until they encircle his arms fully. At the end of the chain a blade forms, wide and wickedly curved and drenched in chaos. Blood drips from the blades, evaporating in the air; the red mist swirls around them, a vestige of unbridled entropy. He does not know what material they are wrought from, but he knows they are sharper than anything technology will ever produce.

They are weapons made to kill without mercy. So long as his rage burns hot enough, nothing will survive.

“Rage and anger followed me from childhood,” his father says. “I lost no battle, and when my quirk appeared, I killed my first person.”

Fumikage swallows. The admission is one he could never hope to have predicted. Nor is it one he wants to know.

“Who?” he asks, voice cracking.
“My father. My own flesh and blood. He was not a good man, not kind, and very often violent. But patricide is not a stain you should wish to bear. I fled to a faraway land in my youth. There are still places in this world where a quirk like mine and no morals are valued. There are things that I did which should not be forgiven. And one day, a man in white made me a deal: one act of violence in exchange for my return to Japan, all debts to that world paid. I killed many that day, purged an infection through death, and I regret every life taken.

"I put aside my blades when I returned free, my sins hidden away by those who are powerful. I met your mother shortly afterwards. Your mother loved me anyway despite my flaws. I could not remain the same man I was. Not when she forgave my sins.

“I was chained to these blades, a slave to my rage. She showed me how to be free. Taught me to love and care. When you hurt that child, I knew I could no longer stand back. You needed an example to look towards. Someone not held by emotions. Always in control. A stoic in thought and action. I think, perhaps, those of my blood will always be tortured by strong feelings.

“People like us, people with powers that in ages past would be called gods of war, must be better. We cannot fail. We cannot believe in the reach of our godhood.”

Fumikage feels a lump form in his throat, unable to say anything in response. There are many things he thought hiding behind his father’s harsh silence. He never once thought that unlocking that door would expose a legacy of corpses and blood, the mark of being the son of a patricide.

His father walks to his mother and lays his hand on her forehead tenderly. “She is not always kind to you, but only for she sees me in you, sees what you could become if you ever failed.”

What can he say to this confession from a man who has never spoken more than a dozen words to him at any given time? This is his father laid bare and it is disturbing in how sincere he is. His father is hard lines and cold edges, a promise of violence and the spectre of death.

“I can’t forgive what you’ve done now that I know,” Fumikage says quietly. “To forgive you would be to betray the pillars of morality I believe in.”

“I already have all the forgiveness I need.” His father shakes his head. “Necessity is the death of morals. Remember that.”

The next hour passes in an uncomfortable silence.

He wishes he has his phone to contact his friends, but it is broken from the explosion. He can only hope that they are surrounded by family, and in the case of Uraraka he can only wait until her location is known to him to visit. She may be vicious, especially towards him, but she is still a kind friend, and her happiness is something to take solace in for it will never disappear.

He pays little attention to his father answering the door. He does, however, perk up when his father says, “No,” as a sharp warning to the person on the other side.

“Sir, we have a right to question him on his actions.”

The width of his father’s shoulders means Fumikage can't see the man. But he can imagine him from his nasal voice, probably reed thin and short, sweating, perhaps in the large shadow his father casts.

“Father, it’s fine.”

His sire sends him a withering glare and any other words Fumikage may have die on his tongue.
“He is a child at a heroics institution with all of the rights and privileges accorded to him. To question him you must inform UA administration.”

“Sir, he may very well be involved in subversive activities against the state.”

“And if you wish to question him then do so lawfully. Now, leave and allow us to be with her in peace.”

“Sir, I can move you aside if you refuse to cooperate.”

His father's stance shifts and the threat of violence fills the air. Fumikage sees the promise of blades swinging through the air, tearing through flesh with ease, and a man standing atop a hill of bodies.

“Will you now?” his father questions, the chains appearing in a flash of fire around his arms. “Can you back that claim?”

Apparently, the man cannot. His father’s stance relaxes slightly, the chains vanishing.

“They will come for me regardless.”

His father looks back to him. “Yes. Because of those… flames.”

Fumikage looks away. “I didn’t tell you because I never thought anything would come from it. And because you never showed any interest.”

“Another of my many failings.” His father exhales. “The flames of Shikoku. There were too many innocents I killed that day. I had hoped you might tell me yourself.”

“No. I just…”

“Did not trust me.”

“Yes.” It hurts to admit that truth.

“I gave you no reason to. You are not… like me, despite my wishes. I wished you to mirror me, but I never changed for your sake.”

“I learnt much from you,” he argues, because yes, he may never approve of who his father once was, but that does not change the fact that much of who he is today comes from the silent man.

His father grunts. “And more in a few weeks from Midoriya.”

They come for him hours later.

Fumikage has already taken painkillers to deal with the patchwork of bruises beneath his clothes, red and yellows and purples. They hurt, but nowhere close to seeing his mother where she is.

It is Midnight who enters the room.

“Hey kiddo,” she says, not a hair out of place. “You know why I’m here, right?”

“The fear of weak men,” his father says.

“I’ll be fine, father. Mother will need someone if she wakes.” His father nods once. “Let us do what must be done.”
“This is just a preliminary information gathering session,” she explains as they walk through the hospital. “None of what you say is admissible in court. The only people who can access those transcripts will be those of us in the room.”

Fumikage scoffs. “We both know that is a lie.”

“It’s the legality of it that matters, baby boy. You can say whatever you want and if they try and use it against you later, well, it won’t end well if they haven’t followed procedure.”

**The same procedures that protected the children?**

His steps falter. That is true. Those eight children he looks after regularly should have been saved and protected in the village hidden in the leaves. Instead, their parents died, the village burnt to ash, and the oldest amongst them dead.

He forces that line of thought away.

“I would think they would send my homeroom teacher,” he says instead.

“Shouta’s a bit… busy organising things. So are Principal Nezu and All Might. Don’t worry, I’ve got your best interests in mind.”

“I was not trying to cast aspersion on your intent. It was a simple matter of curiosity.”

The room the meeting is held in is small and cramped.

Four people sharing it only makes it seem smaller; Midnight beside him, a man in government black—and he had been right that man would be reed thin—and a woman in imperial white across the divide of the plain table. It still has crumbs from the last meeting and the room smells of stale coffee.

It is not, in any way, an auspicious meeting room.


“No.”

"Because I think the last two are very wrong. I mean, how often do quirks suddenly mutate and very loudly scream ‘I'm affiliated with terrorists' as his does?"

“Okay, cool it,” Midnight says.

The man scoffs.

“Let’s give you a bit of history lesson, Fumikage. Some twenty odd years ago, villains decided Shikoku was a perfectly good place to start a war. Cities and towns lit up as villains fought the police, the army, and civilians.” He glances at the woman in imperial white for a moment. "And the only unifying factor was black flames. The same black flames that degrade material in the same manner as the ones you used. This is after your quirk showed a sudden aberration with no cause."

“Quirks can change and drift over time.”

“Not to the extent yours has shown. Look, you tell us the truth and you might not be charged for treason.”
“Stop threatening a minor,” Midnight warns.

“Fine. You may face possible charges up to and including treason should it be discovered you were involved with the subversive act colloquially known as the Purge of Shikkoku. Do you feel better now, Midnight?”

Fumikage closes his eyes and decides against lying. He has never been proficient at them. That is Midoriya’s speciality.

“My quirk isn’t necessarily Dark Shadow. It’s… chaining dreams and nightmares of the void to reality.” There, a truth of sorts. “I chained Dark Shadow as a child and thought that was the full breadth of my power.”

The man snorts. “That sounds like a very poor lie.”

“And if I told a believable truth you would find a way to twist and disprove it.”

“I believe I understand the situation,” the lady in Imperial white says finally, drawing their attention. “Midnight. Whatever your name is. Both of you get out so I can talk to Fumikage alone.”

“I’m not letting you do that,” Midnight says.

"I didn't want you here, to begin with. You are not removing me."

The woman reaches into her pocket and removes a small slate that she places on the table. A holographic image of an Imperial Mandate appears, the white Chrysanthemum encircled by gold on a white field.

“As far as you’re concerned,” she says to the silence, “I’m the highest official in the city and I’m almost certain the Minister of Defence is here. So, don’t be difficult and leave before I have you both thrown in a prison for obstructing a long-standing investigation with so many layers of clearance above you that you will never so much as hear of them.”

The government man stares at the mandate for a long moment. "You bitch." He stands stiffly, anger in every stilted movement as he walks out of the room.

“He’s a minor and none of this is admissible,” Midnight says, one hand on her whip and the other on Fumikage’s shoulder.

“I very much doubt he’s a threat to the state. And I wouldn’t care either way. Now, go.”

With the sign of the imperial family staring her down, even Midnight is forced to leave.

He knows All Might and Endeavour likely have ways around it, but Midnight is not as important. She doesn’t hold society on her shoulders.

For most people, defying a group capable of sinking an island is a daunting undertaking.

“Now that we have the distractions out of the way,” she says once the room is empty but for the two of them, “we can have a real conversation.”

Her blue eyes are sharp as her jawline which looks ready to cut steel. Admittedly, she’s much younger than he expects. Maybe her late twenties at most.

“What do you want from me?” he asks, wary.
Without a measure of the woman, he can’t gauge her possible responses.

Is she a threat? Undoubtedly.

But is she a threat to Fumikage? That question he can’t answer.

She wears the same white uniform the last prince wore when he sunk an island and killed millions of people, the same white uniform that answers to no one. And the same white uniform that the darkest reaches of the web theorise aided the villains of Shikoku.

“You don’t trust me and that’s fine.” She waves her hand dismissively. “You’re thinking of Taiwan and whatever else you’ve read. Fair. The only reason I did this is because of how you phrased things. I’m going to ask you a simple question and your immediate reaction will be all the answer I need. What is your connection to the abyss?”

Tokoyami freezes before he can master himself. She smiles in satisfaction, too sharp to be benevolent.

“Good, so you aren’t simply using similar phrasing.”

His fists clench tight. “How do you know that?”

“Because you aren’t the first person to touch it.”

His world shatters.

Fumikage knows he personally grasped the void, did so a decade ago as a child, and went so far as to chain the creatures within it to his will. He knows of Midoriya whom Dark Shadow calls a king and whom the monsters there both revere and curse as anathema.

The very idea that others touch it, and have done so for decades, if not centuries, terrifies him.

_I told you that the eternal dark has touched bloodlines and quirks_, Dark Shadow whispers through their bond. _You are starting to see the truths hiding in plain view. Be strong, my prince of crows._

“We’ve had experts of varying degrees over the years, even someone who travelled through it,” she says past his shock. “The imperial household is very much aware of it. I know this must surprise you, but did you really think you were special?”

“Then why haven’t you said anything?”

“You want us to tell the populace that the reason things went insane in Shikoku is because of an eldritch plain of existence that will drive you mad. We’d have another wave of anti-quirk riots if we did that.” She shakes her head. “If you are unable to tell the truth, and you know there is a threat, what would you do?”

“Battle it,” he whispers, “in the shadows.”

“As we do. You might be unaware, but in doing so you do our work as well. What I really want is your input on a matter of possibly great importance to us.”

She slides a tablet towards him. “Watch this and give me your honest opinion.”

He presses the play button. The image is relatively grainy, high definition instead of the 4K he
expects from standard security footage. It shows a hospital or maybe a nurse’s office. He sees Midoriya and Todoroki, the former talking to a pale-haired man.

The man throws something and the rest happens too fast for him to track before the image turns to static.

He frowns and rewinds, slowing the speed down to a quarter. This time he can see the cylinder and how Midoriya jumps towards Todoroki, summoning shadows all the while. The shockwave destroys the camera before he can see what becomes of them.

“What does this have to do with me?” he asks slowly, dread coiling around his spine.

The woman tilts her head. “Your two classmates are missing. Endeavour’s child and the other one.”

“Izuku,” he snaps, cold fear permeating every feather on his head. “Izuku Midoriya is his name. Have the decency to call him by that.”

She hums thoughtfully. “Izuku Midoriya, son of Inko Midoriya and Hisashi Atakani? That Izuku?”

“I am not aware of a Hisashi but yes.”

She closes her eyes. “I am sick and tired of their bullshit.”

“What?”

“You don’t have the clearance. Actually, if you repeat anything from the last thirty seconds, I’ll have you shot in a dark alley.” She lets the weight of that threat hang in the air for a long minute. “Now, what I really want to know is if they’re stuck in the abyss. If they are, we can localise an asset to retrieve them. If they’re not, well, we’ll retrieve them either way.”

“You seem very invested in this.”

She smiles. “I’m giving you obvious tells in the hope that you’re paying attention. Think of it as… additional training. But yes, Endeavour is important to us and by extension so is his son. And we would have prioritised Midoriya’s retrieval if someone had done a good job gathering intelligence.”

“Is that not your job?”

“Don’t get sassy, boy. In your honest opinion, with that footage and your own knowledge, are Izuku Midoriya and Shouto Todoroki trapped in the abyss.”

You know the truth.

“Yes.”

“I see.” She takes her phone and types something on it before pocketing it once again. “Thank you. We can begin localizing an asset to retriever your classmates thanks to your aid. Besides that, how would you like a job?”

He blinks. “You just threatened to shoot me.”

“Only if you reveal classified information. We need other experts on the abyss.”

“I think I’ll pass,” he says weakly.
She shrugs and removes another tablet. “If you ever change your mind, or if you have any information to pass on about the abyss in the slightest, then use this. It’ll clear you past every layer of bureaucracy. Don’t abuse it.”

“I thought you would threaten me more.”

“You don’t threaten an asset. That’s just bad practice.”

“Is that all I am to you?”

“Would you rather be a liability? We’re not in the habit of threatening children for having odd quirks. Not even the ones you watch every few days. Yes, we know all about them. We know how to do research. You haven’t committed a crime. I’ll get you cleared and have this incident sealed so no one bothers you about it again.”

“This sounds like an abuse of power.”

“One that works to your advantage. Listen, the government guy wants to have you arrested for a promotion or a favour or something just as inane. We don’t work like that. We’re fighting a war against the real threat, people who’ve touched the abyss and want to generate chaos. We don’t have time to waste politicking. We’re brutal because we’re efficient. You can trust us for that reason alone. If you’re unimportant, we’ll never bother you. If you’re an asset, we’ll protect you. And if you’re a threat…”

He swallows. “You’ll eliminate me.”

The open callousness is surprising. He has never met anyone who values him as an asset instead of a person.

“Got it in one.” She stands. “Have a good day, Fumikage Tokoyami. Remember, you’re on our radar now. Try and stay out of too much trouble.”

“Wait. Shikoku. Taiwan. How were those related to the abyss? I need to know. And why do you know the Midoriya family?”

Her smile is equal parts bitter and cruel. “The first two are classified to you. I’ll tell you about the last for two reasons. Firstly, because you know the consequence of betraying this trust.” She taps her temple. “And secondly, because you’re a valuable ally we plan on using. We know of the Midoriya family because Hisashi was once an ally of ours. And even if he is a fucking socially inept idiot, we look after our own. And that means we’re going to do everything in our power to bring your friend back.”

She strides past him, patting him once on the shoulder.

_Your terror runs deep. I will enjoy it._

“What did she want from you?”

He looks back and sees Midnight. Her features are set in worry. Fumikage takes a breath.

“She’s going to sweep this under the rug,” he says because that’s the only answer he thinks he can say and not receive a bullet to the head.

She kneels and places her hand on his shoulders, meeting his eyes with her steady gaze. “I don’t know what she said, but you shouldn’t trust the imperial family.”
“Trust me when I say I am aware of what they have done and what they are hiding better than most. Sensei, why didn’t you tell us Midoriya and Todorki were missing?”

Her smile is tight. “Why was she asking you about that?” He merely stares at her until she relents. “Because we’re trying to find them. We’ve barely had time to get security coordinated and get everyone medical treatment. We’re looking for them, but the explosion destroyed all of the evidence.”

“All of it?”

“Not a single trace. Even the video recordings were destroyed.”

*They move quickly.*

“I see.” He nods. “Thank you for your aid, sensei. But I would like to go be with my mother.”

He doesn’t go there immediately.

He is smart enough to know the lady and her allies erased the tape of Midoriya and Todoroki and likely for good reason. At least this way the story is that they were kidnapped by villains.

The rooftop is silent and those surrounding it just as empty. He hopes that there is true privacy here, but the entire world has already seen the reach of his power. The inky dark portal that bridges the gap between the material world and his soul opens.

The head of a dragon emerges slowly, sharp obsidian scales absorbing the light and those eyes promising rage and retribution. It has taken him a long time to realise that the chains binding the dragon are visible only to his eyes.

“I have a task for you,” he says to the beast. “Find my allies. Find Midoriya and keep him safe. Bring him home.”

The dragon opens its maw, the darkness within eternal and damning. It could breathe the godflame and incinerate Fumikage.

//I obey, King of Slaves//

Fumikage closes his eyes and feels the dragon turn to shadowy mist. It seeps through his shadow to the void hiding just beneath sight. He shudders when only a single thin chain remains to bind the dragon to his will.

He clutches his heart. Something feels empty there, a gaping hole that was once filled. The emptiness tears at him, leaves him cold and in pain.

“Why?” he groans weakly.

*Because your soul is emptier now. A king is only as powerful as his subjects and you have just lost half of yours.*

*****

Enji Todoroki is a man of determination.

It is why he has never failed a case before. It is why he has the highest number of completed cases. So long as it needs to be done, Enji has done it for the sake of his ambitions. Sleep is a tertiary
concern at best and eating is something he only does to maintain his physique.

He is a man of extreme willpower.

Happiness and temporary pleasures are nothing more than distractions to achieving his goals. He cares little for other people. His sidekicks are there to deal with menial tasks he has no interest in. His children are fixtures in his life like furniture. They are allocated resources to survive, no more and no less. In return, he asks that they do not disturb him, and they are granted freedom to do as they please. After all, only Shouto has any real value.

His son is the culmination of two great quirk lineages.

He is Enji’s greatest pride even if he will never know it. The boy thinks him cruel and Enji acknowledges he has every right to do so. But Shouto is in many ways blind. He has never cared that the boy is not top of his class, never cared that his close combat skills are serviceable at best. Nor does he care much that he lost to the Midoriya boy. How can he care about such trivial matters when Shouto has learnt the greatest lesson?

Fear the flames for it will burn you.

He thinks of his wife, beautiful and strong and ferocious. A woman of such grace that it changed him. Passion is a mixture of love and hate. Until her, Enji never had much in the way of love. But she made his flames burn gently, a comforting hearth and not a wildfire. And every baby gave him the strength to set aside endlessly chasing All Might. For a time, they were happy. Even when they argued, Enji loved her more and more for no one else had the same sheer tenacity. Her brilliance let him forget the demons hiding in his fire.

Hellfire.

The name is the only word he possesses to describe the true nature of his power. He thinks of the first day his quirk manifested. It was March and the world showered pink in petals. The day had been pleasant, the weather mild. And when his quirk manifested, he set his house on fire. An accident, common amongst children, and only notable for the intensity of his quirk.

A raging inferno that incinerated three buildings.

They did not understand the origin of his terror, not the flames themselves but the revelation that came from them. There are things lurking in his fire, monsters and legions that he can see only when the world burns. He never told anyone, not wanting to be institutionalised. Instead, he learnt to power through the visions of nightmares walking in worlds where the laws of physics were humorous jokes.

A plane of true fark and dread legions.

As a child, he witnessed the cold and cruel power of the abyss and the unreal logics that reigned supreme. As a child, he beheld the first flame of creation in its prison. It is his will and determination that keep him from ever seeking the first flame. He knows it is the fire of gods despite that it burns black. It has called him every day of his life except once.

The heart of the godflame.

The day his son manifested his quirk is blurry: the scent of baking cookies and a hint of cinnamon, the feel of a too humid home from Fuyumi using her quirk; the stinging in his finger from the sharp knife edge that cut him. Above all, he remembers the fear of the godflame ignoring him. That day Shouto burnt down half the house and scarred his brother. That day, Enji saw Shouto
reaching into flame, and past the bounds of the world, to grasp the godflame.

To burn the world in his image.

He does not want to imagine what would have become of the world if Shouto had been allowed to touch the flames fully. And he can never risk that reality from coming true. And so, he taught Shout to fear the flame, to hate Enji whom the boy would always associate with fire. It is the only method he has to protect his world from the unknown monsters and a world where hellfire is reunited with the godflame.

An endless wave of fire consuming every layer of the abyss all at once.

And in part, he has succeeded. Even when Shouto summons his flames—he remembers staring in awe at his foolish son bathe the world in fire—to defeat Midoriya, the godflame did not look to him.

But now he fears none of it will matter.

The godflame pays Enji no heed anymore. The black flame that burns away time and space peers past the copse of ancient trees that guard it, past the endless array of seals formed from true dark and disparity that hold it in place. It observes with its infinite power despite being trapped by the fundamental forces of the void.

**Naraka shall be mine**, the godflame intones across realities.

He knows it calls to his son, somehow trapped in the nightmare world that always plagues Enji’s waking world. Sometimes he glimpses his Shouto, sometimes running with Midoriya strapped to his back and sometimes fighting creatures that would give Enji pause. Each time he sees Shouto, the boy is closer to the godflame.

**The vessel shall bring my heart of hellfire.**

Enji wants to scream for what can he do now? Everything he sacrificed to keep his family and the world safe crumbles to ashes and he watches it happen. Because he knows Shouto will reach the godflame. It is as inevitable as death and the passage of time.

As a toddler, his son’s flames slowly drove his mother insane. He knows that she would never have harmed one of their children unless she had glimpsed the monsters hiding in those fires. He knows because she would have killed herself first before hurting her children.

It is why he loves her still and never forbade Shouto from visiting her even the boy never took the opportunity.

He lets flames pool in his hand and burns through the barrier between the real and the nightmare below. His son shoots ice and flame with impunity against creatures that resemble spiders, protecting the boy on his back. He disappears soon after, ascending higher and higher through the abyss.

**Bring him, corpse of the shadowking. Fulfil the oath you made that day.**

Enji sighs. In this room, the solarium his wife spent many hours reading in, Enji can let the iron will and cruel determination fade, and the man his wife loved, strong and determined and caring, can have a moment to exist once more. When the tears fall, fire burns them away. No one will ever see, and no one can ever know this singular moment of weakness.
“Forgive me, Rei. It was all for nothing.”

He can only hope that his lesson has been learnt.

“Fear the flame, Shouto. Fear it.”

****

Izuku wakes slowly, treading through the oppressive weight of sleep. He feels warm and safe, far from any possible danger. It takes him a long time to work past the haze and open his crusty eyes. He blinks away the blurriness until he can see.

He’s sitting on a soft material, grey and very likely the hide of the colossus they’re hitching a ride on. The hide has streaks of gold and emits bright ultraviolet light, perhaps a mating call or perhaps a signal to its compatriots following behind, a herd of millions as far as the eye can see taking part in a pilgrimage.

“Sleep well?” Todoroki asks, his voice too close for comfort.

Izuku looks around and finds himself leaning against Todoroki’s side, their bodies flush. It explains why one side of him is drenched in sweat and the other is freezing.

Todoroki’s face is covered in grime and light scars, the leather clothes from a few layers back torn and exposing a vivid rash in an even more vivid shade of blue. Along the curve of his neck are metallic scales from some parasite. There is a price to everything and the cost to this ride is illness.


“What happened?”

Todoroki shifts Izuku so that his arm wraps around Izuku’s shoulder. His hand, about a foot away from Izuku’s face, lights on fire. The heat is calming, and he feels sleep beckon sweetly. The flicker of those flames is soothing.

And none of this makes sense.

Todoroki hasn’t spoken to Izuku in weeks since he sacrificed his sister on an altar of despair and choked the life out of his mother. Having been the one to push him toward it, Izuku fully understands the frigid silence and burning hate from Todoroki. And for weeks, they had been one wrong word from a violent fight.

He tries to bury the memory of Todoroki choking him in his rage, those pale fingers wrapped tight around his neck and those mixed eyes full of burning anger. There are other memories of the time Todoroki abandoned him completely for a week, left a cripple to fend for himself in the dark recesses of a cruel throne world.

So, this is a terrifying surprise and if he still dreamed, he might think this a nightmare.

“You crashed.”

Immediately, he feels guilt washing over him. “I’m—”

“Stop it. I’m tired of you apologising.”

He genuinely sounds just as tired. His voice is hoarse from disuse, croaky from a persistent throat infection that his ice fails to heal.
“It’s all I can do.”

“Maybe.”

Todoroki makes a cat’s cradle out of his fire before moving on to making spheres that orbit his hand at different speeds and angles. He does this casually, as though years without using his flames mean nothing. Then again, they’ve spent nearly three months fighting and surviving in this place. If Todoroki was anything other than proficient, they would have died long ago.

And Izuku isn’t sure he can come back from death in this state. Not when he’s been called a corpse already by many of the denizens of this cruel place.

“I really did think All Might was your dad,” Todoroki says suddenly, the tiny suns orbiting faster around his hand. “I was trying to be cruel when I called you out.”

“You don’t have to apologise and wow, that sounds hypocritical coming out my mouth.” Todoroki twitches. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really, no.”

“Okay.”

“You sound so pathetic.” The flames die away and the cold returns just a bit, but Todoroki runs hot as a furnace naturally and Izuku is flush against him. “I think my mother loved me. Even though she did what she did. There was never any reason for her to do it. At least, not one I could find. She was always kind and generous. Always protected me from father. Was your father a good man?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen him since I was five. I guess that means he’s not a good dad.”

He only knows what the man looks like from pictures: dark-haired and freckled, and he imagines the man must have wrinkles now.

“I think I’d rather not know my father than deal with what he is.”

He glances at Todoroki, but his companion stares at something far away as though trying to see something known only to him. It can’t be the palaces in the sky or their previous waypoint or even the naked singularities consuming the slowest of the pilgrimage horde.

“How bad was he?” Izuku asks because things will resolve themselves one way or another.

“You were wondering how I could go so long without food. I think we went for survival training when I was six. Took me to a forest in the middle of nowhere and forced me to hike all day with no food or water. We did it every day until he was satisfied with my pace.”

“I’m—”

“If you say sorry one more time, I’m throwing you over.” Todoroki shakes his head, tearing his gaze away from that impossible spot in the horizon. “He taught me to fear the flames. Wouldn’t shut up about it. He’s thrown me in burning building, made me meditate on a bed of nails whilst trapped in a cage of flame, and threw me in a forest fire once.”

Izuku feels sick. Todoroki speaks as though the world must be like that and nothing will change it. That nothing can change it. That powerful men are inherently spiteful and the weak will always be trampled beneath their boot.
Todoroki sounds so exhausted and resigned to a cruel world.

“All of that just because he couldn’t beat All Might.”

“I sometimes think he gave up on his ambition to be number one because of me. I think if I wasn’t around, he’d be there by now.” Todoroki smiles bitterly. “And I wouldn’t have to suffer through him if I wasn’t born.”

“If I see him, I promise I’ll punch him for you.”

The formless mist around them shifts, solidifying with the promise. Todoroki reaches out and touches a promise made manifest. Izuku shivers, feeling a chill in his very soul. Todoroki holds the promise for a moment, twisting the shimmering cube of air tinted a mild shade of green.

Todoroki lets it go and the promise floats away to be consumed by a massive bird.

“Thank you,” Todoroki says sincerely, his voice soft.

“It’s the least I could do.”

“He uses his position to avoid repercussions. I know people have tried reporting things, but he’s so powerful that nothing will come from it. Censorship and privacy laws only protect the powerful, no one else. When I saw you and All Might, I just wanted to scream because it meant there were no good people in the world.”

“He’s a good man.”

Todoroki stares at him for a long time, assessing the conviction in his words. These are the eyes of someone who has felled gods and faced nightmares. They have no time for bullshit.

“One who failed you at least once,” Todoroki says finally. “If he knew anything about your quirk and didn’t investigate, he dropped the ball completely.”

“I never said he was perfect. But he loves me in his own way. I know he’s not perfect and if I’m being honest, he’s a terrible teacher. He’s trying, though.”

Todoroki leans back fully which means Izuku must do the same if he wishes to remain warm. Or stable. The movements of the colossus jostle him, and with his legs useless he can’t really keep upright alone.

“That’s better than Endeavour.”

“That’s not a high bar to set.” He shakes his head. “All Might gave me his quirk.”

“That shouldn’t be—”

“Possible? Todoroki, we’re riding a colossus as it completes a pilgrimage to eat living lightning. Nothing about this is possible. In the face of a quirk that involves a nightmare realm and changes other quirks, can you really say passing on a quirk is impossible?”

“Is that why Tokoyami is different?”

“He’s weird. Connected to this place like me but in a different way. I don’t know all the details. I suppose I would if I wasn’t so scared of the truth.” Izuku shakes his head. “I think we’re all connected to it in different ways. Even you.”
“The way you say that makes me think you know more than you’re telling me.”

“This isn’t my journey. This isn’t my character arc. It’s all about you, Shouto Todoroki. And I’m not going to spoil it. Not when we’re so close.”

He grins at Todoroki, all sharp teeth and crystal nightmares. It is, however, sincere.

“Sometimes I wish you were being malicious. It would make things so much easier.”

“You could ditch me, I suppose. Everything we’re going through is a story. My journey into the abyss was a descent into my own madness but also a discovery of my power. I don’t think your journey is about madness. No, I think it’s an exploration of your suffering in the past. I am your guide, your burden, your foil, a cog in the inexorable machine of your story. I must be dramatic because this is all a metaphor for something. Everything you are will change once you reach the end.”

“You’re a puppet dancing on strings. You can’t do anything other than dance to the tune set.” He makes a pair of scissors out of his flames. “I wish I could cut them.”

Izuku chuckles deeply, his voice echoing across the misty world of the helpless dead. “One day you’ll have the power. But by then it will be too late.”

He looks up to the palaces hiding in the mist, home to beings of infinite angles ruling over worlds of circular fractals of gravity.

“But for now, let’s just enjoy the ride. It’ll take a few weeks to the next waypoint.”

Izuku burrows deeper into the nook they share. Soon, Todoroki follows his example and leans back, making a fire to keep them warm as the colossus continues its pilgrimage.

The time passes in a peaceful haze. The only moment of interest occurs when the colossus passes through a river of helium, crushing the village built on the banks of this strange river. The sounds of terror and desperation wake Todoroki and long after they have passed, his classmate shivers often, thinking of the dead.

“Why are you talking to me?” Izuku asks much later.

Todoroki wakes from his light doze. “Because there’s no point in hating you. I can’t kill you no matter how much I hate you. And I’m just so fucking tired of it all. I’d rather be numb than feel anything.”

That is answer enough for now.

The waypoint, as it turns out, involves the colossus they are riding on throwing them through a green lightning bolt. A dead one, true, but the experience is still disconcerting. Izuku lands away from Todoroki on a glass-like substance.

He only sighs and waits for Todoroki to find him and pick him up. The light the glass reflects would blind anyone not attuned to this place, and he makes sure the shadowed veil is tight around Todoroki. But the light is hauntingly familiar. He once strode towards it, watching the birth of a universe. It isn't the same light, diminished as it is by time.

It is still as beautiful as seeing the event unfold for the uninitiated.

“Why is there a train here?”
Izuku twists around awkwardly using only his arms. He sees the train past Todoroki, a deep purple that stands out potently even through the scorch marks. Beside the train is a bird still burning from the godflame.

“I never thought it was true.”

Todoroki walks over and lifts Izuku onto his back. “What?”

“We travelled through the darkest abyss aboard a train to infinity,” Izuku murmurs. “This is Master Railroad’s train. I thought it was a metaphor, not literal truth.”

“You said metaphors are truths.”

“I suppose I did.”

Shouto’s stance loosens and assumes the position Izuku associates with him doing something new. “Want to see if it works?”

Izuku laughs. “Why not?”

Todoroki walks across the plain of glass reflecting the first act of creation, Izuku observing silently on his back. Despite how visible the train is, that isn’t to say it is close. No, it takes them four days of travelling to reach the behemoth of a thing. Todoroki clambers up the ladder to the engine room. The door opens easily, not a single speck of rust to be seen.

Which is odd. Despite the scorch marks, the train looks pristine despite being centuries old. The engine room is spotless and with a quick wipe down would gleam.

Izuku points to the huge engine. “Interesting thing about having a minor obsession with heroes—”

“Only minor?”

By the way, one shoulder is hitched higher than the other, Todoroki is expressing some emotion. Maybe even a happy one.

"Did you just make a joke?" Izuku asks.

His expression closes off, the frigid blankness overtaking the momentary expression of warmth.

“Maybe.” It is said curtly, a rebuke against any further attempts to make light of his words.

“That’s good because one thing that was always interesting to note about Master Railroad’s train is that it appeared to be powered by steam. Ridiculous because it never actually needed an engine to run.”

“This is another metaphor.”

Izuku pats Todoroki on the chest. “You’re learning. You see, it’s powered by steam. What do ice and fire make?”

“Convenient.”

The strings Izuku must dance on return. His mouth moves without his authority. “This is a relic from the past, an artefact from a great hero. Of course, it’s convenient. This is a story, not a real journey. If we have this train, then we’ll need to use it later when the real threat emerges.”
“Where to, then?”

“Wherever the universe takes us. The train knows where we need to go.”

“If you knew it would take us somewhere traumatic and horrifying, would you tell me?”

Izuku grins. “I think we both know the answer to that.”

“I wish I hated you more.” Todoroki looks away. "Maybe then I could kill you.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, here's your weekly fix of this story. Things are happening, and people/organisations from the background are coming to the forefront. That's what a lot of this season is about, mixing things up and seeing how characters interact with the rest of the world.

I tried something a bit different with Endeavour's POV in terms of the structure, so if it seems a bit odd, that's pretty intentional.

Let me know what you guys think if you've made it this far. Even a simple comment lets me gauge how people are receiving the story. So if you can, drop a line and let me know. But if you can't, just know that your readership is more than enough for me.
Legends of the Past

Chapter Notes

Guess who keeps on lying about the final chapter count?
Guess who's still running a discord server which can be found at the following:
https://discord.gg/4YvCTYR.
This guy over here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘Without understanding the origins of our quirks, truly abominable practices have arisen. With each stride we make in individual rights and freedoms, it seems that our culture takes a step back. Too many are sold into marriage at a young age in the hopes that mixing certain bloodlines will lead to powerful new quirks. This practice is seen very much in the deceased Imperial Heir of Japan who inherited the power of hydrokinesis and geomancy from his parents. His power was such that when Her Grace the Empress was slain during a revolt in Taiwan, he sunk the island of Taiwan in his rage. He would later commit seppuku in atonement. That ritual suicide was needed to placate the populace even slightly is perhaps more telling of the state of the society we live in.’

—Excerpt from ‘Questioning the Modern Age of Heroics’ by Andile Sithole.

Operating a train, as it turns out, isn’t as simple as applying ice and fire in an engine to make it run. No, there are dozens of systems and safety protocols that they need to decipher. Izuku spends his time talking Shouto through the order of operations, not knowing precisely what to do but having an intuitive sense of what must be done first.

He very much doubts this would work in the real world. If they were under the real sun, the train would have exploded with their shoddy methodology. But the abyss destroys all laws of logic and rationality. They need the train to work and thus it will if only because of the influence Shouto’s story exerts on the abyss.

They do get it to run after a day of fiddling with it.

It sets off slowly, the engine room rattling and the pipes shaking as Shouto carefully generates steam. His eyes are narrowed as he generates more ice and slowly intensifies his hellfire. The superheated vapour travels through the pipes, eating away corrosion and burning parasites that have found a home in the old pipes of the train.

The train groans to life, renewed and reinvigorated by the infusion of power. It marches forward slowly as gears unused for centuries move in concert once more, groaning and squeaking as they are forced to life once more. This train is a piece of human engineering and quirk marvel combined, something wholly unique and perhaps a sign of what quirks will look like in the future, less biological marvels and more mutations that fuse together modern technologies—Jirou is his first thought after he remembers her name, and undoubtedly there are others.

And then the train is moving. An inch at a time at first but, as Shouto gains more confidence in controlling the volume of steam he generates, the train moves faster until they are traversing the glassy ground, leaving trails cracked glass that leak the light from the birth of the universe.
Once the train has enough momentum, Todoroki takes a step back. Todoroki grabs Izuku and throws him over his shoulder, though not callously.

Todoroki sets Izuku down in the next car on a rather comfortable chair, his motions gentle. Izuku shrugs and leans into the leather chair, trying to get as comfortable as possible even as Shouto brings him a footstool to ensure his legs aren’t in an awkward position. He might as well since Izuku can’t go anywhere with his useless legs.

_Do you think he’ll survive?_ Mikumo asks when Shouto is gone.

Izuku looks to the chair opposite him, a deep red leather cracked by time and with faded brass studs. If he looks from the right angle, he can see an apparition of his brother, dark of hair like their father and freckled more so than even Izuku.

“I’ll make sure he does.”

_You love him when you’re not trying to kill each other._

“We’ve spent months fighting me in this place. He’s carried me on his back and kept me alive. He’s laid bare his soul for me and sometimes forgiven me the pain I’ve caused him in this. How could I not love him?”

Mikumo smiles benevolently. _That is… good. You are good for each other. All three of you. I’m proud of you. Just, please stop trying to kill each other._

Like his powers, Mikumo vanishes, leaving Izuku deeply unsettled. Ever since he came back, Mikumo has been nothing but kind—except for the long stretches of silence—and it makes him wonder if Mikumo is truly his brother at this point.

Metaphors and literal truths are much the same in this dark place.

An hour or so later, when the train is chugging along over a waterfall of cascading stars, Todoroki returns. He looks tired even if he won’t ever admit to a moment of weakness. His friend of sorts, and ally of necessity, sits where Mikumo did and stares past the creatures of nuclear fire and cruel singularity.

“Do you still think you can be a hero?” Shouto asks randomly. “After all this. How do you even care for people?”

“A long time ago there was this girl in a sunflower dress,” Izuku answer wistfully. “It’s been so long. You’d think I’d remember more than that but it kinda just fades away, you know. She had a bad day, just one bad day. No child ever wants to kill someone and she didn’t even know what was happening with her quirk. I saw it and I couldn’t protect her. I’m going to be a hero so nothing like that happens again. So that officers don’t get away with calling a little girl a villain.”

Shouto hums, not looking away from the spot impossibly far away. Izuku follows his gaze, seeing nothing with his eyes, but feeling an echo of it.

“What are you looking at?”

“Nothing,” Shouto says quickly and that is why Izuku knows it to be a lie.

“I don’t believe that. You think I can’t hear the call?” Izuku smiles bitterly. “There are… echoes, of its power.”
“Then what is it?”

“You know, I’m not sure. Power, yes, but of what flavour I can’t say. It might be the singer that must never be awoken for they spell true death or something else completely.”

When he looks to Shouto, the boy is on his knees, ears bleeding. Izuku blinks in confusion. Then he rolls his eyes in disappointment.

“Oh, you think that’s bad. I got a full dose of it a while ago.”

“How are you not insane?”

“Shouto, I’m batshit insane. I have voices in my head—one who I think might literally be my twin brother—and I’ve committed suicide for answers. I’ve got no preservation instinct considering that I keep on fighting the person carrying me. I am very likely clinically insane and not getting better despite what my counsellor thinks.” He smirks cruelly for he must play a role. “But in this place, sanity is a weakness. You’re a broken little thing just like me. The inky blackness of the abyss filled my cracks. What will fill yours?”

“You called me Shouto.”

“I’d apologise if I cared, but I think we’re close enough for that. I’ll let you call me Izuku.”

“Izuku,” he says slowly, testing the word.

Together, they ride an incongruous train through the darkness between realms.

It is a slow ride, leisurely even, and it gives them a chance to rest. Not that Izuku needs it. Even with his powers shattered, he is still more a creature of this place beneath the skin than he is human.

Shouto only dozes for an hour or two before he needs to power the train with his powers. He works determinedly regardless, never complaining or even voicing an ounce of displeasure. He says little and Izuku has no reason to breach the silence.

Though, when he does breach that glacial silence, it is usually memorable.

Izuku wakes one day to find Shouto above him, strangling the life out of him and screaming obscenities. It is hard to parse through his strangled words, but he makes out ‘Fuyumi’ and ‘mother’ as his vision blackens.

And then he remembers that whilst his legs may not work, he isn’t wholly powerless. One For All fills his arm and he punches Shouto. His friend yelps in pain, flying and crashing into the table.

“You awake now?” Izuku asks, no more upset than the first two nightmares that sent Shouto into a murderous rage.

The first destroyed an entire car of the train. The second ended with every bone in Shouto’s arm broken as retribution. It may have been spiteful, but Izuku is sick and tired of forgiving anything and everything.

Somehow, he knows this isn’t the way everyone hopes he stops forgiving people.

Shouto says nothing, staring at the broken chair leg. There is an air of exhaustion to him, pervasive in the same way that snow pervades the arctic. Driving away the chill with a fire is possible, but
inevitably the cold will snuff out all warmth.

Izuku must fill the silence with stories of the things he’s seen during his deep dives of the abyss: glittering causality beams over the Tannhauser gates and worlds lost to time like tears in the rain; the undying whales whom he misses and hopes have found a measure of safety in their odd journey for survival; the trees that granted him shelter and protection whilst he learnt of his powers; and all the other glorious things in the abyss.

The train bursts through another layer of the abyss, losing much of its momentum. Izuku isn’t certain exactly why it can do so but he assumes it has to do with what powers it, Entropic steam made from the flames of hell and the aegis of a legendary hero.

Shouto stands tiredly, ready to get the train up to speed once more.

“Wait,” Izuku commands, observing the landscape with both his eyes and his sense for the abyss. He may have terrible spatial location in the real world, but the abyss is an open book to him.

The landscape looks familiar, especially that lake of chaos flame. “Oh, this is the place. Come on, we need to do something outside.”

Shouto asks no questions and carries Izuku once the train slows down. He waits until it’s at a slow enough speed before jumping out.

They land easily in a valley that looks like it was formed by a great kick. Izuku points to the area he can feel the source of energy, a debt that must be fulfilled and a wish unforgotten, beyond a series of hills and valleys.

It will take them a while to reach the place where Izuku experienced the full strength of One For All, walking through the ruin and devastation he will one day cause with simple punches and kicks.

But, using One For All always generates green lightning and many creatures feed on that power source. It makes him realise he’ll have to observe the long-term effects of his mentor’s quirk on this place. That is, however, a concern for a later date.

Shouto battles an Iron Giant, generating a sword of swirling hellfire and matching blows with the knight. Each swing of it’s lightning-infused sword is relentless, a mountain of force and destruction bearing down on them.

Shouto rolls his eyes.

A hellfire sword a mile long materialises in his hand. He swings it, cutting through the giant’s metal sword, and decapitating it.

Another contender takes its place, a dream serpent seeking revenge for its fallen brethren that Izuku ate once months ago, before the Sports Festival and under the tutelage of hounds that exist in the corners of time.

It soon becomes a running battle for the creature flies and swoops down to consume them. Its scales are too tough for Shouto to pierce and it rolls between Shouto’s gouts of his fire.

So, Shouto lets them be eaten.

Its insides may be unreal logic and lava streams, but Shouto generates more and more ice until they find a path to the creature’s heart. He plunges the flaming blade through the creature’s heart easily,
used to this after all the creatures they've killed.

The flying serpent crashes violently to the ground, dislodging Izuku from Shouto’s back. He falls through the angles of time within the creature and nearly falls into a vortex of reverse time. The only thing that saves him is an errant shard of ice broken off in the crash.

He waits until Shouto finds him, glad that he has the strength to keep his grip for hours. He catches a glimpse of Shouto’s shoes before the rest of him comes into view.

“I could let you fall,” Shouto says instead of lifting him up. His eyes are cold, frigid and unrelenting.

They remind Izuku of Endeavour, chilling in their willingness to accomplish any goal.

“I suppose you could,” Izuku agrees. “I suppose it’ll make you feel better for a while but it won’t bring back your mother or your sister. What’s done is done. You can still reach them in the real world. But not without me.”

“I hate you.”

Izuku rolls his eyes. Grins a sly grin. Says, “I love you.”

A long moment passes before Shouto reaches down and grabs Izuku’s wrist, hauling him up. It seems a joke is the right answer this time.

The moment they’re away from the ledge, Izuku takes the opportunity to punch Shouto in the face, breaking his nose. He lands on top of Shouto and pins him down with a glowing hand to the chest. Izuku throws another punch and doesn’t stop until Shouto is a bloody mess.

“Fucking make your choices quicker next time,” Izuku snarls, wiping his bloody fists along his pants. “Now let’s get out of here.”

Purely out of spite, Shouto drags Izuku across the ground instead of carrying him. Izuku rolls his eyes even as bits of bones and shards of ice slice his back. Eventually, Shouto’s arm will get tired and be forced to carry him properly.

They leave the belly of the beast together, a cripple and a warrior tied by hate and blood. No better in their relationship, but also no worse. Sometimes, not making something worse is the best outcome.

Shouto breaks through the creature’s mouth with a spear of ice the size of a building. He burns away the tooth shards that fall. Once the opening is stable, they leave and keep heading to the source of the wish.

They crest one last hill. There, at the lowest point of the valley beyond, where shattered stone and chaos flames meet, is what they have been walking towards.

The bones of the last wish-granting dragon, magnificent even in death. Even with its tail missing, the bones of the dragon carry a certain majesty to them, benevolent and dignified in equal measure.

Izuku smiles, glad for once in the last few months.

“Take me to those bones.”

Shouto does so without question, ambling along slowly. There is no rush. Any creature that
remains would have fled in terror from Shouto’s power. With no threats, he can conserve his energy.

Izuku reaches over Shouto’s shoulder and lays his hand on the skull and feels an echo of the wish-granter’s life. He feels the warmth of its last wish, an oath that binds them together, waiting to be discharged.

“Thank you, Eao. Freely, your bones, I wear.”

The dragon is dead, its timeline ended. Yet, he still feels a surge of affection from the dragon. He looks at the dragon’s spine and knows what must be done.

“How the fuck do you expect me to do this? That would have been nice to know.”

He feels the amusement from the bones as it cautions patience. Which is ridiculous. He’s spent months unable to walk. The only reason his legs aren’t shrivelled or his muscles atrophied is because of One For All maintaining his muscle mass. He’s able to use more of it because of that, but that isn’t much of a consolation prize.

Izuku would much rather kick things to death than punch them.

“Going to explain?”

“That, my ignorant disci—oh no, don’t you dare Eao, he isn’t my disciple—and just ignore that outburst. That is a wish-granting dragon I made a pact with. I know it was stupid but, in my defence, I thought my mother would die if I didn't.”

Shouto is stiff. “And what was the pact?”

“It wants to grant wishes. This was its last wish. But it couldn’t just expect me to accept a boon and a curse for no reason. So, it showed me a sign of its goodwill. It saved Shinsou from my powers in the past. It promised me it’s bones in the now, in this relative present. And, one day to come, my disciple will have wings. It also gave me a bunch of truths.”

“I still think it was stupid. How do you know it didn’t sever your spine intentionally? Or engineer things for you to sever your spine.”

Oh, I like him, Mikumo says. He’s a lot smarter than you.

“A good question. It’s a matter of paradox, really. It doesn’t exist in linear time as we do. This is Eao’s present, so it knew what would come when we spoke. So, it knew we would be here one day. My spine would always be severed so it gave me a way out. I suppose that worries me more than anything else because it means the enemy is coming.”

“You keep on saying the enemy. Who did you anger?”

The strings return and Izuku is helpless to fight them. He speaks for something greater now, the story of Shouto Todoroki.

“Not my enemy. Yours.”

Izuku gestures theatrically, the only hope Shouto will know it is not him speaking in truth. “My life is an abomination in both the void and the real. But you? Entropic ice and hellfire. With the right application, your ice could be used to freeze time, to shackle the eternally free, and erode all bonds. Your fire consecrates worlds in your image. This enemy is the catalyst, the darkest moment before
you must pull the sword from the stone and choose your destiny. But there is a cost to these things.”

“I hate it when you do that.”

Izuku feels a massive gust of wind, breaking him from the puppet state, and looks up. Flying through layer after layer of the abyss is a dragon moving just faster than the speed of light.

“Oh, look, it’s Tokoyami’s dragon.”

The dragon appears suddenly before them even though he still sees the dragon flying through the abyss. Time and location behave weirdly when moving faster than the speed of light is involved. Moving faster than light is, in effect, time travel. The results of events are seen before the cause occurs.

“Hi there. What are you doing so far from your master?” Izuku asks cheerfully, completely ignoring Shouto’s bewilderment.

//My master tasks me to find you and return you to the anathema place. Shadowking, your powers wane. You once created dreams of endless shadow upon my father’s hand in your mortal vessel. Why are you so diluted?/

“What’s it saying?”

Izuku waves Shouto away. He doesn’t want to be a translator right now.

"That was you. I thought you were cute. Anyway, my spine's been severed and the… source, or perhaps conduit, of my powers, is shattered. I need your cousin's bones to replace my spine."

//I obey, shadowking/

The dragon lifts its too human hands and grips Eao’s spine. It removes the entire column with one fluid motion, as though bones harder than adamantine are pliant as butter. Oddly, even without their main support structure, the rest of the bones stay in position.

“Help me take off my shirt.” Shouto does so without question, likely too tired to care any longer. “Now, lay me flat on my stomach and give our friend some space.”

It is still disconcerting that one of Todoroki’s hands is warm whilst the other frigid. They linger at the base where shadows pool and plug the wound that will very likely kill him if given the opportunity. Keeping what little darkness he can generate in place to stop both the dreams of dead gods and crimson lifeblood leaking out has become second nature at this point.

The dragon and the spine it holds shrink to a more manageable size. It approaches, head bowed and spine held reverently in its human-like hands. It circles around Izuku warily until Shouto gets the idea and steps away. The dragon presses the shortened spine against Izuku’s.

He’s putting a lot of trust in letting the dragon come so close. Trust in Tokoyami’s control of the dragon given the distance separating the two. Trust that it won’t see him as an easy meal and an even easier way to increase its power.

“These bones I do accept,” Izuku says solemnly, sealing the wish.

Arctic cold and explosive heat grip him in equal measure, surging through his body in a wave of torrential pain. Something tears through the flesh of his back and tears through his flesh. He
muffles his screams as the spine fuses over his shattered one, replacing relatively normal vertebrae with those of a wish-granting dragon.

A flash of light later blinds him—and that might just be the pain blinding him—and the hot pain vanishes, leaving only a dull throbbing as his body acclimatises to what has just happened. He feels the crystal growths in the rest of his bones spread to the new spine, chewing away at it and leaving the bones hollow.

“Did it work?” Shouto asks, crouching beside Izuku’s face. He looks worried but not the least bit disgusted by what he has just witnessed.

Izuku cocks his head curiously once the pain fades. At first, terror grips him because he still can’t feel his legs. It is only after a few moments that his brain forges new pathways and a network of nerves attaches themselves to the new spine.

Then, in an act of balance Jin would be proud off, he rises off the ground with only the tips of his toes. His grin is broad as he takes small steps, getting used to the weight of his new spine. It is heavy, perhaps weighing half as much as Izuku does even after being hollowed out. But it only takes a moment of thought to infuse his back muscles with a portion of One For All.

He kicks suddenly, his legs moving with the same precision he is used to. But then trips because of the added mass in his back. Despite that, he laughs, scrambling to his feet once more.

“That feels good.” He pirouettes on the spot and runs through a quick kata, savouring having sensation in the lower half his body. “Weight’s way off. But I’ll get used to it.”

The dragon flaps its wings, drawing his attention to it. It seems contrite, almost fearful at interrupting Izuku. Or maybe it’s terrified of Shouto's entropic ice coating the ground.

//Your conduit is shattered. The dreams of your sacrifice no longer reside within that form. Should you die in this state, our grace will not restore your mortal shell. You must become whole once again, shadowking//

“And how do I do that?”

//The true godflame’s heat can fuse anything. The portion I possess does not burn hot enough to overcome your infernal engine. Hurry, for it hunts//

“What’s—”

A psychic scream rudely interrupts Shouto.

It cuts through their minds and brings them both to their knees. Izuku recovers quickly, looks up and sees the outline of hate and entropy in the sky, layers above them. It is gargantuan in size, perhaps the size of the Milky Way. It stalks through layers of the abyss, shattering worlds and sundering entire realms of tribute.

What terrifies Izuku the most is that the power he witnesses is only the shadow of the thing, the echo of its glory, and not the true monster.

This is a creature that if loosed upon the human world under its full majesty, with the impossible logic of the deep abyss granting it power, would destroy the galaxy simply by existing. And by moving, perhaps it would sunder the entire universe.

He looks to the dragon and sees it rises feebly, a thousand cuts on its body from shielding them
from the psychic attack. It makes a sound of helplessness as it slowly stands. Then it sets its legs in
the ground and opens its dark maw.

The roar is thunderous, an explosion of sound and force that knocks Izuku away. It is defiance and
fearlessness, a challenge against gods greater than it, so powerful that Izuku slams hard into
Shouto, ears bleeding from the unexpected sound so soon after a psychic attack.

“That’s the enemy,” he whispers, helping Shouto up. “Now get that train moving.”

They are hours away from the train. But so too is the creature. It has dozens, perhaps hundreds of
layers to get through for its physical body to reach them. That gives them time to plan.

Izuku grins and picks Shouto up in a fireman’s carry. The green lightning of One For All fills his
body and he sets off, laughing all the while at the absurdity of his life.

The dragon, more sensibly, picks them up moments later.

*****

The doorway of green light forms, breaking the barrier between real and abyss, and the World
Walker becomes one with the material world. The sun’s warmth fills the old form worn by the
World Walker, banishing the taint of the void in purifying heat.

The neighbourhood is familiar, tainted by the operator’s memories that reduce the efficiency of the
World Walker. The trees and walls and the homes distract the World Walker. It stops by one tree,
running a worn hand down the bark.

A tear runs down the face of the World Walker, the operator’s emotions strong enough to cut
through the security protocols put in place to avoid this very situation. Pushing down the
operator’s feelings is easy enough.

The World Walker approaches the door and knocks, hesitating only because of the operator’s fear.
It has been years, closer to a full decade since the operator returned to this place. This is not easy,
but the World Walker’s search has finally come to an end.

The door opens and reveals Inko Midoriya, mother to Izuku Midoriya and husband to Hisashi
Atakani.

She is the target the World Walker has sought for so long, the final goal of a decades-long journey
through dozens of worlds and a hundred throne worlds.

She is thinner than all the other Inko’s at the same point in time, her features hard and eyes red
with grief. She looks like a fighter, not a stay at home mother.

“Yes? Can I help you?”

The World Walker understands why she would not recognise this form. It is older, battered and
bruised compared to the one she loved, that of the mortal operator. It does not change the wave of
grief that the operator feels, strong enough that any combat efficiency the World Walker may have
is annihilated.

The World Walker lets the coldness and brutality of the role fade away and becomes Hisashi
Midoriya once more. No longer one of the most dangerous entities to walk this earth, a being
capable of facing the Emperor and the Strongest Man Alive as an equal.
No, he is simply a father and husband now, a foolish man who simply loves his family.

His physical features have not changed, but the intent behind them do. His hair is still streaked with the white of age but it no longer seems like molten silver. His freckles are no longer pinpricks of the eternal light of the first dawn of creation, but that of a man who has spent too long in the sun. The horrid scars on his face don’t bear the eternal memory of the glass crows that gave him the wound, crows that slew gods without thought.

Now he looks like a simple man now.

A tired old man battered and bruised by everything he has seen. He favours one leg from an old injury and slouches slightly. In all honesty, he looks like a strong breeze will knock him over.

Still, for the woman before him, he can muster a gentle smile. Seeing her makes every ache and pain vanish, washed away by the endless reservoirs of love he holds for this one woman. She is his better half, the only person he could give his heart to.

There is no one as beautiful as she is.

“Hello, Inko,” he says in his usual murmur.

She freezes at his words. “Hisashi?”

“Hey dear, I’ve missed—”

He is interrupted by an explosive wave of force that sends him flying from the doorway and into the wall.

Hisashi groans as he flops to the ground, hurt badly—physical capacity reduced to sixty percent, the World Walker warns—and surprised that his wife has this much strength. There are many worlds where she is strong, worlds where she has developed her power, but not many where she possesses this level of power. T

“Now,” she screams, her anger splitting a few atoms here and there and creating bright flashes of light. “You come back now. No, you don’t get to do that!”

It is a struggle to get back to his feet. He is on the far side of fifty and his bones aren’t what they used to be. Not that he was ever particularly strong, physically or emotionally.

Inko was the strong one, always fierce and always protective. She was the one who stood up for Hisashi. Still is, given how she nearly broke him without thought.

He looks up and sees the cracks on the road, the uprooted trees and the groaning metal railing. Hisashi holds back a sigh. She has always been fiery, and he will always love her for that, but now he’ll have to pay the money to repair this. Still, he grins at her because even in a rage she is the most beautiful person he will meet no matter the world.

“I’m not going to ask forgiveness for leaving,” he says, "But before you crush me to a fine paste, would you like to know my story?"

“Speak.”

“It’s a long one. And I’d rather tell Izuku at the same time as well.”

His son is the only other person he loves. Seeing him, seeing the man his baby boy became, is
something he has dreamt of for years. In the dark times, when his quest seemed impossible, the memory of Izuku kept him going.

For some reason, that sets her off.

The flare of power is magnificent and the shockwave of force she directs tears through layers of concrete—and heats up the air at the edges, turning it to plasma. It would send him to the hospital for a few months, perhaps instantly kill him, were he not who he is.

Hisashi Midoriya, once Atakani, activates the most basic portion of his quirk and breathes fire. It starts deep in his chest, a spark of heat igniting at his command, and rising through his throat. He parts his lips, shapes them like an O, and exhales a gout of pitch-black fire.

The dark and infernal fires of the godflame lash out and incinerate the shockwave, the ties to whatever dead god Inko borrows power from burning away in the might of the first flame. The afterimage of the god attached to that attack burns in Hisashi’s image, granting him a tiny portion of strength. Enough so that it heals one of his broken ribs.

He lets the flames fade before they can cause permanent damage. And before they start another riot. He would prefer not to have another Purge, especially not in his hometown.

“You know,” he says to the silence, a sly grin on his face, “communication is key for a healthy marriage.”

She always did appreciate his jokes, no matter how bad they were.

Inko is silent for one more moment. Then, she stalks forward, all anger and old grief and unconscious grace. Every step she takes seems to make reality waver. It also makes him realise a joke may not have been the best answer.

“You left.”

she slaps him.

“Without a word.”

She slaps him again.

“We thought you were dead.”

The third slap is instead a punch, one that knocks him flat on his ass.

He winces, having forgotten she took up boxing at some point in her marriage and wipes away the blood gingerly. His nose isn’t broken, but he’ll have to find a healer soon. At his age, shrugging off an injury just isn’t feasible. Weeks from now he’ll feel every wound from today.

“Okay, I deserved that. And more,” he adds, feeling the pulse of her power. “And if you want a divorce, I won’t fight it at all. But can I just talk to you and Izuku.”

She snarls, and a deep gouge tears its way across the ground, missing him by a few inches. He gulps, wondering if, after all, he’s gone through, today is the day he dies. At the hands of his wife, no less.

“You asshole!”

Feeling the sudden flare of power, he decides discretion is the better part of valour.
“You know what, I think I’ll come back when you’re not so angry.”

The World Walker takes over and dodges the next shockwave, burning away the third one as well. It burns through the barrier between the real world and the abyss, generating a doorway and scurries through it.

Hisashi takes control once more as he lands hard on the ground. It takes him a moment to realise it isn’t the ground but rather dark scales.

He glances up and meets the gargantuan eyes of an abyssal dragon, one old as the universe itself and watching something in the far distance. Hisashi stands on its human-like hands, protected from the raging winds of the damned that would tear his flesh off and wondering what in the hell woke up something from the very depths of the abyss.

“Okay, clearly I need better communication skills. What do you think?” he asks of the dragon.

The creature only stares at him in contempt. It will take him to his next destination in return for a decade of his life.

Hisashi smiles back at it. He’s been making deals and promises for decades. A lot of which are still unfulfilled. One day, the creatures will come to collect. But he’s got time until that payment is due. This is perhaps one of the most benign.

Nothing at all like his deal to free a world from a bloody nightmare with fire in exchange for the safe shelter of his blood. And, in all honesty, he has no interest in going to that realm for another decade or so.

Besides, this deal is an easy one to make. He’s already bargained with another creature for an extended lifespan.

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Izuku stands on the roof of the train, scanning the horizon for the enemy.

He can see the shape of it, the outline of eternal death and insatiable hunger in the fabric of the darkness still stuck two layers below them. It rages against the creatures and tactics Izuku uses to distract it for a little while: hordes of dragons that slowed it down; naked singularities and stars gone supernova; even a collapsing black hole.

It won’t last too long. All his knowledge of the abyss and every ounce of cunning has barely kept them ahead of the Elder Thing these past few weeks. For every layer they get through, for every layer they design a trap to hold it, the Elder crosses a dozen more. The only reason they still live is that it had to start from the very bottom of the abyss.

Its power is too great, perhaps only a step below the singers the dragons warned him against. The wake its shadow creates destroys entire realms and tribute worlds and sometimes tears holes to different realities, the spectre of its future intent committing uncountable xenocide. Simply the intent it holds causes catastrophic destruction on a cosmic scale.

And that is before its physical form simply annihilates all laws and rules once it has caught up.

Izuku shivers.

*Do you remember the truths Eao gave you, brother mine? This is the Elder that hunts you.*
“I know. All things are cyclical here.”

He looks away from the nightmare chasing them and to the front of the train. Tokoyami’s dragon beats its wings strongly, burning through any obstacles as it leads them to safety. A thick chain, each link harder than diamond, binds the dragon to the train so that any turns it makes the train will mirror.

It is odd. Logically, he knows that simply riding the dragon should be faster. Yet, in his bones, he knows that this inefficient manner of travel is faster yet. That somehow the legend of Master Railroad is the aegis that protects them from certain death.

Shouto is in the kitchen mixing some rations with the water from his ice—the beneficial property that heals, not the corrosive bit that accelerates entropy—and some canned tuna and vegetables. Izuku watches him bake something like a quiche with their limited supplies, admiring Shouto for his ingenuity. He makes it look so easy.

Certainly, Izuku could cook something better, but he’s come to trust Shouto won’t poison their food supplies. Nothing brings together two people better than a common enemy.

He stands beside Shouto, close enough that their skin touches and they simply stand in the warmth of the oven. No words are needed between them to convey this simple comfort, a reminder that so long as they walk together, they will not be alone. Not when their histories are so similar—the shape of the story if not the details.

Shouto will never care that Izuku brushes his finger against his wrist, not when Izuku has already broken that wrist twice. Izuku as well will never be annoyed that Shouto’s elbow pushes uncomfortably in his side, not after the time Shouto beat him to a bloody pulp.

The bond between them is blood and bone and savagery. But there is also genuine affection as well. Even if those moments only come after cruel words and violent threats.

They eat the meal with their fingers. They have no cutlery and whilst Izuku would have standards in the real world, right now he just wants to satiate some of his hunger.

“We’ve managed to stay just ahead of it,” Izuku says once they’re done. “It’s leading us on. Smart.”

“How long have we been running?”

"Time is subjective… oh, you mean real-world time. I don't know. We're on a legendary hero's train surviving off ancient rations and flying through tracks made of nothingness."

“You lost track, didn’t you?”

Izuku bares his teeth in annoyance. “Maybe three weeks. Maybe five. Don’t worry too much. Things will conclude soon.”

They sit in one of the lounge cars, all elegant wood and genuine leather couches. There are plaques with names written on them from a dozen different languages. Izuku doesn’t recognise a single name.

Shouto stretches languidly over a recliner near a window, staring past the inky dark. Stars streak by, a horde of wolves chasing them for sustenance. There is beauty to be found in this place, but also so much death and ruin.
Even after the Elder Thing destroys everything it passes, new forms of life will rise up and take the place of the dead. Odd and alien and maybe even terrible forms of life, but there may be friends to be made amongst the stars and the void-that-binds.

“You keep on looking to it,” Izuku says once he notices Shouto is looking somewhere else completely. “Do you know what it is?”

“I think I’ve always been searching for it.” Shouto breaks away from whatever holds his attention and looks to Izuku, his mismatched eyes certain. “I should know what it is. Its name is written in my bones.”

“You’re starting to sound like me.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“I’m mad so who knows.” He smiles crookedly. “We’ll get there eventually, no matter the cost.”

“That’s what worries me the most. I killed my mother and sister for—”

“They weren’t your family.”

“You said metaphors were more important than truths here. I slit the throat of my sister and drowned my mother, both with my hands. Those are metaphors but they’re also literal truths. And you made me do it.”

He hates seeing Shouto like this. You can’t tell his emotions by his facial features. No, it’s found in the set of his shoulders and the tension in his calves. Thankfully, Izuku has experience from reading Tokoyami who expresses himself in a similar manner and the months spent with Shouto.

“Let me distract you. What do you know of Master Railroad?”

He gestures wide to encompass the train. It is an elegant thing if dated, more wood and leather than modern steel and plastic. The patterning is the distinctive purple that made Master Railroad so recognisable, a garish colour but one that Izuku has come to appreciate as a safe harbour.

“Not much. Why?”

“Knowing your history is important if only for posterity’s sake. You see, Master Railroad was one of the original members of the New Heroes, the ones who rose up from the chaos of the Second Dark Age centuries ago.”

Izuku’s voice deepens an octave, gaining a lilting quality. This is the voice of a storyteller, a new role that he must play for Shouto. Right now, he is nothing more than a puppet dancing to the strings Shouto creates by his very presence.

“He was at times a commander when they battled warlords across the world, his train transporting troops and heroes. People remember Hawkmoon and Graviton Lance for they slew Titan, the Great Tyrant, in a battle that shook a continent. I love Hawkmoon and cherish her wisdom and legacy.”

He slams his hand on the table, the sharp sound echoing through the compartment.

Shouto shivers as memories of the soldiers and heroes who travelled aboard this train come to life for a moment, their shimmering forms brightening the car. They are all soldiers without borders, warriors of no nation. Men and women dedicated to protecting the sanctity of freedom and liberty no matter the cost.
Very often they paid the ultimate price and gave their lives.

“But aboard Master Railroad’s train, we will speak of his deeds and his accomplishments. Listen close for this is a tale of one of the true legends, a man whose influence is silent but unquestionable. Who stood with him against the Warlord Jack Slash and his Slaughterhouse Nine?”

A dozen of the beings of light step forward in step with the drums beating loud in his veins, and salute. Izuku stands slowly and salutes them in turn, back straight and shoulders stiff.

“We honour you, brave heroes who have been forgotten to time. Your sacrifice gave Master Railroad the time bring a piece of the very sun and secure freedom for the Western seaboard of America.”

Those dozen memories fade to motes of light. The motes swirl, tracing patterns of battles long past. Their names may be forgotten, but they are still legends.

He claps his hands to a simple pattern, that of blood pounding in your ears when your life is on the line. The tempo matches that of dodging between blows and striking down your enemies.

And though he claps alone, a great war drum joins him in honour of these fallen heroes. The final ode to these forgotten soldiers.

“Who stood with the legend when he fought Lung the Undying Warlord, the Great Dragon that terrorised the East Coast of America, his loyal followers, the demon Oni Lee and the Explosion Goddess Bakuda?”

Izuku claps to the beat of claws shredding flesh, of a dozen assassins striking from the shadows, and to the tempo of blasts destroying buildings.

“Who died in pain and torment as a distraction for Master Railroad to reinforce Berlin against the full might of the Empire: the joint Warlords Allfather and Kaiser at the height of their power, Fenja and Menja the Giant Sisters, the steel dog Hookwolf, and all the rest? Who fell to the control of Khepri and to the fists of Scion on their Golden Morning so that he would have the time to send them to the centre of the earth and burn in its molten core?”

He claps at the speed of those who fell to the violent delights of Warlords and villains.

He claps to the tempo of those torn to shred by steel fangs and crushed by giant fists.

He claps to the tune of those enthralled to serve the whims of a monster moments before being struck down by a physical god.

So many come forward. So many salute and disperse to motes of light, their great deeds remembered once more aboard the vessel that carried them to their doom. They pay tribute to their executioner, to the legend of Master Railroad, a joyful madness permeating the memories brought to life for one fleeting moment.

“And who stood with Master Railroad on the day of his greatest victory, a day few remember when it is without equal? The day this great legend ended Stormwind’s reign over Europe without a single drop of blood. The day a Great Tyrant was defeated.”

No one comes forward for there are no memories left. Izuku waits a moment, making a show of it.

“Her might eclipsed our entire generation,” Izuku says gravely. “The woman who could battle
Hero—forever may she rest at peace with her lover Legion—and win, Hero who is greater than All Might and Endeavour and Hawks standing together, surrendered in fear of a man whose deeds are forgotten.”

The drum finally falls silent.

He claps his hand on the table, a poor substitute for the great drums.

“He went there alone, knowing it may very well have been his final battle. You see, Shouto, we are nothing compared to Stormwind. She was a Great Tyrant and it was she who kept us in a Dark Age. Her very presence defined an entire era of history.”

Once more, he claps to the tune of his words.

“Her power was immense. She could create hurricanes on a whim and tear mountains down with her wind. She waged wars alone and won, worth more than a million soldiers and a thousand ships. Master Railroad should have died. Yet, the force of his legend and the strength of his will made the last Great Tyrant surrender.”

He claps for the final time and lets the echo die.

Shouto watches him, enraptured by the story of one of the New Age Heroes, the second of the great Triumvirate, matched in legend only by Graviton Lance and Hawkmoon.

“We stand in the shadow of a legend. He guides us to a tragic end, a possibility to every battle he fought. Yet, he lived. We must do the same and be worthy of the heroes of our past.”

No more needs to be said of the great legend.

Shouto gets back to work, powering the train with entropic ice and hellfire. He works for hours without rest, with Izuku only watching him. He should have stopped him hours ago, but the burning need to equal the great hero of their past is evident in Shouto’s grim determination.

Eventually, Izuku decides enough is enough. He grabs Shouto by the hand, squeezing tight till he feels bones crack and break.

“I’ll keep the train running. You go to sleep.”

“No, I need to stay up.”

“Please, go to sleep. I might not have all my powers back, but I’m strong enough to keep it running for a few hours.”

It isn’t a few hours. Shouto sleeps the better part of a day without stirring.

Izuku speaks to the dragon whilst Shouto slumbers, the only time Izuku isn’t bound to a script for Shouto’s sake.

//Eao wore your human skin when you and my king battled me. It was your power, your eternal darkness and Eao’s wish making the godflame ineffective that exposed me to the slaver’s chains//

He’s clinging to the chain binding the dragon to the train, cold winds chilling his bones. It would be much worse if not for the dragon taking the brunt of it.

“You don’t sound bitter.”
“Bitterness is of your human form. Dark Shadow has taught me much of the skin you now wear. It is the nature of this place, shadowking. The weak serve the strong. The lines of tribute must forever continue. My service and fealty are tribute to the slaveking.”

“And what is my tribute? Tell me, slave of my ally, what is my kingdom?”

“When you wear that skin, you lose your eternal wisdom. You stare at your kingdom. The very darkness, the inky blackness that births nightmares, the worlds of ruin and temples of calamity and true dark that give my father pause. All these things are yours to plunder at will. By your sacrifice do we gain slivers of true life and green lightning. By our grace, eternal your human vessel shall be.”

“I don’t want to live forever. Everyone I know…”

The dragon twists its head to look at Izuku. Its eyes burn orange and gamma radiation, and scars mar its snout. It is young by the scales yet to fully harden and the wings without the layers of adamantine armour.

None of that is as important as the pervasive sense of confusion that eyes convey, as though Izuku’s words are so totally alien they are incomprehensible. The dragon spends a few hours in consideration.

“But they are not your peers” it says at last, still confused. “You are king. Only another monarch can stand the test of time with you. One king rules. The prince rises. And the last must claim his throne.”

“It’s Shouto, isn’t it?”

He already knows the answer. Perhaps he has known since the moment Shouto stood opposed to him at the Sports Festival.

“He must make the choice. As you did. As my prince of crows did.”

“I hate what will become of him.”

“It is a choice that must be made. You can still reclaim the connection to your power and remove him from this fate if you are brave enough to face the Elder in that mortal form. We have waited aeons for two kings, we can wait yet for the last.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, all of that happened.

Let me know what you guys think if you’ve made it this far. Even a simple comment lets me gauge how people are receiving the story. So if you can, drop a line and let me know. But if you can't, just know that your readership is more than enough for me.
You Will Be This Betrayer

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

‘Information does not exist in isolation. There are always consequences to acting upon it. There is always context that is missing. You can never truly have every piece of the puzzle when it comes to people. But having more than your opponent is very often enough.’

—Excerpt from the recovered 'Tenets of Combat' likely authored by an underground hero or vigilante

Kurogiri’s bar has been closed since the day of the attack. It bothers him more than he is willing to admit but there are reasons to his actions.

With his bar closed, it means any of the myriad low-level villains won’t visit seeking guidance and won’t draw attention with their inefficient methods of entry and exit. He is proven right the next day as hero agencies across Honshu perform raids and strikes against petty villains, gang members, and even some of the informants the League relies on.

They are fighting back, but Kurogiri’s orders have largely been for them to hide and move to new hideouts. The division commanders of the League follow his orders to the letter as do most of their subordinates.

The few captured are those who refused his commands, believing themselves smarter the League’s strategists.

Despite his annoyance, he can take the tiniest measure of joy that the heroes also battle the Yakuza groups emboldened by the attack on the Sports Festival and seeing a chance for ascendancy once more. It doesn’t matter. The Yakuza are rats scurrying in the dark, vermin seeking any scrap of food. And though they think they have the power to move openly, Kurogiri already has plans for their eventual downfall.

He appears in the holding cell of their informant, uncaring of the cameras observing him. The device emitting electronic countermeasures on his body renders them unimportant. At best the cameras will see static.

The informant has a moment to notice him.

“Kurogiri, I didn’t tell them anything,” she pleads, knowing what is to come. “I’m loyal to you. Only you.”

Kurogiri nods. “And now you won’t tell them anything.” He forms a warp gate around the informant’s neck. “Goodbye. Thank you for your loyalty.”

He doesn’t look to the head as it falls to the ground with a wet thud and continues with his day. This won’t be the last informant. By noon he has eliminated all six possible leaks, solidified the fear the rest of the League's network has of him and is in the process of localising Stain.

The water tank supports his mass easily as he uses drones to observe the neighbourhood.

He is not so distracted that he fails to sense the threat of the World Walker stepping through one of his doorways. The man looks older than Kurogiri remembers, his freckles deeper and his hair
streaked with silver. With the deep scars on his face, he looks startlingly like his son.

Kurogiri prepares for a battle he likely cannot win, nor can he flee from it. The World Walker’s ability to manipulate the weird place that connects many warp quirks mean he can simultaneously attack and defend against any opponent. And he can follow Kurogiri no matter where he runs.

Getting to Sensei is his best hope of survival.

“Hisashi,” he says warily, not certain how rageful the man will be after what has happened to his son. Whether or not he will still abide by the accords.

At the very least, if Hisashi chooses to violate the accords and kill Kurogiri, then Sensei will avenge that death with the murder of Inko.

The man shifts his weight on the precarious edge of the water tank. “Kurogiri. You were married, right?”

“What kind of threat is that?”

“No threat.”

Kurogiri blinks and only now realises Hisashi has no idea about the stadium attack. Which can only mean he’s been in parts of the dark universe where time runs differently. It may only have been hours for Hisashi since he caused the commotion at the Imperial Villa and talked to Sensei, despite it being days for Kurogiri.

“What do you want to know?”

“How did you get your wife to listen to you when you fucked up. Badly.”

“Apologise. Beg forgiveness. Hope she doesn’t break you in half.”

Hisashi chuckles easily as though they are friends. “She can literally do that.”

Another piece of information to consider. If Inko Midoriya’s power has increased to a level comparable to her son or husband, then the League is very likely fucked. And he has no intention of being in the eastern hemisphere if things go wrong.

“Then give her time,” he says, both in sincerity and to give the League time. “She may need a few weeks before she is ready to speak to you.”

Hisashi nods once and falls through a doorway beneath him.

Kurogiri sighs with the danger gone. They are safe until Tomura decides to do something else. He is the other reason the bar is closed.

His phone beeps.

One of the drones in his network has a positive ID on Stain. He forms a warp gate and steps through it, paradox and causality snapping in three. On the other side, he walks out onto a darkened alleyway, garbage rotting nearby.

Stain stands near a dead sidekick, one belonging to the hero Hawks if the feathered epaulettes are any indication. Stain flicks his blade to the side to clean it and sheathes the sword.

“What do you want?” the hero-killer grumbles.
The name annoys him. Only one person should have that title and he was long dead having killed the titular Hero herself. This man with this false title is nothing compared to the original Herokiller.

Still, Kurogiri is a professional.

“To initiate contact with you. The leader of the League of Villains wishes to conduct a meeting with you.”

That is true if you consider Tomura as the public leader even though Sensei truly runs the League.

“The League. You people disgust me. You’re nothing more than rabble with no coherent goal or message.”

Kurogiri steps forward. “You’re casting a judgement without having met us.”

“Am I? Your Hokkaido branch is weak and filled with drug addicts and human traffickers. I took great pleasure in dismantling it.”

*We don’t have traffickers, Kurogiri thinks. And if there are, then they will die.*

“Anyone can claim a name in hopes the association will garner them protection.”

Stain strikes without warning, his sword stabbing through Kurogiri’s throat. Kurogiri looks down at the blade in annoyance.

“I rather liked this shirt,” he says, stepping left and through the blade. “Why that location outside of hoping that if I spoke, I must have vocal cords? You’re not the first to think so.”

“Your group is a blight upon society. Ando said heroes hold back advancement, but villains like you force society back. You seek immortality and validation by battling heroes, and in the process, you oppress the masses. You all deserve to die.”

“Perhaps,” Kurogiri agrees. “But those I work with seek to see the current establishment of heroes destroyed. For now, our ultimate goals align. Aid us in defeating All Might, and we will go our separate paths.”

“All Might. Once I respected him as a true hero before he was revealed a fraud. He hides behind the media and his position, seeking immortality like all the rest. Like Endeavour and Best Jeanist. He is nothing like Hawkmoon or Hero." Stain sheathes his sword again. "When he is dead, I will come for you and yours. The cycle of poverty and stagnation your kind creates will end by my blade. You targeted civilians, and for that, your days are numbered. Begone."

Kurogiri does not overstay his welcome. There is too much to do in the wake of the Stadium attack, too much to organise and fix in the chaos of the first forty-eight hours. Convincing a fanatic is at the bottom of his long list of priorities.

His next warp takes him to a mental asylum. It takes little time to find the relevant files he is seeking. Takes even less time to find the targets.

The boy with the purple balls for hair lays restrained on a gurney. The file makes him out as catatonic but for periods of intense screaming in an unknown language. He finds the invisible girl only by the straight jacket on her as she stands, not responding to any of the sounds Kurogiri makes. The final target, the rather large boy, tracks Kurogiri lazily, showing a fear response at his presence.
He warps once more. The first two have no chance of recovery just as the files say, but the third still has a tiny sliver of hope. He is just about to warp away when the oddest sensation of being grasped by something slimy envelopes him. He chokes in shock and fails to land on his feet.

He looks around warily, recognising the room Sensei occupies often.

“I see you’ve been avoiding me,” Sensei says, no hint of malice in his voice. Yet, “You conveniently left all means of communication in the bar. How childish.”

Kurogiri straightens his ruined tie. “I did not wish to deal with Tomura’s demands whilst I did damage control. The informants have been silenced, high-value assets relocated, and Stain scouted.”

“You’ve certainly been industrious. Autonomous, even. It must chafe to obey someone you consider less competent than yourself.”

He cocks his head. “I do not consider myself on your level.”

“Perhaps not me but certainly Tomura.” Kurogiri freezes. “How often have you thought to take control? After all, when has he shown an inkling of growth? Your hate must have burnt hot. It must have been so easy to whisper the right words at the right time. A suggestion that Endeavour’s son would be just like the father. You might even have reminded him of Midoriya’s power and told him of the power his father holds. Tell me, how long have you hated Hisashi?”

Dangerous accusations, any one of them. Together, they paint Kurogiri as a traitor of the highest order. Had he any blood it would freeze.

"I've raised that boy since he was five," he says slowly, incredulous at the threat. "I tutored him myself. I spent many nights comforting him when thunderstorms struck. Do not ever accuse me of betraying him. I care for him more than you do."

He doesn’t realise just how close he is to the great villain. Doesn’t notice that Sensei could pulverise the little flesh that remains of his original form.

Right now, none of that matters because if All For One says anything wrong, then Kurogiri has a warp gate ready to remove his head.

Sensei’s laugh is deep and booming. “Forgive me. I wished only to know if you served loyally. You see, a loyal servant would obey his master’s commands.”

The malevolence is sudden and all-consuming. Kurogiri falls to his knees, all motor functions lost. He barely manages to look up at the darkened visage of Sensei.

“Commands such as not harming civilians. Obviously, a loyal servant would obey those commands. Am I wrong?” Kurogiri can’t speak with the oppressive weight of death looming over him. “But you are loyal to Tomura more than I.”

The malevolence leaves. The air is suddenly breathable. It always amazes him how easily Sensei goes from a true monster to a man of refinement at the flip of a coin.

“I told you to obey him without question. I suppose only I am responsible for this failing. Summon the boy. We have much to speak on.”

“You tasked me with him and made me responsible for his actions.” Kurogiri swallows but stands his ground. “And if that is the case, then I should bear the punishment for this.”
“You truly do love him,” Sensei says at length, genuine surprise in every word.

It feels like a betrayal to say, “Yes.”

“You make this very awkward for me. I promised you the death of All Might in exchange for your services and have yet to fulfil my end of the bargain. I let you raise Tomura because there was no one else I trusted who knew how to raise a child.”

Kurogiri closes his eyes. Decades later, the death of his daughter still lingers in his heart, fresh as the day it happened. He remembers her smile, so much like her mother’s and the way she always insisted on dancing with him. Wife and daughter never cared for his appearance or the utility his quirk provides.

They simply loved him for who he was.

Would you hate me for loving another? Would you forgive me my sins?

Somehow, he knows they both loved him enough to want him to be happy.

“A child should be punished,” Kurogiri says, knowing where Sensei wishes to direct this conversation. “But the punishment you would dish out would be disproportionate. Tomura isn’t one of your flunkies.”

“Strength of will and mind. You have both qualities. Once, I had hoped to groom you as a successor.” That admission startles him. “Is it so surprising? You know more about the League than even I. You work tirelessly, and you generate many of the plans we utilise. Had you an ounce of ambition more, a warp gate likely would have split me in half decades ago.”

“I would not betray you.”

“Yes. Loyalty holds you back from your true potential.” Sensei claps his hands once. “Enough of that. Bring him. Regardless, no action is without consequence.”

So, he does, his warp gate opening to the bar. Tomura plays at the arcade game currently taking up more space than Kurogiri is comfortable with. His ward stares at the warp gate for a few seconds before shrugging and sauntering on through, not a care in the world.

“Kurogiri, you smell,” Tomura says before he kneels in supplication. “Sensei.”

A wave of bitterness runs through Kurogiri.

Tomura never shows him anything approaching the same level of respect. He quashes those thoughts, letting nothing show. Showing them means defying Sensei once more, and Kurogiri isn’t yet ready to face his family in the afterlife.

"I permitted your attack on the stadium contingent on following my orders. The original locations of the explosives would have only destroyed an unoccupied and defunct part of the stadium." Sensei shakes his head. "Not this level of chaos you have caused."

The boy glances at Kurogiri out the corner of his eye. “Those kids were threats. One of them is barely human and fuck the one with a dragon.”

“A pair of children scared you enough to disobey me? It seems you have forgotten who I am in truth. Do you believe yourself above the strongest man alive?”
Sensei stands. His dark suit seems to suck in the light and his height casts a long shadow over Tomura. Yet, not even any of the malevolence that brought him to his knees shows.

Tomura is still terrified, or perhaps shamed, by the stiff line of his back showing through his loose shirt.

“I haven’t. You’re the one who saved me. Who taught me.”

Sensei circles Tomura, each step loud as a jackhammer. “Then why did you not obey my orders?”

“They were threats.”

“And I do not condone the deaths of children. You killed civilians and it has galvanised the populace. UA’s brilliant media machine controls the story now. It is no longer a story of a UA student who chose to become a villain, but one who was brutalised and manipulated into this life. Nezu will win a victory from this. After all, he’ll rehabilitate that student and advocate for better treatment of prisoners with the example he set. A student whose quirk had value to me and is out of my grasp.”

A tremor runs through Tomura, visible even to Kurogiri. “We can get another quirk like that.”

“That is not the point. The point is that you use your allies as pieces on a board without any interest in their wellbeing. All Might and his predecessor ended many of my previous allies, and now you do the same to yours through your carelessness. All Might’s reputation was tarnished, one wrong move from demotion, and you’ve managed to wipe all his sins clean in a single act. And we are one step away from a war because of your actions.”

“I can fix this,” Tomura pleads.

“You have set us back. There must be punishment, but afterwards, you may try again as many times as you need. Now, give me your hands.”

Tomura recoils back as though struck. “Sensei, I don’t—”

"The hands that you adorn yourself with right now. By your hands, you committed this act. By your hands, you will suffer the punishment."

When Tomura looks to him, his features screaming terror and helplessness, Kurogiri feels unease. The punishment is cruel, yes, but also just. Those hands are his most prized possessions. And the boy has loved and named each one. It will hurt him to suffer like this, but it will not break him.

It is less punitive than anything Sensei would have chosen without Kurogiri’s intervention.

So, Kurogiri nods, staring at Tomura. Urges him to accept what is to come with his gaze alone.

The terror in Tomura is replaced by resignation and perhaps the tiniest bit of betrayal.

“Yes, Kurogiri,” he says, staring only at Kurogiri. “You know best, don’t you?”

It takes everything he has not to recoil and beg Sensei to forgive Tomura, to let Kurogiri suffer instead. He steels his heart to the pain and remains still as a statue.

Tomura removes each hand, one at a time. The last, the one he names ‘Father’ and reveres, he holds delicately. He whispers something before laying it with the others.

The quirk sensei uses is unknown to Kurogiri. The very air above the hands seems to crack like
glass shattering. Each hand is flattened by some unseen force before being crushed completely. He does it one at a time, the silence punctuated by the cracks of bone and the spurt of the synthetic fluid to keep them from decaying.

Tomura remains perfectly still through it all. “Think on your actions, Tomura. You have room to grow from this.”

Sensei gestures to Kurogiri. He opens another warp gate and sends Tomura through it, not to the main bar area, but to the corner in his room dedicated to his shrine of collector’s edition games. Hopefully, he won’t destroy it.

Sensei does not return to his seat. He stares at the broken hands and the milky white fluid on the floor.

“He loved those hands,” Sensei murmurs.

“He did.”

The Strongest Man Alive sighs tiredly. It is a moment of weakness, one Kurogiri sees only because of his decades of loyalty. And even then, he isn’t certain how much is sincere and how much is a means to manipulate him, to bind him closer to Sensei. Either way, it works.

“What do you have anything left to report?”

Kurogiri swallows.

“Yes. The children from USJ who saw the thing Midoriya became each suffered varying levels of mental instability. Neither Mineta nor Hagakure will make any sort of recovery. There is, however, a possibility that Kouda will recover in time.”

“A shame,” Sensei says, still staring at the shattered hand. “You’re certain those two have no chance of recovery?”

“The doctor’s notes confirmed they will stay in a vegetative state until death.”

Then, I suppose, we can make Nomu of the two.”

For a moment, he feels brave. “Did you not punish Tomura for harming children?”

Sensei is not angry. Far from it. The man chuckles. “It has taken you decades to start confronting me on my decisions.”

He thinks of the crushing malevolence and how it almost brought him to his knees. “Your personality can be oppressive.”

“When have I ever truly punished someone for voicing their opinions. I am not Endeavour. I know what becomes of exposure to the abyss. There will be no recovery. Death will allow the parents to truly mourn and find peace, not eternally be trapped by false hope. It is a cold mercy, and not one I commit lightly. But I will also not let go of a possible Nomu.”

“Understood,” Kurogiri says at length.

“And stain?”

“I have set up a preliminary meeting with him. He seems… a fanatic to an ideology. From what I gathered, he once revered All Might as a true hero until the incident earlier in the term. He does not
seem swayed like that masses that have already forgotten his failings.”

“A man of conviction and will. Someone after my own heart.”

*You don’t have one.*

It takes him a long moment to realise he has spoken aloud. Sensei is still but the air seems heavier. It may be possible to flee through a warp gate if he makes the first move. Unlikely, but still possible.

Then sensei laughs. “Perhaps I lack sincerity and compassion. But I have rules, bounds I refuse to cross. When you have lived as long as I have, you either become a saint like Ononoki or Hawkmoon, or you live to see yourself become the villain.”

There is nothing left to report, no order of business he must explain. If Sensei had orders for Kurogiri, they would have been said already. As it is, Kurogiri largely operates the League independently, free to decide their methods and objectives so long as they follow Sensei’s few cardinal rules and his overall objectives.

He prepares to leave, summoning a warp gate.

“And where do you think you’re going?” Sensei asks, his voice once more oppressive.

Kurogiri turns slowly, terrified despite knowing he is protected if only because of his utility. “Excuse me?”

"Oh, you certainly aren't excused," Sensei says lowly, all pretence of patience or kindness or compassion is gone. "There were members of the Imperial household in attendance."

Kurogiri closes his eyes. Takes a breath. Opens them again and looks to Sensei.

“I didn’t know.”

“No. You’re smart enough not to start a war willingly. But now, because of the accord that keeps you and Tomura protected beneath my aegis, I must pay reparations to the Emperor. Time runs short and nearly two full days have passed. On the third day, we will be at war if it is not stopped.”

Sensei walks to the wall and lays his hand against it. Gears turn and mechanisms activate as a section of the wall opens. Sensei reaches inside and withdraws something.

“Take this,” Sensei says.

Kurogiri walks over and takes it.

The box is made of wood. He understands that on a logical level. But it glows an endless purple that seems to beckon sweetly. It feels like wood, but at the same time, it feels like the passage of time itself, a thousand thousand generations of knowledge permeating each grain of wood.

He opens it.

Inside is the shape of a knife that hurts his brain to look at. It is a simple thing, no longer than his forearm and curved wickedly. On first glance, it appears black until his brain realises that the shape is, in fact, a knife so dark it reflects no light. And yet, on the knife-edge, something seems to shimmer.

*Blood,* he thinks, a moment before that shimmer resolves. It becomes blue then yellow then every
He closes the box without thought. There are worse things than a knife with the blood of gods on its edge.

“It took me months of research to find those artefacts,” Sensei says. “Months of labour and intermediaries and information brokers and mad cultists. And now it will be lost to me forever. Go to the Emperor’s Villa. Give it as a sign of my good will. Negotiate reparations, pay whatever price he asks—be it wealth, a quirk, or your time—and ensure no conflict comes of this.”

He clenches his fists. “You told me I would never have to return there.”

The oppressive weight of All For One’s malice returns, almost crushing him. It is a reminder that this is the strongest man alive, a monster in human flesh.

“I do not care for your feelings right now. You chose to obey Tomura against my wishes. You chose to keep me in the dark. There must always be punishment. This is yours. Go to the home of those who took everything you loved and beg for forgiveness. If the Emperor asks for an apology, you will get on your knees and beg forgiveness.”

Sensei sighs and the crushing weight disappears.

“Izuku, understand that I do not do this out of fear for myself. I do not fear the Emperor or his Guard. They are nothing compared to my strength. But I cannot win that war and keep the two of you alive at the same time. Go and keep the peace between us.”

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Izuku stands in a washroom, a bucket filled with hot water courtesy of Shouto on the basin and a wet towel in his hands. He stares at his reflection in the mirror—green eyes bright with revelation; burn scars still horrid but they don’t fill him with disgust anymore; that streak of white in his unbraided hair, messy and stuck with bits and pieces of things he doesn’t want to consider.

The food and water have done wonders for him. The infections and diseases that ravaged his body have faded away. The crystal growths jutting out his thigh have mostly faded, leaving only leathery skin behind.

He washes quickly, not liking how exposed he is. Logically, he knows he is somewhere safe and private—even Mikumo is hiding deep in his mind—and no one will disturb him. Yet, he still shivers despite the warmth of the room heated by the steam engine, or more accurately, by Shouto’s power.

When he is cleaner, he wears the set of clothes that fit him best. The trousers had started out a bit too long, but he’s had a bit of a growth spurt, not much but enough that they don’t drag past his heel. Even then, he’s not tall in the slightest and he worries he’ll never grow past this. The black shirt is tight, hugging each contour of his muscled frame. The deep-purple jacket, though, fits loosely with its high collar and extravagant epaulettes. It looks ridiculous, but he’s learnt to ignore it a bit.

He walks on over to the next car and finds Shouto eating beans from a can. Izuku rolls his eyes.

“Not gonna use a plate?” he asks, standing next to his friend for the moment.

He comes up to Shouto’s chin, and from the looks of things, Shouto will keep on growing taller. Perhaps even as tall as his father. It is only the strange nature of the abyss that stops them from
looking like they’re starving. Even then, they’ve both lost weight.

Shouto leans away slightly. “I’ll break your finger if you’re judging me.”

Izuku bumps him in the side and decides to take advantage of the natural heater. Considering the cold chill running down his spine, it is a simple alternative to think of over the abomination chasing them. It’s getting closer and closer. Less than a dozen layers separate the train and the Elder Thing.

“What’s your favourite colour?” he asks to put his mind away from thoughts of likely death.

“Is this small talk?”

“I’m sorry, do you want to talk about our shit fathers? The number of times you tried to kill me? That time I broke every bone in your arm?” Shouto’s hand stops an inch away from his mouth, before resuming, the only indication of his discomfort. “Sorry. I think mine might blue. Or ultraviolet. Maybe even gamma radiation.”

Shouto blinks lazily. “Those aren’t… I need to get used to the impossible.”

“Yes, you do. So, What’s yours?”

He mulls the question between a mouthful of canned beans. “Green.”

“I feel so special.” Shouto makes a sound of confusion. “I’ve got green hair and eyes and my family name has the kanji for green. Is this your way of saying I’m just pure awesome?”

“It’s the only colour that doesn’t mean something fundamentally wrong. Red and yellow and orange for hellfire. Blue is my father’s eyes. Purple is this mad train.”

And like that, Izuku’s cheer dies. “Oh.” He leans closer to Shouto, the only comfort he can give right now.

“If you don’t apologise, I’ll show you something special.” Before Izuku can agree, Shouto steps forward and opens a cabinet, pulling a silvery package down. “I just found this.”

“Thank you for not providing any context.”

Shouto sighs. “This is coffee. Genuine Arabica coffee, triple vacuum sealed.”

“I don’t—”

“I will throw you off this train if you finish that sentence.” Izuku stays silent. “Now, I’m going to make some coffee and you’re going to enjoy it.”

And Shouto does make coffee. He moves slowly as he opens the seals and very cautiously grinds the coffee beans. He finds a coffee press from somewhere and uses his powers to heat the water precisely. Izuku watches in bemusement until Shouto is done and hands him a cup of the black sludge.

“Drink,” Shouto commands.

Izuku sniffs it, nose wrinkling. Then, he raises the mug with a flourish, the weight of Shouto’s story taking over once more.

“A toast to the coming end and the sacrifices made,” Izuku says in a deep voice, eyes sparkling
with dark knowledge.

He takes a long sip of the scalding hot liquid, hating the vile taste but having no choice in the matter. He is just a passenger in his own body now.

Shouto’s entire frame is stiff. “I think I’ve lost interest.”

“You must drink and make a toast. Another to the blood you’ve shed.” Izuku’s body takes a deep gulp of bitter coffee. “A toast to all those souls trapped to your hellfire, gods and aliens and nightmares made equal by your power.”

“Stop it,” Shouto snarls.

Izuku’s body smirks. “A toast to Fuyumi whose throat you slit and your mother that you—”

The punch, when it comes, is brutal.

It knocks Izuku over the counter, the mug shattering on the floor. He blinks away the white spots. Groaning, he rolls over. Shouto’s trembling arm, the same one he used to deck Izuku, is encrusted with ice.

Izuku forces himself up. Snorts out a wad of blood. Cracks his neck.

“That was unnecessary,” he says. “You know I didn’t say that intentionally.”

“It felt that way.”

“You think I like being like this?” Izuku shouts. “You fucking think I enjoy this? Fuck you. Despite everything you’ve gone through, I saved your life. You would be dead without me. Stop whining like a little baby.”

This time, Izuku dodges the punch and throws one in turn that catches Shouto on the lip. Shouto staggers back, dislodging the coffee machine.

It clatters to the ground, dark liquid spilling on the rich wood floor. It seeps through the cracks, staining ancient wood and dripping down to the dark underbelly of the train.

Neither of them notices.

They’re on the ground brawling. Izuku takes a slab of ice to the face but elbows Shouto in turn, taking joy in the crunch of Shouto’s nose breaking. He tugs Shouto’s hair viciously and punches him in the side. Shouto bites him, slams his knee in Izuku’s crotch, and flips them over.

Izuku takes the tiny wisp of shadow he can control and shapes it to a blade. Stabbing Shouto in the shoulder is easy and he feels no guilt because there’s already a thick shard of ice in his side.

“I fucking hate you!”

In the chaos, Izuku isn’t sure who says that.

It might have been him just before, or perhaps after Shouto headbutts him in the mouth, hard enough that Izuku bites through his tongue and fills his mouth with hot blood.

It might be Shouto in the space between Izuku lifting him by his hair and slamming his head into the ground. Once, then twice, then thrice.
By the end of it, they're both bloody messes, breathing heavily. The dining car is wrecked, the tables broken and the chairs destroyed. A cold wind blows in from the broken window.

Izuku has Shouto pinned to the ground, one hand around Shouto’s throat. That hand crackles with green lightning, a warning that Izuku could very easily snap his neck.

But, just as Izuku can easily kill Shouto, the reverse is true.

Two blades, one of entropic ice and the other dark hellfire, are at Izuku’s throat. With a simple motion, Shouto can decapitate him.

“You think you’re fast enough to kill me first?” Izuku asks with a bloody grin, ignoring the searing pain from the fire.

“Try me.”

He considers it, genuinely does the maths and works out the probability distributions. There’s a good chance he can do it and survive, a very good chance. It won’t even be that hard to escape. With Shouto dead, then there would be no reason to fight the Elder Thing chasing them. He could hitch a ride on the dragon and get the hell out of dodge.

All it would take is killing Shouto and not dying in turn.

He meets those blue eyes and sees Shouto making the same calculation. And that’s when he decides enough is enough.

Izuku loosens his grip around Shouto’s neck just a tiny bit. He can still snap it easily, but it is the only peace offering he can give.

Shouto does the same with the blades, reducing the pressure slightly, the temperature of the flames dropping.

Slowly, never truly trusting each other, they go from a very likely murder-suicide to two broken boys trying to survive.

Cautiously, they back away from each other. Izuku leans his head against the broken counter, not caring that there will be splinters in his hair. He’s bleeding from a wound in his side and probably has more scrapes and scratches, alongside the mild burn on his neck.

Gently, he applies pressure to the wound and grunts in pain. He spits blood and wipes his face with his other arm, watching Shouto apply ice to his shoulder.

“We’re a mess,” Izuku says.

Shouto says nothing in response. He just sits there glaring at Izuku, hate and loathing and perhaps a hint of regret. Nothing special. They’ve danced to this tune enough times.

“There used to be this eye,” Izuku says to fill the silence. “It was pretty weird since the ocular fluid could heal you. I used it a few times. Could have healed us up in seconds. Now, we’re gonna need plain old bandages. You remember how to do stitches?”

Shouto nods once.

Izuku says no more until the train passes through the next layer of the abyss hours later.

He shudders as the ethereal darkness washes over him, heralding the next layer. He takes a breath,
tastes the nature of this layer on his tongue. He touches the stitched wound in his side gingerly, inspecting Shouto’s handiwork. It’s disgustingly sloppy but will do the job.

“What’s wrong?”

Izuku doesn’t answer. Instead, he walks towards the broken window. He sees an endless plain of orange crystal.

It takes him no more than a minute’s effort to get outside and climb to the roof. Ahead of them is a wall of frozen time. They have a few hours yet to reach it so Izuku walks to the dragon.

“What can you burn through it?”

//No, shadowking. This is a barrier of love my kind cannot pass through, made by a walker of worlds. Those born of true dark or chaotic godflame do not process love as your kind do. We must utilise other means to avoid this, paths that would annihilate your mortal vessel//

He sighs. “But we can go through it?”

//Yes. Beware, this barrier was built as a trap against true horrors. I do not know the cost it will ask of you//

He tells Shouto the good, or maybe bad, news once he’s back inside.

“Get everything you need. We’re parking this train and not coming back.”

“What about the thing chasing us?”

Izuku shrugs. “I think it’s still trapped in that well of reverse time-flow. Not sure. But it won’t bother us for a bit.”

The next hours pass by in silence. Izuku has little he plans on taking with him. The train has served them well enough, and he has no plans of further desecrating a legend’s great gift to them with their constant fighting.

The train stops just short of the shimmering wall of frozen time. They disembark, leather shoes crunching on the crystal ground.

Izuku nods to the dragon.

“Thank you. See you on the other side.”

//Do not perish until your conduit is restored, shadowking. My master would be displeased by your death//

With a single beat of its mighty wings, the dragon rises to the air. With another, it reaches half the speed of light. And with the third beat, it breaks the light barrier, growing larger in mass than Japan in the process.

“How do we get up?” Shouto asks. He has already tried making a bridge of ice, but the end touching the wall of frozen time disintegrates.

“Through that set of stairs.” He points at them, steep and made of some exotic substance he can’t recognise. “And yes, before you ask, it is very convenient.”

They ascend the stairs until, balancing against the harsh winds.
It buffets them relentlessly, and often they need to crouch low to avoid flying off the edge. Even then, Izuku urges Shouto forward and they crawl when the winds are too strong because they can't slow down.

Eventually, they come to a point where the stairs have crumbled.

“Well, I guess we’re climbing.”

“It’s a wall of frozen time,” Shouto says. “How do you expect me to climb it?”

Izuku shrugs and places his fingers against the wall. It feels hard as diamond. Even with One For All, he can't break it.

“The thing about time is that it isn’t set in stone,” Izuku says. “Time flows, even if you have to remind it.”

He concentrates, willing the time beneath his hands to move once more. Slowly, a tiny portion of it melts slightly, enough to form a handhold.

“Think of the future you want to see. Think of the past, of Rei and Fuyumi and even your father. And whatever you do, don’t lose concentration.”

The first hundred metres he scales slowly, taking the time to truly understand the mechanics of unfreezing time with intent alone. Shouto, however, simply has blades of ice that accelerate entropy to use as picks.

One For All is an asset here as he comes to realise. It grants him the strength to continue climbing. But, the flickers of green lightning seem to turn the frozen time to regular stone for all intents and purposes. Any other day, Izuku would experiment more. As it is, he nearly loses his grip when the Elder crosses another layer of the abyss, shattering a universe in the process.

“Get over here,” Izuku shouts.

Izuku uses the largest portion of One For All that he can hold, perhaps ten percent, and punches the wall. It caves inward, the frozen time shattering. Izuku crawls into the tiny nook, somehow translucent enough to see outward in all directions.

Shouto joins him a few seconds later, scrambling to fit inside. It is uncomfortable, their limbs bumping into one another and nowhere enough space.

However, it is much better than being outside when the shockwave hits. It is a storm front of raw power, the aftershock from the Elder Thing crosses to another layer of the abyss. It is what happens when a universe is destroyed in a single moment. They watch in silence as the sky changes colours, going from deep reds to endless purples and the colours that exist past the light barrier.

For an entire hour, they watch the death throes of a universe. It screams in the gamma radiation of stars gone supernova. It weeps in the gravitational collapse of black holes. Its final death rattle is a sudden and violent heat death.

This process which should occur over billions of years is compressed to a single hour. Such is the power of the creature chasing after them.

“We can’t fight that.”

“Yeah,” Izuku agrees. “Not without my full power.”
“Do you think it’ll chase us all the way up.”

Izuku hums. “No. Either it will eat you and get both your hellfire and entropic ice.”

“How reassuring.”

“It’s not my fault your powers are coveted. The ability to burn everything in your image and entropic ice are startlingly powerful considering your mortality.” Izuku shakes his head. “But I think we’ll find what’s calling you first. This is a story and you’re the main character. There’s power to be found but only after more suffering. And even then, the cost will be high.”

Shouto’s mixed eyes are dark with suspicion and weariness. “Do you know what it is?”

“Do I?”

Yes, you do brother. Would you like to know the truth? I am the keeper, the lock, and key. If you ask, I will tell you.

“I don’t think hiding behind you will help,” Izuku admits tiredly. “I’ve done that enough. I know the truth and I’m tired of lying.”

“Who are you talking to?”

He glances at Shouto, only now remembering his presence. “The voices in my head.” Izuku shrugs. “I suppose we’re stuck here because of my own choices. I made a promise a long time ago to a god. I never said no and that’s the same as making an oath. I accepted a wish from Eao and I suppose it’s manipulating me down a road to what it wants. I’m leading you to a fire, Shouto. And I’m going to watch and see if it burns you to a crisp. Not because I hate you but because I think it’s the only way to survive. I’m out of tricks. This is the final stretch.”

You told the truth, Mikumo murmurs in surprise. I’m… I’m proud of you.

“Thanks, but we have to move.”

Shouto sighs tiredly. “Five more minutes.”

“We need to move faster,” Izuku says, glancing at the far horizon. “It’s gaining on us. We can’t waste any more time. We either escape now or face it here, and I don’t like those odds.”

Shouto sighs but gets up. “I hate this. All of this.”

“I know.” Izuku lays his hand on the sheer cliff. "Get moving."

He places one foot on the wall of frozen time, digs his fingers deeps in a crack, and pushes himself up with his leg. Climbing isn’t a matter of pulling yourself up with your arms. Their purpose is to reach distant handholds, to give you a position to make your leg and back muscles count.

Sometimes, time refuses to melt no matter how insistent he is, so Izuku has to create them another way. He glances at Shouto who uses ice picks to generate them a few metres above from Izuku and feels the slightest bit of envy that Shouto can do so without hurting himself.

One For All grants strength to his hand and he slams the wall with the side of his hand like an axe. A spray of sharp stone explodes outward from the point of impact. Izuku keeps his eyes closed, wincing when a particularly sharp chip of time cuts his brow.

Then he puts his hand inside the new handhold, not caring that the stones will scrape his skin.
There’s too little time to care, not when they have so much further to go.

Exhaustion hits Shouto first. Izuku watches him carefully, observing the way his friend’s muscles seize up and quiver the longer they climb. So, he is ready when Shouto loses his grip and tumbles down.

Like lightning, Izuku leaps to the right as Shouto curses. He steps off from the wall for extra momentum and closes the distance rapidly. With one arm he grabs Shouto and with the other, he punches a hole in the cliff.

The sudden stop pops his shoulder and dislocates it. “Climb,” Izuku hisses, dangling precariously from the newly created hole.

“Don’t be an idiot,” Shouto says.

Izuku grits his teeth and watches Shouto make a long blade of ice. He stabs the blade through the wall. When it shatters, Shouto makes another one and repeats the process until he can lodge it in and balance on the flat side of the blade.

The moment Shouto let’s go, Izuku swings up and holds the ledge with his good arm. He lets the dislocated one dangle at his side.

“Keep climbing,” Izuku says. “I’ll pop it back in place myself.”

Placing the tip of his elbow against the wall and maintaining his grip on a precarious handhold a few dozen kilometres above ground is an act of balance that would make Jin proud. Carefully, he pushes forward against the cliff and it pushes against his elbow.

Izuku stifles a scream of pain as his shoulder pops back in place. He breathes heavily as the pain subsides, considering his life decisions and regretting his first death.

*I told you not to do it.*

“Oh, fuck off. You weren’t even a character in my life back then.” Izuku tests his relocated shoulder before reaching up to another handhold. “In retrospect, slicing my wrist was a stupid idea.”

With a deep inhale, he keeps on climbing. They stop periodically to drink ice but otherwise they climb without pause no matter how much their muscles burn. No matter how painful his shoulder may be, Izuku never slows down. No, he just funnels more of One For All. And when Shouto nearly falls again, Izuku catches him and carries Shouto on his back.

“This is weird,” Shouto says, legs wrapped around Izuku’s waist.

“Tell me about it.”

It takes maybe three days of hard climbing till they reach the summit.

The summit is nothing more than the top of a cliff, desolate and empty but for one thing. It is incongruous after all that they have seen because of its mundanity.

“Is that a sign?” Shouto asks uncertainly, glancing at the darkness beyond. “With actual writing on it? Or is that just gibberish?”

Izuku’s feels profound disappointment. “Just because you don’t understand it doesn’t mean it isn’t
a language. Look, the higher up we go, the more… relatively normal things become. You see, things are more stable closer to our world. Sure, we’ve got talking trees but that doesn’t make them —”

“Izuku, get on with it.”

He rolls his eyes. “It’s a logographic system. Each individual character is a word just like Japanese. Well technically, Japanese borrows heavily from Chinese logograms but that’s beside the point. This is interesting because each character is actually an entire sentence but depending on which logic—”

“Just tell me what it means.”

He doesn’t want to. In all honesty, he’s avoiding the truest meaning of the writing because he doesn’t want to take the next plunge.

This is cruel, Mikumo says. His mother betrayed him that day years ago. You must re-enact that betrayal, that moment of suffering in the past.

“You would make a terrible intellectual.” It takes everything he has to force his limbs loose with his stomach churning horribly, to not give away his intent. “Basically, it says the next waypoint is over the cliff.”

Shouto shrugs. “Let’s get on with it before we’re eaten.”

“It’s not that simple. You see, we need a sacrifice of sorts to open the path. A loved one.”

I am so sorry, brother, but there is no time to hesitate with the Elder behind you. There are no other paths forward but this cruelty.

"Well, I don't have anyone I love here."

Izuku grins to hide away the bitter pain in his heart. “Thanks. I feel so special.”

“Oh, come on, I like you and all but—”

“But I’m the reason you had to kill your mother and sister,” Izuku finishes with a sad sigh. “And you’re not over it. You just can’t love me as a friend would. Kindly. Compassionately. Impersonally. At least, not yet.”

“I’m sorry.”

I would spare you this pain, but I do not love him as you do. This was the second truth Eao gave you. It must always come true.

“Don’t be. It’ll just make things harder.” Izuku points at a spot on the sign. “You see that.”

Shouto walks past him and leans in to inspect it.

“Weird squiggly circle, what abomphff—”

Whatever Shouto plans on saying dies in a wet, pained gurgle.

There is a blade made of shadow through his back and his torso. It goes straight through his lung and comes out the other side, a fatal blow made without hesitation.
Izuku grips Shouto’s shoulder to keep him upright, not feeling a single twinge of regret as Shouto coughs blood on the sign. The red drips down slowly as Izuku intensifies the strength of his grip, slowly crushing that shoulder.

“Why?” Shouto chokes out, coughing more blood.

“You see, it asks for a sacrifice of love.”

*Naraka, betrayed by you shadowed hands, as Eao foretold. In some languages, betrayal and sacrifice mean the same thing.*

He pulls the blade viciously to the side. It tears through flesh and arteries, ripping the lung and perhaps the kidney as well. There isn’t a giant spurt of blood like the movies. No, it’s a rather pathetic dribble of blood to the ground that soaks Shouto’s pants and leaves Izuku’s jacket with a patch of bright red.

Shouto groans weakly, his legs giving out.

Izuku has died many times, so he knows exactly how painful the wound is, how the pain seems everywhere at once, a hot pipe shoved through each nerve. He can imagine the complete flare of pain as Shouto’s heart pumps his blood faster and faster through his body and out the gaping wound.

“I love you, Shouto, but not as much as I love my mother.” Izuku lets him fall into the pool of crimson. He grips his friend by the hair and drags him closer to the edge. "This betrayal is the ultimate sacrifice I can make for someone I love."

There are no chains holding him to Shouto’s story any longer. No, this is Izuku Midoriya committing this act, no one else. No outside influence controlling him.

“You have my respect for making it this far,” he says near the edge, unsure if Shouto can hear him.

He lets go and Shouto’s head hits the ground with a dull thud. He glances at the long smear of red, at Shouto’s unseeing eyes and the weak gasps as he futilely tries to breathe with a collapsing lung. It won’t be the blood loss that kills him.

No, he’ll choke on his own blood long before then. A short death. No more than two minutes.

The sky seems to shatter as the next level of the abyss opens slowly. It waits until this ritual is complete, until the betrayal is final and total.

“I hope they remember you fondly.” Izuku laughs cruelly. “This is for every time you choked me.”

He kicks Shouto off the edge.

Chapter End Notes

Let me know what you guys think if you've made it this far. Even a simple comment lets me gauge how people are receiving the story. So if you can, drop a line and let me know. But if you can't, just know that your readership is more than enough for me.

If I'm a bit slow to reply for a bit, it's cause exams suck. Peace.
I'm still running a discord server which can be found at the following: https://discord.gg/4YvCTYR

In more general news, this story is gonna wind up being longer (65ish chapters instead of my original 55). Which isn't a problem for you, I guess, but it means there's gonna be some restructuring. Instead of 4 seasons, we now have 5. Season 3, the current season, is going to be 18 chapters instead of my original 14. Season 4 is now 10 chapters, shorter than the original 12, but now it follows one story arc instead of being two radically different stories. And season 5 will be 9 full chapters plus the five epilogue chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘Age is the great weakness of humanity. We only have so much time in which to succeed in life. We do what we must, failing often, but also finding glory and meaning to life. When your lifespan exceeds human bounds, when you see your hundred and twentieth year with your physical and mental faculties intact, something occurs. It becomes harder to care for people, harder to remember that all life is precious. Love for your fellows is important no matter your age. Never forget this, no matter how old you are, especially if the world is cruel.’

—Excerpt from ‘My Eclipse’ by Hawkmoon.

Shouto Todoroki’s world is one of pain right now. He can barely understand why there’s a dark blade through his torso—everyone I love betrays me—or the words Izuku is saying— a sacrifice of love? what love is this? I carried you on my back and protected you—because none of it makes sense.

He coughs, blood escaping his lips.

Izuku is many things; kind as the noon sun and generous in ways that leave Shouto breathless. He is also clinically insane and haunted by everything he has experienced in this place, driven to violence and the mad logic of this place.

But he is not evil, not a betrayer. Not like his mother, her grey eyes filled with madness. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.

He forces his lips to work. “Why?” he whispers with the rapidly draining strength in his body.

He feels Izuku lean forward, his green hair brushing against Shouto’s cheek. “You see, it asks for a sacrifice of love.”

The world explodes in waves of pain and agony.

He hardly has the strength to look down and see the large gash through his side, bleeding profusely. Has no strength to stay upright and collapses. It doesn’t hurt anywhere near as much as he thought it would. Or perhaps that is because the pain in his soul is so much worse.
“I love you, Shouto,”—*why, why, why does everyone betray me in the end*—“but not as much as I love my mother.”

And there it is. A truth that Shouto can understand. That he will never compare, no matter how hard he tries, no matter the sacrifices he makes for another, he will simply never compare.

Izuku grabs his hair roughly, callously, without a shred of remorse or compassion, and drags him forward. Shouto stares at the slick line of red his body makes, unsure if the lack of pain means he’s in shock or not.

“**You have my respect for making it this far,”** his friend—*not a friend, never a friend, don’t trust anyone*—says coldly.

His head lands on the ground, the pain hardly noticeable.

“I hope they remember you fondly. This is for every time you choked me.”

He meets Izuku’s eyes and sees only cold certainty and callous indifference. It is then that he understands this is no plot, no gambit other than selfish survival. *I’m sorry, mother. Fuyumi. I’m not strong enough.*

He closes his eyes.

The kick jolts him violently off the edge. The pain seems to return all at once as he falls through the vast and empty purple sky, clouds of motley blue-yellow and arcs of blue lightning all around him. He tries breathing, but it only fills his lung with blood.

He closes his eyes.

*I’m going to die here.*

The realisation leaves him calm, oddly enough. Throughout everything he’s gone through in recent months, not once has he truly felt like he was going to die. Go mad, yes. But not perish. Not with Midoriya either on his back or walking beside him. It makes sense, then, that this is the first time he feels the spectre of death.

A jolt of ethereal darkness forces him awake as he passes through another barrier, still falling and bleeding half to death.

Only this time, it’s like the water below is watching him. It takes all his remaining energy to freeze his torso together. And then the rest of his body. He does his best to interspace layers of entropic ice with liquid water with air, cushion after cushion to possibly survive the impact, whilst losing consciousness.

He closes his eyes once more.

The space between closing his eyes and slamming into the surface may be a second or a minute or an hour. All that really matters is the sudden, violent jerk upon landing on a liquid surface at terminal velocity.

He feels everything break despite the barrier of his ice.

Bones break. From the tiny bones in his hands and ears to the large bones in his legs, they all break from the impact.
Arteries rupture. The impact sends a wave of force through every blood vessel, one too large for the walls to contain.

Organs explode. His lung caves in almost instantly, his liver and kidney bursting. His largest organ, his skin, almost seems to pop open in its tomb of ice.

What remains of Shouto Todoroki sinks beneath the surface.

*****

Watching someone you care for plummet to their possible death is an odd experience, particularly when you are the architect of events.

Izuku Midoriya watches his friend and enemy fall to possible death.

Deep in his chest is a pain the likes of which eclipses many of his deaths, a level of grief he has yet to feel. Right now, Izuku would take every moment of fear and terror that plagued him after that first death, relive that existential horror all over again if it meant never feeling this again.

“I’m so sorry,” he chokes out, free to let his true feelings show now that the sacrifice has been made. “This was my only choice.”

There is blood on his hands, still wet. It belongs to Shouto and seems all too mundane. It doesn’t mutate, doesn’t become an endless legion of creatures seeking revenge against their progenitor. No, this is plain human blood, bright crimson in its mortality.

He looks to the sky, impossibly bright and filled with swirling stars. It seems to mock him with its serenity and beauty.

“I hate this,” he mutters, turning around.

There, approaching rapidly, he can see the Elder approaching them. The shadow of its future intent, its desire to consume Shouto’s hellfire only seems magnified after Izuku’s actions. Izuku glares at it, hating it totally and fully and wanting nothing more than to annihilate the creature.

And yet, he knows he is nothing compared to it. Not without the entirety of his powers. Right now, he can barely bring to life a single strand of shadows.

Izuku steps forward, letting the power of his mentor fill his body. He flings his arms wide and glares at the approaching abomination.

“You might not know who I am,” he says softly. “Maybe you do and think this is your best chance. But you made me betray someone I love. Maybe you don’t know what love is, maybe you can’t ever fucking know. Love is the most powerful force in the universe. Fuck darkness and fire. That’s nothing compared to a mother’s love. It’s nothing compared to the love I have or the things I’ll do for those I love.”

The abomination doesn’t seem to care, more intent on shattering the throne worlds standing between it and the layer of the abyss Izuku exists in. That indifference, that level of complete disinterest, pisses him off more than anything.

_You may not have all your powers but you are still the shadowking. You are still All Might’s successor. Even if it means dying, I’m with you, brother._

“Thank you,” he whispers.
Then, he plants his feet in the ground and summons the entirety of All Might’s power. A bolt of green lightning fills the sky, a declaration of his intent. It stays there, bisecting the sky, frozen in time. Slowly, smaller bolts spread outward from it like veins of living lightning until the sky is filled with the electric potential of his mentor’s quirk.

The abomination spares the tiniest fraction of its attention to observe Izuku. They are separated by an entire layer of the abyss and each layer is larger than a universe. Raw power and iron will make petty rules like distance and spacetime irrelevant.

“Listen to me!” The sky flashes once more, another lightning bolt cutting the sky apart. “You think you’re powerful and maybe you are. But fuck you and fuck your power. It doesn’t matter how, but I will annihilate you today. And I’ll do it because I love him. Because I love my mother and my friends. I’ll do it because I love life. Love gives life meaning, and life gives love the chance to exist.”

Life may be weak and fragile, irrelevant in the face of ancient gods and unreal laws. It may be transient and passing, like tears in the rain and ash on snow, a tiny verse to the great story of the universe. But that verse is a prayer, a call to hope against indifference and cruelty. So long as life has a chance to flourish, that prayer will be spoken by each generation. That prayer is simple, carved in the very depths of every soul and every cell, crafted by the hands of something unknowable but fundamentally known, a cosmic force that binds the physical to the metaphysical.

Love and life are inexorably twined by the red thread of fate, bound by it, but also creating it—two halves of a singular whole, greater together and unable to exist apart.

That simple prayer is what keeps Izuku going in this dark place filled with sword logic and throne worlds. There are things he has done that can never be forgiven, too much time spent as a cruel puppet, and they will haunt him till his last day. Right now, he is free of all strings, free of any fate but the one he makes with each action in the present.

Despite all that he has done, he is still the same person willing to try and forgive his killer, willing to find beauty in the cruelty of the dark. It may make him a fool, may make him naïve and childish, but perhaps that faith is why All Might entrusts his powers to Izuku.

Deep in his soul, he wishes to save everyone because saving even one person is to extend life just the tiniest bit.

Izuku takes a deep breath, feeling the strength in his body. The living lightning of eight generations permeates every vein and muscle and bone, enhancing him beyond peak human potential. It may not be enough. Perhaps human emotions and feelings truly amount to nothing in the face of undying gods.

How can he know without trying?

Hopeless though it may be, standing against a being greater than god is what gives him hope to continue standing. It is a cycle, hope feeding into hope, one step forward leading to another.

“I am the Shadowking!” he roars to the heavens, defiant even against a monster that destroys all hope. “And when I fucking say love is the most powerful force around, you had best be afraid. Come after me if you dare, but I warn you, you’re gonna know what real death is like.”

The abomination deigns to give Izuku a tiny sliver of its attention. One of its many eyes, each larger than a universe of endless darkness, observes him.
From the very reaches of darkness, across the expanse of the universe, it attacks Izuku for the first time.

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The only reason Ochaco Uraraka isn't a complete nervous wreck is because of the tortoiseshell cat standing on her lap and very insistently licking her chin no matter how far back she leans away. She isn't sure what the cat is called since it shies away each time she reaches for the collar.

She reaches around the cat for her cup of tea. Pushes the cat back with one finger. Takes a sip quickly before the cat bats away her finger.

Despite the cat being incredibly annoying in an incredibly endearing fashion, this is the single most relaxing thing she's done since the stadium attack three days ago. She is lucky that her parents weren’t at the festival. Luckier still that she made it out with only a few bruises. She’s only just gotten a new phone courtesy of the school and has sent a mass message to her classmates.

There is no certainty that anyone will come. Iida has been silent, and she knows for a fact that he's physically fine. And she doesn't really have any expectations for those with injuries or parents in the hospital.

The café is quiet and sombre. Only two other patrons are there, and both had thanked her for helping their eldest daughter during the attack. She had felt a flush of guilt that she couldn’t even remember the lady until the parents had reassured her that saving their daughter was more than enough, though they did show her a picture of the girl in a white dress.

She looks up when the doorbell chimes.

It is Tokoyami surprisingly enough. It’s not that they actively dislike each other. They just don’t get along too well without a buffer like Kirishima or Ashido or Iida. Or anyone, really.

He looks around warily, wincing in pain when he takes a step. That might have something to do with all the bruises on his exposed arms beneath the rolled-up sleeves of his shirt, an ugly collection of motley yellow and deep purple-blues. No doubt many more litter the rest of his body. She feels a moment of sympathy.

When their eyes meet, he freezes like a crow staring down a particularly hungry cat. He approaches slowly, almost confused. Ochaco puts on her brightest smile and meets him halfway, the cat cradled in her arms.

“Hey,” she says.

He raises his arm, still just as confused as ever. He says no words for a long moment.

She glances at his hand, awkwardly at a halfway point between his side and touching her, as though he is terrified she might disappear.

She shoves the cat in Tokoyami’s chest. “Say hi.”

He holds the cat awkwardly, incredibly wary of the animal. And, from the way all the other cats are staring at him like a particularly large piece of food, he has good cause for that. He sets the cat down and it slinks away to the table with the two parents, one of whom is making origami art between sips of coffee. She recognises blue cranes and a red dolphin and a white chrysanthemum,
and wonders if they are for the daughter.

“In truth, I do not know what to say,” Tokoyami says, adjusting the collar of his burgundy shirt.

She smiles. He may not be the most open person in the world, but he’s rarely malicious. Way too socially awkward and the most obvious closeted goth in existence, but that doesn’t make him a bad person.

“How do you feel?”

“Relieved to see you well. I worry that this is nothing more than a final fever dream before I die beneath the weight of rubble.”

“Oh, you were…”

“Yes.”

Ochaco winces. She knows a lot of people were caught beneath the rubble and nearly died. She just never expected to hear it from one of her classmates. Especially not one she worked with on the very same day to hand out supplies.

“Well, I’m more real than you.” She pulls him by the wrist to the table she’s claimed.

He settles into a chair. “I’ve come to understand what we consider real is rarely the full truth.”

“I think you get too worried over nothing. You should spend some time outside your room and take a stroll in the park.”

She’s come to learn that Tokoyami frowns by pulling his shoulders back and leaning slightly to the left. “I do enjoy nature. Simply because we enjoy it in different ways does not invalidate my way.”

“Wow, you two really don’t like each other.” She looks up at Kirishima. His arm is in a sling and he walks with the aid of a medical cane. “Can y’all not argue for five whole minutes.”

“I very much doubt this counts as arguing,” Tokoyami says, pushing a chair out for Kirishima.

“Thanks,” he says, sitting gingerly. “You two look pretty decent.”

Ochaco’s smile is tight at the reminder she made it through easily. “Well, I got lucky.”

“Indeed. Dark Shadow did much in ensuring my survival.”

Kirishima glances at her and she nods. “Speaking about your quirk, what the hell was that during the festival? That definitely wasn’t Dark Shadow.”

“Yeah, I’m curious as well.” She leans forward, chin resting on her steepled fingers. “How about a few answers now.”

“Does it really matter? Not all quirks manifest fully until later in life.”

“Yeah, I think it does. Come on, is it like Midoriya’s quirk?”

Ochaco frowns. There’s a conversation they’re having that she’s not part of.

“Actually, what’s up with Midoriya’s quirk?” They glance at each other, communicating silently between themselves. “Okay, we can’t have a real talk if you guys won’t say anything. You two saw
what happened. Most of us weren’t anywhere near.”

Kirishima swallows. “I signed an NDA. And I might just be expelled if I talk about it.”

“And I’m technically still under investigation by the government.”

Ochaco blinks. “I’m sorry, what? Did you just say you’re under investigation?”

“By technicality only.” Tokoyami waves away her concern. “Those flames you saw were of a similar nature to those used in Shikoku.”

Ochaco doesn't know too much about the incident, has never particularly cared about that piece of history. She knows the entire region basically lit up as a battleground between villains and police and whatever heroes were available at the time.

“That’s messed up,” Kirishima says, his smile gone. “And those flames, they’re like…”

Tokoyami nods. “Similar.”

Ochaco sighs loudly. “You want to include me in this conversation at some point.”


“Nightmares?"

“No, I mean I very literally haven’t slept since USJ.”

“That’s impossible,” Ochaco says. “You’d die if you hadn’t slept that long.”

Kirishima shrugs. "Well, it's true."

“The dark changes all things,” Tokoyami mutters, looking out the window. “You asked about my quirk. The truth is that I can… bind, things from dreams and nightmares. Like Dark Shadow. Like that dragon you saw."

Ochaco blinks. “That’s insane.”

Kirishima looks to her. “Trust me when I say that’s pretty tame. I’m sorry I can’t tell you more but after what I saw, I’m lucky I’m not in a white-padded room screaming myself hoarse.”

She swallows. “Is that what happened to Mineta?”

“Maybe. Maybe he just got injured pretty badly by the purple thing. I don’t know.”

“Do you think Midoriya—”

“No,” Tokoyami snaps. "He is many things. Different from us all, yes, but that difference is not malice or cruelty. Do not cast aspersions on his character.""Aspersions? Is that your new word of the day? Pretty big word when you're failing most of our classes.”

Kirishima buries his face in his hands. “Oh my god, here we go again.”

“Simply because you have no faith in someone who cares more for you than himself does not mean
I will abandon him.”

“That wasn’t what I said and you know it.”

“Then stop—”

“Can both of you shut up,” a new voice orders.

They look and see Shinsou, deep bags under his eyes, and very thick bandages peeking through his shirt. Beside him is Yaoyorozu and she looks just as disappointed.

“She started it,” Tokoyami says petulantly.

“You didn’t have to continue it,” Yaoyorozu says, seating herself between Tokoyami and Ochaco. “How are you two friends when you can’t have a conversation without arguing?”

“Honestly, I think they like it,” Shinsou says, pulling a chair from another table and sitting slowly. He shares a smile with Kirishima who looks just as bad as he does. Only now does she notice the pale scar around his neck, silvery pale and nearly healed and feels a wave of guilt. How had she ignored the bloody bandages after the stadium attack? Maybe the missing finger made it easy to ignore everything else.

Kirishima sighs. “Okay. How’s everyone doing? I know Asui is with her parents and Ashido is still dealing with some broken ribs. I think Sato has a concussion or something.”

“Ojiro said he’s taking care of his siblings,” Shinsou says, which relieves Ochaco a bit. “A lot of my classmates were running stalls outside the stadium so they’re mostly fine.”

It startles Ochaco at the casual reminder that he’s not in their class even though he’s basically a package deal with them these days.

“Iida’s fine. I think he’s with family. Anyone know about Kaminari and Sero?”

“Sero’s got a neck injury. He’s on bed rest.”

“Kaminari was fine last time I saw him. Jirou’s got food poisoning.” Everyone stops to stare at Yaoyorozu. “What? We grabbed ice-cream together and she’s badly lactose. And forgot her pills.”

“That’s pretty stupid.”

“Yeah,” Yaoyorozu agrees. “But we were stressed and ice-cream. Bakugou was in surgery last I saw him.”

Ochaco puts on her best ‘why are we talking about this’ smile and says, “That sounds great.” She glares at Tokoyami before he can say anything negative. “I got messages from everyone else except Midoriya. Oh, and Todoroki but I don’t think he talks to anyone.”

Shinsou picks up a cat from the floor, a dark one with a missing eye. "Haven’t heard anything from him. Honestly, he probably did something heroic and got hurt.”

“That sounds like Midoriya,” Kirishima agrees.

She notices how Tokoyami very intently stares out the window, very unsubtly not joining in the conversation.

“You know something,” she says, drawing their attention, and is gratified in the nervous way
Tokoyami shifts. “What is it?”

Tokoyami sighs. “You know how I’m technically under government investigation—”

“I’m sorry, but I’m going to need some context here,” Yaoyorozu says.

“Me too.”

“I am not going to repeat this explanation again. Suffice it to say, black flames associate me with Shikoku. And the government doesn’t like that.”

Ochaco blinks because that’s a surprisingly effective summary. “Okay. Now get on with it.”

"I may have gained information that if repeated to anyone may result in me being shot in a dark alley by the imperial household."

Ochaco very instantly feels sick and sees the horror mirrored in the others. “Why are—"

Tokoyami raises a hand to forestall their questions. “Before you ask me for answers, realise that it is related to the same reasons I’m under investigation—and I will be cleared in a few days once the paperwork goes through—but there is a possibility all of us will be tried for treason if I answer fully.”

“That’s messed up. What kind of unmanly stuff are you involved in?”

“It’s not like I said ‘hey, wanna get me involved in something possibly illegal shit’ one morning.”

Ochaco isn’t sure what stuns her silent. Maybe it’s Tokoyami cursing for the first time since she met him. Maybe it’s the sarcasm. Maybe it’s the way his speech patterns went from grumpy old man to a normal teenager.

No, all those things play a part. But more importantly is the raw fear in his red eyes, the tenseness in his posture, and the defeated set of his shoulders.

This is the first time she has ever seen him truly uncertain. And that, most of all, scares her.

“Is it that bad?” Shinsou asks.

“Much worse than you think.” Tokoyami inhales. “The truth that you can never speak of or risk all of us being sent to jail, is that both Midoriya and Todoroki are missing.”

It takes her a long time to understand the pounding sound of drums is the blood rushing in her ears as her world shifts unstably.

Tokoyami meets her eyes and she knows, just knows, that he’s going to say something to make this worse.

“And they can’t be retrieved by conventional means.”

*****

Izuku stands defiant against almost certain death.

*You know, perhaps antagonising it wasn’t the best option.*

He bares his teeth. “No, antagonising me was a bad idea.”
A beam of darkness wide as a planet travels across universes, moving so much faster than light that it leaves a rip the width of galaxies in its wake. The beam eviscerates a horde of demons and shatters ruin world, makes irrelevant all known laws in its inexorable march.

It is a beam of singular violence and destruction, designed purely to destroy Izuku. It is a beam of hate and malevolence so concentrated that it makes Izuku sick to the core that he must face this Elder, this being capable of destroying a galaxy with only its shadow.

The beam slams against the lattice of living lightning.

The force of it hits him right in the soul. This cage of lightning protecting the waypoint is a manifestation of the quirk he inherited, One For All as it takes form in Izuku: living lightning to All Might’s wildfire. Perhaps it is symbolic. Fire cannot survive without oxygen but electric potential can exist in the void of space.

Symbolism is a form of strength here. Raw power just happens to shit all over symbols and metaphors, and that beam has enough raw power to scour a solar system.

Even All Might’s power is nothing compared to the Elder. The chasm between mortal power and god too great to bridge with hope alone.

He swallows nervously as the remnants of the beam approaches, diminished by the lightning cage. There is nothing he can do, no place he can escape to. If death is the only option, then he’ll go out with style.

He gives the impending beam of death the middle finger.

“Bring it,” he says, closing his eyes an instant before it can swallow him whole.

He doesn’t die. It takes a moment to register this, and then Izuku opens his eyes to something odd: a wall of fire. The flames are pitch black, consuming space and time and gravity as fuel, growing larger and larger as they battle the Elder’s beam.

True darkness and godflame wage war. Two fundamental forces vie for dominance, entropy and calamity opposing one another. For a moment his mind wanders to Shouto but that makes no sense. He would feel it in his bones if something changed.

This isn’t Shouto’s doing and it certainly isn’t the doing of the entity that controls the godflame trapped by a copse of ancient trees.

This protection comes from something else entirely. But it is failing, the flames dying to the power of true dark.

The flames fade away and the beam continues unimpeded. It may be lessened by travelling through the shield Izuku created and dealing with the flames, but it is still powerful enough to shatter a mountain. Death is still imminent. But those dead flames give him hope that he is not alone.

In the next moment, a dragon floats between him and certain death. Its dark wings are spread wide, a shield to protect Izuku. There is an aura of power around it, a deep purple mist that declares its presence.

It roars so loud the very sky shakes and trembles, the ground cracking from the force. Izuku feels his ears burst as the power of its roar holds back the beam for a second. That second is long enough for the dragon to cross its arms over its torso, the purple glow intensifying and manifesting around
its arms like armour.

The beam hits it right across those crossed arms. Izuku watches the beam shred its scales and shatter purple armour and tear through tough hide. And yet, the dragon never falters, never gives in no matter the destruction imposed on its body.

Suddenly and without warning, the beam fades away. The inky darkness that filled the horizon vanishes and light returns.

The dragon falls to the ground, breathing heavily. The impact shakes the cliff and makes Izuku trip as he runs towards it. The dragon’s arms are ruins of bone and flesh, and there is a terrible gouge in its chest. He can even make out its beating heart, partially flesh and partially crystallised fire the colour purple.

Yet, there is nothing but determination in its massive eyes, an odd mix of yellow and ultraviolet. It does not seem to care much for the damage it has taken.

//What have you done, Shadowking? This barrier, this ward is of… love? True love? And yet darkness as well? It should not have been able to stop even the tiniest power of the Elder hunting you//

Izuku forces a smile, observing the Elder across universes. They’ve drawn its attention now, marked themselves out as possible threats to its goal.

“Love is the strongest force alive,” Izuku says, a reassurance against the raw loathing of the Elder.

//The very fabric of the abyss felt the reverberations of your declaration. I do not understand. The love you wield as a shield is beyond true dark and you are the embodiment of the darkness. How do you wield this power?/

“I’m human as well.”

//But that is a mortal shell. That skin you wear is your corpse, not your real body//

“It doesn’t matter, we have to go.”

He turns back to the cliff edge he kicked Shouto off and sprints towards it. He leaps over the pool of Shouto’s blood, closing his heart off from the grief of what he has done.

The dragon follows a moment later, gushing glowing blood as it staggers over the edge. It catches up and matches velocity with him. Izuku lands on its shoulder moments below they dive below the surface.

A cold chill runs down his spine when they cross to the next layer. It should make him nervous, anxious even.

Right now, he only feels a sense of relief.

Below them, large as a country, is an eye. An eye that has never harmed Izuku. An eye that has saved him before.

*****

Shouto Todoroki is dead.

Or close enough to make no difference. His body is a broken ruin of pulped flesh and shattered
bones and ruined nerves. It is less a body and more a human-shaped splatter of blood and flesh, held in shape only by ice.

But he isn’t completely dead yet. Only mostly dead and that is all that matters. In a realm where a moment can last an eternity and beings have witnessed eternity, a moment is more time than anyone needs.

The fluid enters his mouth and nose and every other open hole or gap or wound. It enters through every rip where it seems his skin has come apart at the seams, flowing through his veins and marrow and entering his ruined skull.

It embraces him gently as he sinks further and further to the bottom. The unusual property of the eye knits together his broken bones, patches burst blood vessels and seals his wounds. It is quick and almost instant, taking advantage of his entropic ice and accelerating the process.

Shouto inhales when his lungs are fixed.

It is the same inhale as a newborn’s first breath, that tentative exploration of a new environment. It is the same breath after nearly drowning. It’s the breath that says, ‘I am alive and fuck death’.

Somehow, despite his lungs being full of the fluid, he can still breathe. The fluid is heavy in his lungs but he’s never felt this much oxygen with every breath.

I’m alive, he thinks, staring at his hands in the fluid. There are scars on his skin, dozens of silvery marks and he imagines they are from his skin being reknitted.

He looks around and wishes very much that he could get the hell out of here.

Another body breaches the surface, large and with wings. It beats those wings and flows towards Shouto, cradling him in its human-like hands. He can see the gaping wound in the dragon’s chest knit back together, a lattice of flesh and leathery hide and scales reforming.

The dragon rises through the fluid like a rocket, not seeming to care for concepts like aerodynamics. Perhaps the purple glow around it has something to do with that.

The air above is crisp and chilling. Refreshing, even, as he coughs out the fluid from his lungs. No single breath has ever felt so good, felt as necessary as these few.

The dragon opens its maw and makes a deep, guttural sound that he can’t understand. Then Izuku fucking Midoriya slides down from its shoulder and lands beside him.

“Please don’t punch me,” Izuku says, hands raised in a placating gesture. And no doubt to defend his face.

Shouto punches him in the crotch instead. Izuku crumples to the ground, his face contorted in pain. The moment his hands are away from his face, Shouto punches him there.

“You stabbed me,” Shouto roars, trembling with rage. Sick with it, even. “And kicked me off a cliff.”

Izuku gives him the middle finger, one hand still covering his crotch. “Not my fault you don’t care about me. Did you really think I was going to betray you?”

“Let’s just count them: my mother, my father, my brother, and let’s not even talk about how I killed my sister.”
“You make a good point. I maybe shouldn’t have said what I said.” Izuku pauses. “But come on, this was also kinda your fault.”

That drives Shouto to a further rage. He leaps forward and tackles Izuku, headbutting him in the nose. Blood gushes from Izuku’s nose as Shouto punches him once.

Then twice.

Then a third time.

Shouto doesn’t care that Izuku doesn’t fight back. No, there is so much anger that all he sees is red, and only some of it is Izuku’s blood as Shouto beats him to a pulp. He feels his knuckles break and doesn’t stop. He doesn’t stop when Izuku’s eyes are swollen shut because that strange fluid heals him.

Which is good. It means Shouto can take his time breaking Izuku’s jaw and nose and cheekbones and everything solid that makes him who he is. And he can do it again and again. It feels good to see Izuku bleed, fills him with joy to hear bones breaking and flesh pulping.

“I’m sorry,” Izuku chokes out.

Shouto punches him again. Breaks two more knuckles. Wraps his hands around Izuku’s neck.

He squeezes, applying the same cruel pressure he used to choke the life out of his mother. He stares Izuku in the eye, never wavering as those green eyes widen. He doesn’t look away when Izuku taps Shouto’s shoulders urgently nor does he look away when Izuku begs.

“It was the only way,” Izuku gasps out.

Shouto, very frankly, doesn’t care. He just wants to see Izuku feel the same pain he felt.

“I fucking hate you,” Shouto screams, applying more and more pressure. He wants to hear the sweet sound of Izuku’s neck breaking, wants to hear him give his last breath and see the life fade from his eyes.

He would have more to say if not for the sudden crash that steals his attention. A giant horn rises up through the eye, spewing ocular fluid and rainbow blood in the air like hurricanes of blood. Understand that the eye is the size of a continent. The horn made of some material that eats light is as large as a mountain range.

Deep in his soul, Shouto knows that the horn is the tiniest fraction of a percentage of the thing chasing him.

The eye makes a sound of pain that freezes Shouto because nothing without a mouth should be able to make a sound like that. He shivers the longer he looks at the horn because it’s made up of red crystals the scream of nightmares and eternal misery.

Izuku throws him off with a flick of his power.

“Take us up, now!” Izuku shouts.

The dragon beats its wings and rises, shielding Shouto and Izuku with its other hand. Through the gaps, he can see the miasma of dread and undeath fills the horizon far as the horizon and perhaps beyond. Because, seeming to loom over the universe, is something of gargantuan proportions, a being of too many arms and spheres and dimensions folded upon themselves—a contorted entity of
eternal darkness and cruel design.

Izuku grabs Shouto by the shoulder, spinning him around.

“We’re out of time,” he says, and only now does Shouto see how terrified he is past all the blood on his face. “I’m sorry but the thing that’s been calling out to you is called the godflame. And you have to make a choice.”

The dragon rolls to avoid a streak of blackness that tears apart reality, leaving a gaping hole for horrors of the deepest layers of this place to seep through, tainting the psychomutable reality with their presence.

“What choice?”

“I don’t know!” Izuku trembles, eyes wild with fear. “That’s what scares me. But you have to understand that I’m willing to die so you can make that choice. And I don’t care what choice you make. Kicking you off that cliff was my last gambit.”

The dragon breaches thick roots in the sky. It twists and deposits the two of them on one of the roots. It says something in the odd language Izuku seems to understand before it descends wreathed in black flames to fight the shadow of the Elder creature chasing them.

“You can’t just expect me to trust you.”

Izuku takes Shouto’s hands between his own. There’s blood on Shouto’s hands, Izuku’s blood, though his companion seems not to notice. Or perhaps he doesn’t care.

"This isn't about trust anymore. This is when you pull the sword from the stone and decide what shape the sword will take."

Izuku leans forward until their foreheads touch. Sticky red liquid smears his face and Shouto feels it drip down in thick rivulets, tastes the salty liquid on his lips, a promise sealed in blood.

“I don’t think I can win,” Izuku admits, smiling a bloody grin. “I’m pretty sure I’ll die. But, if it gives you the chance to make this choice, then I’m willing to do so.”

Izuku pulls away, his body glowing with power and green lightning. He looks like a hero even if his grin is sad and broken and tainted by blood.

“I said I love you. I wasn’t lying. I’m willing to die for those I love.” He laughs a mad and broken laugh. “I owe you that much at least.”

Izuku leaps back and down past the roots, disappearing from Shouto’s reach.

Shouto closes his eyes once more and takes a breath to centre himself. He closes his heat to the pain of betrayal and the warmth of Izuku’s boundless affection. Because what more can he do but walk forward, no matter the cost?

What choice does he have otherwise?

He stands and looks around. The trees are thick and dark as night. Creatures like Dark Shadow observe him, spears held at the ready. He can’t tell if they are enemy or friend, but they block his way to the very centre of this forest where the call is so loud it is all he can hear.

“I don’t know if you can understand me,” he says to the sounds of the cataclysmic clash going on
beneath him.

Hellfire blossoms to life around his arm. If nothing else, violence is a universal currency, and the power of ash and brimstone is one he speaks fluently. Already, he can feel the dead trapped in a world of fire and misery screeching in agony and rage, gods and monsters and aliens made equal by his powers.

“But I’ll fight you if you try and stop me.”

They make no sound for a long time. Then, bridges of pale light form between the roots, all leading to the centre of the forest. Shouto wastes no time sprinting forward past the crowd that follows behind him like a royal procession. The trees get thinner and paler the further he goes, and he gets the impression that these trees are somehow older.

At the very centre, he finds a grove surrounded by a circle of trees, pale and thin as saplings. Yet, the immense weight of their presence leaves him breathless. Imagine standing in the oldest library in the world, one filled with ancient tomes from a time where the impossible was commonplace. Imagine the weight of history pressing down on you from all directions. Imagine all that, and you get the tiniest inkling of the presence these trees command.

//Come forth, vessel of the heart// one tree says, a psychic imprint upon his bones.

It sends him to the ground.

Shouto grits his teeth and forces himself up. He isn’t here to beg for anything and nothing, not even a presence that feels as old as his universe, will make him kneel. He glances behind him and sees the creatures all kneeling, all waiting, and refuses to be a supplicant.

“You know why I’m here.”

He doesn’t have to look at the cauldron holding the black flame of creation. The flame is low, deceptively tiny for something capable of destroying everything he knows. Half of him just wants to walk over and fall into the flame, the same half that is his hellfire.

//We have lived longer than your universe a dozen times over. You stand before us and must make a choice// another tree says.

Before the psychic scream can bring him down, he burns it away with his hellfire and the screams of those he damned. It is his only protection against these trees. They aren’t cruel, merely powerful.

“What choice?”

//We will perish this day, but this is all part of a plan. Our elder who carries our racial memories will continue, protected by another king, and perhaps one day start our species anew. All that matters is the nature of the sacrifice we make this day. For what reasons shall we give up our lives for you, bearer of godflame’s heart//

“You’re not making sense. Tell me what choice I have to make.”

//You may consider your choice as long as you like// another tree continues. //Time shall stand still until your mortal form perishes. Worry not for the shadowking or the slaveking’s beast. The universe will stand still for your decision//

He grits his teeth in frustration. He’s getting nowhere with these trees as old as his universe.
“What is it?” he asks instead. “The godflame. What is it really?”

//It is one part of the trinity, one-third piece that forms the abyss. It is heat and energy and entropy and the forward arrow of time. It sparked the first forms of life. You call it the Big Bang, that which we call the start of Disparity. It is the beginning and end of all things. At the end of all things, when darkness consumes everything, it will burn away true dark and give space for new forms of life to exist, starting the endless cycle anew//

“It really is a God.”

//All forms of flame are derivatives of it, fragments and echoes of its true glory split off from the start of Disparity. All flames but those of you and your sire. The flames of the eternally damned, the fire that burns an effigy in the worship of the wielder. Yours is unique across the infinite possibilities of the abyss//

“Is that why it calls to me?”

//Yes. It wishes to unite the final piece of flame to its existence. And with it, the godflame shall burn all realities until everything exists as fire and ash. Godflame will consume every world, every universe, every reality and every layer of the abyss and bring in an age of infernal fire//

“I won’t let that happen. I have people to protect back home.”

//Your world, what you call the real, is merely the highest level of the abyss, the one in which heat and energy and orderly godflame reign supreme//

“Why me?” No, he thinks, that’s the wrong question. “Why us? What makes the three of us so special?”

//In the beginning, there was true dark, and the inky foundation of the abyss was created. Nightmares of crystal madness, the Singers who must never be freed, the gods of desolation and their unborn Elder parents roamed and ruled freely. And then came the godflame, the spark that seeded true life and separated the void from your realm. By its heat, did it drive away the nightmares to the deepest level of the abyss. Two halves of different natures. Eventually dark and light would reach equilibrium, what we call disparity. In this disparity came the rest of life, both undeath and true death. It is that life which is the third pillar of the abyss, the final part of the trinity//

“So, let me get this straight. You literally call Izuku the shadowking because he’s what? A piece of true dark. Like that nightmare chasing us? And Tokoyami very literally enslaves lifeforms. This is fucked.”

//This is not about the king of shadow or the king of chains. This is about your choice. Will you rise to become the third king? Will you stand aside and become irrelevant? It is still possible for the shadowking to strike a bargain with godflame and reclaim his power, but the cost will be high. Will you take the power and set all reality to fire?/

“I don’t know what choice to make.”

//The choice does not matter. There is no right or wrong. All that matters is that you choose. Speak to the flame and make your choice//

In the end, it does not matter.

Right now, the one person he trusts and hates the most fights the monster chasing Shouto. Right
now, Izuku stands between him and death all so he can make a choice. It doesn’t matter that Izuku will die for Shouto regardless of circumstance because that’s just the sort of person Izuku is. Right now, he’s doing it to let Shouto experience true freedom.

Much of this may very well be Izuku’s fault, it probably is, but at the end of the day, he would have died months ago in that hospital room. Shouto has suffered through untold pain and agony and betrayal since he entered this realm, but he suffers through that only because he lives. When they aren’t fighting, aren’t arguing, when Izuku isn’t a puppet to a greater force, they are friends. He knows every secret Izuku holds and he has trusted Izuku with just as many truths.

It may be violence and blood that binds them together, but it is trust and affection that forms the foundation of their friendship. The same friendship that makes Izuku willing to die for Shouto without question. That friendship is so strong that Izuku could take the place of his mother in betrayal.

In the face of that kindness, the sort of unbridled love and compassion that gives time its forward momentum, how can Shouto do anything but walk towards the godflame and make the most important choice to ever be made?

He places his hands on the cauldron. The seals on the cauldron are ancient, barriers of disparity and darkness to hold back this god missing a tiny fragment of itself. The dark flames give off no heat, but maybe that’s because they instead consume all forms of energy like time and gravity and dimensional barriers—for a moment he imagines his father watching him, but that image vanishes.

The impossibly hot presence of the godflame fills his mind, burning through all barriers he might make. Heat suffuses every nook and cranny, burning down every wall in his mind and laying him bare before the first flame, the truest expression of energy and light and time.

**My heart, you have returned.** It doesn’t speak so much as it sings in exultation. **Come, hellfire, and return home.**

“No,” Shouto says even as the flames threaten to sear everything he is. “You’re going to listen.”

**Vessel of my heart, you have no presence here. You a mere courier for the shadowking's promise. Stay silent and let fire reign supreme.**

“I don’t fear you. I won’t submit to you. No flame will ever control me.”

Fire isn’t something he fears.

He thinks of all that his father put him through, every torture and moment of suffering to get him to fear the flame. And only now does he understand the lesson his father tried so hard to teach, a lesson that broke their family apart and drove his mother insane. Fear the flame for it will burn you, his father always said but left unsaid is the true lesson: for only then can you control it.

It does not mean he can forgive the man, but maybe he can understand why his father did what he did.

**Then speak, vessel of my heart. Make your case.**

“I’ve come to bargain. I will give you my hellfire in exchange for control.”

**You will die, mortal vessel. I can wait till the end of time for another to come. Hellfire shall belong to fire once more. There are infinite possibilities, and in one of them, another will**
come bearing hellfire. You are irrelevant.

He doesn't really have an argument against that. If this flame really did birth concepts like time, then waiting for an aeon won’t even register to it. Even now, it simply waits as Shouto considers everything. And yet, the more he thinks on it the more he is certain a piece of the puzzle is missing.

He sits and brings his hands together to meditate, the godflame waiting patiently as he considers everything.

I’m willing to die for those I love.

That one phrase keeps repeating in his mind like an infection. It burrows deep in his psyche, fighting for dominance as he considers everything he has gone through. The answer isn’t in their journey on the back of a colossus or the first time he fought a godling.

He swallows and opens the dark corner of his mind where he keeps his memories of a world borne of blood, the world in which he murdered his mother and sister.

He considers what Izuku—or the thing speaking through him—said over and over again. This is his story, an exploration of the suffering he felt in the past. And if that is true, then is the answer not also in his past? Not the suffering, but the good?

The moments of good may be few and far between, but they exist. His life hasn’t only been cruelty and suffering. It hasn’t always been a challenge to grow stronger. To claim that would be to spit on everyone who cared for him, everyone who gave him the strength to continue moving forward.

“I think I understand,” he says after a few hours of thought. “You really do think hellfire is all that you’re missing.”

It is the final aspect that will unite all fire and heat.

Shouto shakes his head sadly. “You’ve never felt love or compassion or kindness. I know this because I’ve seen things that use the godflame. You’re the fire and heat life grows beneath, but you know nothing about life itself. Look at my heart and soul and see all those things you could never imagine.”

He feels it search through him. Memories of Fuyumi baking cookies, of his brother teaching him to play soccer, of Izuku being a kind fool—most of all, Izuku’s love born out of compassion so fundamental you could set gravity to its tune.

He lets the godflame, this being that is one-third of all reality, know what it means to love and be loved as a mortal does, fleeting and passing in nature. He lets it feel the loss of that love when his mother was taken so long ago and dredges up every memory of her compassion, of her love that brought light to their home. Every yearning to play with his sibling and bathe in their kindness. To hope one day that he will move past his father’s influence as Fuyumi has, and give his life to making other lives better.

He lets the godflame feel these human emotions, insignificant and pathetic in comparison to it. But even something that amounts to nothing has value if only because it is novel. Even the most expensive experience is cheapened by repetition, becoming lifeless and dull. Is that not why the godflame wants hellfire? Because it is something new and unique. And if that is the case, maybe love isn’t so pathetic.
Why would a barrier of love stop a dragon made of godflame if love was known to this god?

And so, he lets it taste the very essence of his love, the very definition of kindness and compassion. It is all he has, the only bargaining tool of any importance. It may not be worth much, but it will be worth less than nothing if he doesn’t try.

And then he takes it away, forces the eternal flame away from his precious memories.

**Yes. Yes. Yes. This fire, this warmth. Give this to me. Give me all of this.**

“That’s not how bargains work,” he says patiently. “Passion is half hate and half love. I will give you both. My hatred and loathing as the hellfire to unite all flame. The greatest love I have ever known to give fire context. In exchange, I take control and decide the future.”

**Is this your choice, my heart?**

It sings in exultation, a song of fire in his veins like nothing he's ever felt before. Right now, he has its full attention, every scrap of interest that one-third of all reality possesses. It is like the forces of gravity and electromagnetism all stopping to watch you, something incomprehensible halting everything simply to listen to your words.

It steals his breath, makes him full insignificant and tiny. But it also makes him feel larger than life. Because someone as meaningless as him has the attention of the universe itself. It may be callous and indifferent, but right now, he’s the most important thing to ever live.

*Thank you, mother. Forgive me.*

“Yes,” Shouto says, sealing an oath with the universe.

The pain has no words in the human tongue to describe it. How can you describe a quirk being torn away? Perhaps as a comparison to your limbs being sawn off. How do you describe the pain of every memory of the one you love the most burning away? Every second that passes burns away another instance of his mother, of the person he could never hate despite that grand betrayal years ago.

The godflame rips away every memory of Rei Todoroki from his mind, using her love and compassion like oxygen to feed its power. The love of a single human infuses everything the godflame touches.

He feels the empty spaces and cracks in his soul fill with power and fire. He feels his right eye change as it sees the world as the godflame does, the heat and energy of all life forms, and the ability to see the things a simple human eye cannot. He feels the scorching power of the godflame’s entropy fill his left side as his hellfire becomes one with the origin of fire and time.

At the crucial moment, when the power he inherited from his father becomes one with the first flame, he feels every tendril of the godflame. It is vast, touching so much of all reality that he almost dies from knowing the magnitude of the power he now wields. He feels the sun and stars and time itself, feels their sweeping glory and listens to them sing his name.

When the bonding is complete, a wave of godflame surges outward from him.

The copse of ancient trees burns away. They are kindling to this flame, a coronation fire for a new king and a pyre for the deaths of billions. The black flames spread relentlessly, consuming their descendants.
He floats above a world on fire. His first act king has been destruction.

The psychic scream of their death slams into him. He feels the end of their existence, the loss of trillions of years of knowledge, and knows true grief. But he locks it away for now. There are other things that must be dealt with.

His left side is engulfed by dark and infernal flame, the power of god at his fingertips. His right eye sees the unseen, the things that exist in higher dimensions and other planes of reality. He sees all of time and space and reality like looking over a city from the tallest skyscraper. Every future is open to him, a thousand possible timelines collapsing as he comes to a decision.

It is his choice to burn away everything that is, was or can be. It is his right. Looking at the black flames now at his command, he says the only word that matters in the entire universe.

Shouto Todoroki makes a choice.

“Burn.”

*****

It is by true dark and infernal flame and the undeath that exists between the cracks that the abyss exists. Your choice is made and known to us now, Shouto Todoroki. Your kingdom shall be fire and chaos, the entropic march of the forward arrow of time. You are one of three kings. We have waited aeons for you three to appear. Uncountable iterations and variations have existed and still exist. This is the first that has succeeded.

What will become of abyss now that you stand amongst your peers? Shall you wage war amongst yourselves and annihilate everything in your path? Shall you set your eyes to conquest and subjugate all other realities the void touches? All things are possible to you now. All choices are yours to make. There is no destiny writ in stone for you.

How can there be fate for the gods?

*****

Izuku wonders just how fucked he is.

The thing he’s fighting barely even notices that he exists. Maybe if he had the full extent of his powers, he could drive the creature back. No, he knows for a fact that he could. He isn’t the same scared boy he once was nor is he the teenager struck mad by the horrors of this place. No, had this happened just before the stadium attack, he would have shown this nightmare the true nature of darkness.

Now, though, he is relegated to drawing the beast’s attention away from the dragon battling with him. It only notices him when he flares his powers. The pain is excruciating, and his constructs are weak, but he makes them as large as he can and fills them with the intent of fucking the monster up.

One For All fills his body with strength. He still has some of that ocular fluid in his body, and more is in the air like a fine mist, so it doesn’t break him in half when he uses his mentor’s power to punch a finger larger than Japan. It does, however, nudge the monster just enough that the dragon can escape and burn a path to Izuku at light speed.

He reaches out and grabs its wing. They fly around the creature’s appendage even as its movements give birth to black holes and areas of reverse time—he regrets forcing it into a well of
that stuff to trap it.

“This is stupid,” he says and dives forward, streaks of green lightning surrounding him as he takes One For All to his limits.

He kicks the creature’s horn. Well, technically, it’s the shadow of intent of its smallest appendage. Either way, it breaks.

*If you love him then you will let him make the choice.*

“He doesn’t deserve to suffer like this.”

He spins on the spot and dodges the dread knight created by the shattered crystal. His fist slams into and through its torso. He holds its heart in his hand and squeezes, crushing the metal thing. There are more to be fought and he tears through them rapidly, bringing to bear every scrap of technique he has.

*Isn’t that what his life has always been? Others making choices for him.*

Izuku looks at the streaks of green lightning around him. Grabs one. Flings a bolt of lightning at the infernal engine powering this appendage.

The lightning strikes true and the green explosion burns through the engine. The lightning continues onward, tearing through dozens, perhaps hundreds of enemies.

It doesn’t so much as make a dent in the uncountable trillions being forged with each passing second. It is a hopeless battle without the full extent of his powers. Even with every person on Earth, he would lose.

*For the first time, he has tasted freedom. Let him make the choice and bear the consequences.*

The appendage below him turns grey with the engine powering it destroyed and then vanishes. He sighs and hopes Tokoyami’s dragon can catch him before he can fall into the black hole. It does, thankfully, and then decides to fly straight through it.

They come out in a dark space and see the shadow in its entirety. Izuku raises a brow at how large the Elder’s shadow is. He imagines this is what the Milky Way looks like from the best seat in the galaxy. He shrugs and grabs another piece of green lightning.

He flings it with all his strength. It expands as it flies, growing larger and larger. Everything the green lightning touches disintegrates until it is stopped by the power of the Elder.

He pants tiredly. They’ve been at this for hours and they’re getting nowhere. The Elder’s physical form, its relative present, is nearly upon Izuku. And there’s fucking nothing he can do to win.

*If you love him, kindly, dispassionately and impersonally, then you will let him be free, brother.*

“Oh my god, fine. Just shut up already."

The universe shifts.

The chains binding him to Shouto’s story burn away.

He glances to the forest of floating trees. They burn in the godflame, kindling to the infernal fire. It is different than before. It isn’t just infernal darkness. No, now there is the slightest warmth of compassion and an aspect of the power that let Shouto consecrate worlds in his image, hellfire
merged into godflame.

*He’s changed the godflame itself,* Mikumo whispers from the depths of his mind. *He’s made something new out of something eternal and unchanging.*

“Oh, you’re fucked now.”

Shouto appears in a burst of dark flames. His entire left side is wreathed in the infernal flames, a sick parody of the power he showed during the tournament. One of his eyes is a black so dark that it very literally eats light.

Shouto raises his right hand.

A wall of ice larger than the arctic circle rises and blocks the creature's attack, not because of its strength but because at that moment, it becomes a fixed point in time, frozen against all deterioration. Against something a step from being a god, even manipulating time doesn't do much. The barrier shatters but it has served its purpose.

Shouto lifts his other hand high, almost as if reaching towards the sky.

The godflame swirls and rises to a crescendo. Then, a conflagration of infernal fire large as the sun sparks into existence. The dark sun emits waves of entropy instead of light and a cruel heat that sunders the bonds that permeate the most fundamental parts of existence.

Most of all, the howls of the damned exist within that flame. Hellfire and godflame unified as one entity, power enough to destroy a galaxy held in the hand of one boy. No, held in the hands of a king newly risen.

“Shouto, you know you’re holding a sun, right?” Izuku asks from his place on the dragon’s shoulder, irreverent in the face of power.

“Yes.”

“And you realise that thing’s shadow is larger than our galaxy.”

Shouto turns to stare at Izuku, incredulous. Anything regal about him vanishes and he looks just like the person he’s come to call a friend and ally.

“Are you seriously doing this right now when it’s trying to eat us? No, shut the hell up.”

Then, Shouto turns back to the monstrosity. Its approach is slow only because its vastness distorts the distance between them.

“Burn,” Shouto commands and flings his arm forward.

The dark sun crosses the distance between them and the Elder thing. It looks so small in the face of a monstrosity that large. And yet, as it travels it rewrites fate and destiny. No longer are they bound to die to this thing. No, the shackles of the inevitable future burn away.

That sun expands, growing larger and larger until it is no longer a sphere and more a wall of godflame large enough to consume a galaxy a dozen, no, a hundred thousand times over. It burns away time and space and gravity and all unknown laws of the abyss in its path towards the elder thing.

Nothing can survive that wave, not even a monster like that. It isn't a matter of size but that of a
power differential. And right now, Shouto stands at the pinnacle of power. Everything the flames touch burn away, overwhelming the Elder’s shadow and physical form. It burns and burns and burns, powerless against the full extent of the godflame until nothing remains of it.

Izuku looks to Shouto as the godflame vanishes. He watches Shouto float slowly down to the dragon’s hands.

He collapses and Izuku rushes forward, worried.

Shouto’s shoulders tremble, his expression contorted in pain. He looks scared and horrified, a child and not a king.

“Hey, stay with me,” Izuku whispers, gripping his shoulders tightly. “What’s wrong?”

Shouto raises his head and smiles crookedly. “My greatest hatred and my greatest love. I gave that up.”

Izuku swallows. “Your past.”

“Yes. Hellfire and the memory of my mother. I can’t recall anything about her. I must have loved her but the only reason I know that is because I can’t ever forget the terms of the deal.”

Izuku can’t help but hug him because he knows he would never have the strength to pay that price. And this is all his fault. He holds Shouto tight until he stops trembling.

“Let’s get out of here.” He glances at the dragon and nods.

//I obey// it says before beating its gargantuan wings.

“I can understand it,” Shouto whispers.

“It’s over now,” Izuku whispers. “Let’s just get out of here.”

“How?”

“First, we fix my powers.”

******

They fly through space and reality unimpeded. Izuku takes the time to calm himself, to let his nerves settle. The monster that’s been chasing them is dead, burnt in the power of Shouto’s kingship.

Shouto looks nothing like a king, tiny and cradled in the dragon’s hands. His arms are wrapped around his knees. Izuku swallows uncertainly, not sure what to say in the final stages of their journey. He can’t imagine losing his mother and would never be able to pay that price.

The dragon breaches another layer of the abyss and they pass through an ocean, kept dry by the purple aura around the dragon. Izuku drops down to stand beside Shouto as the dragon finally stops.

It deposits them on a beach of green sand. Izuku cocks his head and scans for the whales. And there they are, doing their best to shy away from the dragon. He waves in reassurance.

Izuku smiles and jumps onto the beach. “The godflame’s heat can apparently fuse my conduit.” Izuku removes his shirt and jacket, glad the latter is only a bit dirty.
“I don’t know what I’m doing.”

Izuku turns to face him, rolling his eyes. “You do.” He points at Shouto’s black eye. “What do you see now?”

“Those things you tried to shield me from. I can see them all. I think the godflame burns away the barriers of life and undeath, real and void. And it all looks so…”

“Pitiful,” he finishes for him.

“Is that how you felt when we were travelling, and you had to watch me struggle against such weak things?”

“Yes. But only because I was useless. Never because of you. But if you can see that, you can see what needs to be bridged. So, hurry up and let’s go home.”

He presents his back once more to Shouto. Warm fingers trace the base where the conduit is. That red orb is what connects him to the power source that makes him shadowking, makes him a peer to Shouto. He may never be able to utilise anywhere near all of his power in the real world, but that’s only because heat and light reign supreme that high up.

“This shouldn’t hurt.”

It does.

The pain is excruciating. But Izuku is used to pain so he doesn’t scream or howl in agony. He knows the moment it is done for the world seems to shift. The shadows become clear to him once more, his sense of this impossible place sharpening until he can sense everything about this layer and not only where the next waypoint is.

He lifts a hand and watches as a wave of eternal shadow rises to his command. The sky darkens as he wields the entirety of his power, darkness and shadow once more his to command. In the back of his mind, he can hear the shrieks of the dreaming dead gods but ignores it.

Izuku grins. It feels good to be back.

“Good. Let’s go home.” He waves at the dragon. “Return to your master. Your duty is complete.”

The dragon leans forward and opens its mouth. It breathes fire at their feet. Izuku blinks because the fire is purple, not black. And the flames have a warmth to them that soothes Izuku. Within those flames is an echo of love, of kindness and even benevolence. All things which should be alien to an abyssal dragon.

But not things that are alien to Shouto Todoroki. He glances at his friend and wonders exactly how much has changed about this place he thought he knew like the back of his hand.

Then, Izuku watches in surprise as many of the growths and scabs on his skin fade away in the face of the warm light. He understands that this is the dragon’s final gift to them before it flies away, power and healing given freely.

“Come on, let’s leave this place.”

Izuku walks towards the pier and savours the smell of this rotted sea. Right beneath the inordinately long pier is a patch of shadow that will work well enough as a portal. He takes Shouto by the hand as he sinks through it.
They land in the twisted version of his room. Izuku waves away Shouto’s question before it forms and simply takes them through the next doorway.

He senses the real world in his soul long before his nose picks up the imperceptible scent of true life or his skin feels the warmth of their sun. They’re standing on the arena. Izuku looks around at the broken stadium and sees the remnants of the makeshift structures.

Under the real sun, he can see the silvery scars on Shouto’s body. Dozens of them, tiny and nearly reflective. Signs, perhaps, of the betrayal he endured.

“We haven’t been gone long,” Izuku says. “A few days at most. Use your ice to make a signal. I think there might be people nearby.”

Shouto nods and steps forward with his right foot. A trail of ice streaks past, longer than the ones he usually makes, before a pillar of ice taller than the stadium forms.

“Good enough?”

“Yeah.” Izuku lowers himself slowly and lies on his back, looking at the sun. "What does the world look like to you now?"

He hears more than sees Shouto mirror his action.

“It looks normal most of the time. But if I focus a bit, I can see the energy all around us. I can see your neurons firing and all of your nerves.”

“And when you really focus?”

“I can see the truth. I can see all the things hiding in the dark. I can see the realms unseen and the worlds of ruin. The godflame… it’s burning away those barriers through my eye.”

“Sounds bad for your eye,” Izuku says lightly. After all, his bones are crystal and his neural network is far beyond human. “Make sure you don’t go blind.”

Shouto makes a sound part amusement and part annoyance. “I’ll try.”

“And what do I look like to you?”

Shouto shifts, his clothes rustling loudly in the quiet, the only sign of nervousness he gives.

“I see a throne of darkness, sometimes small and sometimes massive, but always as large as it needs to be. You’re wearing a crown of true dark and horns of crystal madness. Izuku, those things you were terrified of in lowest layers of the abyss, that song you whispered to me that knocked me down. That's your domain, all of that madness and calamity.”

“I thought so. I guess I am a monster.”

“What makes a monster? I just committed genocide, and no one will ever know. No one will ever care. I feel their grief, I know their wisdom but only because I burnt them away for power. Does that make me a monster? Titan never killed so many.”

He rolls over to look at Shouto properly. “That’s dif—”

“Why? They cared for their young. They taught each other lessons and passed down their knowledge. They respected their elders and fought for each other. Just because they were alien doesn’t mean they weren’t alive. I don’t understand… People kill each other all the time. How can
they stomach doing that to people who look like them? I feel like I’m going to break because I killed sentient trees.”

He looks it too. The only time Izuku has seen him so weak, so vulnerable, he had just killed his mother and sister. They’re both filthy, covered in grime and muck, but right now that doesn’t matter.

“I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry for everything I’ve put you through.”

“Did you know I’d survive?” Shouto asks, his dark eye watching Izuku and laying bare any secrets he has.

“I couldn’t be sure,” Izuku admits. “I had to have faith. This was your story and everything was leading you to an ending. I had to hope that you would survive for narrative reasons if nothing else. You loved your mother so much, Shouto, even after her betrayal. But that betrayal changed you as a person. Things are cyclical here. I had to betray you so that you could change. I was out of tricks. It was my final gambit. One final dues ex machina in your story.”

“You asshole.”

He grabs Shouto instead of answering. He doesn’t spare a glance with the ice blade suddenly at his throat or the anger in Shouto’s eyes. There’s a threat, one he’s used to after all their time together.

“I need you to listen,” Izuku says coldly. “I need to teach you how to lie.”

Shouto blinks and the blade vanishes.

“What?”

“Look at us, we look different. They won’t believe it was only a few days. There’ve been villains who can manipulate time before and we’re gonna take advantage of that. I’m going to teach you how to lie. I’ll show you how to be a keeper, lock and key to any truth. We don’t have a lot of time and I don’t want to be experimented on for the rest of my life.”

Beneath the mortal sun, Izuku whispers the secrets of lies. He whispers the very nature of each lie, how to construct them and make them true. There isn’t much time and this would not work with anyone else. But Shouto has seen physical promises and fundamental truths. This a language they both know.

When he has taught Shouto those truths, he takes a piece of stone and carves a symbol on his thigh. It means nothing personally to Izuku, but it is part of the lie, a calling card for a villain that lived centuries ago. Shouto does the same to Izuku with a blade of ice.

They lie in the middle of the ruined stadium, battered and broken until the authorities arrive.

Chapter End Notes

Well now, that happened. Some of you correctly guessed what would happen, but I don't think anyone guessed the reasons it would happen. Because who the hell thought eye was coming back.
This is the end of the arc I've termed 'The Long Road' in my head. Izuku and Shouto are back. This also represents a mild shift in tone. So far, you've seen the unrelenting darkness in this world. But in the darkest night, a candle shines all the brighter. You're gonna see more and more that most of the viewpoint characters in this story are driven by the love they have. They may not always do good things, but that's what drives them. This season is all about revelations, and you're starting to see the answers. Those answers will form the framework you need for seasons 4 and 5.

Well, that's it from me. Let me know what you guys think if you've made it this far by dropping a comment. But if you can't, just know that your readership is more than enough for me.
Merry Christmas and all that jazz y'all. Consider this my Christmas present to you.

I'm still running a discord server which can be found at the following:
https://discord.gg/4YvCTYR

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘To speak of the New Heroes, our venerated forbearers Master Railroad, Hawkmoon and Graviton Lance, is to speak of their Tyrant peers, Stormwind and Titan. Their histories are intertwined and it is a history involving tyranny and the blood of millions. It is to speak of their successor Hero who took up their mantle upon the dissolution of the New Heroes, Hero who uplifted her homeland Zimbabwe and led a resurgent Southern African economic bloc and ushered in the Golden Age. Hero who was an exemplar of moral heroics and first amongst her peers: Legion, an army unto herself; Skybreaker, the great peacemaker; Trafalgar Law, the Surgical hero; Siren the brave, and the gallant Champion amongst others.’

--Excerpt from ‘The Effect of Heroics’ by Saruhiko Ando.

Fumikage Tokoyami lives a life of control under a strict schedule. He meditates often, a necessary rite when one has a demon whispering violent nothings or a natural predisposition to anger.

At the moment, he’s very nearly about to jump across the table and punch his father. Which is nothing new. Perhaps the context is different as his father’s words are what drive him to anger and not the man’s silence.

“I don’t care what you think of the matter,” Fumikage snaps, “but I am going back to school.”

“That school nearly killed you. Nearly killed your mother.”

“You two will use any excuse you can find. I don’t care. I made it there of my own merit.”

“This is my household, boy. You will listen to me.”

Fumikage rolls his eyes. “Remind me again how many people you’ve killed. And you expect me to think your words are valid.”

A sudden weight fills the air, his father’s bloody presence attempting to crush any resistance.

“My past is not yours to brandish as a weapon.”

Fumikage has felt worse. After all, he’s seen the horrors hiding in the dark and battled a dragon. It may trip some instinctual fear he has of his father, but he can quash it.

“And my future is not yours to decide. I’ll leave if I must but I will not have you squander my scholarship out of baseless fear.”

“And go where, boy?”
“Anywhere away from you.”

“Then leave if you dare. But if you are too cowardly to do so, then you will silence yourself.”

Fumikgae stays silent. Not out of fear but because his heart suddenly skips a beat. And then another.

It is the shock of another entity filling his soul, taking a place beside Dark Shadow. It freezes him in places, locks down his muscles. He almost tips over.

//I have returned, master// the dragon says in his soul.

“Good, boy. Stay silent.”

Fumikage petulantly waves away his father as he stands, doing his best not to show any weakness. It's like his soul has suddenly been stitched over without any way to numb the pain, like his skin has been scraped raw and covered in salt.

He stumbles into the bathroom, locking the door behind him.

His breaths come in short and fast. With shaky fingers, he unwraps the red band, fumbling with the knot. The fabric falls away, letting him breathe easier but also revealing the flesh underneath—a jagged mess of ropy flesh, tiny quills and thick scar tissue.

The only people who have ever seen this are his parents and he has no intention of letting anyone else know.

Once his breathing is under control and the pain has subsided, he summons the dragon. A dark portal appears over his torso. The dragon emerges from it, a thin chain binding it to Fumikage.

Right now, it is relatively tiny, only the same height as Fumikage though its wings brush against both walls. Those bright yellow eyes observe Fumikage and for a moment, he imagines he sees emotion to them. Not alien emotion, but something startlingly human. Almost like compassion. Almost.

He shakes his head. It isn’t anything close to human but rather a beast he must always keep leashed or risk death. He can feel the reservoir of power it holds, once more his to control. Its size is due to the tiny trickle he permits it to have access to.

“Were you successful?” he asks.

//The shadowking has returned to his full power and the one-eyed king has ascended to his throne//

Fumikage blinks. Somewhere, deep in his soul, he understands what that means.

Dark Shadow materialises suddenly, taking up what little space is left. It is disconcerting to have two separate entities looming over him, both easily capable of ripping him apart.

**The godflame found its heart?** Dark Shadow asks, surprise colouring his companion’s voice

//Yes, Elder Tree//

**Did my people survive?**

//Their funeral pyre served as the coronation ceremony for the new king. They have been burnt away by the new king’s power//
Dark Shadow is silent for a long minute and Fumikage is unsure how to broach it. What can he say to his oldest friend after this revelation?

“I am sorry,” he manages.

**Sorry? For what? The complete genocide of my people? Their hope that my knowledge would carry on? Knowledge that has been broken and shattered by you stealing me?**

“I did not—”

**Of course, you didn’t. And I’m not angry at you. This plan has been in motion longer than you’ve been alive. We chose to guard the godflame even though it would lead to our deaths. One day, I’ll remember why.**

Fumikage doesn’t believe Dark Shadow’s indifference. After all, he can feel the soul-crushing grief deep within his soul.

He calls them both back and they return to him. And when they do, something shifts. He feels whole again.

He also feels hungry.

*****

Hisashi Midoriya has three very simple objectives for the day. Well, technically those objectives are prerequisites to his true goal.

Getting his wife to forgive him.

Step one involves getting a new suit. When you're on the far side of fifty, a good suit is a bare minimum for a task this important.

It is why he's currently enjoying a pastry and a cup of decent coffee in the streets of Italy. The day is sunny and might be called beautiful if he isn't plagued by other matters. Such as the new set of orders from his contact in the Imperial household. He hasn't looked at them, and very likely won't until later in the day, regardless of them being flagged urgent. He’s lost a decade with his wife and son because of similar orders. They owe him one fucking afternoon at the very least.

He waves the waiter away when he tries to refill his cup. He’s had enough alcohol this early in the day. He leaves a hard currency chit on the table, tipping triple the price of the meal. It’s a simple sign for the waiter to take his cutlery and anything that might have his genetic material, and decontaminate them completely. He trusts the waiter will do it. It just happens to be that sort of place.

He passes by a statue of Stormwind and sees a short line of people with bouquets of flowers. More than he expects this far away from the anniversary of her surrender or her death. But in western Europe, there are always signs of her presence. He shrugs and puts it out of his mind.

The suit fits well. Maroon with thick stripes, cut in the new fashion without pesky lapels. He wears a grey turtleneck instead of the recommended silk shirts. Not because they look bad on him, if
anything his choice of turtleneck marks him out as eccentric, but because it takes a few hours longer to appropriately fit and conceal layers of composite armour on using the silk shirt than the turtleneck.

He thanks the tailor once he's gotten used to the location of the armour plates in the suit. He is many things, but durable is not one of them. He specialises in evasion and getting the hell out of a fight before it starts. It is partly why he ran from his wife. There is no way he could have taken another punch without spending a few weeks in the hospital.

Age, after all, is the great equaliser in life.

There is a special backroom exit with attached blackout taxi service which he takes. It returns him to his hotel. He nods once to the bearded man limping out with a bulldog following behind and makes sure to not antagonise a man who had taken on New York’s finest group of assassins and won.

He informs the concierge that he’ll be checking out and leaving through ‘alternative means’ and not to worry about him an hour from now. The man simply nods in understanding, asks no questions, and compliments Hisashi on the new suit. Once Hisashi has his luggage consisting of a knapsack, he is ready to leave.

He burps, wisps of fire escaping his mouth. He frowns. The flames are an incandescent green, reminiscent of his fire when his quirk first manifested, and not the fire he acquired later in life.

“What the hell is going on?”

He decides to experiment when he isn’t in a hotel with a fire suppression system. Opening the doorway is easy. In practice, it just involves heating up a rectangular cut-out from the abyss where it touches his location most closely. In theory, it involves multiple degrees in higher dimensional physics, quirk metaphysics, abyssal realmatic theory, and after a while it just got too smart for Hisashi to care. It works and that’s all he needs to know.

Denmark is his next destination. There's a chocolate store that has been rated the best in the world for the past five years. It may have something to do with them growing their own cocoa beans and the grower's quirk that ensured each plant to be perfect—and he means perfect down to a quantum level. He purchases a large box of assorted chocolates.

Finally, he travels to Jamaica. Wrangling a container of their Blue Mountain coffee is an effort of a few hours because he doesn't have the authorisation to make the purchase of the limited product. Money, however, speaks volumes and he pays enough for a full shipment of the stuff just to get a small container’s worth.

It doesn’t make a dent in his bank account.

Once that’s done, he finds a decently hidden spot in Yakushima to practice with. He is smart enough to send a callsign ping to the fortress there. That way, the many imperial guards won’t bother attacking him.

Hisashi stands before a tree and inhales. He feels the fire spark to life in his belly and exhales. A green fire that brings back memories of younger days comes to life. It sets the tree alight, burning it in two ways: the first, the standard, that of combustion; and the second that happens in the unseen realms, that which burns away the concept of the tree, and burns the essence of the tree in the image of the World Walker as a sacrifice, an effigy to his presence.
It is nothing like the godflame which simply burns away the very concept of the thing’s future.

“Well, that’s different.”

He opens a doorway a few layers from where the godflame resides. A sun of infernal fire greets him instead of the forest of floating trees he expects. The aftermath of a great battle greets him, areas of reverse timeflow and psychomutable engines of ruin. Whatever battled occurred there, Hisashi is glad he was nowhere near it.

“I guess you found your heart,” he says to the emptiness. “Was it worth it?”

He steps back to the real and finds a man waiting for him. The man wears a white uniform in the formal battle dress of Royal Guard.

“Itinerant,” Hisashi says politely. “Aren’t you supposed to be with the Emperor?”

The man, the Emperor’s resident warper, sighs. It makes him look older than he is, maybe old enough to be Hisashi’s age.

“Can you please look at the comm package your handler sent?” the Guardsman asks. “Please. We need your help.”

Hisashi shrugs. “I’ll think about it. After I’ve talked to my wife.”

“Wait, you—”

He opens a doorway and lands in Japan. Mustafu, to be specific. The signs of Inko’s rage are still present. The street is still torn to shreds but there is construction tape around the damage. There won’t be any questions from the authorities on whose quirk caused the damage. Such trifling concerns as the law don’t really apply to him or his family. They haven’t for a long time.

He knocks, fearful of the response. Inko is many things. Unfortunately, dangerously violent is one. When the door opens, he thrusts the chocolates forward before she can process his presence.

“Danish chocolate. Best in the world. Please don’t break me.”


“Okay.” He takes a breath in preparation. “The reason I went missing was that my quirk evolved to include letting me travel a really weird dimension which you’ve had contact with going by the fact that you can destroy city blocks if my senses are right. I can also very literally travel to other realities. Well, more like other iterations of this one and please don’t snap me in half and—”

“Times up.”

He reveals the canister of coffee. “Jamaican Blue coffee. Best in the world.”

She takes the coffee. “One minute.”

“Extra?” She says nothing. “So, you see how it looks like my face is clawed out. Well, that’s because it kinda was on that trip when I left. And then I got really lost in a lot of different dimensions and I’ve spent the last decade trying to get back. And the moment I did I came straight back. I didn’t mean to leave, I promise.”

He wonders if her expression has always been so blank or if it’s a new development. It scares him because he’s always been able to read Inko Midoriya and all the variations of her. But he can’t read
“You’re many things,” she says without a hint of emotion, “but you’ve never lied to me before. Get in.”

She steps aside.

Hisashi enters his home, his real home—not the many cheap apartments in very many realities—for the first time in a decade. It is clean, whatever influence in decoration he might have had gone. Not a single picture with him in sight, none of the books he owned on the library shelf. It’s as if he never existed.

And that hurts more than he can imagine.

He takes the coffee back and makes her a cup. The silence as the water boils and he strains the dark liquid is stressful. Because the Inko he remembers is many things but quiet is not one of them. He’s usually the quiet one.

“You travelled the abyss?” she asks once she has her cup of overpriced coffee that probably tastes like vile sludge.

He’s not biased in the slightest about coffee. He just thinks it tastes like shit.

“Yes. I breathe fire, yes, but that’s only a tiny portion of my quirk. I use the godflame, that black—”

“I know what it is.”

He swallows nervously. That was blunter than he expected.

“…Right. I can connect with that heat across dimensions and use it to burn doorways between our reality, the abyss, and other realities.”

“How many other realities did you visit before coming back?”

There is a threat there, one he isn’t too foolish to notice. “You want to know if I ever tried settling down, don’t you?”

She nods, the slightest thrum of power in the air and the chittering of a thousand spiders filling his ears.

“In the first one, yes. I’d just had my face mauled and was a bit too traumatised to do much for a few months. But once I could get back up, I started looking. Usually, I leave a marker for worlds I’ve been to and are safe. They help me find my way back if I go too deep. I couldn’t for this one, my reality, because things happened too fast. I was too busy trying not to die.

“I kept on going from world to world. Some were different, really different. But a lot were like this one. There was usually an Izuku of some sort. He might have All Might’s quirk or my fire quirk or turn into a leviathan or see ghosts. And you were there—sometimes you were a hero, sometimes you were a nurse, but no matter what, you always loved Izuku. I think your love is the only real constant in the universe.”

The hard lines of her granite face soften a little.

“Stop trying to flatter me,” she says sharply.
It makes him flinch back. This is his wife and she’s supposed to be strong, tough, and determined, not sharp as glass and hard as diamond. It makes his bad arm tremble which he tries to hide.

She raises one eyebrow imperiously. “Still trying to hide things from me?”

"Sorry. I didn’t mean to.

“Like everything you kept from me. Continue.”

“It was never the right world. I usually stayed around a few days, sometimes weeks, to make sure you two were safe. Even from me—you would not believe how often I’m a villain. And between each world, I had to travel the roads of the abyss and deal with all those living nightmares. I did it for ten straight years. Looking for my wife. Looking for my son. Not someone who looked like you. But I’ll always care for you and I couldn’t just go without trying to make things better. The hardest to leave were the ones where Mikumo was alive.”

Inko takes a breath, a mantle of grief falling over her shoulders. He knows that grief and feels it every day of his life. And he knows it will never fade. His son is dead and gone. Black hair darker than night and eyes shining brightly. He knew, the very first time he held his boy, that Mikumo inherited his fire quirk—those clouds of plasma his fondest memory. A spark of creation itself held in the breasts of a little boy.

“He’ll never stop haunting me.”

Hisashi smiles sadly. “He was our son. He might have my hair, but everything good in him would have come from you. Just like Izuku.”

“How did you not go crazy?”

The smile dies away. “I did, in a way.”

He takes a breath and lets the World Walker take over. The coldness, the callous indifference to life and willingness to murder, smother the very human Hisashi.

The World Walker looks at the wife of the operator and does a threat assessment: mutated quirk as a result of the abyss; tier three, maybe four, threat; upper limit unknown; god currently being invoked unknown; eliminate with a pre-emptive strike—three godlings of acceptable power that can be summoned on short notice. The World Walker follows the strands of the power she invokes, deciding on spots in the abyss she will be vulnerable and helpless.

That threat assessment dealt with, the World Walker prepares the rites to eliminate the woman if necessary—it will take a few years of the Operator’s lifespan to invoke any of the godlings. That price can be paid easily enough.

The woman gasps, dropping the cup of coffee. The shards are possible weapons the World Walker accounts for. Armour plates will protect vital organs. Face and neck exposed.

“You’re not even the same person,” the possible threat says.

Hisashi takes control once more, the World Walker fading to the back of his mind. It doesn’t protest, per se, but it does implore Hisashi to focus on those ceramic shards.

“I think it’s a form of dissociative identity disorder. It’s a form of protection against everything I’ve seen. I can’t… I’d never be able to function without it.”
He smiles and runs a hand through his dark hair streaked white with age. “You know I love you more than anything else in this world.”

She stares at him in mute horror. “He really is your son.”

“Izuku? I’d hope he’d take after you a lot more. Where is he, anyway?”

He is very glad the World Walker marked those shards as a threat because they’d have stabbed through his arm if not for the doorway he opens instinctively. What makes it worse is the absolute lack of anger on her face, as though potentially hospitalising him is a pretty normal suggestion.

“Oh, I said something wrong there and I’m not sure—”

“Shut up,” she snaps. “Your son, the son you left me to raise alone for a decade, is missing.”

“What?”

“There was a fucking attack on the stadium and we can’t find him. No one can fucking find him.”

He raises a hand to stop her. “Inko, you can punch me later,” he says in the same tone of voice that always gets her to keep quiet. “I need to check something.”

He removes his phones and checks the priority message that’s been trying to get his attention for the last twenty-six hours of real-world time. It’s a retrieval mission for priority targets in the abyss. One of the targets is Endeavour’s kid. The other is his son.

“Fuck,” is all he says.

He slides the phone over to his wife. She raises her brow. “So, you do work for the imperial household.”

“That’s not even vaguely important.”

She reads in silence. The further she gets, the more the quality of the air changes. There is a threat of violence that goes merely from the threat of a quick hospital visit to a long and drawn out death. Inko sets the phone down and stares at him for a long minute.

“You knew he was missing.”

Hisashi gulps. “Technically, I didn’t until just now. And technically, I haven’t been on this earth for more than twelve hours.”

“And you could have retrieved him at any time?”

He starts considering exit options and whether he’s fast enough to avoid Inko pinching his blood vessels—he’s seen that before in one world—or ripping out his testicles—they are certainly small enough.

“Possibly. It would involve me going to a place that’s driven me a bit insane. I wasn’t keen on answering that message because of that.” He sighs, deflating, knowing it is a terrible excuse. “Look. I’d go there for my son. But after being chased away from my home I wasn’t interested in talking to people who see me only as an asset.”

She invokes the god attached to her. It comes back to life just a little bit feeding off her rage. I really need to find out what’s causing that.
“Don’t you dare blame me.”

He hears something aside crash to the ground. A tree snapping in half, maybe, or a wall breaking. The power level is the same, regardless.

A bead of sweat runs down his neck. “I’m not blaming you. I guess I just had this fantasy that I’d come back and everything would be fine. And I wasn’t ready to deal with you not… accepting me.”

“Are you going to get him?” she asks, indifferent to his feelings.

“Please don’t crush me before I finish.” She nods. “I’m not going to retrieve him and please stop squeezing my heart. Thank you. I’m not because he’s with Endeavour’s son and I’ve just realised how much context is missing to this conversation. Okay, you saw how my fire was black the other day.”

“Hard to miss.”

“When did you get so sassy?” He gulps at the intensity of her glare. “Never mind. So, the godflame, the actual… I guess concentrated mass of intent that governs its reach, has always been looking for its heart, the final fire to unite all fire. And since there’s a giant black sun where it was before, and because my flames are green, then Todoroki is the heart. And if that’s the case, then you’ll probably get a call that he’s been found in a few hours.”

“If I don’t, I’m going to kill you.”

She isn’t joking. It is a gamble, but he’s almost certain he’ll manage to survive. He knows how time works in the abyss, and he knows for a fact that he would feel Izuku’s death in his very soul. Anyone even vaguely connected to the abyss would feel the reverberations of that happening.

“So, how’s work?” he broaches.

“Hisashi, shut up.”

"Yes, ma’am."

Exactly three hours of tense silence later, Inko receives a call. He knows it can only mean one thing by her tears, and the deep breaths she takes to stay calm.

“Can I come?” he asks when she is composed.

“You stay right the fuck there.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

There are consequences to marrying people because they're strong and willful. He isn't anywhere near foolish enough to question her, or even to disobey her order. Instead, he cleans up the mess from the spilt coffee and makes a call.

“Hello, Kurogiri. I have some questions for you. You see, I hear there was a stadium attack and my son was involved.”

“That’s is technically true,” Kurogiri says.

“Don’t say a thing. I just want you to listen.” His voice doesn’t change from his usual light tone. “You see, you went after my kid. You went after my son. And that makes me very angry. Shh,
what did I say about speaking? Here’s what’s going to happen. You’re gonna go to your boss and tell him I’m done. Every favour I owed you, consider them paid in full. I don’t work with you ever again. And you people never come after me and mine.

“And if you don’t follow those simple rules, I’ll go after Tomura. I won’t kill him, I’ll just expose him to every horror in the abyss. And when he’s nothing more than a lifeless husk, I’ll return him to you. The only reason I’m not doing that right now is that your boss is a vindictive bastard. You’re probably wondering if you can run off with him. Sure, maybe for a few weeks or even a few months. But I will find you. I spent ten years looking for my family. I saw things that would drive you mad and I never stopped. Right now, you’re wondering if All For One could stop me? Oh, he certainly could. He is the Strongest Man Alive and fully deserving of that title.”

Hisashi chuckles. He’s witnessed All For One bring to bear his power and it is nothing short of awe-inspiring. But for his son, he’d face the entire world.

“He might very well be the strongest All For One to ever live,” Hisashi says respectfully. “And trust me, I’ve seen a lot. So maybe he can kill me. But before he does, I’ll see to it that Tomura suffers. I’ll take away everything you love. Just like what happened to your wife and daughter two decades ago. It will be slow. It will be painful. And maybe I’ll record his screams just for you.”

“If you hurt him, I’ll go after Inko.”

“I know you will. You leave me and mine alone and I’ll do the same to you. The threat of mutually assured destruction. Do you understand, Kurogiri? Stay the fuck away from my family.”

He ends the call and makes a cup of tea. He settles down and contacts his handler from the imperial household.

There’s no way in hell the police or heroes will want to let Izuku walk free so soon. So, he’ll work the system a bit.

*****

Izuku slumps tiredly in the elevator. It’s been a day since he returned, a day filled with interrogations by Aizawa and Nemu and medical staff and, oddly enough, a lady from the imperial household. Most surprising is the lack of police.

Regardless of how tired he is, this reprieve exists only because his mother can be a force of nature. She had said, quite simply, that this could continue at another time. And no one had so much as spoken against her, not even Aizawa. He’s still not certain why they don’t like each other, but so long as they’re not fighting, he can care less.

When she ruffles his hair for the umpteenth time in the last hour, he suffers through it gracefully. Her worry is evident in the tenseness of her shoulders, the tired lines on her face, and the dark bags under her eyes.

“You were gone a long time. You’ve gotten taller.”

The elevator door opens onto a surprisingly empty lobby, only two orderlies scurrying through, heads ducked in conversation. There’s an exit to one side, probably a private one to avoid the picket line of press.

The orderlies aren’t the only people in the area. He sees Shouto first and smiles. The smile dies as he sees him following behind Endeavour.
“Hey,” Izuku says loudly, striding forward. The anger he feels leaves his hands shaking.

“Izuku,” his mother shouts. He ignores it.

Endeavour glances down at him, contemptuous as ever. “Midoriya.”

The hero has maybe a good foot of height on Izuku, and maybe twice his bodyweight in pure muscle. In any other circumstance, Endeavour could probably break him like a twig.

But, as he’s proven once, One For All is far superior.

The energy of his mentor’s quirk fills him in the space between thoughts, so fast that neither Endeavour nor Shouto has a moment to react. In a moment, he’s in the air. In another, his fist meets Endeavour’s face.

The man stumbles back at the force of the punch, enough to hurt but not enough to hurt much. Izuku isn’t stupid enough to pump that kind of power that will level a building or even shatter a wall. Not in a hospital, at least.

“Izuku!”

He looks over his shoulder to his mother sprinting forward, shock and disappointment in her gaze. Izuku shrugs, nods to Shouto who looks mildly entertained. And then to Endeavour who has recovered, showing no hints of pain outside of the bruised skin, and glares down at Izuku.

"That counts as an assault against a hero," Endeavour says coldly.

Izuku smiles, the same smile Kirishima calls terrifying. “And you’re a piece of shit father. I don’t care who you think you are”—he steps forward and points at Shouto—"but if you ever touch him again, if you ever do anything I consider wrong, I will make it my life's goal to break you. Your money. Your power. Your reputation. None of that will so much as slow me down."

Endeavour chuckles, his dripping voice cruel. “You're arrogant. Go back to your mother before you do something you’ll regret.”

Izuku smiles.

He lets the madness infuse his smile, lets the dark malevolence of the abyss fill his eyes, and forces the shadows to vibrate with his rage. The room darkens, the warmth of life and hope and joy fleeing as he lets the gods dreaming in his infernal engine dream in the real world once more.

It isn’t much of his power, really. He has created worlds of shadow and battled gods of desolation. This is nothing but the promise of the threat, the harbinger of destruction and the spectre of annihilation.

He’s never used this much of the crystal madness in his soul, never felt the need to possibly let dread creatures consume reality. But the sight of Endeavour’s cold eyes drives him to new depths of anger. Because Shouto is his friend, a person he cares for dearly. And he will not let him be hurt by anyone.

“I assure you,” he says, one part real and one part the slightest whisper of the song that will end all life, “that I mean every word I say.”

The tension is so thick as to be physical. He has no idea what he looks like. Maybe a scared and scrawny boy threatening a man so much larger. Maybe he looks like a king with a crown of
nightmares. Maybe, he just looks like a fool making a stupid decision.

In truth, he doesn’t care.

“Izuku,” Shouto says, tearing through the tension. “Calm down.”

The command is simple and from someone he trusts. He takes a breath and smiles, the malice leaving. And just like that, the room is normal: soft and vibrant and warm. It may have something to do with the invisible influence of the godflame he can sense, a warning to stop intruding on Shouto’s domain with his darkness.

He spares a glance for Shouto. Shut the fuck up, he thinks, before returning to Endeavour.

Endeavour simply watches him, indifferent to the threat he’s just levelled. The man huffs.

“Boy, I fear no shadow. Come, Shouto.”

Izuku waits until Shouto nods, a silent promise passing between them. He glares at Endeavour’s retreating back.

His mother grips his arm roughly. “What was that?” she asks sternly.

He smiles gently. “I don’t like Endeavour.”

“You don’t punch people you don’t like.”

“Well…”

“No, you, my son, you don’t punch people you don’t like. What did he do to you?”

“He’s an abusive piece of shit.”

She cocks her head. "You got irrationally angry that a parent is abusive?" He nods. "You have no idea how hypocritical that is. The only reason I can't stand your homeroom teacher is that he makes the same accusation."

“To whom?”

“About me to you.”

Izuku blinks. Pulls away from his mother. Says, “Excuse me for a moment.”

He stalks forward to the last place he saw Aizawa, one of those hastily converted interrogation rooms. His glare is enough that no one tries to stop him or even question him. The only person brave enough flees in terror when he levels the full force of his anger.

The door is a standard hospital door, nothing particularly special about it. Which is perhaps why the doorknob crumbles when he tries opening it. No matter. He kicks it at the hinge which blows outward.

He steps through the wonky door. Aizawa is still there as is the principal.

“Midoriya, what do you think—”

“You’re going to shut up right now,” Izuku says, voice hoarse with all the anger he feels. “Who the hell do you think you are? How the hell can you say that about my mother?”
“What—”

"I said to keep quiet. You don’t get to call my mother that. She was the one who kept me sane. She was, not you. She was the one who saved me from me. Not you."

The anger bubbles over. He slams his fist in the wall. His every breath is sharp and shuddering. His body trembles and it takes everything he has not to summon One For All. The living lightning is so close, begging to be used.

He doesn’t care how this looks to his homeroom teacher—angry, disappointed as a father watching a misbehaving child—and his principal—observing, always observing with those eyes that know too much. Doesn’t care if anyone can hear his angry shouts. Right now, the best he can manage is to not destroy the entire floor.

“My mother’s never been anything but kind and generous to me,” he whispers. “She’s the only reason I’m as fucking sane as I am. She’s the furthest thing from abusive so don’t you ever. Say that. About her.”

Aizawa waits the long minute it takes for him to calm down. And even then, when he speaks, he uses a tone best served to calm down a possibly dangerous animal. “You’ve never shown the best judgement when it comes to your personal health.”

Izuku smiles, a broken and dead thing. “You left me bleeding and dying on the ground the first day you met me.” Aizawa grimaces at the reminder. “You hurt more in a single day than she has in fourteen years. So kindly fuck off, sir.”

“Midoriya, you need—”

“Aizawa,” the principal says softly, and yet his voice seems loud as a ringing gong. “I believe young Midoriya has made his point.”

Aizawa glares at the rodent thing. “But—”

“Arguing further will simply embarrass you and make young Midoriya disapprove more.” Izuku nods. “Clearly, this is a misunderstanding that has gone on too long.”

Izuku lets his anger bleed off a bit until his sight isn’t clouded in rage. “I’m willing to forgive it and to forget.”

“And I don’t doubt that you mean that sincerely. I assure you that the matter will be dropped.”

He takes a deep breath. “Okay.” The all-consuming rage abates. “Thank you.”

“Get some rest. You’re still operating on a combat response.”

He grits his teeth. “Fine.”

His mother is leaning against the wall, waiting patiently for him. She has a slight smile on her face. “Well, you set him straight. Took you long enough.”

“Let’s just go home.”

The drive home is quiet. His body is tired and wants to fall asleep. It should be easy. The car is warm and the seat more comfortable than a pile of bones. And yet, he’s too wound up so much as doze off. The closest he comes is daydreaming, and even then, he wakes often with a shadow blade
in hand.

“‘Izuku, there’s someone here to see you,’” his mother says once they’re home. “You’re angry right now, and you’ll only get angrier. I’m just warning you now. He’s upstairs.”

He nods uncertainly.

There are cracks on the road, scorch marks as well, and a wall nearby is shattered. It looks like a fight broke out. And, more importantly, he can feel in his bones the presence of something from the abyss. Its presence is muted by the bright sun but he will never mistake it for anything else.

He steps through the door, unsure of why his mother would permit someone in their home. She’s always been fiercely protective of the space, the only place they can be ‘mother and son’, and not ‘widower and prodigal son’.

The smell of the place hits him first. It’s the grain in the wood that he’s never noticed before and the brand of lemongrass detergent his mother uses, the smell of too strong coffee—though this one is foreign—and chocolate in the air. It smells like home and brings a tear to his eyes.

His fingertips brush against the wallpaper, each divot and dent familiar to him. The floor is cold to his feet and each creak of old wood is intimate. The railing still bears the same scars he carved out in his youth.

In his reverie, he doesn’t notice the stranger until he speaks.

“Hey, Izuku,” the stranger says in a voice rough and weathered with age, but all too familiar.

The man is old, maybe just shy of sixty by the wrinkles and all the white hair. His hair is dark, and he is heavily freckled. Scars, the kind the comes from being mauled, grace one side of the man’s face—the same side Izuku’s burn scars reside.

It’s like staring at a mirror image of himself, one that’s a few decades older, sure, but a mirror none the less. Bile burns his throat.

“Who are you?” he asks, already knowing the answer but not wanting to acknowledge it.

Are you being serious right now? Mikumo asks. You know what, I’m done with you.

The man frowns. The action tugs his scars in a way Izuku is intimately familiar with. The resemblance sends chills down his spine. Not least because they are close to the same height and their posture mirrors each other.

“I guess I look a lot different than you remember,” the man Izuku refuses to acknowledge says, shaking his head as though trying to deny something. “It’s me, Hisashi. Your dad.”

He doesn’t know why he’s standing on the other side of the room, his body trembling.

He isn’t sure why his fist is bloody or why the man lay on the ground, groaning in pain and bleeding from a broken nose.

He doesn’t know why his knuckles hurt the same way they do after a bad punch.

Actually, he knows exactly why. He’s just too angry to process it rationally. Most of him is too busy trying not to commit murder. That doesn’t leave much space for rational thought.

“You left,” Izuku whispers. “For ten years.”
“There’s—”

“Shut the fuck up. I can’t believe—why the hell do you think you can just walk back into our lives right now?”

The man, his father, snorts out blood and rises to a sitting position. He groans, his bones audibly creaking. It makes Izuku realise he’s just punched an essentially defenceless old man. He wonders how All Might would think and immediately feels shame.

He takes a breath. Lets the anger fade away. Extends a hand for his father to take.

Izuku helps him to his feet. The man who claims to be his father hardly weighs anything. A strong breeze might knock him down. Izuku swallows. Had he used One For All in the slightest, he may very well have killed his own father.

“You really are your mother’s son,” his father—no, he’s being called Hisashi and oh fuck I’m not ready for this—says.

“She raised me,” he mutters angrily. “What the hell did you think was going to happen? You never even sent a message.”

“There’s a really good reason for that.”

Mikumo snorts in his mind, dubious. I doubt it.

His father recoils very suddenly. Hisashi stares to a spot just beside Izuku as though staring at a person.

“Mikumo?” he asks tentatively as if he’s seen a ghost.

Izuku blinks. He hears Mikumo choke on his own spit—and no, he’s not going to think about how that’s possible.

I’m sorry, am I going crazy?

“Well, I think I’m the one going crazy since I’m talking to my dead son,” Hisashi says, tilting his head. “I’d recognise my own child anywhere.”

I am so confused.

“You’re telling me,” Izuku says slowly, dangerously, “that you can somehow see and communicate to a manifestation of my psychosis. Mikumo isn’t real. I went crazy and started hallucinating him.”

His father blinks. It takes Izuku a moment to notice the man is blinking away tears. Then he nods as if this all makes sense.

“You should know there’s no real difference between metaphor and literal truth in the void. I named my son Mikumo Atakani. Taking his name is the same as him being alive.”

Oh? Mikumo asks, then, Oh… fuck.

Izuku shoves his rising panic aside and locks it somewhere deep in his mind. He can deal with it later. Right now, he needs to deal with this bullshit.

“You breathe fire. That’s your quirk. Mum told me that was your quirk. And I swear if you give me
“You really are your mother’s son. I’ll show you proof instead.” His father gestures to the side.

Izuku feels it the moment it happens. Heat, perhaps hotter than the sun, and a few degrees out of sync with reality cuts a path between the void to the real world. A doorway of shimmering green appears in the air. It leads to one of the lightest layers of the abyss. He doesn’t need to look to know. He may get lost in the real world, but he’ll never get lost in the nightmare realm.

It is the man who created it that holds his attention. Because that’s not his father anymore. It wears his form, yes, but it isn’t natural. The white in his hair looks like molten silver, the rest threads of true dark. His freckles look like pinpricks of the first light of dawn. And the scar reflects the image of the god that gave them, dead now and feasted on by crows.

It is the eyes that are worst of all. They hold the burning knowledge of the unwritten rules of the abyss, molten orbs of a demi-god of fire and doorways.

The infernal engine, for it can no longer be called a man, takes a step forward. “Shadowking,” it says in a voice of ash and a thousand worlds. “This one named World Walker honours you. This one’s hunt has ended.”

And then it’s gone, his father returning. Hisashi takes a breath. “Sorry about that,” he says, voice so plainly human it is disconcerting after the sight of the infernal engine.

What are you?

“Your father. It’s going to take a while getting used to both of you here,” Hisashi says. “Sit. Let me tell you how I learnt to walk worlds.”

*****

Shouto Todoroki stares at his father. The man is imposing. Implacable. Indomitable. A testament to the strength of Japan's heroics industry. This is a man that could stare an army down and not flinch. Intimidating is but one of the many adjectives that could apply to him. Overwhelming. Towering. Perhaps even dignified.

He also has a black eye courtesy of Izuku.

And that, more than anything, ruins his image. Well, it’s not the only thing.

The sickly cold hate he once had for the man is gone with his hellfire, a part of his deal to take control of the godflame. He is angry with the man, but it burns out quickly. It isn’t the eternal sea of loathing. No, it’s a bushfire that burns out quickly. Even his fear, rooted as an old tree, is gone, burnt away like an infection.

They are in the training room. It should hold bad memories for him, and they are there but divorced of all emotional context. That corner Endeavour had dragged him kicking and screaming from doesn’t make him sad any longer. The door panel, replaced after Endeavour kicked his through it, doesn’t spark an ounce of anger. The memories are like looking at an old film reel. You can make out the details, but there’s no meaning associated with them.

“Show me your fire,” Endeavour commands.

Shouto takes a breath.
Wisps of black flames rise from his left side. They yearn to burn brighter and consume everything. But that yearning is subordinate to Shouto’s desires, to his intent. The power of something fundamental to existence belongs to one boy. At his fingertips is the power of God, the right to burn the universe in an endless fire if he so pleases.

It may very well be the greatest gambit ever executed. Because, despite his power, he has no interest in doing anything with it.

“I taught you to fear the flame.”

He lets the flames visibly fade. They never truly vanish as they’re a part of him as integral as his skin or brain.

“I did.”

“Then why did you listen to its siren call?” Endeavour asks in disgust. “Why did you forget every lesson I taught you?”

Usually, a question like this would elicit fear in him. Now, there’s nothing but indifference. How can he fear a mortal when he’s killed gods?

“You tried using fear to teach me. I saw things more terrifying than you can ever hope to be.”

“What price did you pay?”

Shouto smirks. “I gave up my hatred of you. I gave up your quirk.”

*I moved beyond you,* he doesn’t say.

“That’s not all,” Endeavour roars. “I am no fool. What did you give up?”

“My memories of mother.”

Endeavour takes a step back in shock. And then Endeavour’s body ignites. His rage runs hotter than Shouto has ever seen.

“It’s always wanted hellfire. I taught you to fear the flame and instead you gave in completely. And what did it cost? Your mother.” There is steam around Endeavour’s eyes. “Your weakness sickens me.”

That sets him off. After all the horrors he’s been through, every battle barely won and every scar on his body, to be called weak strikes him to the very core. Black flame sparks to life with his rage, engulfing his left side. The infernal flame seems to sing in time with every beat of his anger, flickering in the spaces between scalding hot anger and frigid hate.

He’s fought long enough that he doesn’t need gestures to command his flame. A deluge of dark spears shoots forward, time and space and gravity burning away in the wake of their indomitable power. It’s the sort of attack meant to kill and leave behind only ash.

It is but a fraction, a percentage with so many zeroes before the one that it may as well not exist, of the power he used against the elder thing that sought to consume his power. To bring to bear that level of power would incinerate the solar system and the aftershocks would shatter a good two-thirds of this galaxy at a minimum. The tremors afterwards would destroy the other third.

And yet, his godflame fails against the wall of fire Endeavour summons. The spears of fire are
consumed by his father’s quirk. He looks at it with his right eye, the one the godflame changed, and sees past mortal boundaries.

And he understands.

He once had his father’s quirk, hellfire, and everything he killed was sent to a place that could be called hell. Naraka, a realm for the damned where gods and aliens and nightmares were made equal by the consecrating power of his hellfire.

That wall of fire his father makes is a portal to a pocket world filled with fire and the eternally damned. All he is doing is adding to the fire of that world, granting Endeavour greater control and dominion over his own realm of the damned.

The godflame dies away at his command. The hellfire dies in concert. Endeavour glares, disgusted.

“I’ve known about the godflame long before you were even an idea. I know its power and secrets. I had the will to reject its every call.”

It isn’t that Shouto can’t incinerate his father, that is never in doubt. But he has no reason to do so. His hate and loathing for the man are gone. Killing him is as necessary as killing a stranger on the street. Which is never necessary.

“You have no idea what I went through.”

“I know very well.”

Endeavour raises his arm and makes another wall of fire. The quality of the fire changes and it seems like reality burns away. And then he can see the void. He can see the sun he created in the void, surprised that it remains.

A crown for my heart, the godflame says in his soul.

“I taught you to fear the flame because I knew what it could do. And now you’ve brought it into this world and united it. You gave up your mother for power.”

He’s never heard that level of disappointment in Endeavour.

“You’re the one who never let me see her,” he says petulantly. He might not remember her specifically, but he can remember details like that.

Endeavour’s flames burst to life once more, anger made manifest. He roars, “When did you ask?”

Shouto takes a step back. “What?”

“When did you ever ask to visit your Rei?” The flames surrounding his father die. “You sacrificed less than you think. Let me tell you the truth. You were the one who drove her mad.”

He takes another step back. “You’re lying.”

“You were the one who never asked to visit her. You were the one who hated her for burning you and you chose to never once speak of her. It’s easy to blame others, use them as an excuse to justify your actions. I am many things, but I loved Rei. I loved her too much to give up her memory for power. I loved her too much to let you drive her further into madness.”

It takes Shouto a moment to understand that the steam around his father’s eyes is from tears. And he knows his father’s anger and disappointment and hate. But he’s never seen a hint of grief from
the man. Not until now.

“You’re lying,” he whispers, trembling.

Endeavour sneers. “Everything I did, I did to protect this family and this world. And you just spat on every sacrifice I made.”

Those are the last words Endeavour says before burning the screen to the garden down. He stalks through, his fires rising and ebbing with each step.

Shouto collapses to the ground, his body shaking. He doesn’t know how long he stays there, alone and cold and trembling with what feels like soul-crushing grief or maybe heart wrenching sorrow. Because as long as he’s known Endeavour, the man has never lied. He’s rude and irreverent and a shit father, but he doesn’t lie.

And if that’s the case, then maybe Endeavour is telling the truth.

“Shouto,” Fuyumi calls.

He looks and sees her running towards him. There are tears in her eyes. “I just found out you… What did he do?”

Shouto lets out a bitter chuckle. “Nothing. I did this to me.”

Fuyumi grips his shoulders tight. “Hey, look at me. I said look at me.” He does and meets her warm grey eyes. “It’s going to be alright.”

He refuses to cry. She’s seen him at his worst, tired and bleeding and emotionally raw. And yet, he never wants her to think him weak.

“Tell me about mother,” he says fiercely. “I need to know. Please.”

She smiles and brings her forehead close until they meet. “I’ll tell you all about her.”

Chapter End Notes

I did say this season was all about answers. And I did say most characters are driven by love.

In other news, hope y’all enjoyed the holidays. I spent it... not sober and feverishly writing a Destiny fic. So if you’re a fan of the game, you can check that out as well.

Well, that's it from me. Let me know what you guys think if you've made it this far by dropping a comment. But if you can't, just know that your readership is more than enough for me.

Take care, and remember, no matter how bad things get, you can bargain with an eldritch god so long as you have love. Keep that in mind.
do you remember her?

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year's everyone. [Insert inspirational message of your choosing].

It's a new year and I'm still running a discord server which can be found at the following: https://discord.gg/4YvCTYR.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

‘Understand that all creatures seek immortality. The primary method is to mate and pass on a genetic lineage. But humans are thinking creatures. We have the opportunity for our names to echo out forever by virtue of our achievements. Centuries after their passing we speak of Newton and Mao, Archimedes and Hitler. Will we remember the heroes of this new era? No. But we will remember the Great Tyrants for their cataclysmic power and their legacy still felt to this day: Luciana Cisneros, the Stormwind; and Pedro Salvatore, the Titan.’

—Excerpt from ‘The Effect of Heroics’ by Saruhiko Ando.

Shouta Aizawa groans tiredly, wondering what being well-rested feels like. It seems another issue pops up every time he opens his eyes, and not all of them are related to the Sports Festival. Most are, but some are wholly new.

Like trying to figure out why someone from the military was talking to Nezu a few short hours ago or the tense standoff between Snipe and someone in the navy. He still doesn’t have answers for either and unless it leads to something burning down in the next twenty-four hours, he frankly doesn’t have the energy to care.

“Two days and we’re no closer to figuring out who took them,” he mutters.

Despite his frustration, he is relieved. Two of his students are back. They may be battered, bruised, and malnourished, but they are alive. Even if they both looked like feral animals moments from a confrontation. He’ll have to monitor them more than any other student, a task he feels will find a way to be more difficult than he anticipates.

After all, Inko Midoriya and Endeavour aren't the easiest parents to deal with and for different reasons.

“Eventually we will,” Nezu says.

The Principal is seated near the window in the teacher’s lounge, recently converted into a collaborative working space. Nemuri is passed out on the couch, stacks of papers spilt messily around her. Any other day, Shouta would have been the slightest bit more difficult about letting her be lazy.

With all that's come out of the incident, they're on rotation. Higari and Sekijiro are both asleep, using the dorms UA has. Nemuri isn’t supposed to be sleeping, but then again, he did lace her drink with a sleeping agent because of how inefficient she was becoming.

*Let’s see how you like someone forcing you to sleep,* he thinks pettily, but can’t help the tiny smile.
It’s something she’s done to him since they were kids. This is the first time he’s done the same back to her. It’s nothing more than a very light sleeping agent.

“That’s not good enough,” Shouta says. “That symbol some sick bastard carved into their legs is turning up hits on—”


On his desk are dozens of files of anything resembling tangentially associated with the symbol carved in the legs of two of his students.

“He died. Master Railroad killed all nine of them.” Aizawa isn’t the biggest history nerd but he is certain of that. That day is still a national holiday in America.

“They’ll always be copycats. It’s the nature of these things.”

“How much older do they look to you? Three months? A year?” Aizawa takes removes a pack of liquorice and takes a bite to calm his nerves. “They weren’t gone for just three days. Some bastard took advantage of this and stole my students. The things they described would get anyone in the military an honourable discharge.”

“We’ll find them, and when we find who took them, I assure you that we’ll bring to bear every resource we have.”

“Including the people in the military you were talking to,” Shouta says snidely.

“Don’t be a brat. There are procedures that need to be followed. When we aren’t so busy, I’ll walk you through them. For now, we have other matters to deal with.”

“Do you know any villains with time quirks?”

“Time quirks are less prevalent now than they used to be,” Nezu says. “The Yakuza hoarded them in the past. Rumour has it they may have another one. I’ll need to investigate that as well. And perhaps see to improving the security around the Todoroki household.”

“We wouldn’t need to do that if he just let us take care of his son.”

“There was no stopping Endeavour if he wanted his son back,” Nezu says. “And having a public argument with the number two hero is never worth it.”

“They need rest,” Shouta says. “They have no right being back at school. We haven’t even considered the psychological ramifications of what they went through. Did you see Midoriya? I didn’t even know he could be angry. Let alone angry enough to break down a door and threaten me. And with his mother—”

“We’ll go through official channels and recommend they both undergo therapy, but there’s not much we can do for either of them. Not without great risk to the school.”

That’s not enough, he thinks. He’s hurting and he’s stuck with her, for fuck’s sake.

He doesn’t know how to solve the problem, not when his student is so insistent on seeing the truth. Not when there’s someone working behind the scenes to stonewall him every time he tries to pull up information on Izuku or his mother. By the third time, every file on the two had just disappeared from every database in the country.
There’s so much work that needs to be done that it’s hard to justify enquiring further. The dead still need to be accounted for, the injured still need treatment, and he doesn’t even know what will happen to the school in the coming weeks.

“I hate that they can bypass all the rules,” he says bitterly. “They’re there for a reason. They’re there to protect our students.”

Nezu scoffs, glancing at Nemuri. She snores lightly and won’t be awake for a few more hours. Hopefully, around the time the next shift comes in.

“Rules only apply to the masses. Midoriya’s being watched by the Imperial Family and I still don’t know why they have such an interest in him.”

Every mention of the Imperial family sends chills down his spine. It reminds him of his meeting with a member of the Royal Guard and the unsaid threat of death. It reminds him of Taiwan sinking and the Purge that followed. It reminds him of his mother dying in black flames.

Yes, he wants to scream at Fumikage every moment but he trusts his student. The boy is noble and honourable to a fault. Whatever the cause, Shouta knows he’s simply working through things. And Shouta’s more than willing to trust in him.

“His quirk?”

“No, it’s likely gone on longer than that. His father has almost no public records and the surveillance around their home is extensive. I’ll need to do a bit more digging. And when you’re as powerful as Endeavour is then you can get away with more things than most people. He may not be as powerful as All Might, but he’s a deterrent just the same. Hawks doesn’t come close to Endeavour and Enji has a quality most people lack.”

“And that is?”

“His growth rate. I paid him quite a bit of attention as an alumnus and the one thing he always showed was growth in combat. Every time he’s fought against someone, he’s come out stronger, sometimes exponentially. If he keeps on getting stronger with every stronger opponent he faces, there’s a chance he might one day match All Might. The government is well aware of that, the military as well. Keeping someone with that kind of potential as an ally is just common sense.”

“Hawks is just as strong at half that age.”

“And Hawks is smart enough to know he’d lose a fight against Endeavour, unlike you,” Nezu rebukes. “A lot of people see Enji’s abrasive personality and assume he got to where he is by being a bully but he got there by being better than everyone else. His growth may have slowed down after having kids, but no one’s come close to taking his spot. Do you want to know something interesting?”

“You’re going to tell me anyway.”

Nezu blinks, taken aback.

“Well then,” he says, recovering, “I have places to be if you have no interest in my lessons.”

The rodent jumps off his chair and heads towards the door.

“Nezu, I need you to do me a favour.”
The rodent pauses but doesn’t turn back. “Your former student turned traitor, I take it?”

That he knows before Shouta says it doesn’t surprise him anymore. “Yeah.”

“You realise he is a criminal? One who took part in—”

“I know,” Shouta snaps. “And he was my responsibility. I was supposed to be his teacher.”

“You were but you aren’t his father. There’s a line where your responsibility ends and what happened to him was unfortunate, but it wasn’t a fault of the school. Students are expelled and live their lives without resorting to crime.”

“I don’t care. Do this for me. I’ve had too many losses this year. I need to do something right.”

Nezu chuckles. “I’ve already arranged for us to take custody of him.”

That admission startles him. “What?”

“It’s why you saw me talking to people in the military. Despite what you’ve seen in the last few weeks, I don’t do what I do out of cruelty. If enough heroes who come out of UA have an interest in changing things for the better, then I’ll have succeeded. Look at All Might, Endeavour, and all the other UA alumni. They’re making things better. The students who graduate from General Studies and Business help out as well. You might not think it, but a moderately competent administrator in public works makes sure people get supplies in Hokkaido and Shikoku. It might be slow and maybe it’ll take a long time, but we’ll get there.”

“And that includes Nagisa.”

“Yes. Rehabilitation is one of my goals as well. Not everyone will leave that facility but some do. And if the rest don’t hurt anyone, then I figure it’s a net positive.”

“Then why do the things you do with the methods you use?”

“Because kindness is the luxury of the strong but cruelty comes easily to the weak and powerless. This world will beat you down at every turn and seeking kindness from others is foolish. You humans will always look out for yourselves and when you don’t, it ends badly.”

“People aren’t monsters.”

“No, but those with power are rarely kind. Of all the scientists who experimented on me, only one was kind to me. He died making sure I walked away free.” Nezu shrugs. “I am not powerful, Shouta. I must be cunning and cruel before I can be kind. But where I can, I help everyone. Remember that. Do more good on balance than bad.”

*****

Shouto Todoroki sits in contemplation. There is a spot in the massive home his father owns that is hidden away from all view, a single concrete circle and fireproof walls designed purely for training with fire. All his siblings have spent time in it before to identify their capacity for fire.

The godflame bathes one half of his body whilst ice coats the other half.

It isn’t really a fire even though it looks like it. It doesn’t give off heat unless he commands it to. No, its power is more fundamental than simply raising the temperature. Though he is glad that his right side runs hot due to the core of godflame in his soul. It means he can still use his ice without
worrying about hypothermia.

He generates a block of ice and lets the godflame surround it.

He sees, using the sight granted to him by the black eye. The godflame isn’t dangerous unless he wills it, so the block doesn’t melt. Heat is only a tiny part of the power, an inefficient portion at that. With his eye like this, and with his concentration focused on the ice, he sees what happens when he commands the flame to consume the block.

Infernal power slices through the bonds between water molecules, sundering the inter-molecular hydrogen bonds. The ice crumbles until he commands the flame to go further. The base molecule for water is made from two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom, linked as a hydroxide ion and a hydrogen ion. With his sight, he can see how the godflame cleaves the intramolecular covalent bonds until only separate atoms exist.

He takes it a step further. Grasps and controls those individual atoms by manipulating the quantum states of their electron and their associated probability until they exist where he wants them to. He wants to dig deeper and see what makes an atom what it is.

He heats the oxygen atom up until the electrons float freely—and he isn’t foolish enough to let that energy escape freely, so he has the godflame consume it and shunt it back to the abyss. And when he has just the nucleus, made up of protons and neutrons, he experiments by taking protons at random from the atoms in the air and adding them to the nucleus until he has an atom of gold. He does this with more atoms, billions upon billions of them, moving purely on instinct until in his hand he holds a gold snowflake.

He blinks, eyes hurting from being open so long.

He rubs at his right eye. His hand comes away slick with blood. Shouto sighs and merely cleans his eye. Bleeding from the eyes is nothing compared to what he has seen.

He stands unsteadily, legs shaking. It takes him a moment to notice just how bright it is. He checks his watch and sees it is noon, not the early hours of the morning he started at.

Then he notices Endeavour, still as a statue and observing him with a blank expression. The man is still taller than Shouto, though the gap isn't as large as it once was. Maybe in a few months, he'll be as tall as his father.

“You could have destroyed this city if you went any further. I warned you to fear the flame, boy.”

Shouto lifts the snowflake reverently. It is perfect on a molecular level, glossy and reflective.

“I made something,” he says softly.

His father stares at it for a long moment. “You did. And in the process, you transmuted matter and altered the natural order of the world.”

“That’s what quirks do.”

“Quirks tainted by the abyss, yes. Normal quirks aren’t the flames of hell.” His father adjusts the top button of his blue shirt. “I can’t forever be there to watch your every step. If you forget, you could destroy the world without thought.”

“I won’t.”
“But you can. No one should suffer the burden of that much power.”

Shouto shrugs. He knows he should be afraid or angry with the man. But those emotions are gone, burnt away along with much of who he was.

“Get your things, boy. We’re going to see your mother.”

The command surprised him. It explains why Endeavour isn’t in his costume on what would usually be a work day. Even at home, the man tends to stay in costume or wear training clothes. Seeing him in jeans and a button-down shirt is perhaps one of the odder things he’s seen today, and that includes the insides of an atom.

The drive is quiet. Shouto doesn’t pay much heed to it. The world looks so different now. There’s light as he’s never seen it before: gamma radiation and ultraviolet and x-rays share space with the currents of energy that permeate a city. He tracks electrical currents underground as they converge to the tallest building in the city, a blazing mass of crackling blue, and to its tip where the tower emits rays of electromagnetic radiation all across the city.

It is a mess of colours and energy, the flow and exchange of that which gives existence its forward momentum. There are humans with electrical networks he finds beautiful, their souls like perfect crystals of orderly energy structures. He sees the energy of the sun, hears the words it weaves and knows it greets him in specific. It sends words of the other stars waiting at his command, hoping one day to speak to him.

It is beautiful to see and hear and experience, a kaleidoscope of something incomprehensible and glorious.

He wipes away the single tear that escapes his iron-tight control. A glance reveals Endeavour observing him.

Contemplating.

Judging.

“I don’t care what you think,” Shouto snarls. “I don’t care if you think I’m weak. You don’t see what I see.”

“Everything I did was to keep mankind safe,” Endeavour says slowly.

Shouto leans away. “You protected no one. You broke our family.”

“If you hated me, hated my fire, you would never reach for the godflame,” he continues. “And even if you did, you’d know its power because I taught you to fear the flame. You did everything I taught you. I’m disappointed because every sacrifice I made means nothing.”

He looks at the man and finds nothing but earnestness. And that stokes his anger. It takes all his concentration not to set the car and street and city on fire.

“It was your choice to put her in a mental asylum,” he says through clenched teeth once his anger has abated slightly.

“Yes. Because I couldn’t risk her seeing that place anymore from our fires—well, yours in truth. I knew to control my hellfire.”

“Being afraid of something isn’t control.”
“Fuyumi and Natsuo visit her all the time. So does the other one.”

“Toya,” he corrects harshly. “That’s his name, you bastard.”

“I could care less. I never said I was a good man. I just did what I could with the resources I had.”

“You didn’t have to treat them like shit.”

“Really? Would you not have resented them if I treated them kindly. If I treated them like that, you would never have helped and shielded them from me—and yes, I always knew. All of you are united in your singular defiance of me. And I would rather have that than see you falter. What choice would you have made if you hated them as well, if you had no good memories?”

Shouto looks away, remembering that moment where he held the power to choose the future. There were possibilities that ended in fire and ash and an endless realm of torment he would preside over.

“I would have burnt it all down.”

“Yes. But it doesn’t matter anymore. You burnt away the ties that bind me to you. You may be my son, but you aren’t the image I made of you. Not anymore.”

“And where does that leave us.”

“That choice is up to you.”

Endeavour opens his door and steps out. Shouto does the same and glares at him in the parking lot of the hospital.

“I failed you,” Endeavour says after what feels like an hour but can be no more than a minute. “I’m disappointed in the choice you made but I can respect it. I can understand why. You’re your own person now.”

“Apologising doesn’t make you a better person.” And it is the closest Endeavour will ever come to an apology. He knows his father, knows his cruelty and his rage.

The man scoffs, leading him towards the hospital. “I could care less. The only repentance I need is knowing you’ll live a long life. That this world won’t burn down in your anger. That same anger you felt in the car.”

Shouto looks away. “You don’t get to walk away from all punishment.”

The man shrugs and gestures to a door. It has their family name on it.

“This is your story now. You get to decide what’s important to you. You get to choose who should be important to you. You’ve outgrown me and my lessons.”

Shouto places his hand on the door. “Your lessons were wrong.”

“Fear the flame for it will burn you,” his father says. “Fear yourself for you can burn the world. Tell me where the lie is and I’ll admit everything I taught you was wrong.”

He can’t argue against that. It is always there awaiting his command. The power to burn the world down is a constant companion.

“Despite everything,” Endeavour says, walking away, “I am proud of you.”
Even in casual clothes, the man is imposing. There is too much bad blood between them. Whilst the emotional context for many of Shouto’s memories are gone, he remembers the physical pain. Remembers the feeling of Fuyumi holding him tight at night as he cried. Remembers the hate on Toya’s face as he walked out, never to be seen in their home again. And then Natsuo months later. But without the emotions, it’s like watching a movie about someone else.

Those five words are the kindest Endeavour has ever said.

Without the deep-seated rage and blood-curdling hate, he can… appreciate the intent of the words. They aren’t said snidely. They aren’t his father's way of asking for forgiveness. They are merely a statement of fact.

He may never forgive Endeavour, but that doesn’t mean he can’t move on.

The door opens easily.

The room is nothing special: a small room with a bed, a cabinet and a TV. There’s a woman sitting in a chair by the window. She looks like Fuyumi, has the same grey eyes and pale hair. Or, he supposes upon seeing the age lines, Fuyumi looks like her. It can only be his mother.

He doesn’t feel a shred of emotion.

She looks up, her eyes taking him in fully. Her face runs a gamut of emotions with more range than Endeavour has ever shown him. There is love there, warm and bright—and the godflame shifts in response within him, reacting to the woman he gambled away for one-third of the universe.

Shock that he is here.

Hope that this isn’t an illusion.

Joy that he is real.

“Shouto,” she says. There is so much sheer relief in her voice that it leaves him stunned, makes the godflame burn hotter and brighter.

How can someone love him so much? Love him as easily as people breathe when he can’t so much as muster anything more than mild interest in response.

He approaches her slowly. “Mother.”

“What’s wrong?” she asks once he’s close. “What happened to your eye?”

“A lot.”

He kneels before her.

“What happened to you? What happened to my child?” She brushes her thumb near his right eye, the one that’s changed from the godflame. “Who did this to you?”

“I did this to me,” he says strongly. “Let me tell you my story.”

And so, he does, speaking slowly about his time in the dark place. He tells her of the Sports Festival and his titanic clash with Midoriya. He tells her of the explosion and finding himself in a world of nightmares and madness.

He doesn’t tell her about the world of blood and fire. He can’t. There are some things he is not
ready for. He refuses to speak of choking her to death slowly, of how he could repeat the act without a shred of remorse. He doesn’t want her to know he killed someone who looks and sounds like her only daughter.

“I did a lot of bad things to survive. I took lives to survive. I gave up your memory for power. And I let innocent bystanders burn to ash because I was careless.”

It may only be him that cares about the trees but he remembers the psychic scream of their death. There is so much knowledge hiding in his soul. He tells her but the tiniest portions of it: their life as creatures of shadow; their rebirth as trees vast as this city; how they age, becoming paler and smaller with each passing millennium.

She grips his hands tightly. Her fingers are colder than his. He’s had to regulate ever involuntary use of her quirk, shifting energy states so the room doesn’t freeze over in her shock.

“Midoriya. Tell me about him.”

Shouto can’t help the tiny smile, a twitch at the corner of his lips.

“He’s an idiot,” Shouto admits. “He cares too much about everyone but himself. He’s willing to give everything for his friends. And he never asks for anything in return. He’s a broken mess but he keeps on walking. He leads by example and never asks you to bear the same burden, and he’d forgive you if you failed so long as you try. He’s my greatest enemy.”

“He’s also my closest friend,” Shouto admits after a silence. “He taught me the law of the jungle and how to be the most dangerous thing there. He was a cruel puppet for a greater force and it made me hate him. We fought all the time. Even now I just want to punch him in his smug face. He’d probably break my nose.”

That makes him smile, unbidden. At some point, violence became a core part of their relationship.

He speaks of returning home, of the interrogations and the lie Izuku weaved easily. He tells her of the conversation with his father, of how his actions drove her mad.

“No, I did that,” the woman who loves him, adores him as only a mother can, says. “There’s no excuse for what I did. And I’m so sorry.”

Shouto shrugs. “I don’t even remember it. But I know I’d forgive you even if I did. Maybe not now, but one day.”

“You can make new memories. I’m here. I always will be. And I’ll always love you.”

Shouto takes her hand. Places the gold snowflake in her palm. Closes her hand around it.

It is the first thing he has ever created with his powers. It is not the burning hellscape Endeavour expects from his flame. It isn’t the inexorable weight of ice he was very literally bred for. Made from his fire, it represents his ice.

It is an act of creation from a force that can set the world alight.

“I may not remember you and I might not love who you were. But I don’t hate father as well. I’m not chained to my past any longer. That suffering doesn’t determine my future any longer.”

She smiles. His heart is not warmed by it, but perhaps, in time, it will be. Perhaps he’ll associate this woman with mother and that with love and kindness and compassion.
“You’re stronger than your parents.”

It is early afternoon and Izuku shares a meal with his mother. He picks at the pork cutlets, playing with them more than eating. His leg keeps on twitching beneath the table, hidden from his mother’s sight.

“What’s wrong?” she asks. “You’ve lost a lot of weight. You need to eat.”

“I’m not really hungry. It’s been too long since I ate normal food. I’m not used to it.”

In truth, a day before he came, he ate quite a bit of tuna on the train. That was one of the few normal meals he ate. In the months he spent in the darkness, his body has become used to a diet of godling flesh and metallic hearts and crystal livers.

This pork is meaningless. Izuku didn’t kill it. He didn’t conquer pig and slaughter it on an altar of his dark power. And even if he were to do so, there is no strength to be had in its heart.

She frowns. “That’s not it. You didn’t even try to eat.”

“You always know when I’m lying.”

“You’re my son.”

He sighs and says, as a compromise, “It’s too normal. Everything about this is too normal. I’m having lunch with my mother. A day ago, I was fighting for my life. I’m checking doors and corners for threats. My quirk’s always ready. I just don’t trust everything is this peaceful.”

“Is that why you punched Endeavour? You just saw him and snapped?”

The memory of that punch brings a smile to his face. “No. I promised Shouto I’d do it next time I saw Endeavour.”

“And your father. I know you’re angry with him but he’s nearly sixty.”

“I know. And that was wrong of me. I just… my body reacted automatically.” He sets his fork down, giving up on eating. “Nezu says I’m operating a combat response.”

“You don’t feel safe in your own home.”

He blinks. “Huh, I don’t. That’s not fair.”

“Hey, you don’t have to be perfectly fine all at once. I’m here. Just take it one day at a time.”

“Okay.”

“Are you ever gonna tell your teachers the truth?”

Izuku considers that for a moment, not surprised that she knows he lied through his teeth during the interviews with the police.

“No. They don’t need to know and they can’t help anyway.”

He spends the afternoon antsy and restless, pacing like a caged animal and more than ready for a fight. His father passes through once to leave Izuku a new phone—one that looks a lot nicer than
Izuku isn’t ready to have another conversation with the man just yet. There’s still a lot of information he has to digest, emotions that he has to figure out and untangle.

A loud thud startles him off the couch. One For All fills his body. The insistent banging is coming from the door. He slinks towards it, crouched low to the ground. He presses his back to the door and opens it slowly, using the door itself to hide him.

The moment he sees the arm—tanned, with callouses from training—he springs to action, pirouetting around the door, his leg already lashing out. The assailant ducks beneath his kick, scrambling back before he can follow through.

“Fuck, Izuku, calm down.”

He pauses and looks at the person. Ojiro with his hands raised in a placating gesture. A friend, not an enemy.

Izuku rises from his crouch slowly, forcing his limbs to loosen. He watches Ojiro bring his hands down from the defensive position.

He looks past Ojiro to the others behind him: Shinsou who clearly hasn’t slept in a week and has a multitude of scars on his neck; Ochaco who looks nervous; Tokoyami who seems indifferent if not for the way Dark Shadow is already manifested; Kirishima being held back by both Ashido and Asui.

He swallows and lets One For All fade, the glow suffusing his skin vanishing. “Hey.”

“Have you calmed down?” Ojiro asks, his posture too slack for it to be anything other than an attempt to placate Izuku and not trigger another reaction.

“Not really,” he admits. “Just don’t startle me. Or try and sneak up on me. Or making any really loud noises. Otherwise, you’re getting punched.”

“That’s a really specific list,” Shinsou says, striding forward. “Besides, you wouldn’t punch me.”

“You’d be the third person today,” he mutters. “And why are you here?”

“Because you’re our friend who got kidnapped,” Asui says dryly.

Izuku nods tiredly, mostly at the lie he must maintain. “Right. Kidnapping. Not that big of a deal.”

“Also, we’re invading your house,” Shinsou says and then enters like he owns the place.

Izuku steps aside to let the rest of them stream in. “Clearly you are.”

“Don’t get upset,” Kirishima says, and hooks an arm around Izuku’s neck. “Just go with the flow.”

“I suggest you do so,” Tokoyami says. “These cretins co-opted me without permission.”

“Please. You were here first.”

“Slander.”

And then they situate themselves in his home, choosing seats and arguing over what they’re going to watch. He stares incredulously as Kirishima ransacks the fridge for a meal and argues with Ashido over what makes a better sandwich between beef and chicken. Shinsou even has the audacity to look Izuku in the eye and tell him that he’s taking one of Izuku’s limited edition All
Might hoodie because he forgot his jacket at home.

Tokoyami is the only one with any decency. He stands beside Izuku, arms crossed in annoyance.

“What is going on?” Izuku asks.

“Your mother contacted Shinsou.” Izuku looks up in annoyance. “And he contacted the rest of us. Asui suggested we all visit. Here we are regardless of your personal feelings on the matter.”

“Aren’t your parents worried or something?”

“It seems Ochaco was insistent,” Tokoyami explains. “And the mention of your mother placated most of the parents. To my knowledge, they hold much admiration for her.”

“I mean sure, but why are you guys here?”

“Only Midoriya is so manly that he thinks a kidnapping attempt is normal,” Kirishima says from his spot in the reclining chair. “Clearly this is another one of those normal things Izuku doesn’t get.”

“Explains so much,” Ashido says. “Um, Ochaco, you wanna explain?”

She sighs. “Remember how we came to visit you after USJ? Same concept, different execution.”

Izuku nods. He still doesn’t get the concept but he’s given up on arguing with these people a long time ago. “Great. You saw me. See you at school?”

“No one’s going to school for the remainder of the week,” Tokoyami says. “A lot of students were hospitalised. And even then, no one wants to send students back after a terrorist attack.”

“Yeah, none of that explains why you’re all still here.”

“Do you want us to go?”

“Um, maybe—”

“Then stop fighting and get comfy,” Shinsou says. “We’re basically having a giant sleepover.”

Izuku opens his mouth. Decides against wasting the oxygen. Closes his mouth. He shrugs and walks over to where Shinsou sits and removes him from the spot with a kick.

“Hey,” Shinsou yelps, sprawled out on the floor.

“This is my seat.”

“That was brutal.”

“You guys just invaded my home. You’re eating my food. Making fun of me. No one is explaining why. The least you can do is let me sit in my favourite spot.”

He’s breathing hard by the end. From the heat, he feels his face might be flushed. Oh, and he might have also been shouting at the end.

It’s Ojiro who breaks the silence. “We’re just here because it means you’re back here with us. We’re not trying to be mean.”
“Yeah. I’m worried that if I look away you’ll be gone,” Ashido adds.

“Being alone is fine,” Tokoyami says, “but not if you are suffering alone.”

He looks them one at a time. Ochaco who is missing her trademark vicious smile. Ojiro who looks worn and tired and about ready to give up. Asui who very carefully never crosses a shadow when she walks. Kirishima who has a false grin and looks ready to punch someone. Shinsou who unconsciously touches one of his many scars. And Fumikage whose politeness is a weak shield.

All of them are here, for him, despite their own personal problems.

“Oh.”

They’re nothing like Shouto who can have a conversation entirely through the way he moves his shoulders. They’re loud and brash and have no concept of personal space. They don’t have overtly tragic backstories or arcane powers—outside of Tokoyami and even that’s not really him having the powers but the things attached to him.

Looking at them, it makes him understand a bit more why he’s stressed so much. Shouto is a bastion of silence, a safe harbour during a storm. But the silence is sometimes the calm before the raging tempest. Shouto is violence and danger and a threat all at once, more enemy than friend sometimes.

He can trust that if he punches Shouto, then Shouto will punch back with everything he’s got. He can’t do the same with Ochaco without fear of breaking her. He highly doubts Kirishima will pounce and stab him.

And it’s hard adjusting to people who smile easily and make jokes or even poke fun at each other. They’re pleasantly warm where Shouto is frigid. Even their passions don’t compare to Shouto’s inferno of convoluted emotions.

There’s something missing and Izuku suspects it to be fear. He’s not afraid that they will stab him the moment he turns around. In truth, he’s not experiencing a combat response. He’s just forgotten how to deal with people who are normal. And compared to Shouto, even Tokoyami seems perfectly normal.

“Is that a good ‘oh’ or a bad one.”

“Maybe.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“I guess not.”

He lets them simply figure things out between themselves. He doesn’t take part in their games or jokes, and he may be tense, but he’s not worried. And maybe that’s more than enough.

He finds a deck of cards from somewhere and hands them out. Poker is a simple enough game, one that they all know at this point. He hands out the cards and they play. There’s nothing they bet on, but somehow it becomes increasingly competitive amongst them.

“Oh, so you’re acknowledging your position?”

“Say that again. I dare you,” Ochaco says, glaring at Tokoyami.
Izuku looks to Ojiro as the two argue once again. His blonde friend looks indifferent. Kirishima is playing on his phone. Asui and Ashido are deep in a conversation. Only Shinsou watches the argument. Only he seems to care.

And if that’s the case, Izuku doesn’t have the energy to bother with it.

It’s an hour or so after everyone has fallen asleep that he opens his eyes. He checks once more that Tokoyami and Ojiro are slumbering heavily in their sleeping bags before tip-toeing over to the library shelf. It’s pitch dark but that hasn’t been an issue for a long time. The book his mother gave him, the one his father owned, is on a shelf near the middle. He takes Hawkmoon’s memoir and walks back to the couch.

He reads through it for an hour before he hears someone get out of their sleeping back. It might be Shinsou’s insomnia acting up again—and he knows how pervasive that can be by every midnight text his friend sends. It won’t be any of the girls since they’re taking up his bedroom right now.

It turns out to be Kirishima.

The redhead settles down beside Izuku in the dark. “Hey. Can’t sleep?”

“It’s too… I don’t know. Not quiet, but I don’t feel safe-no, more like I feel like something’s going to jump out at me.”

Kirishima bumps his shoulder with his own. “Hey, I get that. No shame in it. Everyone handles things differently.”

“That’s something out of a bad self-help book.” He sighs and prepares his lie. “It wasn’t just three days.”

“I figured.”

“The guy who kidnapped us could… I suppose you could say he controlled time in a limited space. It was more six months than three days.”

“I haven’t slept since USJ,” Kirishima admits quietly. “Ever since, well, you know.”

“Nightmares?”

Kirishima smiles in the dark, his teeth sharp and glistening. “No. I literally don’t sleep anymore.”

“Huh.” Izuku shrugs. That’s the single least harmful side-effect of his quirk he’s encountered so far. “Is that why your grades started improving?”

That startles a quiet laugh out of Kirishima. “Yeah. Got nothing better to do.”

“I’m sorry. I know how important sleep is.”

“You’re my friend. Knowing what I know now, I think I would still try to save you that day. It might leave me messed up, but I know you’d die for me. For all of us. I think that’s the least I can do for you.”

Izuku closes his eyes. Takes a deep and shaky breath. Says, “I don’t know what I did to deserve any of you.”

“I think it’s because you try harder than anyone I know. You’re like the manliest person I know. Every time the world punches you in the face you just get back up. Don’t matter that you got scars.
Just proof you ain’t going to stay down.”

“Thank—”

“And proof that you two can’t whisper,” Shinsou mutters from behind them. “Can you please have your deep and meaningful conversation without waking me up?”

“Oh, so I was not the only one awoken by their very loud whispers,” Tokoyami says, sitting up from his sleeping bag.

“This was getting really awkward,” Ojiro says next. “I’ve been up since you kicked me trying to get your book.”

He is glad they can’t see how red his face is. “Sorry.”

"It’s fine. I’ve learnt to put up with your clumsiness. If you can’t sleep then I'll stay awake until morning with you."

“Speak for yourself,” Shinsou mutters. “I’m going straight back to sleep after this nonsense.”

“But you don’t go back to sleep once you’re up,” Izuku says, confused.

“He’s merely being difficult,” Tokoyami says. “You may as well switch on the TV if sleeping is no longer a possibility.”

Somehow, he finds himself watching TV well into the morning, surrounded by people he trusts more than the world. He makes space for Ocahco when she and Asui and Ashido join them because apparently, he's loud enough to wake up an entire household.

“Let’s go to the beach,” he declares.

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The sun is out in force. It feels odd on his skin but perhaps not odd in a bad way. Warm, gentle, and caring. All things he’s become disused to in the last few months.

Izuku stares at the sun, wondering how much of its life remains. Billions of years, yes, but after all that he's seen, that doesn't seem very long. A blink of an eye in all honesty.

“You’ve got a lot of scars.”

He glances at Ashido, currently doing her best to cocoon his legs in the sand with Ochaco. He isn't sure why they want to do that, maybe to keep him in place.

I don't like sand, Mikumo says. It's all coarse and rough, and irritating. And it gets everywhere.

Izuku rolls his eyes. It isn’t like his brother is the one who has to deal with the sand.

“I don’t have that many,” Izuku says, almost tempted to cover up. He’s wearing a pair of shorts and his favourite blue shirt, unbuttoned at the moment.

“You have more scars than all of us put together,” Ocahco says. She taps his side. “How’d you get this one?”

He hums. “I think that was fighting Shouto. Pretty sure it was from that.”
Ashido pokes the outside of his right thigh where his bunched-up shorts reveal a jagged burn scar. “That one?”

“That one?”

“Infection that Shouto burnt away.”

Ochaco shudders. “He…”

“Only after I grabbed a knife and chopped out all the bad bits.” Izuku smiles. “It didn’t hurt as much as you think it did.”

“Midoriya, you have an insane pain tolerance,” Kirishima calls. “You saying it didn’t hurt doesn’t mean much.”

Izuku sits up and sees his friend carrying Shinsou over his shoulder. For some reason, he's tied to a stake. Izuku watched incredulously as Kirishima stakes Shinsou a foot or two into the water despite his protests.

"I guess. Well anyway, I think those are all the interesting scars. The rest are from training incidents."

“Even the one on your arm?”

Izuku rolls his eyes. “You know the answer to that question. It happened a long time ago. I’m a lot better now.”

“You don’t just get better from things.”

“No, it’s a long road with a lot of missteps. Just ask my therapist.”

And though Ochaco has that expression that says she wants to ask more questions, she has enough tact not to. Which makes it easy to relax more and more. These are his friends, perhaps not all of them—Shouto’s absence is always right there in the back of his mind—but enough that he can make do.

That calm is the only reason he doesn’t elbow Ojiro when he sneaks up on Izuku and throws him over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. He only sighs when Ojiro throws him into the ocean.

The salt in the water reminds him of blood, an odd thought certainly, but the first that crosses his mind. He surfaces after a few minutes in the blue, staring at the sun through the water. It takes him a while to remember that humans can’t stay underwater indefinitely.

The added water weight makes walking awkward, mostly because his new spine weighs half as much as he does. He wants to get used to that imbalance without using One For All. There may come a day he needs all of his power, even the few sparks he has to give his back additional strength.

He stumbles onto the sand, sitting.

Fumikage takes a seat next to him, dressed similarly to Izuku. His friend says nothing, just watches the water with Izuku.

“You always come to this beach.”

Izuku hums in consideration.

“I guess I do. This is where it began, where I first learnt about my powers.” He grins and it is a
cruel thing. “I even remember the spot. Right there. Funny the things we remember.”

“Yes.” Fumikage glances over his shoulder, making sure everyone is too busy burying Shinsou to listen in on them. “This is where I accepted Eao’s offer.”

“That was stupid,” Izuku says. “Almost as stupid as me accepting its last wish. Things worked out in the end. If I never accepted that wish, you’d never get that dragon and I would be dead a few times over. I wouldn’t be able to walk without that wish.”

“Do you believe it benevolent?”

“Oh, it has a plan. But I don’t think that plan will hurt us.” He runs his fingers through the sand. “There’s one last piece to that wish. One day my disciple will take its wings. I guess we’ll just have to wait to see.”

“There’s a lot we don’t know.”

“We have time to figure it out.” He smiles. “We’ll talk to Shouto when school starts up. Figure things out from there.”

His friend makes a sound of amusement. “Shouto? How long were you in there to call him by his first name?”

“A few months. Thanks for sending your dragon.”

“It was the only aid I could offer.”

“It saved us a few times so I think it counted for a lot. You’re not angry about me lying to them?”

“I understand why you’ve done it,” Fumikage admits. “I may not like it, but I’m not saying the lie. It is not much of a distinction, I am aware, but it is one I can live with for your sake. By the end of this, we’ll have to come clean and not just to our friends.”

“You mean our teachers and our families.”

“More,” Fumikage says tiredly. “There were black flames at Shikoku. We are not alone in touching the abyss. Perhaps we’ll have to have our lies accounted before the world.”

“I fucking hope not.”

“Hey, you two,” Ashido calls. “Stop hiding and come over here.”

Izuku offers Fumikage a smile and helps him up. Together, they walk back.

Seeing them all together sparks an idea. They're all so startlingly human. On a fundamental level, he knows they'll die. He remembers what the dragon told him, that only another monarch could stand the test of time with him.

And maybe that is true but being with the people here is the most important thing in the world right now. If love is the most powerful thing in the universe, if love is powerful enough to change the eternally unchanging and distort the fabric of the abyss, then aren’t the people he loves just as important?

“Let’s make a hero agency together,” Izuku says suddenly.

They all look to him in silence for a beat, processing his suggestion. It comes from nowhere and
comes without the slightest foreshadowing.

“All of us,” he adds after a moment.

“Where’s this coming from?” Ojiro asks.

“Yeah, this is random,” Ochaco says.

Kirishima scratches this back of his head. “I like you a lot and all, but I kinda don’t want to be a sidekick.”

“And I don’t want any of you to be my sidekick,” Izuku says.

“You’ll have to explain that to us.”

“Exactly that. Us. All of us.” He gestures to encompass them. “We make one agency, no main hero or anything like that.”

“That’s not a hero agency. That’s… I don’t have the words for it. A League of Villains but for heroes?”

Izuku doesn’t particularly like that phrasing. “Or maybe like the New Age heroes. Hawkmoon and Graviton Lance and Master Railroad were all equals, all peers. And they were all friends.”

“That’ll be something different,” Ashido says. “And weird.”

“And perhaps something beautiful.” He can't help but smile, nervous energy possessing him. "Just picture it. All of us, standing together and fighting villains."

“You seem pretty insistent on this,” Ojiro says.

Izuku nods, remembering the words they shared before the Sports Festival. It seems so long ago, months for him but maybe only days for Ojiro.

“That way you can make sure I’m not doing something stupid. I’ll be right next to you.” He spins on the spot and nearly smacks Fumikage in the face.

“Cretin,” Fumikage snaps, backing away.

“Just imagine it. Just for one moment, imagine how awesome it would be.”

“I guess it sounds like an interesting idea,” Shinsou says. “Maybe a bit naïve but that’s all your ideas.”

“I know it’s naïve and maybe it’s impossible, but why should it be? Why can’t we do it? Give me a single reason we can?”

“The ranking system.”

Izuku waves that away. “Then we get ranked as a group. We choose the fights we want to fight. We choose how to fight and why we’re fighting. I’m coming to learn more and more that I can’t make the world I want just by smiling. There must be strength as well and I’m stronger when I’m with you guys. Have I ever told you about the girl in the sunflower dress?”

“Oh,” Shinsou says, looking away. “She’s gonna haunt you forever.”
“Maybe there’s a reason she haunts me.”

“What girl?”

He tells them about that little girl in the sunflower dress. The details get hazier with each retelling. Maybe one day all he’ll remember is the dress she wore. Perhaps he’ll forget all about her. As it is, he can still retell his cowardice with perfect clarity. He can still describe the sound of her wails with haunting accuracy.

“Maybe if I had someone else with me, I wouldn’t have been so afraid,” Izuku says. “Maybe it wouldn’t have amounted to much.”

“Is your life just a montage of tragic events?” Ashido asks, eyes wide.

“Maybe. But that’s why I want us to do this together. I know what it’s like being weak and alone. And friends make it easier.

“I love all of you but I don’t think you understand what it means when I say that.” He takes a deep breath to calm his racing heart. “I love you, Shinsou. You’re my first friend and you’ve put up with me. I love you Fumikage for teaching me your ways. I love you, Ochaco, for being kind and vicious and just being you. I love all of you and when I say I love someone, it means I’ll do anything for them. I want to always be with you guys.”

“What happens if we argue?” Ochaco asks.

“Then we talk and shout and cry and make it work. Just like we’ve done already.”

“Alright, say it straight,” Ojiro says. “Tell us, in your words, why you think this is important. Break it down for us from the bottom up.”

That is simple compared to everything else. It makes him love Ojiro all the more for understanding what he can’t put in words.

“I love life,” Izuku says strongly, reaffirming the declaration he made in the void. “I love the concept of it. Life is fragile and delicate. It might not be special or unique, but I think it’s important. And saving people is the only way I know how to preserve life. Maybe it won’t work out, but isn’t trying better than giving up?”

“You’re such a sap.”

“I know and I don’t care. I want to save everyone and I know that’s impossible, but I can try. And doing something impossible is a lot easier with people you trust.”

“Do you really trust us?” Kirishima asks, gaze shrewd.

“I trust you with my life,” Izuku says honestly. “I trust you with my hopes and dreams and my ideals. I’ve trusted you with a lot of secrets. Maybe not all of them yet, but a lot. Would you have come here if you didn’t trust me?”

“No.”

Izuku grins the brightest grin he has. It is light as a feather and freeing of all burdens. It is a grin that holds every ounce of affection he has for his friends, a grin that can make people forget the scars he has. It is the same grin he learnt from All Might, a grin of someone with a deep abiding love for life.
“I want to be a hero. More than anything, I want to be a hero with you guys.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, that was something relaxing after all the suffering people went through for a big part of this story. Next chapter will come with another in-universe document like the one I did for Kurogiri. There will be a few more, though I think this season only has 3 in total.

That's it from me. Let me know what you guys think if you've made it this far by dropping a comment. But if you can't, just know that your readership is more than enough for me.
We Three Kings

Chapter Notes

Supplementing this is an in-universe file on Hawkmoon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘It has been postulated that quirks spread by a transmission vector of some sort that we currently cannot identify. This theory attempts to explain why East Asia, where quirks first appeared, has the highest percentage of quirks whilst countries such as Iceland, Brazil and Mauritania where quirks appeared later have the lowest percentages. It has been conclusively disproven that this transmission vector is airborne, biological, or water-based. Current theories regarding the quantum states of electrons in mitochondria or exotic particles as a result of gravitational waves prove to be popular avenues of research.’


Izuku is glad he’s finally rid of his classmates. Not because he dislikes them, far from it. He would just rather not have people make startling noises or touching him because all those things make him tense, ready to punch something.

Whatever peace he finds from the beach vanishes and without it, he’s a bundle of nerves.

He tries to read Hawkmoon’s memoir once more, doing his best to ignore his feelings on his father suddenly being in his life again. There are better choices, mostly because this is the only book that is signed to Hisashi by the great hero. The man in question tries to draw Izuku’s attention from the doorway.

“Hey,” Hisashi says, after standing awkwardly for ten minutes.

Izuku sighs and lifts his head, not bothering to ask how he got in. There is no way Izuku could miss the rupture in reality even if it came from the second floor.

“What do you want?”

“I thought your mother might have thrown that away,” Hisashi says instead of answering. “Do you want to see her grave?”

“That’s only open three days a year.”

Hisashi smiles, and for a moment Izuku’s heart stops because it tugs at a memory, formless but happy, a remnant from a time they were a family.

“For normal people. So, do you want to?”

“You know I do,” he says bitterly at the manipulation.

His father opens a doorway. Izuku walks through it, behind the man.

The abyss looks weird, transformed by Hisashi’s own will upon it. It lacks the complete and utter
insanity Izuku is used to and looks more like highways of infinite possibility. Oh yes, there are still monsters hiding in circular angles of time and creatures of nuclear fire, but they seem to be secondary to this network of safe—or as far as that applies to the void—worlds.

They say no words as his father navigates their way down a highway that shifts and changes. Izuku errantly bats away an area of decelerated time flow—he has no intention of spending a long time here—and stares down an entropic beast that has the audacity to bar their way. It flees the moment it recognises his power.

His father opens another doorway and they walk through, the inky blackness of the void fading away to the warmth of the real. He is greeted by a hilly landscape, bone dry and cracked heavily with the scars of ancient battles. He has studied this place before, the site where Japan was attacked by its first villain during the Second Dark Age.

In the distance, he can make out the wall that rings the area, the separation between this dead and desolate landscape mourning the long dead, and the lush green lands rejuvenated by centuries of terraforming, a monument to Japan’s resilience.

His father leads him through the rows upon rows of stakes, dozens of names engraved upon them. Many, though, have no name and bear testament to all those who died nameless and forgotten. These markers to the forgotten dead are the most pristine and stand taller than the rest.

So many were lost after quirks emerged centuries ago. The scale of senseless violence is unimaginable to him now: the dozens of warlords that rose up and created petty fiefdoms built on blood and bone, driven only by power; the mad villains who sought only death and suffering; and the two Great Tyrants, Stormwind of Europe and Titan of South America.

“This is the one.”

They stop before a grave marker that looks no different from the rest. It has a dozen names but the one at the bottom, the one that would usually be least important, bears the most important name: Yui Ikari.

Izuku kneels in reverence before the grave marker of a legend, a hero he respects more than even All Might. He loves his mentor, but he knows Toshinori as a person with hopes and fears and dreams, perfectly human in his imperfections.

This woman, however, is a legend, unassailable and untouchable by imperfection.

He sets down the bouquet of flowers, a mix of lilies, chrysanthemums and carnations before her.

Here is the grave marker of the woman who felled Titan, the armoured god who ruled over Brazil with a cruel fist. The woman who struck the final blow against All-Father and Kaiser, supported only by her ally Graviton Lance. The woman who hunted down Herokiller to avenge Hero and her lover Legion who were struck down by cowardly poison. The woman who outlived all the heroes and villains of her time and died peacefully centuries later.

“May you forever rest in peace,” he whispers. “I remember your words. ‘Anywhere can be paradise as long as you have the will to live. After all, you are alive, so you will always have the chance to be happy. As long as the Sun, the Moon and the Earth exist, everything will be all right.’”

He extends his hand and draws forth shadows to make a replica of her great weapon. The handgun is black where hers was silver and gold, and it will never hold her three lucky bullets. But, no matter how lacking, it is the only tribute he can give to this legend.
Izuku places the replica beside the bouquet. They look so paltry and insignificant in the face of her legacy. He is alive only because of her efforts to defeat the Warlords and one the Great Tyrants centuries ago.

“We are here because of you. If there is an afterlife, I know your allies waited all those centuries for you. One day, I hope we are equal to the legacy you left behind.”

His father grips his shoulder, squeezing gently. Izuku tenses but does not pull away. He won’t insult the great hero by doing something so petty.

“She lived a long life. A quarter millennium. Longer even than Hinata Ononoki. I’m glad I got to meet her once before her passing.”

“I don’t think I’ll equal her legacy. I don’t think even All Might can.”

“Let me tell you a secret about being a parent,” his father says softly. “The ceiling of our ability, the greatest we can ever be, is just the floor your children start at. All Might chose you as a successor for a reason. He may never surpass her, but you will. Just put one foot in front of the other and you’ll do just fine.”

“She could have had an island for a grave, a modern-day pyramid if she pleased. That’s what they were going to do. A crypt the likes of which has never been seen.” Izuku stands and inhales the dusty air. "Instead, she chose to have her name added to a mass grave, her body incinerated. ‘My life is no more important than any other,’ she said on her deathbed. ‘Let me be buried with those whom I could not save, the lost and forgotten. Let me die as Yui Ikari, the woman whom Hawkmoon eclipsed.’”

He turns around slowly, taking in each of the grave markers.

There are ten thousand of them and each has a few dozen names. More dead because of villains than in the nuclear fire that bathed Japan in the twentieth century. This loss of life is the legacy he carries each day he chooses to be a hero. Each person dead, unable to be saved is a reminder of the cost of his decision should he ever fail.

“I want to be a hero. I want to make a world where little girls don’t have to fear police officers. A world where you aren’t needed. A world without people like Endeavour and the Emperor.”

“You’ll be a great hero.” His father opens another gateway. “Let’s go.”

“I’m still angry with you,” Izuku says, following behind.

“You have every right to be angry. As does your mother.” His father reaches out ruffle his hair. Izuku ducks away instinctively. “Sorry. I guess I haven’t earned that right.

“No, you haven’t.” Izuku sighs, noting they’re going down another highway. “Ten years is a long time.”

“More than you can ever know. Your mother’s been talking about a divorce.”

Izuku shrugs. “She has every right to it.”

“I know. I just… I guess I never thought this through.”

Izuku stops and stares at his father’s back. The man isn’t much taller than Izuku and but the shadow he cast over Izuku’s past by leaving is enormous.
“I don’t think you begin to understand how angry and upset she’s been every time I’ve mentioned you. If I’m honest, I think the only reason she hasn’t divorced you yet is who because your connections have been paying for our stuff.”

His father pauses, one foot still in the air. He turns back to face Izuku. There is a level of raw grief Izuku hasn’t seen in him before. One that makes him uncomfortable.

But not one worthy of forgiveness.

“I would never leave you guys like that,” Hisashi says hesitantly. “I didn’t have time to sort things out. I wish I knew what would come and I would have left a letter, a note. Something. I thought I’d be coming back in a few weeks. I didn’t mean to be gone that long. Everything I’ve ever done, I've done because I love the two of you.”

Izuku forces his anger down before something in the void is drawn to it. Already, he’s having a hard time keeping it as orderly as it is and not summoning some calamity. He can feel a rumbling in his soul of an abomination stirring in tune with his anger.

“And I can forgive you for not knowing. I can forgive you for taking so long. But you don’t you dare ask me to stop being angry. You left. End of story. I can’t forget knowing my dad wasn’t ever coming home.”

He wants to cry but forces those emotions down. Numbness is better than acknowledging his feelings right now. He can do that later. Maybe shout at his therapist.

But he doesn’t have it in him to speak to his father any longer.

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Shouta Aizawa is dead on his feet.

There is too much to deal with and not enough manpower to go around. He feels guilty about getting his friend Hizashi to deal with things since he’s barely out of critical condition, but right now, anyone who can walk—even with crutches—and communicate gets a job.

A new alert appears on his computer. It’s from one of the police officers that participated in Midoriya’s interrogation requesting a release of the boy’s personal history as part of an additional background check—futile, given that Izuku’s files have all but vanished.

It certainly isn’t as benign as a simple background check.

They’ve probably done the same for Todoroki. Except there is absolutely no way in hell they’re getting past Endeavour’s lawyers.

He calls Nemuri. “Hey, cops are trying to find something to pin the blame of this on Midoriya. Deal with it before someone else interferes.”

“Oh, like I have to deal hero association and helping All Might investigate the League of Villains and oh, I don’t know, some investigation or other I haven’t even touched yet.”

He rolls his eyes, glad she won’t see it. “Just like everything else. We need everything contained before school opens again.”

“I know but you’re asking for the impossible. I’m using third years from General Studies to run a PR campaign because we’ve got no one free. I’m doing background checks on the third-party we're
using to hire third-parties that are subcontracting out duties because of how overworked we are.”

He shakes his head. “Get rid of all the third-parties and just hire the subcontractors directly.”

“Yeah, I’ll just pull out a financial law degree and suddenly know how to handle those documents.”

“Fine. Get… Cementoss to—no, wait, he’s doing something with Power Loader. Ectoplasm. Fuck, get his clones to do something.”

“We’ve been doing that since you suggested it two days ago. I swear he’s about to pass out.”

That reminds Shouta. He grabs a stim pack and injects it in his upper arm quickly. The cold wave of clarity rushes through him, his breathing heavier now. It’s like ice in his brain, painful, but the cold pushes away his exhaustion.

“Did you just take more stimulants?” Nemuri asks, worry evident in her voices.

“I just got five new priority alerts since we started this conversation. I don’t have the time to worry about my health. Fuck, I’m so busy I don’t have time to die.”

“I’ll get on it,” Nemuri says slowly, uncertainly.

Shouta sighs. “Thank you. Get some sleep and yes I know how hypocritical that is. Better one of us gets some rest.”

He ends the call. Reaches over for the pot of coffee that’s just finished brewing. Pours sugar into the jug and drinks straight from it.

In his other hand, he’s drafting a memo to send to their lawyers.

He doesn’t want anyone looking too closely at their students, doesn’t want the imperial household or the government coming close to the school. If they do that, they might find out about the institute Nezu’s been running for the last few decades. And whilst the idea of it keeps him up at night, he can at least use that time awake to contain any of the problems plaguing UA.

In the face of everything, he can agree with Nezu: do more good on balance than bad.

Looking into the students also means they might dig deeper into Midoriya’s background. And that’s the sort of thing he wants absolutely nothing to deal with just because of the fallout that will inevitably come from it.

Partway through writing the memo, he remembers UA has a team of secretaries and people who get paid to write stuff. Regardless of how overworked they might be, he passes on a message for them to deal with the memo instead.

The door opens. Aizawa takes a gulp of coffee as Nezu enters, looking as ruffled as anyone working for UA. The mammal is typing a message in one paw without looking at the device.

“What did you think of Midoriya’s interrogation?”

“He was… you’re procrastinating, aren’t you?”

“Only partly.”

Aizawa shrugs. Nezu is dealing with double Shouta’s workload without including whatever project
he has Sekijirou working on.

“He wasn’t telling the truth. There’s a lot more he isn’t telling us.”

Shouta glances at the personnel roster from Endeavour’s agency, a peace offering since they dealt with much of the stadium security. He selects three of the junior sidekicks and assigns them to Nemuri.

“I felt much the same way. The closest villain I can find is a member of the Yakuza with a time quirk and it wouldn’t be able to do what they went through. I’ve already passed that onto the police. What do you conclude from that?”

“A new party or they were lying.”

“The former terrifies me,” Nezu says. “I can understand the League attacking so brazenly but a new group with the information and abilities to act in that chaos worries me, especially if they’ve kept hidden this long. If it’s the latter, I have my suspicions that it may have to do with his quirk.”

“You think he wasn’t honest about the quirk assessment a few weeks back?”

“Not at all. I think we barely understand the full extent of his power. However, he wants to be a hero and if we keep guiding him well, things will work out. For now, we can ignore his quirk.” Nezu sighs. “At some point, talk to Tokoyami. But, that’s not why I’m here. I need you to sign this letter.”

The notification for it comes in a moment later. The words are blurry, and he sees double for a long minute.

He must be more tired than he thought if reading is this difficult. His frown deepens as he stares at the letter.

“I am not signing an apology letter to Inko Midoriya of all people. Do you really think the kid can tell the difference between normal behaviour and abusive behaviour at this point?”

“I frankly don’t care if you believe Izuku’s words or not. This vendetta has gone on too long. Inko can ruin us if she decides to pursue legal action against us. No, you’re going to sign that apology letter—a letter which our lawyers will keep a copy of. We’re in a burning house. I’m not going to let you pour gasoline everywhere in your arrogance.”

There is a hardness to Nezu’s voice, one that has never been directed at him before.

“He’s my student.”

“Yes. And you’re terrified of failing any more students. I sympathise more than you can imagine. But right now, this isn’t the way to protect him. If the school shuts down or if I’m forced to fire you, how can you protect any of your students? Sign the letter. An unhappy peace is better than any conflict, no matter how short.”

He sighs and clicks the checkmark. His electronic signature appears at the bottom of the page, alongside that of Nezu’s.

“Thank you. I don’t need more problems from you.” Nezu sighs. “I’m still upset you ruined my holiday two years ago. I just wanted a few days of peace and quiet and I come back to find you’ve expelled an entire class.”
“Oh, get over it. You shouldn’t have dumped me with all your work whilst you went to a beach in Greece.”

“Up to that point, I’d worked without a single break for maybe thirty years. Thirty years of monitoring Japan, of making and executing plans older than you, and you destroyed a good chunk of them in a single week. Do you understand how important those children were? In a decade, they would have all been vying for the top spots. They would have had the power and influence to make things better. Do you really think I’d fill a class with students from Hokkaido and Shikoku exclusively by mistake?”

“You gave all of us leeway to act as we pleased.”

"I did. It's, unfortunately, a part of the accords that I must maintain. A loophole my enemies try to exploit often. It rarely succeeds. But there are prices to be paid for having a seat at the table."

“Why was that so important? Why was that so much more important than other people?”

Nezu sighs. It is the same sigh Shouta has given to a student failing to understand basic concepts.

“Because Japan is at war, Shouta. And that war is the only thing that keeps the peace. We’re all fighting for the right to decide Japan’s future. I’m doing so through public perception and moulding the hero industry. The military’s trying to further their control past Shikoku and turn Japan into a military junta. And, if I’m being honest, I genuinely don’t know why the Imperial family hasn’t taken over.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

"Sure, until you consider that people support the militarization in Shikoku. They’re terrified of another purge, of more black flames sprouting and another wave of protests. And if the military is strong, we’re safe from outside invasion.”

Shouta doesn’t shudder at the reminder of that horrible event in his youth. It’s been decades. At the very least, he’s mastered his reaction any time someone mentions the event that got his mother killed.

“Every signatory of the accords balances each other,” Nezu continues. “I may not have an army or a Royal Guard, but most of the top heroes are students I taught. If nothing else, I can call on them for support. But you see, Shouta, whatever strength I have is entirely dependent on how fondly my students remember me. I don’t have a true power base outside UA and I can’t ever have one without violating the accords.”

“Why?” he asks, too tired to think much.

Nezu observes him for a moment.

“Fear. Fear of my intelligence. Fear of how alien I am relative to you humans,” Nezu says, waving with his animal paw. “They’re all worried that if I’m not restrained, I’ll have a power base equal to any of the international powers. They’re terrified I’ll have something as strong as China’s Great Ten or an organisation as numerous as the Vancouver Island Villain Association. Quite frankly, they don’t want me even having an information network half as good as the Taiwanese remnant.”

“Japan is stronger.”

“Perhaps. But you know better than most that stealth and misdirection are your allies. We might have powerful quirks, but there’s guarantee we’d ever win a war. And even if we could, the loss of
life would be too great.”

Shouta hums. More things to research. If half of what Nezu says is true and not paranoia, then there’s too much he is unaware of.

“Have you found anything about my students? The ones that I expelled.”

“Still tracking them all down.”

“And?”

“As I suspected, most of them are living perfectly decent lives. Some aren’t doing as well as I’d like, but that’s the nature of things.” Nezu raises a paw to forestall his arguments. “I’ve passed along their names to some of the alumni. They’ll see to it that they get better jobs.”

“Thank you. And Nagisa’s class? He said only five were still alive. Six including him.”

“Harder to track just by their nature. They were all from Hokkaido and Shikkoku, and people can go to ground easily there. If they don’t want to be tracked, they can hide better than most places. Snipe’s been busy searching the underground for any information on them. It’s taking some time but Snipe should be meeting a broker later this week. We’ll have more information then.”

Shouta nods. “Good. Do you think they’ll be ready for the internships?”

“I think it doesn’t matter,” Nezu says. “We’re too busy to teach them full time. We should be grateful so many agencies are willing to take them on for three weeks.”

The door opens, a secretary barging in. The secretary looks frazzled, hair dishevelled, and panting heavily.

“Sir, we’ve got a problem,” the secretary says between laboured breaths.

Nezu sighs. “One to ten.”

“Wherever you put the crown.”

Shouta is rushing out the door, nearly knocking the secretary down, Nezu on his shoulder. Nearly. He isn’t that rude yet. Still, he makes his way through the school rapidly, glad there aren’t any students to see his mounting panic.

“Don’t do anything foolish,” Nezu murmurs as Shouta races down a flight of steps. “We’ve violated none of the accords.”

“Then why are they here?” Shouta asks harshly, nearly tripping on the last step.

“I don’t know and that worries me. They know I have contingencies in place if they attack me.”

Nezu falls silent. Shouta takes a moment to compose himself and walks outside, back straight and quirk ready. It is a tiny shield against the worry gripping him.

There’s a man standing at the base of the stairs, calm and indifferent to Shouta’s panic. He offers a small wave when Shouta stops, stunned.

The short man is dressed in the white military uniform of the imperial household. That isn’t what makes Shouta pause.
It’s the fact that it feels like looking at Izuku Midoriya.

The hair might not be green but it’s just as dark. The eyes are the same colour and the man even has scars exactly where Izuku does, scars of a different nature certainly, but it is still disquieting. The man below him looks like Izuku in a few decades.

The idea of seeing Izuku, broken and confused and unbelievably kind Izuku, in that uniform, makes him sick to the core.

“What do you want?” Nezu asks without an ounce of politeness. “We’ve broken none of our agreements.”

The man smiles a cruel and twisted thing. "My name's Hisashi Midoriya. You might know my son."

Shouta decides right then and there that he is completely over the headache Izuku gives him every day merely by existing. Because this, right here, explains too much. It explains the security around the home. It explains why the man has no history for the better part of three decades. It explains why every record of Izuku or Inko is suddenly gone.

“I didn’t think you were in the picture,” Nezu says coldly, his fur bristling. “Surprising to see you here.”

The man, Hisashi, takes a step forward. “Well, I was busy. And I think you can tell by the uniform that you can’t silence me or buy me out like any other parent.”

“Unfortunately. I’ll ask again. Why are you intruding on UA territory? What does the Emperor want of us?”

“Him? Nothing. I’m just a father concerned with his son being spied on. That’s going to stop immediately. As far as you’re concerned, from now on, unless Izuku breaks a rule you’re going to leave him alone. No interrogations. No questioning. You don’t even look at his files without my express permission.”

Nezu makes a sound that might generously be called a hiss. “We don’t give in to the demands of a man we can’t even prove is his father.”

“Oh, shut up. He looks like a clone of me. And he is under my protection.” And then the man points at Shouta. “You happen to piss me off, so I will hold you personally accountable if my son is harmed. And if you so much as look at my wife wrong, so much as mutter a bad word in her direction, I will kill you.”

Shouta scoffs. “I’ve had a lot of people threaten me with that. I’ll take my chances.”

The man laughs as if that is the funniest thing he’s heard all year. Then he glares, his jade eyes looking like green fire.

“Oh, you’re funny. This isn’t a threat. If you mess with my wife, I will bring to bear every resource the imperial household has against you. If my son is hurt, I will light this school on fire. Then, when UA is a burning ruin, I will crucify you to it, and watch you burn to death slowly. You think you’re powerful, hidden in your castle, untouchable because of old agreements written by older fools. Deals that I brokered. I promise you that there is nothing in this world that can protect you from me.”

Hisashi takes a single step forward and everything about him changes.
His eyes are like endless green stars, a constellation of dark knowledge. His face is devoid of all emotion, just cruel ruthless efficiency in the hard lines of his face. His scars, once mundane, remind Shouta of gods dying and their corpses being consumed.

Worst of all is the singular and all-consuming promise his presence heralds: death.

“I’ve forced the strongest man alive to stand down,” Hisashi says in a voice like a thousand worlds dying. “Don’t fuck with me, little boy.”

Izuku puts up with his mother’s fussing valiantly, understanding why she is reluctant to let him go. That simple desire to keep him safe from the world warms his heart and he hugs her in return before walking out. The morning air is chillier than he expects but nothing he can’t ignore.

He enjoys the walk for all of three minutes before his father materialises beside him, the doorway existing for half a moment.

Izuku sighs as it collapses.

The last time he saw his father was at the memorial site, yesterday. He hasn’t heard a single thing from the man since then. Given that he had just vanished, claiming ‘important business’, Izuku hasn’t been very pleased with him. Less so than usual.

“What do you want?”

“Just a gift,” his father says and hands him the small wrapped package. “Something of an apology.”

Izuku pockets the gift. “Great. You can go now.”

His father nods. Pats him on the head once. Vanishes through a doorway.

With a sigh, Izuku sets off to the train station, taking his time through the throng of people all trying to go about their business. Mostly, he walks slowly so nothing startles him. It would be a shame to attack someone by mistake.

The train ride is quiet until the first station. He listens to music in peace, watching the world pass by outside. For a moment, he imagines what the world could look like consumed by shadow and eternal flame: a sick miasma of darkness and burning heat and monsters around every corner.

A part of him doesn’t hate that idea.

A poke to his shoulder pulls him away from his thoughts. He sees Shinsou, exhausted as always, and smiles.

“Hey.”

Shinsou takes the seat beside him. “You good?”

“Daydreaming.”

“Wanna share?”

“Is it weird that I look at you and I just get worried? I know you’re here and I know you’re… fine, but I’m worried I’m going to open my eyes and you’ll all be gone.”
“That’s pretty morbid for you. And it’s just a finger,” Shinsou says, waving. It’s odd seeing the empty space where his finger should be. Perhaps because it’s a friend being hurt.

“I’m used to you worrying about me, not the other way around.”

"It's not an important finger. This is the important finger."

Shinsou lifts his middle finger.

“You little shit,” Izuku says, unable to keep from smiling. “I’m sorry.”

“It happens. Look, no one’s fine but it could be worse, you know. That’s what I tell myself every time I close my eyes and see another dead body. Maybe that’s fucked up, but you just have to move forward. It wasn’t me who did and I couldn’t stop it. Feeling guilty is just a waste of time.”

Izuku cocks his head. “Is that working?”

Shinsou chuckles bitterly. “Not in the slightest. But being an insomniac means I don’t sleep enough to deal with nightmares. And honestly, at least I don’t have nightmares about being lynched for having a villain’s quirk. Silver linings, right?”

Izuku shakes his head. “I’m just… I guess I’m glad you’re alright. It’s weird just going back to school like nothing happened.”

“Would you rather the school shut down?”

“No. I guess you’re right.”

That is answer enough and Shinsou doesn’t question him any further. The ride is companionable. There isn’t a decade of resentment or frustration between them. No particularly bad fight. No weird connection to the abyss. Just two people who like each other.

At the gates he asks, “Did you ever, you know, wind up asking Ochaco… um, fill in the blanks.”

Shinsou laughs silent. "Well, there was a terrorist attack and it just didn't seem right to ask when you were MIA."

He ducks his head. “Sorry and you're just going to say I need to stop apologising for everything.”

“Huh, you can learn. See you later.”

Izuku waves as he leaves. He takes the time to remove his father’s gift and unwrap the packaging. And nearly have a heart attack. It is a deck of cards, one that he’s heard rumours of on the internet and always at exorbitant prices. He wants to open it.

Instead, he drops it in his shadow for safekeeping and continues onward.

UA looks different. The gates and buildings are still as grand as he remembers, monuments appropriate to a school internationally recognised as one of the best. So, it isn’t like the paths are dirty or the windows are broken. It’s the way students walk with their heads bowed or huddle in groups, laughing too loud for it to be genuine cheer.

Most telling are the flags. This is the first time he’s seen them at half-mast. Every time he’s seen the gates of UA, the billowing flags have always stood tall, reminders of the unconquerable monolith that is heroism embodied in one institute.
Now, the flags represent the trust people have, tarnished and diminished, but still present. So long as they stand, they can rise again.

He doesn’t make it far in the school before he’s accosted once more.

“Midoriya.”

Looking back, he sees Itsuka Kendo, pulling an aggrieved looking Monoma behind her.

“Hi,” he says for lack of anything better to say.

“I don’t think the great Izuku Midoriya needs to be disturbed,” Monoma says sarcastically, wiping the dust off his shoulders. “He only has time for majestic kicks and breaking stadiums.”

Izuku flushes. “That wasn’t intentional.”

“Keep quiet,” Kendo says to her classmate. “I just wanted to ask how you’re doing. We hear you wound up… well, you know.”

“Being kidnapped? Super fun times.”

Kendo laughs nervously. “Humour, right?”

“Yeah.” Izuku nods and decides to change the subject. “How’s the petition going?”

“Well. We got the Big Three to sign it and most of their class signed. The board of governors is organising meetings over it. It’s only the second years who aren’t interested.”

“You can’t change everyone.”

“Well, It’s good to see you, Midoriya,” Kendo says.

“It is the highest honour for him to bask in my glory,” Monoma says.

Izuku shrugs, not sure how to engage with that. “Okay. Oh, how’s Ibara? I haven’t seen her around.”

“She’s not… she’s not coming back this term,” Kendo tells him. “Injuries. A piece of braided steel broke off and hit her. It’ll take a while to heal.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It was a terrorist attack. Nothing you could do.”

Monomo shifts, his eyes darkening. “If I ever find the person responsible—”

She whacks him on the back of his head.

“Ey,” he says in annoyance.

Kendo grabs him by the collar and brings him close. “You’ll stay the hell away and call the authorities. You don’t mess with villains like that.”

“Tetsuetsu’s dead,” Monoma says, soft as a blade, not caring that he’s being manhandled. “I’m not gonna forgive that, Kendo. If I ever find the people responsible, they’re dying.”

Well, that escalated quickly.
Kendo glares at her classmate. "I don't want to lose anyone else."

“I know. And if we get the people who did it, we won’t ever lose anyone again."

“I’d stop you.”

“I know you would,” Monoma says and there is none of his usual eccentricity. “Thank you, for being better than me. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

There is a tenderness to their words that make him feel like an intruder to something special and private. The words aren't meant for him in the slightest, and yet he is still privy to these details. It reminds him that people have their own hopes and dreams and fears that have nothing to do with him.

It also makes him care for them more. They aren’t friends by any stretch, but they’re startlingly human, and they are his peers.

Kendo looks to Izuku, seeming to remember he is there and struck silent by their words.

“Well,” she says slowly, awkwardly, grief colouring her voice, “see ya.”

She pulls Monoma with her who doesn’t so much as look at Izuku.

*You can’t help them. You can only move forward.*

He sighs. There isn’t any choice but to go to class and face his peers.

His class is a mess of bandaged people.

They look like extras to a B-list zombie movie. And one with a terrible costume designer at that. The class only has a few people and he waves to Asui who waves back, and Kirishima who is currently in an arm-wrestling contest with Sero. Which Iida isn’t stopping. He frowns but decides his friend must just be willing to let people relieve stress after the Sports Festival.

It also looks like neither Sero or Kirishima are putting much force into their competition.

It may be cruel, but a part of him is glad that no one in his class is dead. And yet, there should be twenty desks, not seventeen.

Shouto sits in his seat alone, looking out the window. The set of his shoulders is tense. Izuku walks over, making sure to keep his footsteps loud. No need to give Shouto a reason to stab him.

“Hey, Shouto,” he says loudly.

He hears a crash but chooses to ignore it. Probably just Sero losing the arm-wrestling contest.

“Izuku.”

Another crash and someone hissing, “Keep quiet,” almost distracts Izuku but he powers through it and sits on the edge of the desk.

“You look pretty bad.” Shouto tilts his head slightly a bit in response. “Like someone just spilt some ice-cream you waited an hour to get. Do I have to punch him again?”

“Please don’t,” Shouto says quietly.
His posture is open so Izuku takes it as a sign that it isn’t Endeavour that has Shouto looking so bad. “Okay. Wanna meet up?”

“The fuck is this shit?” Bakugou shouts, startling Izuku such that he falls off the desk. "Do you fucking punch everyone with shitty backstories into being your fucking friends?"

He stares at Bakugou in bewilderment, noting the dark brace around his right arm. And then notices everyone else is staring at him as well.

“No?”

A vein appears on Bakugou’s forehead. “You lying piece of—”

Jirou shoulder checks Bakugou from behind, interrupting him. “Move and shut up.”

“You bitch,” he snarls back, reaching to slap her hand away with his bad arm, the one in the black brace.

Izuku sees the pain cross Bakugou’s features, a single moment of weakness that is noticed by everyone. The class falls silent because Bakugou, despite everything, has always been a force of nature. And to see him visibly in pain is like seeing one man hold back a hurricane.

It simply isn’t right.

“Fuck off you whiny little bitches,” Bakugou shouts after a beat, a moment’s hesitation.

“What did we say about that word?” Jirou asks, before twisting Bakugou’s ear.

Izuku takes the opportunity to find a seat as the two argue. Or, more accurately, Jirou teasing Bakugou mercilessly. Izuku stares incredulously as Kaminari joins in.

A soft brush of a finger against his wrist makes him look back at Shouto. He’s not smiling exactly, but he is amused by the way he is leaning back slightly in his chair.

Izuku shrugs and takes his seat as Sero and Kirishima join Jirou and Kaminari.

He retrieves the deck of cards when no one is looking in and very slowly out the first card. It has a metallic sheen and a thin protective covering on it. The Ace of Spades is a picture of one of All Might’s battles in America. The second card is a picture of him with David Shield shaking hands before All Might would leave for Japan again.

Aizawa enters looking haggard and tired. His eyes are so bloodshot that there is more red than white, and his fingers twitch.

“All of you shut up right now,” he snaps.

And they do. Aizawa is rarely ever overtly angry. But considering he looks like he’s on more stimulants than is healthy, it may explain a lot.

*Why is he glaring at you?*

Izuku isn’t certain of that. He offers Aizawa an uncertain smile. In return, all he gets is Aizawa turning his attention back to the class.

“Allright people,” Aizawa says, voice hoarse. “Good news, no one’s getting expelled.”
“Everyone knows you’re not expelling anyone,” Asui mutters loud enough for everyone to hear.

Aizawa glares at her. “I am going to ignore that because I am too tired to care.” He takes a visible breath. "As I said before the festival, it's a good chance to get recruiters looking at you for internships. Usually, we'd do it this week, but someone decided to blow up our stadium. As a result, a lot more attention fell on you and more recommendations were submitted."

“Hell yeah,” Kirishima shouts.

“Don’t get excited. Most agencies just want cheap labour to deal with the increased workload. Actually, that sounds like a great idea. Next person to interrupt me is going to be my errand boy. Usually, I’d give a speech about hero names but I don’t have the energy for that. Instead, you’re getting a nice set of rules about your hero names and you’ll submit them to Midnight for review. You have until tomorrow evening to get a name Midnight approves of.”

“You’re just being a lazy fuck.”

“Bakugou just shut up already. I don’t want to have you for three weeks.” Aizawa looks back to the class. “Also, for security purposes, all of you have to download a new app for your phones. You press the giant emergency button and it sends out a message with your location and starts recording everything. I hope you’re all smart enough to be able to press that button. Questions? No? None? Good. Here are your recommendations. You have fun. I have more important things to deal with. Unless the class is burning, Iida, I don’t care.”

Aizawa points the remote at the board and clicks a button on his way out. Names and numbers appear on the board.

Izuku doesn't really pay attention to them. He's a bit more interested in the limited edition All Might deck of cards he has, courtesy of his father. He may be angry at the man, but he knows the deck costs a lot of money.

“Holy shit, Midoriya.”

He looks up at Ashido. “What?”

“Look how many offers you got.”

He frowns and looks at the board, not expecting more than one or two. It takes him a bit to go through the list of names: Ojiro who has twenty-three; Ashisdo with thirty; Kirishima just breaking a hundred, Tokyoyami with nearly a thousand; Bakugou, Todoroki, and Ochaco with nearly double that each; and then his name at just over four thousand.

“Huh.”

"How’d you do it, man?” Kaminari asks, fake-crying. “You always pull wins outta your ass.”

Izuku shrugs. “Maybe get kidnapped?” He looks around, noticing the mood has instantly died. “That was a joke.”

“Maybe you should lay off on the jokes,” Sero says.

“Yeah, you’re really bad at them.”

“I don’t think you’ve ever made a good one,” Ojiro adds.
Izuku shrugs once more, still shuffling the cards. They’re heavy as far as cards go but the images of All Might’s battles on them are worth it. Especially with how the jokers are signed.

“Okay.”

“He doesn’t fucking care,” Bakugou says, standing. “I’m not staying with you cunts if we don’t have class.”

Bakugou gives them the middle finger before striding out.

“Is someone going to make sure he doesn’t do something stupid?” Kaminari asks.

Yaoyorozu stands. “I’ll deal with it.”

Iida takes charge after that. They may not have traditional classes, but there is required reading they have to go through. Their class rep guides them through it and has them teaching small groups. Until it is time for maths and Kirishima pushes him to the front of the class.

It’s basic calculus work, nothing that would trouble him on any given day.

He teaches the class easily, fielding their questions and trying not to be side-tracked by explaining higher concepts. After the lesson, he goes for lunch and picks at his food for a few minutes. Seeing normal food after eating the hearts of godlings and metallic flesh is disquieting.

It just seems so lacking in comparison.

Eventually, the concerned glances he keeps on getting from Shinsou and Ojiro make him put the chopsticks down. “Staring at me won’t get me to eat. I’m not hungry. Get over it.”

He stands and gets rid of the lunch tray, walking out of the lunchroom without another glance. He wanders through the school to clear his head, wondering why his temper runs so hot.

Blame your father, Mikumo says.
That makes him laugh.

“What’s got you laughing, baby Midoriya?”

He looks up. “Hi, Hatsume.”

She’s dressed in what can only be work clothes, stained black with oil and a dozen more colours from other chemicals. Despite that, she looks so happy and calm despite the Sports Festival that happened so recently.

“You should stop by the workshop sometime. I’ll design a new costume for you.” She twirls her spanner.

“Okay. Why?”

“Well, the government’s funding a lot of my designs now. I hate having to fill out their paperwork and deal with their tiny design iterations, but they let me do whatever I want the rest of the time. So, it’s a thank you present. You wanna fly? I’ll get you a jetpack.”

He steps back. Her grin is just a bit too gleeful. “Sounds... awesome.”

“Now, onto important things. How’s your boyfriend?”
He blinks. “What?”

“Really? Rumour mill says Todoroki valiantly saved you and you fell wildly in love with him, and that you’re going to elope.”

He flushes. “Okay, I am done with this conversation.”

“Wait,” she calls out. “Let me live vicariously through you. I need the details!”

Classes, or rather, Iida getting them to read from their textbooks, the rest of the day passes peacefully enough. Izuku doesn’t read from his textbook during these periods. It’s a waste of time, really, given that he could teach a class on quirk history any day of the week.

It is on his way out the school that he hears a loud thud.

Izuku pauses, cocking his head. He listens and yes, the sound exists outside his mind. He follows it to a hallway that a bit out of the way.

There is Tokoyami backed up against a wall. Three students he doesn’t recognise surround his friend and all of them look ready for a fight.

His first reaction is to break them.

His second reaction is to break them.

His third reaction is to break them in a way he can get away with.

“Hey,” Izuku says, forcing a smile even though all he feels is a cold rage. "How's about you take a step back?"

The one holding Tokoyami glances back. “Stay the hell outta this. This bastard will pay.”

Tokoyami looks to him, indecision clear in his gaze. “Don’t, Midoriya.”

“You should listen to your friend,” one of the two girls says, her limbs tensed in preparation. “I lost family to fuckers like this.”

Izuku glares at her. Any other time he might feel sympathy at the bandages or the cast on her arm. He might be interested in why the third has a medical cane. But not now.

“Maybe you don’t know me,” he says, walking forward. “But I’ll be honest, if you don’t let go, I’m going to break every bone in that hand.”

“First years always think they’re the shit after the festival,” the third bully says. “Go back—”

One For All fills him with power.

In the space between breaths, he has crossed the distance. Before the bullies can react, he grasps the first bully's wrist harshly.

“I will break your wrist first,” Izuku warns, voice steady as a mountain, his grip unyielding. “Then I’ll break the next twenty-seven bones in your hand.”

The bully he’s holding gulps visibly. “You wouldn’t dare.”
“Try me.”

Izuku smiles, a tiny portion of crystal madness peeking through.

He’s stabbed one of his closest friends in the back in a desperate gamble. Breaking the bones of someone he dislikes will be easy, easier than beating Shouto to a bloody pulp. Easier than kicking him off a cliff. Easier than punching the number two hero without fear.

Easier than facing down an endless monstrosity that destroyed galaxies.

He glares, knowing that the bully will see eternity reflected in his eyes and his sheer indifference to a concept so mundane. These are the same eyes that stared down gods and told them to fuck off. These are eyes that have made sense of unfathomable logic.

A teenage boy is nothing to eyes that have seen the vastness of the universe.

“Hey, ain’t worth it,” the girl says. She looks to Izuku, wary and almost skittish. “Let go of him and we’ll go our separate ways.”

Izuku nods and releases the bully who steps back quickly.

“Come after him again and I’ll break you,” Izuku warns. “And that goes double for any of your friends who think they can follow up.”

“Fucking protecting a villain,” the bully says, stepping back with his cohorts. “The law will catch up with you fucks.”

Izuku says nothing and watches them until they are gone. Then he releases the breath he didn’t know he was holding and lets One For All fade away.

“That was unnecessary,” Tokyami says, pushing off from the wall. “But thank you.”

“What’s up with them?”

Tokoyami rolls his shoulders, straightening his blazer. “They see the black flames and naturally associated them with Shikoku. And very many people had family and friends in Shikoku.”

Izuku’s fists clench. “That’s no excuse. And don’t you dare tell me they’re justified. No, that Is not how it works. They’re being assholes and I’ve seen enough of that shit to last a lifetime.”

“You’re talking about the girl.”

Izuku relaxes his fingers. “I thought I was over it but I guess she’ll always haunt me. Seeing my dad just brings everything back.”

“Good fathers seem to be in short supply.”

That startles a laugh out of him. “Let’s go to the beach. It’s time we sit down and talk.”

The walk to the beach is familiar, one they have done many times over.

He jumps on a railing and spreads his arms wide, teetering for a moment. Once he has regained his balance, he puts his hands in his pocket and walks on the thin railing as easily as Tokoyami walks on the ground.

“Have you given any thought to a hero name?”
"Not really. Don’t particularly care.” He gestures to himself, spinning on the spot in an act of balance that would make Jin proud. “Why can’t I just be Izuku?”

"It is not the name one would associate with a hero. It is the name of a friend, not a great hero."

“If I wanted to, I could call myself Deku.” Tokoyami grunts, a request for information. “It was something of an insult and something of a nickname from Kaachan. I guess calling him Katsuki makes more sense now. We’re not the same kids and I don’t really care what he does. I don’t have to be the Deku to his Kacchan. I’ve seen too much to be defined by him.”

“People grow. Still, I dislike him greatly.”

“Well, he doesn’t care He’s got Yaoyorozu and Jirou from what I can see. Maybe even Kaminari. I think the two of us together was always just a toxic and volatile mix,” Izuku says ruefully. “Do you have a name?”

“Tsukiyomi.”

“The god of the moon. A guiding light in the dark.” Izuku nods. “It’s a good name. I guess Shadowshield works for me. It’s honest to me without giving it all away. I don’t think I’m arrogant enough to name myself after a god. Besides, they’re no good ones left. I mean, I called the godflame Amaterasu when I first saw it.”


“Do I look like I make storms?”

“Who knows. Perhaps you shall one day.”

He wonders at that, wonders at the true extent of his powers. In the abyss, he wields darkness, the very foundation of that alien plane. But here, in the real world under the sun, he can only wield shadows, a pale comparison of the full power he has used before. But none of that has anything to do with storms.

And what of the living lightning? Mikumo asks.

He considers that, remembering how he wielded bolts of lightning in that last battle against the Elder Thing that tried to consume Shouto’s hellfire. Then again, that was his intent made manifest in a realm where promises can be solid and dreams are just as real as anything here.

Tokoyami chuckles. “Some see Susanoo as a war god as well.”

“I would rather be a peacemaker than another Warlord.”

“I know you would not. It’s too quiet here,” Fumikage says, gesturing to their surroundings. “No one’s around.”

“I asked my dad to make sure no one was observing us. Complete privacy.”

“He’s well connected, I take it.”

His smile is brittle. “My father wore a white uniform when the Purge of Shikoku happened.”

“I can’t judge,” Fumikage says slowly after a beat. “Not when my father is what he is.”

Izuku cocks his head. “Sometimes the void contaminates the real world. And when that happens,
you can’t really save anyone. It’s just a matter of burning away the infection. That’s what he said.”

“Do you doubt him?”

“No. I’d know if he was lying. He’s just like me.” He shakes his head. “Maybe I’m just like him.”

“Well, should I ever find myself faced with that choice, I will remember your words.”

“Do you know what’s happening for everyone who… who died?”

"Unfortunately. The school will hold a special assembly come Friday to commemorate those who died." Fumikage sighs. “It’s odd that villains would resort to an act like that. Theft and murder, I understand, but an act of terrorism like that has not occurred in decades.”

“Well, we can ask them once they’re behind bars. They hurt people I care about and for that, I’m going to find them. It might not be tomorrow, but the League will go down.”

“I find I agree with you.”

Shouto is already at the beach, standing patiently on the pier. His back is to them and he seems relaxed. Izuku points at him.

“I invited him here because we’re all connected. All three of us.”

Tokoyami nods. “Dark Shadow has mixed feelings about him.”

“I can understand why. Will that be a problem?”

Fumikage pauses. “No. It claims it’s come to accept what needed to happen for the two of you to survive.”

“Shouto,” Izuku calls out.

His friend looks back, his black eye seeming to burn with power. That disquieting moment of his feelings laid bare passes quickly. There aren’t any secrets he’s hiding from Shouto, and if there are, then they’re hidden from Izuku as well.

“You gonna stand all day?” Izuku asks, kneeling in kiza to the left.

Shouto’s reactions are guarded. Probably due to Tokoyami. Shouto kneels similarly to Izuku as Tokoyami sits cross-legged.

“You called us here.”

He smiles at Tokoyami. “Well, you might as well bring them out. It’s gonna be that kind of conversation.”

Tokoyami makes a sound deep in his throat. Swirling darkness rises from his shoulder and Dark Shadow manifests. It hovers protectively over its master, the thread of darkness binding it to Tokoyami tiny and thin, almost like a finely braided chain.

Another spot of darkness appears on Tokoyami’s side. A chain made of darkness appears and travels straight to the water. The head of his dragon breaches the surface, its eyes focusing on Izuku for a moment before it looks back to its master.

Izuku extends his hand and brings forth a swirling mass of darkness from his shadow. He lets it
settle around his legs, oscillating faster and slower without much thought.

He nods to Shouto who sighs affectionately. Dark flames flare up from his right arm. Shouto forms orbs almost like mini suns out of the godflame and lets them orbit his body.

“So, we’re all pretty different.”

“So, we’re all pretty different.”

“Your ability to understate all matters will forever astound me.”

Izuku ignores him.

“Well, I got my… abyssal quirk factor from my dad? So, did Shouto. And both are dicks for different reasons. Mine took part in something I hate. His is an abusive shit. Yours any better?”

“Plainly put, he’s a violent murderer.” The casual admission startles Izuku. “I’ve spoken to him more in recent days than in recent years, and the stories leave me… disquieted. He is not the man I want to be and we fight at every turn now. But I believe the quirk factor did manifest from him.”

He is chained to his rage and his blades chained to his rage, Dark Shadow says, its voice relaxed and peaceable. Your dragon is chained to your soul and your soul chained to your dominion. They are symmetrical abilities even if they are not equivalent.

“But why us?” Izuku asks the oldest among them, a tree that’s lived and seen more than Izuku can imagine. “My quirk drove me mad. Yours made you suffer in the past. And you’ve had to deal with a corrupting influence since you were a kid. But suffering doesn’t make us inherently special.”

Much of my wisdom is gone but in the presence of you three kings, much of it returns as well. I do not know with complete certainty but I know that everything has waited for you three young Gods.

Dark Shadow shifts, changing shape before his very eyes.

Its form elongates, what would be legs on its brethren twisting till they form roots that burrow deep in Tokoyami who seems not to notice much. It gains branches and leaves until it looks like an odd cross between a biped and a tree, an odd and alien symbiote to be certain.

Somehow, this seems the truest incarnation of Dark Shadow.

Dark Shadow speaks in a light tenor, warm as the stars and just as constant. There is a richness to its voice, a joyous timbre that leaves Izuku feeling calm as an ocean on a spring day.

Shadowking, anathema to void life and true life both—your kingdom is the inky black of the abyss, the foundation of the void, the power to match any challenge by the grace of true dark and the lines of tribute from ruinous throne worlds that existed before light and time. To you goes the right to drench all reality in darkness and impose your anathema logics.

Scorchking, heart of the godflame and bearer of its sight—yours is entropy and energy, creation and destruction in equal measure: from you the concepts of time and gravity and all the natural laws were born. It is your right to burn reality in your image and consecrate reality with hellfire.

Slaveking, my prince of crows and slaver of all life—by your chains shall you bind the lives that arise from the intersection of true dark and godflame, slaves to your will forever no
matter their power. Those slaves shall endlessly tithe unto you their energy and loyalty to do with as you please. To you goes dominion and sovereignty over the concept of life that exists under Disparity.

“That doesn’t explain what we are,” Izuku says softly, disappointed, for that is an explanation of what something is, not why it is.

“I don’t care,” Shouto says. Izuku glares at him but Shouto shifts his shoulder slightly, completely indifferent. “I paid the price and got my power. It doesn’t really matter to me.”

“That’s not how stories work,” Izuku says slowly, looking at Shouto and the dark flames in his hand. “Everything you went through in the abyss was a story. It was a metaphor for your suffering in the past. Getting a new power cost your memories and passion, but it also freed you of the past. But it can’t just end like that.”

He looks to Tokoyami next. Dark Shadow hovers above him. Behind Tokoyami, in the water, his dragon observes them silently, observing the conversation between kings.

“Because you broke your code of ethics, you got me hurt. And since then, you’ve been doing everything to atone for it and grow as a person. And your reward for all that guilt was a new power. It may have costs down the road, and your moral code will probably be challenged more, but it makes narrative sense.”

“I think I understand something about you now,” Tokoyami says, doing his best not to smile in his odd way. “You really do think of things as storytelling tropes.”

“I do not… okay, I use them but that’s because truths and metaphors are the same things in the void. And that place makes more sense than here.”

That’s quite sad, Mikumo says.

Shouto leans back, as does Dark Shadow. “Izuku, who the hell is that?”

A few days ago, anyone else seeing Mikumo would have surprised him. Considering his father came and shattered his worldview on the matter, Shouto being able to see him isn't shocking, not when one of his eyes can see Izuku’s soul.

“My dead twin brother,” he says, waving away any possible questions before they start. “It’s weird. It involves my dad. I don’t want to talk about it right now.”

“You mean Mikumo,” Fumikage says.

Izuku blinks. “I told you that?”

“You have trusted me with many things, your brother included. If you do not wish to speak on the matter, who are we to force you? What right do we have to question you?”

You hold every right to question a peer. But perhaps the question truly does not matter. Dark Shadow says, looking at a spot near Izuku. Perhaps the universe exists to be observed and thus all forms of life arose. Perhaps the abyss exists because it wishes to be observed, to be defined by a singular will, and thus you three were born. If that is the case, no choice you make is wrong. I do not believe there is a destiny for you. All possibilities are open. What fate can bind Gods?
“We’re not gods,” Izuku counters. “Stop calling us that.”

What word better describes you, shadowking? Within the void, your true form creates endless realms of darkness. And in the real, the endless lines of tribute and sword logic allow your corpse to win against any threat. You’ve faced monsters that would destroy this world simply with their attention. What is that if not a God?


“My father once told me that in the past people with quirks would have been worshipped as gods and that we should never believe in the reach of godhood. I agree with you, Izuku. I could not face the threats you have. I would have died during those same battles.”

My prince of crows, yours is the slavery of all life. With that dragon alone, your power has grown and your pool of energy expanded greatly. Your kingdom must be filled first before you can truly ascend. Bind life and your power shall grow exponentially. Scorchking, you burnt entire worlds and living gods in your image and trapped them in your own personal hell. Deny it all you will, the very fabric of the abyss has acknowledged you.

“What the fuck are we supposed to do?”

Whatever you please. There is no fate prescribed for you.

“I don’t like that answer.”

Then forge another destiny, shadowking. You are bound only by yourself. What right do I have to command a king? Ultimately, we will love or die by your decisions. Your whims carry the weight of life itself.

“I don’t want that responsibility,” Izuku says tiredly, weary with the weight of the world.

“You have us,” Fumikage says warmly. “Trust in us and we will trust in you.”

“It’s too much power for any single person to have.”


“That isn’t a good answer.” Izuku sighs. “You know, I used to just be a quirkless kid and now you’re trying to tell me I’m a God. With a big ‘G’ at that.”

I can give you no answers, Dark Shadow says. The universe simply is. Asking why it came into existence is a foolish gambit. But I suppose, the secrets of the universe are trifling concerns to you, now. Do as you wish, shadowking. Live as a human if it pleases you. Conquer everything should you feel the urge. Walk the vacuum of space and see all that reality has to offer. You are constrained only by yourself.

He looks to the sun setting over this meeting of kings and wonders at the future. It seems so absurd that any single person should have so much power. The very idea is like trying to hold the image of every star in the sky and then trying to map every single planet and asteroid all at once in your mind. Absurd and unreasonable for the human mind.

And yet, deep down, concepts such as eternity are things he has seen and been unimpressed by
He’s walked to the beginning of a universe and watched its birth pangs, seen that which existed before the laws of the universe were writ in stone: a formless and howling pit of madness. He has watched the force of gravity snake away from the grand unified force at the very beginning of everything and observed the electromagnetic force follow suit, leaving the nuclear forces together. But even those sibling forces split apart and became their own entities.

All of this he witnessed in an area of the abyss where time behaved differently, where an hour for lunch was as long as the formation of a universe. A place where his perception of time fundamentally altered so that he could witness it as nothing more than a few glorious hours of entertainment, where a Planck time was an observable phenomenon for a human.

For pure entertainment, he witnessed and recorded events that would utterly revolutionise modern-day science. Compared to the trivialities found in every corner of the abyss, it is nothing more special than another setting sun.

Is it truly so absurd? Mikumo asks.

“Make me a promise,” Izuku says, standing and facing them. “Promise me that you’ll stay with me. Promise me the two of you won’t ever leave me.”

“If you don’t kick me off a cliff again,” Shouto says wryly.

That startles a laugh out of Izuku, a single clear note. And for a moment, it seems like the entire world brightens with his joy. He looks to Fumikage and offers him a smile. Dark Shadow is gone, returned to the safety of its master’s soul.

“And you?”

“I swore an oath to you once. Have you forgotten it already?”

“I guess I have.”

He rubs his scar awkwardly, knowing it could only have been from the Battle Trial so long ago. Honestly, he was so hopped up on meds and anti-psychotics that he hardly remembers his first few weeks of school.

Still, from the sadness in Fumikage’s eyes, it must have been important to him.

“I promise I won’t forget it this time.”

“I swore that so long as I lived, you would always have an ally in me,” Fumikage says solemnly. “I do not mean to break any oaths I make. They have guided me well. Perhaps they will guide me well in the far future.”

Izuku forces a grin and stands. He pulls Fumikage and Shouto with him, not caring for their protests. It doesn’t matter that he barely comes up to Shouto’s shoulder or that Fumikage is a finger or two taller than him.

They stand as equals. Nothing as mundane as height can change that. Not when the crystal nightmares of his bones and the dreaming dead gods within his spine whisper that unequivocal truth. Come what will, there will always be fire and darkness and life that arises.

Nothing can change that.
“Alright,” he says, accepting what is. “The three of us. To the very end.”

“To the end” Shouto agrees.

“We three kings,” Fumikage says, nodding. “I suppose I can live with you two miscreants as friends.”

Just for that, Izuku pushes him off the edge and into the ocean. His friend squawks as he tips over, flailing his arms wildly as he falls. He lands with a large splash.

A few moments later, he surfaces. His feathers are matted to his skin and he looks completely undignified, nothing at all like a king. Izuku smiles, bright as a sun exploding.

He reaches out to help pull Fumikage out.

“Was this necessary?”

Izuku laughs, clapping hands with Fumikage. “Absolutely.” He pulls with all his strength, lifting Fumikage partially out of the water.

Which is, of course, when Shouto pushes him forward.

His life is absurd and filled with madness. Maybe this is all a hallucination brought on by a psychotic break—and, honestly, that idea fills him with both dread and peace. Maybe there isn’t a happy ending with powers that can destroy the universe, but right now, all he cares about is getting revenge and forcing Shouto into the water.

For a few minutes at least, he can put his mind away from conversations of godhood and an unclear future, and just be a kid again. A kid who doesn’t have to bear the sins of his father and the whims of a cruel universe.

He can be a kid who mercilessly drags Shouto underwater the moment he catches the bastard.

End of Season III-A: Revelation

Chapter End Notes

Well, there ya go. A bit of worldbuilding and a lot of answers.

So, I'm going to be going on hiatus for a bit. This story quickly went from something I did for fun to a fulltime job, hobby, my destresser, and a major stresser as well. A lot of it came from treating this season as though it was only as long as season 1 or 2 when it's longer than both by a big chunk. So whenever I came to the conclusion this season was done, something else popped up. And by the time I was nearing the end, the quality lagged a lot. And I don't want to release shit for the next 10 chapters. At this point, you guys have the grounding necessary to go into the second half of this story. You know the major players and their affiliations as well as the state of the world, even if not all the details. The rest of this season covers really going into depth to set up the grand story of the world. And you know what, I don't want that to be a half baked poorly edited mess.

So, I'm taking a while off to get the rest of this season in a state I enjoy without having
to take time away from school, my personal life or my health. This chapter is the perfect stopping point for a while.

If you've enjoyed this, let me know. If not, let me know as well. But as always, your readership is more than enough for me. Cheers. I'll see you when I'm back.
Welcome to the first chapter of the second half of Season 3. I'm still running a discord server which can be found at the following: https://discord.gg/4YvCTYR.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Season III-B: Accelerando

‘The Royal Guard of the Imperial Household has three primary duties. The first of these duties is the protection of the Emperor and the designated Royal Lines. Each member of the Royal Guard has been handpicked to be a loyal and lethal instrument to the Emperor. To defeat a Royal Guard is an incredible feat for they possess powers that defy expectation. Where an Emperor may hold the power to shatter a country, the Royal Guard possess the strength necessary to capture cities, defeat opposing quirk users, and hold back small armies.

They demonstrated each of these capabilities during the Anti-Quirk Riots by recapturing Sapporo, annihilating the extremist organisation Aorgiri Tree that aided the quirkless militia, and holding back the entirety of a special-operation platoon that managed to infiltrate the Imperial Palace. They, along with the Emperor, ensure Japan’s supremacy in quirk related combat for they do not abide by the unspoken rules of Japan’s Heroics industry.’

—Excerpt from ‘Examining the Japanese Imperial Family: An American’s Perspective’ by David Hayter.

“Shouto, can we talk?”

He looks up and sees his sister Fuyumi. There is a nervousness to her and it takes all his concentration not to automatically view her soul with his right eye. With the way it has changed, he can lay bare all her thoughts and secrets. He loves her too much to try.

Right now, he’s in bed well past the time he would normally be up and training. Lying in isn’t something he has had the opportunity to do and today he takes advantage of that chance to be a lazy teenager.

He sits up, leaning his back against the wall. She knows him well enough to read the tiny changes in his expression and walks in. She sits on the edge of his bed, close to his knees.

For a long time, they simply look at each other. She looks so much like his mother barring the glasses and the few streaks of red hair. An insidious part of him wonders if he loved her in the past simply because she looks like his mother, looks like safety and comfort, but without any memory of betrayal.

It doesn’t matter anymore. Those memories of his mother are gone, burnt away in black fire.

“Yes,” he says once he realises she is waiting for his explicit permission.

“You weren’t kidnapped, were you? You’re too tall now.”

He shakes his head. “Got lost.”
“And you don’t remember mother. That’s why you asked me to tell you about her.”

“I made a deal to survive. That was part of the cost.”

She reaches out and brushes her fingers near his right eye. Her body runs cooler than his right side by about twelve degrees.

“And your eye? Can you see out of it?” His lips twitch in amusement. “I’m asking a serious question.”

He looks at her and sees her nervous system in startling detail, the trail of neurons firing and crossing synaptic junctions. He could, given enough time, learn to read the electrical currents of her brain and turn those to words. But that would take decades at best.

“I know. I can see everything now. I can see your thoughts being formed even if I don’t know what they mean.” His gaze falls on her torso. “I can see the foetus you terminated.”

She pulls back, her face a mix of horror and disgust and shame. “That’s not—no one was supposed to know.”

“Sorry. That wasn’t kind.” He blinks, letting the enhanced sight fade away. “I’m not judging you. I can just see these things. I try not to. This is the first time I’ve looked at you like that.”

She takes a short breath. “Do you want to talk about what happened?”

“Not really. It was hard enough telling mother.”

“It won’t get any easier if you keep quiet.”

“I know.”

He extends his right hand. Black flames come to life dancing across the surface of his palms like waves crashing against the shore. Fuyumi observes them curiously, not disgusted, but also not at ease.

“Let me tell you the truth about Endeavour and me. I know you always said I had one quirk, and that it belonged to me and not him. That was wrong. The Hellfire I inherited from Endeavour is its own quirk, sitting side-by-side with mother’s ice. They really are the flames of hell.”

The flames shift and burn away a tiny portal to the portion of the abyss where every creature he killed burns in eternal agony. It is a tiny glimpse to the dead gods he has revived and slain, to the shambling abominations burnt in effigy, and to the worlds of blasphemous truths consecrated in his image.

He filters the image so that Fuyumi isn’t struck by madness, burning away the negative influence of fluctuating quantum-state serpents trying to propagate their final moments of undeath to the real world. They mutate endlessly, a memetic nightmare that, if given the chance, will alter the world to something darker and made of crystal engines.

She looks pale at the sight. “What are… what is that?”

“A long time ago, before any of this was even a dream, there was only true dark, darkness so infinite and all-consuming that only a fire that exists at the beginning and end of all things could dispel it. Those creatures you saw burning in my own little hell were born from the disparity of light and dark. This world we live in is just the highest layer of reality universe where the
godflame’s influence reigns supreme. Time and entropy and every natural law you take for granted are just the influence of this fire.”

“And that makes you what exactly?” There is a quiver to her voice, an oscillation in her vocal cords that means fear and apprehension.

“‘What is fate to the gods?’ A tree as old as the earth asked me that once.” He lets the flames form the shape of Dark Shadow on the pier that day, rooted deeply in its master. “I had to travel through the depths of the abyss and I was gone for months. I had to fight for my life in a universe that made no sense. I was betrayed by someone I love. I killed two people I love. For that, I was proclaimed Scorchking, and my coronation was a funeral pyre of an entire species. Do you really want to know?”

She lays her hand over his burning one, heedless of the possible danger. Shouto makes the flames run cool, doing nothing more than dancing across her pale hand. It is an act of trust, one that leaves him breathless.

For the first time, he looks at Fuyumi Todoroki and sees a woman stronger than he imagined, someone who kept their broken mess of a family as intact as it is through sheer force of will. He sees a woman that loves Shouto without question simply because he is family.

There is no ulterior motive, no violence or malice in her gaze.

“Tell me.”

The smile that graces his lips is the first one that isn’t reliant on knowing his micro expressions. He shows his teeth as he smiles, stretching those muscles for the first time in a long while.

It startles Fuyumi enough that she flicks him on the forehead. “You don’t know how to smile. It looks weird.”

That only makes him smile wider. “Thank you for being you.”

“Now tell me everything.”

“I guess it starts with Izuku. Everything seems to start with him. He’s my friend and he loves people as easily as the sun gives life. He’s also spiteful, vicious, hypocritical and more than willing to punch people.”

“Please don’t tell me he was the one who punched father.”

“Would have fought him there too if I didn’t stop him. He’s like a rabid animal but he’s loyal. When the stadium exploded, he used his powers and took me to that place to save us both. Doing it severed his spine and I had to carry him on my back.”

He continues the tale, leaving nothing out where he avoided certain topics with his mother. He tells her of the fights with Izuku, every broken bone and cruel word. She holds his hand as he speaks slowly of the pain when Izuku broke every bone in his arm, or the many times he beat Izuku to a bloody pulp with a smile on his face.

“We managed not to attack each other at school,” he says, proud of the accomplishment.

She stares in shock when he speaks of Master Railroad’s train and the dragon Fumikage sent.

“Like an actual dragon with wings and claws and feathers? Not the Ryukyu sort?”
“It could be as large as it needed to be. Sometimes it was as small as a house and sometimes it was so large it could fly across galaxies. It breathed these same flames.”

When his story comes to an end, she simply stays silent as she absorbs his words. Shouto entertains himself by drawing patterns with the black flames on her skin. It makes for an interesting way to tell stories.

“What will you do now? You haven’t chosen an internship.”

He shrugs. “I wanted to rest and figure out my powers a bit more.”

“Dad sent you an offer.” Shouto nods. “I think you should take it. I know you hate him—”

“I don’t. I lost that as well.”

“As I was saying,” she says in the same tone Aizawa uses when they’re being more annoying than usual, “he probably can teach you more. And I don’t think you should stay alone. People are products of their memories and emotions. You need to make more.”

“I’m still angry with him for breaking up our family.”

“I know.” She considers him for a moment. “Do you want to be a hero?”

“Of course, I…” He blinks slowly, the chilling realisation creeping up on him. “No, I don’t really care anymore. Huh, interesting.”

“You wanted to be a hero for a long time. Because you saw dad and it reminded you that heroes weren’t always the best of people. And you wanted to surpass that. You don’t hate him anymore, so that drive to become a hero is gone.”

“Then why should I take the internship? If being a hero was about hate then what’s the point?”

“Because it was about being better. It was about not being afraid anymore. If being a hero made you want to be better, then maybe you need to remember why you wanted to be a hero.”

“By being a hero intern?” The logic there is as circular as time itself.

“By helping people. By saving them. When you were stuck in the dark, what gave you the strength to keep on moving? What made you take another step forward when you could have given up?”

“Izuku,” he says easily.

“But before he became your friend. When you were angry and bitter and upset? What made you keep on going?”

“I wanted to help him. He couldn’t walk. I was the only person who could protect him.”

“You were the only person who could save him. You were the light in the darkness. There’s a kid in my class whose terrified of the dark. Sometimes he doesn’t sleep because the nightmares are so bad. And I tell him something each time. It doesn’t always help but sometimes, just sometimes, it makes all the difference.”

“Tell me.”

“The dark is generous and it is patient and it always wins. But in the heart of its strength lies its one weakness: one lone candle is enough to hold it back. Love is more than a candle. Love can ignite
the stars. You were that candle for Izuku. I think you’ll learn how to be a star if you learn to be a hero. Do it for me if you can’t do it for yourself.”

“Okay.”

He takes her hand and she pulls him out of bed. He’s taller than her now, not by much, but enough for it to be noticeable. Yet, he doesn’t feel bigger than her in any way that matters.

“Get to it,” Fuyumi says.

Their home is silent as he walks through it. Once, years ago, when Shouto was little more than a toddler scurrying underfoot, it used to be filled with the sound of training and Endeavour shouting and hushed whispers amongst his siblings. He remembers Natsuo’s lough laughter echoing through the halls, Touya’s acerbic and sarcastic commentary following their footsteps, and even his father speaking delicately to Fuyumi.

Now, the silence is disquieting. Not so much because it represents something horrible, but rather because it represents the absence of everything that once was, the ugly and the joyful. In these cold and empty hallways, there is nothing but the frigid silence of their failed family without a hint of warmth and joy.

He knocks once at his father’s office, a sharp sound that echoes in the quiet. This is the first time he has had the audacity to disturb the man but this time, he isn’t a scared boy.

Shouto Todoroki wears a crown of infernal flame, and for better or worse, the only limits are those he imposes upon himself.

“Enter.”

Todoroki opens the door and steps through. His father is standing behind his desk, looking outside the glass wall that makes up the wall. The view is nothing spectacular, just a small pond and water flowers. A tiny ornamental bridge crosses the divide from the rows of lilies along his father’s office and the shrubs blocking sight of the solarium.

There is a massive blank in his memories when it comes to the solarium. It can only mean his mother spent time in it any memory of her is gone. Perhaps she was the only reason he ever visited the solarium.

He walks forward and stands beside his father. They don’t look at each other. They don’t need to.

Endeavour is a wild spark of hellfire, unique and brilliant and alien to the vast and unyielding godflame that infuses Shouto’s soul. They don’t need to look at each other to converse, but sometimes the appearance of a thing is more important than the things itself.

“The solarium was her favourite room,” Endeavour explains, voice gruff. “She spent hours reading stories to you in that room. That solarium was the first time I learnt I loved her. She was headstrong and stubborn and pushed me every step of the way.”

Shouto nods, grateful. It is a peace offering, one he is willing to accept gladly.

“I’m accepting an internship with you.”

“Why?”

“Fuyumi says I need to remember why I want to be a hero.”
“We begin tomorrow then. We’ll be going to Hosu to investigate the Hero-killer. Keep your flames hidden. I can’t protect you from the ramifications of that. People still remember the Purge of Shikoku.”

A distant and tiny part of his flames rises within his soul at the mention of the region. He tastes smoke and death on his tongue and wonders what truly happened that night.

“Understood.”

*****

Toshinori Yagi feels old with each passing day. The burdens of the world weigh on him more as his power fades. The constant ache in his side intensifies each time he thinks of the future, of the fight to come against his nemesis. It will be the battle to decide the future itself, to decide which ideal deserves to see a new era.

It will be him who fights that battle, not his successor. No matter the power Izuku has gained, no matter the mental and spiritual stability he has fought valiantly for, the gap in abilities is still too large. Toshinori knows he could win a fight against Izuku as easily as breathing. Experience, speed, and pure raw strength are all in his favour even in his weakened state.

Izuku just isn’t ready for that level of combat, and by the time he will be, Toshinori will no longer have the fading embers of One For All in his soul.

One day, he doesn’t doubt Izuku will surpass him and every torchbearer who came before. He sees it in the lightning that surrounds the boy each time he uses One For All, an electric potential that is dizzying and beyond comprehension. But it is just that right now, potential.

So, Toshinori must make contingencies. This is one of them.

“Who is Gran Torino?” Izuku asks.

They’re in Toshinori’s tiny office, Izuku seated on the only other chair. His successor looks well-rested, recovered from the ordeal he went through. Toshinori doesn’t, for a single moment, believe it was something as mundane as kidnapping. But he’s come to trust Izuku, and he knows his successor will tell him one day.

Trust goes two ways. There are things Toshinori keeps hidden. It is only fair that Izuku has his secrets as well.

“The man who taught me how to truly control my quirk,” Toshinori explains. “And the only person I believe can help you the most during this internship. I taught you the foundations to strengthen your body, Jin Mo-Ri taught you form and technique, but Gran Torino can help you find that hidden talent. You’ve come far, but you still wish to imitate me.”

“You’re the greatest hero,” Izuku says simply, with so much faith that it astounds Toshinori as always. In those green eyes, there is madness and dark knowledge, but there is also more love than any one person should have.

“And one day you’ll surpass me.” Izuku’s sudden grin is blinding and sharp. “But you won’t fight like me. You are much more agile than I am. It is your first strength and one day you’ll be far faster than I could ever hope to be. But even when I watched your fight against young Todoroki, you resorted to your fists more than you needed to.”

“Why is it so important now? Won’t any internship help?”
“My boy, there is a villain. He is the greatest Japan has experienced. Do not argue this with me. I know his deeds and the shape of his sins.” Toshinori closes his eyes, the pain of Nana’s fall still fresh after all these years. “He is old, old as the quirk you have inherited. Perhaps older. We’ve clashed many times and I’ve won only once, purely by luck. From the very jaws of defeat, after he had struck me with a fatal wound, he let his guard down.”

Toshinori rubs the purple ropey mass on his side. It will perhaps always pain him. His only saving grace as a hero is that he hasn’t suffered any other injuries since then. One more injury and he won’t be able to maintain the dying embers of his power.

“He gave you that wound.”

“Yes. He beat me after I cornered his organisation. We clashed, and I could not win. He boasted that he was the Strongest Man Alive and I believe his confidence was no lie.”

“The Throne usually produces some of the strongest quirks in the world.”

“And he has killed an Emperor battling with his Guard,” he says softly, remembering the fear in Nana’s voice the day she told him that tale. “When you have won against the foes he has, then it becomes easy to fall into the trap of arrogance. I was beaten and close to death. Maybe I was dead. When he let his guard down, I pulled every dreg of strength I had into one last punch. I had avoided defeat, but I wasted that opportunity.”

“To arrest him?”

“To kill him,” he intones gravely, a hundred regrets colouring his voice. “This quirk of mine that you’ve inherited exists to stop him and put an end to his villainy. To stop him before he amasses the power to truly face the world and win.”

Izuku frowns deeply, scratching his thigh. The same one that was crushed by the Nomu. Toshinori has seen the silvery scars there and regrets not coming fast enough that day. If only he had been more decisive, he could have spared his successor an injury and a limp.

“That’s a legacy of murder,” Izuku says after a few minutes of thought, revolted. “Of revenge. That’s vengeance, not justice. If we go down that path, are we any better than him?”

“Those thoughts plagued me at that time.”

“You were genuinely afraid,” Izuku concludes and Toshinori nods. “What would make you afraid?”

There is something childlike in his unshakeable belief in Toshinori’s superiority. For a long minute, Toshinori considers how best to rip those final vestiges of naivete from his successor. It can’t survive in this world. There is too much cruelty and indifference.

He’s seen death and laughed at it, Toshinori thinks sadly. He can be a child a bit longer.

“I have fears as any normal man. I fear for you and your headstrong ambitions. I fear you nobility and sense of justice will get you hurt. And that is why you should never face him on any battlefield. I know you don’t want to hear this, but you cannot win. That is not your fight, and should you ever encounter him, promise me that you’ll surrender if you cannot escape. And if he takes you, do not try to lie or hide information from him.”

“If he makes you so scared, then I won’t argue with you. I promise.”
“Thank you.”

He sits taller now that one burden is gone. Should All For One and Izuku ever meet, he can trust now that Izuku will not do anything to harm himself. Not after his promise.

“When I struck that blow and brought him down, I hesitated. To take a life is no easy thing and I worried I would lose sight of my morals. I think, more than anything, I feared becoming a villain.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“I’ve told you long ago, back when you hadn’t received One For All, that there were days I want to tear down the system. It allows the corrupt to walk away and injustice to occur. It would be simple for me to take over and become a villain just as bad as any other. It was that fear that made me hesitate.”

“I don’t believe you would do that. You live life ethically.”

“I live with a strong set of ethics that I refuse to compromise. I believe that the more powerful you get, and perhaps older as well, the more important it is to make a set of rules you abide by without fail. Even if that means allowing corruption to go on, my duty is not to route out corruption, it is to protect people by battling villainy and set an example they can have faith in.”

“But,” Izuku says slowly, “if you know people are corrupt, then aren’t you corrupt by association if you leave them alone? It’s like how they treat… murder by association or something.”

Another thought that plagues him often. How much do his actions truly accomplish when he upholds the system that makes villains in the first place? Toshinori knows that fundamentally, things must change. But it can’t be him who does that.

He looks at Izuku and sees an unshakeable determination. It saddens Toshinori because he can the shape of Izuku’s greatest fear, a fear so fundamental that his successor hasn’t noticed.

*It will hurt when you learn it. I only hope you are strong enough to carry forward.*

“There is only so much one person can do. My mandate, the mandate of this quirk, has always been to defeat the villain. I refuse to exceed it because once you take a single step on that path, there is no coming back. I do not know who he was before, but in my deepest heart, I worry he was someone like me. Someone powerful. Headstrong. Charismatic. Someone with a strong sense of justice. I can’t say the circumstances that made him a villain. Perhaps it was the era he was born to. Perhaps it was evil done unto him that made him lash out against the world. But my greatest fear is that he took the first step I’m terrified of.”

Izuku shakes his head. “You wouldn’t stay on that path. You know good from wrong. And I know it sounds childish but it’s not naivete. I know what quirkless discrimination is like. I know what police brutality is. I don’t think for a single second that you could do that.”

He tilts his head, considering his successor. There is a tremor running the length of one arm, perhaps an old injury acting up again.

“You’re afraid of the possibility. Why?”

“Because if you can, then anyone can. If you of all people can make a choice like that then… You’re a hard image to live up to.”

His successor looks terrified, absolutely haunted by the idea. Has he truly become such a legend, a
concept less than a man, that the one person who knows him better than anyone else alive only sees the myth?

For the first time in a long while, he genuinely regrets being a hero.

“I did not become who I am in a single day,” he begins slowly, testing each word carefully. “It is a long journey and every day is difficult. I made many mistakes, some I regret to this very day. But, so long as you hold true to your ideals, then I believe you will always find the right path at the end. But, only should you have ideals you follow, rules that limit the scope of your power. If you do not, then it becomes easy to justify any action as necessary.”

He remembers every moment he just wanted to walk into the National Diet and overthrow the government and institute laws to stop villainy. Those moments never last long, and he never gives them any true consideration, but they exist and still shame him.

“Accept Gran Torino’s offer,” he says finally for there is nothing left to be said today.

Toshinori leaves Izuku to his thoughts. He has perhaps five more hours of strength left in his body. He may as well make use of them. Let the world see All Might and know he is strong. Perhaps he will inspire a single person to do better. And if he can, then everything will be worth it.

His phone rings after he has stopped some petty criminals from vandalising a store. He doesn’t particularly care about their motives as he gives control of the situation to the police.

All Might answers his phone.

“Toshi, I think we have a problem.”

“When don’t we, Noamasa?” he asks, chest rumbling deeply in amusement.

“After the stadium attack, we've been on high alert looking for other threats. The Yakuza have been mobilising recently.”

“Organised crime syndicates aren’t usually my usual thing.”

Too much red tape and bureaucracy and corrupt officials for my liking.

“This one might be.”

“I didn’t think your bosses cared for organised crime?”

Whilst that’s a bit annoying, he never wants to navigate the minefield of Tsukauchi’s conflicting loyalties to justice and to the state.

Almost a decade to this day, after his battle with All For One, when he was recovering from his injury, Naomasa had been there. He had seen All Might's true form. And as a sign of trust, in turn, Naomasa told Toshinori his true allegiances beyond the police.

They’re friends now but there is always that consideration of who he serves through his actions.

Given everything else in the world, Naomasa is harmless, all things considered, and very much a supporter of the changes Yoshinori wishes to see.

“They do when they’re being led by people with quirks. Come down to the station and I’ll tell you all about Overhaul.”
All Might sighs as the call ends. There is always so much to be done and never enough time to do it.

*****

Izuku sets his bags down in the lounge in preparation for his trip tomorrow. He’s leaving home for the first time. It may only be for three weeks but he won’t always have his mother’s protection looming over him.

“You’ll do fine,” she says, ruffling his hair. “Now do me a favour and get me your medical files. I forgot where you put them.”

He blinks at her. “Okay.”

He walks over to the spot on the shelf between the space where his books end and his father’s begin. The file is an innocuous thing as only the summary is paper, the rest electronic data drives.

“I should have looked there first.”

“It’s fine. Something wrong?”

She smiles benevolently. “I met your teacher, Jin, at the festival. We talked about a few things.”

“Is he doing well?”

“You should ask him yourself. Do you have any more teachers I don’t know about?”

He flushes. “Does my internship count?”

“No.” Izuku sighs in relief. “Go to sleep. You have a busy day tomorrow.”

Sleep is one thing he has come to relish. It is a period to ignore the world without consequence. Not a time to dream for there is little difference in the reality of the abyss and nightmares.

Tonight, however, he dreams of light.

He walks down a hallway filled with colours and lights, every colour of the rainbow and vibrant ultraviolet. He reaches out and touches the lights. They flow between his fingers like sand, physical though they should be immaterial.

Vaguely, he remembers this, remembers walking down this passage. He remembers walking to the end of the stream of lights and seeing eyes observing him.

There are four left. He doesn’t know what these beings of light are. Yet they look terrified. Where before there were seven shining beacons, only four fading flames remain. The void where the others existed is massive and consuming, an endless maw that looks all too familiar.

He comes, they whisper. Save us.

No matter what they are, they ask to be saved. To deny that is to deny the story of Izuku Midoriya.

He reaches out.

And wakes up, the dream vanishing quickly.

Izuku blinks slowly, seeing a poster of All Might on his wall. The dream is still there in that hazy
sort of memory, mostly mist and magic.

“What the fuck?” he wonders, struggling to recall the dream.

*What’s wrong, brother mine?*

Whatever tenuous grasp he had on he had on the dream slips away. "Fuck. Go away."

*You’re a prissy bastard in the morning.*

With the memory gone, he’s left with no choice but to get ready if he doesn’t want to miss his train. He showers and dresses quickly. His bags are under the staircase and he grabs them, heading out the door.

He is greeted by the weathered and scarred face of his father. Instantly, his cheer vanishes.

“Father,” he growls. “What do you want?”

“Morning, Izuku.” His father places his hands in the pockets of his expensive looking suit, a bright yellow thing with thick stripes.

*Hi dad,* Mikumo says cheerfully.

“Hello, Mikumo.” The man gestures and a doorway appears behind him, crackling faintly with green flames just beyond reality. “I’ll give you a ride and maybe we can talk a bit more.”

“No,” he says in the same instant that Mikumo says, *Yes.*

“Humour an old man.” Izuku crosses his arms. "I'll get you All Might's original cape from David Shield."

Izuku walks through the doorway without a second thought. He is not giving up an opportunity like that even if it means talking to his father.

*You’re so easy,* Mikumo says but he sounds amused. Relieved, perhaps.

There are dozens upon thousands of highways they could take, his father’s influence upon the abyss. Izuku can see how temporal the structures are, built and supported by the godflame, not his father. He has a suspicion that if he took certain combinations, he may wind up in the distant past or the far future.

He takes the highway to the left that leads upwards and twists into an odd shape that months ago would have left him screaming in agony. Now he can perceive the eight-dimensional shape as easily as he can a simple cube.

He sets forth having absolutely no intention of talking to his father.

*How did you get through here safely?* Mikumo asks curiously. *When you were younger.*

Their father hums. “I often had the support of the Royal Guard once my warp quirk materialised. And the World Walker was birthed soon afterwards. I made deals with gods and demons and a thousand lifeforms. Go anywhere you like and you’ll see my influence. I made so many waypoints between the layers of the abyss and negotiated relatively safe areas.”

Izuku cocks his head. “Tell me, did you negotiate a waypoint involving the sacrifice of a loved one?”
Hisashi nods. “One of my best traps. Most things in here don’t conceptualise love so I could trap them in the deeper layers. Though you and your friend fucked that up. You declared love to be the most powerful force in the universe. And then Todoroki infused the godflame itself with love. I don’t think you comprehend how you’ve irrevocably changed the fabric of reality.”

*You may want to stop talking.*

“Why? That’s just how it is.”

“Because,” Izuku growls, One For All already infusing his body, “I had to stab someone I loved in the back because of your fucking trap.”

“Oh.”

Izuku trembles with his rage. He spots a dozen creatures swimming through a black hole and collapses it on them just to expend a tiny bit of rage he feels.

"He carried me on his back when my spine was severed and I had to betray him." He glares at his father. "I have dragon bone for a spine. And it was your fucking fault."

*It wasn’t and you know it.*

“Shut up.”

His father raises his hands, palms out in a placating gesture. Izuku has seen too many creatures to believe the lie of body posture. But he knows deep in his crystal bones that his father will never hurt him.

Maybe even can’t hurt him.

“How did you get through the abyss with him carrying you?” the man asks after Izuku has calmed slightly and only a few hundred more creatures are impaled on spears of darkness.

Doing so had been easy, so easy that between one blink and the next, the darkness had offered up a tribute of hundreds of godlings and demons to appease his anger.

“We found Master Railroad’s train,” he says finally.

“That’s convenient,” his father says slowly, his scars twitching in a way that looks familiar.

“It was odd because it just happened to be scorched.” Understanding blossoms in his mind. “And right next to it was a charred bird.”

His father steps back. “Okay, look, I didn’t think you would need it.”

“It’s a priceless cultural artefact. You don’t just set it on fire.”

“How was I supposed to know you needed it?”

“Do you set everything on fire to solve your problems? What is wrong with you?”

“I have to be pre-emptive about things. Not all of us are gods here.”

“I’m not a god,” he snaps. “I’m tired of people calling me that.”

*You are the shadowking of this dark and infernal place. Did you know they call him that, dad?*
“The World Walker does so I do. And anyway, I could feel it the moment I saw you. There’s so much pure and untainted darkness in your soul that it’s like staring at a singularity.”

“Why? It makes no sense.” Izuku throws his hands up in frustration. “I didn’t even inherit your powers.”

His father stops walking. “Are you certain? You travel between the abyss and the real world just like me. Your power might have mutated a lot but it’s still just a variation of my quirk.”

“But you’re attuned to the godflame. It doesn’t make sense for me to use shadows.” He generates a singularity of pure darkness where all mortal laws suddenly fail. “And that’s the antithesis of your fire.”

“I honestly don’t have all the answers. But I breathe green fire. Mikumo breathed clouds of green plasma Your power leaves green lightning—well, technically how One All For expresses itself in you.”

At this point, he isn’t even surprised his father knows about the quirk, and perhaps knows more about it than All Might does.

“So that’s one line of inheritance,” his father continues. “I walk between worlds. You fall through shadows between realms. And every iteration of Mikumo I’ve met who has a quirk expresses some form of minor warp quirk. Is it so hard for you to imagine that the very fabric of the abyss changed you? It certainly changed me.”

“You’re talking about the World Walker.” He shudders thinking of the emotionless machine that spoke in the voice of a thousand worlds, some thriving but most cruel caricatures of life.

“Yeah. It’s a personality construct that protects me from the influences of the abyss, born from my nature as a risk manager and given power by this place. That’s what it really is, the ultimate risk assessor and guide. A metaphor given life and power.”

“Like Mikumo.”

“No. Maybe. Did you first start hearing him after you touched the abyss?” Izuku nods. “Then it’s possible that in your attempts to forget, you gave him that eldritch knowledge you tried to hide from and the void gave him life. Or something. It’s really just conjecture.”

“He left when I started taking my anti-psychotics and came back after a wish-granting dragon cursed me.”

“There is so much wrong with that sentence. Why would you even accept a curse from… you know what, never mind. I’ve made worse deals myself. But taking anti-psychotics wouldn’t get rid of him. He still exists, they just block your ability to hear him. I tried them as well and the World Walker never left. I just couldn’t hear him.”

“You’re telling me they’re useless.”

“For that purpose, yeah. I mean, as mood stabilisers they work, but Mikumo is very much real. What were you doing when he started taking the antipsychotics?”

**Hunting down the ghosts. I still need to find the last four.**

“Good job,” his father says proudly. “Even if Mikumo started out only as an imaginary construct, he’s taken on your brother’s name and become just as real as any other Mikumo I know. You
might not be able to touch him, but that doesn’t make him any less real than you. Different, but just as real.”

They cross the space between universes and enter the real world once more. Izuku shakes off the parasites clinging to his nails and purges the rest with his shadows.

“Have you ever tried bringing people not connected with you through the abyss?”

“A few times. There’s a limit of five.”

“That makes no sense. It’s a giant doorway. What valid reason is there for only five people to get through?”

“Because it’s not really a doorway. It’s… think of that as a completely unique portal coded only to individuals I choose and existing simultaneously on top of each other. Each one requires energy which I draw on from the godflame. And there’s a hard cap to how much energy I can draw. Exactly enough for five entities. Nothing increases it.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“Maybe for a god,” his father says lightly. “Catch.”

Izuku turns just in time to get a faceful of purple fabric. He stares at the conductor's hat curiously, the same deep purple as the train that carried them to safety. Two feathers that look awfully familiar are attached to it.

“Why did you steal his hat as well?”

His father shrugs. “Because his corpse wasn’t there and that pissed me off a bit. I was hoping to talk to his ghost for personal reasons. Anyway, keep it.”

“No. Give it to a museum or something. You can’t just desecrate everything you see.”

Hisashi shrugs. “Alright. Take care. Oh, he’s not dead before you worry too much.”

“What?” he asks but his father is already gone. “I fucking hate him.”

You do? Huh, you actually do. I didn’t know you could hate someone. I don’t think I like this emotion.

“Shut up and leave me alone.”

The apartment building has the right address. With a shrug, Izuku walks up the stairs and knocks.
He waits a few seconds. Then a minute.

He enters Gran Torino’s apartment. And is greeted to a crime scene.

“Hi,” he says with false cheer. “My name’s Izuku Midoriya. And I’m going to call an ambulance if you don’t say something in the next ten seconds, Gran Torino. I am not putting up with mind games.”

The man stands, eyes focused and sharp as a hawk. There isn’t a trace of weakness in his old frame.

“Not as stupid as Toshi. Get in. We don’t have time to waste with your training. I hate training dual quirks and smart asses, and you sound like both.”
“Lovely,” Izuku mutters as he enters the apartment.

He barely manages to duck the first kick.

*****

Fumikage Tokoyami walks to a warehouse for the first day of his internship. Whilst not the most auspicious of locations, he had never expected to meet the two people who would one day help him understand the true nature of his power at school.

Accepting the offer from Hawks, the hero ranked fourth, had been a simple decision. He isn’t sure why he’s been asked to meet at this warehouse instead of the man’s agency, but he assumes it to be a test or practical lesson or perhaps both.

He opens the side door to the warehouse and enters. It is dark, oppressively so. His eyes take a while to adjust. There is a chair he struggles to make out in the gloom and perhaps a person sitting on it.

I do not like this, Dark Shadow warns.

“Neither do I.”

Still, he walks forward, ready for an attack. The closer he gets, the more he can hear the muffled whimpers of the person sitting in the chair. He pauses, wary, before taking another step.

Bright light floods the surrounding, blinding him. He whirls around, coming face to face with a woman he, unfortunately, knows too well. She wears the same white uniform, but this time is surrounded by allies.

Four people, all in white uniforms, and perhaps all more dangerous that he is.

“Fumikage Tokoyami,” she says flatly. “It took you less than three days before you went around and told people about Midoriya and Todoroki’s situation.”

He realises then and there that this might be the dark room she had threatened him with a bullet to the back of the head. Of the four other people with her, two carry guns on their person.

Stand tall, Dark Shadow commands. You are my prince of crows. Show no fear.

He swallows, readying his powers for might be a losing fight. His main objective will be to summon his dragon as a distraction and then retreat with Dark Shadow through the roof. It will have to be done quickly if he wishes to survive.

“Yes.”

“Disappointing but hardly unexpected.” She walks towards and then past him to stand behind the man in the chair, features hidden by a hood. “I’ll forgive that indiscretion as you had your dragon aid in their retrieval. And because you looked so cute with a cat.”

It’s hard keeping all five of them in sight, so he settles on focusing on her. She seems to be the leader, and likely the greatest threat as well.

“You saw that?”

“You’re an asset. We don't leave assets unobserved. Nor do we leave debts unpaid.”
She removes the hood to reveal a middle-aged man he doesn't recognise. The man is unconscious, which makes him wonder what he has gone through to have made such pathetic sounds.

“And you consider that a debt?”

She nods, dark hair following the movement. “Of course.”

“You speak of debts, yet I don’t know your name.”

“To you, I’m the Imperial household.” She points to one of the four with her. “So is he. So are the rest of them. I won’t give my name to an outsider, Fumikage.”

“Don’t call me that,” he snaps. This lack of malice leaves him unbalanced. She hasn’t threatened him once unlike the last time they met.

“Sure.” She flicks the man on the head. “This man is responsible for attacking the children you sometimes take care of.”

It takes him a moment to figure out what she means. Then he looks back to this unassuming and overweight man who supposedly committed the crimes she accuses him of. She pulls his head back so Fumikage can get a good look at the man. One eye is partially open and Fumikage can glimpse a purple expanse where there should be white sclera.

“What?” he asks because it sounds ridiculous. This unconscious man doesn’t look like he could harm more than a hamburger.

She nods, circling around both him and the man.

“Nagato was the man who orchestrated the attack on their village hidden in the leaves. Personally, killed half the parents. We've been hunting him down for fucking ruining our plans. Whatever you want to be done to him, we will.”

“What?” he says again because it seems like that sort of day.

“If you want him whipped until he dies, we’ll do it. If you want to remove his limbs yourself, we’ll clean the mess. We don’t care. He doesn’t fucking matter to us.”

He watches her. There isn’t any indication that the woman is lying or manipulating him. Or perhaps she is doing so with honesty.

“Why are you doing this?”

“Because we look after our own, my dear asset. You ordered your dragon to retrieve Midoriya. You aided us. We do not forget kindness. Show him the files.”

Of the four others with her, one steps forward and hands him a tablet. There’s a picture of the man. He scrolls down. Sees a list of crimes. Scrolls further down. Watches a recording of the man committing heinous acts that leave him ill.

“This is…”

“Monstrous,” she finishes for him. “The sort of man that a death penalty would be applied to. Whatever you want done, we’ll do.”

*He is not deserving of life. It is your right to take it.*
Fumikage blinks. That sounds like something his father would say. *What would Midoriya do?*

The answer to that is simple. Izuku Midoriya is someone Fumikage can always look towards for a moral answer when things get confusing. He might be spiteful and vindictive, but the quiet sense of justice and the eternal faith in mankind is something worthy of emulating.

“Let the courts of law deal with him.”

She shrugs and gestures to the man. The four with her move forward and grab the man, carrying him away. Fumikage watches, disquieted, and unsure of what is to come.

*That is your right as well.*

“Alright. If you ever change your mind, we can arrange something more gruesome,” she says that with a smile that makes him shudder.

She claps and a light illuminates the warehouse more evenly. There are a few crates and boxes, but otherwise, the space is empty.

“So, was that a test of sorts?”

“No.” She frowns at him. “We were being sincere. I told you before that we’re brutal out of efficiency. If you wanted him to suffer then he would suffer. I don’t have time for morals if it’ll secure the goodwill of a special asset.”

He grits his teeth. He isn’t loyal to her at all. But he is smart enough not to pick a fight he doesn’t like his odds of winning.

“You keep saying special asset like it’s a title,” he says instead.

“It is. You’re one of two I have access to at the moment. Those kids you watch, they had the potential to be special assets, though not the variety I specialise in.” He steps back, staring at her in horror. “Don’t be so shocked. At that level of power, you either join a group that cares for you or you’re under the thumb of a villain. It was the ninth, the little fox, that we really wanted. He was stronger than the other eight combined.”

He thinks of the fox memorial in their facility. “How did he die?”

“Inexperience. The bane of youth.”

She walks towards the table, gesturing, and he follows her. There is a box hidden by a dark cloth on the table.

“This is the end,” she says, tracing the outline of the box beneath the cloth. “Our debt is repaid.”

“Good. I never want to see you again.”

“But—”

“No.”

“We’re in the process of localising a group possibly connected to the abyss. And using ritualistic slaughter to access it.”

“This seems too convenient.”
She smiles and removes the fabric. The box beneath is wooden in nature, coloured a deep purple and seeming to glow with power. A part of him recognises it as a piece of the abyss.

Most of him, though, is busy trying to keep Dark Shadow from tearing the woman in half. The demon has materialised, larger than the light should allow, and its eyes burn with rage. Only the thick chain of his soul binding them together keeps Dark Shadow from leaping forward.

**That’s made from the bark of my people, you bitch,** Dark Shadow roars, low and menacing.

“It was given freely, acquired through diplomacy. Open it.”

It is a risk to take any of his concentration away from Dark Shadow. And yet, the box is so tantalising and represents knowledge. It beckons sweetly. Fumikage reaches for it. The wood *feels* old, an echo of the eternity the tree has witnessed whispering secrets to his soul.

Dark Shadow makes a sound that might be a name, but the language is unpronounceable to Fumikage. And yet, the grief Dark Shadow feels nearly brings Fumikage to his knees.

**She speaks true. This could never be taken by force and retain that memory.**

Dark Shadow sounds stunned, no longer straining against Fumikage’s will. It gives him the opportunity to unclasp the latches and open the box.

It is a knife and there is blood on the knife.

It is a subtle knife with an edge that cuts time and there is shining blood on the knife.

It is a subtle knife with an edge that cuts time, forged by the godflame and blessed by the rage of a dying star, and slick on its edge is rainbow blood, bright and potent with a promise of immense power.

The longer he looks at either knife or blood, the more it seems to solidify, the concept of blood and knife becoming more powerful and inherent to the universe.

**That is the ichor of gods,** Dark Shadow says, pulling him back from the brink of an endless spiral.

“It came from one of the cultists,” she says, wisely not looking at it. “You may not trust us. We are cruel, brutal and merciless. But who else is willing to battle in the darkness to ensure others can stand in the light? If you join us, you can help protect more than you would as a hero.”

Listening to her words is easier than looking at the knife.

“I don’t believe you to be just. I don’t believe your ideology.”

“That’s your first mistake. We’re not fanatics. We’re just people who’ve seen the truth. If you ever think we go too far, then destroy us.”

“Inevitably you will. So why try to recruit me if you know we will come to blows?”

“Because you’ll still fight the only war that matters. The tools and banner may change, but the essence of the fight will be the same. Look, you have three weeks for your internship. You can choose to go, and we’ll transfer you back to Hawks’ agency. But you can also come with us when we launch our raid in two days. Do it and see the true battlefield.”

*I do not like her. I do not trust her. But I also said that the material world and the void should*
not mix. Fumikage, she may be mad, but she is also right.

“You’re asking me to blindly follow someone who threatened to execute me.”

Yes. You have her measure and you know her nature. Violent, brutal and without mercy. What purpose does this serve? She sees you as a weapon to be wielded.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” she says. “In two days, return here when you’ve made your choice.”

She waves. And then, in a flash of light, she vanishes as though she was never here. All that remains is the wooden box and the impossible knife.

Don't trust her, trust in what you see. You see a piece of the void. What havoc could this knife unleash if a murdered took hold of it?

He shudders, seeing the endless wave of violence and the tide of blood that this blade could bring forth. Something so simple, almost benign by abyssal standards, and yet its potential for bloodshed is unmatched.

“I suppose it’s time for my story arc as Izuku would say,” he says to his companion. “In two days, my friend.”

Two days, my prince of crows. Prepare yourself. You’ve only just skimmed the surface of the abyss.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, this is a new chapter and today isn't a Thursday. If you're wondering why, well, simply put, I needed a win and this was kinda one way to do that. Life has a habit of being a bit of bitch, especially when you make poor decisions.

The next chapter won't be next week. It might be some time next month if nothing goes horribly wrong. If you're curious, writing and editing a single chapter takes me, on the low end, 6 hours per thousand words. So yeah, each chapter is a huge chunk of time invested. Don't worry, whilst the next chapter or two will be released erratically, the next 22ish, constituting somewhere in the realm of 210K will be released on our usual weekly schedule with a short break between season 3B and 4.

In many ways, you can consider this your 6-8 week warning to reread stuff because I ain't putting up a summary. This season will focus heavily on the worldbuilding, specifically the many factions and how they've influenced the world. This will all tie into season 4 which is just an absolute banger that completely changes the landscape of the world. It's what I spent most of this year working on (and let me tell you, banging out a 100K for it whilst at school was painful and super fun).

That's enough rambling from me. Let me know what you think by dropping a comment. But, if you can't, know your readership is more than enough for me. Cheers and Godspeed.
‘The second duty of the Royal Guard is to ensure the sanctity of a burial procession should a member of the Royal Household perish. Whilst the degree to which the rites are performed varies based on importance, everyone from the lowest secretary to the Emperor himself undergoes these rites. It is currently unknown what these burial rights entail but a form of ‘purification’ is granted during the cleansing process. It has been speculated that these rights are part of the indoctrination that creates the incredible loyalty of the Royal Guard as there have never been defectors. Given the power, knowledge, and talent available to the Royal Guard, I believe it is foolish to ascribe these actions as those of a paranoid occultist.’

—Excerpt from ‘Examining the Japanese Imperial Family: An American’s Perspective’ by David Hayter.

Fumikage Tokoyami sits in a helicopter for the first time in his life. It’s nothing like the ancient relics of 20\(^{th}\)-century media that seem clunky, slow and obtrusive. This helicopter is a thing of beauty. Sleek and silent, it cuts through the sky without disturbance from the erratic wind.

He sits across the woman who calls herself only by her affiliation, a member of the Royal Guard and currently his supervisor for his internship. Unofficially, of course. Officially, he’s being a diligent student under Hawks’ tutelage. A part of him suspects this will come back to haunt him, be he must know. Power and knowledge are promised to him, and perhaps with them, he will be strong enough to stand beside Shouto and Izuku as an equal in more than just name.

It may mean following people he doesn’t trust, but it’s an acceptable compromise.

A laptop connected to another device is on her lap. She fiddles with it in silence, making whatever it is the large box with a dozen different buttons, outputs and multiple screens do its job.

“Got something to say?” she asks, not looking up.

Her hair is just a shade too dark to be natural, he notices. And her skin, which he thought pale, seems to shimmer with light beneath the surface. For a moment, he thinks he can make out patterns of light beneath that pale skin.

“What do you expect me to say? I have little choice in where we go. We’ve been heading south since morning and—”

“North-east, actually. Though that’s not horrible for you.”

“Explain.”

She finally looks up from her device. “People like you don’t have a sense of direction.”

“Mutations don’t affect geospatial abilities negatively,” he says flatly. It wouldn’t be the first time
someone insults him for his mutation. It certainly won’t be the last.

She adjusts the sleeve of her hoodie. She’s dressed in casual clothes just as Fumikage is and nothing about her form her gentle blue eyes or round face give the impression that she’s a cold-blooded killer.

“Your insecurities are showing. Not having control over them is a weakness that you can’t afford working for me.”

“I don’t work for you.”

She leans forward. “Really? You aided in the retrieval of Midoriya at my bidding. You dealt with Nagato. I paid you for completing those objectives. Now you’re following me like a lost puppy instead of flying around with Hawks.”

“If your only objective is to insult me, I will leave right now.”

“Hm, that would be an interesting test of your survival capabilities.”

He crosses his arms. “You know I have a dragon.”

“I may have forgotten,” she says lightly. Falsely. “And people connected to the abyss have no sense of direction. It’s just a thing you all struggle with.”

He says nothing to that as the helicopter sets down on a pad just outside of the city, no more than two floors high.

This city, Hakodate, is one of the larger population centres in Hokkaido at just shy of a million. The first thing he notes is the smell of shit and the cloying waft of a narcotics. As they walk down the stairs, he sees what may well be a prostitute in the distance—and Fumikage refuses to think of how young the male is.

In the distance, he can see abandoned buildings with rows of camps on the roofs. People sit around fires, walking between tents, and bartering goods. Further away he sees shacks built into the side alleys, a town nestled within the city. Those shacks are older looking than the rooftop tents, more stable and solid. There is a sense of hostility to them, as though living on the ground is dangerous and those on the rooftops have it easy.

“This is nothing like Mustafu,” Fumikage says, mostly to himself.

“Let’s not make our broker wait. And stay close.”

He stiffens when she grabs his arm and entwines it with his own.

She leads him gently away, her arm entwined with his own. He looks away from the man passing a plastic with white powder to an elderly lady, hair white and teeth rotted.

He steps back as two people entangled in a fight tumble past him. They’re both mutants and both look unhealthy, skin an odd sallow colour. They scream obscenities and fight with reckless abandon, tearing with claws and biting with fangs. More animal than human, they’re the vision Nagato who hated quirks and acted on that fear to kill a child, and others like him, imagine when they see mutants. Wild and unchecked evolution that might one day run rampant and become a singularity that will see the world end.

The woman merely leads him towards
Someone bumps into his shoulder roughly. It happens too quick for him to notice. His companion flows and moves around Fumikage. She kneels the woman who bumped into him and slams her into a wall. A flash of light and there’s a blade at the woman’s throat.

“Stop,” Fumikage shouts, moving forward.

Wait, Dark Shadows murmurs, and Fumikage’s muscles lock up.

“Return it.”

The woman, no, the teenage girl who bumped into him spits in his companion’s face. “No.” She headbutts the younger girl. The girl yelps in pain before she’s slammed into the wall once more.

And Fumikage refuses to be part and party to this. With a thought, he shatters Dark Shadow’s hold over his body and moves forward. He lays a firm hand her arm, the one holding the knife.

“I said stop.”

“Check your right pocket.”

Fumikage brushes his hand against his pocket. Nothing. His phone should be there. He shoves his hand in the pocket and finds it empty.

“Return it and I won’t break your jaw,” his companion says.

The girl snarls, “Fuck you.” But she puts her hand between her breasts. She pulls out his phone.

His companion takes it and steps away from the girl. “Get the fuck out of here.”

The girl nods and darts away, bare-feet slapping against the pavement slick with water and piss and whatever other fluids. They watch her flee before facing each other. She has his new phone in hand.

“This”—She shakes the device—“contains communication protocols of Imperial Household. It may be encrypted twenty ways to Sunday but the signal it gives off during the emergency pulse can be observed. Do not lose it. I entrusted you with it not so you could lose it in a few hours. I will be very disappointed if you make that mistake again.”

He does not stand down. “The way you took it was unnecessary.”

“It was. You need to learn about the world you’ve stepped into. Now, come. We can argue later. After we’ve visited the broker.”

He takes the device back, but this time, he sets Dark Shadow to guard it, hidden beneath his clothes.

They continue down the alleyway and exit onto a rather clean street. There’s no sign of the girl, no sign of the violence and cesspool they left an alley behind. It’s like walking into another city. He wonders how divided this city really is, how many layers upon layers of misery and suffering can be unfolded in a single night.

As they walk, the roads widen and the façade of the shops changes from dilapidated to old but well-maintained. Mostly, though, he’s paying attention to the mutants and how they’re presence goes from ubiquitous to almost non-existent.
The doorway she stops at is unassuming.

The thugs lining the street and watching them are anything but. They don’t impede them but the promise of retribution should they do anything is heavy in the air. The door opens with a creak. They walk up the narrow staircase.

There is one door on this floor and she opens it without fear. The room is large and clean. A shelf lines one wall and is covered in trophies and memorabilia from books to model cars and everything in between. The wall opposite is made entirely of glass as though the man in behind the desk fears no assassins.

“Giran,” she says to the seedy looking man in the purple suit.

“Agonist. And… a UA student.” The man claps his hands together.

“Don’t call me that,” she snaps, and he sees a flush of embarrassment on her features.


Fumikage doesn’t trust this man.

He seems too indifferent to the suffering. Perhaps even the sort to profit from it. If how clean his area of the city is, then he’s running something massive. He hasn’t seen villain activity, but sometimes villains aren’t the worst things in a city. It might be trafficking or weapons smuggling or things that would make anyone sick to hear. That he has the audacity to accuse Fumikage is more insulting than anything else.

“No, I am not a villain. I have no need for your information.”

The man waves away his indignation with contempt. “Selling out? Boy, everyone has a price. It doesn’t have to be money. It might be an ideal. A promise of protection. Maybe even a mutual interest.” He shifts. “You’re not good at hiding your emotions. What did you want from me? You wouldn’t have brought him here without cause.”

The woman from the imperial household, Agonist as she’s supposedly called, places her hand on Fumikage’s shoulders. “All the information you got from him. Consider that free and open in about a month.”

“Oh. How delightful. I’m still not giving out information for free.”

Fumikage grits his teeth. They’re treating him like a prize, a creature to be viewed at its owner’s leisure. As if his thoughts and ideas are unimportant.

Stay calm, Sark Shadow whispers. Watch.

Agonist and the broker Giran speak quickly, both blunt as a hammer. There isn’t as much double-speak as he expects. No, there level of honesty between them is surprising. He does notice, however, that no matter what, Agonist always keeps herself between Tokoyami and where he expects Giran to keep a weapon beneath his desk.

She is teaching you her ways. The ways of this shadowed world. Learn from this and become a better king.

“One day you’ll give me a better discount.” Agonist removes her other hand from her hoodie,
holding a hard currency chit. She flicks it through the air.

It lands on Giran’s desk with a dull thud. “You target can be found on Nakajima. Force composition anywhere between sixteen to thirty.”

“An abandoned island. Lovely.” She squeezes his shoulder. “Nakajima it is. Let’s go.”

They leave, unharmed by the thugs outside. Not a single one says anything lewd to his surprise, and she leads him to a small apartment complex on the other side of town, almost abandoned but not quite. She shows him to a room, and he’s surprised to see his hero costume on the bed.

“We’ll rest overnight. Get some sleep. You’ll need to be fresh for what comes.”

The door closes, leaving Fumikage to his thoughts.

*****

Izuku lays in bed, staring at the plain ceiling of the room he’s been given to use by Gran Torino. It’s nothing special, plain in a way that makes him appreciate his own much more. There isn’t an ounce of character to the walls.

*Being an All Might fanboy isn’t characterisation, Mikumo says. You’d be a rather one-dimensional character if that was all there was to you.*

“Are you fucking talking to me in tropes?”

*Isn’t that how you understand the world, brother mine? Isn’t that the reason you kicked Shouto off a cliff? You hoped his story wasn’t over and gambled his life on that idea. You gambled the life of someone you loved on a possible deus ex machina.*

Izuku sits up, feeling his muscles protest mildly. “You know what, shut up.”

He rolls out of bed and throws on some shorts, glad he doesn’t have to deal with an awkward boner this late at night. Or ever, now that he gives it any thought. It’s been a long time since he last took care of business, months, perhaps.

The air outside is cold, frigid enough that his eyes water when he sticks his head out the window. After everything he’s been through, it doesn’t really phase him enough to put on more than a long-sleeved shirt.

He walks downstairs in the pitch dark, able to see perfectly. There’s more than enough light in the infrared and ultraviolet spectrums for him to use and being in the dark makes no real difference to his eyesight. In fact, he sees better in the darkness than he does at noon.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

He looks over his shoulder and sees Gran Torino at the top of the stairs, dressed in sleeping clothes. The man looks grumpy and surly and thankfully not trying his absurd addled old man act.

“Taking a walk,” Izuku says with a smile. “Can’t sleep.”

The old man scoffs. “Training still starts at dawn.”

“I’ll be up.”

The town is quiet tonight which is exactly what he needs. He picks a direction and walks aimlessly,
not putting much thought into. Hopefully, he can find his way back without being lost. He sends a few messages to his friends, the standard stuff that doesn’t mean much but somehow means so much. It wasn’t that long ago that the only friend he had was Shinsou. Now, it’s almost dizzying how many people he knows and can call on at any time without worry of being turned away.

Fumikage’s response worries him mildly because he can read between the lines that his friend is about to do something stupid.

“You’ll tell me if you need help, right?” Izuku asks during their call.

His friend huffs. “Yes, but I believe this is important. There are things I need to learn. I’ll keep your advice in mind.”

“The good advice?”

“I suppose so. Go to sleep, Izuku. We’ll speak again.”

The call ends.

Izuku sighs. He knows that tone of voice. It’s the same tone he himself used when he first explored the abyss. Maybe something amazing can be found at the end of that journey, but he’s walked it first-hand and know that it is sorrow’s road.

Still, Fumikage knows a lot more and is better prepared than either Izuku or Shouto were at the beginning.

He finds himself in a park, brightly lit by street lights. He shrugs and finds a railing to walk on, balancing on the balls of his feet until he needs to jump to the next section, always landing on one foot. Could he sprint this easily? Yes, but this is also a training exercise. Sometimes doing things slowly with supreme grace and control is more valuable than speeding through it. Do you know the way your muscles twitch and betray your balance when you take a step that lasts a minute?

When he has reached the end, he tips forward and flips midway, landing easily. He’s hardly got his bearings when he’s forced to sidestep aside.

Izuku glances at what seems to be a man sliding on the floor.

“You should watch where you’re going,” he says calmly as the man slows and rolls forward, turning his forward momentum into a purely vertical jump. It’s a simple way to stop, one that Izuku will try out later in his training session with Gran Torino.

“You could have hit someone,” he continues, because not everyone is as agile as he is. “This city’s filled with old people.”

“Sorry about that,” the man says, turning fully. “I’ll make sure—”

“Is that the limited edition All Might hoodie from last year,” Izuku says, cutting him off and closing the distance in an instant.

The man stumbles back, startled, and Izuku sees it’s someone not much older than he is. Young twenties at most and rather plain looking.

"Um, yeah," the stranger says. "Not a lot of people know about it. A lucky catch, really."

Izuku isn’t really paying attention to that. He’s more interested in the scuff marks on the hoodie,
more interested in how it looks to be falling apart at the seams. And, oh fuck, the colours are faded.

“What did you do to this?” he asks in horror, because this, this right here is a genuine abomination against humanity this likes of which he can’t even imagine.

*Are you being serious?* Mikumo asks. *You are. I can’t believe you’re—*

“I mean, I like wearing it.”

“To what? a fight?” The stranger tenses. “You do. You monster. What are you, a vigilante or something… oh, that explains a lot.”

The man takes a few steps back. “Okay, look, I did not admit to anything, you hear.”

Izuku shrugs. “I’m not gonna call the police on you. They’ve got more important things to deal with.”

“Thanks. Don’t need to deal with that right now.” The man cocks his head. “Wait, you’re the kid from the Sports Festival.”

Izuku shrugs. “I guess. And you are?”

“Crawler.”

“Izuku Midoriya,” he says politely. “Nice to meet you.”

“You seem like a good guy,” Crawler says. “We’ll be looking out for you.”

“Thanks?” He blinks. “Who’s we?”

“All of us.”

And then the vigilante is gone.

****

Kurogiri, the right hand to the strongest man alive, is annoyed. Partly with his master but mostly with the maniac he is forced to work with. Stain is violent, ferocious, and uncontrollable, with no sense of authority or organisation. Exactly the sort of person Kurogiri loathes working with.

A large portion of that frustration is because he has no idea what Tomura is doing right now, or how likely he is to accidentally fuck up one of Kurogiri’s plans.

“Three targets that fit your criteria,” Kurogiri says to the newly christened hero-killer. “I’ll warp you behind them. Eliminate them and we retreat.”

Stain scoffs. “They aren’t worth anything. These are sidekicks barely out of school. They don’t control anything. Killing them doesn’t attack the main players of the system.”

*I hate people who overestimate their strength*, Kurogiri thinks, glad no one can read his emotions. Stain isn’t powerful by any stretch, and Kurogiri knows it would take him all of three seconds to kill the fool.

“Would you prefer to do this alone?” Kurogiri asks calmly, tired of Stain’s rabid ideology.
He opens a portal and gestures to it. Stain glares at him before walking through the portal.

Kurogiri follows, the version of him inside the warp gate protecting Stain from the influence of the monsters watching them indifferently. Stain doesn’t notice the green bolt of lightning he grabs to shatter reality on the other side. He also never notices how the universe resolves the paradox of three Kurogiri’s, collapsing two of them, and leaving the one who walks outside with Stain.

*He’s highly skilled in traditional combat,* Kurogiri thinks, watching Stain kill two heroes easily, and hardly struggling with the third. The moment they are done, Kurogiri warps them outside the city and bids the hero killer farewell before he can go on another rant.

There are other things he must attend to this day, as he does most days. His time in the bar is usually the only time he can relax fully. And, ever since the Sports Festival, the League has been busier than ever. Tomura's acts had ramifications well beyond merely antagonising UA.

All debts must be paid.

It is why he once again dons a white uniform with a chrysanthemum in full view, hating every moment of this humiliation. It won’t be the last time he’s forced to work with them. All this because of Tomura’s insistence that the explosives be more dangerous than they were before. And now, Kurogiri has sold his time and quirk to keep the peace.

He meets with the Royal Guardsman on a hill overlooking Hakodate. The man smokes a cigarette and leans against a tree, talking to someone on the phone.

“You’re certain you don’t need help with him?” the man asks, unaware, or perhaps indifferent, to Kurogiri. “Kid’s new. Might as well… Eh, I guess teenagers think with their dicks more than their head. Just be gentle with him. He sounds fragile. And honest. I think he might appreciate that. Just tell him the truth all the time.”

The man slips his phone away, looking up finally. He nods.

“Kurogiri,” he greets, extinguishing his cigarette. He throws it away and brushes a leaf off his perfect white uniform.

Kurogiri inclines his head. “Guardsman Ryujin. Let’s get this over with.”

He opens a warp gate.

“Aren’t you happy to work with us again? We all missed you.”

Kurogiri stays silent.

Together, they warp to Djibouti. They land right in the middle of China’s military base overlooking the Bab al-Mandab Strait, grown and expanded tremendously since its inception. Numbering over twenty thousand in personnel, it once served as China’s major force projection against Warlords in that part of the world.

In the modern era, it has been used as a staging ground for China’s force projection in the region and a point of contention after they took the JSDF base located in the country almost a century ago. A retaliation, of sorts, one that hasn’t been paid back.

Until now. Today it will serve as a measure of the Emperor’s displeasure. This isn’t the first time an Emperor has sent his Guard as a show of force nor will it be the last.
The response time is admirable, all things considered. A base-wide alarm goes off within five seconds. Within the next few, there are bullets headed their way and soldiers with quirks approach.

*Much too slow,* Kurogiri thinks.

He feels the weight of power before he tastes ozone. The air seems to shimmer as Ryujin brings forth his power.

The bullets stop mid-air as the magnetic field forms. The Guardsman raises one arm, and Kurogiri shivers as the power in the air intensifies. Then, when his hand reaches the highest point, it happens.

It begins with a spark, a tiny flash in the air. That one spark births thousands more, arcing from bullet to metal pole to gun to metal buttons. He shivers as the air thickens and it becomes harder for the gases in his body to move.

And then, without preamble, the lightning comes. The world is suddenly drenched in bright flashes of lightning raining down from the sky, a sudden and violent elemental shower, raw power and annihilation at the whims of one man.

The lightning freezes, solid in a way that should be impossible.

The Guardsman reaches out, almost to grab the lightning with both hands. Then he spreads them wide. The frozen lightning bolts expand, rushing outward in a circular pattern as they consume anything and everyone. It is a wave of electric death orchestrated by one man, unyielding and uncaring of the death and destruction caused.

It takes a while for sound to return and for his vision to clear out. And when it does, he sees the crater surrounding them. They stand on a pillar of unblemished land where, for hundreds of metres, there is pure destruction.

“Do you think they’ll finally get the message to leave Japan alone?” Ryujin asks, a cigarette in hand.

“I doubt it,” Kurogiri admits. “They’ve always been stubborn and seen us as a tiny island of savages.”

The Guardsman chuckles, lighting his cigarette with a spark of lightning. “True. They never seem to figure out Japan hasn’t been invaded for a reason.”

Kurogiri scans the horizon and can make out a few buildings still intact. The endless blue sea calls out to him, peaceful and vibrant in the bright sun, and altogether indifferent of the carnage and devastation wrought this day. None of the people alive is foolish enough to continue this fight. No, calling it a fight implies there was a challenge in the first place.

“Death is the name of our trade and destruction our means of influence,” Kurogiri says after a beat. “I wonder how many people realise the wars from the Second Dark Age never really stopped? They just became less overt.”

“Not many. The idea of one person being able to do this is impossible for some people to conceptualise. What happened here will be called a catastrophic weapons malfunction. Even after All For One destroyed Tianjin with his quirk and ended the Third Sino-Japan War, they called it an act of *unparalleled terrorism.*”

“The first of his Reprisal Wars.” Kurogiri accepts the offered cigarette. “A warning, perhaps, not to
antagonise the strongest man alive or his subordinates.”

It has been a long time since he smoked last. There was a time after the death of his family, but before Tomura that he had taken on every bad habit he could. Not that he has lungs to destroy or receptors to feed the addiction. But the motion of it, of lighting a cigarette and smoking had been soothing in a way.

“Then maybe don’t get our people killed, Kurogiri. You know our rules. Leave us and ours alone and we’ll always extend the same courtesy. Attack us as you did, and we’ll activate a kill order on Tomura.” The man smiles. "Your family has always been your greatest weakness."

Kurogiri flicks the cigarette away in disgust. “I think we’re done here.”

“Are we? I don’t think a person is ever really done with us. You wore our uniform and burnt your bridges. Now you’re here, wearing the same uniform again and rebuilding those bridges.”

It takes all his willpower not to open a warp gate and decapitate the man. Instead, he opens a portal and nods his towards it. Ryujin rolls his eyes and walks through.

They arrive in Japan in a single moment.

“A word of advice,” the man says before Kurogiri can leave. “I know you hate the Yakuza, so I’ll tell you there’s no point in making contingency plans for their new leader. All Might is on their trail.”

Kurogiri closes his eyes.

The idea that All Might is helping him sends a wave of revulsion down his spine. And yet, it means one of his enemies will die. It is, very easily, an evil he can swallow. In time, All Might will die. And, if in the process, he deals with Kurogiri’s other enemies, then he can push down his anger.

On his way back, he finds a bin and throws the uniform in it. He sets it alight, watching it burn to ashes like his hopes for a family, and returns to his normal attire.

He returns to the cafe to check on Tomura. The boy is engrossed in a stack of paperwork and Kurogiri is surprised enough that he nearly stumbles.

“What?” his ward snaps, looking up from the desk. His eyes are bloodshot, but that’s nothing new.

“What are you reading?”

“Threat reports and mission logs. I need to know how the League is run to inherit it. Not all of us can spend the day relaxing.”

Kurogiri cocks his head, deeply amused. “It’s good to see you taking a greater interest in things.”

“I want an honest answer. Who are the villains loyal to?”

“You and Sensei,” he says automatically.

“No, I think you’re loyal to us. But who do they call when they have a problem? Who do they report to?”

He thinks of the informant in prison right after the Sports Festival, the man begging and pleading to be spared because he was loyal to Kurogiri. Not Sensei, and not Tomura.
“Me,” he answers hesitantly.

Tomura chuckles. “Kurogiri, the perfect fucking guild master. Of course, my League is loyal to you. Get the fuck out.”

Kurogiri doesn’t sigh but it is a close thing. No matter how hard he tries, it always seems Tomura has another reason to be upset with him. He leaves without a word and appears before Sensei.

He nods in greeting to the Strongest Man Alive. His master is observing a screen with a string of text running across it. It makes no sense until Kurogiri uses the cypher. The message tells the story of a world ready to light on fire with one wrong move. Canada’s Hero Association have been at an unprecedented level of alert, constantly skirmishing with the Vancouver Island Villain Association. There’s something about Brazil and the Titanites that passes by too quick for him to read.

What does please him is the notification that the police really are looking at the Yakuza and that All Might is part of the job.

Sensei waves his hand and the screen dies. His master turns to look at him, nodding in acknowledgement.

“Of all my subordinates, you have never once knelt to me. Do you know that?”

“I knelt to the Emperor and begged his forgiveness, but I am not loyal to him.”

“Is that bitterness I hear. I take it the job left you upset. Is there anything of note I should be aware of?”

“China may send a retaliation strike against Japan.”

All For One waves his concern away. “Please, give me a tiny bit of credit. I deal with those every few years. They won’t send any of their Great Ten just to die. It would leave them much too vulnerable against Russia or whoever else they’ve pissed off recently.”

He startles at the crass language Sensei employs. He is respectful and polite to all his enemies. That he can’t extend that same courtesy now is telling of his contempt.

“What do you think of Stain?” Sensei asks without preamble.

“Highly skilled given his limited physical abilities. His quirk gives him an incredible advantage against most close-range combatants, and he has built his fighting style around it.”

“All true. Yet I asked what you thought of him, not for his threat assessment.”

“I… see. He is a fanatic driven fever mad by his ideology. It is completely ridiculous, but it makes him predictable.”

“People flock to those with strong ideals. I sincerely hope Tomura learns that lesson well from Stain. It is rare to find someone of such strong convictions.”

Sensei extends his hand and the wind in the room suddenly picks up. Kurogiri watches as the plain wooden chair in the room floats, carried on currents of wind.

Sensei sits gingerly in the chair. He has a man of raw power and possesses an enormous presence simmering below the surface. And yet, sometimes, he seems like a normal old man of purely normal strength.
It makes Kurogiri wonder how much of it is honest, and how much that honesty is simply another manipulation.

“That wind quirk,” he says instead. “I’ve never seen it before.”

“Oh, you have. Aizawa’s student you used, Nagisa, had a classmate with this power. Truly a shame that he let her powers go.”

Kurogiri tilts his head. “That would make her a child. You hate recruiting children.”

“I never tried to. I found the girl broken and overdosed on a drug her friend sold. I healed her and ensured her safety. And when she begged for me to take away the quirk that represented everything she lost, I did so.”

“To use her.”

“I would have wanted a psychological weapon against UA when she was well but Nagisa did the job just as well. He struck at the very foundation of Aizawa and Nezu’s teaching philosophies.”

“Her quirk was powerful if remember correctly.”

“Very much so. Anyone with it could become… perhaps not as powerful as Stormwind, but perhaps something memorable as well.”

“That seems wasteful. To use her like that when she could reign destruction.”

“Perhaps. People are not pieces on a board. Powerful yes, but I would not take away her free will.”

“You took her quirk,” Kurogiri says in confusion. “You used her purely for the utility of her quirk.”

“Because she was broken utterly and completely. Her mind will never heal. Better to use the quirk then let all her power fade away. I had at one point intended to give it to Tomura.”

“What stopped you?”

“It would have forced him into a mould. He is never to battle on the frontlines. He needs to be a leader, a strategist. Someone who organises, not someone who punches the biggest enemy. Giving him that quirk would be to destroy him of all potential.”

“So, you’ll use it to battle All Might?”

“Perhaps. But I hope to find a successor worthy of this power. It is a power that would make Stormwind proud.”

“You have other candidates?”

“Of course. At one point you were one, though you have little interest in that role. Gigantomachia who represents the strength of body. It would be wasted on him. He is too simple and brutal in many regards. Tomura whose strength of will shall be crushed if I force the oppressive weight of this quirk on him. All that remains is someone to teach Tomura strength of mind. Take a guess, won’t you.”

“Nezu perhaps.”

“No. That wouldn’t allow Tomura any room to grow. One does not simply scale Everest before
climbing a hill.”

“Hisashi?”

“Close. His son.”

“You want Midoriya to teach him strength of mind? You realise he’s a monster.” Sensei merely nods, indifferent. “Why are you so certain he’ll be adequate to the task? Or even that he’ll move as you please?”

“I’ve told you before that people are not pieces on a board.”

“You applied that to our allies. You said nothing of our enemies.”

Sensei leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. He looks so incongruous in that simple chair, nothing menacing or powerful about him today. Well-dressed in a dark suit, but that’s a given.

“I suppose I did not.” He chuckles. “An oversight but one I will allow. Your willingness to call me out is far more important than blind obedience. I do not move young Midoriya. There is little point. He is Hisashi’s son.”

Sensei says it as if that is all the answer in the world. And in a way it is. But with Sensei, it is never that simple.

“Hisashi isn’t a man of conviction,” he spits in annoyance. “He has neither loyalty nor discipline.”

“Your hate towards the man is always a joy to witness. And he is neither. But he is cunning and conniving. He scurries in the dark and rarely stands in the light. In anyone else, I would call it fear. But not in Hisashi. Why?”

“He is powerful, I suppose. Highly mobile. Connected.”

“He is all those things, yes. He has learnt to leverage his abilities, to lessen his weaknesses and magnify his strengths. That is pure intelligence. It was he who brokered the current accord between me and the emperor. Hisashi manipulated both I and the Emperor during Shikoku. We danced to his tune out of necessity. Anyone else, I would have killed. But he furthered my interests and solidified the Emperor's foothold in the army. A man who uses you but gives you your treasure is not one to kill.”

“You admire him?”

“I find his struggles admirable. He isn’t a magnate or a titan, yet he holds in check a man who can split a country in half and the strongest man alive. And he does so by leveraging his greatest asset.”

Sensei is waiting for him to ask. This is a performance as much as it is a time to learn.

“Which is?”

“His reputation. A man who could fight off the Royal Guard or decapitate the League of Villains is to be feared. The possibility of him working for either against the other ensures his security and authority. If his son has inherited even half of that intelligence, then he will be a formidable foe once he grows. Sometimes, your enemy is your greatest teacher.”

*****
Fumikage Tokoyami is ready for the day, invigorated by the trust his closest friend has in him. The morning sun is almost blinding, reflected over the calm waters.

His companion seems to not notice it. In fact, she seems calmer and more present in the bright light. The edges of her seem to waver in the bright light, and it makes him wonder exactly what her quirk is.

They stand overlooking the marina as the boat is prepped to take them to their destination. It gives him a good sight of the area surrounding the pier. It's a bit out of the way but has a place for the helicopter.

“Why is there so much suffering here?” Fumikage asks, watching a group of three smash the window of a car in the distance.

He wants to head over and stop them, but after seeing the murky underbelly of this city, he’s become slightly indifferent to it. That, and he’s hesitant to start a something when they’re about to leave. The sun is setting, and strong emotions like that will give Dark Shadow an opening to influence him.

Agonist pulls her hoodie off. It pulls her shirt up and Fumikage looks away before he can see more than a glimpse of tightly corded muscle.


You’re no fun.

“Have you ever gone travelling?”

He doesn’t turn back even though it sounds as though she has worn her clothes. To do so will give Dark Shadow an opening.

“I’ve visited Tokyo before.”

“So, a no basically. Mustafu is the seat of UA. There are more hero agencies per square kilometre there than any other city. And all of them are UA alumni. What does that tell you?”

She walks into view, a white coat over her underclothes. It has the crest of the Chrysanthemum Dynasty on the breast pocket, but other than that it looks very normal.

“That people like to return home.” He looks away from the plunge of her breasts and focuses on the window.

“There are… agreements made by the powerful, accords that define lines of authority and territory. Mustafu, in practice, belongs to UA, not the government or the crown. Look at every position of power and you’ll find they graduated from UA’s other courses.”

He frowns. “I’ve never noticed that.”

“Because you’ve never seen the real battles. Fighting against villains isn’t important. Fight against the organisations importing drugs and weapons, support education and reform programs, and you clean up the streets better than arresting some petty crook. Mustafu has that support as do places like Tokyo. Nezu’s quest for control has brought a lot of good to the capital region, and even much of Japan. His intelligence and ability to make complex plans make him a nightmare to deal with. It’s why the accords limit the scope of his personnel. You’d have just been another piece in that
machine. Another ignorant fool.” She smiles, honest in her insult. “No one gives a shit about Hokkaido.”

“They’re our people.”

She shrugs. “The Crown considers Hokkaido a security threat as it rightfully is. The government sees it as a drain on resources. They have no value.”

He clenches his fists together, anger building. She says this so casually as though millions of people aren’t suffering.

**Think. Ask the smart question.**

“Why? What conceivable reason is there to abandon our fellow countrymen?”

“The anti-quirk riots started here. They’re the ones who made up most of the militia that attacked the palace. Tell me a few demographic facts about Hokkaido?”

He narrows his eyes, knowing the answer after a night or research.

"Highest percentage of mutant quirks. The highest incarceration rate in Japan. What else is there?"

“They may have the highest percentage of mutant quirks, but they also have the highest percentage of quirkless people. If quirks are a form of power, and wealth inevitably goes to the powerful, what would happen to a place like Hokkaido?”

“It would be abandoned,” he says softly, disquieted.

She smiles and this one feels sincere. “The economy was based around tourism and agriculture. When the dark age rolled around, no one wanted to visit and their economy suffered. The villain Ashfall turned half their arable farmland to dry salt pans. There were only so many resources to go around, and the rebuilding efforts went to Kyushu. And once Hokkaido slipped too far, it was ignored. Those with powerful quirks were incentivised to go to other regions through marriage, scholarships, the military and positions in private organisations. It’s a positive feedback cycle at its worst. People are arrested without trial here constantly. The prisons are giant labour camps. Law and order are kept by those with power.”

Something twists in his gut and makes him feel ill with anger and sadness. "How does it benefit you to let these many people suffer? We're here fighting this secret war because you stood by and did nothing."

“Is that what you think?” She takes a step toward him. “You think this happens because of poverty and disenfranchisement?”

“Yes.”

She takes another step. “Then you’re a fool. Hokkaido has the lowest number of abyssal incidents. It is the wealthy and powerful, those who think they can experiment with forces beyond their knowledge that dabble in the abyss. It is them we have to worry about.”

“That’s still no excuse.”

She bares her teeth in a mockery of a smile. “Come with me and see the war.”

They take the boat to Nakajima when night falls.
The ride is slow and Fumikage gets the chance to watch the six people she’s bringing along. One pilots the boat whilst the other five talk amongst themselves, laughing at a story one tells. He doesn’t expect that kind of levity from people all in imperial white.

Agonist watches the group from a corner of the boat, smiling gently. No matter how close they get to the island, the warmth in her gaze never lessens.

The engine cuts off a few hundred metres from the island and they drift on the momentum they have built up. One of the group jumps out when there’s about a hundred metres left, a thick rope coiled around his waist. Fumikage watches him swim toward the shore, pulling the boat along.

Once on the ground, he plants his feet in the earth and starts pulling. Fumikage simply stares as the boat is dragged by the force of one man. And absolutely no one looks at it oddly. It does, however, have the advantage of letting them moor in silence.

Nakajima is an abandoned island. He knows that intellectually. Seeing the undisturbed forest still throws him just slightly. There is nature in Mustafu, but it’s the sort that has been intentionally preserved. It isn’t this untangled mess that plainly looks ugly in how the trees aren’t exactly placed to give the illusion of wilderness.

He loves it.

“The location is west,” Agonist says to him and the six people with them. “Standard formation.”

They split off into groups of two. He heads to what he thinks is west and gets about ten metres before Agonist pulls him back.

“I said west,” she says and pulls him like a child in that direction.

The move quietly, the two of them further back than the rest. She splits off soon after, urging him forward silently. After a few minutes, he starts wondering if maybe they’re all being paranoid.

He crests a hill and comes face to face with a man in dark garb. There is a moment where the two of them stare at each other in shock.

Then, Dark Shadow, he commands.

The demon leaps forward and wraps around the man before he can raise his long knife. Dark Shadow continues forward and slams the man into a tree. Then, it brings the man up and slams him down. Then again.

“Decent reflexes for a student.”

He looks right and ahead. Agonist leans against a tree, another body at her feet. The person is dressed in the same dark robes as the one Dark Shadow defeated.

Dark Shadow returns with an object in hand. It’s the knife the man had. And the more he looks the more he is certain that it is from the abyss. There are red stains on it. Human blood, he realises and feels a wave of revulsion.

The revulsion vanishes very suddenly. Close your heart to the pain.

She plucks the blade from his hand gently and tucks it beneath her coat. “Don’t ask focus on it. Ask questions later and mourn when they’re safe. Understood?”
With a nod, he sets off again.

This time, she stays near him as they walk through the island. It is no problem seeing the path in the darkness as it may as well be daytime to him. The thick roots are easy to avoid and the tree branches simple to duck beneath.

What he notices most is the absolute dearth of animal life no matter how far they go. Not a single bird or squirrel. It seems like even the insects have fled the deeper they go.

She pulls him back before he can walk past the tree cover towards the large tarp. She points over his shoulder and he sees two of her allies approaching silently from another direction. He can barely make out the second group and assumes the third is nearby.

“It’ll be too chaotic for you to follow,” she whispers in his ear, her breath sending a shudder through his body.

The three teams move inside and he waits anxiously, grounded only by the too warm hand on his shoulder.

It takes a long few seconds before he notices any signs of activity. He sees flashes of muzzle fire and hears screams and shouts. It lasts maybe half a minute. Then, silence falls.

He follows behind Agonist as they enter the tent.

The blood is the first thing he sees. Deep lines and streaks of red cover the floor. He follows it past the cultists—unconscious by the rise and fall of their chests—and towards the body on a table.

It is a child, perhaps eight years old with short hair. There are chains binding the child’s arm to the concrete slab and they are dry with blood. In the child’s chest is a knife, pulsating darkly.

_Breathe_, Dark Shadow commands and the all-consuming emotions disappear. His lungs restart and he inhales the coppery air.

Just in time for the world to shatter.

The wave of force is sudden and sends him flying back. The force is strong enough that he goes through the tarp and would land hard on the ground if not for Dark Shadow catching him.

He rises to his fist just in time to see the column of crystal where the stone slab should have been. It has the same maddening sheen as when Midoriya died. And just like then, it breaks apart to reveal something beyond human.

The creature is not a human child any longer. It drips darkness and has eyes of crystal. Every jerky motion of its too long tipped in claws that casually rip time make him ill. The creature screams, and it is at once the shrill sound of a child in agony and a dirge of endless suffering propagated constantly throughout the universe, an act of hate and malevolence so insidious that the air around the creature rots.

Long tendrils of black fluid fall down the sky like oil on glass, glistening with infection and madness. The fluid flows back to the child and he watches its body contort, shifting through a dozen realities as something from the depths of the abyss wears the child’s skin like a fine coat, supple and ready to be corrupted.

There are splotches and bumps on its skin, and he knows that should they burst, they will unleash a disease that will spread through the island, infecting it with unreal logic. That disease will spread
endlessly until the oceans run red, fetid carrion creatures dying endlessly beneath the surface, and
the final humans are hunted down by creatures that defy all logic. Merciless, relentless creatures
that will strip away every ounce of individuality, replacing it with this infernal abomination.

The creature shifts its crystalline eyes away from Fumikage and to the side where one of Agonist’s
allies is only now just getting to his feet.

In the blink of an eye, the creature has crossed the distance, leaving a trail of broken time in its
wake dangling like shards of glass floating in the air.

In another blink, it stands above a dismembered corpse given no chance to react.

In a third blink, blood from the corpse has risen and surrounded the creature. The blood shines
bright with abyssal power as it hardens, solidifying to a second skin.

It turns its attention to Fumikage. He feels terror grip him, the same terror when he saw the
monstrosities of the abyss.

He has no chance to react before it is upon him. Time seems to slow as the blood around what
counts as its arms extend, becoming claws to rend demigods.

Dark Shadow, though, is not possessed of mortal reactions.

The demon surrounds Fumikage in its form just as the claws hit. Instead of slicing him in half, the
claws rebound off the diamond-hard second skin he now possesses.

He watches the creature warily. Then realises that it is neither near him nor the corpse. No, it is in
its original place above the slab, looking to not have moved once.

How? He wonders, not understanding.

The cultists that Agonist’s teams neutralised are on the floor, unconscious. The creature hasn’t
looked to them or made any motions to attack the defenceless people.

And yet, at the same time, the cultists are dead. That's a fact if the suddenly ripped limbs and blood
splatters are anything to go by.

But it looks like it hasn’t moved. Looks like it has barely processed his presence. The people are
on the ground, alive, yet dead.

It turns its attention to Fumikage once more. For some reason, he has a sudden sense of déjà vu, as
though they’re replaying events that must forever happen in a casual loop.

And then it attacks him exactly as it did moments ago. This time he can see the claws and how
they’re no longer red but a rainbow with colours far outside visual range. It makes a sound like a
thousand angry crickets and a howling child bleeding out alone and terrified.

It strikes him exactly as it did before. Its claws hit the same spot and rebound with the exact same
sound.

Then it is back in its original spot.

And yet, if he looks hard enough, he can see the… afterimages of the creature as it kills two more
of Agonist’s people. There are more mirror images standing atop dead corpses, blood being used to
create a second skin.
That is a shadow of its future intent. But for a creature like this, future and present are relative.

Those mirror images, those representations of its future, suddenly solidify. He's looking not at one creature, but at eight. He knows in his bones that these are its offspring, all as dangerous as the first and that they will continue propagating forever.

Eight pairs of crystal eyes shift and stare at him. They burn with unholy fire, an effervescent light that perverts the concept of light itself. These creatures, father and children, are so far removed from godflame that he can feel the world itself scream in revulsion at their presence.

They move in unison, and he sees it, sees the vision of the universe they wish to create. One where everything is the same, where this creature and a trillion trillion clones rule over life and light and destroy as they please, spreading their infection everywhere.

He forces himself ready as Dark Shadow awakens fully, leaning protectively over Fumikage. In the depths of his soul, he feels his dragon awaken at the threat.

A blast of bright light incinerates one of the creatures. Agonist steps into the open, her fists bright as floodlights from the power of her quirk. The light banishes the darkness and Dark Shadow shrinks, weakened by the blinding light.

She smiles at Fumikage despite the deaths around her. There is no fear, no interest in these creatures all suddenly converging on her.

“Let me show you my power.”

Her form seems to break, and she becomes light itself, bright and blinding and beautiful. The light is pure white and radiant. She takes a step forward and her form makes a sound like wind chimes, so gentle and incongruous in this place of death and endless mutation.

She is humanity perfected, a bright light to walk towards. So long as he stands within her light, no harm can come to him. Her light is a promise to banish the dark, to wage war against it endlessly until only light remains.

In another moment there are beams of light attacking the creatures, dozens of beams until they fill the clearing. Some miss and they tear apart the ground and the trees and any stones in the way. The beams leave scorched trenches in their wake.

He watches them burn in the light of her quirk as it tears through the second skin of diamond blood as though it may as well be paper. A trail of light is all he sees as she fights the creatures in both the present and their relative future.

He can’t track her movements, can’t tell the difference between a beam of hardlight and her simply weaving through the clearing. All he knows is that she battles ferociously. The creatures send waves of something like frozen time but light annihilates them. They summon forth a mist of impenetrable darkness that decays the trees and soil, blackening them.

She simply fills the clearing with so much light that Fumikage’s eyes feel like they’re burning, an incandescent halo of benevolence and fury, marked only by the sound of wind chimes. He doesn't know what's happening, only that he is helpless.

The light vanishes, and she stands beside him very suddenly, not a hair out of place. The creatures are… dead, perhaps, is the best word for they no longer exist. The ground where they were is scorched black with heat and there are pools of burning hardlight.
Only two of Agonist’s original teammates remain untainted. Both are dead, scarlet flowing through their shredded torsos. He can see bone and organs and smells piss and shit in the air.

Fumikage turns to the side, sick. His stomach churns and his chest heaves as he expels the contents of his stomach.

“Hey, you’ll get used to this.”

He’s seen monsters in the abyss and cruelty first hand. But he’s never seen death quite like this. Yes, he saw corpses at the Sports Festival. But he hadn’t seen them die first hand by a monster.

“I don’t want to become that person” he whispers, clenching his eyes shut.

She kneels beside him.

“No one does. But only a few have the strength to fight this war. Do you think it's an excuse now? Do you think we left Hokkaido out of cruelty or out of pragmatism?”

**What did Midoriya say to you? Sometimes the void contaminates the real world and you must burn away the infection.**

"You've made your point. Just. Stop."

“Okay. I know it’s hard. But weakness means death here.” She places her hand on his shoulder. It is a warm anchor, a reminder of life itself.

It grounds him enough to stand once more. His hands shake just like they did at the Sports Festival. And that sends him spiralling back to being trapped under rubble, scared and terrified of being crushed under rubble and his lungs stop working once more and—

**Calm yourself,** Dark Shadow orders and the feeling disappear. **You must not feel for those lost. You must protect those who still live.**

He inhales, fists clenched so hard his knuckles hurt. But the pain in his heart vanishes and he can stare at the destruction dispassionately.

“Can you function?”

Agonist is watching him. Her gaze holds neither judgement nor sympathy. It is simply a query for information.

That is infinitely better than pity. “Yes.”

“That fear you feel is a reminder that you are alive. Understand?” She waits until Fumikage nods. “Good.”

**You burnt them in your light,** Dark Shadow says aloud, materialising in the real world. **How?**

“An application of natural laws,” she says, walking towards the altar. “Moving faster than light is, in practice, a form of time travel.”

She picks up the knife that had once resided in a child’s chest. The creature it had become is gone, not a single trace of its infinitely propagating nature remaining.

The knife has rainbow blood. In a flash of light, it is cleansed of all influence from the realm of
“I move at the speed of light naturally because of my quirk,” she says carelessly, as though the fact is unimportant. “The influence of the abyss lets me move just a bit faster. Enough that I could face it both now in the present, and in the near-future which it tried to escape to.”

“No even All Might could battle that,” he whispers.

Her grin is sharp. “You have more confidence in the outcome of that fight than I do. Now you must make a choice. Will you continue to hide in ignorance? Or will you choose to battle the shadows?”

He looks at the corpses and knows the answer.

He looks at the knife, cleansed of its abyssal influence and knows the answer.

He looks at the slab a child was sacrificed on, screaming to be saved and finding no salvation in the cruel world, and knows the answer.

“You knew I would be unable to stay away if I saw,” he says bitterly.

“Yes. I manipulated you.” She extends her hand, the one without the knife. “I am Izanami of the Royal Guard. It is my mandate to battle the abyss and burn the darkness in my light till my dying breath.”

“Why did he call you Agonist if that is your name?”

Her left eye twitches and she continues as if she never heard him say that, "But my true name is Maya Yotsuba. Only those of the imperial household can call me that.”

Fumikage hates every fibre of his being as he takes it.

“Welcome to the household. You’ve made a great choice” She pulls him away from the blood and death. “Come, let’s get you home. I must perform burial rites for them. And it is not your time to witness them.”

She stays close to him all the way back to the shore, her arm wrapped around his shoulders. It makes it easier to ignore what he has seen with her nearby. Her very presence is a reminder of life and its beauty for she is a testament to it.

They stop at the boat.

“I don’t know how to pilot a boat.”

He stares at her. “Neither do I.”

“Well, I guess we can just wait until our helicopter pilot comes to look for us.”

“How long will that take.”

She looks at her watch. “About another two hours.”

Fumikage doesn’t want to be anywhere near here for another minute more.

“This is ridiculous. How can you not operate a boat?”

“Same way I can’t drive. Look, I move close to light speed. I only use these things for you people.”
"That's… a salient point." He can't argue with that, not when lightspeed is magnitudes faster than anything man-made.

He closes his eyes and reaches for the chains that make up his soul. One is attached to Dark Shadow. It is the older and larger of the two. The second one, though, is known to him just as well if not the creature on the other side.

*Wake up.*

The dragon rises from its slumber in the depths of his soul. It rises at his command. At the barrier between soul and real, it hesitates until he tugs on the chain binding it to his will. In the real world, a pit of darkness swirls in his chest.

The creature emerges head-first, long snout and smouldering purple eyes, the same colour as its new fire. Its neck is scaly and thick with muscle just like the shoulders from which the wings spread out. It scratches clean through the stone with its hind legs as it emerges. Finally comes the tail that wraps around Fumikage's body loosely, a possessive action is ever he's seen it.

Fumikage rests his hand on its side, feeling the scales hard as diamond. The dragon rumbles deeply in pleasure. It curls its neck around to look at him, snake-like tongue tasting the air. It observed him just as he does it.

“Magnificent,” Agonist, Maya, Izanami, or whatever her name truly is, says in awe.

The dragon—and he will name it but saying 'my dragon' sounds infinitely cooler to Fumikage—gives off a wave of displeasure at the interruption through the bond they share. It shifts so that more of its body is between Fumikage and Agonist.

“It was smaller at the hospital,” she says. “Can you control its size?”

Her voice makes the dragon rumble, a sound so low a normal human wouldn't hear. But Fumikage can feel it through the scales, the warning, the threat of violence. He tugs on the bond and forces it to calm down.

“Yes.” He pulls at the bond to draw its attention. “We need a ride across the lake.”

It looks at Fumikage. Then Agonist who is indifferent. Then to Fumikage again.

“Don’t worry about me,” Agonist says before he must compel its obedience. “I just needed to get you across.”

“Right.”

The dragon lowers its head in what may be a bow of supplication. He grabs a bone spur and uses it to hoist himself over. The scales aren’t as uncomfortable as he expects though he wouldn’t want to try this for a long period of time.

It raises its head. Fumikage grabs the bone spurs on both sides for support, settling in comfortably.

“Go straight to the helicopter. It’ll take you home.”

Fumikage nods and raises his hand in a wave. He wishes he had a sword, preferably one shining or burning with fire, as the dragon beats its wings.

In the real, it is forced to obey the laws of gravity and aerodynamics to an extent. It can’t simply
reach max speed in a single beat as it could in the abyss, and he very much doubts it can exceed more than the speed of sound. So, it is forced to beat its wings a few times to rise through the air. The gusts of wind generated uproot loose earth and dust.

With one final beat, it ascends. It flies as a leisurely pace. For a moment, Fumikage is tempted to take a picture. Then he remembers just why he needs to ride a dragon and his mood sours.

**Be glad I hold back your emotions**, Dark Shadow says.

The dragon beneath him rumbles in warning. He feels Dark Shadow metaphorically roll its eyes at the threat but the demon retreats further into his soul.

He inhales the cold air as the dragon flies lazily. Both scale and hide of the dragon are a deep black, darker even than his light-absorbing jacket. It circles the island, skimming close to the water. It ascends suddenly, corkscrewing, before closing its wings.

His stomach plunges as they fall. Only his grip on the bone spurs stop him from falling off, and he hangs on tightly, dangling in the air. It opens its wings, arresting its momentum.

The sudden stop slams Fumikage back in place. It hurts mildly. Mostly, though, he laughs freely.

They fly past the pier and the dragon sets down out of sight. He dismounts the dragon and brushes his hand against its long jaw.

It nudges him forward gently, a sign of its affection, purple eyes bright.

//Let my wings feel the currents of this world, my king//

He chuckles, its kindness a reassurance after what he has seen. And infinitely surprising when he thinks of the cold and violent beast barely restrained by his power that it used to be. Back before Shouto became a king and changed the nature of godflame.

“Watatsumi,” he says. “That will be your name.”

It stares at him and he feels a bundle of emotions he can’t really identify. There’s joy mixed with something purely alien and something like nostalgia.

//Thank you, my king. This name I will bear with pride//

The sound it makes is less an ominous rumble and more a loud purr. He stares at it in amusement and pulls on the bond connecting it. It nudges him once more before it returns to his soul, dissipating in wisps of darkness.

The pilot is waiting for him, still staring where Watatsumi was moments ago. The man is older than him by a good five decades, hair mostly white and deep age lines marking his face. Under no circumstance would Fumikage be rude to an elder.

So, for the man to bow forces him still.

“Sir,” he says, voice layered with decades of experience. “Where are we to go?”


The man rises from his bow. “As you say, Sir.”

The disconnect between fighting abyssal creatures and dealing with his mother screeching at him
for being out so late is jarring. His father, thankfully, is silent in a supportive way. Or at least he refuses to get involved in the argument. Apparently, a package has come for him, handed over by a man who spoke no words.

The package is beside the prop sword in his room. He holds the handle of the blade, wondering one day if he’ll ever have a real one. Fumikage lets go of the handle, finding the idea foolish. He doesn’t know how to use a weapon. It would take too long to learn.

And he doesn’t even want to explain to his mother why he has an actual sword when he can barely get away with being gone for a day or two.

He unwraps the to find a list of protocol and identification codes Maya expect him to read and memorise. Finally, there is a note to check his bank account.

He has yet to see that much money in his life.

There should be elation. Instead, a wave of grief and revulsion and anger hits him like a freight train. It is crushing, a wave of emotions that drowns him in despair and grief. He’s on his knees in an instant, still and silent and crying all at once, his throat choked with emotions.

*Your emotions, with interest*, Dark Shadow whispers cruelly.

“‘You traitor,’” he whispers on his knees. He holds his chest as the emotions feel like they’re about to break him in half.

All he can think about is that boy on the slab calling out to be saved.

The boy he failed to save.

**Chapter End Notes**

So, I’m busy. Probably for the next five months. Chapters will come out as I have time to edit them. Basically, everything up to about chapter 56 is written, I just don’t have more than a few minutes here and there.

Let me know what you think by dropping a comment. But, if you can’t, know your readership is more than enough for me. Cheers.
'The UN Doctrine to Quirk Warfare places strict limits on quirk usage in the military for a reason. Imagine a soldier with a hardening quirk, a common quirk archetype. They have the armour of a tank but far greater mobility. Imagine a soldier with an explosive quirk. They wield the power of a rocket platoon without the concern of a logistics supply. Quirks magnify the utility of a soldier. It is why every military in the world does not abide by this doctrine. Including the UN itself. Was it not armed quirk regiments that the UN used to enforce peace on their terms during the Dark Age? Was the fabled Hawkmoon anything more than a hired killer at the behest of the UN? We're lying to ourselves if we think otherwise. Go to Brazil and you will the scars of that campaign centuries, endless miles of barren land and the great ravine to Titan’s Fall. Quirk warfare is bloody, destructive and chaotic…'


Katsuki Bakugou is angry.

That anger is the sun rising each morning. Maybe one sunrise is prettier than another, sweeping purples and brilliant oranges far as the eye can see. Maybe a sunrise is special because it’s seen somewhere new, a snow-swept mountain or a churning ocean, or witnessing the light of the sun grace a field in a valley at the beginning of spring. Maybe it is special because you watch it on a deck with someone you care for, chilly autumn air caressing you gently, the whisper of the wind intermingling with stolen breaths.

But one sunrise is still a fucking sunrise. You might ascribe value to it, but it's still the same experience. Darkness and cold, then light and warmth. The colours don’t matter and the scenery is merely decoration to the sun itself, given value only to those who observe it. The sun does not care how you view it. It will rise and set regardless of whatever meaning you give it.

Katsuki being angry is therefore nothing new. The only difference is the context. That context being that Shikoku is one fucked up place and it pisses him off. This isn’t how he wanted to spend his first internship, not when he received offers from both Hawks and Best Jeanist.

He’d rather be fighting villains with those either instead of patrolling the streets with Edgeshot. Because fuck, the fake ninja likes talking.

“You’re lucky you go to UA and people can recognise you,” Edgeshot says, continuing what seems like an endless monologue. "If you tried to stop that fight, they wouldn't do anything more than breaking a bone or two at worst.”

Right now, Edgeshot’s hand is holding him by the shoulder, holding him back from perhaps doing something stupid. His grip is crushing, powerful in a way Bakugou doesn’t expect from someone who walks so delicately, light on his feet in a way that reminds him of Izuku—and thinking of that always sends him to dark corners, so he focuses on his anger instead, anchoring himself to the present day.

There’s a fight going in the middle of a basketball court, two people out for blood. One is a mutant that looks like a tiger, long claws and sharp teeth and raw brutality. The other seems to just be a regular person, no powers other than a graceful hand and a very long knife, but Katsuki isn’t stupid
enough to believe that.

The one with the knife rolls forward and slices her opponent’s arm, backing away quickly. He can’t understand how the fuck Edgeshot is indifferent about the fight, or how the five people in the area seem more interested in preventing Katsuki from interrupting than stopping the fight.

“You see those two over there? Underground heroes. That guy in the back is a vigilante. No idea about the other two so they’re unaffiliated with any other group.”

He’s aware of the three and has kept them all in his line of sight. There’s a park bench and a tree for cover should it come to that, and he can always backtrack to the alleyway if need be. Not that he thinks anyone is willing to get in a fight with a top ten hero.

“The fuck does that have to do with letting her die?” he asks, seeing her take a hard punch to the face.

Edgeshot scoffs. “She’s baiting him.”

Katsuki frowns as the tiger mutant leaps to the woman on the ground, intent on ending the fight. At the very last moment, she rolls into the attack. He can't see what happens next. All he knows is that the mutant is suddenly screaming in pain, a knife deep in their arm, and the woman has her arms raised high, whooping in victory.

Two of the spectators rush forward, one with a medical kit and the other apparently there to hold the mutant down.

“Shikoku isn’t like Kyushu,” Edgshot says as they treat the mutant. “There aren’t enough heroes or police. So, it’s taken up by people like them. I don’t know what grudge those two had, but it’s sorted out now. No one’s gonna get hurt because of it in the future.”

Katsuki clenches his left fist, not his right because that one hurts like a bitch.

“Fuck, you think he’s not gonna go after her.”

“Of course not,” Edgeshot says, pushing him to keep walking. “If he does, a group of four, maybe five or six people will find him and kill him. This fight was sanctioned and permitted. Anything else isn't. Think of it as a duel of honour. Those were permitted in ancient times. Ambushing someone was a crime then. It’s a crime now. People make their own peace here.”

Edgeshot waves at a group of soldiers walking down the road. One waves back, glancing at the basketball court. Edgeshot shrugs and they continue onwards.

“I grew up here,” his mentor says. "Saw the Purge first hand. It's why I'm a hero. I don't want that to ever happen again in my home. But the military must go away. The base here was large but it wasn’t anything like this. There weren’t military barricades and patrols everywhere before the Purge. Now, you don’t go more than a few minutes without seeing a uniform.”

Katsuki isn’t stupid by any means. You don’t get into UA by being stupid and the school had covered this part of history as part of his curriculum. He knows the military base here only used to house the 14th Brigade in the early twenty-first century. Following the emergence of quirks and the widespread destruction caused by the Dark Age villains, the Central Army had largely been devastated baring the 14th Brigade. It had been chosen as the new headquarters for that army, expanding as the city expanded.
It would, over the centuries, be the location for the headquarters of the reformed Central Army, and in time, the entire army. Zentsuji might not be the capital of Shikoku but it does boast a considerably larger population than the official capital of Takamatsu.

It also boasts the single largest army in Japan at slightly over a hundred and fifty thousand by Katsuki’s best estimates. As large as the entirety of the JSDF in the twenty-first century.

“Everyone has a goal, Katsuki. Mine is demilitarisation. That makes All Might my ally when it comes to matters like this. We work the same events and walk in the same circles.”

Edgeshot points at a man in a dark hood watching some kids play on the street. No one seems to care about this. Katsuki watches him and then feels more eyes on him. He looks at sees someone dressed similarly further ahead. The more he looks, the more of them he sees.

It takes him a moment to realise that person they consider an enemy, the person they distrust on principle, is him. Katsuki is a stranger here, someone not to be trusted, a foreign influence who might not share the same interests or goals.

“That's where I started out, just trying to make things better for a few people. Keeping the peace. There's a safe zone down the road. Everyone is protected there, doesn't matter who they are. You start something there and you'll be lucky to walk away with a broken face. Military police once tried to apprehend the villain Shinobu a few years back. That started a three-month riot and ended with Shinobu's Vow, a battle that never seems to end. Ask most people here, and they’ll tell you they support her Vow.”

Edgeshot speaks quietly, looking straight ahead. There is a melancholy to him, a profound sadness that leaves Katsuki uncomfortable. This isn’t the first story Edgeshot has told him, nor does it seem like it will be the last.

There may be joy and happiness to be found, but if there is, it’s hiding beneath a pile of suffering Kastuki has only barely skimmed the topmost layer. A riot here and an execution there, a curfew in a few weeks back and maybe a slum suppression in a few weeks to come.

“I like the internships,” Edgeshot continues, steering them away and down a new direction. “It makes sure you kids actually see what you might have to deal with. You're strong, don't get me wrong, but you're too brash because of that. You need to be patient. Wait for just the right moment to strike. Giant explosions are good for intimidation but an efficient attack takes less energy. You can stay in a fight longer. Your arm's busted up and I've seen how much pain it causes you to handle the recoil. If you don't adapt then one day you won't be able to use that arm.”

Fuck you, he thinks bitterly, because it would be so simple if it only hurt when he used his quirk.

He can't feel a good two-thirds of his arm, splotches like inkblots denoting areas of feeling, black numbness on a canvas of excruciating white pain. The portion protected by the brace hurts the worst, a searing pain that flares up intermittently. His fingers, the three he can feel with any consistency, feel raw and scraped and sometimes the pain heightens to a point where he contemplates chewing them off.

“So, we just fucking give up?”

“It’s a cycle, you see. Poverty breeds poverty. Once something gets bad, it only gets worse.” Edgeshot leads him down another street. “The only reason you got into UA is cause of a scholarship.”
“I got in there cause I was better than everyone else.”

"Really? How much did it cost you to take the entrance exam? On your dad's salary, it probably doesn't matter. Running those exams is expensive. I was just lucky enough to get in on a draw."

“How the fuck do you know about my dad?”

“I pulled up your records. Even looked at your red order.”

He tenses, remembering the conditions with excruciating details. He remembers the private chamber the judge explained the full details of his red order, the room dusty and crammed with him and his parents and Aizawa. If he ever makes a single mistake, if he ever hurts anyone other than a villain, if he ever goes beyond the bounds of the law, then there is a laundry list of crimes he will account for. If he ever does fuck up, then maybe if he’s lucky, he’ll walk a free man when he turns forty.

He doesn't like thinking about it.

“That was sealed.”

“It was sealed until I paid a broker for information.” Edgeshot watches him indifferently. "Your information isn't really private. You're rather lucky that classmate you hurt is so kind. Otherwise, you'd be in prison."

Katsuki grits his teeth, doing his best not to scream and lash out. Does everyone think he doesn’t regret what he did every day of his life? Every night he goes to bed remembering the fear in those green eyes and every morning he wakes up with a scream in his throat.

“I fucking know.”

“Good. Because I have three weeks to teach you everything UA can’t.”

He glares at the hero before stalking past him, staring at the ground. It makes it easier to pretend that he’s not a terrible person undeserving of anything he’s received so far. He wishes he had someone, anyone, to speak to. Not his therapist because she just pokes and prods in all the wrong ways. Someone, though, willing to understand his failings and meet him half-way.

“Bakugou!”

He looks up and sees Yaoyorozu of all people trailed by Jirou and a hero he’s certain is Ryukyu. His lips curl into a snarl. He knows they both got an internship to the province. He just hoped he could avoid them for the next three weeks.

Honestly, he’d rather not see anyone he knows. Especially not people who know his failings and their shape as well as these two.

“The fuck are you doing here?”

Edgeshot shoves him forward, having snuck up behind him. “They’re on patrol. Think things through a bit.”

He fucking hates the smug smirk Jirou wears. She’s somehow dazzling even in her dark outfit, more intense than the drab backdrop that is Shikoku. And that leaves him breathless for a moment before he focuses on the anger instead.
“I think you guys can have a short day,” their mentor, Ryukyu, says, nodding to Edgeshot.

Edgeshot offers Ryukyu his arm like a gentleman. She shoves him aside, chuckling. The two wave even as they walk down the road.

“Lazy bastard,” Katsuki mutters.

He watches his mentor walk off with another hero. The bastard has the audacity to laugh at something she says.

“Let's get lunch,” Yaoyorozu suggests once the two heroes are gone. “There's this really nice hotel with the best calamari in Japan. We can catch up.”

Katsuki is tempted to say no. It's his first instinct. Who the fuck does she think she is acting like they are friends? They don’t know each other or have anything in common. It doesn’t matter that they message each other often and she was the person he discussed his internship with before accepting it. None of that means they’re friends.

It also sounds like the sort of personal lie Deku’s Kaachan would make and he never wants to be that person again, defined purely by his inadequacy and insecurities. He doesn’t want to go back to hating someone simply for being kind and decent.

“You're paying,” he grumbles, shoving his hands in his pockets.

He's sick and tired of being alone. There are exactly two people his age still willing to give him a chance and both are standing before him.

“You done with your internal conflict?” Jirou asks, rolling her eyes.

“Fuck off.”

He lets Yaoyorozu lead them to a restaurant. Maybe he feels guilty they’re being served food that costs more than most here will pay in rent for a month. But then Yaoyorozu makes a joke that sets Jirou off, and for a moment, he’s willing to forget.

*****

Toshinori Yagi isn’t certain how he came to agree to this madness but he understands the importance of image more than most ever will.

Some days he wonders how badly society would be rocked were his weakened state to be revealed. How does one simply continue with their lives knowing the pillar upholding society isn’t the steel structure they thought, but a mouldy wooden plank? He worries about this more often than he’d like.

I should stop burdening Izuku with my worries, he thinks but dislikes the idea immediately. Izuku has already seen him without his powers and accepted him. Better that he knows and expect the burdens of the path he walks than be surprised by the weariness it brings.

Most of all, Izuku is someone to confide in. There aren’t many people he trusts like that.

“We’re here today with All Might,” the interviewer says, pulling All Might from his thoughts. “Thank you for joining us today at the Quirk News Network.”

He grins his famous grin. “It’s my pleasure to be here today.”
UA’s Sports Festival was attacked recently and by all reports, the person responsible for perpetrating the attack was a UA student,” she begins with no preamble.

That lack of false pleasantries is one of the main reasons he will occasionally grant them interviews. They want answers and hard facts, not gossip.

“A former UA student, yes,” he agrees. “One who was withdrawn from the heroics program for behaviour unbefitting a hero. It is a tragedy that the young man would resort to such an act but we are ultimately responsible for our own actions.”

“But don’t you as his teachers hold responsibility for him as well?”

He isn’t my successor, he thinks uncharitably and instantly feels shame.

That boy should have been helped. Toshinori isn’t certain what form it should have taken, and he can’t turn back the clock and fix the issue, but the fact that it happened is problem enough. No child should be forced to make a choice like that.

“In many ways we do but there is a limit to which we can guide any child,” he says deeply. “We do not monitor and observe a student outside of campus for the sake of ensuring their privacy rights. It is always a fine balancing act between mentorship and being intrusive. And after a student leaves the campus, be it from graduation or expulsion, they become responsible for their own actions. Certainly, we are willing to help, but we can only help those who seek it.”

She nods, shifting in her red lounger. It’s leather like the one he is delicately sitting on despite that fact that it could probably survive someone triple his weight.

"That highlights a concern many of our viewers have. There seems to be no real safety net in place for alumni. Once you're out of school then that's it. Specifically talking about the perpetrator of the attack, Nagisa and his entire class were expelled two years ago. UA has always had a reputation for accepting only the very finest with its exams, but the fact that an entire class can be expelled shows the exam isn't a particularly good metric for future success."

All Might’s grin strains just the tiniest bit. She’s being polite and perfectly courteous, but she smells blood and circles around him with her questions, waiting for a single slip-up.

"It did work for a long time but we have found it to be an outdated model. So much so that many of our students signed a petition to have it evaluated. We believe strongly that students are the best form of feedback available to us, and as such, the entrance exam will be assessed thoroughly in the coming months, and a more balanced system put in place."

“Hm, and what changes do you expect to see come next exam?”

“I’ll say that this has yet to be confirmed, but I believe a psychological screening process will be front and centre. Very likely, examination groups will be smaller and take place over the course of a week to see the full breadth and utility of a student’s quirk, as well as the ingenuity they show with it.”

“That seems closer in structure to the hero licensing exam. Don’t you fear it will dilute the licensing exam if you use something so similar?”

He takes a sip of water to reset the conversation and give himself a moment to think.

“Hardly,” he says, choosing casual dismissiveness. “The licencing exam test the more practical application of being a hero from combat to rescue activities. The new exam will be focused on
ensuring a student has the necessary temperament to be a hero and if they have learnt to make use of their quirk. And if it causes the standards of the licensing exam to increase, then I see no problem with it. UA has always been the premier heroics school in Japan and stands shoulder to shoulder with Toledo Research Institute in Spain and Hero Memorial Academy in Zimbabwe. The entrance exams of those institutes have always been the highest in the world. And if UA must change it’s exam structure to stay abreast with the international heroics industry then it will.”

She frowns slightly, undoubtedly hoping to find a weakness or a flaw to pounce on. Polite though she may be, they aren’t allies by any means.

“That was a very concise answer. Speaking of your students, they’re currently taking part in their internships. With the increase in crime, many parents have worries about the danger posed to these youths. Especially since these internships will be an unprecedented three weeks compared to the usual one week.”

“I’m not worried for them. They’ll be under the watch of top heroes with decades of experience. And having personally seen their resilience, I can say with certainty that I have no worries. They will learn and grow from their first experiences in the field.”

“Even with the hero-killer present? The last who held that title killed Hero and her wife Legion.”

“It’s a lofty title to hold. His claim to fame is that he has defeated some heroes. That’s not a title I would brandish with confidence. The last Herokiller did not escape for very long and neither will this imitator. We can tell based on his attack patterns that he isn’t particularly strong. He's struck against sidekicks from the shadows at the end of their patrols when they are already tired. Even with that, we've cast a net. He'll be apprehended within two weeks.”

“Aren’t you afraid he’ll run now?”

“Not at all. If he runs, then he invalidates whatever point he thinks he’s making. If he stands his ground, then he will be defeated. No matter the outcome, this hero-killer loses.”

“You haven’t taken any interns,” she says, shifting the topic. “In fact, since Sir Nighteye you haven’t formally worked with any sidekicks.”

There is a bundle of pain and regret deep in his soul every time he thinks of his former sidekick. He knows he should do something and confront his past, but right now the idea is too painful.

One day, he will, but not today. Today he must with deal with this interview. Tomorrow, and the next few weeks, he must deal with the Yakuza.

“I haven’t taken any interns because there is little for them to learn from me.”

She raises a single perfect brow. “Really? Nothing for them to learn from you? All Might, greatest hero of the Modern Hero Era?”

“They know who I am, they know my ideals and beliefs and fighting style. I don’t want to create a carbon copy of myself. These children are the future and the lessons they learn for themselves are more important than any I can teach.”

“A lot would like another All Might.”

“And I’d like to be twenty again,” he says jokingly, smiling despite the constant pain he feels in his side. “But we just have to accept what we have and make the best out of it.”
“The government has recently declassified more footage of your fight against the Iron Dancer. Before we only had grainy images of the fight that got you named the Perfect Fighter.”

All Might inclines his head. “I haven’t thought of that battle in quite some time.”

And he very much doesn’t want to. It was one of his earlier fight in America, back before he was fully confident of his abilities and certain of his capabilities. It was a fight he very nearly lost, the second so soon on the heels of his losing Nana.

"By all rights, you should have lost,” she says, not cruelly. “He had more experience than you did and was much faster than you are. You spent close to half an hour battling one of the foremost martial arts experts in the world. It’s been dissected by many analysts but I’d like to hear from you how you won a fight that should have been unbeatable.”

It had been a sobering reminder that there are other powers, some equal to him, and a few who surpass him. He wonders, some days, at the heights of power the legends of the past held, the likes of Hero and Stormwind. There is reverence when people speak of them, of Stormwind slaughtering an army and Titan trampling mountains beneath his massive form.

*Will they remember me?*

“Firstly, you have to remember that no one is unbeatable,” he says after a moment of silence. “Even the greatest villains can be defeated. If you believe in their invincibility, then you give up your will to win. You will have lost the fight before it has begun. Acknowledge their strengths, yes, but never to the point you blind yourself to the possibility of victory.”

“How did you win in your own words?”

“I kept punching the same spot. Nothing fancy about it. He was more skilled than me so complex manoeuvres were detrimental. I played to my strengths, the power of my punches, and kept on hammering one point until his defence broke. It may have taken half an hour but I had the perseverance to win.” He grins for the audience. “You can topple a mountain if you chip away at it long enough.”

She nods sagely, eyes darting towards the clock.

“Do you have any parting words?”

“One form of wisdom is to take the words of those who came before and believe in them earnestly. One of my students is wiser than I can ever hope to be but, there comes a time when we must make our own beliefs as one of my peers informed me. A time when we must stop looking to other symbols and become our own symbols. I have been called the Pillar of Society but that is because I believe in society. We can all become pillars if we are willing.

“I’ve come to learn that the hardest step a person can take is the next step. Taking a step forward, being able to place one foot in front of the other, is an act of faith in and of itself. It is the ultimate prayer against despair. So long as we keep moving forward, we’ll meet the rising sun eventually. The greatest step forward we can make is passing the baton to the next generation. I believe fully that those who next will surpass us all. The students I have been privileged to teach will surpass me and forge a legacy greater than any I could hope to make. They have the greatest advantage over us: they can take our wisdom and forge a future without using our outdated means. Our duty right now is to make the world better in what few ways we can and entrust them with the power to choose a future.”
"Well, there you have folks. Thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule for this interview."

All Might grins.

“It is my pleasure.”

*****

Police officers cordon the area from civilians, tape and authority their methods of control. Shouto Todoroki walks through the crowd of tense officers with his father, not once stopped by them. A few people recognise him from the Sports Festival and say his name in awe.

He spots a man with a squad in quirk suppression gear standing with a squad dressed similarly and their eyes meet. His eyes are grey as a frigid morning on a stormy sea and just as cruel. The man says something that is likely a curse before turning away.

Shouto puts him out of mind. They have more important things to deal with right now. Like the dead hero in the alley.

The sight of the corpse elicits no disgust in him. It’s a dead body, about as important as any other. Maybe the blue fur and tail and scent of sulphur might be interesting were the hero alive. There was a person behind the hero, someone with loves and hopes and dreams. Shouto feels no pity for the dead hero.

It means he had simply not been strong enough to survive.

In the abyss, death meant you were too weak to survive. And whatever strength you had was simply consumed. He’s killed many creatures intentionally and committed genocide accidentally. A single human life doesn’t mean much to him.

“What can you tell from this corpse?” his father asks, as he always does when they encounter a new corpse.

Shouto lets his right eye see past the bounds of normality. His father looks like howling dead, burning eternally in a fire stoked purely by hate, and not the lines of ordered energy most humans look like. There are dark smudges around the corpse, impressions of the murder, and they paint a blurry picture that he can follow if only barely.

“The spine was severed first,” Shouto says, watching the psychic residue of the crime play out in his sight. "Stopped him from moving. Single cut. Repairing the spine would be difficult without a quirk like Recover Girl's."

*Or a dragon's spine as a replacement*, he thinks, remembering how they repaired Izuku’s. He certainly doesn’t want to think of the agony the procedure had caused Izuku, but he also doesn’t want to forget Izuku’s sheer joy at walking for the first time in months.

That electrifying grin still leaves him dumb, unable to speak past an inarticulate grunt.

His father huffs in annoyance. “You should stop relying on her. Her quirk is powerful, but it does not replace trained surgeons. I’d trust them over a trumped-up emergency responder any day. What else can you see?”

“There wasn’t much anger in this. It was cold and calculating. The second cut to his throat happened much later.”
“Good. Why?”

“Maybe he wanted to spare him initially,” he suggests to which Endeavour shakes his head. “To use him as a warning?”

“He had heroes like Ingenium to send a message,” Endeavour says.

“From the reports,” his father continues, walking towards the police cordon, “Ingenium only died because no one discovered his body with the chaos of the Sports Festival. The real reason is that this Hero-killer is a narcissist.”

For a moment, Shouto sees a shadow walking down the street. The shadow looks familiar, someone he knows, but distorted by rage and hate and anger. He wants to say it is Iida, but he’s never seen Iida in a bad mood, let alone ready to murder someone.

The vision fades, making him blink rapidly.

They fall silent as they pass by the police. His father exchanges a few words with the grey-eyed man.

“That makes no sense,” Shouto admits once they’re past the police and not likely to be overheard by the few onlookers.

“He preys on weak heroes and whilst they die slowly, he speaks to them. Maybe it’s threats, but most likely he’s driven by a violent ideology. People like this see themselves as righting some perceived wrong.”

“What if there is a wrong he’s fixing? What if he has a point?”

His father glares. "Not like this. All this does is take away resources for dealing with villains and policing actions. Nightcrawler here was a rescue hero. Now he can't save any more lives. Whatever wrong this villain thinks he's correcting, this is the wrong way to go about it."

“I’m surprised you care so much for the law. Seeing as how you used all of your resources to keep authorities out of your life.” He shoots his father a snide look. “Quirk marriages were made illegal centuries ago.”

“Your point being what exactly? All of us are bargaining chips. You. Me. Your mother. All that matters is who is willing to pay the price.”

A surge of anger rushes through him and he feels very ready to incinerate his father. The only thing that stops him is the expectant look in those steel blue eyes.

“Good, you can still control yourself. Your mother’s quirk was valuable for its power and inheritance. Five generations of various water emitter quirks culminated in your mother’s perfect ice quirk. There were many people who sought a union with Rei. The rich, the wealth, and the powerful. And they all fled before one man.”

“The Emperor.”

“Yes. How did you… No, that’s unimportant. He wanted to add your mother’s ice quirk to his son’s dual quirk and create the first triple quirk. Can you imagine the power they would wield then?”

He can. The Emperor's son had sunk Taiwan in a fit of rage. To imagine that scale of power added
to the ability to control ice makes him shudder. The Imperial Family would hold the world hostage by the threat of their power.

“The Emperor whose earth quirk can raise mountain ranges and destroy cities easily. His son who controlled the oceans on top of that power and killed twenty-million people in one fit of rage. And whatever his child would be able to do if they got Rei. They would own the world more than they already do.”

“No one should have that much power.”

“Don’t you? The godflame makes up the very essence of your soul.”

Shouto inclines his head in agreement. His control over those infernal flames makes him powerful even if he can’t quite wield them with the finesse he did in the abyss. He’s strongest there, he knows that. Here, the godflame abides by its own laws and he can only call a portion of it.

Still enough to burn the world, but perhaps not enough to completely wreck the galaxy. He’d have to weaken the boundary between this world and the other layers of the abyss to operate at full power, and he’s not sure he wants a world like that.

He walks the streets of the city in silence with his father, unsure of why they’re walking so publicly. They seem to have no objective. Endeavour even signs an autograph for a group of children. He doesn’t smile or suddenly become gentle, but the sight of his father kneeling to sign a child’s notebook is still absurd.

“Heaven is important to the public,” Endeavour tells him once the kids are gone. “People need to be reassured that their heroes are competent, especially with the recent murders. Stand tall and let them take strength in you.”

Shouto grunts but takes his hands out of his pockets. “Inefficient. We could be searching for leads.”

“And what do you know of investigations?”

“Go to the crime scene. Look at the crime scene with my weird eye. Follow psychic residue. Simple. It’s what you do, after all.” It is said snidely and with too much pettiness.

His father levels a glare that prior would have silenced him for the rest of the day. The people in their way automatically step aside, unaware of why the street is suddenly filled with such heavy dread.

“Don’t take that tone with me. You will show me respect or you can return home. This was your request. I did not beg you to come.”

They turn the corner and there’s Iida around the corner, talking to some hero. Just like he saw minutes ago.

Shouto stops in place whilst his father continues walking towards the pair. Because the sight is so familiar that it leaves him with a sense of vertigo.

Right now, Iida looks calm and collected. Iida looks just as cheerful and diligent as usual. His hair is impeccable, his smile bright, and his costume resplendent. It paints the picture of the perfect intern.

Shouto doesn’t have to look very hard with his right eye to see the dark and coiling miasma around
Iida. It's a churning Stormfront of rage, grief, violent intent, and cruel determination.

Just like the shadow Shouto saw minutes before.

“Isn’t that one of your classmates, Iida?” the sidekick asks Iida loudly, pushing him forward. It gives the sidekick the opportunity to talk to Endeavour without Iida right beside him.

They stand awkwardly together, neither knowing what to say. They’re not friends. Classmates, sure, but the only connection between them is Izuku—always Izuku.

“Todoroki, how are you?” Iida asks, removing his helmet.

“Iida, can we talk in private.”

“Sure,” he says cheerfully. Iida waves at the hero he’s working under who nods.

Shouto takes the time to scan for a quiet alleyway, one without heat signatures and much in the way of electromagnetic activity. There, two streets down is an alleyway between two office buildings. It’s long past the work day ended though as always there are people working diligently.

“What’s wrong?” he asks Iida in the shelter of the alley. “You look like you’re about to kill someone.”

Iida cocks his head, the picture of innocent confusion. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Todoroki. I admit I haven’t been sleeping well since the Stadium, but I can’t look that bad.”

The lie is beautiful and delivered expertly. Even Izuku would be impressed. Sadly, Izuku is a much better liar than Iida could hope to be.

“Let me tell you a truth in exchange for that lie. There are exactly twenty-seven heat signatures in the building behind you, four of them are small pets. I can tell you there’s someone downloading a lot of data about to cross the street to your right.” And just as he says, there’s someone walking with a bulky looking device in hand. “You don’t have any real reason to trust me, but I didn’t have any reason to tell you that truth.”

Iida has a great poker face, his expression not shifting for a single moment. He wonders who Iida learnt it from, then realises there’s only one person they know who lies as easily as breathing.

“Well, that’s an interesting expression of your quirk but—”

“I’ll tell Izuku,” he threatens and Iida freezes on the spot. “I’ll tell him and you know for a fact that he’s gonna hop on a train right now and shake you until you tell the truth. And if you don’t, he’ll start crying and probably tell All Might.”

It’s the single pettiest insult he’s ever wielded. His father would be disappointed if he heard, but he suspects that Fuyumi would find it hilarious.

Iida stares at him incredulously. Shouto simply pulls out his phone. Iida moves like lightning and grips his wrist harshly.

The veneer of civility disappears from his classmate. His eyes are filled with such loathing that Shouto almost chokes on it, this raw and malicious intent to see any path forward.

“The Hero-killer killed my brother,” Iida says darkly and slow as a glacier. “He’ll kill more. I’m going to kill him first.”
That makes more sense. That is something that makes sense. Kill or be killed is the nature of the abyss, and what is this universe but the topmost layer of it. The power burning in his soul is the power to scorch reality to his image, to burn everything away and start over.

“Okay. Do you want some help?”

The hand around his wrist tightens painfully. “What?”

Iida is perhaps the person in their class he considers most like a hero after Izuku. Perhaps not as all-loving of life itself, but diligent, respectful and driven. And if considers this the right path, then what reason does Shouto have to argue?

Fuyumi told him to figure out what it means to be a hero. This seems a perfectly valid way to do so. He’s committed genocide once before, killed creatures just as alive as he is, and forgotten how to love his mother. Killing a single mortal mam won't weigh in his conscience.

Perhaps it never did.

“He’s killing heroes,” Shouto says, removing his hand from the Iida’s painful grip. “Heroes save people. If I help you stop him, doesn’t that mean more heroes stay alive and they can save more people? Which means we’re saving those people. The maths is simple.”

The logic sounds reasonable to him. Kill the person killing the heroes and save a lot of people. Simple. Neat and tidy.

Shouto extends his hand. “I’ll help you kill him. And you help me figure out how to be a hero.”

Iida clasps his hand. “I think I might have misjudged you.”

“You can be my third friend.”

Right after Izuku and Fumikage. He may be willing to put up with the others in his class, but he doesn’t expect to see them in a few centuries, not like his equals.

*****

“I thought you were some hotshot with two quirks. Put some effort into it.”

Izuku groans from his spot on the ground. Everything hurts and he regrets calling Gran Torino out that first day. Because he’s shown absolutely no mercy since then. It has been training since that moment and there has been no pause. He’s been slammed into the ground and humiliated by an old man running circles around him.

It is pure combat training and Izuku can’t help but love it. There is a challenge to every exchange, a call for him to be better. Each bruise forces him to move just the slightest bit faster to avoid another injury.

He rolls to the side before Gran Torino can kick his face in. A small crater forms where his head was moments ago.

_You realise you’re being beaten by a senile old man._

“Shut up,” he snaps.

He takes a kick to the face for that. “Don’t get distracted.”
He stays focused for the rest of the training session, ignoring Mikumo’s unwanted commentary. It makes it a bit difficult to weave between Gran Torino’s incredibly quick attacks. One For All comes to life and he dashes forward. He twists low and summons a shadow pole, the green sparks vanishing.

He swings at Gran Torino who leans back. The old troll kicks the pole away. Then he kicks Izuku in the face once more.

“Your mistake is thinking they’re two separate quirks,” Gran Torino chastises whilst they rest an hour later. “You either use One For All or you use your shadows, but you don’t flow into them. You called your quirk Shadowshield but you don’t use shields.”

He takes that advice.

When Gran Torino next attacks he makes a shield out of the darkness and blocks the powerful kick.

Gran Torino flips over it as Izuku expects. But this time he doesn’t banish the shadows, doesn’t waste precious moments, and instead pirouettes on the spot, the shield still around his arm.

He blocks Gran Torino’s blow with darkness in one arm. And then he twists, kicking low with one leg. And then he charges forward, shield raised and bashes into Gran Torino.

The retired hero lifts his leg and lets his sole take the blow. The moment his shield makes contact with the hero, Gran Torino jets away, landing a short distance away and entirely unharmed.

Which makes Izuku blink. When he opens his eyes again, Gran Torino is in his face. Izuku has perhaps a split second to curse before the pain comes.

He stares at the sky, head pounding.

“Good,” the man says above Izuku. “You’ve already figured out you’re not All Might. Kick where he would punch. Dodge and weave where he would block. Now it’s just a matter of getting you to figure out how to incorporate your quirk properly. Shadowshield is an emitter quirk. Defence and offence are the same things for emitters. Again.”

With grace, he flips and lands on his feet. Gran Torino nods.

Izuku dashes forward.

A strand of darkness shoots from his shadow seeking Gran Torino’s leg. It misses as he expects. Instead, he grabs the strand and turns it into a hard pole with a single thought. He twists and swings the weapon.

Gran Torino blocks it easily but it gives Izuku a single chance to move forward and kick at the old hero.

“Foolish,” Gran Torino whispers and grabs Izuku’s foot as his leg rises.

Izuku stares in shock as the hero uses his kick against him to get height and momentum. Then the hero activates his quirk and closes the gap too fast for him to react.

He takes a boot to the face and feels his nose break.

Izuku snorts blood out, annoyed, but he still stands and slides into a ready stance. “Bring it,” he
Gran Torino sighs, cracking his back. “You’re a masochist but you’ve got drive, kid.”

It takes no more than an hour before he’s beaten black and blue. Izuku wheezes, wondering if there’s anything broken in him then remembering his bones are stronger than normal with their odd crystal lattice supports. He would definitely feel any major bones breaking.

Which reminds him that he’ll have to get his medical report from Recovery Girl at some point.

You want to see the monster beneath the surface? Mikumo asks, sounding frustrated. You’re not human, brother mine. Why should you care?

“There’s a clinic nearby. One of the nurses has a healing quirk that will accelerate the healing process. After we visit her, you’re going to figure out the range and limitations of your emitter. If you can’t tell me the exact range you can sense, the area you need to make shadow constructs, how many you can make, then I’m going to beat you down again.”

“Yes, Gran Torino.”

“This is something that’s been bothering me, but why can’t you make constructs our of other people’s shadows. You can feel mine, right?”

Izuku nods. “Yeah. It’s half a square metre.”

“Smaller than yours. So why can’t you make constructs out of it.”

“Because I… huh, I’ve never tried that.”

Gran Torino kicks him in the shoulder. “You’re one of the smartest idiots I’ve met. Once you can make constructs from any shadows and incorporate into your fighting style, you’ll be top tier. Keep people bound with shadows. Block attacks with shields. Dodge what can’t be blocked. Take them down with One For All. As it is, you’re at the very least strong enough to win against B-rank threats easily enough. A-rank would be a stretch without help, but if you got lucky then maybe I’d bet on you.”

The retired hero sets off with a wave, hobbling on his cane. It makes Izuku wonder just how much is a lie and how much is genuine age.

He gets a call after the nurse has set his nose and lectured him for a good ten minutes about proper care. He’s nodded along knowing he’d just get back to fighting tomorrow and knowing that his body will heal by then anyway.

“Hey, Uraraka,” he says happily. “How’s the Internship?”

“Good. You sound like you have a cold.”

“Broken nose.”

“It’s our first week. How?”

“Getting my ass handed to me by an old man. I took a bit of a training internship. I’m just working on getting better control over my quirk.”

“Really? You need better control of your quirk?” She sounds incredulous over the phone. “You beat Todoroki like he was a little boy and you didn’t have control of your quirk?”
He shrugs, not that she’ll see it. “Yes?”

“Your powers are just broken.”

He laughs. “Yeah. Are you and Shinsou ever going to go on a date?”

“Not you too. Asui and Kirishima won’t shut up about it.”

“There’s this nice café downtown with cats called Anteiku. It would be a great place for a date.”

“Right. Are you going to take Todoroki there?”

He blinks. “No. Why would I?”

“Because… oh yeah, you’re kind of an idiot. Never mind.”

“Please tell me you aren’t pulling a Hatsume and think I’m in a relationship with Shouto. Because we’re not.”

“You know you call him by his first name. You don’t call anyone else by their first name. I don’t know what’s going on between you two but it’s something even if you’re not sleeping with him.”

Uraraka ends the call before he can respond. His ears burn and he is glad no one is around to see him.

I’m here, Mikumo says.

“Shut up and go to sleep.”

He looks to the setting sun and wonders if everyone else is having half as much fun as he is. He hopes they are. What’s the point if things are boring? What’s the point to life if you don’t challenge enemies stronger and faster and greater than you?

*In the beginning, that idea would have frightened you.*

“Back then, I wasn’t ready.”

This time, though, he has no fear as he dives deep into the abyss. Training never stops and it’s one fight after another. He heads deeper and deeper, past the more benign creatures, and towards the ones willing to fight him. He challenges creatures that don’t follow any of the natural laws, constantly shifting forms and destroying concepts like time and death. He still manages to defeat them.

And maybe, just maybe, he enjoys the thrill of fighting to the death.

**Chapter End Notes**

We keep plodding along. The next chapter will hopefully be out in the next 2 or 3 weeks. Anyway, see you when I see you.

If you enjoyed this, let me know. Otherwise, cheers.
Chapter Notes

I feel like I just updated. Whatever. As you've probably guessed, updates come whenever I have time to fit things around getting a degree.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

‘The third and final duty of the Royal Guard is more mysterious than their burial rites. It is given no mention nor is it acknowledged officially. But there are rumours, substantiated only through the after-effect of their actions, including Taiwan sinking and the Purge of Shikoku. It is believed that the Royal Guard is a major player in a conflict unseen to the common man. It may be against villains of the Japanese government, but their indifference to corruption and villainy grant credence that it is of far greater importance. The only true substantial clue to this war is a phrase uttered by a member of the Guard: ‘Cleanse the dark and halt the conduit’. It is unknown what either the ‘dark’ or the ‘conduit’ refers to, but it is the only indication of this secret war of theirs.’

—Excerpt from ‘Examining the Japanese Imperial Family: An American’s Perspective’ by David Hayter.

Inko Midoriya is exhausted.

The toll of her son missing for three days still weighs heavily on her, the nightmares of his corpse—his true corpse, not the creature of crystal madness and anathema logic that she knows instinctively in her soul, tortured and mutilated by exposure to the abyss—in a cremation chamber still haunts her. Every day she wakes up and checks his room, forgetting that he isn’t home. And every day, her heartbeat speeds up, sweat trickling down her neck until she checks her phone and sees a message from him.

She brushes her fingers against the All Might poster, knowing that in another world, it is ripped and torn. Seeing it isn’t possible with her eyes, but the same part of her that lets her know the names and letters of the gods, lets her see that truth.

She raises one of the many figures of the man her son respects with all his soul, no matter how foolish that idea may be.

“Stay safe,” she whispers, knowing he won’t hear, and knowing it is a futile hope. No matter how much she wishes it, Izuku will always find himself in trouble.

If he must fight at the forefront, if his burning need to be a hero means he will pit himself against villains, if his desire to make a better world forces him to fight the world, the very least Inko can do is fight the threats he isn’t ready to acknowledge.

Once, during the Sports Festival, she had made a promise to herself, and perhaps to the parasitic gods hitching a ride in her body, to bring down UA for their failings against her son when he is ready to stand on his own. He isn’t there yet, but on the day, he left he was confident and strong.

That, more than anything, means he is ready to step forward. She hates how young he is and how foolhardy his actions will be, but she refuses to abandon him. Izuku will move past her influence.
and protection, but for now, she is still his mother.

Today she will begin that plan. There will be justice, no matter the cost.

Izuku may hate her for what she will set in motion, but she will not allow him to be Nezu’s puppet. She can hardly imagine a tenth of his possible schemes, but she has done enough research into the Heroics Industry and UA alumni, found the tiniest discrepancies only through their influence in unrelated events.

The biggest, and perhaps most well-hidden, is that most of the top forty heroes are UA alumni, and yet, there aren’t anywhere near as many UA alumni as sidekicks. It is a tiny thing, easy to overlook under the assumption that they immigrated to other countries, an image well-constructed by UA’s brilliant media machine. It isn’t a total lie, but the numbers are just different enough. One person here in one photo and missing in another. A social media account incredibly active before a single post about retirement due to injury, before almost total silence.

With a deep sigh, she gets up and leaves. On her way out, she passes Hisashi who sits on the couch, Hawkmoon’s memoir in his hand. Their eyes meet, and for a pregnant moment the air is charged with a decade of anger and longing. Anger wins out.

“Unless we ask for you, stay out of the house.”

He closes his eyes, taking a long breath. Her husband sets the book down and stands.

“Oh, okay.”

She waits and observes him leave, silent and head bowed. He looks defeated, and she feels nowhere near enough sympathy to surmount the resentment. At the doorway, he hesitates.

“Can I at least—”

“No,” she snaps, not caring what he might have meant. “You don’t have any rights in this family anymore.”

“That’s fair,” he says, and for a moment, she remembers every kind word they shared when they were younger.

That moment isn’t enough to cut through a decade of loneliness and resentment. It is close, but not close enough.

She forces her jaw to move and says, “Goodbye, Hisashi.”

Exactly ten minutes after he’s gone, she regains control of her feelings. Ever since he came back, opening old wounds and making new ones, neither she nor Izuku has found any measure of balance.

Still, those ten minutes almost makes her late for her meeting.

She enters the office and takes in the wood desk and the man sitting behind it. He wears a simple suit, and his office is just as simple. The only items of note are the many pictures of his family, and a framed shirt for some quirkless sports team or other. The words are in Japanese, but a small part of the power that lets her son understands all languages is lodged in her soul, and it reads as ‘Armoury’.

“Thank you for seeing me,” she says immediately, with little interest for the false pleasantries. “I
know your schedule is very busy.”

The man twitches slightly, off-balance. Almost startled. It isn’t the politest thing to do.

“The pleasure is all mine. Please have a seat.” His voice is high and reedy.

She takes the offered seat, crossing one leg over the other. Back straight, hair in a tight bun, and gaze steady, she makes for an intimidating figure.

“I was recently informed I should speak to a specialist for burn injuries and treatment options for my son.”

The doctor nods and launches into a detailed explanation, the fifth she’s heard this week. The details and options may be slightly different, but they all paint a damning picture. She lets him continue, nodding where needed, and asking for clarification on certain procedures.

“And how long exactly do skin grafts take? And how difficult are they to perform.”

“Skin grafts for burn wounds? Oh, we do them all the time. They don’t take up much time.” The doctor looks up. ”Unless you meant reconstruction surgery. That can take a few weeks to fully recover. But usually, patients can get back to their jobs after the first week once a lot of the pain has subsided.”

Her smile is wide and completely frigid. She removes a picture of Izuku, specifically his wound in the immediate aftermath so many weeks ago. She is glad, for once, that everything must be recorded for legal purposes these days.

She shows him the pictures of Izuku.

He takes a long minute to observe the picture, mumbling to himself. Then he looks up, a question in his features.

“Hm, I assume this happened when he was out in the field?”

She startles. “I’m sorry?”

“The wounds are severe, don’t get me wrong. But the only reason they wouldn’t fully heal is if he was treated in the field without an equipped operating room. What unit did your son serve in, if you don’t mind me asking?”

Her smile is thin. “None.”

The doctor leans back. “I’m sorry, but the only people in Japan who have scarring like that either couldn’t access a hospital or are army veterans.

“I see.” She stands quickly, startling the doctor once more. “Thank you, doctor.”

“Wait. Midoriya,” he says slowly. “That’s your name. Your son goes to UA. He was in the tournament.”

“Goodbye, doctor.”

“Before you leave, I have one piece of advice,” he says, his voice deep unlike his earlier tenor. “I can guess what you want to do.”

The politeness vanishes from his features, and only a deep-seated bitterness remains. She
recognises that brand of bitterness very well.

“Really now,” she says with a touch of bitter humour.

“Do you know how many people were injured in their Sports Festival? And it’s not their fault. Somehow, my son can nearly die and I’m expected to blame villains, or heroes, for their incompetence. You’re not the only person with a grudge. And you won’t be able to do it alone.”

She looks over her shoulder and offers him a vicious smile.

“I don’t plan to.”

"I don't know if you really understand what you're fighting against," the doctor says quietly. "Do you understand how powerful UA really is. They're not just a school. They practically own the city it's in. They might as well be a city-state. Trust me, I've tried. It isn't worth it."

“Maybe. But I have to try anyway.”

And I don’t think you had anyone like Hisashi on your side.

An hour later she sits in a café enjoying a cup of strong coffee. A cat rubs insistently at her leg, seeking attention. And Inko just isn’t in the mood to entertain the creature much, not when she already has one in her lap and another around her neck.

“Fuck, you look ridiculous.”

She looks up to see Mitsuki, her phone out and undoubtedly there will be a dozen pictures on social media in a few minutes.

Inko rolls her eyes. “Sit. We have things to talk about.”

“You finally ready to talk about what’s going on with your quirk?”

Inko leans away from the cat licking her chin. It’s hard to have a serious conversation with a single cat involved, let alone two of them. The only reason she likes this place so much is that they serve the strongest cup of coffee in Mustafu.

“What treatment options were you given for Katsuki?”

Mitsuki’s frowns. “What does that have to do with us meeting?”

Her smile is bitter. “Do you remember Jin?”

“Weird shirtless dude with bullshit anime eyes?”

“He asked me if I’d consulted with anyone other than UA for Izuku’s burn treatments.”

Mitsuki looks away. “I’m sorry but—”

“I’m not here to fight with you,” she says quickly before Mitsuki retreats. “But did they ever off you any other treatment options? I can assure you they didn’t for Izuku after USJ. Everything was done in house to protect him from villains. And I swallowed that up.”

Her smile is bitter. It isn’t the entire truth, but close enough. She has no intention of telling Mitsuki the full extent of her son’s quirk. They may be friends again, or close enough, but that level of trust doesn’t exist between them.
It may never exist again. There will always be a battle trial and a sealed red order hanging over each interaction they share.

Mitsuki’s features soften a tad. “He’s got permanent nerve damage in his right arm. He can still use it mostly. But I don’t think he has feeling in most of it. It’s hard getting him to talk about anything.”

“I talked to a few doctors about burn treatments and facial restorations. They said they do them all the time and they take less than a month if you’re using advanced nano-grafts which were introduced five years ago. UA told me Izuku would be out of school for months.”

Mitsuki narrows her eyes. Her friend is smart despite how she acts.

“Then she either didn’t know… Or she chose not to tell you? Oh, fuck.”

“My thoughts exactly.” Her smile is flat. “Will you help me?”

*****

For Fumikage Tokoyami, the days since the raid have been peaceful. He has yet to be called again by Agonist and spends his days in the forest training his powers. After the creature they fought, he now needs to be fast enough at summoning Dark Shadow or Watatsumi in a fight. Anything less, and he may not survive the next encounter.

**Why should death bother you?** Dark Shadow asks through their bond.

He’s on his way to the train station, having received an encrypted message earlier that morning. It had taken him a few minutes to figure out which cypher to use

“Because I don’t want to die young.”

He can feel Dark Shadow’s annoyance. **Your kingdom is life under disparity. Do you truly believe yourself so weak that death is a worry?**

He doesn’t answer that question, not sure if he wants to consider it. They made a promise, the three of them that day on the beach, and he supposes a part of him never really internalised what eternity meant.

The train ride leaves him with time to contemplate his thoughts. Death is something he hasn't really worried about, not since the Sports Festival and nearly being crushed beneath the rubble. Nothing since then has felt so visceral.

Maybe it is the reason he sleeps with a single sheet instead of thicker blankets now. The last time he did, he woke up panicking and sweating and almost woke his parents up. Perhaps he did, given that neither of them bothered him the next morning in any way, and his mother kept shooting concerned looks.

His father, as always, was silent.

Either way, he’d rather not think about it. He disembarks at a train station near the pier. The twenty-minute walk is good and lets him clear his mind. Yes, he could take a bus, but that would leave him crowded by people.

The building is right on the water, looking over the water. It smells like salt and something cloying that he can’t place.
There’s an advanced looking biometric sensor next to the door. He enters his details along with the passcode he has for a low-level meeting like this. The floors are modern tile and there is much more glass than he expects. It looks like something ripped straight out of a modern work magazine with the bright walls and lack of actual offices.

There are people milling around or at their desks doing work. Hardly any of them look over thirty-five and absolutely none of them look like they’ve been in a fight before. He feels like a piece of meat beneath their attention as he enters.

Someone carrying two trays of coffee piled high almost steps over Fumikage. He manages to avoid dropping the coffee as he stumbles.

“Who the hell…” The young man dressed in shorts with suspenders and a dew dozen piercings gets a good look at Fumikage. “You’re the one everyone’s talking about. Inquisitor, right? The special asset? Royal Guard in training.”

Fumikage blinks. “I beg your pardon.”

And then he’s surrounded by a group of people trying o get their coffee. They don’t look like people working for the imperial family. They barely look like people formally employed what with their tattoos and piercings and odd hair colours.

“Give me my coffee, already,” one woman says, jostling Fumikage aside. “I don’t care if he’s the Emperor’s secret heir. I need caffeine now.”

Fumikage wisely steps aside before he’s trampled by the group.

He finds Agonist, Maya, watching this fondly. He approaches her, uncertain if this is a serious meeting or not.

“I’m confused,” he says, voice barely audible over the loud noises the group is making. “They do not seem like…”

“Not everyone is a fighter or has a quirk. We need accountants and engineers and all the rest just as much as any other group. We just don’t care about bullshit like work clothes.”

“Right. And why did he call me a Royal Guard in training?”


“I heard that,” the man in question shouts.

“Doesn’t change a thing,” Maya—it feels wrong to call her Agonist or Izanami when she is so relaxed—calls back. “We’ll use the backroom. Don’t destroy anything while I’m gone.”

There is a chorus of ‘yes, ma’am’ from the group before they go right back to whatever it is that is causing them so much humour. Fumikage follows Agonist to an office on the second floor. It has glass panes separating it just like the rest of the office and is hardly what he calls private.

She sits on her table. Fumikage chooses to remain standing. She’s taller than him as it is. No need to make himself needlessly shorter.

He must force himself to look her in the eyes and not the deep plunge of her neckline. And he’s almost certain Dark Shadow is pushing and prodding, forcing desires that aren’t his.
Oh, they are. You just try to hide them.

“We don’t have many special assets,” she says before he demands an answer. “You’re one of two I oversee, and until recently I had none. We have maybe ten all told. You’re working directly with me, a Royal Guardswoman, and it gives the impression that I’m grooming you to take a seat at the table.”

“I’m never going to protect your Emperor.”

She shrugs. “That’s what a special asset is. A person with special skills that won’t take the oaths of the Guard but is amenable to working with us. Just ignore Nakajima. He’s probably running a betting pool that he wants to rig.”

“I see. You called me here to debrief.”

“What were your impressions of the raid?”

He frowns. “It was unnecessarily violent. Too many lives were lost out of what seemed like a reckless attack. And they were ill-equipped to deal with the threat.”

“All true. Given the circumstances, six lives is an acceptable price for a successful operation.”

“By what measure do you call the successful?”

“We stopped it. It multiplied eight times in under a minute. If it got to a population centre, we’d have to burn down the entire city.” She stares hard at him. “They knew the score. The risk of death is a constant in our field of work.”

“Wait… You could have eliminated it before it became a threat.”

“I was assessing the nature of the creature.” She rolls her eyes. “I told you, moving faster than light is time travel. I was fighting that thing from the very beginning. It took you a while to catch up with my relative present.”

“That’s…” He trails off, unsure of how to process that.

“Please, continue basking in my magnificence.”

“Why do they call you Agonist?” he asks just to be belligerent.

Her eye twitches. “I swear, you kids are the worst.” She sighs. “It’s an insult that’s never gone away, alright.”

“And Inquisitor, why did he call me that?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. Maybe read some of the documents we send you.”

Thankfully, he can’t flush. There’s a stack of them he’s ostensibly supposed to have read, and he’s touched none of them.

“What is our next objective.”

Agonist claps. “Our next mission is simple. We have reason to believe a pirate group is smuggling in abyssal weapons. We’ll be working with the Oki Mariner.”

The name means nothing to him. “Why don’t we do this ourselves?”
“Because I’ve lost my boat pilots and I’m pretty shit at tracking.”

“You told me I was not ready—”

“And you still aren’t,” she interrupts, not harshly. “That’s not why I’m calling you here. You’ll be seeing a friend and I thought it might be good for you.”

“Whom?”

“Your classmate, Asui Tsuyu.”

Shouto Todoroki knocks on his sister’s door.

It is open just a sliver, an invitation for anyone to enter. He, especially, has no reason to wait. Never has and never will. Still, he waits for her quiet, “Come in,” before entering.

Her room is shades of grey and blue, with the odd hint of green. It’s as wintry and chilly as the ice quirk they share between them. She’s seated at her desk marking schoolwork as she always does after dinner.

“Hey,” she says without looking up. “What’s wrong?”

He doesn’t question how she knows something is wrong. Of everyone, perhaps she knows him better than Izuku ever will.

“Can I ask you a question?”

She puts her red pen down and closes the book on her desk. “Sure.” She gestures to her bed with her free hand.

“What happened?” he asks, staring at the bandages around her wrist.

She looks back to him, startled, and it makes him realise how threatening his stance has become. He’s coiled tightly, ready to hurt anyone who dared raise a hand to his sister.

“Calm down. I tripped on a tree root. Landed on my wrist.”

She wouldn’t lie if it was a person who hurt her. Living in Endeavour’s home meant they all had more than enough experience hiding injuries and lying about them to teachers and friends in the case of his siblings. But amongst themselves, those lies don’t exist.

“It’s just a sprain, nothing more,” she adds.

He takes a breath and forces his body to relax. He doesn’t feel that emotion, but he doesn’t want to scare his sister.

“Let me see,” he says more insistently.

She sighs. “You worry too much.”

He takes her hand gently, careful not to apply any excess pressure. Slowly, he unwraps the bandages and reveals her inflamed hand, a patchwork of motley purples and yellows and shades of blue.
“Do you trust me?” he asks, placing his free hand just above the swollen wrist.

She pushes her glasses up. “You won’t hurt me.”

He takes a deep breath and activates his other quirk. Tendrils of frost spread from his hands and over her wrist. His fire quirk isn’t the only thing that changed. The ice he can generate is just as alien. If he chooses it can accelerate entropy and be corrosive to anything it touches. But just as it can destroy, it can also be used for good.

What he does isn’t healing. It is simply changing the direction of time for her wrist. Slowly, the swelling dies down and her wrist reverts to its original state.

She flexes her wrist cautiously, eyes widening when she feels no pain. “It doesn’t hurt.”

“No.”

“Have you ever thought about being a medic?”

For a moment, he considers that. It would be easy to heal people, to mend their ailments and fix them. With enough time and experience, there won’t be anything he can’t heal. And yet, if he leaves UA, he’ll have to abandon everyone he knows. It will mean leaving Izuku and Fumikage and Iida.

“No. Never. Can I ask my question now?”

She laughs delicately. “Yes.”

“Heroes are supposed to save people. And saving people means arresting the villains, right?” She nods. “But you know that guy from America, the one with bat wings who throws villains in prison even though they escape each time.”

“What about him?”

“Well, the villains go on to kill other people. Doesn’t that make him responsible for all those deaths.”

"If I'm remembering correctly, he has a code he doesn't compromise on. And killing is one of them. I don't think there's anything wrong with a code like that. It's noble if anything."

“But isn’t he then responsible for every death after they escape prison. He has the power to stop those deaths but he doesn’t. That sounds like he might as well not help.”

“And if he stopped, then all the criminals hiding would come back. All the corrupt officials would worm their way back in power. It might not be perfect but it’s better for the average person now then it was before.’”

“If he was willing to kill the really bad villains, then it would be even better.”

“I don’t think that makes him wrong. Taking a life is difficult and it changes people. Look at you, arguing that death is a good option for a hero to take.”

He looks away, not willing to concede her point but conceding it all the same. He’s told her of his time in the dark, powerless and trapped in a story he couldn’t control. He’s told her of that one battle against someone who looked and felt just like her.

They both know what he did. They both know taking a life is something he is more than capable of
“Then explain why. He captures villains knowing they’ll kill more. That just sounds like… I don’t know, weakness, maybe.”

“I think it’s fear of his strength. If he justifies that taking one life is okay, then taking the second and third and hundredth becomes easier. And some people aren’t willing to take that first step.”

“Then he’s a coward?”

“No, I think he’s brave. It’s hard standing by your ideals when the world is telling you otherwise. Now, why are you so interested?”

“I was having a conversation with a classmate about the new hero killer.”

It is true in the strictest sense. Those are the best lies as he’s come to learn. If you can get your way with a sincere truth, use that instead of any convincing lie.

Fuyumi nods. “Well, don’t get too dragged down by it.”

There is nothing more than needs to be said between them. She will always be there if he needs help. Later, Shouto tells his father that he’ll meet up with him in Hosu later and that he wants to catch-up with Iida before their patrol starts.

He catches a glimpse of a vision in the corner of the room. He looks and sees himself leaning against a wall, surrounded by three corpses.

“Don’t be late,” the man grumbles, staring at a report.

His father’s words make the vision vanish. Shouto nods and leaves, setting off to Hosu.

He meets Iida in a café. It’s nothing special, just another place hidden in a forgotten corner of the city.

They greet each other warmly, putting on a show for the two patrons and the owners of the store. The tea he orders has little taste to it. Nothing’s really tasted nice since he left the abyss so long ago. Nothing really compares to the heart of a godling burnt in his image.

Maybe nothing ever will.

“What did you bring?” Iida asks, looking over his shoulder.

Shouto almost rolls his eyes. Almost. Instead, he unlocks his tablet and pulls up a map of Hosu. There are coloured lines overlaying the map.

“The patrol routes for the heroes in the city.” He taps another button and seventeen black crosses appear on the map, all marked with a name. “And his victims. Including Ingenium.”

Iida glares darkly and, for a moment, Iida is ready to kill Shouto. Without mercy. Without hesitation. Without remorse.

*I like him*, Shouto thinks.

“But make light of this.”

“Sorry,” he says sincerely. “It’s hard to remember what’s appropriate.” He points to his right eye,
the darkest shade of black. “Getting this was painful. It’s hard to… sympathise sometimes.”

Iida takes a breath. The anger doesn’t vanish, but it does lessen. Iida has no reason to believe the story of his kidnapping during the Sports Festival to be false.

“Patrol routes are just suggestions. They’re areas a hero is reasonably expected to patrol in a given night with no interruption. All of Stain’s first five murders in Hosu were outside patrol routes, picking off heroes returning from work. Ever since then, he’s been bolder and targeting heroes during their patrols, like Nightcrawler yesterday.”

“This is why we have to kill him first. He’s a murderer of the worst sort.”

“The thing is, I think he’s been getting help. There aren’t any solo patrols allowed in Hosu anymore. There’s no way he’d be able to get in, kill someone, and escape without alerting their partners.”


“That’s the working theory. Probably why they don’t want us operating after dark without a big group. These are his three most likely targets.” He taps a button and glowing red dots appear on the map, all three just before patrol routes would intersect.

“How do you know all this?”

“Because Endeavour is surprisingly competent at this and he’s part of the investigation team.”

“If they know he’ll attack there, it seems ill-advised to send out small teams.”

“Each patrol team is made up of A and B-rank combat heroes.” Shouto points at spots around the likely attack spots, marking them. “And there are patrol teams operating close enough to respond within two minutes. We’ll meet up later tonight near the end of the patrols.”

Iida nods. “If we find him, I won’t let him walk away.”

“I’ll burn his legs off,” Shouto adds helpfully.

Iida seems not to appreciate it by the way he grimaces. “Let’s meet at the first location at seven.”

Shouto parts ways with Iida and meets his father in town.

They go on patrols and even stop two minor crimes. But it all seems so unimportant now. People wave and ask for autographs from his father, somehow unafraid of the hero killer simply because Endeavour is in the city.

A tug on his sleeve pulls him away from his thoughts. He looks down to a little kid, gap-toothed and smiling brightly.

“Can I have your autograph, mister?”

Shouto blinks, confused. He takes the proffered pen and signs his name on the notebook.

”Thanks,” the kid says before running off to join his friends.

It leaves him confused. There’s no reason anyone should want his autograph.

“People flock to strength,” his father says. “They remember the strength you showed at the
That makes little sense. He isn’t a hero by any formal definition. To place their faith in him simply because they saw one fight seems foolish. But people are foolish as he’s come to learn.

It is much later in the day that he says his goodbyes to his father. The man glares at Shouto, his blue eyes frigid.

“I won’t protect you from your own foolishness,” he warns.

Shouto’s is indifferent.

He heads to the meeting spot and waits patiently for Iida. He appears soon enough, looking tired and sustained only by a deep well of hate that Shouto can’t help but find impressive.

They say no words.

Their first location is a few blocks away and they keep to the shadows of the main streets as they move. No one can really accuse them of breaking regulation if they use the simple excuse that they’re going to a café to get some group work done before heading to the train station. A lie is only as good as the context behind it and being a diligent UA student is perfectly good context.

The first possible point of attack is uneventful. They wait until the trio of heroes walks out onto the main street without issue before heading to the next site.

Shouto smells the blood long before they reach the alleyway. It fills his mouth and nose. He walks forward slowly, drawn inexorably to the scent. There are three corpses littered through the alley, and though they are dead, he can feel the fading embers of the strength they once held.

“We’re late,” Iida informs him, unhelpfully.

Shouto takes a calming breath before he says something rude. He stares at his hands, seeing blood and death and fire dancing between his fingers. It isn’t real, nothing more than memories and his imagination, but for him, dreams and ideas are as real as the corpses.

More and more, he’s coming to understand why his father was as harsh and cruel as he was. Shouto puts his hands in his pockets and forces the feeling down.

“Not by much,” he says, voice breaking. “They’re still bleeding.”

He leans against the wall, crossing his arms. Then pauses, feeling an intense sense of repetition like he’s already done this before.

Shouto swallows uncertainly. He’s leaning against a wall and there are three corpses just like he saw before in his father’s office.

“Let’s go,” Iida says. “We might still find him at the last site.”

“I doubt it. He doesn’t ever attack more than one location on any given day. There’s more we can learn here.” He sees past the bounds the reality and lets the scene of their death play out.

It isn’t particularly clear, more like starlight outlines of intent and wisps of light than a clear image. But he can understand it well enough.

“He killed all three of them rapidly,” Shouto says and then points to the one furthest back. “Died
before he even knew what was happening.”

He sees the second turn around, a spark that may signify his quirk coming to life before the immense shadow that represents the hero-killer snuffs it out.

“This one had enough time to turn before she was killed. A single stab through his eye.”

The last of the three wisps throws a punch that the hero-killer dodges around easily and brings his blade across the hero’s throat.

“He put up a fight for a few seconds. The cut is too jagged.” Shouto shakes his head. “I’m calling the police. Let’s go. We failed tonight.”

“You really can see these things.”

“Yeah. Let’s get out of here.”

Shouto yawns and rubs his right eye. Details are sometimes blurry, especially after he uses his power. As they walk to the station, he wonders if the blurriness is permanent or if he’s becoming blind to the real world in that eye.

Because whilst things are crystal clear in his left eye, everything has a blurry tinge to it and the colours are washed out slightly in his right eye.

In his right eye, he can see the darkness hiding beneath the surface.

*****

Fumikage prepares for another battle, meditating in a corner. He feels Dark Shadow in the depths of his soul, just as focused as Fumikage is. The two breathe in sync, their energies pulsing in time, distinct but intertwined. Soon enough, his dragon joins them, bringing forth rage and curiosity that is lessened by Fumikage’s peace and Dark Shadow’s determination.

When they are ready, he stands. They are so close to the surface that he sees the outline of scales running down his hands, his dragon forever protective of its master. Dark Shadow is so close he can almost hear the demon’s thoughts.

He takes a breath and pushes them down just the slightest bit. He doesn’t want them appearing if someone startles him.

Maya, sometimes Izanami and sometimes Agonist, waits for him. She nods.

The two of them head to the mariner, he in his dark costume and she in her white jacket. They draw odd looks from a few of the people working at the pier, but people are used to heroes enough that they largely ignore them.

“She’s working with the pro hero, Selkie, on his ship, the Oki Mariner,” Agonist says.

He glares at her out of the corner of his eye. “We should not involve her. She has nothing to do with this.”

“Do you happen to have a competent pilot who you trust not to run at the first sight of trouble? Or someone who knows how to track pirates?”

“Why don’t you have others?”
They walk down the ramp to the berth where the other ships are docked. Some are sleek and brand-new pleasure yachts. Others have signs of wear and tear. To Fumikage, outside of their different sizes, that is the only observation of importance about them.

"The area we're searching over is massive. We've got maybe twelve groups and each of them has someone who can stall for time if they encounter the threat."

"Then hire more people."

"I wish it was that easy. Now shush, little crow."

He accepts the insult as they approach a mutant who looks, unsurprisingly, like a selkie. He is tall and dressed in a blue bodysuit. And he does not look pleased to see them.

"Welcome to the Oki Mariner," the pro hero Selkie grumbles.

Agonist salutes. "Permission to come aboard, captain."

"Not like I have a choice. Get on." He jabs a finger to two of the sailors working on the lines. "Stay out of their way and we won't have problems."

Agonist smiles. "Thank you, captain."

They go up the short ramp. Maya taps him on the shoulder, points towards a corner that looks unimportant, and pulls away to talk to Selkie.

On the way, he sees the cause of his reticence for this mission. Asui Tsuyu. His classmate. And she doesn’t look impressed.

"Asui," he says, waving at her.

She doesn’t smile as he expects. "Tokoyami."

He frowns. She almost never calls him by his family name. And the last time they met before the internship, she had smiled immediately.

"It’s good to see you."

"I wish I could say the same. Excuse me, I have to secure the lines."

He blinks and watched her join the other sailors. He wonders if he did something to insult her without knowing.

Fumikage leans on the railing, away from where Asui and the sailors are working. He isn’t sure what he has done to anger her so, but he is unwilling to needlessly antagonise her with his presence.

The sailors work quickly and soon enough they’re heading off. He watches the calm waves, lulled almost to sleep by their serenity.

"I’m Sirius," a woman says, pulling him from his thoughts.

Her smile bright and earnest, and she is dressed in a sailor’s uniform.

"Fumikage Tokoyami. Or Tsukuyomi, if you prefer my hero name."

"Hm, I like Tokoyami more."
“It makes little difference to me,” he says and is startled to find that to be true. Neither of them truly encapsulates the nature of his power or the shape of his soul, more placeholders than true names.

"Aren't you a UA student?" He nods again. "Then why are you working with her?"

“A mix-up with my paperwork,” he says, which is technically true. “I've had the opportunity to improve my skills in investigations and tracking.”

"Well, I hope it doesn't come back to bite you in the ass."

He shrugs. “I thought we were heading north, not south.”

She cocks her head, genuinely confused.

“We are.” She points at the sun. “It’s setting west. You can use that to orientate yourself at sea.”

“Thank you,” he says, embarrassed. Thankfully, she doesn’t pursue the matter.

The sun sets long before they get any hint of the pirates. He catches snatches of conversation amongst the sailors filled with technical jargon he doesn’t understand.

Fumikage watches the dark water in a corner out of the way. He still knows nothing about boats, but he is starting to understand Agonist’s contempt of vehicles. He has a dragon and that is infinitely cooler. And significantly faster.

The only downside towards doing so is that he has no idea how to track someone over the water. And even if he could, his sense of direction would not help him.

He hears someone approach and glances over his shoulder. Asui’s expression is still blank and vaguely disappointed.

“Why are you angry with me?” he asks after a minute of cold silence.

“How much did they pay you?” Asui asks bluntly.

He gazes at her a moment longer before returning to his vigil. “You’re implying that my loyalty was bought.”

“Looks like it. New costume. New shoes. New phone. What was your price tag?”

**She’s calling you a sell-out. A traitor. A coward.**

The disappointment in her gaze, the judgement without knowledge, lends credence to Dark Shadows words. He feels the anger rise and struggles to master it.

“I don’t have a price tag,” he says slowly. “I work with her because there is no other choice.”

“That’s what we all say when we make the easy choice.”

His chuckle is bitter. “This was not an easy choice.”

Even now, he can still hear that little boy screaming to be saved. He can’t forget his failure and the cost to it. That child didn’t deserve to suffer. If he can make it so that no more children ever suffer like that, consumed by the abyss, then isn’t it all worth it?
They stop a ship an hour later. From the urgency and the words being exchanged by the sailors, these are the pirates they’ve been waiting for.

There are maybe a dozen people on the ship and all of them look suspicious.

*They’re pirates. I would be surprised if they didn’t look suspicious.*

Fumikage enters the bridge where Agonist and Selkie are in a conversation. Selkie stands beside her captain whilst Asui is in the corner, watching him.

“I don’t trust this,” Agonist says to Captain Selkie. “They wouldn’t be stupid enough to keep the cargo on one ship.”

The captain frowns. “Sirius. Froppy. And, what’s your name?”

“Fumikage, sir.”

“That’s a mouthful. You three, keep on heading towards the second objective. We’ll investigate here.”

“Aye, captain,” Sirius says.

With so many pirates on the other boat, the sailors must leave to secure the ship and the pirates. That only leaves the three of them to deal with whatever is to come.

“They’re hiding in the Shadow of Double Rock,” Sirius says in the captain’s chair an hour later. Fumikage can only barely see the outline of the rocks and that is with his enhanced sight. Sirius and Froppy talk rapidly, Fumikage confused and hesitant. It isn’t fear for his life, but fear of what will come.

There's something out there between the rocks, waiting for them. This is a trap, one that they're blindly walking into. But how does he explain a formless fear to people who have never seen the abyss or the gods of desolation hiding within?

They anchor the ship outside of visual range.

Froppy and Sirius have the advantage of being able to swim. Fumikage doesn’t have that luxury. But he does have Dark Shadow and holds onto the demon tightly as they rocket across the surface to the rocks. Dark Shadow pulls him up whilst the girls make scaling the rock look as easy as breathing.

“Stay here,” Sirius orders. “Froppy, you take red, I’ll take blue.”

He watches Sirius and Froppy jump down from the rocks and dispatch the two pirates, one dressed in red and the other blue. Both have a single blade, a bright white in the dark night. Even from this far away, he can tell it’s an abyssal weapon, one that promises to consume life.

“Simple enough,” Sirius says over the radio channel.

She and Froppy head towards the hatch stealthily.

“Let’s get this hatch open—”

Fumikage feels a pulse of dread and knows they’ve fucked up. It hits him right in his soul, and he feels both Dark Shadow and his dragon recoil in disgust.
“Run!” he roars, terrified suddenly.

Fumikage jumps down onto the ship just as another pulse smacks him, sending him stumbling to the ground. He summons Dark Shadow just as a third pulse hits him, locking his limbs with fear.

The ship’s cabin bursts apart in a wave of force. It sends Sirius and Froppy flying back. Dark Shadow materialises and catches them before they hit the rocks.

Which is good because he doesn’t want to deal with injured allies with this thing in front of him.

The cabin has burst open and the ship has a hole through it. That isn’t important. The thing suddenly floating on the water is infinitely more important.

He can imagine what the creature looked like before. Perhaps a mutant like an octopus, maybe a few more appendages than expected but bipedal.

“What the hell is that thing?” Sirius shouts from behind him.

This thing is nothing like that. It towers over him, casting a gargantuan shadow that throws everything into further darkness, not caring that it walks on the water. Each tentacle is barbed with bone spurs and they are a luminescent blue, crackling with an electrical potential. The boneless arms split at the forearm and leave it with four hands, each holding one of the weapons they have been searching for, the most dangerous the long blade the emits a miasma of true darkness.

The weapon brightens, green sparks dancing along its length. They promise death and destruction and an end to life.

Fumikage has about half a second to regret all his life decisions before the creature swings the sword. A wave of green entropy rushes towards him, breaking apart spacetime and leaving cracks to the darkness.

He’s ready to summon the dragon and have its bulk take most of the attack. He need not have worried.

A wave of solid light blocks the attack, an incongruous moment of hope in the face of this monstrous creature.

Izanami appears in a burst of light, each step like wind chimes in the air. Somehow, though she walks forward, time seems to have stopped. He can make out the droplets of water hanging in the air, the green spark existing between one moment and the next. Even Dark Shadow, protecting his two allies, is frozen in one spot.

A soft and gentle light pushes back the darkness and time resumes. She flings a beam of hardlight that pushes the creature back and then she’s gone. She appears before him with Asui and Sirius under her arms, both looking ill, perhaps from the speed and perhaps from the monstrosity before them.

Agonist grins and it gives him hope that together, they can win this fight. So long as she’s with him, there’s no way in hell he’s losing.

“I’ll let you handle the kaiju. Never thought I’d say that.”

And then she vanishes in a trail of light, leaving Fumikage to deal with the creature.

I hate you.
One tentacle flings out and slaps the two lackeys on the sinking boat. Blue lightning consumes them, their bodies twitching and spasming.

And then they rise, living corpses just as corrupted, and dripping sparks of lightning. They have spurs that drip a bright liquid that burns through the deck and their eyes are gone, replaced by crystals that seem to go on forever, folding in on themselves.

Fumikage does not hesitate. There is no time for that. Any chance they have to escape is a chance they have to propagate in the sea or perhaps head to the land and taint the nearest city. He doesn’t know what the world will become, but he knows these creatures will spread a wave of undeath that will consume the population if given enough time.

Perhaps these creatures that fundamentally follow the laws of time and space won’t be as much a thread as the creature the boy became, but he refuses to let the darkness infect his world. He remembers Izuku’s advice.

Sometimes, the dark infects the real, and the only way to deal with it is to burn it away.

Watatsumi, he commands and the dragon materialises from his soul. A dark portal materialises over his chest and the dragon slithers out, its dark scales consuming the starlight.

It needs no prompting to open its jaw and roar a terrible sound that strikes fear into his bones. Its claws ignite in purple flame and it leaps towards the taller monstrosity, roaring in rage. The sound displaces the water and pushes the kaiju back.

The two crash into the rock outcropping, thrashing and tearing into each other violently.

Fumikage turns away from the battle and focuses on the two creatures leaving scorch marks with each step. He wishes he had some sort of ranged weapon because he doesn’t want to engage them at close range. Not when they have those white blades.

I really need to get a sword.

The bond between him and Dark Shadow comes to life and the demon materialises. In the night, it is massive. It takes every ounce of concentration to control it, and it drains him of energy rapidly.

Dark Shadow darts forward, one massive claw slamming into the blue creature. There is no sense of mercy or compassion from Dark Shadow. No, all it wants right now is to end the existence of everything it can.

The red one raises three of its arms. Arcs of blue lightning shoot towards Dark Shadow. They slice through the demon’s shadowy form. Dark Shadow roars in anger and pain, its size reducing due to light.

The blue creature darts forward and swings the short white blade. It slices through Dark Shadow’s arm without resistance, an act of retribution.

He glances at Watatsumi and finds it engaged in a violent fight against the kaiju, trading purple fire with green entropy. It’s winning, and in another minute or two, it’ll probably be the victor.

Except Dark Shadow doesn’t have that long. Fumikage draws energy from the dragon which reduces in size and shunts it towards Dark Shadow who grows larger. The dragon doesn’t complain but it does back off and breathes purple fire instead of fighting at close range.

Dark Shadow is vindictive in its advance, one arm raised to ward off the lightning. It endures the
swipes from the blue creature with the white blade.

The moment Dark gets close enough, it swings hard and fast.

Fumikage watches the arms of the blue creature fall to the ground. With another lightning fast swing, Dark Shadow tears it in half.

The demon doesn’t wait for the body to hit the ground and rushes towards the red creature.

Dark Shadow grabs the creature in both hands, uncaring of the lightning battering its form. Then the demon pulls.

He looks away just before it is ripped in half. He looks back to see Dark Shadow tearing it apart, claws slicing and rending, blood and crystal and metal organs spewing onto the deck. The liquids eat through the ship and he doesn’t want to imagine what will happen to the marine life in the area.

He feels sick but not so sick that he can’t force Dark Shadow to return to his soul. The demon howls in rage as it is sucked back. He shoves it as deep as he can, unwilling to risk it influencing him with its rage.

The drain on his energy disappears just in time for Watatsumi to take advantage of it.

The dragon is held in the grip of a dozen tentacles. It roars in pain, thrashing wildly. And then, its claws light up in purple fire. It slices through the tentacles, a dark miasma spewing from those tentacles and simply floating there.

Freed, his dragon closes the distance to the kaiju. With its all too human hands, it grips the beak of the kaiju. He watches muscles strain beneath dark scales as Watatsumi forces the beak open.

Fumikage feels a tug on his energy like none before, so large and swift that it sends him to his knees.

And then, Watatsumi breathes a beam of purple flame so bright it blinds Fumikage. He can feel the immense heat of the flame even from this distance and it lights up the ocean and the night sky.

When the bright light disappears, the creature is gone and there is a thick haze of steam in the air. The rock formation they were fighting over is molten slag, bright reds and yellows against the dark sea. It is bright enough that he can see dozens of dead fish on the surface of the water.

The kaiju, however, is gone. Nothing of its influence remains, burnt away by that beam of fire.

Watatsumi swims towards Fumikage leisurely, apparently indifferent to steaming water.

He can see the holes in its wings and through its torso, all dripping a white ichor that likely constitutes its blood.

//It is dead, my king// it says proudly.

“You did well. Return.”

The dragon does so without complaint. The constant drain on his energy vanishes, and some of it remains.

He collects the dropped weapons, wrapping them up in his cloak and careful to not touch them with his flesh. Considering that they damaged Dark Shadow and a dragon, he doesn’t intend on giving
the blade the opportunity to harm him further.

He finds a spot not covered in acid and sits down tiredly, the toll of the battle hitting him all at once. It may not have been him fighting, but Dark Shadow and Watatsumi consumed his energy to sustain themselves.

It takes another thirty minutes before they pick him up. Agonist helps him up and sits him down on a chair, throwing a thermal blanket over him.

Sirius gets him a cup of hot chocolate, smiling gently. “Good job, kid.”

He’s too tired to say anything and simply nods, wrapping his fingers around the cup. It’s odd that he feels so cold given that the air is warm and he’s in dry clothes.

There aren’t any dead amongst the crew of the Oki Mariner. The worst off is Selkie who has a long cut on his arm, but Sirius had stitched and bandaged the wound, though not after Agonist had checked it for infection.

Supposedly, they had been trapped in a room with a completely reflective material and Agonist’s instinctive attack had rebounded until it struck Selkie.

The three of them have a conversation that he isn't bothered to eavesdrop on. Likely Agonist swearing them to secrecy or a warning about the weapons now in her possession or something just as unimportant. Right now, all he wants is to go to sleep and pass out for a few hours.

Fumikage sits on a crate once they return, hugging his blanket tightly.

He watches Asui approach warily.

“So that’s your dragon.”

He nods. That, at least, is something he can deal with.

“Watatsumi.”

“You really do believe you’re a god.”

*Do not believe in the reach of your godhood*, he remembers his father saying that day weeks ago in his mother’s hospital room. Asui says it in the exact same tone his father used. The voices may be different, and the phrasing changed, but the inflexion is the same.

“I do not.”

“Tsukiyomi. Watatsumi. Both are kami.”

He rolls his eyes. “It’s a name. It means nothing.”

“Like the lives you took?”

“They weren’t human. Not anymore.” He looks away to the ocean. “Do you understand now why I work with her? This is the real fight.”

She shakes her head. “I wasn’t unconscious when Midoriya died. There was no way anyone could sleep through that. I know the stakes. I saw them. I hear drowning gods calling to me every day of my life. It terrifies me, but it doesn’t mean I can justify joining them. You’re making the easy choice. Not the right one.”
“You saw what we fought, and you consider this the easy choice. Do you have any idea what could happen?” He keeps his fists at his side, afraid of what will come if he fails to control his rage. “I saw a dozen people die because of something just as bad. And a hundred thousand more would have died if weren’t there to stop it.”

She looks unimpressed. “Sacrifice a dozen to save a thousand. You sound like Titan and every other warlord.”

“They did that for power,” he shouts. “I don’t want power. I don’t want credit. I just want people to stay safe.”

“It starts out like that. Then it becomes a hundred. Maybe a thousand. Then you start supporting bad laws because it makes things easier. And when a dictator comes by promising to help, you’ll support them. Am I wrong?”

“You are.” He closes his eyes. “That boy didn’t deserve what happened to him. To suffer and have no idea why he was suffering. I can’t let that happen to anyone else.”

“I know you better than anyone except Midoriya. Duty and honour matter to you more than anything. You think you’re some knight doing good in the dark. You think this justifies any action you take.”

“Sometimes the hardest choices require the strongest wills.”

Asui shrugs. “If that’s the choice you’re making, then I can’t be your friend.”

That hits him like a punch to the gut. “What?”

“You made your choice.” She shrugs and turns. “Live with the consequences.”

“Wait,” he calls but she does not look back.

He watches her walk away, unable to say another word. Most of all, he can see the frayed links of the chain binding them together, a dozen blackened and shattered links on the ground. They aren’t physically real, but they exist.

Maybe she is right, he wonders.

She does not understand the costs. She has seen nothing. Preserve the boundaries between the real and the void or risk everything perishing. Morals do not matter in this fight. How you win is not important.

He rubs his eyes tiredly. “I worry of the person I will become if I continue down this path.”

You’ll be alive to worry about it, my prince of crows. Close your heart to the pain and move on.

His phone vibrates. He retrieves it and sees a flashing red light. An emergency signal. There are perhaps only ten people that would put him as an emergency contact. With ice in his heart, he clicks it.

The footage is from an odd angle. But he can make out Izuku in his hero costume standing opposed to a man with too many knives.

“I’m not standing aside,” Izuku shouts, the audio picked up by his phone’s microphone. “You’ll have to get through me to get to him.”
“Boy,” the man says, hardly audible form the distance. “I’ve killed heroes twice your age. You won’t win.”

It doesn’t take much for him to make the connection. Izuku is fighting someone Fumikage would loathe to meet, the horror of Hosu who has left a field of corpses in his wake.

Izuku battles the hero-killer.

*****

In the hours before his fateful battle, Izuku Midoriya turns to Gran Torino. “Hosu? Why are we going there?”

Izuku dodges a surprise kick from the retired hero. He makes it look effortless. In reality, he’s terrified of Gran Torino beating him down for the eighteenth day in a row. The man is relentless when it comes to training and has worked Izuku to the bone twelve hours a day since his internship started.

The training is very different from anything All Might or Jin Mo-Ri subjected him to. His hero taught him to be physically strong whereas Jin taught him foundational combat technique. Gran Torino is nothing like that. No, he teaches Izuku tactics and combat instinct, breaks the bad habits he’s unintentionally formed by battling gods and nightmares, and shows him how to overcome a gap in speed or intelligence or experience.

Fighting like a human with human rules is different from fighting within the abyss where concepts are more important than pure strength. There, this wouldn’t even be a contest. But on earth, in this topmost layer of the abyss where gravity works, he needs to follow the rules.

All that is to say Gran Torino beats him to a pulp for twelve hours a day.

“Because they’re casting a net over the city to catch the hero killer. Their last plan failed, so they’re bringing other heroes as well.”

Izuku nods. “You think I’m ready?”

“After two weeks of beating your face in every day, you better be ready.” The old man huffs.

“Besides, I feel like you’ve been fighting for months. You gonna tell me?”

“Maybe when you and All Might decide to tell me about Nana Shimura.”

Gran Torino clicks his teeth in annoyance. “That’s not my story to tell. Go bother Toshi. I’m just here to break all the bad habits he taught you. Let’s go.”

Which is why he finds himself in Hosu as it burns.

The smoke fills his lungs and burns his eyes. He dodges a blow from the Nomu that attacks him and kicks it in the knee, breaking the joint. With a small hop, he slams his knee in its face and brings it down.

“Why am I always in these situations?”

Gran Torino glares at him, standing on another downed Nomu. “If you have the time to speak then you have the time to help. Go be useful.”

Gran Torino throws something his way. A badge, one with his name and picture on it.
“Temporary combat authorisation for this operation.”

The fact that he has one means Gran Torino trusts his abilities.

“Now get to work.”

Work means fighting Nomu and villains, pitting himself against people willing to kill. It means maybe losing a limb or an eye or having his body broken by an enemy stronger than him. It means maybe, just maybe, he’ll find an opponent capable of pushing him.

Izuku grins.

And jumps off the building in a shower of green sparks.

Chapter End Notes

Well, Inko's back with her very own arc, which will continue next chapter. Fumikage shows us what happens to abyssal exposure and gets put through the ringer. All Might will make a reappearance next chapter and we'll finally get a taste of his power. Those of you who've been paying attention will know exactly who he's fighting.

Next chapter is the Stain fight. For those of y'all who've been waiting, it's finally happening. And the outcome will reverberate through the rest of the story.

That's it from me. Let me know what you guys think if you've made it this far by dropping a comment. But if you can't, just know that your readership is more than enough for me.
Chapter Summary

In which, the author decides to be trendy.

Chapter Notes

The real April Fool’s Joke is my update schedule.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘I am critical of heroes and the role they have played in our stagnation. But consider then that heroes are a driving force for good. They may contribute to the cycle of poverty and stagnation in this modern era, but remember Hawkmoon’s words, ‘Anywhere can be paradise as long as you have the will to live. After all, you are alive, so you will always have the chance to be happy. As long as the Sun, the Moon, and the Earth exist, everything will be all right.’ They are simple words but they are a final call to optimism and free will. So long as we choose it, we will not go quietly into the dark night. So long as we hold true to our manifest destiny as a species then even the stars will tremble at our passing.’

—Excerpt from ‘The Effect of Heroics’ by Saruhiko Ando.

Inko Midoriya is tired and perhaps she won’t ever stop being tired. It gets harder to fall asleep when spiders wish to speak to her, to use her to commune to their dark gods in the cracks between the abyss and the real world. They are respectful but insistent, and on occasion, she must kill the few that refuse to acknowledge her power.

Perhaps she should be more worried that sometimes she wakes up and there are spiders the size of a small car watching her. They aren’t purely physical, ethereal creatures fluctuating between shadows and dreams and all too real chitin.

//Great mother, Shadowking sire, let speak to our progenitor. Let us arbitrate peace between our people//

Inko stares at its dozen eyes, searching past the alien madness and complex designs for its true intentions.

She rolls her eyes. “Get out. I’m not letting you make a conduit out of me.”

//shadowking mother, there must be peace between us and the shadowking. Let us become one people//

Inko crushes it with her power, compacting it to an easily manageable cube. Her window opens with a thought, and she flings the cube out towards the sea.

That’s one thing dealt with for the day. She cleans up quickly and applies her makeup carefully. It
is another weapon in her arsenal, and she has learnt to wield them all. Even Hisashi, should it come
to that.

Nearly a full week ago, she set this meeting, and for six days she has waited for confirmation.
Today, she meets the first of many who will help with her plan.

The house isn’t particularly large and uninteresting form the outside, painted a pale yellow and
without much in the way of character. The doorbell has a stylised falcon stencilled into the wall, a
protector of sorts.

A sullen boy of perhaps twelve opens the door. He has that smile all children wear when they’ve
seen something horrible but don’t know how to process it. Still, he leads her through the home
simple home. It takes her a moment to understand that the simplicity is by design, a statement
against boldness or pretentiousness.

The room he leads her to is smaller than she expects. There are birds, multitudes of them, and all
observe her in eerie silence. It isn’t natural for so many birds to be this quiet.

“They’re mourning as well,” the lady in the room says, tending to one of the more colourful birds.
“They always seem to know.”

“They always do.”

She finishes tending to the bird and turns, adjusting the strap of her summer dress. Her features are
hard and heavyset, the jutting chin and hard scales part of her mutation. It is her eyes that Inko pays
most attention to. A deep current of grief hides behind that steel, a flavour of grief Inko understands
all too well.

“Take a seat.”

Inko does so, waiting for the other lady to settle herself comfortably before she speaks.

“Mrs Koda, thank you very much for meeting me today.”

The woman smiles but it isn’t warm or compassionate. Inko knows that smile. She wore it for years
after Mikumo died.

Only Izuku kept her sane by any measure, only he kept her marriage to Hisashi going. And for his
sake, she will keep walking this path.

“What do you want?”

“I want to talk about your son, Koji.”

She tilts her head, curiously. “Get out.”

“After we’ve spoken, certainly.”

“Do you have any idea what it’s like knowing your child isn’t coming home?”

Inko offers her the sincerest smile she has in her arsenal. It is one she learnt from Izuku and she
wields it like a sword now.

“I gave birth to twins. I held my eldest for a few minutes before he died. And I thought my
youngest wouldn’t breathe for a long time. So yes, I understand more than you can imagine the
pain of losing a child.”
The anger suffusing Mrs Koji dies a slow and pitiful death. “Oh.”

“I’m not here to fight you or try and get something out of you. I’m just one grieving parent trying to keep my son alive. I think you understand that.”

Inko observes how she glances to the side, undoubtedly where her living son resides and mourns in his own way. She did the same for years after Mikumo died, always looking to Izuku’s room and checking.

She’s done much the same after Izuku discovered his quirks and plunged into the depths of madness. Especially after Mikumo returned. She’s not sure how to handle the fact that the manifestation of her son’s psychosis is supposedly real, and that she’s supposed to care for a voice in someone else’s head.

But if there is even the chance that it is true, she knows she will love him just as much as if he were real.

“Fine. Tell me what you want.”

“My son was severely injured in his second week at school,” Inko begins. “I think you’ve undoubtedly heard about the furore regarding All Might since he oversaw the event. My son was burnt badly. That’s not important. What matters is the treatment options we were given. Because I was led to believe he would be out of school for the entire term if he got surgery. Except, five specialists I’ve spoken to recently told me that with easily available technology, he wouldn’t have to miss more than a few days of school. And two weeks on light activity. The last specialist thought he was a soldier after I showed him the scars.”

Mrs Kodo leans forward, more interested than before.

“Go on.”

“My son was involved in USJ as well and suffered severe trauma to his leg. Here’s a picture.” She slides her a photo of Izuku’s leg, more a red mush with the occasional chunk of bone than anything else.

She looks away immediately. “Can he…”

“Walk? Yes. With a limp. And maybe that was the absolute best they could do. But Aizawa pushed us to finally get Izuku a quirk assessment. At UA exclusively.”

“Why?”

“Short explanation is that his quirk has detrimental effects on his mental state. The explanation they sold is that villains might be able to steal a third-party assessment.”

It isn’t the full truth by any stretch, but it is honest enough for her purposes.

“That’s happened to heroes before.”

“What makes it best is that Aizawa’s spent the last few weeks with a grudge against me because he thought I was abusive to my own child. The same man who cornered me in a hallway and threatened me on school grounds.”

"He's a pro-hero. They wouldn't do that."
Inko almost rolls her eyes. “Have you known men in power to care for the rules?”

“I know where you’re going with this.” Mrs Koji sighs. “Fine. Tell me your case.”

“Mitsuko Bakugou’s son has permanent nerve damage. We called a few specialists and all three assured us that had they been present with a team they could have treated it with no issues. One of my son’s friends lost a finger. That’s not even counting the dozens of injured students I don’t know about. When some of Izuku’s friends came over, they looked like extras to a war movie.”

“Students died,” Mrs Koji says quietly. “I don’t know if I would have preferred that to what’s happened to Koda.”

“And despite all that, UA is safe and secure in their position. After all, if the heroes they hired couldn’t keep the stadium safe, what chance did a school have? That’s the story and people are buying it. People are blaming villains for the systematic failure of the school. They’re saying the same villains that attacked Shikoku were involved in this. There’s so much disinformation going around and people aren’t willing to really look at UA because most of their heroes came from UA.”

“I’ve heard better conspiracy theories. No one’s going to believe you and I’m not going to have my life ruined by your mad crusade.”

"I'm not here trying to coerce you. But my son goes to this school and he's been hurt by them time and time again. I don't know how many other students have suffered but I plan on stopping it. I just need your help. And to do that, I need your story.”

“You’re asking me to burn any and all bridges I have with UA for someone I don’t know.”

“Yes. I’m asking for a lot, and there’s maybe nothing good that will come of this. Maybe I’ll wake up to my own execution. I don’t know.” Inko smiles. “But if it’s for my son, I’m willing to die. And I know he’ll make something better if I die.”

“I don’t really care if you live or die.”

“That’s... fair. Cold, but fair.”

Mrs Koda lets out a tiny laugh. “Tell me something you’ve never told anyone else. I need to know how much I can trust you.”

Inko swallows, considering what to tell her. There are so many secrets she’s keeping, so many lies she’s unearthed. She could speak of Izuku’s quirk and its effects, or perhaps the things from her youth.

But there is one that will destroy her should it ever come to light.

“My husband’s name is Hisashi Atakani and he’s a risk assessor. He also has a warp quirk.” Inko sighs, tired of all the things he kept, and all the things she must now keep. “On the day Shikoku burnt, he wore a white uniform. That’s my secret. If you tell the world, everything burns to the ground.”

Mrs Koda watches her, assessing the validity of her words. Then she nods.

“Nezu was the one who approached us. He was polite and sounded sincere but... maybe I’m going crazy, but it felt like he was leading the conversation the entire time. Every time I was angry, he had just the right words to say.”
“You’re not crazy. When Izuku was hurt, the very first thing he did was put in a position where I could do as he said or look hysterical. I think you of all people can understand.”

“A woman acting hysterical. Why on earth would you listen to their words?”

“Yes,” Inko agrees bitterly. “What did he offer you to take Kouda?”

“Money. A giant lump sum. I haven’t touched it.”

“Good.”

“The best treatment at this facility they run.”

“What’s it called?”

“I… I don’t know. I just always called it the UA place. I have a number but not much else.”

“Do you think I could have it?”

“Why? How will it help us?”

Inko smiles because the woman says ‘us’ where before it was ‘you’. It means they’re on the same team now.

“My husband has connections to people who have the power to investigate. He’s useful for something, at the very least.” She nods. “I think I’ve taken up enough of your afternoon.”

She is ready to leave. Of course, that’s when everything goes horribly wrong.

“Mum!” the child shouts, bursting into the room. “Hosu’s on fire!”

*****

Toshinori Yagi has worked with the police many times. He knows much of their procedures and is grateful he isn’t beholden to follow them. After all, when you are the strongest hero alive, the most perfect fighter, there is leeway to your actions.

He allows them to surround the two blocks around the Yakuza base and cordon it off. They do so silently and efficiently, well versed separating a possible battleground from civilians.

“I believe they’re the last holdout.”

Toshinori looks to his friend, Naomasa, and nods. “Hopefully. They’re a dying breed. They failed to adapt to this era.”

“With the Yakuza gone, there won’t be any other crime syndicates left. Just the villains.” Naomasa smiles. “And that’ll be easy with you here.”

I hope you never meet All For One, he thinks.

“And this has nothing to do with your bosses?”

Naomasa smiles. “Officially, my superiors in the police department want this done cleanly. Unofficially, my real bosses are rather annoyed that the Yakuza broke the cover identities of a few of our agents.”
“You’re skirting the line this time.”

“Is stopping a crime syndicate a problem regardless of the reason? They’re killers and human traffickers. I genuinely loathe them more than other villains.”

Ultimately, Naomasa is someone he trusts.

“Let’s get this over with.”

He cracks his neck, rolls his shoulders, and prepares for battle once more.

All Might, the great hero, strides toward the base. His steps are even and measured. There is little point in wasting more energy than necessary. His body still hurts from the injury years ago, and every step makes it worse.

And yet, if he stops walking forward, it means All For One will win. So regardless of the pain and agony being a hero presents, he will stride towards the dawn where the villain is dead.

All Might bursts through the wall of the hideout and lands gracefully in the middle of the room. It is spotless, and his nose burns with the harsh smell of disinfectants. He scans the room, counting the criminals and noting how everything is arranged neatly.

He grins at the startled Yakuza, especially the young one. Understandable. How often does All Might simply walk into your base?

“Greetings, young Chisaki.” The boy twitches, perhaps fear, perhaps annoyance. “Would you make this easy and surrender?”

“All Might, a pleasure,” the boy says politely. “Kill him.”

Toshinori tilts his head and casually avoids the bullet. He flings his arm out and the shockwave topples the criminal Chronostasis from his perch, knocking him first into a wall and then to the ground. All of this happens without All Might moving a single step.

“I take it we’ll do this the hard way.”

The battle begins.

He may be outnumbered, and he may not know the quirks of these individuals, but there are few people he knows can match him. And these Yakuza are no match for the Pillar of Society. Even if he is aged and frayed with time, he is still amongst the greatest combatants of this era.

All Might enters the battle and wins for there is no other possible outcome.

It does not matter that one saps his vitality and grows larger, nearly twice the height of All Might’s strengthened form. There are endless reserves hiding beneath the surface so long as he searches for them. And so, he does, reaching for the fading wildfire in his soul, reaching for the flame that is Nana and every holder of One For All before him. He lets their power permeate his arms, strengthening him to new heights.

He crushes the villain’s defence with one steely fist. The Precept gasps once, before collapsing, unconscious from a single blow to the chest. All Might relaxes his arm. The others won’t be strong enough to survive a blow like that.

He doesn’t care that one rotates his shoulders so fast that each blow is like a piledriver. These are
blows that would genuinely hurt, and might leave him exposed, should they connect. So, he does as Izuku would and weaves between the blows, patiently building momentum with each duck and weave until an opening appears. His left jab breaks the Yakuza’s mask and sends him flying into the villain with a wide-brimmed hat.

The telekinetic barrier is nothing to his immense strength and shatters after a single blow. The knives thrown his way are irritants, and the only reason one has a chance to stab him in the shoulder is that he stumbles, experiencing a sudden wave of vertigo. And maybe he does take a hard blow to the face by the man with crystal fists that makes him stumble back.

They think they sense weakness—the criminal with the katana who leaps forward; their leader Chisaki ready to destroy All Might with his quirk; the man whose mouth is wide open to chew through All Might’s flesh—when he steps back.

“Foolish,” he intones gravely, eyes burning blue.

His power surges as he prepares for the attack to end this. The world comes alive to his senses, brighter and clearer as time seems to slow. He sees everything about these Yakuza, knows how they will attack, and knows none will ever be capable of matching him in a hundred years of constant training.

The chasm is insurmountable.

He slams his hands together. The shockwave rips through the concrete floor before it hits the Yakuza. It pushes them back, the destructive force tearing through the walls and throwing them out.

He breathes harshly when it is done. His body is still strong. Only the injury from that battle against All For One years ago slows him down. As it is, he still has time as a hero.

“One more hour,” he guesses.

He walks towards the leader, indifferent to the rest. The police stationed outside are mobilised and ready to arrest these criminals.

He kneels beside the leader, taking care to keep one of his arms pinned beneath his leg. He isn’t dumb enough to assume his quirk isn’t activated through his hands, not after the way he rushed All Might.

“Now, young Chisaki, how about we have a conversation.”

The boy groans in pain. “I would prefer we don’t.”

All Might chuckles and applies pressure to the boy’s arm. Just a bit. Not enough to break anything. But enough to make the boy grit his teeth.

“You and your organisation are over,” All Might says. “The Yakuza have fallen completely. Now, tell me where I can find the girl and you might not spend the rest of your life in prison.”

It may take a few minutes, and perhaps some legal protections for his people, but Chisaki folds. All Might feels something in him break as it always does when he must arrest a youth. What makes them who they are? What road led them to a life of crime?

In the end, it isn’t his job to answer those questions. His only duty is to defeat All For One and let the new generation decide the future. He can set the stage, but he won’t be the star.
Finding the girl is easy. She’s kept in a building nearby. All Might lets the police deal with those protecting her and enters afterwards.

The first thing he notices about the girl is her horn. It is long, perhaps a few inches, but doesn’t look to be a weapon of any sort. An odd mutation to be certain, but he has seen odder. It is nothing special compared to the many others he knows.

The second thing he notices is how she is crouched in a corner, eyes wide with fear. And perhaps wonder as she recognises him.

"All Might," she whispers as though this is a dream.

He grins at the terrified child. “Never fear, I am here.”

“This is a dream. You’re never real.”

He closes his heart to the pain and any sympathy he felt for the Chisaki fades away. He is willing to excuse circumstance to the youths who become villains. He isn’t willing to excuse them when they perpetuate the same actions.

“Kai Chisaki will never hurt you again.”

He extends his hand, an offer of salvation given freely. He can protect people from villains all he wants, but against personal demons, one must always save themselves. But that doesn’t preclude external help.

“The sun will only rise if you walk towards it,” he says softly, no longer the booming voice of a hero. “I will help you take that first step.”

Slowly, hesitantly, afraid that this is a dream or maybe a nightmare, she takes his hand. Coldness creeps up his arm and straight to his soul. He feels his body changing, unsure of the why and the how. Maybe an unintentional quirk activation from the child?

He hides it beneath a grin as he picks the girl up and cradles her in his arms. She cries openly and unashamedly, crying in the crook of his neck.

Eventually, her tears fade and she enters a deep slumber. He hands her over to Naomasa.

“Keep her safe.”

Naomoasa nods. Nothing more needs to be said. Naomasa will do absolutely everything in his power to make sure that girl is safe.

When she is saved, Toshinori takes stock of one impossible fact. The constant pain he has suffered for years is gone.

He lifts his shirt and finds the wound there gone. Impossible.

He blinks in shock and wonder. The grotesque purple scar is gone. Only unblemished skin.

Every other wound he’s healed from, but not that one. Absolutely nothing, from advanced organ growth techniques to innumerable healing quirks had been able to heal him. It is a phenomenon to do with All For One and One For All, and how those two quirks interact.

He activates One For All once more and lets its strength fill his body.
It isn’t the peak of his power by any stretch. His quirk is still fading. But this is magnitudes more than anything since the injury. It isn’t the small wildfire he has become used to. No, this is a blazing inferno of power. The continent-wide fire of his prime may be out of his reach, but it burns brightly in Izuku.

This, though, is more than enough for whatever battles he will fight.

He laughs deep in his chest.

It is appropriate, then, that in this moment of joy, every single screen in the area lights up. And they all show one thing: a city on fire. Hosu looks like a warzone, villains and Nomu clashing against heroes.

Toshinori sighs in disappointment.

“I’m coming for you, All For One. This time, you die.”

*****

Shouto Todoroki stands on a rooftop, Iida beside him, as they watch Hosu burn. It started suddenly, and before he could really process it the city has become a battleground. He surveys the world, seeing the lines of energy and following them to their sources—there, across the city is a Nomu engaging a group of heroes; closer and to his right low-level villains attack a police precinct; to his left, a few kilometres away, a pyrokinetic sets buildings on fire.

Shouto sighs, annoyed. “All I wanted to do was help you kill the hero-killer.”

He senses what Iida is going to do long before his classmate makes a move. It’s a stupid plan, the kind of reckless nonsense that would have gotten Iida killed before Shouto appeared.

“Wait,” Shouto says, grabbing Iida before he walks away. “You’re not going to find him out there.”

Iida pulls away. “We don’t have time. He’ll be there, and I am not failing my brother again.”

“Just listen for once in your life. When has he ever worked with the League like this? People don’t just change. When has he ever attacked in public?”

“Then, where is he?” Iida snaps. “Tell me right now so I can kill him.”

“He’s going to be away from the fighting. Somewhere no one’s paying attention to. Somewhere with a small group of heroes and…”

Shouto grins suddenly as the pieces fall in place. This may not have been his plan, or perhaps he’s been following it in the back of his mind, but he’ll take it.

“What?”

Shouto turns slowly. In the dark shadows, he can make out a glint of something metallic and a flair of red.

A knife sings as it slices the air. He doesn’t have the time or the casting distance to summon his ice. So, he does the only thing he can. He sees a world in which that knife is molten slag.

A stream of black fire materialises from his eye. It consumes the knife in its infernal grasp. The dark flames chew through steel and carbon fibre grip until nothing remains of the blade.
“He’s right here.”

Shouto wipes away the blood dripping down his eye. No point starting a battle with a disadvantage, even if his eyesight is shot to shit in one eye after that stunt.

The hero-killer, the menace of Hosu, approaches slowly, easy as a cat toying with its prey. One hand grips the sword on his back, still sheathed as if he considers them toys at best.

“True heroes don’t seek to kill,” he says malevolently, an oppressive weight making the air heavy. “I suppose the corruption’s infected students as well. Put up a good fight, at least.”

There was a time when the malevolence in the air would have crushed him, brought him to his knees in fear. That time was over half a year ago by his reckoning, somewhere in the range of six months fighting to survive in the abyss.

Shouto summons entropic ice in one hand and eternal black flames in the other.

“Time to get your revenge, Iida.”

His classmate walks forward, the rage in his soul so close to exploding outwards. It is a miasma of thick hate and unyielding rage. It tastes like ashes and burnt corpses. Shouto approves.

“Gladly.”

*****

Izuku doesn’t bother spending much time on the Nomu or the petty villains barring his way. He is so far above such weaklings that he almost feels bad for how quickly he beats them, moving like a flash of green lightning and striking them down with kicks better suited for breaking down concrete walls.

Still, they’re in his way as he sprints towards the tiny flares of godflame he can sense. Which is the only reason he doesn’t get lost.

He does, however, pause when he gets to the source of the fire. It isn’t a villain as he first assumed, but a Nomu breathing gouts of intense fire and seemingly unharmed by the flames surrounding it.

What bothers him about the act is that there are no civilians nearby. If there were, he would be able to feel their flickering shadows as they fled. No, this area is empty of life. It seems to just be out to cause property destruction.

Which may be true, but he doesn’t wish to test if that theory will hold.

Izuku leaps towards the Nomu, landing on the ground lightly. It still instantly turns its head, dark eyes homing in on Izuku.

It opens its unhinged jaw, a cavernous expanse of black, and expels a gout of flame.

Izuku grins and twists, sweeping his leg up. A pressure front of wind escapes at the tip, parting the wave of flame clean down the centre. Fire runs along either side of him, but Izuku is unharmed.

He dashes forward, low to the ground. The heat of the fire surrounding the Nomu leaves his skin dry and makes his scar itch.

He dodges the first blow of the creature before twirling around it. His first kick clips its waist, disorientating it long enough for Izuku to leap into the air. He brings his leg down in a massive axe
kick that crushes its shoulder.

Izuku steps back as the flames surrounding it intensify, grateful that his armour has an ablative coating and that his boots are steel tipped.

Getting close to the Nomu is a problem with that barrier of fire. So, he does the simple thing and calls upon his shadows. Dozens of darts form, all hard as diamond and sharp as a blade. Most lose cohesion because of the fire and light, but enough get through to pierce the tough skin of the Nomu.

It shrieks in pain before collapsing.

Izuku taps the creature’s torso with his foot and sees it tense unconsciously. Good, it is still alive. He leaves an emergency marker with his phone and sets off once more to Shouto’s location.

He finds Shouto in a back alley fighting the hero-killer, Iida at his side. Izuku doesn’t rush in and instead observes the battle. The hero-killer is quick, fast enough to match Iida in the enclosed space. His knives come close to slicing Iida, but each time they are blocked by shards of ice.

He glances at Shouto and finds his friend is watching his as well. There is a small smile on his face, as though he’s having fun, and not battling a murdering villain. And something about that makes Izuku rage.

With a single leap, he lands between Iida and the hero-killer, startling them both. His kick pushes back the villain, giving them space.

“Midoriya,” Iida says in shock. “You said you weren’t going to tell him.”

“I didn’t,” Shouto replies happily.

There’s a childlike joy there, as if he’s glad another friend gets to join in on the fight. A part of Izuku understands wanting to fight with someone you’ve fought with before, but the two of them together isn’t a fight so much as an execution.

“So, you’ve gone from heroes to sidekicks to teenagers.” He bares his teeth, sharp enough to shred flesh. “That’s pretty pathetic.”

“Teenagers who spent the last two weeks trying to kill me,” the hero-killer says, his voice deep and dripping malevolence.

Izuku blinks slowly. “Iida. Explain.”

“He killed my brother,” Iida snarls and tries to shove past Izuku.

With an arm filled with One For All, Izuku flings him back without thought. He’s still watching the hero-killer carefully.

“Sorry, what’s your name?”

The hero-killer takes a step back. “Stain.”

“Right. Stain. How’s about you give me a moment. Please, and thank you.”

Izuku turns and exposes his back, indifferent to the possible danger the man holds. At worst it will kill him. Most likely, Shouto will send a wave of ice to protect him. Realistically, he’s fast enough to dodge any blow.
“What the fuck were you trying to do?” Izuku roars at the two. “And Iida, if you say another fucking word, I’m going to throw you in a ditch.”

“We were going to beat him to a pulp and stop him killing other people,” Shouto offers simply. Earnestly. Shamelessly.

Izuku looks at him incredulously. Then looks to Stain. Then back to Shouto.

“That’s not how you be a hero. I am done with all of you idiots.”

“Are you done talking?” Stain asks.

Izuku shrugs. “Mostly just stalling.”

With the hand he’s kept hidden this entire time, he raises his phone. Right now, the screen is blaring red, sending an emergency broadcast through the app Aizawa forced them all to download.

Stain wastes no time to speak and throws a knife at it. Izuku could dodge it. But then again, he can hear a shard of ice. The shard slams into the knife and diverts its course. The ice shatters, sharp flecks scratching Izuku.

He yelps throwing the phone away instinctively.

“You fucker,” he snarls, because the only way that would happen is Shouto wanted it to.

*Are you still not over everything that’s happened between us? I fucking hate you.*

Stain unsheathes his sword. “I’ll kill you as well if I have to.”

Izuku rolls his eyes. “I’m not standing aside,” he shouts, feeling the thrill of the coming battle. “You’ll have to get through me to get to him.”

“Boy, I’ve killed heroes twice your age. You won’t win.”

*And I’ve killed gods that would drive you mad,* he thinks. *You’re nothing but a training exercise.*

Stain dashes forward, a red demon intent on ending him. The man is fast, far faster than a normal human should be.

But he isn’t Gran Torino fast.

Izuku ducks and weaves between each swipe of the sword, a deadly dance where a wrong move means death. He’s danced to this tune many times before in the abyss against monsters to whom the laws of physics are a joke.

He hears Iida charge forward just before Stain pulls out two more knives from somewhere. He’s perfectly willing to ignore it until he doesn’t hear frost spreading across the ground.

Which means Shouto doesn’t plan on being helpful.

Izuku roars in annoyance, twisting and kicking up to deflect one of the knives. Stain takes the opportunity to slice at his torso.

The blade catches on the steel plates of his armoured vest, and Izuku rolls back. He hears Iida grunt and grits his teeth in annoyance.
“How did he not dodge that?”

“So, what’s your story? I mean, there’s got to be a reason you’re trying to kill kids.”

Stain throws another knife that Izuku dodges easily.

“You’re stalling for help.”

“Yeah. And?”

He barely manages to keep track of Stain as the villain blurs forward, his sword rising in an arc to decapitate him. Izuku scrambles back hastily, feeling the blade score a cut across his forehead.

“Because heroes are corrupt!” Stain roars, his blade making patterns of light that Izuku avoids easily. “Their ranking system is a lie that they hide behind. They’re heroes for fame and wealth, not to help people. They support a corrupt government.”

Izuku shoves Iida aside, annoyed partly because of Stain but mostly because Iida is fucking useless at this level. He doesn’t have the experience or raw skill to face Stain. Which means Izuku must expend most of his concentration in keeping Iida alive.

“F*ck your conspiracy theories.”

"Have you ever seen Hokkaido? Its people are starving and in poverty, because the government won't lift a finger." Stain punches Iida in the face errantly, like just as annoyed with his as Izuku is. “They purged Shikoku and killed thousands. They let the people who sunk Taiwan walk away.”

Izuku doesn’t really have an argument against that. Not after the things he’s learnt from his father. So, he decides to be a teenager and resort to sarcasm.

“And your solution to that is to kill people. Right.”

Izuku dashes forward and shoves Iida aside, taking a knife to the arm in the process.

“Keep him alive, Shouto,” he snarls, ripping the knife out and throwing it back at Stain.

For a moment, he senses a spark of godflame around the blade before the villain simply plucks it from the air and sheathes it. He ignores it for now. Shouto probably has a reason for burning his blood away.

“All creatures seek immortality. No one will remember the heroes, but they will remember the Great Tyrants. And these false heroes want their fake achievements to be remembered forever. They hoard wealth and power. I’ll end them before they can perpetuate an unjust system.”

“Yeah, and whatever system you put in place will be just as bad. It’ll be something built on blood and death. And stop taking Ando out of context.”

Shouto sends a wave of ice that Stain leaps over. The villain lands lightly on the ice, standing above them. It gives him the high ground. Izuku’s watched enough movies to know that danger.

*I am going to kill Shouto.*

Izuku leaps up and spins into a kick that Stain ducks under. They battle on the ice, sliding and slipping between kicks and sword swings.

Neither of them is taking this seriously. Izuku because he knows the battle will be over the moment
Shouto decides he’s bored. But Stain’s hesitance to go for the kill leaves Izuku unsettled. 

Iida’s explosive roar distracts them. Izuku watches Iida leap between the buildings, gaining momentum to jump on the slab of ice.

And completely wasting whatever advantage he would have by attacking from stealth.

Izu shares a glance with Stain as they both wait for the second it takes for Iida to get on the platform. And is promptly met by Izuku kicking him off the ice. Not maliciously, but because Stain would have sliced Iida’s throat if he moved an inch forward.

“Stay out of this.”

“Look at your friends. He wears Ingenium’s armour to find revenge. And your other classmate is indifferent to the idea of murder. Those aren’t heroes!”

“Yeah, they’re idiots not representative of the rest of us.”

Izu leaps over a horizontal swing and brings his leg down in a devastating kick that shatters the ice. Falling through the air, he dodges one of Stain’s knives and lets his vest take the second.

“Besides, doctors get paid for their work.” Izuku says, rolling away from Stain’s attack. “So, do firemen. And they all protect people. They all work for the government. So what if they get paid? We should let people die if the people saving them are paid. Fuck your logic.”

He weaves past a vicious swipe and slams a foot in Stain’s side.

“They aren’t heroes.”

Izu punches him in the face, genuinely annoyed.

“Tell that to everyone who’s had surgery and lived. Tell that to everyone who was pulled out of a burning building. You can’t have it both ways.”

“You’re a child who has seen nothing.”

Izu raises a brow a second before he kicks Stain in the face, sending the man stumbling back. He may take a blow to his other arm, but it is nothing compared to all he has suffered.

“I don’t care. That doesn’t matter. You’re trying to kill kids. It doesn’t matter if heroes are petty bastards looking for wealth because your actions are wrong. A hero sees injustice and says no to it. I’m drawing a line right now and behind me is everyone you’ll try and hurt.” He glares at Iida who stops in his tracks. “Even if some of them are idiots. Shouto, fucking be useful.” 

His friend sighs and sends spears of ice to Stain. Which all miss.

Izu takes a deep breath to calm himself. It also distracts him long enough for Iida to dash past and engage Stain.

I’m surrounded by idiots, he thinks as Stain toys with Iida. He lets them go at it for a few seconds until Stain’s disposition changes, his intent going from distraction to genuine violence.

Izu runs forward, slow relative to his peak abilities, and only reaches Stain after he’s stabbed Iida in the arm. Might as well let him learn that there are consequences to everything.

He breaks the knife that would have killed Iida with a strong kick, ducks to let a block of ice hit
Stain, and surges up to clip Stain’s chin with his toes. The blow sends the man reeling back.

Izuku lets Iida feel useful by kicking the villain in the side and into a wall. Then he glares at Iida.

“I said stay out of this. This entire fight is your fault.”

He tilts his head to block the knife, not once looking back at Stain. No, he’s focused on Iida who seems to be on the verge of exploding in rage.

“He killed my brother,” he says as if that’s answer enough.

Izuku punches Iida. He feels Iida’s nose crunch beneath his fist, blood spurting as his classmate is knocked back by the blow.

“That doesn’t make it right!”

He grabs Iida, sparks of green lightning running across his body, and throws him towards Shouto. His friend, sometimes enemy, catches Iida with one hand. Frost creeps across Iida’s face, and even from here, Izuku can tell Iida is being healed.

Stain huffs a quiet laugh. "At the rate, this is going you're going to kill each other and prove my point."

Slowly, ever so slowly, he draws forth power from his shadow and creates a long pole of inky darkness. It will break soon since it isn’t directly attached to his shadow. But it makes for a powerful tool to point at Stain with.

“If you feel so strongly about heroes, why don’t you fucking join a political party and become Prime Minister, you asshole. Instead, you resort to the easy path of violence."

The easy humour vanishes from Stain. “I won’t join a government like that and let myself be corrupted.”

There is no word needed for them to cross the distance and swing their respective weapons, a blade and a pole, a weapon of violence and one for peace. Izuku isn’t particularly skilled with his weapon of choice, but he has no choice but to learn between each furious exchange. He doesn’t know any real form but appropriates the stances of Renewal Taekwondo. After all, the basics of combat stay the same.

Don’t get hit and hit your opponent harder.

And Izuku is excellent at dodging.

When Stain parries a blow, Izuku hops away before jumping forward. He falls for a feint and takes a blow to the side, surviving only because of his armoured vest.

“I fucking hate people like you,” Izuku shouts, dodging between blows. “Of course, this system is messed up! But the way you’re trying to fix it is just as bad. You’ll become another Warlord and no one wants another Dark Age.”

His pole shatters, leaving him exposed. Eyes wide, Izuku tries scrambling back but the distance is too close. He may be skilled, but not with a weapon, and certainly not against someone who uses a sword for a living.

He hears a whistle. Sees something white slam into the blade and deflect it away. Feels the blade
slice one of the straps holding his vest together.

With a leap, Izuku gets out of range and rips off the vest, leaving him exposed. It doesn’t matter. His greatest armour will always be One For All.

He summons his power, the sparks of green intensifying as he prepares for battle once more.

“Maybe you’re the only true hero.”

He blinks, confused by those quiet words. “I do not want your approval.”

It starts as a high-pitched whisper, a whine that grates at his teeth. Then it becomes a flare of light behind him. And then Iida is past Izuku, his engines working overtime and moving far faster than either Izuku or Stain can hope to match.

Iida’s blow, when it comes, sends Stain flying upward like a rocket. Iida continues running and a trail of frost spreads past Izuku, expanding to become a curving ice ramp that Iida follows.

Iida’s a blur of silver as he ascends. Iida leaps off the ramp and brings to bear the force of his squared velocity in a single glorious kick.

Stain twists in the air, bringing his sword to block the blow. The steel shatters and Iida’s blow connects, sending Stain down to the ground.

It’s like watching a small explosion. Dust kicks up after the earth craters, obscuring Stain. The impact of it makes the ground beneath vibrate.

Iida lands gracefully, breathing harshly. He turns and glares at Izuku, his nose unbroken. There is a rage in his eyes, but as well, there is a dark satisfaction.

“I thought you were my friend.”

Izuku sighs. “I am. That’s why I want to stop you.”

“Don’t get in my way.”

Then Iida freezes mid-step. Izuku frowns in confusion, then sees the blade sticking out of Iida's leg.

“You should have gone for the head,” Stain says cruelly, standing from the small crater as Iida falls. “Same mistake your brother made.”

Izuku watches him walk forward, limping slightly. The man pulls the blade out and licks it with a bulbous tongue.

He looks battered and bruised and should not be able to walk without a hardening quirk.

How fucking durable is he? Izuku wonders, because he knows exactly how painful a blow like that is. And he has One For All to take the brunt of the damage.

“Now, where were we?”

Izuku bares his teeth. Glances over his shoulder to Shouto who rolls his eyes but nods.

“The part where I beat you to a pulp,” Izuku says, finally ready to take this seriously.
Izuku doesn’t need to give a signal to Shouto. No, they know each other so well that the sudden ice wall has less than an inch of separation between Izuku and it. He runs beside it as Stain backpedals.

Then he kicks off the ice wall to the brick wall opposite it. Stain makes the mistake of jumping over the ice.

Izuku shoots off from the wall, spinning through the air. His leg rises and he strikes Stain right across the chest.

The man rises higher and flips in the air. Knives appear between his fingers as he orientates himself in the air. Then he’s flinging knives straight at Izuku.

Shards of ice fly over Izuku’s shoulders, brushing past his hair, and strike the thrown knives. They deflect the blades away.

Izuku keeps his eyes on Stain and shifts into a slide. The move looks ridiculous and in any other situation would lead to broken bones.

But with Shouto, he doesn’t need to worry about that. An ice ramp, shaped to fit him perfectly, greets him. He slides without losing momentum and lands in a crouch beside Shouto.

“No fire,” he says, brushing his fingers against Izuku’s wrist.

Izuku nods, finally understanding at least a part of why Shouto is being useless. He wields the godflame, the same black flames that flared up when Shikoku was purged. The same flames that nearly got Fumikage arrested.

It’s not an excuse for his abject indifference to Iida or his willingness to kill Stain. If he needs to beat more character growth into Shouto, then Izuku will. It may not be fun, and he might wind up burnt to a crisp, but he has no intention of letting this go any further.

Together, there isn’t any way Stain can beat them. Izuku no longer needs to worry about keeping someone safe now that Iida is out of the fight.

He surges forward and punches Stain in the shoulder, hoping to cripple the joint. The villain just elbows Izuku with the same arm.

“You’re trying to change things by force but you’re losing to kids,” Izuku says after a painful blow to the face. He’s pretty sure something around his eye is broken from the blow.

“All creatures seek immortality.”

Izuku stumbles back, safe by virtue of Shouto protecting him with his ice. Which is great because Izuku has blood in his eyes that he wipes away frantically, backpedalling rapidly till he’s standing beside Shouto.

“They might not be perfect, and things need to change. But not like this. You keep on quoting Saruhiko Ando like you know anything about him.”

He dodges another knife and kicks Stain in the stomach.

Stain catches his leg between his arm and chest. Like a piston, he punches Izuku with enough force that without crystal in his bones, his jaw would be broken.
“I know more than you!”

Izuku twists around the hold, bringing his other leg up from the other direction. His kick pushes Stain back and the two disengage.

“He ended with a message about hope.” He weaves between punches. “’So long as we choose it we will not go quietly into the dark night’. Those were his last words. Stop cherry picking his beliefs.”

Stain leaps back, putting distance between them. He scrambles around Shouto’s ice, avoiding the shards and spears easily.

“And that dark night is a world where heroes keep corrupt governments in power, high on the power of their fame and fortunes. Heroes like Endeavour.”

Despite it all, Izuku finds himself liking Stain. Just a tiny bit.

“Let’s end this,” Stain says, just in time for Iida to stand on shaky legs.

“Stay down,” Izuku roars, knowing his hope is futile. Iida is just as stubborn as everyone else in his life, it seems.

In an instant, a wave of ice traps Stain before he can escape. The man curses, stuck in position as Izuku gathers the power of One For All in his leg, and Iida’s engines come to life with a violent roar.

Izuku times his approach to match Iida on the other side. In sync, as though they have practised this a dozen times over, they attack.

In a single glorious moment, the blows connect from opposite directions. It is enough force to destroy a steel wall brought to bear against a single human.

Maybe he is imagining it when he hears Stain’s ribs breaks. Maybe not. Either way, Stain pukes blood and falls to the ground helpless. He hits the ground hard, groaning in pain.

Stain slumps over in agony, still conscious, but only barely. Izuku walks toward him, pausing only to level a glare of such intensity that Iida steps back in fear.

He crouches so that they are eye-level. He finds it amazing that Stain is still conscious. As far as Izuku can tell, everything so far has been pure skill and raw determination. The man has no hardening quirk, no special technique to reduce damage.

No, Stain only has unyielding conviction.

“You’re right about many things, Stain,” he admits, hating it all the while. “You’re right that the hero industry cares more about money and image than saving people. Things need to change. But not like this.”

“You think words will fix anything,” Stain says weakly.

“If I must stand against the world to make it better, then I will. But there must be justice and compassion to make a change that matters. And Stain, no matter how noble your cause, your actions invalidate its legitimacy.”

Stain’s eyes are cold black pits, but Izuku can see the man he must have been. And it’s not someone he can ever hate.
“The world will hate you.”

Izuku shakes his head. “Some will, but people ultimately are good.” He stands fully. “Any place can be paradise so long as we have the will to make it. You could have made a paradise. Instead, you failed.”

This was never a battle of martial prowess. Against Izuku alone, Stain would have lost. With the three of them, there was no chance of his victory.

No, this is a battle for his ideals.

And, for the moment, Izuku has won.

“Get him tied up,” Izuku says.

He leans against the wall, breathing heavily. Shouto tends to Iida first, using his ice to heal their classmate. After Izuku glares at him, Shouto extends his power to help Stain.

Only then does Shouto stand, nodding towards the heroes approaching. He watches Shouto pick up his phone and ignores it. The thing is ruined. He’ll have his father buy him a new one.

The pro heroes are here now. Izuku observes them indifferently, leaning against the wall. He spares only a moment to glare at Endeavour before Shouto heads over and speaks to his father.

Hey, I’m back... what the hell is going on?

Izuku sighs in annoyance. *I was busy. Where were you?*

*Just killing the last ghosts in your head. Don’t worry—*

“No,” Izuku snaps. “You’re going to tell me now.”

“Midoriya, what’s wrong?”

Izuku glares at Iida until he takes a step back. “You shut up. You do not get to speak.”

_Do you wish to know, brother mine?_ Izuku crosses his arms and inhales to force down his rising anger, and unintentionally making Iida step back further. _Ever since you inherited the living lightning, your mind was invaded by spirits. I do not know their machinations, but they wish to drive you to a singular cause. They wish you to kill someone._

Izuku considers that. _The living lightning? One For All? Why would that want me to kill someone?_ Because of the oath that binds. Your lightning lives only to end life. And you really should duck.

“Wha—”

Something slams into him hard and fast. It tears through his undershirt, sharp blades slicing his shoulders, and then he’s in the air.

He looks up and stares at the Nomu carrying him higher and higher with each beat of its membranous wings.

“Mikumo you fuck,” he snarls through the pain, ready to summon his mentor’s quirk.

But then he hesitates. Mikumo doesn’t lie. No, that’s what Izuku does. And if One For All pushes
him to kill someone, then is it right to use it now?

Then he decides he can debate a moral conundrum when he’s not being carried off to who knows where by a Nomu.

His stomach drops suddenly. He looks around, noticing the Nomu suddenly listless and falling to the ground.

He sighs. Braces with One For All. Crashes into the ground.

He rolls and lands away from the creature in a daze. Blinking away the spots, he sees Stain standing over the Nomu which sports a knife through its brain.

The malevolence Stain generates is enough to freeze the heroes in their spots. It is thick and heavy like rotting blood, a promise of endless violence towards a future.

“I will make things right. Let one man bear the sins of society so it may be fixed.”

Izuku has faced gods and demons, conquered worlds of ruins, and suffered more than anyone can imagine. This is nothing to him.

One For All fills his body with light. Sparks of green lightning arc across his skin and he dashes forward, nothing more than a blur.

The man collapses over his fist, his weight resting over Izuku’s bloody shoulder.

“What is just and what is right matter,” Izuku says strongly. “You may be right, but there’s no justice here. Stop fighting.”

Stain coughs weakly. “Stopped by a little brat. You weren’t even trying.”

“You were a worthy opponent,” Izuku whispers. “I wish we could have met under different circumstances.”

“I entrust it to you then,” Stain rasps, so low that Izuku can barely hear it. “Show them a true hero.”

The tension leaves Stain’s body along with his strength. Stain finally falls still, his determination overpowered by the injuries he has sustained. Before he can topple over, Izuku kneels with him. The villain falls into Izuku’s arms.

In unconsciousness, Stain looks like a normal man. Maybe bloody and covered in bruises, but there is nothing monstrous about him.

Slowly, Izuku stands, the Hero-Killer cradled in his arms.

He glares at Endeavour and finds he still hates the man. The man is everything wrong with hero society. Powerful and protected simply because of his quirk.

“What is a hero? The answer to that is simple.”

With a thought, the green lightning of One For All surrounds his body. This is his strength, his power, how One For All expresses itself within him.

“A hero is anyone who says no to injustice.”
This is the electric potential of his legacy. So long as he walks forward, people will follow the trail of his lightning.

*****

This is how what it means to be alive on this day.

Ochaco Uraraka has a cup of coffee with Shinsou on their first date. It's awkward since neither knows what to say, but she's willing to push past it. Besides, Shinsou blushes the loveliest shade of red when he’s embarrassed. So, when her phone vibrates incessantly, she’s annoyed because it means she can’t watch him choke on his drink after an innuendo. When she sees the blaring red border, she regrets not pulling it out earlier, especially since Shinsou has his phone out as well. The image isn’t perfect but she can clearly see Izuku matching blows with the hero killer. “Idiot,” they both say at once.

Kaminari Denki knows a trending topic when he sees it. He lives, breathes and eats social media in his spare time. It isn’t very difficult to jury rig the emergency broadcast into a live stream and uploads it on a dozen servers as it happens. "Holy shit," he says once it starts trending across Japan. "Come on Midoriya, you got this."

Shouta Aizawa is just completely done with Izuku Midoriya. The boy literally exists to give him a headache. He fully regrets the app because as far as he can tell, the entire country is watching Izuku fight the Hero-Killer. And the worst isn’t that it’s a physical battle. No, the worst part is that Izuku is systematically tearing down Stain’s ideals and the heroics industry.

Inko Midoriya is both proud and terrified. She knows her son, knows he cares more about saving people than politics. And because of that, she knows he won't be prepared for things to come. He can't possibly understand what it means to agree that the heroics industry is corrupt—and he may not say that word exactly, but all the analysts will read it like that. She opens a social feed and every single post asks about Izuku and his ideals. “I’ll keep him safe,” Hisashi says, beside her suddenly. “I failed him before. I won’t do so again.”

Bakugou Katsuki watches Izuku battle and wonders how far behind he’s fallen? No matter the setbacks, Izuku has kept on growing, kept on improving. And now, Izuku is so far ahead it feels like trying to reach the moon. He wonders if he can ever cross the massive chasm that stands between them. “Just fucking stay still.”

Koichi Haimawari, the vigilante Crawler. He remembers meeting this boy and having faith in him. And now, that faith is being repaid. Crawler looks at his contemporaries and equals, a dozen other vigilantes and many more without affiliation. “I told you he’d do amazing things.”

Kirishima watches the stream in silence, disquieted by what he hears and what he sees. He hears Izuku insult everything they fight for, insults the very idea of the hero agency he wanted to build, and insults Kirishima’s dream to be a hero. He sees someone cold and willing to let a comrade be hurt. “What happened to you?”

Toshinori Yagi stands in the middle of a street, still revelling in his newfound strength, and watches his successor battle the Hero-Killer on an advertisement screen. The boy is determined and unyielding in his beliefs, no matter the consequences they may hold. It reminds Toshinori so much of Nana that it hurts because they are both willing to stand against the world for those they believe in. “I’ll entrust this society to you, my boy. Just let me fight the villain.”

This is how it feels to be Tanabe Kaori of Hokkaido. You see a young boy fighting against the Hero-Killer, a force so great every hero failed to hunt him down. One boy who calls out the
injustices of the society you suffer in. Yours is a life of hardship, of struggle, and the fault lay squarely at the hands of the government and their heroes. Perhaps, you wonder, this child may be the hope you are looking for.

In the darkness of his base, All For One laughs as one boy shows his resolve against a man that gave pro heroes pause. His amusement is genuine because he never expected Hisashi’s son to be so moral. Intelligent, perhaps, but not a creature of such moral conviction. “Is this the weapon you wish to use against me, Toshinori? I wonder if you know how hard you’ve failed. That boy will never be a hero.”

Chapter End Notes

One thing I've found as the scope of this story increased is just how much of it I would never be able to tell. I can't go in depth with Crawler's life or spend more time looking at people living in Hokkaido, I can't spend time on Ochaco's relationship. There are wars and battles going on right, social revolutions simmering under the surface, and so much more that I can't touch without this story quickly running a million words, and for real, who really wants to suffer through that? This last scene was a chance to show a bit more of that and you'll see it happen a lot more often with major events.

If you enjoyed this, let me know and leave a comment. If not, let me know as well. Otherwise, know your readership is more than enough for me. Cheers.
‘Secondary mutations are still a subject of extreme debate in the scientific quirk community. A secondary mutation, by definition, requires that it not be connected to the original mutation or the quirk. Individuals who possess secondary mutations technically possess two or more quirks. The only guaranteed method of testing for secondary quirks is in space. The First Tanegashima Expedition members all showed rampant secondary mutations, as did all following manned space flight.’

—Excerpt from ‘A Beginner Scientist’s Guide to Quirk Theory.’

Inko Midoriya sits in her lounge watching the news. There’s only one story on every station, the story of her son and the hero-killer. Every news outlet, every media feed, and every newspaper has her son featured in some ways.

The articles praising her son aren’t important right now. No, she is more focused on his detractors. And there is one common thread amongst the more valid ones, that her son never actually disagreed with Stain. His methods, perhaps, but not the reasons for those methods.

Most of all, his final moments are plastered everywhere. Izuku Midoritya, carrying the body of the Hero-Killer, and shrouded in lightning. Her son asking Japan a simple question: what is a hero?

His response, however, is already causing division and turmoil. The battle lines amongst the pro-heroes have been drawn. Mt. Lady and Best Jeanist have both released press statements criticising her son’s words, though the latter is using the economic benefit of heroics and the generally improved livelihood of people in the last few decades. Which had worked until Edgeshot posted a long analysis on the downward trend of the economy in Shikoku and the rampant militarization present there.

There is no statement from UA. Even All Might is silent on the matter, but he was recently seen speaking to Edgeshot which is implication enough of his support.

“He’s a difficult kid,” Inko says fondly, rejecting the latest in a long line of interview offers.

She wonders if one day her son will ever stop worrying her, then realises that day will only come when he changes the world. That day will only come when he’s finally made a world where people are kind and just and forgiving.

It’s a foolish dream, one that won’t ever be accomplished. And yet, the dream of peace when warlords and tyrants roamed had been called foolish. Then the New Age Heroes came, and that impossible dream became a reality.

“I agree,” Hisashi says from the other side of the room, and strategically placed to flee out the door. “Always is. You want me to investigate this place?”

“Yes.”

He raises his mug of coffee in acknowledgement. It is his second of the day, and he looks jittery and nervous from the caffeine. The only reason he drinks it is that it is Inko’s beverage of choice.
“Can I ask why at least?”

“Because UA’s been purposely manipulating us into using their services for Izuku.”

He looks up from his phone, frowning severely.

“Wait, I thought you were using UA because you liked them?”

“You only speak like that when I’ve said something incredibly stupid and I am not in the mood.”

"Sorry. It's just that... look, UA decides how the heroics industry appears in Japan, right? Seventy per cent of the top forty heroes at any given time are UA alumni. So, they wouldn't want anything tarnishing their reputation. Keeping medical services in-house is just one method of control."

She smiles because that’s better than levelling their surroundings with her power. Her rage is sudden and hot, and maybe if she lets it explode outwards, she’ll stop hearing a thousand spiders chittering in the back of her mind.

“You knew,” she growls.

“I don’t even know what we’re talking about. I’ve been back for like three weeks. And we weren’t talking for most of them.”

That makes her calm down a bit. A tiny bit. Infinitesimally tiny.

“We’re talking about our son’s injuries. Like his burn scar. Or his limp.”

Hisashi’s expression is blank, not out of indifference. No, this is a cautious sort of blankness, the kinds he wears when he’s terrified of bothering her.

“It’s not like I know how he got them. Look at me. I got all of these walking the abyss.”

A part of her always feels upset when she sees the scars on his face. Four long gouges starting from his temple and reaching down to his neck. She wonders how close he had come to death from that injury. That worry, like his face, is a mirror image of her son.

“And you never asked?”

"I can barely ask my son how his day was," Hisashi says softly. "I don't know him and he doesn't want to let me know him. The only reason you're talking to me is that you want something and that something isn't my company. How was I to know? I'm not going to violate his privacy like that when he barely trusts me. You told me to stay away and I did. Just like you asked."

“You left. You don’t get to act like this isn’t your fault.”

“I know. But all I want is for you to stop being angry when I’m ignorant about something. I can’t know these things if you never stop to let me know. I’m playing catch up for a decade of memories.”

“You need to earn our trust. And you can start by telling me the truth. Why do you work with the Imperial family? Were you ever in risk management? Is your name even Hisashi Atakani?”

She glares at him, no matter that he's seen things far more terrifying than her. Hisashi is Hisashi, a fool, a powerful one, but one she knows. And he's always feared to lose her approval. Even now, that's still his greatest fear.
“You want me to lay bare my secrets. The things in my past I tried to keep away from you and Izuku.” Hisashi closes his eyes and draws a deep breath. “I gave my soul to you and Izuku. The two of you were all I ever needed in life. You two let me be normal. I love you more than you can imagine.”

She bares her teeth to hide the flare of emotion, the old thread of good memories that she holds dear. There are too many for her to lie that the memory of him isn’t beautiful, even if the man she sits across is different. Violent. Dangerous. Cruel, even.

Nothing like the gentle and quiet man she married.

“Love without trust isn’t really love.”

“I trusted you with everything that was good and kind about me. I gave you the quiet man who loved his family, not the monster stained red.” He chuckles bitterly. “I suppose it’s finally come to this. I lived by the sword and now it’s time to have my sins accounted.”

“It has,” she agrees and waits patiently.

Despite it all, he is still the man she married, quiet and haunted by the past. He carries the same grief and muted madness. He’s as vulnerable as a mouse in a cat’s claws, weak and terrified of greater monsters. Most of all, he just wants her approval and affection. Just like Izuku.

She blinks. 

Oh fuck, I still love him.

“My name is Hisashi Atakani and I lived as normal a life I could with my parents,” he begins, unaware of her turmoil. “They died when I was in university. A car accident. That was all true. I never discovered my quirk until I was in my thirties when I got stabbed. You were there beside me. Thank you for staying with me when the ambulances came. It would take weeks until I figured out why I was having nightmares of things I could barely describe.

“You see, my love, I could see… visions of the worlds I could one day walk. And as I experimented more with my power, the darker my flames became. And when they were closer to black, I stopped using them around you. I said I was afraid I could burn someone by accident. I just didn’t understand what was happening. And when they were pitch black, I guess… maybe I just— quirks are instinctive, and I just reached so easily to the void. I burnt the barrier between the real and the abyss. It was just there, this impossible doorway to something horrifying. But also, something I couldn’t look away from.”

She swallows. “And you walked through.”

He opens his eyes, so bright with knowledge and a hint of madness.

“No. I was stopped by a member of the Royal Guard. They were watching me ever since my quirk activated the first time. Just casual monitoring form low-level agents. But as it changed, as I touched the godflame more and more, the news reached the Royal Guard. They stopped me and explained what was happening. And that’s how I learnt more about what was happening. They taught me about the abyss and its influence on the real world.”

“And you started working for them?”

“Yes. A job here. A job there. And then I wanted to know for myself. I travelled the depths of the abyss. I learnt secrets, brokered a thousand deals, and spoke to gods. I walked so many miles to
learn the true nature of things, of all the seasons under heaven and the fundamental laws of the void. I saw different realities. A lot of them were beautiful. I loved each world I could spy on where things were normal, where you and Izuku and Mikumo lived happily. But there were so few of them compared to the worlds consumed by dead gods and converted to infernal engines by endless legions of thralls. Touching the void is dangerous and the ramifications are extinction. This world had been lucky so far. Do you remember Shikoku?"

*I remember you in white, silent and cold and indifferent to the suffering. I remember how weak I was to not ask.*

She doesn’t say any of that. It would be too confrontational and may very well cause him to flee in fear of her anger.

“Everyone remembers the Purge.”

“It wasn’t my warp quirk that day. They had another, a man named Goro Hanazuki but that’s not important. When the imperial heir sunk Taiwan, he killed twenty million people. He sacrificed them over the coast of Shikoku. Unintentionally, he sacrificed them to a dead god and brought it to life just a tiny bit. The Purge wasn’t an act of madness. It was the only way I could save Japan.”

She stares at this man who so casually speaks of the deaths of millions. “You purged it? You killed them?”

“I organised it. The Emperor and his Guard.” He raises one hand. Then, slowly, he raises the other. “The greatest villain of Japan. I brought them together to face the threat. I gave the villains reason to attack during the purge to distract the heroes and police. And whilst this happened the Royal Guard would cleanse every place the abyss had infected. I moved the Emperor and All For One like chess pieces. And when that was done, I sat them at a table to discuss peace. I gave them both what they wanted as an offering of goodwill.

“From then on I did jobs for them. I protected the imperial family and aided All For One’s schemes. And I balanced them by the threat of siding with either. And all the while they worked together to stop any abyssal threats. That day when I left for Korea was just another job. Just one more thing to do to keep you and Izuku safe. To stop cultists from summoning memetic nightmares. It just all went wrong and I found myself lost in a different reality. That’s my truth, Inko. I’ve done things that can’t be forgiven and I’m not asking you to.”

Her teeth are gritted so hard they feel like they will break. It would be so easy to summon her power and do… something. Her emotions are oscillating between hate and anger and grief and traitorous forgiveness.

Slowly, she masters those feelings.

“How many people have you killed?”

“Not as many as you think. I… I’ve manipulated things so people would die. But I’ve never taken an innocent life before. Only those who were tainted by the abyss and too far gone. And those who’ve threatened my family.”

“You said they were monitoring you after your quirk activated. It wasn’t because your quirk changed, was it? Are you—”

“You want to know if I’m related to the Royal Family. A lot of people want to know that.” His smile is bitter. “And in this case, it doesn’t matter and it never will.”
“Why?” she asks, voice hard as tempered steel.

She won’t let him side-step the issue.

The man she remembers dating was skittish and quiet and loving of life.

Her fiancé was awkward and magnificent in the depths of his love.

Her husband is scarred and haunted and only now does she know the reasons behind it.

“Anyone of Japanese blood can inherit the throne by technicality. It doesn’t matter if they’re part of the line of succession or not. But those who abdicate their right can never take it. People like me, and by extension Izuku, can’t ever take it. For your protection, I brokered peace between two dangerous people but you were in the crossfire if anything went wrong. So, I worked another deal. Protection for you and later Izuku in exchange for losing my right to ever claim the throne. I could have been eighth in line for the throne but I never coveted it. I could have been a random nobody and I never looked to it as a goal. I never loved it as I love you.”

He stands and crosses the distance between them. Then he kneels, maintaining eye contact at all times. It is an act of trust as she has always been able to tell the truth from his eyes. Right now, there is much love that it leaves her breathless for a moment.

"I knelt to the Emperor for your sake. I sold myself to a throne I hold no allegiance to keep you safe. Giving up the chance to sit in an uncomfortable chair for the guarantee that people I loved more than life itself would be safe was never a hard choice. You know the truth. What will you do now?"

The oddest thing is that she understands. She’s seen the things that have clung to Izuku each time he has returned from exploring the abyss. She knows there’s something wrong with her mind and that her powers have changed greatly because of it.

Sometimes, it feels like something is stuck in her throat and when she coughs it out, she finds crystal spiders skittering on the sink basin. And they all beg for a chance to arbitrate peace amongst shadow and spider.

“You’ll protect Izuku?”

He smiles. “I would die for him.” He says it as though it’s the most obvious thing in the world, as obvious the runes of dead gods she sees in her visions and the chittering of endless spiders she hears.

“Then investigate that place. He wants to be a hero but I don’t think this world will let him. If UA is a threat to him, if Nezu has his own plans, then we’re going to dismantle everything he’s ever created. We’re going to do it legally. We’re going to start by destroying their reputation.”

“You’ve become vicious.” But his smile is sharp. “If this is what you want to do, it’ll take some time. And Izuku might hate us for this.”

“I’d rather he knows the truth then live blissfully in ignorance. He can’t stay naïve forever.”

“Nezu isn’t evil. Neither is UA. They’re a net positive influence on Japan. I hope you know that.”

“I do. I just don’t care anymore.”

In the back of her mind, she hears the chittering of a thousand spiders.
Fumikage Tokoyami has his phone in hand, watching the video feed from another angle. The table by the corner makes for a comfortable enough perch.

This may be the dozenth time he’s seen the video, but he can’t look away. Izuku Midoriya, his friend and peer, standing against the hero-killer. And not simply that but winning as well.

Yes, he has Shouto with him—when did I start calling him Shouto?—to help in the video, but Shouto isn’t the one who tore down Stain’s ideals. No, that honour belongs to Izuku.

Fumikage is equal parts proud and horrified. Not least because of how every news outlet is reporting the story. His news feed is filled with questions on Midoriya—and every third one asking about him references the Battle Trial to some extent, the worst which hold All Might, and surprisingly enough, Fumikage, responsible for Izuku’s scars; not untrue but he has no idea how they got that information—and his inbox flooded with requests from reporters wanting an exclusive interview.

Simpering peasants wishing to speak to their prince. Pathetic.

Eventually, after the dozenth notification, he simply sets his email address to reject all new mail for the next few days. If there's something from school, he can log onto the school website and check there.

“He’s a fool.”

“He’s charismatic,” Maya corrects, walking over with a case in hand. “Smart like his father but with a will to match. He’ll go far with that. Any place can be paradise. I suppose we need people like that to make changes to places like Hokkaido. Let him stand in the light whilst we battle in the darkness.”

“You don’t find his words upsetting?”

“I could care less about the heroics industry. If he wants to change it then he can go right ahead. And if you want to support him, we’ll help you.”

He cocks his head. “Why?”

“We support each other. Simple as that. We try to avoid stupid in-fighting. Now get off.”

He rolls to the side, annoyed. She pauses at the sight of his tablet. For a moment, he worries he opened something he doesn’t want anyone ever seeing.

“Are you actually reading the news?” she asks, incredulously. “Public news?”

“Yes?”

“Oh, you young fool. Those outlets are useless. They aren’t talking about what’s going on with the underground heroes and vigilantes. They aren’t ever going to touch on the unaffiliated quirk users.”

He frowns, taking back his tablet. “What makes any of them important?”

“Nothing. That’s what makes them dangerous. They’re not part of any accords like we are. They don’t have a seat at the table like UA and the JSDF. That’s why we monitor them. They don’t have
to follow the same rules. And right now, all their chatter is about your classmate and Stain.”

“And what are they saying?”

“They’re watching him, for now. Someone called Crawler keeps mentioning his name. We don’t know his motives right now.”

“But you are monitoring him?”

“Just send a message to someone in information to keep you updated.”

He nods as if that means anything. “Sure.”

“Here,” Maya says, sliding a case towards him.

He’s seen it before a few times, the sort you use to carry a costume. The first, and only, he had received had been from UA. It opens to his fingerprint and iris scan, hissing as the lid rises slowly.

Inside is a cloak just like the one he wears made from the same light absorbent material. He picks it up and unfurls it.

And then he sees the white. Where the outside had been purely black, the inside is a semi-reflective expanse of white. The same shade of white that Maya wears.

“No,” he says on principle. “I will not be branded by you.”

"We fight the same war. Besides, it has utility." She reaches in and removes a clear canister. Within are white pellets. "These make a large burst of light when destroyed. There's a tiny shard of trapped hardlight in them. It’s a protection against Dark Shadow. I saw how you failed to control him at sea."

Shame fills him. Two dead, and whether they were too far gone or not is irrelevant as they were torn apart when he failed to control the demon. That burden and the consequence from it is one he must bear alone.

Such as Asui’s dismissal of any friendship they held before. That is one that leaves him filled with anger, so much that he needs to meditate more often or he’s prone to break something.

Maybe the nightmares of Dark Shadow rampaging without restraint and his dragon setting cities on fire at his command that cause his frustration. They share space with dreams of that boy on the altar, a sacrifice to madness and power. Either way, he hasn't slept well since before the internship.

Maya takes the cloak and holds a pellet. She crushes it slowly.

Blinding light fills the room and sears his eyes, leaving him blind. Fumikage groans, clutching his eyes in pain.

“Why would you do that?” he roars, still blinded.

She catches him before he can fall. Everywhere she touches is a line of heat, and if he wasn’t blind it would send shivers down his spine.

“I’m always manipulating you. But I do so with earnestness and sincerity.” She says this gently.

“Why am I ruthless?”

“Because you’re efficient.” He blinks. The world is still blurry but not the overwhelming white of
before.

“I want you to wear my colours. You’re my Special Asset. My Inquisitor. I’ll dress you in obsidian and pearl, pretty boy.”

He steps away before he can get another whiff of her natural scent. It’s already filling his nose and he wants to clear it.

“Vile wench. Stay away from me. I will not be corrupted by your influences.”

She laughs. “I’m not the one making you feel that way. Besides, I’m willing to do many things but minors aren’t included. Come find in five years when you’ve lost the baby fat.”

*She’s got you there. And don’t you ever dare use those things on me.*

He blinks the last of the spots away, glad he can’t show a blush with the feathers.

“I have no baby fat,” he snaps instead.

Her shoulders shake with laughter, dark hair sweeping across her face. “I’ll stop teasing you.”

“Thank you.”

“Anyway, the inside of the cloak reflects the light better. They won’t be anywhere near as bright by themselves. But, for when you want to let Dark Shadow work his—it, she, whatever gender—magic, we’ve got these beauties.”

She removes another canister, this one filled with black pellets. She holds one of the pellets then flicks it to the side. It hits the wall. A dark gas comes to life at the impact point, perhaps large enough to conceal two people side by side.

“Standard smoke pellet with an internal trigger mechanism. The gas is laced with the same light absorbent material as your cloak.”

*Fumikage, I think I’m in love.*

*Shut it.*

Inside are a pair of goggles, the glass tinted the same odd purple-black of Dark Shadow. He wears them and looks to Maya.

Who happens to be holding another white pellet.

“No!”

He sees her smile just before crushing the pellet. The flash of light is bright, yes, but no blinding. He may not be able to make out her details at its brightest point, but he can still see afterwards.

“Highly advanced light-filtering technology in those. No point in blinding yourself as well.”

He nods. “I take it they enhance low light vision?”

“Yup. Lastly, armoured vest and trousers. Light enough they won’t impede your movement. Though given that you’re a long-range fighter I’d rather have you armoured head to toe.”

The vest is surprisingly light despite having thin plates of dark armour running sideways on its
front and back. The trousers are the same and provide protection to his thighs.

He removes his current cloak which leaves him in his long-sleeved shirt. This one regulates his temperature against the cold. He’s learnt since USJ not to assume the weather will be perfect all the time.

The vest fits him well but there’s no way in hell he’s wearing those trousers with her still in the room. He stares at her until she gets the message and turns with a sigh.

He shrugs the trousers on quickly, glad they aren’t tight by any measure. They’re surprisingly stretchy. There is a belt inside and he wears it. On either side are three pouches, each with odd grooves; the ones to his left white and those on the right black.

“You done?” Maya asks, turning without waiting for his response. “Oh, you found the belt. You see how those grooves are curved. Put your fingers in them.”

He does so, finding they fit so well he must wonder exactly how they have his measurements down to the millimetre.

“Now drag your fingers up.”

The shape of the grooves forces his fingers close. Right at the end, there is a moment of tension, and then he finds himself in possession of three white pellets trapped between his fingers.

“Huh,” he says.

He flings the pellets to the far wall. Two fly true whilst one veers off greatly.

The flash is bright, and without his goggles darkening, he likely wouldn’t be able to see for the next five minutes.

“You named yourself Tsukiyomi, god of the moon. The light in the dark. You’re the middle ground between extremes. And now you look it.”

She’s right. With his cloak fully closed, he doesn’t look changed from his previous costume. But when he opens it, the white shines through, brightening the surrounding area.

He frowns and inspects the way the cloak is latched to the vest right beneath his throat. He removes one of the two latches and flips the cloak around to expose the white side. He latches it closed once again. As he suspects, it is noticeably brighter around him in a radius of five metres.

“Who designed this?”

“Remember the idiot from the office?”

“The things you learn.”

She laughs beautifully. “Yeah. He wanted to add obsidian knives but I thought that might be excessive.”


“Oh, you’re such a teenager. Let’s finish this last job and get you home.”

“The knives are still an option, right?”
“Let’s just get this over with.”

An hour later, Fumikage and Maya observe an illegal deal from their balcony perch. There are two vans out in the open, shielded from sight by the tree cover to the west—or maybe south, he’s not sure. The people wear suits but he can make out guns on some of them.

Two though, simply talk slightly away from their guards. They are arms dealers, and they specialise in the equipment Maya is dedicated to hunting down.

“What did you get this information from?”

“Giran.”

“I need to know. Is he a villain?”

One of the dealers is invited to look at something in the boot of the SUV. He says something and the other dealer laughs. They seem amicable given that their guards look ready to shoot each other.

Maya hums. "I suppose you could say that. He certainly doesn’t work for your side of the law and sells information to the highest bidder. Admittedly, he does have a fondness for the League.”

“Then I’ve worked with a villain. It starts off easy, does it not? Let a few die to save a thousand. Let a villain walk free so you know about the few you’ll let die. How long before I’m supporting a dictator?”

“Stop being so cynical, little crow. Giran’s an information broker and a middleman. He has utility and his own form of honour. He honours his deals with everyone and picks no sides, providing a neutral ground for anyone to make deals. We use him. The League of Villains uses him. A lot of underground heroes use him as well. Taiwan and China and Australia use him. He never sells information on clients unless they give him permission. Everyone trusts him simply because he can burn us all with everything he knows.”

He frowns. “You said all the information he got from me was free. Why?”

“To protect you. Things are coming to a head soon. The villains are moving—they’re seizing Yakuza assets up and preparing for something—and UA is preparing in the background The Herocis Industry and the government are sitting with their thumbs up each other’s asses after their raids on the League.” He frowns at the imagery. “And the three of you exist. Letting everyone important know you’re with a Royal Guard protects you. Because no one wants to face my wrath, let alone all the power I can bring to bear.”

“Keep the assets like Giran and me. Ignore the non-entities. And neutralise threats. Is it really that simple?”

“Yes. Just like the threats you’re going to deal with. “

A guard brings forward a briefcase to the dealers. He opens it and shows the stacks of what may be either silver or platinum to the other dealer.

Maya taps him on the shoulder. He nods and steadies his breathing.

He swipes his fingers through the grooves on the left side and comes away with three white pellets. He flicks them forward.

The goons don’t have a moment to react before the bright light blinds them. *Dark Shadow,* he
commands and the demon materialises.

It grips the edge of the building, and like a catapult, it sends Fumikage flying. He removes a
handful of the black pellets and throws them down in the middle of the group.

Dark smoke fills the area. Fumikage lands in the middle of the smoke, his knees screaming in pain,
but he forces that feeling down.

It isn’t like true night in the cloud, closer to dusk than anything else. It still empowers Dark
Shadow. The demon lashes out without hesitation, revelling in its power when it should be
weakest. Bullets are fired, but the demon flings goons aside with impunity.

Fumikage isn’t foolish enough to stay in the same spot. He weaves through the darkness and finds
a goon. He isn’t specialised in close combat, but against an opponent that’s disorientated, it’s easy
enough to sweep his legs out and punch him in the throat.

The crack of a bullet makes him duck. The bullet hole is a few feet away but Fumikage scrambles
back as more cracks fill the air. He rolls under the SUV just as a bullet nearly hit him right in the
arm.

He rolls to the other side away from the source of the bullets. And comes face to face with
someone holding a long knife. Or rather, his beak comes uncomfortably close to the pointy end of
the knife.

*Note to self, get a knife.*

Dark Shadow slams into the man before he can slice Fumikage. The demon feels jubilant in its
strength. Fumikage jabs his thumb to the side where the bullets came from.

Dark Shadow rushes over. Fumikage waits until he hears a scream and a crunch before standing.

Only a minute has passed and his opponents are defeated. Two weeks ago, he would have
struggled greatly to beat more than two.

*You would have rushed in like an idiot. Also, let me catch you before you hit the ground like an
idiot."

“Note to self, don’t land like an idiot ever again,” he says, humouring the demon.

He ambles over to the boot. In the centre is a metal case, locked seven ways to Sunday by
biometric encryption.

He extends his hand; Dark Shadow’s claw materialises around it. He tests the weight of it,
watching how the darkness mirrors his actions. It’s a small thing, but the level of symbiosis
between them is higher now than ever before.

*One day, when you trust me fully, my darkness will be your armour, my talons your blades, and
Watatsumi’s wings your wings. One day you will look like a king."

*Perhaps one day, he agrees. But not today.*

He feels a thrum of displeasure from his oldest companion but chooses to ignore it.

He places his hand over the edge of the case. Then he curls his fingers. The claws follow the
motion and tear through the layers of metal like paper. He drags his hand across the case until its
contents are laid bare.

Inside is an egg.

He calls it an egg because that is the closest term he has to describe the object. The shell is made of glass unshattering, the outermost layer is shattered glass of fractal patterns but the deeper layers, the ones closest to the core are untarnished glass.

He doesn’t bother with the fact that the glass looks like clear steel and each shard seems to hold another egg trapped in a mirror dimension. He’s come to expect these things.

A flash of light heralds Maya. She looks at the egg in the case.

“Keep it,” she says after a moment.

“I don’t think I can.”

“Why not? Disparity and life are your domain, right? She grabs one of the briefcases with the metals and opens it. “Platinum. Well, this is yours now. Would you like it in cash or just like this?”

Fumikage blinks. “I like how you think I have any idea what to do with that much money.”

She shrugs. "Buy some games. Go on holiday. Do something with it."

“And how do I explain that to my parents?”

“Not my business. Though, if you want a sword…”

He blinks and considers how awesome a sword would be. “Is this love?”

She laughs. “Boys. You only want one thing. Anything the looks cool and causes destruction.”

He holds the strange egg. The edges, despite being sharp enough to cut molecules, do not harm him. Perhaps they never can.

A chain of pure black rises from his hands and wraps around the egg. The chains drag it down to the darkness of his soul.

He shudders, feeling the way the egg adds weight to his soul. It isn’t one egg as he suspected, but thousands sharing the same metaphysical space.

Oh. That’s interesting.

What is?

You know how I call you prince of crows. Well, you may just have adopted a flock of crows.

He laughs at the absurdity of it all. Maya watches him patiently.

“I think I want that sword.”

She rolls her eyes.

Shouto Todoroki sits in a hospital room, watching the outside world and valiantly ignoring the
glaring contest between Iida and Izuku. Not that it’s much of a contest when Izuku’s eyes look like
green bolts of lightning, mystifying and uniquely dark. Iida, at the very least, is stubborn enough,
and perhaps acclimated to the weirdness that is Izuku, to match that glare.

He knows how hypocritical that is when his right is all kinds of fucked up. He can make out the
shapes of the people congregated on the grass outside, but it lacks the sharp outline his normal left
eye can see. At the very least, he can see the networks of energy that make up a person, the most
orderly structure of godflame made manifest in neurons and obedience to laws of electromagnetism
and gravity and all the other laws of this universe.

Still, normal colours are losing all vibrancy in his right eye. Maybe a few weeks from now, or
perhaps a few years if he is lucky, and Shouto will only be able to see the unseen: the glimpses of
other worlds and layers of the abyss; the magnificent potential of the human and the immaterial
links between person and quirk and the world around them.

It will be a different kind of sight, but no less valid.

Izuku gets up, drawing Shouto’s attention. His friend is bandaged where he took a blade to the
shoulder for Iida and has a small cut on his brow. They should both heal perfectly well, especially
once Shouto gets an opportunity to corner Izuku.

“He’s not angry with you,” Shouto says after Izuku has left the room to use the toilet.

“I’m sorry, but he punched me in the face.”

“He… developed a habit of doing that. And besides, I healed that. He's just worried and annoyed
and doesn't know how to process it. We're usually worried about him, not the other way around.”

“He kicked me in the fight.”

“Do you want the honest truth?” Iida nods. “Well, that’s because they were having a conversation
and you kept on interrupting.”

Iida glares. “A conversation with the hero-killer. That’s why he’s angry at me?”

“Look, Iida, you would have died alone. You just don’t have the same experience we do. Izuku
could have beaten Stain alone, but he was busy making sure you didn’t get killed. You’re just not
at that level. All you were doing was interrupting their conversation.”

“I’m not weak.”

“I never said you were. But Izuku spent the last three weeks fighting for twelve hours a day against
a pro-hero. And Endeavour’s raised me to be a fighter. It’s just a matter of experience. They
weren’t fighting to see who was stronger, they were fighting to see who was in the right.”

“And what was the answer to that?” Iida spits out.

“That they were both right, even if they didn’t agree with each other’s methods.”

The silence that falls between them is heavy and awkward. Shouto doesn’t particularly care to
continue the conversation. Especially not when Izuku returns and the mood darkens further.

They stay like that until another person walks in. Shouto blinks at the mutant with a dog’s head and
errantly wonders if he loathes cats or is sensible and likes them. The others are Iida and Izuku’s
respective mentors.
Endeavour not being here is nothing surprising. He likely fully expects Shouto to talk his way out of this as another lesson.

Thankfully, Izuku seems more than willing to do all the talking for them. He lets his friend argue with the three people and pays attention to the reporters outside.

“Everything you said is on national television,” he hears when the chief-of-police raises his voice. “All three of you have blatantly broken rules and regulations.

“I have a combat authorisation,” Izuku says defiantly. “Limited to that one night. I haven’t committed a single crime. I know quirk laws like I know my scars.”

“His authorisation was approved through the proper channels,” Izuku’s mentor says.

“And you,” the man says, rounding on Iida, “were trying to kill him. You acted outside the bounds of any authority you might have had.”

“Then maybe Stain was right,” Izuku says spitefully, which doesn’t shock Shouto.

It doesn’t make much sense to Shouto. His only reason for wanting to be a hero was out of hate and spite for his father. And without that, he doesn’t really have any reason to care. As it is, being a hero is just a fun diversion and an excuse to spend time with Izuku and Iida and Fumikage.

Shouto hasn’t paid much attention to the conversation with the mongrel. He’s more than indifferent to such nonsense at this stage. It’s some petty accusation that Shouto would normally ignore. Except, Izuku looks upset and angry.

And that’s just not happening.

“You’re just proving Stain right,” Shouto says softly. “You care more about regulations than you do about heroes saving people.”

“You’re unlicensed children who tried to kill—”

“Correction, we’re unlicensed children that did what pro heroes failed to do.” The room is dead silent. “Hosu was on fire. There was nowhere we could go. Stain wanted us dead in the first place. Both of us were going back to meet up with our mentors when he attacked us.”

“That’s not how these things work. You said it yourself.”

Shouto scoffs. “Did you want us to lie down and die whilst we waited for some paperwork?”

“The laws are intended to keep you safe. To keep people from taking justice into their hands. Because if we let that happen, then we get kids trying to kill people.”

Shouto raises a single brow, imperious and contemptuous. Mostly, it’s to give him time to see past the real world and witness the fight again.

“Technically, no one said anything about killing Stain. Go over the footage as many times as you want. Everything we did was self-defence, and no matter how you feel about it you can’t prove it.”

“The police department will still seek out full compliance in the law with UA and the hero agencies you were working with.”

“We did nothing wrong. We have logs spending time with each other after a workday. We both had authorisation from our mentors to do so. It’s not our fault nothing was done about the hero-killer by
proper authorities or that Hosu started burning on our way back.”

The chief-of-police glares at him. Then he sighs, all the formal bluster disappearing.

"Look, kid, let me level with you right now. Personally, I think you guys did a good job. But the law is the law. Had this been private, I would have had it swept under the rug. As it is, there’s a picket fence of reporters trying to get access to you."

_That explains why they’re there._

“Then tell the truth,” Izuku says. “Come clean with it all. I had a combat authorisation. They were just going home when they were cornered. There was nowhere to run so we just did what we had to.”

“And that included criticising the entirety of the hero association and agreeing with a serial killer?”

Izuku twitches. “I agreed we needed reform. I never agreed with killing people or eliminating heroics. And there’s nothing illegal about that.”

"Stain's ideas were dangerous. People are going to twist your battle for their own dangerous ends. What is the reform you're talking about? Something as broad as that is something villains can use."

Izuku snarls. “Don’t you dare.”

The chief shrugs. “No one will care what you meant. All they’ll care about is the loudest story. You think people will pay attention? No, they’re just going to watch some analysis of your fight to support whatever political belief they hold.”

Someone bursts into the room, frazzled and dripping sweat. The officer looks terrified but still manages a salute.

The chief looks to the lower ranked office. “What?”

The officer points at Izuku. “Chief, his parents are here.”

“And?”

“Sir, you might want to see this yourself.”

“Stay here;” the chief says, glaring at the three of them. “I’ll be back. Mizushima, Sorahiko, with me.”

Just like that, the three of them are left alone. Shouto returns to his bed, leaning his back against the wall as Izuku and Iida resume their staring competition.

“Maybe Stain was right?” Iida spits out. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I am trying to get you out of this without being expelled or sent to prison,” Izuku hisses back. “Don’t act like a petulant child.”

Iida crosses his arms. “Coming from a broken child like you?”

The moment he says that, Shouto is ready to teleport Iida out of the room. Because the shadows instantly darken, anathema monsters threatening to rise up and consume everything. It takes more effort than he’d like suppressing Izuku’s powers and shielding Iida.
Worst of all is that song that will end life that he can barely hear, a whisper from something so unnatural and immense that it makes Shouto sick. It is from the depths of the darkest and cruelllest parts of the abyss, a place that the godflame’s heat doesn’t reach.

Izuku shoots Shouto a dirty look, before returning his glare to Iida. “Fuck off.”

“Why is your dad being here important?” Iida asks blithely, ignorant of how close he was to dying.

Rationally, he knows Izuku wouldn’t willingly hurt Iida. Rationally, he also knows that Izuku only wears the skin of a human. Beneath that cracking veneer of civility is a wealth of power the matches Shouto but is fundamentally opposed to him.

Izuku, thankfully, doesn’t glare or blow up. “He may or may not be vaguely affiliated with important people and why the hell am I answering anything. I’m still pissed off with you. You know what, I’m getting lunch because I might just punch you if I don’t.”

Shouto shrugs and follows behind after a few minutes, following the trail of dark smoke and green sparks that only he can see. A part of him instinctively doesn’t like the darkness but it is easily smothered by the affection he has for Izuku.

His classmate is in a small cafeteria, hunched over a meal. Shouto approaches slowly, making enough noise not to startle Izuku. He doesn’t want to be stabbed.

Shouto lays his hands on Izuku’s shoulders, sliced up by the Nomu. A sheen of frost spreads down it. Such is the trust between them that Izuku doesn’t even look up from his third plate of food. With a mental twist, the entropic properties of his ice reverse, and time flows in reverse to a point when Izuku’s shoulder wasn’t injured.

“You gonna do the same for Iida?”

Shouto considers it for a moment, unsure of why Izuku asks it like that. Like it’s a test of some sort.

“He’s a… friend? You don’t want me to?”

"How did you even—no, too tired to care. Just help him. Probably won’t even understand how lucky he is to have a -get-out-of-permanent-injury-free card lying around."

Shouto shrugs and heats Izuku’s frosted side enough for the frost to melt, but not enough for it to evaporate. He can tell the water is close to freezing.

Izuku yelps in annoyance, wiping away the liquid.

“I hate you,” Izuku says, a small smile gracing his features. “And your jokes suck.”

“I know.”

He wonders if there will come a day when he isn’t surprised by how much joy Izuku finds in simply being with people, no matter their flaws, or the depths of his forgiveness. Perhaps one day when he’s old and grey, but not now.

“If there was a hard choice to be made, you know I’d make it for you so you don’t have to?”

Izuku pokes him in the chest, finger bright with One For All. It hurts and will likely bruise, but Shouto can deal with such things easily.
“That’s the problem. You’re not supposed to be fine with making choices like that.” Izuku rubs his eyes in frustration. “I get it. You lost a lot with the godflame. You wanted to be moral and good and a hero because you hated Endeavour. You wanted to be a decent person because the person you loved most betrayed you, and you don’t want to continue that cycle. I get that you lost you reasons for doing that, I get that you’re relearning it all. But I’m not going to let you make those choices.”

Shouto wonders how likely that is.

Sitting upon a throne of crystal madness and darkness from the far reaches of the abyss, in a place where time and space and order have no meaning, Izuku-the-shadowking surveys the endless tribute of fell gods. Izuku-the-shadowking makes endless universes of true darkness, imposing anathema laws unto the fundament of reality.

This ancient God wearing a walking corpse thinks his ideal world can be won with peace and kind words. Maybe that’s why Izuku acts weak, as though he isn’t a god. That lie he constantly tells himself.

Shouto lets his sight slip into realms unseen, surveying an infinite number of futures. It’s impossible to see Izuku—or Fumikage, for that matter—but he can see the patterns of those around them. He can see the likes of Kirishima or Asui or Ojiro.

I’m so sorry.

“For your sake, I hope we don’t have to,” he says instead because the future can still be changed. They aren’t bound by fate and never will be. They’re the ones who decide the future.

He takes a seat opposite Izuku and steals an apple from his plate. It doesn't taste of anything special. There is no special crunch or a perfect combination of tartness. No, it's just an apple he won't remember eating in an hour.

Just like every other meal he's had, it means nothing. It makes him yearn to walk the abyss and find a crystal heart to eat. Because this does nothing for him.

“I want to save people. And that doesn’t mean killing people first.”

Shouto leans back slightly. “Sometimes I see things and they aren’t pretty. I saw how Stain killed those people and there was nothing good in it.”

“Then let’s make a deal: you tell me what you see, and I’ll tell you if we should do it your way.”

“I can live with that compromise. What happens now?”

“Probably my dad just speeding things up a bit.”

“I know that. I meant with Iida.”

“Oh, I… I’m not sure.”

“You’ll forgive him after a night’s sleep.”

Shouto startles, staring at the space right above Izuku’s shoulder. “Is that your dead twin brother talking to you?”

“Unfortunately,” Izuku says bitterly. “And no, I don’t want to talk about Mikumo.”
Shouto nods slowly, but even then, he can’t help but stare at the person who looks like Izuku but with dark eyes and long dark hair. And Mikumo is staring right back at him.

The apparition raises a hand. And then, excruciatingly slowly, he lifts his middle finger.

“Your twin is a little shit.”

“I said we’re not talking about him.”

The police chief shows up whilst they’re in the middle of a game of blackjack, the pack pulled from Izuku’s shadow. Izuku is winning. There was never a chance in hell Shouto could. But, it’s a fun enough way to pass the time.

“You’re cleared to go,” the Chief says, disgruntled.

Izuku frowns. “I’m sorry about my dad.”

“Just get out of my sight already. I can’t get angry with kids because of their parents.”

He can’t help the slight laugh that escapes his lips. No matter what, Izuku always causes trouble. He receives an elbow to the side before Izuku pulls him along.

A few minutes later, when they’re both lost and somehow in a supply closet, he regrets his decision to follow Izuku. There is little space between them and the closet is dark. Even then, he knows every shade of green in Izuku’s bright eyes and could paint a picture of his scars without sight. Maybe his favourite is the starburst on Izuku’s lower torso from their clash during the Sports Festival. Perhaps it is the scar from cauterising an infection Izuku picked up during the abyss or maybe it’s the burn scars that have come to define him so much.

Here, where no one can see them, Shouto grabs Izuku by the shoulders and shoves him violently against the wall. The act is abrupt and sudden, no indication given of his sudden mood shift.

“Shouto,” Izuku says gently, a soft warning of green lightning. There is nothing friendly or kind in that voice, just a promise of violence.

In the darkness, he can feel the presence of the dead gods dreaming within Izuku. They are old and ancient gods of desolation, beings that existed before light and time were even ideas. But, no matter how powerful they are, this Earth is still his domain.

Fire consumes their presence, their future intent on this plane of reality. Infernal fire dances with true dark, two ancient forces that, if truly allowed to fight, would end all life in the universe from the aftershocks of the clash.

He doesn’t look down to the long blade of shadows pressing against the artery in his thigh. Fair, given that he’s pressed a long shard of ice against Izuku’s kidney. Whatever kindness and compassion exists within their friendship is built on a foundation of conflict and death and choking hate.

“Some days, I see you and I just see everything I suffered through.”

“I know,” Izuku says gently, his breath tickling Shouto’s ear.

It sends a shiver down his spine, a prickling sensation he loathes. It makes him feel weak and vulnerable, a teenage boy and not a living god, someone terrible at making friends and not a being who decides the laws of the universe. Every day, he teeters between the two: the being of infernal
fire and the boy who wants to leave his father’s shadow. He wonders what will happen if he fully embraces one side.

“I hate you more than anyone else alive,” Shouto says coldly. “I killed my mother and sister because of you. I trusted you and you broke that trust. Every day, I wake up and I want to kill you. I want to burn away every trace of your existence.”

“I know. I feel the same way.”

And then Shouto smiles. It is awkward and feels uncomfortable. It might very well be hideous for all he knows.

“You’re still my closest friend.”

Izuku smiles back, all crystal madness and compassion. His grin is as natural as gravity, a fundamental force that draws everyone towards him. No one can resist that smile. Izuku’s grin is as sincere as he is, and that sincerity is as sure as the inevitability of death. Nothing can stop it and it will always find you.

“I know.”

Gently, he lays his forehead against Izuku’s.

He stares at those green eyes, so much like lightning, and wonders what Izuku sees in his eyes. Does he see someone scarred by a mother’s betrayal and broken by a father’s cruel love? Does he see the screaming boy forced to suffer for months in the abyss, fighting and killing ceaselessly? Who does Izuku see when even Shouto himself doesn’t know who he is?

Slowly, with a grace that will always surprise him, Izuku raises his hands. His fingers have been scarred by his quirk and his ceaseless training, yet, he moves as though Shouto is delicate. As though Shouto is a fragile statue, Izuku touches his face.

He bites the inside of his cheeks to stay calm, to keep from moving and exposing himself. Izuku taps a pattern on Shouto’s skin with his finger, one side unbearably warm and the other almost frigid. It means nothing but perhaps, because of that, it means so much more.

Cautiously, deliberately, Izuku says three words with all the care in the world.

“I see you.”

Those words are said softly but with so much force in them, as though he is willing Shouto to see the same things with only his words.

That just makes him angry. He has no right, absolutely none, to find faith in Shouto. No one should have that kind of boundless compassion and he knows Izuku doesn’t, knows it from every fight and cruel argument and promise of death.

“It’s not fair,” Shouto snarls, dark flames surrounding him. And yet, they don’t harm Izuku. “Why can’t I just hate you? Why can’t you just be my enemy? Why does this have to be complicated?”

Through it all, through every drop of blood spilt between them, something formless will always bind them together. Billions of years from now at the heat death of the universe, Shouto will be able to find Izuku, drawn to him forever and ever.

Formless darkness rises from Izuku’s skin. It is chilly as the void, alien and abominable. It won’t
harm him and perhaps never will.

He watches as a strand of darkness meets his infernal flames. The two powers slip and slide against each other, a momentary interaction that is infinitely long, neither gaining dominance over the other. This is the nature of the universe, light and dark, void and fire, enslaved to their base desires.

“Love and hate are two sides of the same coin,” Izuku says. “I love my friends and I’m willing to die for them. I’d rip off my arm and shred my heart if it meant keeping them safe. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for them. For Fumikage. For you. But you’re the one I want to kill the most.”

Shouto forces a smirk to regain even the barest hints of confidence and control. “Eternity would be boring if we didn’t fight.”

Izuku’s grin softens and becomes a gentle smile. “Yeah.”

Here they are, two scared kids with the power to end the world, lost in a closet. The passage of time doesn’t matter right now. Nothing does, except the space between them and the rhythm of their powers, opposite and alien, yet dancing to the tune of their heartbeats.

A blink and eternity would pass by, and they’d still be here, bound and chained to each other. Loyalty borne of blood and hatred forged through compassion keeping them here with each other. He wants to see Izuku burning on an altar of Shouto’s hate and knows Izuku wants to see Shouto drowning in darkness. It would be so easy to take that step, to let everything between them turn to endless hate and rage.

But right now, with no space separating them, he doesn’t want to do that.

The door opens, harsh light filling the room. Instantly, their powers vanish and they’re scrambling away from each other. His leg catches on something, and then he’s falling to the ground, dragging Izuku with him.

He groans in frustration, shoving Izuku off him. His classmate yelps as Shouto finally gets a good look at the old man watching them from the doorway.

“Kids these days,” Gran Torino mutters. “I’m too old for this shit.”

“Wait!”

Gran Torino throws his hands up. “Not my business.”

“I hate my life,” Izuku says after the old man is gone. “He’s going to tell Toshi and Toshi’s going to tell Jin who’s going to tell Ojiro who’ll tell Shinsou and then Ochako’s going to know. Fuck.”

Shouto rolls his eyes, standing. He extends his hand to Izuku who takes it. He pulls Izuku along as they follow Gran Torino’s trail, knowing he’ll get lost without someone to drag him there.

Waiting in the private parking lot are Izuku’s parents are waiting for him. Shouto waves at his friend as he gives his mother a hug.

Shouto makes the mistake of looking at Izuku’s father.

The man is watching Shouto. No, not Izuku’s father in the real world—who is still focused on his wife, joyful in a way so reminiscent of Izuku that it floors him—but the infernal machine residing in his soul. The immaterial machine watches Shouto, and he knows it is devising a dozen different ways to possibly kill him should he prove himself a threat.
This one greets you, one-eye-king, the things says finally, its voice that of a thousand worlds in his bones. May you find love and hate once more.

And even when Izuku’s father turns away with his wife and son, Shouto can still feel the machine watching him, cataloguing his weaknesses and making a dozen plans to kill him. It won’t make the first move, despite how much Shouto wants it to. Izuku’s father looks like a fun challenge.

Shouto smirks.

Chapter End Notes

Well, two chapters in like a week. I deserve a medal or something.

Anyway, if you enjoyed this, let me know. If you didn’t, don’t hesitate to roast me. As always, your readership is more than enough. See ya starside.
These Four Walls

Chapter Notes

Supplementing this is an in-universe file on Stormwind.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

‘To question what is just and what is right is the luxury of the powerful. It is the luxury of the strong and of the wealthy to look back on history, and through the court of public opinion, pass judgement. A hero must never consider whether their actions are just, only that they are within the bounds of the law. To ask this question assumes that the law is wrong. I propose a counter-question: by which definition is a lawless action right? If a loved one turns to villainy, will you then permit their escape, and thus aid in whatever subsequent crimes? It is the right thing to do, is it not? After all, is personal loyalty not right in all cases? If we abide by the rule of the right, then we will descend into a lawless society. The letter of the law supersedes all personal beliefs.’

—Excerpt from ‘The Laws of Heroes’ by Hinata Ononoki.

Shouta Aizawa enters Nezu’s office, feet dragging on the floor. He’s tired and overworked and the only times he’s slept in the last two weeks have been when he’s collapsed from overwork.

“Shouta, do you know what your student has done?” Nezu asks before Shouta can even sit down. The rat-bear-thing is twirling an unlit cigar, his claws tapping a simple pattern on the chess set on the desk.

He’s talking about Midoriya. There’s no one else who causes as much trouble. Shouta takes a seat, groaning in frustration.

“Insulted heroics as a whole,” he answers, glancing at the chess board on the principal’s table.

“That, but the method in which he did it is the true issue. He defeated the Hero-killer. Do you remember who killed the original Herokiller?”

Of course, he does. Every child of Japanese birth knows.

“Hawkmoon.”

“There’s a certain parallelism there,” Nezu says. “But no, the issue is that his words can be used by anyone. He called everyone out: the heroics industry, the government, the Imperial family, and the military. I knew he was charismatic, just not to this extent.”

“Yes, I’m aware this is an issue. Did you just call me here to treat me like a child?”

His words are harsher than he intends but it is a rebuke. Despite Nezu’s assumptions, he isn’t a complete idiot.

Nezu inclines his head, accepting the reprimand for what it is.

“With a few words, your student is destabilising a tenuous peace. I’ve had an endless stream of emails from parents from Shikoku and Hokkaido threatening to pull their students. Edgeshot and
Best Jeanist had a screaming match in public. In public, Shouta. Two top ten heroes calling each other out and behaving like brats.”

Shouta winces. “He means well.”

It's the main reason he still lets Izuku attend despite his numerous issues. The boy just wants to help people, and Shouta will see that happen.

It has nothing to do with Izuku being his favourite student.

“There was an incident involving Fumikage and a few second years a few months back. It was a stroke of luck more than anything that the altercation didn’t turn violent.”

“And you didn’t tell me why?”

“Because it was faster to tell them they were on probation until they graduate then to call you over. Anyway, those same students got into a fight with students from Ketsubutsu during their internship. Apparently, UA is now an institute that harbours and actively encourages Stain supporters.”

“He doesn’t support Stain.”

Nezu shakes his head. “It doesn’t matter what he personally believes. He didn’t take control of his own story, so everyone else is taking a piece of it for their benefit. This behaviour is why I dislike you humans. You’re irrational, predisposed to believing fake news and taking other opinions without thinking them through.”

“Not everyone’s like that.”

“You certainly are, though you claim cold rationality as your modus operandi.”

“It is.”

Nezu rolls his eyes petulantly. Shouta decides against calling him out.

“You need to understand why the battle lines are being drawn because of one child. It’s time I teach you the about the world,” Nezu says politely, as though they weren’t about to have an argument. “It’s time for you to learn the players in this Great Game we play.”

Shouta taps the board. “I thought you didn’t like chess.”

“I don’t like chess analogies,” Nezu says. “It’s too limiting. Too simplistic. Doesn’t account well for other variables like socioeconomic influences and political agitators like your student.”

“He’s not,” he begins, but pauses, considering his words more carefully. “Fine. He is. But that’s just because he cares about people.”

“Let’s start with the government and the heroics industry.”

Nezu opens a drawer.

He reaches in and pulls out a piece that resembles the National Diet building, placing it on the edge closest to Shouta. Then he pulls out a piece that represents Hawks and Edgeshot alongside a few faceless pieces.

“Not All Might?” Shouta asks.
Nezu shakes his head. “He’s a UA alumnus. Those are my pieces.” He taps the National Diet building. “The government ostensibly runs the country. They control the body that makes the laws, they control the police and organise public works. And they supposedly have control of the military.”

“I take it that’s not true in the slightest.”

Nezu reaches in and removes a tank. He places it on the right side of the board. Soon after, faceless soldiers join the tank.

“The army which is based in Shikoku. The government has, functionally, no control of that region in the slightest. By technicality, the army reports to the Minister of Defence who is subordinate to the Prime Minister. In truth, the Minister of Defence is a pawn of the army and a member of the military junta they’re looking to create.”

He doesn’t let his fear or hesitation show. “Military juntas are never successful.”

“Considering Australia’s been under one successfully for the past century, the military would say you’re wrong. Stormwind’s Europe was another and even after her death, the entire region is unified under her laws. No governmental structure is inherently unstable. Humans are what cause even the most well thought out democracies to be cesspools of corruption.”

Nezu removes four pieces, boats that he places at each corner of the board. “The Navy. Allied to the military and the Imperial family, they're usually the first line of defence against invasion. They're also the most likely at any given time to defect and start a pirate fleet if they feel slighted.”

“Like Rokuro Okajima and his crew,” Shouta says, remembering the ship and its crew that lasted a year on the run before being sunk.

“Yes. Imagine that, but it is the entirety of the navy that goes rogue. I suppose, given that a large portion of the navy was slaughtered by unreasonable orders during the Dark Age, I can see why they may still bear a grudge.”

Nezu places a piece that Shouta fails to recognise. It is only after he places the piece on the edge opposite to the government and heroes that he understands.

“Villains,” Nezu explains. "I haven't had enough time to carve a piece for them. But they're one of the last groups. Diagonally opposed to heroics, and by extension the government, they possess a lot of power. You saw what they did to the Sports Festival.”

He grits his teeth in frustration. “Yes.”

Nezu takes a Chrysanthemum and places it on the left side of the board.

“The Royal Family,” Nezu says. “Incredibly powerful but not publicly active. At least, not since Taiwan sank and their heir committed seppuku. Allies of convenience with the navy though they’re opposed to the army and the government. The Royal Guard is their major means of force projection.”

He takes six pieces and arrays them protectively in front of the Chrysanthemum piece.

"I don't know what exactly the Royal Family's done to secure the loyalty of the Guard but it must be powerful. No one's ever defected or attempted a coup like a Royal Guard usually does throughout history. Four of them are foreigners but they're all loyal. It bothers me some nights. Especially since they have this unfortunate proclivity to stealing my students on occasion.
“The last time every group was involved led to an incredible loss of life. The Imperial heir who killed twenty million Taiwanese people. The anti-quirk riots that followed soon after: police against civilians against their own neighbours; one-third of heroics students getting slaughtered by extremists and incompetent leaders. And then the Purge of Shikoku where the streets ran red with blood and black with fire. There's a balance of power, a precarious one that's maintained by agreements that are centuries old. And when that balance is destroyed, the loss of life is devastating. Do you understand now why I don't simply use my influence like a bludgeon? Why I don't try to fight out of the agreements that bind me?"

Shouta remembers that time well. His childhood is defined by those events. He lost his mother to black flames during that time and saw more violence, chaos, and bloodshed than anyone should be subjected to. He’s over it, mostly, enough so that he isn’t automatically trying to drown Fumikage for the way his quirk changed.

He may be disquieted and sickened by the black flames, but he is more than willing to give Fumikage the benefit of the doubt. The boy will come clean eventually and admit to everything. And when that happens, Shouta can help him.

Fumikage will have no choice but to accept his help, even if Shouta needs to drag him kicking and screaming towards heroics.

“You lack the power,” Shouta says.

“No, you idiot. I do it because I want peace. A tense peace is better in every case than a war, no matter how short.”

“Where do you go then.”

He places UA’s symbol right in the middle of the board. The school looks so small and insignificant against those forces.

"One needs perspective. Do you see how we are surrounded by enemies on all sides?”

He takes pieces that resemble All Might, Endeavour and a few other heroes, all larger than in stature than the school, and places them around the school in a defensive triangle.

“This is my power. My alumni and the influence they possess.”

Nezu places them around UA before taking a faceless piece, turning the triangle into a square.

“The alumni from the other courses. They take positions that, whilst less prestigious, advance my ideals. A diligent accountant in public works makes sure money is allocated correctly and that people get the resources they need.”

“This is insane. How do people not—”

"Notice? Because people are willfully ignorant. I don't claim they're stupid, just busy with their lives." Nezu shrugs. “You see it time and time again. No matter how great a country looks, there are always regions filled with poverty and violence. It might be along lines of race or ethnicity or even religion, but it’s always been like that through history. The impoverished suffer in every nation. It’s a simple fact.

“You can tell how progressive a country is in how they treat their lowest denominator. It doesn’t matter how technologically advanced a nation is if they have no interest in extending a shred of human dignity to the poor.” Nezu huffs. “Look at me, talking about human dignity. It’s such an
interesting concept. How ironic that a non-human tries to instil that value in other humans. Well, whatever good mood I had just vanished.”

There is a bitterness to Nezu’s words that runs deep, as old as the rodent-bear-thing has lived, and that’s significantly longer that Shouto’s been on this earth. It surprises him that he is Nezu’s confidant, someone Nezu shares his fears and hopes and secrets with.

And there’s little Shouta has given back other than loyalty.

“Do more good than bad on balance,” Shouta says. ‘I think you’ve done that in your own way. I may not always agree with you and when you finally croak, I’m probably going to tear down a lot of what you’ve built.”

Nezu laughs. “Yes, you will. When you grow old, it becomes easier to forget how important human life is. Eighty years for me is like three centuries for you.”

“How are my students?” he asks after a beat.

They are a constant source of worry. Every night they keep him awake.

“We’re localising them,” Nezu says gently. “I promise you. We have Toji going through medicals and psych evaluations. There will be scars but he made it. Ryoji’s in prison for selling drugs and whilst I would like to get him out, some judges are putting up a fuss. Some of the alumni have conveniently taken up activism for prisoner reform so he’ll be out in a few weeks, months at most. With All Might’s attack on the Yakuza, we managed to pull Kensuke out.”

That’s three. With Nagisa in custody and Rei in the facility, that makes five.

“That still leaves fifteen.”

“They’re harder to find. About five are working with the Imperial Family now.”

“Fuck.”

“My sentiments exactly. I dislike them greatly, but I can’t help but admire their methods of control. Cracking their indoctrination is impossible given more than three weeks and I’ve certainly tried.”

Shouta frowns. “There’s a lot to be said for admiring your enemies, but not to the point we take after them.”

“Too far?” Shouta nods. “Well, there is a reason I keep you around.”

“You’re certain it can’t be broken.”

“Not after two or so weeks. Surprising since I don’t know any drugs or hallucinogen compounds that can provide the same effect. Not even in conjunction with more physical means of coercion. One day I’ll crack it, but I’ve failed the last three times.”

“And the rest?”

“Snipe’s meeting with a broker gave him the location of three of them. He’s currently traipsing through the rainforests of Malaysia.”

“Isn’t that a conflict zone?”

Nezu waves away that concern. “Snipe thrives in conflict zones. He gets restless in peace. So long
as they’re alive, he’ll have them back in a week. And if someone’s harmed them, he’ll deal with them.”

Shouta refuses to ask how. There are things he's fine with being willfully ignorant about. This happens to be one of those things.

A sharp knock pulls him from his thought. They both look to the door as it opens.

Nemuri peeks her head past, waving broadly. “Hey.”

Nezu smiles. “You’re here to steal him away.”

“I didn’t even say anything.”

“I know you well.” Nezu shoos Shouta. “Go have fun. I don’t think the school will burn down in the next few hours.”

Shouta shrugs. It’s a welcome distraction considering what he’s heard.

“We’ve come to a decision,” Nemuri says, throwing an arm around Shouta. “You’ve been too busy and we’re going drinking.”

She drags him out of the office, waving goodbye to the principal.

He rolls his eyes, looking to Hizashi who is outside in the hallway. Shouta is not surprised to see him with Nemuri. If anything, he’s just glad his friend is up and walking.

“Why are you forcing me to do this?”

His friend pokes him in the side.

“Cause we like you,” Hizashi says, voice raspy and thin, nothing like the rich and booming voice he had before the Sports festival.

It makes Shouta sad. Hizashi may never be a hero again. But he can still be a teacher.

He doesn’t smile for Nemuri or Hizashi. They know him too well to need that. Before he can argue, they’re dragging him away.

*****

Tartarus prison is an island unto itself, a vast complex holding some of the most dangerous villains of Japan. Connected to the mainland only by a long bridge, a bridge with multiple checkpoints and security stations, it is near impossible to escape. Escape via the sea is unfeasible due to the very visible patrol boats, and even should one escape, for a mile in every direction, there is monitoring equipment beneath the water and along the barren shore.

There are few prisons in the world as impenetrable as Tartarus. It was designed centuries ago to hold Warlords in check, and though it never weathered that test, it is still a formidable location.

He is here only because of a request from an inmate, one his mother and All Might had vehemently argued against.

Izuku, however, refuses to reject this offer. He needs to see this man and learn who he truly is. Why he is who he is.
There are so many security measures it leaves him dizzy: biometric scans, pressure sensors to compare his weight against his most recent medical records; two separate lie-detector tests; a comparison of his quirk against a portion of his quirk assessment unsealed for this test; and a final check to remove any sort of device capable of emitting an electronic signal.

Finally, after every possible check he can imagine, he is given permission to enter a viewing room. And strongly reminded that there are no less than four gunmen trained on him at all times, not counting the turrets that will spring up should he try something.

The room is sterile, white tile floor on white tile ceiling. A barrier divides the room, the bottom-half thick steel and the upper half clear ballistic glass.

He slides into a seat across from the man. It isn’t a comfortable chair nor is it painful. No, it, like everything else in this prison, is designed to fulfil a singular function and fulfil it well.

“Stain.”

The name is heavy with expectation and possibility. It isn’t one to say lightly. No, saying his name is to carry the weight of revolution, even if only for a moment.

The hero-killer bares his teeth in a parody of a smile. Not that Stain has the capability of moving more than his face. The man is stuck in a straight-jacket and his body strapped down to the wheelchair.

It looks inhumane and makes Izuku sick to see. This isn’t what he wants to fight for. He’s fighting for a world where prisoners leave their jails better than they entered, not one where they’re treated callously.

“Kid,” the villain greets with a small amount of respect. “Know why I called you?”

_Don’t be afraid_, Mikumo says. _He is a test that you must pass._

“To talk. You want to take my measure. I want to do the same.”

“Let’s skip the bullshit and dive into it.”

Izuku forces a grin and lets slip a hint of violence and madness. A thrill of pleasure runs up his spine when Stain’s eyes widen slightly, the tiniest hint of fear. Already, he has won the first round.

“Bring it.”

“Quirks and heroes halted progress,” Stain says rapidly, strongly, attempting to recover ground. “Villains regressed it.”

“Saruhiko Ando,” Izuku says in acknowledgement. “The emergence of quirks brought violence and instability. Without the New Age Heroes, Warlords would still roam the earth and leave havoc in their wake. That’s not a conducive environment for advancement.”

“Haven’t you heard, necessity and struggle are the great foundation of all advancement,” Stain says tauntingly. “Peace only allows linear advancement along already known technological lines. Breakthroughs aren’t common during times of peace.”

Izuku rolls his eyes. “Right. That’s why people went from landlines to touch-screen devices with incredible processing power in about twenty-five years of relative peace.”
“And in the centuries since, we have slightly better cameras.”

Izuku inclines his head, conceding that point to Stain if only for a moment. The rate of advancement is something he knows all too well.

“There has been no significant scientific advancement ever since the advent of quirks. We see as much advancement in a decade as our predecessors before quirks saw in a year.”

“That’s only partly true,” Izuku says. “The Tanegashima Space Centre recently proved manned flights to Mars are possible away from the Equator with advanced technology. They built entirely new rocket technologies, pioneered new material science research streams, and advanced the field of controlled environments.”

"Manned missions to Mars were already planned in the twenty-first century. We're behind them and it's centuries later. That isn't advancement. That's why our view of heroes needs to change. We're complacent, believing our great heroes will save us from everything. And the villains themselves push us back even further."

Izuku holds back a glare, and perhaps a smile. It isn’t often that he speaks with someone who knows as much about quirk matters and fewer still he genuinely respects.

“Sure, but you’re ignoring the biological constraints. People are still leery about space travel, especially after the Tanegashima team’s first long term trip. The entire team experienced rampant mutation. Of the five manned missions since then, sixty percent of the crew showed aberrant mutations. The Tanegashima team may not have sent another manned mission yet, but they’re getting there. One underfunded team that made equivalent strides to the periods of advancement you’re talking about. It’s not that technology isn’t advancing, but we’ve reached a level of mastery that incrementing the body of knowledge even the tiniest bit requires an advanced multidisciplinary team. And besides, you’re completely ignoring quirk-based research.”

Stain scoffs. “Which Japan is lagging behind in. And do you know why we’re failing to reach the same heights as Zimbabwe or Spain?”

“Because we have more stringent laws regarding quirk testing.”

“No, because people are afraid. Fear of the unknown makes us hesitant to accept change. It’s why Japan is filled with villains and corrupt heroes that support an unjust government.”

“And your solution was working with the League of Villains. Even though you hate villains?”

"Know your enemy. Only then can you truly defeat them. I dismantled their Hokkaido branch. Working with them to defeat a common enemy would have accelerated my plan for destroying their organisation."

“And who the hell was your common enemy?”

Stain’s gaze is dark and cruel. “All Might.”

Izuku feels ice creep down his spine. No, that isn’t fear or dread, but cold rage. Slowly, he unclenches his jaw before his teeth shatter.

“I would have expected All Might to be someone you respect.”

“He’s no different from the rest. Him and Endeavour and Hawks are all the same.” Stain clicks his teeth. “I did some research about you. Do you know how easily he could have stopped your
“classmate from hurting you?”

“Fuck you,” he snaps, mouth clicking shut loudly at the end.

“And he chose not to. Maybe out of arrogance. Maybe indifference. But it proved he is the same as them.”

Izuku feels his canine shatter in his mouth. He swallows the blood and bone and crystal. It can grow back.

"You don't know him as I do," Izuku says, a moment away from punching through the ballistic glass and strangling Stain.

He focuses on the odd sensation of a new tooth pushing through, slightly larger and perhaps sharper than the last canine. It takes a good minute, but it is a minute he uses to regain his composure.

“You never received a trial,” Izuku says, changing the subject. “Criminal trials aren’t processed in a day. All Tartarus prisoners need judicial permission.”

Stain has a smile on his face, one-part satisfaction at making Izuku lose his composure, and one-part genuine amusement.

“Why would you believe I would get one?”

“Because that’s how the law works. Society crumbles when we don’t follow the law.”

“Trials are only for people they consider human. But a villain can never be human. To call a villain human implies humane treatment.”

“And what’s wrong with that?”

Stain pauses, his eyes narrowing. “I don’t know if you’re naïve or just have that much compassion. Humane treatment comes with costs. It represents an expenditure of time, money, and talent. But if you dehumanise a villain, then you can throw in a hole and forget about them until they inevitably die due to malnutrition or inmate violence.”

“That’s…”

“The society you will fight for. That All Might, Endeavour and Hawks fight for. That your school teaches you to fight and protect. Am I villain for wishing us to go back to the standard set by our predecessors, by Hawkmoon and Hero? They fought for freedom whilst your heroes battle for wealth. How different are they from the Warlords of old? They may not hold territory and are government sanctioned, but they fight for the same reasons as the warlords.”

He swallows, gripping his trousers tightly. “That doesn’t justify what you did.”

“And yet now you know. The one true hero knows of society’s ills. You fought me not just because you wanted to protect your idiot friend. You fought because I represented a world you would not abide by.”

“You’re wrong,” he whispers.

“Am I? You quoted Hawkmoon. Any place can be a paradise. Is this your paradise?”

“You’re taking that out of context.”
“No, I’m not and you know that. Ando and Hawkmoon were both clear about one thing: we can only achieve a brighter future by battling for it. Were your ideals simply words to impress yourself?”

Stop retreating, Mikumo says sternly. *You know the truth. Face it. No matter how much it hurts.*

With a deep breath, he speaks the truth.

“No.”

Stain shakes his head. “By beating me publicly you can’t ever back down. You do that and you’ll lose your legitimacy. The world watches you now. In time, they will label you as a villain for standing against their society.”

“Calling for reform doesn’t make a person a villain.”

“That’s the story of history and change. Get a history book and see what happened to anyone who protested a king’s decision, who campaigned against the government. Most revolutions end in failure and vilification of the revolutionaries.” Stain nods, almost to signify himself. “The people in here. Do you know what unites them?”

“No.”

“Most of them are villains, but some of them fought for societal change or tried to keep their communities safe. There are kids in here, some as young as sixteen. Haven’t killed anyone. But they were more than just people who fought heroes. No, they were the kind of people with ideologies that went against the government. People who made peace in lawless cities.”

“That’s just the side of the story you want to hear. People don’t get put in here if they’re harmless.”

Stain’s eyes narrow as a hawk would on seeing a mouse.

“What is Stormwind to you?” Stain asks without preface, a sudden change to the flow of their conversation.

No matter. This is an answer engraved in Izuku’s soul right down to the bone. It is the cornerstone of his existence, as certain as the law of gravity in the real world.

“She was a villain and a tyrant,” he answers simply. “She was the one who kept us in the Dark Age. When she surrendered, the New Age began.”

Stain laughs. “How naïve. Tell me, do you respect Master Railroad?”

“Everyone does.”

“If you ask any single person from Europe, they’ll tell you he was, at best, a puppet of a corrupt UN. At worst, he was the vilest of villains.”

Izuku recoils, eyes wide. “He was a hero.”

“Not to Europe. The day of his disappearance is a continent-wide holiday. Stormwind unified the fractured states and restored order. Because of her, there was clean water, food, and construction. Because of her power, no one challenged Europe. That’s why they’re at the forefront of development. Anyone who does that is a hero.”
“She killed tens of thousands of her own people. A few million more across the world. You can’t justify that.”

“Then why was one of the three largest hero institutes built in the city she lived out the rest of her long life? Toledo Research Institute stands beside UA as one of the great hero institutes, and it was built in honour of her. You call her a villain, and yet, Europe hails her as a visionary and peacemaker scorned by foreign enemies. Go to Dublin or Athens or Helsinki or Berlin and you’ll find monuments to her.”

“Next you’ll try and tell me Titan was a good man.”

"No. He was a monster and a despot. Even his own soldiers feared him more than they loved him. It's why people around the world love Hawkmoon. Even Europeans do because she destroyed the Empire that rose up in the wake of Stormwind’s surrender and took over Germany.”

Izuku grits his teeth. “She was a tyrant.”

“She was a Great Tyrant and wore that title proudly,” Stain says, his smile sickening. “But she wasn’t a villain, not by any stretch. Her hands might have been stained red, but she brought peace. And she never killed anywhere near as much as our Royal Family did. She killed her enemies and made examples out of dissenters. You live in a country where one of your highest bodies killed twenty million people. The last Taiwanese people hate Japan and consider us all villains.”

“The man who committed that crime died.”

"And you think that will reassure a kid who lost her entire family when one man sunk an island. Ninety percent of the population was killed."

“We never forgave him for that. No can forgive that. Just like no one should forgive Stormwind for those she killed.”

“To the people of Europe, she can be forgiven. You know of the Warlords of the past.”

“Hawkmoon and the other heroes fought against them.”

“Yes, but not in Europe. They were too bogged down everywhere else. Europe had seven Warlords, some monsters and some simply because no one else would lead. Stormwind fought them all: the Don Quixote Family and their leader Doflamingo fell in Seville; the undying armies of Gecko Moria in Belarus; the Snake Empress in Rome who became part of her government; the strongest swordsman who cleaved the Carpathian Mountains in half during their duel; the Sand Crocodile whose schemes to subvert her people failed against her might; the First Son of the Sea who would be her Admiral, and later a minister of her government.”

Izuku knows those names but European history was never his interest. The tales of Hakwmoon and Master Railroad and Graviton Lance, the New Age Heroes, and the lands they visited have always held his attention. Just like most people, he can name the two Great Tyrants and even many of the Warlords around the world.

But there are too many to know them all. Warlords were common and villains capable of destroying cities were the norm. The Dark Age had been a time of near constant bloodshed and conflict, a time where petty kings found power and were dethroned daily. Every country in the world shows the scars of the era, from mountains cut in half to dried seas and giant trenches through capital cities.

“They traded seven dictators for one tyrant,” Izuku says after a beat. “Doesn’t seem like a great
“It was one of the best deals ever brokered. The petty wars between Warlords stopped. The citizens you would protect could walk outside with looking over their shoulder. They weren’t subject to the cruel whims of a Warlord or their indifference to villains.”

Izuku glares. "On a whim, she sacked Minsk and tore down the Swiss Alps to make an example out of her dissenters. Stop trying to say she was good. A monster can do something good and they'll still be a monster at the end of the day."

“Regardless of how she did it, her influence was beneficial to the people of Europe. The war against Titan, the same war that Hawkmoon and her allies led, freed Brazil from a despot, but tens of millions died in the process. Being a hero is easy because of what people like Stormwind and Hawkmoon and Hero herself did. None of us here would have survived that era. Hesitation meant death. Only the strongest could make a future.”

“Might doesn’t make right.”

“It did back then. Back then, people as strong as All Might were a dime a dozen. Back then, people with All Might’s power helped those who couldn’t help themselves. Strength is the privilege to help the weak. When was the last time you really helped people, kid? Not that bullshit hero stuff. When was the last time you helped someone who needed it?”

From anyone else, he may resent the accusation. But an insidious part of him genuinely likes Stain. Smart, charismatic and captivating, Izuku knows that in another time and under different circumstances, they may have been friends.

This man, this supposed villain, is someone Izuku can’t help but like.

“There was a girl once that I couldn’t save,” he says, unbidden, knowing this man will understand. "I don't think she was older than eight. That sunflower dress was a bit too big, but she'd grow into it, I think. I was just walking back from school. Maybe I was going to it. I don't know since it's been so long. Her quirk activated, and she killed people by mistake. I watched the police do their job and bring a villain down. She was begging to be saved and I fucking sat back and did nothing.”

Stain watches him carefully but with a genuine sense of empathy that Izuku can feel easily. There isn’t any pity or something so crass, just understanding.”

“How old are you?”

“Fifteen, no, I think I’m sixteen.”

With all the time he’s spent in the abyss, Izuku has lost track of his age. Without the tiny growth spurt he’s experienced, Izuku wouldn’t be certain if time affects him any longer.

“Same difference,” Stain says. “What were you gonna do? Fight the police and go to prison? Refuse and become a villain? Keep on fighting till you’re another Warlord?”

“I’d never go that far.”

“But you’d do something.” Stain sighs. “Look, it was a shitty hand but that’s the kind of shit your heroes protect. I never got a trial and I never will. And if you keep on trying to be a hero you won’t be able to help the next kid.”

“Then what the fuck am I supposed to do.”
“Stop trying to save people. You hate this system as much as I do, and people who want to save others let it exist. Go help everyone that’s been forgotten. Go to Hokkaido and Shikoku and help people there.”

The light in the room flashes from green to red then back to white. It is the signal that their time is coming to an end.

“You’re young,” Stain says, sighing heavily. “I can’t fault you much for that. Be a kid as long as you can. One day, that childish view you’ve built up will come crashing down. When that happens, you’ll have to start making hard choices. You’ll have to find your own justice in a brave, new world. And a lot of people will hate it, hate you. I hope you’ll be ready because I’m trusting you with changing things.”

“Against my better judgement, I think I don’t dislike you.”

“My name is Chizome Akaguro. If anyone deserves to use it, it’s you.”

He can’t help the tiny smile that graces his lips.

“Izuku Midoriya.”

“Break me out and I’ll give you your first beer.”

“I don’t drink.”

Izuku stands and leaves the prison. He leaves behind someone he wishes he knew better and under kinder circumstance. It doesn’t feel fair that this is how it must be. He’ll never forgive Stain for his actions, never forget the bloodshed he caused, but he does regret any of this had to happen.

In the quiet of his room, hidden away from everyone, he looks at his hero memorabilia. Dozens upon dozens of figurines and posters and card packs and clothes. With a heavy heart, he pulls it all down and packs it in boxes. When that’s done, he carries those boxes to the spare room and stores them there.

His room feels barren with only a single poster of All Might on the wall. This is something he can’t part with. All Might is his hero, his friend, and mentor. But maybe, just maybe, there are lessons he needs to learn that Toshinori can’t teach.

Izuku closes his eyes, remembering that girl he failed to save. Alone, in his barren room, no one is there to see him mourn a little girl that the world has forgotten, alone somewhere in a prison.

“I wish we met under better circumstances, Chizome.”

*****

This is the last official day of his internship. After this, Fumikage Tokoyami will have a short break before school. A long weekend, really, before returning to his classmates. His classmates who include Asui. The anger remains and perhaps will never go. The possible confrontation leaves him nervous.

He wonders how Izuku is doing with media attention. He’s never been one for the spotlight, preferring to hide like a skittish mouse despite being a predator. It is part of what Fumikage finds endearing about him, that duality between civility and violent madness.

“We’re gonna see someone before I drop you off.” Maya doesn’t look at him when she says that,
too busy watching the view outside.

Fumikage looks at Maya and shrugs. He has other things significantly more important to do. Like research how swords are forged and their various designs. If there is any good to come out of this internship, it’s that he will have a sword one way or another to replace the fake in his room.

His only comfort from a week of bloodshed and abyssal monsters will be a weapon of war. There’s an implication there that Fumikage doesn’t want to think about.

_Have you considered something?_

_What?_

_That you have essentially sold-out to the imperial family._

Fumikage frowns. _You told me this was necessary._

_It is. But think. She showed you something you could not abide by and bought your sense of honour. She grants you her affection easily. She taught you, clothed you, and paid you. It makes you her creature through and through._

_The same way you’re my creature_, he snaps snidely.

Dark Shadow laughs in his mind. _Oh, my dear prince of crows, we all have chains. You’re just too blind to see the one she has around your throat._

“You gonna keep frowning like that all day?” Maya watches him out the corner of her eye. “Because it’s ruining the mood.”

“If I wanted to quit right now, would you let me?”

“Yes,” she answers without hesitation.

“Why?”

She sighs and shifts to face him fully, patient as any teacher. “Because I’m not here to coerce you. Leave and just keep our secrets to yourself and I’ll leave you be. It’s that simple. Work with us and you’re an asset like the person we’re visiting. Walk away and you’re a non-entity. Betray me and you’re a liability I’ll eliminate. It’s simple calculus.”

“It’s ruthless calculus.”

The helicopter sets down.

“To survive and conquer you need to be ruthless and willing to sacrifice. Is this where we part ways?”

He considers it. To leave is to step away from this path that has already driven away Asui and may drive away others. Izuku would never agree with sacrificing one life to save a thousand. For Izuku, the only life allowed to be sacrificed is his own.

“Ignorance isn’t bliss and knowledge is no curse. The true curse is to have the power to act on that knowledge. To have both is to bind yourself to the chains of duty.”

“I’m not even going to pretend I know what’s going on with you.”
“It means I am stuck with your presence.”

“Cool.” She opens the door and steps out of the helicopter. “I don’t particularly care about how edgy you want to be or any of that teenage angst.”

Fumikage leaves as well, glad that he can’t blush and sees the pilot, the same older man from Nakajima.

The pilot bows to Fumikage. “Inquisitor.”

“Thank you,” he says, uncertain of what else to offer after that.

The pilot smiles.

Fumikage rushes after Maya.

“Inquisitor. Why that name? What about me makes you think of an Inquisitor?”

“We have a person whose job it is to come up with our codenames. Sometimes they make sense like our warpers being called Itinerant and Nomad. Sometimes they’re very bad and obscure references. I’m pretty sure he chose Inquisitor as someone who searches for truth. It might also be a historical reference to the Spanish Inquisition or even some game. Honestly, no one really knows.”

“And Agonist?”

“Can you just shut up about that. Izanami is my official title.”

“Which no one seems to use.” Fumikage rolls his eyes and decides not to push her. “He bowed to me. Why?”

“Because you’re important now. Because you’re one of us.” She ruffles his feathers affectionately. “You fight the battle he cannot. And for that, he honours you. In many ways, he probably hopes you’ll become a formal special asset.”

“What?”

“You really should read the dossiers we send you.”

“I do,” he protests.

She scoffs. “Please. You barely even know how my OTA is structured.”

“Your what?”

“Proving my point.”

They take to the roofs as they head to their destination. Being back in Mustafu makes him smile because this is home. He hasn’t spent more than two days in the city since his internship started in earnest, sleeping in hotels and boats and helicopters. He’s come to love that freedom of being unattached to a single location.

Still, despite that, Mustafu smells like home and for now, that’s enough to calm his restless heart.

“Asset Nomad can be odd,” She says. “Don’t worry, he won’t hurt you.”
It takes him a moment to orientate himself until he can recognise where they are. He’s been here a few times, not often, but often enough he wouldn’t manage to get too lost.

They’re two streets away from the Midoriya household when they come across a man leaning against a solar panel array.

The man is short, only a bit taller than Fumikage. His hair is dark, peppered with white. His eyes are a green that burns with knowledge of the void. It is the horrible scars, perhaps from a giant claw, that encompass the left side of his face.

“So, you’re the one,” the man says. “Tell the elder tree to stop hiding.”

Fumikage frowns as does Dark Shadow within his soul. Without prompting, the demon rises from his body and watches the man warily.

“It’s been a long time since we spoke to each other,” the man says.

**You know me?**

“Of course. We had many conversations under the watch of the godflame’s vessel. It seems you’ve found yourself attached to royalty.”

**Yes. This is my prince of crows,** Dark Shadow says affectionately. **Not the most dignified, perhaps, but my favourite.**

“I would hope he is. I never expected your final life-cycle to look like this. Compact, mobile, and able to survive places where the godflame exerts the most influence. How much of your memories remain, Old Bark?”

**That name… I had forgotten I once held it. My memories return slowly.**

The man grins. “Hopefully you’ll get them all back. You’re the last of your kind. They’ll need your knowledge if you make a new forest.”

**Burnt by the heat of the flame we guarded for an eternity. A fitting pyre, and a more fitting coronation ceremony, for a king.**

“I would expect you to be bitter.”

**Bitterness is of you humans.**

Fumikage knows that to be a lie. He can feel the grief and bitterness as easily as he can feel the wind on his feathers.

A glance shows Maya completely indifferent to the man or his words. Fumikage crosses his arms.

“I’m sorry but who are you to know so much?”

“This is Special Asset Nomad,” Maya says. “This is the man who would have retrieved Izuku if he hadn’t been a disaster at talking to his wife and gone missing.” The man shrugs. “Everyone calls him the World Walker. He’s an ally, unfortunately.”

“There’s nothing unfortunate about me.”

“You’re still an ally and you’re still doing our work. That makes you an asset. We keep our assets.
Especially you.”

The man rolls his eyes. “Fanatics,” he stage-whispers before focusing on Fumikage. “My name is Hisashi.”

He blinks. He knows of only one Hisashi of any importance. And he’s learnt there’s no such thing as coincidence.

“Atakani?”

The man leans back, surprised. “Yes. I haven’t been called that in a long time. You saved my son. For that, I will always be in your debt. Thank you.”

The man, Izuku’s father, changes fundamentally. Where once there was an elderly looking man who had been through too many fights, now something else completely stands where he stood. Their forms are roughly the same: black hair, yes, but now it seems less like strands of hair and more wisps of shadows; the freckles remain but they are pinpricks of the light of creation, and its scars bear the weight of felled gods.

Hisashi Atakani is gone and in his place stands something his soul identifies as the World Walker. He knows instinctively that it is an infernal engine following a set of instructions. It calculates threats and devises the most expedient way to eliminate them no matter their nature.

*Never fight this machine, my prince,* Dark Shadow says through their private bond. *The destruction is not worth it.*

“I will not harm you, Elder Tree” It nods to where Fumikage imagines Dark Shadow resides in his soul. “When you are ready, this one World Walker will find you and take you to the abyss, slaveking.”

The world seems to tear apart as a doorway forms. Beyond it, he can see the abyss and winged creatures riding on gusts of reverse causality.

“Wait,” Maya says.

The World Walker vanishes, leaving Hisashi in its place. “What?”

“She says she wants to see you. Go visit her before she makes us kidnap her uncle.”

Hisashi shakes his head. “I’m not her uncle.”

“She doesn’t care.”

Hisashi sighs, before walking through the doorway. The rip in the fabric of spacetime vanishes with his passing.

“Who is she?” Fumikage asks after a beat.

Maya observes him for a moment. “The Emperor’s daughter.”

Fumikage turns his head slowly, processing those words. “The Emperor’s daughter calls Hisashi uncle. What the fuck?”

She shrugs. “He’s not actually her uncle but kids can be stubborn. Hisashi’s worked with us a long time and we’re fond of him, even if he is an unrepentant idiot.”
Fumikage takes a deep breath and looks to Dark Shadow. The demon is lost in thought, disinterested in the conversation.

“Do you remember him?” he asks, poking at his connecting to the demon.

Dark Shadow rumbles. **Perhaps. There was a human skin-morph that I remember. I remember speaking under the auspices of the godflame’s heat. But I cannot remember the full details. Perhaps in time. All I know is that he helped me pioneer this life-cycle, this contingency against extinction.**

There is frustration in his companion’s voice.

“We’ll figure it out.”

Dark Shadow nods once before returning to his soul. And, for some reason, shoving the dragon aside in its resting spot. It grumbles but does nothing else.

Maya stands. “Let’s go.”

He walks beside her as they head to his home. “Is he powerful? Like Izuku.”

“The Midoriya family is… exceedingly powerful. From the Sports Festival footage we’ve gathered, Inko Midoriya may possess one of the most powerful telekinesis quirks we’ve ever observed. There’s no real point of talking about Izuku. You know the extent of his power. But Hisashi is an odd case. He’s physically nothing special. Fit for his age but a good blow will take him out.”

“So, you could beat him in a fight?”

She laughs as though that is the funniest thing he has ever said. “Inquisitor, he’s taken on the entire Royal Guard and won.”

His eyes widen as he thinks of all that he has seen of her abilities. To move as fast as the light itself and brandish it as a weapon capable of burning away corruption from the abyss. If they got into a fight, it would be over before he could form a single thought. The idea of one man beating her and her allies stretches the limits of his imagination.

“But you…”

“Everyone has a counter and that’s what makes Nomad so dangerous. He can counter just about anyone. With his doorways, he can deflect any attack. And, for unique cases like my own, he has made deals with creatures in the abyss that completely nullify our abilities.”

“Aizawa then. His quirk nullifies other quirks.”

“He’s got another ability. He breathe the godflame.” Fumikage shudders. “It’s his final ability. I’ve seen him use it once after being pushed to the limit.”

“That sounds broken.”

"Not necessarily. As I said, he's not physically strong. He has little defence against sneak attacks or attacks from outside his perception range. If he doesn't come to a fight prepared, then he's going down. Admittedly, when we fought, it wasn't a fight so much as him throwing a tantrum. Which we deserved.”
He makes a sound of confusion.

“He went missing on a job for us and spent a decade away from his family. It made him a bit upset. If I wanted to kill him, I would have stabbed him in the throat. But it was our fault he wasn’t with his family for a decade. He’s smart enough to pick battles he can win, and when he finds an opponent that may be a threat, he neutralises them with diplomacy. That man balances the Emperor against certain other groups with his presence alone.”

“No man should hold that much power.”

“You hold potentially as much. You should read your threat report.”

He stops walking. Maya only notices after a few seconds and turns, hand on her waist.

“I’m not certain if I should be worried that you have one or that you’re willing to let me see it.”

She shrugs. “Maybe you’ll learn a bit about yourself. We’ve already dealt with your weakness to light with your new costume.”

That is true. Fumikage catches up to her and they continue walking.

“I don’t understand. He’s a… special asset to you, but you seem to hold him in high regard. Is he part of the Guard? Related to the Emperor? Does that make Izuku a prince?”

“The answer to that doesn’t matter. If he is, then he’s abdicated his right to the throne. And if he isn’t, then he’d never be able to claim the throne anyway.”

“If I asked again, would you tell me the honest answer?”

She laughs humourlessly. “Yes.”

“And if I asked what you consider Izuku?”

Her hand is on his head, smoothing out his feathers. Anyone else, he would have slapped away for invading his personal space. But there’s a melancholy to her that makes him hesitant to do so.

*Or you’re thinking with your dick.*

“A non-entity. It’s a requirement of our agreement with Hisashi. We protect Izuku and his mother against threats. We leave them be from our machinations. It is a small price to pay to ensure he holds All For One in neutrality.

“What the hell is All For One?”

"A name you won't ever utter around another soul." He looks around and finds the street empty. "There are old agreements that keep Japan stable. That keeps any country stable, really. Our agreement with All For One, brokered and enforced by Hisashi, is one such deal.”

“You fear him. This… All For One.”


“But you could beat All Might. He can’t be that strong.”

She isn't smiling. The persistent confidence and blase attitude to all threats are gone.
“I could beat All Might with the entirety of the Guard if he wasn’t prepared and I attacked from stealth, and even then, the losses would be severe. He’s the greatest hero of this era, the most Perfect Fighter in the world for a reason. And All For One is the Strongest Man Alive. The mountain between them is… don’t ever pit yourself against them. I would need the full might of the Guard to save you. And even then, I doubt all of us together could survive against All For One.”

She kneels, her hands gripping his shoulders tightly. There is genuine fear in her eyes. This is the first time he’s ever seen her afraid. Not even monsters from the abyss inspire anything more than caution from her.

“He’s killed Emperor’s before,” she says quietly. “He fought Japan and broke it over his knee. He has won wars alone. We don’t know why he hasn’t taken total control, but he can at any time he wants. Promise me you’ll never go after him. Promise me you’ll never try to fight him.”

“I promise,” he whispers.

“Good,” she says. “Because if you tried to attack him, I’d kill you for the sake of everyone I love. I won’t risk a war with the Strongest Man Alive.”

Chapter End Notes

Anyway, if you enjoyed this, let me know. If you didn't, don't hesitate to roast me. As always, your readership is more than enough. See ya starside.
‘My arrogance made me see heroics as a simple matter. It is not. Both it and the law I argued be upheld even at the expense of compassion are messy things. There is rarely any cut and dry answer. Very few are willing to see themselves as anything but the hero of their own story. Circumstance turns many to crime. To simply brand them villains and sentence them to life in prison solves nothing. I have spent the last five years speaking with many of these villains and their stories are nothing short of mournful.’

—Excerpt from ‘Reminiscing on the Final Hour’ by Hinata Ononoki.

Kurogiri has many concerns, the least of which is making sure Tomura doesn’t get himself hurt with whatever scheme he’s concocted. He has a few assets observe and monitor his ward as he goes about his business meeting Giran, not truly interested in the why, but more interested in making sure Tomura isn’t caught up in a Yakuza attack.

Thankfully, the boy is holed up in his room and Kurogiri can get down to League business.

His bar is the meeting place, a neutral zone with a suite of electronic countermeasures for security. It is also deep in League territory and should there be an attack, he has three cells nearby and dozens of other minor villains causing a distraction for the heroes and police in the region. No one will have any reason to visit his bar.

Tonight, he nurses a glass of gin and sits at a table with three others. After Sensei and Kurogiri, these three are the most important people in the League’s command structure. The woman in gold nursing her beer controls their branch in Okinawa whilst the elderly man drinking water runs Shikoku.

Kurogiri has known them for years and values their utility and dedication. These two are pillars of logic and calm, powerful and obedient to Kurogiri’s commands.

It is the third, the youngest amongst them, that Kurogiri is uncertain of. The boy is untested and an unknown factor.

“We’ve managed to recover most of the Yakuza’s assets after All Might’s attack,” the elderly man says, eyes clear and sharp. “Give us a few more weeks and we should have total control.”

Kurogiri nods, glad that his long-standing enemies are finally defunct. He’s never much liked the group. The last time he dealt with them nearly involved one of those vile quirk-suppressing bullets to the head.

“Our control of local credit unions has increased as their assets have grown,” the old man continues. “We should have a legal source of funds for the next few years. I’ll have a full report of our financial assets next week once our acquisition of the Detnerat Group through our proxy
holdings is complete.”

The woman chuckles. “Not like you to be late on something.”

“I was reorganising our spies in the military. A few nearly got caught and we lost a casino. Sending resources to Okinawa overextended some of our agents in the Meta Liberation Army.”

“Well,” the woman continues with a flourish, accepting the rebuke gracefully, “things in Okinawa are lovely. We have Taiwanese remnants trying to smuggle bioweapons, a massive weapons deal between America and few dictators off the coast of Okinawa, and the cultists are in a tizzy ever since someone raided their weapons shipments.”

Kurogiri takes a sip of his drink. “Business as usual then?”

“Yes,” she agrees, taking a swig of her beer. “I’ll let you know if things are fucked in a new way.”

He glances to the boy who has stayed silent so far. The boy is nervous, his hands tightly clasped together to stop from fidgeting.

“How did Stain’s attack affect our holdings in Hokkaido?”

The youngest amongst them shrugs, affecting composure. He isn’t the real division leader. No, the previous head died fighting off Yoroi Masha and destroying League data before the organisation could be compromised further.

“Not as bad as Stain was mouthing off. Gutted an affiliate organisation and even managed to localise a hideout. Mostly, he took out the fight club. Snuck in, got the boss man first, took out everyone else.”

“Unfortunate. His family has been taken care of?”

“Had a runner drop off payment for the next six months. Added a bit more cause they’re having a kid. I hope that’s not a problem.”

“Not at all. Are people lying low?”

“Trying to. Thanks for getting us out before the heroes hit the bases. Not a lot of breathing room, but we’re managing. The only problem is that people don’t got security. Got kids breaking the rules and sorting out their business on the streets. Even had a few people start shit in the safe zones. Shinobu dealt with them, but then Hawks got involved, and we all know how that ends.”

Kurogiri looks back to the woman, knowing she has a surplus of assets. Not least of which because Kurogiri has moved League personnel south since the stadium attack to keep many of them out of the limelight.

“We’ll be taking personnel and supplies to help out in Hokkaido. We still need order in the region.”

“It’ll hurt the budget,” the woman says. “And it’ll hurt our ability to neutralise the arms deals should they try to do more than use Okinawa as a safe port. Should I include the teams monitoring the cultists for your selection?”

“No. Sensei has ordered they remain at their posts.”

“Ain’t never seen Sensei before, boss,” the boy says.

“Be lucky you haven’t,” the lady says. “You’d piss your pants.”
Kurogiri glares. “Enough. If we affect the monitoring teams, we’ll be violating our end of the accords. Understood?”

“Understood,” the elderly man says without complaint. “Speaking of the accords, I hear rumours that the World Walker is back in play.”

“Unfortunately. All interference with Imperial assets is forbidden. Remind your cells that if they do, we’re cutting them loose and disavowing them.” He looks back to the child. “Report to Tomura should you have any issues.”

The boy from Hokkaido clicks his teeth. "The fucking reason do I have to talk to him?"

“He is your superior.”

“That kid ain’t my boss,” the child snaps. “Never seen him in Hokkaido. Never seen him get my people out before the hero’s attack. Fuck if I’m going to listen to a spoiled brat.”

“Be very careful of your next words,” Kurogiri warns, mist popping menacingly.

“You ain’t gonna kill me no matter what I say. He would, but he ain’t got rules. You do. That’s why you’re the bossman, not some child.”

It takes every iota of control Kurogiri has to not remove the boy’s head. Because he’s coming dangerously close to insubordination.

The woman from Okinawa shifts uncomfortably. “You plan on shortening your life expectancy any further?”

“Don’t act like the rest of you don’t think the same. What’s he done? Attacked a stadium and killed some civilians. That got the heroes on our asses. Attacked Hosu and for what? Burning a few empty buildings and losing an entire cell, including three Nomu.”

“Are you refusing my order?” Kurogiri asks slowly, voice soft as the first leaf falling before the storm.

There are lots of things Sensei, and by extension Kurogiri, will accept. Everyone who works for them knows that. Questioning commands has never been a crime and neither has raising objections. But refusing an order without due cause is something of a death sentence.

That is why everyone falls silent, wondering if they will lose another division commander in such a short time.

“No,” the boy says after a beat. “Merely raising my concerns over your channel of communication.”

“Then follow my commands.”

“You know I’ll do what you say, boss. No need to threaten. Know I’m loyal to you.”

Kurogiri ignores that. “Is there anything else of importance?”

There isn’t. Or at least, no one is willing to test his temper.

Which is good because Kurogiri needs to travel to Harare and speak to one of his informants observing that part of the world. They don’t have as extensive a network as he likes in Southern Africa, but they also don’t have enemies from the region. And things are still as stable as he left
them.

After he has contacted his informants, restructured their personnel and given them new orders, he makes a quick jaunt to South America. In back alleys and gambling dens in Argentina, he speaks to Sensei’s agents who are preparing to launch a counterstrike against a rebel faction. The Brazillian president has nothing but good news for Kurogiri and assures him that their bilateral trade agreement with Canada is progressing well.

With that information, he returns to Japan. Hopefully, everything hasn’t gone horribly wrong in the few hours he has been gone.

Sensei is in his room as always, monitoring Japan and the world through a dozen different screens: some which show surveillance footage, others the stock market; three dedicated to underground media and news; and four screens simply observing the movements of the world’s armies. It looks like there will be another war in India and Korea is due an economic crash.

Kurogiri doesn’t know what patterns his master searches for with the aid of a quirk, perhaps many of them, but he trusts Sensei to inform him of any important changes.

“The last operation was an abject failure,” Kurogiri reports tersely. “We lost five Nomu and managed only to kill low-level heroes. We also lost Stain. The only good thing from this is that our operatives managed to take Yakuza assets after All Might's battle.”

"In many ways, this looks like a failure," Sensei says. "But I believe we gained much more out of this than anyone realises."

“Tell that to the plans I’ll have to rework. The fire Nomu would have been of great help come our next operation. It would have paired perfectly with the invisible Nomu.”

He is pacing as he speaks, a nervous energy filling him mist body.

“Something else is bothering you.”

_No shit_, he thinks but will never say.

“They aren’t loyal to Tomura.”

Sensei cocks his head. “Who?”

“The division leaders.”

“And why would they be? Respect is earned, not freely given.”

“But he’s your heir.”

Sensei chuckles. "You're a father upset the children at the park aren't playing nice with your son. I told you many times that I had hoped you would be my successor. They are loyal to you because they see your work for their benefit. You make the plans that keep that advance their interests and the contingencies that ensure their safety.”

Kurogiri is too dignified to lash out and argue like a petulant child. They should be loyal to Tomura first and foremost.

“Tell me how this was a success in any way,” Kurogiri demands tersely, annoyed enough that angering the Strongest Man Alive isn’t a concern.
A part of him knows he has little to fear from Sensei so long as he remains loyal. Perhaps humiliation should he anger the man, but nothing that he can’t walk away from.

“Peace, Kurogiri. You’re a great planner for tangible things. Money, assets, and people are within your sphere. But you aren’t very good at planning for more subtle things like socioeconomic influences and ideals. Tell me, what do you think of Hisashi’s son?”

“He’s a contradictory fool. He agreed with Stain, agreed that his personal ideals were ultimately false, yet the world praises him.”

"Not the world. He has a lot of detractors like Mt. Lady. A lot of his fame comes from defeating Stain. Most of it though comes because he cares more about people than he does ideals or duty or money. His sincerity to save people is palpable. And that's important."

“You want to use him.”

Sensei smiles cruelly. “Yes. I want to see his full potential.”

“As a villain? Hisashi would wage a war against the League if you touched him.” He tenses, his mind leaping to make the connection. “He would go after Tomura.”

“Perhaps. But the boy holds One For All. To steal him away, to turn him to my viewpoint, would crush All Might, and my brother’s quirk would finally be under my control. And that can be done without harming the boy.”

Kurogiri stares at Sensei for a long moment, unsure if he heard that right.

“Your brother?” he ventures cautiously.

Sensei turns his head slowly and Kurogiri feels his life expectancy plummet. The great villain stands with deliberate slowness. At his full height, he towers over Kurogiri.

"I would usually kill anyone if they heard that slip-up. But you have proven useful and you are loyal.”

Kurogiri takes a step back, failing to master the instinctive reaction.

“May I… ask?”

For a long moment, Sensei watches him. One wrong move and Kurogiri will be a corpse. There is no world in which he can face Sensei, especially not one personally angered by his actions.

“Do you know what our current system of heroics is based on?”

“Vancouver Island’s Hero Conglomerate,” Kurogiri answers immediately, terrified of the consequences of hesitation. “They were the first hero agency from what I understand.”

“Yes. But before them, in the chaos after Stormwind and Titan were defeated, peace and freedom were kept by a group of people with quirks. They enforced the rule of law through force and the threat of violence. Until the inevitable occurred. The people they empowered saw them as a threat and gave them an ultimatum they refused. Their reward for their sacrifices was to be branded as the first villains of this modern era. And since then, they have been in a perpetual war between heroes and villains. Japan took this model without considering the consequences. I knew many of those first villains and smuggled those unwilling to wage an endless war.”
“They were your allies.”

“Yes. And in many ways, I founded the Vancouver Island Villain Association. I saw a world I could not abide by, one where my brother was hated for not having a quirk. Many flocked to my strength and we fought the extremists and their backers. Any who harboured a grudge against the quirkless, and even the quirkless who hated us, were the enemies we faced. We forced peace through our strength, and when there was stability, I went to Vancouver to help my allies once more.”

Kurogiri listens attentively as his master speaks of the past as though it was yesterday, events centuries old still clear in Sensei’s mind. This isn’t a history easily found. Sensei’s past is a mystery, one the man has actively kept hidden. To find any knowledge of the man is to trace his influence on the world, to trace China’s failed invasions and the deaths of an Emperor and his Guard.

Though he can’t actively confirm it, Kurogiri believes Sensei played a role in every major conflict in the past century, guiding one side to ruin whilst empowering another. There is no proof but in the long-term effects that benefited Japan foremost, and the League eventually.

“I was there for years, setting them up for their coming war. I taught them the laws of power and the nature of the Great Game. I showed them how to survive in the dark and left a strong structure. When I returned to Japan, do you know what I found?”

Kurogiri closes his eyes. “A land of heroes.”

Sensei smiles but it feels nothing close to benevolent or cheerful. He leans forward and gestures theatrically with his arms.

Kurogiri doesn’t process the next few seconds very well. All he knows is that the air itself changes. It becomes heavy and feels like standing in the eye of a storm. Malice, deep and ancient, an endless river of loathing, crushes him beneath its weight.

All of that occurs in one moment before it disappears.

Where once there was a simple room with monitoring equipment, there is now a destroyed room. The tiles have been torn to shreds, the walls eviscerated and the equipment ground to a cloud of fine metallic dust. Sensei remains standing, uncaring of the sudden destruction.

Around Kurogiri the tiles are undamaged. The circle is tiny though, barely large enough to contain him.

“I found my brother calling himself a hero,” Sensei says in clipped, flat tones. “I found my brother working for the government. One of their first heroes. A shining example of how the government was protecting the people from my organisation. From my allies.”

Sensei inhales and paces around Kurogiri slowly, not saying a word. “I battled my brother and broke him over my knee. But the fool refused to surrender or give up. He passed on his quirk with instructions to kill me. My last gift to my brother turned against me. He was their shining beacon, their great hero, their angel and saint.”

Sensei stops right behind Kurogiri. His senses come alive and he sees the room clearly, sees the dust that settles on shattered tile and the location of each rip in the walls. Time, for a single moment, seems dilated for Kurogiri.

“My greatest betrayer was their hero.”
The air shifts once more and the malice returns, creeping up his spine and reminding Kurogiri that he lives only at this man’s mercy. He can feel the oceans of blood Sensei has made, the throne of broken bones and limitless strength that he sits upon. Like this, he can remember that Sensei is a monster first and foremost.

His voice is the whisper of a blade slicing a throat.

“I sought those responsible for his betrayal. I killed them and their families, took their quirks and used them against their allies to destroy their morale. I broke all monuments to their hubris. I became the devil they wished me to be. I fought off the Emperor of that time and killed their heroes. They called me a living nuke and I could have ruled over a country of bone and ash. Do you know what stopped me?”

“No,” he says weakly, ashamed that his voice breaks in the presence of this man who is determination embodied.

“A single child stood against me. I offered her the chance to run. Instead, that little girl drew a line in the sand. I had just killed her family and friends and heroes. Any other child would have been terrified. But she stood tall and proud, braver than any who call themselves heroes. ‘I’m not afraid of monsters,’ she said. Any other day, I would have killed her, a girl no older than your dead daughter.”

It takes all his self-control not to rage, not to shout at this man. Because no matter how sick the idea makes him, Sensei is the only person who can grant him his revenge. He is the only one who can kill All Might.

“I stayed my hand because the battle was over. Those responsible for my brother’s betrayal were dead. And yet, that little girl let me know I had lost the war. When a child is willing to stand against you, then your methodology has failed. I could destroy this society easily, but it would simply reform stronger than before. It cannot be by my hands. My methods are old and outdated, unsuited to this era. It must be my successor.”

Sensei takes a seat once more, another spot untouched by his quirk, and lounges languidly. But the weight never truly disappears. The scars of his anger remain, a reminder of the power he so casually wields.

“And if Midoriya is his ally, then all the better.”

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This facility is on the outskirts of Mustafu and highly guarded with layers of security. The security guards in stiff body armour are the easiest to spot but, if one spends enough time, the roving security cameras and monitoring drones reveal themselves.

It has been some time since he last came here. The last was a few days before his internship, and Fumikage has been too busy ever since to visit. Now seems as good a time as any with school starting up again in a few days. He doesn’t know when next he’ll see the children, and given that he has vital news, now is the best time to speak to them.

Just admit you miss them, Dark Shadow says fondly.

Fumikage rolls his eyes as he approaches the first of many security barriers. Amongst them are a full-body X-ray scan for weapons, a physical body search, and biometric verification. Finally, he will need to hand over the UA authentication pass Aizawa gave him so long ago.
He walks to the first checkpoint and reaches in his pocket to retrieve his ID. Except, the woman waves it away, raising a brow.

“Not for you, Inquisitor.”

Fumikage freezes and looks to the security guard. She looks average, her mutation being lizard frills down her neck, and undoubtedly on the other parts of her body that are hidden by the armour, and bright yellow eyes. There is nothing special about her. Most of all, there isn’t a single speck of white or a chrysanthemum anywhere in sight.

And yet, against all reason, she calls him by the name granted to him by the Imperial Household, a name that should be a secret.

“I was unaware this facility belonged to... to us,” he finally settles on, a weight in his throat.

Her eyes have slits instead of round pupils. “We just run security, sir. Anything else, you’d have to search our databases. I don’t have the clearance.” Unspoken, is that he does.

“Understood. Thank you for the information.”

She smiles, and it looks so shy as to be out of place. "You're welcome, sir. No need to show ID again."

And he doesn't need to show a single piece of ID. He receives nods from the guards instead of a pat-down for concealed weapons. The doors locked by biometric locks open automatically without prompting.

He greets the caretaker politely as always. The man with quills barely musters up the energy to wave weakly, but Fumikage ascribes it to the dark bags under his eyes. He’s had long days and even longer nights this past week and understands that level of exhaustion intimately. Yesterday was the first day he returned home at a decent time, and even then, his memories of the past week had plagued any attempts at sleep.

Pushing away the tiredness is only a matter of willpower as he walks down the hallways. There are signs of damage as always, like the wall melted through with lava or the many holes from fists or bodies thrown around.

He smiles fondly and crosses the final threshold. The space is just as beautiful as it was before, the right side mimicking an open valley with only a fox statue to interrupt the expanse, and the left side is thick with plants and vegetation.

“Hey, Fumi,” a blonde girl shouts and tackles him to the ground. “Where ya been?”

“Busy.” He grunts and shrugs her off harshly. She giggles, unhurt, and scurries away to find another of her friends.

He walks towards the heavy plant life. It is always a risk as entering is asking to be pranked by any of the rambunctious children. And indeed, the moment he passes under a tree he is soaked to the bone.

He looks towards the giggling and sees the redhead boy with racoon eyes. “Got you.”

"Indeed," he says, wiping water away from his eyes. "Do me a favour, please?"

The boy cocks his head. “If you get me chocolate.” Fumikage simply stares until the boy shifts
nervously. “Fine.”

“Call everyone else to the statue. I have something to show you.”

“It better be good.”

The kid scurries away before he can reply. I like them.

“I know you do.”

Fumikage walks towards the statue and waits patiently for the children. It only takes fifteen minutes, a few explosions, and nearly a dozen fights before a group of eight children sit on the grass before him.

The rest of the group is just as diverse as the first child: a girl with feline features and burning blue fire; a boy with pink eyes playing with coral; one who looks like a very fury human the slings lava at another child who makes steam; a kid with a horse’s snout being flown around by a girl with wings; and finally a brawny child who flicks ink and Dark Shadow.

“What are you gonna show us?” the girl with translucent wings asks.

“I know a little about your past,” Fumikage says. “Not much, but enough to know what happened to your village hidden in leaves.”

“Can we not, please?” That’s the smallest one, a boy with pink eyes and coral on his hands, who speaks. "I don't want…"

One of the older children with red fur wraps an arm around the kid and pulls him close. They all look sad though some hide it better than others, like the redhead who shows no emotions but the shifting of his sand gourd.

“I do not bring up these emotions without cause.”

There are benefits to having lots of money. Holographic emitters are one such benefit. The image it shows is of the man responsible for the suffering of these children who are nothing but kind and generous and beautiful in their simple joy.

“Nagato,” the blonde girl whispers in horror. “How did… He’s not supposed to…”

Fumikage raises his hand to calm them before her distress spreads any further. At best, the group looks ready to run in terror.

“Peace. He can never harm you again. I have ensured it.”

“How?” the redhead asks.

Fumikage smiles. “He is imprisoned, and I watched him get taken away. They’ll send him to Tartarus, and no one will ever see him again.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

He has only half a moment to react before there is a pile of children crushing him. There are thanks and sobs and relived words from the children. Mostly, Fumikage tries to get oxygen in his lungs before he blacks out.
The children can barely keep still over the next two hours. There’s steam and lava and sand and children strong enough to crush steel flying through the air. It looks like a warzone and only Dark Shadow’s timely intervention spares him from more than a few cuts. Until Dark Shadow isn’t fast enough and a piece of rock slices through his arm.

That forces the kids to stop. The oldest, the redhead, has the decency to drag him to their caretaker. The man has a disappointed gaze for both Fumikage and the little tanuki until they explain.

“It’s good to see him in prison,” the man says after the children have been sent to bed. “I think the spirits of their parents can rest at peace. That little fox will happy.”

Fumikage checks his bandage once more. The wound won’t need stitching and will heal cleanly so long as he doesn’t do anything too foolish in the next few days.

“It is the least I could do. It was an act of good. And I needed to do something good.”

“Yes. But he was always hidden through proxies and a dozen false leads. You had to have paid a price for it. What did it cost you?”

He thinks of the things he has seen fighting in the dark, the monsters and corruption. It runs counter to his memory of losing Asui’s friendship, and a part of him knows it can never be recovered. Most of all, he thinks of the dead he has seen and knows that he would take those lives if it meant holding back the abyss.

It is a loss of innocence, one Fumikage mourns for no one will ever know the cost to his soul. No one will ever see him crying in the shower or his hands shaking as something reminds him of those who have fallen. No one will see his crushing guilt or fear.

“Everything,” he says as a compromise.

“That’s a high price to pay.”

“You told me once you hoped I had the strength to pay the ultimate price. I’ve come to learn that giving up your life to save someone is easy. That is not the hard part.”

“What is?”

He looks to his hands, red with his dried blood. It seems appropriate for this moment that his hands are stained red. Perhaps he never took those lives, but Dark Shadow and his dragon did, and both belong to him. He ordered them, even if he didn’t personally take those lives. It doesn’t absolve him of the acts.

They were lost to the darkness, his companion says soothingly.

Rationally, he understands that. Emotions and adolescence don’t lend themselves to rationality.

“Sacrificing your beliefs for the greater good,” he says heavily.

The caretaker pauses. “I see. I hope you find a light at the end of your road.”

“As do I,” he says quietly.

“I don’t know the path you’re going down. And I’m sorry to say this, but I can’t risk you being near these kids any longer. That’s not the lesson I want them to learn. I know I can’t force you to do anything, but please, respect my wishes. I know you care for these children. And this is the best
things for them.”

It takes him a long moment to understand the caretaker has finished speaking. His ears ring, drowning out all sounds. Those words are distorted as though he’s underwater. More than anything, he suspects he isn’t hearing those words with his ears, but instead his soul is understanding the intent behind them.

Fumikage closes his eyes. Forces down his sudden and hot anger. Opens his eyes.

“I… understand,” he says slowly, voice thick and heavy. “Thank you for everything.”

“It’s been a pleasure, Fumikage Tokoyami.”

He takes the man’s hand, numb. It would be so easy to snap it in twain. Calling upon Dark Shadow’s claws would be easy as breathing. It would make sense to destroy this man trying to keep him away from one of his joys in life, children who look up to him and see someone they can trust in.

“And to you. Call me should the need ever arise. I will answer without question.”

“And bring an army in white whilst you’re at it.”

“You do know,” he accuses, though there is no heat in it. Everything tastes like ashes now.

“Not all of it. But I figured out who they were a long time ago. It was enough to guess why they call you sir. There is no space for kindness with that uniform.”

They say no more and Fumikage leaves. The guards outside sense his mood and leave a wide berth as he leaves. He forces a smile for the woman with the lizard mutation, but she seems more frightened by the rage smouldering in his eyes than comforted by his teeth.

The world is coloured red with his rage as he walks aimlessly, and he wants to break everything. Because how is it fair that he makes sacrifices only to lose relationships.

*He’s wrong,* Dark Shadow says and sends a wave of reassurance through their bond.

That tells him his anger must be ready to explode if Dark Shadow isn’t taking advantage to weaken his resolve. It doesn’t work. If anything, it stokes the fire hotter and hotter.

*Maya was kind to you.*

“She was manipulating me!” Fumikage roars in the emptiness of the beach. “That. Is not. Kindness.”

*You need to calm—*

*Shut up and get out here.*

He doesn’t give Dark Shadow a choice and forces it to materialise. He chains the demon’s will, suffocates any thought and feeling it has through rage and chains. Darkness settles around his skin as he wears Dark Shadow as a second skin.

He feels strength and speed flow through him. He punches the breakwater wall in anger and watches a part of it shatter to his newfound strength. A deluge of water rushes past, soaking him to the bone. Fumikage ignores the stone chips that bounce off Dark Shadow’s skin.
He opens his mouth to roar once more. And then, he feels Watatsumi rise past the barriers of his soul and materialise. Except not fully.

The dragon’s wings materialise roughly where his shoulders should be. He lets his insatiable anger guide him and he leaps forward, bounding a great distance with Dark Shadow’s strength.

Watatsumi’s wings beat before he hits the water and Fumikage finds himself flying, long wings catching the air. Any other day he would feel joy and exhilaration. Right now, all he wants to do is destroy something.

He doesn’t know how far he flies before he comes across a tiny patch of land barely large enough to be called an island. It’s a pitiful thing, rocky and unimportant. So, he doesn’t feel any guilt in breaking the stones with his fists.

And when the rage burns so bright that he feels sick with it, Watatsumi’s purple fire surrounds Dark Shadows talons. It makes it far easier to destroy like this.

It may be minutes or hours or days later before his rage finally abates. He lies in the sand, staring at the night sky. The stars are bright, thousands of pinpricks of light piercing the veil of darkness.

Dark Shadow and Watatsumi have both returned to his soul, exhausted by his ceaseless anger. If he had the strength to continue, they would.

“I’m sorry,” he says to them both.

Never do that again, Dark Shadow warns, angry and fearful. You took away my will. Made me a slave in truth.

“Forget me.”

Dark Shadow does not respond but retreats further back into his soul until Fumikage can barely feel his first friend. Somewhere in the depths of his soul mired with blood his closest friend hides. He yearns to reach out but hesitates, afraid of what he will do.

That fear keeps him rooted to his spot in the sand, listening to the waves lap lazily against the shore. There is sand in his feathers and down his shirt, blood running down his reopened wound. He looks a mess and is glad no one can see him in this state.

“Slaveking.”

He looks to the side and comes face-to-boot with the infernal engine of the World Walker. The creature that wears Hisashi Atakani’s skin is indifferent to his state.

“Yes?” he asks, uncaring if the threat the thing poses.

"It is time to fulfil an oath," the World Walker says.

It has an odd voice, an echo of a thousand worlds beneath each word. Those worlds it has seen are worlds of ruined, blackened husks struck by calamity after abyssal calamity. Listen to the World Walker speak and the necessity of Fumikage’s actions become apparent.

“What oath?” he asks of the thing that looks like Hisashi Atakani.

A doorway appears, cutting through the barrier between real and abyss casually. Beyond, he sees the madness that is the void, a space where laws are made by those who are powerful. Beyond, he
sees a place closer to home than the real world.

“To the abyss, I will take you. Let your horde grow. Ascend to your throne.”

He feels the dragon in his soul awaken and rises to the surface to observe. It vibrates with anticipation, with the need to rip and rend and give tribute to its king.

Dark Shadow, though, is silent.

It may be a foolish choice, but he has made many, and will likely make many more. He needs the strength to face any monster that breaks the natural laws. And the abyss with its alien laws and crystal engines of ruin is the only place he can gain that strength.

He stands and looks to land in the distance, land where the facility is. It is the past forever barred to him just like his friendship with Asui. And then he looks to the portal where his future lay, a pathway opened by a man in perfect white.

“So be it.”

Fumikage Tokoyami steps through the portal. Let him battle monsters on the outside and not the demons within. That might, at the very least, distract him from the pain in his heart.

*****

Izuku Midoriya is stuck in liminal time, in a space between growth and stagnation. It would be so easy to step away from the door and turn back, to act as though everything is the same. A part of him would forever hate himself if he did so.

If he turns around, won't he be doing the same things he's always done? Running and lying his way through problems are things he knows. This, however, is to face something different.

“Are you sure about this?”

“Yes. I’ve been trying so hard to save people that I forgot I can help them.”

Izuku smiles at his mother, honest as he can be. She is hesitant to let him go and he loves her even more for it. But sometimes, he needs to move away from her protective embrace. Maybe it is time for him to grow up.

“He’s a villain. You don’t need to listen to him.”

"You can find wisdom anywhere. Even from people, you hate and people you think are stupid." Izuku shoulders his pack and tightens the straps. “Maybe he’s wrong and maybe he’s right. But I won’t know if I don’t find out for myself.”

His mother sighs and pulls him into a quick embrace. “I hate that you’re growing up.”

“Everyone grows up.”

With one final kiss, he stands and walks away from home.

This is the second time in a month that he is saying goodbye to this place he grew up in. He’s hardly been here for more than a few days in the last few months, partly because of his time in the abyss with Shouto and partly because of his internship.

Still, he needs to know. Izuku boards the train and heads to Hakodate. Tomorrow will be the first
full day of the time he plans on spending there.

Almost immediately he is struck by the poverty, the thick and heavy stench of despair and despondency. He walks the streets to the hotel his father procured, noting the lines of wealth and how only a small portion of the city thrives. And no matter how much it hurts not to stop the fights that occur, he forces himself only to observe and catalogue everything.

*This change is too big for you to solve by being a hero to one person,* Mikumo says, disquieted.

It is so prevalent he can’t even figure out where to begin. How does one change the socioeconomic state of a city? Fighting villains won’t work because he can’t tell if there are any. Who should he rescue when people are trapped by the circumstances?

After he checks in to his hotel room, Izuku picks a direction and walks through the city. Doing so without intent reveals things he would otherwise never have noticed: the police exist not to protect the people, but to keep certain areas quarantined against the poverty; the hero agencies are sparse and understaffed; too many office buildings and storefronts are in disuse.

Despite the bad, there are areas of hope. There are parks and squares that seem to be protected by individuals wearing no uniform or gang colours, but they all ensure fights are not permitted in those areas. And when a fight almost breaks out, the two are taken to another spot where they fight, watched by those who brought them there and anyone else with more than a passing interest.

In all his years he never saw a prostitute, or a very public drug deal watched on with complete indifference. He can see weapons being exchanged in the back of a rundown store, and though he wishes to stop it on principle, the buyer is a young mother with her child in tow. If he takes away that weapon, will he be taking away her only way to keep her child safe? Even then, how can he be certain it won’t be put towards something other than self-defence?

Hakodate is nothing like the neat and orderly Mustafu he knows. It is a cesspit of violence and poverty and crime, nothing more than a breeding ground for suffering. And yet, in Mustafu he saw a little girl arrested when she should have been saved.

One the first day, he volunteers at a hospital.

The man at the reception looks at him in confusion, then shock at his sincerity. He is given a bright vest and directed to help move supplies. Izuku does it without complaint and soon he is being borrowed by everyone in the hospital. They never ask him to complete complicated tasks, but often enough they’re too short-staffed that a doctor is restocking skin grafts instead of helping a patient, and maybe he does find it a bit demeaning to pick up laundry, but the nurse he gives the folded stacks of clothes to almost cries.

Between moments of work, he speaks with anyone and everyone he can. He wants to know their story, their history and what made them find their way here.

He helps a nurse with two patients, glad for his first aid certification and the dozen times he has been injured. He cleans the man’s vicious wound and stitches it, no longer surprised they are willing to accept him despite his lack of genuine qualification. They’re too understaffed to say no to anyone who knows how to thread stitches and attach an IV line.

“These injuries are from people sorting out their issues on the street,” the nurse says, splinting broken finger. “That idiot Stain took out the fight club. At least with that, people could sort out their stupid issues without worrying about dying. Someone steals your girl, then fight it out over there. Usually got someone with first aid training and people to stop it going too far. Now it’s just
chaos and blood in the streets near the children.”

He wonders how long it takes to become accustomed to these conditions. How long till you can tell the difference in the quality of blood spilt in the streets and in a sanctioned fight club. Blood spilt is blood spilt. It can never be reclaimed.

For the rest of the day, he does simple admin work, cataloguing inventories and dating the remaining supplies. It is tedious work, but something tells it lets someone with more experience and knowledge help those in need.

At the end of his day, he is ready to return to his hotel. On the way out, he is stopped by the nurse he helped earlier who thanks him profusely. Behind her, he can see a few staff members, all of them waving with smiles on their faces.

That one image of tired and overworked people smiling is worth more than the shirt that says he volunteered. They take a picture together and though Izuku hopes they keep it private, he’s come to accept that it will be online in a few hours.

A few hours later, in his hotel room, he sees a minor news article with that picture on it, one written by the Quirk News Network. There are questions being asked, and not all of them are terrible. Still, he's glad that the only reason he saw it is because of the many flags he's setup.

On the second day, he goes to a local soup kitchen. This time, there are two others who seem to be new. Izuku works in the back, chopping vegetables for a while, but spends most of his day washing dishes and cleaning the kitchen till it sparkles.

They don’t include him immediately in the conversations. There is too much slang they use, and words he understands the meaning to don’t line up in the context of their conversations. He may speak all languages, but only in their clearest forms.

Yet, when their conversation veers off into the territory of villains and things that might not be legal, one of the new volunteers calls him out.

“You sure he won’t rat us out. Look at him. Probably richer than all of us combined.”

Izuku closes the tap and turns around, shamed. He can’t deny that accusation. His father wields wealth and authority, and so does Izuku because of that. That wealth belongs to Izuku now as well. He knows it because of their house, small and comfortable yet patrolled by security. He knows it in the way his wardrobe has changed since his father returned, the clothes staying the same but for an extra zero to the price tag.

These are changes he hasn’t given much thought to.

“If you want me to leave, I will,” he says sincerely. “I’m not here to make things difficult for anyone. I just… I guess I wanted to do just a tiny bit of good in my life.”

They don’t ask him to leave. No, instead they ask the volunteers who called him out. Izuku picks up the slack without complaint because no matter how busy he is, something inside him genuinely enjoys this. He doesn’t learn as much as he did that first day, but he learns more than enough.

It is because of those conversations that he visits Goryokaku. Once, centuries ago, the star-fortress was a thriving and vibrant place. Today, the canals are dried out and the greenery is nothing more than salted earth, sterile and dry. All that remains of the government hall are a few wooden columns and a collapsed roof.
“Who did this?” he asks Mikumo.

It isn’t his brother who answers.

“No one knows.”

Izuku looks over his shoulder at the lady who has been following him for the last few hours. He’s known about her from the very beginning, but he’s let her shadow him because she never tried to hide her presence.

“Some say it was the anti-quirk rioters,” she continues. “Some say it was the government trying to eliminate extremist leaders during the riots. Others would accuse Aogiri Tree and some would tell you the Imperial Household. Either way, it’s only civilians who suffer.”

“What do you want from me?”

She smiles. “I want your story. You took down the hero-killer and now you’re here, in Hokkaido. The same place he started in. I want to know why.”

“No,” Izuku snaps. “I don’t care how much you pay me. I’m not here for fame or money. Just let me get back to work.”

“You’re famous now,” she says. “I’ve seen your face on every magazine. People want to know who you are and what you believe in. And this, helping out in Hokkaido, will sell.”

He grits his teeth. “I’m trying to help. That’s all I’ve ever wanted to do. Now leave me in peace.”

The conversation with the journalist leaves him unsettled at the very idea that he is famous. So, he spends the evening doing research on his name. There are so many articles and opinion pieces that leaves him too anxious to sleep. Especially when so many are wrong, when so many twist and manipulate his words.

That is the cost of fame. The public knows you and will use you for their whims. Unless you control the story being told.

On the third day, he goes to a mental ward. The place is old and dilapidated. Despite that, he gets the sense this is one of those places that is protected just as the parks with children or the schools and hospitals.

“What do you want me to do?” he asks the organiser.

“Go talk to people?” he asks, startling him.

“Huh?”

“Look, kid, we’ve got people for all the things you think need doing. Go out there and talk to them. Remind them that they’re still people. That they aren’t monsters.”

He speaks to a mutant with purple horns and a large mouth. There are old scars running the length of his lips as though someone tried to sow them shut.

In the deepest parts of his heart, Izuku knows it to be the truth.

“Wanted to be a hero,” the man says, his mouth filled with many rows of shark teeth. “Tried my damned hardest. Even got into a school. But it’s next to impossible to go when your family’s been kicked out of the apartment. Can’t get mail if you don’t have a home address.”
He thinks of his hotel room that probably costs more a night than most people in this city will see in a month. It leaves a deep pit in his stomach, one that is equal parts shame and irrational hate—hate at himself, at the world, at the heroes and police and government. He pushes those feelings down before they can consume him.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Saw your battle against… what’s his name?”

“Stain,” he answers, surprised that the famed hero-killer is distant news to some people, an otherwise unimportant blip in their day to day lives.

“Yeah. You’re here, right? You’re doing something. You didn’t just say something and do nothing, you know. I’ve seen Hawks destroying the block fighting a villain. Ended Shinobu’s Vow right then and there, and he had no fucking idea what she meant to us. The worst part was we all knew the kid. Just trying to keep some peace and order against some Yakuza scum. Nothing wrong with that but not going to an expensive school.”

“What was her Vow?” he asks, surprised that anyone would support the villain.

The man frowns. “To free Shikoku from the military and uplift Hokkaido.”

Izuku closes his eyes, pushing down the rage that threatens to consume him. In what world is that so wrong?

“That can’t be it,” he says, but knows it to be true.

Did Stain not tell him the truth of Tartarus and the prisoners there? Very many of those imprisoned were those who rejected the government and sought a different future. For their ultimate crime, they will live forgotten in the depths of Tartarus, unseen and unheard.

“She was a called villain because she was against the government,” the man says softly, as though he knows Izuku is breaking. “But the government was never on our side. The military never cared about us. I don’t think Hawks was cruel or even knew what he was doing to us. He just saw another villain to be taken down.”

And though it pains him to walk away, there are other stories to be told. Not all of them are cold and cruel. Some are tales filled with beauty and grace, joy and the timeless of human dignity. But those bright spots are few and far between.

This is the cost of your oath to save everyone. You see what it means to be a hero. What choice will you make?

“You’re what we really need, honey,” an older woman says to him during lunch. “If all the kids your age spent three days a year, just three, helping out, then things wouldn’t be this bad.”

She has a bitter smile, one that smacks of old regrets and disillusionment. “Three days where kids like you do some good instead of wanking over your phones.”

His blush is a furious scarlet. He’s been caught once by his mother and never wants to repeat that ever again, though he doubts that will ever be a worry. Still, there is honesty in her words, a bitter earnestness that is captivating to listen to.

“The rules are different here,” she continues. “You get one chance and if you fuck it up, you’re gone. The police don’t care so we must do it ourselves. Rape someone, traffic someone, start shit
in the safe zones, and your chance is up. If you’re lucky, it’s a bullet to the head. If it’s some fucked up shit, they’ll make a show of it.”

When he leaves, he hears the flash of a camera. It is the reporter and she grins as though she has found the greatest prize.

_Control the story. Tell the story you want to be told._

Izuku sighs tiredly, worn down to the core after only three days in this city. The idea that this is normal for some disgusts him.

“I’ll give you the entire evening if you don’t twist my words,” he finally concedes, exhausted. “If you tell the story honestly.”

Her grin softens, fewer hard edges permeating it. The sense of victory she likely sought slowly dies as she sees the fragile edges of his breaking heart.

“Alright. Tell me the story you want to be told.”

“I’ll tell you who I am.” He places a hand over his heart, clutching his shirt tightly. “It starts with a girl in a sunflower dress that I couldn’t save and involves a conversation with the hero-killer.”

At first, it is hard speaking and his voice is scratchy. He’s never done this before, and the complete fear of knowing everyone will see this makes him hesitate.

She notices and asks, “What did you learn that really surprised you?”

There are so many answers to that question, so many steeped in despair and violence and misery. Yet, one crushes him more than any other.

“An old man told me about Shinobu’s Vow,” he says, tears in his eyes. “Maybe he only told me the side of the story he wanted to believe in. Maybe it was all a lie. But, if all she wanted was to help people, then was her vow so terrible?”

These moments spent in Hakodate are but snapshots into the lives these people live every day. He is an intruder granted the privilege to know these stories, to carry them and perhaps make a change to help those who have been forgotten.

It is an honour and a burden, a gift that he holds close to his heart. In speaking to this reporter, he bears his heart fully, withholding nothing but the truths he can never speak—the truths of his quirk, of All Might and many of his failings.

But there is enough to tell that they speak well into the night. He lays his heart open to this reporter and by extension the world. They’ll hear his story, untwisted and honest, the story of a boy trying to make things right in this confusing world.

“All I’ve ever wanted to do is save people,” he says at the end. “Life is precious, and I love life. Maybe it makes me a fool, but I won’t stop trying. I’d rather fail than give up before even trying.”

Maybe it will change nothing. Maybe it will change everything. All he knows is that he must keep trying until the very end.

On the night of the third day, he sets his sights homeward and returns.
This is what it means to be Japanese today. Things are changing and they will change soon.

This is how it feels to be Tanabe Kaori of Hokkaido in the morning. You eat breakfast slowly, savouring what may be your only meal of the day, and see the notification from your friend. You open it, expecting a joke or something inane. You do not expect the story of Izuku Midoriya. You remember him the night he fought Stain. You remember the uncertain hope, hope because he may be better than the heroes before him, and uncertainty because he may be just as bad. For the first time in a long while, you feel trust in heroics.

You are the vigilante Crawler, trying to enforce an unsteady peace at a discussion table for the forgotten and disenfranchised. There are factions vying for power, too many for you to fully trust. But everyone is watching this boy, the same boy you said would do great things. “Give him a chance,” you say to your peers. “That’s all I’m asking for here.”

This is how it feels to be the hero Edgeshot of Shikoku. You're at home, stuck inside until the military curfew ends. You could leave in your hero uniform and get away with it. Better not to antagonise them unnecessarily. They know your identity, know your family and friends. So, you stay at home and watch an interview with a boy less than half your age. You watch him shed tears over Shinobu’s Vow. For the first time, you wonder if there is hope in the future.

You may be Kohei of the Horikoshi Cult, first amongst equals, preparing a summoning ground off the coast of Japan, indifferent to the mewing of a child. The words of a child are unimportant compared to surviving the relentless pursuit of the Royal Guard. You must succeed at all costs. Godhood is the final goal and you will have it.

You may be Captain Yosuke Kadomatsu of the navy, on a fast track to Rear Admiral, holding the defensive line against a Chinese fleet and praying for another day of peace. The line has existed for decades, an uneasy peace that so often turns bloody for a few hours. In your cabin, you watch one foolish boy call out you and the navy you love. You scoff in annoyance. That boy knows nothing.

This what it means to be Kouta Izumi, watching the interview with your aunt Mandalay. She is silent and seems disturbed, but you can only find hope in those words this Izuku speaks. Maybe, just maybe, there’s one hero who understands the failings of society. Maybe he will show the world that heroes shouldn't be praised.

Regardless of who you are, you can feel change brewing. Soon, the tide will wipe away the old order. Only the strong will be left standing.

Will you stand tall or be swept away?

Chapter End Notes

Izuku's trip was a moment I've been waiting a long time to show. There's an alternate ending I have hiding somewhere based entirely on that trip. Anyway, if you've enjoyed this, let me know. If you haven't, let me know as well. As always, your readership is awesome.
In all honesty, I just want to get this story arc over and done with.
My discord server can be found at the following: https://discord.gg/4YvCTYR

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘The reputation of a hero is more important than their deeds. Hawkmoon is considered a hero in Europe whilst her ally, Master Railroad, is reviled. They fought in many of the same conflicts. The only difference is that it was Master Railroad who forced Stormwind to surrender. Stormwind who is considered a hero and liberator in Europe, and its staunchest defender. Is it any wonder then, that Master Railroad is one of Europe’s greatest enemies, and his acts in service to the UN led to the European Union walking away from the UN? To be called a hero is simply a matter of reputation, not your deeds.’

—Excerpt from ‘The Effect of Heroics’ by Saruhiko Ando.

“All I’ve ever wanted to do is save people. Life is precious, and I love life. Maybe it makes me a fool, but I won’t stop trying. I’d rather fail than give up before even trying.”

Kurogiri watches Hisashi’s son tell his story to a reporter, listening intently to the words of a foolish boy. When the interview ends, Kurogiri turns to face Sensei.

“And you think this boy can be an ally? After all he’s said?”

There is a note of derision to his voice, one that Sensei undoubtedly picks up on. There are few people who have the audacity to insult this man in any way. Kurogiri is one.

“And what did he say?” Sensei asks, amused. “That Hokkaido is a problem that needs to be fixed. That he, the institute he goes to, and the industry he works for have failed. That he wants to change society in his image. What difference is there between us and him besides the final vision of society and the methods employed?”

“That fact that he’s a hero and will oppose us.”

“Really now? And when did he stop any crimes in Hokkaido? We were monitoring him every step of the way and he left our public agents alone. He didn't act on the criminal information we fed him at the soup kitchen. He may not know it is the League which keeps Hokkaido afloat, but he recognises the lesser evil. And if permitting lesser evils leads to a greater good, then he will be an ally.”

“I doubt his moral compass will allow that.”

“Everyone does, at first. But it starts with one step. He’s already taken the first step and in time he will take another. Every time he sees something wrong with the world, he’ll seek to change it. And if we show him the lesser evils, he’ll permit them so long as it leads to eventual good. And, given enough time, he will commit the lesser evil himself. Humans are predictable like that.”

“I hope you’re right.”
“I rarely am wrong these days.”

Kurogiri huffs. “The same way you weren’t wrong about how easily you would win against All Might? I very distinctly remember saving you after you underestimated his resilience.”

“Wisdom is simply learning from your experiences,” Sensei says, lacking the malevolence Kurogiri expects after a comment like that. “I had never lost before then. I had broken him and thought him dead. I didn’t expect the hidden reservoir of strength he had left considering every detection quirk I had told me he was dead.” Sensei leans forward. “One For All stockpiles quirks. I suspect one of the wielder’s had a quirk like that. But, enough of that. Go meet Tomura’s guests and acquire whatever they need. It should be interesting to see what he makes of them.”

With a sigh, he opens a warp gate and heads to the base Tomura has taken over in the last few days when he isn’t spending all day researching or speaking to Giran.

The base is lit well which makes it easy for Kurogiri to take in everyone.

Tomura looks strange in his large black jacket, more menacing and older at the same time. Stranger perhaps, because he now wears a mask that covers the lower half of his face instead of the hands Sensei destroyed as punishment.

“Kurogiri,” Tomura says curtly, “you’re just in time. Meet the Vanguard Action Squad.”

He doesn’t know many of them. Outside of Muscular and Moonfish, none of them has shown up on the news. He knows Dabi by way of their threat assessments and Toga by way of the many corpses she has left behind.

It is the reptilian mutant that gives him the greatest pause. The man dresses in a manner reminiscent to Stain: combat vest and a long crimson scarf, a dozen knives on his person, and an eye mask identical to the hero-killer.

Kurogiri dislikes him immediately, not least of which because he’s a clear Stain fanatic. No, they’ve been watching Spinner for a long time and wrote off any potential he might have as a villain. Too honourable and noble to join their order.

Quite honestly, he was under the impression that Spinner was a vigilante.

“He’ll be our transport and get whatever equipment you need.”

Kurogiri bows shallowly. “As you say.”

“We’ll be launching a raid in a few days. Don’t get caught and don’t do anything to draw attention to yourselves.”

“I’ll kill whoever I want until then,” Muscular growls, flexing his massive arms. “Don’t tell me what to do.”

Tomura cocks his head, as confused as a king would be at an ant screaming defiance.

“Kurogiri.”

He creates a warp gate instantly, placing it around the villain’s neck. It happens in the blink of an eye, faster than most of them can process.

“If I give the order, he’ll close that gate,” Tomura says to their shocked audience. “Doesn’t matter
how strong or fast you think you are. So, when I tell you not to cause problems, I expect you to listen. Is that understood?”

Muscular grins a bloodthirsty grin, a smile that has seen death and left orphans in its wake. It is cruel and sadistic and perfectly fitting for this giant man.

“Good,” the man rumbles, still as a statue. “If you aren’t strong enough to kill me then you aren’t worth following.”

He waits until Tomura nods before dissipating the warp gate. The tension in the room very slowly bleeds off. The tiny wisps of blue flame vanish from Dabi’s arm. Spinner returns to his crouch. Moonfish’s long teeth retract and he stops looming in his dark corner.

The people in this room are dangerous, nothing compared to the threats Kurogiri regularly deals with, but worthy of consideration. And in such an enclosed space, any fight would end badly.

He observes them as Tomura details the nature of his plan. He would sigh if not for the people with them because the plan is absurdly stupid, unlikely to succeed without extensive modification. He’s not certain how accepting Tomura will be of any changes he makes.

“Twice, you are capable of creating more than one clone at a time, right?” Tomura asks though it’s more a threat than anything else.

The villain looks to Tomura. “Fuck no.” Then he glances at Kurogiri, apprehensive. “Sure.”

It leaves Kurogiri sour that he’s being used as a threat to coerce one of their allies.

Afterwards, he creates warp gates wherever they wish to be dropped off and collects the list of equipment each of them requires. Some are simple products he’ll have a low-level agent deal with. Others, like the complicated weapon Spinner requires, will need to be fabricated. Thankfully, with their acquisition of the Detnerat Group, it’ll be a trivial task.

The most confusing is the one the teenage boy, Mustard, asks for.

“This is military grade hardware,” Kurogiri says. “The guns I understand, but this is military grade hardware.”

The kid shrugs. “Plan and anticipate your enemy’s movements. The Tenets of Combat taught me that.” The boy grins. “They’ll be the ultimate escape route. So long as we have them aimed at their bases, we can always escape with the threat of using them.”

_When did kids get this cynical?_

Kurogiri should say no. Mutual destruction is always a terrible plan liable to go wrong in an instant. And yet, there is a cockiness to Mustard’s grin that can only come from youth. He’s so young it hurts Kurogiri that they’re letting him make this choice.

And children have always been his weakness. Most importantly, Sensei gave the order to acquire whatever the Vanguard needs.

“All right,” he says after a beat of silence. “I’ll get them for you.”

He isn’t sure what will come from this decision. Ultimately, he can only hope that the consequences don’t burn them all.
When that is done and he has procurement orders sent, Kurogiri returns to the bar.

“I would have helped you acquire and organise them,” Kurogiri says, handing Tomura a glass of whiskey. “Recruiting Muscular was a dangerous proposition. He very well—”


“The League is yours to inherit. I am loyal to you.”

Tomura chuckles bitterly. “Are you?”

“Yes. I’ve served Sensei faithfully, but I went against the strongest man alive because you asked for it. I would suffer any pain for you.”

“Then why did you let him take my hands?”

“Because you needed to be punished,” Kurogiri snaps, startling them with his loss of control. "We've let you do as you pleased. You never worried about the consequences. I was supposed to raise you, but I never taught you that basic lesson."

“You’re not my father,” Tomura snarls. “And you won’t ever be him.”

It is a simple fact. One that hurts almost as much as the pain of thinking of his daughter. She may be dead and gone, but her memory haunts him.

He stares at Tomura for a long moment.

“You’re right, I’m not your father,” Kurogir says quietly. “But I was the one there for every nightmare. I was the one who made sure you slept through every thunderstorm. I was the one who bandaged your wounds and taught you everything you know. I bought you your first game.”

He takes a step forward and places his mist hand on Tomura’s shoulder.

The boy isn’t his son and can never be that. They do not share the same blood or even the same interests. No, they are bound together by the plans of an ancient man. There should be nothing but a cordial working relationship at best.

But emotion makes a fool of logic.

Still, Kurogiri will always consider him a son.

"I don't care if you hate me or see me like some piece to discard. I would die for you. Not your goals. Not your ideals. Not your plans. I'd die for you, the boy I raised and the man he’s becoming.”

*****

Shouto Todoroki sees the world differently now. His left eye shows the world normally in blues and reds and yellows. He sees it in shades of green: the dark green of Izuku’s hair as his head bobs with whatever point he makes; the bright green of his eyes that always see the best in people; that odd shade of electrified seafoam that comes whenever he uses All Might’s quirk.

It is his right eye, pitch black and altered by the godflame, that sees much more.

Midoriya sits on his desk, saying something about heroes that Shouto pays little attention to. He is
bright and warm and kind in his left eye.

When he looks with his right eye, Izuku is a creature larger than the universe, a being of true dark sitting on an infernal throne outside of time, dread monsters above the laws of entropy and time and energy singing a song that will sunder all life in the worship of their master.

It gives him a headache to pay attention to these two conflicting views. He understands now more than ever what Dark Shadow meant by calling Izuku anathema to real life, the life underneath their yellow sun and ruled by the forward arrow of time, and true dark, the beings in the deepest layers of the abyss that operate on sword logic and ruined throne worlds.

He stops seeing with his right eye, and the world returns to normal. Or, at least normal enough. He closes his left eye and the world is blurry to the right. More so now than after the Stain fight. It's not to the point that he can't make out details, but a part of him knows he won't be able to see the real world in a few months out of that eye.

“And that’s why Stormwind vs. Hero is a stupid question. That’s just a destructive draw that doesn’t help anyone.” Izuku gestures, almost smacking Shouto in the face.

Shouto pulls the hand disconcertingly close to his face to the surface of the table. He places his own above Izuku’s as his friend—and that feels wrong, almost too little to describe everything between them—keeps on emphasising his point with his free hand.

Izuku’s hand is slightly warmer than room temperature and littered with many tiny scars. Shouto traces a simple circle with his index finger against the expanse of Izuku’s skin, letting his voice wash over him. There aren’t many sounds more pleasant than his voice as he explains something he enjoys but they all revolve around Izuku in some form: the sound of his joyous laughter; the silence that comes only when he is vulnerable and terrified of everything around him; the simple way he says ‘I would die for those I love’ and the resounding echo of his promises made manifest.

A tingling down the back of his neck makes him realise someone is observing him. He glances to the right and sees… Tsuyu, he concludes. And the moment he notices her attention, he notices Kirishima and Uraraka watching him, and not paying any true attention to Izuku as he continues his rant about the ridiculousness of something or other.

“What?” he asks, voice not rising above a monotone.

Izuku stops speaking and looks to him immediately, the hand beneath Shouto’s tensing with his worry. No one else would notice the mild distress.

“You two are pretty close,” Ochaco says with a smile that’s equal parts gentle and sharp as a blade. It draws the attention of everyone else in the class.

Izuku cocks his head, confused as ever. “Why wouldn’t we be?” he asks as though being close to Shouto is the same as breathing.

“Right, but it’s been what? Two, maybe three weeks since the Festival?”

Months for Shouto and Izuku but she will never understand that. Or, at least, he hopes she never does. There’s a part of him that’s long gone mad, a part of him that’s weak and simpering. He burnt that part of himself on the pyre of his grief and sanctified it through hellfire and entropic ice. It had left someone strong and resilient.

“I heard the most interesting thing from Ojiro,” Uraraka continues.
“I told you she’d find out,” Izuku whines piteously.

Shouto tunes them out. They aren’t that important to him. Maybe if Iida were here, he’d have more interest. They aren’t his friends in the same way Iida is. There is no shared violence between them.

“I think we’ve established that Midoriya just picks up strays whenever he likes,” Kirishima says fondly.

Shouto levels only a tiny bit of his attention to his classmate standing with his arms crossed. “I’m not a stray.”

“Whatever. So what’s the story with you giving an interview?” Kirishima asks.

“Well, I guess it’s because…”

Shouto stops paying attention. He already knows the answer even without being told. There isn’t much about Izuku he doesn’t know and if it were important, he’d find out eventually. Instead, he just takes comfort in the indisputable fact that Izuku is here and nothing can change that.

“Hey, Momo, do you have a spare pen?” Jirou asks and for some reason that draws his attention. He’s not sure if they’ve spoken and he’s taken care to ignore her. Not out of malice, but simply because they have no reason to talk. And Jirou returns the courtesy.

“Sure.” Yaoyorozu raises her hand. There is a

sparkle //Heat to create the image//

and //of smouldering dreams//

the world //burning in effigy to draw//

stops. //the spark of Creation//

That light is not simply a unique property of her quirk.

This is the first time he has been near her quirk since the abyss and bonded the first flame to his soul. And right now, with the world standing still, she draws on that eternal flame to power her ability. It is a tiny spark, a small portion that was he outside he would never have noticed, but looking at it in action, he knows her ability intimately. The godflame is creation and destruction in equal measure, and she wields a tiny fragment of that creation.

He blinks and time resumes. Nothing has changed about the world. Yaoyorozu has a pen that she passes to Jirou, created from nothing but a dream and power.

No one notices that Yaoyorozu has stolen fire from the gods and uses it as she pleases.

He stares at her, unsure if he saw right. Even with his right eye, he can’t see anything unusual about her soul. It isn’t much different from any normal human.

It makes him wonder if she possibly could have bonded with the godflame had things been different, a queen instead of a king. More than that, he wonders what will happen if he binds a sliver of infernal fire to her soul.

Maybe later, he decides, because it sounds too intimate to do without express permission.
“Hey, Shouto.” He blinks and looks to… Ojiro? “Please don’t be like Shinsou and stare at her all day. Just ask her out.”

He cocks his head, confused.

“What?” he asks in his usual monotone because he completely lacks the context to understand that statement.

“Huh, didn’t know you could even like people like that,” Asui adds. “Thought you were a frigid guy. Guess that fire is there for a reason.”

He glances to Izuku who is engrossed in his conversation with Kirishima. Looks back to his classmates speaking to him as though they are friends, as though they move in the same social circle.

Instead of bothering with them, he simply grunts in annoyance. There, that will get them to leave him alone.

Izuku flicks him on the forehead, not turning around. “Play nice.”

That sets Asui and Ojiro off. Both laugh as though they have any right to mock him.

“You’re like a dog that needs to be trained,” Asui says. “Midoriya really does pick up strays.”

Fumikage—when did I start calling him that—enters the room and immediately Shouto can tell something is wrong. He looks only slightly past the real with his right eye and sees the flows of energy in him, shaped so much like chains. Except, when they last spoke there were only two. One to Dark Shadow—Old Bark, the godflame in his soul supplies—and the second for his dragon—Watatsumi.

Now, though, he sees dozens of thick chains of energy.

Shouto looks closer, letting the godflame burn away the barriers between reality and the unreal. He sees Tokoyami’s soul in its entirety.

It is a massive expanse, equal parts the dark that suffuses Izuku and the searing heat of the godflame within Shouto. In the centre is a massive throne—the will of the slave king—upon which Fumiikage sits, surveying the legions of creatures chained to his throne and dragging it across the Disparity between light and dark. There is an egg held by this manifestation of Fumikage Tokoyami, ready to hatch new creatures to add to his horde.

He thinks back on Dark Shadow’s words perhaps only a month ago, the claim that they were gods. Young, yes, but gods none the less. Even the forest of ancient trees, floating in the abyss on their long pilgrimage, claimed something similar.

The difference in strength between them is still great. Right now, should it come down to abyssal powers, he can still face off against Fumikage. But he knows that Fumikage hasn’t truly settled into his powers. It is different from Izuku who rejects his nature, unintentionally weakening himself. This is simply a matter of time before Fumikage stands equal to them. Perhaps he may even surpass them.

He looks further and sees spectres of possible futures. Each possibly is like a sun, bright and luminous. Each atom of each sun is a pattern of events, links and connections between people and the cascading effect of their actions.
He parses through those futures, searching for one where Fumikage is happy.

It's hard, impossible really. He can't see Fumikage's future any more than he can Izuku’s. But of them are beyond date and destiny, creating and collapsing an infinite number of possibilities with every decision they make.

But there are patterns to the collapsing stars, common threads that he can follow related to the people around them.

There is no pattern that ends with Fumikage happy at UA.

Shouto can stop it happening. But he understands the importance of freedom, even if it first comes with pain.

*I'm sorry. It'll hurt for a long time before it gets better.*

He glances at Izuku who is still distracted. *I hope you understand.*

“Kaminari, shut the fuck up,” Sero hisses loud enough that everyone focuses on it.

Shouto tries to figure out the situation: Iida looks tense enough to punch someone even if he isn’t looking at the two; Sero has Kaminari in a headlock with one arm and the other covers his mouth; Uraraka with a frankly terrifying smile.

“I’m just saying that—”

“Kaminari, it would be a good idea to keep quiet,” Uraraka says calmly, as though her smile doesn’t promise pain.

“I’m just saying—”

“He killed my brother,” Iida interrupts, standing quick enough that his chair falls. “And you think you have any right to say that when I’m here. He was killing people.”

*So were we,* Shouto thinks but does not say. There’s a hierarchy of people he will side with. Fumikage and Izuku are at the top, followed by Iida.

“I’m not saying he was doing any good, but the way things were handled wasn’t right.”

“He’s going to rot in prison like he deserves.”

Izuku sighs.

“Hey, Iida, sit down,” Izuku says sharply. “You have every right to be angry and hate Stain. No one’s ever going to say you don’t. But you tried to kill him—”

“Izuku,” Shouto interrupts.

“No, fuck that. You know what you were trying, Iida, and that invalidates the reasons behind it. There was no good from what you were doing.”

“He’s in prison—”

"Without a trial," Izuku shouts, silencing the class. “Branding people villains and sentencing them to life in prison solves nothing. That’s what Hinata Ononoki said and she was the biggest proponent to following the letter of the law. And we haven’t even done that. We’re doing everything wrong
and we’re gonna get more Stains if we don’t change.”

“And do what, destroy hero society?”

“Stain had a point,” Izuku says, uncaring of the shock permeating the room. “I get where he’s coming from.”

“Midoriya, I usually agree with you but this time you’re wrong,” Kirishima says. “Maybe the fame’s getting to you.”

Shouto glares at Kirishima. Izuku hates media attention and being in the spotlight.

“When was the last time any of you went to Hokkaido or Shikoku?” Izuku waits a long moment for no one to raise their hands. “I spent three days in Hokkaido. I spent three days volunteering at a hospital, at a soup kitchen, at a mental ward. There was no one there to save because there were no villains. Heroes save people, sure, but it doesn’t change much for someone down in the dirt.”

“That doesn’t mean he had a point.”

“He did, and that’s what pisses me off the most. His point wasn’t that heroes were a problem. His point was that all of us, you, me, our family and neighbours, all of us perpetuate a simple problem. We don’t help those in need.”

“We’re here because we want to be heroes and we want to save people. You’re the one who said doctors and firemen are heroes as well.” Kirishima’s arms are crossed as he says that and he looks unimpressed.

“And they are. But when was the last time you heard about the underfunded hospitals in Hokkaido on the news or the rampant poverty in the region? People are surviving on subsidies that barely help, and no one gives a shit. No, all we care about is that Endeavour solved another case or Gang Orca dropped a rank, and let’s not lie, it’s because he’s not a photogenic mutant. I’m part of the problem. I’ve got so much hero merch that I may have a genuine spending problem.”

Izuku is standing, pacing with nervous energy. He seems giddy, exuberant, and ready to give his life for a stranger in a distant land.

“I’m not saying heroes have to go or anything so stupid, but we need to be better,” Izuku continues. “Most of All Might’s salary goes to campaigning for demilitarisation in Shikoku. I want to be a hero, that’s never gonna change. But I don’t want to be a hero if it means forgetting everyone else. Heroes save everyone in front of them, but they don’t help the people they can’t see. That’s all Stain was fighting against. His methods were wrong and his actions can’t be justified, but maybe if I start helping people, and all of you do the same, maybe we can make it so another Stain doesn’t exist.”

“That doesn’t bring my brother back.”

Izuku smiles sadly. “No, it doesn’t. And I’m not asking you to forgive him or stop being angry. I’m just asking you to be a good hero so that no one else loses someone the same way you did.”

Against his will, Shouto feels a smile grace his face. This is Izuku at his best, arguing for people to try and be better. Not the Izuku fighting for his life or making deals with monsters. None of those is as true as this person right here.

This is the Izuku willing to lay down his life for anyone.
Of course, that’s exactly when Aizawa enters the class. The man looks slightly less tired than usual.

“I don’t know if I even want to know,” Aizawa says. “But you all have exams.”

“The fuck exams are you talking about?” Bakugou roars.

Shouto makes a sound of confusion. He hadn’t realised Bakugou was even in the room.

“Oh, did I forget to tell you? If you fail these exams you don’t get to go for the camp trip.”

“ Fucking what? Did you forget to tell us shit about these and now you’re trying to cram it in like you planned it all along? Fuck you.”

“Thank you for the colourful language, Bakugou. Now be a good student and shut up so the rest of us can forget about you.”

Shouto only pays attention when he must change to his hero uniform, the same he wore during the internship. It’s been repaired and remains just as functional as he likes it. No ridiculous cape like Izuku’s or ostentatious cloak like Fumikage’s.

His matchup is against Nezu. He will stand alone against the principal whilst his classmates are placed in groups of three.

Shouto looks at Nezu dispassionately. He understands why they’ve matched him against his principal. He opens his right eye once more and sees the shadows of what may come.

And finds himself disappointed.

This isn’t a fight for his survival or even a fight to determine the future of the universe. This is just part of some petty scheme or other, something so far beneath the list of concerns that it is frankly sickening. He’s spent months fighting gods and nightmares and has fought the famed hero-killer without worry for his life. This is nothing compared to either.

With a heavy sigh, he enters the fray and battles his principal.

And wins.

*****

Fumikage Tokoyami stands in the centre of the rotunda, gazing dispassionately at the marble columns and the tiered floors. It is a sign of UA’s wealth and power, from the granite columns to the solid wood panels. The ceiling is domed and plated with copper that’s been corroded and turned a pleasing shade of green. For most other institutions and even government bodies, this would be their seat of power.

UA uses it merely as a destructible training ground.

He knows Hero Memorial Academy is just as opulent. In the very centre of the campus is a building of gleaming archways and glass spires and the stone walls Zimbabwean monuments are so famous for. This resplendent achievement of architecture and ingenuity exists for the sole purpose of housing the bodies of the titular Hero, whose death ended an entire Age of Heroics, and her lover Legion when they were struck down by poison at their wedding. They and the twenty family members who died are protected by the eternal vigil of a dozen soldiers.
This display of power by UA is not subtle and he knows it for what it is. It creates the impression of power and casual wealth to visitors and students. And after what he has seen battling in the shadows, Fumikage is not impressed. This is not strength but weakness, the fear of one day being toppled and fading away into obscurity.

The pouches strapped to his belt seem to weigh heavily. He fiddles with them, fingers obscured by the voluminous cloak draped over his shoulder. Modifying a hero costume isn’t against school rules, and most can be attributed to style, but the goggles are too high-tech to be anything but a major modification, the pouches with the dark and light pellet directly affect his fighting style, and the interior of his cloak is a brilliant white.

A part of him knows that he will be called to answer for those changes, to speak the truth of what he did during his internship. The people he worked with and the deaths he witnessed, and some he willingly allowed to die by Dark Shadow’s claws or Watatsumi’s fire.

That is if Asui hasn’t betrayed that final trust and already told the school.

The announcement for the test echoes across the rotunda. He prepares himself for the fight to come.

White smoke surrounds the space and dozens of copies of Ectoplasm surround him. He can’t pick out the real Ectoplasm from the group but he’s faced creatures that can clone themselves.

With the World Walker’s aid, he is more suited to deal with numbers than ever before.

“As a courtesy,” thirty voices say at once, “I’ll warn you that I have no intention of moderating my strength. Do you understand?”

Fumikage nods once, a dozen white pellets in his hand. “I understand—”

Before the last syllable has left his lips, four of the clones pounce. They close the distance rapidly, graceful despite their peg legs.

Fumikage nearly fails to throw the white pellets on the ground before a peg leg clips him in the shoulder. The force rattles his arm and pushes him back just as a bright light fills the room.

His goggles filter the light and he dashes to the side before they can reorganise. Instinct screams at him and he ducks one of the clones and weaves to the right.

From the way it is moving, it is still blinded. But when he takes a step, the clone tracks the motion and closes the gap.

*Is he tracking my sounds?* Fumikage wonders just as he’s kicked in the chest.

The force lifts him off his feet. He draws the black pellets and throws them to the ground before retreating.

He sprints through the doorway to the side, footsteps echoing loudly. He understands now just how insidious this place is. No matter where he goes, Ectoplasm will always be able to track him. Every corridor amplifies his every sound.

There are multiple ways to enter any space, like the three doors leading to different corridors, the staircase giving access both above and below. And, were ectoplasm capable of it, he could break through the walls.
He keeps running, never staying in one position whilst he thinks of a way to win. Ectoplasm is a hard counter to his abilities and everyone with a brain saw that during the Sports Festival. Single target combat is his strength, not crowd control.

A dozen clones appear before him. Dark Shadow, he calls, expecting his companion to respond immediately.

The demon stays silent.

His eyes widen as the clones cross the gap. Fumikage curses mentally and searches his soul for something appropriate for this.

Five threads of darkness streak through the air. At the end of each streak, a hound of quicksilver appears. The hunting pack bounds forward, leaving shimmers of twisted time behind them. Ectoplasm’s clones pause at the sigh of these new creatures and five fall before diamond-hard claws.

These are hounds that hunt in the angles of time and the newest of his horde. These five are only a small part of the pack howling in his soul.

He throws another set of white pellets down the hallway. The bright flashes blind the clones and let the hounds tear through the clones with impunity. They do not see through something as mundane as electromagnetic radiation, but through the trails of golden time all living creatures bound to the laws of entropy leave behind.

When the white hallway is empty, he leans against the wall, breathing heavily. He rubs the spot where Ectoplasm's leg struck his chest, grateful that the armour plate took the brunt of the blow. Otherwise, he might not be able to stand.

The five hounds stand at attention before him. Like normal dogs, these hounds have fur made of long shards off-white crystal cold to the touch above their quicksilver bodies. They have empty pits where there should be eyes, a darkness that is disconcerting in the real world. Their fangs look like diamonds but are sharp as any blade in a maw that drips an acidic liquid that eats through the marble floor.

He pushes off the wall after having rested for twenty seconds. There's a set of stairs and he rushes towards them, the hounds running ahead of him. He summons five more and sends them the opposite direction to serve as a distraction and hopefully serve to confuse Ectoplasm.

They don’t last long.

Fumikage shudders as he feels his hounds lose to Ectoplasm, their immaterial forms returning to his soul.

He’s good, Fumikage acknowledges.

He reaches a balcony overlooking the central space of the rotunda, breathing hard from the sprint up multiple flights of stairs. For a moment, he thinks himself safe.

Then, like clockwork, the hounds all snap to attention just as a mob of clones jumps over the balcony railing, landing in their midst.

A clone weaves through the hounds, darting with the agility of a ballerina on speed enhancing drugs, whilst the others battle the hounds. Fumikage backs away as the clone flips forward over one hound, kicks off another—and in the process sends it straight into another—and lands cleanly
past his protectors.

He considers summoning more of the hounds before a peg-leg whacks him in the face. Fumikage stumbles black, bleeding from the nose and mouth. His ears rings and white spots dance in his vision.

He throws a weak punch blindly, operating on instinct alone. A vice-like grip clamps around his wrist and pulls him forward. A knee to the torso stuns him, the pain tearing past whatever barriers he built against the pain.

He doesn’t see the hound that leaps on the clones back and rakes long claws against its back until it pops. Through the haze of pain, and through the bond he shares with the pack, he gets the impression of danger/master and attack/kill/protect that they operate on.

Mostly, though, he lists to the side without Ectoplasm’s grip on his arm. He slips over the edge and falls.

His eyes widen. There is nothing to catch him should he hit the ground. And from this height, that means serious injury, perhaps even death.

_Dark Shadow._

_No._

He curses in frustration then calls upon Watatsumi despite the pain. The dragon awakens. Its arms materialise and impale one of the walls, slowing him down.

_Why will you not aid me?_ He throws down an entire pouch worth of black pellets and lets the darkness fill the space.

_Because you took away my will. You took away what made me an individual. I am not yours to do with as you please._

He can sense the hounds tracking down Ectoplasm’s clones through the dark cloud. The fights are vicious and short-lived. Ectoplasms defeated clones disappear in a burst of white whilst his hounds return to his soul in an explosion of darkness.

_That’s exactly what you became when you called me slaveking,_ he snaps.

_Leave me be._

_Vile traitor._

Fumikage puts the traitor out of his mind as a new clone rises, this one the size of a colossus. It crushes the remaining pack with its foot.

“Fuck me.”

The colossus sweeps its arm and picks Fumikage in its grasp. Its grip is unyielding and threatens to crush him with contemptuous ease.

“Do you surrender?” the real Ectoplasm asks from his place on the ground right in the centre of the rotunda. He hasn’t moved from his original spot. It simply means he hasn’t been threatened by Fumikage this entire time.
And that makes him angry. A fire within his soul burns with his rage. The very idea that he hasn’t progressed, that a retired and crippled pro hero who spends his time teaching can beat him with ease, turns his vision a shade of vivid red.

“No,” he shouts.

Deep in his soul is an egg from the abyss, a gift from Maya, Izanami of the Royal Guard, and sometimes Agonist. It has been incubating, the creatures inside gestating with the protection of his soul and waiting for a catalyst to hatch.

His rage is that catalyst.

It is a single egg, but the shell is made of layers upon layers of glass unshattering. Each layer is another egg in another dimension.

When the egg breaks, it is a thousand eggs breaking in the same metaphysical space. It is not one crow that rises from the shattered egg but a thousand more. All they have ever known is Fumikage and his rage. They rise to the surface of his soul, not once needing to be commanded.

And when they are at the barrier between his infinite soul, an endless world of chains and slavery, he unleashes them upon the mortal world.

He opens his mouth and roars in anger, a portal appearing at the end of his beak. A flock of angry crows appears, growing larger and larger and larger. They fly on wings with feathers of glass unshattering. Their tail feathers ending in gold chains that jangle and sing a single crystal-clear note: a ringing sound that encompasses the rage of the slaveking. It is not a pleasant sound, but it is the truest sound in the room.

The flock of crows tears through the giant clone with talons better suited to feast on dread beasts and undying gods. Against a giant made from mere mortality, they are disappointed in the ease of the task.

When the clone is dead, Fumikage falls to the ground and lands roughly on his knees. With a single command, the flock returns to his soul. All but one bird which chooses to stay. He extends his arm and it alights there gently, careful not to scratch him with sharp talons.

The bird has three glowing green eyes like those of a Hive god and long horns that twist and coil like cruel spires reaching towards a desolate future.

“Are we done?” he asks a stunned Ectoplasm.

The man cocks his head. “I suppose we are. I accept defeat.”

It turns its head to look at Ectoplasm. Then, it opens its mouth and screeches. The sound warps the air, exultation and warning at once. The sound hits him right in the bones and all the way down to the marrow.

The sound makes him smile.

*****

Izuku Midoriya stands in an open field against his opponent. There is no place to hide or run. No, all he can do is fight and hopefully win.

Win against All Might.
Even he doesn’t have delusions of that happening. Not unless All Might is hobbled, which he is, and moderating his skills, which he hopefully is.

“My boy, I suggest you come at me with everything you have. I am stronger than you imagine.”

Izuku isn’t sure what happened to his mentor but something is different. There is a strength to him that he lacked. No, it’s more like he can bring to bear more of his strength than usual.

"Bring it,” he says with a bloodthirsty grin.

The battle begins.

Izuku isn't like All Might. He lacks the innate physical prowess to wield his quirk like his mentor. He may never have the power to punch as hard as his mentor.

But that’s fine. He’s not as fast in a straight line. But, when the distance is zeroed, all that matters is turning faster. And Izuku is just the slightest bit faster to turn.

The moment the battle begins, Izuku darts forward, a blur to normal eyes. All Might dodges his first kick and simply tanks his punch.

When All Might punches with enough force to crush a truck, Izuku kicks the hand aside just a tad. Just enough for him to scramble to the side.

Just enough for him to pirouette with the momentum and kick low and hard.

He isn’t trained to use his fists like All Might. Taekwondo is the foundation of his fighting. Striking with his feet feels so much more natural than his fists.

And his legs are naturally stronger than his arms. They can take a tiny fraction of One For All more than his arms can.

Shadows rise and pull All Might back. He breaks the bond but the stumble is enough for Izuku to capitalise on. He kicks All Might’s knee and jumps to the side before his mentor can respond.

All Might flicks his finger and a shockwave of force knocks Izuku off his feet. The move is unexpected because he’s never seen All Might use it. No, it’s the same move he used against Shouto at the sports festival.

He lands on his back and rolls with the momentum. Just in time to see All Might bringing his fist down in a mighty blow.

He jumps off All Might’s arm and flips in the air. With the momentum, he brings his leg down in a mighty axe kick.

All Might blocks the blow with crossed arms, not showing any signs of difficulty. Disheartening, but he never expected to overpower someone as strong as All Might. The chasm in strength and speed and experience is one nearly impossible to shatter.

*Any monument can be defeated. If he has no weakness then create it.*

He blinks and hides his grin. Mikumo is right, All Might has no weaknesses. So Izuku will force one.

With that, he resumes the fight with renewed determination.
When All Might moves to grab him and pin him down, Izuku darts like an eel around the move, twisting around his mentor. He pauses only to slam his foot in All Might’s knee before getting out of range.

Every blow he can land is on that one knee. Oh, certainly All Might is careful to protect it, but focusing his defence on one side leaves tiny opening Izuku attacks. And Izuku punishes each opening with a crushing blow, drawing as much of One For All as he can.

The blows are blocked in general, but sometimes he can sneak an attack to that knee if he moves fast enough. As their fight progresses, Izuku moves faster and faster, settling into a rhythm that he controls.

His kick is high and All Might blocks it with one arm easily. That’s fine. He crooks his leg at the knee, trapping the arm, and brings it down.

With his guard low, Izuku twists with the momentum and slams his knee in his mentor’s face. All Might’s head moves an inch.

Maybe less.

He knows All Might is toying with him. There’s no way he can win. This man is a monument to strength.

Still, Izuku summons a rod of darkness and slams it against his mentor’s knee once more. All Might’s eyebrow twitches. Maybe in annoyance.

Weakness, Mikumo answers as Izuku takes a blow to the side. It cracks a few ribs, but Izuku has suffered through worse.

He isn’t Katsuki who thrives on instinct. No, he needs to think things through a dozen moves in advance. Except, he knows that’s one of his great weaknesses.

Izuku lets go and stops thinking. His body knows what to do. Thinking is just another barrier it must break before sending instructions to his body.

He makes a shield of darkness, an impenetrable fortress.

All Might shatters it with a single blow, his fist seemingly coated in steel for a moment.

Izuku ignores the oddness. He only needed the shield to distract All Might for half a second.

Green lightning and eight generations of power crystallise. He moves faster than ever before and moves to stand beside his mentor, leg raised in a kick he has seen once and attempted a thousand times over.

It is a simple back kick, the striking action performed with the heel. Nothing special taken out of context. And yet, with his mind blank like this, he performs it the same way Jin showed him months ago.

The world splits.

He’s attacking All Might from one side while he attacks from the other at the same time he’s attacking from behind him. Three blows performed so fast that they may as well be done at the same time.
Third stance Hwechook, Mikumo whispers, amazed as All Might stumbles back, dazed.

Izuku doesn’t share that amazement. This is the first time All Might’s knee is completely exposed. He spins, generating momentum. With every ounce of power he can draw, Izuku kicks All Might’s knee.

His mentor stumbles to the side, defence broken completely. He’s already moving to finish this fight. He makes a spear of true dark, the inky malevolence of his kingdom, and prepares his final blow.

He thrusts the spear forward.

You can do this, brother, Mikumo says proudly.

All Might’s back is unprotected. The man lists to the side, off balance from the last two attacks. This is his chance. Every skill he has learnt, every lesson he has been taught, all the experience from all the battles crystallises into one perfect victory.

There is pain. There is darkness. Then there is light.

Izuku looks around slowly. It’s been a long time since he’s been here. His body is walking down a narrow passage. As always, he reaches out and to the rainbow light. Like water, they part around his finger. He looks forward and sees the eyes, bright as any fire.

Except, this time there is only one. One being watches him. Just from seeing him, Izuku can tell he is the first. And he will be the last.

You did not save us, the voice says, loud as a burning forest.

He reaches out against the darkness. “I tried,” he says.

You will never be a hero.

The darkness wraps around the last figure and drags it away. Its burning eyes watch Izuku with emotions he can’t decipher.

He has won.

And then Izuku is falling hard and fast to the darkness. He reaches out to the being just before it is destroyed by someone wrapped in darkness and wielding a green bolt.

Izuku wakes slowly, his head pounding. He winces, trying his best to recall any part of that dream. Like mist, it slips through his grasp, leaving him with the vague sense that something monumental has happened.

It takes him a moment to master his migraine and look around. He isn’t in the field any longer. No, he’s on All Might’s back.

“Good job,” All Might says without looking back. “You’ve improved a lot.”

Izuku blinks away the last spots in his vision. “I lost?”

All Might sets him down and stops Izuku from stumbling.
His mentor grins and it hurts more than anything. “Your plan was good but you shouldn’t have
gone after my knee again. I simulated being off-balance and vulnerable. You should have gone for
the final blow instead.”

He swallows. “I see.”

“Hold your head high, my boy. You have improved greatly.”

“Right,” he says, forcing a bright grin.

When All Might is gone, he lets the tears fall. He cries silently, not making a single sound. It isn’t
fair. What has all the suffering been for if he still loses this easily? Victory was his by right.

“I was so fucking close.”

*That was cruel, brother. He stole that victory you rightfully earned.*

“What the fuck did I lose? Tell me why I’m not strong enough.”

*You’re stronger than you know. You’ve killed gods and made blasphemous worlds. No matter
what, I am proud of you.*

*****

Shouta Aizawa is tired from his evaluation of Yaoyorozu, Jirou and Bakugou. But he is also proud.
The three have come a long way and work well together. Bakuguo most of all surprises him as he
never expected his most unruly student to listen to any plan.

And yet he listened and executed the plan perfectly. And when the plan failed, he gave Jirou and
Yaoyorozu the time they needed to escape and win the exam.

*He’s taken the right lessons, Shouta thinks. He’ll be a good hero if he keeps on growing like this.*

Shouta is glad he counselled Bakugou to take Edgeshot’s internship instead of Best Jeanist. He
respects Jeanist for his technical competency, but more than anything, Bakugou needs someone to
cultivate patience and precision. Edgeshot has done just that, filing down Bakugou’s reckless
attacks and tempering them.

His door opens. Shouta looks up and sees a tired looking Fumikage.

“Aizawa-sensei, I have to speak with you.”

Shouta stares at the boy in the threshold of his office. There’s something off about the way he
stands, too tense as though expecting a fight. His hands are clenched in fists that he can see through
his trousers, and his red eyes seem to smoulder with tightly controlled rage.

He looks nothing like the boy from before the internships.

*No, it was just before the Sports Festival that he started changing.*

Shouta gestures for the other chair. If he can help it, then he refuses to lose another student.

“Thank you,” Tokoyami says, settling into the chair. He sits ramrod straight.

“What did you want to talk about?”
“I believe you are aware my quirk has shown… developments, ever since the festival.”

“Which you chose to keep secret,” Shouta reminds in light reprimand. “I didn’t pursue it afterwards due to the fallout of the event. I’m glad you chose to come here personally after your exam. There is, however, a reason that we require notice of quirk drift. Especially in cases that, from all accounts, involve fire matching those of Shikoku.”

The boy shifts. “The contents of that interview were to remain sealed.”

“You’re my student. I wasn’t going to simply ignore it.”

“That is not the point. That’s a subversion of the law, of due process. What lesson do you seek to inspire in me if you so flagrantly disregard the law?”

“Tokoyami,” he says in reprimand.

The boy sighs.

“In truth, my quirk is not Dark Shadow. It never was. Dark Shadow was simply the only manifestation I was capable of. My quirk lets me… create constructs. Those arms you saw during the festival were the same.”

“Don’t lie to me. Don’t feed me some stupid story. Tell the truth or say nothing.”

Tokoyami inclines his head, accepting of the reprimand. “I apologise.”

“As you should.”

“My quirk is similar to Izuku’s.”

A sudden chill runs down his spine. There are too many ways that statement can be taken. He understands the superficial connection where Midoriya manipulates shadows, Tokoyami has a creature made of it. But the fear he feels in his bones, and the memory of the walking nightmare, make him hesitant to take it superficially.

“Explain.”

“By what means. You made me sign an NDA. I could hardly speak to Midoriya of his own quirk.”

Shouto stares at the boy, eyes hard as steel. “When we’re talking about a quirk like that then you can ignore it.”

“Ignore the law for answers. I suppose that is nothing special.” There is a bitterness to his words. “I will alleviate your immediate concern. I haven’t perished by any means nor do I intend to test the limits of my mortality.”

He lets out a breath he hadn’t known he was holding. “And you will never. Understood?”

“But where Izuku controls shadows, I can control nightmares made real. Everything you have seen is because of that.”

“And why didn’t you tell us immediately.”

Tokoyami shrugs. “Because I did not trust you. Because I needed to find answers on my own.”

“You should have come to us.”
“And how would you have helped me?” Fumikage’s eyes are cold as he stands. “You know nothing of this matter. If you did, I would be able to tell immediately.”

“Do you think I wouldn’t try to help you?”

The boy shrugs. “I can’t say. Help comes from the strangest place. I suppose I came only to tell you the truth. My purpose is accomplished.”

That leaves Aizawa feeling hollow, a cold pit settling in his chest.

Fumikage stops at his door. “Sensei, if you had to choose between my life and that of my entire class, what would you choose?”

“I wouldn’t. That question represents a false moral dichotomy. Sometimes you can’t save everyone, but you don’t go into a situation expecting to sacrifice someone.”

“Of all people, I thought you would understand.” He sounds so disappointed. “Sensei, if it came down to it, I would sacrifice myself for the many.”

“Self-sacrifice is not the same as willing consigning others to death.”

Tokoyami raises his left hand. “A thousand lives here.” He raises the other. “A dozen lives there.” He closes his right hand, the one with the few. “I know what choice I would make. And I would sleep well at night knowing the right choice was made.”

The boy from the Battle Trial, scared and lost and questioning his ideals, is now gone. There is nothing but cold logic and burning rage. He’s seen those eyes before. The cold ruthless calculus reminds him most of Nezu. But that rage, it reminds him too much of Bakugou at his worst.

“That’s not what it means to be a hero,” he says harshly. “And if you think that way, I’d rather expel you than let you go on.”

“Expulsion isn’t a fear I hold. Not any longer. I saw people die. I saw people I couldn’t save. If I had been less hesitant, if I had been willing to sacrifice one, then perhaps a dozen more would be alive.”

“You weren’t ever supposed to be put in a situation like that. Hawks wouldn’t have let you make that choice.”

Tokoyami shakes his head. “Hawks never had a say in the matter.”

“He was supposed to watch over you.”

“I never met Hawks.”

Shouta blinks in confusion, a certain dread creeping in on him. “He would have told us if you didn’t go for your internship.”

He watches the boy finger the clasp of his cloak, nervous almost. Except, there’s a level of deliberation to the action.

“Only if he knew I accepted in the first place.”

“What did you do?”

The boy flicks the latch on his cape. One side falls down his side, long cascades of dark material
flowing over his back to reveal a white interior. The white is pristine and may be a perfect white, not something close to white, but the purest of whites.

It is the same shade he has seen the Emperor wear, the same shade the man known as Itinerant wore to warn him away from the Midoriya home. It is the same white that Hisashi Atakani wore when he came and threatened UA with ruination.

He sees a boy willing to sacrifice others without remorse, dressed in the perfect white silks of monsters, and proud to do so. He sees a student burning with rage and righteous indignation.

He sees a student indoctrinated by the imperial family, so far into their grasp that he can’t see the chains around his neck. He sees a boy proud to work with a group that sank an island. A group that took part in the Purge, the same Purge that saw his mother die.

Shouta sees a student he has failed utterly and completely.

*Cracking their indoctrination is impossible given three weeks*, he remembers Nezu saying, remembers Nezu admitting to failure.

“I saw the truth and could no longer stand back.”

“There is no good that can come from being their dog,” Shouta says tiredly, so fucking tired of it all.

*Why, you idiot, why?*

“You saw what became of Midoriya. I assure you, I’ve seen worse. And I’m willing to sacrifice myself to protect people.”

He has made so many mistakes in the past, most of them with his students. He failed Nagisa and Rei and the rest of his class two years ago.

And now, because of his trust, he has made another mistake. He trusted Fumikage to tell the truth, trusted him not to do anything stupid. Trusted in his honour and nobility. Trusted him to make the right decisions or to seek help if he didn't know what the decision was.

And now that trust has been betrayed.

“They’re a paramilitary organisation that operates as they please. Every crime, every atrocity they’ve committed, will be your crimes and your atrocities. I hope you’re proud of your decision.”

Closing his heart to the pain is difficult. Students are children and they are always his responsibility to raise. But he can only do so much when they aren’t in his sight. He can give them tools and lessons, but it is always up to them to choose what they take from them.

“No, but—”

“Because you’re expelled.”

Fumikage’s eyes are wide, equal parts shock and terror and childlike confusion. It is a sight he has seen with every expelled student. It never stops hurting.

“But—”

“You made your choice. Live with the consequences.”
He thinks of the millions who died in Taiwan, the recordings of their final moments a collective scar on the Japanese psyche. He thinks of the chaos from the anti-quirk riots of his childhood, of that year of fear and terror and warfare.

Most of all, he thinks of his mother, long gone and burnt in black flames.

Chapter End Notes

Well, that happened. Y'all thought there were no consequences, didn't you. As always, let me know what you think.
‘Japan is a perfect example of reputation being more important than your deeds. The current system of heroics in Japan was adopted from Vancouver Island without thought to the long-term consequences. The Vancouver Island Villain Association was once made up of vigilantes and peacekeepers who became villains only because the government branded them as such out of fear. The perpetual war between the vigilantes turned villains and the Hero Conglomerate is mirrored perfectly in Japan.’

—Excerpt from ‘The Effect of Heroics’ by Saruhiko Ando.

Kurogiri wears his best suit and waistcoat today. The suit is a deep navy, not quite black but close, and the waistcoat a soft powder blue.

In his hands is a bouquet of flowers. Though he may hate it, there are all chrysanthemums in various colours. On this day, and only this day, he can set aside his disdain for the Imperial Household and their failings.

Because, the two people resting beneath the ground, are the only good that came from that family.

“Hello, Ino,” he says solemnly. “It’s been a long time.”

He kneels in the mud, not caring that it ruins his suit. It doesn’t matter as much as being close to one he loves. The bouquet rests gently against her gravestone, a shade of white marble that is pristine decades after it was erected.

“Twenty-two years to this day. I’ve never stopped thinking about you.” He traces her name with misty hands, closing his eyes to hide away the pain. “Do you remember that lake where you proposed to me? You got one knee and made an honest man of me. I went there recently and I didn’t break down. I think I’m finally moving on and I don’t know if that makes me a bad husband. I’m sorry if it does.”

He leans his head against the gravestone, wishing he could feel the cold stone as other humans. This is the closest he can come to be with them, and even then, the barrier of touch separates them. Not as much as death, but it still leaves him bitter.

“Akane, baby girl, you were too young. I miss you and I’ll always think of you. I’ve killed so many just to destroy this society that would take you from me. I’m sorry for everything. I think this is ending soon. When All Might is dead, I can finally join you. I don’t know if you'll forgive me and I'm so sorry if I've disappointed you. I just… I miss you, princess.”

He thinks of her, so proud and imperious and graceful. And just so beautiful it takes his breath away. His daughter was everything. They both were. Every day he’s thought of them and every plan to finally end All Might has been made for them. All Might is the exemplar of this society, the one who embodies every fault and every failing. If he falls, then this society will fall with him.

Maybe there is something noble and decent that can be built from the ashes of Kurogiri’s dreams of happiness. If there is, then he’s willing to dedicate his life to that future that exists past the horizon of All Might’s oppressive strength.
Maybe he’ll fail and this will amount to nothing. But if he fails at least he can say he tried. And if he dies, then he’ll be reunited with them anyway.

“Ino, I know you understand the ruthlessness of the decisions I’ve made. I know you’re smiling because I’ve stained my hands red for revenge. You were always the vicious one between us, always stronger than I could ever hope to be.”

He smiles, remembering her ferocity. She was the one who made the decisions, the one who taught him to be calculating and vicious. Despite all that she was, she still loved Kurogiri and their daughter. She loved the two of them tenderly, gently, and with more compassion than she ever showed for anyone else.

“Akane, I’m glad you never grew up to see how cruel the world and your family were. Wearing a white uniform isn’t an easy thing. Carrying the Chrysanthemum is a heavy burden. The things I did for the Emperor, the things you might have had to do… I’m just happy you never did.”

He chuckles bitterly. What sick world does he live in to be able to find some relief in the death of his daughter? How cruel is it that not living is a better option than confronting the person you’ve become?

“Have I ever told you about Tomura?”

There is no response. The dead don’t speak and they never will. If they could, they would be alive, and Kurogiri can’t travel back in time to fix his mistakes. He can’t journey back and stop a hero from killing his family. He gave up on that futile hope long ago.

Still, he smiles.

“I don’t think I have. Akane, let me tell you about your brother. He’s a stupid kid that plays too many games and doesn’t respect me. He’s going to try something crazy and I’ll have to save him when it goes wrong. And after I do that, he’ll curse me out for interrupting his fun. I shouldn’t even like him.”

He laughs bitterly, a hiss of escaping air. All that should exist between them is a business relationship and a shared loyalty to Sensei. That, however, is too little to encompass anything between them.

“I suppose we don’t get to choose who we love, only the way we love them. I think you would have liked him for a younger brother, Akane. And maybe you could have taught him some manners, Ino. I’m sorry, but I can’t leave him yet. I can feel things are going to end soon. He needs a father and I’m the closest he has.”

He touches the gravestone one last time.

Here lie Ino and Akane Hanazuki,

Mother and daughter bound,

From womb to the grave.

They will be remembered,

By a generous father,

And a loving husband.
How often has he read these words? Too often. To his dying day, he will remember these words. Everyone has loved ones and everything Kurogiri has ever done has been for those he loves. They’re dead now, but he can extend his love for one more person.

He can choose to love his surrogate son, wayward and irreverent though he may be, as much as he loved his wife and daughter. Maybe one good act doesn’t wipe away his past actions, but loving Tomura is the only kindness has left to give.

“Wait a bit longer for me.”

He leaves.

Perhaps it is a weakness but he doesn't return immediately. He travels the world, seeing sights he always thought of taking his family: Great Zimbabwe and its ancient walls; the Hanging Gardens, built from a quirk and an act of dedication; Titan’s Fall in Brazil where the Great Tyrant fell. He doesn’t stay more than an hour in each place.

Maybe it’s selfish given everything that needs to be done, but he needs time to himself. Time to think and reflect on all that he has done.

And when his resolve has returned, he sets his sight homeward.

He appears before Sensei and, for the first time since they met long ago, kneels before him. If things really are ending, then maybe it’s time to try something different.

“I have returned,” he says strongly, confident in his loyalty. “What are your orders?”

“Perhaps I go outside my bounds,” Sensei says slowly, and it startles him so much. The idea that this monument to strength and power and cunning is contrite, hesitant even, in speaking to Kurogiri, is breath-taking.

There is no reason Sensei should hesitate, no sentence he cannot say for what repercussion can the Strongest Man Alive face, and no act he can commit without instant absolution. It is the nature of power. Those with ultimate power exist above the realm of petty laws and human morality. If he truly wished it, Sensei could rule as the Third Great Tyrant and rule over a quarter of the world. That he chooses not to despite his power makes Kurogiri respect him more.

“I gave you my life and loyalty,” Kurogiri says without looking up. “Only you can speak of them.”

“I did not have the honour of knowing them, but I know you. Whatever doubts you may have about the path you set out on that day on the mountain, trust that they would stand by you.”

“Thank you.”

“If you believe my words, then stand. I will not have you kneel before me.”

“You’re the only person I would kneel to.” Kurogiri stands slowly. “You’ve never asked me to. Thank you.”

All For One laughs. “You are the most loyal. I do not forget loyalty. Give me your report. Tell me the state of Japan.”

“The vigilantes and unaffiliated individuals are behaving oddly,” he begins. “They seem to be organising rapidly. Even underground heroes are taking part. It’s been happening for a few months now, but it’s reached a critical mass. I haven’t been able to figure it out, but they’re using green
lightning bolts as their calling card.”

“Oh, a lightning bolt.” Sensei grins. “Tell me, are they expanding and instituting new safe zones? Are they interfering with hero operations, especially in Hokkaido? Are they rioting against the military? Are they refusing to obey orders from pro heroes?”

Kurogiri blinks. That is, essentially, what he planned on telling Sensei. Perhaps in greater detail, but the nature of events remains the same.

“How did you know?”

“Because the same thing happened during the Dark Age, the New Age and the Golden Age. Even I did much the same as a youth by gathering others behind a common set of rules and an ideal. Movements like this herald the changing of an era.” Sensei leans forward. “They have been galvanised by the words of a boy and cannot abide by the failings of the government any longer. A boy who believes in Shinobu’s Vow and has taken up her legacy, unintentional though it is. People won’t pay attention to them until they’re suddenly another great power.”

“Should we eliminate them?”

“No. They have as much right as Tomura to choose a future. I can break them in a few minutes if I wished, but it is no longer my place to choose the future. Speaking of him, what do you think of Tomura’s Vanguard?”

“They’re… a ragtag bunch. A violent murderer, a high school student, a walking fire hazard, a serial killer, a teenager, and a Stain fanatic. In all honesty, I don't think he's even really a villain.” Kurogiri would smile if he could. “But they are Tomura’s. He made the group and I’m proud of him.”

“As any father would be.”

“He doesn’t see me that way.”

"I believe he does. He may fear me and see me as a pillar of strength, but I'm not the one he sees running the League. He may ask me questions of philosophy, but it is you that he looks to for advice. He may not wish to admit it yet, but he sees you as his father figure."

Sensei stands and only now does Kurogiri notice he is wearing his life support equipment. It’s always hard to see him in this dimly lit place. And so often, he foregoes it, relying instead on his regenerative quirks.

“Kurogiri, I entrust things to you for the next few days.”

He looks up. “I’m sorry?”

“I have things to do overseas. It seems the Chinese have launched a strike against my allies in Vancouver.”

“Why would they do that?”

"Because though you wore the Emperor's colours when you destroyed their Djibouti base, they know you are loyal to me. This is a retaliation, striking at me where I have the least control.”

“Forgive me.”
Sensei waves away his apology. “I told you to accept anything for peace. The fault lies squarely with me for not anticipating this.” The villain smiles, a cruel thing that fills Kurogiri with dread. “Besides, they’re sending three of their Great Ten. I’ll take great joy in annihilating them.”

“Do you have any orders?”

“The Vanguard is his group. I cannot tell him what rules to abide by. He’s young, still capable of making mistakes and learning from them. I’ve made the mistake of constraining him to the rules that I learnt. Immortality is the death of morality. I cannot force my lessons and methods that failed onto him. He has to learn, even if I disagree with how he will act.”

“You know what he plans on doing.”

“I know Tomura. I don’t need to read his plans to know how he plans on fighting the war. Perhaps attacking the youth who will inherit the world is the way forward. Attack their ideals and destroy their educational foundation.” Sensei shrugs, a rather human reaction. “Perhaps my failing was to only go after the most obvious signs of power—the government, the Imperial family, and the great heroes.”

“You rarely admit your failings.”

Sensei inclines his head, a weariness Kurogiri has never seen coming over him. It makes him look… not weak, because weakness is not something one can associate with the Strongest Man Alive, but perhaps resignation.

“It was a child who stayed my hand centuries ago. It was a child, a girl no older than eight who forced the strongest man alive to stand down. I never thought to go after the future. It was always the present I fought. Even now I struggle to understand it fully. I don’t understand why things have changed so much since my youth. That’s why I must entrust my beliefs to a successor.”

Sensei shakes his head.

“Watch over him, and ensure they stay away from Imperial assets. Other than that, I have more important things to deal with.”

“Understood,” Kurogiri says.

*****

Inko Midoriya tries her best to enjoy her morning. Try being the operative word.

She is woken at dawn by an ethereal spider, large as a small car, singing a song of peace and harmony and the tribute from an endless genocide. She ignores it, sliding around its many legs, too furry and too unreal at once.

Before a cup of hot coffee, she is too tired to call on her power and destroy it. Besides, it isn’t trying to hurt her and lets her pass without issue.

In the kitchen, she makes a cup of coffee, brushing aside the small, and distinctly normal spiders from her mug. She checks it for eggs, not wanting to possibly incubate anything else after that weird thing from the Sports Festival, part serpent, part spider, and part dream.

She drinks her coffee at the table, ignoring the normal spiders that make runes of formless power to invoke some godling or other. She nudges one aside just before they complete the final link and use the power found in unnatural shadows to summon something. As a precaution, she takes a few
lamps and illuminates the odd spots of inky darkness Izuku leaves behind until they are vanquished by the light.

//Mother, shadowking mother, let us summon those who came before. Speak and broker peace between our people. Let the shadowking’s genocide fade to dust in memory//

Inko ignores the spider. They have been nattering on and on about peace between them and Izuku. And that’s ridiculous because Izuku can barely hurt a fly, let alone commit genocide. No, he loves life too much for that.

All forms of life, no matter how alien and surreal.

A colony of dream spiders walk above the clouds as she goes to the gym. They watch and sing and offer endless lines of tribute, the power for her to become a godling and rule over the earth should she simply accept their peace.

Inko has long ago learnt the folly of deals by entities she knows nothing about. She spends an hour at the boxing gym with her trainer, an old friend from university. Back when Inko was a bit more serious with the sport and could have gone on to be a prizefighter.

Then Izuku came in her life and she won the greatest prize.

By the time she returns home, the spiders are gone. She finds her husband in the kitchen eating toast and drinking tea. Just like Izuku, he doesn’t do well with caffeine.

Seeing him there stirs up old memories of a time when they were happy and together, when Hisashi wasn’t scarred and she couldn’t speak to gods, when her son was just a simple boy trying to figure things out in life.

But that time is dead and can never come back.

“Okay, talk.”

Hisashi sighs. “Not even a kind word to start the morning?”

“I spent the morning punching a bag. Do you want me to punch you as well?”

He smiles, raising his hands in to surrender. “Alright. I did some digging on the place they put those kids in. By all appearances, it’s a pretty reputable place. Honestly, if I went crazy, I wouldn’t mind being put there.”

“Don’t tempt me.”

“You have to dig a bit harder to find the sealed wing. Nezu hid it well. It’s not on any plans and the space it occupies is so well designed you won’t find it. I had to buy the information from—”

“Can we skip the exposition?”

“He’s been running it for thirty years at least if the analysts are correct. Any UA alumni who could completely jeopardise their image as an institute is placed there, out of the public eye. It’s part of why UA has the cleanest rep across the world.”

“I need more than just guesses. We need solid information. Things we can work with.”

“I’ll get it. Keep working on Recovery Girl and I’ll handle this. Deal?”
“Deal.”

And maybe it is a weakness, but she sits down and has breakfast with her husband. They don't talk, but she also doesn't kick him out.

*****

Fumikage Tokoyami does not return to class after speaking to Aizawa. He sees little point in doing so now. Expulsion is not something he ever expected to be a major consideration in his life. The closest was nearly a decade ago when, in his rage, he had harmed another child. It had been homeschooling since then.

In less than six months at a formal institute, he finds he must leave again.

He returns his books to the library, gives his key card to a disapproving librarian, and heads to the locker room. The dark cloak of his costume feels heavy this day. Unclasping it, he places it in its case and follows through with the rest of the costume.

The shower calms him slightly. In the empty room, with frigid water spraying down, no one can his tears and any tremors are from the cold and not choked sobs. His hands shake violently as he towels his body dry, but no one enters, no one comes close to seeing this moment of weakness.

It feels wrong to wear the UA blazer and so he doesn’t, leaving him only in his white shirt without the red tie. The trousers from his costume replace the standard UA trousers. It may look a bit odd but he’s seen weirder. And it means he won’t have to wear the colours of this place that has abandoned him.

You deserve worse.

“Silence.”

It is too late. Already, that simple sentence has wormed its way in his mind, uprooting all his fears and insecurities. He’ll have to face his mother and prove her right. He’ll have to face his father’s disapproval. Worst of all, he’ll have to bear the pity of his classmates.

And that makes him angry.

“Damn you.”

One deep breath. One long breath. Repeat. He does so until the world isn’t shades of red. Once his emotions have been mastered, Fumikage heads to his former class. They have a free period due to the final exam. He may as well face them now before leaving.

The door is so familiar yet seem so alien to him now. When he enters, he feels like an intruder to a place that has become a second home.

There are sixteen students—I’m sorry, Kouda, I’m sorry Hagakure, I should have saved you, I should have been better—and they aren’t his classmates any longer. Most of them are doing their own thing or engrossed in conversation. They ignore him because what reason would they have to pay attention to him. Wearing parts of his costume isn’t odd, not when Kaminari and Ochaco do the same. No one pays him the slightest bit of attention.

Except for Izuku. He looks up from his game of cards the moment Fumikage enters.

“Hey,” he says with a bright smile from even brighter green eyes. “You took forever. Everything
“Alright?”

“Hey, you alright man?” Kirishima asks, standing from his seat beside Ashido. “You kinda look like you went through a ringer.”

“You passed, right?” Uraraka asks.

And just like that, Fumikage realises this is a mistake. These fools, these naïve idiots who know nothing of the horrors seeking to break the world, love him in their own way. And he knows from the way they care for Izuku, from the way Izuku cares for Shouto, they would love him all the same no matter his crimes.

His throat is tight, a noose tightened around his neck. He fails to form a single word, unable to breathe under the crushing weight of their kindness.

“I know it sucks but it happens,” Uraraka continues, looking as worried as Ashido beside her. “Right, Midoriya?”

Izuku ducks his head. “Yeah. I failed as well. It’s not the end of the world and wow, it’s weird doing this entire reassuring thing.”

His mind finally catches up. Slowly, he regains mastery over his body. “No, it is not,” he says, hoping his words are steady.

From the way Todoroki suddenly focuses on him, he has failed. They share a glance and, at that moment, he understands that Todoroki knows. Perhaps he knows everything. Yet, Shouto smiles as though wishing him luck.

Once, at the beach, they had made a promise. The three of them till the very end. And right now, Shouto is telling him he can find out who he is away from them and come back whenever he pleases. This is an ending, that smile says, but not the end of us.

It gives him the resolve to speak.

“I simply came to say goodbye,” he says evenly.

“Are you feeling sick?”

“No. Just…” He looks to Asui who makes no secret of her disapproval. “You were right.”

She cocks her head. “What happened?”

Fumikage shrugs. “Oh, I was just expelled.”

There is a single moment of silence, so thick with tension that you could cut it with a blade and it would bleed rainbow ichor. It is the silence that comes from a fundamental truth being dispelled, dark and cloying and as subtle as a hammer to the face. It hits with the same force if Kaminari falling off his desk is any indication.

His crash breaks the silence. And then there is a cacophony of voices, all vying to be the loudest.

“Huh?”

“—Nani—”

“—The fuck is this shit you’re—”
“—How the hell—”

There are too many voices for him to make sense of them all. Not that he can with how Izuku is very suddenly in front of him. His friend is taller than him. Before it was an inch or two at best. But ever since his time in the abyss with Shouto, he stands nearly a head taller than Fumikage. That still makes them the two shortest people in the class.

“Who did this?” Midoriya asks, no, he growls in threat. “Who did this to you?”

A week ago, he would have taken a step back in fear. “I did this to me. And I will bear the consequences.”

Izuku grips his shoulder. He feels bone creak under the tremendous strength his friend holds without thought.

“I’m not losing any of my friends.”

Fumikage bats his hand away. He knows it occurs only because Izuku permits it to occur. Physical strength was never his gift. And without Dark Shadow to supplement it, perhaps it never will be.

“Then talk to Aizawa and not me,” he snaps, knowing it is unfair and not caring. “Just let me go.”

Asui grabs Izuku’s hand. That aborts Izuku’s lunge. “Stop. Let him go.”

“But—”

“She’s right,” Fumikage agrees. “This is not your fault. Not your responsibility. Just… I’m sorry. Thank you, and goodbye.”

“Izuku, stop,” Shouto demands quietly. “Please, just stop.”

He hears one last thing before he leaves. “Can someone explain what the fuck just happened?”

He can feel their eyes on him as he walks out the school, sixteen sets of eyes just watching the retreating form of his back. The journey to his house is long and silent.

*****

Shouta Aizawa is tired to the very core of his being. Filling out Fumikage’s expulsion form saps away at his energy and will with each ticked box and typed explanation. Signing at the bottom and completing the process is the last straw.

He eats one bag of salted liquorice miserably. Then two more. He contemplates seeing Nemuri or perhaps Hizashi. They would both know what to say. They both know him better than he is willing to admit and would know how to ease his heart.

But that smacks of cowardice. He told Fumikage to live with the consequences. It would be nothing short of hypocrisy if he couldn’t do the same.

Nezu’s office is the very top of UA, the highest floor and overlooking the entrance to the institution. Supposedly, he watches students enter for their exam every year, marking those out with potential from a distance. In truth, he rarely looks to the gates, always too busy with one matter or another to cast his eyes away from a screen too long.

“Nezu, we have a problem.”
The rodent-dog-bear-thing looks up from his computer, startled. He blinks as though still lost in thought.

“I’m sorry, what did you say?”

“I said we have a problem.”

Nezu sighs loudly, returning to his device.

“Shouta, we’ve had a problem every day for the last month. Would it be one of your students?” Shouta frowns but nods. “What else has young Todoroki done now?”

Shouta grunts. “Todoroki?”

“Yes. Endeavour’s son. Random black eye he chose to never explain. That one. The one spouting black fire as if it’s going out of fashion.”

Shouta hisses in frustration. Are all his students trying to give him a heart attack? What’s next? Will Yaoyorozu reveal she’s a Goddess of Creation?

“What?”

Nezu finally looks at him, looking away from his tablet.

“Oh, you had no idea. During his exam, he used black fire. I would have pulled up the police report from the Stain incident, but his father is blocking me at every turn. And from your confusion, it was another student. The most likely candidate would be young Tokoyami.”

“Well, his quirk is like Midoriya’s from what he’s told me.”

Nezu hums. “Those arms had black flames. Shouto has black flames. I haven’t reviewed the footage from his battle with Ectoplasm yet with how I’ve been concerned on Shouto—oh, that’s why Ectoplasm marked his report as urgent. What happened?”

“His quirk mutated further. During the test, he had a pack of what looked like quicksilver dogs and a flock of glass crows.”

“That is worrying but not critical. Those abilities can be hidden. What can’t be hidden is Endeavour’s son being associated with the Purge of Shikkoku if he uses his flames in public. The stadium attack at least drew attention away from Fumikage’s abilities and—”

“He’s working for the Imperial family,” he says bluntly, completely derailing Nezu.

The pen in Nezu’s hand shatters. The two pieces clatter to the ground with dull thuds.

“Why?” There's a coldness to his gaze. "Money? No. Not interested in material gains like Aoyama or Uraraka. Privilege? No, not Bakugou. He’s not an easily swayed fanatic and he’d tell Midoriya if he was being threatened… Midoriya, whose father works for the Imperials. No, not that. Can't be that. They showed him something his honour demands that he face,”

He stares at Nezu, reminded once more of why he fears the rodent’s intelligence. In under a minute the man has worked out what Aizawa needed to be told.

“There’s still time to convince him otherwise. Three weeks is not enough. I can… I can break the indoctrination. No, three weeks is too long. Fuck. Where is he?”
“Home, probably. I expelled him.”

Nezu cocks his head, observing Shouta and seeing everything he tries to hide. In that one moment, everything he keeps close to his heart is exposed to the principal.

The rodent stands and walks towards the wall on the right. He taps it in an odd pattern and the wall slides away to reveal a biometric sensor. Nezu places his paw over it.

The ground shakes suddenly and violently. Shouta crouches immediately, glancing once and seeing Nezu unperturbed by the event. He rushes to the window and scans the horizon. There, at one of their training grounds, is a cloud of thick smoke.

He watches in horror as the training ground falls to ruin, building collapsing over each other. It doesn’t take very long, but undoubtedly everyone in the school is watching this play out. As it is, he can see some of the third-year students streaming outside, trying to understand what is going on.

“What the hell?”

“Shouta Aizawa,” the principal says, voice as hard as steel, “you just expelled a student with a quirk possibly as dangerous as Midoriya or Todoroki. You just told the Imperial family that they can have him without a fight. What the fuck is wrong with you?”

He recoils. Nezu is never angry. Annoyed, sometimes stressed, but not outwardly angry like this.

“He was willing to sacrifice other lives.”

“Your morals don’t matter!”

Those words echo in the room. Nezu breathes hard, chest heaving and eyes with a spark of maniacal genius.

“Of all things, you could have done, why did you choose expulsion? Why do you have to do the most expected thing every single time? Why can’t you change and try something different? Are you actively trying to sabotage me?”

“I’m—”

“Shut up. Your greatest weakness is your arrogance.” Nezu points with a long claw. “You always think you know what’s right when you know nothing. He’s out of my sphere of influence. By my predictions, the variety and versatility of his creatures make him a high A-rank threat now. What if he has a few dozen more he didn’t reveal? What if any of them are like what Midoriya became? You just gave away a walking army in your fucking arrogance.”

Only Nezu’s harsh breathing interrupts the silence. The rodent looks close to violence and it shocks Shouta to the core. In all the years he’s known the principal, the rodent has never sworn, never looked this close to physical violence.

He takes an unconscious step back, unsure of what’s to come.

“When you expelled Rei, I was ready to fire you.” Shouta freezes. “One of the more powerful wind quirks since Stormwind and now she’s stuck in a mental institute and hasn’t used it once. I had every reason to get rid of you. Instead, I decided to train you properly. You were a benefit these last two years. I could count on you to deal with everything short of assassination. But now you’ve given away Tokoyami. Your vendetta with Inko Midoriya means Izuku is outside our grasp.”
“He’s my student.”

“No,” Nezu snaps. “He is his father’s son. And don’t for a single second think you can win any sort of fight against Hisashi. I’ve used every single resource I could to assess that man. And the only thing I could find is that he took on the entire Royal Guard and walked away. Not years ago, but a few weeks ago. I wouldn’t be confident of taking on a single Royal Guard with all of UA’s staff.”

Nezu takes a moment to steady his breathing. Then he walks to his desk and rummages through a drawer. The rodent withdraws a pack of cigars and a lighter. The rodent lights one and takes a long drag, raising one claw to stall Shouta from saying anything.

And when he is done with that, he throws the pack at the wall.

Nezu sits in his chair calmly, as if he hasn’t just lost total control of his reactions.

“I may be powerful but I can’t control Endeavour. The man’s a force of nature. He’s threatening to pull Shouto out and train him privately if I don’t stop prying. And what will the world say when Japan’s number two hero pulls his son out of UA. Our reputation will burn.”

Nezu laughs, his face in his paws. There is a level of pessimism Shouta never thought he would ever associate with Nezu.

“I’ve never been outplayed quite like this by my enemies,” he says bitterly. “And yet, in a single afternoon, you've set most of my plans on fire. Aizawa, I won’t fire you because I don’t need to give off the impression of further disunity to our enemies.

“I can fix this.”

“No, you can’t. All you do is make problems for me to fix. But you’re going to deal with the camp. Organise extra security. Maybe get the Big Three. Whatever you do, don’t make things worse for me whilst I run damage control. Now get out and let me fix your mess.”

And then Nezu turns away from Shouta to stare at the collapsing training ground.

*****

Fumikage Tokoyami finds both his parents at home.

His mother is recovering from her injuries during the Sports Festival and won’t be doing much but lying around for a few weeks. His father has never worked. It makes sense from the stories he has heard. He can’t imagine the hulking mountain of muscle with blades sharp as rage would do well in any work environment. Or even make it through without a death.

“Why are you back early?” his mother asks from her seat on the couch. She doesn’t look away from the screen for more than a few moments, reminding him just how valued he is.

He sets his bag down by the doorway and walks forward. His father reads a newspaper, his tiny glasses looking ridiculous when the pale man has more muscle on his neck than any reasonable person should have.

“I was expelled,” he says casually, fighting to keep his anger controlled. “You finally have your wish.”

“What did you say?”
Her shrill voice sets him off. It’s the same tone she takes every time she berates him. Now that he thinks about it, that’s the only tone she’s taken with him for the last few months.

“I said I was expelled!”

The weight of his father’s presence crashes down on him. The man hasn’t looked up from his newspaper but there is no doubt his full attention is on Fumikage.

“Boy, do not speak to your—”

He slams the expulsion letter on the table, regardless of how terrifying his father can be.

“Enough. I don’t care what you have to say. I know the man you are and it’s not the man I want to be.”

His father sets his newspaper down slowly. Deliberately.

“Be very careful of your next words. I will not accept that kind of arrogance in this household.”

“You’re a murderer. Whatever redemption you think you’ll receive by playing this role will never come. Your hands are stained red and they will never be clean. Nothing you do will erase your past!”

He’s breathing hard, chest heaving from shouting so much. And maybe he’s not simply shouting at his father. Maybe he’s shouting at the person he will become if he continues down this road. There is blood on his hands, unintentional and nowhere near as much as his father’s, but it makes them more similar than he would like to admit.

Two violent fools chained to their rage.

Like father, like son.

As he glares at the man, a flash of understanding passes through his mind. If he stays here, then he won’t change. He’ll just become a clone of his father.

His father very slowly stands. “You know nothing. You have seen nothing.”

“I’ve seen more than you could ever imagine.”

He lets his presence extend. It is like light and shadow all at once, and the rattling of thousands of chains fills the room. It is the howling of bloody hounds and the caw of glass crows. It is the powerful whoosh of a dragon’s wings before it pounces and shreds you with its claws.

If it must come to a fight, then Fumikage is prepared.

“You two need to stop right now,” his mother finally says.

“Silence yourself,” Fumikage says callously. “You love this monster but you could never support me being a hero. You think forgiving this monster will make you a better person. What value does your opinion have?”

A crushing and oppressive weight settles over the room. The air is thick and hard to breathe. He looks to his father who has taken a single step forward, burning chains settling around his forearms. It is him that makes time stand still with the intensity of his rage.

"Do not speak”—one step forward and Fumikage smells the cloying scent of a thousand corpses
left to rot—"to your mother"—a second step and the weight intensifies, pressing down on his back like a mountain felled by a god—"Like that."

A week ago, this would have been enough to leave him lying on the ground in tears. Today, he simply juts his chin in defiance. He forces his presence against his father’s. Two immaterial forces clash in their home, a prelude to what may come.

The scent of blood to be shed fills the air, almost drenches them in it. One wrong word and they will come to blows. Maybe he shouldn't press the matter, but he refuses to accept another loss. Not from anyone.

“I will speak as I please.”

His father inhales and it sets his eyes aflame. They are menacing and would force a mortal man to stop in their tracks. For Fumikage, those eyes are nothing.

“Then leave my home.”

It is said with finality.

There is no recourse here, no chance for forgiveness. His father has spoken a commandment. He feels the invisible chains binding him to his parents snap. They don’t see it, but he can observe how the immaterial chains clatter to the ground.

Another end, he thinks, watching the links shatter to a thousand pieces.

“No,” his mother says, eyes watering. “You don’t need to go that far.”

“The boy seems to believe in his godhood. Let him face the real world without our protection. And when he inevitably fails, he can crawl home and apologise.”

“So be it,” Fumikage says. “I’ll prove to you that I do not need you.”

He heads towards his room, ignoring the harsh whispers his parent’s exchange. His mother sounds angrier than ever before even if his father refuses to budge.

On his bed, he finds a package that he doesn't remember receiving. He opens the box. Inside, resting on red velvet, are two blades. Both are straight and double-edged, and neither is longer than his forearm. He knows them to be tanto.

Most importantly, they are a brilliant white. The waves from the folding process are distinct, a vivid shade of blue that seems to glow with their own light. He picks one up, surprised at how heavy it is, and touches the metal. It is frigid to the touch and he can tell from the way they slice the air and leave sparks that they aren't natural to the real world.

No, these are abyssal weapons. The same that were used against him during his time with the Doki Mariner. He would recognise them any day. They sliced through Dark Shadow and perhaps could have killed his companion.

The moment he cuts his thumb on accident, he feels his energy drain. The ripples on the blades glow brighter the longer he allows them to steal his energy. He shakes his head and sheathes them in the accompanying white scabbard.

He wears the costume that Maya made for him, an improvement in every way from his first childish design. Better to walk out proud than weak and miserable. He finds his new belt has straps
He doesn’t look at his parents as he walks through his home for the last time. There is a cheque in his hand signed for more money than they should need in the next five years. It is the last obligation he has to them and he discharges it by placing the piece of paper on the table.

“Goodbye, mother. Father.”

He stops at the threshold of the door, teeth gritted painfully.

“I will not be back.”

The door shuts quietly and just like that, an entire chapter of his life has ended.

Closing that door means turning his back on his childhood, on his dreams of being a hero. The anger leaves him slowly, drip by drip of rage leaving his system until he simply feels empty. He walks aimlessly, thinking of every decision he has ever made, and how it has come to this. Expelled and kicked out in one day.

There is one person he can trace to these events, one person he knows won’t betray him as abruptly as Asui or Aizawa of his father. And, if he’s being quite honest, neither gave him more than a few seconds before breaking all ties.

He removes his phone and makes a call.

On the second ring, she picks.

“Maya, I need you. Please.”

He waits a long few minutes alone, leaning against the wall.

A burst of light nearly blinds him. There she is, Maya Yotsuba, Izanami of the Royal Guard. Her blue eyes are just as cold as usual and her features hard. Her white uniform seems appropriate right now.

“What’s wrong?”

He refuses to chuckle, no matter how bitter he is. In truth, he fears if he starts, they’ll turn to uncontrollable sobs. Holding emotions in is hard enough. Forcing them back in after they’ve tasted freedom is harder still.

“Everything.”

She approaches him slowly. He wonders how agonising it must be to move at a speed he can process. Her hands rise slower still, almost uncertain. For the first time, he notices that there is a subtle glow beneath her skin.

Warm palms settle on his cheeks and long fingers wrap around his neck lightly. She smiles, gentle as a sharp blade and just as honest as a corpse for the dead tell no lies. There is something unnervingly graceful in seeing her features soften.

“I’m here and I will protect you,” she whispers and he knows it is the truth.

“Why?” he chokes out, throat heavy.

“Because you’re my Inquisitor. My Fumikage. I dressed you in white silk and gave you your
knives. I own you just as much as you own me.”

“I’m just another asset to be used and thrown away.”

“My asset. My special asset,” she says fiercely.

He knows she is manipulating him, but she’s never lied to him. She might be using his need for validation against him, but he made the call and knew what would come from it.


She shakes her head slowly, dark hair covering her eyes. And yet, the intensity of her gaze never once vanishes.

“Not me. Never me.”

“Promise?”

Her long fingers brush the knot of his red necktie. She unwraps it with deft fingers and each touch sends shivers down his spine.

He wonders what she sees when the last binding falls away. The line between bird and human has never bee clean. It is a jagged mess of ropy flesh, tiny quills, and scar tissue. As horrifying as the scars Midoriya has, but perhaps worse for this is natural.

Yet, she doesn’t look at him any different. If anything, she hardly seems to notice. No, that’s wrong. She simply doesn’t have any interest.

“I promise.”

The certainty in that word is freeing. It is an oath between them and he feels the chains of that promise tighten like a noose. He sees her and sees all that she is. A woman possessed of cruelty, ruthlessness and violence. This is a woman who could easily kill a dozen people and feel nothing. But she’s always been honest about her nature.

And the one thing he’s learnt in the month he’s known her is that she is loyal. Loyal to her family. Loyal to her Emperor. Loyal to Fumikage.

She will never betray him first. Not like Aizawa. Not like Asui. Not like his father. He can trust in that loyalty because she is ruthless, cruel, and violent.

“Let’s go,” he says at last, deciding there are worse people to trust.

“Where?”

“Wherever home is.”

End of Season III-B: Accelerando

Chapter End Notes

So, today’s the one-year anniversary of this story. It’s kinda weird saying that because
it doesn’t really feel that long. I guess time flies. There have been some major highs and lows with this story, and I’ve come to resent it just as much as I love writing it. We’re what? 330K posted? Way more written and scrapped. It’s been a crazy ride writing this whilst in school and I’ve learnt a lot about myself in the process.

I suppose it’s auspicious that season 3 ends one year after I set out to tell this crazy story. At the beginning, this was just a pipe dream of Izuku maybe having different powers, maybe having better training. And then, as I stared writing it, I had to figure out why the world of BNHA is the way it is and that left me a lot of room to build on. You’d be surprised by just how horrifying canon is when you spend a few minutes thinking about it. One thing led to another and now we have this, some weird Lovecraftian horror story moonlighting as a political drama and socioeconomic analysis (which makes me sound much smarter and more qualified than I am).

You’ve seen the factions from UA to the League to the Imperial Household to China and Taiwan. You’ve seen the major players and gotten a taste of what they all want. You know Endeavour isn’t defined solely by his A+ parenting and All Might isn’t infallible. You know who Kurogiri is and why he follows the enigmatic All For One. You know about Hisashi and those he worked for before. The first 3 seasons are, in many ways, the necessary setup for the arc I’ve been waiting to tell.

You needed to know the stakes for everything to come. You needed to know why people were so opposed to each other and why they accepted compromises with their enemies. You needed to understand the threat each faction posed. Most of all, you needed to know the characters and their failings to understand why they’ll do what they’re about to do. Buckle up, because you haven’t seen anything yet.

Because, in season 4, we go to war.

Thank you for sticking with me and see you soon.
Season IV: Ascension, Chapter 43: the future you choose

Chapter Notes

Welcome to season 4. Didn't expect me back so soon, did ya.
My discord server can be found at the following: https://discord.gg/4YvCTYR

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Season IV: Ascension

Chapters 43-56

‘There are a group of phenomena commonly called the Seven Great Mysteries and have been avenues of speculation. The Great Warp Quirks, of which Master Railroad was the first, was the Initial Mystery as it could not be explained. To this day, Warp Quirks are the most anomalous of all quirk types and the rarest. He would be responsible for the second mystery, his disappearance which took the peak of Mount Kilimanjaro. Over centuries, we would learn that there were a group of Immortals such as Hawkmoon and Hinata Ononoki who ignored the passage of time of centuries.

In quick succession, the Twin Bombings, and the Raoul Island Upheaval would occur. The former befell Tianjin and Juba, and they are twins for they possess the same fallout composition. The latter would see Raoul Island suddenly increase to thrice its size and become an inhospitable wasteland actively harmful to life. In more uncharted territory is the secondary mutation trigger of space, lending credence to the theory that quirks are a cosmic phenomenon.

Finally, in recent history, the Brazillian Ghosts have manifested. They are the recorded imprints of the dead who style themselves as gods. Currently, a necromantic quirk gone awry is the leading theory.’

—Excerpt from ‘The Beginner Scientists Guide to Quirks’.

Fumikage Tokoyami stares at the wall, tired in a way that isn’t just physical. The wall is plain and without much embellishment but for the very subtle pattern that he notices only out of the corner of his eye, a texture to the wall that can be seen at only a few angles. Stencilled so carefully on the white wall to not be noticeable on cursory inspection is a rose bush, not the chrysanthemum he expects.

He doesn’t know where he is.

A bedroom, obviously, but not the geographic location. The room may be bigger than his entire house, it may have a set of ornate furniture near the fireplace in the corner and even a breakfast table in delicate wood, but he can’t get shake the mild disquiet he feels.

The bed, at least, is comfortable enough that he has no qualms about doing nothing to relieve his ignorance. No bed should be this comfortable.

A sharp knock forces him alert. He sits up, only now noticing he’s slept in his school shirt and combat pants.

“Enter,” he says on the second knock.
He sees the cart before he sees the man pushing it. The man is dressed in a white uniform, one more formal than anything Fumikage has ever worn in his life.

The man bows upon entering fully. “Lord Inquisitor,” he says. “It is a pleasure to host you today.”

Fumikage simply watches the spectacle of someone laying out a full breakfast in silence. This is absurd. The cutlery alone looks more expensive than anything he owns and he still doesn’t know where he is and perhaps, he is being willfully ignorant, but Midoriya has managed to do so perfectly well for months if not years.

*I can choose to ignore things for another hour*, he thinks.

He finally steps out of bed. The tile floor isn’t cold as he expects. Then again, underfloor heating is centuries old.

Fumikage slides into the chair the man pulls out. “Thank you,” he says.

Despite the ornate crockery, the meal itself is something he’s familiar with: brown rice served in a simple bowl, a perfectly rolled egg omelette, a soup he assumes is Miso Shiru, and a salad served with delicate slices of apple. It looks like something he would eat at home, not the place he's being willfully ignorant of.

“Guardswoman Izanami stated you would enjoy a plain breakfast,” the man says.

And that explains enough. Of course, she would know. There’s not much he assumes she doesn’t know about who he is and the things he tries to hide from himself.

He takes the chopsticks and takes a bit of the rice. It tastes magnificent in a way he’s never expected out of breakfast.

“This will likely be a confusing period,” the man says.

He has bright yellow eyes, Fumikage notices, like liquid gold against darker features that aren’t Japanese. South American, perhaps, but not Asian in the slightest.

“It is,” Fumikage agrees after a bite of the salad.

“Lady Izanami is out for a few hours dealing with matters of importance to the Emperor. This wing of the Villa hosts the members of her OTA and that of Guardsman Itinerant.”

“Hm?” he asks around a sip of soup.

“Organisational Taskforce Assignment,” the man says, waiting for Fumikage to gesture him on. “Every member of the Royal Guard commands an OTA, each dedicated to fulfilling one task. The OTA you are an informal special asset to is dedicated to battling the abyss.”

“I see.”

“You didn’t read the dossiers at all.” The man sighs. “Fuck, she’s getting sloppy. I think she genuinely likes you.”

He blinks.

“I’m sorry, but who exactly are you?”

“You can call me Itinerant of the Royal Guard.”
Fumikage blinks once more, annoyed and amused. He sends a tiny tug to the creatures connected to his soul, awakening them should he need to fight this man. He might not win, but he has no interest in any games.

“Why did you put up this farce?”

“Oh, I just wanted to get to know you,” Itinerant says. “Look, I know what it’s been like. I sat right there at one point. Well, not there exactly, but you get what I’m saying.”

“I don’t,” he growls.

“Okay, look, your handlers out for business and I thought you’d be better off having someone explain things to you before you go running off and making a mess of things. It can be a bit awkward.”

“Speaking from experience?”

“The last Itinerant recruited me as a Special Asset. You see, there’s always an Itinerant in the Royal Guard.” He grins, showing off his perfect teeth. “One warp quirk for every generation of the Royal Guard. The last Itinerant ditched me here just to see how much havoc I could cause.”

“I take it you know everything about me.”

“Enough, but I didn’t come here to threaten you or anything. Just to explain a few things since I know for a fact that Maya can’t explain shit. Ask your questions?”

He finishes his rice and sets it aside. There’s still a bit of the salad and he’s rather hungry.

“Who are you, really?”

“I’m the Itinerant, the Guard’s warper,” he says with a smile. “Alexander Petros is my name. I’m half-Grecian if you haven’t figured out.”

“I take it not all of the Guard is Japanese.”

“Just Ryujin and your handler.” The Guardsman pours tea for Fumikage. “The rest of us are recruited across the world. Ra’s from Zimbabwe, though I think she may be Egyptian. Our dear Oberon is from New York.”

“I hate whoever comes up with your names.”

He sighs. “Everyone does.”

“What is it that you do?”

“I just make sure no heroes or villains destroy the balance of power.” His smile is bitter. “Your friend is making my life very difficult.”

“Midoriya? He’s a good person.”

Itinerant stands. “Yes,” he says angrily. “You can do whatever you want within reason. Fucking shout and someone will probably help you.”

“I’ve angered you.”

“You think. You’re not very good with people.”
“I’ve been told. Why does Izuku bother you so much?”

“I just don’t like his father. Have a good day, Inquisitor. And welcome to the household.”

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Izuku Midoriya smiles uncertainly at his counsellor. She looks much the same as the last time he saw her to the best of his memory. But that was months for him, closer to six months than the five or so weeks since she last saw him.

He hates how it’s hard to remember details about her. Did she always wear large glasses or are those new? Was she a redhead when they last spoke or has she dyed her hair?

Forcing his muscles to relax, Izuku says, “I haven’t seen you in a long time.”

“Only a few weeks,” she says kindly, unaware of how wrong that is. “It’s good to see you as well.”

“Were you injured?”

“Thankfully not. I watched the festival at a friend’s home.” She smiles then, small and bright. “No, tracking you down was far harder to have a conversation.”

“I guess there wasn’t much time between the Sports Festival and the internships.”

Her smile slips. “You’re glossing over something important.”

“Oh, you mean the kidnapping.” He shrugs. “I guess it happened and no, I’m not trying to hide from a traumatic event. It’s just not that important. Yeah, it wasn’t fun and hurt and I hated seeing my friend suffer when I couldn’t do anything to help. But, and this is going to make you upset, pain brings clarity.”

“We’ve talked about that attitude.”

“We have,” he agrees. “It’s not like I want to hurt myself. It’s just that seeing someone else in pain, someone similar enough to me that… I guess, it was like looking at myself from an outside perspective. I acted like I was a victim all the time and twisted everything to shift the blame. People tried helping me and I just kept on pushing them away. I didn’t try making things better. I just lashed out as much as I could. Does that make sense? It hurt me because I was seeing what I used to do, but that hurt made it more apparent, made it clearer.”

She says nothing for a long time, fiddling with her pen. Izuku waits patiently, used to being observed at this point. It doesn’t make him nervous or uncomfortable as it used to.

“I’m glad you’re recognising your behaviours,” she says eventually. “I don’t like the context behind them and I don’t like how blasé you are about that context, but I’ll accept those steps forward if you promise we’ll revisit the topic. Honestly and without pretence.”

He nods, running his fingers along the rough fabric of the armrest. “There’s a lot about my quirk I’ll have to tell you. Things I’ve kept hidden from a lot of people. Next time we sit down and talk, I’ll tell you all of it. Just not today.”

“Next time,” she agrees. “Tell me how you feel.”

“Angry. I feel sick with it some days. My father’s back, you know. Just up one day out of the blue. I punched him immediately.”
She scratches something on her notepad. “And why did you do that?”

“Because he left me for a decade,” he snarls, the anger flaring up again. “I understand why he had to leave, but logic and emotions don’t mix well.”

“If you did understand, I believe you wouldn’t harbour these feelings.” She smiles gently. “You’re a kind person. If you can’t forgive him, then it isn’t just because he came back suddenly.”

“No, it’s… I don’t know.”

“Try.”

“What do you do when the image you have of someone isn’t the person they are?”

“You can try to reconcile that image by learning about who they really are. You forgive them when they don’t live up to that impossible image you have and cherish every moment when they’re perfect or excellent.”

“This is a pretty fucking hard image to reconcile,” he says tersely, fingers digging roughly into the armrest. “My father is everything I can’t stand. Everything I can’t abide by.”

“What exactly?”

He takes a breath. “I’m his child, his genetic legacy on this earth. I’m supposed to be everything he failed to be. My father told me that his ceiling is my floor, that his best is just my starting point. But I just want to burn the foundation he laid because it makes me sick.”

“You make it sound like your father is a villain,” she says delicately. And he understands why. It wouldn’t be the first time a villainous parent and a heroic child were embroiled in a rivalry. Too often it turned violent and rarely did both walk away.

“I’d rather he be a villain. At least it would all make sense then. It would be simple.” He sighs, scratching the couch errantly. “One day I’m going to have to face everything he represents and I don’t know if I’ll be ready. I don’t know if his love for me is greater than his loyalty to his oaths.”

“What oaths?”

“I’m not going to tell you, no matter how much you pry.” His smile is thin, wan, and false. “That’s my past I’ll have to face. Pick something else to poke and prod at. Not that.”

“Tell me about your friends, then.”

That should be a safe topic. They may argue occasionally, but he never worries they’ll leave him. Today, however, it’s anything but safe.

“One of my best friends has been expelled and if I talk to Aizawa I’m afraid I’ll start a fight. And I don’t want to do that.” He sighs. “When I saw him yesterday, all I saw was red and I knew I couldn’t talk to him. Because all I wanted to do in that moment was break in half and I refuse to act like that.”

Once more, she writes something on her notepad. He catches a glimpse of very neat handwriting.

“Tell me about him. Your friend,” she clarifies.

“He’s got an honourable streak a mile long. I think it’s stupid but it’s what makes him who he is
and I would never take that away. It’s why I trust him with things I can never tell my other friends.”

“Things like?”

“My quirk,” he admits. “The things in my head when everything’s just too loud. He taught me a lot, gave me a book actually. He added all these personal notes to them. It doesn’t feel right to know that much about him without asking, but he wouldn’t have given me that version if he didn’t want me to see it. It’s like seeing a glimpse into someone’s mind without all the awkward barriers.”

“And why do you think he wanted you to see it?”

“To know I’m not alone in doubting my right to be a hero with my quirk. To know that someone else understands having a voice in your head. I don’t really care much for concepts of duty and honour. I care about people. But he cares for people by the rules he sets, the things he’s honour bound to see through.”

“That seems like a heavy burden for someone so young.”

“It’s a burden we’re choosing to accept.”

“I think he saw something his honour demanded he fight and Aizawa wouldn’t let him,” Izuku continues. “Or something else, I don’t know. He’s pretty stupid about things like that. He thinks he can do everything by himself and would rather be in pain than ask for help. And that’s... just like me. Fuck.”

She makes a sound of amusement.

“Maybe that’s a good thing in some regards. You’re a kind person and I don’t think anything will change that.” She smiles. “You talk about All Might often. He’s a teacher here. I think he’ll listen to you if you think what’s been done is unfair. And I don’t think you’ll punch him.”

“No. He’s too tall for that.”

It’s a bad joke at best. She inclines her head but says nothing, waiting. Waiting for him to make the next move.

He sighs.

“You want me to tell the truth.”

“The same way you told the truth in that interview,” she answers. “I was so proud when I saw you there because you were facing your past, you were facing the things that hurt you.”

“The truth is hard.”

“It is. But I think you’re at your best when you’re telling the truth. It doesn’t matter what it is. Just tell the truth.”

*Secrets are power, brother mine. I am the keeper, lock and key. Tell the truth if that is your power.*

“Alright. I spent a long time thinking about dropping out and staying in Hokkaido. Maybe I’d be able to make a difference there. I don’t know if I need to be a hero to make things better. It was just the only way I knew how to help people, but I’ve learnt saving someone doesn’t mean you’ve
helped them. Saving someone doesn’t change the reason they were helpless. And maybe that’s why Fumikage’s not here. Maybe he can make things better elsewhere, but it needs to be his choice. I’ll put my faith in him to be a good person and trust him to call me if he needs help.”

“Go on,” she says encouragingly, her smile bright.

“I talk to Mikumo all the time. He’s always there.”

Mikumo grunts in surprise. Are you really going to—

“Have you been taking—”

“My medication? Yes, every day. And they’ve helped a lot. I might be angry and bitter and upset, but I think that’s the normal kind. I feel like I’d be a lot worse without them.” He smiles sadly.

“Mikumo told me to keep on taking them. I know it sounds ridiculous, but what if he’s just how my quirk manifests, at least a part of it?”

“The issue is that I can’t say if that’s true or a product of your delusions.”

“I know. My father has something similar and his quirk is close to mine. I’m not saying you did anything wrong when I… back when I nearly lost my mind. But maybe we were working under incomplete information.”

“And I’m more than willing to make adjustments. Tell me another truth.”

“Shinsou’s my best friend and Ojiro my second. But I feel like I don’t spend enough time with them. I feel like I don’t pay enough attention to them. I didn’t call them during the internship.”

“You can go and talk to them. That’s always an option.”

“I know.” He grins. “Another truth. I want to start a hero agency with them. All my friends. Together. Fighting the battles we think need to be fought. I’ll be strong when they’re weak, and they’ll do the same for me. And if we try our best, maybe we can change things. Really change things. If even one of them was with me, I might have been able to save the girl in a sunflower dress.”

“That sounds like a noble goal.”

“It is. I’ll have to tell them the truth about my quirk and why I am the way I am. But I trust them. I’ll go tell them at camp.”

It becomes so much easier to speak after that. They’re small truths, perhaps inconsequential in the grand scheme of things. But perhaps they’re just as important so long as he’s telling the truth.

*****

Fumikage Tokoyomi has spent most of the day in his room. He’s calmer now after a few meals and a good shower. Currently, he’s dressed in simple blue shirt and darker blue waistcoat.

There’s a closet attached to his room. Whilst the clothes within fit well, half of them look too formal for anything but a meeting with the Emperor. And he certainly refuses to wear any of the white uniforms. He may have been expelled, but he doesn't work for them.

The shirt and waistcoat were pilfered from two separate outfits and the trousers are a simple black. He considers three ties, each carried by a glass crow for his inspection. Perhaps it’s a
misappropriation of his powers, but they may as well make themselves useful. He settles on the sky-blue tie with a geometric pattern.

The crows float back to the closet and pack the ties away delicately. He watches in amusement as he ties his tie, one crow perched on his shoulder.

It’s been a day since his conversation with Itinerant, and he’s spent most of that time in his room or wandering the common areas of the wing. It is nowhere near as formal as he expects out of the Imperial Villa. At least, this wing isn’t. People are just people. Some are reverent and some are rude, though all call him Inquisitor with genuine respect.

He doesn’t trust them by any stretch.

It’s why there’s always a crow near him. Right now, the crow is perched on his shoulder as he heads to the dining hall. It’s a bit after lunch, so the hall isn’t crowded or busy. His first instinct is to take a seat where he can observe the entire hall and not have anyone sneak up on him. Unfortunately, everyone else had that idea already.

There’s a spot near the window that takes up the entire wall. It overlooks the small field and garden. There’s a body of water and a bridge crossing it. On it, he watches two children playing a game of some sort, balancing on the bridge struts.

He orders food absently, entertained when one of the children falls into the water. A chuckle makes him look up and he notices a few other people watching the spectacle. There’s a table with teenagers his age. One sneaks a wave that he returns uncertainly. She smiles at him, brilliant and simple.

“I see you’re making friends.”

He looks up. “Maya,” he says as she sits.

She is wearing sweatpants and an old shirt, looking nothing like the lethal and dangerous member of the Royal Guard he knows her to be. It makes her features just the slightest bit softer.

“Rumour has it you’ve been walking around like you’re about to be attacked,” she says. “I thought I told you what we’re like.”

“Brutal and efficient.”

The group of teenagers head out. The girl glances over her shoulder and meets his eyes.

“And honest.”

The meal comes soon after.

He eats quickly and in silence, aware of the absurdity of a glass crow roosting in his feathers. Not least because she fucking starts feeding it strips of bacon. Within a few minutes, even the people outside are laughing at him.

“Was that necessary?” he asks once he’s done with the meal and walking through the hallways.

“You need to trust us. You’ve been kicked out of school and your home. At the very least, don’t be rude.”

He sighs and returns the crow to his soul, stepping aside to let a group of women in white uniforms
pass by. They’re deep in conversation, not noticing either him or Maya.

“I’m in a place I’ve never been to and I know none of you. I don’t know this place and I don’t
know the people.”

“That's because you have to try. You've done what outside of eating and wallowing in your room?
Usually, most people who get kicked out find themselves on the street.”

They step outside.

The air is crisp and the heavy with the scent of newly cut grass. This section of the Imperial Villa
isn’t traditional in the slightest. It looks more like a post-modern piece of architecture, sweeping
lines and sharp angle and a surprising amount of function—he’s paid attention to how there are
sections where barricades will pop up and there’s wireless charging everywhere.

“And what, you expect me to just say hi to someone.”

She waves at a group of soaking wet children. One waves back, smiling, before being dragged
back and thrown in the water.

"Yeah, like that girl who was trying to get you to say hi. It's not like she's going to walk over to the
big and scary Inquisitor, the bane of the abyss and horror to the horrors."

“They call me that?”

“No, they don’t. You’re special, but not everything revolves around you. They think you’re lonely
and weird and need to smile more. Just put a tiny bit of effort into talking to people here.” She
flicks his ear. “You’re part of the household now.”

He grits his teeth. “I never wanted this.”

“Do you trust me?” Maya asks, sitting on a bench.

“Oh, of course.”

There’s a wall behind the bench. Fumikage leans against it when he sits, glad for the tree that
shades him from the harsh sun.

She laughs. “You’re growing older, my little crow. My Special Asset. If I asked, would you join
the Royal Guard?”

“No,” he says without hesitation. “We fight the same battle out of necessity. But I would not serve
your Emperor. I would never die for him. You know that.”

“I just had to ask. Sometimes things change after a full night’s sleep.”

“This never will. I may have burnt my bridges, but I will not take that step.”

She strokes his head, removing a leaf that’s tangled up in his feathers.

“Well, if you won’t swear an oath of fealty, would you like to become a formal special asset?”

“What difference does it make? You people already show me respect.”

“Everything,” she answers. “Right now, you command respect because you fight the war, but you
don’t hold any true command. You’re an ally, an outsider, not a true part of the household. If you
formally become a special asset, you’ll join us without swearing to protect his life.”

“[I see no benefit in doing this.”

"You'll be granted the Imperial Mandate of Heaven," she says gently. "You'll be granted a dispensation to act with our name and be protected by our treaties. You'll become a commander of my forces."

“Just like that?” he asks, incredulous. “You would give me power over your people when you hardly know me. Trust given so easily is trust lost easily.”

“I know you. You’re honourable to a fault. It is your greatest weakness but also your greatest strength. You wouldn’t betray us. Ever. One day you might leave but you wouldn’t betray us, not unless I taught you how to hold a knife in the dark.”

He doesn’t answer immediately.

There are people here that he doesn’t know and doesn’t care for. But they’ve yet to harm him, yet to do anything to make themselves out as enemies. Perhaps this is all a grand manipulation and the children playing the water are actors. Maybe the girl who smiled at him is a plant designed to lull his senses.

Perhaps this is who they are. People with their own hopes and dreams and failings.

“Would you do it for me?” she asks when he’s been silent for an hour.

“Why?”

“Because you’re mine. And I want everyone who sees you to know that I stole you from UA. I want you to wear white silks with your head high and not be afraid of what anyone thinks. I want you to become mine in truth.”

She is cold and calculating. But there is nothing about her that makes him doubt her words. This is nothing more than another means to bring him closer, to chain him to her influence. And yet, there is no malice.

“This oath goes two ways,” Fumikage says, seeing the shape of it. “You will be mine as well. We’ll be tied till the very end of all things.”

“Yes.”

Fumikage sighs. “For you, I will.”

Only he can see the chain that wraps around his neck, that loops around her neck and binds them together. It isn’t tight yet, hasn’t been completed, but the shape of it is powerful. Because behind her he can see the dozens, perhaps hundreds of chains that bind her to a white chrysanthemum.

They bind her to the teenagers lying on the grass and talking. It binds her to the adults walking from one location to the next, bowed in deep conversation. One chain, thicker than all the rest, binds her to the tallest building in the Villa, the one that can only belong to the Emperor.

“How much did you manipulate me?” he asks.

She shrugs. “Every step of the way. I called one of my colleagues and he said you’d respond best to honesty and trust. So that’s what I did. I never lied to you. I told you I was manipulating you and
how I was doing it. I showed you something you would have to fight and hoped Aizawa would fall into old patterns of expulsion. He did that just that. A simple plan, don’t you think?”

“What would happen if he didn’t?”

“You’d chafe against the restrictions they imposed on you. You’d argue and lash out until you finally left.”

“What happens now?”

“I’ll organise the ceremony for later tonight. Make sure you’re in full combat dress. And maybe talk to someone.”

A burst of light blinds him. He blinks away the spots in his vision. When he can see clearly, he’s alone once more.

Fumikage sighs. He doesn’t know what to do. Every decision he makes only seems to make one thing worse no matter what he does. Lying to Aizawa got him expelled and the led to being kicked out. And now, he’s binding himself closer to the root cause.

With a shrug, Fumikage picks a direction and walks.

“Excuse me,” he says after an hour of walking and somehow walking in a circle four times.

He’s speaking to someone close to his age that he picked out at random. “Inquisitor, right? That’s what they call you.” Fumikage nods. “Well, how can I help?”

“I am attempting to get my bearings of this place. Unfortunately, my sense of direction has betrayed me and I’ve circled here for the last hour.”

“Alright, I can help.”

Maybe it's not much, but he does get to know the man more. He's from a rather minor family in the Royal Family, so far from inheriting the Throne, he jokes that Fumikage would get it before he does.

He points out a few important locations: the different compounds housing the groups underneath the Royal Guard; the many training halls and their differences, some meant purely for quirk combat and some for more traditional forms of combat like the sword; the many security offices which he apparently has access to; and the compound which the Emperor and the most important of the Royal Family reside in—which he’s allowed entrance to without question after a quick biometric scan.

It’s a city within the city, the Imperial Villa within the Royal City, housing the thousands who are part of the household. Unlike the original Imperial Palace in Tokyo, this city was built for the express purpose of housing the Royal Family and those loyal to them. They’re the largest employer in the region, run the police and are the local government.

He’s somehow found himself playing a game of soccer with some of the boy’s friends. His pants are wet and his waistcoat splotched with grass stains. But at least it lets him ignore his life problems.

A message pulls him away from his fun. It is from Maya, telling him to get ready. He sighs and says his goodbyes to the group, heads to his room and takes a shower.
He stands, dripping wet, and stares at his hero costume.

“This hasn’t been a hero costume for a long time,” he says, waiting for Dark Shadow’s caustic response. Then he remembers and closes his eyes, bitter and angry.

There’s a spot in the closet with his combat clothes. There are a few copies with minor variations, all useful in different situations.

He wears the black vest with its dark armour plate running sideways on the front and back. The trousers are still comfy and protective with their thigh plates and shin guards. He buckles them with the thick belt, checking the each of the pouches is full of pellets.

For a long moment, he stares at the cloak. One side is a light absorbent black and the other side is perfectly white. In the end, he puts it away.

He’s not ready yet for that.

Without it, he just looks like anyone ready for a fight. With it, however, it reminds him too much of the hero Tsukuyomi he envisioned as a child.

Finally, he takes the knives that were gifted to him. There are two, both long as his forearm and straight edged. They are bone white with blue ripples, incredibly heavy for their size. Each is perhaps five pounds, absurd when he knows a katana is barely half that.

They are abyssal knives and don't need to follow conventions he is used to. The metal of the blades is frigid and sucks away his energy. When he flips one, it slices the air and leaves brilliant sparks. The sheath is white wood and there are straps on the back of his belt for them.

He sets off for another night of mistakes.

*****

Toshinori Yagi is weary and feels his age more now than ever before.

His soul feels old and worn down by time, his spirit weathered by the winds of this changing era. Deep in his bones and in the wildfire of One For All, he knows he’ll have to face the villain soon. Face him and win because no one else is strong enough to stand on that stage.

They call Toshinori the Perfect Fighter. Perhaps he isn’t always the fastest and strongest and most experienced and technically gifted in every fight, most yes, but not all, and in those few fights, he still won.

He worries that he will not be able to match the man they call the strongest alive. By they he means those in the highest echelons of power, those who know of the secret wars fought. They have clashed once before, matched blows like two gods of war, and ultimately Toshinori came out the victor.

From the very jaws of defeat, broken and bleeding and practically dead, he struck down the villain.

With the return of his physical prime and with all the knowledge he has gained, perhaps the story will be different. One For All isn’t the endless fire of his youth but a smaller wildfire, one that burns brighter and hotter. He lacks the hidden reservoirs he took for granted in America. There are limits to his strength.

Perhaps it will be enough. Perhaps it won’t. Either way, he’s prepared for the final battle.
“Izuku.”

His successor turns, the false grin on his face replaced by a smaller, truer, smile. “Sensei.”

“May we speak?”

Izuku nods.

Soon, they are in All Might’s office, hidden and tucked away from the rest. It’s not a particularly large thing, a rather recent acquisition at Nezu’s insistence, but it has the advantage of being windowless and away from traffic.

Here, he can be Toshinori Yagi instead of All Might. Here he can let his power fade and return to his natural body.

He does, waiting for the pain. It takes him a moment to remember that there is no pain in his side thanks to Eri.

“My boy, I’ve treated you unfairly.”

Izuku hums. “Tell me how.”

That isn’t the immediate rebuttal he expects. Toshinori isn’t sure if that’s a good thing or not.

“I am not so arrogant as to ignore my faults. I’m… I fail often as a teacher. There was no opportunity for you to pass. I gave you no options and you still forced one. At the skill level I fought at, you had every reason to win. Because you were smart and determined and brave. Taking that victory from you was cruel. I hope you can forgive me one day.”

“I’m angry and upset but I forgive you.”

“You shouldn’t forgive so easily but I believe that is what makes you strong.” Toshinori smiles. “I told you that years ago I was injured and a limit imposed on my abilities.”

“Um, yeah?”

“Recently I battled a yakuza group. In their possession was a girl with an interesting quirk. You see, it can… reverse time to a degree.”

“What does that…” His successor cocks his head in thought. “She healed you. Does that mean you still have One For All?”

Toshinori shakes his head. The fire is there, burning hot and bright. But it’s nowhere close to the endless flames of his youth.

It certainly is nothing compared to the glorious lightning of his successor.

“No. One For All belongs to you and only you. In a few weeks, perhaps a few months if I am lucky, it will fade completely. But until then, I am stronger than I was before.”

“Will you tell me the truth?” Izuku asks strongly. “I want to know. About Nana Shimura and the villain and this quirk. I want to know the truth about everything.”

His successor stands tall when he asks this, unafraid of rejection. He’s come far since he grabbed Toshinori’s leg and revealed his greatest secret. There is a confidence he once lacked. The terror he once held when he discovered his true quirk is tempered now by resolve, his eyes a bright green
well of determination and dark knowledge.

Izuku looks like a hero and it makes Toshinori prouder than ever before.

“I suppose it’s time I tell you the entire truth about One For All and All For One.”

And so Toshinori tells him the truth of the two great quirks. He tells Izuku what little he knows about the quirk and the monumental battles that have been fought in its name. He tells Izuku of the line of succession and the heroes that have fallen against the great villain.

“Nana died in Tokushima. She fell to All For One. It was a bad place to fight. Too many civilians. Anywhere else, I want to believe she could have won. But she would rather die than let a single civilian die. And she wouldn’t let me get hurt.”

Toshinori closes his eyes, remembering her glory.

“She was my mentor. I loved her greatly and she loved as you do. Fiercely and bravely. She would go the distance for any stranger. And for those she loved, she would hold the line till the end of time. She never asked that you stand as tall as she could or fight as long. All she asked is that you tried. And if you failed, she would carry you on her back and keep you safe.

“My smile is how I honour her legacy. She taught me to smile despite my fears. She taught me the power of smiling when it came to saving people. When I look at you, Izuku, I see the best pieces of her. You’re just as determined and just as brave. I see her strength and nobility in you. If she were here, I know she would have taught you better than I ever could.”

“But she isn’t you,” Izuku says. “You respect her, yes, but you’re my teacher. My mentor. You’re my friend. I grew up calling you All Might but I call you Toshinori now. Hawkmoon and Hero could come right now and offer to teach me.”

Izuku smiles gently, something so innocent and compassionate that Toshinori feels his heart stops. This smile is the reason he put his faith in Izuku. Seeing it reaffirms his decision to trust Izuku.

“And I’d say no. Because they’re not people. They’re legends. And legends can’t ever be your friends.”

“Friends,” he says, testing it. “Yes. I think it would be an honour to call you a friend.”

“Why did you accept me when I lied about not having a quirk? I want to know if you chose me because I wouldn’t stay dead.”

“I think that may have been a part of it. It was an additional reason to entrust you with it.”

Izuku swallows, his expression falling. “I see.”

“My boy, I know I’ve failed you before, but I would like to think you know I care for you.” He smiles. “Even without it, I had already chosen you. You, Izuku Midoriya, the kind boy who jumped in to save his bully. I didn’t choose you for your quirk. I chose you because of your love for people. You love life like it's the most important thing in the universe. There’s no one I could possibly trust with One For All more than someone who would love everyone they're saving without having met them. That's what makes you a good person, my boy.”

Izuku stays silent, considering his words. He almost speaks, then stops. Toshinori is content to wait until he is ready. Things may be happening quickly, but he is willing to savour every moment with Izuku.
“I don’t know if I like what society is right now,” Izuku settles on. “I can’t stand police offers suppressing children for having no idea about their quirks. I can’t stand what the Imperial Family has done. I can’t stand what my father did. I think I hate what UA stands for. Every day I spent in Hokkaido made me sick with grief and anger because I’m part of the problem. I want it all to change. I want to save the people we forget about. And I don’t know if I can.”

Toshinori nods, understanding more than anyone else possibly could.

Some days it seems futile to try. Some days it seems that his efforts amount to nothing. And when those days come, he forces himself out of bed and tries harder.

Better to try and fail, then fail to try. One step forward at a time. Do that, and eventually, you’ll meet the rising sun.

“Then make me a deal.”

“What deal?” Izuku asks.

“Let me battle the villain and wipe the slate clean for you. Let me end All For One’s threat, and once that is done, the legacy of One For All shall fade.”

Everything ends. Sometimes, though, the way it ends can be chosen. And what is an ending but the beginning of another story?

Toshinori smiles because he has faith in the boy-becoming-a-man to make something noble out of that ending.

“You are my successor and I trust you to choose a path to the future. I’ve always had to be an exemplar of the present against the dark past my nemesis represents. I’ve always had to remind people that they can choose to stand tall and walk towards the sun. But you can show them the road to walk.”

“That’s a lot to bear.”

“Yes, it is. But I don’t think anyone except you can carry that burden. You’ve come farther in such a short time than most will in ten lifetimes. When you stood against Stain, I knew I had made the right decision. You care about being both just and right in a world where most can’t even care about one. Most importantly, you care about people.”

“What if I’m not strong enough?”

“Then you make a strong foundation and pass on that responsibility to someone worthy. I’m not going to make you perpetuate a cycle. I want you to make your own choices free of the legacies of the past. That is the responsibility I place on you. I give you power without direction. It will be up to you and your morals to choose a path.”

“What if I’m wrong? What if I make the wrong choices?”

“You won’t.”

“What about Tokoyami? Didn’t he make the wrong choices? Isn’t that why he’s gone.”

“I will have words with Nezu and Aizawa. I have no spent as much time with him as I would like, but he has never seemed anything less than an ideal hero candidate. Worry not on the matter and do your best at camp.”
“I don’t know if I even want to go,” he says honestly. “I want to be a hero but I think the hero I want to be isn’t the hero UA wants.”

“Take it one day at a time and I’ll sort things out. If after camp, when you aren’t so angry, and you choose to move away from UA, then I will support that decision.”

“Thank you.”

“You can always call on me.”

Izuku huffs. “Can I ask you a question?”

“You already did. But you can always ask me another.”

“Do you regret anything?”

“I regret many things. I think what I regret most is never having my own children.” Toshinori sighs tiredly. "Knowing that it makes me wonder if I became a teacher to fill that void."

“I thought you came to look for a successor.”

“I did but… being a teacher is much like being a parent. I’m responsible for shaping who you become, responsible for setting an example you can follow. But I do that as All Might. No, it’s all things around it that I’ve been seeking.” He smiles. “In knowing Asui’s refreshing bluntness or having Ashido tease me. It’s seeing Kirishima’s grin when I tell him stories about Crimson Riot or Bakugou staying quiet when I give him advice.”

“How do you even have the time?”

“I make it. You’re my successor but they’re also my students and have lessons to learn. Not from the Symbol of Peace, but from their awkward teacher. Everyone knows the Symbol. There aren’t any lessons All Might has to teach that they can’t learn by reading about me. But an autobiography isn’t the same as talking Monoma through the practicalities of his costume or showing Kendo how to deal with a sudden unbalanced mass.”

Does doing so mean he doesn’t spend as much time as a hero? Yes. But it also means spending time with the people he believes will shape the future. And that’s more than worth it.

“I was proud of your interview and how you conducted yourself,” Toshinori says gently. “When you’re being honest, the qualities that make you who you are shine through brightest. Your kindness, your compassion, your empathy. Most of all, your genuine interest in people. I know you have doubts, but just remember that you’re trying to save people and things will work themselves out.”

“I’m terrified I won’t be good enough to match you,” Izuku admits. “I think it might be my greatest fear.”

“It isn’t.”

Izuku frowns. “Then what is?”

“I know your greatest fear and I know you aren’t ready to know it.”

“I haven’t been lying to myself.”

“I know you haven’t. This isn’t because you are trying to hide from yourself but because you
simply don’t know who you are. I don’t know the circumstances you’ll discover it, but I want you
to remember that I knew and that I still believe you’re the only successor I could have.”

Toshinori stands. “Take care at camp.”

Izuku stands as well. “I will.”

“And if you see a boy called Mirio Togata, tell him I said he’s doing good work as a hero.”

Fumikage walks through a dark corridor at night, tense and worried. This is another mistake that
he’s making, one that can’t be undone. But it’s already too late to run away. He’s honour bound
now to follow through with this. An oath once made must always be kept.

“They'll let me enter with weapons?” he asks, fingering the handle of one of his two white blades.

He doesn’t know how to use them in a fight. Then again, he’s always been a ranged fighter. And
now, he’s less that and more a commander of a horde.

“The entire Guard will be there,” Maya says. “All six of us. I’d be able to stop you long before you
even thought of hurting him. And though I like you, my little Inquisitor, I would gladly kill you to
protect him.”

He nods as they walk.

The draft is cold and he smells the saltwater. They’re by the sea, he guesses, unsure since they took
him in a helicopter with blackout windows. Given his sense of direction, all they had to do was
circle a few times before he was completely lost.

“You won’t have to bow or kneel,” she tells him, her grip on his shoulder harsh. “There is no ritual
or ceremony to this. But there is one rule. Speak only when he tells you to.”

“Understood.”

She nods, letting go of him. She vanishes in a burst of light, leaving him alone. He sighs and walks
to the end of the corridor. Stairs greet him, a long flight that he takes carefully, unwilling to slip on
the slick surface.

He’s breathing hard by the time he reaches the top, his thighs burning. The knives weigh him
down, pulling him back with their absurd weight. That is only compounded by the armour he
wears.

For a moment he waits to hear Dark Shadow’s insulting remark.

“I suppose you have every right to be angry,” he says to the emptiness.

He exits and walks towards a new fate.

On either side are tall platforms, three chairs on them. He spies Maya and Itinerant on the left but
isn’t certain who sits next to them. The other side is just as foreign to him. Like this, they can
scrutinise his every action.

The Emperor is an old man, eighty-three and in his twilight years, odd given that his daughter is a
youth. His robes are traditional and emblazoned with the chrysanthemum of his dynasty. The man
sits on a throne taller than those the Guard use and there is a sheathed blade across his lap atop a
bundle of fabric.

He stops at the base of the dais, staring up at arguably the most influential man in Japan, a man capable of destroying cities whose line led to genocide. His wrinkles are deep and prominent, set in a sallow face. He’s bald and has only a thin moustache for facial hair. You would never take him for someone who wields a quirk capable of destroying a landmass if you saw him on the street.

Until that is, you saw his eyes. Sharp, calculating, but deeply compassionate. An odd combination, one that makes Fumikage uncomfortable.

“State your name before us,” the Emperor says, his voice deep as a mountain and just as loud.

He could lie to himself the shiver is from the cold wind on his bare arms. A man that old and frail looking shouldn’t sound that strong.

“Fumikage Tokoyami.”

The Emperor observes him for a long moment, judging him. Fumikage wonders what he sees. A scared boy? Someone in over his head? A piece on the board? Or someone worthy?

“You have fought where others would flee,” the Emperor continues. “Age and nationality do not matter to the Imperial Household. They matter to the Throne. Are you of Japanese descent?”

“No, I don’t, he thinks. Maya told me no one of this.

“Yes,” he says instead.

The Emperor stands.

He carries the sword and fabric in both hands, walking down the five steps of the dais to stand on the same level as Fumikage. The Emperor is taller than him, unsurprising given Fumikage’s short stature, but even in his advanced age, the Emperor is an imposing figure at over six foot.

Fumikage might not be kneeling, but he feels tiny before the frail man.

“Guardswoman Agonist”—some amongst the Guard bursts out laughing, and there is the tiniest undercurrent of humour to the Emperor—“has vouched for your character. She claims you are honourable, just and compassionate. She claims you believe in human dignity and the sanctity of human life. Does she speak true?”

“Yes,” he whispers.

“This blade is your oath,” the Emperor says, presenting it to Fumikage. “You shall be an exemplar of mankind. Where others would flee from the dark, you will enter the battlefield first and leave it last. You shall be a Special Asset against the horrors of the abyss, the final shield between mankind and the desolation, and the first weapon against the nightmares of the dark below.”

The Emperor extends the sword.

Fumikage takes it, finding it light and easy to carry. The sheath is made of leather he can’t recognise, a dark metal that hurts to look at wrapping around its length. All in all, it is a beautiful
thing.

He unsheathes the sword and recognises he blade immediately.

It is dark as midnight and emits smoke of true darkness. It is one of the abyssal weapons they searched for that day on the water with the Doki Mariner and Asui, cut down for a human to wield —just over a metre in total length, perhaps eighty centimetres devoted to the straight edged blade. He remembers the creature that wielded it, strong enough that it held off his dragon, Watatsumi, for a few minutes by wielding the sword now presented to him.

That blade reminds him of losing Asui as a friend, of being expelled and leaving home. It is his regrets and fear in physical form. It will forever be a mark of his shame.

It is also a sign of freedom.

This is his choice, no matter the consequences. No one has forced or coerced him to do this. Perhaps he has been driven to this, manipulated by outside forces. But, knowing the threat of the abyss, he would always come to a path like this. Perhaps not the Imperial family, but he would always fight to protect mankind from darkness. Maybe he would do it as a lone vigilante and maybe he would start his own group, but it would always come to this.

The blade is light as a feather. For the first time, he knows the weight of true freedom. And it is freeing.

“This oath, I do accept,” Fumikage says.

He sheaths the blade and holds it protectively. He can feel the power it holds. More importantly, he can feel the destructive potential it holds.

The Emperor extends the dark bundle to Fumikage.

“Accept this token of our favour.”

The cloak is thicker than he is used to but just as functional as the ones he wore before. But where the first was a plain black, and the second had a white interior, this one differs more than just the white fur hood.

The black side has the symbol of the Emperor, the Imperial Chrysanthemum: the flower is pure white against the dark background, but where the ornate gold swords would be are white blades, and where there would be a simple shield is instead intricately stitched to look like links of a chain.

The white side, however, differs greatly in loyalty. There is a moon, below which are a dragon and a crow and a hound. Gold chains bind the moon to the creatures. He styled himself after Tsukuyomi, the god of the moon. He is the moon binding a horde to his command. And stencilled in the moon is a tree.

Dark Shadow, he thinks, feeling the grief crash down on him.

“The white chrysanthemum represents loyalty and honesty,” the Emperor says, unaware of Fumikage’s turmoil. “Be loyal to your oaths. Be honest to your peers and to yourself. Do you understand the realm you have entered?”

No.

“Yes,” he says instead, voice steady and deep.
“What is your true name? The name given to you by my Agonist.” Someone behind him laughs again. “The name of your promise. The name to whom that blade was given.”

He swallows, seeing the chains that will bind him to these people by doing this. And yet, all of this has been his choice. In the deepest parts of his soul, he knows he would make the same decisions again.

“I am the Inquisitor.”

“Your duty shall be simple, Inquisitor. Seek corruption and cleanse it from this world. Protect it where others cannot. You will do this with the protection of the Imperial Household and with our authority. Wear the symbol of our household with pride.”

He means the cloak. There’s a choice to be made: to wear the side that represents the moon or the one that represents the imperial family.

He chooses the option that won’t have a chance of pissing off six people who can kill him. The cloak is heavy, the material thick and sturdy. The white of the cloak is incredibly bright against his dark clothes.

He feels the straps on the cloak and figures out what they're for. With one smooth motion, he slots the sword in place. The slots run horizontal across the cloak and the sword follows with it. Which is for the best. At over a metre, the sword is two third's Fumikage’s height. This way, at least, he can walk without feeling like an idiot.

This isn't meant for it to be unsheathed from his back. That's horrendously impractical. But for carrying a sheathed weapon at a formal event, this works.

“Accept this Mandate of Heaven and join your power to ours.”

A part of him understands that this ritual is not complete. There is something more, the final act to bind them together.

Power.

The Emperor gives him trust, but most of all, he gives Fumikage power. This is the power to act as he pleases, backed by one of the mightiest entities in Japan. To have no doors barred to him, to be the highest authority in any city. This power may bring Fumikage success, but it may also bring ruin to the Royals should he abuse it. And now he must show the power he will, in turn, give, the power that may bring the Emperor success or perhaps ruin Fumikage.

Long chains of darkness materialise from his body. Slowly, his hounds manifest behind him, a legion of quicksilver beasts that feasted on time itself. They drip acid from the dark maws, bristling in annoyance that there are no enemies to battle. A flock of crows, their feathers formed of glass unshattering hover above him, patient and cunning and ready to devour gods at his command.

Finally, his second companion appears. Watastumi is large, towering over the gathering and casting a shadow that encapsulates them all. This darkness is the shadow of his intent, the vessel of Fumikage’s right to rule as a king. Tonight, he grants it to the energy to be as tall as a building.

“This mandate, I do accept.”

The Emperor hands him a simple octagon. It has the white chrysanthemum on one side and a moon bound in chains on the other.
“We recognise you, Inquisitor,” the Emperor says, not afraid of the beasts arrayed before him. “May the odds ever be in your favour.”

There is a flash of light and the entirety of the Guard stands behind their Emperor. He notices one of the men is turned around, facing the wrong direction, and another looks queasy.

“This island was raised by my power for your vigil,” the Emperor says. “It will exist only for this night. Use it as you please.”

Itinerant steps forward. A wave of something that hurts to look at—frozen time, his soul supplies—engulfs the group. In a moment, they are gone, leaving him alone.

He stares blankly for a minute.

“I was just ditched,” he says bitterly.

Then he gets up and takes a walk.

The cloak, at the very least, keeps him warm as he explores the island. There isn’t much in the way of vegetation though the scent of dead fish is cloyingly strong the longer he walks. The island is sloped, gently where the gathering occurred, and more severely near the centre.

In the centre is a bowl filled with dead aquatic life and plant matter. It’s new since he can’t see any obvious signs of rot or infection.

Fumikage shrugs and lets his hounds and crows free. They may as well clean up.

He finds the highest spot of the island on the opposite end. It takes perhaps two hours of hard hiking before he reaches the spot. From here, he can look over the entire island. His dragon is flying somewhere in the distance whilst his horde is busy eating.

Right now, his soul is empty but for one entity. He sits cross-legged in concentration, the sheathed sword resting on his thighs.

Dark Shadow, he says, searching the deepest recesses of his soul for the demon. He finds it and pushes at the bond between them lightly.

What do you want? it snaps venomously.

I have a gift for you. This is not an attempt at an apology. Please.

The demon rises to the top of his soul and manifests in the real world. It is large in the darkness, eyes a cruel yellow. It observes his thick cloak with disdain, bristling in annoyance.

You’ve chained yourselves to them.

“Yes,” he agrees. “It is a mistake but I have no other choices. Being a hero is beyond me now. But, protecting this world is not.”

Dark Shadow makes a sound of disgust, looking around carefully. It spots his horde tearing into the dead marine life. Right now, they’re fighting over a whale carcass. They watch one hound dart across and steal the carcass as the crows fight off the rest of the pack.

The King who bows. That is what they will call you.

“I did not bow. But I also did not come to battle you.”
He raises the blade in both hands reverently. It is light, much lighter than a sword its length should be. Very literally light as a feather.

“This is my gift. I do not know what metal this is forged from, but I know it can sever the bonds between us. If you wish to stay with me, let it be by your choice. I will not force you to stand by me. No matter my anger, I can never take away you will. Not when you hold that blade.”

Dark Shadow takes the blade between two long talons. It examines the dark sword, tilting it this way and that.

It was made from a shattered infernal engine in the depths of the abyss and forged to this shape by the godflame’s might. This blade represents the dominions between your two peers. It is a Blade of Disparity between true dark and eternal heat. You would give this treasure to me without hesitation?

Fumikage nods. “You were my first friend even when you opposed me. I will not force you to stay. Not you and never you. There must be trust between us even if it is held by a sword.”

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to Season IV of the Dark Below. There are moments in this that I’ve been waiting to tell for what feels like years. Some scenes are almost entirely unchanged. This season is the culminating of most of the plot threads I’ve built up over this story. I promised you that things would be wild and crazy. I promised you a war and I mean to deliver it very soon. It won’t be pleasant, and it might very well not be happy, but it’s time.

This is the Season of Ascension. But for one person to ascend, another must fall. Brace yourselves because people don’t pull punches in this story.

Thank you and take care.
‘Never trust in the threat ranking of any enemy for it cannot be considered the full article of an opponent’s combat abilities. Each battle is a learning experience to hone one’s skills. A villain’s quirk may not become more dangerous, but their utilisation and versatility of their quirk has no upper bound. Skill, experience and battle tactics can be learnt and improved upon. Even the simplest quirks can have unexpected uses. Do not underestimate them. To do so is to be wilfully ignorant. To be ignorant is to accept defeat.’

—Excerpt from the recovered 'Tenets of Combat' likely authored by an underground hero or vigilante.

Shouta Aizawa walks down a dirt path through the forest UA owns. He’s tired and filled with grief. Everything has blurred together since the expulsion of his student and his heart feels no lighter. The rebuke from Nezu afterwards still echoes in his head and haunts his fitful sleep.

But for now, he must close his heart to those feelings. He knows it may not have been the best decision, but all he can think of when he sees that white uniform is Shikoku burning in black fire. All he sees is his mother dying to those flames.

The house is on the outskirts of a forest, always guarded by armed security. Every inch of the forest is covered in monitoring equipment. It’s a good system. Even if you could escape the security, you’d have to escape acres of forest.

By the time you could get anywhere, the forest would be swarming with security. Shouta hesitates at the door of the small home. He takes a breath, then knocks.

There is no response. Warily, Shouto pushes the door open.

The home isn’t anything special, as mass manufactured as you can get with simple floors and an even simpler floor plan. From the front door, he can see all the way to the patio past the small lounge and dining area. The only things of note are the security systems they don’t even attempt to hide.

Lounging languidly on a simpler recliner is his student. Former student, he amends.

“Hello, Sensei,” Nagisa says softly, vivid red eyes observing him.

The boy looks healthier and has put on a bit of weight. His wounds and infections are being treated and it shows as his features are relaxed, no longer constantly in pain and trying to manage it. His grey hair is cut short, nothing like the long and tangled mess right after the Sports Festival.

Nagisa raises one hand and waves lazily, making a show of the collars on his arm. It makes Shouta focus on the dark collar around his neck and two red bands flashing slowly on its surface. They’re there to send electric pulses should Nagisa leave the house.
It's significantly kinder than the explosive system the military initially insisted on. It had taken all he had to fight against that idea. Yes, the boy has blood on his hands, but everything he did was out of fear and manipulation.

What of Fumikage? An insidious voice asks. Wasn’t he scared and manipulated?

He pushes it away.

“You look healthier,” Shouta says, taking the only other seat available to him.

“Aren’t you afraid I’ll attack you?”

Shouta chuckles mirthlessly. “The shock collar will stop you long before I need to use my quirk.”

“How rational,” Nagisa says. “I’ve missed that. What do you want from me, Sensei? I don’t have any extra information to give. I’ve told you everything I know.”

“I came to see how you’re adjusting.”

“Well enough. I may be bored out of my mind but that’s a good thing.” The boy smiles. “What weight is crushing you, Sensei?”

“A mistake I made.”

“Ah, you expelled another student, didn’t you? That’s a terrible habit to have.”

“I know,” he snarls.

“Oh, I don’t mean the expulsion itself. I just mean it makes you predictable. And when you’re predictable, it’s easy enough to guess your next action.”

He doesn’t clench his fists. It’s a close thing because that sounds too perfect an answer. If Nagisa, who hasn’t seen him in years can figure out his actions and the reasons behind them, then wouldn’t someone trained by the imperial family be able to figure it out.

Those bastards, he thinks bitterly.

“It’s a lovely story you spin for me,” Nagisa says to fill the silence. “A student brainwashed by villains being rehabilitated by UA. You turned a PR disaster into a victory and now UA looks progressive. You’re changing your exams and instituting a teacher-student exchange program with Toledo Research Institute and Hero Memorial Academy.”

Shouta is tangentially aware of that. He’s got a stack of paperwork as tall as he is to deal with after camp and sort out those issues. That is, if Nezu even lets him handle anything more important than being a chaperone for the rest of his life.

“And to top it all off, you’re expanding. Two more classes and rumour has it that Gang Orca and Kamui Woods are going to teach them. Not to mention all the extra staff that's joining. Nezu truly is amazing.”

He ignores the sarcasm.

“How are you doing?”

“Can’t complain that I’m being used as a puppet for the story you’re telling. House arrest under armed guard is better than anything I’ve had in years. Food, shelter and even entertainment. You
know, I took two showers yesterday.” Nagisa smiles. “This isn’t a punishment at all. Why would you go so far?”

“Because I made a mistake,” Shouta says. “I’m going to find the rest of your class. Rei’s safe and we’ve gotten Kensuke and Toji. I’m not resting until your all safe.”

It happens in stages. Nagisa’s eyes widen, slowly and in confusion. He cocks his head slightly, processing Shouta’s words. He blinks once. Then twice. On the third blink, his eyes glisten.

Nagisa cries openly, still stuck in confusion. Then he laughs between tears, rubbing at his eyes furiously.

“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

Shouta does his best not to react.

“I’ll organise a visit with Rei for you when I’m back,” he says once the boy is composed. “Please, stay out of trouble.”

Nagisa's grin is sly. Shouta remembers it well form teaching the boy. It reminds him of a time when things were simpler, back before the politics and the endless mistakes.

He carries that warm feeling as he herds his students into the bus later that day.

Midoriya glares at him and makes absolutely no secret of it. There are tiny sparks of green lightning and he looks tense. Perhaps the only thing keeping him from leaping forward and attacking Shouta is Ojiro’s arm around his neck in a tight grip.

He lets the children make as much noise as they please during the ride. Let them have a bit of fun before training starts.

Does he take a bit of joy in watching the platform collapse? Not a lot. Does he take a bit of enjoyment in watching them struggle to survive in the forest? Maybe. But they’ve caused him enough sleepless nights that he doesn’t care anymore.

He listens to Mandalay relay the situation in the forest, paying attention to the little boy nearby. Kouta, he knows him to be, the surviving son of the Water Hoses. The kid looks angry and ready to start a fight. Shouta understands his anger, understands his hatred towards other heroes.

Who would want to constantly be told their parents death is a good thing?

“This is a bit mean, Sensei,” someone says, pulling him from his thoughts.

Down in the forest, his students are struggling to deal with the seemingly endless swarm of golems. They’ve been programmed to be aggressive and extremely mobile. From what he’s heard, Sero’s going to have some serious bruises for the rest of the week.

He looks to Mirio. The third-year stands away from his two peers, smiling broadly, his eyes bright and warm.

“They have to get stronger,” he says, walking away.

He’s never had the privilege of teaching Mirio Togata but from every report, he’s turning into a splendid hero. Maybe a bit more energetic than Shouta wants to deal with, but an ideal leader and hero.
The boy follows Shouta so they won’t be overheard. If it was something simple, he would have come with his two peers. The fact that they’re not following behind, and Nejire is actively distracting Kouta, means this is private.

“My agency’s been looking into a lot of the vigilantes. Things are getting weird. Ever hear of the Lightning Bolts?”

“Just whispers,” he admits. “I’ve been too busy to keep up with the underground.”

“Well, let’s just say you might want to pay a bit more attention. Because that kid in green might have just started something huge.”

Shouta closes his eyes. “I’m not surprised. Stain and that interview.”

"Yup. Pretty scathing remarks about the hero industry. I didn't get too much time before you pulled me here, but something's going on with the vigilantes and underground heroes. There's a lot of movement. Way more than usual. And with what's going on over in Vancouver, it looks bad.”

Shouta blinks. “Vancouver?”

“Yeah. Looks like their villains and heroes are about to go to war. Looks like it’s going to be bloody. Every skirmish so far had a few casualties.”

Shouta nods. “I’ll talk to a few people and send a message to Nezu. We can’t afford that violence reaching Japan. Thank you.”

Mirio grins. “No problem. Just don’t want to be blindsided again like the stadium.” He looks around. “You brought in a lot of security.”

An entire squad from a security consultancy firm. Shouta lacked the time to fully trace their money, but he’s almost certain they’re owned by a private military corporation, even if he doesn’t know which. They’re dangerous.

Which is good. Dangerous people sometimes provide the best security. They’ll be the first ones to deal with any attacks that might happen over the next week. It will give Aizawa and Sekijiro time to deal with possible assailants and call for backup from the hero agencies in the next city. Shouta ensured that they have hardline communications with an agency specialising in rapid response and he’d tested them personally. That agency can have six heroes here in under fifteen minutes, and the rest can have teams over within forty-five minutes.

“Not taking any chances. You three will be working shifts at night with the security guards and the teachers. Don’t push yourself too hard.”

“Understood.”

Togata hesitates, fingers twitching nervously.

“What is it?” Shouta asks.

“I know I shouldn’t be asking, but he was in my year and we may not have been close, but Nagisa was a peer. They all were.”

Shouta inclines his head. “They’ll be just fine. I’ll make arrangements for you to see them if you’d like. It might do them good.”
Izuku sits away from his classmates, picking at his food. They all look exhausted after the first day of training. Izuku, on the other hand, has become used to this level of intensity.

Gran Torino did beat you to a pulp for three straight weeks.

He doesn’t shudder. That was both incredibly useful and incredibly painful. After months fighting nightmares and memetic concepts, it had been necessary to remember how humans fight. I

Kirishima stands from his table and shoots Izuku a smile. Izuku shakes his head, signalling that no, he’s not in any mood to talk to someone fairly. At least, he hopes Kirishima gets the message.

When Kirishima’s smile falters, but he continues, Izuku realises only he has access to his interior monologue at any given time.

And me.

He lets his false cheer vanish, leaving only glacial indifference. It’s a warning, a simple question: are you willing to deal with this? Kirishima slows and stops in response, a rather simple no.

Izuku scoffs, disappointed, before returning to his meal.

When he is done, he hands his plate to Mandalay, thanking her sincerely if not with any warmth.

He heads past the frenetic and exhausted energy his classmates occupy simply by being in the same room. He nods to Pixiebob who is walking through the hall. There, at least one authority figure knows where he is.

He leaves the hall.

The air outside isn’t cold. Fresh certainly, but not cold. He could walk through here with a long shirt at most.

“Where are you going?”

He isn’t surprised that someone speaks to him. He felt their shadow before he left the building.

The teenager is blonde and looks only a few years older than Izuku. His eyes are absurdly bright as though there is a headlight behind them.

“For a walk,” he answers.

“Well, you shouldn’t stay out too long. You never know what’ll come and get you at night?”

He can’t help his smile. “Like your two friends on patrol?”

The stranger smiles brightly. “Izuku Midoriya, right? I saw that petition you started.”

“And?”

“It was good. I liked it.” He extends his hand. “Mirio Togata.”

Izuku shakes it.

“You already know me.” He blinks. “Oh, All Might said you’re doing good work.”

Mirio cocks his head in confusion. “Did he?”
Izuku shrugs. “He’s weird like that. Well, have fun.”

“Sure?”

The moon is bright, casting the world in a soft grey. With it like this, he can feel the forest teeming with activity: small rodents flitting from one location to the next, birds in flight, and the many people he doesn’t recognise. Given that no one has mentioned them, he assumes they are security.

He walks aimlessly, seeking only to get away from the other humans. The forest is quiet unlike the hall, peaceful not unlike the beach. He brushes his fingers against the trees, savouring the coarse feeling under his fingertips.

*Are you going to tell your friends the truth about everything?*

“I will,” Izuku says, stepping over a thick root. “Camp’s only a week long. I’ve got another few days.”

*I still don’t understand. The truths you speak are your form of power. You spoke a truth of love and the abyss changed for you. Yet, you lied and hide from the truth, from your own power.*

“I guess I was afraid of being something more than plain old me.”

“Who are you talking to?”

Izuku startles and trips.

At the last moment, he twists into a spin and catches himself. He looks up and sees a boy sitting on a tree branch a few metres up.

“You’re really sneaky,” Izuku says, smiling. “What are you doing up there? Wouldn’t you rather be inside?”

“I don’t like your class. You wannabe heroes are too loud and stupid.”

Izuku shrugs. “They are very loud. I came out to get away from it.”

“So, you see it, right?” the boy asks, suddenly excited. “You see the problem.”

“What problem?”

“The hero problem. They just make things worse.”

Izuku takes a deep breath. “Okay, I feel like you have a tragic backstory for me to hear. But first, how’s about you come down before you fall?”

“I won’t fall.”

Izuku raises his hand. Then he brings down one finger.

“What”—another finger—“are you”—only two fingers left—“doing?”

He brings down the last finger. Right then and there, an owl that’s been hovering in the background smacks right into Kouta. The boy yelps, arms flailing as he falls.

Izuku catches him easily.
“Told you to get down.”

He sets the child down, smiling benevolently at him.

The boy smacks him. “You’re an asshole, Midoriya.”

Izuku ignores it. It doesn’t hurt and maybe he is being difficult.

“I never gave you my name. You can call me Izuku if you like. What’s yours?” he asks, directing the conversation.

“Kouta.”

Izuku kneels so that they’re eye-level. He extends his hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

The boy stares blankly at the hand. “What are you doing?”

“This is where you shake my hand.”

“I know what a fucking handshake is. Why are you acting like…”

“Why am I not treating you like a child?” Kouta nods. “Why should I? So, are you going to shake my hand or what?”

The boy frowns, his face scrunching up as he decides. Finally, he sighs and gives the most half-assed handshake Izuku has ever experienced. Still, it means he can be taught some manners.

_He’s not a dog._

“Now we know each other,” Izuku says, smiling. “That means you can tell me how you know my name.”

“I saw you on the news,” Kouta says.

Izuku rubs his eyes, mildly embarrassed. Sure, his classmates and his counsellor knowing is one thing. But a random kid he’s never met knowing him makes him uncomfortable.

“Yeah. That was weird.”

“How old was she?” Kouta asks bluntly.

Instantly, his cheer dies. Oh, his smile stays present but the warmth in his gaze fades away, replaced by utter desolation. There is nothing but cold, alien logic to his gaze.

“No older than twelve,” he says slowly, observing Kouta as a hawk would a mouse. “Maybe a bit younger. Too young. Why?”

“A real hero would have saved her. There weren’t any. And even then, they let it be like that.”

“Heroes can’t be everywhere. They can only save the people in front of them and make society better one person at a time.”

Kouta shakes his head vigorously. “No. They’re making everything worse. You’re the only one who sees how heroes are ruining everything. That they shouldn’t be praised.”

“What about All Might?”
“He’s the strongest but everything stays the same. It’s the same fights and villains and he doesn’t do anything. And all the rest of them... they just act like spoilt brats. They don’t deserve the praise.” Kouta’s eyes harden. “They shouldn’t be praised for dying.”

With startling clarity, he understands. Slowly, he asks, “Kouta, where are your parents?”

“Dead.”

Izuku swallows nervously, not sure how to proceed. It’s eerie hearing Stain’s ideology spoken through the lens of a little boy. And yet, Izuku isn’t totally against his words. They are childish and naive, buy maybe that’s why he finds them so endearing.

“Everyone says you should be proud, don’t they? They think they’re making it better by reminding you of that.”

“You see, you do get it.”

“I do, you’re doing something pretty interesting,” Izuku says gently. “A lot of people do it. Right now, you’re taking my words out of context to support your argument.”

“What?”

“I said we shouldn’t praise the current system and that we should try and fix its problems. Not that we should get rid of heroes. I’m sorry about what happened to your parents. I don’t know them and I don’t know how it happened, but I know one thing about parents. No matter what, they would want you to be happy. You’re allowed to be angry but you need to move past everyone else.”

“I’m not going to forget them,” Kouta snarls, stepping back. He’s shaking, trembling with anger.

“I never said that. I never said you have to move on from them. But you have to move on from the random strangers telling you how to feel.”

For a moment, he thinks his words have reached the boy. Then, the boy punches him in the crotch.

Izuku’s eyes widen and he tips over.

“You’re a random stranger,” Kouto screams in his high voice, stalking past Izuku’s crumpled form.

**Huh, I didn’t know you still worked down there**

“Shut up,” he groans weakly, rising to sit.

He leans against a tree for a few minutes as his body recovers from the violent and unexpected attack. Once he can stand without a blinding flare of pain, he trudges back to the hall, checking that Kouta did, in fact, go back.

There’s a nice warm mattress waiting for him. He stumbles to his mattress in the corner and closes his eyes.

He isn’t surprised by the light surrounding him. He has seen this corridor many, many times before. As always, he reaches out and touches the rainbow light that makes up the walls. This time, it feels cold and haunting and sends a chill up his arm.

He looks forward, expecting to see one of the many fiery eyes.

There is no one watching him. There is nothing but a gaping emptiness. It is a space devoid of any
warmth or happiness or joy.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers, understanding. “I should have saved you.”

Why?

He turns and sees Mikumo, dark of hair and standing taller than Izuku. All he can make out are his facial features. Everything else is hazy.

“Because I want to save everyone.”

You can’t save everyone.

“I need to try but I didn’t even try. I need to be better.”

His brother smiles a mad grin. I saved you from the dying fire.

“Mikumo, what did you—”

I gave you a clean slate. Everything you do now is your choice. Now, wake up.

Someone’s shaking him awake. His eyes snap open, the misty haze of sleep passing in a single instant.

It is Kirishima, his features a mask of worry. There’s something wary in his gaze.

“Hey, you alright? You were muttering a lot in your sleep.”

Izuku blinks slowly, trying to grasp the details of the dream. But it’s like trying to hold water with an open hand.

“There was something important in that dream,” he says, swallowing.

Kirishima watches him slowly. “Well, get back to sleep,” he says after a moment. “I’ll keep watch.”

He nods. “Yeah.”

He heads out without eating.

Izuku trains his quirk for the first time. Everything he’s done up until now has been raw combat training in one form or another: Jin Mo-Ri who taught him the foundations of form and technique in the months before the entrance exam; Ojiro and Iida who proved adept sparring partners, both more technically competent in a fight and both with different lessons to be learnt; and Gran Torino who taught him to use his quirks interchangeably without hesitating, a single quirk rather than a mishmash of abilities to call on.

Right now, he’s working on making air blasts. During the Sports Festival, he needed to break a few fingers to generate a shockwave until the very last kick which left a deep gouge.

He settles into a common back stance, breathing calmly. He’s a bit out of the way of his peers at his own insistence. Somewhere in the back, he can hear Bakugou destroying something with a crazed roar and in the corner of his vision he can see Sero swinging from one tree to the next till he crashes head first. It’s an amusing diversion, certainly more entertaining than Aoyama being sick for the third time from quirk overuse or watching Sato and Yaoyorozu gorge themselves.
One For All flows through his limbs, strengthening them. He directs most of it to his legs, watching green sparks manifest.

Then, in one sudden and violent motion, he kicks. At the apex of his kick, he stops, sending as much force through his leg as he can.

It isn’t an awe-inspiring trench or even a shallow gouge. Izuku frowns, air buffeting his face and tussling his hair.

“Why isn’t this working?” he asks, after the fourth failed attempt.

*You’re thinking it through too much. It wasn’t just a kick then; it was Renewal Taekwondo. There’s a difference in intent.*

Izuku rolls his eyes. Lets One For All Fade. Activates it again.

There’s still a bit of lag, made worse when he tries to specify a portion of his body to amplify. It’s a weakness he still has, something that stops him effectively flowing from one offence to another. Gran Torino had mercilessly taken advantage of it. Whilst it doesn’t matter against people who aren’t physical monstrosities, anyone as fast or faster can mercilessly take advantage of that gap.

So, he practices, flexing One For All active before letting it fade. He practices letting it activate only in one limb without much success and almost breaks his pelvis doing so. Apparently, moving at extreme speeds isn’t good for the human body—or whatever bits are still human given that he has crystal in his bones and a dragon’s spine in his back—which is unfortunate.

There needs to be a minimum amount of One For All in his entire body to make it safe just to handle the internal forces and torques generated.

Maybe it is petty, but he doesn't stop training when he feels a shadow approach him. He knows its shape well enough to know who it is. All he does is shift gears to something less intense.

“Midoriya, we need to talk,” Aizawa says, likely sick of being ignored.

Izuku doesn’t look up from the shadow spheres he’s juggling. Three of them right now, though the fourth had dissipated under the sunlight. One of them is about to shatter.

“What’s there to say?” he asks casually. “Unless you’re here to apologise to me.”

“Not everything is about you.”

“Then why are you here?” he asks snidely. “If it’s not about me, why are you telling me? If it has nothing to do with me in the slightest, why are you trying to justify yourself to me?”

“Because you’ve isolated yourself from your classmates.”

“Because I’m angry.” Izuku snaps. “And it’s not fair to take it out on them. But you, you keep on making things worse. You went after my mother and then you expelled my friend.”

“We’re not here to talk about your mother.”

“And yet, here we are, talking about her.”

“I haven’t said one word to her since then and I’ve apologised to her.”

“Yeah, in a letter that was written by someone else.”
“So what? I’ve kept my end of that apology. I haven’t done anything even if I don’t believe she is
good for you. Because I don’t, for a single moment, believe you are in any way, shape, or form, fit
to make decisions regarding your own health.”

Izuku grits his teeth so hard they feel like they’re about to break. “I’m better.”

“Yes, you are. But you don’t care about your own death. It means nothing to you even though the
ramifications on your psyche are evident in everything you do.”

Izuku stills. He doesn’t care that one of the spheres hits his head or that the other two dissipate with
his lack of concentration.

“Like what? Being willing to move on. That’s what you seem completely incapable of doing. I
moved on from Bakugou. I moved on from what you said. I moved on from the Stadium. I fucking
moved on, not because there’s something wrong with me, but because there’s no point dwelling on
the past. Why can’t you move on?”

“Now you’re changing the narrative and making yourself out to be the victim. Something you
always do.”

“Fuck you,” Izuku shouts. “Fuck you and your bullshit. Give me one good reason to justify
expelling Fumikage. One.”

Aizawa crosses his arms. “Does joining a paramilitary organisation opposed to UA count?”

“What?”

“He joined a paramilitary organisation,” Aizawa repeats. “I can’t ignore that. He made that choice
on his own. No one forced him to hide or lie. He could have come to us, could have us the truth.
He kept his quirk a secret from—”

“I did the same,” Izuku snaps.

“Yes, and then you came clean. You didn’t go out and join a military group.”

“Why didn’t you try to convince him? He’s an idiot but he isn’t cruel or evil.”

Aizawa raises one hand. “A thousand lives.” He raises the other. “A dozen here. Which would you
choose to save?”

“Neither. I’d save both. I’d never go into a situation willing to sacrifice them.”

Aizawa closes the hand with a dozen lives in it. “That’s the choice he was willing to make, the
choice he insisted I should be able to make if it ever came to your class. I’m sorry that it hurts, but
his path diverged from heroics and he’s never going to walk that road again.”

“You don’t know that.”

“You’re right, I don’t. The only thing I can hope for is that he doesn’t do anything worse. I can
only hope he walks away from his foolishness.” Aizawa sighs, looking so tired. “In truth, I think
he’s only going keep walking down that road and he's never going to look back.”

“Tell me whom and I’ll help him. I don’t care.”

“You know, maybe you can. Just go ask your father. He works for them.”
Izuku’s eyes widen. “No.”

“Yes. Your father who works for the imperial family. You father who threatened to burn down UA. That’s the group your friend joined.” Aizawa steps forward. “So maybe I didn’t make the best choice but forgive me for not trusting a person who joined them. Forgive me for not trusting someone who lied about their quirk constantly and never came forward. Forgive me for choosing not to help someone working with a group that killed twenty million people.”

He glares at Aizawa. He stares down a man he once respected, a man he once considered a mentor and maybe a friend in the future. Someone he thought he could trust—and in many ways, he did trust Aizawa with the truth of his quirk.

All Izuku sees now is a petty man on a vendetta, lashing out at everyone for his past mistakes. He sees the person he could become one day if he keeps playing the victim. And maybe he still is by blaming Aizawa, but Izuku doesn’t care anymore.

“No,” he says deep as the void that is his kingdom. “Never.”

He says it with the slightest hint of the song that will end life and no doubt his eyes burn like bolts of green lightning, bright with dark knowledge. And maybe the temperature drops and the sky seems to darken because the dreaming dead gods within want to be let free to rampage and consume everything.

“A truth: I know what my father did and I trust him more than you.” He grins, an unending maw of crystal teeth fit to consume gods. “Another truth: I want to be a hero, but not at UA. Not with you.”

The second day of camp begins without much fanfare. They are woken at the crack of dawn, just before the sun rises. He still feels angry and bitter after the confrontation with Aizawa, but he’s willing to walk his own path now more than ever.

He is changing when he feels the approaching shadow, uncertain of who it is. He pulls his shirt down fully and turns, seeing Iida. His classmate looks uncertain, wary even, and hesitates before he speaks.

“Can we talk?”

“Are you done being angry with me?” Izuku asks.

“You’re the one who was angry with me.”

“Because I was worried. And yes, I know how hypocritical that is. It’s just that I didn’t know what to say and you just kept on making things worse.” He takes a breath to calm down. “Look, I don’t claim to understand how you feel about Stain and I was wrong with how I handled things in class. I shouldn’t have said it the way I said.”

“Midoriya, I don’t—”

“Just let me finish. Please. I’m trying to figure out the words and if you interrupt me, it’s hard. Okay?”

“Alright.”

“I didn’t consider your feelings when I said that. Because once I start hurting my friends because of
my beliefs, then maybe there’s something wrong with my methods. And your methods were why I said you were wrong, why I said Stain was wrong. Doesn’t that make me wrong as well? And even if it doesn’t, I can’t excuse being petty and spiteful to you. It doesn’t excuse not being a better friend to you.”

Guilt and fear drive his words. Guilt at everything that’s happened between them and fear that if he doesn’t speak now then maybe their relationship will crumble.

“I never told you.”

“Because you didn’t trust me. Because I didn’t care more about you and that’s not fair. I might be saying this wrong, and maybe I shouldn’t, but I’m sorry about what happened to your brother. I’m sorry I wasn’t there to help you. I’m sorry I didn’t consider how you felt.”

Iida shuffles awkwardly. “It’s okay.

“No, it’s not. I think, more than anything, I need to come clean and tell you all the truth.”

“What are you talking about?”

“My quirk. It’s different. Just like Todoroki’s.”

“That’s good, I guess. I had Todoroki helping me the entire time. He threatened to call you if I didn’t let him help.”

Izuku chuckles. “That sounds like him.”

“Yeah. He was helpful tracking Stain down.” Iida shakes his head, smiling. “He kept me safe more than a few times. I don’t know, he could just see things, you know?”

“See things?”

“Yeah, He said he got it from his dad. He could see how the… how the victims died. I wouldn’t be surprised if there was a lot more he saw.”

*The sight of the godflame, Mikumo says. It birthed the arrow of time. I suppose seeing the past and future isn’t so farfetched.*

Something about that sentence makes the back of his brain itch. He puts it aside because he has other matters to consider. Such as training.

They are, once again, split up for individual training. Izuku ignores that persistent itch in the back of his mind as he walks past the training grounds, glaring at Aizawa.

He heads deep into the forest, far from any of his classmates. He walks for over an hour before he finally stops.

*One For All* fills him and grants him strength. He kicks at a tree with every iota of the quirk that he can manage safely.

He watches it tip over. Good. He keeps training his quirk, learning more and more of the limits he can reach. Right now, safely, it feels like he can hold a good quarter of *One For All* and utilise it effectively without worry of damage. It has something to do with the crystals in his bone and whatever other changes have occurred to his body.

Watching the change as he draws on more of *One For All* is interesting. At the lower end, his body
develops a mild glow. But as he increases, the sparks of green lightning intensify.

Doing so allows him to ignore the itch in the back of his mind. Seeing the past and future, Mikumo had said so innocuously.

Izuku kicks another tree in frustration.

By evening, that scratch has become an all-consuming sense of frustration. He taps his foot rapidly, twitching and unintentionally creating a burst of wind.

When the sun sets, he heads back. The hour-long walk does nothing to soothe him in the slightest. If anything, he’s twitchier and more annoyed than ever.

He sees his cohorts making dinner.

Kirishima waves at him. “Hey, how was training?”

“Good,” he says absently, scanning the area.

When he sees Shouto, he can no longer hold it back. He’s somewhere in the back carrying logs for the bonfire.

Izuku stalks over. He taps Shouto on the shoulder. The moment he turns, Izuku punches Shouto suddenly and without hesitation.

His friend stumbles back, dropping his pile of logs with a loud clatter. Shouto glares at him, baring his teeth in warning. In that pitch-black eye, he sees the end of time itself.

“Midoriya, what the hell?”

He ignores them.

“You knew,” Izuku shouts, shaking with anger. “You fucking knew he’d leave.”

Shouto licks his cracked lip. “Yeah.”

He leaps forward and slams into Shouto. They tumble forward, biting and punching and kicking and screaming every obscenity possible. They’ve danced this dance a dozen times before and it is always brutal.

All he wants right now is to strangle Shouto.

“You asshole!” Izuku roars, elbowing Shouto in the throat.

He takes a brutal knee to the groin for his trouble. Fuck it, he’s taken worse. He twists around Shouto’s blow and punches him in the kidney.

Before he can process it, there’s an ice fist in his face. He lists to the side, then snaps forward, headbutting Shouto.

Strong hands pull him back. He’s put into a submission hold rapidly, fast enough that it disorientates him.

He wants to flex and break the hold until a strong tail wraps around his waist, pinning him fully.

“Calm down,” Ojiro hisses.
He sees Shouto being held, surprisingly, by Bakugou. “Calm the fuck down!” Bakugou roars, applying more pressure. Shouto winces slightly.

Izuku doesn’t care that he’s making a scene but right now, he could care less that Asui looks disappointed or that Ochaco looks fearful. They have no right to look at him like that, not when they have no idea why he’s so angry.

“You fucking knew,” he snarls.

Shouto raises a single perfect brow. “And?”

Izuku glares at Shouto. “I hate you.”

“Feeling’s mutual.”

“Oh, come on. You guys are friends,” Kirishima says.

Izuku would shake his head if not for the fact that Ojiro is keeping him in place. “Let go.”

“Not happening,” Ojoro says.

“Bakugou, get Shouto of here,” Iida says strongly, disappointed.

“I can walk on my own.”

Izuku glares, doing his absolute best not to tear out of Ojiro’s grasp and jump on Shouto. It would be easy, but it would mean hurting Ojiro and he, unlike Shouto, doesn’t deserve that.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he asks tiredly. “You should have trusted me.”

“Because he wouldn’t be happy here.”

“What?”

"His path diverged from yours a long time ago. You want to change society, make it better for everyone. He wants to save everyone and your methods are too different. I'm sorry."

“What the fuck is even going on?” Bakugou snaps. “The fuck bullshit plot point is this?”

“ Shut up,” Izuku snaps back, before turning to Shouto. “You don’t get to say that.”

“He deserves to be happy and he’d never be happy lying to himself. I’m sorry, but he won’t be happy at UA. There’s no future where he can be happy here.”

“Fuck this shit,” Bakugou says, letting go of Shouto and shoving him towards Iida. “This is not my fucking character arc. I don’t fucking care.”

“If I let go, will you stay still?” Ojiro asks once someone has dragged Shouto away.

Izuku considers that. His limbs shake with all the fury he’s failing to restrain. More than anything, he just feels embarrassed by all the eyes watching him.

“I’m going to take a walk before I punch someone,” he says calmly.

“So, you want to explain what that was about?” Ojiro asks, expression both disappointed and worried. “Why you’re acting out?”
That expression is mirrored in everyone around him.

“No,” he says bluntly.

“Let him go,” Ochaco says.

Ojiro does so. Izuku turns around, stalking past them. His arms tremble and he feels his shadow vibrate as he struggles to control his rage.

“Do you want to bring Kouta some food?”

He tears the box out of her hands. “Fine.”

He doesn’t look back.

*****

Fumikage hates being on the floor. He hates being forced to the floor. He hates being whacked on the head by someone he barely knows.

He also hates using a knife. The blunt training knife is nearby, resting innocently beneath a man’s foot.

“You’ve never used one before,” his trainer for the morning says. “I thought you had some experience with them.”

“None,” Fumikage growls, annoyed.

He’s trying to learn how to fight with a knife. The white blades are powerful weapons, he knows, but not in the hands of someone who cannot use them. And since he’s given away his sword—why did I give it up right after I got it?—he must learn to use what he has.

Yes, he can summon a pack of hounds or a murder of glass crows, but it means nothing if someone closes the distance fast enough or if they’re already away from him fighting another enemy. Besides, he can tell that these knives are supremely suited for killing abyssal monsters.

It also gave him something to do instead of getting lost all morning. The offer of training had come about after a few minutes of watching children sparring in one of the halls, all armed with different weapons. When the session had ended, the instructor had extended the offer for training.

“Well, you’re learning faster than most people,” the man says, helping Fumikage to his feet.

They’re not in a training hall any longer, but rather on the outskirts of a field. There’s a group of twelve people who have been training all morning as well. Training to use their quirks. It is like UA—and though that thought brings him pain, he forces it down—except that there is a level of efficient brutality to the way they use their quirks. There is no flash or showing off, no shouting out moves or posing. No, they attack to cripple and kill.

“They’re brutally simple.”

It is a stark difference to how he has fought. Efficiency is something he’s never really trained for. Compared to the twelve people sparring, he may as well be a showman.

“Yes. They’re a suppression squad.”

Fumikage makes a sound of confusion.
“Inquisitor,” their trainer, the same man who is training him today, says politely. “Rumour has it that you don’t read the dossiers.”

He closes his eyes, embarrassed. Deep in his soul, he feels chains rattling. His dragon and hounds and crows all angered that their master was insulted. He tugs on the chains in reprimand, forcing them to behave.

“No, I don’t,” he says.

*I probably should.*

Reading them, however, means fully accepting what he has done. It is another step forward, another chain around his neck. One day, his actions will have to be accounted for. He’ll have to stand before his mother and father and tell them the truth, explain why he hasn’t responded to a single call or message. Before his friends, he’ll have to explain why he thought this was the right decision, and a part of him doesn’t want to do that because he knows Izuku will forgive him, will accept what he has done and will always accept him despite his mistakes.

Fumikage doesn’t deserve forgiveness.

“This is one of our suppression teams,” the trainer says. “They’re made up of people with quirks and they’re some of our most effective combatants. Those kids are new. Guardswoman Izanami has a few trained teams under her command, though I suppose you have command of them as well.”

*Special Asset,* he thinks, feeling the chains of authority binding him to the trainer and the kids on the ground training.

“There’s a good chance you’ll be the highest ranked person on the field,” the trainer continues. “You’ll need to learn how we’re organised and how we operate.”

He glances down at his training clothes, like his usual vest and pants except for fewer armour plates. Most of all, there’s the Emperor’s symbol over his heart, stencilled in a light grey. It marks him, as with all other things.

“I suppose I will.”

"Suppression teams are all quirk users, six per group. We don't have that many. I think maybe twenty across the entire household. None of them is close to your level, let alone the Royal Guard. Remember that. The absolute strongest may be as strong as Gang Orca at best though she's unlikely to win that encounter. They're trained for either abyssal combat and conventional warfare. They’re here to support you or the Guard, not to stand on the frontline against top tier heroes or abyssal threats.”

Fumikage fingers the white blades sheathed on his belt

“Understood.”

“Yes and… Don’t you dare take a break!” the man roars at the kids. “You only stop training when you’re dead! As I was saying, you’ve got suppression teams and then you’ve got strike teams. They’re more conventional and much larger. Each one’s led by someone with a combat quirk. They’re what we send against the Taiwanese remnant or whenever a navy captain thinks about going rogue. I take it you don’t know anything about small-scale tactics.”

He rolls his eyes. “You take joy in my ignorance.”
“I know your type. You’re hoping you can coast by without learning much. That’s not going to happen.” He points at one of the kids who is on the ground unconscious. “Simple mistake her captain made. In the field she’s dead. You’re going to be responsible for a lot of lives.”

A flash of light interrupts Fumikage from speaking. He glances at Maya and sees her in a formal white uniform, not her usual civilian garb.

“I see you’re scaring him,” Maya says.

“Izanami,” the trainer says respectfully. “He’ll be taking lessons in tactics, strategy and logistics. This is non-negotiable. You’re bad enough as it is.”

“Fine, fine, fine,” she says. “We don’t have any objectives this week. You can have him when we get back in a few hours.”

He doesn’t let his relief show as he steps away from the trainer. “We’re going somewhere?”

“Yup. Maybe wear something warm.”

A few hours later, their helicopter sets down in a new location. It's somewhere off the coast of Japan, that much he can tell, but without his phone, he can't even check their location.

“What did he mean yesterday about the Throne?” he asks, bored.

“Oh that. You’re just bumped up in the line of succession,” she says. “Remember, anyone of Japanese birth can claim it. But, on the offhand chance that all the royal lines somehow all die off, it’s a contingency to ensure someone aware of the abyss takes the Throne. Don’t worry, Ryujin and I are far ahead of you, and there are dozens of people between us. It’s never going to happen.”

He exhales sharply. “Good.”

The helicopter sets down and they exit onto a landing pad. Wherever they are, it’s raining heavily. The landing pad is on the far side of a large complex, and from here he can see the swarm of soldiers in white on the compound walls.

“It is time you know a secret we have kept hidden from you.”

He frowns, following her inside. “I know you keep secrets.”

“Yes, you’re a smart little crow. But now, I will show you the secret of our greatest shame. This is the greatest act of trust we can ever show you. It will bind us fully.”

“Where are we?”

“Yakushima fortress,” she says. “This is one of our strongholds.”

“This was a national heritage site,” he says, following her past a biometric scan.

“Until we co-opted it and put a fortress on it. Now shush.”

They walk through the fortress, constantly descending. The air gets colder the lower they go, and the security measure intensify. They cross one final barrier before the noisy hum of electromagnetic scans disappears.

She opens a door into a room with wood walls and floors. He spies a garden to the left, a rather large one with a pond and unless he is wrong, it likely extends the length of the compound. On the
right is a spacious training area.

Kneeling in the centre is a middle-aged man of Japanese descent, dressed in a simple suit. There is nothing of note about him, dark hair and bright eyes. He has no scars or prominent facial features.

For a man who committed genocide, he doesn’t look special.

Fumikage sees the man who was once the Imperial Heir, a man with the blood of twenty million on his hands and fails to understand. This is a man who sunk an entire nation in grief, whose actions destroyed Japan’s reputation and directly led to a year of riots and nearly a civil war.

“You died,” is all he says. “We saw it. We saw your corpse. We verified it.”

Maya lays a hand on his shoulder and squeezes. He bats it aside, stepping away from the two of them so he can watch them both.

“He’s dead,” Fumikage snaps. “What trick is this?”

She smiles sadly.

“You’ve met Hisashi, Special Asset Nomad. And you know his title of World Walker. It isn’t some obscure reference. It’s what he does. He walks alternate worlds. When my prince did what he did, there was no option but to placate the world with his death. We just never felt the need to let anyone know it was a prince from another world.”

“My father killed his son to save his son,” the man with the blood of an entire nation on his hands says in a soft voice. “It was tragic watching myself die.”

“Tragic was everyone you killed,” Fumikage snarls, reaching for one of his blades.

A flash of light blinds him. A strong grip keeps his arms in place.

“Don’t,” Maya warns, her features devoid of any warmth. “He is of the Royal line and I am bound by my oaths. Do you understand?”

One of her hands keeps him in place. The other holds a hardlight blade, pressed against the vein there. It is a reminder that no matter how close they are, they have different goals and objectives.

He takes one deep breath and forces his limbs to loosen. Fumikage nods. She waits one moment, assessing him, before stepping back, her blade dissipating.

“I have a lot of questions,” he forces out once he has control.

"Ask your questions,” this man, who was a prince, commands. Perhaps he still is.

“Did you know what would happen?”

“I acted out of anger. Too many died because of it. Remember that emotions have no place at the level of power you operate at.”

He clenches his fists. Pushes down his rage. Says, “And yet you did just that.”

“Power is not an easy burden to handle. It takes one moment for everything to come crashing down. You’re one of us, now, Inquisitor. You will have to make hard decisions and being emotional will only lead to lives lost.”
“I should tell the world of this,” Fumikage says softly. “They deserve to know and my morals demand I tell the truth.”

"And will you? You could tell the world and ruin the Imperial household. They will call for not only my death but that of the Guard and everyone aware of my existence. It would ruin us. It would lead to civil war. Do you understand the trust you have been given?"

“This is just another chain to bind me.”

“Let me tell you something,” the prince says, observing him. “There is never a situation where we have no choice. That’s a lie. You may be afraid of the consequences, but don’t act as if you didn’t make this choice of your own free will.”

“And what will the consequence be if I tell the world?”

"For yourself? Death." He nods to Maya who shrugs unapologetically. "For Japan? Civil war first. Then it will be China and Russia and America that wage war against us."

“You committed genocide.”

“I know,” the prince says. “I do not let myself forget my sins.”

He looks around at the luxurious space, underground and protected from the world. “You call this remembering. You’re a fucking coward.”

“You know the truth now,” Maya says. “What will you do?”

“My father once told me that necessity is the death of morality.” He glares at her. “Were my morals a necessary part of your schemes?”

“How many times did I tell you that you could leave?” she asks in turn. “We didn’t contact you after you went back to school. We wouldn’t have if you didn’t take that first step. Do you understand? Everything has been a choice you made and you’re faced with the consequences. But are we really that terrible?”

“Twenty million innocent lives!”

“Yes, but we swore an oath to protect the Royal line.” She lays a hand on the Chrysanthemum on her heart, one which he now has as well. “Regardless of his crimes, we swore that oath and would follow through with it. No matter the cost.”

“In choosing to hide this, you may as well have taken part in it.”

“The Imperial Heir died. That is a fact. Does it really matter that it was another?”

“Yes. The principle of it matters.”

“Then you have a choice to make,” she says. “And consequences to deal with.”

“I need time to think,” he says furiously, storming out.

Chapter End Notes
I may have told someone there was an Inko scene in this chapter. Well, let's say I was living in the future and it's happening next chapter.

Either way, here ya go. Let me know what you think.
Uphold the Letter of the Law

Chapter Summary

In which, our first death of the night occurs.

Chapter Notes

Is there an update schedule? Yes. It just also happens to be whenever I feel like it.

My discord server can be found at the following: https://discord.gg/4YvCTYR

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘The spirit of the law must not be considered when acting as a hero. The ego of a hero must be discarded when they operate with the authority of their nation. Individuals fighting in the heat of the moment cannot be expected to make rational decisions. Leave it to the courts of law to dispense compassion and dignity and allow heroes to follow the letter of the law strictly and without mercy. So long as they act with the authority of their governing body, any act is permissible for a hero.’

—Excerpt from ‘The Law of Heroes’ by Hinata Ononoki.

Inko Midoriya sits at her dining table. There are stacks of documents, all ordered meticulously and neatly.

They represent the starting point of their lawsuit against UA, specifically against Recovery Girl. There are dozens of signed documents from medical professionals, research papers into treatment options, and more legal documents than she could hope to understand. Thankfully, they have lawyers for this. Lawyers paid for by Hizashi’s seemingly limitless funds.

“I didn’t think you would get this done so quickly,” Mitsuki Bakugou says, looking at the scans of Bakugou’s injured arm. The last time Inko saw him, he had been wearing a thick brace.

"At least something's being done about it,” Mrs Kouda says.

“Once we do this, there’s no going back,” Inko says. “I’m prepared. Are you ready?”

“I’m not ditching you,” Mitsuki says. “If there was even a chance they could have done better, then we can’t let them get away.”

Inko signs her name on the document before her. Despite being written in legal jargon, it is merely an acknowledgement that everything in the coming lawsuit is true to the best of her knowledge.

Mitsuki and Mrs Kouda sign their documents as well.

“Well, I never thought I’d be suing UA less than three months into the year. Katsuki’s going to kill me when he gets back from camp.”

"At least he'll come back from it,” Mrs Koda says.
Mitsuki swallows. “Sorry, I didn’t—”

“It’s fine. One day I’ll get over it.” Mrs Koda stands. “Well, this has been interesting. I’m going to spend time with my family before counter lawsuits come.”

Mitsuki stands as well. “Well, I think that’s a good way to spend the week.” She offers Inko a smile. “Marasu’s off early tonight. You wanna come?”

Inko shakes her head. “I’ll be fine. Both of you enjoy yourselves.”

When they are gone, she slumps tiredly against the door. Some days, it gets so hard to keep the façade of an implacable mother up. She can never be weak, not around her peers or enemies or her son.

She shivers suddenly and stands tall, alert. She goes to the second floor and straight to Izuku’s room.

It is Hisashi, holding one of her son’s many notebooks on quirks.

“You know he has pages on both of us,” Hisashi says fondly. “He’s barely seen my quirk and he’s already dissected its weaknesses. ‘Attack from range or stealth, unlikely to survive more than one good blow’. Never knew he was so vicious. I think he gets it from you.”

She frowns. “I never taught him that.”

“You were strong when he was weak. He stands taller whenever you’re around.” He sets the notebook down. “Everyone stands tall when you’re around. You’re just so… larger than life, I guess.”

“Where have you been?” she asks instead of dealing with that confusing mess of emotions.

“Busy.”

“That’s not going to work anymore.”

Her husband smiles. “Well, I was helping one of the Guard destroy an abyssal cult and I found some interesting information regarding one of the UA teachers.”

“Yes?”

“Snipe, our favourite outlaw, is Nezu’s pet assassin. Found him wandering through Malaysia—”

“That’s a warzone.”

“Yes, it is. Great for a cult looking to operate unnoticed. Anyway, he was looking for some of the students Aizawa expelled. He led us right to them. We snatched them up before he got close.”

“And that helps how?”

“They’ll be part of the case against UA, specifically against Aizawa. When we present eight students, all expelled in the same year, who had every opportunity for success stolen from them, they won’t have any argument. Not when the student behind the Sports Festival was from the same class.”

Inko smiles, nudging a spider away. “Good. UA will burn.”
“It’s what you want, right?”

“For Izuku, yes. And these cultists? Will they be a problem?”

“Maybe. We took down one order but from the information we stole, there are a few more that have been working for centuries. The Guard will start localising them in the coming weeks before they summon something.”

“That’s good. Are you staying for dinner?”

Hisashi tenses. “Is that an option?” he asks warily, afraid of the rejection and the hurt that comes from it.

For a moment, she feels guilty that she pushed him away immediately and without thought. For a single moment, she regrets not being kinder to him for these last few weeks.

That moment of weakness passes and she lets those feelings wash away, cocooned in the spider silk of her iron will.

“I wouldn’t be asking if it wasn’t.”

He smiles.

“Okay.”

*****

It is dawn when Kurogiri warps to the rally point, accompanied by Mustard. The boy struggles to carry the bulky container in his hands, a metallic container almost as large as the boy is tall. On principle, Kurogiri refuses to help him carry it. His master may have given him the order to acquire equipment for the Vanguard, but even he has reservations of the boy’s plan.

As it is, even warping the box feels like too much. The boy thanks him once they exit the warp gate and step onto the ridge. The sky is still dark, only the slightest streaks of purple marring the dark.

Kurogiri nods politely to Muscular who crouches near the edge, oppressive in his pure and raw physicality. The man looks ready for a fight with the first person to provoke him.

For all intents and purposes, this is the middle of nowhere. There isn’t another settlement for thirty kilometres in any direction, and the small gas station has already been taken over by League operatives. They and the five other teams will be the main distraction once the attack on the camp begins.

It’s a simple enough plan, one which will stall the police and whatever petty heroes make the nearest city home. That will give Tomura’s Vanguard more than enough time to attack the camp. There’s a timeline of events that need to be followed. Once the main assault begins at the camp, Kurogiri will retrieve his other agents and warp them to safety before returning here.

Mustard stumbles with his case, tripping over it. The case lands with a loud thud, so very loud in the emptiness.

The hulking mountain of muscle stands slowly. Muscular walks slowly, silent as a swift death, and approaches Mustard who scrambles to his feet. The man flicks the latches on the case and opens it.
He stares at the contents: high-grade ballistics weaponry, acquired by Giran from an arms shipment stolen from the army. Incredibly illegal and incredibly lethal.

_Incredibly foolish_, he adds.

“What bullshit is this?” Muscular asks threateningly. “Fucking being a coward.”

“One last escape route,” the kid says, stepping back in fear. Understandable. Muscular is brutal and terrifying, a mountain of muscle and raw violence.

Kurogiri really shouldn’t get involved. It’s late and he’s tired and this is a new suit which he’d prefer remains clean.

But it’s just the three of them right now and Mustard is a child. Children have always been his weakness.

He steps in front of the kid and stands against Muscular. He doesn’t cross his arms or anything so foolish. The man is certainly intimidating, but he holds nothing to staring down the Strongest Man Alive.

“I would advise you against attacking your comrades,” Kurogiri says politely.

“The servant can speak,” Muscular snarls, never stopping in his approach. “Tell me why I shouldn’t kill you both right now.”

Kurogiri doesn’t bother answering with words. He just opens a warp gate beneath the man and creates an exit where he was crouched before.

Muscular lands lightly on his feet, rather surprising given his immense bulk, not disorientated in the least. He simply glares at Kurogiri.

Their standoff doesn’t ever truly end. Mustard stays behind Kurogiri, foolishly seeing him as a protector. Or perhaps Kurogiri is the fool for not accepting what he is.

A grunt interrupts them and he looks over the edge.

Kurogiri observes Spinner climb the mountain, confused as to why he didn’t take the easier path behind them. Then again, he seems to climb as well as any lizard, even if he is dressed like a cheap rental Stain groupie.

Spinner crests the ridge, landing on his feet easily. He looks at the group, confused.

“I thought I was late,” the reptile says, observing Muscular warily.

“The others are still making their way here.” Kurogiri opens a warp gate to a spot in the bar and retrieves Spinner’s absurd weapon. “Here you go.”

The reptile grins and takes the handle of the weapon, despite having a perfectly good sword on his back. Kurogiri isn’t certain what purpose the mishmash abomination of daggers, knives, machetes and hatchets, all bound together through a series of chains and belts, serves.

Spinner nods, testing the heft of his new weapon. He lifts it easily with one hand and swings it as though it weighs nothing.

_Enhanced strength_, Kurogiri adds to his mental assessment of the Vanguard member. He wields the weapon with a surprising level of competence,
“Nearly to spec,” the reptile says. “One of these knives is too light.”

He watches Spinner circle the area slowly, relaxed, as if he’s just getting his bearings and testing the weight of the weapon. And somehow, by the time he’s done, he’s standing near Mustard, opposed to Muscular. It doesn’t fool anyone, of course, but it surprises Kurogiri that he is able to figure out the source of tension immediately.

“You don’t mind if I use this, do you?” Spinner asks.

The reptile places his sword over Mustard’s case before the boy can answer. He removes a roll of cloth from a pouch on his back. Carefully and meticulously, he goes about wrapping his weapon. Kurogiri wonders what kind of tear-resistant material he’s using because regular cloth would have been torn to shreds.

All the while, Muscular watches this. His fingers splay out before fisting, each time a finger cracking like a gunshot. It’s a base intimidation tactic, one the Kurogiri refuses to be intimidated by. He’s seen much worse.

Mustard, who steps back and places himself further behind Kurogiri, clearly hasn’t.

Spinner glances at him out the corner of his eye, an unasked question in his gaze—is he an ally or an enemy?—and a strong grip on the hilt of his weapon indicating a readiness to act. It raises Kurogiri’s appraisal of him just a tad.

Kurogiri shakes his head no.

“I suggest leaving your aggression for the fight ahead,” he says before there is a fight.

They stare each other down until Muscular makes a sound of frustration. “Fine. I can wait a few hours.” He returns to his vigil over the mountain, crouched and still as a statue.

Mustard lets out a tiny exhale.

“What now?” Spinner asks.

“We wait for everyone to gather.”

Slowly, they come. Some come alone like the other child they have with them, a violent serial killer who goes by the name Toga, though that certainly isn’t the name she was born with. She comes when the sun is at its highest point and seems to take an immediate liking to Mustard.

“What’s this for?” she asks cheerfully.

Mustard pauses in his actions. He’s trying to fit a series of wires and biometric sensors to his torso. It worries Kurogiri that the boy is paranoid—and spiteful—enough to setup a dead man’s switch.

“One final exit route,” Mustard says. “They let us go or we blow up the camp. Never fight on the enemy’s terms. The Tenets of Combat taught me that.”

Toga just smiles and pats his cheek as one would a fond pet. Though the boy blushes, he likely doesn’t understand how little meaning there is in that gesture.

Magne and Moonfish come together, though it seems Moonfish is blindly following her without thought. Compress and Twice enter together, seemingly in a competition for the best landing.

Dabi appears last when night has fallen, trailed by a few Nomu. The Chainsaw Nomu is the largest
of the bunch and there is one with wings as well. It is only by watching the ground sink that he realises there is a third and final Nomu. Whilst it bothers him mildly to not have control of the Nomu, of the group, Dabi is the only one he trusts not to be an idiot.

Besides, it is Tomura’s wish that Dabi leads the operation. For some unfathomable reason, his ward has taken a liking to the pyro.

Whilst Kurogiri may have another operation prepared to occur simultaneously, it is purely in support of this one.

"Seems we’re all here," Dabi says. “Well, you all know the boss man’s objectives: cause havoc, kill teachers, and acquire the targets. Anyone need a reminder of the student’s we want?”

No one says yes. Good, because Kurogiri would have gotten rid of them for being so lazy. Admittedly, he’s almost certain Moonfish has no idea what they’re talking about.

“Anything we need to know, Kurogiri?”

“The situation’s changed,” he says, stepping forward past Magne. “Our agent’s information was faulty and they’ve only now just updated it. There’s additional security we were unaware of. A kill-squad from a PMC operating as security. In addition, they’ve brought three of their senior students, all capable heroes. Do not underestimate them.”

“Good,” Muscular says. “More people to kill.”

“We can work with that,” Dabi says. “Toga, funnel them to my sector and I’ll burn them down. Compress, deal with any stragglers we miss and get it done quickly. Remember, Mandalay and Ragdoll are priority targets. Boss wants their quirks and you’re the best at retrieval.”

Compress steps forward and bows. “Let me know where you are, and I’ll retrieve any target you have.”

“Remember the two rules we have,” Kurogiri says. “You don’t kill kids. Kill as many of the teachers as you want but not the children.”

“What happens if I kill any of the students?” Toga asks with a cheery smile.

Kurogiri considers that. She is the same age as the students.

“Go ahead,” Dabi says before Kurogiri can say no. “Make a statement. Everyone else, you’ll just have to entertain yourself on the security and the teachers.”

He wants to argue against that idea.

“This is going to be the best camp ever,” Toga says, grabbing Mustard by the hand. “Let’s kill a lot of them, okay.”

“Okay?”

“What’s the other rule?”

“You see a boy with green hair and burn scars, you leave him alone. Beat him to a pulp, but he’s not an acceptable target. Understood?”

Dabi claps his hands together. “Well then, we’ll move in an hour. Toga, have some fun.”
She grins and, in that grin, Kurogiri sees death and blood.

****

Fumikage Tokoyami sits in a field. The crescent moon shines down on him, illuminating the field in a murky greyness. The rain is chilling but he feels none of it.

All he feels is conflict.

There is a choice he must make. Will he stay silent and allow a man who committed genocide to walk free? Or will he choose to deal with the truth and face death?

*This isn’t a choice*, he thinks bitterly.

One life or twenty million. That’s what it really comes down to. Which does he value more? Millions of nameless, faceless people that died long ago or his own life.

It reminds him of a similar choice he made an eternity ago. There was a time where he was faced with the choice of telling the truth of Izuku’s quirk or letting his friend perpetuate a lie. He had chosen the latter, justifying it as not being the one to say the lie.

It is a weak justification, now that he looks back on it. *I didn’t commit the murder, I simply watched it happen and keep it secret.*

He wipes away water from his eyes futilely. His feathers are soaked and they’ll keep on dripping water for a few more hours after he gets out of the rain. If he gets out of the rain.

“Have you made a choice?” Maya asks him gently, her voice raw and flat, as though she isn’t ready to kill him.

“How many people know he lives?”

“Not many. The Emperor. The heads of the other royal lines. The Guard and a few Special Assets. Maybe five or so from intelligence. And the few servants who have access to his rooms.”

*And now me.*

“Would you kill me?”

“Only if you told the truth,” she says, honest as always. “We’d monitor you for the rest of your life. If you ever slipped up, we would activate a kill order. Admittedly, I don’t know how well death would stick for you, so I’d rather not go that route. As I’ve said before, you’re free to leave whenever you want.”

“And go where?” he asks tiredly. “I have no family—”

“You’ve ignored their calls.”

“I have no friends—”

“Did you ever call them?”

“I’ve been expelled—”

“You still have a scholarship offer from Shiketsu.”
“Damn you woman,” he snaps, punching the ground.

“Do you want to know why you’re angry? It’s in your psyche report that you never read.”

He scowls. “Tell me.”

“Because you trust us. That’s what makes you angry. You trust us because you know we’re brutal and honest and efficient. You trust that we won’t ever betray you and now that you’ve seen the extent with which we protect our own, you know we’ll do the same for you. We’d hide your crimes. We’d hide your failings. We’d protect you from the world and fight to the death for you, and you know it. That’s why you always walk closer to us.”

“Stop it.”

“No,” she says, walking closer. "You asked to know and now you must. You're terrible with human interaction so you crave affection from anyone who accepts you. You cosplay as a knight because you have a streak of honour a mile long and you want to protect people. You know we protect people from the threats they don't see and it fulfils your idea of a dark knight. You long for freedom and it's why you argue with your parents and defy authority.”

“You manipulated me,” he says weakly for it is no argument.

She shrugs.

“And I told you I was, many times. I always offered you a way out and I still am. But you keep choosing to come back because a part of you knows that your trust will always be returned.”

He laughs bitterly, a furious and broken sound so much like a sob.

“So, I chose this? I was always going to choose this?” He punches the ground once more. “Are you telling me there’s no agency? I refuse that idea. I make my own choices.”

_I am a god. There is no fate for me._

And just like that, the world shifts. Like bubbles of darkness, his soul manifests upon the earth. His hounds rise up from inky pools of darkness, their quicksilver fur standing on end and their gaping maws dripping acid. The acid chews through the ground as they growl, a deep and terrible sound.

In the skies above, his murder of crows circles languidly. They sing and their song is a song of his rage. It is crystals shattering and worlds ending, the sounds of suffering and chains rattling.

Most importantly, his dragon stands protectively behind Fumikage, black scales eating the moonlight. Its eyes are a deep and virulent yellow promising death and destruction, its outstretched wings capable of carrying the world. Through the gaps of its exposed teeth, purple godflame escapes, a final reminder that it will set fire to his enemies so long as he commands it.

This is the power to kill armies and take cities. It is the power to stand above every human and abyssal lifeform and rule as a king. And yet, he hasn’t truly ascended. Not yet.

Maya observes this show of force indifferently.

“We’re all bound by our past experiences,” she says gently. “We’re creatures of habit and predictable biology. Free will exists, at least I believe that. But your choices can be guessed. You’re not going to attack me because I haven’t betrayed you. You’re not going to leave because of the oath between us.”
He stares at her and his dragon rumbles menacingly. The crows shriek and the hounds bay. They are ready to attack and protect their master.

“Damn you.”

And then they vanish, fading to shadow, and returning to his soul.

She exhales. “Oh, thank god.”

“What?”

“I’ve known you a month. I could have been horribly wrong.” She smiles. “I made a gamble, nothing more.”

He lets her approach and doesn’t pull away when she holds his shoulders. There’s something so relieved in her gaze that he almost forgives her. Almost.

“You owe me.”

“We don’t have to keep score between us. What do you want and I’ll give it to you?”

“The World Walker. There is a debt he owes.”

“Are you certain?” she asks once more.

“I am. But first, I must settle things with Dark Shadow. Once I have control, call the World Walker.”

“I trust you.” In a burst of light, she vanishes.

Fumikage inhales and calls Dark Shadow forth.

The demon rises slowly, hesitant of his intentions despite the blade it now wields. It towers over Fumikage when it manifests, rage and malice infusing the air. Its bulk is such that it blots out the moon and shrouds him in darkness. Like this, a single swipe of its claws could tear through a row of trees and not even notice.

Not that it needs to with the blade in its hand. The same blade pointed at Fumikage. The smoke from the blade corrodes the air, turning it stale, and blackens the grass. He feels Watatsumi growl within his soul, the hounds howl with rage and the crows screech. All of them ready to defend their master.

Fumikage doesn’t share the same fear.

**Why have you summoned me?**

“Trust,” he says, unafraid. “You said one day I would wear your form as armour. Your claws would be my blades. I forced you to do that and took away your will. Now, at your strongest, I ask you to trust me once more.”

**Trust lost is not easily regained.**

“Then break the chain between us. Do so and be free of me.” He stands now, so much smaller than the demon, and yet he doesn’t feel like he is looking up to it. “But, should you choose it, let us break past our fears. I trust you, my friend.”
He extends his hand. Lays it over the blade. Pushes the sword down.

“Do you trust me?”

It does not answer in words. The sword is thrust into the ground. Dark Shadow becomes smaller, its form seeming to fold in on itself and become denser. It slides across Fumikage’s arm, the chilly darkness the caress of an old friend.

He shudders when roots dig deep in his back and spine. And then it feels like there are two people sharing space in his mind. He feels Dark Shadow far closer than ever before, its thoughts his thoughts. And it nearly brings him to his knees.

There is rage and anger and malice and spite. But there is joy and forgiveness and old knowledge that runs deep as the very earth.

He has seen monsters and darkness and nightmares leaving calamity in their wake. But this makes him understand how insignificant he truly is. The knowledge Dark Shadow holds is older than the sun and infinitely more beautiful. It is life and death and rebirth, a thousand thousand memories of teaching and communing with beings of reverse time and witnessing the godflame’s imprisonment.

And through all those memories, there is one word that towers over all others: friend.

It applies only to Fumikage.

He swallows, barely managing to keep his tears back. The thrum of amusement from Dark Shadow tells him it knows, and that it accepts his weakness anyway.

*You are my first friend*, Dark Shadow says, lacking that otherworldly quality that always permeates its voice.

Fumikage rises from his hunched position and feels the strength Dark Shadow grants him. He flexes his fingers and watches Dark Shadow’s talons follow the motion without question. He grasps the sword plunged in the earth and lifts it.

And nearly slices his foot off. Until Dark Shadow takes control of his limb, an inversion of their usual relationship. His hand rises without his input. Dark Shadow moves one leg back, flowing into a simple stance.

*Hold it like this*, the demon says, shifting his body until the blade is parallel to his shoulders, one foot pointed forward whilst his weight rest on his back foot.

A rip in the fabric of spacetime heralds Hisashi Midoriya. The man has a loose smile on his face and it looks so much like his son’s that Fumikage feels guilt.

*Your paths diverged a long time ago.*

“Is that your ultimate move?” the man asks, hands folded over his chest. “Heroes always have one or two. What are you calling it?”

*I have not given it any thought.*” he says and nearly drops the sword in shock. His voice is deep and reverberating, an inhuman sound overlaying his normal tones.

“Black Ankh,” Hisashi says, amused. “Trust me, it works.”

“Black Ankh,” he says slowly, testing it. And finding it lacking.
He does not need to call Watatsumi for it to rise to the surface. Its long membranous wings sprout from his back and purple flames surround Dark Shadow’s claws. The flames spread down the length of the blade, illuminating the blackened grass in a sickly purple light.

“Black Ankh Ascendant,” he says finally.

The man shrugs. “So, you want to go back to the abyss. How deep?”

“As deep as you can take me.”

“Alright.” A doorway forms to the darkness. “If you pick a fight, I’m not helping you.”

Fumikage huffs and walks to the darkness. Once more, he will enter the abyss willingly and knowing what is to come.

*I will stand with you,* Dark Shadow promises as he steps in the middle of an endless row of acolytes and wizards chanting the litany to their failed caricature of a god.

He raises the flaming sword. Lets the entire horde within his soul escape. Wages battle against these creatures.

*****

Neito Monoma is many things. Narcissistic for one, eccentric if you’re being charitable, and egotistical if you’re being cruel. He has a crippling inferiority complex he attempts to hide with sarcasm and odd behaviours. He is all these things and so much more.

He loves his classmates fiercely but under no circumstances will he ever show that to 1-A. They must stick together more than anyone else. They’ve been relegated to the backseat, unimportant and forgotten. Between the entire class, there were no more than five hundred recommendations, most of which went to Ibara—and thinking about her makes his throat tight with sadness.

“Stop being lazy,” Setsuna Tokage says.

He looks up at her and smirks. “Don’t call me lazy.” He picks up a stack of logs, hoisting them easily over his shoulder.

"Well, you are."

“Do we have to take part in this scare contest?” Neito asks.

“Aw, you worried you can’t scare the great and mighty 1-A?” Setsuna asks in turn, attempting to provoke him. “I thought our magnificent Neito feared no one.”

He laughs, a fake sound that grates on the ears. He’s had a long time to practice it and Setsuna still winces when she hears it.

“Fine, I’m sorry,” she says and he stops laughing. “I’ll stop poking there.”

He sets the logs down beside the fire. Thankfully, no one trusts him to cook. Which is for the best. Last time he tried to cook for anyone, they had been put in the hospital for a week. Whilst Neito may have been fine, he has no interest in going to prison for attempted murder.

“I think I should bake 1-A some muffins,” he says to his classmates, all gathered around the table and eating.
They pause, some looking terrified and Kinoko turns a rather interesting shade of green.

“No,” Itsuka says from the other end of the table. “Don’t poison anyone.”

“Fuck your cooking,” Yosetsu says, shuddering. “Last time you made food you got me and…” Tetsuetsu. That was the last time he made anyone food.

Neito pushes his tray forward and stands. He is not, in any way, ready for the sudden wave of grief. Three weeks later and the pain isn’t gone in the slightest. It shouldn’t hurt as much as it does. Neito wasn’t that close to him.

That doesn’t change how much it hurts.

“Fuck,” he hears Yosetsu say.

Neito doesn’t look back. He needs to get away right now before anyone sees him showing weakness, more so than he’s already shown by walking away.

“Neito,” Itsuka calls, following behind. “Just stop already.”

He doesn’t.

Once he’s clear of hearing range, a massive hand grabs him and stops him in his tracks. Neito sighs and he can lie to himself that the reason his breathing hitches is because Itsuka is squeezing his lungs.

“We need you and you’re just running away.”

Neito scoffs. “I’m not class rep. No one needs me.”

“Do you think you’re the only one upset?” she asks, and that hurts more than anything. “You don’t have a monopoly on grief. What do you think will happen if you let anyone see you’re upset? We’re a class but you act like you’re the only one who’s upset.”

“Because I’m not ready,” he says softly. “So, stop asking me to get over it.”

She squeezes tighter. “I’m not and you know it.”

“All of you are acting like they were never there.”

“Because of you,” she snaps. “Because no one wants to make you sad. Every time someone mentions Tetsuetsu or Ibara, you run. And you know what, despite all your egomaniacal nonsense, you’re still our friend.”

He glares at her. “Put me down.”

“Will you run away?”

“No.”

After a moment, she sets him down. They don’t say anything immediately. She’s taking his measure, trying to gauge how off-balance he is. Neito is just exhausted, tired of everything they’ve gone through.

“I’m tired of losing people,” he admits. “I’m afraid I’m going to lose you and Setsuna and
Fukidashi.”

“Then why are you running?”

“Because I’m me and I can never be weak or emotional.” He smiles ruefully. “Neito the eccentric. Monomo, that weirdo who hates 1-A and only has vapid thoughts.”

“No one thinks that.”

His smile is cynical. “I don’t really believe you.”

“You're too stubborn for your own good. Let's go for a walk.”

He sighs. “Fine.”

Their walk is silent and though he’s tempted to breach it, there’s too much to unpack and he’s not ready to go poking at the bundle of grief and anger and weariness.

On the way, Kendo taps his shoulder and points to their left. Sitting on a tree root is someone he hasn’t seen in a few weeks.

“Midoriya.”

Midoriya looks up from his spot. Cradled in his hand is a metal container, the sort you use to keep food warm. “Oh, hey Kendo. Monoma. How are you?”

“Oh, just great,” Monoma says snidely. “You enjoying the spotlight as usual?”

Of all the students in 1-A, Midoriya is the one he dislikes the least. And if he’s being honest, he does respect Midoriya for his honesty. That doesn’t mean he will get a free pass.

“Don’t be rude,” Kendo says. “Training must have been brutal.”

Midoriya touches his cheek gingerly, bruised and scratched. “I guess.”

“Getting hurt at camp. Even we haven’t done that yet,” Monoma says. “1-A students truly are the greatest.”

Kendo shoves him aside, annoyed. ”I think it was really brave of you. What you did. Talking about… well, everything.”

“It wasn’t anything special.”

“You see, for the great Izuku Midoriya, such feats mean nothing.”

Kendo smacks him. “Stop being an ass. But yeah, I’ve got family in Hokkaido. I think I’ll go visit over the break.”

Midoriya smiles. “That’s good to hear. I want to go back instead of taking an internship. Or get an internship there. Just help out however I can.”

“Well, maybe we might just be working at the same agency.”

“And the Great Midoriya steals another maiden’s heart,” Monoma says sarcastically. “One word and all the women swoon over him. It must be the scars.”
Midoriya laughs suddenly, genuinely happy. He touches the scars, tracing them.

“Never saw it like that. Well, see you.”

He walks past them, not heading back to camp. Neito stares at the retreating figure alongside Itsuka. When he’s out of earshot, he urges her forward and they keep walking.

“Really? You think he’s brave?” Neito asks snidely. “And you want to intern at the same agency?”

“Are you jealous?”

He flushes. “What, no? I just think you don’t have to spend all your time with him.”

“Sure, sure. I believe you.”

“Do you smell smoke?”

Itsuka sniffs the air. “That’s weird. You think 1-A’s pyro set something on fire. Heard he’s having a spat with his boyfriend.”

“Why do you think I care?”

She shrugs. “I don’t…”

“What?”

She simply points east.

The flames engulfing the horizon are a vibrant blue.

“That can’t be Todoroki,” he says numbly. “Do you think—”

“Villains? Yeah.”

He grins viciously. “Well then, why don’t we go give them a proper UA welcome?”

She smacks him. “Don’t be stupid. This isn’t time for revenge. We make sure everyone’s safe first. We’re all getting out of here together.”

“Sure.”

Neito nods absently. All he can focus on is finally getting his revenge.

For Testuetsu.

For Ibara.

For everyone else.

Today, these villains die.

She grabs him by the collar and brings him close, eyes fierce. “Don’t. Whatever you’re thinking, you can’t do it.”

“You don’t even know—”

“I’d stop you,” she promises. “Whatever you’re thinking off, I’d stop you. Don’t be reckless.
We’re gonna be old and grey and making fun of 1-A, alright?”

He can’t help his smile. “Alright. You and me till the end.”

*****

Izuku carries a container as he walks up the hill overlooking the forest. It looms protectively, a benevolent summit watching over everyone he knows. It’s the sort of place he would run to if he wanted to distract himself. And considering this place is easily accessible for a little boy to reach, it is the only logical place to go to.

_right, and the shoe prints didn’t help you in the slightest_.

“Shut it.”

His face hurts and there are bruises all over his body from his fight with Shouto. He must look horrid if Kendo commented on it, especially given that half his face is already scarred. Well, he supposes that people can get used to anything in a world with mutations.

He turns the corner and finds Kouta huddled near the edge. The boy is smart enough not to sit so close to the edge that he will pitch forward if startled.

“Hey,” Izuku calls.

The boy turns his head, eyes hidden by his cap. “What do you want?”

“I brought you some food.”

“I don’t want anything from you.”

Izuku shrugs and sits down beside him. He opens the container, findings a simple meal of rice and fish. He takes the chopsticks and eats some rice.

“Why are you doing that?”

“You said you don’t want it. I’m not going to waste food.”

Not that he’s hungry. He could very well go the next few weeks without food and not be bothered by it. If anything, he eats for the taste of the meal, not for its nutritional value. There’s nothing truly alive about most meals. Nothing that compares to killing a god and eating its heart.

“You can’t just eat my food.”

“Look, Kouta, you’re angry and bitter and if I’m being honest, I get that society pisses you off.” He grabs the kid by the collar and pulls him close, startling him. “But when I bring you a meal, I expect you to eat it. Or I will force it down your throat, one spoon at a time.”

Kouta’s eyes are wide. “Let go of me.” He smashes a fist against Izuku’s face.

It doesn’t so much as make Izuku budge an inch.

“It’s a pretty bad few days, all things considered,” he says slowly, calmly, and utterly implacable. “Dealing with a kid who mindlessly spouts the philosophy of a man I personally respect—a man I know—to make a stupid point, is not one of them. Bringing food for said kid is also not on the list. So, you’re going to eat instead of being a whiny brat. Because I just had a rather violent fight with my friend. I’m about to be expelled, so I do not care about politeness right
now."

The boy squirms in Izuku’s grip, hitting back and screaming obscenities. Slowly, as Izuku talks without raising his voice above a cold whisper, Kouta finally stops moving. Maybe it’s cruel to use his physical strength like this, but he’s making a point: sometimes, you need to listen to other people even if it hurts.

Finally, he lets go.

Kouta tumbles back, landing on his ass. He mutters a curse but the words die on his lips as he sees Izuku’s indifferent gaze.

“Eat.”

Izuku hands the container to the boy, who takes it apprehensively. Oh, there’s certainly a bit of hate in his eyes, but hate is a verb, a doing action. This is nothing more than a child’s interpretation of the action, an attempt to mimic it.

He waits patiently, sniffing the air and smelling smoke. Probably Shouto working off his annoyance.

“You can’t tell me what to do,” Kouta mumbles but eats a tiny bit of his food.

“If you can spout philosophy without any context behind it, I can tell you to eat your food.” Izuku hands the spoon over. “And guess what, you can go tell Mandalay or Tiger or the rest. Except it invalidates whatever point you were trying to make with isolation. The only person it’ll embarrass is you.”

He watches the forest, keeping Kouta in the corner of his vision. The boy eats slowly, forcing the food down more than anything. Perhaps that has something to do with how Kouta’s sitting on Izuku’s scarred side. Every time Kouta looks ready to say something, he takes on look at his scars, tenses, and settles down.

Good, it means Izuku can enjoy the sight of the forest burning in blue flames.

He blinks and reviews that sentence in his head. He examines each word and then decides he needs a second opinion.

“Hey, Kouta, can you see a fire in the distance?”

The kid looks up, then freezes. “What the fuck?”

Izuku sighs.

Without the moon shining bright in the night, there isn’t much contrast between light and shadow. Not enough to make any shadows. But there are just enough for him to sense the approaching shadow. The person it belongs to must be massive but more than that, it feels like blood and war and death.

Izuku rises to his feet and before Kouta can react, he pulls the boy back. The container and cutlery go flying over the edge as he places his body between Kouta and whoever it is.

“What—”

“Shush,” he says harshly, heart beating faster and faster in his chest. “You can stop hiding.”
Slowly, with measured and graceful steps, the villain turns the corner. The villain wears a tattered black cloak and a mask, simple and plain and menacing. Standing as tall, perhaps even taller than Endeavour, the villain is intimidating enough as it is.

A part of him wants to fight the villain, wants to prove himself stronger in every possible way. He wants to conquer this challenge just as he conquered every other challenge beforehand. But, there is a scared boy trembling behind him, and Izuku refuses to let that boy be terrified for even a single day longer.

“So, how do you feel about letting the kid go?” Izuku asks.

Might as well. For all he knows, he’s dealing with a villain with morals and honour.

Izuku takes a step back.

The villain reacts like lightning. Faster than Izuku can fully process, the villain crosses the distance between them. He has a moment to react and plan.

He moves forward as well, shoving Kouta back. He ducks low and twists, kicking the side of the villain’s fist and diverting the force.

The fist shatters the stone and the villain’s momentum leaves half his forearm encased in rock. Izuku dashes back to Kouta. Whatever else, he needs to get him away from the battle.

Except, the villain is already free of the stone. With a sweeping motion. The villain discards the cloak.

The man beneath is blonde and physically perfect but for a cybernetic eye, the only blemish to this monument of war and violence.

“Why?” he hears Kouta whisper.

Izuku doesn’t respond.

Those are muscle fibres surrounding the villain's left arm, the same arm he punched a hole through the stone so casually. Izuku can do the same with enough preparation and that’s what worries him. Is the transformation localised to one arm? Unlikely because when is Izuku’s life ever that easy.

“Oh,” the villain says in a surprisingly normal voice, “you were on the list.”

That sends a jolt of fear running through Izuku. What list? No, that’s not the right question. There are only two reasonable possibilities, extraction or execution. One means he’ll live regardless and the other means Kouta will die if he makes a single mistake.

“I wonder how you pissed off the boss so much,” the man approaching with the inevitability of death says. “He said not to kill you, but I think I’ll have some fun first.”

Izuku almost rolls his eyes because when is his life easy.

“Kouta,” he says instead, “I’m going to save you, right here and right now because sometimes there’s no choice but to fight.”

The villain pauses for an instant.

Izuku doesn’t attack because that’s not an opening. But it does give Izuku a few moments to charge his power. One For All leaves his body glowing brightly, sparks of green lightning arcing from one
finger to the next in anticipation.

“And here I thought you were going to say some stupid bullshit.” The man laughs and the sound chills him to the bone. “You’re right. You fight and win or you die.”

Despite his apprehension, Izuku grins. It isn’t one of fear or an instinctive response. No, this man is an overwhelming threat.

And Izuku wants to conquer that.

The villain raises his right hand and Izuku can see the muscles fibres growing there like a writhing mass of tentacles. He’s like a dark mirror of All Might, a pillar of strength and cruelty.

“Midoriya right?” Izuku nods warily, and it might be stupid to give a villain but it’s a few more seconds to plan. “Do me a favour and don’t die too quickly.”

The man charges and Izuku barely manages to track it even with One For All enhancing his senses. The villain’s already on his left before Izuku starts twisting. There’s too much force there to even bother blocking and he’s too slow to plan a counter.

His kick is instinctive, not meant to stop the punch but deflect it. It feels like trying to deflect a train with a twig. Izuku goes flying back and slams into and through a layer of the rock wall. It takes him a moment to remember how to breathe.

“Tell me where Endeavour’s kid is, and I’ll kill you quickly,” the villain says and Izuku wants to scream because Shouto’s a friend who’s been with him to hell and back.

Maybe Shouto is a little shit that needs to be punched repeatedly, but the only person allowed to hurt him is Izuku.

The rage is what makes him take up a stance. Izuku understands exactly why they’re after Shouto. It isn’t his quirk—if they knew that they wouldn’t so much as fuck with him—but his relationship to Endeavour. This isn’t some cheap attack of opportunity. The villain, and whoever else is with him, wants to strike out against hero society through UA.

“I like that expression. You want to kill me right now. Can I take that as a no?”

“Fuck you,” he spits.

Izuku dodges to the right on instinct and barely raises his arm to block the follow-up punch. In a split second, he concentrates One For All to his right arm.

The impact from the villain’s punch annihilates his guard. His bones strain and creak, but the crystal lattice within keeps the bone intact.

Izuku goes flying back.

The villain follows whilst Izuku is still in the air, catching up before Izuku can land.

Shit, Izuku thinks and twists around the blow, countering with a fist of his own on the villain’s hand. It diverts the blow enough that the villain’s fist is in the ground whilst Izuku uses the displaced force as a platform to jump upward.

He raises his leg and brings it down with all the force he can manage in an axe kick to the villain’s head. The ground beneath them shatters and dust rises, obscuring his sight. He’s not stupid and
knows that isn’t enough. He tries to leap back but stumbles when his leg doesn’t come with him.

“You’re pretty fucking fast,” the villain says as the dust settles. He sees the villain’s other arm raised to protect his head and Izuku’s foot is in his grasp. “But you’re not strong enough.”

With one mighty swing, he slams Izuku to the ground, driving his straight through it.

He feels something, maybe everything, break. He lifts Izuku again. *Ah shit*, Izuku think, before he’s slammed into the ground once more.

Then again.

And again.

*You know we’re fucked, right?* Mikumo asks, his voice the only reason Izuku stays conscious. *Not enough light to make shadows. Just the living lightning to protect you.*

This isn’t anything like Stain. And not only because he had backup then. No, Izuku hasn’t been so thoroughly outmatched. He’s never fought anyone stronger, faster and more skilled than him with the intent to kill. The match against All Might doesn’t come close. His mentor hadn’t been out for blood.

His vision is blurry as he stares at the villain. The man is half turned to the side and saying something, but that cybernetic eye tracks Izuku.

Izuku blinks. *Oh, has a weakness.* It takes him a moment to realise that the villain is talking to someone. *Who?*

*Don’t be stupid, brother. He’s talking to Kouta and you know it. No one’s coming to save you or the boy. You need to get up and win.*

The villain turns and walks towards Kouta.

*Get up,* Mikumo orders, urging him to stand.

He’s left with no choice when the villain raises his fist against the boy.

One For All fills his body once more and he dashes forward. He knows the element of surprise isn’t on his side. At least, he works under the assumption that someone with as much clear battle experience as this villain would anticipate his actions.

So, when the villain turns Izuku is ready. He feints left as though he’s going to attack with his uninjured arm.

He enjoys the moment of gratification when the villain’s eyes widen. Overextended, and with Izuku’s open palm heading his way, the villain doesn’t have an opportunity to dodge.

His cybernetic eye doesn’t feel like punching a brick wall like the rest of the villain’s body. It crumples beneath the strength of his strike and the villain goes flying, stones breaking and dust kicking up.

He hears Kouta scream. He glances his direction and sees the kid flying over the edge.

*The shockwave.*

Izuku leaps back and grabs the kid before he can fall off the ledge. “Sorry,” he says to the boy once
he safe from falling.

“Thank—your arm,” Kouta says, forcing Izuku to look at it.

Mangled and bruised heavily, he won’t be shocked if there are many cracks. But it doesn’t feel as damaged as it could have been. Very likely, the internal mutations within him keep his arm intact.

“Why?”

“Because you deserve to live,” Izuku says a moment before he hears stone breaking. “No,” he whispers, turning.

The villain stands, red fibres writhing over his body. There’s blood covering his face and a horrible wound where he cybernetic eye used to be. The bloody mess is going give Kouta nightmares if he survives the night.

“You fucking piece of shit,” the villain snarls, blood dripping down his face “I wasn’t gonna kill you but now I’m going to take my time ripping you apart.”

“Kouta, get on!” he screams and thanks every god that the kid doesn’t hesitate because the villain is already moving.

Instinct is the only thing that lets Izuku dodge a strike that tears apart the cliffside. He ignores the sound of tonnes of stone crashing down, ignores the complete certainty that his mastery of One For All won’t help if the villain gets a single blow in.

The villain stands from his crouched position, wobbling slightly. With one eye missing, his depth perception may very well be useless.

Izuku leaps back, trying to put distance between him and the villain.

And then the villain is in the air with them. Izuku twists and kicks, sending a wave of force to dodge the blow.

The villain’s fist slams into the wall, arm deep. To his absolute horror, the cliffside develops a series of cracks. The villain tugs, unable to get his arm out.

Kouta loses his grip and gives a pained cry as the boy tumbles behind Izuku. It is cruel but that pain means he won’t get instantly killed the moment the villain pulls his fist out of stonewall and attacks again.

“Kouta, I need you to run, right now,” Izuku says.

“What? No, he’ll—”

“Kouta!” he shouts. “No matter what, I’m going to stop him. But I need you to run if I want to fight.”

This is just like fighting Stain in a way. Iida interfering in a fight and Izuku being forced to deal with his survival.

The boy’s crying now, Izuku can tell even with his back turned to him. “Let’s run. We can get away.”

Izuku shakes his head. “Too late,” he whispers as the villain pulls free of the stone’s grasp. “Kouta, promise me something.”
“What?” the boy whispers, stepping back.

“Promise me you won’t blame yourself for what comes next.”

He doesn’t listen to Kouta’s response. Time’s up and all that matters is whether or not Kouta will see the monster Izuku’s hiding just beneath the surface. He doesn’t want to lose control and possibly leave Kouta traumatised for life.

The villain’s muscles fibres are thicker, covering more of him than before but they still barely cover his face. No, instead his neck and back muscles are providing protection there, concentrated around his working eye.

Good. It means there’s still a chance.

The abomination of muscles and hate charges for Izuku, every step shaking the ground. Izuku raises his left arm to block against what might as well be a tank. His arm dislocates instantly but he pushes back, every iota of strength in his body fighting against the inexorable tide that is this villain.

And he’s losing.

This villain is a physical powerhouse that completely eclipses Izuku. He’s closer to All Might’s level than he is to Izuku.

It doesn’t matter, though.

Winning this portion of the battle isn’t the point. He never, for a single second, thought he could match this creature in pure strength.

But he has two advantages: one, the villain can’t see half his field of vision; and two, he still has three free limbs.

The moment the ground beneath him cracks Izuku steps to the side slightly. It feels like madness to let only one arm take the entire force for more than a second.

A second is all he needs.

Izuku makes a straight kick to the villain’s knees with One For All coursing through his body. He hears the crunch and sees the explosion as the knee fails to handle the force. The burst of force expels tendons and viscera all wrapped up in a sudden expulsion of blood.

It is a sudden shock of cartilage and tendons, ruptured flesh and shattered bone, that shatters the villain’s defences. The villain, unstable, tilts to the side, howling in pain.

The villain’s eye had given away his weakness.

There are barely any muscles fibres there naturally so it stands to reason any other area like that would operate similarly. It is a gamble that he wouldn’t reinforce his knees the same way he did his elbows and joints.

A gamble that barely works.

Without the force pushing against his left arm, Izuku can redirect his power to a winding elbow that blows away the villain’s muscle mass, exposing the weak flesh underneath the biological armour.
Not all of it and certainly not around his good eye. The muscles there are growing thicker as the villain tries peddling back on one arm, terror in his good eye.

Good, that wasn’t his target anyway.

His mangled right arm rises, fingers and thumb extending and his power concentrating around his hand. The green lightning of One For All is so concentrated there that his hand resembles a glowing green knife.

The villain doesn’t see the danger, doesn’t see the hand as it slices through the weak concentration of muscle fibres near the ruined cybernetic eye.

He probably does feel the fingers plunging through his eye socket.

Izuku doesn’t stop there because he can’t know whether the villain will stay down, especially after he’s barely done any real damage to him.

So, he doesn’t hold back as his hand shatters the villain’s skull and punches straight through the other side. He watches as dark flesh is flung outward and his skull explodes. Bone shards slice Izuku’s arm, his blood intermingling with the villain’s ruined head.

His left eye seemingly stares at him in shock, the final sight the villain sees being a little boy who completely eclipsed his strength.

The villain falls back.

Izuku pulls his hand out of the man’s skull, not looking at the gore covering his arm. He takes a breath because oh fuck he’s just killed someone and it doesn’t matter that this is a villain because he’s going to prison and—

“You, you,” Kouta’s voice breaks him from his thoughts. “You saved me.”

Izuku blinks, shocked still, and doesn’t react to the small pair of arms wrapping around his waist. He raises his bloodied hand away from the boy and places the other on his head, confused because he is certain this would end differently.

“Right,” Izuku says awkwardly, pushing his guilt and revulsion down. Right now, he needs to be strong and unburdened.

“He killed my parents,” the boy sniffls.

That puts his words in context. The boy shakes and trembles. Errantly, Izuku is glad Kouta hasn't pissed himself because that would be too many bodily fluids in one day.

“Why?” Kouta asks, shaking. “After I insulted you and punched you.”

Izuku snorts and shifts so that Kouta’s facing away from the villain.

“You know, the first time All Might saved me I puked on him.” Kouta laughs, startled. “Laughing’s a lot easier than crying. Trust me on this.”

“You’re an idiot,” Kouta says, and whilst his laughter is tinged with hysteria, he isn’t going to have a nervous break just yet.

“I am. Now do me a favour and close your eyes.”
Izuku waits until the boy does so and walks to Muscular, checking twice more that Kouta hasn’t decided that listening to your elders is for losers. He doesn’t look at the pulverised head, the shattered knee or the bloodstains. It’s harder to avoid the deflated muscle and the horrible smell it brings—not decay, nothing like the corpse whales, but similar still.

For a moment, a very long moment, he contemplates tearing out the villain’s heart and eating it. It’s the nature of the abyss, to consume the power of those you killed. To the victor go the spoils.

The gnawing pit in his stomach seems to deepen, beckoning him forward one step at a time. He can feel the power Muscular holds and he can claim it.

All it would take is eating a mortal heart. Easy, compared to feasting upon the flesh of metallic godling’s trapped beyond time.

You have more important things to deal with.

He walks past the body and towards the discarded cloak, setting aside his hunger.

Izuku tears a strip and makes a sling for his right arm. It hurts but this way it won’t flap every which way and cause him more pain. With another strip, he wipes away the blood and sticky flesh. Even with his best efforts, his skin is still tinged red.

Stop thinking about it.

Izuku stands and he takes the remainder of the cloak, throwing it over the villain. He takes a few pieces of stone and uses them to pin down the cloak. It isn’t much but it’s better than nothing.

“I’m not sorry I killed you,” Izuku whispers, finally, voice flat and hard as steel. “I’m sorry you were my enemy.”

He looks to Kouta and sees a terrified boy a step away from a nervous break. The boy is weak, pitiful, and wholly incapable of surviving alone. He’s prey to be hunted. Or maybe the boy is prey to be protected by the biggest predator around.

He likes that idea. So, Izuku smiles at Kouta, letting his predatory instincts fade in the presence of a little boy. They can always come back later if there’s a threat.

“You wanna help put out that fire?”

He wonders how many enemies are waiting to face him. He wonders how many are waiting to fall to his power.

Kouta clambers up Izuku’s back. Like this, the boy can’t see Izuku’s violent grin. Like this, he can’t see the sheer exhilaration as he leaps off the cliff surrounded by a shower of green lightning.

Chapter End Notes

Remember when I said people don’t pull punches? It goes both ways.
Remember when I promised you a war? This is the opening conflict, the first punch that sets Japan on fire.

Anyway, let me know if you enjoyed this. If not, your readership is more than enough.
See y'all next time when shit really goes to hell.
Shouta Aizawa is tense, nervous and tired. It’s a bad mix on the best of days. Today is the worst of days.

He doesn’t know what to do about Izuku, doesn’t know how to heal that relationship or if mending it is even possible. All he wants is to sit down with the boy and speak to him when they both aren’t angry. To speak honestly and kindly and try to find some middle ground. And yes, he’s aware that he could have handled things better.

Most of all, he worries about the students he has expelled. A list that seems to get longer and more terrible with each year. Some days he counts them off. Those who are dead—and any number over zero will be too many. Two who became criminals, one a terrorist and one who worked with the Yakuza. He thinks of those hiding in the jungles of Malaysia, a war-torn region, and wonders what they hoped to find there.

Fumikage is on his mind the most. One student stolen from him, beyond his means to retrieve. He isn’t so arrogant as to think he could march into the Imperial Villa and demand his student back. And even if he could, he doesn’t know if Fumikage can be a hero any longer.

He puts those thoughts away and deals with the situation at hand. Namely, the outhouse burning to the ground.

“Move!” he orders, knowing Sekijirou will keep the students safe and deal with the fire.

It takes him no time at all to reach the door. He slams it open and steps out. Instinct screams at him.

He ducks beneath a gout of fire. His capture equipment snakes out and wraps around the villain’s legs. He tugs and brings the villain down.

“Damn, you’re quick,” the villain says.
He sees a spark of blue flame. Before it can get any further, Shouta activates his quirk and neutralises the villain’s abilities.

With a quick move, Shouta’s pinned the villain to the ground, digging his knee into the villain’s back and grinding his face against the rock.

“Names, numbers, quirks?” Shouta growls out

“Fuck off. Well, see ya.”

The villain disintegrates.

Shouta raises a brow in confusion at the puddle of goop. It had happened suddenly. One moment the villain is solid, the next a grey liquid.

*Cloning abilities?* He wonders, terrified. If that’s the case, it means there might be dozens of each villain. They may very well be outnumbered.

And that’s not a situation his students are ready for. He's taught them technique and quick thinking. Hopefully, their internships taught them how to handle stressful situations.

This isn’t a stressful situation. No, it’s much worse. This is life or death. That villain had been out to burn him to a crisp.

“Get moving,” Seikijirou says, his blood solidifying over the flames and snuffing them out. “They won’t get past me.”

Shouta nods, grateful. He won’t have to worry about the students there.

“Contact security.”

“I know how to do my job,” Sekijirou growls, staring off into the distance. “I don’t think they’ll help much.”

He sets off quickly, heading towards the fire. That’s likely where the real villain is and, if Shouta can take him down, it may be the difference between victory and defeat. The gas cloud and the fire are there to funnel people into kill zones—at least, that’s what Shouta would use them for.

A rustle makes him tense, instinctively rolling to the side just before someone streaks past him. His quirk is active until he lays eyes on the person.

It is Midoriya carrying Kouta. Midoriya looks like he’s been through hell and is wreathed in green lightning, ready to keep battling. One arm is hidden by a makeshift sling, but what little he can see is a horrible purple colour. His torso is a motley collection of bruises, and, if Shouta’s guess is right, probably internal bleeding.

“Aizawa,” Midoriya says, surprised. “Take Kouta. He has a water quirk and—”

“What happened?” he asks instead, focused on Midoriya’s other arm. It has a red sheen on it, one that can only have come from hastily wiping away blood with a dry cloth.

“He was going to kill Kouta,” Midoriya says quickly. “I couldn’t-I had to stop him.”

“Listen to me,” Shouta says. “It doesn’t matter what happened. You kept him safe and that’s all that matters. Do you understand?”
Midoriya nods. “They’re after Shouto. He said there’s a list. I need to go.”

He wants to say no and force him to stay here. But, above all, he knows Midoriya has combat experience. It hurts, but right now, he needs to consider his students as chess pieces. Injured as he is, Midoriya is still likely stronger than most pro heroes.

Shouta needs to move him like a chess piece against his opponents.

_Damn it, Midoriya. Damn it, Nezu. Damn it all._

“Get to Mandalay,” Shouta orders. “Let her know everyone is authorised to fight but they should all fall back to the hall. Stay safe and don’t be reckless.”

“Do you even care—”

“Don’t accuse me of that,” Shouta says, keeping watch. “Whatever else you think of me, just know I care about you more than you can imagine. I care about all my students. And right now, my only option is to have you fight. So, when I say stay safe, I fucking expect you to do it instead of being a whiny brat. Understood?”

“Yes.”

“I know you’ve fought at this level of chaos. Prioritise a retreat. Never attack unless you outnumber them. And remember, if you die, it will make everything worse.”

He doesn’t want to think of what will happen if that occurs. The death toll will be massive if only because of the rampage Midoriya will go on if he dies.

Kouta screams suddenly, pulling him out of his thoughts.

A burst of blue fire forces him to jump back. Midoriya jumps in the other direction. A line of fire separates the two of them.

Shouta glances to the side.

Two enemies approach, another of the man with the flame quirk and a Nomu.

_How many are there?_ He wonders, not sure if he’s referring to the Nomu or the pyro clones.

It doesn’t matter. This is just one more fight. One more chance to lose and die.

“Midoriya, take him and go,” Shouta snaps, quirk active and already neutralising the enemy’s fire abilities.

“But—”

“Keep him safe,” Shouta snaps, capture equipment at the ready. “That’s an order.”

Out the corner of his vision, he sees Midoriya nod. Then, he vanishes in sparks of green lightning.

This isn’t a good matchup.

The Nomu alone likely has physical abilities that completely outmatch him. It’s the other villain, however, that’s the real problem. With that fire, the moment Shouta stops using his quirk, he’ll have to contend with fire on top of whatever abilities the Nomu has.
The Nomu rushes him, fast as a bullet. Shouta barely dodges the blow, jumping further away from the fire.

It means he must take his eyes off the villain.

Another wave of fire forces him back, the heat so hot that the air scorches his throat and lungs. He feels the hair on his eyebrows burn off as he scrambles back.

His capture equipment snakes out and wraps around the Nomu’s legs. Before he can tug, the creature generates a chainsaw and cuts through the strands.

Fuck, he thinks, dodging to the left and closer to the pyro.

He flips over another gout of flame and dashes towards the dark-haired man. He makes it maybe halfway there before the Nomu is on him. It slams an arm against Shouta.

He gasps in pain as he flies away. He hits the ground and skids across it. Through years of instinct, he lands in a perfect three-point crouch.

He doesn’t let the pain show on his face.

This isn’t good. There’s a path to victory somewhere and in another situation, where most of his attention wasn’t on the possibility of dead students, he would be able to find it. Right now, though, the best idea he can come up with is to retreat and let Sekijirou join the battle.

A shockwave slams into the fire villain. It sends the villain flying into a tree. The villain lets out a pined grunt before he disintegrates.

Nejire Hado walks past the treeline.

“Hey, Sensei,” she says cheerily. “Need some help?”

Well then, this just became a fair fight.

Nejire is like a storm, fast and imposing and implacable. It makes him proud that she is a UA student as she battles the Nomu, taking no damage at all.

The fight ends quickly with her help.

Just like the villain, the Nomu disintegrates. Shouta swallows nervously. That means the original is still out there somewhere.

“Hado, situation?”

“Oh, we’re losing,” she says with a levity that doesn’t reach her eyes. “I found bodies.”

“No,” he whispers. “Who?”

“A girl from your class.”

She leads him to the body. Every step forward fills his heart with dread, cold tendrils clawing down his spine. Only experience keeps his hands from shaking.

He recognises her immediately. There’s no world in which he would not recognise her. Green hair and soft features.
There is a single perfect cut across her throat tarnishing every memory of her. Every memory of her dry humour and awkward smile.

Every single memory of Tsuyu Asui will always be overlaid by this final sight of her, bloody and her features frozen in terror. There is no life to those eyes, and he knows they will haunt him to his dying days.

He closes his heart to the pain. It’s hard, almost impossible. The grief is thick in his throat and the magnitude of his responsibility hits him now more than ever.

*How many more?* he wonders, terrified. Then he forces himself to be strong. *No more. Not today.*

“Hado, you can fly. I need you to find students and get them to safety. Understood?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t take any risks. No one else dies tonight. This is as far as the villains get. This far, and no further.”

*****

Ochaco Uraraka decides that she loathes camp and will never, under any circumstances, go to another camp. The movies make camp out to be this fun time to spend with your friends in the middle of nowhere, breaking rules and just being kids.

They never talk about camps being attacked except in bad B-list slasher films. And whilst she has a fondness for how over the top and cheesy they are, she never wants to be in one. Because now she understands how people fail to run in a straight line without tripping.

One of the villains is a nightmare raining down saw-like teeth everywhere. It's the reason she's been split up from Asui and anyone else who might have been on the ‘scare path’ and she decides that Aizawa chose the worst possible night for a teaming bonding exercise.

She leaps to the side just as a wave of blue fire incinerates much of the forest to her right. She doesn’t know who the hell that is, but she’d like it if Todoroki could get off his ass and deal with the fire. Maybe that’s not fair but she can hear fights in every direction and has no way to communicate.

“Ochaco!”

She pauses, glancing to the side. It is Asui sprinting towards her, eyes wide and shifting every direction as she tries to avoid the fire. There’s a bit of blood on her, Ochaco notices distantly.

“What happened?”

“Villain,” Asui says, matching pace with Ochaco. “Cut me up.”

Ochaco nods and sets her sights to camp. The fire’s blocking their way so she’ll have to circle around. It will mean a longer time and they might encounter more villains. Still, it is a safer path than wading through the fire.

She tenses when she hears the ground explode. Then she sees the glacier of ice in the distance, expanding endlessly away from camp.

“What the hell are you doing?” she mutters, worried.
Todoroki’s one of their top fighters. Even Ochaco isn’t so arrogant as to think she could beat him in a fight. Him and Izuku are so far beyond her abilities that she had to contend with her bitterness and jealousy every day.

Tokoyami she could take any day of the week. Not that she’ll ever see him again.

Another burst of fire makes her tense. Asui shoves her aside and they tumble to the ground, landing in an ungraceful heap as the air above them heats up.

“Thank y—”

Ochaco coughs suddenly, tasting copper and seeing red flecks on Asui’s grinning face. She blinks slowly, trying to understand what’s going on.

She looks down and sees a knife lodged right in her sternum. Her dark shirt is stained with blood. It isn’t the gush of blood she expects after so many bad horror films. No, it’s just a dribble of blood.

“You’re not—”

She chokes on her blood once more.

“Kuro said the big boys can’t kill you,” Asui says cheerfully. “But it’s just us girls here. We don’t have to follow the rules. We can have some fun.”

Asui rips the knife out.

It doesn’t hurt immediately. There’s a part of Ochaco completely divorced from events. Yes, her best friend just tore out a significant chunk of her torso. Yes, that’s definitely her lung that’s been punctured from the sudden weight. Yes, that’s her lifeblood leaking profusely.

Then the reality of it hits her. A flare of heat and agony runs through her body, a pervasive and all-encompassing pain like a thousand needles. She opens her mouth to scream, to say anything, but she merely coughs blood.

It’s hard to keep her head up. The world shifts in and out of focus, spinning lazily.

She sees Asui lick the knife sensually, a perversion of everything she knows Asui to be. She can only watch helplessly as the person above her become her mirror image.

She tries lifting her hand. If she can just touch Asui, then maybe she can win. It takes everything she has to raise her trembling hand. The villain cocks her head, then smiles. A moment later, that knife has pinned her hand to the ground.

That grin haunts her. It seems so sincere and at odds with the casual violence.

*I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Ma, dad, take—*

Ochaco Uraraka dies with only a villain for company.

A minute later, Ochaco Uraraka blinks at the body beneath her, cocking her head carefully. No, that movement feels a bit too exaggerated. She slaps her cheeks gently. There, that feels a bit more accurate.

She stands, startled by the strength in her muscles. Ochaco is fit, incredibly so, despite what her appearance may suggest. There’s a level of strength and endurance that she just hadn’t expected. Well, anyway, she might as well take advantage of Ochaco’s cute face.
“Hey Dabi,” she says into her radio, “do you think you could stop trying to burn me down.”

“Sorry. New body?”

“Yup,” she says cheerfully. “I like it. You think you can set this section on fire so no one tracks me down?”

“If you go make yourself useful and get one of our targets.”

Ochaco giggles, then pauses. No, Ochaco isn’t the giggly sort. More likely to smile broadly and laugh deep in her chest.

She sets off, getting used to a new gait. It doesn’t take very long given the amount of experience she has. She has a rough idea of where the fight is and decides to head towards Spinner. The lizard's nice and he even protected Mustard whom she may have a bit of a crush on, not because he's particularly attractive, but because she wants to see him drenched in blood.

That would make him appealing. That pale hair dyed burgundy by blood, his mouth opened as he tries taking his last breaths. She won’t kill him. Kurogiri seems to like him to an absurd degree which makes her think he’s got a dead child somewhere in his history, especially given how he mothers Shigaraki.

Maybe she can engineer Mustard’s death. No, even better, she can find out if he has any family and tear through them. That would probably leave him a gibbering mess.

She twists on the spot just before a blur of green lightning streaks by her.

Ochaco wants to grin but that isn’t something she would normally do. Instead, she shouts, “Midoriya,” in a steady voice.

Her classmate turns on the spot, eyes wide. One of his arms is in a sling and he's shirtless—it takes everything she has not to pounce on those rock-hard abs because those pale scars need to be traced by her deft hands, and maybe in the process, she can get him mewling beneath her touch—with Kouta on his back.

His eyes have a glint to them that almost makes her smile. It’s a cold viciousness that she would recognise anywhere. Those are the eyes of someone who has killed, willingly and fully aware of their choice.

*Okay, tonight’s going to be fun,* she thinks. *I wonder who he killed?*

“Ochaco,” Izuku says breathlessly though he’s not breathing hard—*delayed panic reaction.*

“Where’s everyone?”

“I don’t know,” she says honestly. “I’m trying to get back to camp.”

“Fuck. I don’t… Kouta, say hi to Ochaco.”

“Hi,” the little boy says.

“Izuku, I’ll take him,” Ochaco says earnestly. “You go fight the villains. I’ll look for the other students.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”
"She’s going to take care of you for a bit, okay?"

The boy nods, sliding off Izuku’s back. He looks uncertain, wary of her. This is why Ochaco dislikes kids. They’re perceptive in a way most adults aren’t.

“Stay safe,” Izuku orders. “The Pussycats are fighting some lizard guy back that way. They should be done soon.”

She nods, offering him a small smile. He smiles back and then vanishes in a burst of speed, sparks of green lightning lingering after he’s gone.

“I don’t like you,” Kouta says bluntly, arms crossed as if half the forest isn't on fire.

Ochaco smiles back at him. Just because he’s cute, she isn’t too rough knocking him unconscious.

She activates the radio. “Hey, Mister Compress, I got one of the targets,” Toga says brightly. “He’s really cute.”

“I’m a bit busy. Give me fifteen minutes.”

“Sure,” Ochaco says. “I’ll get another one as well.”

Compress doesn’t respond. He might be in a fight. Ochaco shrugs, setting the boy down in a spot a bit out of the way of the trees. She relays the coordinates to Dabi so he doesn’t accidentally kill the boy.

Now, she has to go help out Spinner.

She sprints in the direction Izuku came from. It’s rather easy to follow given the rows of flattened trees that he ran through. The idea that he has so much power makes her shiver, and she falls in love with him all over again.

*He’s strong and handsome and kills people,* she thinks cheerfully, smiling. *I think I want to marry him.*

Which is odd. She's never really liked anyone so much. Then again, no one is like Izuku Midoriya. No one’s willing to stand against the world the same way he is. No one embodies Stain’s beliefs more than he does.

He’s everything she could ever want.

The sounds of battle pull her from her thoughts. She spies Spinner holding off two pro heroes with a long knife held in his hands. His giant weapon is a ruined mess, blades scattered about everywhere.

But, it’s an advantage of its own. Spinner leaps back and grabs a knife on the floor, throwing it to Mandalay to force her back just before he swings to fend off Tiger.

“Mandalay,” she says loudly, drawing their attention. “It’s Kouta and he’s bleeding and—”

Spinner throws a knife towards her. Mandalay leaps forward, pulling her to the ground before it can hurt her.

“Tiger—”

“I’m good,” the big man grunts, grappling with Spinner for control of his long blade.
The hero grabs hold of her. “Where?”

“I can show you,” Ochaco says, scrambling up and running back the direction she came. “I left him with Asui so he should be safe.”

“You did good,” Mandalay says.

Ochaco preens under the praise, hiding her flush by turning her head. It’s odd running with Mandalay. The pro is faster than she is but stays exactly five strides ahead of her. Probably to face a threat first if one emerges.

It’s something any pro hero would do. It’s what makes them heroes in the first place.

It’s also what makes them predictable.

“He’s not subtle,” Mandalay says as they pass the flattened trees.

“Nope. But he’s a good guy.”

They come across Kouta’s resting spot.

“Where’s Asui?” she asks, faking her concern perfectly.

Mandalay doesn’t answer, moving towards the boy quickly. She’s too focused on everything else to notice Ochaco remove a sedative from her pocket.

She always carries a sedative on her just for situations like this. Her costume may be lost somewhere in the forest but she still has some of the equipment from it.

Mandalay doesn’t have more than a moment to think before the needle’s in her neck and the contents depressed. It’s a fast-acting thing, built on two centuries of medical advancements and the need to contain superpowered individuals with abnormal biology.

Mandalay collapses on the ground. Ochaco smiles, glad that she wasn’t discovered.

“Well,” Compress says from above her, “you’ve been busy.”

She looks around and finds Kouta gone already.

“Did you get any?” she asks, taking a bit of blood from Mandalay.

“Yaoyorozu and Magne. The big girl took a pretty bad beating but she’ll make it.”

Ochaco smiles. She rather likes Magne. There aren’t enough girls on the team.

When she looks up again, Compress is gone along with Mandalay. She rolls her eyes.

Ochaco drinks Mandalay’s blood and slowly becomes her.

It takes her a moment to get used to the height difference. Mandalay is quite tall, all things considered. She’s very bottom heavy, her legs feeling a tad too long for her height.

She heads back in long confident strides. Mandalay would know this forest perfectly and would never need to look down.

Mandalay heads back to Tiger’s position. And finds the situation has deteriorated once more.
Spinner’s on the ground, slinking away from earth beasts courtesy of Pixie Bob. Tiger slams into him from the side and the two go tumbling down in a vicious melee.

Mandalay runs forward. “Pixie Bob,” she calls, startling her teammate. “I found Kouta. He’s safe for now.”

Pixie Bob nods.

Then her teammate punches Mandalay across the nose, stunning her.

“Did you think I wouldn’t know?” she asks threateningly. “She never surprises her teammates.”

Toga inclines her head because that’s on her. She never did account for how a telepath might talk to their teammates.

But Pixie Bob makes a mistake and looks away for a split second.

That’s all it takes for Toga to twist out of her grip and mask her presence. Before Pixie Bob can fully process it, she’s already flipped over her.

She wraps her legs around Pixie Bob’s neck and uses her forward momentum to flip the hero over. Pixie Bob slams into the ground but recovers quickly, rolling to the side.

Too slow.

Toga is on her and punches her in the sternum. She twists around and slams an elbow in the hero’s armpit, dazing her once more.

Then, Toga brings her down with another flip. She forces Pixie Bob into a submission hold. There’s no way she can break free of it. Toga squeezes as hard as she can whilst Spinner fights Tiger.

If she can take out Pixie Bob then that means they won’t have to face a dozen enemies. Besides, Pixie Bob is on the list of targets.

Pixie Bob thrashes wildly, futilely. Toga has leverage on her side and a lot of experience fighting people bigger and stronger than her.

The heroine slaps the ground and makes an Earth Golem.

“Spinner,” Toga snaps because she can’t let go, not yet.

The lizard moves like a blur, elbowing Tiger in the chest. Toga wants to scream because he could have just killed the hero right then and there.

Still, it means he gets close enough to shove aside the golem.

Toga stands. Two on one odds sound pretty good to her. Well, that is until a pillar of earth slams into her side.

She curses as she hits the ground, her side burning with pain. She lets out a pained grunt, unable to master her pain. Her disguise slides away, Mandalay’s features shedding away and leaving Himiko Toga.

Spinner slams his foot down on Pixie Bob’s head, rendering her unconscious. The lizard grins, savouring the act of violence.
Toga tries standing but something’s broken and she just lists to the side weakly.

And then Tiger is on her, his massive hand around her throat.

*****

Mirio Togata is a cheerful and warm person, a classmate everyone likes and a great hero in the making. Right now, he has no smile, no laugh ready.

He's outnumbered four to one against a group of villains. One with razor-sharp teeth that is absurdly fast. A woman whose quirk keeps him off-balanced, pulled from one direction to the next if he stays exposed for more than a second. And though he may want to take her out first, she's protected by a Nomu with chainsaws.

Why does it have to be chainsaws? He wonders, leaping through the earth and coming out behind the villain in a black straitjacket. He knows Moonfish the cannibal and has read his dossier, so Mirio is completely unsurprised when he flips on a dime and dodges Mirio’s blow.

These aren’t amateurs, he thinks when Magne, another villain famed for her brutality in dealing with police, sends him crashing down with her magnetism.

At the last moment, he activates his quirk. Changes direction. Rockets out to hit the fourth enemy, a Nomu that’s been spreading purple balls everywhere.

The purple balls stick to everything they touch. Thankfully, Mirio doesn’t need to worry about them given his quirk.

He can see the frustration mounting in Magne as he weaves between their blows. He can’t go on the offensive given how organised they are, but his quirk means that they can’t hit him.

Which is fine. He’s not out to win. He knows what will happen if he makes a silly mistake and gets injured. No, all he cares about is keeping these villains occupied and away from Tamaki Amajiki who has five students to shepherd to safety.

All he has to do is hold out until Tamaki comes back which might be in ten minutes or ten hours depending on how fucked the situation is. Right now, it looks pretty fucked.

His distraction nearly costs him an arm courtesy of Moonfish’s teeth. As it is, the villain scores a clean gouge before Mirio turns impermeable.

Magne makes a signal and the purple Nomu pulls back.

Not happening.

Mirio dips beneath the ground and chases after it. It’s headed deeper into the forest, possibly where other students are fighting. He can’t let it get away.

He surfaces, ready to kick it down and stop it.

Then he’s tugged back and flies through the air. He turns impermeable before a chainsaw can bisect him.

He is coming to hate Magne more and more. Her power completely nullifies the benefits of his intangibility. She can use it when he’s in the ground, the air or on land, regardless of how impermeable he is.
With the Nomu, he can’t reach her since she can react fast enough to send him flying back. With Moonfish around, he can’t stay tangible long or risk a serious injury. And when he’s tangible, he’s at risk of getting stuck on the adhesive spheres.

He’ll win, given time, there’s no doubt of that. It’s just a matter of how badly injured he is by then and if some of the students wander into the battle zone and place themselves in danger.

A wave of ice splits the battlefield in half.

Mirio sighs in annoyance.

He knows Todoroki by reputation, having witnessed his duel during the Sports Festival. The kid is powerful, of that Mirio is certain.

But he’s also arrogant as hell. He’s walking casually as though there isn’t a battle going on. Then again, he’s flinging spears of ice that keep Magne and the Nomu distracted without looking at them.

Moonfish screeches, an endless deluge of teeth raining down upon them.

Todoroki raises a brow and lifts his hand. Instantly, a barrier of ice manifests, blocking Moonfish’s attack.

“I’ll deal with him,” Todoroki says flatly, telling an inviolable law of the universe.

For a moment, Mirio imagines he sees a flash of black fire, a spark of heat that burns away any other possibilities.

“Yes,” he says, the words escaping his mouth before he can really think them through.

Todoroki meets his gaze, still firing ice spears. His black eye—Wasn’t it grey?—seeming to see everything that Mirio is or ever will be. Then, his lips quirk up.

“Don’t get distracted or they’ll kill you.”

Mirio huffs. “I should be telling you that.”

Todoroki settles into a stance. In the next moment, there is a giant pillar of ice. Mirio blinks in surprise, seeing Todoroki riding the pillar that’s still growing.

It slams into Moonfish, sending him flying.

He watches, incredulous, as Todoroki seemingly walks on air, making temporary ice platforms that last only for a split second.

Still, he won’t look a gift horse in the mouth. That’s one less enemy to deal with. Three opponents he can fend off easily enough.

And just for his distraction, he takes a blow from Magne’s giant magnet.

It leaves him rattled and disorientated, and he just knows some of his ribs are broken. He twists in the air, trying to activate his quirk. Then he sees the Nomu with one arm raised—one of its none lethal arms.

Sometimes, winning is about trickery.
He activates his quirk a second too late intentionally. The Nomu’s giant arm slams him down. He shoots through the ground in the darkness.

*Note to self: don’t get distracted.*

With that in mind, he rockets upward.

He comes out the ground and his fist connects with the Nomu. It stumbles back, swinging wildly with its six arms.

Mirio leans back, dodging the blow easily. And then he’s flying forward, pushed by Magne’s quirk. He goes intangible with a sigh. This fight is just getting tedious.

He needn’t have worried.

A beam strikes the Nomu and it goes tumbling wildly through the air. Mirio grins. A moment later, Nejire lands beside him.

"Hey, you."

“Need a hand?” she asks.

“Take the Nomu. I’ll deal with her.”

Magne attacks more aggressively now that she has no one defending her.

Mirio keeps with his deception, letting his quirk flicker on and off as though it has a limit. He takes a few glancing blows intentionally, none that would hurt him or even debilitate him. But they have the benefit of making Magne reckless in her assault, certain that she can win.

He is completely solid now when Magne pulls him with her magnetism.

At the last moment, he goes impermeable. He has the pleasure of seeing her eyes widen in shock just before he kicks her will his strength.

She goes flying. At the apex of her arc, one of Nejire’s beams strikes her. She screams out in pain.

Mirio winces as she slams into the ground.

He turns and gives Nejire a thumbs up. She’s still dealing with her Nomu, though five of its arms are shattered. She takes a step back to dodge its attack.

Nejire gets stuck on one of the balls. She yelps as she falls back onto her ass.

“Nejire!” he roars as the Nomu pounces.

A moment later, she fires a beam that pushes it back.

“I’m fine. Focus.”

“Sure, I’ll—”

Time compresses very suddenly. Nejire is in the middle of a dodge whilst the Nomu is frozen mid-step. There forest fire seems almost like stained glass for all that it moves.

Finally, he sees Magne and she’s the only person who seems to be moving in real time.
He sees Magne grinning at him, her fingers splayed in a code-signal.

And then time resumes.

Miriø Togata’s world is one of pain. He looks down and sees the bright red blood coating his torso. More so, he looks to the blood seeming to float in the air, shaped like claws.

He tilts his head back, body weak, and sees nothing behind him. Going impermeable doesn’t work when there’s something through his torso, and he’s liable to lose concentration and fall forever.

A shimmer of light. He blinks tiredly as the light shimmers once more. And then, he sees the creature. Tall and imposing, grey like the other Nomu. But this one fades between view and invisibility with ease. It opens its mouth to reveal sharp rows of teeth, glistening with saliva.

The first row of teeth instantly pierce his skull and tear through his brain.

He doesn’t feel it when the creature rips his head off in a bloody mess of flesh and bone. He can’t hear Nejire’s scream of anguish nor can he notice how the other Nomu capitalises and gouges through her throat.

Miriø will never notice any of this. His is just one death amongst many that night.

One simple mistake is often the difference between life and death.

*****

Katsuki Bakugou is angry.

No, anger doesn’t begin to describe the immensity of his feelings. He is so angry he’s gone past rage and bluster and headed towards calm.

He’s with Momo and they’re cut off from Jirou. She’s someone deeper in the forest but the villain with the teeth had separated them before the fires made things worse. To top it all off, there’s a cloud of poison gas and for some unfathomable reason, Momo thinks they need to help the side characters no one gives a shit about.

“Don’t be an ass,” she says.

“I never said anything,” he mutters.

“But you were thinking it.”

He rolls his eyes, keeping careful track of their surroundings. It sounds like a warzone out there. He doesn’t know how, but he suspects fucking Izuku has something to do with half the mountain collapsing. No one else has that kind of strength to them.

The other, far worse option is that a villain did that. And if anyone but Izuku was fighting him, then they’re probably—

“Pay attention,” Momo snaps as he nearly steps over a student.

He doesn’t apologise but he does place the gas mask over Kaminari’s face. He throws Kaminari over his shoulder, grunting in surprise. He didn’t think Kaminari of all people would weigh so much given how skinny he is.

*Metal bones?* he considers for a moment. Then he decides it doesn’t matter right now. He can poke
and prod Kaminari later when they're all safe.

As it is, he lets Momo place under his arm. There’s no way that Momo could carry either of them alone and they may as well have someone with free hands should they be attacked.

“I’m not a fucking pack mule,” he mutters but there is no heat to it.

He hears a rustling and tenses, ready to drop them and attack.

One of the Pussy Cat’s, the blue one with the earth powers, slides into view. She looks unharmed, surprising given the fact that there’s a fucking war going on.

“Where are you going?” she snaps like she has any right to. “Camp’s the other way.”

“Fuck you,” Katsuki says reflexively.

“We’re trying to get to the gas cloud,” Momo explains a beat later, holding up one of the gas masks.

Pixie Bob hesitates for a moment. “You need to head back. What are you going to do when you’re carrying people?”

Katsuki rolls his eyes. “Maybe you can stop being a shitty side character and help. I don’t know, make some fucking earth monsters and carry them back to camp.”

“Bakugou,” Momo hisses.

He clicks his teeth in annoyance but stays silent. He’s not the best at figuring out when he’s gone too far. Which is good because neither Momo nor Jirou has any fear of telling him off.

“No, you can’t…” she trails off, one head cocked as though listening to something distant. “Kouta.”

Her features harden, a mix of grim determination and resignation. She slams her hands on the ground. Instantly, five of the same golems that plagued their first day of camp materialise.

She’s glaring at him, eyes hard as steel.

“Stay safe. Don’t be reckless.”

“Yeah, fuck you too.”

Pixie Bob nods towards one of the beasts. He gets the idea and deposits Jirou and Kaminari onto the beast.

“Listen, this isn’t a game,” she says harshly. “They’re playing for keeps. Do you understand?”

Momo tugs him back before he can curse her out again. He doesn’t stay silent because he agrees but because it fucking hurts his right arm, the one still in a brace that feels like molten fire when he can feel something through it.

She winces, somehow seeing the pain he’s hiding. “I’ll keep him safe.”

Pixiebob nods once before mounting the beast and setting off back to camp.

That just leaves the two of them. They head towards the source of the gas, moving quickly. They
stay silent, wary of an ambush.

He sees a giant glacier form in the distance and wonders just who Todoroki is fighting. He puts it aside given that the glacier is moving away from him rapidly.

She grabs him and forces something into his pocket before he can process it.

“The fuck?”

“So we can find each other,” she says, showing him a device glowing green.

“You think they’re gonna fucking give us a chance?”

The golems are arrayed around them in a defensive pattern as they go further into the forest.

It happens out of the corner of his eye, at the very edge of his vision. His instincts scream and time seems to slow. Even then, all he sees is one of the golems explode outward.

He steps forward, putting himself between the enemy and Momo as the dust back just as the dust clears.

The man is massive, a hulking monstrosity of power and muscle. He grins cruelly at Bakugou, dripping malice with every movement.

“Oh, you were on the list,” he intones. “Give me the girl and I’ll kill you quickly.”

“Fuck you.”

Bakugou is fast, all things considered. He might not be as fast as Iida in a straight line or anywhere close to Izuku turning on the spot, but his reactions are second to none.

As such, he has the privilege of seeing the villain destroy the stone golems.

The man punches the first golem before it can react, his fist slamming through its throat and coming out the other side. With a sharp tug, the villain rips his arm free and shatters the golem in the process.

Katsuki has only just taken a step back before the villain pounces on the second golem.

He doesn’t bother with anything fancier than a punch that disintegrates the golem in an instant. Shards of stone arc through the air and one even slices Katsuki’s face.

Katsuki’s is pushing Momo further back when the villain attacks the third golem. He crosses the distance so fast that Katsuki can’t track the motion. He slows down when his leg makes contact with the golem. And then its rocketing high into the air.

In the space it takes Katsuki to get in a position to attack, this villain has already destroyed three golems.

Katsuki doesn't hold out much hope that his attack will help. Either way, he brings his hands together. He doesn't have to worry about making enough sweat given that he’s been sweating bullets ever since the villain appeared.

“Ka—”

Momo is only just now catching up to everything. She’s not as fast as he is and it must have been
disorientating to have been pushed whilst there was destruction all around her.

“—tsu—”

It doesn’t matter. He closes his hand, letting only a tiny circle remain exposed. The villain cocks his head, glaring at Katsuki with disdain.

“—ki—”

He activates his quirk.

The explosion isn’t a wide and dispersed thing like he usually does. No, this is a beam like a lance of raw fire. It slams into the villain.

Boom.

He waits, tense, as the smoke fades away.

The villain stands, completely unharmed. What was once a normal arm is now covered in a mass of red muscle.

“Good try,” the villain says with a mad grin. “My turn.”

The golem from earlier, kicked into the air, crashes down.

Katsuki doesn’t see him move but he feels the effects all the same.

The blow is thunderous. It is the power of a speeding train or a falling mountain. It destroys every defence he has and sends him flying.

At some point, he slams into a tree that arrests his momentum. He gasps, stunned, and falls face first to the ground.

He tries crawling forward but something, maybe everything, is broken. He can’t see much. The villain is a red blur and maybe that’s Momo or maybe that’s a fucking tree.

Katsuki blinks.

When he opens his eyes, there is a yellow blur standing near Katsuki.

“Oh, my dear Muscular, what have we here? A sweet little girl and broken boy.”

Katsuki blinks again. When he opens his eyes, the yellow villain is in the trees.

“And now we just have a broken boy.”

“I’m going to kill him now,” Muscular says.

“Are you now?” the other villain asks, gesturing theatrically. “Interesting fact. You, my dear brute, are dead. Killed by another little boy.”

“What?” the villain asks, deathly quiet and perfectly still.

“Just that you failed. You won’t be missed. I bid you, adieu, dear Muscular.” The villain bows once and then vanishes.

Muscular roars in rage, his murderous intent crashing down on Katsuki. It is the weight of a
mountain, a promise of death and unending pain.

Katsuki blinks, too tired and broken to care.

He opens his eyes, surprised that he isn’t already dead. Someone stands between Katsuki and death.

A long tentacle swings out and slams into the villain. It cleaves the villain in half and he disintegrates.

“Hey, can you hear me?”

Bakugou groans out a simple, “Fuck off.”

The student inspects him, touching his neck and chest—which makes Katsuki roar in pain—and finally his legs.

“Broken ribs,” the student mutters, shifting aside Katsuki shirt. “Possible internal bleeding. A concussion. Come on, let’s get you somewhere safe.”

The student picks him up.

Any other time, he might be furious at being carried like a fucking princess. Right now, staying conscious is the best he can manage.

******

Shouto Todoroki walks on platforms of ice that appear for a moment before vanishing, driving Moonfish back. It’s quite easy to achieve. All it takes is making an avalanche of ice.

Could he defeat Moonfish—whose name is writ upon the villain’s soul and that’s there for Shouto to see—in a few seconds? Yes. But where is the fun in that?

Shouto cracks his neck.

“It’s been a while since I killed anything,” he says once he’s put a few kilometres between him and the main fights. “Make it fun for me.”

Shouto lets his platform vanish and drops to the ground. It is a good two hundred metre drop, fatal for most standard humans. For him, it’s just a slightly longer fall.

He lands in a crouch, sending his inertia, momentum and kinetic energy to another reality in the instant before he hits the ground. He rolls his shoulders, hearing them pop.

He walks slowly, destroying those endless teeth with entropic ice. This villain, a top tier enemy, is nothing compared to him. He is sport, nothing more.

“You see, I have some anger issues,” Shouto says, deflecting long lances of teeth with a tidal wave of ice. “And I’m trying to work through them. But fuck if it’s working out. So, I’m going to kill you because I’ve had to act like a good little hero for the past month and it’s driving me mad.”

He raises a wall of ice without thought. It deflects the jagged teeth of the villain.

He tracks Moonfish’s heat signature with his right eye through the ice. When Moonfish comes into view, Shouto sees a world in which the teeth burn, and so reality shifts to accommodate.
Moonfish screeches in fear, skittering away like a massive insect.

“Do you know what a godling’s heart tastes like?” he asks patiently, following Moonfish lazily. “Have you ever heard the suns sing your name in worship? Have you ever consecrated a world in your image? Do you have any idea how crazy I’m going acting like I’m weak and powerless because of some petty human laws? At least Fumikage doesn’t have to pretend anymore. He better thank me later.”

He cocks his head, feeling Mirio die. You should have paid attention, he thinks callously.

“No? Well, I guess you can serve as sport. Your death won’t be quick. It won’t be painless.”

Right now, he’s dealing with his frustrations. He wants to punch Izuku and beat the shit out of him. And since he’s not here, since he’s constantly surrounded by petty mortals, he’ll settle for murdering someone unimportant.

Then, he raises his hand and manifests a spear of godflame. He flings it forward and it shoots past Moonfish. In an instant, that entire section of the forest goes up in black flames that chew through wood and animal flesh and stone in an instant.

A moment later, the fire is gone, as is that area of the forest.

“A long time ago I made a deal to become God with a big G,” he explains to the villain trying to flee. “It cost me my love and my hate. You’d think that would do something for my anger issues. Nope. All it did was make me less empathetic. I don’t give two shits about the law or decency or being a hero. I don’t even know what I want, but it isn’t that.”

Sorry Fuyumi, your advice was wrong.

He steps forward, burning away time and space. In a flash of black flames, he crosses the distance between him and Moonfish. He manifests at the same level as Moonfish, a hundred odd metres above the ground.

Before he can fall, he burns away the concept of gravity as it affects him. Just like that, he’s floating. It isn’t anything particularly special. Gravity, like the nuclear forces and electromagnetism, belongs to the godflame.

With contemptuous ease, he generates dozens of pillars of ice to trap Moonfish. The villain thrashes, trying to escape. His teeth do nothing to ice that can’t ever be affected by time.

“Let me tell you something, Moonfish,” he says softly, observing the villain like the insect he is. “You are nothing. You will never amount to anything. I’ve seen you across a thousand possible futures and your existence is a cosmic dead-end. This day is always the final day of your story. After this, you die or go to prison or fade to obscurity.”

He smiles, summoning the godflame to his hand. He holds the infernal flame that is one-third of all reality and it is his to command. A part of him knows how easy it would be to scorch the world and remake it in his image.

But he rather likes his sister and Izuku and Fumikage and his mother, and they all like this earth.

For their sake, he limits his power to only setting Moonfish on fire. He watches the villain burn in agony, screaming in anguish as the infernal flame burns him away. It burns the concept of Moonfish away not simply in this world, but a thousand others.
This is his right as a king.

In the pyre, he sees a spectre of a coming future. No, he sees the coming future of this world.

“What the fuck?” he wonders, parsing through the patterns of probabilities to try and find the causal weakness.

He recoils, blinking in shock. He’s hit by a wave of horror and revulsion at what will come to pass. It almost leaves him frozen in fear and, for a single moment, he finally understands why Izuku wants to save everyone. It's to spare them from the pain of loss.

Then he finds the weakness in the pattern. Time's running short, all possible futures collapsing and converging to one reality that he and Izuku and Fumikage will have to live through.

“Monoma, you fucking coward,” Shouto growls, turning back to the camp, and searching for the bastard. "No, no, no, no."

Come on, come on, come on, he thinks, trying to find the one signature that corresponds to Monoma. There are dozens of people fighting, dozens of burning souls that he must sift through. Doing so reveals those who have already fallen but he ignores them because they don't matter anymore. Right now, he needs to stop whatever's about to happen.

Found you, he thinks, ready to vanish in a burst of fire.

Too late.

The explosion is glorious.

A rippling conflagration of flame and heat that lights up the night sky like another sun. He feels every death as it occurs, sees every soul as they are burnt away by the heat of the explosion. The shockwave smacks into him, and in his shock, it strikes him down.

Shouto falls from his throne in the sky, cast down from grace by purely human means.

Chapter End Notes

I did warn y'all that no punches were being pulled. It's life or death for every character going forward.

If y'all enjoyed this, let me know. If your favourite characters didn't make it, let me know as well. Either way, see ya later.
The Gods Hear Your Prayers

Chapter Summary

In which we learn why things blow up.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

‘The destruction caused by quirk warfare is unprecedented. We live in an era of evolution where children and senile old men can destroy cities with their quirks. A single geokinetic quirk can destroy a mountain range and a photon-emission quirk can blind a city. Whilst my contemporaries ignore the power of supplemental quirks such as enhanced senses, understand that they increase the lethality of a soldier exponentially. Ignore the flashy quirks and focus on those that are more subtle. A hardening quirk renders an enemy rifleman unit useless. Enhanced senses can recognise ambushes long before they occur. Precognitive quirks can completely change the nature of an engagement. Despite the length of time quirks have existed, a definitive guide to quirk combat is difficult to generate due to the diversity of quirks. I believe, fully, that the next World War will be won by the group most able to effectively utilise their quirks.’


Neito Monoma has felt grief before. Losing Testuetsu had been a blow he never really recovered from. And though Ibara is alive, he hasn’t heard from her since the Sports Festival. That was all he thought his heart could take without breaking.

Right now, he has more people he’ll never speak to again. People he knows and loves whom he will never speak to again.

Setsuna Tokage, a bullet-riddled corpse behind him. A comrade and friend, someone Neito could trust. Someone he could trust to take care of the class if he or their class rep weren’t around. He wonders how long it will take people to notice just how much she did in the background to make sure things went smoothly.

Manga Fukidashi, his speech bubble now a permanent exclamation mark in death. There won’t be any children smiling at his antics now. No one will ever laugh because of him.

The hardest though, the one that leaves his throat tight, is Itsuka. He understands in a distant sort of way how she died. Of course, she would put herself between danger and her classmates. Of course, she would do her best to keep her allies safe.

Of fucking course, she would leave him behind.

That, right there, is the ultimate betrayal. It was meant to be the two of them till the very end, cranky old adults mocking a new generation of children. Seeing her in death, it’s easy to admit he loves her. He doesn’t want to marry her or anything like that, but he does want to be with her forever regardless.

That foolish dream is dead. And now, in this new and cold reality, he must get revenge.
He stalks the gas cloud without a mask. The quirk he’s copied has the benefit of immunity to whatever gas is in the air.

It makes it trivial to find the villain in the centre. This quirk is new and alien to him, but he's played with quirks that have similar detection abilities.

As though he were born with this quirk, he uses the gas to mask his movements. Even if he weren’t so careful, no one ever expects their quirk to be copied. It makes them blind to their own weaknesses.

He finds the villain in a clearing checking his phone. Shorter than he expects for a cold-blooded killer, but then, appearances are deceiving. Neito would know. Everything he does is an act of some sort.

As silent as a ghost, he walks up to the villain.

In one smooth motion, he clamps his hand around the villain’s wrist, tugging him to the side. His foot slides forward, tripping the villain up. Then, with his free hand, he elbows the villain in the armpit, shocking the villain enough that his grip on the gun loosens.

Neito pulls the gun away and kicks the villain away.

The villain stumbles forward, yelping. He trips and lands gracelessly. He twists on the ground, scrambling back.

Neito raises the gun and shoots him in the leg, not hesitating for a moment.

The villain screams.

Neito stalks forward, indifferent to the villain's pain. Why should he care? This villain chose his path a long time ago. No one forced him to attack a camp filled with students. Certainly, no one encouraged him to pick up a gun and shoot students.

Getting shot back is only fair game in Neito’s mind. It is the absolute bare minimum this villain deserves. Every punishment his mind concocts requires more equipment than he can reasonably acquire.

He steps on the knee, savouring the villain’s screams. They are high pitched, a grating screech that makes Neito smile.

Eventually, however, he gets bored with that sound and removes his foot. The villain groans, curling up into a ball.

“Pathetic,” Neito says as the villain tries to crawl away on just his arms.

“Nothing will bring them back,” the villain whimpers.

“Maybe,” Neito agrees, following casually. “But revenge sounds just as good.”

“Wait, heroes—they don’t—”

Neito kicks the villain in the side, forcing him onto his back. “I’m not a hero.” Neito straddles his waist, knee shoved roughly in the villain’s abdomen.

He rips the helmet off the villain. It reveals a child, barely a teenager, with pale hair and pale eyes, forehead slick with sweat. There’s nothing special about him other than his age.
Too young to watch a movie alone. Too young to be making any choices. Too young to even have a girlfriend.

Apparently not too young to be a villain. Apparently not too young to pick up a gun. Apparently not too young to be a murderer.

“Don’t,” the boy whimpers, terrified.

“Well?” he asks, willing to hear the kid out. Maybe there’s one shred of decency in this kid.

Then the kid grins. “Cause they’ll die anyway.”

Neito punches him. Then a second time. Then a third.

He observes the boy, wondering why it has come to this. What kind of world justifies beating a little kid?

Then he realises it’s the kind of world this piece of shit killed for. Every moment of pain to come is something this rat bastard deserves.

So, he punches the kid again. He doesn’t stop, not till his hand is slicked red with blood and the boy’s face is a pulpy mess.

When his knuckles have broken and he’s exhausted himself, Neito grabs the gun. He places the gun at the boy’s temple.

“She said she’d stop me,” he says calmly. “She fucking said she’d stop me. And she’s gone. Because of you.”

The boy wheezes something. Neito leans forward, ear against the boy’s mouth.

“You don’t know—”

The kid bites down, tearing through his ear. Neito grits his teeth before slamming the gun against the boy’s head.

His vicious grip relaxes and Neito pulls back, cradling his bloody ear with one hand. It hurts, perhaps the worst physical pain he’s ever felt. He can still see half his ear in the kid’s mouth.

Then again, it feels like someone ripped his heart out with a rusty spoon. A bit of disfigurement never fucked anyone up as badly as watching your friends die.

“Just die with dignity.”

He thinks of Itsuka and all the great moments they shared. He thinks of Setsuna and Manga and every moment between them. He thinks of how they will never speak again because of this pathetic example of humanity.

When he considers that, his choice is very easy.

Neito pulls the trigger. The bullet rips through flesh and bone and brain matter easily. The kid dies, pants drenched in piss.

In the end, Neito’s actions will cause more deaths, not prevent them as he thought.

In the end, his quest for revenge will end in more deaths of those he wishes to protect.
He does not know it but there is a dead man’s switch linked to the briefcase on the ridge overlooking the camp. It is tied to Mustard’s vitals, a final gambit built out of hope and spite. When Mustard’s heart stops beating, a pulse is sent that opens the case. A dark block of steel rises and tilts to reveal a row of high-yield explosives.

By killing him, Neito does not know the devastation he will bring forth. The explosive payloads launch, targeted at the main building.

Neito sees the flash of light before he feels the shockwave. The rush of hot air slams into him, searing his throat and lungs.

“No,” he whispers, looking at the bright conflagration, right where the camp building is.

He looks down and hears the beeping. Rips the villain's shirt open and sees the biometric sensor. The flat line of a still heart seems to taunt him with all his failures.

He is many things but stupid is not one of them. He knows what a dead man's switch is.

Neito swallows. “I’m sorry, Itsuka. Wait for me. I hope you forgive me.”

He raises the gun. Takes aim. Pulls the trigger.

*****

Kurogiri warps the last of his operatives out of the city. The group was battling heroes in a city near the camp. Now, however, it is time to return to the camp. The heroes and police will be arriving there soon, but the distraction paid off.

It may have cost a third of his agents assigned to this mission now in custody, but he can free them later once the Vanguard is safe.

He generates a warp gate. One becomes three as the universe shifts. One Kurogiri who exists as the entry point. Another who walks an endless road made of green lightning. And the last who steps out onto the ridge overlooking the forest.

The destruction is immense.

To the west, he can see the fires around the lodge building. To the east, the forest still burns in blue flames, a blue that continues spreading even as he watches. Half of a cliff has been destroyed, leaving behind a tower of rubble. In the far distance, the forest is simply gone, replaced by scorched ground.

This is the power villains wield without checks and balances. Once, during the Second Dark Age, this level of destruction would have been a daily occurrence in the middle of a city. I'm an era with Warlords and villains without rules, survival had been a constant struggle for the weak.

You foolish boy, Kurogiri thinks. What did you do?

He walks towards the other members of the Vanguard Action Squad. Magne who is battered and bruised but sports a triumphant grin. Dabi observing the fires with a smile. Compress who bows theatrically in greeting. Twice muttering to himself, picking at his costume as if he's trying to escape from his skin.

“Objectives accomplished,” Dabi says without turning. “Two Pussycats have been acquired. We missed out on Todoroki, but we got Yaoyorozu and some kid. I’d say this is a resounding success.”
He looks amongst them. Muscular and Moonfish aren’t here, not that either will be missed. Given their natures, Kurogiri is glad. Two uncontrollable killers are the last people he wants on his team. More honestly, he doesn't want them anywhere near Tomura.

“What of Mustard?” he asks, keeping his voice level to hide his worry.

From Dabi’s raised eyebrow, he fails at that. “Dead man’s switch went off. Sorry about that.”

Kurogiri blinks once. He hasn’t known Mustard for a long time so the pain shouldn’t be as prominent as it is. But, Kurogiri was the one who stayed silent and let him take part in this operation and gave him access to weaponry no boy should ever have.

That one death weighs on him now.

He opens his eyes, accepting that Mustard died as he lived. If nothing else, he will respect that tenacity and hope he died bravely.

“Where’s Spinner?”

“Still fighting Tiger is what he said. You mind getting him, Kurogiri?”

He nods once, generating a warp gate.

“Head back,” Kurogiri orders. “I’ll pick up the stragglers.”

“Has anyone seen Toga?” Compress asks. “She got two of our targets. I would prefer we find her before she wanders off for more fun.”

“Bloody girl hasn’t been responding.”

The members of the Vanguard head through the warp gate. He ignores Twice’s inane comments and Compress’s theatrics. He doesn’t have any interest in that right now.

No, now he must retrieve the last members of the Vanguard because if he doesn’t, Tomura will be upset. Kurogiri doesn’t have the willpower to deal with that right now.

Finding Spinner isn’t very difficult. He just warps to five locations until he hears the sounds of combat and homes in on the position.

The reptile is battling one of the Pussycats. They’re both evenly matched. Most importantly, they both have a hostage in hand.

The man is large, not as large as Muscular by any stretch, but still respectably built. He’s Tiger and the main frontline fighter of the Pussycats. Usually, he would be dominating a fight. Two things stop that: firstly, he needs to worry about Spinner’s hostage, Pixiebob. Secondly, Tiger needs to deal with the fact that Spinner is surprisingly competent.

Also, Tiger has Toga in his firm grip, one arm ready to crush her.

Convenient, he thinks as he steps into view.

Instantly, both Spinner and Tiger tense. The former relaxes, leaping towards Kurogiri. The latter tightens his grip on Toga’s throat.

“Give them back,” the hero roars.
Kurogiri looks to Spinner who has Pixiebob on his shoulder, held securely with one arm. His other arm has his shorter blade, the impractical monstrosity nowhere to be seen.

“Or what?” he asks amiably. “Will you kill the girl? She’s the same age as these students.”

“She’s a fucking murderer and doesn’t deserve to live.”

“Disgusting,” Spinner mutters, tense. “Heroes are only heroic when it’s convenient.”

“Give. Her. Back.”

Kurogiri shrugs. They’re out of time and need to leave now before they’re swarmed by police and other heroes.

There’s no chance of rescuing any other allies. He has a responsibility to those who live and are waiting for him. He has a responsibility to Sensei and Tomura. He knows what they would order him to do.

Instantly a warp gate forms around the hero’s neck.

“You should have left the child alone,” he says calmly.

Tiger doesn’t respond. Heads tend not to talk when they’re removed at the neck.

“You didn’t even hesitate,” Spinner says in shock.

“You’ve never killed anyone, have you?” he asks.

Spinner doesn’t answer. He simply grabs Toga and hoists her over his shoulder.

“What happened to your weapon?” he asks.

“Some kid broke it,” he answers belligerently.

“The same kid who broke your snout?”

“Fuck off.”

Kurogiri opens one final warp gate.

“Let’s go. We’ve won today.”

Ejirou Kirishima hates camp. This is a new and undisputable fact. Camp sucks and he is never going to one again. That is, if he makes it out alive.

He shoves Honenuki back and crosses his arms. The Nomu’s blow shakes him badly, but he holds his ground even as his bones creak.

“Go!” Ejirou roars.

There’s a group of them behind him. Juzo Honenuki and Yui Kodai, Aoyama and Sato. That latter two are unconscious with Aoyama bleeding heavily from a wound. The former two are, quite frankly, not the best counters to this Nomu, not when they’re already injured.

This Nomu makes his throat constrict in grief.
He dodges a barrage of purple balls and all he can think of is Mineta. The guilt crashes over him in waves even as he fights. They may not have been the closest of friends. Really, he spoke to Mineta a dozen times at most. But that doesn't mean he can't feel sadness. That doesn't mean he can't feel guilty for forgetting all about him and moving on.

Disliking someone doesn't mean you should want them to die. Eijirou may not have liked Mineral much, but that doesn't mean he ever wanted him erased or forgotten. Doing so would be cruel and spiteful, and Eijirou is neither of those.

“But—”

“Move before you get us all killed!”

He blocks another blow. It sends him skidding back, two deep gouges in the ground from where his feet remained firmly planted on the ground.

It leaves only a metre between him and the group. Strewn across the ground are purple spheres impeding their movement. It makes it impossible to retreat quickly or to launch an attack.

“Please,” he begs, forcing his quirk to activate once more.

His skin hurts from overexerting his abilities and withstanding the Nomu’s blows. There are long rips along the length of his arms from improperly activating his quirk. It hurts, burns like a fire, in fact, but he can’t give up.

So long as he draws breath, Eijirou will fight the good fight. He'll fight to protect those who cannot protect themselves until the end. It’s why he chose his hero name, partly in honour of his idol, but partly as something to work towards—a riot in red ennobling people to be better.

With a roar, he runs forward and meets the Nomu’s gigantic punch with one of his own. And though he feels his fingers break, he doesn’t let it push him back.

“Run!”

Intentionally, he stops fighting the blow.

The Nomu overextends, unbalanced, and Eijirou sidesteps. He capitalises by punching it in the side with his other arm, driving hard with all his power.

There isn’t much left. It feels like he’s been fighting for years, not the few hours he’s spent ferrying injured students around and dealing with a clone of the reptile villain.

The Nomu doesn’t react to his blow.

At the very least, he can see the two 1-B students helping Aoyama and Sato retreat.

He steps around another sweeping blow, careful not to get stuck on any of the purple balls on the floor. It’s a nightmare trying to navigate the ground and it’s the main reason he hasn’t attacked back.

One wrong move and he’ll be trapped, open to a beating he knows will crush his defences. As it is, he can only keep his quirk active for a second at most.

The Nomu lifts its knee suddenly. At the last moment, Kirishima hardens his chest before the blow makes his chest rattle.
He grits his teeth through the pain and punches the Nomu. It blocks the blow with one arm.

Eijirou pulls back. Then he is tugged forward.

He stares at his fist, currently stuck to a purple ball. A purple ball linked to five more that are attached to the Nomu’s arm like a chain.

He knows exactly what’s going to happen.

“Fuck.”

The Nomu lifts him up with that arm. Kirishima hardens his body in anticipation. Then the Nomu brings its arm down.

The impact rattles his teeth and sends flares of pain through his existing injuries. It does so once, then twice, then a third time.

Lying on the ground, he can appreciate the surroundings a bit more. Even with the blue fire in the distance, the stars are beautiful. A view like this isn’t one you get in a city.

*Might as well enjoy one last view,* Kirishima thinks, too tired to get up and fight. *It was a good run.*

The Nomu’s purple skin is so familiar it hurts. It opens its mouth revealing rows of long, serrated teeth, glistening with drool.

It forces Eijirou up with the chain connecting them together.

He throws a weak punch, unable to activate his quirk. It hardly notices the blow as it brings him closer and closer to death.

“God, this is so unmanly.”

A bolt of green lightning crashes down.

Crack.

The shockwave snaps Eijirou’s head back and he goes tumbling aside. A cloud of dust blooms outward, obscuring his vision.

He tries rolling aside but is tugged back. He glances down and sees his torso trapped by two purple balls holding him to the ground.

When the dust settles, he sees Izuku dodging between the Nomu’s blows as if this is a game. He has no concern even though one of his arms look badly hurt.

Why should Izuku be worried?

Izuku circles around the Nomu faster than it can react, not so much as hindered by the purple balls in the area. He moves with a dancer’s grace, the agility Kirishima has always noticed finally being used. Each motion is perfect and beautiful, never once coming close to the balls.

The Nomu punches and Izuku blocks the blow with an open palm, not budging in the slightest. He looks disappointed almost.

Slowly, he closes his hand around the Nomu’s fist. Then he crushes that fist, taking all the time in the world.
Eijirou sees the sparks of green lightning before he hears the sickening pop. Izuku continues, crushing that fist beneath his monstrous strength, indifferent to the pain he's causing.

The Nomu shrieks, a sound that no normal creature should ever make. It is a sound of animal pain and raw fear.

Izuku cocks his head, confused, as though he’s inspecting a particularly interesting bug.

The Nomu punches him. Izuku doesn’t react, an immovable monument in the face of a blow that would shatter Kirishima. He merely squeezes harder in response.

And though the Nomu may shriek in agony and thrash in a futile attempt to flee, Izuku doesn’t budge. He simply keeps on applying pressure until the Nomu’s fist is a ruined and pulpy mess.

Eijirou’s dry heaves in disgust.

That snaps Izuku out of his trance. He puts on a fake smile a moment before he lets go of the Nomu. It scrambles back.

Then, for some reason, it leaps forward, swinging wide.

Izuku twists around the blow, flipping up and into the air. He twists and slams his knee into the Nomu’s head.

Kirishima hears a sickening crunch just before the Nomu rockets into the tree. It twitches erratically before falling still.

For a long moment, one heavy with expectation, he hopes the Nomu disintegrates just like the other clones.

It doesn’t. The corpse remains, partially lodged into a tree trunk.

“It’s dead,” he whispers, horrified. “You killed Min—him, you killed him.”

“I thought it was a clone.”

He looks up and meets Izuku’s gaze. There isn’t a hint of terror or remorse in those eyes. His eyes are frigid pits of jade, bright with mad knowledge, but so impossibly dark that they suck up all light in an all-consuming void, an unending hunger that can consume everything.

He’s known Izuku a long time, not as long as Ojiro and Shinsou, but he still knows Izuku better than most. Yet, he still has the distance to separate his affection from Izuku’s faults unlike everyone else. When he battled the hero-killer, it had deeply disquieted Ejiriou. When he had brushed aside Iida’s feelings, it had left Eijirou uneasy. Seeing him violently attack Shouto—someone he so clearly loves as the sun loves the earth—had left him sick and fearful.

He knows how Izuku talks when he lies, the way his eyes meet you head on as he attempts to hide a lie. It’s a show of strength and confidence, but Izuku has only ever been honest at his most vulnerable, scared and terrified and grieving for someone he hardly knows. Izuku is honest in his tears, not his brilliant grin.

Right now, he sounds afraid but his eyes tell another story. He meets Kirishima’s gaze instead of fleeing, the cadence of his voice just a touch too flat to be honest and lacking the tremor whenever he’s honestly confused.
Eijirou takes an unconscious step back because he can’t recognise the person before him.

It may not have been Izuku who killed Mineta and turned him into a Nomu, but he still killed it without hesitation. The monstrosity that he became, that creature of unreal laws and too many eyes and mouths that ate universes, that creature rendered Mineta a gibbering mess.

*What if*, a traitorous part of his mind whispers, *he spared me because we’re friends?*

“No, you didn’t.”

Izuku takes a step back, his face a mix of revulsion and shame. But that expression is only on the surface. Nothing in his green eyes mirrors those emotions.

“Don’t say that,” Izuku says, wringing his hands together in fake nervousness. “Come on, we need to go. Look, you’re hurt.”

Izuku is a great liar. His facial expressions and gestures are perfect, his pitch and tone those of someone distressed. But Kirishima knows him and has seen the deepest truth of his being. He’s seen the monster hiding beneath a thin veneer of humanity. He’s seen Izuku wield powers that shit on the laws of physics and rewrote them in a bolt of green lightning. Maybe that’s why he can see through the lie of humanity.

*You killed it and felt nothing*, he wants to say. That thought makes him examine Izuku closer.

One arm is purple and mangled though it doesn’t seem to bother Izuku. His other, though, is smeared with red. It isn’t fresh blood nor can it belong to Izuku as he has no open wounds.

He opens his mouth to question him.

Then he’s on the ground, Izuku on top of him. There’s something wild and frenetic in his gaze.

“NO!”

**Bang.**

The shockwave slams into them before Eijirou understands what’s going on. It feels like being hit by a sledgehammer everywhere at once, a rattling deep in his bones.

The heat comes next, a sudden spike in temperature that leaves him stunned. The air dries and the single breath he takes sears his lungs.

And then, just like that, things normalise.

“What was that?” Eijirou asks

Izuku doesn’t respond, eyes transfixed on the horizon.

He pushes Izuku off and sits upright. There, in the direction of the hall, is an inferno. He feels his heart shatter.

“That’s it?” he whispers, horrified.

“I don’t know what to do,” Izuku says, his voice tiny and broken and finally honest. “This isn’t—we can’t… I can’t.”

“We need to keep moving,” Eijirou says tiredly, close to breaking. “Aoyama might be—fuck.”
He forces himself up, wobbling dangerously. Izuku grabs him by the elbow. Then, in one motion, Izuku carries him over the shoulder.

There is so much ash and fire and death that he can’t think straight. Izuku navigates their way carefully, unbothered by the weight or the darkness.

All Eijirou can do is run through a list of names, of all the people he knows and hopes are safe.

They find the group on the ground, battered and bruised.

Izuku sets him down and rushes to Aoyama, the one most injured. The other three are hopefully breathing.

Izuku checks Aoyama’s pulse. For a gut-wrenching moment, Eijirou fears the worst and worries that this will be a name he has to strike from his list. Then Izuku nods, setting his hand and applying pressure to the wound.

Eijirou forces himself up and checks the other students.

Burn wounds mark them all, Honenuki having taken the brunt of them. His shirt is fused to his back, and it makes Eijirou sick to see. He doesn’t know what to do or how to even alleviate his pain. The only good thing is that him taking the brunt of the injuries means that Sado and Kodai aren’t as injured.

Even then, they have patches of skin burnt black. Some areas are merely blistered and raw.

Tonight, Eijirou finally understands hate. The kind of thick and vile sludge that makes you sick to the core. Or maybe that’s horror. He can’t really tell the difference anymore.

Knowing he can’t help, he instinctively looks to the most powerful person in the area.

Izuku is relaxed as he stems Aoyama's bleeding, comfortable with blood and a fatal wound. It's the sort of calm he has when he's shuffling cards or talking about some ancient hero no one cares about.

“There's blood on your arm,” Eijirou says, deliberately calm.

They both know he's talking about the long dried blood in his right arm. Yes, his hand might be red with fresh blood, but the rest is old and flaky.

“Yeah,” Izuku replies, voice as light as a feather.

It’s the tone he takes when he wants to avoid a confrontation, to avoid facing a truth. Eijirou has heard it too often from Izuku and come to accept it as just another quirk of his friend. Izuku may be kind and generous and warm, but he’s also a consummate liar and hypocrite. They’re flaws Eijirou had been willing to forgive before.

Now, he’s beginning to see how much of a mistake that was. Power shouldn’t be held by those who aren’t the very best examples of humanity.

*He's not even human,* Eijirou thinks, disgusted with himself for thinking it, even if he knows it to be true.

“What happened?” he asks, voice hard as steel because he refuses to let Izuku hide the truth. Not anymore. Never again.
“He was going to kill Kouta,” Izuku says eventually as though that’s reason enough. “I couldn’t let that happen.”

Eijirou freezes. No, no, no.


He turns. Izuku is gone. Vanished as though he never existed.

Dread grips him, long tendrils running down his spine. He scrambles to the side, frantically applying pressure to Aoyama’s wound.

In the trees above, a masked man in a yellow coat watches him. He tips his hat to Eijirou.

“You should take care of your possessions better if you don’t want to lose them,” the villain says, holding his hand out.

He sees a glint of something reflective. Eijirou is no fool. He knows what it means even if he doesn’t know all the detail.

He wants to charge, to fight with all his strength. But he very literally holds Aoyama’s life in his hands.

“Give him back!” Eijirou roars.

“I hope you enjoyed the performance for the night. I've set the stage for the greatest play of this era. Count yourself lucky you saw the start of it all.”

And then the villain is gone.

He wants to chase after him. But if he does so, he might as well kill Aoyama quickly instead of this cruelty. That doesn’t even touch on Honenuki whose ragged breathing has fallen silent.

He roars his anguish, screams against the heavens because this isn't fair. This isn't right. The villains aren't ever supposed to win in a fair world.

That's the story, isn't it? Heroes winning against overwhelming odds time and time again. Who wants to live in a world where the villains win? Doesn't that mean it’s a hopeless world with no meaning?

He lets the world hear his hopes for a kind and just world die. He screams his fleeting dreams for the trees to ignore.

Eventually, he falls silent, out of breath and energy and the will to rage against the world. He just wants to sleep and be done with everything.

But Aoyama’s dying beneath his hands.

His classmate is hardly breathing, his complexion too pale to be healthy. There’s too much blood everywhere, some of it from his damaged arms that hurt so fucking much but mostly it’s from Aoyama.

“Please, Please, please. If there’s a god out there, please, just fucking help already.”

The world shifts, suddenly too hot and heavy. For a moment, he thinks he sees a blaze of endless black flames consuming all creation, flames older than the concept of time blazing a path to an
uncertain future. He sees an endless hellscape of shambling abominations and undying gods trapped in an endless hellscape.

Impossible.

But then, hasn’t he already seen the impossible?

Todoroki approaches wreathed in black flames that distort reality. He looks the part of a dark god, one ready to burn the world he finds lacking.

He catches sight of Eijirou and assesses the situation dispassionately, the fires vanishing as though they were merely an illusion.

Todoroki kneels beside Eijirou. He lays a hand on Aoyama’s wound. Instantly, ice and frost creep up it.

“This will help,” Todoroki explains, as though that makes any sense.

“How?”

“The dead are beyond me. But the living, even the very recently deceased, can be brought back.”

“You’re not making any sense,” he says automatically.

“Where is he?” Todoroki asks instead. “He was here just now. I can still see his lightning.”

Eijirou looks around but sees no sparks or streaks of green lightning.

Hardly paying any attention to him, Todoroki runs a finger along Eijirou's forearm. Frost creeps up the wounds he has.

He yelps, tumbling back. He's ready to shout at Todoroki, to curse him out. And then he realises that there is no pain.

The injuries he's taken are gone. He looks at Aoyama and finds that he isn't bleeding, his breathing stabilised. His complexion is still pale and he’s sweating in his restless unconsciousness, but he doesn’t look like he’s about to die.

The others, as well, are healed. Their burns and wounds have vanished, leaving unblemished skin. Honenuki is breathing and, to Eijirou's stunned disbelief, the expanse of his back is clear skin. His clothes might be burnt, but they aren’t fused to his skin.

For the first time in his life, Eijirou understands what a miracle looks like. He knows the awesome nature of God’s grace; vast, chilling, and magnificent. It is a sweeping tale of glory, the power to change the world on a whim, and truly rise above the pettiness of humanity.

And it absolutely terrifies him. Every time Todoroki opens his mouth, Eijirou comes to the conclusion that he’s a little shit and Eijirou has no idea what Izuku sees in him. There’s nothing compassionate or kind about him.

What are you? He wonders, staring at Todoroki who waits patiently for his answer.

Apparently, he takes a moment too long. Todoroki's expression shifts to something ominous for a single second, so quick that Eijirou doubts his eyesight.

“They took him,” he immediately answers, unable to stop himself, before looking away from
Todoroki.

It had been like every choice to stay silent had disappeared. Every possibility of keeping quiet had been burnt away the moment Todoroki’s mood shifted.

Flares light up the night sky.

He knows the signal well enough, one of the many codes UA students are required to memorise: ‘situation critical, temporary safety, rally point,’ the flares read out.

It means that he has a job to do. It falls to him to be strong and competent and anything other than a boy about to have a nervous break.

He sets Sato over his shoulder’s in a fireman’s carry and picks up Aoyama. The weight doesn’t bother him, not when so much else weighs heavily on him. The other two are unconscious but they’ll be safe here. Hopefully. It's a gamble reliant on the villains being gone, but Eijirou can't carry them all.

Todoroki stares at the sky, eyes vacant and distant.

“Hey, don’t break down,” Eijirou growls, shoving Todoroki as best he can whilst carrying two other people.

He’s forced to lead Todoroki back to camp, pulling him like a toddler. He sets him near Shouji who seems solid if utterly silent.

Alone, he makes the trek back to collect the 1-B students. He doesn’t expect any help, not under these circumstances. As he expects, no one is available or capable of helping.

Though he wishes to pass out for the next five years, he forces himself to pick up the students and carry them back to safety. Or what amounts to safety now.

The only consolation is that the explosion was held back by Vlad King’s quirk, a gargantuan shield of solid blood now shattered. He tracks the long shards of blood, glad that they held back most of the force of the explosion.

The trees around the building are scorched or flattened, a testament to the destructive force the villains brought this evening.

Still, the barrier hadn’t been able to completely contain the explosion. He can see the bodies covered by sheets and wonders how many he knows.

He helps where he can but there's not much he can do. He isn't Iida who has somehow kept his composure and delegates tasks effectively despite his grief. He isn’t Suneater, last of the Big Three, who knows first aid and helps the medics.

Eventually, he finds himself herding the students incapacitated by grief or shock. Here is Kaminari struck by grief over Sero’s corpse, holding the lifeless hand tightly. There is Ashido fighting off anyone trying to pull her away from Asui, and Eijirou takes an elbow to the face before he subdues her, dragging her away. There is Yui Kodai, awake now, staring at Vlad King’s scorched body.

This is almost worse. He doesn’t know how to help people with their grief, not when he’s choked by grief and filled with so much shame.

“I couldn't save him,” he explains to Aizawa, eyes squeezed shut. “Aoyama was bleeding and I
couldn’t-I was too…”

Aizawa is grim-faced, expression blank.

“What did he say?” Aizawa asks insistently, his voice hoarse from the smoke.

Eijirou swallows and tries speaking. But nothing comes out. All he can see is that masked villain, taunting him with Izuku.

A part of him, a part that he dislikes and wishes never existed, is glad that Izuku is gone.

It makes him sick but a part of him can’t ignore that hungry gaze, that ceaseless need to kill and consume and conquer. It reminds him too much of that monstrosity that broke the laws of gravity and spacetime merely by existing. The same monstrosity that rendered Mineta and Hagakure’s and Kouda to nothing more than thrashing husks, all sanity gone from their young minds.

Back then, he couldn’t imagine Izuku willingly doing anything like that. Back then he'd been willing to absolve Izuku immediately just because he went through the motions of confusion and grief. That's all they were, Eijirou realises, motions to follow without any genuine emotion backing them.

Right now, though, it’s so easy to see that madness and dark knowledge and the complete indifference of a cruel God in those jade eyes.

How many has Izuku killed? Two Nomu at least, one at USJ and one only hours ago—Mineta, he decides, refusing to let him be forgotten a moment longer. One villain whose identity Kirishima doesn’t know.

“Kirishima,” Aizawa says, insistent but gentle. “I know it's hard, but you saw them last.”

“He said it was a fucking performance,” he forces out. “This was just a game.”

Aizawa doesn’t push him any further. Eijirou is grateful. Another question and he might have just picked a direction and walked, never looking back.

He's resting tiredly against a tree when Todoroki sits next to him.

His classmate says nothing, offers no comment as the fires die out and the bodies are moved. Todoroki doesn’t offer to share his thoughts when they see Aizawa punch a tree, shouting in rage. He says nothing when a group of students from 1-B hold vigil over the corpses of their fallen classmates: Monoma and Kendo together as always, fallen alongside Fukidashi and Tokage; Awase and Kamikari dead in the explosion; Tetsuetsu long gone and Ibara lucky to be in the hospital instead of dealing with this.

What words can he offer when Iida finally just sits down, exhausted and battered down and unable to help anyone? Should they congratulate Shouji for picking up responsibility or admonish those who aren’t injured but haven't helped?

Is it even fair to place any expectation on his classmates in a situation like this just because he is angry and bitter and so, so sick with grief?

Together, they watch the authorities try to bring some semblance of order. Somehow, the police and rescue workers completely ignore him. But, he's coming to suspect they're unconsciously ignoring Todoroki.
It says a lot that he only feels empty when Tiger's body is carted past them. Maybe grief can run dry? Then again, compared to seeing Asui and Sero, this is nothing.

“Kirishima, do you think you’re a good person?” Todoroki asks suddenly.

“What?”

“I think you are,” Todoroki continues vacantly. “A good person. It’s going to be hard being a good person. I’m so sorry.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Nothing important but maybe the most important thing in the universe. Who knows? It’s hard to see things when he’s involved. When the three of us are involved. You see, we exist outside fate. We make our own destiny.”

Eijirou isn't ready to deal with someone else breaking, not when he's being crushed by the weight of it all.

Kirishima swallows, tugging at Todoroki’s arm. “That’s good and all, but we need—”

“It could go any direction, really,” Todoroki says over him. “It’s a river with a thousand different streams. Sometimes, you can see it all. But he’s like a fucking dam being dropped on that river. And now you can’t really see that other side. You can make guesses and hope for the best, but you can’t ever be certain. The maths breaks down completely. I'm fucking terrified of not knowing and I hate that feeling. I hate having the future blurred—I couldn't fucking see Vlad King just because Izuku was nearby. Just cause he fucking said no, the future I saw disappeared. I hate losing control of what's to come because he's fucking having a fight. I hate not being able to see him because he never stays still. He's always fucking running ahead of me and then he’s going to blame me when he stumbles and chooses a different road.”

“You’re not making any sense. I know you love him but you need to stay focused.”

Todoroki seems not to hear his words.

“You’re a good person, a good friend. Maybe even a good hero. I’m so sorry.” Todoroki smiles but there is nothing warm to it. “Just be you and everything will fall into place. Just keep on being a good person.”

I am a good person, he thinks. That's why I'm here.

“I could have stopped this,” Todoroki says to fill the silence. “It would have been easy with fire and ice.”

“You're not responsible for what they did.”

“No, but I am responsible for what I do. I could heal everyone here but I won't, because they don't matter to me. I didn’t have to make a game out of killing that villain.” He chuckles mirthlessly. “The futures are converging and I can’t see them all. Buckle up, Kirishima.”

His horror is deep and wide. He darts a quick look and finds Todoroki observing him lazily.

Todoroki’s black eye watching him intently is disquieting. It seems to know everything that Eijirou is and what he can never be. It freezes him in place even when all he would like to do is shake Todoroki until he explains exactly what he means by killing a villain. He wants to know how
Todoroki can be indifferent to the pain when he can alleviate some of it.

“This is just the start.”

“What do you mean?” he whispers, revolted and afraid to know the truth.

“The future is always in flux,” Todoroki says. “Not for you. Mortals can’t outmanoeuvre fate. You’re just bystanders swept up in the wake of those with power. Chance and coincidence are nothing more than the confluence of our decisions. The butterfly effect is a lie because it ascribes too much power to the powerless. All that matters are the decisions of Gods. We change the future with our every whim. Everyone you see right now should be dead. That was the future I saw, but it changed because another god said no at the right time. Do you understand, Eijirou?”

That, more than anything else, chills him to the bone. Never has Todoroki called him by his first name. In fact, no one ever calls him that, not even his parents.

“No, I don't think so,” Todoroki continues. “You’ve never really seen the secrets of creation. I can see the shadow of Izuku’s anathema song on you like a dark mark. And yet, you learnt nothing from looking upon the face of God, not even the simplest words to invoke a godling. You and Asui survived seeing it with your minds intact. I wonder if the shadows knew you were under the protection of their king. Do you think he would spare you from that fate now?”

Todoroki offers a mirthless smile.

“Friendship won’t spare you from his ambitions and it certainly won’t get him to accept peace on your terms. Oh, sorry, wrong time and place. That possibility died moments ago just like a thousand iterations of you. It gets hard keeping track of you most of all. You just… disappear so often.”

He leans away from Todoroki. “Stop it.”

"None of what's to come is your fault. You're a good person and you'll always fight the good fight. Do you understand? You have no control and no choice. Everything is all part of a plan and you're just an actor reciting your lines, a stilted character in a badly written book. You're nothing more than a plot device to tell a satisfying story. The three of us, we're the audience, the narrator and author of this grand tale. Do you think everything you're seeing is for your benefit? No, this view is just for my benefit so I can better see the river. This is all by design. Do you want to peek behind the curtain?"

Eijirou swallows, uncertain of what is being offered but knowing that he must know. Just as the first fish had the audacity to walk the shores of the world, driven by an insatiable curiosity, so too must Eijirou know.

“Yes.”

“Are you certain? Once you know then it can never be unseen.”

“Show me,” he says resolutely, but unprepared for what is to come.

For a moment, one precious and unforgettable moment, he sees a reflection of what Shouto sees.

It is a kaleidoscope of light, an endless tapestry of stars in the skies, some clear and bright, but most dying in awe-inspiring implosions. He realises, with a wave of glorious revelation, that each star is a possible future. He watches an infinite number of possible futures die, a sight beyond human comprehension, and knows this is nothing but a pale echo of what Todoroki truly sees.
He understands now that the river and dam were poor metaphors for him to possibly understand. Even now, the idea that Shouto maps out every atom and every bond in these infinite suns is madness. And then Eijirou sees himself, a thousand-million iterations, collectively meaning nothing in the face of dying suns. Every single one is a possibility, one potential person he could have become had circumstances been different or new choices made. And then he sees the broad splotches of eternal darkness obscuring sections of those futures. In others still, those futures are blocked by endless chains.

And then the vision is gone, collapsed like another timeline.

Eijirou blinks away the memory of the suns in all their glory, singing a song of the future that is the past that is the present, a choir vast and beyond understanding directed by Todoroki’s will.

“I shouldn’t be telling you any of this,” Todoroki says, staring at the smoke-filled sky. “But maybe I’m in shock and mourning. Maybe I want absolution for what’s to come and you’re the only one who can give it, but you won’t and you never will. Maybe I regret not being better tonight and all the people who’ll die because of my actions. You can’t change the future. Not when we’re around. We’re like black holes sucking away all choice and meaning. It’s futile, really. Tell me, Eijirou—you don’t mind that I call you that, do you? I feel I know you better than everyone else—do you want to live a long and happy life?”

What can he say to that? Of course, he wants to be happy and prosperous like every other human. But somehow, he feels that saying so is the wrong answer. Every answer feels wrong, preordained by a power he can’t truly comprehend. Even though his mind can’t hold the memory fully, he knows there were a million possibilities where he is happy or sad or fighting an endless war or mired by villainy.

Fundamentally, none of them matter.

Todoroki leans back, closing his eyes. His features relax and for a moment, Eijirou thinks he’s fallen asleep.

“You don’t have to answer because it doesn’t matter. Just sit back and enjoy the ride, Eijirou. Find happiness where you can. But don’t pray to god again. We might be listening and we may not always be very nice.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, there's that. One more chapter before this night ends. Next chapter is going to change the landscape up a lot.

Anyway, let me know what you think. Drop a comment if you liked it. If you didn't, tell me why.

Cheers.
A Warlord Rises

Chapter Summary

In which, the night finally concludes.

Chapter Notes

As a reminder, I have a discord sever up and running at https://discord.gg/4YvCTYR

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘The power of a warp quirk cannot be ignored. With one warp quirk, the problems of logistics and travel time are eliminated. A single warp quirk can wage asymmetrical war against a larger enemy force. Being able to slip behind all defensive lines and attack where your enemy is weak magnifies the operating power of this small force. I propose that a single rifle platoon with a warp quirk is equivalent to a battalion. Furthermore, a platoon of quirk combatants the same size will have a force projection of no less than a full-sized regiment.’


Today is a good day to be All For One, the Strongest Man Alive, though not the strongest to have ever lived. He is not so arrogant as to think himself the equal of the legends of the past—Hero, Titan, and Stormwind—but he is a close second. Of all who have come since, he is the only one worthy to be considered a contender.

The weather in Vancouver Island is beautiful. The sky is clear and the sun out in force. Well, given that it’s the height of Summer, and the capital city plasters ‘Beautiful British Columbia’ on everything, anything less would be disappointing.

The sun won’t set for another few hours. Which is good since he doesn’t get much time in the sun so he may as well enjoy it.

Currently, he’s seated on a large slab of stone he used to crush a group of heroes from Vancouver who thought they were ready to stand on his level. He’s not sure who they are given how they fell in two seconds when he was focused on more important enemies.

Enemies like the broken body of the August General in Iron—a pretentious title for a weak man to claim—that he's using as a footrest. The Chinese agent, sent out as part of a reprisal strike against All For One through his allies on the island, had lasted just shy of five minutes. Which, all things considered, places him as one of the most powerful people alive.

Unfortunately, All For One is peerless in this modern era. Powerful doesn’t cut it.

He huffs, amused. Even perfection isn’t good enough. I wonder if you’ve grown, Toshinori.

The bodies of Celestial Archer and the Socialist Red Guardsman are strewn somewhere else on the
farm that is now a battleground. The three members of the Great Ten battling together hadn’t amounted to much more than a pleasant distraction from the boredom of controlling Japan from the shadows. Against enemies like Hawks and Endeavor, they'd force a draw at the very least, and he gives them even odds of victory.

A shame, he supposes, given that he’ll have to hire someone to restore the farmland. No reason to have a farmer suffer without just cause. He’ll make a large donation to whoever owns the land to forgive the devastation they’ve caused, half of it scorched to the ground and the other half a cratered wreck. Not least because this is the homeland of his allies.

“Was it not on this very spot that this organisation was founded centuries ago?” Sensei asks.

The woman near him looks up from her phone. She rolls her eyes, a starlingly young action though one that is endearing.

“You say that every time you’re on the island.”

“Do I? I suppose old age will do that to you.” He rises. “And now your organisation has total control of Western Canada and the American Northwest. How fortuitous that the Hero Conglomerate chose today to attack.”

He nods to the pile of corpses burning in the distance, dozens of the greatest heroes British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan had to offer, now dead and forgotten. He’s not sure which warp quirk brought them all here given that its owner fled as soon as the fighting started in earnest, before returning with a legion of reinforcements from the Americans.

Sensei had been so insulted with his gall that he had annihilated the legion immediately, not even letting them get an attack off.

“And suspicious,” she adds.

“Come now, do you think they would be so underhanded as to use China’s attack to launch their own assault in the hopes that you would whittle down a foreign invasion before crushing your organisation? Do you think the heroes would have then pinned the invasion on you in the aftermath? They certainly wouldn’t have taken advantage of the unrest and suspicion in the aftermath to incarcerate anyone even vaguely affiliated with villainy. I very much doubt they’d tighten their laws until this province was little more than a police state run by heroes. That’s conspiracy talk right there.”

He nods towards the pile of corpses belonging to the Great Ten and their support staff, soldiers armed with quirks and ready for a war. He doesn’t bother trying to see if he can see the plumes of smoke from the three ships that brought them over given that he sunk them a few hours ago.

He turns to face the other members of the Vancouver Island Villain Association, an organisation that he helped form centuries ago, and helps to this day. He doesn't control them even though he has a seat on the ruling council, but he does come to their aid when they request it.

A few dozen villains who look tired and weary and battered down by the years of facing off threats not just from Canada, but from the American Northwest, sit on the field. Some lie down, completely exhausted. Others still, are treating the injured, and carting those in critical condition to the field hospital that’s being setup.

Still, there is an air of relief to them. They have just won the largest quirk battle since the Dark Ages when Warlords roamed freely and villains were synonymous with slaughter, not the villains
of this modern era that are no more than vigilantes and revolutionaries. It is rare for more than a
dozen quirks to battle in one battlefield. Today, however, over a hundred quirks clashed against
each other.

It isn’t only the farm that had been damaged. The coast the Great Ten had used is still on fire and
there are smaller battles that occurred in the major cities, but most of the destruction had been
contained to this vast tract of farmland.

He senses Kurogiri the moment he appears. His right-hand man looks agitated, his gases snapping
and hissing more so than usual.

Sensei raises a hand to forestall anyone attacking his subordinate. That would be too awkward.

“Kurogiri,” he says loudly. “How unexpected. I take it something horrible happened.”

“Well, plainly put, we may be fucked.”

Kurogiri glances at the many individuals behind him and the woman near Sensei.

“You’re amongst allies,” he says honestly. “Speak freely.”

“Tomura kidnapped Izuku Midoriya.”

He considers that for a minute, mulling over an endless array of scenarios and contingencies.

Izuku Midoriya, son of Hisashi Midoriya who is a threat because of his quirk—not to Sensei but to
his organisations. Hisashi Midoriya who can call forth the Royal Guard and the assets of the
Imperial Household. Hisashi Midoriya who has no problems throwing money at mercenaries.
Hisashi Midoriya who will undoubtedly use abyssal assets in any battle.

Izuku Midoriya, the successor to All Might who is the only person to have forced a draw against
All For One in two centuries. All Might with allies in the Hero Association that will answer his call
because, when All Might goes to war, most people would willingly go to war.

He works through a thousand different connections between a hundred different organisations from
the military to China and Australia and the Taiwanese remnants and abyssal cultists. It’s a dense
web of treachery, hate and tenuous alliances that he’s spent most of his life manipulating to his
desires.

Finally, he comes to one conclusion.

“Oh fuck,” he says simply, cursing for the first time in decades.

All For One takes a deep breath and claps his hands together. Partly, it’s to hide the sudden tremor
running through his body and centre himself once more.

“Well, this was a fun diversion. If you’ll excuse me, I have another war to win.”

“Thank you as always, Sensei,” their leader says, bowing. “Should you require aid, we will honour
our debts to you.”

He smiles freely, not worried about showing weakness.

“Come now, I do not abandon my allies. This is only natural.”

“Will you speak to them before you leave?”
He sighs theatrically, but there is only fondness. He might as well enjoy a few minutes of peace before everything goes to hell.

All For One walks forward till he is at the edge of the slab. It places him higher than the other villains who observe him. Some, the youngest amongst them, do not know him, which is a shame. But he sees the reverence in their eyes and knows they are willing to trust him for his acts today if nothing else.

“When you’re my age, you have an excuse to sit wherever you please,” he says pleasantly. “How many of you are over forty? Over fifty? A century? None? And yet you sit in the dirt after your greatest victory. Get up.”

And when they don’t, he lets his overwhelming presence wash over them. It is heavy and cloying, a promise of destruction and unyielding strength.

“I said, get up.”

They do so, wary, and some very close to pissing themselves. He doesn't blame them. Withstanding the full force of his killing intent is an accomplishment in and of itself. Obviously, he doesn’t bring to bear even half of it, and not towards any single individual. He doesn't want them catatonic nor does he let it affect the medics and their patients.

“Eyes up, villains,” he says strongly. “This is your country and this is your land. This is your moment and you have won. This is your victory against the heroes. You made China’s Great Ten fall. You think you’re scared for the future, but you’re not. You think you’re worried about the military, but you’re not. That isn’t fear. That’s your sharpness, that’s your power.”

Someone slams their foot on the ground in tune with his words.

Thud.

Thud.

Thud.

It is a simple sound but it means much more than anything complicated.

“We are villains! There is no enemy we cannot beat. There is no hero stronger than us. You are the victors and the future belongs to you. Stand tall and never bend your back. We are villains and we are strong, we are sharp and we never feel fear. The future belongs to us!”

He raises his fist high in the sky and summons his power. He is the pinnacle of strength and the sky shatters at his command.

“VIVA la Revolution!”

For two centuries they have said those words. Today, the revolution is complete, and they are the victors. Today, the Villains have won.

“VIVA la Revolution!” they roar back. “VIVA! VIVA! VIVA!”

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Izuku Midoriya doesn’t like the look Kirishima gives him, equal parts disgust, revulsion and disappointment. They’re friends and friends shouldn’t look at each other with suspicion and
distrust. Not when there’s smoke in the air and their classmates are hurt. Not when everything is falling apart around them.

Things fall apart naturally given time. There’s no reason to accelerate the forward arrow of time. There’s no reason to break something that still stands.

“There’s blood on your arm,” Kirishima says calmly.

They both know he’s not talking about Aoyama's blood as Izuku tries to keep his classmate from dying. He glances down at the red stains of Muscular’s blood, dull yet vibrant against his skin. The villain he killed. Maybe there was no choice, and he tells himself that, but he feels no remorse for it.

Izuku swallows, glad that Kirishima can’t see his face. It would be impossible to make a convincing lie right now.

“Yeah.”

“What happened?” he asks. No, Kirishima demands that answer in a voice harder than steel and more unyielding.

“He was going to kill Kouta,” he says weakly. “I couldn’t let that happen.”

“What did you do?” Kirishima asks.

Izuku stays silent for a beat, wondering how best to lie his way out of this situation.

And then the world lurches. It twists every which way rapidly and a part of him knows that his body is being squeezed into a shape crystal bones and dreaming gods should never be forced into.

What the fuck? Mikumo asks, bewildered.

The space is... not dark or even cast in shadow, but devoid of light, nonetheless. This isn’t his domain in the slightest. It’s a space that exists between the angles of time and beyond space. Even now, he can feel his perception of time shifting and fights against the sensation futilely.

And then the world shifts and Izuku’s body elongates, returning to its natural state. The crystal lattices of his bones return to their nominal places, his organs shifting so that they aren’t pulped by the sudden collision.

Izuku comes out swinging. He operates purely on instinct, lashing out with a vicious kick.

It hits someone and he’s maxing out One For All to enhance his perception. The one he kicked is the lizard guy—didn’t I fucking deal with him?—currently on the ground and holding his torso in pain. There’s another villain in a theatrical yellow costume. A girl he doesn’t know being carried by a much larger woman.

The gunshot makes him freeze.

He turns his head and sees the pale-haired villain from USJ. Then his brain catches up with the gun in his hand pointed at an unconscious Kouta Izumi.

“Do you think you’re fast enough? I know you specced into a dex build but are you willing to take the risk?”

Those words make little sense to him but he understands the warning well enough.
“Don’t you dare,” he warns, feeling the darkness in the room deepen.

The shadows vibrate, a promise of endless darkness snuffing out every hope and dream and moment of human kindness. There are dead gods dreaming in the base of his spine and they threaten to spill out, threaten to build a throne out of blood and bone and unreal logic.

He forces a grin that is endless hunger and a wave of darkness that will subsume reality in anathema logic and crystal madness.

The villain digs the gun into Kouta’s temple. “You sure you can live with that?”

For a moment, he doesn’t care. All he wants is to beat them down, to break them over his knee and see them ruined for their crimes against him and his school. It would be so easy if he is willing to sacrifice the boy. The villain wouldn’t even realise he is dead. The others might be able to react, but if he wants, they’ll all be dead in a few seconds

They have no right to command him. He is a king, god with a big G, and greater than they will ever be. They live only because he permits it, and right now, he’s close to seeing them die for their audacity.

Right now, he’s willing to see the world die to satiate his desire for vengeance. Everyone even tangentially involved in hurting his friends needs to die, and they need to do so immediately.

Then he stops, forcing his rage away. There’s a life on the line and it isn’t his to gamble away.

The shadows lighten and the immensity of a world under eternal darkness vanishes.

The odds aren’t in his favour. Being able to kill them means nothing if he fails to save Kouta, especially after he promised to save him earlier.

As he’s learnt in the abyss, promises are the most important thing in existence.

“You’re a fucking monster but you’re not invincible.”

_You’re chained only by your morals, brother mine. You are a God. Is the life of one boy worth your dignity? Is that all it takes to bind a God? You could win and end it all. Are you going to waste this chance?_

He stares at Kouta’s unconscious form and knows the answer to that question.

A little girl in a sunflower dress haunts him as his greatest failure. He doesn’t want to add this little boy to that list.

“What’s your name?” Izuku asks calmly. “Tell me so that I know the name of the person I kill if a single hair on his head is harmed. Because I promise you this, there is nothing in this world that will stop me from ripping you apart.”

He raises his hands peaceably, palms up.

“Cuff me or fuck off.”

The villain scoffs. “Not today. Compress, show our guest his fellow captives.”

The monitor behind the villain comes to life. It’s split into four sections, each showing a prisoner. Mandalay.
Pixie Bob.
Ragdoll.
Yaoyorozu.

Izuku grits his teeth. “You bastards.”

Someone behind him giggles, not that he pays any heed to it. There are more important concerns in front of him.

“You’re right,” the pale villain agrees, “there is no physical restraint that could stop you. But you’re a hero and that makes you weak. Can you live with their deaths?”

The bluster he’s cultivated vanishes. The answer to that question is simple. There’s no world in which a hero will let innocents die.

Izuku wants to be a hero more than anything.

“The name’s Shigaraki,” the villain says, smirking cruelly. “Now here’s what’s going to happen. You behave and nothing bad happens to them. You try to escape, I’ll kill the girl first. You do anything that I think is suspicious, then I’ll kill the boy. But only if you do something.”

“I hate you. One day, I’ll have your life in my hand and I'll remember this moment,” Izuku promises and he means to keep it.

“Toga, collar time.”

He tenses when someone touches him. But then the villain digs the gun further into Kouta’s temple, forcing him still.

The collar is metal and cold on his neck. It doesn’t seem to warm up to body temperature no matter how long it stays on.

“This device is pretty simple. There’s a signal constantly being sent between the collars and this base. Yours is the master collar. If that signal stops sending, well, they’ll be a fine red paste. Do you understand?”

He doesn’t respond because he’s afraid he’ll leap forward and strangle the villain, odds be damned. This isn't just cruel, it’s shameful and embarrassing. He’s the strongest person in this room, and they all know it, and yet he's being controlled.

“I asked you a question. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” he grits out.

“What do you understand?”

“If I try to escape, they die.”

“If you try to tamper with the collar, the signal stops sending. Do you understand? If you piss me off, then five people die and that's on you.”

Izuku sighs. There are too many people here to fight and too many who will die if he tries. Shigaraki and Toga, a bulky woman and a reptile, and finally the man in yellow. They have total control.
No, they don’t, Mikumo whispers. They have the illusion of control. Show them the strings.

“Alright, take me to your leader,” he demands. “Hurry up.”

“What?” Shigaraki snaps.

“You’re not the leader of this operation. Maybe you lead the goon squad but you’d have been arrested a long time ago. The only reason I’m here and standing, instead of chained to a cell like the rest, is because your boss wants to meet me. Now take me to him and stop wasting your very finite life.”

Sometimes, all it takes is a bit of confidence and bravado to get what you want.

These villains, or Shigaraki at the very least, aren’t threats to him. They would never have the audacity to take him if they knew who his father was. Maybe they didn’t have that information, which means they’re going to perish in a few hours.

Or, more chillingly, they knew and didn’t care. And only a powerful backer could do that. Only someone as powerful as All Might could do that.

There is only one man who fits that description. The one person All Might fears.

Izuku glares at Shigaraki.

“Take me to your master.”

They do so. Kouta is passed to the lizard with orders to kill him should anything seem suspicious. To his surprise, the lizard shifts uncomfortably for a split second before taking the boy.

He’s shoved forward through a dozen different brightly lit corridors that look identical. He’s long ago lost any sense of direction.

The room is shrouded in shadows, too uniform to use. The scent of antiseptic burns his nose and he can hear the beeping of a medical device. He feels he should know, given how often he’s been in a hospital.

It bothers Izuku that the man is so still, not even displacing the shadows around him.

Remember that they hold the illusion of control. You can break it only by playing their game.

Shigaraki shoves him forward and he stumbles.

“Sensei,” Shigaraki says brightly, and not at all the dry and menacing Izuku is used to. “We failed to retrieve one of the targets but we made up for it with this one.”

“You did well, Shigaraki,” the man says in a deep voice distorted by the breathing apparatus Izuku can barely see. “But I believe young Midoriya has all the answers we need. I can’t help but find myself curious. Leave us.”

He only just manages to hear Shigaraki swallow then laugh lightly. “Sure, sensei. I’ll see to the others.”

“Hello, my boy,” the man says after his servant is gone. “I’ve heard much about you.”

“Hi,” he says softly, naïve innocence lacing every word. “Who are you?”
The man cocks his head and it is unnerving seeing a statue move.

“Have a seat,” he says instead.

There is a plain wooden chair. He contemplates rebellion. Decides everything hurts and sitting hurts less than standing.

Besides, there’s less a chance of someone dying if he behaves.

"I will be very disappointed if you can't figure out my name, though I sincerely doubt you don’t already know it. I saw your fight against Endeavour's son. You broke him down to size with a few words and… saved him." He says the word with the same tone as a parent trying to break a child's bad habits. "Don't tell me that intelligence was a single occurrence."

Izuku inhales deeply and winces. Everything still feels broken from the fight with Muscular. But the pain brings clarity. And if his mind is clear, he can make a plan to win.

“I don’t know your name,” Izuku says with a level of calm he doesn’t feel in the slightest.

“I know you do.” He sounds amused. It makes Izuku’s arm tremble. “I will admit I was surprised that Tomura liked you so much. He hates All Might and I very much expected him to hate his successor.”

“I’m not and he hates me,” he says fiercely. “You know for a fact that my quirk is Shadowshield.”

The man chuckles roughly and it makes Izuku wonder what trauma his vocal cords have gone through. “Would you like to try again? One For All incorporates any quirk the wielder has. We both know this as we both know who Toshinori Yagi is.”

Everything is wrong about this. The man is All For One, the same man that wounded All Might and ordered an attack on his class. This is the same man responsible for every injury his friends have suffered. Worse still, if any of them died—which he hopes is simply a walking nightmare—then this man is responsible.

And yet, there isn’t a single hint of malice. Interest and empathy in spades, yes, but not a single fleeting instance of cruelty.

Izuku shakes his head, uncertain.

“Shall we dispense with the falsehoods, dear boy?”

It isn’t a question. There’s a threat in villain’s voice, a warning to avoid antagonising him. This, now, is something Izuku understands.

“All For One,” he says blandly. “They call you the strongest man alive. I mean to see you dead, regardless.”

The villain rumbles. It takes Izuku a moment to realise he’s laughing.

“Yes, I suppose I can see why Toshinori chose you.”

“Why am I here?” Izuku asks. “You know exactly who I’m related to.”

“You’re a hero through and through,” the villain says instead, ignoring him. “That is why Yagi chose you. You gave your life to save your teacher, and you can’t imagine how angry it made Tomura by defeating his favourite Nomu so handily. And then you stood against Stain, a man
Tomura hates almost as much as Yagi, and you tore down his ideals. You picked apart every fault in his thinking during the heat of battle. What was it you said, ‘we can make a paradise so long as we have a will.’”

He nods his head as though in respect.

Izuku doesn’t want his acknowledgement, especially not when he can’t tell what’s right and who this man is supposed to be. He’s supposed to be a criminal, ruthless like Tomura and more malevolent than Muscular. Except he’s just praising Izuku like a teacher—or maybe a fond uncle—would. It hurts his head and only the pain gives him enough clarity to not simply agree.

And it’s so fucking hard after Kirishima left him unbalanced, questioning every action he’s taken so far.

“Unfortunately, those same qualities that make you a good hero make you weak as well. Tell me, dear boy, how easily could you have escaped if you wished it? If you were willing to sacrifice five lives.”

“Fuck off.”

The villain makes a sound deep in his chest, almost like thunder.

“Yui Ikari is a woman I admire greatly,” the villain says, amused, but changing the subject. “Using her words alone would have earned you my respect, young Midoriya. But you also cut down the entire Modern Age of Heroes as well. You are truly vicious to tear down the pillar your mentor stands on. And you said it so articulately and passionately during your interview that it moved Tomura. Very little does so, and yet, your words did so. Can you imagine the reaction the world had to your words? How old are you? Fifteen? And yet, you spoke so casually and succinctly of a societal revolution that anyone could follow your words and thoughts. Why, I think, even Spinner quotes you now.”

The lizard guy, Izuku wonders but tilts his head in confusion, a plan already forming.

_Lock it away_, Mikumo snarls, reprimanding him like a lightning strike. _Whatever you’re thinking, lock it away. He’ll see if you don’t._

He’s never felt so outmatched before, at least not like this. He knows that everything he doesn’t say and every controlled reaction gives the man the answers he’s looking for.

“He wasn’t the biggest threat,” he says instead.

All For One pauses and then laughs, clear and bright despite the distortion and breathing apparatus.

“I hope he didn’t harm you too much,” the villain says, meaning his arm. “Sometimes, it seems they forget I don’t condone the deaths of children.”

Izuku stills, his hands balling up into fists.

He laughs, because that’s all that he can handle, and it sounds like he’s both sobbing and choking. Because how fucking absurd is that idea? There’s a collar around his neck, and if he tries anything, Kouta and Momo will die.

That certainty is all that stops him from ripping All For one limb from limb.
“Really now,” he says between a choke and a sob, grief and rage warring inside him.

He doesn’t care that All For One is watching him carefully, dissecting his reaction. “Is it truly so difficult to imagine?”

“Maybe you should have told Muscular that before he tried to kill a little kid for standing in the wrong place.”

He only realises his mistake after the fact.

The wave of dread from this man silences him, makes him want to run far far away because there is no surviving this. It’s like seeing the deepest depths of the abyss, the monsters who only care for death and destruction, contained in a single human. Izuku is confident in his powers but now he understands All Might’s warnings to flee from the man if he ever saw him.

This mortal man is as close as you get to god with a capital G whilst staying purely human. Every instinct tells Izuku that he can’t win a fight against him. Sure, he could die and that would solve the issue, but he knows the villain would never allow that.

“He did what?”

This isn’t like Muscular. Comparing All For One to Muscular is to compare a bonfire to an erupting volcano. The difference in magnitude is so large that it might as well be infinite.

“Would he have happened to come back with the rest of the Vanguard Action Squad?”

Izuku knows, just knows, that he can’t win in a fight against this man. Martial prowess means nothing if you can’t stand and you’re a moment away from shitting your pants. His only saving grace is that this menace is directed towards someone else.

It isn’t that he hasn’t seen beings more terrible and fearsome—in his spine reside dead gods dreaming and waiting for a chance to consume the stars—but seeing it in a human, one without a shred of abyssal divinity, leaves him truly stunned. It makes him wonder at the strength of Hero and Titan and Stormwind, those who towered over everyone else. Would they have the same presence? Could the threat of their malevolence freeze armies and kill the weak-willed?

If they truly stood at the pinnacle of the world, then doesn’t that make them physical gods? If they had touched a shard of abyssal divinity, would they rule over the world as iron gods, their strength reshaping continents on a whim?

“No,” he whispers.

“Good.”

And just like that Izuku can breathe again.

He inhales deeply, not caring that it hurts. There is no menace, no indication that this man nearly crushed his spirit from a fit of anger directed at someone not even in the same room.

It makes Izuku nervous. Which is real? The rage and malice, or the calm praise? Are they both equally true?

Focus, Mikumo snarls furiously. *Everything he says is part of a plan, one move in a chess match. You’re a piece and he controls both sides.*
Izuku looks at All For One. Sees the villain’s relaxed posture. Accepts that simple fact.

Listen to me, brother mine. I am here and he doesn’t know. I will be the keeper, the lock and key. Your strength lay in truths, mine in secrets. Together, we can defeat him. But you must show weakness.

“I take it you fought him?” Izuku nods. “How did you defeat him?”

You must show him your truths until he believes them. Manipulate him with your honesty until he shows you his heart. That will be the moment you strike.

Izuku swallows and trembles, looking away. He doesn’t want to answer. He’s not ready to acknowledge the truth.

“My boy”—Don’t call me that—“I will not press you to answer. Have you read the works of Hinata Ononoki? I see that you have. So, tell me, do you believe that you acted in accordance with the law? Did you uphold it strictly and without mercy?”

It hurts because he respects the woman and agrees with much of what she says.

She was one of the great quirk philosophers and her works had negotiated peace treaties. What is he supposed to say to that? He’s being absolved by a villain, the same villain who ordered Muscular’s attack, and maybe it is because All For One gave the order that he is forgiving Izuku without knowing the details.

The truth is that you are scared and lonely and shamed. Show him that truth. Use that truth. Let him win this battle and each battle to come until the very last. And then, you will kill him.

The tears stream down his face before he can stop them. And he doesn’t want to cry before this man. Physical weakness isn’t the same as emotional. But his chest hurts from much more than his fight with Muscular.

His heart feels like it's going to break.

“My dear boy,” All For One says softly, compassionate yet without pity. “What did you have to do?”

The way he says it, as though Izuku had no choice, makes it infinitely worse. Comfort and kindness should not come from his enemy. Yet it has.

“I killed him.”

The sound he makes is animal grief and human empathy rolled in one. Taking a life is no easy task.

It may have been easy in the heat of the moment when Kouta’s life was on the line but seeing Kirishima’s disgust and revulsion had rocked him right to the core. Knowing one of his closest friends could look at him like a savage beast had shaken loose every fear he thought tightly hidden and brought them to the forefront.

“I killed him. I couldn’t win and keep Kouta safe. Not without—not without doing it. He was too fucking strong!” Izuku shouts suddenly and then whispers, “And I was too weak.”

He looks at his hands, sees the scars and bumps, sees every flaw and imperfection, and realises that the scarred exterior is infinitely better than the monster within, hiding beneath a thin veneer of humanity. Those hands have blood on them, blood taken willingly through force and violence.
Doesn’t that make him a villain?

“I was too weak to be a hero.”

“I believe I can understand you now, my boy,” the villain says, and it’s so much like All Might that he wants to scream and rage and just accept the kindness.

Izuku shuts his eyes and wants to shut his ears as well.

“I have seen heroes kill for less and not feel remorse. I have seen villains save others and fight fiercely for those they love—you know very well of Shinobu’s Vow. You are neither. You are simply a boy and a boy should not make the choices you have had to.”

He’s lying, Mikumo screams desperately. *Remember the malice. Trust in his rage. Don’t forget that you’re a piece on a board.*

Izuku takes a deep breath. Centres himself through the pain in his arm and torso. Accepts that he has lost this battle.

He feels the shadows around All For One twist. The man can tell. His smile is gentle yet victorious.

“But I had to,” he says finally, playing the role with perfect sincerity. “This world is cruel.”

“Yes, it is. Your teachers espouse its virtues, yet you have seen the grim reality of this era. They did not teach you to think critically and yet you learnt despite their failings. They taught you through lies and logical ruses, but you have found strength in empathy and honesty.”

He grits his teeth so hard that a few break. He swallows tooth shards and crystal bone and thick blood, not wanting to give away anything.

The villain smiles benevolently at Izuku. “I had wanted to see the boy who might one day grow to become my greatest enemy. I wished to take your measure and hoped that you might come to see the man I truly am. Despite my misgivings, I must applaud Toshinori’s teaching skills. I never once thought he would groom a successor for me.”

Izuku recoils, raising his head in defiance. He lets the mask slip, and maybe it’s a mistake, but he doesn’t bother hiding any of his bottomless rage.

“I would never,” he spits out, acid and hate lacing every word. “Do not. For a single second. Think I’ll be like you.”

*Calm down. Everything he says is a trick, a method to elicit a reaction. He’s adjusting everything for you. Every truth he says is based on your previous reaction.*

“Oh,” he says like a parent humouring a child’s newest discovery. “So, you don’t believe that this system of monetary gain and wealth in exchange for heroics is a detriment? You don’t believe that this ranking system leads to corruption? You don’t believe the government has failed too many people? You don’t believe in Shinobu’s Vow? Believe in any of those things and society will label you a villain just as I am called a villain. Were your words merely the boast of a fanciful child?”

His bones creak from how tightly he’s clenching his fist. “I never meant it like that.”

“Really now. How many villains have been labelled so simply because they disagreed with the systems put in place?”
Too many, Izuku knows. Any number more than zero is too many. Izuku won't rest until the world isn’t like that. He won't rest until good people can be happy and safe and protected.

He won’t rest until a girl in a sunflower dress can grow up to be happy.

“That doesn’t excuse villainy.”

“Civil liberties exist only so long as you have power. You wish to change the system, as do I. Our methods might differ, but our goals ultimately align. A word of warning, Izuku, already many people call you a villain for your words against Stain. They remember your fight against Endeavour’s son and the strength you displayed, and they fear your code of ethics and charisma. They remember your interview and fear your candid vulnerability. How many heroes will side with you when you take away the system they profit from?”

He shuts his eyes, taking a deep breath. Every word the villain says is one of his fears articulated. Didn’t he see many of his classmates disgusted when he said Stain was right? If they, the people who know him best, find it hard to trust in him, then what of a stranger?

If Kirishima can look at him as an enemy, then anyone can. If a friend can turn on him in a moment, then the world most certainly will.

“I can tell you wish to believe otherwise. A trade, perhaps. An honest answer for an honest answer.”

Izuku eyes the man warily. Everything he has said has been honest, as far as he can tell. He nods, though, because this may be a chance to learn something from the villain.

Perhaps, he can uncover a secret to destroy All For One.

“I will permit you to ask your question first as a sign of goodwill.” That surprises Izuku. “Obviously, I will not tell you the location of this base or anything that will aid you in escaping.”

“Obviously,” Izuku says wryly. “Why don’t you condone the deaths of children when you’re prepared to kill two of them if I escape?”

“Because it is the best way to chain you. But the children won’t die first. It won’t be young Kouta or Yaoyorozu. No, it will be Pixie Bob or Mandalay or Ragdoll who die first. And you won't accept their deaths. No hero borne of All Might’s image would.”

Izuku swallows. That is chillingly callous. There are three adults who stand to die if Izuku tries anything, and there's no guarantee that the villain will kill them quickly. It may be long and arduous torture first.

“You must learn to be more specific with your questions,” the villain says gently. “I will give you another answer freely.”

“Why?”

The villain chuckles. "Because I can. Hear me well. I don't condone the deaths of children because of the system of ethics that governs my life. Children and innocents are safe from me. And now you think of the Sports festival and think I am a hypocrite. But you see, my plan would have only destroyed an uninhabited part of the stadium. The ones who went against my plan were punished."

“What did you do to them?”
“To one, I took away his hands,” the villain says casually. “And to the other, I broke his spirit. This attack on your camp was conducted whilst I was on the other side of the world. I’ll investigate the matter and give out appropriate punishments to those involved. I do not betray my ethics, dear boy. And now, for my question.”

Be ready for it, Mikumo warns. It will shatter your defences.

He tenses, prepared for whatever the villain may ask.

“Do you regret killing Muscular?”

“Yes,” he says easily.

The malice returns. It is a crushing tidal wave of hate and malevolence, an elder god’s will imposed upon the world. This is the power of a man who can reshape a nation.

And it fucking terrifies Izuku because no human should feel like a monster from the abyss whilst being entirely human.

“An agreement between men must always be kept.” The villain leans forward, easing the pressure just a bit. “I’ll ask you again. Do you regret killing him?”

He feels numb answering.

“No,” he says, forced honest by fear and terror and resignation. Forces honest by the shape of his plan for victory. He can’t lie or hide a truth if he wishes to win. No, Izuku must lay bare his soul for this villain to dissect.

The villain makes a sound of amusement before the pressure vanishes completely. The weight of the world disappears.

“I think I enjoyed it,” he admits to the beep of a villain’s heartbeat.

He remembers the sense of conquest, the heady rush of victory and dominance. He remembers being so tempted to plunge his hand into Muscular’s chest and rip out his heart, to consume it and grow fat from his strength.

The only thing that had stopped him had been Kouta. A mortal boy had chained a god's desires. Maybe, that’s why he did what he did to the Nomu.

Izuku shuts his eyes. “And then I killed the Nomu because I could.”

Who judges God but God himself?

*****

Kurogiri answers his master’s call the moment it comes, warping away from his surrogate son.

“Kurogiri,” Sensei says the moment he arrives. “Do you understand what Tomura has done by bringing that boy here?”

“Declared war on the Imperial family.”

“Hisashi brokered the peace between me and your former family. And now, we’ve taken the son of a singularly dangerous entity. I do not doubt that he will mobilise the Royal Guard to enact a kill order.”
“Then send him back,” Kurogiri says calmly. “I can have him returned to his home immediately. The one who hurt him is dead and we can pay reparations should it come to that.”

“Yes, we could return him. Heal him, even.”

Kurogiri freezes. He has never heard hesitance in Sensei before. Consideration, yes, but not hesitance. He sweeps his gaze over the great villain, noting the tiny muscles twitch in his neck.

“You don’t want to,” he says, horrified.

Sensei stays silent for a beat.

“You’ve seen my power, and I assure you, it is nothing compared to my prime. One For All has… worn me down over the centuries, one tiny injury after another until All Might’s most recent blow. Unlike other wounds, they never fully heal. Given time, One For All will win if all torchbearers continue to oppose me. A part of me knows I can never get the quirk back, but if the next wielder is not a hero, then even if they oppose me, I will have won the future.”

Kurogiri is incredulous, tilting his head as though hearing an Alien language for the first time.

“That boy will never be a villain. Even you admitted to that.”

“No, he won’t, but maybe he can be something different,” Sensei says. “Maybe he can move past the definitions of heroes and villains and vigilantes. Maybe he can force us into a new era.”

“This is madness.”

“Yes, it is, but the only difference between madness and genius is success.”

“This is a path to failure,” he snaps.

“I will kill All Might and fulfil my half of the agreement we mad on that mountain decades ago,” Sensei says softly. “But the spirit of One For All will pass down to another who will perpetuate the same system and eventually, our ideals will fail. But this boy is… he is not a hero, not yet at least. He can be shown the truth.”

Understanding blossoms, unfurling like the petals of a lotus, and dread fills his heart.

“You’re willing to gamble the League against the heroics industry. Against UA.” He meets the eyes of this singularly dangerous man. “Against the Royal Guard. You wish to face Japan in its entirety for the sake of one boy.”

“This boy represents All Might’s legacy. He represents the future of heroics. If he turns away from heroics, then we win. Permanently. If he falls, then never again will there be an age of heroes.”

“If you fail, then we all die for nothing. The Guard will find us. Hisashi knows our bases.”

“Not all of them.” Sensei stands, filling the room with his dark presence. “There are some which I built to hide against abyssal means of detection as a final contingency.”

“That isn’t guaranteed. Hisashi is… mad on his best days. I do not want to face him mad with grief.”

“Nothing is ever guaranteed. The best you can hope for is that you have chosen wisely. In people most of all. I cannot achieve this ultimate victory without you.” There is cruel honesty there. “Of all my subordinates, none have served as well as you in two centuries. I wish, often, that you
sought more than All Might’s death. You are strong-willed, patient, and cunning. You have the makings of a good leader. A good successor. Perhaps the best I’ve ever known. You were the one I most hoped would succeed me.”

Sensei stands before him and does something impossible. With one hand glowing a deep and vibrant gold, he lays his hand on Kurogiri’s shoulder, on his flesh and blood shoulder.

The sensation of his quirk disappearing in that one area is disquieting, almost nauseating. How long has it been since he felt wind and warmth through human flesh, and not an analytical interpretation of gaseous interaction? When was the last time he felt this human?

Decades?
Maybe never.

“Will you stand by me? I will kill All Might. But to destroy his legacy totally, I need your aid. I can only end this age of heroes with your strength. I will make you the legend that set a new era in motion. I just need you to fight alongside me a bit longer, my friend.”

There is an earnestness to Sensei that is stunning. The man is being totally honest with him, hiding nothing. Kurogiri can see his weariness, the weight of two centuries on his shoulders, and the burden of being the Strongest Man Alive.

This is like seeing the secrets of the universe revealed before your very eyes.

To have Sensei call him a friend is like nothing he’s ever felt before. It leaves him feeling light. It leaves him feeling free.

He feels grateful, more than ever, to have had the pleasure of knowing Sensei. How can he ever betray the trust of the only person who has been honest with him from the beginning?

How can he ever forsake his one friend?

“What do you wish of me?” he says, willing to trust Sensei one more time and every time after this.

Sensei relaxes, the tension in him suddenly disappearing. It’s like watching a power station shut down, the eerie hum of power that you forget about fading away.

“We have the advantage whilst they regroup. From what my spy tells me, UA is still in disarray and no official communications have been sent. We have a tiny window to operate in. Your first objective is to relocate essential League personnel to our new primary facility. Secondary combat personnel will be moved to smaller hideouts.”

“It will be done.”

“Good. We will have to destroy their capability to track us. The police force investigative division will be your targets. Naomasa Tsukauchi’s death is a priority. Despite appearances, he is a senior official in the state’s intelligence apparatus. I will provide secondary targets. Do not hesitate. Show no mercy. And eliminate officers as you see fit to demoralise them. Finally, I will give you control of the Nomu.”

“All of them?”

“All but a few High-end Nomu. Use them to wreak havoc across Japan. Utilise our combat personnel to supplement them. Your primary goal is to attack strategic locations—police stations,
hero agencies and military command posts are prioritised—and sow fear in our enemies. This is a delaying action. We have the momentum and we must maintain it until we destroy All Might’s legacy. Stay no longer than you must and never fight unless you have every advantage. You can't absorb casualties.”

“I’ve never led an operation of this scale.”

“I will give you the quirks of Ragdoll and Mandalay. Use them to coordinate. With them, you can monitor the status of a hundred people and send them orders instantly. With your warp quirk, you can provide support as needed.”

It happens suddenly. He feels the pain of needles stabbing through his shoulder and shudders. Something foreign and alien snakes its way through the bits of him that are flesh before joining his gaseous body. It’s like all the blood in your body suddenly flowing in reverse, something different and disquieting.

The feeling of another quirk is disconcerting.

But at the same time, it isn’t him who has the other two quirks.

Every time he uses his warp quirk, there are always three iterations of Kurogiri, two of which are destroyed by the universe resolving that paradox. He thought they were oddities of his quirk, no truly separate entities. Yet, the burden and strain of the additional quirks aren't forced on one person, but split between three entities.

One Kurogiri feels his mind expand as he perceives his master in a new fashion. The man before him is like an endless pool of power to his senses and Kurogiri knows he will always be able to track Sensei no matter where he goes. He senses the injuries Sensei has accumulated in his lifetime, a staggering number of wounds that would have killed any normal human a thousand times over.

The second quirk sees Sensei’s mind as a signal tower that he can communicate with at any time. There should be a range to it, he knows almost instinctively, but when combined with the other quirk, no distance is large enough to separate them.

They could be separated by the span of a galaxy, and Kurogiri would still be able to speak with his master.

Finally, the Kurogiri who exists in the real world hums. *Is this working?*

Sensei tilts his head. “Yes. I believe this is working.”

Sensei steps back and Kurogiri’s shoulder returns to its gaseous state. The Strongest Man Alive with over a dozen quirks held in his body, each capable of elevating a single man to competing for the top ten spots, claps his hands together.

It gives Kurogiri a headache trying to track the interplay of quirks there. At least three separate vitality quirks and a regenerative quirk as well. One hardening quirk and a few to affect the natural laws to varying extents. Many more supplementary quirks that he can’t figure out.

The strongest two, however, are like supernovas compared to the rest. One is like the sky shattering beneath the immensity of Sensei’s power. The other quirk feels like the atmosphere itself. It feels like the power to threaten Japan and rule it without challenge.

“Extract every operative we have working with the Royal Family. All non-combat personnel are to
go into hiding. No matter how this ends, the foundation will still be in place for whoever comes next.”

Kurogiri nods.

“And Tomura?” he asks though he can feel the boy.

He’s in a room with Dabi and Spinner, calm for the moment. His senses expand outward and he feels Magne and Twice and Compress, Kouta and Yaoyorozu, the remaining Pussycats—two lacking their quirks and the other pumped full of drugs—and the miscellaneous staff they have on hand to keep the facility running.

He stays the fuck away from sensing Hisashi’s son. There is something altogether too terrifying when he tries, a whisper in the back of his mind that speaks of death, and a form of power so alien —yet so similar to Kurogiri’s warp quirk—that it almost disperses his body.

Sensei, thankfully, doesn’t notice Kurogiri nearly die to the dead gods dreaming in a boy.

“She should my gambit fail then you are to do everything in your power to ensure his survival. Sell out the League if you must, but do not let him fall. Protect and raise him.”

“He was meant to lead.”

“I will not risk him. They know you and have seen you before. The League respects you, but in Tomura, they see a child with too much power.” Sensei shakes his head. “He cannot know. Tell him that he is to organise the Vanguard and security for the new facility. Whatever it takes to keep him away from this war.”

Sensei steps back even further, giving Kurogiri room to breathe and think, even though his presence is even heavier now that Kurogiri can accurately sense the power he holds.

“This is a heavy burden. Can you do it?”

It is an honest question and he knows, just knows with every fibre of his being, that Sensei would accept it if Kurogiri said no. He would accept Kurogiri’s decision to leave and flee from the coming war.

Kurogiri nods, accepting the responsibility he must now bear.

It is crushing in its immensity. His only goal for the longest time had been to All Might die. Now, he is thrust into the forefront to bear a burden only he is suited for.

And yet, that this authority is given so freely is a testament to the man he calls Sensei.

“I will follow you to the very end.”

All For One chuckles, a deep promise of violence to come. A warning to their enemies. But to Kurogiri, it brings only a comfort. After all, that malevolence is directed only at their enemies.

“I know you would. Now go. Victory only comes to those with the will to grasp it. The future is promised only to those with the strength to take it by force. Stain your hands red and destroy this society that would take away an innocent child from a father.”

Ino, Akane, I hope you understand.

Kurogiri opens a warp gate. One becomes three. At the end of his journey watched over by
creatures of cruel machination, two fade away and only the man Sensei trusts enters the room where the Vanguard is gathered.

"Pack your things," he commands coldly cold and unwavering. "We are moving facilities. You have three minutes to get your possessions."

“What the fuck?”

Kurogiri turns his sulphurous yellow eyes on Spinner. “You fools started a war with the Royal Family by taking Midoriya. The people who sunk an island will come for us. They will see all of us dead if you waste any more time. Now go. You have two minutes.”

“You aren’t—”

“Silence,” Kurogiri growls, cutting off Dabi. “The fragile peace keeping Japan from civil war has just been broken. In a few hours, there’s going to be fighting on every island and every city. Spinner, contact Compress and get our guests ready for transport. Now move.”

He doesn’t wait for a response and walks through another warp gate. He gathers up the facility’s staff, giving them no chance to ask questions before he transports them to the new facility they are using.

“I’ll explain soon,” he promises to the group of twenty.

And then he’s gone, relaying orders and commands to the League of Villains. They’re startled, unnerved by the sheer speed at which he moves and gives orders.

“You need to go to ground,” he orders the Division Commander of Shikoku. “Every operative you have, tell them to get out. Stock up on resources and supplies. Don’t waste time.”

And then he’s gone once more. He heads towards the hideouts of the League’s combat cells and wastes no time.

“We’re at war,” he says to people who have lived their entire lives fighting in warzones across the world. He opens warp gates for them and they move through them without question.

Finally, when that is done, he returns to the facility and finds Tomura standing alone. His expression is carefully blank but his eyes reveal everything.

He knows.

“I’m sorry,” Kurogiri says.

“The League was meant to be mine,” Tomura says, a deep sense of sadness filling his voice. He isn't unintelligent despite his immaturity.

“You took Izuku Midoroya, the son of the man who keeps Sensei in line. You're not powerful enough yet to stand on this stage.”

“I haven’t made you proud, have I?”

Kurogiri stills, uncertain of Tomura for the first time in years. Kurogiri has always thought of him as a son and he's watched him grow into a man. The pride he feels is pervasive, his love for Tomura a cornerstone to his existence. He had always thought those feelings unrequited.

Perhaps Tomura does care for Kurogiri just as much as Kurogiri cares for him.
“You’ve made me prouder than you can imagine. But if you fight this battle, you will die.” He offers what amounts to a smile with a body made of mist. “And I refuse to let you die.”

No matter what it takes, Tomura will die old and surrounded by those he loves. It'll be the greatest gift Kurogiri can give to his son.

*****

Naomasa Tsukauchi is a tired man.

UA has just been attacked, a coordinated strike that occurred simultaneously with five others in the area. Those attacks had stymied rescue operations, held up heroes, and destroyed the communications network which left the area a dark zone.

It is one of the most effective assaults they’ve organised, with a level or precision Naomasa would be hard pressed to match. He wonders if they hired foreign militants to aid them, then discards that thought. He knows exactly how dangerous Kurogiri can be when pushed. There’s a base in Djibouti that was destroyed and Kurogiri was seen there when it happened.

Right now, he’s in his office. Not the one in the police station but the real one in the Public Security Intelligence Agency HQ.

He has no official rank but that doesn’t change the fact that there are only four, maybe five, people higher up in the food chain than him. Honestly, he likes being a detective and working with heroes for his day job. It has the added benefit of giving the PSIA accurate information on the current state of heroics.

Besides, Toshinori knows who he works for and he’s never told Naomasa to stop. They dance around the matter when they work together, careful never to put each other in compromising positions. The few times that occurs, they usually talk through it honestly.

He's reading through the casualty report—thirteen dead; eleven of them students, Vlad King who is a competent teacher, Tiger; and too many injured that they don’t even bother listing their names—when someone bursts into his office. He recognises the woman, a rising rookie with a lot of competence but just a tad too much arrogance for anything other than fieldwork. A shame as she's one of the most methodical agents he's seen. If she could get rid of the arrogance, he sees her running the Agency in a few decades.

“Calm down,” he tells her before she speaks. “It can wait—”

“Sir, the villains attacked a hero agency in Chiba prefecture,” she says breathlessly.

*Already? How bold.*

“Then send heroes to—”

“You don’t understand, they’re already gone. They came in with thirty Nomu and left in under two minutes. They didn't even hesitate to slaughter everyone.”

His eyes widen. That’s… insane. Killing a few dozen people in a year is exceptional for villains these days. To think that they would actively slaughter the entirety of a hero agency leaves him horrified.

“How—"
The door opens, an intern stumbling in. “Sir, a police base in Okinawa prefecture was attacked.”

“What the fuck? That’s on the other side of the country.”

The reports stream in.

Villain attack after villain attack after villain attack.

They never stay long. No, they appear and then move to the next location, leaving death and destruction in their wake. And before any defence can be organized, they’re on the other side of the country attacking a different organization.

The reports are so varied and numerous that he’s moved anyone of any importance to a shared space on the thirtieth floor. It is a secured meeting room with hard-line communications to every other PISA comms hub.

Every monitor displays information on Japan from military operations to hero rankings to their current foreign relations. The largest, however, displays a map of Japan with several crosses. Each cross represents a new attack location and the number never stops rising.

"Sir, the military base in Shikoku was attacked. An incendiary device right in the command base. We lost half the senior officer staff.”

Naomasa barks out orders quickly and efficiently. He needs every ounce of cool he has given that the junior agents look like they’re about to fall apart and those with experience are too busy dealing with a dozen different problems.

"Where’s the boss?” he asks when neither of his superiors has shown up or made any attempts to communicate.

“Dead, sir. You’re the highest-ranking agent still alive.”

His eyes widen even as the room falls silent. That was not what he was expecting. The boss has been a constant in their lives for decades. She had been strong-willed and obstinate, but incredibly competent and always worthy of his respect. The idea that she’s gone is just… Then he thinks of what she would say and knows he’s doing her spirit a disservice.

Then he glares at everyone. "You can rest when you’re dead. Get back to work."

“Get the Prime Minister on the line,” he orders. “Direct line to his office. Tell him to declare a state of emergency and prepare a line of succession.”

“The power station in Niigata was destroyed by—”

He ignores that one. Not very important all things considered. “Someone find Nezu and shove data at him. We need a plan and he’s the best data analyst.”

“—they just attacked the Fleet Admiral—”

He curses and slams his fist on the table. Barely anyone notices. “Make sure the fleets don’t try to flee. Destroy their contingency facilities if that’s what it takes.”

“—airport was targeted—”

He rolls his eyes. An airport can wait. “Get information to the Minister of Defence’s office. Recommend they start preparing for foreign invasion. Get them to activate whatever backdoor
channels they need to confirm our international allies are still our allies.”

“—thirty dead—”

The reports don’t stop streaming in. Naomasa doesn’t stop giving orders. They work for hours, tirelessly trying to create some semblance of organisation. After six hours it becomes apparent that there’s hardly any central authority in the groups that need it most. After twenty, it becomes obvious that they’re organising an entire country at war. He’s become the central hub for organisation and information across Japan, a vital part of the network connecting generals and ministers and heroes to try and coordinate something.

In the span of a day, Naomasa had gone from unimportant to more critical than the Prime Minister. His orders dictate the movements of soldiers and police, his words directing national policy, and his commands diverting police from major drug operations.

Those around him tense and the base alarm screeches.

Naomasa doesn’t hesitate—neither do any of his agents who are all reaching for their guns or arming their quirks. He turns, withdrawing the gun beneath his coat.

He squeezes the trigger and fires.

His bullets hit a shimmering barrier. Then a dozen more bullets all hit the barrier, each as ineffective as the last.

There, standing as though he belongs in this room, is Kurogiri. Behind him are a group of four and they exude a sense of menace. Each of them looks like a trained killer bred in violent warzones across the world. One has her arm extended and she’s the one generating the shimmering barrier making their attacks ineffective.

“Good, you’ve gathered the rest of the command staff,” Kurogiri says. “Thank you for making this easy. Good night.”

Naomasa realises his mistake too late. The only reason they hadn’t been attacked was for this very moment. The moment where they consolidated their strength and hid behind their fortress walls. The perfect moment for an enemy to slip past all their defences and escape. Without him, any organisation Japan had will completely collapse.

He’s the strongest link in the network, the most vital aspect keeping the country running right now. That makes him the critical failure point.

_Damn it. Toshinori, it’s on you now._

Naomasa sees the edge of the warp gate around his neck. He sees Kurogiri throw an incendiary device and watches his subordinates leap away futilely.

And then he sees nothing more.

*****

Turn your head and listen carefully.

Can you hear it? Wait and focus. Still your breathing and calm your heart. The sound is everywhere. It’s carried by the wind and running through your bones. No?
Do you not hear the sound of rain washing away arterial blood? Do you not hear the snap of fat burning and the sizzle of flesh cooking? Do you not hear grieving mothers curse their enemies? Do you not hear the final words of the dying?

Listen: Japan is at war. The world hears the cries of a nation besieged. Are you still deaf to it?

This is how it feels to be Shouta Aizawa, teacher of the dead. You want to scream and rage and turn back time to fix every single mistake in your life. But that rage is only a means to avoid the present. Your students have been attacked and too many are dead. Sekijirou, your fellow teacher, has died and you must handle this situation. They hold you responsible, as they should. The only reason you aren't in cuffs is that you have information on the villains who have just started a war.

Listen: the dead howl and demand bloody payment for blood spilt. The dead live in our memories. They live in the oaths children make as they pick up their fallen father's gun. Pay attention and you will know that each shot fired is that father screaming defiantly against death.

This is how it feels to be Kurogiri, right-hand to the Strongest Man Alive, and strategist of the League of Villains. You wage war alone, only ever staying in one location long enough to cause maximum havoc. There are dozens of Nomu under your command, those most dangerous and optimised for combat. They are your artillery platforms and your tanks. To command them, you have forty of the most lethal members of the League, all members who have had combat experience in the sweltering hot wilds of Malaysia and the concrete jungles of Georgia. They are lethal and brave and used to guerrilla warfare. But those are the people you allow to be seen. There are others, a group of twelve, who exist as assassins and sow terror by attacking the families of heroes and police officers and commissioned officers in the military. Soon, Japan will know the terror of a Warlord. Soon, they will learn to hear your name and tremble.

Listen: peace is only an extended ceasefire. Do you know what peace sounds like? It's the honeyed words of politicians trying to stop the next war starting. It's the staccato fire of soldiers running drills as they prepare for the next war. It's the hushed conversations of generals deciding which cities are strategic resources and which will be abandoned to enemy occupation.

This is how it feels to be Captain Yosuku Kadomatsu of the Japanese Navy 2nd Fleet. Your homeland is at war and you're stuck out at sea. Your first loyalty is to the navy, and you would abandon Japan to protect it, but you do not want to let your people perish. The war has barely started and two admirals are dead. You do not have time to mourn those great women you respected. No, now you must ensure your ship is ready to defend Japan from China. You observe their ships on radar and wonder if your commanding officer will give the call to attack now before they have reinforcements.

Listen: the living suffer and must fight. It is the burden of life, the great legacy the dead leave behind. To live is to struggle. To die is to admit defeat.

This is how it feels to be Eijirou Kirishima. Too many of your friends are dead. Those you knew and loved are dead. Those that remain are shell-shocked and horrified as reports of the death toll streams in. This shouldn’t have happened. There was no reason for one attack to become a war. But, as you look at Shouto who has stayed silent, you fear that this war is because of Izuku. You fear that your friend started this somehow. You fear that your fears aren’t unfounded. You fear that one day you’ll have to make a choice and stand against the monsters in your midst. And you know you can’t win that fight.

Listen: Claim your destiny with your bloody hands and fight off all contenders to your throne. The future cannot be avoided. It can only be taken by those who are strong and determined.
Listen: The time for Ascension has begun.

Chapter End Notes

As it stands, canon has finally been taken off life support and laid to rest. From here on out, it's all me.

The first night of this war is finally over. Kurogiri is the one character I've thought was completely broken since his introduction and now you see why. We'll be seeing a lot more of AFO in the coming chapters. It's his time to shine and for Izuku to learn his secrets.

Soon enough, we'll have the two biggest fights I've had the pleasure of writing and they are every level of awesome.

Anyway, this is my last chapter for a while. Gotta focus on school. If you enjoyed this, let me know. If you didn't drop me a line.

Regardless, see you in a bit. Cheers.
‘The nature of each era of heroes has been fundamentally different and this is partly due to the social forces that lead to each era. The first wave of heroes led by Hawkmoon and her two equals was marked by unprecedented warfare across the globe. It is not very surprising that the New Age Heroes were primarily made up of mercenaries of whom, only Hawkmoon would develop an ideology later in life. Hero and her allies would be born of an idea to free their respective countries from corruption and autocrats, and as such, they weren't heroes and more extremely militant revolutionaries. They would still inspire a Golden Age through their acts. The Modern Hero Era is marked primarily by vanity with little in the way of nobility. There will very likely be a hero who rises up and leads by an example, ennobling the populace to reach for the glory of an idealised past.’

—Excerpt from ‘The Effect of Heroics’ by Saruhiko Ando.

Today is the day that Toshinori Yagi regrets accepting One For All from Nana.

He regrets accepting her quirk and becoming a hero because today he can’t be a hero. There are no villains to battle and there is no one to rescue.

The attack on the communications tower in Chiba has left thirty dead and ten injured. It had taken All Might a few minutes to run to this spot at his max pace from Tokyo. By the time he arrived, the explosives had been set off and the control systems rendered to slag alongside the power relays.

There is no time to rebuild or replace the tower, not when the same thing has happened at a dozen locations across the country.

He lifts a giant stone slab and lifts the corpse of a man, killed by a brutal blade wound in his chest that almost cleaved the cavity in half. If that wound hasn't killed him, then the blood loss from being trapped by rubble would have. He sets the man down amongst the other thirty bodies covered by plain sheets.

The acrid tang of burnt electronics and burnt flesh follows him constantly. Even the outside air does nothing to help.

A member of the rescue team offers All Might a water bottle. He accepts it with a grateful smile though he does not drink from it.

Now more than ever he cannot afford to trust anyone implicitly. The League has a shapeshifter amongst their ranks and it can be anyone. All Might can overcome physical threats but a poison will kill him just as easily as any other person. Hero had perished to poison. He does not mean to follow in her footsteps.

One day, he will die. But not before he beats All For One. Not before he rescues Izuku from the
clutches of his nemesis.

He does not know what mad tortures his successor had suffered at the hands of All For One. It has been three full days and though he does not doubt Izuku’s strength and courage, anyone would break after being subjected to his whims.

His only hope is to find his successor intact.

Later in the evening, after five more rescue efforts and dozens of corpses, Toshinori finds himself walking with Nezu. The principal looks as worried as they all do from his seat on All Might's shoulder.

“It is absurd to see our own tactics used against us,” Nezu says calmly, though that calm can only be a lie.

There is an investigation pending regarding UA and the camp disaster, only a month after the Sports Festival. But it can wait until the war is over.

“What tactics?”

“Warp quirks have traditionally been on the side of heroes. Master Railroad was the first and perhaps the most notable. Hero’s wife, Legion, could generate clones with warp quirks on occasion. Even recently, the Canadian Hero Conglomerate used a warp quirk to transport the entirety of their battlegroup. Though admittedly they did lose that battle. It seems we took their power for granted.”

All Might turns the corner, stepping around a distracted messenger. No point in being rude.

“Quite honestly, I have no interest in a history lesson. They have my students and I want them back.”

“Bakugou claims that Yaoyorozu placed a tracker on him,” Nezu says. “We’re scouring the forest for it but there was so much damage done that it’ll take a few days to find. And even if we do win, I don’t know if we’ll be in a state to fight back. My best-case analysis has ten thousand dead.”

The meeting room is large and airy. Given the number of heroes, decorated soldiers, state intelligence and members of the Royal Household, it makes sense that the room needs to be large enough to accommodate them all.

It has already been divided into camps. The section for the heroes has Hawks sitting beside Mirko, Beast Jeanist and Yoroi Musha a row behind, Gang Orca and Edgeshot on the other side. But at the front, right besides Hawks, is a reinforced chair.

He takes the seat beside Hawks who looks relaxed, feet on the table and arms behind his head. All Might wishes he could have even a tenth of that youthful arrogance.

“Old man,” Hawks greets. “See you’re still kicking around. Nezu, still using everyone as free transport. I think people should start charging for shoulder time.”

Toshinori huffs. “I see you’re as jovial as ever. Greetings to you all.”

He doesn’t pay any attention to their responses, speaking only when he needs to as he observes the room. Endeavour isn't present, the only real surprise of this meeting.

“Where is Enji?”
Hawks hums in consideration, one eye cracked open.

“On a ship somewhere,” Hawks says lightly. “Apparently we're being invaded as well.”

Toshinori clenches his fists tight, taking a deep breath to calm himself.

“An explanation would be preferable, Hawks.”

“Don’t ask me, I’m just getting second-hand information from what’s left of the Public Safety Commission. Can't really get information when no one's in charge. Or alive.”

“You shouldn't speak lightly of the dead.”

“It must be nice not having to write condolence letters for your dead sidekicks.” Hawks shrugs casually, but the whatever ease he had is gone, replaced by pure derision. “When was the last time you told a grieving mother that the son they entrusted you with isn’t coming home?”

The fact that Hawks went straight from calm to insulting tells him he has crossed a line.

“This isn't a grief contest,” Best Jeanist, one row behind, says.

“How’s about you stay in your lane and stick to your looks?” Hawks asks snidely. “I read your casualty reports. A bit of singed hair never hurt anyone.”

“Since when did you become a petulant child?” Gang Orca, two seats to the right, asks.

Hawks rolls his eyes. “Y’all always bring up my age.”

"Perhaps we should behave for our distinguished guests,” Nezu says coolly.

All Might knows the two generals and three vice-admirals are watching them, as are the members of the Public Security Intelligence Agency and the Imperial household.

All Might raises a single brow and lets his presence be felt. It is heavy and cloying, a blazing bonfire of One For All weighing down and threatening to burn any who stand in his way.

It lasts only a split second but it is more than enough of a reminder that he is the Greatest Hero and those beside him are his peers, worthy of respect and tested in battle.

“I believe,” All Might says strongly, voice clear and carrying through the room, “that we should start this meeting. Whatever organisational differences we have can wait for another time.”

One of the generals stands. He walks supported by a cane, bandages covering his neck and hand. He’s in pain, but he walks with such steely determination that Toshinori is willing to acknowledge his strength.

“The League’s attack was a masterstroke in asymmetrical warfare, force projection, and quirk warfare,” the older general says. “The first four hours of the attack were a series of retreats to split up the League and decentralise their cells. The next twenty were a series of surgical strikes designed to cripple our ability to coordinate, communicate and stabilise. By the end of the first day, half of the army’s senior command staff had been killed and two admirals were dead. Every senior agent of the PISA was caught off guard and killed by an incendiary device.”

All Might doesn’t let his grief show. Naomasa is one of those dead in that attack. Though he may not have agreed with Naomasa’s allegiances, he was still a good man with a good heart.
“With the army and navy in disarray, and the state intelligence apparatus defunct, he would set his sights towards the Hero Public Safety Commission and assassinate senior staff and destroy their central databases containing the identities of known League operatives. They managed to find three major off-site backups. There may be more, but we haven’t found any official with knowledge of them. In the span of a day, the League achieved the single most devastating military victory against Japan since the Dark Ages.”

The general changes the display to show every organisation he just mentioned. It shows their command structure as it was a few days ago, intact and functional. Then, names and faces are crossed out till over half the screen is large red crosses.

“This attack has just made every warp quirk on the planet a strategic asset and a vital part of national security and international deterrence. This attack will be remembered a thousand years from now as the single most effective use of a quirk in a war. Kurogiri’s name will forever be spoken in the same breath as Sun Tzu and Graviton Lance, Napoleon and Master Railroad, Warlord Allfather and Erwin Rommel. He may very well be the first person in two centuries worthy of the title Warlord.” He lets that sink in. “That was just the first day.”

The display changes to a map of Japan, clear and marked with major locations of interest—hero agencies, military bases, power stations, hospitals, and major manufacturing plants.

“Over the next three days, Kurogiri and his force of approximately forty Nomu and sixty humans would systematically cripple our infrastructure systems. They’ve managed to destroy communications across half of Shikoku and destroy four major power stations and many more substations. Currently, seven percent of Japan is without electricity and nine percent without running water. They’ve crippled the police and hero efforts to restore peace by directly attacking vulnerable stations and agencies.”

The locations on the map are removed, replaced by the main prefectures with numbers beside their names.

“The current death toll stands at four thousand directly attributed to the League’s forces. With emergency services completely swamped and many locations without water or electricity, this number is expected to rise. As it stands, a hundred villains are successfully waging a war against Japan and we are completely incapable of neutralising them given their mode of transport. The only real victory we have achieved is capturing a high-ranking member of the League who wasn’t part of this attack.

“Finally, I will speak on the international situation. Now, our three biggest concerns are, in order of danger: China’s remaining Great Ten, the Vancouver Island Villain Association, and the Taiwanese remnant. The first is seeking revenge for an unsanctioned attack on their Djibouti military base orchestrated by the Imperial Household and the presence of Japanese nationals during their failed Victoria attack. We anticipate that three of them, alongside their forces, will move to reinforce the Naval battle lines. The second are long-standing allies of the League of Villains and are currently organising their strongest members to join the fight here.”

“How strong we talking here?” Hawks asks.

“Of the five members who will definitely join the assault, they are each on your level.”

Hawks scoffs but Toshinori can see how tense his steepled fingers are. He may appear calm but they all know the magnitude of the threat they face now.

“Finally, the Taiwanese Remnant will see this as an opportunity to sow discord amongst the
populace. Their most likely goal will be to integrate insurgents with the local populace during the chaos for a larger assault during the reconstruction period. Given that the League has opposed them many times, it is unlikely they will join sides now. I’ll pass the floor to the representative of the Imperial Household.”

The general returns to his seat as if he just spoke of the weather, not a war briefing.

A woman from the section claimed by the Imperial Household stands. She is young, perhaps her late twenties, maybe early thirties. Her presence makes Nezu bristle, surprising Toshinori with the intensity of his sudden rage.

She walks forward, her pace steady and measured. Once she is at the front, she bows before them before rising.

“I ask your forgiveness for taking time on formalities but in times of war, they must be observed now more than ever,” the woman in the white uniform says. “I am Izanami of the Royal Guard, here on behalf of His Imperial Majesty, the Emperor, in accordance with the Unity Treaty and the Paramount Accords upheld for one hundred and twenty-seven years. As per the terms set forth by the Paramount Accords, signed and witnessed by the National Diet, the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the navy and military, the League of Villains signatory is hereby stricken from the accords.”

A murmur of unease runs through the hero section of the table, All Might startled most of all.

“Maybe I heard ya wrong,” Hawks says for all of them, “but you’re standing here telling us that you were allies with the guy we’re fighting. Run that by me again.”

And though Hawks has his feet on the table, Toshinori can see he is tensed, ready to flip forward and attack.

He can sense the other heroes prepared to attack or defend as well, all waiting on his signal.

“I believe an explanation is needed,” All Might says before anyone does something stupid.

Nezu jumps off All Might’s table. Though he is small, he commands the room with his presence.

“The Paramount Accords were signed following the Kusanagi Rampage 127 years ago after the National Diet was slaughtered to a man, the budding heroics industry annihilated and the Joint Chiefs of Staff killed by the villain group. There are many signatories, including UA. The Accords have been instrumental in maintaining peace for the past century.”

“You call this peace?” Edgeshot asks snidely. “My hometown has no water or electricity because of your peace.”

“I did specify that it was for the past century. The Accords are the primary reason Japan has remained unified.” Nezu sets eyes on the Royal Guardswoman. “Yet even I was unaware that the villain was a signatory.”

“It was one of their leader’s demands in return for permitting the Accords.”

“You say permit like he was the one who allowed them.”

“In truth, the Kusanagi Rampage event was not carried out by a group of villains,” the Guardswoman says. “It was carried out by one man.”

“The fuck?” Hawks curses. “One man?”
“We have records dating back to the Dark Ages and we offer them freely as a gesture of goodwill. The person leading this war is the Strongest Man Alive,” she says.

“What, Kurogiri? We have records of him and he isn’t that powerful. Ruthless, but not the strongest.”

“Kurogiri is his right-hand man. I speak of All For One who has lived close to two centuries. He’s waged wars alone and won. He’s fought off an Emperor and his Guard and walked away unscathed. Millions of deaths are attributed to him. This is a man who destroyed Tianjin and parts of South Sudan. There is only one person he’s lost to.”

She points to All Might and all eyes fall on him.

“In exchange for our knowledge and power, we request All Might not take part in the battles to come,” the woman from the Royal Guard, the one who calls herself Izanami, says.

“Your demands are absurd,” a general says, disgruntled. “He’s our greatest combat asset. All Might’s power would make this sea battle irrelevant.”

All Might glances at the general. “I think you misunderstand something. I am willing to set aside your arrest until this war but that does not make us allies.” He pushes his presence out once more. “I am not yours to control. Do not, for a single moment, forget that.”

“What he said,” Hawks adds casually, his gaze never drifting from the ceiling. “Y’all just made enemies out of all of us. Maybe you got used to your Accords keeping you safe and protected, but you’re all on my list now. You knew about All For One and you did nothing. This, all of this madness, every grieving parent and orphaned child, this is on you.”

All Might finds himself nodding. His war with All For One was only ever between the two of them, never through proxies or dead civilians.

“This is why the Accords were necessary,” Nezu says, stopping the situation from degenerating any further. “To stop this infighting and permit channels of dialogue. But your request is rather unusual. All Might is the Greatest Hero. We need him now more than ever.”

“All Might is the only asset we have capable of matching All For One,” Izanami says. “We refuse to allow his power to be squandered. In exchange, every combat operative of the Imperial Household will wage this war alongside you.”

Even All Might falls silent.

He knows the power of the Royal Guard. Nana more than made sure of that. And whilst he expects them to fight, the Emperor’s designs have always been mysterious. There is no guarantee that Emperor would have chosen to involve himself in this conflict.

“We’ll battle the Great Ten’s remaining force before they invade,” she continues. “We’ll face the Vancouver Island Villain Association before they touch Japanese soil. The VIVA who just won the bloodiest quirk battle this century. They faced off against three of the Great Ten, every hero of the American Northwest and the Western Canadian provinces and annihilated them. The western seaboard of North America might as well belong to villains now.”

She takes a seat on the table at the front.

“It will be Imperial blood that will be spilt to ensure Japan’s sovereignty. Current analyses place
Imperial losses at no less than fifty percent. It will be a slaughter. But we need assurances that every drop of spilt blood has meaning, that our sacrifice won’t be squandered.”

“You’re not the only ones who’ve lost people.”

She inclines her head, acknowledging those words.

“No, but we’re the only ones with a sense of perspective. We know the enemy we face and quite honestly, we can coexist with him and maintain our current way of life. Just as we’ve done for a century.”

“You’re cowards.”

“The Emperor has a signed draft of total surrender should All Might be injured,” she says. “Injured. Not even killed. Injured. That is our ultimatum. Without us, you cannot hold back the invasion. Without All Might, All For One will slaughter us all.”

In the depths of his heart, Toshinori knows that to be true. He remembers being a broken mess after their fight, half his torso simply gone and struggling to hang onto life. Most of all, he remembers how little damage he did.

“There is no version of this where we win without All Might at his peak. We do not know every quirk All For One has but we do know one.”

The screen lights up. On it, is a grainy image of a man in armour and two other Royal Guard.

The video has been slowed down so they can easily see the massive stone pillar, less a column and more a hill, flying towards the group of three.

The man flings his arm. The air in front of him seems to crack. And then the column shatters to an invisible force.

“This was recovered footage of All For One’s final battle against the 128th Emperor of the Chrysanthemum Dynasty. Over Raoul Island, All For One would face the Emperor and his Guard for three whole days. That island is now five times its original size and a radioactive wasteland completely hostile to life. And from that battle, he stole the Emperor’s quirk. All For One holds the precursor quirk to the one the current Emperor holds. Do you understand? The current Emperor could sunder a mountain. His son sank an island out of grief without effort.”

All Might doesn’t let his worry show. All For One hadn’t shown that quirk during their battle. No, it had been sly tactics and an impenetrable steel defence.

“There is no known weakness to this quirk. It can operate through any environment or medium and scales to continental levels. The one weakness you could argue is that the user is stuck in the devastation.” She looks to All Might. “All Might punched All For One and he still walked away. I doubt he has that weakness.”

“Are you saying he can’t be beaten?” a vice-admiral asks.

“I’m saying that if we can, then the cost will be high. All Might must be the tip of the spear. There is no one else who comes close.”

*****

Kurogiri’s war has raged for four days. He’s tired and ready to pass out but he can’t, not yet at
least. There’s too much to be done.

Right now, they’re in an apartment the League owns, observing the position of a convoy through a mix of satellites and drones. Usually, there would be ECM they would have to contend with, but Kurogiri’s strikes have been surgical and designed to kill the enemy’s ability to retaliate.

The convoy is ten vehicles strong and thermal imaging shows a few rooftops along the route to be filled with people, soldiers and heroes together most likely. Unfortunately, they're clustered around what would make good ambush points for conventional groups who must deal with travel times and escape routes or general logistics.

A warp quirk annihilates those considerations.

With his group of a hundred, he is successfully waging a war against the entirety of Japan. They can attack where the enemy is weakest and decapitate command structures, and they can retreat without leaving a trail to follow.

The quirks he received from Sensei make coordination trivially easy. Search makes it so that he can keep track of his entire team—half the humans, thirty in total, are sleeping or resting in multiple safe houses, whilst the other half are awake and with him.

There are five Nomu he has with him in case they need heavier support. But for now, with surprise on their side, conventional weapons will do.

We move soon, he sends to everyone taking part in this operation using Mandalay's quirk.

The three leaders with him look up from their table where they are planning. Each is decked out in armour and carries a rifle. They don’t look particularly special but each has a body count in high hundreds attained through wars in Georgia and Malaysia.

The apartment is a hive of activity though it is oddly silent. They can’t afford to be suspicious right now nor can they afford for the activity level to noticeably spike. So, he watches his soldiers check ammunition and ready their quirks in utter silence.

“In and out in two minutes,” he says to the squad leaders.

“Yes, sir. Do we have operational command?”

Kurogiri nods. “Yes.”

“Then drop team one on this rooftop,” he says, pointing at one with a cluster of heat signatures. “Kill them quickly and we’ll have a good vantage point. Team two will stop the convoy. Team three will slaughter anyone in the area.”

That plan is more violent than any Kurogiri would decide on. But he isn’t well versed in war. Operations and logistics, yes, but not combat tactics and strategy. Honestly, had Japan been prepared, they wouldn’t be winning as handily.

Given that they have yet to lead him wrong, he listens to their suggestions.

He warps the first group and lets them pounce on the soldiers waiting there. He doesn’t stay around to watch the bloodbath, instead, he transports the second and third teams.

He watches as they efficiently destroy the road, forcing the convoy to stop. And long before the soldiers escorting it can get out of their cars, smoke grenades are being thrown and guns are fired,
sharp staccato cracks in the dead of night.

A group of three carrying long blades slink away and enters the fog. Even from here, Kurogiri can hear the screams of heroes and soldiers being hacked to death.

It takes seven minutes before he can warp his teams away. Seven whole minutes in which anyone with a warp quirk can arrive and deal damage to them.

But no one does.

He warps the teams to safe houses across the country, noting the two who have died and the four injured. That's over a tenth of his operating force and he can't absorb those losses. He’ll have to start using more Nomu now.

Their target, the convoy’s captive, is startled when the bag over her head is removed. The Division Commander of Okinawa, captured whilst that cell of the League went to ground, blinks in surprise when she sees him.

“Kurogiri, what the fuck is going on?”

“Not yet. We need to meet the others.”

He generates another warp gate and gestures for her to enter. She shoots him a distrustful look before they leave. And then they are in Bulawayo, overlooking the city from a mansion in the hills. Whilst not as populous as the capital, Bulawayo comes a close second with nearly four million living here. Besides, Kurogiri likes it a lot more than the capital Harare, as it is more scenic to observe.

And, it doesn't have a massive monument to Hero standing nearly a kilometre tall. That alone makes it a better city.

The other two Division commanders are already in the lounge, the older man who commands Shikoku pacing fitfully whilst the boy in charge of Hokkaido is the picture of calm. A surprising reversal, but then again, war brings out the best and worst in people.

“Kurogiri,” the boy says in greeting, seemingly indifferent.

“What the hell is going on?” she asks now that they’re safe. “Since when do we wage wars?”

“The League doesn’t,” Kurogiri says, taking a seat.

He wishes he had muscles to stretch out but if he’s sitting then that means he isn’t working and that is a close second. It also forces everyone else to sit and be polite.

Once they’re seated, he continues.

"This is not a League operation. Do you understand? None of you was notified of this. All for One, Tomura, and I did this without consulting anyone else. Less than a hundred of us are waging this war. Not the hundreds of villains in the League. Not the supporters in the tens of thousands. Not our allies across the globe.”

“Oh,” the elderly man says. “Deniability.”

“Yes.”

“This isn’t who we are,” the woman says. “We fight as a group or fall together. That was the
agreement. We work for you and we change society. Not this. This isn’t the League. The VIVA won without resorting to this.”

“As far you’re concerned, the League is dead,” Kurogiri says. “We can’t win this battle, but we intend on winning the war. Listen carefully. I don’t have much time to explain.”

“I dislike this,” the man from Shikoku says. “Abandoning our allies.”

“You’re not. You’re fulfilling Sensei’s final order.”


Kurogiri sighs. “Thank you. Will you follow my final commands?”

The boy considers it for a moment but they all know the answer. Despite his failings, he has always been loyal to the League and to Kurogiri most of all.

“Yes.”

“These are the last orders I will ever give you,” he tells them. “After this, we go our separate ways. You and the League. Me and my war. Understood.”

“I don’t like this,” the woman says. “But I’ll do it.”

“You’re to go to ground. Break up your divisions and decentralise leadership further. The cells aren’t to have any contact, is that understood? Once you break them up, you destroy knowledge of their locations and any means of contact. There can’t be a weak link. This war will end in a few weeks at most. Next, you’ll take advantage of the chaos to forge new identities for the League operatives. This contingency is one we’ve planned for years.”

“Understood.”

He hands each of them a data drive from his pocket. They are heavy and bulky drives, military-grade and encrypted in more ways that Kurogiri can imagine, locked to the biometrics of the person he gives them to.

“Inside are the locations of hard currency and other assets. I don’t know what you’re each getting, but you’re going to use it in the aftermath. Use it to rebuild and legitimise yourselves and the League. Rebuild our resources and make something new.”

"Fuck," the boy says, seeming to finally understand what is happening. "This is how it ends? Running away? What, we go and be businessmen and farmers and engineers and politicians? We go back and perpetuate the system?"

“That’s up to you,” Kurogiri says. “I’ve given my orders. What you do next is up to you.”

“Will we see you again.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. But you will know Sensei’s successor when he comes.”

“You don’t mean Tomura, do you.”

“No.”

It hurts him to admit it. But even he can’t deny the sheer frenetic energy Sensei has whenever he
speaks of Izuku Midoriya. It sickens him that Hisashi will gain more power through his son, makes him ill that Tomura’s birthright and legacy will be stolen. It’s a plan bound for failure, one destined for destruction. In the dark parts of his soul, he worries this is Sensei’s grand plan for suicide.

And yet, if this goes through, then Kurogiri can take Tomura and run. They can find a new country and live new lives without the weight of Sensei’s immense legacy crashing down on them.

Kurogiri is tired. All he wants to do is spend time with his son. Villainy has brought him hardship and pain and war. Maybe they can find another path, one that leads to happiness.

And if it all fails and Kurogiri dies in the process, then he knows his wife and daughter are waiting for him in death.

No matter the outcome, Kurogiri will win.

“I don’t know his ultimate plan, but Sensei said that his successor will declare himself against the world. Stay hidden and do not contact him unless he contacts you first. And even then, the choice is up to you.”

“What do you mean?”

“No one will force you to follow someone you don’t trust. It must be your choice.” He shakes his head. “I chose this path. I’m willing to die to see it through. But I will not make you suffer for my sins.”

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Izuku Midoriya is off-balance. A part of it is due to having no idea where he is. The larger owes to the relative freedom he has.

They haven’t chained him up nor have they pumped him full of muscle relaxants like they threatened. No, if anything, he is in an odd state of limbo.

The villains, those from the Vanguard, don’t know what to do with him. The lizard is equal parts fearful and admiring. Toga has an unhealthy fondness of him whilst the burnt one known as Dabi is utterly indifferent.

Shigaraki, after two whole days of spouting random bullshit about society, has finally given up on trying to convert Izuku. Maybe it had something to do with Izuku insulting him.

“Just shut up already,” Izuku snaps a few minutes into Shigaraki’s latest rant on society. “Have you ever read a book or do you just regurgitate second-hand thoughts that get reinforced with anecdotal evidence? I’d literally rather die than listen to you for another minute.”

The villain falls still, glaring at him. Compared to his boss, it’s a child wearing his father’s coat.

“I could kill Ragdoll first.”

“I may be a captive audience but I’m not a captivated audience.” Izuku shows his teeth, sharp enough to chew through demons. “You won’t because your boss didn’t give you permission. They’re the only cards keeping me here because I know he won’t let you touch Kouta or Momo. Do it, lose one of your chains. You’ve only got three.”

He hasn’t seen Shigaraki since then, though Toga has taken to leaning over his shoulder wherever possible.
They take him to see the great villain a few hours later. He is still in the same room, still hooked up to medical equipment and still shrouded in darkness.

The plain wooden chair is still there. Izuku decides there and then to take just the slightest bit of control back.

He turns the chair on one leg and sits the wrong way, arm’s crossed over the back.

“Hello, my boy.”

“Don’t call me that,” he hisses. “You have no right.”

“I see you’re in no mood for a lesson.”

“Your lessons are shit,” he responds automatically.

A hint of malevolence returns. “Do be polite. Manners maketh man, dear boy.”

Izuku bares his teeth. In the politest voice he can manage, he says, “I find your lessons droll, uninteresting and uninspired.”

And then, in Arabic which he learnt in a week, he adds, “Using old English phrases that Hero resurrected does not make you sophisticated.”

“A story, instead,” the villain responds in unaccented Arabic. “Yes, I think you may be interested in this one.”

“Why should I listen?”

“Because there is a reward at the end for you.”

He is in control. You have no choice but to play his game with his rules.

“Fine,” Izuku grits out.

“You won’t even demand to know what reward I offer first?”

“No, because it doesn't matter. I have no choice. Let's not lie to ourselves, All For One. I'm your prisoner, kept captive only by innocent lives. I'm not here because I want to be here. If I could, I'd fight you to my very last breath.”

“I wouldn't kill you. When you're as strong as me, winning fights without killing is trivial. And, I don't kill children. One day, maybe I'll tell you that story.”

“Hopefully, you'll have died of old age by then.”

“Do you know how old I am?”

“Don’t particularly care.”

“I was born at the end of an era. Hero’s Golden Age which lasted thirty years. I was a boy when she was assassinated, maybe twelve, maybe ten. I never got to see most of her fights and I won’t act as if I remember them. But I do remember her strength.”

“You respected her,” he says, surprised.
“Of course. Her strength made her worthy of respect. She was the pinnacle of strength at the time, in the same vein as Stormwind and Titan the era before. There was no one who matched her or came close. Even at the height of my power, I would be hard-pressed to survive an encounter with her.”

Which, Izuku is thankful for. Hero was a legend, more powerful than the rest. Maybe only two people were stronger than her, and the reign of the Tyrants had already ended by then.

“I remember her last great battle against Duchess. They fought over the sea. She forced that encounter there so that cities wouldn’t be destroyed. They were so glorious that day,” the villain says wistfully. “There hasn’t been a fight quite like it since then. Can you imagine two people so fast and strong that you could only track them from the clouds they evaporated with each blow and the storms they displaced? Can you imagine blows so powerful that you could pick the seismic waves up an ocean away.”

These are the moments that terrify him. This man, in this very moment, isn’t a villain. He’s a person who has seen much of history and has more knowledge than most will ever have.

Right now, he’s just an old man reminiscing on the good old days. A man who lives, not a villain who takes lives.

Izuku loves life as the sun loves the Earth. He doesn’t want this villain to be humanised because then he might just feel empathy. That idea leaves him terrified.

*Your kindness is a weakness and a strength.*

“No, I don’t think you can imagine that power. I am the Strongest Man Alive today and I would have been a minor irritant if I tried to interfere. Do you understand how powerful they were?”

“What I’ve seen might surprise you.”

The villain barks out a laugh. “Yes, you are a surprise.” He shakes his head. “I still remember the two iconic moments of that fight. There they were, flying in the air and sizing each other up. This was moments before the final blow and both had their helmets off. And then, Duchess said something that made Hero laugh. To this day, I haven’t figured out what Duchess said, but it must have been memorable.”

Izuku’s not sure why, but he smiles. Hero defined an era and was without equal. To hear this story of her last battle from someone who saw it is not something he ever imagined experiencing.

“Maybe Duchess told Hero a bad joke,” he says sarcastically.

“Perhaps. Hero was odd on the best of days. The second moment came after their final blow. It happened too quickly and destroyed every camera in the area. The force of it split the clouds across the world. And then came the shaking. And when the camera’s got a good look, it was to see a churning ocean with waves a mile high. We waited, everyone in the world waited, to see who would walk away.

“And there came Hero, making her grand reappearance in Maputo. Her armour was destroyed from the force of the blow. But she walked out the ocean and onto land, her fist raised high to the sky. And then she roared her victory for all the world to see. Behind her, the ocean itself seemed to roar with her. That moment was seared into my mind as a child.”

He can’t imagine this imposing man being a child in a home with parents and maybe even siblings.
“I can’t believe you respected a hero.”

“She was nothing like your modern-day heroes. She killed Duchess in that confrontation. In fact, she killed most of her enemies. She knew the danger a living enemy might one day pose.”

Izuku swallows. “What?”

“Oh yes. I know your education systems attempt to hide the truth of her and even of Hawkmoon. But neither left their enemies alive. If a villain is dead, they can’t come after your loved ones or kill civilians. It was, I suppose, a different era. I was just a boy when Hero showed me the true definition of power. It was and still is, the strength to annihilate any enemy who opposes you.

“The ocean still bears testament to her power. Hero Trench in the Indian Ocean at a maximum depth of six kilometres and nearly five hundred long. I walked its depths once just to see the magnitude of power wielded that day. You can still find Duchess’s armour there, preserved perfectly after all these centuries.”

Who really is this villain? He’s seen events that shaped the last two centuries of history and has been a driving force in shaping events. And yet, he isn’t the villain Izuku expects. He’s malevolent, yes, but there’s something just beyond sight, something hiding behind his nobility and startling empathy.

_Find it, Mikumo whispers. That will be his final weakness. Find it and kill him with it. This deception is all for that purpose._

“I think I’ll let you talk to them,” the villain says. “You have remained well behaved.”

“What?”

"The boy and the girl. I will let you communicate with them. I suppose I am in a good mood."

“Positive reinforcement?”

"If you want to think of yourself as an animal, then who am I to stop you. Next time we speak, I shall teach you a lesson. And please be polite to Tomura.”

There’s a threat there. Or perhaps it is a warning that the villain will let Tomura kill their captives if Izuku angers him. Either way, he’s willing to behave.

They don’t take him to see Kouta or Yaoyorozu immediately. Perhaps it is a punishment for insulting Tomura earlier.

The only way he can keep track of the time through their guard rotations. Izuku doesn’t need to sleep, so they’re forced to devote extra attention to him.

He frightens Spinner when the villain wakes up from his nap. The first things the villain sees are Izuku’s burning green eyes and a smile that can consume worlds.

“You’re not a very good guard,” Izuku says pleasantly.

“Shut up,” he snaps back but Izuku can see he is flustered.

_Push him._

Izuku cracks his neck. “What’s your name?”
The lizard tilts his head. “Spinner.”

“Not your made-up name. Your real name. Mine is Izuku Midoriya though I think you already know that.”

“Shut up already.”

Izuku rolls his eyes, letting the mad knowledge fade from his gaze.

“We might as well get to know each other. I see you’re a fan of Stain.”

“So what?”

Spinner may be gruff and confrontational, but Izuku can read him like a book. It’s trivial after speaking to All For One and having met Kouta. There isn’t much difference between the lizard and the boy. Both are foolish Stain fans who blindly follow his ideology without really knowing it.

**Belittle him now.**

And with Mikumo here, it becomes so much easier.

“Nothing. It’s just something we have in common, I guess.” He smiles. “Obviously, I actually know him and his philosophy. So, tell me Spinner-who-won't-share-his-name, what society do you want to create?”

“One that isn’t corrupt.”

“Every society is corrupt to some degree.” Izuku cocks his head, "You haven't given this any thought any more than you've given me your name."

Spinner twitches, agitated. He can choose to avoid answering that and lose. He can choose to give an answer and have Izuku tear it apart. Or he can give Izuku his name and win slightly.

On an instinctual level, Spinner understands his options.

“Shuichi,” he says after a beat.

“I'd say it's a pleasure to meet you but you did kidnap me and attack my class.”

He’s been well behaved so they aren’t pumping him full of muscle relaxants. That gives him the opportunity to shrug casually.

“I don’t think Stain would have approved.” His smile widens. “Then again, you didn't really know him.”

Shuichi grits his teeth but says nothing. Smart.

“Well, maybe you will,” he offers, eliciting Shuichi’s interest. “Before All Might busts down these walls.”

Spinner stiffens at the reminder of who he has made an enemy of.

“He must be tearing through the country looking for me. And yes, I am that special,” he says, cutting Spinner off before he makes the obvious comment. "Do you think some no-name kid would get to meet your boss's boss when you haven't met him? Oh, All Might will come for me. Do you think you can beat the greatest hero of this era?”
The answer to that is obvious. Izuku knows it as does Spinner. He can see the fear creeping up Spinner's spine, that tendril of dread and doubt.

The same tendril that All For One infected Izuku with during their first meeting. It sickens him to use those same techniques.

_You must learn his ways if you wish to win._

He knows Mikumo speaks the truth, but it weighs heavily in the pit of his stomach. It feels like the lead heart he ate once that didn't sit well, but still together worse.

Eventually, they let him see Kouta.

The boy tackles Izuku and then he's babbling a mile a minute between sobs. It's an incoherent jumble that Izuku can't decipher despite knowing all languages because language implies structure and this has none.

“Shush,” Izuku says holding the boy tight. “I need you to be strong.”

The cell is observed by Magne who holds the detonator a bit too casually for Izuku’s liking.

“What’s going on?” the boy asks, voice wobbly and fearful.

Izuku inhales slowly.

“We’ve been kidnapped,” he begins slowly, gently. “I need you to listen carefully. Whatever you do, don’t fight them. Don’t argue with them. Don't piss them off.”

Kouta punches him. “Why won't you fight?”

“Because they have Mandalay.”

Kouta freezes. “What?”

“Pixie Bob and Ragdoll as well.” Izuku touches his collar. “If I fight, if I try to escape, then they won't make it. I promised to save you and I will, I promise. Right now, doing what they want is the only way I can keep you safe.”

“This isn't fair.”

He pulls Kouta close. “I know. That's why we need to be strong. Can you do that for me? But we have to be strong in our own way. If you’re scared, then you should cry. Scream and shout and be upset. You see, they're liars unlike us. We need to use the truth to win, okay?”

Kouta nods against his chest. “Okay.”

Izuku holds him as he cries. There is no other comfort that he can offer the boy. Izuku can’t trust him with the plan nor can he offer false reassurances. But he can be a pillar of support for the moment.

Magne opens the cell, jabbing her thumb out. Izuku sets Kouta down on his cot. He squeezes Kouta’s shoulder and whispers, “Stay safe.”

The path she leads him down is a winding thing, one with more turns and corners than is necessary. And though he may be lost, he catalogues the shadows he can feel and counts the people in the facility. It isn’t just the Vanguard and All For One, but at least a dozen other staff members.
When he lags slightly, curious by the runes on a door—ancient, filled with power, and built from Disparity—she shoves him forward. It takes him a moment to realise that the rune isn’t visible to normal eyes. As he is led through the facility, he feels more and more of these runes, some built from sparks of godflame and others from shards of true dark.

They come to the edge of the facility and he knows that because his senses just stop. One moment he feels every shadow in a perfect sphere and the next it’s like a wall of blankness has just been shoved into the sphere.

To his best guess, it is an oscillating shield of godflame, true dark, and disparity. Magnificent, and something he would study had he stumbled upon it in the abyss. Unfortunately, it means Shouto won’t be able to track him.

Magne opens the door to Momo’s cell.

This one is heavier, as thick as his arm is tall. There is no visible lock or latch. Her room is as plain as Kouta’s, blank white walls and reinforced padding. He sees the door to the adjoining bathroom which is shut now. Just like his, it likely only opens at certain times of the day.

Momo herself is sitting cross-legged on her bed, her hair pulled into a tight bun and her features frigid. There are dark circles around her eyes and she wears clothes that cover every inch of skin but her face and fingertips.

“Hey,” he says, waving.

“Why aren’t you chained up?” she demands immediately.

They aren't friends so he understands she wouldn't trust him immediately. Classmates, yes, but the location of the camp was supposed to be a secret and yet they had been attacked. It still hurts.

“Because of this.”

He points to the collar, identical to hers but for the green band of light. He takes one tentative step forward. When she doesn’t recoil back, he takes another and then another until he is at the bedside.

“We all have those.”

“This is the master collar,” he explains, smiling gently. “If I leave or do anything suspicious, it sets the rest of them off.”

He extends his hand, imploring her to take it silently. He needs her trust even if only for a moment. And he can’t do anything overt, not when there are cameras everywhere and Magne is watching him.

Her features don’t soften but she extends her hands.

Izuku holds her hands gently, smiling as he places his finger on her pulse, hidden from sight. This is a gamble and he doesn’t know if she understands Morse code, but he must hope. Hope had saved him during the worst parts of his life. Maybe hope can save him again.

_Trust me_, he says in Morse Code.

“I'm not going to risk you,” he says. “I can live with a lot of things but not with your death on my conscience.”
"How can I?" She responds, filling him with hope.

“I wouldn’t expect you to.”

*Do you have a plan?*

Yes.

“Have they been treating you well?”

“As well as can be expected. Food sucks but the showers are hot.”

*What is it?*

*Let them think they’ve won and beat them at the very last moment.*

“Might as well take your time and enjoy it. There's not much else we can do.”

*Tell me the truth.*

“I think Shouto has a crush on you,” he says randomly.

*There's a weak link. I need to subvert him to our side.*

“Your boyfriend has a crush on me?”

Izuku splutters, features flushing. “He’s not my boyfriend.”

“No one believes that.”

*That’s risky.*

*I don't have a better plan.*

“There’s nothing there.”

“What does this have to do with anything?”

*Which villain?*

*Can't tell you. They'll see if you know.*

“Nothing,” he admits. “This is just… filler, I guess. I don’t have to think about everything else.”

*Please trust me,* he says, squeezing her hands tightly.

“You think you can work a way for them to get Kouta something to distract himself?”

*There's a tracker on Bakugou,* she says. *They might find it and track us back.*

That makes him blink in surprise

"I'll try. It might not happen quickly but hopefully, it'll be soon."

His grin is genuine because now there is another avenue. If nothing else, there is hope that they will be found.
All he must do is keep everyone alive until then.

“Time’s up.”

Izuku glares at Magne, baring his teeth. When she taps the detonator, he falls still.

“Just go,” Momo says, calming him slightly.

His back may be hunched and his fists trembling with rage, but he is winning. The weaker they think he is then the stronger he is in truth.

He’s betting everything on a plan with a thousand moving pieces, pieces controlled by outside forces, forces that he can’t see. Everything is just one step towards that. He’ll be weak when they expect strength, compliant when they expect defiance. He’ll be whatever he needs to make sure Momo and Kouta are out of the base for the final piece to the puzzle. The ultimate goal is to see the villain dead.

It will be his greatest victory.

*****

Fumikage Tokoyami towers over a mountain of dead nightmares in the depths of the abyss. This battle on a world with creatures travelling backwards in time is the latest in the long war he has fought alone.

Unfortunately, this world has no creatures he has any interest in enslaving. They are too far aligned to darkness, less alive and more beings of true dark with a facsimile of life.

“Well, this has been a fun distraction,” Hisashi says from his throne of skulls built from a host of beings Fumikage slaughtered.

Fumikage twists his sword currently embedded in the torso of a godling. Purple light consumes it, searing it from existence and leaving nothing behind.

He flicks the sword to the side. A wave of purple erupts from it, burning another godling before it can return to a time it was alive.

“I suppose it has,” he says, voice deeper than before.

“I like this place as much as the next guy but I also have secrets to learn.” Hisashi stands. “Can you get back by yourself?”

Fumikage considers that for a moment. He feels the power held within his soul; an ocean of raw energy tithed unto him by all the creatures enslaved beneath his will. There are so many that he can’t count them, Dark Shadow and Watatsumi first amongst equals, but there are others with vast reserves of power that are his to command.

He wonders if this is how Shouto feels. The power to destroy continents as easily as breathing is at his fingertips, ready to be unleashed should he choose it. And yet, though he has faced godlings and demons and nightmares, and stolen their powers, he feels there are still heights of power to be attained.

“Yes.”

Fumikage summons Dark Shadow's claws around one hand and let’s purple fire surround them.
With one violent slash, reality distorts and a rip in spacetime appears.

“I believe my means will suffice,” he says once the rupture has stabilised.

“Sure. Take care.”

A highway of green materialises before Hisashi. Izuku’s father waves before setting off deeper into the abyss. Fumikage watches him for a long time until a dragon—how many are there?—swoops down and picks the man up.

He shrugs. Hisashi is a Midoriya and Fumikage knows all too well the power they hold. Beneath his laziness and casual disinterest, Hisashi is still a dangerous man.

Regardless, Fumikage is confident in his powers now. He knows the extent to which he holds dominion and the abilities his kingship grants him.

“Do you think we’re ready?” he asks his oldest companion.

I believe you have ascended enough to stand beside your peers now, Dark Shadow says from within his soul.

Fumikage returns to the real world in one great stride that spans universes.

The sun is a scorching beacon under godflame, a constant reminder of Shouto’s dominion. It doesn’t bother Fumikage much outside of leaving him with an itchy nose as though he has allergies.

His power is muted but for a few long minutes, his presence distorts the fabric of reality, stretching time and forcing hard angles to the direction of gravity. The atoms in the air decay around him, sparks and flashes of nuclear fire dotting his body.

Eventually, he remembers what a human is supposed to feel like and manages to contain his power more appropriately. He grasps true dark and godflame and moulds them, mixing the two together to a mixture more closely resembling the earth.

He stares at the blackened ground and the air that has rotted beneath his power and waves it away, watching reality shift to his whims. Green grass overtakes the blackened earth in a wave and the air returns to a normal mixture of oxygen and nitrogen. Whatever abyssal monsters that were birthed by his presence die as he kills the environment they were suited to.

One day, he knows he will be able to do so and create entire universes. Not today, but soon. His domain is life under disparity, but life can only thrive under the right conditions. Whilst he can’t utilise true dark or godflame directly, he can choose how they intermix. A nudge of darkness here and gravity becomes less constant. A spark of godflame there, and he can make time run faster.

He is a few kilometres from the Imperial Villa. All he needs do is walk in a straight line and get to the main highway.

Which means he gets lost for the next three hours before stumbling onto the road even further than he started. Fumikage shrugs and just walks the empty highway casually, as though he doesn’t have a giant sword on his back.

He hears the vehicle well before it comes into view. It is an armoured vehicle with the symbol of the Household on it. A man he has never met leans out the window.
“Inquisitor, where the hell have you been? You chose a bad week to go on vacation.”

Only a few days?

It has been much longer for Fumikage, close to a year by his best estimates in a place where time is malleable.

He shrugs.

“Busy. What is the issue?”

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe the fact that Japan’s at war.”

“What?”

The man opens the backdoor and Fumikage scrambles inside. “Mind if we talk and drive?”

Fumikage nods. “Sure.”

He listens to the briefing with growing dread as they drive down the highway. His homeland is under siege and he has been gone for the entirety of the attack.

“Currently, the military has been hit the hardest,” the driver says, pulling into a compound on the outskirts of the Villa. “Half the senior command staff is dead and the juniors who might be a threat are being picked off.”

He steps out the car and is led through the compound to a meeting room with members of the Imperial Household he recognises as part of the Intelligence division. He sees Itinerant and nods towards the man.

“Let’s get this meeting started,” Itinerant says. “The army, navy and hero society accepted our ultimatum. As such, we’ll be upholding our end of the bargain.

Fumikage listens quietly as he outlines the plan of attack, disquieted with how easily he speaks of murder and assassination and civilian casualties. And yet, he can’t say if this is the wrong way to go.

Japan is already losing a war to one man. If they are invaded, then there is no chance that the country will remain.

“What triggered this war?” he asks once Itinerant is finished. “There was no reason for any of this. Villains have never dabbled in war.”

“They attacked UA’s camp.”

He freezes. “Attacked it?”

“Yes. Eleven students dead and two faculty members. The Pussycats were defeated completely, with Tiger dead and the other three kidnapped.”

He hasn’t been paying attention after the first number. Eleven, he repeats in his head.

“Show me the list.”

Many of the names he knows tangentially. But others he is aware of.
Itsuka Kendo, representative of 1-B and Neito Minima who was always with her. Both dead and
gone.

Hanta Sero, someone he wasn’t close to but they did talk often, and always with Kaminari nearby.

Asui Tsu. That name chills his heart. They may not have parted on good terms but she was still
someone he knew and liked.

Ochaco Uraraka. That name crushes him. Ochaco who was kind and vicious and determined, who
pushed him at every turn and broke his composure. Ochaco who Shinsou loved and he doesn’t
doubt the two would have made a magnificent hero couple.

“Inquisitor,” Itinerant ventures gently. “I understand they were your friends but you have a
responsibility to the household now.”

He takes a breath. “I will stay true to my oaths. Continue.”

“They kidnapped two students and the boy living with the Pussycats.”

“Who?”

“Momo Yaoyorozu and Izuku Midoriya.”

Without an instance of hesitation, he turns on the spot.

Fumikage stalks out the briefing room without looking back, cloak billowing furiously behind him.
Everyone gets out of his way the moment they see him, red eyes like twin suns and raw power
leaving blackened footprints.

And when he inevitably gets lost, he slashes at a wall. It crumbles before his rage and he walks out
to the blistering hot sun.

Itinerant appears in a wave of frozen time, features furious.

“Where are you going?” Itinerant growls.

“To find my friend.”

“Is this more important than the oaths you swore?”

“Yes,” he says simply. “This oath came first and I will not break it. I refuse to forsake him.”

His dragon materialises, a menacing beast of pitch black. It doesn’t roar but it makes Itinerant take
a step back. Who wouldn’t when there is a dragon towering over even the tallest buildings in the
villa?

With one powerful jump, Fumikage clears thirty metres and lands on its shoulder. He doesn’t care
for everyone observing him.

“We are allies, Itinerant,” he says in a voice that carries across the villa. “But some oaths matter
more than others.”

A single thought is all it takes for Watatsumi to beat his massive wings and take to the sky.

The dragon flies a straight line across Japan as Fumikage extends his senses searching for a blip of
true dark. But there are so many people and places touched by the abyss. Musutafu itself drowns
out every other signal with the overwhelming darkness and equally bright godflame.

Japan is big and trying to find Izuku is like trying to find a needle in a haystack at night without limbs. Quite impossible from the air alone.

His dragon loops a slow circle as he summons his flock of crows. One lands on his arm.

“Find him,” he orders.

The flock disperses, feathers of glass unshattering beating furiously as a thousand abyssal birds split off to search for his friend.

*Had you been able to find him easily, do you think the Scorchking would not have retrieved him?* His oldest friend asks.

“Shut up.”

They fly from one end of Japan to the next, constantly searching for any sign of Izuku’s presence. The campground is the only place with signs of his existence, remnants of his green lightning still affecting the landscape. Still, those remnants are too old to be of use. There aren’t any tracks to follow no matter how hard he searches.

His dragon comes to a halt as they’re flying back.

Ahead of them is Shouto. He knows this because no one else stands on infernal fire as though it’s solid ground.

Fumikage doesn’t know much about Shouto, admittedly. The boy is his peer and equal. They were both UA students. They both have fathers whom they dislike. And they both hold an impossible fragment of the abyss in their souls.

He jumps down and changes the mix of godflame and darkness till gravity isn’t a consideration and he’s floating in the air. He beckons Shouto closer with a wave.

There is a flash of black fire and then Shouto stands a few paces across from him. Though he looks mortal, Fumikage can feel the vastness of his power, the first flame clinging to his presence. He doesn’t understand how other humans can’t feel this cataclysmic power. It’s like looking at a dark sun larger than the galaxy.

In another world and another set of circumstances, they may have been enemies battling over shattered worlds and dying galaxies. Their powers aren’t opposed to each other, but Shouto’s fire is an extreme with no regard for the destruction it causes. It has no interest in the life that grows beneath it.

“We swore an oath that day on the beach,” he says. “Allies till the very end.”

Shouto nods. “I can’t find him.”

“I owe him everything,” Fumikage explains. “I don’t care how many people need to die but I will not stop until he is safe.”

“He would hate you for sacrificing others in his place.” There is a quality to his monotone that makes Fumikage think Shouto doesn’t share the same sentiment. “It’s the only reason he hasn’t fought his way to safety.”
“He knows nothing about the cold calculus of survival. He isn’t willing to sacrifice people. I know him well, and I know he can’t make the society he wants without opposing the world.”

“I know. I don’t want him to make those choices. I can’t see him but… I think it might break him.”

Fumikage stares at Shouto, assessing him. In the hard edges of his face and the cruel indifference in his dark eye, he finds a form of kinship.

Fumikage will never be a hero.

But neither will Shouto.

“Then let us make those choices.”

“I can see the future with this eye. Let me make the plans. I’ll give him his society whether or not he wants it by the end.”

“How much can you see?”

“A lot,” Shouto says tiredly. “Not you and not Izuku. We’re singularities, the three of us. The future is… a suggestion, a gentleman’s agreement between us. It’s always in flux where we’re involved. I’m tracking the remaining possibilities and finding the patterns to try and map it out.”

“So, you know how it will end?”

“No, and that’s what terrifies me.” Shouto smiles. “But we made a promise. Till the very end. No matter what that end looks like. I don’t think anything else matters.”

“Nothing else does,” he agrees. “Can you find him?”

Shouto shakes his head. “There are too many locations and with all three of us operating across Japan, it’s like looking through ink. They’re using something to avoid abyssal detection. I don’t know what it is.”

“We’re left with conventional means then,” Fumikage says. “I will use my connections and direct our purposes to that.”

Fumikage removes one of his short white blades. It is heavy, the knife edge promising to consume all energy and life.

He flips it deftly and presents the weapon handle first to Shouto.

“I can’t take this from you.”

“Consider it a loan. I expect it back.” He bares his teeth, feral and bloodthirsty. “Take it and use it to kill whoever took him.”

Shouto takes the weapon.

An invisible chain settles around him, a promise to a person they both love and devote their entire personage to. It amazes Fumikage that Izuku can bring together two people as broken as they are, can mend their deficiencies and overlook their flaws, and the very idea of him is enough to seal an oath like this.

“To the very end,” Shouto says.
“We three kings,” he agrees.

So long as it is the three of them, Fumikage is willing to accept any outcome.

Perhaps it won’t be pretty and perhaps it won’t be beautiful. Maybe it will end in bloodshed and destruction. None of that matters. Not so long as the three of them are together.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Canada Day to my fellow Canadians and Happy Freedom day to all y'all down south. Anyway, we're back for a special edition before I disappear for a few more weeks.
The Cost of Conviction

Chapter Summary

In which, the Midoriya household reminds people why they're terrifying. Izuku learns a few pertinent lessons, Inko has no fear, and Hisashi follows up on a promise.

Chapter Notes

Well, it's been a while but I'm alive and well.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘The presence of the Vancouver Island Villain Association has been the primary reason Canada and the United States have stayed unified. It can be argued that their formation marked the passing from liminal time following Hero’s death and solidified the nature of the Modern Hero Era. This organisation, since its inception, has possessed the quirk strength equivalent to one-third of the continent. Their might has been a deterrent to the very strong secessionist movement in the American south-east and the interior. Without the VIVA, Quebec would have been able to secede without issue, but the presence of VIVA allies in the region has ensured they stay part of the country. Ironic, is it not, that a villain organisation ensures peace and stability in North America.’

—Excerpt from ‘The Effect of Heroics’ by Saruhiko Ando.

Shouto Todoroki is bored.

That adequately describes his feelings right now. It has been one interrogation after another, officials and police trying to get a modicum of information out of him. Thankfully, he’s Endeavour’s son and there’s a war going on which means no one particularly cares that he killed Moonfish.

Killing the villain hadn’t provided much entertainment. Seeing Fumikage again had been far more entertaining, especially since his power has grown greatly. A part of him had wanted to fight the dragon for the sake of it.

He, alongside his other classmates, are gathered around Bakugou’s bed. Most of their class is in the same section of the hospital, held there for their safety and to keep track of them should another attack occur.

“Don’t be stupid,” Jirou says, glaring at Bakugou. “You can barely move.”

Bakugou snarls, sitting up. Even his anger isn’t enough to cover up the rather obvious pain he feels from whatever section of his ribs is damaged. Shouto could heal him but he doesn’t like Bakugou. It might be petty, but he’d do it if someone called him out on it.

“I’ll be fine.”
“Come on, man, this is ridiculous,” Kirishima says. “How the hell are you even going to find them?”

“Momo left a tracker on me. It’s somewhere in the forest.”

“Okay, sure, but that doesn’t help you. They won’t give it to you.”

“No, but someone in this room is the son of the number two hero.”

Shouto shrugs as all eyes fall on him. “And?”

“You’re going to find the location and then we’re gonna rescue them.”

They argue more, though Shouto doesn’t participate. This is just mindless nonsense that has little to do with him. He’s already made his choice a long time ago.

He does, however, notice Iida watching him. “What?”

Iida squares his shoulders. “I know that look. You plan on doing something stupid and I’m not going to let you do it.”

“I’m not here to ask for your permission,” Shouto says. “I’m going. This is just a courtesy for those of you that want to come.”

The room explodes in hushed conversation, people debating anything and everything. He can already see who isn’t coming—Kaminari who is absolutely devastated by Sero’s death and Aoyama who remembers nearly dying, Sato who has no stake in the people kidnapped and Shoji who is smarter than the rest. The others, though, are a tossup. It could go a dozen different ways and he doesn’t care enough to track the possibilities.

“Do you think they’re gonna show mercy because we’re kids?” Kirishima asks. “Look. This is crazy. This is no joke.”

“I didn’t take you for a coward,” Ashido says. “How long have we known each other? Five years. All that talk about manliness was just that, wasn’t it?”

Kirishima flushes but he stands his ground. “I nearly died. It was game over and there was nothing I could do. Aoyama nearly died in my hands and you think this is about manliness. That only matters if you’re alive.”

“He’d do the same for us,” Bakugou says quietly. “He’d fucking walk right in the middle of a warzone for any of us.”

“You think that argument applies to Midoriya of all people? You think he’s worried about dying?”

“Eijirou,” Shouto warns because that isn’t his secret to spill. And if he thinks he has the right, Shouto can burn away just enough nerves to make his collapse look natural.

Kirishima glares at him but beneath that bravado, Shouto can see his fear. Seeing a thousand different iterations of himself, a thousand different possibilities that all amount to nothing had likely sapped away a lot of his blind confidence.

“Stop fighting,” Iida says. “If you even think about going. I’ll tell the police. I’ll tell Aizawa and make sure we all get thrown in a cell if that means no one does this.”

They glare at each other even as the room blows up again, a thousand accusations being flung
around. Shouto, however, is indifferent. The police? They’re mortals. Nothing more than kindling to his fire. He likes Iida, so he’ll make sure not to hurt him. Maybe a bruise or two, but nothing permanent.

“I’ll fight through the police,” Shouto warns. “Do I look like I care? Do I look like I’m afraid?”

“You look like you’re going to do something that’ll get you killed. At best. At worst, you’re gonna drag people down with you.”

Shouto shrugs. “This is a brave new world. The rules are different.” He gestures to everyone in the room. “You all know the stakes. You all know what happens if you’re too slow or get distracted. I’m going to find him because I made him a promise a long time ago, and I refuse to break it.”

“You think love will keep you safe?”

Shouto glares at him, furious. Love had changed the nature of the eternally unchanging godflame. Love had given Izuku the strength to stand against a being a few steps below god whilst mortal. If Shouto had even a shred less love for the people around him, if Izuku had decided he loved life just a tad bit less, then there would be no earth. This wouldn’t even be a discussion.

Hidden in another realm is a knife gifted to him by Fumikage, a person he has little in common with. A person he’s said maybe two hundred words all told, and never alone and unprompted. That knife had been a gift made from a mutual love for one person. It had been another promise, another oath just as important as any other he has made.

“Love is the single most powerful force in the universe,” he says and means it, and so the laws of the universe rewrite themselves.

They may not notice, they may not even understand, but he’s just seeded a way for people to become greater than they could ever hope to be.

“We’re going,” Ojiro says speaking for the first time.

He looks tired and beaten down, hair unkempt. He lacks any of his usual composure, eyes bloodshot and angry enough to set fire to the world. Shouto approves.

Shinsou, sitting quietly beside Ojiro, nods. “What he said.”

“Why are you guys—”

“We knew him first,” Shinsou says harshly. “We knew him long before you ever saw him during the entrance exam. I am not going to let him suffer like this and do nothing.”

“You might die,” Iida warns, exhausted.

“He’d do the same for us,” Ojiro says. “His biggest dream is to make a hero agency with all of us. If we leave him alone, we may as well spit on that dream.”

Kirishima tenses. “You think that dream will ever exist? You think he’ll be the same person? Because I promise you, he won’t be.”

“What the hell has gotten into you?” Ashido snaps, standing.

“You have no idea what he’s done. None of you sees it. You don’t even realise he's lying to you.” Kirishima shakes his head. “I’m done. You go follow through on this crazy plan.”
“You’re a coward.”

“I’d rather be a coward than dead. And not for him. Never him.”

Shouto watches Kirishima stalk out. The others just watch this in shock. Kirishima and Izuku had always been close, inseparable even. Yes, there were others, but he doubts any of them ever imagined a day where Kirishima would ditch Izuku.

“Well, I guess there’s nothing left to say,” Ojiro says, standing. Shinsou mimics the action.

“Where are you guys going?”

“To train,” Shinsou says. “Our master’s seen a war before. We’ve got however long—”

“Two weeks,” Shouto interjects, knowing that everything will happen then.

“Two weeks to get ready. I’m going to train day in and day out till I’m ready. You should all do the same.”

Shouto inclines his head. “Alright. Two weeks. If any of you change your minds, let me know.”

“This is madness,” Iida says one last time, but even he can tell the argument has been lost.

“This is the new normal.”

He keeps his face blank though he wants to smile. The future will be blood and violence, one challenge after another. They’re going to start a new era and Shouto plans on playing kingmaker.

He’ll make Izuku a king whether he wants the crown or not.

*****

Izuku Midoriya spends his next days in captivity in silence. He doesn’t say a single word to the members of the Vanguard no matter how much they poke and prod at him, Shigaraki especially. He has no interest in giving them any more power over him.

After the fourth day, he stops eating. They don’t care at first, not until three days pass and he hasn’t eaten anything.

It doesn’t bother him much. Food is something he eats mostly for the taste, given that he can eat an entire cow and still have room to spare. It may have something to do with the mutations beneath the skin. All he knows is that it is another way to hold power over them.

They all try to get him to eat, not because they care, but because Tomura has a distinct fear of what will happen if he dies. Dabi threatens him with fire and Izuku shows his burnt face, unafraid. Compress attempts deception whilst Magne uses brute force. Shigaraki threatens him with Mandalay but Izuku simply shrugs, calling his bluff.

When Spinner tries, Izuku bares his teeth and they seem to elongate endlessly as he draws every iota of loathing for the reptile. The darkness deepens and Izuku reminds Shuichi of who truly has power here. They may have lives held over him, but he could consume every iota of joy and hope and light from their souls without blinking.

Push him further.

A sound fills the room, low and soft and unyielding. It makes Shuichi freeze as a primal instinct
against something ancient and unknowable activates. It is the all-consuming anathema of true dark
against anything born of godflame like humans.

And then Izuku lets it fade, smirking at Shuichi. There is fear in his eyes as he backs out the room.

The last person they try is Toga. She slips into the room, smiling and smelling of blood.

“Come on, you need to eat,” Toga says, sitting across from him. He doesn't but they don't know
that.

He watches her indifferently, unblinking.

“For me?”

_Use her_, Mikumo says.

Izuku reaches for the plate.

Toga’s smile is bright and clear as he takes a bite of the bland meal. It could be the most amazing
meal in the world and he would still only taste ash. But she, like the rest, can be moved like chess
pieces. They don’t know they are pieces on the board in the great game Izuku plays against All For
One.

It is the most dangerous lie Izuku has ever constructed because there are lives on the line if he
fails. If he makes the wrong move, it will instantly be checkmate. He is outnumbered and on the
losing end, but that is his strength. The more All For One thinks he has won, the stronger Izuku
will be.

He keeps that at the forefront of his mind when he next meets the villain.

They take him to a different room for the meeting this time.

This one has larger doors and they open pneumatically, one loud thud after another as it unlocks
before swinging open. A tonne of reinforced steel takes a long while to swing open and he hears
the whine of powerful actuators driving the system.

The room is well lit so Izuku can make out All For One immediately. The villain’s back is to Izuku
as he stares at a screen showing strings of numbers and letters that make no sense to Izuku no
matter how hard he tries.

"It is a cypher," All For One says. “It tells me the state of the world as my informants see it.
Canada is in an uproar now that their Hero Conglomerate is defeated. It even looks like the cold
war between the western American states and the central ones might just turn hot because of that
loss. You see, my boy, heroes—or any organisation with quirks—are a guarantee of military
force."

Izuku says nothing in response, trying a dozen different cyphers and still failing to crack the
streaming numbers and letters.

“Quirks have been the main deterrent against invasion for Japan since the Dark Age. The many
Emperors and their Guards. Hawkmoon and her legend. Just like tanks and missiles and even
nuclear weapons in the case of the absolute strongest quirks. I stand above them all with my
strength.” The villain glances over his shoulder. “I hear you’ve taken up silence. Will you attempt
to antagonise me as well?”
“Will you threaten anyone if I do?”

“Perhaps.”

“Give Kouta something to do. He’s eight and he’s stuck in a cell with nothing but his thoughts.”

“Easy enough. Let me show you the laws of power that govern the world. The laws that dictate when nations move against each other and when a single person becomes more powerful than an army. Let me teach you the rules that govern geopolitics. Let me teach you the rules of the Great Game.”

“I’d prefer not to listen to you.”

“I’ll make you a deal,” the villain says, not turning around. “Play this game with me and if I find you worthy, I’ll let Kouta walk free.”

“That’s a shit deal. That gives you all the power.”

“I already have all the power. But this is a chance for you. Play this game and maybe he’ll be able to walk free. Refuse, and I’ll punish him. There are many horrors you can inflict without harming a child. His remaining family, for instance. I’ll make him watch as I kill Mandalay.”

Izuku grits his teeth, fists clenched tight enough to draw blood.

“I hate you.”

“I am a villain, boy. Never forget that. So, shall we play?”

This is what he believes. These are truths he holds close to his being. Learn them and turn them against him, brother. Let him teach you how to destroy him.

“For Kouta.”

All For One turns and the floor beneath them changes. It lights up, making Izuku realise it is a screen. A map of the world, larger than any Izuku has seen in real life, appears. Japan has been enlarged, big enough now that it takes Izuku ten paces to walk from one end to the next. It is large enough that he can clearly make out Mustafu and other small cities in detail.

“The world itself is the map upon which the Great Game is played,” All For One explains, standing beside Izuku.

It takes everything he has not to shiver or give away his nervousness. A part of him knows that his determination is another reaction All For One catalogues, another piece of the puzzle for his manipulations. It doesn’t matter what he does, everything helps All For One in one form or another.

That’s fine. It’s all part of the plan.

“Everyone single person alive plays it, but only a few are important enough to have a piece instead of simply being a region to be influenced.”

The villain walks past Izuku. A wall rises from the floor where the Indian Ocean would be. All For One taps a button and the wall parts, revealing a set of figurines. He removes a few of them, holding them between his fingers.

“Everyone plays the game by different rules. You need to understand everyone’s rules to truly be in
control. This is Nezu,” the villain says, placing a carving of the principal over Mustafu.

His hometown changes colours to a solid blue. He watches as wards in Honshu and Shikoku gain a blue border.

“What does this tell you?”

“I don’t know, that he controls Mustafu?” The villain nods. “Which means he doesn’t control those other regions but he influences them?”

“Good. Nezuu’s rules are simple: never hold power yourself but teach enough people so that they wield it for you. All Might. Endeavour. His cadre of general studies graduates. He holds little power of his own but uses his influence to force Japan into his image. What image, do you suppose, is that?”

There is only one answer and All For One has already given it to him.

“The hero rankings. They have three of the top ten spots.

“In the last thirty years, forty of the top one hundred heroes at any given time have been UA alumni. Nezu turned UA from an acceptable hero institute to one of the three greatest institutes in the world. Odd, isn’t it, that of the other two, one was built in honour of a Great Tyrant and the other to the great Hero who murdered her enemies. What skeletons do you think UA holds?”

Izuku shakes his head. “That isn’t the game we’re playing. Get on with it.”

For some reason, that makes the villain smile cruelly. “Oh, that will be a fun discussion.”

He walks a few steps till he stands over Shikoku.

All For One places a tank on Shikoku and the entire region turns red. Nezu’s blue border remains, but it isn’t anything compared to the vibrant red fill of the military’s power.

“The military is unquestionably the main power there. This is the seat from which they want to create their junta.”

He places a few more tanks here and there, some prefectures gaining a red border but none with the undeniable control of Shikoku. Finally, he places a boat near the coast of Okinawa. That coast light up red.

“The admiralty is based out there, both naval and aerial. They support the idea of a military junta. This is their force disposition.” He places ships and bases on islands around Japan, with some out in the middle of the ocean. “What do you see?”

Izuku follows the lines of power, walking around Japan and the great villain.

“A circle,” he says finally, and then a red ring surrounds Japan.

“Yes,” All For One agrees, “but the real question is whether they look within or look without.”

“I don’t know.”

“Take a guess if you don’t know and try to justify it.”

“They’re looking outward. Sailing and flying are forms of movements. They aren’t tied to the ground like the military.”
“A good guess and it is true. But only if we ignore other forces.”

All For One places a single soldier where Taiwan once was. It is sad and pathetic compared to the other forces.

“‘The remnants.’ Then he places seven figures on China. ‘The Great Ten, now the Great Seven given that I killed three of them.’

Izuku swallows. ‘How powerful were they?’

The villain hums. ‘They made for adequate practice,’” he settles on. ‘You’re wondering if they could have posed a threat to me. Perhaps if all ten fought me at once, then I might have to use my full power to win.’

All For One takes a silver ‘V’ and walks to North America. He places it over Vancouver Island. Instantly, British Columbia, Alberta, Montana and Washington gain a silver fill whilst Saskatchewan and Oregon alongside Idaho gain a silver border.

“My allies in Vancouver Island. By winning against the Hero Conglomerate, they told the governments of America and Canada that they are now an independent state. A nation built by villains for villains. It may not happen immediately, but eventually, those two nations will fracture because of this. Do you understand now why the navy looks inward?”

“They’re a defensive line against the world.”

“Yes. The only thing keeping the Navy tied to Japan are the forces against them. The navy is the first line of defence but there is always a fear that they will mutiny and flee. I know for a fact that they have protocols and infrastructure in place for that eventuality. A paradox, or perhaps an irony. A navy tied to the land yearning only to be free.”

Izuku frowns. The Dark Age and the destruction it had caused had left cities and islands uninhabited. Entirely new archipelagos rose from cataclysmic powers clashing. Border lines had changed with some countries being decimated. It had been a world war where individuals held the power of nations.

“But they could go if they wanted to.”

“And go where? That’s the problem. The Pirate Supernovas during the Dark Age are remembered well by many nations around the world. No one wants another navy fleet of dozens of ships roaming around the world, fighting whatever battles they please, and accountable to no one. Perhaps Australia or some other petty dictator would welcome their power, but it would more likely galvanise a massive coalition to battle them, especially since they have nuclear capabilities.”

“Then why do they want to leave so much? It makes no sense.”

“Because they were the ones who died first during the Dark Ages. It was navy men and women who took the brunt of every engagement. It was the navy that was purged twice. Because of that, they seeded the idea of a military junta running Japan.”

“They knew what they were signing up for.”

All For One shrugs. “And now they’re stuck between a country they can’t trust and a world that will see them burn. Let me show you another power.”

He takes a Chrysanthemum and places it over the Imperial Villa. That region turns white. But only
that region. Others grain splotches of white, but never the definitive fill or border of the military or UA.

“They’re more powerful than that,” Izuku says. “The Royal Guard. They have their own soldiers as well.”

“Ah, but we haven’t entered their rules. Look at how the world changes when we enter the Royal Guard.”

He places a chrysanthemum with a lightning bolt against the Great Ten. Two more Chrysanthemums, one on fire and one with a clock are placed against the silver V. Finally, the last of the guard is placed with the navy.

And just like that, a white circle surrounds Japan. Oddly, though, streaks of black appear in the white circle.

“This is the state of the world right now. Japan is at war, both within and without. To ever hope to win, you need to understand the laws of power. The Imperial Household protects Japan with their Guard from outside invaders. But they also protect Japan from the abyss.”

Izuku falls still, looking up at the great villain. His features are blank but he fears he has already given away too much.

“You know.”

“Of the abyss? Yes. Your father was very informative.” The villain smirks. “I knew about you long before you joined UA. You weren’t important, not even when you suddenly developed a quirk. I’ll admit, it took me a bit to determine if you had adopted One For All but my spy confirmed your relationship with Toshinori.”

“Spy?”

“How else did you think the League would know the layout of the USJ? Did you think we simply prayed to the gods to reveal the location of your camp?”

Izuku rolls his eyes. “Behave yourself,” he snaps. “I take it you won’t tell me your spy. Fine, then where are you on this map?”

The piece All For One uses to represent himself is just a plain wood model, nothing special about it in the slightest.

He places the model right in the centre of Japan.

Shikoku and Hokkaido gain a purple glow immediately. The outline of Japan is coloured purple. A ring larger than the navy and the Imperial household materialises. He sees distant countries gain a purple glow as well, the western provinces of Canada most prominently, alongside Egypt and South Africa. Brazil, Switzerland, Greece, Morocco and Portugal all gain the same purple fill. The countries near them gain purple borders. There are more like Bangladesh and Indonesia and Mexico that all belong to All For One.

Looking at this, Izuku finally understands the scale of power the man possesses. He stares at All For One in horror because that isn’t just influence. Facing the League had been something he expected to do for decades.

The idea that once he is done with the League, he will have to face other organisations around the
world aligned with All For One fills him with dread.

He may very well need to fight entire countries with all their economic and military power. If they refuse every overture of diplomacy, he'll have to compromise or fight a war. If he truly wants to beat All For One and destroy everything he built then...

_They'll call you a Warlord at best_, Mikumo voices his thoughts, terrified as well. _Maybe even a Tyrant._

“I am the Strongest Man alive and I’ve seen two centuries,” All For One says deeply, joyfully. “My influence is further reaching than anyone else. I have waged wars alone and won. I may not be Stormwind or Titan or Hero, but no one has come as close to them as I have.”

The villain circles around the room, around the world, slowly and exuding menace with every step. This is a show of force, nothing more and nothing less.

“My empire is not as far-reaching as Stormwind but I have ruled it longer than she did. I may not be able to withstand a dozen nukes like Titan but no hero will ever come close to killing me. My punches are not as strong as Hero, but I can destroy countries with my strength. Do you understand now why no one has ever beaten me?”

All For One lays a hand on Izuku’s shoulders. Izuku cranes his neck up to meet his gaze, refusing to back down.

“Toshinori did,” Izuku says.

“Even you don’t believe that.”

Izuku bares his teeth. “I believe in him. And when he faces you, I’ll be right there beside him. And we will beat you down. Stormwind and Titan and Hero all died. We’ll add your name to that list.”

All For One watches him, assessing the conviction of his words. Then he nods, smiling. The villain takes a step back

“Yes. Strength of will. You have that in spades. A good successor to a powerful legacy needs it.”

“I’ll never be your successor.”

"I wasn't talking about me. But do you see how you're changing? You associate power with my name.”

“One day, you’ll regret taunting me. Tell me your rules so I can defeat you?”

All For One smiles and removes his piece. A piece representing Kurogiri appears as well as a hand that can only be Tomura. But additional pieces, pieces he is unaware of, appear as well.

“This is my method for power. I hold the power to shatter Japan but I entrust the future to my subordinates. I have learnt that it cannot be by my old and outdated means that change Japan. Someone else must take my lessons and mould them for the future.”

Izuku shakes his head. “Nothing good can come from your lessons. There’s a reason One For All exists and it’s to battle your evil.”

“Is that what you know, dear boy? Can you say that with certainty?”

“Yes.”
The villain shakes his head, disappointed.

“Well, if you believe that, then we have nothing left to say today. Go. I’ll release Kouta in a few days.”

*****

Fumikage Tokoyami finally gives up on his search. There are no leads he can find using purely abyssal means. Which is why he tears through dozens of layers of the abyss to travel the breadth of Japan. He steps out into his room in the Imperial Villa.

It is empty, thankfully enough. He takes a shower and throws on another set of armour, before heading out.

The villa is a hive of activity, people bustling from one location to the next. He doesn’t make it very far before a flash of light heralds Maya in full imperial regalia, white uniform over white armour.

“Done having a tantrum?” she asks immediately. “We need to get to work.”

He nods. “How has the Guard been mobilised?”

“Ra and Itinerant are preparing to stall the VIVA before they get anywhere near Japan. Ryujin and I will be dealing with China when their remaining Great Ten mobilise. Our last two members are going to be wherever they’re needed most.”

“And the Emperor?”

“Unguarded save for me,” Maya says softly. “He’s willing to risk death to ensure Japan’s sovereignty.”

“I never thought the villains were this dangerous.”

“They’re led by the Strongest Man Alive. We underestimated the skills of his right-hand man. Stupid, given that he worked for us before.” Maya shakes her head. “Come on, let’s go. I also need to know if you’re going to run away again.”

He frowns. “I didn’t run away. And I’m ready to fight this war.”

She snorts. “Ready? You’re the furthest thing from ready. Do you know how to spot a sniper? Do you know what an ambush looks like? What do you do when the enemy has the high ground and are laying down suppressive fire? Have you ever taken part in a retreat?”

The answer to every question is no. How could he? He’s trained to be a hero and a bootleg part of it has been facing threats from the abyss.

“Then teach me.”

She nods once.

“I’ll teach you tactics and strategy,” she says. “I’ll show you what a formation looks like. But I won’t let you enter the battlefield.”

“This is my home.”

“And this is the highest level of lethality.” She looks him in the eye. “Have you ever killed
before?”

“What?”

“Have you ever killed a living human untainted by the abyss before?” she repeats, forcefully.

“No.”

“This isn’t some joke. It’s going to be kill or be killed. If you hesitate, you will die. Maybe you’ll be lucky and wind up immortal, but you’ll get other people killed.”

“You think I can’t learn?” he asks stubbornly.

“I’ll show you,” she says.

There is a flash of light and then they’re gone. Travel through her quirk is always odd. He doesn’t become light as she does, but he is still somehow attached to her in a protective field.

They stop suddenly and it takes him a few moments to get his bearings. He almost regrets doing so.

It is blood spilt on the earth and death for miles around and bloated corpses feasted on by carrion. It is the devastation of a ruined base, collapsed walls and raging fires, the controlled anarchy of people trying to restore even a modicum of order as people die in agonising pain, howling in rage against an unfair world.

He feels sick immediately and sways. Only her strong grip keeps him upright.

“This is the meaning of war.” She says it softly, a warning and a grim reminder.

“I’ve fought gods and monsters,” he says weakly, watching someone scream as their friend, maybe their lover, leaves the mortal coil.

“But humans aren’t gods or monsters. Do you understand now? Taking a life isn’t easy, not the first time at least.”

He counts them. One with a blade embedded in her chest. Another missing their head. A third with a bloody throat, glassy eyes staring vacantly to the sky. A fourth that is nothing but burnt bones.

A fifth and a sixth and a dozen and hundred, all dead or dying. They won’t be the last. More and more will suffer in agony long before this war is over.

“Then teach me.” He meets her patient gaze. “Forge me into a weapon.”

If he must stain his hands red to protect Japan, Fumikage will do so gladly.

*****

Izuku is tired and angry and disappointed. They aren’t good emotions, more harmful than useful in most cases. But they are all that he has. The angrier he is, the weaker he appears, the stronger he will be.

He'll play the part of the obedient and helpless prisoner prone to outbursts of anger. He’ll be pliant beneath Toga's perverse touch and utterly indifferent to Shigaraki in favour of his master.

Most importantly, there is one whom he must keep off-balance and questioning.
Spinner must be your target. All For One taught you manipulation through strength. Now do the same to him if you wish to survive.

He’s unrestrained, sitting in a chair. Dabi observes him quietly, one finger always ready to set off the detonators.

A screen has a reporter describing power outages in Shikoku and estimates for recovery. Without context, Izuku has no idea why things are the way they are, especially given that there is a death toll in the bottom right corner. It may be the Great Ten invading or All For One’s allies from Vancouver.

“You know, Shigaraki,” he says to the quiet of the room. “I can understand working with what you’ve got but why the fuck do you have that piece of shit with you.”

He’s looking directly at Spinner who frowns. “What did—”

“Oh, you’re deaf and stupid as well. You couldn’t even fight a fucking rescue hero without losing.”

Toga laughs. “Fun,” she says simply.

Good, Mikumo says, let them think you merely hate him. He’s a piece on the board and you control both sides.

“You’re nothing but a Stain groupie.” He draws every ounce of disgust he feels about this situation and projects it to the lizard. “You’re pathetic and you’ve got nothing going for you. You copy everything—”

“Shut the fuck up,” Spinner interrupts.

“—he does and you don’t know shit about the man. I respected Stain, you know. He was outnumbered when he fought me and he still nearly won. He had a strength of character, of will. The fuck do you have?”

Dabi, the scarred one, holds out a flaming arm to stop Spinner.

“You don’t know shit.”

“I broke your weapon after I fought Muscular. Now that’s a proper fucking villain. And I fucking killed him. You aren’t a threat. I could have taken you on months ago and right now you’re nothing but an irritant. Where’s your conviction, Spinner?”

The villain is shaking with rage and only Dabi’s arm is keeping him from leaping forward. Izuku bares his teeth, taunting him and, for a split second, reminding Spinner of a grin filled with endless teeth and unrelenting malice.

The others don’t see it but Izuku knows Spinner falls still because of his instinctual fear reaction, not because he is afraid of Dabi.

“I dare you to fucking punch me.” Izuku smirks. “Stain would have.”

“Don’t you fucking dare!” Shigaraki roars before Spinner moves. “Don’t you fucking move.”

The threat keeps Spinner in place because even he can see how Toga and Dabi are positioned around him threateningly. They don’t see that they’re isolating him, removing him from the group with their actions.
Spinner, however, is vibrating in rage, but his eyes dart to Toga and Shigaraki, assessing his chances for survival. It’s something he does unconsciously.

*You see his cowardice now. He is not the knight he thinks he is. Push him further.*

Izuku laughs. “Ah, are you scared of Tomura? I can’t even call you an attack dog. You’re nothing but a pet.” He looks to Shigaraki. “Let him. Please, I want to see him fail to fucking do it. And you know what, Muscular punched me and I walked away. I won’t even feel this.”

Tomura meets his gaze then nods to Dabi. The moment that arm is down Spinner is across the room, his hand wrapped around Izuku’s throat and lifting him up.

“I don’t care if Stain liked you,” he snarls. “I’m going to enjoy this.”

Izuku huffs, tired. “Stain wouldn’t have said anything. He’d have just broken my nose.”

*Show them your weakness. Show them the boy beneath the legend.*

The rage, the bluster, all that passion leaves him then. It makes them all pause.

“I just don’t understand you. You respect Stain so much and now you work for the group he hated more than anything else. Stain earned my respect but everything you do just spits on his legacy.”

Izuku looks away and focuses on the bloodstains on the wall.

“Go ahead. Punch me already.” He shakes his head. “I’m tired of breathing the same air as you.”

The grip around his throat tightens. Izuku simply closes his eyes. For a long moment, he wonders if he miscalculated because the pressure only increases. He sees bright spots beneath his eyelids.

Eventually, the grip slackens and he lowers Izuku.

“You’re fucking cra—”

*Now.*

Izuku takes the opportunity and slams his head forward.

His forehead meets the villain’s snout and forces him to stumble back, blood gushing freely. Dabi and Toga are on Izuku in moments. He’s brought down roughly, a needle plunged into his neck.

He feels his limbs go lax. Muscle relaxants, he realises, even as Dabi forces him up and against the wall, brilliant blue flames ready to roast him to a nice crisp.

“How’s a free action,” Izuku says, channelling every ounce of the same menace that All For One exudes. It makes even Shikaragi pause. “I told you Stain would have just broken my nose.”

He slumps forward in the strong grip holding him. There is no anger, no disappointment, only apathy as he looks to Spinner.

“I can say with complete certainty,” he says, meeting Spinner’s eyes, “that you embody everything Stain hated and sought to change.”

“Fuck,” Toga says, “this kid’s hardcore.”

His punishment for that act of defiance comes swiftly.
They make him watch as the bones in Mandalay’s arms are broken, one by one, from the smallest to the largest. He can’t look away, because every time he does, he has the pleasure of hearing Pixie Bob’s screams as she is electrocuted. So, he keeps his eyes wide open and watches Mandalay suffer for his actions.

Her screams never seem to end and they mix with the Vanguard taunting him. All the while, Izuku keeps his teeth gritted so hard that they shatter. And when they grow back in, he breaks them again. Anything, even the slightest distraction, is welcome.

He watches how Spinner smirks at her pain and at his discomfort. When the reptile glances his way, Izuku grins, triggering Spinner’s instinctual flight reaction.

“I wonder how well Yaoyorozu will do without food and water for a few days.”

“You’re all cowards too afraid to hurt me.”

“I told you the name of the game,” Shigaraki says from behind him, four fingers digging painfully into his neck, keeping his gaze on the act of torture.

He watches Yaoyorozu shiver as the temperature plummets. The thin blanket she wraps around herself doesn't help when the temperature drops below freezing. It's only made worse when she receives no water for the entire day.

Deep in his heart, something dark and cruel is borne of seeing this. It is hatred, pure and unrelenting and endless.

When he's finally allowed to look away, every shadow in the room darkens and vibrates with his rage. Glimpses of the monsters hiding in the dark below manifest, a step out of tune with reality. This is a promise of a future to come should he ever forget to restrain himself, a world of sword logic and lines of tribute.

“I hope one day I can forgive you,” Izuku says, eyes endless pits of darkness that kill the light. “I hope one day I can let go of this hate because all I want to do is rip out your hearts. I want to see you all suffer and burn and regret every decision you've made.”

You must be better if you wish to win. They must see a saint.

He meets their eyes one by one, seeing all they will never be: Shigaraki, the prodigal son; Himiko, a lost girl drowning in blood; Compress, the stage man who has become the mask; Dabi, who sets his emotions alight and dances on the ashes; finally, Shuichi, the pretend villain who still has a chance.

“I hope you all live good and happy lives because it means I let go of my hate. I hope you all find some measure of kindness because it means you aren't my enemy.”

He lets the darkness and madness fade.

“My last enemy was Muscular. Remember that. Remember what happened to him. Remember that you’re all too scared to hurt me.”

He turns away from them.

Keep your back straight and your head high. This is your strength. They think you restrained and leashed. Remind them, constantly, that you are chained only because you permit it.
“I’ll promise you this,” Izuku says. “If any of you touch Kouta, then I don’t care. Everyone in this building will die.”

His show of power has made them wary.

Not all of them by any stretch. Himiko seems to find him even more entertaining after that show of force and practically spends her time on his lap. He puts up with it, careful only to lean into her touches when he seems exhausted.

He listens to her as she whispers sweet nothings in his ear, taking note when she reveals innocuous information. He learns that Twice and Magne don’t get along well and that Kurogiri is the one waging the war.

“He’s there and then gone,” Himiko says in his ear, making him shiver. “He’s just so cool. Don’t worry, older men are fun, but I like you the most.”

The closer he is to her, the more helpless he appears, the more willing she is to speak. Izuku knows that Compress spends hours on end away from the rest of the group and that Dabi is restless, prone to starting fights with the staff in the facility. She never says anything about Twice who Izuku saw maybe three times.

That, more than anything else, tells him that there is more than one facility being used. It's a guess, one that might be horribly wrong, but there's no reason for him not to be in this base. This is the safest place for the Vanguard given that All For One is in it.

They let him see Kouta again in a few days. Magne pushes him through the facility. He bares his teeth, hissing like a car, before shrugging off the arm.

Kouta’s room is different. The walls aren’t utilitarian white anymore. Now, there are splashes of colour from a paint set in the corner. Izuku takes note of the television and games console, glad that there is something for the boy to distract himself with.

“I didn’t know you could paint,” Izuku says.

It isn’t a very good painting, but he’s not about to tell Kouta that. At the very least, his childish resilience means he still has a spark of creative ability. So long as that spark remains, Izuku can live happily.

It may be cruel and callous, but seeing Mandalay suffer has put things in perspective. Kouta never chose any of this and was never given the opportunity to say no. Above all others, Izuku needs to make sure Kouta is safe.

He can’t know Mandalay or Ragdoll’s wishes, but if they love Kouta even a tenth as much as he suspects, then he knows they would want him to take care of Kouta first.

Izuku kneels just before Kouta tackles him. He hugs the boy tightly, leaning his chin against Kouta’s head. He says nothing when Kouta cries silently, only shielding him from Magne's view.

“I promised I’d save you,” Izuku whispers soothingly. “Okay. I’m going to get you out.”

“What about Mandalay”—for a moment, Izuku freezes—“and Pixie Bob?”

Izuku rubs Kouta’s back to give his hands something to do.

“First I’ll get you out,” he settles on. “Sometimes, being a hero means you have to win one battle
at a time. And I promise you, as far as I’m concerned, you’re the most important person alive. Everything I do is to keep you safe.”

Kouta pulls back to meet his eyes. They are red rimmed from his crying. “You promise?”

Izuku grins, extending his pinkie. “Tomorrow or a year from now or a century, I promise I’ll do everything I can to keep you safe.”

And so, they seal their promise.

It might mean nothing to Kouta, but for Izuku it is a statement like gravity makes things fall. So long as he lives, he’ll keep Kouta safe for getting him involved in this. Come what may, he’ll fight to the very end to make sure this kid stays safe. It’s the least he can do.

“What do you care so much?”

“I chose to be a hero,” Izuku says. “If I die but you live, then I’ve lived a good life. I’ve lived a life I can be proud of. That’s what it means to be a hero. I’d never hesitate if it meant you lived. I know you don’t want to hear this, but I think you can understand now why your parents sacrificed themselves for strangers they didn’t know.”

“You know me.”

“Even when I didn’t, I still would have done the same. They left you and that’s not fair, but they died as they lived. I don’t know them, but I know that deep in their hearts, they hoped that on the day you needed a hero most, one would show up. Don’t stop being angry and sad. Never stop. Keep that pain and grief close to you. But one day, maybe not this year or next year, you’ll understand why they did what they did.”

Kouta smacks him in the side. Izuku huffs, amused.

“Do you want to hear a story?” he asks instead.

Kouta nods. “Sure.”

“Let me tell you about Hero.”

The boy frowns. “I don’t like heroes.”

“I know, but you’ll like this one. I’m talking about Hero, the one who ushered in a Golden Age. Hero who stands beside Hawkmoon and Graviton Lance and Master Railroad as a legend. Hero who led to a resurgence in southern Africa and ennobled so many others to stand against injustice. That Hero.”

Izuku pokes Kouta in the forehead just for the sake of it. The boy bats his finger aside and for a moment, the sadness following him like a shadow vanishes.

“I know, but you’ll like this one. I’m talking about Hero, the one who ushered in a Golden Age. Hero who stands beside Hawkmoon and Graviton Lance and Master Railroad as a legend. Hero who led to a resurgence in southern Africa and ennobled so many others to stand against injustice. That Hero.”

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And so Izuku does, telling the story of Hero’s Golden Age centuries gone but no less important for what it achieved. Izuku doesn’t hide the gory details. They lived in a different era, one with rules that were harsher.
He speaks for hours and Kouta listens, enraptured.

Finally, he speaks of her last fight.

“They were so glorious that day, Hero and Duchess,” Izuku says. “Each punch shattered the sound barrier. They were so strong that you had to look at how the weather patterns changed just to follow them. You could track their punches by the earthquakes a continent away. In the end, their final blow was like no other. Have you heard of Hero Trench?”

Kouta frowns, but nods. “No way.”

“You can still find Duchess’s armour at the bottom of the trench. But out came Hero, her armour broken but she looked so bright. She raised her fist and roared. I swear, the world roared with her.”

Izuku ruffles Kouta’s hair, grinning.

“One day, you’ll roar and the world will listen. One day we’ll be strong enough that no one can ever hurt us again. Just stay strong.”

You sound like All For One.

For the first time in months, Izuku ignores his brother

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Hisashi Midoriya doesn’t return immediately after sending Fumikage back home. No, there are secrets to be learnt about One for All and the living lightning.

He communes with godlings and allows an alien hive mind to infect him so he may see their memories. The beached whales have a few interesting stories to tell him about Izuku and his journey through the dark.

Somehow, it all ties back to Master Railroad.

Every story he learns takes him back to the man’s train and each journey circles back to it.

The first warp quirk, the World Walker says.

“You think he brought a piece of the void with him and that led to everything else.”

Unknown. The dragons or the elder trees would know.

“And they’re both not options.”

There are other locations he could search for and more entities who would have that knowledge. But they would all try eating Hisashi first before communicating with him. And he’s not ready to do that alone, especially not when he can bother Fumikage or Izuku help.

He sets aside his curiosity and makes a doorway to the real world.

The moment he returns to the real world, his phone blows up with messages. He reads through them carefully, his heart sinking with each word.

“Oh, shit.”

Hisashi searches everyone location he’s ever interacted with All For One or his lackeys. He
searches every base and every meeting point. He uses every line of communication he has and tortures his way through a string of informants.

The destruction and devastation don’t matter to him. He could care less that people are without electricity or that he watches people die to brutal acts of violence on the street. Weapons and drugs flowing freely don’t interest him unless they lead to an informant of importance.

None of them knows where his son is.

“Where is my son?” he asks politely for the third time.

The girl strapped to a plain metal chair across him is terrified. It may have something to do with the pile of corpses behind Hisashi, all members of a League cell he managed to track. They were her friends before he killed them for being useless.

“I don’t know,” she cries.

He considers her. Young, no older than eighteen, but competent if her position in the League network is any indication.

Hisashi presses the button in his hand. The woman spasms, grunting in agony as a few thousand volts of electricity course through her body. He lets go and she slumps forward.

Hisashi sighs when he smells the urine. That will make disposing of her more cumbersome.

“Where is your boss? Tell me.”

“I don’t know,” she moans. “Kurogiri just—”

He electrocutes her once more, letting this one last longer than the last.

“I said your boss,” he snarls once she’s coherent. “Not Kurogiri, your real boss.”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about. Shigaraki is nothing to us.”

“Then tell me where your division commander is.”

She shakes her head. “Vanished. We were all told to break up and hide. No communication between cells. I haven’t spoken to anyone from the League some the war started “

Hisashi stands and approaches her. “Well if you're useless then I may as well get rid of you.”

He places the gun beneath her jaw.

“No, no, no. Please don't.”

Hisashi pulls the trigger. It clicks. Empty.

“Huh, how embarrassing. Well, I suppose you can live.”

Her sobs change in tone, from terror to relief.

“Thank you.”

“You shouldn't thank me,” he says honestly. “A clean death was the nice option.”

Hisashi opens a doorway beneath her to some distant part of the abyss. She screams as she falls.
Without another thought, Hisashi sets off.

He returns home and prepares for his wife’s rage.

He is surprised to find her silent. There is no destruction, no damage wrought to their home or even the neighbourhood.

She’s making a cup of calmly whilst he looks haggard, blood dripping down him and smelling of death.

“Our son was taken,” she says, setting down a cup. “Izuku’s gone and they won’t give me information. I had to open that safety deposit box you left a decade ago. A personal line to the Emperor himself. Imagine that, little old Inko Midoriya speaking to the Emperor and demanding information.”

Hisashi winces. Of course, she would do that.

"He told me they weren't participating until they received a confirmation to enact a kill order on those who kidnapped our son. You know what he said? He said you might be able to get him before they're at war."

Inko adds two spoons of sugar to her coffee.

“Did you find him?” she asks without looking at him, drinking her cup of coffee as though nothing has changed.

Hisashi shakes his head. “I can’t track him. Everything I have isn’t working.”

She takes a sip of her coffee. She hums in consideration before adding another spoon of sugar.

“I know. That’s why I told him to go ahead with that kill order. I knew you would fail him again. Who took our son?”

He winces, ashamed and guilty.

“His name is All For One and he’s the Strongest Man Alive. There’s no one alive who can match him.”

“This is the same villain you worked with.”

It is a statement, not a question. She knows who he once was, knows the lies he’s told and the powers he’s bartered with. A favour here, an errand there. Easy enough to keep All for One away from his family.

“Yes.”

His wife stands and stalks towards him. She grips his collar and pulls him forward. Her eyes burn with rage. There is nothing calm or dignified. No, this is a mother’s pain as its worst.

“I want UA to burn to the ground until there isn’t even ash left. I want these villains to suffer. I want their heads. I want everyone they love to die. I want them to know my pain. Do you understand?”

Hisashi nods. “I do.”

“Get out. Don’t return without my son.” She touches the gun beneath his coat. “If he doesn’t come
back, you’re the final target on my list.”

“That’s… fair.”

“If you can’t bring him back, I’ll call forth every god and demon I know. I’ll see this world die if it means he comes back. Don’t fail me again.”

She lets go and turns away. The dismissal hurts but it’s nothing he doesn’t deserve. He had made a promise to keep his son safe and that’s failed so spectacularly.

Hisashi leaves through a doorway and heads towards one of his safe houses in Korea. He picks out the most well-armoured suit in his collection and chooses a higher calibre gun. When that’s done, when he’s truly ready for war, he heads to fulfil a promise.

He might not be able to keep his son safe, but there’s one person he holds responsible. There is one person he warned.

Aizawa is in UA's teacher’s lounge, bent over and sifting through files. The man looks beaten down and broken, too busy to mourn but half a step from breaking.

Hisashi coughs, drawing his attention.

“You,” Aizawa growls, standing to his full height.

“Hello, boy.”

He paces the length of the room calmly.

This room is where they laugh and joke and relax whilst every crime against his son occurred. There is Nezu's favourite spot in the sun by the chair. Here is Midnight’s desk, clean and cluttered only by numerous pictures.

“I warned you once that I would hold you accountable for my son.”

Hisashi turns, letting the gun beneath his jacket peak out. Aizawa tenses, ready for battle.

“You don’t want to do this,” Aizawa says, his capture equipment already in hand. “You can’t even use your quirk.”

Hisashi shakes his head. Yes, his ability to warp may be suppressed. But long before he could, he had another ability.

He inhales sharply and in the next moment, a stream of green fire escapes his lips.

It doesn’t matter if Aizawa can neutralise his other quirk because it needs line-of-sight to work. And the wall of green flames breaks that.

The moment the full power of his quirk returns, the World Walker takes control and assesses their chances for victory: *enclosed space limits target's agility; dual nature of Operator’s quirk neutralised target’s greatest strength; in possession of target’s movement patterns from twelve separate world’s with an 82% or higher similarity.*

The World Walker opens a doorway and finds a creature longing for slivers of true life. In exchange for protection, the World Walker promises to tithe a human life. The creature agrees and the contract between them is sealed in bone and crystal.
This occurs in less than a second.

By then, Aizawa has already leapt over his desk and is in front of the World Walker. The hero punches cleanly, a blow that would destroy the old and frail body of the Operator.

A shimmering wall intercepts the blow. It brightens and then the force of Aizawa’s blow is amplified a dozen times over before being reversed.

The hero grunts in agony as his arm explodes from the sudden internal forces. Every bone shatters with sickening crunches even as blood vessels burst and his skin rips open in deep lines.

The World Walker retrieves the gun and takes aim. Before it can fire, Aizawa's capture equipment snakes out. The hero is fighting against the agony of his injury. Commendable.

The threads force the gun down and wrap the World Walker's arm to his waist.

Nothing to worry over. His gun is aimed to the ground so he simply fires and opens a doorway at the same time.

Then he opens another right behind Aizawa.

The teacher is too slow and takes the bullet right to the knee. Not that he’d be able to react to a bullet. Maybe if he didn’t have a ruptured arm, he might have managed something.

Aizawa topples over, his sound of pain unrestrained and horrifying.

He isn’t foolish enough to think Aizawa doesn’t have a secret ace. So, he repeats his earlier trick, firing from safety.

**Bang.**

**Bang.**

**Bang.**

Three bullets, one for each working limb. A hero can survive a lot, Aizawa more than most, but even he can’t battle with each limb incapacitated.

The battle is over. In truth, this was simply a formality before the execution. Had he wanted to do this efficiently, he would have warped an abyssal creature to consume the teacher before setting off an explosive.

He ambles over to Aizawa, dragging a chair along with him. He turns it and takes a seat beside the fallen hero. He’s breathing heavily but he’s on the far side of fifty and not that fit.

“I told you once that I would burn down everything you love if my son was hurt,” Hisashi says raggedly. “Where is he? At home, safe? At a camp that was supposed to be protected? No. Instead, he’s in the hands of a villain so powerful that comparisons are useless.”

“You're a monster,” Aizawa spits out.

“Yes. How did you know?” He cocks his head, curious, then realises it doesn’t matter. “I'm going to kill you then I'll kill one of your friends. I won't destroy UA today. No, once this war is done, every secret and lie will come to light. I'll let Japan burn it down for me.”

Hisashi kneels beside Aizawa and grips him by the throat, clenching tightly.
“I told you not to fuck with me, boy.”

“You’re all monsters. All of you.”

“Your mistake was thinking you were powerful. You aren’t even a piece on the board. You made enemies of the wrong people.”

Hisashi inhales once more and feels the spark of heat ignite in his chest. Gently, he exhales the green flames. They burn the man’s face, chewing through skin and fat and muscle. In the process, he tithes this death to the creature that granted him protection. The screams give him just the slightest bit of joy but then they end, and he’s left with the sizzle and snap of burning fat.

And when he is done, Hisashi stands. The fire suppression system activates and water pours down. Being wet just pisses him off. He takes a massive breath, the largest of the lot. And then he breathes superheated flames that vaporise the water.

He sets the room alight with his quirk, fuelled by his rage and love for his son.

“I know he was your teacher,” Hisashi says in the middle of a burning building, “but they’re my enemy now. One day, I hope you understand why I did this, son, even if you don’t forgive me.”

Without another word, he leaves.

Chapter End Notes

Yup, he's dead dead. Hisashi has no chill.

Let me know if y'all enjoyed this as much as I enjoyed writing it. Everyone's plans are coming to a head. In 2 chapters, the fighting picks up again and it will be glorious.
Chapter Summary

In which Izuku sets his plan in motion.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to my Discord server for not reminding me today was a Thursday. If you’d also like to forget to remind me to post updates you can join at: https://discord.gg/4YvCTYR

I’ve also released IHI Threat Assessment: Hero for those of you a bit curious about Hero and her history.

‘Never fall into the trap of fighting on the enemy’s terms. If the enemy can fly, clip their wings. If they have the high ground, destroy the mountain and send them crashing down. If they have artillery, stand next to them so that their only choice is to perish as well. If they have armour, impede their mobility. And if they are smarter than you, more skilled and more cunning, if they move you like a piece on a shogi board whose rules you don’t know, then flip the board over and change the game.’

—Excerpt from the recovered ‘Tenets of Combat’ by the late Shouta Aizawa, the Eraserhead.

Izuku stands tall when he meets All For One the next day.

The room is the one in which the villain showed him the laws of power, but It is different. There is a concrete table and two benches across from one another. All For One sits on one of the benches, setting up a chess set.

There are things he has seen that have given him pause but perhaps the sight of the Strongest Man Alive in a dark suit preparing for a game of chess ranks amongst the strangest.

All For One clicks his fingers, not looking up from his methodical manner of adding pawns to the chess set. Instantly, the screens covering every inch of the room come to life. They give the impression of a sunny park in the height of summer and, if he didn’t know better, he would swear he can smell fresh flowers.

“When will you let Kouta go?”

“In two days.” All For One gestures to the other bench. “Seat yourself.”

Izuku does so. He has no gambit he is willing to risk Kouta for. And, he doesn’t doubt All For One will see through his plans instantly if he so much as attempts to implement them a moment too early.


“How do I know you’ll keep your word?”

The villain brushes imaginary dust off the lapel of his immaculate suit. Izuku, dressed in plain grey shirt and sweatpants doesn’t look anywhere near as dignified.

“You wouldn’t listen to me if I was anything less than totally honest. You're a consummate liar based on all the reports I’ve read. Given that you lied your way out of questioning after the stadium attack, I don't doubt you would immediately detect a lie. So, do you believe I will let him go in two days? Do you believe a villain can be honourable?”

Izuku clicks his teeth together, frustrated. There’s no winning with those questions. But one answer leads to Kouta going free, even if it hurts to consider.

“Yes.”

The villain nods and gestures for Izuku to play.

This isn’t a game he knows. Cards and games of chance he knows, not this static game of strategy.

“I don’t know the rules,” he says after moving the pawn.

“Then consider this a practice round where I will teach you the basic moves. I will show you the principle movements of each piece. After I place you in checkmate, we will start again.”

Izuku takes that challenge to heart. The knight, he soon learns, is his favourite piece because it can reach any spot given time. It may not be the castle that can traverse the length of the board in one go or the bishop or even the Queen which has too much power for his liking, but something about that agility speaks to him.

After the villain makes exactly nine moves, he says, “checkmate.”

Izuku looks at the board every direction he can before accepting that yes, he has lost this battle. It doesn’t matter. Losing until the very end is his goal. He can’t lose sight of that.

“I dislike chess analogies,” All For One says as he resets the board. “Unfortunately, everyone makes use of them.”

“Why? Not enough pieces for your liking?”

All For One chuckles. “No. It simply desensitises you to the value of your subordinates. A pawn is of little value. Associate a person with that, and they have just as little value. It becomes easy to throw them away for a tiny fraction of power.”

“I don’t believe you’re that benevolent. Not for a single second.”

Izuku plays first when All for one doesn’t answer. Once more, he slides a pawn forward, this time two steps instead of one.

“Then let’s consider it pragmatically.” The villain moves his knight first. “If you consider someone a chess piece, then you fall into the belief that they can only move in certain ways. A pawn moves one step at a time and a Queen wherever it pleases. That is a lie. Humans aren't two-dimensional. Everyone, from the most pathetic hero to the greatest villains have reasons for what they do. And though we may disagree and find those reasons abhorrent, they are still reasons.”

All for One takes Izuku’s knight with a pawn. “Humans can think and make choices. Chess pieces
“Then why chess?”

“I’ve been through enough for a man as old as me, it’s almost a rite of passage.”

Izuku frowns, looking at the pieces on the board. Then he sighs, knocking his king over.

“There were at least two paths to victory,” the villain says.

“No there weren’t,” Izuku snaps back. “You controlled both sides from the very beginning. The only difference was how long it took for me to lose.”

“Sometimes, you must lose to win,” the villain says.

“What?” Izuku asks, forcing his body to stay loose and relaxed.

All For One huffs in amusement. “Lose until you’re stronger or smarter, and then, when your opponent thinks you’re beaten, that is when you show your strength.”

It feels like everything is crashing down. Every plan and thought suddenly smoke and mirrors, cheap parlour tricks against one who knows made the tricks.

Then, to his relief, All For One says, “It doesn’t work well with games like chess. Your pieces are finite, your moves mathematically determined. I think you would much prefer a game like poker. Toshinori did the same when we fought. I thought him dead, and he retaliated in that moment.”

The corner of his mouth twitches unbidden. “One more round.”

They play another around. Izuku loses again this time, but he sees it through to the end. They play another and then another and another until the games last more than twelve moves.

“Was Stormwind a villain?”

“Yes,” Izuku answers automatically.

“To the people of Europe, she is a hero and a revolutionary scorned by a corrupt UN.”

“Yeah, and you’re not particularly revolting until you let hostages be tortured. I don’t care about the Warlords she defeated. I don’t care if she unified Europe and liberated it. She killed for the sake of it. The ends don’t justify the means. If your means are unjust, then the ends are wrong as well.”

“Would you tell that to all the people who had access to water or electricity because of her?”

“Yes.” He meets All For One’s pitiless gaze. “She’s called a Great Tyrant for a reason. Not a saint or martyr. A Tyrant with all that entails. She killed and sacrificed the masses for her ambitions whilst those she cared for were protected. It wasn’t her peers who died but the faceless masses.”

“Let me give you a truth, young Izuku. When it comes to those you love, do not make the mistake of sacrificing them. If your strength comes from that, then one day you’ll have no one left. If you must choose between those you know and the faceless masses, then always choose to protect those you love.”

The villain says it quietly, completely ignoring the game of chess. Izuku wonders if he can even see him, or if the villain sees something in the past.
“You don’t know the meaning of love. You’re not compassionate or benevolent. You’re a monster with fake rules that you use to justify your cruelty.”

The villain frowns and Izuku feels a smidge of his oppressive power.

“My rules are anything but fake. Perhaps I am not compassionate or benevolent, but I know myself. And when you know yourself, you can create constructs of ethics to abide by.”

“Stop trying to act like you care.”

“What is worse: to not care but live life ethically, or to care but commit amoral actions?”

“That’s a stupid question. It’s too simple.”

“When we first spoke, you would have jumped at the latter. It is good to see you’ve grown. Here is a truth—”

“I’m tired of your truths,” he snaps, interrupting the great villain. All For One waits patiently for Izuku to explain, always waiting patiently to tear apart his logic. “You twist everything I say or think. And you try and justify it because you’re teaching me.”

“I told you once that I will always be honest with you. I am brutal, cruel, and conniving. I make choices that would make you sick to the core. But I will never lie to you. I know what I am. Most importantly, I know what you are. And you, ultimately, are a great successor.”

“Bullshit. I’d rather die than be a villain.”

“Yes, you would. But I never spoke of being a villain. You wish to change society in your image. You wish to make it better. For anyone else, I would call it a fool’s dream. But you are powerful. Driven. Moral and just. Most importantly, you are both intelligent and charismatic.”

“Flattery won’t get you anywhere.”

“A simple observation. What would you do if I were to tell you that for over three decades UA has been running an institution designed specifically to hide their problems and have done so by manipulating the law and grieving parents?”

“I’d call you a liar,” he says shakily.

“What if I was to tell you that they specifically place UA students who have experienced psychotic breaks and are a danger to UA’s public image?”

“They’re there to protect them.”

“And what if I were to tell you that your classmates Hagakure, Kouda and Mineta were placed there after USJ?”

He swallows. All For One waits patiently for him to speak. “I’d ask how you know.”

“Because of my spy in UA. You were, at one time, shortlisted to be instituted there. The only reason you weren't is that your father is very well connected.”

“The crown.”

“And to me.” Izuku freezes. “We are not allied any longer if that is your concern. He is a dangerous man, your father. He balanced me against the Emperor. Ensured we remain neutral.”
“My father’s a good man.”

“Can you say that with full certainty? Forgive me, that wasn’t the main point of this discussion. Your father is a simple man who loves his family, but he knows what this world truly is. Now, knowing that UA has done what it has, would you choose to ignore it?”

Izuku closes his eyes. “You know I can’t.”

“I do. You see something wrong in society and wish to fix it. That is why the board of governors is changing the exam structure of UA next year. All because of one petition you started.”

“I hate you.”

All For One shrugs. “Hate is an honest emotion. Your principal runs the institute. Based on recent information, Aizawa is aware of the institute.” He doesn’t let the horror show, doesn’t let a single iota of disgust shine through at the villain’s words. “Yes, the same man who teaches through lies and wrongly accused your mother of abuse. The same principal that has Snipe as a pet assassin. Both claim to care for you. So again, what is worse: to not care but live life ethically, or to care but commit amoral actions?”

He doesn’t answer. They both know what he thinks.

He’s tired from speaking to AFO, tired of the games and deceptions and manipulations. But he knows that if he even lets up for a second then everything will come crashing down. The man has centuries of experience over him and the greatest weapon a villain has ever used against him: honesty.

Toga and Spinner are his watchers for the day. The latter being here isn’t a surprise. It may be a punishment or it may be some weird manipulation, but more often than not Spinner has been with him.

He offers her a weak smile which she returns earnestly, patting him on the cheeks. He leans into it in a moment of weakness. He doesn’t have to fake it. All For One has taught him the ways you could twist earnestness to manipulate someone. It is a method of power just like martial strength or business acumen.

Perhaps the most powerful.

“I don’t hate you,” Izuku says softly, looking at Shuichi.

Spinner narrows his eyes, claws tensing towards a knife on his side. Izuku smiles softly, and though Spinner tenses in fear, it isn’t the smile designed to activate his dormant fear responses. No, it’s just a normal human smile.

“I just don’t understand you. You’re a lot stronger than I give you credit for. Maybe you’re not as strong as Stain now but the next generation is always greater than the last. Their ceiling is our floor. After all, didn’t you fight off three of the Pussy Cats at once? You didn’t win, but sometimes, holding out as long as you can is more than enough.”

Spinner looks to him warily, unconsciously touching his broken snout. But he doesn’t say anything. Sometimes silence is a strength. This time it is not.

“All creatures seek immortality,” Izuku says quietly. “Do you know who said that?”

Toga laughs. “Stain. You know he did. He punched you right after that.”
Izuku tilts his head in acknowledgement. “Yeah, he did. He broke one of the bones around my eye. Not fun. But he was quoting Saruhiko Ando’s ‘The Effect of Heroics’ which is all well and good but he kinda just cherry-picked what he liked from it.”

“You need to shut up,” Spinner warns.

Izuku snorts. “We all do the same. Do you know what Ando’s last words were?” Izuku smiles benevolently, a teacher guiding a student. “So long as we choose it, we will not go quietly into the dark night.” I prefer Ando much more than Dylan Salvatore because he’s infinitely more optimistic.”

“You’re just making shit up.”

*And you just lost this round*, Izuku thinks.

“Chizome Akaguro might have been one of the great philosophers of this era if he hadn’t found his true calling.”

“Who the fuck is that?”

“You don’t even know Stain’s name,” Izuku says sadly.

He watches Spinner clench his fists in rage, practically vibrating with his anger.

“Toga,” Izuku says instead.

“Call me Himiko.”

“Alright, Himiko. Has Spinner ever killed anyone before?”

The man in question glares at him. “Shut up.”

“I don’t think so,” Himiko says cheerfully, twirling around the reptile. “Have you ever killed anyone before?”

“Yes,” he says, a bit too quickly.

“Hm, you didn’t kill Tiger or Pixie Bob,” Himiko says, leaning closer to Spinner.

“Those were fair targets,” Izuku says, shoving his revulsion away. “Any other villain would have.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“I just wanted to confirm something,” Izuku answers. “You see, you’re not much of a villain. A real villain would have killed either of them. That shows a lack of killer instinct. Or inexperience.”

Himiko bumps her shoulder against Spinner’s side, laying a hand on his forearm. And though Spinner stays still, Izuku can see how his face flushes beneath the scales.

"You ever have a girlfriend before? Or do anything with a girl.”

“Don’t tease him,” Izuku says. “You know, they don’t really bother with villains like you. I bet in their databases you’re just a vigilante with a bad rep. What’d you get your rating for, anyway?”

“That has nothing to do with you.”
“Considering that you and yours kidnapped me, I think I’m allowed to ask a few questions. I’ll take a guess: robbery gone wrong and you wound up injuring someone.”

“Shut up.”

“No, no, no, that seems too villainous for you. Tell me, were you trying to protect someone?”

“Shut up.”

Izuku barks a laugh, condescending and cruel. “You’re even more harmless than I thought. How long were you a vigilante before you heard Stain’s words?”

“Shut the fuck up right now.”

*Push him and don’t stop, Mikumo advises. This is the moment of your victory.*

“How many people did you save? If we went by the number of people killed, you’re the only person in this room who would be a hero.”

That sets Himiko off. She laughs hard and loud, eventually draping herself over Izuku. “Oh, you’re just too much fun.”

“They say the line between hero and villain is just one bad day. I think the line for you is having someone giving you a chance.”

With Himiko focused on Spinner, she doesn't see the smile he gives Shuichi. It is an earnest smile, peaceable and kind and forgiving.

It is a smile that offers peace without question, reconciliation without cost. It is a smile that accepts all the Shuichi will never be, one that is willing to care for the person he could be if he makes a different choice.

She doesn't see how that smile pierces Shuichi’s defences and leaves him unbalanced, eyes wide and fingers twitching. She doesn’t see how, in the span of a second, every interaction they’ve had is recontextualised.

Himiko doesn’t see the doubts and worries and uncertainty Shuichi suddenly faces. No, she completely misses when the tables turn. For the first time, Izuku has an ally, even if Shuichi doesn’t know it yet.

When she turns her attention to Izuku, that secret smile is gone. All that remains is the tired and exhausted boy.

All that remains is Izuku, not a hero or a revolutionary, just a boy barely treading water. A boy Spinner attacked and kidnapped for no reason.

Everything he does is a manipulation, a way to elicit the reactions he needs. But, none of it is a lie. And though it may be how All For One behaves, it is still a powerful weapon to have.

So, he attacks one last time and gives them a truth.

“I miss my mother,” he whispers as any tired and broken boy would whisper.

*****

Inko Midoriya sits in her lounge watching the news. Or, more accurately, watching a dozen news
feeds at once for updates. There is one piece of information in specific she is hoping for.

//Great mother, shadowking sire, let us find him as a sign of goodwill/

That would be the massive spider perched in the corner, each twitching leg flitting between a
dozen higher dimensions. Beady eyes that tell a tale of genocide watch her and she can see the
glistening fangs, each longer than her arm.

She’s getting sick and tired of them.

“Do me a favour and get out of my house already,” she says.

//A favour is a bargain owed, great mother. We seek peace between spiderkin and shadowking. We
will come to collect on this favour and offer peace one last time/

It fades between realms before she can reply. At least now she doesn’t have to deal with it or any of
the other spiders—normal, terrestrial spiders linked to a greater hive mind—lurking in her home.

Something on a news feed catches her attention and she flicks to it. The headline and the report
within bring a smile to her face.

Inko sends her husband a simple message. *Come*, it reads.

It takes a few minutes before a doorway forms in the middle of their lounge. She wonders how he’s
never managed to accidentally cut someone in half. But only for a moment.

“Aizawa is dead,” she says the moment he appears.

There are splatters of blood on his jacket and he looks tired, worn by the war. She feels no
sympathy. Everyone feels that way.

“Yes.”

Inko nods. “He’ll hate us both.”

Hisashi shrugs. “He’ll be here to hate us. I’m sorry for all the pain I’ve caused you.”

“I’m not going to forgive you. They say someone used a fuel-air explosive.”

“I’ve had experience covering my tracks before. I’m not an amateur. There’s no evidence of me
being there.”

“Good. So long as he doesn’t find out.”

“He’ll figure it out eventually. He’s a smart kid. Even if he doesn’t piece it together, I won’t be
able to lie to him if he asks?”

She narrows her eyes. “You managed to lie to us both for years.”

“I’m the same man you once loved.”

*I still do*, she thinks bitterly.

“You’re not the same man. No one stays the same forever. Get back to work, Hisashi.”

He bows his head and leaves through another portal. She pushes down her regret at the set of his
shoulders, tense and nervous and filled with the same sort of grief she feels. Yes, she is taking advantage of him mercilessly and cruelly, but this is no time for sympathy or compassion. All she wants is her son back and it doesn’t matter how much blood must be spilt in the process.

If Izuku never speaks to her again, that's fine. So long as he's safe and whole and healthy, she's willing to accept his hate.

She leaves home, not trying very hard to hide her identity. All things considered, Mustafu hasn’t been the target of any attacks. She also knows Hisashi has security watching over her. It’s cloying knowing that someone is always shadowing her, but the love they shared has become this suffocating monster fed on blood and death.

There are more than a few stores that are still open, their safety kept by packs of vigilantes. On the way over, she sees someone in a dark hoodie spray painting a lightning bolt on the side of the building.

She ignores it and enters the store. There are strict limits placed on the number of goods that can be bought, and from the way someone gets forcefully evicted for trying to bribe his way with hard currency chits, they have no interest in taking bribes.

She pays for her groceries quietly, not putting up a fuss at the outrageous prices. Her husband is useful in some regards. She walks out, basket in hand, and heads home.

She doesn’t get very far.

“How does it feel having a villain for a son?”

Inko slows to a stop, tilting her head to look at the reporter. She hadn’t noticed the man, too busy minding her own business. He’s got that smug look all reporters from trashy online outlets have, too smarmy to have manners or anything approaching decency. Not anything like the reporter her son met in Hokkaido.

“Be very careful of your next words,” she warns, polite as a silk garrotte.

“You heard my question.”

It takes all she has not to crush the man with her power.

“I heard you milking the suffering of innocent students and good heroes simply for better ratings. I heard a man hiding behind a camera and ‘free speech’ and ‘journalistic integrity’ when all you are is a leech. You feed off pain and add some glitter to it. What, is this going to go into your Top Ten Reasons my son is a villain article? I can see from how you’ve paled that you haven’t had a creative thought your entire life.”

She gives him a fake smile. “You want to do this? When was the last time you helped someone? When was the last time you volunteered anywhere? When was the last time you did more than a boy of fifteen? Never? I thought so.”

The man backpedals, flushing and shamed.

“Where do you think you’re going?” she asks fiercely. “You started this. You’re going to see it through. Let me tell you about my son.”

*****
Shuichi Iguchi, the vigilante-turned-villain, finds himself guarding Izuku Midoriya more and more now. He thinks it may be a punishment for having his nose broken by the kid because Shigaraki is just a spiteful bastard sometimes.

When he isn’t doing that, he’s in the simple room assigned to him away from the other members of the Vanguard. There is a private network that he can access. Given that he’s got almost nothing else to do, he finds himself reading. The words of the great philosophers of the hero eras are at his disposal. He learns more of Hinata Ononoki and Dylan Salvatore, Saruhiko Ando and Andile Sithole. He reads their ideas without the bias of someone else, without Stain’s personal twist or even Izuku Midoriya’s scathing objections.

He regrets it almost immediately because, in truth, he’s been quoting Stain who has been quoting other people. Without context, he’s just been saying empty words without thought.

_Ignorance is bliss_, he thinks, before heading over to his guard shift for the day.

It is him, Compress and Shigaraki this time, much to his surprise. The last time Shigaraki and their captive spoke had been filled with vitriol, mutual disdain and condescension. It had, at that time, reinforced who was really in control between the two of them.

Nothing of interest happens for most of their shift except Izuku—*when did I start calling him that*—baring his teeth occasionally. Each time he does, Shuichi’s heart rate shoots up and it takes everything he has to stay calm and not bolt.

At some point, the screen comes to life, showing a woman who looks with green hair speaking to another man. The man throws accusations at the woman about birthing a villain, much to Spinner’s surprise.

“They already think you’re a villain,” Shigaraki, his nominal leader, says ecstatically.

Shuichi watches the mother of the boy they captured speak. Her words are anger and brimstone, fierce in a way that terrifies Shuichi. She’s less a mother and more a shark smelling blood.

“They want to invalidate me,” the boy says. “In the same way I invalidated Stain’s ideals, they’re looking to tarnish me.

“This is the society you fight for.”

Izuku shakes his head. “No, it’s the society I want to change for the better. I want to make a society where you aren’t called a villain for being kidnapped. I want to create a society where a little girl isn’t treated like a villain for a bad quirk activation.”

And isn’t that what Stain fought for? Isn’t that why Shuichi joined the League? At the time, they had seemed like the only people willing to fight everything he hated about Japan, about the world. Now, he’s not so sure.

_Maybe, Stain was right about him._

He lets no one see his moment of hesitation.

Yet, somehow, the boy’s green eyes seem to know. The corner of his lips quirks up as though he knows everything Shuichi thinks.

“I believe we can all be better,” the boy says. “I believe that none of you are products of your upbringing or environment. No one is inherently good or evil. No one is born to be a hero. We just
choose who we want to be.”

“Society’s given us no choice,” Compress says for the first time. “This is a popularity contest to them, a game show with lives on the line.”

“That’s a lie,” Izuku says, looking right at Spinner. “You’re afraid of the consequences. You made the choice to attack a camp full of children. You started a war against Japan. And now you’re afraid of the consequences, claiming you were forced to do it. Don’t be a fucking coward. Admit what you’ve done.”

“We struck back,” Shigaraki says. “We showed them how weak heroes really are. We showed them that their saviours are nothing more than children playing the biggest game of cops and robbers.”

“And that makes you strong?” Izuku asks. “You attacked kids and now you’re hiding behind the real villain running the League.”

The rage comes instantly. “Say that again,” Shigaraki says slowly.

Izuku shrugs. “You heard me. What are you going to do? Hurt me? Hurt someone else? What happens if I snap and decide that seeing your bloody corpse is worth it?”

He remembers how easily the boy had broken his weapon and nose. Shuichi hadn’t even been worth more than a split second of concentration. Most of all, he’s seen the pictures of Muscular’s corpse. Shuichi hadn’t been able to eat anything that day.

The boy grins. “I killed Muscular when there was no reason to do so. Does that make me a villain? Maybe it does, but I never wanted to kill him. Still, I made that choice. The logic was simple: eliminate him before he could go on to kill me, to kill Kouta, and kill my friends. But listen here, he made the choice to go after a little boy. He made every choice up until then. He wasn’t forced to do it. He wasn’t forced to kill the Water Hoses. No one can force you to do anything. We can lie that we had no choice, but ultimately we just tell that to ourselves in fear of the consequences.”

“Have you ever considered public speaking?” Compress asks, equal parts genuine and condescending.

Izuku sets cruel eyes on Spinner. There is darkness in those eyes, ancient and fundamental, the sort that consumes vacuum and stars. That darkness is why they have him chained through hostages.

*How does no one else see it?*

"Why, our dear Shuichi has never killed anyone. He made that choice consciously. I killed someone with my quirk. That makes me a villain, some say. Doesn't that make him a hero by that very definition? Doesn't that mean he's chosen to be a hero."

“Fuck off,” Shuichi says, tense.

Suddenly, it feels like there are two enemies in the room with him from the accusation. Compress who tips his hat, amused, and Shigaraki who observes Spinner with something malicious.

It’s a standoff, one that Spinner wants no part in. Maybe he’s reading the situation wrong. Maybe Compress is just entertained by the show and wants to see Spinner lose his cool. Maybe Shigaraki wants to release his anger and Shuichi is a convenient target.

A part of him, a very large part, doubts any of that is true.
“You see the giant scar I have on my face?” Izuku asks to fill the silence. “My childhood friend did that to me. I still forgave him. Do you want to know why?”

Neither Compress nor Shigaraki turns their attention back to Izuku, focused more on Spinner. He keeps his body perfectly calm, no hint of fear or aggression in his powerful frame. No reason to incite violence.

“Because he chose to do better. I’m willing to forgive a lot of things. I’m certainly willing to give anyone a second chance. It would be hypocritical of me not to.”

*****

Toshinori Yagi hates war.

He can say, with complete honesty, that there is never any reason for war. There is no justification for the piles of corpses left behind by Kurogiri’s rampage across the country, blood on the sand and grief in the air.

He listens blandly to a report, more focused on the fact that Aizawa is dead. Aizawa, a fellow teacher and someone he respects is gone, killed in an attack by Kurogiri. An explosive device matching the same signature the villain used to kill Naomasa.

The rage in his heart burns and threatens to consume him. He’s tempted to go on a quest for revenge and see every single villain pay for this. And yet, he knows that if he does so, he’ll look in the mirror and see All For One. When he stands on a mountain of rubble and death, what difference will there be between the two?

Instead, he chooses to be productive with his time. He helps where he can though every time he does, there’s someone there to remind him of the conditions of Imperial support. He stays away from any location that could possibly turn violent.

Today, two weeks into the war, he decides it is time to deal with something from his past.

The agency is one he has never visited before. He’s kept track of it but he’s never felt the right to enter. He still doesn’t feel like he has the right and maybe he never will.

Inside, he finds a hero waiting for him.

“Hello, Nighteye.”

His former sidekick, his former friend and student, is tense. He can understand given that they haven’t spoken to each other in years, that silence broken only once when he took Izuku as a successor. That argument had soured whatever goodwill there was between them.

“All Might. What do you want?”

They don’t use their names with each other. This is professional, not personal, and that is what makes Toshinori realise he messed up.

“I came to speak to you.”

“There’s nothing to say. You told me exactly where we stood.”

He loathes how Nighteye adjusts his glasses because it's always done as a defensive measure.

“I regret many things in life,” Toshinori admits. “I am not a good teacher and I was meant to teach
you how to be a hero. I failed greatly at that. You’re a hero as competent as you are despite me.”

Nighteye takes an unconscious step back, surprise evident in every motion.

“Why are you telling me this now?”

"Because I do not believe the way I treated you was far. I showed no maturity and treated you cruelly when all you wished was to help in the only way you knew how to. I’m sorry."

“Why now? Why, after all these years, do you decide you need to tell me?”

“You told me once that you saw my death. I hope you are wrong but, in my heart, I believe you are right. He has my successor. He has the boy I entrusted the future with. I will take him back by force and violence. I will kill All For One.”

Nighteye grits his teeth. “You’re going to die surrounded by fire and you’re willingly walking to it.”

“Yes.”

“You should have chosen Mirio. None of this would have happened.”

Toshinori grins. “Perhaps. But I consider Izuku my son. And I will not let him suffer because of me.”

Already, Izuku has suffered too long at the hands All for One. Weeks captured and subjected to the cruel designs of a villain. He wouldn’t wish that on his worst enemy.

“What did you expect from this? This doesn’t change all that happened between us.”

“Of course, not. I failed you. I broke your trust. I am not here to ask forgiveness, not even to make amends. But no matter the outcome of this battle, I want to know I did all I could to mend this bridge. If I die, I do not want anything left unsaid. And if I live, then I wish you to know I am here. And I am more than willing to make amends.”

“Toshinori,” Nighteye says, then falls silent. He struggles to form the words. He inclines his head instead. That is answer enough.

“Thank you, for everything. Goodbye old friend.”

Nighteye doesn’t chase after him. Maybe there is nothing between them and that bridge is truly burnt to a crisp. Whatever the case, he doesn’t want anything left unsaid between them.

There is one last person he must speak to today. One last person he must do right by. The home in Mustafu is one he hasn’t visited though it is a short way from the beach he trained his successor so often.

He senses the guards doing their best to stay unobtrusive and decides they aren’t threats. They neither impede his journey nor do they aim their weapons. Undoubtedly, they’ve already sent communications to their commanders but he can’t fault anyone for diligence.

He knocks on the door sharply.

Inko Midoriya is someone he has never spoken to and that changes his perception of her. He’s heard of her from Izuku and knows she loves his successor as the sun loves the earth. He’s seen her ferocity during the interview she had and can’t help but admire that strength she holds.
“All Might,” she says calmly though he can see the muscles around her eyes twitch. “Please, come in.”

“Thank you.”

He follows behind her. The house is larger than he would have expected for a single mother and it makes him wonder just what Izuku hasn't told him. There are things they keep from each other, but usually, they are unimportant or things that they will speak of on a later date. Perhaps, more likely, Izuku is ashamed of the truth and not ready to face it. Whatever it is, Toshinori has faith in the boy.

The seat is large enough to fit his large frame and for that, he’s grateful. He’d rather not tower over her if possible.

“I failed your son.”

“You did,” Inko says coldly.

“I came here to apologise for putting a target on his back.”

“I told him the day he accepted your power that he would inherit your enemies.”

Toshinori blinks, surprised. “Oh.”

“You thought he wouldn't tell me,” she says, incredulous and insulted. “Me? Izuku’s never kept anything from me and you have the audacity to think he wouldn’t tell me. You gave him a quirk, put a target on his back, and now he’s gone. Because of you.”

“Yes,” he agrees. “I will not give you reassurances because I believe you have heard enough of them. Instead, I will tell you the name of the man who took him. He is the villain All For One, the oldest villain of Japan. He has fought the Emperor and his Guard and won. They call him the Strongest Man Alive.”

“I know,” she says, unimpressed. “I know his sins and I know his crimes and I do not care, All Might. I don’t care if he’s god himself because I want my son back.”

All Might takes a breath. To say this is to make an oath, a promise that can never be broken.

“I will kill him. For you. For Izuku. Even if it costs me my life, I swear he will die.”

Her face is hard as a statue and colder than granite. There isn’t a single muscle twitch as he speaks, not a single reaction of her body. All Might can’t read her in the slightest.

“See to it you do. If you cannot, I will have my husband do so.”

That is better than he could have hoped for.

“I know I have no right to ask this of you—”

“You certainly don’t.”

“But, should the worst happen, let him know that I always knew his greatest fear and I do not regret anything. Tell him to never look back and keep walking towards his future. Tell him to try his best and make a world he wants to see.”

Her features soften. “For his sake. Now, please leave my home.”
He stands and walks outside, not looking back. She will tell Izuku one day. Maybe not immediately after Izuku returns, but perhaps when he needs to hear it most.

His walk is interrupted very quickly. A man leans against a wall, casual and relaxed despite the air of fear and terror surrounding Japan.

The man looks like Izuku. He also wears the perfect white of the Imperial Family. Which explains quite a bit about the home.

“I came simply to warn you that you will get one chance to defeat All For One. I give it to you out of respect for the admiration my son holds for you.”

All Might simply grins. He does not fear death and never has.

“Your son will come back safe.”

Before he walks away, he looks over his shoulder at Izuku’s father.

“I don’t know your name. He’s never once mentioned you and he does not keep secrets from me. Maybe he’s ashamed of you. Perhaps he doesn’t care enough about you to speak of you. But tell me, can you name his greatest fear?”

Hisashi’s face is blank. “He fears he won’t live up to your legacy. It is always his fear.”

Toshinori shakes his head, disappointed. “His greatest fear is that to change society for the better he’ll have to stop being a hero. But if he chooses to become a hero, he will betray all that he stands for. I know him and I know the fears he holds. Fears he doesn’t even know he has.”

He turns away from the man who sired Izuku but is not his father. Toshinori Yagi turns towards the rising wind, cold and frigid, and walks towards the setting sun.

“Despite what you might believe,” Toshinori says, “you do not know what is best for him.”

After all, Izuku is Toshinori’s son in all but blood.

*****

Today is the day Kouta walks free. It is finally time, exactly two days after the villain promised. Two weeks into their captivity, Izuku Midoriya will get to see Kouta safe.

All For One grants him permission to see the boy one last time. Spinner is given the honour of being his guard, not Magne who usually accompanies him. Spinner is uncertain on whether to push him forward or just watch a few paces behind.

Good, keeping him unbalanced is Izuku’s goal. And, after seeing his mother’s interview, everything he believed in has been called to question. He loves his mother more because even now she keeps him safe. Her love, deep and endless and compassionate, is the final piece to the puzzle of Shuichi Iguchi’s loyalty.

And though he may not know it yet, Shuichi is Izuku’s creature through and through. He associates fear with Izuku’s endless tooth-filled grin and kindness with Izuku’s smile. Whatever view of nobility he once had is replaced by the image of Izuku fighting with his rage to find forgiveness for those who wronged him.

A lie told often enough is no different than the truth.
Don’t be arrogant. You haven’t won yet. You must still defeat the villain.

Izuku knows that very well. But, for now, he can ignore it in favour of seeing Kouta go free.

He smiles at the boy and doesn’t protest when he tackles Izuku. Whatever the cost, Kouta will be safe.

“Hey, look at me,” Izuku says, gripping the boy’s shoulders. “Don’t cry.”

“Why aren’t you coming?”

“Because there are people I have to save,” he says, his gaze landing on Shuichi for a second. “You come first.”

Kouta hits Izuku in the chest. “I hate this.”

“You’ll be safe. Just promise you’ll stay safe and I’ll come find you when this is all over.”

Something dark and all too mature fills Kouta’s gaze. Those are the eyes of someone who has seen death and the cruelty of the world first-hand.

“Promise me you’ll come back,” Kouta demands. “No matter what else, promise me you’ll come back.”

He isn’t asking about Mandalay or the rest. Do you understand, brother? He understands the shape of your plan and he knows there isn’t room for everyone.

It breaks Izuku’s heart. He extends his pinkie finger just as they did a few weeks back.

“I promise,” he says when their fingers are intertwined. “My father can keep you safe. His name is Hisashi Atakani. He’ll do right by you.”

“I don’t care about him.”

He hugs Kouta tightly. “No matter what, you wait for me. Alright? Wait for me and I’ll come find you.”

When the warp gate manifests, Izuku feels his heart lighten just the tiniest bit. The collar around Kouta’s neck opens and clatters to the ground.

“Wait for me,” Izuku whispers one last time.

Then he pushes Kouta forward before he can break. Kouta’s eyes are wide and pleading, but there is childish understanding in them.

When the warp gate closes, Izuku closes his eyes. He takes a deep breath to calm his nerves but that fails and the tears come hard and quick. They aren’t tears of sadness but of joy.

“He’s safe,” he whispers, picking up the collar. “He’s safe.”

You have one more to save, Mikumo says.

Momo. That kills his joy before it can be fully realised. He still needs to get her out before he can kill All For One.

Use him.
He glares at Shuichi. “Momo’s next,” he promises. “She walks free next.”

Then he clenches his fist around the collar. He hears it beep dangerously, screeching in warning moments before it goes off.

Months ago, it may have scared him. Today, he simply lets the darkness consume the explosion.

He meets Shuichi’s eyes. “Do you understand? She walks free next.”

And though Shuichi says nothing, he doesn’t bar Izuku’s way as he leaves. Though he says nothing, he still falls in place three paces behind Izuku, a disciple following his master.

Izuku’s plan isn’t complete yet, but it is close. All he needs now is to save the Pussycats.

No matter his strength, he can show none of that to All For One.

The map on the floor is much the same, though he notices the pieces for the VIVA and the Great Ten are now off the coast of Japan, both being opposed by the navy and the Royal Household. There are numbers next to each prefecture. Causality reports, attrition rates and percentages for things he knows nothing about.

He can recognise the casualty projections for the coming conflict between Japan's navy and that of China. The battle will be bloody and ruinous, and from the long arrows, it will likely spill into Okinawa. Outnumbered two to one on every front, the navy will bleed.

“Without the Royal Guard, this war would be over already,” All For One says. “Without them, my allies in the VIVA would have made it here and annihilated the Hero industry. Obviously, I’d have to battle All Might, Endeavour and Hawks, but that would be nothing special.”

Izuku grits his teeth. “Don’t be so arrogant.”

“Thinking all Might stands a chance just because he managed a draw is the height of arrogance. I’m the Strongest Man Alive for a reason.” All For One nudges the Emperor’s piece. “I don’t hate the royals. I respect them. They have a duty and they follow it. They keep my homeland safe. Even after this war, I won’t go after them. Oh, certainly, I’ll make the Emperor kneel and force a treaty that benefits me. But I’ll let his Empire continue in its current form. I won’t force it to fail.”

“How kind,” Izuku says dryly.

“Today I will speak about failure theory and how it applies to the Great Game.”

“Why should I listen to you? Kouta’s gone.”

“I’ll give you the definition of failure theory and then you can decide to stay or not. A simple enough bargain, yes?”

“Fine.”

“Failure theory, as it applies to the Great Game, is the study of how, when, and why an empire can fall. An empire, in this case, being defined as a coalition of two or more pieces.”

The villain taps his piece and then Kurogiri’s. Every region with a piece affiliated with All For One pulse purple once, and there are so many across the globe.

“We form an empire called the League of Villains. Failure theory applies to us just as it applies to China or the Taiwanese remnant or Japan’s government. When you understand failure theory, you
understand the weak points of any empire. By understanding failure theory, you will learn how to destroy your enemies with the least amount of currency expenditure."

*You must know. He’s teaching you how to destroy him.*

“You’re manipulating me,” Izuku says in response to them both.

“Yes. In my two centuries of life, I’ve come to learn that the truth is the most effective way to manipulate anyone. I’m teaching you how to destroy me. But, at the same time, I’m teaching you how to destroy my own enemies.”

Izuku wants to say no. Everything he’s used to manipulate Spinner has come from a villain. But, as he looks at the map of the world and the empire All For One built over centuries, he knows he must understand. If he is to win every fight, then he must know the rules All For One plays by.

And once he knows the rules, only once he knows the man beneath the villain, only then can Izuku truly win.

“Fine. Teach me how to destroy you.” He bares his teeth. “Show me where you’re weakest so I can destroy you.”

All For One chuckles.

"First you needed to understand the rules each piece plays by. I taught you those earlier. Now you must understand another concept: currency expenditure."

All For One taps Nezu’s piece. Musutafu's blue fill recedes, white light overtaking half of it. Izuku isn’t certain why Nezu has lost power there.

“His currency is in influence. He must pay those below him with the promise of positions of power. Students in general studies and business join UA because it is a guarantee towards greatness and wealth. In return, those students expand Nezu’s sphere of influence. This applies as well to heroics. Nezu spends his forms of currency to empower those below him, those who keep him in power, and they return more currency for him to spend in a cycle. Follow the money, as they say.”

“Stop making it out as if everyone is corrupt.”

“It’s the nature of the world. Wherever there is a power structure, the Great Game and the laws of power apply. Consider yourself as a piece. You play the Great Game. In fact, you’re one of the most dangerous pieces I’ve ever encountered.”

“I’m not.”

The villain huffs in annoyance. “Yet, being kidnapped started a massive war. Would anyone really go to war over someone insignificant?”

“Fine, tell me how I factor into this.”

“Let’s ignore your personal ideals and consider that your greatest supporter is your father. The currency you pay your father is in kinship, in his continued genetic legacy. But your father has negotiated power from the Emperor and from me in the past. He accumulated wealth, power, and influence for his family. A rather selfless goal taken out of context but incredibly selfish when you consider the result. Because your father loved you, tens of thousands, maybe more, will die. As I said, you’re incredibly important piece by virtue of your father alone.”
“I never asked for this.”

“But you did ask to be a hero. You’re a polarising figure and a rallying cry for the disenfranchised. Entire organisations support you because you embody their beliefs. You will one day have a support base in the nascent Lightning Bolts. This will be the means of currency for that organisation in the future. You will have to provide martial strength and centralisation for those below you. In time, should you become powerful, you’ll be their representative in the Great Game. You’ll need to accumulate influence to keep those below you satisfied, and as they accumulate influence for those below them, that power will flow back to you.

“You’ll use that power to get better subsidies for people in Hokkaido. You’ll use your power to reduce the military presence on the streets of Shikoku. You want to help people so you have no choice but to do so. You’ll go to Hokkaido and make things better because that’s who you are. Your influence will place pressure on the government to change. And in the process, your power base will expand. That’s your currency: goodwill and influence.”

Izuku frowns. “Why goodwill instead of… I don’t know, actual money.”

"If you have the goodwill of the people, then they will support you. If they support you, they will place pressure on their community leaders to make changes in accordance with your words. Wealth will inevitably flow through you and to your subordinates. With this, you can get a sense of failure theory. In your case, your empire easily collapses should you die. Should you prove ineffectual, or go back on your promises, you will lose your support base. If you lose your support base, you won't be able to bargain a better economic situation for your supporters. It's a vicious feedback loop that will kill your revolution."

“Then what’s your failure theory?”

“Oh, the League has quite the number. The simplest and hardest is my death. If you kill me, the League will have to evolve, thus changing the cultural identity of my empire.”

All For One picks up his piece and sets it aside. A moment later, purple recedes from the map as his influence dies until only Japan has a hint of the League’s influence.

But, at the same time, more colours fill the lands All For One once controlled. At their centre is a purple star, a reminder, perhaps, of their former ruler.

It reminds Izuku just how much power All For One truly holds. One villain that stands head and shoulders above everyone else, a towering bastion of cruel strength in this era.

“But you see, a major form of my currency is my ideal for a different society. Ideals don’t die with one person. If you kill me, Kurogiri or Tomura will continue my ideals—technically that is the question of succession, but we won't go into that. Yes, wealth flows down from me but most of the League is unified by common purpose as well. Killing me would simply alter my empire, but it would, at its core, remain. The most dangerous failure theory would be legitimisation.”

“Who would legitimise you?”

“The government.”

“But you’re a villain?”

“Exactly. If the government offers clemency for all villains in my organisation, then it collapses. People have homes and families to take care of. If they can suddenly be employed, then it disproves my ideals. In fact, if they did that, they would have the opportunity to snatch up much of
my personnel and rebrand them for the hero roster.”

“That’s… absurd. They wouldn’t ever do that.”

"Consider your words," the villain says slowly. "You're saying the concept of reconciliation is absurd. You're saying the concept of forgiveness is unviable in this society."

Izuku takes a step back.

“That’s not what I’m saying.”

“It very much is. My ideals can, ultimately, be cut down to one simple concept: the current society is unjust and must be broken for people to be free. But if they launch a truth committee with the intent of peace and reconciliation, then it utterly and completely invalidates my points. In the best-case scenario, my successors and I, alongside my division commanders, will be tried. Punishments will be given to those in command positions whilst the followers below will be given amnesty and reintegrated into society.

"The reason this will fail is that restoring Shikoku and Hokkaido is too costly for the government. Not only that, doing so would antagonise the military junta in Shikoku. And that may have a cascading effect on the navy and the imperial family. There are too many incentives to keep Shikoku and Hokkaido as they are and those two regions are where I draw over half my organisation.”

“People can choose to be better.”

“Certainly, but most of them will never be pieces on the Great Game. You are one and you need to understand the laws that govern power if you wish to succeed. You want to make Hokkaido better, then the government will be your enemy. You want to change Shikoku, then you’ll have to make an enemy of the military. Do you want to end villainy? Then you’ll make an enemy of me.”

“The moment I took One For All, you became my enemy.” Izuku bares his teeth. “And I’ll fight you to the bitter end.”

The villain laughs, delighted. “Yes. You’ll use my lessons and my methods. In the end, I’ll gain my goals through you.”

“I’ll never be you.”

"But you're already planning how you will destroy my empire through the lessons I've taught. You're trying to figure out the military's failure theory should they oppose you. You're cataloguing the players of the Great Game and trying to determine which ones can be allies and which ones you can consume to empower your fledgling empire. We’re not so different, my boy. The nature of revolution stays constant even the methods we use are different. Go now.”

Izuku shakes his head but it isn’t defiance. All that All for One accused him of, he had done. Who is to be an ally and who is to be an enemy? How can he leverage his father’s influence should it come to that? How do gods and the abyss slot into the game?

When he leaves, his head is bowed deep in thought.

You’re changing, brother. His words are a virus and they’ve taken root in your mind. His logics have infected you to the very core. Your thoughts change at his command.

“What do you expect me to do?”
Everything changes. But no matter how truthful his words, do not forget the truth at the centre of your being.

“What is the truth?”

“Who the hell are you talking to?” Dabi asks tersely.

“The voices in my head. Now shut up.”

*All Might wishes to see society remain static. You wish to see change society. As does All For One. So too does Stain. But their methods are their failings. The truth, brother mine, is that you want to save everyone.*

“I already know that.”

*But the simplest way to save everyone, to ensure that no one is forgotten or hidden under the shadow of the easily visible, is to change society for the better. Do not forget this. It is your guiding light. You must save everyone, even those you hate. Save them from those who are powerful. Save them from those who are cruel and indifferent. Most of all, save them from themselves.*

He looks at Dabi and wonders if he could ever forgive him for his crimes. He wonders if he could save Dabi if it came to it.

“I don’t think I’ll ever forgive you,” he says to the silence of the room, drawing Spinner and Compress’s attention. “But I don’t want to rip out your heart anymore.”

Dabi scoffs. “Keep quiet.”

“I hope there’s a future after villainy for you. I hope you make something good and decent out of whatever remains of your life.” He smiles. “I hope this is all worth it. I hope this is everything you dreamt of.”

“You’re quite the talker, aren’t you?” Compress says.

“I think that if a person dies as they lived, then maybe they lived the best life they could.” He smiles at Spinner. “What purpose is there to life if we don’t live freely, walking towards the rising sun?”

“We can fight for change,” Dabi says. “We can fight for a society without heroes. A world that doesn’t hate us for no reason.”

“If that’s the life you want to die by, then live like that. But I think we can all change before we die. Just hold your head high and try something new.”

*****

This is how it feels to be Japanese today. Your homeland is at war, besieged from within and without. There is blood in the water and ash in the air.

This is how it feels to be Tanabe Kaori of Hokkaido. You haven’t gone to work in two weeks, terrified of losing everything. But you must leave today. The gnawing hunger has grown too great to ignore. There are safe zones still being enforced, mostly by the League and the legion of vigilantes and underground heroes with lightning bolts. Maybe you’ll die on the way. Maybe not. But you have a son who is starving.
This is how it feels to be Kohei of the Horikoshi cult. You are first amongst equals of your cult, one of the few cults that managed to avoid detection by the Imperial Family. With this war, you see an opportunity. War means the dead and missing are forgotten. A thousand missing is nothing compared to the death toll to come. Yes, you will have your enlightenment.

This is how it feels to be Koichi Haimawari, the vigilante Crawler. The military has been mobilised and you don’t know what to do. You’ve made overtures of peace to the League, gone on your knees and begged for the safe zones to remain just that, safe. Thankfully, they’ve remained safe, but everywhere might become a warzone. You finger the lightning bolt on your sleeve, wondering if placing your trust in a boy younger than you was foolish. The villains move too quickly, appearing and razing police stations and hero agencies in minutes before leaving. By the best guess of the Lightning Bolt network, there are at most a hundred villains and Nomu. And yet, it’s like ten thousand of them are fighting all at once. All you can do is direct your allies and try to keep them safe.

This is how it feels to be Acting Rear Admiral Yosuke Kadomatsu of the Japanese 2nd Fleet. Every hope and dream you’ve held of peace is gone with the arrival of the Chinese fleet. This would not terrify you. You have the aerial advantage and artillery platforms to support your fleet. But at their head, you see four personal vessels of their Great Ten and now feel dread. They are the premier quirk users in China, peerless and equal to any of your top heroes—top heroes who are engaged in a losing war on the mainland. Your only saving grace are the two members of the Royal Guard at the bow of your ship. You cannot fail. If you fail, they will go on to invade Japan.

This is how it feels to be Eijirou Kirishima. You’ve gone with your family to your grandfather’s farm in the mountains. It may be cowardice, but it means they’re safe and away from the main battlegrounds. You keep watch each night, observing the horizon for enemies. Tonight, you see people scurrying at the base of the mountain and wonder if today is the day the war comes to your home. You prepare yourself. Be what may, you refuse to let your family die. Even if it means staining your hands red.
The Vanguard Counterstrike

Chapter Summary

In which, the fighting begins and there will be blood.

Chapter Notes

And since we're here, we might as well give All For One a bit of a backstory. Go read that as well.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

‘Some ask if heroes have an obligation to wage war at the behest of their government and the answer to that is simple: Yes, they must, and they should do so without a shred of hesitation. Should the government be lawful and built on a legal constitution, the war declared as per the UN Doctrine to Warfare, and approved by the populace, every hero has an obligation to pick up arms and wage that war. A hero must not question their role in the war, but they need always question the war itself and its causes. If a war is unjust, or the government unconstrained by fair laws, then a hero has the obligation to wage war on that unjust system.’

—Excerpt from ‘The Law of Heroes’ by Hinata Ononoki.

Izuku Midoriya has been a captive of the great villain who defined the Modern Hero Age for fifteen days now. Each day, he learns more and more about the man beneath the mask. Each day, he learns a better way to manipulate the Vanguard, Spinner most of all. Each day, he pieces together the story of All For One.

Today isn’t a lesson. Today, they play chess. This is their fourth game. The last three were conducted in utter silence.

Izuku moves his pawn forward and decides now is the time to attack.

“I’ve come to the conclusion that you’re a hypocrite.”

All For One hesitates for a fraction of a second. “Oh?”

“You claim that you don’t condone the deaths of children and yet, how many people died when your group attacked the camp?”

“Technically, the group belongs to Tomura but you aren’t interested in technicalities.” All For One takes Izuku’s pawn with a rook. “I’ve said adults should never kill children. That is a law I follow and haven’t broken since I made my system of ethics. No adult killed a child during the raid. The deaths were at the hands of a child younger than you and one who I believe is just older than you.”

“You still recruited them.”

All For One shakes his head. “The old adage that you can’t teach an old dog new tricks is very
true, my boy. When you reach a certain age, every thought you hold is based on your experiences of your youth. This world of yours is different than the one I grew up in. Heroes killed when I was your age and there weren’t any hero agencies. The great Hero may have inspired the trend, but she wasn’t bound by your morals. I remember the chaos that followed Hero’s death. Order could only be restored by martial strength, by those with the will to live.”

“Nice story,” Izuku says derisively, but understanding slowly dawns on him. And he hates the idea of the man All For One was in his past.

Confront him with it. It is another strength you hold over him.

“At some point, you come to learn that those younger than you do know best. They are the ones who define an era and live with the consequences. Not old men like me. I won’t stop a child from fighting for what they believe in so long as they know what they believe in. I will caution them against it but in the end, if someone dies as they lived, then I believe they lived the best life they could.”

You’ve said the same thing many times, brother.

Izuku takes All For One’s bishop with his knight, not letting his face show any emotion.

“How did you come to that conclusion?”

“Through my life experiences,” the villain says. “It’s a simple conclusion that I believe people like us, determined and headstrong people, inevitably come to.”

“Inaction is much the same as committing the act,” Izuku says, uncomfortable and seeking to change the topic. “If you have the power to stop a crime and yet you let it happen, then you may as well have done it. The more powerful you are, the greater your responsibility to society is.”

All For One hums in thought. “Then, you may as well have been the one to put down the girl in the sunflower dress.”

Izuku freezes, dread coiling around his heart. “What?”

“She died in that prison after your interview,” All For One says. “You didn’t stop the officer, so, by your own words, you were the one who sent her to prison. Your words incited the prison riot she died in. Her life is on you then.”

“Fuck you,” Izuku snarls, not caring about his composure. “Fuck you and everything you say.”

He stands, ready to walk out. He’s done with the games and manipulations. Fuck All For One.

Then the malevolence crashes down on him. It is raw and oppressive, a reminder that this man has stood above all contenders for centuries.

“Would you like to add Mandalay’s death to your conscience?” the villain asks politely. “If not, take a seat and let us finish this game.”

Izuku swallows but takes the seat. He glares at the villain, hating him more. Mandalay is alive and there is a chance, no matter how slim, to save her. The girl in the sunflower dress is dead—and he knows the villain isn’t lying—and gone, a terrible memory he’ll have to carry forever. He has a responsibility to the living.

To Momo suffering because of him.
To his mother who is undoubtedly grieving terribly.

To Kouta whom he made a promise to protect.

“That was cruel and unnecessary.” Izuku castles his king.

“That isn’t in the Asian version of chess,” the villains say, but shifts his queen forward one square. “And I am a villain. I must do something to maintain my image.”

“All creatures seek immortality.”

“Saruhiko Ando. Did you not insult Stain for cherry-picking his words?”
Izuku shrugs and moves his king forward. ”Just an observation.”

“What do you hope to achieve with Spinner?” He loses a knight to the villain’s pawn.
Izuku doesn’t let his features react. “What?”

“Come now, the others may be too foolish to see what you are doing but I notice these things. Will you attempt to lie?”

Izuku swallows nervously. The option is there. He’s always been good at lying and hiding away truths. But he remembers their last conversation and knows that All For One has been humouring his deceptions.

“No.”

“Good. It would have been very easy to kill him had you done so.”

*Another life he holds over you. Your plan is being used against you. No, it was his design from the beginning.*

“You don’t seem angry.”

“You’re using my methods. I’ve taught you and you have learnt. Why would I punish you for being a good student? I’m neither Aizawa nor Toshinori. Now, what is your plan for him?”

“He’s an idiot,” he says slowly. “Easily swayed by polarising figures. He doesn’t think for himself.”

“You wish to… save him, from himself.”

He slides his queen diagonally across the board. “I suppose I do. Check.”

All For One castles his king. “Why?”

Izuku moves his queen back, unwilling to lose it. “A truth for a truth. Why me? Why am I the only one you’re trying to convert?”

“You make the mistake of thinking I want to convert you. I know you will never become a villain. But what makes a villain? What makes a hero? This world is not black and white. It is shades of grey. Believing otherwise is a fool’s gambit.”

“There are good people.”
“Yes. And those same people support corrupt systems. Those people partake in the Great Game and the laws of power. I don't wish to convert you. I wish to open your eyes. Because a truth once seen cannot be forgotten.”

*Clearly, he doesn’t know you. Doesn’t know me. He is not omniscient, brother mine, no matter how it seems. I am the keeper, the lock and key. The truths you hide are known to me.*

“I was told once that a disciple of mine would be granted wings,” Izuku says, knocking his king over in checkmate. “Assume that this event is inviolable and will occur.”

“A dangerous assumption but one I will entertain because you’re being honest. And because I’ve seen first-hand the potential of the abyss.”

Izuku knows that. The tales All for One shared of mad cultists and townsfolks mutated under the influence of the dark realm left him disquieted. It is his power and domain. In a way, isn’t he responsible as well? If darkness infects the land, then as the king, shouldn't he be held accountable?

*No, you aren't. Don't willingly step on that minefield.*

“I don’t know if it meant literal wings or not. But what is flight if not freedom? Shuichi tries so hard to be Stain that he only shackles himself to the ground. He’s not strong or powerful, but he’s also barely a villain.”

“And so, you wish to convert him to your side. To become your ally and steal him from Tomura’s grasp.”

Izuku shrugs. “I want to save him from himself. I don’t know about the rest, but he can still have a future. If I can save him from his own ideals, someone who kidnapped me and fought against me, then I can change anyone. If he can become my disciple, then I can make anyone believe in me.”

“Shall I give you a truth free of cost.”

Izuku frowns. “Everything has a cost. You might not be the one demanding the price, but there’s still a cost.”

All For One laughs, a deep throaty baritone. "You've learnt much from me. The cost of this truth is the nature of responsibility. When you change someone's ideals, you become responsible for them. If you do this to Spinner, if you truly make him your disciple, his every action from then on will be your responsibility. Should the law come for him, then you must stand on his side. Should he betray me and harm my interests, then you will have to stand against the League. Do you understand the responsibility you will bear?"

If he does this, it will be hero society and the government and villains all coming for him for harbouring one of the people who started a war. Doing this may very well be the same as starting another war, one he will fight alone.

“Yes,” he says resolutely. “I’m going to change society brick by brick.”

“So quick to accept that duty. You remind me of myself.”

“I'm nothing like you.”

“Oh, my dear boy, we’re more alike than even I would like to admit.”
They play another game in silence. Izuku wins this one after twelve moves. All For One huffs in annoyance and resets the pieces. He comes to learn All For One doesn’t very much like losing but he is willing to accept his losses with dignity.

They play again.

“All Might once called you the incarnation of evil,” he says part way into their sixth game. “A person who simply wants to become the embodiment of devilry.”

“Do you believe that?”

“I’ve come to learn no one is that simple. I know a lot about quirks and I’m coming to understand a lot of people. Shall I give you a truth in exchange for a truth? A truth about All Might for a truth about the man behind your mask?”


Izuku rolls his eyes.

“Oh, he’d be fine with it. He told me never to fight you because I wouldn’t win. If telling a truth about him grants me immunity from your wrath even a minute longer he’d tell me to take it. And when he does come and fight you, I’d rather know everything about you to help him. If it leads to your death, I certainly won’t mourn you.”

All For One stays silent for a moment. Then he chuckles deep in his chest, a rumbling sound that makes him all too human.

“Oh, you vicious child. Tell me your truth.”

“All Might has a fear. A fear that should he exceed his mandate of stopping you and battling villains, and instead root out the negative elements of society, then he will become another Stormwind or Titan. He fears that at the end of that road, should he ever take that first step, he will be confronted with a mirror. And the reflection he sees will be your face.”

“How unsurprising, in truth. Such a base fear. What truth do you wish?”

“You’re many things,” Izuku begins. “Ruthless. Intelligent. Cruel. But you’re honest and have a set of rules you refuse to cross. You’re as charismatic as All Might and brilliantly terrifying as Nezu. You respect Hero and Hawkmoon. And that makes me wonder how you became a villain.”

“That is simple.”

“No, let me finish,” Izuku says strongly. “I won’t have you twist this. You were born roughly two centuries ago at the tail end of Hero’s Golden Age. The heroics industry started about thirty years later. Before that, there were no heroes, only vigilantes in the classical sense—people who acted outside the bounds of the law. And Hawkmoon was active if anyone crossed the line and became a villain. I think you can see where I’m going with this.”

All For One nods, his features blank and emotionless. “Say it,” he demands.

“Fact: the requirements for being a hero are always strictest after a tragedy. Fact: the heroics industry values the flashiest quirks from photogenic individuals—it’s why Gang Orca will never rise higher than ten no matter what. Fact: vigilantes of great power are labelled villains. Fact: Japan’s heroics model was adopted form the Vancouver Island model and the first villains there
were vigilantes before. Tell me, All For One, the greatest villain of Japan, were you once a
vigilante?"

“In two centuries,” the villain says slowly, “there are few who guessed that. Some of my brighter
subordinates. Yet, in just three weeks, you have guessed what All Might failed in decades.”

All For One pauses and it is more for Izuku's benefit. It is an offer to retreat and avoid that part of
the villain’s life.

“Say it,” Izuku demands in a mocking parody. “I want to hear you say it yourself.”

“Yes, by your current definition, I was once a vigilante. We were the ones who brought peace and
sanity through our strength, just as Hawkmoon did to South America. Just as Stormwind restored
order to Europe. Just as Hero who ushered in a golden age. I organised those of us with a common
goal under one banner. And then those from Vancouver Island followed my model. I helped create
that organisation and they followed in my footsteps. They restored order to the island. And as
thanks, the government labelled them all as villains because they refused to be the government’s
killers.”

Izuku blinks. “What?”

The villain nods. “Quirks weren’t as prevalent back then. They were still an incredible form of
power. Imagine an organisation that held one-third of North America’s quirk strength. If you had
that power, you could rule the entire continent.”

“Stop. I got my truth.”

“No, you asked. You demanded. Now, you will know the true foundation heroics society was built
on.” All For One leans forward and for the first time, Izuku sees a glimpse of the fury he is
struggling to manage. “You pushed and prodded. This is the cost of truth.”

“You cannot run brother. He holds too many lives over you.”

Izuku draws a deep breath. Squares his shoulders. “Say it.”

“They kept the peace and allowed elections to occur. They upheld everything you believe in.
Freedom. Democracy. Truth. And then, as payment for their blood and pain, they were given an
ultimatum. Join the new Hero Conglomerate, nothing more than another branch of the armed
forces, or be labelled as traitors to the state. That is what the word villain truly means in this era.
To be a villain is to be honourable and uncompromising in your morals against a corrupt
government. To be a villain is to be a revolutionary. To be a villain is to fight for what you believe
in. When they asked for my help, I would not say no. I showed them how to organise, I taught them
what I knew, and I prepared them for a war that may never end. It was a war that lasted a century
and change. Recently, they finally won.

“When I returned, my brother had become a hero whilst my allies in Japan were branded as villains.
They were dead or in hiding or imprisoned. All because Japan saw Vancouver’s model and adopted
it without a second thought. My own brother betrayed me for a corrupt government. I gave my
brother his quirk and he used it to destroy everything I built. And when I beat him down, he passed
it on. Over a century later, a boy of fifteen holds that quirk, questioning my morals and demanding
every truth I hold.”

“No,” Izuku whispers.

“That is your legacy, Izuku Midoriya. One For All is a legacy of betrayal and murder and
corruption. When I see Toshinori, I see my dead allies. When I see you brandishing that power so casually, it is a personal insult to everything I have fought and bled for. I may not be a hero, but I did not attempt fratricide.”

And though All For One holds back his rage, Izuku can see how the air behind him has shattered. He feels the overwhelming power this villain holds and knows his mortal form could never beat him.

“One For All is a beacon of an unjust society. It is a rallying call to everything wrong in this world. There are monsters, yes, but none have been praised as much as your quirk. That is the truth. I may not be good or kind or just, but this war I’ve waged for a century is to tear apart a society that would pit brother against brother for no reason but power.”

Izuku shivers at the malevolence. “Then why didn’t you reach out and try to find peace? He was your brother.”

“Because he was so far gone that every word I spoke was poison to him. He spat on every overture of peace, on every offer for a ceasefire. My own brother who I protected cast me as the villain of this story. He wrote the history the world believed. How long would you have lasted after such a betrayal?”

Izuku doesn’t respond.

Kirishima’s look of disgust haunts him weeks later, a constant source of dread every time he looks back on that night. That look is what horrifies him the most from that night. Not killing Muscular or seeing Aoyama bleed out. Not killing the Nomu or seeing All For One’s hostages. Knowing that Kirishima, his friend, considers him an abomination hurts more than all that combined.

What more were his own brother to look at him like that?

“I am no philanthropist or saint. I don’t claim that me and mine restored peace out of pure altruism. I wanted the power to rule and never be opposed, but I never wanted a world like this. Everything I did was All For One person, my brother who betrayed me. I will not let you ignorantly perpetuate a cycle with no knowledge. If you’re to face me with my brother’s quirk, then know the legacy you now hold.”

All For One stands and he is a towering presence, a dark monument to strength and villainy and so, so much more than Izuku could ever have imagined. His very presence distorts every cardinal truth Izuku held about heroes and villains.

This is a man who saw hero society founded and he does not lie. His greatest strength is in manipulating a person with an honest and unbiased truth.

For him to say those words, then it means All For One believes them with complete certainty.

“Get out of my sight, boy. I have never been more disappointed in you.”

*****

Enji Todoroki is about ready to collapse where he stands. He hasn’t slept in the last three days, too busy dealing with a few Taiwanese Remnant cells backed by the Chinese military. The last two weeks have been an exercise in tracking remote cells trying to sabotage power stations or attack hospitals or deal more damage to their already frayed organisational structures.

Those two weeks had been filled with death, dozens of burnt corpses in concrete jungles and the
sweltering heat of a battlefield fought in a forest. This isn’t the first time the military or navy has requisitioned his abilities in the last two decades nor will it be the last.

Unlike the other heroes, he understands the necessity of clandestine activities and doing what must be done. Just ask his family.

Today, he is finally back in Tokyo, listening to a briefing for the planned counterattack in the next few days. The plan is simple enough, two teams for the two bases. The base in Kitami has a confirmed sighting of Midoriya and Yaoyorozu, the other in Yokohama with confirmed movements of Kurogiri with some Nomu. Endeavour will lead one team whilst All Might the other. As the two strongest heroes, that responsibility falls on them.

They will be supported by the military in this operation, thousands of soldiers quietly being mobilised whilst tanks, helicopters and artillery platforms are ready to be rolled out.

There are equal odds of the leader being at either base. It makes sense that he would be closer to Midoriya in Kitami, the most likely place All Might would head to, especially given that Hokkaido is a major support base for the League. It also makes sense for that base to be a decoy base whilst most of the forces are gathered in Yokohama.

It will be a hard decision, one entirely up to All Might. Enji could care less. Either way, this was will end once the attack commences. All that matters is that their side wins.

“You’re back,” All Might says after the meeting is over.

The man looks tired if strong, grieving in his own way. There’s an air of uncertainty to him that Enji doesn’t like.

“Half my agency is dead,” Enji says.

“I’m sorry.”

“We underestimated the villains totally. We thought them nothing more than rats hiding in the dark. One man with a warp quirk and hundred soldiers is successfully waging a war against us and we’re losing.”

“That’s why we have to strike now. We can’t afford to absorb any more losses.”

Enji looks at All Might, seeing the blazing fire of strength within him. It is nothing like the pitiful flame he has had for the past eight years. No, this is the wildfire Enji remembers from his youth, the unbeatable power of All Might in his prime.

"You've recovered your power," Enji states simply.

“Of course, you would notice.” All Might huffs, amused. “Yes, they’re back. Entirely by accident. I’ll need every bit of power.”

“You know the person we’re facing. How powerful is he? The truth.”

Toshinori hums. “They call him the Strongest Man Alive. And he fully deserves that title.”

“Then he needs to die.”

“Don’t make light of this.”

“I assure you I’m not. But we have no choice. I am not so arrogant to ignore the difference in
strength between us, but if there is to a be a future for those who come after, he needs to die.”

For Shouto. For Fuyumi. For Rei. For his family that he broke out of fear. This villain, this great monster that even All Might fears, must die. His threat needs to end.

“I should lead the Yokohama team. That’s the larger base but…”

“Midoriya was seen at the other base.” Enji scoffs. “And you’re hesitating now? Pathetic.”

“That boy is—”

Enji surges forward suddenly. He grabs a fistful of All Might’s shirt, his flames springing forth and pure rage contorting his expression.

“Enji,” All Might warns softly, his presence filling the air.

“That boy is your successor. He’s your student. And you’re hesitating.” Enji bares his teeth in anger. “That boy is your son in every way that matters and you’re dithering over what to do.”

All Might startles, eyes wide. “It shouldn’t matter. I need—”

“I would burn the world down for my son,” Enji shouts. “There are things I’ve done that won’t be forgiven and I don’t care! But right now, you’re willing to sacrifice your son on a bet. How can you face the Strongest Man Alive when you can’t even make a simple choice like this?”

“He won’t hesitate to kill you if he’s in that base,” Toshinori says softly.

“I’ve never feared death.”

“There’s no chance you can win.”

“Then I’ll land a single blow,” Endeavour says strongly, “and slow him down. At this level, a single blow can make all the difference.”

“Why are you so ready to do this for me? We’ve never been friends.”

“Because I’m a father and that boy is your son,” Endeavour says as if that is answer enough. And perhaps it is.

Shouto doesn’t hate him, thankfully enough. Perhaps the boy will never forgive him, perhaps Enji will never speak to Touya and Natsuo again, but if they live then this will all be worth it. If they make it to old age and die surrounded by family, then Enji will gladly bear whatever sins the world heaps upon him.

And perhaps, a world without him is a better world.

“Thank you.” All Might extends his hand.

He faces this man he has looked up to as the pinnacle of strength, the man who kept moving forward even though his powers were shattered. All Might is someone he one day wants to equal, the same man Enji looked up to as a teenager. If it takes facing the Strongest Man Alive to get to that level, then Enji will take that risk.

The only way he will become stronger is to face stronger opponents. Maybe, just maybe, he can close the gap enough in that fight.
Endeavour joins hands with him.

“Go save him. Whatever comes, I’ll buy you enough time.”

In a few days, he promises to surpass the limits imposed on him by parenthood. In a few days, Endeavour will become a star or he will go out like a supernova.

Today is the twentieth day of the war for Japan. Today is the day Fumikage Tokoyami takes part in his first real battle.

He stands at the bow of a naval ship, listening to the explosive reverberations as ships trade blows, one barrage of ballistic rounds after another. The sun is bright in the sky, blindingly so. It serves to illuminate broken hulls and the long scars left by high-explosive rounds carved across the surface of a dozen vessels.

This is the largest naval battle Japan has taken part in for the last few centuries, the last during an aggressive act from Indonesia. Today, dozens of naval vessels protect Japan from an unprecedented attack from China.

They are outnumbered two to one and must deal with the four members of the Great Ten leading this assault. Their ships are long, sleek vessels exuding menace, emblazoned a bright red. Behind them are what seems like an endless tide of vessels to support them. This is the most important battleground. This will determine the shape of Japan’s future. This battle will determine Japan’s sovereignty.

Fumikage observes this all calmly. He knows for a fact that Dark Shadow is doing something to his emotions, rendering them inert and leaving only cold steel behind.

You won’t enjoy getting them back.

“ Likely so,” he murmurs.

“I still don’t believe you’re ready for this,” Maya, Izanami of the Royal Guard, says.

She wears her full regalia, a blinding and perfect white reflecting onto the deck of the ship. It marks them out as targets. It also marks them as threats. Fumikage wears much the same, though his armour is heavier and his sword is strapped to his back. They are bright and luminous, a rallying cry for Japan’s oldest institution.

“He has to be,” the final member with them, Ryujin of the Guard, says. “There’s no time left to learn. We hold this position and win. There’s no other choice.”

A loud bang interrupts them, their ship firing for the first time. It sends vibrations through the deck and up Fumikage’s bones.

“Once we get close enough, I’m taking us right to that lead ship before they get near us,” Maya says. “I’ll do my best to protect Ryujin as he unleashes havoc. You have the most important job.”

“Destroy their artillery platforms and engines. Destroy their radios, communications, and weapons. Stop their planes from mobilising. Sink their ships.” He inhales. “Even the numbers gap by any means necessary.”

“You can’t hesitate for even a single moment.”
“I know.”

“You can’t worry about Izuku.”

Fumikage nods. “I’ve entrusted Shouto with that responsibility. I’m going to make sure that when Izuku returns, Japan is still standing.”

“You love them.”

Fumikage nods, knowing it to be true. Three kings bound by a promise more important than light and dark and life.

“Yes.”

“Good,” Ryujin says. “A reason to fight is important. I believe it’s time.”

He withdraws his sword and lets Dark Shadow’s strength fill his body. Dark membranous wings sprout from his back and his sword glows with purple light so bright it shatters the air and distorts reality.

Fumikage Tokoyami, once a student, but truly a god, joins the battle for Japan’s sovereignty.

With one gargantuan step that breaks spacetime, he lands on an enemy vessel. He takes a moment to survey the runway and the jets preparing to take off, not caring that alarms are blaring or shots are being fired. Dark Shadow is more than capable of protecting him from mortal armaments.

He unsheathes his sword and infuses it with power. It thrums, a deep vibration that reaches his bones, and emits an oily smoke even as the edge glows purple.

With a single slash, it emits a beam of raw power that tears through the runway. The beam of energy uproots carefully engineered reinforced steel, flinging chunks of steel every which way. He hears the screams and shouts as humans are caught up in the blast but he ignores it. They chose their side.

When the light fades away, Fumikage has already summoned his hounds. Dozens of quicksilver hounds rush across the deck, tearing through artillery platforms and chewing through anyone that resists.

His flock of crows are in the air, heading towards another ship. Their feathers of glass unshattering make a horrifying sound, one of pure rage and total malice. Their scream is Fumikage’s anger made manifest, a promise that there is no bright future, that there is no chance of victory. They go after the crewman, mercilessly tearing through flesh and bone.

A comet crashes down onto the deck and the ship lists. When the smoke clears, it reveals a tall robot bristling with armaments and exuding cold menace.

It is one of the Great Ten, the Shaolin Robot, one of the premier quirk users in the world. This is a being capable of standing beside Endeavour as an equal.

“I’ll give you one chance to surrender,” Fumikage offers.

The android raises its arm lightning quick and fire off a blast of energy. It strikes Fumikage right in the face.

He sneezes, nose irritated by the cloying scent of the energy. It has the added benefit of dispersing
the dust cloud.

Fumikage grins, relishing the challenge to come. He raises his sword and falls into a stance, ready for the coming battle.

“Show me your strength.”

He’ll show the world his power. He’ll make sure they remember his name.

****

Shouto Todoroki is ready to leave and rescue his friend on the twentieth day of the war. He’s dressed in casual clothes. A hero costume won’t really help him at this stage, not when he has infernal fire and entropic ice at his command.

At the gate is his sister, arms crossed. She looks disappointed. That makes him falter in his steps.

“Fuyumi?”

“You’re leaving.”

Shouto nods. “Yeah. I have to.”

“You don’t have to do anything.”

“You’re right, I don’t. I need to do this.”

He walks towards her and offers her a gentle smile.

“Don’t do that,” she says. “You know I can’t argue with that stupid smile.”

“Do me a favour and go get mother. Bring her back and keep her safe.”

“What’s going to happen?”

Shouto shrugs. “I don’t know. Everything is in flux. I’d just rather be prepared for the worst. I’ve made sure the basement can handle a nuclear attack.”

She stares at him in surprise. Then it fades to fondness. “I don’t know what to do with you most days.”

He makes a gold snowflake. “Mother has one just like this. If you need help, if everything goes so horribly wrong that you feel the need to call me, I’ll answer.”

She bumps her forehead against his. They stay like that for a moment and Shouto almost turns back, willing to bask in his sister’s unconditional love.

“Stay safe.”

“I will.”

“You know I love you right?”

“Well, I am me.”

“And you’re an ass.” She shoves him back fondly. “Go do what you need to do. I’ll get mother.”
Knowing his mother will be safe is a weight off his back, one he didn’t know he was carrying. He vanishes in a flash of black fire, catching a glimpse of Fuyumi’s sadness. It sends a tiny thread of guilt up his spine, but he forces it down and lands at the entrance to UA.

There aren’t many better places than this to meet up. The school isn’t in use right now following the attack on Aizawa—and Shouto isn’t certain why Izuku’s father felt the need to go that far, but he supposes there must have been valid reasons, and if there aren’t, Shouto will still go to sleep at night. Maybe Izuku and Fumikage will care, but he’s made of stronger stuff than either of them.

He finds the raid team waiting for him. Ashido, eyes bloodshot and out for blood. Iida who is tense and paces erratically. Ojiro and Shinsou who are bastions of calm. Jirou doing her best to keep Bakugou from exploding.

It’s a volatile mix ready to set off. A part of him wonders who will be caught in the explosion.

“About fucking time,” Bakugou snaps.

Shouto glances at him for a moment before turning his attention back to the group.

“The police managed to find the tracker Momo dropped on Bakugou. We’ll be following the signal.”

“How?” Iida asks.

“The same way I tracked Stain. Now, get ready.”

He extends his hand. Ojiro doesn’t hesitate and places his hand above Shouto’s. The rest follow suit though Bakugou curses them all out.

“Stay calm and don’t jostle me,” he warns.

“Wha—”

Infernal flames consume the group.

Shouto burns a highway following the signal to Momo’s tracker, a bright lighthouse for him to follow. Space and time mean nothing to the flames that created both. Shouto may not have total control over them, and he is still learning the full extent of his powers, but this is well within his abilities.

They appear in an alleyway a few hundred metres away from the Yokohama base. Almost instantly, Shinsou steps back and vomits everything in his stomach.

“I told you to stay calm.”

“What the fuck was that shit?”

“Quiet unless you want the military patrol to hear us.” He waits until they all fall silent. “The hero team is going to knock on their front door. We’re going to go through one of the side entrances.”

“How do you know about these?”

“I stole the plans from my father. Now come on and stay quiet. We need to get in before they start shooting.”

He leads the quietly, using his eye to check for heat signatures and avoid guard patrols. They
nearly get caught by a camera before Iida grabs his shoulder, pointing at the small device. Shouto nods his thanks and sets it on fire before they continue.

With his right eye, he can see possible futures and pasts that never happened. Some of those show villains taking secret paths and he follows them, leading the group through the patrols.

There’s an entrance attached to an unobtrusive building just outside the military encirclement. Shouto burns through it with godflame, grateful that no one decides now is a good time to ask questions. Ojiro helps him carry the giant metal slab before it falls and they set it aside.

Shouto jumps down first, landing silently. The tunnel is dark, lit only by a few emergency lights. Thankfully, he can see in the dark with his abyssal eye.

There is no one nearby though he can see a mass of bodies above ground. Below, however, is a pitiless void that his eye can’t pierce. That, without doubt, is where the main base is.

He gestures and the others jump down.

"We use this as a rallying point," Iida says. "If you get lost or separated, head straight back here. Use the radios if things get dicey."

Shouto rolls his eyes. "Radios are going to be useless soon. Standard protocol is to blanket an area in ECM. Everything but a few bands will be taken."

There are two options. They can go to the left or to the right. Most likely, both options are traps. Instead, he plans on going straight through the wall ahead of them.

He feels the wall, testing its integrity. He can’t see past it but that doesn’t leave him without options. He freezes the wall over, concentrating. If it conducts well enough, then the moisture on the other side will condense and freeze as well. And he can control that just as well.

After a while, he concludes that no one is on the other side of the wall.

With his flames, cutting a square through the metre of concrete and steel is easy. There is a lot of resistance from whatever they're using to mute his powers, but eventually, it gives way. He generates a ramp of ice to catch the slab. It slides down to the other side.

They enter quietly. It’s a cell of some sort by the cot in the centre and the bars on the door. What surprises him is the painting on the wall, childlike and simplistic.

“Kouta,” Iida says. “He was released a few days ago.”

“The Pussycats might be alive,” Jirou says.

“We didn’t come for them,” Shouto says.

“So what? Do you think he’d be happy if you ditched them?”

That, unfortunately, makes too much sense. There are a lot of things Izuku will do if he finds out Shouto didn’t at least try to save them. Most likely, he’ll start crying, and that’s not something anyone should suffer through. Worse still, he might just break Shouto’s legs and beat the shit out of him.

The lights go out and the base rumbles violently.

The group startles, Bakugou cursing loudly. He waits for the shaking to end, his annoyance
growing with every moment. They aren’t professional, sure, but they could at least not act as they’ve never been in a warzone. They survived USJ and camp. This is basically the same thing.

"It’s begun. We need to move quickly." He turns in a full circle, looking for gaps in the field interfering with his sight. "There. Momo’s one level above us, a few hundred metres that direction."

He sets fire to the door, consuming it in black flames. The door melts to a pile of metal sludge. Shouto covers the metal in entropic ice, stealing the energy from the molten metal. It’s a quick and dirty way to deal with the heat.

The door leads to another corridor, identical to all the rest. Bland walls and harsh lights interrupted by the occasional door or hallway. At least they have an objective to head towards.

Those behind him don’t make much noise, thankfully. They turn the corner and Shouto freezes on the spot.

There, just as surprised as Shouto, is a villain dressed in plain clothes. Before anyone can react, Iida crosses the distance. In a quick motion, he brings the villain down.

Shouto blinks. He expected more flailing and noise from Iida. Maybe he has learnt from the Stain fight.

“Give us the location of the hostages,” Iida says angrily, pinning the villain down.

The villain spits in his face. “Fuck you.”

Shouto rolls his eyes and grabs the man’s arm. He can see his neural network and what is a neural network but a network of energy. He finds the pain receptors and sets them alight.

The man’s eyes widen and he opens his mouth to scream. So Shouto generates a dome of ice to cover his face and trap the sound.

All they can see is the way the villain’s body spasms in agony.

“Fucking hell,” Bakugou says softly.

“Did you think this was going to be pleasant?” Shouto asks, meeting Ojiro’s gaze. He’s the one with the strongest moral compass amongst the group. “We need to know.”

“This is torture,” Ojiro says.

“What do you think they’ve been doing to Momo,” Ashido says angrily. “To Izuku.”

Is killing their families an appropriate response for hurting him? He wonders as the group continues their debates on the morality of torture.

Ojiro looks ready to continue arguing until Shinsou lays a hand on his shoulder. Ojiro closes his eyes, defeated.

“Fine.”

I hate all of you, Shouto thinks, annoyed.

This is exactly why he didn’t want to come with them. Far easier to teleport right into the enemies’ midst and fling fire everywhere. Now, he can’t do so without worrying about collateral damage
and their reactions because at least one person is going to tell Izuku everything he’s done so far.

He lets the villain suffer for a few more minutes before letting up. He disintegrates the ice dome.

“Now, where are the hostages?”

The villain is smart enough not to resist. A few minutes later, they have a rough idea of where everyone’s being kept. Unfortunately, Izuku’s cell was hidden from everyone outside the Vanguard and the Pussycats were moved on a strict twelve-hour rotation. They have a list of likely locations but not much more to go on.

Before they leave, Shouto boils a tiny volume of the man’s blood to make an air bubble. He won’t notice it, and neither will the group, but the man won’t be alive in a few hours no matter what happens.

Their first goal is to head up and get Yaoyorozu. After that, they can search for Izuku and the Pussycats. Iida secures the villain, tying him and gagging the whimpering man. He looks sick to the core, but he does it without a word, iron-hard determination tempering his emotions. It’s part of the reason Shouto likes him.

That, and being willing to murder Stain. If only Izuku hadn’t stopped them, then he’d have some very fond memories with Iida. Maybe he could have led Iida down a path with a lot more violence and bloodshed.

They’d have so much fun.

“Mina,” a voice whispers.

They all turn, ice down their spines. Even Shouto is shocked to the core. There, flitting across the hallway, is a ghost. Tsuyu Asui is dead, yet that is her green hair splayed out behind her.

Shouto is rooted to the spot long after Ashido moves forward, her arm outstretched.

“Asui,” Ashido says, turning.

“Don’t,” Shouto warns, coming to his senses. “It’s a trap.”

It must be. The world still makes some amount of sense. If Asui is alive then that means the concepts of life and death don’t apply to humans anymore. And if someone, or something, has the power to rewrite laws baked into the very fabric of this universe, laws that are integral to Shouto’s power, then they’re all kinds of fucked.

If that’s the case, if there’s another being on his level, then Shouto’s burning everything down, grabbing Izuku, and running. Fuck this operation.

Before anyone can stop her, Ashido’s running down the hallways.

If it isn’t Asui, then fine, he can live with what comes next. That, at the very least, means there isn’t some greater threat beyond them.

“Fuck,” Shinsou says, then he’s sprinting after her.

What right does he have to stop her?

Hasn’t he already known what would come of this day? Not all the details, but the nature of events. Today will be filled with blood in the mouth and death in the air, ruin and destruction around them.
The extent of the chaos to come is constantly shifting and it terrifies Shouto because he knows for a fact that having the power to burn the world doesn’t matter if you’re knocked unconscious in half a second.

He forces his emotions down and masters that fear.

“Bakugou, Jirou. Follow them. Keep them safe.” He glances up once more, seeing through the sections of the wall shielding his sight. “Momo’s still there. Go save her.”

“Fuck you,” Bakugou snaps, but he follows behind the group, Jirou beside him.

That just leaves Shouto with Ojiro and Iida. Not a bad team, all things considered. Both are fast and competent, controlled where the others are volatile messes.

“I don’t like splitting up,” Ojiro says, tense.

“Deal with it.” He smirks. “It’s more fun anyway.”

Iida moves suddenly, shoving Shouto against the wall. Well, that changes his assessment of how competent his classmate is.

“Do you even give a shit?” Iida swearing surprises him, surprises Ojiro as well.

“I didn’t force anyone here. You all came when you could have walked away like Kirishima.”

Iida applies more pressure. “You could have kept quiet and told no one about this. You think everyone’s going to make it back? Divide and conquer.”

“We’re friends,” Shouto says because he genuinely does consider Iida a friend.

“Are we? Right now, I don’t think you care.”

Shouto does care. About Izuku and a bit about Iida. The others are… tangential to his goals. It’s not like there aren’t a few thousand iterations of them that are practically identical to the ones he knows. He can go visit them if he ever needs to replace these versions of his classmates.

Ojiro grabs Iida by the shoulder and pulls him aside. “You’re the one doing the dividing right now,” he says lowly.

Iida glares at them both. “Fine. Lead the way.”

Shouto does so gladly because if he doesn't, he might just punch Iida and he isn't certain Iida is anywhere near as sturdy as Izuku. They’re used to beating on each other, but not everyone is that strong.

The tension is thick but neither of them says a word, more interested in keeping their footing as the ground shakes occasionally. A spark of hellfire above ground makes him shiver. His father is here and if they meet, that conversation will be very awkward.

The door opens into a rather open room with staircases on either side. He scans the room and finds an electronic device in the next room. Yaoyorozu’s tracker, but not the girl herself.

“Not this one.”

A warp gate opens, spewing out a group of enemies. It isn’t the only one and he can feel many of them opening up throughout the entire facility.
Five Nomu and a few villains with bladed weapons and guns. Nothing he can’t face. But he can’t do that whilst keeping the other two alive and safe.

He’s good but not good enough to protect them against villains with so much blood on their hands that he can smell it, their souls stained by countless murders on battlefields across the world. These villains aren’t playing around given that he can sense four more approaching from the shadows, ready to decapitate his allies.

He flings ice that direction and raises a wall of flame to protect against the hail of bullets.

“Get going! Find the Pussycats. Get the hell out.”

He can only hope the two of them are good enough to deal with what comes next.

He summons infernal fire to one arm and lets ice encrust him as a shield. This is going to be harder than facing Moonfish.

Which means this will be the first fun thing he’s done in a long while. Best to savour his entertainment. No telling how long until something fun comes along next.

*****

The hero’s counterstrike begins on the evening of the twentieth night. It coincides with the attack off the coast of Okinawa. If—when—he wins, that’s another battle that Toshinori Yagi will need to fight. Another battle in a war that might last forever.

All Might watches as the military sets a perimeter around the Kitami base, a warehouse complex in the middle of the city. Beside him are Gang Orca, Mirko and Wash, alongside a whole host of military personnel. They wait in anticipation for the perimeter to form.

“Don’t hesitate,” All Might says. “Don’t make mistakes. And don’t get caught off-guard.”

All Might leaps forward. If there is to be battle, he will be the first to enter it. He lands on the ground roughly, the earth-shattering beneath him.

The villains don’t hesitate to attack him. Good, because if they’re focused on him, it means they’re not focused on his allies. Unlike the others, he can tank blows that would leave them a red paste on the ground.

He weaves between enemies, eliminating them with strong blows, and blocking many more. They try to trap him with a variety of quirk, they try to impede his motion or leave him disorientated, but that means little to him. He is All Might and unless they are all equal to Mirko at the very least, they are nothing to him.

Fighting them is an exercise in futility. Every time one villain is defeated, a warp gate materialises and sends them off. It happens so quick that he can’t do much about it, and given the number of recent assassinations involving warp gates, he doesn’t want to add his name to the list.

The ground trembles violently, making him and the remaining villains stumble. All Might claps his hands, generating a pressure wave that sends the villains flying back.

All Might leaps over a building to find Gang Orca in a defensive stance, facing off against another individual more than double his size. The hero is firing a wave of hypersonic waves to hold back the villain’s attack.
Toshinori is still in the process of landing when the villain’s strike connects.

The impact is so powerful that All Might feels it in his bones. Gang Orca doesn’t even make a sound before he’s unconscious, eyes rolling back.

All Might leaps forward, catching the hero. Gang Orca breathes shallowly. His breathing is wet, as though a rib or three are broken. He sincerely hopes it isn’t a punctured lung.

He stares at the massive person before him. He exudes malice and cruelty, a savage beast designed only for battle.

He doesn’t doubt that it is powerful. It shattered Gang Orca with one blow, breaking through the defences of the number 10 hero as though they didn’t exist. And of all things, Gang Orca has some of the most powerful defensive abilities of them all.

The creature opens its maw, thick wafts of steam materialising. “All Might,” it rumbles in a voice like stones cracking. “You will die.”

“Perhaps,” he agrees. “Perhaps even tonight.”

All Might slams his fists together. The shockwave of force slams into the monster, pushing it back. It stares at him in shock, surprised that simple air had pushed it back.

“But not to you.”

He draws on the power of One For All, channels the memory and strength of Nana Shimura. It is a raging wildfire, the strength to fight through any obstacle. A legacy centuries old courses through his body. He may not have much time left with One For All before it fades, but he has faith in his successor who will continue that lineage of power.

Against this villain, he won’t need more than a fraction of that power.

All Might surges forward. He punches the villain faster than it can react, watching as his fist sinks deep into its thick hide.

The villain roars in pain and raises its arms, bringing them down faster than a creature that large should move.

All Might crosses his arms and guards against the blow. The force of it surprises him and he doesn’t doubt that the blow will hurt in a few hours.

The ground below him cracks and he sinks. For a moment, the pressure subsides as the giant lifts one arm.

That arm comes down like a piston, attacking All Might’s guard once more. He grits his teeth through the attack, refusing to show any weakness to this villain.

Then the force doubles suddenly. The blow rattles his bones. As does the second and third.

He is knee deep in concrete when he decides this has gone on long enough. When the giant raises its arm for another blow, All Might removes one hand for a moment. The pressure is immense but he refuses to fall.

His free hand punches forward, releasing an airwave of force. It stuns the giant just long enough for All Might to flex his leg muscles and shatter the concrete trapping him.
He dashes forward and crouches low beneath the giant’s guard. Then, like a piston, he rises and slams his fist in the giant’s gut.

It rises through the air, choking in pain. Ten metres at first. Then twenty and thirty, a colossus thrown around as a child would a ball.

It makes a sound, still conscious. All Might rolls his eyes. No one is ever smart enough to stay down.

He leaps into the air and pulls his arm back. There is fear in the giant’s eyes. It knows what is coming. Heat and power infuse his arm. He draws a deep breath, feeling the endless reservoir of power rise to his command.

“Delaware SMASH!”

The blow is colossal.

A shockwave forms on impact travelling so fast that the air seems to explode. Glass shatters and small animals die from the power in it.

The giant falls fast as a jet diving. It crashes into the ground with enough force that the buildings tremble, groaning in protest.

When he lands and the smoke clears, he sees a hole shaped like the giant.

“Fifty metres?” All Might wonders errantly. “Could be better. I’m still not used to having my power back.”

All Might cracks his neck and walks towards Gang Orca. The hero breathes weakly but is still conscious. Good. He signals the support to tend to him as he enters the base.

There are villains, dozens of them waiting for him. It takes him a few minutes to deal with the fodder, mostly because he doesn’t want to collapse the structure. He heads deeper into the base, exuding confidence in a way he doesn’t feel.

A giant door bars his way. All Might punches a hole through it and then rips it apart at the hinges. It takes a minute for the dust cloud to disperse, aided by a sweep of his arm.

The room is empty and grey, a concrete prison holding one person. He finds Izuku strapped to a chair. He crosses the distance in an instant, filled with hope for the first time in a long while.

“Izuku,” he says gently.

The boy raises his head and that is when All Might knows something is horribly wrong.

Those eyes aren’t green but rather, they’re red crystal spreading across the thing’s face. Where there would be a burn scar, there is instead a winding Lichtenberg figure in a sickly green, iridescent and venomous. Its chin is distorted and those ears too long to be human.

All Might recoils away from the creature, leaping back.

“/Hello, sensei/” it says in a voice that reverberates in the room, an unnatural sound like crystals scratching against each other.

The creature rises and only now does he see how its flesh has fused with the steel chair. Before his very eyes, he watches the steel melt and morph, becoming a sick parody of Izuku’s hero costume. It
has rusted steel for ears and a mad grin of endless teeth.

This thing, whatever it is, isn’t human. The air around it seems to die as its metal flesh twists and churns, transforming before his very eyes.

A gunshot interrupts them.

All Might tenses, whirling to look at the gunman. It is a blond man wearing a spandex suit and carrying the gun.

All Might readies for a fight.

“That wasn’t aimed at you,” the villain says.

All Might looks towards the false Izuku floating in the air. The creature twitches and shudders, sickly-yellow sparks arcing towards the ground. The sparks intensify and the creature moans, a sound like shattered time breaking.

“/Save me/” the creature grumbles, deeper than any human should be.

Then it dissolves into a puddle of grey goop.

All Might stares at the grey goop as it evaporates, wondering when the world went so horribly wrong.

“This wasn’t supposed to happen,” the villain says, drawing All Might’s attention. “Clones aren’t supposed to do that. Her clone drank his blood and became some... distorted echo of him.”

“What did you do?”

The villain finally looks up, revealing his eyeless face. They’ve been gouged out recently and All Might steps back in horror.

The villain smiles. “Mankind was never meant to look at the face of God. I saw a reflection of a tiny fragment. It drove me to sanity. Don’t make the same mistake.”

The villain raises his gun and fires. All Might braces, expecting pain. Then he hears a thud.

The villain is on the ground, a hole blown through his head. The gun clatters to the side, forgotten.

He closes his eyes and heads back up. There is nothing more here. He came here to find Izuku or battle All For One. His duties are not yet done.

He is halfway up the stairs when a crack makes him freeze up.

**Bang.**

**Bang.**

**Bang.**

He shivers, wondering when the world stopped making sense. The only people down there had been the villain and whatever that creature was. Which means a dead man shot himself again.

When this is all said and done, he is going to sit Izuku down and have a very long discussion with him.
The night air is crisp. He gives orders to cleanse the base with napalm immediately, warning them not to enter the base again. It needs to be done.

“What are you going to do?” Mirko asks.

The other base is in Kamino Ward, half a country away. A thousand kilometres and change separate him from Izuku.

All Might is not the fastest man alive. There are many others who exceed his speed and he has acknowledged this fact. He is not as fast as those who move at relativistic speeds.

But one fact remains: he is still bloody fast.

On the ground, outside of relativistic speeds, he may very well be the faster person alive. He is at his physical prime once more thanks to Eri. In his twenties, he would regularly run the border of continental USA in a single day simply to test himself.

This is nothing new.

“I’m going to run there.”

He sets his feet in the ground. Tenses his muscles. Takes a deep breath.

In one moment, he is gone and the ground behind him shatters. In the next, he crosses the sound barrier. In the third moment, he is at his top speed.

The people don’t see him, but they see the marks of his passage on the world. They hear windows shatter and see massive craters in the roads. They feel the wind of a violent breeze and reel back from the sudden snap of the soundwave.

They do not see All Might, the greatest hero.

He is simply too fast to be seen.

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Mashirao Ojiro limps through the dank underground base, spilling blood on the ground with each step. There’s a deep gash running the length of his tail and there’s not much to do about it. It hurts like nothing he’s felt before. The villain that inflicted it is on the ground, writhing in pain from a broken collarbone.

Iida is somewhere behind him, securing the last villain. One of them had revealed the location of the Pussycats after some rather brutal questioning—torture, though he doesn’t want to use that word—and Ojiro plans on retrieving them.

The Pussycats are there, all unconscious, just as the villain said. Ojiro runs towards them and only instinct saves him.

He swerves to the side at the last moment, a stream of blue flames searing his thigh instead of his torso.

He grits his teeth, doing his best to balance on one leg and ignore the pain.

The villain is what he imagines Shouto would look like if his classmate had no control over his fire and the edgiest fashion sense possible. But those blue flames are no joke. He can feel their heat from here.
“We knew you were here from the very beginning,” the scarred villain says. “Your friends are dying and you’ll have achieved nothing.”

He puts weight on his bad leg just to test it and nearly collapses. He can’t even use his tail as a crutch.

“Fuck you.”

“Here’s what I’m going to do,” the villain says. “I’m going to fling a lot of fire at the Pussycats. You can ignore it and let them die. Or you can jump in the way in the vain hope that your friend gets here quickly enough.”

There is a blue spark and then the villain’s arm is covered in fire. “Make your choice,” he taunts.

I am so done with heroics, Ojiro thinks, before leaping in front of the Pussycats. He spreads his arms wide, knowing that it is futile but unable to do anything else.

He closes his eyes, accepting what is to come. He’s had a good run all things considered. Made some friends, pursued his childhood dreams and kept on going no matter the obstacles. It’s as good a life to live as any. Maybe better than most. At least with this, he’s going out to protect someone else.

His parents will be proud of him once they get over their grief.

And then he’s shoved out of the way.

Startled, his eyes snap open and he sees Iida in his place, eyes closed and resigned. Ojiro reaches out as he tumbles, unable to reach him or stop it from happening.

Ojiro can only watch as the flame engulfs him. He listens to Iida’s screams in horror, unable to move forward because this is wrong. This isn’t how the world is supposed to work.

The villain cocks his head in surprise. “Didn’t expect that.”

Iida moans in pain, alive somehow. Then Ojiro notices the earth golem shielding them. Pixie Bob, fighting through the pain and sedatives.

A dozen golems rise from the ground and for the first time, Ojiro feels a modicum of hope. Together with those golems, he has a good chance of winning.

The tide has finally turned and this is his chance.

Except, the villain doesn’t look bothered by this. The villain shrugs, revealing a remote in his hand and presses a button.

“No!” Pixie Bob screams, sheer terror and desperation in that sound.

A part of him freezes up, completely entranced on the horrifying sight of the collars around their necks beeping, going from green to red in an instant. He is mesmerised at the sight of Pixie Bob trying to rip off the collar, then of her trying to shove Iida away.

Too late.

Boom.

That same part of him that is frozen observes the way the explosion leaves an almost clean cut.
There they are, whole and healthy. Three adults with all their limbs and faculties. One moment they have heads. The next, there is a wave of force and heat that stuns Ojiro.

The force of the explosion flings them aside without regard for theatrics. It’s a large enough explosion that he holds out absolutely no hope of Iida surviving. The force of it leaves Ojiro’s ears ringing and his body sore.

When he can see again, he doesn’t see their heads. They’re simply gone, vaporised by the explosive. There’s a horrific smear of blood and viscera instead.

In that moment he makes the decision to kill the part of him that is kindness and decency and abiding by rules because all that has left his friends dead. They don’t have a place in war.

Ojiro thought he knew what anger was, something hot and bubbling and choking. Now he understands that anger runs cold. Pain, he supposes, brings clarity, even if that pain is your heart shattering.

The villain is too distracted by the explosion. Maybe not for more than a second or two. That, however, is more than enough.

Ojiro isn’t the fastest—that was once Iida—or capable of turning on a dime the same way Izuku can, nor is he anywhere near as mobile in the air as Bakugou. This time, however, he doesn’t have to be.

He flings himself forward, twisting in the air. The villain reacts too late, trying his best to backpedal. Before he can get more than half a step away, Ojiro wraps his bloody tail around the villain.

His tail has always been the strongest part of his body.

He wraps it around the villain’s neck. Blue flames come to life, burning his flesh, but Ojiro ignores it. His body spins one direction whilst his tail twists in another.

He doesn’t hear a crunch or a snap as he expects. The fire around the villain simply dies away.

It’s hard to manage his weight on one leg, but it is worth it watching the villain fall, limp and lifeless, eyes staring blankly ahead. A part of him that he already hates finds joy in seeing his enemy fall. The villain deserves it. He and all his allies deserve to die for everything they’ve done.

Ojiro shakes his head and hops towards the Pussycats. They’re gone, all three of them. Four, now that he remembers Tiger. An entire hero team wiped out for absolutely no reason.

He picks up Iida. His friend’s body is burnt black and he doesn’t breathe. Ojiro knows he’s gone, but he refuses to leave him behind tonight. It’s the fucking least he can do.

Everything hurts and his vision is blurry, but he somehow manages to walk forward, leaning against one wall. He stumbles a few times in his quest to find somewhere safe, not caring that he’s in no state to fight if a villain finds him.

Not that he needs to worry about that. The scent of blood hits him long before he turns a corner. He is greeted by a hallway filled with corpses. It sends a flutter of disgust through his chest but he masters it. Dead villains mean nothing to him.

There’s one person who could have done this.
He wades through a sea of blood and bodies carrying the corpse of his classmate. He follows the trail of carnage up two floors and down a dozen corridors, more and more bodies on the way. A part of him is proud, another part disgusted.

He pauses at the sight of a puddle of blood floating in the air and dripping down. The blood marks it as a Nomu, visible only by the pattern of the blood splatters. That oversized body and those long claws, an animal head and thick muscles. He can only see the outline of those features where blood has been spilt on it.

There’s one person he knows with an invisibility quirk.

“Fuck, Toru, why you?”

No one answers. Why would someone answer? He’s alone and accompanied by the dead. The dead have never spoken and they won’t today.

Finally, the trail of the dead ends. There is a smear of blood leading towards one person. Shinsou Hitoshi, breathing heavily and leaning against the wall. There’s a large gash down his torso bleeding profusely.

Shinsou looks up. “Hey,” he says, coughing up blood.

Ojiro rushes towards him, not caring that his leg and tail are both screaming in agony. He sets Iida’s body down and applies pressure to the wound. The blood is hot and sticky and he hates that it’s out of Shinsou’s body.

Shinsou hisses in pain. “Fuck, that hurts.”

“Come on, don’t do this,” Ojiro pleads.

“Invisible Nomu. Got it in the end.” Shinsou smiles, blood staining his teeth. “I’m fucking terrified.”

“You can tell me all about it later,” he says, hating the feel of hot, sticky blood. “We’ll joke about this when we’re old.”

Shinsou almost laughs but it sounds more like a pained sob than anything else.

“Not your fault,” Shinsou says, closing his eyes. “Remember that.”

“Don’t you dare.”

Shinsou doesn’t respond.

Ojiro tries his best for a full five minutes before accepting what is. He flops to the side and just sits, leaning against the wall. He stares at the fluorescent lights, not really seeing anything and not really caring.

A villain could come up and he’d be too injured to do anything anyway. What does it really matter anymore?

Shinsou is his friend, one he knew long before school. They were brought together by Izuku being Izuku, blindingly kind and ridiculous in equal measure. Shinsou, who learnt under Ojiro's master, and through that, their friendship only deepened.

Hitoshi Shinsou, caustic and sarcastic Shinsou, who had the biggest crush on Ochaco, is dead and
there is nothing to do about it. The dead are dead and they can never come back.

At least you'll be together, he thinks, closing his eyes, and letting exhaustion take him.

Maybe it isn't very long but it might as well be an eternity before Ojiro’s is roused from his slumber by furious whispers.

“Oh, fucking hell.”

Ojiro opens his eyes. There is Bakugou, trailed by Ashido. She’s carrying an unconscious Jirou. All three of them are bruised but they don't have any serious injuries.

He looks to Ashido. “Guess what?” he asks bitterly. “It was a trap.”

She’s pale, all the blood drained from her face. “I’m sorry.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Ojiro closes his eyes. “We should never have come here.”

“Momo wasn’t even fucking here,” Bakugou says, his voice weak. “She’s already gone. We came here for nothing.”

“The Pussycats are all dead, Ashido. Iida tried his best and now he’s gone because you couldn’t stick to the plan. I killed the bastard who did it, at least.” He smiles cruelly. “Oh, I also saw Toru. You remember her, don’t you? I guess invisibility is a great quirk for a Nomu.”

Maybe he’s being spiteful and cruel, but none of this would have happened if they just moved as a group. And it’s her fault because she thought the dead didn’t stay dead.

He meets her eyes, feeling nothing. Maybe you can become numb to pain. All it takes is enough pain before it all starts blurring together.

“Iida and Shinsou are gone,” he says furiously. “That’s. On. You.”

“God fucking damn it,” Bakugou snaps, stepping forward angrily.

There is a spark of black fire and then Shouto appears. He is drenched in blood, hair without a trace of white, and littered with injuries here and there. Ojiro can’t tell if he’s gritting his teeth in pain or grinning from some sick sort of joy.

Shouto assesses the group, his dark eye falling on each of them. That half-grimace half-grin dies down. Finally, he looks at Shinsou and Iida, staring at them for a long moment.

“I’m sorry,” Shouto says. “They’re gone. I can’t do anything.”

“No one can.”

He’s not sure who says that but Ojiro agrees with the sentiment. None of this matters anymore. They’ve failed, utterly and completely. All they can really do is try to survive.

“I promise I’ll bring you all back safely,” Shouto says, his menacing aura finally vanishing. He just looks tired and resigned.

Then Shouto spins on the spot.

In a split second, where before there was air, there is a barrier of ice. Ojiro opens his mouth to ask what he is doing.
The blast hits them like a freight train.

Chapter End Notes

The fighting has just started. Next week involves All For One being a badass.
The Strongest Man Alive

Chapter Summary

In which, All For One shows off.

Chapter Notes

I have been waiting a very long time for this chapter. A very long time. There is a reason they call **All For One** the Strongest Man Alive.

This chapter is also dedicated to my friend Ash. You gave me the strength to go through a lot of this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘The greatest threat to any system is not military force. That helps, certainly, but the greatest threats are always ideological or cultural. An invading army can be beaten back. The greatest general will lose to nature. A nation can be retaken if the capital falls. But should the cultural identity be destroyed, then the old nation can never be reclaimed. Those who call themselves heroes hold both military might and ideological strength. They must not be allowed to falter or wane. As such we must hold them to a higher standard, that of perfection’

—Excerpt from ‘Reaching Perfection: International Translation’ by Dylan Salvatore.

Izuku Midoriya feels the change in the air on the twentieth day of his captivity. The air is sharp, acrid, and promises blood.

The Vanguard are tense and there is only one reason they would be so tense. It makes Izuku grin because everything will end this day. His plans will come to fruition and every moment of weakness will be worth it. Every humiliation and indignity will have meaning.

“People make their own choices,” he says to the Vanguard. “There are consequences to those choices.”

“Shut up,” Shigaraki snaps almost immediately.

Izuku shrugs. “They're coming, aren't they? The heroes. All Might. All of Japan, really.”

“You don't know anything.”

“Shigaraki, just stop. For once, just stop. You’re here stuck in a base with me. A base All Might will come to. Your boss is going to die today and there is nothing you can do about it. I'd suggest running.”

“If you don’t shut up, I’ll kill the girl.”

“Do it,” he threatens, glaring at Shigaraki and Shuichi behind him. “And if you kill her, then what?
I'll come for you and make it my life's purpose to see you die.”

No one moves for a long second.

The room is dark, cast in ravenous shadows ready to consume everything in a tidal wave of cruelty. The only light comes from Izuku’s eyes burning like green suns and the green lightning arcing across his body.

“Make your choices.” Izuku smiles a bloody grin. “Live with your decisions. Die by them. Just make sure you own them before the end.”

He lets the darkness fade. And then, he walks forward. He doesn’t look back at them as he leaves the room.

All For One stands in his map room, observing the war of Japan calmly. There are close to a dozen battlefields, most along the coast and over the sea, but he’s learnt to recognise Kurogiri’s Nomu.

Where there was once a hundred following Kurogiri’s orders, now there are only sixty. Still, it means that each villain or Nomu managed to take down no less than three hundred each.

“This is our last conversation.”

“Perhaps,” the villain agrees. “Perhaps not. The future is always in flux, dear boy. It belongs to those who are strong and determined, it belongs to those who are free. It’s not something given with no strings attached. You must take responsibility for that freedom and prepare yourself for what is to come.”

Izuku nods, genuinely surprised. “Keep walking forward and eventually you'll meet the rising sun.”

All For One huffs fondly. “Quoting Toshinori. I believe that might have been the first thing he said that wasn't simply parroting Nana Shimura.”

Izuku frowns. “You hate her more than you hate Toshi.”

“Perhaps.”

“What happened to her? Why does no one remember her?”

“People remember the Great Tyrants, not the heroes.”

“I don’t believe that’s the whole truth.”

“No, it isn’t. I despised Nana Shimura. I despised her weakness and her reckless abandon. She inherited my brother’s quirk, but she was not equal to his legacy. And so, I erased her from history. Just as I did all the previous holders.”

“That’s cruel and spiteful and petty. I’m disappointed.”

“I am a villain, boy. Nothing has changed. They helped destroy everything I helped build. All my allies were killed or arrested at the hands of the government; their lives shattered by my brother’s fists. To bear his legacy is something one must be worthy of. Nana was not. Nana was a pathetic torchbearer whose only achievement was to pass on One For All to Toshinori, and through him, to you.”

Izuku crosses his arms over his chest.
“She died fighting you. She died making sure civilians didn’t suffer because of your fight. She died proudly for those she loved. By your words, she lived the best life she could. She trusted Toshinori to live in her stead and he beat you. And when you finally die, I’ll be right there beside him.”

All For One smiles darkly. “I see you’ve shed the lie of weakness.”

“It wasn’t a lie. You still have four hostages.”

“I doubt that very much. You told our dear Spinner to save Yaoyorozu and so he will.”

“Why aren’t you angry?”

“Because you’re willing to accept their deaths for victory. The Pussycats mean nothing to you, but the girl is important to you. Letting them die is a lesser evil for a greater good. It is what I would do in your position.”

“What do you fucking expect me to do? I can’t save everyone. I know that. So, tell me how. Tell me how and I’ll do it.”

“There is little chance to save them,” All For One says gently. “If you attempt to save them, I or one of the Vanguard will see to their deaths. If you go near them, your collar will set theirs off. Attempting to save the Pussycats will kill young Yaoyorozu and you will not risk that.”

“I hate you.”

“Your feelings don’t matter. This is another lesson. You cannot save everyone no matter how hard you try, and some lives are worth less than others.”

“Why? What purpose does it serve?”

“Toshinori would never accept that outcome. And yet, you do, against every ideal your mentor holds. Sometimes, one life is worth a dozen more.”

“I want to be a hero.”

The villain shrugs, uncaring of Izuku’s desires. Why should a tidal wave care for those in its path? When has a hurricane ever stopped in its tracks to consider the destruction it causes?

All For One circles Japan calmly, something about Kitami drawing this interest. “This is where we are,” he says, tapping a spot in Yokohama. “The assault will begin tonight. In many ways, it already has. Will you indulge my whims one last time?”

Izuku shrugs. All For One is a dead man walking. It doesn’t matter what it costs, Izuku will see to it that he dies.

“One last conversation.”

“We spoke of fears before. Do you know what your greatest fear is, my boy?”

Izuku sighs. “I don’t. That I’ll be trapped in my own madness. That this is all just a mental construct I’ve been reliving every day for the last few months. That I’ll cause my mother’s death. Maybe I was just born to end the world.”

“Those are all genuine fears. But they aren’t the one you hold deepest. You will never be a villain, but you will also never be a hero.”
Izuku bares his teeth, a threat and a promise balanced on the sharp edge of his fangs. “I will.”

“No, because you can’t be a hero and change society at the same time. You abhor corruption, yet the heroics industry is run by a corrupt government. You loathe this system of monetary gain for heroes and the power they receive as a result. Most of all, you despise the indifference to the common man the government and Imperial Family hold. The goal deepest in your soul is that you wish to change society for the better.”

“That’s not…” the words die away.

To deny them is to deny the most fundamental truth. To refute that point is to argue away the existence of Izuku Midoriya. To so much as manipulate them is to destroy the image of himself.

_He speaks the truth. Saving the forgotten is the pillar of your soul, brother._

“And you cannot be a hero if you wish to change society,” All For One continues, as dark as space and just an inevitable. “Being a hero means maintaining society. It means doing the same as your mentor and perpetuating injustice.”

“He does that only because you’re here.”

“You’re angry because you know I’m telling the truth. Toshinori is a powerful man, but he does not seek change as you do. He does not seek a world in which your father and your teachers and the Royals are unnecessary. Just as he is not Nana Shimura, you are not All Might. He wishes to maintain the present. You wish to drag the entire world kicking and screaming to the future you desire. In the deepest recesses of your soul, the place you hide your greatest secrets and shame, that hidden vault is where your greatest fear lay.”

All For One leans forward, a predator watching his prey.

“You fear that to be a hero is to betray all that you stand for. But, in choosing to stand for what you believe in, you must betray all that your mentor stands for. Your greatest fear, my dear boy, is that you must betray either yourself or your mentor to have a future.”

Izuku’s teeth are gritted so hard that one breaks and slices the inside of his cheek. His body shakes with rage and grief and denial.

“You’re—I… I’m not…”

He fails to form any denial. To do so is to deny himself in his entirety. When has Sensei ever spoken a lie?

_You’ve lost, totally and fully. I am so, so sorry for what you will become._

“An old panther once told me that it is hard for a good man to be a good king,” Sensei says delicately as a knife on a jugular ready to spill red arterial blood.

“Izuku Midoriya, your name is already known to the world. If you continue down this path, if you choose revolution over your mentor’s heroism, then you will have to oppose Japan, and then the world. You will need to learn the cold calculus of revolution, the nature of the Great Game and the laws of power. Just as you bathed your hands red with Muscular’s blood as the lesser evil, there will be many others who oppose you to death. It will be heroes who see you tearing down their society that battle you. It will be the military watching you dismantle their power that will aim their rifles at you. You must learn to compromise with those you hate if it means another day of peace. If a compromise is unacceptable, you will need to use the tools of war. This is the path you
He forces his jaw to loosen enough to hiss, “I’ll oppose you every step of the way.”

Sensei chuckles darkly as clouds pregnant with a coming storm that will flood a city. “I know you shall. You have the will to stand against everything you see wrong with this world. You have the intelligence to make the plan that will kill me and the physical strength to match blows with me. You are the perfect successor. How delightful that Toshinori would groom you so perfectly.”

*Remember brother, All Might claimed to know your greatest fear and he chose you anyway.*

“I’ll never be you.”

“No, of course not,” Sensei says, indignant. “I don’t want a clone. You’ll surpass me just as you will surpass Toshinori. And you'll do so by making a world where neither of us is necessary. You’ll make a world where brothers aren’t forced to fight. You’ll make a world where a child isn’t given a legacy of death and betrayal.”

“It won’t be a world you like. I promise you that.”

“You’ll make a world where a little girl in a sunflower dress doesn’t have to suffer.” Sensei smiles cruelly. “If you make that world, know that you make me proud. Goodbye, my boy. It was a pleasure to teach you.”

That, of course, is when the base starts shaking.

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Shuichi Iguchi knows what is happening the moment the base shakes. The attack has begun and if someone knew, they didn’t bother informing him on the matter. Right now, he isn’t certain if the other members of the Vanguard are still in the base. It’s telling that he has no idea if his team has abandoned him or not.

*They’re not my team,* he thinks bitterly, rising from his seat. *They haven’t been for a while.*

He wears his armour quickly and retrieves his sword alongside the knapsack with a false ID, hard currency, and contact details to people who can get him out of the country.

It is time to make a choice. This is the most important choice Shuichi will ever make in his life. Does he side with Tomura or does he side with Izuku Midoriya?

It is madness that this is even a choice. Shuichi is a villain dedicated to the destruction of heroics as is Tomura. They both loathe the society they live in. Shuichi joined the League because this seemed the best way to see Stain’s ideals of a better society.

And yet, hadn’t Stain entrusted Izuku with the future?

Deep in his heart, he fears the choice was made long ago. When had things changed? He can’t tell, but he does know that he isn’t a member of the Vanguard, isn’t really a villain and maybe never was. And even if he is, someone is willing to forgive him and grant him a second chance. That, more than anything, is enough.

*Momo’s next. She walks free next.*

That had been Izuku Midoriya’s declaration on the day the boy, Kouta, had left. Now, it seems less
He grits his teeth and shoulders his bag, leaving his room. He heads to the other side of the facility, glad that they’re underground as the shaking intensifies. No one is there to impede his path thankfully.

Momo’s room is easy enough to unlock. When he enters, he finds it empty.

“No,” he snarls.

There aren’t many places she could be. If it was another Vanguard, they would head to one of the rally points, likely the one on the lowest level. Kurogiri is supposed to evacuate them should it come to that.

He sprints through the base, heart racing as he thinks of possibilities. Maybe she’s dead and there’s nothing he can do about it. He pauses at an intersection, hearing raised voices. They sound young, too young to be villains.

He risks a glance and finds a group of children huddled in discussion. They’re going to come this way given enough time. This is the only way to get to the Pussycats.

The lights flicker then go dark. Shuichi takes that opportunity to move, hidden by the darkness. He keeps his steps light because that isn’t a fight he wants to deal with.

The rally point is the lowest room in the compound, nothing more than a concrete slab with dozens of support pillars. He finds it silent and cold, his breath misting despite it being summer. Cautiously, he steps amongst the darkness of the pillars as he searches for her.

There, he thinks and runs forward.

The girl is still. For a moment, he fears the worst. This child is his best hope for redemption and survival. Sometimes, he wakes from nightmares of Izuku threatening them all with death and struggling so hard to find forgiveness. In those dreams, it’s always burning green eyes and teeth that chew through planets.

Then she breathes, giving him hope.

Deftly, he unties her. His fingers don’t shake. He’s been in one too many high-stakes situations for that to happen.

Clack.

Clack.

Clack.

Footsteps. Shuichi throws a knife in the direction of the footsteps, taking up a defensive stance. His sword is light in his hands and the weight comfortable. Familiar. He misses his larger weapon but that one was unwieldy.

He likes the concept of a weapon with a lot of reach. Maybe a spear, he thinks as the person comes into view, flipping his throwing knife.

“What are you planning, dear Shuichi?” Compress asks calmly, leaning against a pillar. “I had my suspicions that you would turn. Lima Syndrome. I’ve seen the symptoms before. He had you from
the very beginning.”

Shuichi raises his blade. “Are you going to stop me?”

He doesn’t like his odds. Compress is fast, blindingly so, and if he touches Shuichi then it’s game over.

“I don’t have to win,” Compress says. “Just stall long enough for Magne and Toga to get here. The odds aren’t in your favour.”

He grips the handle of his sword tighter, sweat slicking the rough grip. That means the only real option is to fight and win.

“I won’t hesitate.”

Compress huffs. “You will. You’ve never killed anyone. Tell me why you betrayed us.”

“Because this isn’t what Stain would have wanted. This war is madness and you’re crazy if you think this ends well.”

Compress merely observes him with that disquieting mask that gives away nothing.

“I have a gift for you,” Compress says warmly. “Or make that two gifts.”

Shuichi tenses. It could be anything.

The villain raises his hand, showing off two marbles. “Our dear friends, Toga and Magne. Would you like to get them out?”

He takes a step back, startled. “What?”

“A little boy that you kidnapped and held hostage is trusting you to rescue his friend. I think maybe there’s a reason he has that faith in you. I’d ask Kurogiri but there’s no guarantee he has any interest in anyone but Shigaraki.”

This could be a trap to make him lower his guard. There’s no way to verify those marbles or their contents.

“Why are you giving them to me?”

“No one will look for you. Misdirection is a magician’s greatest trick,” Compress says, walking past a pillar.

When he reappears, a second later, he looks completely different. Gone are the magician’s clothes. Instead, he looks like a boring man in a hoodie. The change is so shocking that Shuichi nearly drops his sword.

“Why are you trusting me?”

“Because you’re a good person and good people are predictable. Do this as your final act as a Vanguard. Do this as one moment of loyalty for those you’re going to betray.”

Shuichi growls. “You were planning on getting rid of me a long time ago.”

“No, we weren’t. Loyalty for loyalty. But you were never loyal to the cause.” The shabby looking man glares at him, eyes a bottomless black.
“Why did you do this?”

“I’m a performer,” Compress says, shrugging. “This is the greatest piece of stagecraft I’ve taken part in and the entire world is watching. I made it happen by taking Midoriya. And if I get away with it, well, they’ll remember me forever in certain circles. This is my myth that I’m making.”

Compress approaches him slowly, hands raised peaceably.

“Do this yourself,” Shuichi says, taking one step to cover Momo.

“I can’t. There are people I care about that I need to find first. I can’t risk dying with these marbles beforehand.”

Compress flicks his hand. Shuichi catches the marbles in one hand, the other still keeping his sword ready. He doesn’t look away from Compress.

“What will you do?”

“Meet up with Tomura eventually. We’ll find the marbles and then we’ll vanish.” He clicks his fingers. “Just like that. What do you say?”

He sets his blade down. “Where?”

“The hill we started this war on. It’ll make for a fun story to tell in a stage far away from Japan.”

Shuichi frowns but he gets no sense of malice from Compress. Maybe a hint of madness, but who doesn’t have that.

He takes the girl in his arms. “Fine,” he snarls.

Compress is already gone when he looks up. Shuichi shakes his head. But maybe Compress did give him an unspoken gift.

Shuichi sets aside the red cloth and the eye-wraps. They are too much like Stain, too much a reminder of blindly following without thought. But giving them up seems like a betrayal as well.

He wraps them around one arm and heads through the base once more.

Izuku is being kept in one of the more secure areas. Shuichi moves quickly because things are blowing up, spewing clouds of smoke everywhere.

He stops right by the boy’s door, nervous only until he hears another explosion. He opens the door, ready for what may be.

Izuku is tied to his chair, looking calm but incredibly tired as well. He looks up to Shuichi as though this is everything he expected. The boy merely raises his head and offers a tiny smile, nothing dangerous about it in the slightest.

“Have you made your choice?”

The answer is obvious, evident by the girl in his arms, but sometimes things need to be said.

“Yes.”

“Tell me your reasons,” Izuku commands, the final test of Shuichi’s loyalty.

"I believe Stain was right. But his methods were wrong. I believe your methods will succeed where
he failed.” Shuichi nods towards the girl. “We must hold all who would call themselves a hero to a higher standard, that of perfection. I believe you’ll find some means of perfection.”

Izuku smiles, eyes wide. There is something so unbearably kind and compassionate in that smile that it crushes Shuichi.

“Dylan Salvatore. You’ve started thinking for yourself.”

“Only after you manipulated me.”

Izuku shrugs. “It was my only gambit. I had to hope there was a good and decent person beneath the villain. I’m glad I was right.”

Shuichi swallows. “Do you think there’s a future for me? They’ll come after me no matter what I’ve done.”

“Then why are you doing this?”

“Because you’re worthy of my loyalty,” he admits. “I’m willing to follow you. It’s stupid and crazy, but I have faith in you.”

“If you follow the path I set, then I’ll fight the world for you. You will be my first disciple, Shuichi Iguchi.”

That word sends a shiver down his spine. It is a promise built on darkness and madness, a power that he can’t hope to comprehend.

“Thank you for giving me a chance. Thank you for saving me.”

His… master smiles. There is nothing monstrous about it.

“You saved yourself when you chose to be better. Now go, I have a villain to kill.”

The ground rumbles and Izuku’s chair nearly tips over. His newfound master flexes his muscles. In a shower of green sparks, the chair and restraints shatter, and he stands, rolling his shoulder.

“You’re gonna go to my home. It’ll be protected. If you see a woman, tell her that Mikumo would have wanted me to be a hero. And if it’s a man, tell him his ceiling is my floor.”

Shuichi stares at him curiously. “I’ll do it.”

“Stay safe. Goodspeed, Disciple.”

Shuichi nods and watches Izuku Midoriya walk away, head held high and power in every step that. Green lightning trails the footsteps of the boy he’s chosen to entrust his future. It makes him smile.

Somehow, knowing that Izuku will fight for him is as good as having God on your side.

With a teenage girl in his hands, Shuichi leaves the base. He leaves the Vanguard and his short-lived life as a villain in the rubble of a collapsing base.

*****

Enji Todoroki is prepared for the coming battle. There is a chance he will die this day, but he has long since accepted his eventual death. And, if it means destroying the League of Villains, he will fight to the death.
Most importantly, Toshinori—and how odd is it to call him a friend now?—has placed his trust in Enji to battle the villain whilst he rescues the boy he considers a son. This isn’t something he ever expected a year ago.

Now though, he is willing to trust All Might to finish this battle if nothing else. And, if Enji goes down in a glorious blaze, then maybe that will be enough to earn forgiveness.

*I love you, Rei,* he thinks, flinging a burning spear at a villain.

The greatest difficulty is in dealing with the erratic movements of the villains. One moment they are attacking from the safety of the upper levels just before Enji sends a flare of fire towards them. The next, they’ve been warped just behind the soldiers accompanying them.

Enji must trust in Hawks to provide overwatch and make sure they aren’t ambushed. He needs to trust Edgeshot’s intel is accurate and up to date.

Most of all, he must be the leader they all look up to. He can’t take a single blow, or it will demoralise the entire assault team. Every attack must be lethal, and he can never miss.

*Shouto, take care of your family. You’re a man now.*

A portal opens, heralding a new wave of enemies. The most threatening, however, is one of the Nomu. This one has a long neck and its face is hidden by a hood made of skin.

He lets fire surround his fists, prepared to battle this creature and its allies. After All Might, he is the most powerful hero in Japan. In another life, maybe if he hadn’t set aside his ambitions for his family, he might one day have equalled All Might.

Securing a world where the power of God wasn’t inherited by a hate-filled child was more important.

“Go!” Hawks snaps. “We’ll be fine. Hold him off and wait for us.”

They both know there’s little chance of Enji’s survival. If All Might, the greatest hero of their era, a man whose physical capabilities make him unbeatable, fears this man, then there is little chance of Enji making it out alive.

But what choice do they have?

He nods and sets forward. He extends his arms and lets hellfire surround them. Then he flings them forward, an incandescent beam of fire and death dispersing the enemies.

Enji sprints through the devastation, trusting in Hawks and the others to provide cover. He slams through a wall then another, leaving the battle behind. With his eyes, he can see the trails of light and fading fires. There is one greater than all the rest, a magnificent fire more like a volcano ready to erupt. It can belong only to one person.

*Let’s see if you’re worthy of your title.*

With one flaming fist, Enji shatters the door and walks to what may be his final battle.

*****

All For One sits in the darkness of his map room. The screens are off for the first time since he started using this base. It has served him well, but he no longer needs to know the state of the war.
Why should he care about a war that he has already won?

With one perception enhancing quirk, he tracks the assault on his base. There are two major groups, one led by heroes attacking from the front and harried by a legion of Nomu and villains. The other, smaller group, is occupied in the depths of his base, battling the Vanguard and a small smattering of villains. That smaller group is most likely the children that call Izuku Midoriya a friend.

Four lives fade all at once, likely the Pussy Cats and a student. Then he feels someone die a few seconds later. He checks the vital monitors of each Vanguard. Dabi’s have faded. Not a loss of any importance.

Tomura might mourn his passing, but Sensei won't.

“Kurogiri,” he calls.

All For One waits a few minutes before his right-hand man materialises. Kurogiri’s suit is ripped and scuffed, splattered in blood and stained by other fluids.

“We can’t hold out any longer.”

“I suppose it’s time,” All For One says. “You’ve done well, Kurogiri. You gave me the time I needed to win. Evacuate with the remaining humans. The Nomu will serve as a distraction. And see to it that Midoriya is teleported to the depths of the base.”

“Understood.”

He gestures to the box on the table, not caring that his facility is under attack. “That box contains the data drives of the League. It is time for my successor to take them and decide the future.”

“The League was meant to be Tomura's.”

“The League was intended for my successor,” he says bluntly in reproach. “Tomura was just another candidate as were you and Gigantomachia. Do not fear. I will not leave you without direction. Tomura is your primary objective. I can only trust someone who loves him as a son to execute this order. Your primary goal is to make sure he dies old and happy, surrounded by those he loves. Secondly, follow my successor as you would me. And finally, do not go after Spinner. He is my successor’s first disciple.”

Kurogiri nods solemnly. “You don’t intend on returning.”

He considers that.

The heroes and soldiers won’t be a problem for him to face. They will all die simply because Sensei wills it. But All Might is the true threat. He won’t be here in time to save any of the heroes, but he may arrive when Sensei is at his weakest.

It will be a hard fight, perhaps the most difficult of his life. But the stakes are too high, and the deck firmly stacked against him.

“I very well may, but I have won the ultimate victory. Now I must set the stage for him. I will kill the greatest heroes so that none may oppose him. I will show the world the ultimate villain so that he will not have to bear the hate of the common people. When he fights, they will see a man battling against a society that could let this war happen.”
“You’re going to martyr yourself.”

“Yes, I suppose you could call it that. I always wanted to be a saint.”

“Every saint has a name.”

All For One huffs in amusement. “I suppose you’ve earned the right.”

For the first time in centuries, he utters a name forgotten to time. He says the name he was born to centuries ago, the name his mother christened him by long before being a villain was even an idea.

Today, on this day, he says a name last spoken after his fateful battle with his brother.

And when he has spoken that name, he says, “Do keep it a secret.”

“It was an honour to serve you. I would stand with you till the very end.”

All For One laughs, genuinely amused and perhaps a bit warm. “A long time ago I promised I would kill All Might in exchange for your loyalty. I don’t mean to break that promise.”

Kurogiri opens a warp gate. His friend and loyal servant bows to the waist in supplication. This is the first time Kurogiri has ever bowed to him, and only the second time he has shown his loyalty like this.

“I will always be loyal to you and your legacy.” Kurogiri rises. “You are the man I respected the most.”

Of all his subordinates in the last two centuries, Kurogiri truly is the finest.

He lays a hand on Kurogiri’s shoulder, neutralising his mist quirk with one of his own. He grips Kurogiri’s flesh shoulder and squeezes it tight.

“I’m glad I could call you my friend.” All For One smiles. “Go, now. Take care and live a long life with your son. Should the worst come to pass, and if there is an afterlife, then know I will watch over your family.”

He pushes his friend through the warp gate. Kurogiri vanishes, leaving All For One alone in the room.

He takes his time preparing and setting things to right. A dozen messages, final contingencies for this very eventuality, are sent to agents across the world. He gives an order for the VIVA to pull back from their fights with the Royal Guard and consolidate their forces. A message here and a message there tells agents in Brazil and Switzerland and every other country he influences to decentralise.

Finally, to every member of his network, he sends one last message set to delete after it is played.

“For the better part of a century and a half, I have been called the Strongest Man Alive. Today, I will show you why. Eyes up. If you call yourself a villain, then stand tall and never bend your back. You are stronger than you think. There is no hero more powerful than you. Show no fear and always be strong. Remember that we are patient. Remember that we endure. And when we are ready, we strike, even if only to destroy the weakness within us. Tonight, I will show you the meaning of power. Tomorrow, remember my strength. Remember my glory. Hold it tight to your heart and make your own future.”
When his message is recorded and sent, he walks to the wall. It slides aside, revealing a groove large enough for one item. It is a suit he has never worn, kept specifically for this day.

Slowly, with meticulous care, he wears it as one hero heads deeper into his base, tearing their way through doors and barriers. The suit fits the contours of his body, designed to accommodate the latest collection of quirks he has and provide some layer of armour.

He straightens the cuffs just as the door blows open in a wave of fire.

With a quick surge of power, the fire disperses before it can reach him.

Endeavour walks through the smoke, grim-faced and wreathed in his fire. Every step melts the floor beneath and there is no indication of arrogance on his face.

This is a man who has come to die.

He activates an infrared quirk to supplement his eyesight and layers that with another perception quirk. With those quirks, he can accurately pinpoint the children nearby, hidden by a few walls. They will be the only ones safe from his power.

This may be his first fight in a decade and his instincts may be slow. He may have dozens of tiny injuries from two centuries of battle. He may be old and weary of life. But there is one fact he knows, one fact that Endeavour must know.

“You are not ready to stand on this stage,” All For One warns, his voice gentle as the eye of a storm, the final bastion of protection before death.

“You’re scum,” Endeavour says, his flames surging and melting the concrete. “You’ll die today.”

All For One is willing to accept his determination no matter how futile it will be.

Sensei gather his strength. With a single, glorious punch, he shatters the wall behind Endeavour.

The force of the blow sends the hero flying outside and tears through the walls on either side. The pressure front is like a freight train, tearing through walls and, based on the sudden cold spot, Shouto Todoroki’s ice barrier.

With measured steps, he follows the hero outside.

The night air is warm, clammy almost. The sounds of battle fill the air as the other heroes face the remaining Nomu, High-End leading the final defence. They’re all fighting to All For One’s left, protected by buildings and warehouses.

It takes him a moment to find Endeavour. The hero is hidden by a pile of rubble. After a moment, a flaming fist shatters the wave of rubble and Endeavour stands.

He extends his arms wide.

“Show me your power, Endeavour. Show me the futility of your resolve.”

Endeavour roars and flings his arms out. A gout of fire bright as the sun lights up the dark. All For One scoffs in annoyance and bats aside the fire as though it is an errant concern.

“I said show me your power, boy.” He cracks his neck. “I’ll give you another chance and if you fail to impress me, I’ll kill your son first.”
It is a false threat, but maybe there is just a tiny shred of compassion in Endeavour. Maybe, just maybe, he’s not the sort of scum who doesn’t care about his child.

Endeavour falls still. And then the flames around him explode outward, a beacon of scorching power that reaches towards the sky. It is a pillar of pure heat and fire, a signal flare to the entire world.

The hero stands in the middle of his wasted power, eyes narrowed, and hands raised towards the sky. Then the fire coalesces towards his hands, the tower becoming a tiny sphere of compressed energy that glows brighter and brighter.

Then Sensei feels the change in the air, smells the ash of the burnt dead and the wails of the eternally damned. It sends a chill down his spine as, for a moment, he hears the rage of all those he has killed, millions upon millions calling for his death.

The fire condenses down to a single point. Then he feels the air become heavy and dry as Endeavour summons reserves of power.

_Hm, I wonder if I underestimated him._

He knows exactly what’s about to happen. Condensed energy attacks are nothing new. All that matters is how strong Endeavour proves himself.

The wave of fire is magnificent, a tidal wave of concentrated destruction a hundred metres wide. The temperature spikes so high that it blinds him. He can smell the melting concrete and the ozone of ions being stripped from the air.

This is the power that makes Endeavour the number two hero. It is the power that terrifies any who would invade Japan. There is no doubt that he could face an army alone.

It is not enough. It can never be enough. The power to face an army only makes him worthy of mild consideration.

He brings forth the second most powerful quirk he has ever wielded and raises his fist. The air seems to shatter as he gathers his strength.

With a mighty roar, he slams his fist forward.

Force and vibrations travel through the air, a stormfront of inexorable power to stand against the flames of hell. The two powers battle. The acrid flames of hell against his unstoppable vibration quirk.

This power is comparable to the quirk that gained him the title of Walking Nuke, the quirk that aided him in destroying Tianjin and a large swathe of South Sudan. He remembers his fight with an Emperor a century ago and the cataclysmic battle that shook an island and completely reformed the landmass. He remembers being pushed to the point of using his third and final charge of that quirk to eliminate the Emperor's Guard.

This quirk he wields now is the spoils of that battle, stolen from the dying body of the Emperor of that time. It is a worthy prize, one more versatile than the last.

The flames disperse, overwhelmed by Sensei's quirk. The air shimmers from the leftover heat and he swears he can hear the dead howling in agony.

Casually, he wipes the dust off his shoulder.
“Did you think it would be so easy?”

He savours the slow horror on Endeavour. It is the horror of knowing one of your ultimate moves, something you have developed and refined for years, has yielded no results.

The horror disappears suddenly, and only grim determination remains.

*Good. Make this fun.*

Endeavour is, however, nothing short of adaptive. He may not have the pure strength to match Sensei, but he does use his fire to make each punch a rocket.

Endeavour attacks relentlessly, attacking one spot over and over again. It makes him mildly predictable as All For One has seen this methodology countless times.

But he’s never seen it from the greatest pyrokinetic he’s ever met.

All For One steps past a burning fist and moves to grab it. A spike of fire immediately emerges from the fist and would stab All For One straight through the hand if not for his metal strengthening quirk that activates.

Endeavour twists, a long whip of fire coalescing in his free hand.

He activates his vibration quirk, blasting away the whip. All For One steps forward, past Endeavour’s guard, and punches him in the chest.

Endeavour rises through the air, his face a rictus of pain.

The hero masters his pain at the apex of his arc and generates a pair of whips. He swings them down, burning lines of hellfire capable of melting through buildings.

All For One activates his quirk and annihilates the attack with a wave of force. The fire flares instead of dispersing, leaving him blind for a moment, and regretting using an infrared quirk.

The next moment, he sees a dozen lances of fire heading his way. He dances around the first few, cursing the slowness age and injury have imposed when one sears his right thigh. It will slow him down a fraction. Not much but enough to possibly be a problem later.

And then he notices Endeavour falling from the sky, a flaming comet of destruction.

The hero slams against All For One in a cataclysmic blow. An eruption of heat and flame spreads out from the impact.

All For One grits his teeth, feeling his body sink through the concrete. Endeavour intensifies the output of his flames, pushing Sensei deeper and deeper into the earth until his knees are trapped by concrete.

*This is getting annoying.*

He searches through his catalogue of quirks and finds a kinetic redirection quirk. For a moment, he considers that one that lets him fuck with the laws of thermodynamics but decides that will make the fight boring.

The quirk activates. Every iota of kinetic force Endeavour generates is suddenly redistributed in every direction. The blast wave frees Sensei and sends the hero flying away. It is so powerful that he hears the building behind him creak and groan.
He steps out of the crater slowly, listening to the whine of the camera drones observing the battlefield. No doubt every news feed is clogged with footage and commentary on the fight.

“Do you know who I am, boy?”

Endeavour rises from his kneel. “A villain just like the rest.”

He flings his arm to the side and a row of buildings collapses instantly, crashing down to the ground just as Endeavour’s determination will crash down.

“No, not like the rest,” he says darkly. “I am the pinnacle of strength. Show me your worth.”

This time, Sensei goes on the offensive. He wades through a gout of flame unflinching, metal skin granting him protection.

He slaps Endeavour with the back of his hand. The hero slams into the ground but rolls with the impact, rising and flinging fire.

Sensei bats the flames up and away, finding himself disappointed. Perhaps his standards are skewed from seeing the likes of Hero battle and even witnessing Toshinori’s strength, but Endeavour is rather pathetic.

His attacks are uninspired, his defence shaky at best. The number two hero is just a well of untapped potential.

*What could you have been if your ambition hadn’t died with your children?*

That thought makes Sensei rage. Having children is no excuse for weakness. Being a terrible father as well makes it less of an excuse.

“Get up, boy,” he demands after having sent the hero into another crater. “You will fall and fail today. All that matters is the strength you show before the end.”

A chill crawls down his neck, not of fear, but merely of perception. Someone wants him very, very dead.

He activates his vibration quirk and sends it through the ground and towards his base. With a tremendous crash, the base collapses, stalling the heroes within. Maybe it will kill one or two as well. Hopefully, it will slow Izuku.

Endeavour spits blood and rolls his shoulders. The flames around him calm from the wild inferno, compressing until they are a uniform layer of fire around him. The hero slides into a fighting stance.

“How about you give it your best shot?”

All For One is more than willing to oblige.

This is when the battle truly begins. He keeps his abilities simple: raw strength to overwhelm, metal to protect and his vibration quirk to disperse powerful attacks.

For an entire minute, he simply punches through Endeavour’s defences. He slides around uninspired fire attacks and retaliates with ease.

Then it happens. Endeavour slides around one of Sensei’s blows and makes a counterattack. It misses, yes, but the fact that he could impresses Sensei.
Something changes the longer they battle. Each block Endeavour makes becomes more precise and he shifts between offence and defence faster and faster till they are the same thing, one blow flowing into a block flowing into a blazing sword slash flowing into a wall of fire.

_Is this all it took for you to surpass your limits? An enemy stronger than you?_

All For One catches Endeavour’s fist in his left hand. And nearly screams in pain.

There are three long claws protruding through his hand. Already, Endeavour moves to capitalise on his split-second of hesitance with a burning fist.

All For One takes the fist straight to his face, feeling his defence crack slightly. He snarls before slamming his head forward and striking Endeavour across the nose.

It dazes the hero and gives All For One the time to crush Endeavour’s hand beneath his fist.

_You could have been glorious, All For One_ thinks, kicking the hero away. _Show me the limit of your power so that I can crush your hope._

Before he can take a step forward, a dozen lances of fire slice through the air. All For One sighs, disappointed. He doesn’t bother doing more than step aside.

Endeavour keeps on flinging waves of fire, regardless that they aren’t effective. Everything around him catches fire. He watches as the flames rise higher and higher, consuming the air and wood and concrete and everything in their path.

All For One cocks his head because that’s not how normal fire behaves.

The streams of fire coalesce into a net around AFO, perhaps a hundred metres wide and just as tall. They burn with hate and loathing and death, so thick it makes AFO genuinely surprised Endeavour has this level of strength already.

He doesn’t understand what Endeavour does with the air current… _No, he's moving the air currents by manipulating regions of high temperature._

The level of fine control to funnel new and fresh oxygen to the burning strands of the net, to make them burn hotter and hotter until they can scorch any material, is astounding. Not only that, the air within the net is being sucked up by those temperature gradients.

The trap is twofold. The heat of the net to keep him in position and the direction of air flow creating a vacuum to choke All For One. It is magnificent in its simplicity and devastating because of the control Endeavour possesses.

What amazes him most is that he’s never heard rumours or whisper of this technique. Simply practising it would have been impossible to hide. Which means this technique, this ability that Sensei admires for its ingenuity and skill and raw power, is something Endeavour came up with on the spot.

It is the crystallization of Endeavour, the perfection of his varied powers. It is magnificent and worthy of respect. This is the power of a man who has broken past his limits and ascended to new heights of power.

Sadly, he has already stolen a quirk to send Endeavour plummeting to the depths of irrelevance.

He draws on the power of the wind, on the quirk of Aizawa's former student. It is the strongest
wind quirk he has seen since Stormwind and he barely has any control over it. But it lets him feel the air currents. It lets him grasp the air and send it the opposite direction.

Scorching hot air suddenly flows away from All For One. It seems to catalyse as the net expands, straining against the bonds Endeavour imposes upon it.

The net explodes outward suddenly, a wave of heat that will consume everything in its path.

It is a churning and roiling mass of hellfire, and somehow, he knows deep in his soul that anything burnt by this will be erased from existence in its entirety. Including the children that he’s kept safe this entire battle.

He generates a rotating disc of wind around their position. He doesn’t have the fine control to make this gentle, so he simply flings the cocoon away at high speed. They will likely survive with Endeavour’s son amongst them.

He is many things, but he no longer can count himself a child murderer. For a few more minutes at least. Besides, he may as well leave his successor’s friends intact. No reason to be needlessly cruel.

The wave of flame chews through everything indiscriminately. It consumes metal and concrete and all the oxygen in the air, leaving nothing but scorched earth.

Endeavour falls defeated, utterly and completely, by his own trap. Half his body is burnt black by the flames, but the other half is perfectly fine.

Sensei isn’t certain how Endeavour survived that attack. He checks his watch. *Seven minutes.*

“Commendable,” he says, willing to respect Endeavour for this singular act of defiance if never for anything else. “You are ready to stand on this stage. Live, and show the world your strength once more.”

He flexes his wind quirk to the upper limit of his range, about five kilometres by his estimate. He plucks the streams of air, spins high pressure against low pressure, and creates a very sudden hurricane.

He lets his other quirks fade as he focuses on this one act. Creating two hurricanes at once is far beyond his control. But he is smart enough to make two from one. He forms a single high-pressure wall, breaking the perfect circle of the hurricane. All For One widens that pressure front along the arc of the circle until he is left with two-thirds of a circle.

Then he splits it, folding the high-pressure front to envelop the two hurricanes and send them in opposing direction to wreak additional havoc. Perhaps it is spiteful, but he hopes it slows Izuku down further.

This is the first time he truly has used the quirk. He can only imagine its potential, nowhere close to the realm of Stormwind, but perhaps one day it will also be whispered in the same breath.

This will be his final gift to his successor. One he thinks is fitting. Perhaps, he can become a sovereign of the sky.

He sees the flash of light and only his advanced perception quirks prevent him from dying. It is a bar of hardlight, the power Izanami of the Royal Guard wields. She is perhaps the best suited to deal with him. The power to strike faster than he can pull up one his quirks.

It is good that he has dozens prepared just in case.
In the space between understanding the threat and formulating a counter, he is already in the air from her first blow. By the time he selects a quirk, his body is assaulted by dozens of hardlight beams, each feeling like a jackhammer.

A metal sheen coats his body, deflecting the beams of light. It tears through buildings due to its new path and even crosses one of the hurricanes.

She fires blasts of hardlight, an endless deluge that he can’t keep track off. But he has the laws of physics on his side.

With the metal sheen, she can’t harm him any further. She may be fast and her attacks powerful, but they are subject to the laws of physics. Light reflects and right now, his body is covered in a perfectly reflective skin.

That initial attack had been her only chance to win. Should have gone for the head, he thinks, amused, because they always make that mistake.

He activates his vibration quirk in every direction, a sudden bubble of force transmitted through the air. Then he sees her a kilometre away before he’s being attacked by more hardlight.

She tests his patience. He can't hit her when she is in her light form, but neither can she hurt him. What she can do, however, is stall him until the heroes arrive. And if they manage to hold the line for a long enough time, he’ll have to face All Might as well.

Not impossible given that Endeavour has been… He scans the area and finds Endeavour missing. Did she retrieve him?

“I’m going to destroy the Villa right now,” he threatens, summoning his quirk.

The air around him shatters and he lets his malevolence bubble forth. It weighs heavily, a physical declaration of his presence and might.

She materialises before him, a knife in hand. “The Royal lines will survive.”

He smirks. “You think I don’t know of your bunkers in what remains of Taiwan. I can still give the order for them to be destroyed.”

Her features don’t change. Then she’s gone in a burst of light.

He’s not foolish enough to think she’s fled.

She has only one true weakness. Her quirk lets her become light and move as fast, but she retains none of the momentum when she becomes corporeal. She can’t bring to bear the kinetic energy of her squared velocity. He knows this because the earth still stands and isn’t annihilated by the atomic explosion a person moving that fast would generate.

So, he isn’t surprised when she manifests behind him. He may not be fast enough to have tracked it, but like this, she is nothing more than a standard human.

He lets her stab his arm with her alien blade. Necrosis creeps up his arm as a result of the abyssal blade. It is a small sacrifice to ensure victory.

Instantly, faster even than light, his quirk rushes through his body and up the knife and then to her. The metallic skin covers her instantly.
It is the perfect trap. It may not kill her, but she cannot bring to bear her powers against him. Her light will simply reflect endlessly in the perfectly reflective coffin. And should she become corporeal then she will suffocate.

Just like that, he has eliminated the second greatest threat to his person available to the Emperor.

He stares at his dying arm and activates his regeneration quirk. It is nowhere near as fast as the one he gave the USJ Nomu, but it at least halts the spread of decaying tissue. And even with it like this, he can puppet it and channel his quirks through it.

He chooses to wait. He can afford that luxury. All Might is on the other side of the country, distracted by Gigantomachia. It may not hold him for long, but it will be enough. And even if it fails, Toshinori can’t run half the length of Japan in a few minutes.

He wishes the world to see his power. Floating in the air, he wishes to remind them why every mention of his name has been stricken from the record books, why the alias he used in the past to wage war against the government is hidden in the deepest safes.

He spreads his arms wide, a dark god surveying his ruinous kingdom.

And ruined it is.

Buildings and warehouses have been destroyed by his shockwaves. Countering Endeavour’s quirk has set fire to everything flammable. The only reason the world isn’t aflame is because of the hurricanes he created that are still ripping through the city.

This is not the full extent of the power he wielded in his prime. But it is more than anyone alive has personally seen.

He may not be Titan or Stormwind, may never be able to win against them, but his power makes him a peer amongst legends.

“You children believe yourselves my equal. You believe you can stand against me. You have forgotten my power. You have forgotten my name.”

He lets his malevolence bubble over, an almost physical manifestation of two centuries worth of hate and power and cruelty. It freezes Hawks who stands foremost amongst his enemies now that Endeavour has fallen.

“I have seen empires rise and fall. I have shaped history through my strength, fought wars alone and broke nations over my knee. I witnessed Hero's final battle and spoke to Hawkmoon as an equal. What have you children ever achieved?”

Which legend has Hawks defeated to stand before Sensei, a man who breaks legends regularly? What has Shinya Kamihara, that pathetic dress up ninja, achieved compared to Sensei? Who can Crust shield when All For One has destroyed every barrier set before him? When has Yoroi Masha fulfilled impossible oaths for his liege lord? And how dare Ryuko Tatsuma call herself a dragon when she is nothing but the palest and most insignificant imitation of a true dragon?

“Let me remind you.”

He does not care for their attacks.

Hawk’s feathers may be strong and sharp enough to tear through buildings, but Sensei can catch them with his wind quirk. He flings those captured feathers towards Crust who hastily erects a
barrier to protect himself.

It gives him the time to meet Ryuko’s massive blow. He catches her clawed arms with one hand and activates five strength quirks at once. He clenches his fist and crushes her arm, scales and bones crumpling like paper.

To her credit, she still has the presence of mind to attack with her hind legs.

Sadly, his left arm is already filled with his drill quirk. He stabs through her scaled torso and takes a moment to observe how the necrosis spreads from his arm to her.

And without a regeneration quirk, there is nothing to slow the spread of decaying tissue as it creeps to her heart.

He drops the dragon hero and lets her crash to the ground, nothing more than a pathetic heap of bones and failure.

Edgeshot and Hawks do not hesitate even with one of their allies dead. He jukes away from Edgeshot’s grief-stricken blow meant to kill without mercy. He blocks Hawk’s feather-sword, surprised when it cuts through his now metallic skin, and draws blood.

Still, he does not worry. He kicks Hawks in a blow that flings the hero aside, probably crushing half his rib cage as well.

His fingers stretch endlessly and stab Edgeshot. He forces the hero’s quirk active, holding Edgeshot against his will as he sharpens to a needle long as a telephone pole.

Like a rocket, Edgeshot streaks through the air and breaks through Crust’s barrier, cutting clean through the shield hero’s chest.

All For One grins as the hero falls. It widens when he notices that Edgeshot will hit one of the hurricanes and die in their winds.

“I am an army unto myself!”

His fists shimmer with power. He can very well destroy Kyushu if he wishes. Once, centuries ago, he very nearly did after slaughtering those responsible for his brother’s ultimate betrayal.

Only a little girl had saved Japan.

They will never know her bravery. They will never know the unshakeable nobility of a single child, weak and defenceless, but willing to stand defiant against him.

These fallen heroes arrayed before him are nothing compared to that child.

Yoroi Musha dashes forward wielding his odachi. His armour clangs with each long stride, each step a memory of samurai long past. His silver sword is a legacy to swordsmanship.

The hero spins and unsheathes his blade in a single perfect swing. In truth, it is three perfect swings all existing at the same time, impossible to dodge.

So, he doesn’t.

With one shining hand, he catches the blade. Then shatters it, savouring the horror in the old hero’s eyes. He turns and uses the hero to shield himself against Hawk’s sharp feathers.
The armoured hero coughs blood. Amazingly, he has the strength to draw his shorter blade and slash it across All For One’s chest.

He clicks in annoyance and crushes the hero’s throat.

Only Hawks remains to battle him, defiant even in the face of death. He is stalling, perhaps waiting for All Might, but more likely hoping for backup from the soldiers All For One senses.

It is a respectable number if his estimate is right. They even have people with quirks trying to tame the hurricanes. They will succeed but only after many more casualties.

He errantly defends against Hawks as he surveys the opposition. He hasn’t seen Japan roll out its tanks in decades nor has he seen hundreds of soldiers mobilised this quickly. The sky seems to be filled with helicopters.

They aren’t foolish enough to give him time to wait. And they are more than willing to kill Hawks as well to stop a walking disaster.

He forms a wall of wind to stop the hail of bullets and rain of missiles. And just to be an asshole, he flings the armaments all the way to the battalion approaching a few kilometres from the vanguard.

He activates a perception quirk. It shows him clusters of life and intent. He finds the ones that match the soldiers shooting at him. There are three large clusters all converging on him, hundreds, perhaps thousands of soldiers, all ready to face Sensei. Foolish.

He raises one glowing fist and grabs the air itself.

“I am the greatest villain!”

With that roar, with that declaration of intent, he brings his fist down and pulls the sky with it.

The sky shatters.

Waves of force materialise above the army and slam into them. Bones and metal frames and helicopter wings are crushed beneath the immensity. They do not have time to understand before they are destroyed by his overwhelming power.

Hawks stares in horror at the shattered army. Thousands are dead, the greatest weapons made by men inconsequential in the face of his strength.

“You monster,” Hawks rages.

He has killed many more without an ounce of regret. These lives will not weigh on him.

The hero twirls in the air. A barrage of feathers slams into All For One. Sensei blocks the first wave of feathers with his metallic skin.

It is when the ground beside him explodes beneath the force of one feather that he realises this is Hawk’s ultimate move.

The feathers come faster and faster, more and more force in them until they are missiles carpet bombing the area more effectively than any piece of modern technology. They very well could kill him.

He layers wind and force and a few other defensive quirks to shield against this power. Even then,
some of them slice through his flesh and one stabs him through the shoulder.

He takes a feather directly to the chest, the force of it pushing him back. It feels like someone taking a sledgehammer and striking his organs directly.

Sensei coughs blood, knowing that another blow like that will bring him to his knees. He doubles on his power, focused more on deflecting the feathers than blocking them.

For a boy of twenty-two, Hawks is more than worthy of his position as a hero.

However, like all things, it ends. The explosions stop and silence returns to the world. Sensei lowers his arms and looks at Hawks as he lands on the ground, his wings stripped of feathers.

In his hands are two feather swords. He holds both in a fighting stance, face grim but determined. His body is littered with dozens of cuts and bruises, his torso a mess of black and purple. Yet, despite that, he stands tall.

All For One inclines his head in acknowledgement.

He has a minor telekinesis quirk, and with it, he summons Yoroi Musha’s broken odachi. Even with it shattered in half, it is still a respectable length. And, it has been so long since Sensei indulged in a good swordfight.

“Your determination is admirable.”

He salutes with his sword and they battle once more.

The level of skill Hawks holds is surprising for one who has not dedicated his life to the sword. His blocks and parries are stiff and un inventive, but they are acceptable. There isn’t anything truly imaginative about his footwork, no fluidity or that spark of brilliance that every natural swordsman has.

All For One is not a swordsman to any degree. But even a minor hobby practised for two centuries can grant mastery.

It isn’t a fair fight by any stretch. Hawks is twenty-two, barely an adult, and holding his own against the greatest villain. With a sweeping blow, he disarms Hawks.

His feather blades clatter to the ground. Hawks lets his hands fall to his side, fingers twitching as though he wants to continue fighting.

Hawks breathes hard, knowing he is defeated, yet he still stands tall and unbowed. He is the last of the heroes still standing and now, knowing death is imminent, he refuses to submit.

He is the embodiment of why Sensei’s methods have failed. Others will see the nobility of his final moments and seek to emulate his actions. These dead heroes will be a rallying call for another generation who will battle Sensei.

It is a seemingly endless cycle that must be broken for a new era to begin. Only his successor holds that power.

“I commend you for surviving this long against me.”

Hawks shrugs, casual to the very end. It is a lie, a point of bravery against imminent death.

“Get it over with, ya hear.”
Perhaps it is that arrogance, that refusal to bow and be conquered that makes Sensei change his mind. Perhaps he’s grown old and soft. Regardless, he does Hawks the honour of a quick and painless death instead of something needless and cruel.

Just like that, six of Japan’s greatest heroes are dead, seven in total defeated. In one single battle, he has completely changed the landscape of heroics. He is injured, yes, but he has fought with a hole in his heart before. Fought and won.

*I’m getting old and slow*, he thinks tiredly. *A decade ago, I would have won without a scratch. A century ago it would have been over in a second.*

The world is watching, judging, and fearing the strength he shows. What was once a single camera drone is now a dozen from every news network and a dozen more private drones. Undoubtedly, they watch him with satellites and planes. Perhaps the observatories are focused on him as well.

They do not remember him but now they are aware of the monster stalking them at night. They will never be able to forget him after this. No, his actions now will forever be immortalised alongside the Great Tyrants.

Sensei closes his eyes, seeing what he must do for the world to change. Everyone alive must hate him. More than that, everyone must hate the society that allowed him to rise. He must do this for his successor.

*Do not forgive me. Do not forget me. What I do, I do for you. I do it willingly and gladly, my boy.*

He raises both hands and grasps the sky once more. All For One grits his teeth and sets his feet in the ground as he summons forth the endless reservoir of his power, of his most powerful quirk.

“All For One grits his teeth and sets his feet in the ground as he summons forth the endless reservoir of his power, of his most powerful quirk."

“All For One grits his teeth and sets his feet in the ground as he summons forth the endless reservoir of his power, of his most powerful quirk."

“Oh, you!”

The very earth fights against him, the stable ground refusing to be moved. All For One does not care. He will move continents for his goals. The earth has no choice but to obey.

“Remember!”

There it is, the line where the vast plates of the earth’s crust meet. The earth screams in protest as he shunts more and more power into it. It will obey for he gives it no option.

“Me!”

His arms strain and his suit sleeves turn to shreds as the sky seems to shatter for miles upon miles on end. The force of a continent-shattering quirk fills the air, permeates the entirety of Japan in an aura of dread and horror.

“Now!”

He pulls the shattered sky down.

Nothing happens for a long second that seems to stretch out forever. That second is filled with dread, with overwhelming malice and the certainty that the world will end. Not in the distant future or through nuclear warfare. No, it is the cruel assurance that the world will end today because one man wills it.

When it happens, no one can claim ignorance.
The world topples, the very bedrock groaning and crying out in pain as it is torn asunder. It is a grating sound, so loud it echoes in blood and bone as the earth heaves against its will, forced to obey the whims of one man.

The ground shatters, cracks that stretch for miles scarring the landscape. They spread like a network of veins, all originating from All For One. They will be the lifeblood of the destruction he causes.

Deep trenches form from those cracks. Magma bubbles up from those endless rips in the earth that seem to last forever.

Building collapses, their foundations destroyed. They slam into the ground, throwing up massive clouds of dust and debris. Some knock into each other before tilting together like lovers falling to their deaths.

He lets his strongest quirk run wild. He lets this cataclysmic quirk destroy without restraint, without empathy for the children and innocent that shall die. Doing this may mean breaking every oath he has followed this last century, but for his successor, it is worth it.

He will become the image people see when they think of a villain. When they see his successor battle to change society, it will be a society that let All For One exist that they will see.

They will witness one man destroy a city. They will witness as one man makes tectonic plates shift violently, generating massive tsunamis tall as a mountain. They will witness one man generate earthquakes across Japan in a single moment.

All of this will have a domino effect that will go on and on. It will be sudden mudflows and avalanches destroying remote towns. It will be collapsed bridges and cities with their very foundation torn out from under them. It will be coastal cities sinking into the oceans and volcanoes erupting.

Today, he will spill so much blood that his name will be synonymous with a natural disaster. Today, mothers will watch their sons drown, little girls will witness their fathers push them towards safety before being consumed. Today, the world will fully understand why Japan has never been invaded in the last two centuries.

That will happen now. Soon, people in the mountains will freeze to death without heat. Others will die slowly, suffocated beneath the rubble. More will die to plague and disease.

He feels it deep within the earth, an alien power that pulls him from his thoughts. Another force battles him for control over the earth. All For One snarls and pumps more and more of his power against the Emperor. He will not be defeated by a frail old man.

Do you think yourself safe in your palace?

The country seems to vibrate, tremors and shudders racking the length of Japan as the two battle for dominance. Slowly, All For One steals control from the most powerful earth quirk. And when he has control again, he shunts a stormfront of vibrations through the bedrock of Japan out of annoyance.

He doesn’t consider what will happen from a sudden amplification factor slamming through Japan. Maybe other cities will have to deal with sudden gouts of magma like the one All For One avoids with a single step to the side.

He casts his senses to the coasts and feels the ships battling for Japan's dominance. With one
mighty heave, he generates a wave to consume the enemy vessels. Perhaps no one will acknowledge it, but All For One has just won another war alone.

Then he feels someone pluck away control of the earth. The tremors still, the tectonic plates falling silent. And, no matter how hard he tries, he cannot take control of them.

It isn’t the Emperor who has done this. No, he can feel that power attempting to mitigate the damage All For One has already caused. This is someone else, someone with a quirk capable of levelling an island and suddenly forcing a tidal wave to stop. And he knows of only one other person with that power.

So, you did live.

He feels how the volcanoes calm before they can make the situation worse. He feels the Imperial Heir stabilise Japan with his power, millions of tonnes of stone and rock rising from the seafloor to prop the foundation of Japan like a tourniquet.

Still, it has done its job.

He stares at the last remaining camera. The man holding it is struck dumb in awe of the raw power. That someone would be brave enough to approach an active warzone just for a better shot is commendable. Foolish beyond all doubt, but perhaps the eye of a storm is the safest place to be in.

He rips off his tattered jacket and discards the torn shirt, revealing the heavily scarred body of someone who has fought for centuries and earned his title.

In a voice no louder than a whisper, he states the most important fact in the world.

“I am the strongest man alive.”

*****

This is how it feels to be alive today:

You have just witnessed the rise of the greatest villain. You have just seen his proclamation. You have seen his battle against your heroes. No, it cannot be called a battle. A sheep may struggle before the slaughter, but that is no battle. Seven of your heroes have just fallen, putting up no true resistance.

Who is this man who calls himself an army and kills thousands of soldiers as easily as breathing? You wonder this as you ask the person beside you, only to realise they are frozen in terror.

You see this monster proclaim himself the strongest man alive and cannot find a flaw in that logic. How many others have destroyed a city alone? How many can reshape a landscape and stand indifferent to the power they wield? How many bring to bear the power to affect an entire country?


The most powerful legends in history. All of them wielded power equal or greater to this.

It is terrifying that another legend now walks the earth as they did. It is inexplicable that the Strongest Man Alive in the world is a villain. It is also your greatest hope.

Stormwind surrendered to the winds of time. Titan fell to Hawkmoon. Hero died to poison.

All enemies can be beaten.
There is one person who embodies your hopes and dreams. One person who can stand against the greatest villain. One person who dominates your mind when you think of the word ‘hero’.

“Never fear,” you hear All Might say strongly.

He strides across the broken landscape, never walking faster than an easy stroll. He does not care for the many trenches or the flowing magma. It is the greatest reassurance you can receive for it means he has no worries.

“I.”

And if he holds no worries, then victory is possible.

“Am.”

You look to the person beside you and see hope in their eyes. You see them sit taller, back straight in imitation of the great hero. Their eyes burn with an echo of All Might’s steely blue-eyed determination.

“Here.”

You hope the greatest hero can win for there is no one else alive who can stand on this stage.

Chapter End Notes

Now go read my Threat Assessment on All For One. I'm kinda proud of that one.
The King is Dead, Long Live the King

Chapter Notes

In which, All Might and All For One settle their differences with a conversation and a cup of tea.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘I have had the unique privilege of seeing three eras of heroics. I remember rejoicing when the New Heroes came to Japan after illuminating the Dark Age. I mourned the passing of Hero, and her lover Legion, whom I strongly believe inspired the best in us—Hero was powerful, just, and a firm believer in the law. And I was there when the first hero agency was founded. My experiences have given me the perspective I lacked as a youth. And this perspective is simple: all things change and the old order must give way to new ways. The only question is whether power is given freely or through force.’

—Excerpt from ‘Reminiscing on the Final Hour’ by Hinata Ononoki.

Hisashi Midoriya is tired of blood and death. Not because he’s tired of killing. No, he’s ordered enough deaths and fought for his right to live in the abyss long enough that he understands that the weak fall to the strong. No, he’s tired because he is no closer to returning his son to his wife.

The massive assault being planned has forced him to the side-lines; a joint attack between the military, heroes and the imperial household. And he isn’t allowed to participate. All because Inko commanded that All Might kill All For One. Hisashi, right now, is nothing more than a contingency should All Might fail. A final ditch attempt when all hope is lost.

She doesn’t trust him to protect their son and that, more than anything else, leaves him tired. Still, she gave him orders earlier. That’s why he’s in a League bunker hidden below a military base abandoned in the Dark Age. The earth around it is a noxious gas filled place, toxic and hazardous to humans.

There are many creatures in the abyss more than capable of empowering Hisashi. Whilst he could do that, the more expedient process is simply to open a doorway right in the middle of the base and let the World Walker deal with the rest.

Twenty minutes later, he’s wading through a pool of blood, annoyed that the World Walker isn’t very good at keeping things clean. He gets a sense of annoyance from the mental construct in the back of his mind. He sighs fondly and retrieves his phone when it rings.

It is Inko. He stares at her name, his fingers hesitating. He forces himself to answer.

“Yes?”

“You need to come here now.”

She cuts the call before he can reply.

There is a pile of corpses in the corner being consumed by a creature with a dozen arms flickering between multiple dimensions. He’s owed that debt for years now, a short time for a creature
existing above and below time.

“I hope you’re done because I need to go,” he tells the creature.

It... doesn't look up because that implies it has eyes to look with and a head to raise. Rather, it contorts the appendage with the most sensory organs through sixth-dimensional space and down to third-dimensional space to observe Hisashi.

//World Walker, this debt is fulfilled//

The creature slips between a dozen dimensions before finding one that will let it step sideways between this universe and a portal to the deeper levels of the abyss that will exist in the far future. It gives Hisashi a headache watching it depart.

He makes sure to wipe his hands clean before leaving. No reason to literally come home with the blood of his enemies. This is his eighth cell since the war started, and though it may be taxing, Hisashi will never shirk a task Inko gives him.

For her, he will commit genocide if she asks. It may not be healthy, but power and obsessive love aren’t a gentle mix. That raw, unfiltered love, like the exploding Sun consuming the Earth it adores, is what kept him going through a hundred different worlds. If she demands the blood of their enemies as atonement for his failings then everyone who has ever wronged them should fear because Hisashi does not know mercy.

He warps to the complex his family has lived in for the better part of twenty years. It is the shabbiest of the homes here, all owned by political defectors and wealthy informants living in Japan at the Emperor’s leisure.

His home is just as he remembers it though it feels colder without Izuku’s constant presence here. There are no sparks of green lightning flitting between the shadows, only visible in the corner of your eye. It almost seems as though his son never lived here. Yes, his books and memorabilia are visible, but that doesn’t really define his son.

His son may appear human on the surface but calling him that is a lie. Hisashi has seen the medical scans from months ago, long before his son fully embraced his powers as shadowking. Even then, his body was a network of crystal lattices and aberrations. Now, though Izuku may not notice it, every shadow is darker around him and he leaves traces of green lightning wherever he goes, a physical marker of his raw presence. If they took another scan there likely wouldn’t be anything human beneath his skin.

No matter. It still feels good to be home. His wife is in the kitchen making a cup of something that isn’t coffee for once. Strange. She drinks coffee like it’s water.

“Hello, Inko.”

To your left, the World Walker says, irritated.

He glances to the left. There is a boy that isn’t Izuku in his home, six, maybe seven years old, and wearing a cap.

Hisashi blinks because he’s pretty sure he doesn’t have any bastard children. Of all things he’s done, he’s never once been unfaithful to Inko. And this kid looks nothing like Inko to be her child.

“Old man,” the kid says, not a polite greeting so much as an insulting statement of fact.
He looks to his wife who has a softer expression on her face. It isn’t for his benefit.

“This is Kouta Izumi.”

He nods, sifting through a dozen different threads of information stored in the back of his brain. Admittedly, he hasn’t been keeping up with everyone kidnapped. Other than his son, none of them really matter to him.

“Great, but what does—”

“You look like him,” the boy says bluntly. “Like Izuku.”

“How exactly do you know my son?”

“Because we were kidnapped together. He told me to ask for Hisashi Atakani.”

He decides he isn't sober enough for this but it also makes too much sense. That name, the name he held before marrying Inko, always registers a priority flag. He didn't know Izuku knew that but his son has always been smart.

“Alright,” Hisashi decides. “What did my son say?”

“That you’d do right by me.”

Hisashi closes his eyes, accepting the responsibility. His son entrusted him with this boy and he doesn’t mean to betray Izuku’s trust further. Not after how often he has failed Izuku. The greatest failing was simply never watching him grow up.

“I’ll go prepare the spare room,” he says before heading up.

From every report, Kouta is the child of the deceased Water Hose team, taken in by his aunt Mandalay. Mandalay, who is part of the Wild Wild Pussycats of whom Tiger is dead and the other three have been kidnapped.

Which means the child has no one else. Hisashi would have absolutely no interest in him if not for Izuku. But because his son is who he is, kind and gentle and forgiving, Hisashi will do his best to keep the boy safe.

So, over the next few days when the authorities attempt to extract every ounce of information regarding All For One, Hisashi or Inko is with him at all times. Neither of them gives the kid bullshit platitudes about everything being alright. Given that Inko is a step away from walking towards a battlefield and devastating it, that she can keep be gentle towards Kouta is an accomplishment.

It has the added benefit of letting Hisashi be at home with his wife. They rarely speak except to communicate important information. It hurts but he understands her anger, understands how he is at fault for much of what is happening. The distance between them was made by Hisashi and only Inko can shorten it.

“Are you guys getting divorced?” Kouta asks him bluntly, looking through one of Izuku’s notebooks.

Hisashi shrugs. They’re in Izuku’s room because Kouta has a massive case of hero worship. Large enough that he’s taken a crack at many of Izuku’s incredibly dry books on philosophy.
“I don’t know.”

“You’re nothing like him. You just look the same.”

“I would hope not. He takes after his mother.” Hisashi smiles. “He looks up to her, you know. She’s strong and brave and fierce.”

Excitement sparks across Kouta’s features. “He does?”

“He does,” Hisashi agrees.

Tonight, is the night this war ends.

Twenty days after the first battle, the heroes and villains will wage the final battle of this war. Kouta is fast asleep, courtesy of the sedative Hisashi laced his drink with. It may not be ethical, but he’s committed such terrible acts that making sure a kid sleeps through something traumatic might as well be a good thing.

He and Inko are watching the assault on the news. All Might who battles a villain as tall as a building and a hero team led by Endeavour bogged down by a multitude of villains.

Hisashi knows the moment someone enters his home. There are dozens of security systems in his home and getting past them is a feat.

He looks to his wife. Inko somehow knows as well that someone is in their home. She’s looking to Izuku’s room.

“Do what you will,” she tells him.

“Alright.”

He removes the gun from his jacket and ascends the stairs carefully, ready to breathe a gout of flame against any intruder. Kouta’s in the spare room and his door hasn’t been disturbed. Cautiously, using the door as a shield, he enters Izuku’s room.

Inside is a lizard man decked out in light armour. He recognises him as a member of the Vanguard Action Squad and raises his gun, ready to shoot him. Until he notices the body in man’s arms.

Momo Yaoyorozu. One of his son’s classmates and daughter to the very wealthy and powerful Yaoyorozu family. There are too many possibilities for Hisashi to guess wrong so he chooses not to.

“Explain,” Hisashi orders the lizard, gun trained straight on his forehead.

The man sets Yaoyorozu down and takes a step back, hands outstretched to show they are empty.

“Your son told me to bring her here.”

Hisashi already knows where this is going. And considering that it is Izuku, he doesn’t find it too shocking. Still, he needs confirmation. He flicks the safety of the gun.

“Ten seconds or I have to explain to my wife why there’s a dead body.”

“If I was to see you, I’m to tell you that your ceiling is his floor,” the lizard says, confused. “And that if it was a woman, that Mikumo Atakani would want him to be a hero.”
Hisashi sighs, lowering the gun. Both of those are things only he and Inko know. Izuku would die before he revealed secrets like that to his enemies.

“If my son survives, I’ll rescind the kill order on you. Until then, if you try to leave, I will hunt you down and kill everything you’ve ever loved.”

“He said both of you would threaten me with that.”

Hisashi can't help his smile. It isn’t happy or kind or even forgiving. No, it’s a smile promising death.

“Good. Because I don’t care about his thoughts and feelings. If he doesn’t come back unharmed, your death will be slow and painful.”

That, of course, is when the ground starts shaking.

“Oh shit,” he snarls, knowing what’s about to come. “Grab her!”

He runs towards Kouta’s room, grabbing the boy before he can fight off the bleariness of the sedative.

“Hisashi,” Inko demands, staring at Spinner and Yaoyorozu and the trembling ground. “Explain.”

“No time.”

He’s thankful it’s just the five of them. Five is the limit of his power, the maximum number of entities that he can take with him.

He opens a doorway below them and they all fall through. He opens another whilst they scream and they travel through that one as well.

They land in the middle of a darkened room that lights up when Hisashi snaps his fingers.

"We're in Korea," he says before anyone can ask. "It's a safe house."

“What’s going on?” Kouta asks blearily.

Hisashi opens a gateway behind Spinner and gestures him away before Kouta sees him. That’s not a conversation he wants to deal with.

Thankfully, Spinner is smart enough not to argue.

He snaps his fingers again and the screen on the wall comes to life. On it is the sight of All For One standing in the ruins of a devastated city. On one side is a casualty count that just keeps rising and rising.

“Possibly the total destruction of Japan.” Hisashi shrugs. “That or the best fight ever. Even odds, I’d say.”

*****

Toshinori Yagi walks through a devastated city.

This is but one of many that have been ruined by his nemesis. Skyscrapers toppled over. Great ravines bisecting cities. Towns sunk beneath the waves. Hospitals and schools shattered by raw power.
It breaks his heart to ignore those who are trapped and calling out for salvation but defeating All For One is more important than a hundred thousand people who will die because he chose to ignore them.

The path to a bright future lays beyond the hurdle that is his nemesis. The villain stands in the middle of what was once a thriving warehouse district and now is nothing more than a ruined crater with founts of magma here and there. There is ash and rubble and death all around them and the villain seems at home in the chaos.

He may be tired from running half the length of Japan. He may be slightly off after destroying two rampaging hurricanes. He may be weary after losing Izuku for so long.

Regardless, he stands to oppose All For One.

This is the last battle. It must be. This is where Toshinori will fulfil Nana Shimura’s legacy and those that came before her. Seven generations of torchbearers have culminated in Toshinori Yagi standing here. Now he will end what should never have begun.

“Hello, Toshinori. Have you come to die like the rest?”

Toshinori doesn’t bother replying.

The wildfire of One For All, seven generations of power passed down for this one moment, rages within him. He lets that heat fill his body, forces it to perfect every muscle and bone and organ until he is the most Perfect Fighter to exist in this modern era.

In a fraction of a second, he crosses the distance between them. He takes pleasure in seeing his nemesis’s surprise right before Toshinori’s fist strikes him in the liver.

The villain chokes on his spit before he goes flying, spinning uncontrollably. Toshinori leaps towards him, not willing to let up on the advantage. He fires a blast of tightly controlled air that slams All For One straight down into the ground.

He strikes once then twice then thrice then a dozen times, each air blast stronger and more tightly contained than the last. This is his greatest opportunity to end the fight cleanly.

His enhanced reactions let him see what looks like the air beside his face shattering. Toshinori raises his hands to block the sudden wave of force. It hits like a mountain falling on his arms, heavy in a way that is absurd.

Just as he’s managed to deal with that, All For One is rocketing through the air towards him, his arm grotesquely large with stolen quirks.

Toshinori kicks the air to retreat. Then he feels a burst of force hit him in the back, startling him and forcing him back in place.

He has no choice but to meet All For One’s blow.

The explosive force from their fists meeting is thunderous. It is raw energy and power that tears through the air. When it meets the crumbled buildings, it shatters them as though they are fragile glass.

For All Might, all he knows is that his fist feels like it is on fire. Bones cracked and knuckles broken after one simple exchange. No matter.
He punches with his other arm. Just before he makes contact, the air beneath his fist shatters and a blast forces his strike to miss.

He has a moment to curse before All For One punches him straight in the chest. The magnitude of the blow is beyond anything he’s felt before. It forces out every breath in his lungs and sends him flying to the ground.

The concrete below breaks as Toshinori’s body digs deep. For a full ten seconds, he has no control as he is forced through the ground by a single punch.

Eventually, he stops falling. He takes a moment to get his breath back.

Then he hears the rumbling from all around him. He glances up and barely sees the speck that is All For One. The villain waves at Toshinori.

“Oh, shit.”

The ground explodes.

The force hits him in every direction, a million blows that can’t be blocked. It is like every horrendous blow he has taken in his entire career all at once. His organs jostle from the force, his bones creaking.

Toshinori tenses through the pain. Grits his teeth. Flexes his muscles.

It sends a wavefront of power that neutralises the vibrations for a fraction of a second. That fraction is all he needs to rocket out the ground.

He lands heavily, bruised and battered and bloody. Something in his chest is definitely broken but he can’t let that pain show or All For One will take advantage of it.

“Are you warmed up?” his nemesis asks, stretching his arm. “Killing the other team was a fun way to get the blood pumping.”

Toshinori spits blood on the ground in response.

All For One chuckles. “I’ll be spilling a lot more. Don’t go wasting it already.”

The air gets heavier suddenly. It makes a high-pitched sound that grates on his ears. All Might sees the way it sharpens and becomes a thousand blades capable of cutting through steel.

The villain raises his bad arm, the one with black veins and a dark presence. Then he clenches his fist.

A thousand air blades come crashing down. They cut through layers of concrete and destroy what remained of the buildings behind them. This is a technique to kill armies, to leave nothing but a million bloody bits and pieces.

It is nothing to All Might.

He roars, remembering Nana’s impeccable defiance. He remembers her bravery and compassion as he gathers his power. It is fire and heat and a legacy so heavy that it crushes him some days.

Most days it frees him.

Toshinori flings both fists forward and creates his largest air blast ever. It is a dome a hundred
metres long of raw and unfiltered force. It annihilates All For One’s attack and races towards the villain.

The villain says something that Toshinori doesn’t hear before punching with his good arm. Like glass, the sky shatters. Like always, a wave of force rushes out and meets Toshinori’s counter.

The two forces battle, raging against each other. Then they fade. Without continual sustenance, they cannot survive long.

There is no signal that forces them towards each other. Yet, they both know the battle must continue until only one victor remains.

All Might punches cleanly, a blow that All For One deflects easily. The force of it continues onwards for a few kilometres, shattering everything in its way. All For One generates a blade of compressed, rotating winds. All Might catches it between his elbow and knee, not caring for the laws of nature. He’s learnt to ignore such trifling concerns.

He headbutts the villain and it feels like hitting a steel pole. When he pulls back, a metallic sheen covers All For One’s forehead.

“This strength. This power. How did you regain the power of your prime?”

“That has nothing to do with you!”

AFO chuckles. “Do you think this strength is enough to match me. You drove me back because I didn’t take you seriously. I will show you no mercy.”

All Might knows all that.

Even at the height of his power, he won only because All For One thought Toshinori defeated and let his guard down. He had stolen a stalemate from the jaws of defeat. Even when they fought, All For One hadn’t shown this power to destroy cities with impunity.

He was toying with me.

None of that matters. He is the greatest hero and he will defeat this villain. Not because he thinks himself superior or even an equal, but because there is no one else who can stand on this stage, no one in the world who can even battle AFO.

He alone in the world can possibly close the gap and win.

“I will kill you today,” Toshinori says.

All Might has one advantage and only one. All For One is already injured. That left arm of his dangles at his side, only sometimes used, and he has a suspicion the villain is using a quirk to puppet it. He is burnt, notably on his leg and right arm. A deep gash runs the length of his chest, a puncture wound through his shoulder, and there are small scratches across his exposed torso.

This is all that seven of Japan’s greatest heroes managed. Together, facing one man, they managed to inflict a few minor injuries that he ignores.

It must be enough. All Might refuses to let their sacrifice go to waste.

Enji, thank you. You paved the way to my victory with each blow. You better be alive.

When their fists meet, the shockwave is like an explosion. A trench a mile long forms at the
boundary where two unstoppable forces meet.

The fists meet again and the air screams with the force of it. Once more, their fists meet and the ground trembles beneath the power of physical gods battling.

Toshinori knows why All For One is meeting him fist for fist. This is nothing more than a tactic to demoralise him. There are dozens of quirks he could use. Instead, the villain uses raw strength to meet his strongest blows as if they are nothing.

He fights without hesitation. Every block he makes must be perfect. Every counter or deflection cannot waste an ounce of motion. Every attack must be aimed to kill.

He must be the Perfect Fighter to simply survive.

All Might may not be the strongest or fastest or most experienced. But no matter the enemy, he has always been greater in at least two of those categories.

All For One’s grotesque arm punches with enough force that Toshinori is pushed back. More than half his blows are avoided by quick ducks and weaves. And every plan he makes is countered long before he can initiate it.

All Might is the greatest hero, the exemplar of society. He is the most perfect combatant alive today.

The world looks to him when they think of the greatest fighter alive. He may not be a legend of the past, may not be their equal, but he fully deserves to be counted amongst them as a peer. Any battle should be one he wins easily.

And he just doesn’t have it.

He slams his hands together reflexively, creating a high-pressure front that annihilates the fine control of All For One’s coming wind attack. It leaves him exposed to a straight punch to the liver.

All Might roars and brings his clasped hands down in an overhead blow. It strikes the left arm the villain has rarely used since the battle has started.

Enraged, All For One hits him with a glowing fist. The strike sends Toshinori flying through a dozen buildings and to the other side of the city.

He has maybe half a second to regain his bearings before All For One is above him, roaring in anger. The villain brings down a glowing fist that Toshinori barely manages to twist around.

With the side of his hand, Toshinori strikes the villain in the torso. All For One gasps in pain, his defence broken.

All Might slams a knee in his chest. Once again, he hits steel instead of flesh. Except this time, he feels it yielding to his power. He roars and keeps pushing, keeps drawing on the wildfire of his quirk to enhance his power.

He hears the steel shatter.

*Come on,* All Might pleads, one fist ready to end this.

Then he’s hit by a blast of compressed air. It forces him away. He tumbles roughly, a long trench forming in the wake of his flight.
He lands carefully on the ground. This part of the city hasn’t been completely shattered. Perhaps that is why he can hear civilians in the nearby area. He can hear the screams of fear and howls of pain, the terror that grips children, and the horror at seeing this devastation. Throughout the cruelty of All For One’s cataclysmic attack across the country, these people had managed to survive.

All Might has brought the battle to them.

*I need to—*

“Get me away from the civilians,” the villain interrupts, rising from the ground.

All For One wipes the blood away from his mouth. Despite all the damage All Might has done, the villain hardly seems to notice it.

“That’s how Nana died. Are you going to repeat her mistake?”

All Might knows he can’t. There’s no one else but Izuku who can possibly match this villain and Izuku just isn’t ready. No matter how much power he has, he doesn’t have the experience to survive. He may be fast and quick enough to react to All Might at half power, but even Hawks could do that. Hawks is dead.

They meet once more in the middle, fist clashing against fist. Except there is no wave of force this time.

All For One frowns before punching again. Once more, All Might blocks the blow with another. Once more, there is no wave of force.

“Amazing,” the villain says. “You would have failed this technique last we fought.”

It is a simple technique.

All he has to do is to match All For One’s blow perfectly with the exact force and angle to neutralise the blast wave. It takes an incredible amount of precision just to read how much force All For One will use and even greater concentration to equalise it.

This is all he can do to protect the civilians as their battle tears through the city. The worst part is that his nemesis constantly pushes him back, away from the devastation and closer to the civilians. And there’s nothing he can do to halt it.

All Might may be stronger physically, but All For One uses his metal strengthening quirk or a quick burst of kinetic amplification to bridge that gap. He may be more technically gifted as a fighter, but All For One gives him no chance to bring that to bear, always using ranged quirks from odd angles.

This is nothing like their last fight. All For One is out for blood. There is no taunting. Just pure and unrelenting combat.

All Might sees the glow around All For One, sees the way the air for miles around shatters. This is an attack meant to destroy what remains of the city and hopefully, All Might as well.

He isn’t such a fool as to let an enemy have the time to build-up a devastating blow.

He thinks of Izuku, thinks of his incredible speed. Toshinori may not be lightning given form, but for a moment, he can emulate the pure technique of his successor’s movements.
Faster than he’s ever moved before, Toshinori closes the distance, a wave of superheated air catching on fire behind him. The friction from the air sets his body alight but the flames are too weak to harm him.

Besides, a flaming fist only makes his blow stronger.

His fist slams across the villain’s mask, shattering it. All For One spins through the air, his control of his quirk vanishing.

Toshinori flexes, extinguishing the flames. It’s a good technique to use. He just wished he invented it years before and had the time to mix it with his air blasts.

The one victory is short-lived.

All For One is implacable. He never retreats, never hesitates, and his inexorable approach never stops. He stops giving All Might chances and instead simply rains devastation down with his two quirks.

Every block All Might makes is to block no less than three attacks at once. Every counterattack means he must weave through a dozen attacks to reach the villain. And when he blocks a single blow, he blocks enough raw strength to shatter the city a dozen times over.

All For One stops his endless assault, cracking his neck. The man doesn’t look tired. No, if anything, he looks like he’s just started enjoying this.

“I haven’t had a fight this fun in centuries.”

Toshinori doesn’t respond. He’s too occupied with trying to get oxygen in his lungs. He doesn’t understand how All For One has enough energy for small talk when it’s taking everything Toshinori has just to stay standing. His ribs are broken, knuckles bloody. His right leg is about to collapse and he’s had fix his dislocated left shoulder twice.

The villain is ancient and injured. He should be the one failing to breathe. Not Toshinori who is a quarter his age.

Then the villain laughs. It is deep and full and sounds genuinely joyful.

“You don’t understand how weak I’ve become. Honestly, it’s shameful that I’ve let myself go so much. When I was your age, I would have won already.” All For One grins. “Battles like this defined my youth. Can you imagine it, Toshinori? We were gods amongst men and I stood above them all.”

The villain rises off the ground and floats above Toshinori. He is a summit that so many have tried to scale, a pinnacle that no one has reached in two centuries. Toshinori plans on seeing him fall to the ground.

“Toshinori, I’ve decided, you are worthy of my brother’s quirk. Let me show you my strength.”

Toshinori prepares as this will be the one that decides whether there is a chance of victory.

He hears the wind as it picks up and the clouds rumble angrily. He watches as sudden vortexes of swirling wind manifest, cyclones rampaging at the whims of a cruel villain.

The villain raises his bad hand and the winds there swirl faster and faster until they form a massive drill of tightly compressed air and blades of wind in layers spinning counter to each other. It sounds
like steel breaking and feels as heavy as the depths of the ocean.

This attack is powerful enough to tear through half the city and annihilate anything in its path. This isn’t an attack for anything less than complete and utter annihilation.

Toshinori calls upon the strength of One For All and lets the wildfire within empower him. He forces his body to relax in preparation. This block must be perfect, a single continuous set of motions that are individually perfect and together reach far beyond perfection.

For a moment, he feels a hand on his shoulder and knows it is the spirit of Nana Shimura, here with him as always. He takes heart knowing that she will always watch over him.

All For One launches the attack.

With a roar, All Might leaps towards it. He draws everything he has and punches the drill of compressed air.

It pushes at him, an unyielding force capable of destroying everything behind him. No more deaths will come from this fight. No more civilians will die. That is a promise he intends on keeping. Even if it means dying.

The drill fights against the force of his punch, screeching in rage as it attempts to destroy him. It is the single greatest force All Might has ever tried to push back, the heaviest weight he has ever lifted and the hardest material he’s ever felt. But he feels it give way, inch by bloody inch.

He roars, pumping more and more power into his fist. *Come on*, he thinks, feeling it shift back even more.

“You should pay more attention to your surroundings,” All For One whispers, standing right beside him.

All Might’s eyes widen in horror. He sees the way his nemesis’s fist glows and the air around it shatters. Then the villain raises his arm to punch Toshinori.

Toshinori twists aside as much as he can but the villain is too close to avoid the attack. The blow hits him on the left side where his old injury was. It tears through his defence, ripping through flesh and muscle and organs. Part of him is focused solely on the agonising pain. A greater part is focused on how he’s losing the strength to fight against the drill.

All Might grits his teeth. With his left arm, he grabs All For One. He stops fighting the drill and in a single fluid movement, their positions are reversed.

He catches a glimpse of the villain’s utter panic.

“FUCK!”

The sky shatters once more as the villain musters an instinctive defence against the attack. It won't be enough. Not against an attack like this.

All Might grins just as the drill hits them.

**BOOM.**

The explosion is catastrophic.

A thousand blades of wind lash out across the city, cutting through buildings and bridges and
people with complete indifference. The shockwave knocks downs anyone who survives the blast and sets off a thousand smaller explosions across the city. The force disintegrates homes and flattens cars, shatters every piece of glass in the city and deafens anyone who managed to survive.

Even with All For One taking the brunt of the blow, it is still the worst pain Toshinori has ever felt. Nothing, absolutely nothing, has ever hit him this hard.

All Might isn’t sure how he survives. His world is unrelenting pain and agony, a blow that exceeds his memory of his last fight against All For One. He rolls to the side, roaring in pain.

He tries to stand but falls back down.

“It’s over.”

_I did it, Nana_, he thinks, wheezing. _I did it, Enji. Hawks, Aizawa, I wish you could see this. I’m sorry I wasn’t fast enough._

It doesn’t matter if he can’t get up because he will never need to again. This moment is everything he has been working towards, this one victory the culmination of his life. He wishes he could see Izuku again, wishes his successor could see this magnificent act of defiance.

He lays his hand on his wound, feeling the emptiness there. It’s a burning void of pain that any regular man would have died to already.

_Be strong without me._

At least, with this, Izuku can choose a road to the future without the great villain looming over him. With this one victory, he has given Izuku the greatest gift he can give.

He closes his eyes, ready to rest with a smile on his face.

“Magnificent!”

That voice sends chills down his spine. Whatever tiredness had threatened to overtake him vanishes and his eyes snap open.

As the smoke clears, he gets to see the villain. All For One is covered in his metal skin but even that failed against the last attacks. There are dozens of thick cuts across his body but even then, he stands tall and undaunted.

The metal skin fades away. All For One lays a hand over his shredded chest. To Toshinori’s horror, the largest of the wounds stop bleeding.

“This isn’t my strongest healing quirk,” All For One says, breathing hard for the first time, blood covering his face. “Not even my second strongest—that one’s stopping the necrosis from spreading. You see, Toshinori, the ability to keep on fighting is what separates each plateau of strength. There’s a hole in your stomach. So what? I’ve fought without a heart. Get up and prove your worth.”

He hates that it is a villain urging him to stand, hates that it is All For One more than anything. But the villain is right. He has no choice but to stand.

So, he does, standing on wobbly feet. His knees shake and his arms weigh heavily, but he forces them into a simple boxing stance.
All For One grins and it is a bloody thing. The villain slides into a stance as well. Once more, they battle.

With the wound in his side, even throwing a punch feels like doing something impossible. The blows are weak and slow.

All For One ducks beneath the first and sidesteps the second. The villain punches Toshinori in the chest.

It pushes Toshinori back and it boggles his mind that All For One can match him like this. Each blow feels stronger than when they started and the villain had used an assortment of quirks then. Now, it is his natural strength matching blows with Toshinori.

“It’s because your defence is gone,” the villain says after kicking Toshinori in the face. “I’ve fought your quirk for over a century. Your defence is based entirely on the reserve of power you have. It weakens the longer a fight continues. You wouldn’t notice. You’re more powerful than most people in this era. None of them could outlast you.”

All Might leaps forward and throws a straight punch. The villain twists around it and grabs his arm, locking him in place. Then his nemesis knees Toshinori in his left side. The side with a hole in it.

The pain is excruciating. It feels like a hot shaft of metal shoved into the hole and left to sit for hours, continually heated. It blinds him and all he sees is white.

He does, however, feel it when the villain flips him over and sends him crashing to the ground.

“It’s a shame you can’t match me,” All For One says, circling around Toshinori’s broken body. “You were right to pass it on. It needed another generation to be my equal. You came close but close is not enough on this level.”

All Might grits his teeth and forces his body to move. Slowly, he rises to his knees. It takes the remaining reservoir of his strength to stand once more.

“Your successor would have been strong enough one day. It’s a shame that he belongs to me now.”

All Might isn’t stupid enough to believe that or let those words affect him. Psychological attacks are just another part of All For One’s arsenal.

The villain raises his damaged arm. A dark sludge appears in the air. All Might is prepared for another attack from this new quirk.

It spits out Izuku who shudders in disgust. Then the boy who is his son in all but blood stands.

“I hate getting lost,” Izuku says, devoid of emotion. “Was it necessary to collapse the base on me?”

There is a coldness to Izuku. His determination runs frigid. Though he stands tall and strong, that strength looks distorted and corrupted. Standing beside Toshinori’s greatest enemy, he is the dark vision Toshinori fears to the very depths of his soul.

The villain sees that fear and pounces on it.

“He’s been a good student of mine. Is there anything you’d like to say, Izuku?”

Izuku looks around, eyes callous and cruel. He stares at the bodies and destruction as though they
mean nothing to him.

“You taught me how to be strong and unflinching. You taught me every lesson a child could hope to learn. You’re the greatest man I know, sensei.”

This is the moment All Might gives up. What point is there in battling when the war has been lost. He feels the fire in his soul fade away.

All For One spreads his arms wide. He clicks his fingers and the collar around Izuku’s neck falls away.

“Do you see now what you have wrought, Toshi—”

He is interrupted by the most beautiful sight Toshinori will ever see.

Izuku flows like lightning and strikes All For One in the back. The kick breaks the sound barrier and sends All For One stumbling forward.

For a moment, Izuku towers over the villain. His body glows brightly with power, green lightning surrounding him. The lightning arcs across the ground, a maelstrom of untapped potential. This is his successor in all his glory, wild and unrestrained.

“Thank you for teaching me, Toshinori-sensei.”

All For One stands, eyes narrowed.

“Do you think you can face me, my boy? When there are all these civilians around?”

Izuku smiles cruelly and raises his hand.

The darkness deepens and in the depths of his soul, Toshinori feels something hunting him, a monster of epic proportions and unreal laws. It is the end of the universe, a world of anathema laws and creatures that consume joy and hope.

The shadows rise and Toshinori glimpses things that were never meant to be witnessed by mortal eyes. He hears a song that is death and feels the power that would destroy the stars. Whatever light there once was dies. The fires aren’t gone but their light means nothing.

All For One tries attacking Izuku.

Toshinori isn’t certain what his successor is doing but he trusts the boy more than he trusts the power of One For All. He blocks the villain’s blow and feels his bones shatter at the power behind it.

“I’m not going to fight on your terms!”

The tidal wave of darkness engulfs them all, a torrent of power that has seen eternity’s end and found the sight disappointing. It is the power of something ancient and eternal, a fundamental constant to the universe.

It is the power of a king.

And as the king commands, the world must obey.

It’s like falling through molten diamond and flying in the corners of time, stepping back in time and witnessing the end of the universe. It is impossible and against every natural law.
He lands on something that can approximate to the ground but deep in his soul, he knows it to be the litanies of the unhallowed gods.

Toshinori looks around at this alien universe, unsure of anything he sees. He recognises the darkness. It is the same madness he has seen in Izuku’s eyes and the inky foundation of his quirk.

He never once thought that it would be this magnificent. It is terrifying and awe-inspiring. This is his successor’s quirk. This raw and unimaginable domain belongs to Izuku and Izuku alone. The universe is lit up by a foundation of green lightning, an impossible cage stretching across the universe.

Looking at Izuku, standing tall and defiant, he couldn’t be prouder. This is his successor, someone who will become more powerful than Toshinori will ever imagine.

Izuku Midoriya is lightning and darkness given form, an unknowable king sitting on a throne of endless power.

“I didn’t know empathy was a scalpel and kindness a hammer,” Izuku says in a voice that reverberates across the world. “And you respond to them just like everyone else.”

His nemesis is completely unphased.

*****

All For One has seen the darkness of the abyss a few times before. Sometimes, when he travels through Kurogiri’s warp gates, he feels as though creatures older than time are watching him. He has battled people corrupted by this dark realm and seen the consequences of the infection spreading, damned humans with veins of liquid gold and shimmering roots buried deep in the ground that must be burnt away. But he has never set foot in it.

Until today.

“Your arrogance is the reason you’re going to die today,” Izuku says. “Everything you taught me, I used against you.”

All For One listens to the young boy—no, he deserves to be called a man—with only passing interest. He looks around this endless hellscape. There in the sky is a star stuck in its final moments, a sickly thing set to become a supernova that will destroy this star system and then a black hole to consume all that survives. Above them, engulfing the horizon are the rings of a gas giant, and the longer he looks the more he can make out the nightmares skimming across the surface.

It has been a long time since he learnt of this place, a century since he began observing a phenomenon mutating people in remote towns and mad cultists empowered by something alien, and decades since he met Hisashi Midoriya who told him the full truth. He looks to the man’s son, so defiant and proud, his eyes burning with untold fears, but never once does Izuku seem broken.

“You rat,” All For One says and hides the affection beneath malevolence. “Sleep, now.”

There are dozens of quirks he has amassed, most of which are only known to him. A dart shoots from his nail faster than sound and strikes Midoriya in the neck. It is a quirk designed to paralyse and incapacitate those with regenerative power, a constantly mutating sedative that works instantly. The boy would crumple to the ground if not for Toshinori Yagi catching him.

“You’re not walking away,” Toshinori roars, a petulant child to the end, failing to understand the
futility of his defiance.

There are many things Sensei regrets. He regrets the allies he failed to protect, lost to the cruel hand of the law and murderous heroes. He regrets his failings as a brother and wishes some days that he tempered his emotion to meet his sibling halfway. He regrets not caring for Tomura better and not letting Kurogiri raise him fully as a son.

He regrets not finding Izuku earlier.

*I wish you had been my son. I wish we had more time, dear boy.*

He regrets all these things and lets them pass. None of it will matter. He glances once more at Izuku, cradled in the arms of his nemesis.

*This world I entrust to you. You’re the greatest student a teacher could ask for. It’s going to be hard but I have faith in you.*

Knowing that the future he desires is secure, All For One returns to the present.

He removes the remnants of his mask and lets it fall to the ground; a reminder of the weakness forced upon him by his first loss. If he is to fall here, then he will do so as the greatest villain of Japan. His name will be remembered for centuries. This dark world demands theatre and so he will perform to the very end.

All For One chuckles darkly, spreading his arms. His malevolence permeates the very fabric of this plane, filling it with cruel spikes and hard edges of broken time. The ground cracks open and lava spills out, lances of entropy raining down from the sky and even malevolent gods landing to observe this conflict, shifting between dimensions and imposing evil logic upon the laws of this place.

“Perhaps. But I will win no matter the outcome.”

He knows in the deepest recesses of his soul that he will fall today. Over two centuries of experience and knowledge crystallise into a single moment of understanding: today will be the final battle he fights.

All For One and One For All will die.

There can be no place for them in the new world he knows Izuku will create. And that is why he is at peace. Toshinori will always cling to his power, always try to shield Izuku from the future. Toshinori will always try to maintain this present.

It is his greatest weakness.

One For All is like fire and the land behind Toshinori is a blazing inferno, representative of the wildfire he still wields. And in that inferno, Sensei can see the ghosts of the past. Seven heroes whom he has killed stand protectively behind Toshinori, torchbearers made manifest to battle him once more.

He sees Nana Shimura, resplendent in her billowing cloak of flame and beautiful in her hatred. He sees his brother, smaller than the rest but just as confident, the wisdom of centuries worn like a fine mantle.

All of them will face him. The legacy his brother built and cultivated, a plan forged centuries ago, will come to fruition in this one battle. The full weight of One For All will clash against All For
Yet, no matter how intimidating the sight of the dead returned to life is, he knows they are fundamentally flawed. They are a dying fire, unable to exist without oxygen.

All For One knows he is just as arrogant as his nemesis. His methods and ideals are old, remnants of the past. But he has hope that Izuku will adopt them, mould and adapt them for the future. But even should he discard them in favour of another path, All For One is willing to accept that.

Izuku Midoriya is lightning given form, the greatest natural source of power on Earth and able to exist in the vacuum of space. He is the eternal darkness of this mad place and can never be tamed by any mortal means.

All you can do is place your faith in him and hope for the best.

“He is my successor, not yours.” All For One takes a step forward, ready to meet eight holders of One For All, returned to life by the alien logic of this realm.

He is outnumbered. There is no chance of his survival. But, no matter what, he will still win.

The Strongest Man Alive gathers the strength of his most powerful quirks. Steel covers his skin in an impenetrable defence. A cyclone of violent wind circles his left arm. A glowing field that shatters the very fabric of reality surrounds his right arm.

Armed with his weapons of war, he takes a step forward.

“Show me the strength of your resolve, Toshinori.”

He looks to the spectre of his brother. We’ve lived too long, he thinks. All for one person and one for all people. We were such fools.

He sees his brother nod, smiling. They have always known each other better than anyone else. Fitting that they are together at the end, enemies till the end.

Under the auspices of dreaming gods and eternal demons and the ghosts of the past, they fight once more.

The Strongest Man Alive and the Perfect Fighter wage their final war.

Two titans clash beneath a dying star.

*****

Izuku wakes in a single moment, no sense of disorientation. He rolls to the side instinctively. He need not have.

Devastation greets him. The land has been decimated, craters and newly formed valleys as far as the eye can see. Gouges miles long litter the landscape, cooling lava rising from them and entombing the dozens of dread creatures in the grasp. He sees gods sundered by mundane power; their corpses impaled upon lances of entropy. The gas giant’s rings are simply gone, destroyed by whatever cataclysm sundered this moon.

He walks forward in a daze.

“All Might,” he calls out. “Yagi. Where are you? Toshi, can you hear me?”
There is no answer. At least, not one that he can hear. He trips and lands face first in the ground. Izuku groans.

He hears a whisper and looks up.

There is a ghost of blue fire and it beckons him closer. Izuku recognises him vaguely from a dreamlike memory. This is the first, the man who started it all. Izuku walks through the burning ghost and shudders at the heat that suffuses his body.

There is another behind the first, this one green. He walks through it, heat and warmth filling his soul. There is one of grey fire that stands resolute, joy permeating the flames Izuku absorbs from him.

He walks through four more burning ghosts before coming to the final one, a woman with a burning cape. She smiles and points behind her. Izuku knows her to be Nana Shimura and she is glorious, a brilliant gold flame of power. She is a beacon of power and justice, someone who would fight till the very end.

Izuku nods and walks through the final ghost, feeling his soul settle.

Something grabs his ankle.

He twists, ready to break whatever touches him with One For All. Its power fades at the sight of blonde hair, bloody and matted.

“Izuku,” his hero whispers.

Izuku scrambles to his side. His mentor is missing an arm and bleeding heavily. It takes him a moment to notice the gaping hole in his side.

“No, no, no, no, no.” Tears fall as he grips All Might’s remaining hand. “You can’t leave me.”

Piercing blue eyes focus on him. His hero, his mentor, his father, grins, strong in a way he can never imagine. "Hold your head… up high a-and smile, my son.”

His eyes close. For a moment he thinks Toshinori is gone but they open, burning blue with determination.

All Might lifts his hand. By all rights, he should be dead. And yet, he grips Izuku’s trembling shoulders with a strength he shouldn’t have.

“You are next,” All Might rasps. “Walk forward and you…”

His grip grows lax. Izuku grabs his hand before it can fall.

“You will… meet…”

His eyes close.

“The sun.”

He feels the embers of One For All vanish, travelling up Izuku’s arm and to his heart. Izuku looks at this man, this colossus who stood above every hero as the symbol of peace. He is massive, the strength of his quirk with him till the very end. This is the hero All Might, not the man Toshinori.

And yet, Izuku knows his time is ended.
His howl is animal grief, raw and unfiltered. The sky breaks as he roars in rage, and shame, and a
dozen different emotions he can’t name. Green lightning arcs across the ground and the sky as he
cries over this man who grins even in death.

And when the emotions have left him hollow and empty and numb, he rises. He looks to the star
trapped in its final moments and raises his hand towards it. Instinct guides him as he lets every
ounce of his power permeate the abyss.

“Grieve me with me,” he snarls and tugs at the bonds of frozen time.

He has never seen a hypernova, never seen this event that outshines the universe for a moment. Its
heat and light burn away the universe, empowered by his strength, and carrying a single word left
behind in its wake: goodbye.

He stands alone in the dark, the corpse of his teacher at his feet. There is no light left in this
universe, nothing but the emptiness in his soul.

*I’m so sorry, brother.*

What does it matter if he’s sorry? Something so mundane as sorry can’t bring him back. Toshinori
is gone and there is nothing anyone can do.

“You truly did love him.”

He glances over his shoulder and sees All For One’s kneeling corpse. The cadaver lacks an arm
and has a hole in his side, a mirror image of All Might.

“Yes,” he says to the corpse for the dead deserve respect. “He believed in me. He was a father to
me.”

“Did I not teach you as well?” the corpse questions.

Izuku shrugs. “You did but you also took him from me. I hate you. I wish I could have killed you
myself. I wish I could have ripped out your heart and broken your spine. For everything you took
from me, I would have broken another bone.”

The corpse chuckles. “Come closer, young king.” Izuku does so, not able to stop his legs. “Was
Stormwind a villain?”

He glares at the corpse.

Stain asked this question. A living All For One asked the same question. It isn’t a simple answer. It
is tied up in centuries of history, a Modern Hero Age built on betrayal and cruelty. To answer
without thought is to insult the legacy of One For All, a legacy built on the promise of fratricide.

Were Hero and Hawkmoon not killers as well? Was the heroics industry not started by a
government seeking power and control? Was it not that same government that allowed the murder
of twenty million to go unpunished?

Was it not the same government that allowed a little girl in a sunflower dress to be called a villain
and die?

“No.”

He feels numb saying the word but, in his heart, he knows it to be the truth. Stain was a villain for
fighting against an unjust society. In another time, he would have been called a revolutionary. In another time, Stain may have been great.

Stormwind freed Europe from true villains. Stormwind defeated seven Warlords. Stormwind died surrounded by those she loved.

“She was a Tyrant who can never be forgiven for the blood she spilt, but she wasn't a villain.”

The corpse raises its remaining hand and rests it against its ruined chest. Light suffuses the hand and it tears through the skin and muscle and bone of its torso. The corpse yanks its hand out, gold mist spewing forth instead of blood.

In it rests a heart, still and dead as the corpse holding it. Yet, what meaning does undeath hold in the alien realm?

“I give you my heart. Consume my flesh and grow fat from strength. Give life to this dead heart.”

His hands rise unbidden. How can he deny the request of a dead man he respects? He takes the heart, shining bright with power.

A human heart is large, and it takes both hands to hold it fully. This is the heart of a man who walked the earth like a god of destruction, so powerful that he stood undefeated for centuries. There is a strength within, the power to conquer and rule. This is the power of one who reached the pinnacle of strength and found no challengers. It is the bounty of two centuries of power, the tribute of a supplicant to a king.

Izuku eats it.

The corpse falls forward, whatever alien power maintaining the facsimile of life fading away. Izuku looks at it dispassionately.

He returns to All Might and kneels. With one arm beneath the man’s knees and the other beneath his broad shoulders, Izuku stands. Green sparks dance across his skin and over All Might.

It is by instinct alone that the dark platform rises. A spear of green lightning forms and shoots away, tearing past the layers of the abyss.

The night sky of the mortal world is shrouded by ash and dust. The stars are bright pinpricks in the night, the moon bathing the world in soft, diffuse light. He hears the helicopters before seeing them, hears the anxious silence of the officers before he looks down.

The world waits, tense and expectant.

He takes one step forward and then another, leaving the corpse of All For One behind. The great villain is dead. The greatest menace Japan ever faced lies alone and forgotten in the rubble of his actions.

Izuku walks past battered heroes, paying them no heed. These are not people he knows and their actions matter little in the face of the greatness that was All Might. He crosses the police barriers. The crowd part, silent as they should be, for in his arms, he carries the Symbol of Peace.

The world may watch his solitary walk, but they do not matter. They never once knew him and now they never will. They will always see All Might and never Toshinori.

He looks to the sky once more and remembers the brilliance of the stars mourning his mentor.
“Goodbye.”

Chapter End Notes

Welp, that fight finally ended.
The Eternal Rest of a Mentor

Chapter Summary

In which, people learn to grieve.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

‘Time changes all things. It wore down my sharp edges and left someone I can hardly recognise. I will leave future generations to decide how I will be remembered. It is an honour to know history will be the judge of each word I put to paper. How far, I wonder, are we to search this broken world for our better selves? Will we allow the weight of past sins drag us to the ground? I truly hope not. In the years to come, I hope they read my works only as a reference for how barbaric we were as a people. The future is bright if we work towards it. In the immortal words of those greater than I, ‘Any place can be paradise so long as you have the will to live.’

—Excerpt’ from ‘Reminiscing on the Final Hour’ by Hinata Ononoki.

This is not the first time you have inverted the lines of tribute, Izuku Midoriya. This is not the first time you gave unto your subjects the tribute of the living lightning. Now, you have broken the barriers between the inky darkness of your kingdom and the orderly structures of the godflame that protect the world of your immortal corpse.

Do you wish this to become your new throne world? Shall the shadowking exist on this plane and corrupt this land? All things are possible for you. If this is your wish, we will see it accomplished. It is by your anathema body that the abyss was founded, and it is by our grace that your immortal shell will live eternally.

Loyal subjects will always know the desire of their king. Feast upon this universe and tithe it to the shadowking. Consume the stars and the vacuum between them. Annihilate each world and create acolytes off all life.

The king has granted you passage.

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“State your name for the record.”

The voice is cold, flat, and indifferent. There isn’t an ounce of emotion or interest in anything other than facts.

“Izuku Midoriya,” he replies with just as little emotion as the interrogator. “Age, fifteen. Nationality, Japanese. Individual number: 14-17-23390615. Currently Registered at UA Hero Academy.”

“You understand that everything you say will be recorded and used as part of a larger investigation.”

Izuku rolls his eyes. “I understand I’m being unlawfully held in a military base by an organisation
The sharp inhale is the only sign of annoyance on the man’s face. They’ve been over this each day for the past four days. Oddly enough, this captivity is harsher than All For One’s. The freedom to move as he pleased or even to speak to people is gone. For the last four days, everything has been to a schedule with no deviation.


“You were at the centre of the largest war Japan has faced in the last two centuries, held captive by a natural disaster. The Kamino Ward War took over five million casualties in a mere month. We require answers and you have them.”

_They named the war in honour of the final battlefield. It doesn’t roll off the tongue very well._

He gives the same response as always. “Let me contact my family.”

"You're here for your own safety."

That’s a new response. One that drives Izuku to burning rage.

“My safety,” he says slowly, tilting his head.

One For All comes to life within him, the livewire of electric potential filling his body. He sweeps his arm out faster than the interrogator can register.

“The strongest man alive held me in captivity,” Izuku says as the wall collapses. “He’s dead. Don’t bullshit me.”

His interrogator startles in surprise at the shattered wall, eyes wide. Then he sees how the next four walls have holes through them. The alarms are shrill and piercing, grating on Izuku’s ears.

When the interrogator opens his mouth to speak, Izuku glares at him with the full force of his presence. It forces the man down into his seat, immobile.

When soldiers stream in, guns at the ready, Izuku extends the full force of his power. It is lightning and darkness and death, the power of a king ready to be unleashed and cause devastation. It is a reminder that he is here because he chooses to be here and not because they have any power.

“You have questions, I understand that,” he says to a room of soldiers frozen by the power of one boy. “But, considering that you and yours want to rule Japan in a military junta, I’m not inclined to care. Now, contact my parents and let them know where I am.”

He eases up on his presence just enough for the interrogator to draw breath.

“We’re not—”

“My father’s name is Hisashi Atakani. Search that up. You really don’t want to needlessly antagonise him.”

He can understand the appeal of this, observing as a group of grown men are forced to the ground simply by his presence. For a moment, he sympathises with All For One’s needless arrogance.

_Is this how you will rule, brother mine?_
It isn’t an admonishment but a genuine question. Still, it reminds him that these men and women are frightened by the war that has been waged and simply wants a guarantee that nothing else will go wrong. He eases up on the pressure.

“It’s going to take a nap,” he says, rising.

Boldly, he walks out the room, indifferent to their fear. He bares his teeth at the first person who tries to stop him, and those teeth are the fangs of a creature ready to eat the sun. It sends the man scrambling away.

In the solitude of his room, he lay on the bed and stares at the blank ceiling. His senses are enhanced enough that he can hear the panic in their voices as they try to figure out what to do. Mostly, he follows their shadows and, if he focuses hard enough, he can find the distinction in movements as fine as a keystroke as someone types out a memo.

He stares at his hands and the flickering lightning. He is still using only a fraction of One For All but it somehow seems more, somehow seems greater than anything he could ever hope to achieve before. Breaking down the walls had been easy, so easy that at the last moment he had to cut most of the power to the blow before he destroyed the base on accident.

*It is the nature of the abyss. The weak give tribute to the strong who in turn plunder as they please. The fading fires of One For All, returned to life to face their great nemesis, chose to return to you before passing on. Their power, the power of each previous wielder, was added onto what you already held.*

He feels the living lightning of One For All and knows it has intensified. More than that, however, he can feel the incredible heat of the other torchbearers and their power waiting to be used.

“How strong will I become?”

*How does it feel to be the strongest man alive?* his brother asks mockingly.

For a moment, he feels a heartbeat in his torso, one alien and different from his usual heart. It is the heart he ate, All For One’s parting gift to him. He lets the heart return to death and stop beating, discomfited by the sensation of both beating in tandem.

They move him to another facility soon after that. This one is in Tokyo and he’s given greater freedoms than before. He’s uncertain what exactly his father threatened them with, but it must not have been pleasant.

His parents, his mother most of all, constantly try to force their way to him. Thankfully, he’s allowed to call them and explain that he’s here willingly and of his own volition.

“It’s fine,” he tells his father. “I’ll be home in a week. Tell mum this is necessary.”

Izuku wonders how much of this is his fault. So many are dead and so many will keep on dying. The casualty report keeps climbing, a legion of the dead howling out in anguish and pain. There are dozens of messages that bombard his phone once a tiny bit of the networks come back. Everything is so slow now and bandwidth choked. Still, it warms his heart to know people are worried for him.

That warmth is crushed when he finds out who hasn’t made it. The first name hits him painfully and he crushes his phone, partly out of an instinctive aversion to pain but mostly so he can pretend it isn’t real for a little bit longer.
“Not today,” he decides.

Later, he finds himself in a room being interrogated by the same man. The man is wary, remembering the last time Izuku was pushed and broke down a wall without thought. Still, the man is a professional and they go through the same song and dance as usual.

“Your quirk is officially registered as Shadowshield,” the man says. “It is officially described as an emitter dealing with shadows with secondary strengthening abilities characterised by green sparks. I think that’s a lie.”

Izuku smiles blandly. “Are you accusing me of having a dual quirk? Only the Royal Family managed to successfully breed dual quirks. It took them centuries to be successful.”

“We have footage of the final moments before you, All For One, and All Might vanished from sight. Whilst we don’t have footage of your return, we do have eye-witness testimonies and global illumination the same shade of green as your lightning.”

“Witness reports change constantly, and humans are terrible at remembering things. Any answer you get has already been tainted by time and inattention.”

The interrogator is undeterred. “Our current hypothesis is this: you possess two separate quirks, an emitter with secondary warp capabilities, and a strengthening quirk characterised by green lightning.”

They’re smarter than you give them credit for.

Izuku sighs. “Fine, sure. Let’s go with that.”

“So, you acknowledge this as the truth?”

“I acknowledge that my quirk, Shadowshield, was accurately registered with the full extent of my powers, barring a warp capability that developed only during the middle of the Kamino Ward War where I was held captive by the villain All For One. Regardless of whether they are two separate quirks, their behaviour is intertwined and inseparable, and as such, may as well be one quirk.”

The man leans forward. “A single warp quirk, combined with a force of one hundred individuals, successfully managed to decapitate the command structures of the army, the navy, the Public Safety Commission governing the Heroics Industry, and both state intelligence apparatuses. With that in mind, can you stop being an asshole?”

“No thanks.”

The man closes his eyes and takes one long breath. Then he opens them, eyes hard and determined.

“Fine. Here’s the situation as it stands. Every single warp quirk in the world, of which there are no more than ten, are now greater strategic assets than nuclear weapons. The strategic destruction one can manage with one warp quirk is more viable than Japan’s nuclear arsenal. As such, you are a strategic weapon.”

“I’m no one’s weapon,” he snaps, feeling a rising wave of anger wash over him.

He hears a snap and looks down to see two holes in the ground from tapping his feet too hard in agitation. He takes a breath and forces his anger down.

“I’m not a weapon,” he tries again politely.
"You destroyed a series of reinforced wall capable of surviving a blow from a tank without thinking. With both an emitter and a warp quirk, you're now one of Japan's primary invasion deterrents. By virtue of your quirks, you’ll be required to stand at the forefront when China finally regroups and decides we’re weak enough for an invasion."

"I'm not yours to use as a chess piece."

"You have the same power of a queen with the authority of a king."

Izuku grits his teeth. “I hate chess analogies. Do you know why? Because it makes it easy to desensitise yourself to the value of those around you. People aren’t pawns to be thrown away.”

You speak like All For One. Those were his words. Is that a truth you’ve chosen to take from him?

“We can pretend you’re not a king with dozens of pawns at your command.”

“I’m not.”

The man reaches over and withdraws a tablet. He slides towards Izuku. It lights up, showing a simple green lightning bolt.

“They call themselves, very unimaginatively, the Lightning Bolts. Usually, after an incident like this, we would scoop up all the vigilantes and anyone unaffiliated with a major organisation. Except for this time. They all refused and working together under one banner. Your banner.”

The tablet changes images to a man Izuku has seen only once.

“Crawler,” Izuku says. “I’ve met him once. Doesn’t mean I tell him or anyone else what to do.”

“Really now? The manifesto of their organisation is the same as your very public principles: the reformation of the heroics industry, the removal of the military presence in Shikoku, the empowerment of Hokkaido, sweeping changes to the judicial system and the current electoral process. These are your ideals. If they follow them, then they may as well be taking orders from you.”

“Or maybe they’re just decent human beings who want to make things better for everyone,” Izuku taps his finger against the desk. “You’re… scared of them. Afraid of what they’ll do.”

"We account for all of our nuclear weapons. Why do you think we wouldn't do the same for you? We just came out of a war and we can't afford you starting another one. Tell me, in your own words, why the Kamino Ward War started.”

“Because a villain decided to cause chaos and slaughter people. That’s the last three centuries of history in a nutshell.”

“We have the facts and a timeline of events. The League moved against UA during your USJ trip and again during the Sports Festival Bombing. You would then publicly defeat Stain, starting a wave of civil and political unrest across the country, aggravated by your interview in Hokkaido. Finally, the attack on UA’s camp trip comprising 1st-year heroics students. You were involved directly in all of these incidents.”

Izuku shrugs. “I guess I’m just unlucky.”

“Let’s zoom out a bit. Following the stadium assault, China’s Djibouti base was attacked by a member of the Royal Guard and the villain Kurogiri, who was once a member of the imperial
household. Kurogiri who took part in the Purge working with All For One. The Purge of Shikoku which was orchestrated by a man known as Hisashi Atakani. That's the name of your father. It’s a rather interesting web of connections, isn’t it?”

Izuku smiles blandly. “I’m told I look like him.”

“Hisashi Atakani, now Hisashi Midoriya, who worked for both the Emperor and All For One. The latter who could have avoided a war by returning you, but he chose not to. We want to know why. Why did the Strongest Man Alive start a fight he didn’t need to when he hasn’t done so in over a century?”

“Because he was old and tired,” Izuku says. “You live two centuries and see everyone you know die. You watch everything you take for granted fade to the wayside and your way of life become irrelevant. He could have clung to power for another century, but he chose to say goodbye to it all. This war, all this death and bloodshed, was nothing more than a final huzzah. This was an extended suicide, nothing more. He wanted to be remembered as more than just a villain. He wanted the history books to call him a force of nature, a walking apocalypse.”

Do you believe that?

“So, you were just the means of his suicide?”

“No,” he says in response to Mikumo.

“Then what?” the interrogator asks. “What were you?”

“A way to lure All Might,” Izuku says. “All Might was my mentor. All For One knew that. It’s why they had the clone at the other base. Against the joint team supported by All Might, he would have died without accomplishing anything. They had strength in numbers, so he split that strength and made it a weakness.”

“You seem to know a lot about how he thought. Only a villain understands another villain so well.”

The accusation stings for only a moment.

“Well, maybe if Shikoku wasn’t a shithole because of your presence, none of this would have happened.” He leans forward, staring at the man with eyes like endless jade pits. “You’re trying to shift blame and absolve yourselves of your failings. The society that gives rise to men like Stain and All for One is one you and yours built. You want power and control, and for that, you leave people to suffer. That’s not something I can forgive.”

Izuku stands.

“Stop.”

He shakes his head. “I’m going home.”

“You can’t leave.”

The shadows darken as all light and hope and life leaves the room. The crystal madness in his soul, the dreaming gods howling to the tune of Izuku’s tightly restrained rage and anguish, fills the room. He walks towards the man, each step forming a trail of solid green lightning.

The man falls out of his chair, scrambling back in terror. There is no light but the green of Izuku’s
eyes and the lightning of his soul, and neither are friendly.

He kneels before the man and lays a hand on his shoulder.

"If I squeeze, it'll shatter your shoulder. If I squeeze harder, I'll rip off your arm." He removes his hand and taps the darkened wall. "I could flick my finger and this building would collapse. If I wanted to, I could walk into any military base and slaughter everyone in it. I'm here because I chose to be here. I chose to see the nature of the military, to see if there was something worth redemption. Do you understand?"

The man says nothing, struggling to breathe.

“One day, I will come and purge your military of every bad element. It may not be tomorrow or this decade, but I refuse to let this cycle continue. You’re right to be afraid of me and what I might do. But the only people who should be afraid are people like you, powerful men who don’t care about those who suffer because of your greed.”

He stands and takes a step back, gazing dispassionately at the man. There is nothing special to this man, no redeeming qualities. He is nothing but a gnat.

“You sicken me.”

With a thought, shadows consume Izuku and he walks the barrier between the real and the abyss. This endless darkness is his domain, his power and right. He walks a road of endless darkness and searches for his home.

He steps out into the warmth of the sun and sees the damage done to the neighbourhood. Deep cracks mark the road and walls have collapsed. More than a few buildings have burnt to the ground and a thick smog fills the air.

A part of him wants to walk towards the devastation and help those who can’t help themselves. He has the power to do so, through physical capabilities or through his shadows. But a larger part of him just wants to be at home.

He knocks on the door.

The footsteps are heavy and the shadow weak, but familiar. Long before she gets near, Izuku knows it will be his mother who opens the door.

His mother looks tired, dark bags under her eyes and more lines than he remembers. Everything about her looks drawn and sapped of the quiet strength he admired so much. This isn’t his mother possessed by indomitable willpower and a love deeper than the abyss, but a woman tired and broken by the devastation one man wrought.

At that moment, seeing his mother anything less than magnificent, makes him hate All For One. It is a seething, burning hatred that runs deep to his core.

At the core of that hatred is the society that gave rise to him.

And just like that, Izuku can let go of his rage. It’s all just so big, this question of blame. He wants to hate All For One but the man is dead. Hating the dead just seems so pathetic.

“Hey,” Izuku says, uncertainly.

She stares at him for a long moment.
Suddenly, this seems like a horrible idea. What if she doesn’t want him? What if she blames him for all of this? What if she sees a villain instead of her son?

Then she pulls him into a bone-crushing hug, so tight that he wonders if she’s lost control of her powers for a moment.

“I thought I had lost you,” she says raggedly.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. I promise, it’s not. You’re back and that’s all that matters.”

“I know.” He smiles though she won’t see it. “But I still made you worry. I could have come home earlier but I didn’t want to make an issue of it.”

She hugs him tighter. “I know. You’re a good kid.”

His smile cracks. “Thank you,” he says, for that is still true.

“I know you and you are a good, even if you don’t believe it.”

“It’s just you here,” he says instead. “I thought he’d be here.”

Izuku swallows nervously. All for One promised to return Kouta, promised that the boy would be unharmed. Had he reneged on that deal?

“Your father’s out with Kouta.”

Izuku exhales harshly, deflating. He chuckles but nothing about that laugh is happy. “He’s safe then.”

“I promise he is.”

“I believe you. That’s all I wanted. To save one person.”

“You saved Yaoyorozu as well.”

Izuku smiles. “I guess I did. Kouta’s going to stay with us,” he says, resolutely.

“Are you sure? Doesn’t he have…”

He shakes his head. “They’re all gone. I know we can’t save everyone who lost their parents to this war, but I can save him. I made a promise to him to keep him safe and I don’t mean to break it.”

“I’m not going to stop you.” She smiles. “He’s a delightful boy.”

“When he’s not being a little shit,” he mutters, remembering every time the kid hit him.

“Izuku,” his mother says sharply in reprimand.

“Sorry.”

They stand there awkwardly, still mother and son, but also strangers trying to understand each other. His mother is colder and harder than he remembers, strong in a way that's almost cruel.

He wonders what she went through whimsy he was gone because he knows that strength. It's the same strength that pushed him towards sacrificing the Pussycats in exchange for Kouta and Momo.
“Let’s talk about something serious,” she says, pulling him from his thoughts.

“What?”

“UA. You know I can't let you back there.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

“Too many students died and there have been too many failures. I'm not willing to trust them ever again.”

“I know.”

She frowns. “We’re looking at legal action, your father and I.”

He smiles wryly. “And Kacchan's mother, right? Probably Kouda or Hagakure's parents as well.”

“You know.”

“Not the details but… I know you and I know my father. I guess I’ve always known. I won't stop you if that’s what you want. I'll stand by you because you’re my family.”

“Do you still want to be a hero? There’s Ketsubutsu if you want to stay in Japan. Or Hero Memorial Academy in Zimbabwe.”

“Or maybe Toledo Research Institute, an institute built in honour of a Great Tyrant.”

Her smile fades. “It’s hard, I know, but you need to keep walking forward, one step at a time.”

“Do that and you’ll meet the rising sun,” he says wryly.

“I thought you’d be more upset.”

“I am. But, if I start crying, then I won’t stop. If I let one tear out, then I’m just… I won’t be able to stop—and I can’t deal with that, you know. I just never want to have to cry because it’s real and he’s gone.”

He’s breathing harshly, heartbeat frantic by the time he gives by on speak. She holds his face gently and wipes away the stream of tears, not caring that he is weak and sad and struck by grief.

“I love you,” his mother says.

That proves too much. Whatever mastery he had over his emotions vanishes, the coldness gone, replaced by the scared little boy who never really grew up. He cries, holding his mother tight. Everything he’s kept hidden by a veneer of control comes out, every fear and the soul-crushing grief he has. He doesn’t know how long he cries for, but there’s a wet patch on his mother’s shoulder by the time the tears run dry.

When his tears are dry, they speak of everything that happened. They speak in hushed tones and tentative questions, trying to piece together everything that went unsaid whilst they were apart. And when she falls asleep on the couch, exhausted, he covers her with a blanket and walks upstairs.

There is damage to his room, cracks running along the walls and his window is broken. His desk and the computer are both gone, and he assumes they were destroyed. There are posters and books missing and the bed is smaller than the one he had before. At the very least, it is clean and there
aren’t any safety hazards to it.

The clothes in his closet have been placed in boxes neatly stacked on top of each other. He opens each box until he finds one with his favourite hoodie, one with a picture of All Might on it. It’s old and worn but still comfortable. Izuku wears it, comforted by the familiar fabric. It fits tightly against the broad expanse of his shoulders and the curve of his biceps.

Nothing has ever fit so well.

The door opens slowly. At first, he thinks it’s his father, but the man’s fiery presence is downstairs with his mother. Their eyes meet for the first time in weeks, Izuku’s green to Kouta’s black. There’s an undercurrent of hesitation, of uncertainty that any of this is true.

He kneels as the boy rushes him. Izuku catches him and wraps his arms around him.

“Hey, Kouta.”

“You said you’d be back,” Kouta says, his voice breaking.

“Sorry, I’m late.”

Kouta smacks him but there’s no strength to it. “I hate you.”

“I know you don’t mean that.”

The boy hits him in the chest. “You don’t know anything.”

Izuku only smiles sadly.

“I’ve lost my best friends and I’m too scared to look for the rest because I’m afraid I’ll just break if I see them. I’ve lost my closest mentor who was more a father to me than my dad. I know the pain you feel. I know that pit in your stomach that feels like it’s never going to go away. I know that feeling of functioning but not really feeling. I know what it’s like to wake up and feel like you’re drowning.” He pulls the boy closer. “I’m sorry you have to know what that feels like. I’m sorry I wasn’t strong enough.”

“It hurts.”

“I know.”

“I miss them.”

“I know.”

“I just want them back.”

“I know.”

“I wish none of this happened.”

Kouta doesn’t cry but Izuku holds him until the boy is composed. There will be more tears in the future. They will both remember their captivity and the cost they paid in those they love.

“If you want, there’s a place for you here,” he says softly. “I know it’s not much of a choice, but it’s all I can promise right now.”
“Could you have saved them?”

“Kouta…”

“The truth. Could you?”

Izuku shakes his head. “No. He wanted them dead from the very beginning. He was older, more cunning, and more powerful than me. We only made it out because he allowed it.”

“I hate him for what he did.” Kouta stares at him. “Make me a promise.”

“Anything.”

“Promise me you’ll be strong enough that this never happens.”

“I promise.”

Eventually, the boy falls still, exhausted from the day. Izuku doesn’t begrudge him that. If anything, he wishes he could sleep as well. He carries Kouta to the third room and lays him on the bed, tucking him in.

Would you have cared for me like that if I lived?

He looks to the mirror in the room, the room that was once meant for Mikumo Atakani. In it, he sees his brother, hair dark as midnight and eyes darker than Izuku. His features, though, lack the scars Izuku has. Despite all that they have been through, Mikumo has done nothing but care for Izuku. He’s done nothing but be a good brother.

Izuku isn’t so cruel to deny that truth.

“Yes.”

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Shouto Todoroki doesn’t know what to do with his time. There is no school to go to after a war like this, not when half the students in UA’s heroics program are dead. Not when an investigation is brewing.

He devotes a portion of his time to his mother. He learns more about this woman he once loved, each story helping him build a new image in his heart to care for.

“I don’t think we said a single thing to each other during the negotiation or the weeks after the ceremony,” his mother says, smiling wistfully. “One day, we’re in the solarium and we haven’t said a single word, so I grabbed him by the collar and pulled him down. Told him he can either speak to me or I’m walking out. That was the day I learnt your father could be painfully shy.”

“Endeavour? Shy? Are you sure we’re talking about the same person?”

“He wasn’t always as hard as he is now. He was pushed into that marriage by his family just as much as I was. Have you seen how bad he is at public speaking? That’s because your father is shy and he uses bluntness to hide it.”

Shouto shakes his head. “I don’t see it.”

All he sees are harsh words and burning determination. He sees Endeavour’s disappointment and spiteful words. He can’t imagine vulnerability. No, that isn’t true. He can still remember the day...
they visited his mother and the words Endeavour spoke. Unrepentant words, yes, but also freeing
words.

He remembers his father’s words so clearly. _Despite everything, I am proud of you._

Maybe, just maybe, the shy man Rei remembers is also the true version of Endeavour just as the
cruel and arrogant man Shouto knows is true.

“Well, he’s changed a lot, but he’ll always love you, no matter how bad he is at showing it. So,
here I am, five foot nothing, standing on a chair so I can grab his collar. His eyes are wide, and he
looks like he’s terrified for his life—what exactly do guys say about women that gets you so
terrified? Anyway, I tell him he can start talking to me or I’m walking out.”

“Did he talk to you?”

“Well, he did squeak something out that might have been a yes. I think that’s when he fell in love
with me. Your father isn’t… the nicest person in the world, but he did love his family until I
happened.”

“That wasn’t your fault.”

She holds his hands gently. “I still did it. I hurt my own child. There are no excuses for that. You
should be angry and upset with me. I don’t deserve you not hating me. I don’t deserve your love.”

“You always will.” He kisses the back of her hand gently. “I love you, ma.”

He smiles. It only widens when she laughs at it.

Most of his time is spent rebuilding his home. It wasn’t designed to deal with an earthquake and
much of it is shattered and destroyed. He’s never built a home before, but he doesn’t need to buy
hardware supplies—not that there are any readily available. With his ice, he can reverse damage to
the superstructure. With his fire, he can fuse anything that needs to be fused and convert materials
as needed.

When there aren’t enough materials, he flashes deep into the abyss and slaughters creatures that
resemble the materials he needs. Much of steel beneath the concrete is from the corpses of an iron
giant. The concrete filling is made from grinding the chitin from armoured birds-like creatures.
When he needs screws, he finds smaller entities with twisting horns that he can jury rig to be
useful.

During his breaks, he spends his time looking to the future. Everyone is so busy with the present
effort of rebuilding that they forget that the future will come whether or not they hide their heads in
the sand.

People ignore the fact that Japan is still technically at war with China, a war that can at any time
resume. They choose to pretend that the economy isn’t all sorts of fucked and that it will be
decades, perhaps centuries, before it reaches stable levels. They don’t consider that the League
practically walked away freely after the war with only about a hundred confirmed kills or captures,
and only thirty being from the war force. They ignore how villains are building a new nation with
Vancouver Island as their capital, and how it will be the reason a civil war starts in North America.

Shouto doesn’t care about any of that. He’s more interested in mapping out the patterns that will
arise from the actions Fumikage or Izuku take. And that, more than anything, bothers him. There
are so many possible futures, some more likely than others, and he can only track them from
watching people around them. Kirishima proves incredibly useful. He’s almost a constant of the
universe and observing his state gives a quick overview of what sort of future it is.

There are days where he sees something flit across his vision. It is in a distant star system and is never the same. Something dark stalks the void that binds the stars together and the stars themselves whisper warnings. He can’t make much sense of them as stars process things very differently. This universe he and his family lives in belongs to godflame. Earth exists in the topmost layer of the abyss where the natural and orderly laws birthed by the eternal flame hold sway.

Seeing something nearly as dark as Izuku hiding in the emptiness of space is disquieting.

“I guess everything changes,” he says to himself.

He manifests a wisp of godflame and stares at the fire. These black flames which birthed concepts like time and entropy have stayed constant for a period longer than eternity, seeing neither change nor difference. Now, though, merged with hellfire and the memories of his mother, Shouto has made something new out of the eternally unchanging.

Maybe it’s time the natural order of things changes once more. Even if it does mean humanity must fight for its right to live.

At least I won’t be bored.

“Shouto.”

He lets his visions of possible futures fade away, blinking away the dryness of his eyes. He blinks to get rid of the blurriness in his right eye. When it doesn’t fade, he realises it might just be permanent.

“What’s up?”

“Dad’s awake.”

Shouto nods. He feels like that’s something he should do. “Okay. Are we going to see him?”

“He’s in a naval hospital. That’s why we haven’t been able to find him.”

“Sure.”

She frowns. “You knew.”

He shrugs. “I called Fumikage and he found out for me. He’s in the best hospital that’s operational and stable.”

She puts her hands on her hips and that’s when he realises that he’s made a mistake. “And why didn’t you think to tell me?”

“Because it wasn’t important?”

“He’s family!”

He winces, taking a step back. “Sorry?”

She just shakes her head. “I don’t even know what to do with you.”

“At least we have electricity?”
That was one of his earlier projects. An endless fire to generate steam from ice, turbines built from the corpses of metal gods and superconducting wires from the nervous system of a shambling darkbeast.

“Have you been keeping up with your studies, at least?”

“Sure, let me learn about electromagnetism and nuclear forces and gravity when I’m the one who decides those laws.”

“Then tell me the law of gravitation. Or Schrodinger’s equation. Or any foundational law describing the laws you supposedly get to decide.”

“Um…” He blinks. “That’s weird. I know what they do, I just don’t know why they do what they do.”

She pokes his forehead. “Nothing’s free, not even power. You’re my little brother. I’m not here to feed your budding god complex. Come on, let’s go see dad.”

He looks away and waits for her to walk away a bit. “It’s not a complex if it’s true,” he mutters.

“I heard that.”

The corners of his lips twitch in what might as well be a broad grin. She never puts up with his nonsense and never seems to care that he can rewrite the laws of physics on a whim. It makes him love her just a bit more.

He catches up to her. “How do you even plan on getting to father?”

“I don’t know, maybe the helicopter parked a kilometre away.”

He glares at her in annoyance then looks in the direction she’s pointing in. There are collapsed buildings in the way, but he can see through them and finds the helicopter just shy of a kilometre away on a patch of ground freed up by a fallen building.

They walk down the road, or at least the half that hasn’t collapsed, in silence. There are people working on them, a group of five young men clearing the rubble. Shouto waves and they wave back fondly. Given that he’s paying them in transmuted silver for their work, he fully expects them to be grateful. They’re not the only team he has working like this. There are dozens more across the city.

Singlehandedly, he’s keeping entire families fed and helping towards the restoration in a way being a hero never would. He’s seen the reports and knows that the remaining heroes are practically useless in their occupations. There aren’t many people trying to take advantage of the chaos. No, most people are either helping with reconstruction or trying to survive.

Ensuring secure supplies of food and water are more important than stealing a TV when there’s no power to run it. Stopping a petty crime is a waste compared to distributing their heavily rationed supplies.

“Do you know what’s happened to Touya and Natsuos?” Fuyumui asks when they’re in the air.

He shakes his head. “I checked Natsuos’s school. He’s not dead, at least. Left a quick letter that he’s looking for his girlfriend. Did you know he had a girlfriend?”

She shakes her head. “Well, he walked out of the house and barely talks to us, so no. And Touya?”
Shouto shrugs. “No idea. He never really stayed in one place for more than a few weeks. I can’t even tell if he’s in the country.”

They speak quietly for the next hour. He learns that she’s running the school after gathering the remaining teachers and turning it into a daycare of sorts. It frees up so many people to help with the reconstruction that they’re receiving funding and supplies from Detnerat—which Shouto is certain belongs to the League but anyone who helps gets a free pass as far as he’s concerned—and Fuyumi just might be the most popular person in their prefecture.

The helicopter lands on a ship in the middle of Sagami Bay. It’s a large thing bristling with massive guns and bearing the scars of their previous conflict. He can see a large rip on the deck from a piece of ordinance just skimming the surface. Interestingly, he can see the echoes of Fumikage’s power on this ship, immaterial chains running along the hull.

They are greeted by a man in full regalia when they step out. The man has blunt features and looks like he hasn’t slept in the last three weeks. The crew hastily trying to repair the damage to the ship look just as tired.

“Shouto and Fuyumi Todoroki. I’m Vice Admiral Kadomatsu. Let’s go see your father.”

The vice admiral turns on the spot and walks away quickly. Fuyumi struggles to keep up which makes Shouto snort. She elbows him in annoyance.

“Aren’t you too important to be acting like a guide?” Fuyumi asks, and whilst she is curious, mostly it’s to get the man to slow down.

“Your father is our greatest threat deterrent. Your brother is just as important. I’d rather not risk someone needlessly antagonising strategic assets.”

Shouto sees Fuyumi tense. “They’re not weapons.”

“As you say,” the admiral says blandly. “Reports from the camp attack indicate your ice has healing properties. We’d like to make use of them.”

The soldiers on the way salute their vice admiral. All of them are armed and look more stressed the further they walk. Some even are openly crying.

“Casualty reports,” the admiral explains. “When people can get news of their families, it’s usually not good.”

“What’s the body count at?”

“Officially, two million. More accurately, it’s predicted at six million by the end of the week. The number will rise to over ten million in the coming weeks.”

Shouto takes that news in stride, not caring much for it. But it leaves his sister upset so he takes her hand and squeezes tightly. She sends him a soft smile.

They enter the hospital wing of the ship and only now does Shouto see the injured. There are so many of them on every surface possible.

Shouto knows what Izuku would do in this situation. His friend would try to help. Shouto could care less but he’d rather be able to say he did everything he could when he sees Izuku. It will make things a lot better.
“I think dad can wait,” Fuyumi says softly. “Admiral, will you let him work?”

“If it saves my men and women, then yes, God yes.”

He walks towards the first body, a woman with white hair and breathing heavily. He looks with his right eye and finds the lung injury. He lays a hand over her torso gently. Carefully, he generates a lattice of ice where the injury is. Through it, he reverses entropy and returns her lung to a healthier state. And just to be nice, he fixes up a few problems that would normally develop in a few years.

Her breathing evens out and her pained sleep ends. She won’t wake up for a few hours, but she’ll be alive by the time he’s done.”

He stands, cracking his neck. “How many people are injured?”

“We’ve retrofitted half the ship as a medical hospital.”

Shouto sighs. “Let’s make a deal. I heal all of them and you send them to help with reconstruction.”

“We were going to do that anyway.”

“Starting with Mustafu,” he specifies.

“Shouto,” his sister chastises.

“You’re rather self-serving.”

“Yes. And?”

The vice admiral frowns. “Get to work, then.”

It takes him the next six hours to get to everyone. One person doesn’t take more than five minutes on average, but some are injured much worse than others. He comes to learn much more about the human body than he ever wanted to. In all honesty, there is nothing beautiful about it. It is just a sack of flesh and fluids and inefficient evolutionary adaptations. That might be why he starts experimenting with their genomes, altering something here and unlocking a different evolutionary path there.

At some point, Fuyumi organises people based on the severity of injuries. He doesn't know when she does that, all he knows is that she's directing him from one area to another. She forces him to stop and eat at some point.

“I’m fine,” he says, and really, he is. Shouto has dealt with surviving in the abyss on a mix of ice and the occasional godling’s heart.

“I’m not going to ask again.”

He takes the ration roughly and bites into it. Then he burns it with godflame in his mouth, so he doesn’t have to taste it, before doing the same to the rest.

“There. You happy?”

“You’re a brat.”

Eventually, once he’s dealt with a few hundred people and probably made more than a few of them believe in God, he’s allowed to see his father.
Half his body is burnt to a crisp. Shouto can see the damage through the bandages with his right eye and it doesn’t look good. There’s a drip feeding him with powerful opiates. Somehow, his father’s burning rage lets him stay awake through the pain.

“Hello, father. I saw you get beaten down. That was entertaining.”

His father glares. “Wh—” Endeavour grits his teeth when that tugs at his scars.

This may very well be the best day he’s had in a long time. He pokes his father’s bandages which makes the man hiss in agony.

“This was done through hellfire. You tithed your own flesh to the image of yourself. Rather an odd application of those flames. I’ll have to look into it.”

“Do something,” his father groans out. “Or get out.”

Shouto rolls his eyes in annoyance. A coating of frost covers half his father’s body. The nature of the injury naturally wants to fight him, naturally wants to stay as it is. Shouto glares at it and rewrites the laws of hellfire.

Slowly, he observes as his father’s muscle and fat return, thread by thread. Once Shouto is done, none of the burn scars remains. Admittedly, he could have down something about the many deep cuts but he's not that nice. Endeavour is functional and that's all that matters.

His father sits up and burns away the bandages. He observes his arm, checking it for issues clinically. Then, Endeavour gets out of bed. Even in a hospital gown, he looks imposing.

“Where are you going?”

“There’s work to do. Without All Might, I’m the strongest.”

Shouto exhales sharply. “Sure, strongest hero maybe. Definitely not the strongest person.”

“Stop being an ass and get out of my way, boy.”

He obliges his father, stepping aside as his dad stalks past him.

“Oh, by the way, mum’s back.”

Endeavour freezes up. “What?”

“I thought about not telling you but then I realised that wouldn’t be fair to her.”

“Somehow, touching the flame that birthed creation made you an immature smartass.”

Endeavour grabs the sweatpants and throws them on, followed by the grey shirt. It’s two sizes too small for him, but then, most things are.

They walk out of the room together.

“Fuyumi.”

“Father.”

“Awkward reunion,” Shouto adds, grabbing Fuyumi by the shoulder. He does the same to his father, startled that he’s nearly as tall as the man.
He grins at the vice admiral just like Izuku would, all fire and sharp teeth and the birth of creation.

“Don’t forget our agreement.”

“I won’t. Endeavour, we need to speak.”

Shouto gives the man an apologetic smile. “No can do. We have an awkward reunion to suffer through. Also, you got the wrong deterrent.”

In a flash of black flame, they’re gone.

*****

Fumikage Tokoyami spends his time dealing with one issue or another. With Maya missing and many of the senior members dead, he is the highest ranked member of her arm of the Imperial household. It falls to him to organise dozens of people and give them new assignments, to send letters to the families of the dead, and to navigate the internal politics of the household.

Itinerant proves invaluable through it all. The man may be brusque to Fumikage, but he at least has enough sympathy not to let him drown in the new duties he holds.

“I don’t even know what this means,” Fumikage says, setting down a paper with a message written in a cypher.

Itinerant glares at him. Then he looks at the paper.

"Use cypher code 6-B. The decryption cypher name is always found in the header and footer of a document."

That only helps so much. It takes him a few minutes to decrypt the document and by then, there are more than a dozen other documents he needs to deal with.

“With Izanami MIA, and two members of the Guard dead, you’re tapped to become the next member of the Guard,” Itinerant says after sending a message. “You certainly have the power and you’ll be ready for the duties associated with it.”

Fumikage sighs. “I have no interest in protecting the Emperor.”

“But you will kill at his command.”

“I didn’t.”

Itinerant raises one perfect eyebrow. “You sunk ships and set your beasts on people. Do you really think they lived miraculously?”

A part of him is aware of that. Yet, the circumstances had been different. Japan had been at war within and without. Fumikage fought to defend Japan’s sovereignty against a Chinese invasion. Is that not a moral and just cause? Can killing not be forgiven if its for the right cause.

You’ve learnt to lie to yourself well.

That stings, but he doesn’t let his feelings show. “I have no interest in serving your Emperor.”

“He’s your Emperor as well. She took you to see our great secret. That makes you one of us now.”

It hurts to admit, but now, after a war, he understands the importance of having deterrents as
powerful as the Imperial Heir. His powers had stopped the devastation of All For One’s attacks from being cataclysmic. His powers had made the wave that sunk the rest of the Chinese fleet which had saved Japan further. A few million dead compared to over forty million at the most conservative estimates. And, if he’s being honest, he couldn’t give two shits about Taiwanese people who died three decades ago.

He sighs but continues reading reports. One mentions that the children he looked after are now alone with the death of their caretaker a few hours ago. He closes his eyes but assigns them to be transferred to the Villa in a few days. For now, the security teams can deal with them.

“Taking the role means power. With All For One gone and most of the top heroes dead, we’re the strongest quirk force in Japan. You can make genuine changes.”

“Still not interested.”

“Tell me why, at least.”

“Because if I accept this role then it means she’s dead and not coming back. I know she’s not.”

Itinerant stays silent for a beat. “You need to accept—”

“I refuse to accept that future,” Fumikage says, cutting him off. “I would know if she died. The chains binding us together still exist.”

“If you say so. There are two empty roles with Oberon and Loki dead. You could take those.”

“Itinerant, enough.”

They speak no more on the matter. As the days progress, Fumikage becomes more familiar with the protocols of the household when not in war. Despite how informal and lax they can be, there is a procedure for just about everything and paperwork associated with it.

He speaks to the Emperor only once in the man’s vast office. Only one member of the Royal Guard, a woman he’s yet to speak to, is with him compared to the six on the day Fumikage was inducted. The Emperor speaks bluntly, requiring status updates without embellishment.

“My crows are supplementing the abyssal detection teams,” he says after an hour of mundane speak. “As far I understand, half the equipment used for that was destroyed by the war.”

The Emperor nods once. “Is there anything more?”

Fumikage shakes his head. “No.”

“We are pleased with your work, Inquisitor. You do us a great service and we will remember your actions. Dismissed.”

It is later in the evening when an aide bursts into his room, uniform dishevelled and sweating. Fumikage frowns, realising he’ll have to up the physical training of the secondary staff if they’re this unfit.

“We found her.”

He’s out of bed in a flash.

“Where?” he demands.
They’re keeping her body in an armed facility on the outskirts of the Villa. Fumikage walks past people taller than him and comes face to face with Izanami of the Royal Guard entombed in a metal coffin.

“Leave,” he commands.

“But—”

He is not like Shouto who is an eternal flame or Izuku who is endless darkness. His is the power of disparity, the twilight hour or the first moments of dawn. But he is also total and complete domination. There are dozens of chains that bind him, and if he chooses, the weight of the invisible chains binding everyone can be crushing.

Everyone in the facility suddenly finds themselves weighed down, being pulled down by an invisible burden.

“I gave an order. I expect it to be followed.”

He lets the weight fade and suddenly they can stand tall again. Thankfully, no one is willing to push him on the matter and soon enough he is alone.

Fumikage looks at the metal vessel concealing Maya and feels a pang of sadness. She was the one who gave him his freedom, gave him his blades and showed him the true fight. She gave him power and wealth and affection freely. No, there was a cost to it all and that cost was his ideals. A fair trade.

He summons the remainder of the crows in his soul, the rest spread across Japan. Only five of them remain and they float above him, observing their master silently.

“Consume only the metal,” he orders and knows they will obey without hesitation.

Carefully, they shred through layer after layer of metal. There’s a possibility it is her physical form trapped in there and he refuses to let her be harmed.

Slowly, the crows whittle down the metal coffin. A thousand beams of hardlight escape the metal shell. A few hit him in the chest, but he’s strong enough to ignore them. He doesn’t pay attention to the destruction caused by the hardlight beams.

Right now, he’s too busy looking for the right shaft of light. He closes his eyes, searching for the chain that binds them together.

There, he thinks and tugs at the metaphysical bond between them.

The golden beam suddenly solidifies and becomes Maya Yotsuba. He smiles at her as she looks around, eyes scanning everything wildly.

“Hello.”

She stares at him, dumbstruck. Then, in a burst of purely human speed, she hugs him suddenly.

“Thank you. I nearly… I nearly lost myself. I was light for too long and I wasn’t me anymore.” She looks lost, terrified. “You saved me more than you know.”

“We made an oath. You have taught me and protected me.” He relaxes in her grip. “I am your Inquisitor.”
“What the fuck took you so long?”

Fumikage only chuckles.

*****

Izuku watches the reconstruction efforts from the safety of his home. Every news network is playing the battle between All Might and All For One. They’re showing All For One systematically decimate the top ten heroes, create hurricanes and generate earthquakes. They show one man wage war and winning until the very last moment.

He hates looking up his name because there’s just so much information available. He even has a Wikipedia page, now. Who is Izuku Midoriya? There are a thousand different answers. Some call him a hero, some a villain, many a revolutionary in the making, and those are just the reasonable ones. He’s supposedly on every end of the political spectrum, a proponent of unchecked capitalism and a firm disciple of Marxism. It makes no sense that he has no control over who he is. Everyone has a different idea of who he should be and what he should be doing.

More than anything, Izuku just wants to sleep and fade to obscurity.

“He killed so many,” he says from his perch on the roof, a month after the war ended. “Why?”

For you, Mikumo says. He believed you his creature. And so, he chose to kill everyone who held the power to oppose you.

“I thought there might be something good in him. I thought maybe I could change him like I changed Spinner.”

He was old and set in his ways. What he did was all he knew. He used the methods of the warlords of the past. He could not adapt to the present where All Might reigned, nor could he force a future with his means. You represent the culmination of his life’s work.

“Why? I’m never going to be a villain. I want things to change, but why would he die for me?”

Children are a chance to do better. Legacies are simply another way to have children. He placed his hopes and dreams in you to create a world where brothers don’t fight brothers, and a little girl in a sunflower dress can grow to be happy. To give you the best chance, he killed them all and made himself the greatest villain. When he saw that even All Might could not win, he summoned you to end it all and solidify your mythos. When you stand against injustice, they will see a man refusing a world which created that villain. He martyred himself for you, brother, and they will never know.

“That doesn’t make him good.”

No, it does not. But he knew his faults. He lived life with rules that he broke only for you. All For One will never be good or decent, but he tried with his broken means. And when he learnt those means failed, he asked you to try something he could not. He entrusted you to make something beautiful out of his shattered faith and broken dreams.

“He gave up.”

Is accepting your failings so wrong? There was grace to those failings, nobility and honour behind his intent. His acts were vile, but they were all he knew. And now he is dead, and all that he was, he entrusted to you. He entrusted you with his strength and with his legacy. You must choose the future you want to see.
He considers that, considers the weight of everything now resting on his shoulders. A long time ago, it seemed so easy. Be a good hero and fight villains. It became more complicated so early. One girl and a police officer who changed his path, getting to know Shouto and discovering Endeavour’s crimes, seeing Aizawa fail him time and time again. Stain who taught Izuku to see the truth for himself and choose a path to the future. Learning about Nana Shimura and having All Might acknowledge Izuku’s desire to change society had diverted his path even more.

Most of all, meeting All For One had recontextualized everything he knew. The great villain who saw two centuries of history, who witnessed Hero battle and spoke to Hawkmoon as an equal had forced Izuku to consider things differently. The greatest villain of this era who was once a vigilante, a man who brought stability through force to both Japan and western Canada. A man who was betrayed by his brother and who waged a war for centuries.

Izuku can’t ever forgive him for what he did. He loathes the villain, hates all that the villain did and justified away, every moment of cruelty and villainy inexcusable in his mind. But, deep in his heart, he knows he respects All For One and wants to make a world where that villain isn’t necessary.

“Hey,” Izuku says, patting a spot next to him. “I’m surprised you got through the security so well.”

The shadow that’s been watching him for the past few minutes approaches.

Shuichi Iguchi, the former villain Spinner, and perhaps Izuku’s first follower, sits down heavily. He’s wearing the same armour as always underneath a dark jacket with a deep hood to hide his features.

“They’re good but I’ve dealt with tighter security.”

“Or maybe my father added you to the approved list.”

Spinner exhales sharply. “Maybe.”

“Have you heard of the Lightning Bolts?”

“Yeah. I’ve been following them these last few days. They’re… I didn’t know you had other disciples.”

Izuku shrugs. “I never told them what to do. I’ve only ever met one of them.”

“But they—”

“They made me a legend, not a person. I’ve become a concept to them, an ideal to follow. One day I’ll deal with them. Can’t have people using my name when I don’t know how they’ll go about achieving their future.”

“I’ll keep monitoring them where I can.”

“What happened to the Vanguard?” Izuku asks.

Shuichi looks to him and there is a flash of uncertainty. “I fulfilled one last request.”

“If I asked, would you tell me where they are?”

Shuichi swallows nervously. He stays silent for a long, tense minute.

“Yes,” Shuichi settles on. “Would you go after them?”
"I don’t think there’s a reason to other than revenge. And that’s just not worth it."

"Every life is precious. When we forget that, we forget our humanity."

His smile comes unbidden and there is genuine warmth to it. Spinner watches him uncertainly, but that fades away at Izuku’s electrifying smile.

"I have taken many lives, and each is a greater burden to bear as I age. From the boys swayed by rousing words to the jaded old men struggling to keep their children fed, each life matters. When we forget this simple fact, we cast aside our humanity." That was the full quote from the great Yui Ikari whom Hawkmoon eclipsed. I much prefer her to Dylan Salvatore. Perfection is impossible for people to reach."

“You’re not perfect,” Shuichi says, nervously. Izuku nods at him encouragingly. “I don’t think he meant we should be perfect, but that we should try. If we strive towards perfection, then our moral failings and blemishes can be ignored. We only truly fail when our effort falls short of our moral limit, but the blame decreases the closer we get to our moral limit. So long as we try to be perfect, we can be forgiven for not being good enough.”

Izuku laughs joyously. "I didn't think I'd ever heard something optimistic out of Dylan Salvatore's philosophy. Thank you, for showing me that."

“You’re welcome. Thank you for giving me another chance.”

“Keep Kouta safe. No matter what, watch over him, alright?”

Shuichi nods. “Do you think he’ll ever forgive me for my role in things?”

Izuku shrugs. “Can you forgive yourself?”

Shuichi stays silent. Together, they watch the night turn to dawn, red and purples streaks across the sky. Perhaps it is a sign, a reminder to move forward.

And when the sun has risen, Shuichi says, “Ask me again if I'm alive ten years from now. I’ll be watching you when you speak.”

Izuku sighs. “The funeral. I don’t know if I’m ready.”

“All you have to do is try. Speaking about a man you respect can’t be harder than converting your enemy.”

“No, it isn’t.”

There is no excuse when he thinks of it like that. In the afternoon, he wears the best suit he owns, one his father went all the way to Italy for. He gives up with the tie almost immediately. When he’s ready, he heads towards the site of the great funeral for All Might, exactly a month after the hero fell in battle.

The burial ground overlooks the barren wasteland from Japan’s first villain attack in the Dark Ages. It overlooks the mass grave markers to those who died alone and forgotten, the place where Hawkmoon was buried only three decades ago.

It is a relatively private ceremony, not open to the public. The coffins had been driven by a full procession across a road hastily fixed just for this moment.
Now, at the end of the journey, they prepare to bury the greatest hero of this era. There are dozens of officials from the Prime Minister to generals and admirals alongside some of the remaining heroes, including Endeavour. Foreign dignitaries, most notably America’s ambassador to Japan and many from south-east Asia. Notably, there isn’t a single hint of Chinese presence.

Even the Emperor is here today, he and his remaining Royal Guard. Izuku meets Fumikage’s eyes in that sea of white and offers him what amounts to a smile.

The most important, however, are the many UA students given precedence today. This is the burial of All Might and the UA students who died in the war alongside him. Today, they will be honoured for their actions.

The speeches are long and, in many cases, completely uninspired. Too many of them are filled with politics and wholly unsuited for a day that should be auspicious. Even now, this early, they look for more power and insult Toshinori Yagi’s memory.

He wishes he had the strength to speak to his classmates, but he is too terrified of breaking if he speaks to them. A lot of the terror is seeing the disappointment in Kirishima’s eyes or the raw grief that Ojiro carries. Those feelings aren’t things he’s ready to deal with.

Not today, at least.

He doesn’t want to speak. The last few weeks have been a cycle of pain and more pain. He can accept the physical and psychological pain the League inflicted upon him. That is nothing. He has faced much worse.

But the pain in his soul is something different. He thought taking a life would be the worst thing he would experience. Losing his friends is so much worse.

He thinks of Shinsou, his first friend and the first of his peers he willingly told the truth to. He remembers every dry joke and kind word they shared. He thinks of how much Shinsou cared for Ochaco and wonders if one day they might have had children. Would they have Shinsou’s hair or Ochaco’s soft features? Would they be a perfect mixture of the two? Or would their children look nothing like their parents? Most of all, he thinks of the favour he owes her and will never have the chance to repay.

Asui was the one he knew the least. Blunt and hilarious in equal measure, she was the one reminded them all to have fun. Most of all, she had a strong moral fibre that was never compromised. He wishes he could have known her better, wishes he could have been kinder and shown more interest in her.

Iida is gone as well. He was always the most diligent of them all, the least likely to make a joke but someone you could rely on. Iida who mourned the passing of his brother badly but became a better person in the process. And it absolutely crushes Izuku to think that Iida chose to sacrifice his life as a true hero would.

They are being buried beside All Might. They and all the other students who fell to the League.

The dozens of coffins represent UA students just as All Might was. And in death they are dressed in their hero costumes, posthumously graduated from the institute and granted hero licences. All because they sacrificed their lives for others. All because they chose to do good.

He names them as they are buried, refusing to, even for a moment, forget who they were. Human life is precious, weak and fragile, but all the more beautiful for its flaws. It is worth fighting for,
and the first battle is never letting the dead be forgotten.

Hanta Sero.

Neito Monoma.

Itsuka Kendo.

Setsuna Tokage.

Manga Fukidashi.

Yosetsu Awase.

Togaru Kamikari.

Too many gone. Students who committed one crime that they paid the price for. Their only crime choosing to try and better themselves, and better the world by being heroes, and this is the price they paid.

More and more he understands why All For One would refuse to kill children, regardless that he broke that oath at the very end. The grieving parents, the mourning siblings, and the grandparents wondering what went wrong whilst they lived out their twilight years.

Aizawa is gone, murdered in school by parties unknown. Izuku regrets the last words they shared, bitter and angry and full of mistakes. But no matter how bad it was, he never wished for things to end like this.

And now they expect him to be strong and speak at the funeral of this great legend and those whose time was cut short. They ask him to be better than he has the strength to be.

They ask the boy who carried his corpse to speak for All Might. They ask the boy who was there when the war began and was there at the very end to speak. Izuku Midoriya, the most famous and controversial teenager alive.

He takes a long minute on the podium, throat dry and eyes stinging with tears. All he wants is to say goodbye to his friends he couldn’t protect, those who died trying to save him, and those he never knew better.

“IT’s hard standing here and talking,” he says slowly, his voice scratchy. “How do you talk about someone who defined an era? How do you talk about the greatest hero of our time? You know him as All Might, the Pillar of Society. You’ve spoken about his deeds and the impact of his legacy.”

Izuku wipes his eyes before he starts crying because they haven’t. They’ve tried to use that legacy for their own ends.

“I knew him as Toshinori Yagi. And I think he… he would want me to talk about the man beneath the legend. He told me once that he smiled because it was the legacy he inherited from the hero he respected most, Nana Shimura the Brave. Because when he smiled, he could save a person’s soul as well.

“He wasn’t that happy. He wasn’t a cheery man. To be a pillar is a great burden and it weighed heavily on him. Very often when we spoke, he would be melancholic and doubt himself, and whether he lived up to the legacy of his mentor. He mourned for her just as we do a loved one and carried his grief for years. He feared failure as much as any person. He was tired and weary, beaten
down by the weight of his own legend. And if I’m being honest, he wasn’t the best teacher in the world.”

He looks at the crowd, very many horrified and stunned by his admissions. Bakugou whose anger is gone and replaced by cold grief. Momo, the one he rescued, who bows her head somberly. Kirishima who only glares at him, disappointed even more.

“He was a flawed man who made many mistakes. Had he been faster and more determined, perhaps I wouldn’t stand here with my face scarred. Had he been resolved and unwavering, perhaps much of the destruction from the war wouldn’t have occurred. Toshinori Yagi made those mistakes because he was human, just as you or I. The burden was greater because we only saw his symbol. One flawed man carried us all on his shoulders and we never once noticed.”

Izuku forces a grin, thinking of his great teacher and his failings. He accepts all that All Might could have done better, and realises that all of the mistakes he was willing to forgive as a broken boy are still mistakes he is willing to forgive now.

He accepts those mistakes and lets them wash away. That acceptance soothes a part of his soul still raw from the last few weeks, eases his pain and guilt if only for a moment. It is the same absolution and forgiveness his mentor would give without question.

Today, Izuku will give the world the same absolution.

“He was also the greatest man I knew,” he says, voice strong and clear. “He never let his fears stop him. He learnt from his failings and became a better teacher. He worked harder than anyone I’ve ever met to protect us. He wasn’t a hero for fame or wealth. He was a hero because he wanted to save people with all his heart. For Toshinori, he would go the distance for any stranger and hold the line no matter the cost. He never asked that you stand as tall as he could or fight as long. All he is asked is that you tried. And if you failed, he would carry you on his back and teach you to be stronger. When he failed, he would do his best to do right by you.”

He’s crying now, openly and unashamed. None of this is easy, to tell the truth of the man he respected more than anyone else.

“All Might may have been the greatest pillar we could ask for. But Toshinori was the greatest teacher we never knew we needed. We took for granted the fact that he would be here forever. And I… we…”

He takes a deep breath and centres himself. He refuses to break and dishonour his mentor.

“The last words he spoke were something I thought to keep private. But I am not the only one who mourns. This was the last lesson he will ever teach. Listen close and engrave these words in your soul.”

He points at them. Points at Bakugou and Ashido and Ojirou and the entire world. He looks at them and they look at him, and through him, they see the grand spectre of All Might’s legacy, one built upon centuries of history.

“Hold your head up high and smile. You are next. Walk forward and you will meet the sun.”

He doesn’t know who claps first. Maybe Ojirou or maybe his mother, maybe Kouta or maybe Bakugou. All he knows is that he walks down the stage to thunderous applause. The cheers don't make him proud but maybe, just maybe, if he can give hope to one person, then that is more than enough.
He takes his seat between Kouta and his mother. He accepts the comfort they offer gladly. He takes a deep breath to steady his heart.

“Goodbye, Toshi.”

Izuku leaves the funeral the first moment he can, tired of facing people. They all want to speak to him, to offer condolences or congratulate him or try to impose some sort of power over him. It’s sickening and fills him with anger.

Somehow, his steps lead him to the beach where it all began. The pier is broken in half and the seawall collapsed. It doesn’t matter. This place always brings a measure of peace to his heart.

He sits on the jagged edge of what remains of the pier. It creaks dangerously so he makes support pillars out of darkness, not shadow, but true darkness.

Perhaps he’s run away from it, not truly willing to face the magnitude of the truth. When he used shadows, it was part of a lie that Izuku Midoriya was just a boy, odd and perhaps tainted, but a boy. Now, he’s willing to accept that darkness that is his right, the eternal foundation of the abyss and the darkness that permeates it.

If nothing else, he doesn’t want to be a pale imitation of the legacy that came before him. He’ll be darkness in truth, not a washed-out shadow.

“I wanted to say goodbye to you here without the world watching,” he says to the dead. “This is where I got my powers. It seems so long time ago. Funny that I always come back here.”

_Is this the path you wish to walk, brother mine?_

Izuku nods, inhaling the sharp smell of salt and death. The endless blue calms his skittish heart. He reaches out, trying to grasp the ocean in his hands. All he wishes some days is to let the waves take him.

“This is where my journey began, and I hope I get to see it before the end. I never got to know you very long, but I wish I could have met you years earlier and learnt more from you. Maybe I could have shown you a different road to walk. You’ve taught me a lot about myself and about the world. You were honest where others weren’t, and you were uncompromising in your beliefs.”

He thinks of those in the military, his enemies to come one day. He’ll never accept a junta and knows he can never accept another heroics industry built on a corrupt foundation. Everything needs to change from the ground up. And sometimes, burning everything down and starting again is the easiest way.

The future was placed in his hands. As he looks to the sparks of green running along his scarred fingers, he knows the future will be filled with lightning.

“You entrusted me with too much. I’m tired of it already. Society must change but I’m so fucking tired. I hate you for making me want to be better than you ever were. But I will always respect you.”

He reaches into his shadow and removes the broken symbol of his teacher.

“You were a great man even if your legacy will be a hard burden to bear. I promise to surpass you. I hope you’re watching the story I’m about to tell.”
Make an oath that will reach him even past the barrier of death. Let him hear your conviction.

Izuku considers that. Finds it to be true. Grins a violent grin and musters his energy.

“I am Izuku Midoriya!” he roars to the indifferent waves. “The future belongs to me!”

Making that declaration saps him of whatever strength he had. That single moment where he could forget the past disappears beneath the bleak reality of the present. The loneliness and the heavy burden of his legacy crash down on him.

He inhales and lets the dead heart within him come to life. The second heartbeat runs in the space between the beats of his first.

And so, here where it all began, he says his final words to the teacher he knew the least.

“Stormwind wasn’t a villain. She was a tyrant who brought peace that lasted for centuries.”

The wind takes the shattered mask. Izuku watches the last memento of the great villain float away, never to be seen again.

“I will never forgive you, but your time is ended. May you rest in peace.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, we're getting close to the end of this season. One more chapter to go.
The Oncoming Storm

Chapter Summary

In which, Izuku says no to the world.

Chapter Notes

Accompanying this is the *The Kamino Ward War* which serves as an in-universe summary of major events for the story, with a focus on the buildup to the war.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘Do you know my name? Have I become the mask to the passage of time? I did have a name, but I doubt it matters any longer. I am Stormwind, now, and ultimately, I am victorious. Remember my acts as you will, but never forget the endless warzone that was Europe before I restored order. I ended the Second Dark Age and ushered in light over Europe. Listen carefully to my words and tread gently upon my life, dear reader, for you tread upon my thoughts and my failings.’

—Excerpt from ‘My Thoughts and My Failings’ by Luciana Cisneros, the Stormwind.

Izuku Midoriya spends the weeks after All Might’s funeral in obscurity, coalescing with his family. His mother and father are awkwardly working out the boundaries of their marriage once more, and after everything that’s happened, staying angry at his father seems too petty to consider. Mikumo, however, constantly urges Izuku to leave the house and just do anything.

“But I’m comfortable,” he says from under his blankets.

*Just get up and do something. I’m dying of boredom in here. You don’t even have ghosts to kill anymore.*

Izuku groans and rolls out of bed. “Fine.”

His room looks better now that he’s spent time fixing it up. He grabs some clothes and takes a shower quickly.

Downstairs, he finds Kouta, the latest addition to the household, doing whatever homework he’s been assigned by Shouto’s sister. Finding out she is a teacher had been a surprise, more so when she ranted at Izuku for letting Kouta do all of nothing for a few weeks, which he finds unfair since she could have blamed his mother.

*Do you really see anyone shouting at your mother?*

Izuku concedes that point. Either way, having something to do is better than aimlessly wandering and he feels he should encourage it, regardless of how hypocritical it is to do nothing as well.

“Hey,” Izuku says, making Kouta look up from his maths homework. “Just you today?”
“Yeah.”

Izuku grins. “Okay. Let’s go.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know. We’ll figure it out as we go.”

They leave the house together, Kouta rushing out ahead of Izuku.

A shadow flits past his senses. Shuichi. Izuku smiles but gives a signal for the former villain to break off and do something else.

The city still bears the scars of the war. Even with quirks and advanced technology, it will be years, maybe decades, before everything is set to rights. Thankfully, massive industrial and construction companies are charging practically nothing for their work—and though he knows many of them likely belong to the League, Izuku won’t fault them—and people with quirks suited to this work have proven invaluable.

Surprisingly, many of the schools are up and running. A joint effort between Shouto’s sister, the industrial companies, a legion of parents, and, to his surprise, Endeavour’s influence, all working towards the end of keeping kids in school and busy. That’s why bus routes are running so quickly instead of the shattered rail system.

It bothers him to see lightning bolts everywhere. Some are spray-painted on walls and in alleys, others are worn proudly by people who stand taller just seeing Izuku. He does his best to make sure Kouta doesn’t see, but that’s a foolish gambit at best.

“Are ya ever going to do anything about them?”

Izuku rests his hand on Kouta’s cap. “Not today. Today it’s just us.”

“Okay.”

They walk, speaking about everything and nothing at the same time. He gets distracted when Kouta mentions having trouble with maths and spends more time than he should on the absolute failings of the schooling system given the way they teach the subject. He may be, mildly speaking, passionate on the subject.

“I’m not saying you need to know how to derive Schrodinger’s equation, but you should at least know what a multivariable function is. This is probably why no one’s figured out quantum gravity… hmm, I should probably publish that paper. I guess I know what I’m doing tonight.”

He has a few dozen notebooks detailing the maths behind the formation of the universe and how the fundamental forces relate to each other. Maybe he can do that as a new hobby. Change his narrative to something other than a violent war.

They pass by a building that makes Izuku slow down.

“Huh, I haven’t been here in a while.”

He smiles, surprised that it’s open and running. Through the glass windows, he can see people training and fighting, more now than ever before. People look for ways to exert control over their lives after a crisis. Learning to fight is just one way.
“Let’s go inside.”

It looks largely the same he can see the scars of damage. There is no power to this part of the city, so the dojo is using harsh chemical lights instead. The fridge he’s used to seeing in one corner is gone, replaced by a cooler box. The front desk is still the same.

The man who taught him form and technique is at the front desk, startled for the first time since Izuku met him.

“Kouta, I’d like you to meet Jin Mo-Ri. Say hi.”

“Hi,” Kouta says, partially hidden behind Izuku.

“Good to see you, boy. Taking care of self?”

Izuku nods. “Trying to. Are you managing alright?”

The man gestures at the people training in the back. “Not much but honest work.”

He feels Ojiro enter the dojo behind him, cognisant of the way his shadow twitches with his tail. Izuku swallows nervously, not turning around yet.

“Hey, Kouta, you ever want to learn how to fight?”

“Not really.”

He pats Kouta’s shoulder, pushing him forward gently. “You never know. Might as well try.”

Kouta glares at him, lips pursed in annoyance. However, something about his expression must give away his nervousness because Kouta merely sighs and heads towards Jin.

“Beginner’s class starting in few minutes,” the ancient fighter explains. “Come on.”

Izuku nods encouragingly as Kouta is led towards the gathering of children and their parents in the back. They’ve all been watching Izuku since he came in and it bothers him that he can’t go anywhere without this happening.

“There’s a park nearby.”

They both know the one he’s talking about. Without saying another word, Izuku and Ojiro walk outside and towards the park. It takes a good fifteen minutes punctuated only by the awkwardness between them.

The park is quiet, only a handful of people walking through it. Izuku stops in the middle of a free patch and shrugs his shoulders, facing his friend and former classmate.

Ojiro slides into a ready stance, not saying a word. Izuku follows suit.

He lets Ojiro attack first, lets him set the pace and tempo. He deflects a punch and twists around a kick, only to have to backpedal hastily away from an elbow.

They reengage, moving faster and faster. No blow is meant to hurt. This is nothing more than a conversation they’re having without words. They keep going until Ojiro can’t go any faster, until he’s at his physical limits. It isn’t much more than a fraction of the speed Izuku can reach with One For All.
He stays at that speed, just slightly faster than Ojiro can physically match, so his friend makes do with pure skill. As a contemporary fighter, Ojiro is, and perhaps always will be, more skilled than Izuku. Perhaps that’s why, after an hour of careful probing, Ojiro slips past Izuku guard and punches cleanly.

The blow just grazes Izuku’s chin and stops there.

Ojiro grins. Izuku grins back.

“Hey,” he says, taking a step back.

“Hey,” Ojiro says back. “How are you?”

“The honest answer? I don’t know. I’m just… so fucking tired. I miss them. I miss all of them.”

Ojiro nods. “We all do. I’ve been worried about you. You just stopped responding.”

“I didn’t know if you guys still wanted me nearby.”

Ojiro pulls him into a hug. Izuku doesn’t resist and hugs him back.

“You’re an idiot!” Ojiro snaps but there’s no heat to it. “But you’re our idiot, alright?”

“Yeah.”

Izuku’s eyes are watery when he pulls back but his grin is still strong. “How is everyone?”

“Coping. Kaminari hasn’t said a word and Kirishima’s avoiding us. Yayorozu’s the only reason we still see Bakaugou and Ashido. We still meet up every week on Wednesday. You should come.”

“I think I’d like that. Next time.”

“Next time.” He cocks his head. “Are you thinking of going back to a hero school later? When things are working better.”

Ojiro shakes his head. “No, I think I’d just like to start my own dojo later. Maybe the others do but we’re fifteen and half our friends are dead. I don’t know if I’m ready to lose anyone else.”

In the distance, he spots two figures. He waves at Kouta approaching behind Jin Mo-Ri. Kouta looks exhausted and about ready to fall.

“What’s the story with the kid?”

“He’s got no one else. I can’t help everyone, but I made a promise to keep him safe.”

Ojiro claps him on the shoulder. “You keep that promise. It’s gonna be hard with what you plan on doing?”

Izuku raises his brow. “I don’t plan on doing anything?”

“I know you better than you know yourself. And you’ve got that look in your eye. It’s that same look that made you save Todoroki. The same look you had when you went to Hokkaido. The same look you had at the funeral.” Ojiro squeezes his shoulder. “Stay safe.”

He says goodbye to his friend and his former teacher, glad that they’re safe and making something out of their lives. He’s not disappointed that Ojiro wants to do something other than being a hero.
In fact, he’s joyous his friend wants to do something as noble as running a dojo. It means he’ll be safe and not in the line of fire.

The consequences of fighting have become apparent now. No one ever expected war to come and no one expected to lose their friends and family. If his friends choose to avoid heroics, it means there won’t be another person he loses before their time.

Later, Izuku is enjoying the warmth of the sun.

He glances down at Kouta who dozes. They’re sitting on a park bench, watching a group of kids play football amongst themselves. Kouta leans against him using his side as a pillow. His head is closer to Izuku’s liver than it is to his chest, right where his second heart resides.

Izu sighed fondly and lifts him up gently, carrying him over his shoulders.

Kouta is light on his back, easy to carry. He doesn’t notice the weight as he makes the long walk home. Shuichi is somewhere nearby, observing Kouta. Knowing that, knowing that Kouta will always have a guardian, sets his hearts at ease. It had been a dangerous gamble, one that hadn’t fully succeeded, but the outcome is worth it.

He shifts Kouta once the boy starts slipping off his back. That startles Kouta awake and he yawns.

“What do you want to do when you’re older?”

“Be a hero like my big brother.”

That hits Izuku right in the heart. Kouta might be half asleep and barely aware of his words, but it doesn’t change what it means, doesn’t change the responsibility he has over Kouta now.

_Am I just being casually replaced? Okay, cool._

Izuku swallows. “I’m not a hero. I just want to help people. You can do that without being a hero.”

“But I want to be like you.”

“Okay, but what else would you be if you could?”

“I don’t know… wait, maybe a history guy.”

“What?”

“You know, those guys that record stuff that happens.”

“Oh. Why that?”

“You said they didn’t remember Nana Shimura. And she was All Might’s mentor. Well, if I write down your story then everyone will remember, right?”

Izuku laughs gently. “Yes. I suppose so. I think you’ll be a great historian if you put your mind to it.”

His mother berates them for being gone the whole day without saying a word. He understands her worry and bears it gracefully, only mildly entertained when his father tries to defend his actions. That ends as well as can be expected and somehow, it is Hisashi who winds up being grounded.

They eat dinner together as a family, arguing over everything. It’s comfortable and peaceful, not a
single worry amongst them.

She pulls him aside when they’re done. Kouta and his father are struggling to clean the dishes, both too busy snapping at each other. At least there aren’t any punches being thrown around. The last one had left Hisashi limping for a week.

“There’s something I need to tell you, but I wasn’t ready to,” she says, making sure they aren’t heard. “It’s from All Might.”

His heart stutters. “Oh?”

“Before he died, he came to our house. To apologise to me and promise to get you back. I can’t forgive him for putting that target on your back, but I’ve moved on enough to tell you this.”

He forces a smile. “Tell me.”

“He said he always knew your greatest fear and that it doesn’t matter. He said you should keep walking towards the future you want to see and that all you need is to try your hardest.”

Izuku shudders, throat tight. “Yeah.”

He says nothing more and retreats to his room, crushed by those words. Once more, All Might is there to absolve him of his worries before they even manifest. Those gnawing concerns he’s been hiding from, the responsibility he’ll have to bear by being All Might's successor, aren’t gone, but they settle.

That is the power of All Might and his legacy. Even gone, his smile brings peace to Izuku's heart.

*****

The rest of Izuku’s evening is spent finding software robust enough for writing out a Theory of Everything. After a while, he realises that there isn’t a single package with the features he needs, so the next few weeks are spent recoding the software to have the functions he needs. Because after a while, he realises there’s no real framework in place to describe what happens within a singularity, and quantum gravity alone only gets you so far.

A lot of what he does is done through instinct and memory. He isn’t Shouto who can simply decide which laws work and where, given that they’re borne of the godflame, but though his powers are of true darkness, his human form was born just like every other human. He can feel out the limits where certain things break down, and when that stops being viable, he calls Shouto over and gets him to simulate those events.

“You’re really stupid,” Izuku says after Shouto stares blankly at him for the fourth time that day. “It’s simple. You’re the one writing the laws.”

Shouto rolls his eyes. “At least I’m pretty.”

“Whatever you say. Now, all I need is for you to make a Dirac sea with finite particles and matter-antimatter annihilation. That should deal with negative energy… oh, I need to deal with entropy at some point. Please tell me you know how that actually works.”

“It just does.”

Eventually, he manages to dumb things down enough for Shouto to understand. And though he pokes fun at Shouto, he does appreciate having someone to replicate any framework for the
universe as he pleases. He also has his father requisition a massive bank of quantum computers to
generate results since, whilst he can do that maths in his head, no one will believe results unless
they’re backed by something they understand.

Before he knows it, an entire month has passed before he’s ready to break the scientific
community. He at least has the decency to provide clear, simple explanations of each assumption,
model, and simple guides to understanding quantum gravity which serves as the foundation for a
dozen other breakthroughs he’s casually adding.

You’re a troll, Mikumo says after Izuku has uploaded the massive files and software packages
necessary to open those files.

Izuku shrugs. “I spent an entire year in the abyss just proofreading the files. I lost track of how
many years it took just to write out everything.”

You haven’t grown much older.

In the mirror is the same face he’s used to seeing. Maybe he’s lost a bit of baby fat, but otherwise,
he looks identical to when he left. He doesn’t feel much older though that might be due to his
perception of time stretching, a year only feeling like a few days at most.

“I guess I will see eternity’s end.”

Those years of work haven’t translated to more than a few weeks in the real world. During the day,
he takes Kouta to the dojo after he’s done his schoolwork so than Izuku can ignore him for a few
hours and picks up whatever homework Fuyumi has for Kouta that week.

One time, a crow with glass feather lands on Izuku shoulder. He stares at its three eyes, bemused
for a few minutes.

“Tell him I’m doing fine and to take care of himself.”

The crow flaps its wings and leaves. He watches it go; certain it will relay his message to
Fumikage. They will talk one day and discuss everything that has happened between them, but not
today. Maybe not even this month.

A few days later, he’s lying on his couch and reading a book when he gets a new guest.

He feels the rupture in the fabric of spacetime immediately. He’s felt it enough to know who it is.
Even then, the fact that it connects two points using endless darkness means it is within his
domain. It is his right to know who walks his kingdom.

“I’m going to warn you once that I’ll kill you if you’re here for a fight,” Izuku says, not looking up
from his book.

“I’m not here to fight,” Kurogiri says, his gas body hissing. The villain walks into view carrying a
box. “You’re very much your father’s son.”

Izuku hums. “Why?”

“I had to use every favour I owed to not have the Royal Guard kill me and Tomura. It took finding
Guardswoman Izanami for them to calm down.”

“I’m in mourning so I’d rather avoid violence. Understood?”
“Yes.”

Izuku sets the book aside. “You’re being rather docile.”

“My revenge is complete. All Might is dead”—don’t kill him, don’t kill him, don’t kill him—"and the weaknesses of this hero industry revealed. Even were you to kill me, you would only reunite me with my family. No mortal prison could hold me.”

“I am not listening to your tragic backstory.” Izuku gestures for him to sit. He’s many things but he won’t be rude. “Would it change things if I threatened Tomura?”

“You’ve become vicious.”

“Being kidnapped and taught by Sensei will do that to you.”

You idiot, Mikumo says as Kurogiri freezes.

“I see,” the villain says. “I had my reservations about this, but I see I was wrong. This is for you.”

He places the box on the table and slides it forward. Izuku opens it and is greeted by neat stacks of data drives. On top of them is a letter.

“What is this?”

“Sensei tasked me with ensuring you received this should he die. I believe he altered the contents on the morning of… when he finally fell. I’ve completed his final order. What do you want to be done?”

Izuku frowns. “I want you out of my life. Out of Japan. Go fucking raise that man-child better. Live a good fucking life. Without the two of you, the League in Japan suffers and will never really reform. Do something decent with your life before the end. And no matter what, the Vanguard won’t take another life. If they do, and I find out, I’ll hunt them down and them myself.”

Kurogiri stands. “As you wish.”

The villain leaves through a warp gate. Izuku waits a few minutes before he takes the box and its contents to his bedroom.

The letter is heavy, the pages thick and the writing elegant.

Dear Izuku,

If you are reading this, then I am dead. Perhaps by your hand. Perhaps by someone else’s. If you caused my downfall, know that I am proud of you for exceeding all expectations. If you mourn me as a teacher, know that I place the future in your hands.

Contained within is all the data you need to dismantle, reform or continue my empire. It contains every personnel file, every threat assessment, all my plans past and present, the names of my allies, and the location of my bases.

I give you this in good faith. Continue my work. Destroy my legacy. It does not matter to me. This was originally meant to go to Tomura, but I have changed it today. You are the greatest student I have had the pleasure of mentoring. You are strong, brilliant, and motivated. You will change society permanently where I failed. Where my brother and his numerous successors failed.
The burden I place on you is heavy. You are the culmination of centuries of history between one for all and all for one. There is no other person I believe capable of changing this world.

I tried to change it with my strength. I slaughtered soldiers and destroyed much of the government once. Alone, I waged war against Japan after my brother’s betrayal and broke it over my knee. A little girl stood against me and drew a line in the sand against me. She was valiant and noble, unafraid of facing the monster that just killed her family. It was then that I understood it could not be by my methods that society changed. I followed that child and generations later, Nana Shimura would be born from her lineage. And from Nana, Tenko Shimura would be born, though you know him better as Tomura Shigaraki.

Everything, I've come to learn, is cyclical and intertwined.

You asked me once why I created a system of ethics to govern my life. The answer is simple. I respect Hawkmoon, so when she called me forth, I answered. Understand that time changes us, and its passage wears us all down. She wished to die. Long ago she attempted to commit suicide. But the bullet was lucky and granted her immortality instead.

I took her quirk and let time affect her once more. It would take nearly a century for her to pass of natural causes. She gave me one simple directive: live life with rules that must never be compromised. Immortals become callous and cruel yet both she and Hinata were kind till their deaths. It is because of a system of ethics they refused to compromise.

I would not dishonour her command. Her words were true. I could destroy society and slaughter civilians without remorse, but my ethics will no longer permit it. Take care to remember that. When you choose a path, set lines you will not cross. Since then, I never killed children. I always treated my subordinates as people. And I chose never to intentionally target civilians. Those were the cornerstones of my ethics.

I worry I must break those vows to wipe the slate clean and set the stage for you. I worry that in the final moments of my life I must once more become the man I abhorred.

I cannot see the future. I cannot tell you what path to take. I offer you no reassurances. Whatever society you build will be yours and yours alone. Perhaps I will see it. Perhaps I will not. It doesn’t matter. I saw my shattered faith and broken dreams reborn in you. What more, could I ask for?

I entrust you with creating a paradise.

Sincerely,

Sensei.

“Damn you to hell.” Izuku sighs.

He takes the first data drive and connects it to his laptop. There is no password. Anyone, absolutely anyone, could have opened these. It isn’t laziness or indifference. All For One had trusted Kurogiri, his most loyal subordinate, to pass these files on to Izuku.
The files date back two centuries from the very beginning, detailing how the Modern Era truly began. They tell the story of Vancouver Island and what became of the vigilantes there. It tells the history of dozens of wars and countless battles, of reshaped landmasses and the arc of world history.

Most importantly, it tells the sins and crimes of everyone. It names their nature but ascribes no judgement. He learns how the military junta in Australia was born and discovers how the rules governing Japan were never passed through the Diet, but are remnants of emergency powers that were never rescinded. He comes to learn the atrocities the military has committed and the various crimes the Public Security Intelligence Agency hid from sight.

The more he learns the sicker he feels.

It takes him days to just skim through the data drives and gain a broad knowledge of every major in the world and their plans. How Nezu sought to control and influence, and what he did to secure that. The length and breadth of quirk marriages and many people killed by the Taiwanese Remnant on their insatiable path for revenge. The massive threat China has always posed to Japan. The tenuous peace in North America that has just been shattered.

He sets the last drive down, sickened and disgusted by what he has learnt. It makes him wonder if there is any good left in this world. But only for a moment before he remembers his friends and all those he helped in Hokkaido, trying their best to survive in a cruel world.

At the bottom is a book, leather-bound and worn. The corners are upturned, and the cover scratched badly. Still, he can make out the title: 'My Thoughts and My Failings' by Stormwind.

“Is this supposed to be your final gift?” he asks bitterly. “I hate you.”

And yet, Mikimo says, knowledge is still knowledge, regardless of the source.

He opens the first page and reads.

*****

Fumikage Tokoyami hasn’t been home for a very long time. It feels like years, and subjectively speaking, it has been given all the time he spent in the abyss with Hisashi. His home still stands, thankfully, though much of that is because Fumikage used his influence to ensure the neighbourhood was amongst the first to be restored.

To his surprise, Shouto had somehow wrangled the navy into helping. When questioned, he had just shrugged and vanished in a burst of fire. He isn’t certain what the signifies, but the chains that bind them together have only become stronger so he assumes only good can come of it.

He knocks sharply and waits patiently.

The door opens, revealing his mother. It takes him a moment to process that he stands nearly a full head taller than her now.

“Fumi,” his mother says, hawkish featured stunned. “You’re—”

“I’m not back,” he says, killing her hope. “I came to see how you are.”

She deflates, her feathers falling in disappointment. “Oh.”

"Where is Father?"
“I don’t know. Where have you been? Why didn’t you ever call back?”

He bows his head in acknowledgement of that fact. Ever since he walked out that day so many months ago, he hasn’t returned their calls even though he has paid attention to them from a distance. He made the choice to stay away and avoid them no matter how much they reached out first.

“I was discovering who I am and who I wish to become. I could not do so here or at UA.”

She narrows her eyes. “Who?”

He shrugs and reaches into his coat. He isn’t dressed in any ceremonial regalia but simple battle armour beneath a nondescript jacket.

The holographic emitter, his mantle of responsibility, is heavy in his hands. It comes to life, displaying the white chrysanthemum of the Imperial Household.

“You’ve joined them,” she says slowly.

“Yes.” He puts the emitter back in his jacket. “I came merely to see how you are. I am glad you are whole and safe.”

“Wait,” she says before he can take a step back. “You can’t just show up and leave. You’re my son.”

“I want to believe that sentiment has no ulterior motive, mother, but I find it hard to consider. You pushed me away with your words and actions.”

“I never wanted you to get hurt.”

“And by defying you, I have become stronger than you can imagine.”

“Strong?” she asks incredulously. “Two people destroyed a city and you think you’re strong? I didn’t raise a fool.”

He frowns but doesn’t let her words affect him. Yes, he may lack the combat experience right now to match All Might and All For One, but he is still a king. One-third part of all reality is his to command. Perhaps they could each battle five dragons, but what does that matter when he has over a dozen.

“I am not… my quirk is not what we thought it was. I don’t know how well you remember my fight during the Sports Festival, but Dark Shadow was never my quirk.”

He lets Dark Shadow settle around him like a second skin. It comes easily, naturally, as though it was always meant to be. The darkness that makes up Dark Shadow is warm and fills him with strength, fills him with the reassurance that there is no enemy he cannot face.

He extends his shadowed hand and summons a crow with feathers of glass unshattering. It cocks his head and passes on a message from Izuku, surprising him, but he lets none of those feelings show.

“This is my power. I hold dominion over the life from the realm Dark Shadow originates.”

His mother simply stares at him as he lets the darkness fade from his body.

“What have you become?”
Fumikage shrugs. “What I was always meant to be. Goodbye, mother. We will see each other again. But not today.”

He turns and walks away, not caring if she has anything to say. Everything that needs to be said has been said already. Maybe one day he’ll come back, and they will manage to meet each other as equals.

Two roads down, he sees a mountain of a man walking in the opposite direction. They both pause and stare at each other.

Fumikage’s father is still a towering presence, a testament to strength and violence drenched in blood. Even from this distance, the man still has a foot of height over Fumikage. Yet, it never feels like he must look up at the man.

They stare at each other for a long moment.

Fumikage walks past his father without a word. His father doesn’t say a word, doesn’t reach out or even try to meet him halfway.

This isn’t his home anymore and maybe never was. He summons Dark Shadows claws and rips a hole in the fabric of reality, stepping into the abyss and journeying to his true home via the abyss.

He steps out into the main square of the Imperial Villa, startling the people milling about. He shrugs but waves peaceably at someone he knows. That is enough for people to go about their day. Given the varied members of the Guard, they are more than used to eccentricity.

He finds the children in a part of the villa built just for them, reinforced walls and floors and even some caretakers who can deal with their abilities. He isn’t ready yet to speak to them. Maybe in a few weeks. Instead, he communicates through letters that he sends, claiming that he is busy elsewhere. They accept that reasoning well enough, not asking too many questions.

Two days later, he’s busy reading reports of abyssal detection. There seems to be a buildup of incidents, some which he sends people to monitor and observe, hoping it is nothing more than a natural result of mass bloodshed and not mad cultists.

Maya, his friend and handler, enters his office. It had surprised him to find out everyone thought he knew about it and was simply choosing not to use it. He wonders why on earth they think he wouldn’t use the office with a massive screen set up and banks of computers capable of running the best games on the absolute best settings. Not that he ever lets anyone knows that’s what he uses them for.

“Yo, we have a meeting.”

“Hm, I wasn’t made aware of one this urgent.”

She shrugs. “Well, Hisashi did just barge in and call it.”

The meeting is conducted in a sealed meeting room in the palace itself. This is the second time he’s had an opportunity to be in the same room as all the members of the Royal Guard, four now due to the losses against the Vancouver Island Villain Association.

He, alongside Hisashi, are the only ones who aren’t members of the Guard.

Hisashi is dressed in a bright suit performs a rather shallow and perfunctory bow. “Thanks for being here today. It’s nice knowing you jump at my command. Does wonders for the ego.”
Itinerant leans forward in his chair. “I could give less than two shits about you. Tell us what you want and stop wasting our time.”

“Someone’s annoyed.”

“Do you really think you’re that important now?” Itinerant snaps. “All For One’s dead. The League is disbanded. Your role as a deterrent is over. And honestly, you barely helped. I don’t know why we even put up with you anymore.”

“I think we both know why.”

“You think she’ll forgive you and let you come back?” Itinerant scoffs. “I don’t know why she’d want a broken old thing like you as an attack dog.”

“Fuck off.”

Fumikage raises a brow, surprised at the enmity between the two. He hadn’t known it existed. Maya flicks his thigh beneath the table, a warning to master his body language.


“Alright, here’s what I want. I want UA to burn. I promised my wife they would suffer. I fully intend to see that happen.”

“They still possess some modicum of influence,” another Guardswoman says, this one a woman with Arabic features. “Too many remaining pro heroes are alumni. Enough to make action against them… more trouble than it’s worth.”

“I intend to break their power base. Nearly half the students in their heroics course are dead or crippled. Their parents want justice. My wife wants justice. We will help them. I think it is time for UA to be audited to the fullest extent.”

“You’re talking about all levels. The crown. The government. The UN. You really want to see them burn.”

“For my son, I will cleave that institution apart.”

Fumikage frowns. “You’re making a lot of decisions for Izuku when you barely know him.”

Hisashi twitches. “I didn’t realise you were allowed to speak.”

“He has a greater right to speak as you do,” Itinerant says, opposing Hisashi once more. “You aren’t of the Guard. You are barely a Special Asset. He has served faithfully and loyally. He returned our ally to us. You bring nothing to this table that we don’t already have.”

“And honestly,” the one known as Ryujin says, “Kurogiri did more to help us this decade than you. I don’t care how old he is, he has every right to speak.”

Fumikage nods his head, grateful.

“I agree with much of what you say, Hisashi. UA has failed me and my classmates. Heroics society has failed. Who else but us can fill the void left by the deaths of the Kamino Ward War?”

“We stepped away from the light because of the Heir,” Ryujin says, fingers crackling with electricity. “One does not simply return to the spotlight after that.”
“What choice do we have? Only Endeavour remains. Outside of Shouto and Izuku, we represent the most powerful quirks in Japan. Perhaps there are others as powerful, but only we believe in protecting the people.”

“We do that by battling the abyss,” Maya adds softly. “We do that by protecting Japan from invasion.”

“I have seen the depths of the abyss,” Fumikage says. “I know its power because it permeates my very soul. There is no one more suited to battling the abyss than I. All I ask is that we stand against villainy as well.”

“You don’t care about being a hero,” Hisashi says.

“No. But Izuku does. He will change society and I will support him.” He meets their gazes. “I am loyal to him.”

“And I will support my Inquisitor,” Maya says, stunning them all, including Fumikage.

“This isn’t our mandate. We can’t—”

“The Emperor will permit it,” she says. “I’ve seen to it.”

He looks at her, startled. She merely squeezes his hand beneath the table where the others can’t see.

Ryujin sighs, standing up in annoyance. “I don’t care what you choose. I need to deal with stalling China’s next imminent invasion and whatever the fuck Australia is planning. Do what you want so long as it doesn’t stop me.”

“Are we agreed then?” Itinerant asks. “We launch an investigation to see UA shut down and step into the light once more.”

“I can live with this,” Hisashi says.

Fumikage nods. “As can I.”

*****

Izuku Midoriya decides he likes being famous for something other than the war that ended nearly three months ago or his fight against Stain. Being hailed as a visionary in the scientific community is a lovely feeling. Yes, every theoretical physicist in the world is examining his data and reviewing it, because the idea of one person completely upending their understanding of the world is insane. Sadly, Izuku’s life has been marked by insanity for a long time.

Even then, the very best can’t find fault in his explanation for quantum gravity. That, alone, is enough to have him shortlisted for a Nobel if the rumours are true. Izuku could care less. He just wants to direct attention to other things.

He sees Crawler once nearing the end of the third month.

The man is wearing an All Might hoodie, a new one this time. It depicts the great hero as he approaches his final battle, eyes burning blue and indifferent to the lava around him. An armband with a lightning bolt draws Izuku’s attention, but he says nothing about it.

“I thought you were staying low,” Crawler says whilst they’re in the cat café. “Then you’re on the
news for things I barely even understand. I guess you are special.”

Izuku shrugs, glancing around the café. Entering it had brought back every ounce of grief he thought he had dealt with.

Pinned to one wall are pictures of couples and families. In one unobtrusive corner, there is a picture of Ochaco and Shinsou on their first and only date, a black cat in Shinsou’s arms reaching towards Ochaco who grins and there is nothing vicious about it. It hurts so fucking much to look at because it feels like a lifetime ago.

Still, he lets Crawler see none of those feelings. They belong only to him and his friends, those who still talk to him. He only lets Ojiro and Ashido see his grief when he sees them every Wednesday, only talks to Momo in quiet tones about the captivity only they will understand. Katsuki is the one who surprises him the most each time they meet. There is something intensely quiet about who he is now, his anger and bluster tempered by loss and failure. He’ll make a good hero one day.

“I’d rather not be,” Izuku says. “I’d rather people didn’t wear Lightning Bolts and say they follow me when I’ve done nothing to earn it.”

“That’s just how eras change. I had to do a paper on the start of the Modern Hero Age, everything from how vigilantes were labelled villains and the VIVA rose. It’s always like this. Someone inspires a group and they follow them, regardless of your feelings. You can’t stop being an idea, all you can do is control the shape of that idea.”

“And you’re just fine with trusting me? You don’t even know me.”

“Out of everyone, at the very least, you’re the lesser evil. That’s the nature of things, really. You just choose the lesser evil. But I think you care about people. I think you’re a good person trying to do the right thing even when it’s hard. You didn’t use All Might’s funeral to push an agenda or take control of his mythos. You just talked about the flawed man beneath the legend. You broke his myth and showed us a human, someone we could be like, not a demigod beyond us. That’s enough for a lot of people.”

“That shouldn’t be all it takes.”

“Of course not,” Crawler agrees, “but you stand at the confluence of so many events. Standing against Stain and then your interview that started this whole thing. You were there when the war started and you’re the one who ended it.”

“I didn’t. That was All Might.”

“And you carried his body. You carried the body of the Pillar of Society out of the rubble you left the greatest villain behind. The symbolism there is rather profound. And then at All Might’s funeral, you say, ‘You’re next’ as if he was talking about anyone but you.”

“He was talking about everyone.”

“That’s not what people believe.” Crawler stands. “We’ll wait until you’re ready. Just, don’t make us wait too long. And stay out of trouble.”

The vigilante lifts his hood and walks out, leaving Izuku behind. He sighs because it’s becoming harder and harder to just avoid everything. Even now, with the café mostly empty, he knows the patrons in it are just spies for one organisation or another. He can see it in the way they walk, the way their shadows shift as they react to each word spoken during the conversation.
He finishes his tea and leaves, frustrated with everyone just waiting for him to do something. The last time he did nothing, a war started. What happens now if he actively makes a choice? How many will die because of it?

*You can’t choose how people will react to you. All you can choose are the decisions you make now. The future is promised to no one.*

Izuku shakes his head, walking out. “It’s promised to those who are free. And you can only be free by being strong and determined.”

*You sound like him more and more.*

“Not every lesson he taught was horrible.” He looks to the bright sky. “And not every lesson All Might taught was perfect. They’re two extremes, the two ends of the scales when hero society is involved. And maybe the scale itself is the problem.”

He walks through his hometown for weeks on ends, wandering aimlessly. It’s something he’s grown accustomed to and so have the people. They know him by name, know the boy who lifts entire buildings in showers of green lightning, the boy who leaves shadows to support collapsed structures and bridges so construction can occur safely.

It’s better than doing nothing even if he could be doing more. He nods to those he’s met before, especially the roving bands Shouto hires to help with the reconstruction. He’s surprised by the number of navy men, but they are efficient and diligent in their work.

As the sun sets, he hears the sirens long before he sees the police barriers. He walks faster and faster, seeing the large crowd behind the row of policemen.

“Move,” Izuku says, shoving past them gently but insistently.

The moment he sees the officers he knows exactly what’s going on. They have anti-quirk gear on, guns that fire rubber bullets, tasers, tranquillizers, and containment foam.

They’re focused on one of the collapsed buildings. Through the windows, he can see a line of hostages and knows that this isn’t something he can ignore. Not anymore.

“What’s going on?” he asks strongly, his voice carrying across the street.

“Villain,” someone answers immediately. “Got a quirk that lets them retrofit anything to a bomb. Took some hostage.”

“He’s not a villain,” someone only a bit older than Izuku says.

“You think this shit ain’t a villain’s work. Fuck you.”

“He’s a kid. An angry and stupid kid, but a kid. This shouldn’t happen.”

Izuku is tired right down to the bone. He wants to walk away and pretend this isn’t happening. He’s not ready. He knows that if he interferes, he will have to stand against everything he hates and bear the consequences.

For a moment, he feels two strong hands rest on his shoulders, the hands of the two people who defined this era. He feels the weight of their legacy now more than ever. One for All and All For One. The greatest hero and the greatest villain. The Perfect Fighter and the Strongest Man Alive.
His teacher of a few days, Sensei: *You wish to see society change but you fear that staying true to yourself is to betray your mentor.*

His hero, his father, Toshinori: *I know the greatest fear you hold and still entrust the future to you.*

Their is a legacy that spans two centuries, a legacy that saw the end of Hero’s Golden Age and birthed the Modern Hero Age. One that saw the rise and fall of empires. It is a legacy that shaped two centuries of history.

If either saw him hesitate, they would both be disappointed. In this one moment, stopping this is something All For One and Toshinori Yagi would both agree on. And if those two could ever find common ground, it would be right now, in this very moment. They laid the path. All that remains is for Izuku to walk it.

With confidence he doesn't feel, Izuku walks forward.

“Stop,” he declares in a voice that pauses everyone in their tracks.

Everyone, that is, except for the lead officer.

He meets those grey eyes for the second time and feels no fear. He isn't the boy terrified of his own reflection or the one shaken by Stain. He is a child in many regards, but in this, he holds more maturity than any other person.

No matter what, there will never be another girl in a sunflower dress that can’t grow old and happy.

He lets the darkness that permeates his soul, the crystal shrieks of the dreaming dead and the chilly grasp of old gods, fill his grin that is less teeth than it is a maw with endless fangs that will tear through all hope and light and joy. Every step he takes trails green lightning, a declaration of power so great that it threatens to sunder the world in a god’s judgement.

“Stand aside,” Izuku says, channelling All Might. Then, with Sensei’s contempt, he says, "You have no use here."

“Kid, go home before you get people killed.”

Izuku levels the full force of his glare at the man. “No. This won’t happen. I’ll fight through every single one of you before I let this happen. You think your violence will save anyone? No. I refuse that world. Let me through. Let me save everyone in that building.”

Without turning back, Izuku continues walking. The officer reaches towards him but a vicious spark of lightning slaps him back.

One officer raises his gun, but another stops him. “Do you know who that is?” he whispers furiously even as Izuku keeps on walking, indifferent to the muttering of gnats.

He enters the collapsed building confidently. Much of the ground level is ruined and the second floor has caved in, making a natural ramp to the second floor.

“Stay back!” It sounds like a boy no older than Kouta. “I said stay back.”

Izuku lets his powers fade away and raises his hands peaceably, scanning the area for the boy. He’s not with the hostages on the second floor currently cowering for their lives. He certainly isn’t hiding behind one of the desks.
The bomb right in the middle is as good a place as any. It's a towering thing taller than All Might, jury-rigged and scrappy. It barely looks stable, but it hums audibly, grating at Izuku’s jaw. The frequency is close enough to the natural resonance frequency of the crystals in Izuku’s bones that they hurt.

“My name’s Izuku,” he says. “And I’m here to save everyone in this building.”

“Get back before I set this off,” the boy shouts from his spot behind the bomb. “It’ll take out half the city.”

“Okay, then take me hostage as well because I’m not leaving without everyone.”

“What?”

“Yeah, it sounds crazy, doesn’t it? Just as crazy as a six-year-old destroying half the city.”

“I’m ten,” the kid snaps back, peeking his head out.

Izuku raises his hand instantly, noting how there’s a red dot on the back of his hand. It would be on the boy’s forehead if not for that one action.

“They would have shot you right then,” Izuku says, stepping in the line of the shot. “Now, there’s a red dot behind my neck. If they have a high enough calibre, they could shoot through my neck and hit you as well.”

The kid scuttles back to safety. "Fuck."

“Cursing’s bad for a boy your age. So, now that I’ve saved you once, will you let me come closer?”

For a long moment, the boy stays silent, weighing his options. Izuku is surprised that the kid is this level-headed in a life or death situation. Or maybe he just doesn’t understand the repercussions of this path.

“What’s your name?”

“Izuku like I said. Izuku MIdoriya.”

“No way.”

“Yes, the very same. I’m the one who carried All Might’s body. He was my teacher at UA and a close friend. Right now, he’d be doing everything to save you and the hostages as well. You might not know me, but I’m not here to hurt you.”

Izuku takes one step forward, then another when nothing comes from it.

“Stop.”

He takes another step forward. “This is a good setup you’ve got here.”

“I said stay back.”

“You know, I respect what you’re doing. It must have taken a lot of cunning to get all this equipment.”

With every step, he becomes more confident that this isn’t a villain. Hesitating like this means that
the kid doesn’t really want to hurt anyone.

“I think you’re a good kid at heart,” Izuku says, taking the final step and seeing the kid. “I just think you’ve made a bad decision that you think is the only option. I think you’ve been wronged and you’re trying to find justice.”

The kid is tall, all things considered and comes up to Izuku’s shoulder. He’s in scuffed up clothes with sweat stains and grease marks. His hair is pale but there are more than enough grease streaks that it takes a moment to identify that.

“You don’t know shit.”

“Well, I did slit my wrist to get an answer, so I think I know a bit about bad decisions.” Izuku shrugs despite the kid’s horror. “The answer wasn’t worth it. Tell me your story. Tell me why you’re here.”

“Do you know who runs the construction companies? It’s the villains. The same villains that started the war. They’re being paid by the government to fix the mess they made.”

Izuku nods. “I know.”

“What?” the boy asks, scrambling back. “You know?”

“Yes, I do. I also know that the war wasn’t started by everyone. I know the story isn’t as simple as you think it.” He speaks as All Might would, calm and gentle but undeniably strong. “The same way I know you’re not a villain. The same way I know you think this is the right decision.”

Izuku slouches his back so that they are eye-level. The kid has lavender eyes, odd, but not as odd as any of the things Izuku has seen.

“But,” he continues, tone darkening and taking on Sensei’s profound disappointment, “What do you think this will change?”

The child pales for a moment and takes an unconscious step back. “They’ll pay for what they’ve done. You’re fighting for the same thing as me.”

“I’m fighting to change society for the better. You’re just going to kill some innocent bystanders. Do you know what they’ll do to you? They’ll throw you in a hole without trial and you’ll die forgotten and unloved. This isn’t the way.”

“At least my death will mean something. They’re watching right now. They let a corrupt government rule. They let the imperial family murder as they please. They killed my parents.”

Izuku smiles, honest as the greatest villain.

"I'm sorry that I couldn't change things fast enough. But look at me. Your life will mean more than your death ever will. Things will change. I promise you this. And the last time I made a promise, the greatest villain of Japan died. Let me help you."

“You promise.”

Bold as his mentor, he says, “Yes,” with a promise that permeates the air. “You’re fighting for the right reasons.”

Izuku extends his hand, an offer to be saved. “But the way you fight is just as important. If you
murder innocents, then you aren’t any better than the people you’re fighting. Take my hand and let me save you.”

“They’ll just lock me up.” The boy places his hand, his trust, in Izuku.

Izuku pulls him up and out of what might have been his greatest mistake. “You broke the laws. You’ll stand trial, yes, but it will be a fair trial. And maybe, if the laws are illegal, then the trial is also illegal.”

He goes about releasing the hostages, sparring the time to reassure them. When one tries to attack the boy, Izuku stops him with a firm grip.

“Not like this,” Izuku says softly. “A grown man should never hurt a child. What example are you trying to set? Is violence the only way you can move forward? Be better. I know you can.”

He glares the man down, only satisfied one he looks away, shamed. Izuku leads them towards the front door.

“All of you can leave.”

He grips the boy’s hands tightly as the hostages flee past them, streaming down from the second floor. He waits a few minutes until he is certain everyone is gone and safe. Then he covers every door and window in a film of shadow.

“Dismantle the bomb.” It isn’t a suggestion but a command he expects to be followed through without issue.

The child may be nervous, but he works with deft fingers. Those fingers strip actuators and power cells easily, cutting through wires and rendering the explosive inert.

“What else can you make?”

“Just about anything that goes boom, really,” the kid says. “I like building engines a lot. Those are fun. Still trying to get more than ninety percent Carnot.”

Izuku shakes his head. How many people have been locked up without their talents being used? How many were driven to villainy by circumstance and misunderstanding? The answer is more than one and one is too many.

When the bomb has been defused, Izuku takes the boy’s hand once more. He doesn’t care about the grime or sweat because it means the boy trusts him, trusts Izuku to protect him.

“I have a little brother. Adopted, I guess. He’s a little shit but I still love him. It’s going to be scary facing the world. I would know, I’ve been putting this off for a long time. Just trust that no matter what happens, I’ll make sure you won’t get hurt.”

The kid nods, terrified. “This was a mistake, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, but I’m going to save you from it.”

With that, he turns around and lets the shadows fade. With even steps, he walks out of the collapsed building with a little boy hiding behind him. The crowd’s gotten significantly larger and he knows it is only because of his presence.

He faces the officers and reporters and the world itself. He wonders what he must look like. Does
he look like a hero? Would his mother be proud of him? Would his father? Would Aizawa?

*I am proud of you,* Mikumo says.

That reassurance gives him the strength to step forward, regardless of the consequences. He shields the child with his body. If his words are to incite violence, then he will take the first blow.

If he must fight to change society, then let him walk enter the battlefield first and leave it last.

“Give us the villain,” the lead officer says.

Izuku cocks his head as though considering that option.

“No. Do you know why I’m going to refuse? Just now, you called a scared little boy a villain.”

The officer grits his teeth. “I’ll call you a villain as well if you resist. You think we don’t know everything about you?”

“He committed a crime,” Izuku says loudly, unafraid of the possible consequences. “But this society drove him to it. We drove him to it. We permit the excesses of the Emperor. We support a government built on illegal systems. We let officers incarcerate children without trial under the guise of them being villains.”

He points at the officer, regardless of the hate in those steel-grey eyes. This is a confrontation a year in the making, a remnant from Izuku’s time as a weak and defenceless child.

"That man took down a girl who had a bad quirk activation. A girl in a sunflower dress who was terrified and had no idea what was going on. She should have been helped, no—"

“Shut him down,” the officer orders.

A crack like a gunshot. Izuku’s shadows rise to protect him, batting away the rubber bullet.

“Even now they seek to hide their skeletons. I ask you, all of you listening, how long will you permit”—crack—"injustice to continue? Taiwan sunk, and we ignored the millions who died.”

Crack.

“How many lives will we ignore?”


"What value is there to human life if we let these things go? Every life is precious and priceless!”

Crack. Crack. Crack.

A dozen rubber bullets all lay on the ground a metre away from Izuku, nowhere close to harming him. There are snipers with deadly weapons trained on his position, ready to execute him if given the order.

“We let heroes and soldiers fight our family in Hokkaido without question. We let thousands perish in Shikoku and never once asked why. It was the villain Shinobu who vowed to save the people of those regions. Why didn't we ask why a villain had to fight that fight? I may not have been born, but I bear responsibility every day I let these atrocities be forgotten. Every day I choose to support this system. Every day I let this system protect me.”
The police move forward, weapons raised. Izuku lets go of the child and takes a step forward, hands raised.

“I won’t fight you,” Izuku says, walking confidently. “I refuse to let there be violence. Take me down if you must, but I will not stay silent. I will admit my crimes because I refuse to hide them. I killed the villain Muscular. I had won, and yet I still chose to commit that crime.”

Two officers move forward, guns at the ready. Izuku raises a brow in amusement and that stops them in their tracks.

“Here’s the truth about All Might. His quirk is called One For All. The man One For All was one of Japan’s first heroes. You know his brother as All For One, the villain All Might died defeating.”

“Get on your knees!”

Izuku does so, kneeling in kiza. He is stillness and calm personified, an unmovable rock in the chaos. He is peace and serenity, indifferent to outside interference.

“One For All was passed down for nine generations. Like a mutation, it can be inherited. Nana Shimura the Brave was the seventh. The great All Might was the eighth. I am the ninth.” That makes the officers pause in their slow approach. “All Might chose me as his successor. He chose me knowing I did not agree with this society. Your Pillar chose me because he could not change society. He had one mission. To free us from the grip of All For One’s influence. He died doing so.”

“Shut him down.”

The containment foam they use is chilly. But they make the mistake of leaving his head untouched. He knows they do it as a safety precaution.

“We must be worthy of his sacrifice,” he shouts. “There will only be dawn if we fight for it. If we let this happen, we’ll start another Dark Age.”

“Secondary threat contained. Capturing the primary target.”

Izuku glances and sees their weapons pointed at the boy. The boy is terrified, staring at Izuku. There is a plea in his gaze, a call for salvation. And there is no version of this where he will let this boy suffer as the girl in the sunflower dress.

One For All fills his body. The moment he hears the first crack of a bullet, he flexes. The containment foam is designed to hold the strongest of villains.

But it is not prepared for One For All.

In a burst of white liquid, Izuku is free. He moves like lightning, running past the rubber bullet. He places himself in front of the boy and outstretches his arm. The bullet hits him right in the chest, where the child’s head would be. He forces his rage down as more bullets are fired.

They hurt but he has suffered through much worse. He has shattered bones and traversed the abyss with a broken spine. To stand aside is to betray the legacy of All Might who is the legacy of Hero who is the legacy of Hawkmoon who is a product of Stormwind.

And he refuses to betray the memory of any of them.

“You’re firing at two children who aren’t fighting back,” he says once the bullets have stopped,
green lightning arcing across his body. “This is the society you live in. This is a society your heroes fought and died for. A society where children are labelled as villains for the sake of convenience.”

“Jesus, someone tranq the kid.”

He bats aside the dart with a tendril of darkness. It lands needle first in the ground.

“What is a hero?!” he roars suddenly.

A wave of green lightning surges out from his feet. It doesn’t go very far, but instead stays close to him, a terrifying reminder of the electric potential he holds.

He points at the camera, at everyone watching this with an arm engulfed in lightning.

He calls them all out. A boy of sixteen standing against a system that is centuries old. A boy who is scarred horribly and whose eyes burn with old knowledge stands tall under the weight of the world.

“Ask yourselves, what is a hero? A hero is someone who sees injustice and says no. Where is the justice here? I say no. This is the line and I refuse to be moved! Call me a villain, but I will not stand for this. Even Stormwind would be disgusted by you.”

The officer steps forward. The hate is palpable and entirely reciprocated. The enmity between them is old and bitter.

“Comparing yourself to Stormwind won’t win you any favours. Stand the fuck down before we use lethal force.”

“Kill me if you must, but know you stand against All Might’s legacy.” He spreads his arms wide and arcs of lightning strike the ground. “This lightning is his legacy and it stands against you. Know you stand against Hero whose compassion brought freedom. Know you stand against Yui Ikari whom Hawkmoon eclipsed.”

The officer merely glares at Izuku.

“Fucking fire.”

It’s real bullets this time, the sort that can kill him. And whilst he might hate the person who gives the order, he’s not willing to be responsible for his death. Not when he knows the devastation the monster he will become can cause.

He inhales and gives life to Sensei’s dead heart once more.

The spark of power within it comes to life and Izuku feels power the likes of which astounds him because it means All For One willingly chose to die, chose to finally rest and entrust Izuku with the future. This man who was the great villain of Japan chose to leave his power with All Might’s successor.

The power is colossal, a great mountain that even One For All failed to scale over two centuries. He feels the weight of it, the crushing burden of raw power All For One held every day of his life and it chokes Izuku with the magnitude of it all.

He feels the winds as a seventh sense, feels every current and zephyr, and knows they are his to control. Just like the shadows, the roaring winds belong to him.
And he feels how One For All supercharges his abilities. The potential of One For All, magnified by the dying flames of the last torchbearers, empowers this gift from his last teacher. What may once have been a passably strong wind quirk expands exponentially, fed by the power of One For All. The reach of the quirk leaves him breathless as he feels the sky itself bow to his control.

At his fingertips is the power to control the weather itself. The wind for miles around, the atmospheric pressure and even the temperature of the wind are his to decide.

This is the power to surpass the greatest wind quirks in history. Perhaps, this is the power to become a god of storms, Susanoo, as Fumikage suggested so long ago. Three sibling gods for three young kings, the domains of wind and lightning his to control.

He feels the way the bullets slice through the air and knows their flight paths. Of them all, only two won’t hit centre mass. Only two aren’t a threat.

One For All increases his perception enough to see the bullets in flight but it is Sensei’s final gift that lets him silence the world.

He surrounds the bullets in cocoons of wind and diverts their course around his body. The currents carry them around his body and then over his shoulder, back into his hand.

The world is silent. No one makes a single sound.

They are too terrified. They know this quirk, this indomitable wind that the greatest villain wielded during the final battle of the Kamino Ward War. A battle a single man fought against the greatest heroes of Japan and very nearly won.

He opens his hand and lets the bullets fall to the ground. They clatter to the ground, one dull thud after another. One reminder of the futility of standing against him after another.

The sky above churns with currents of wind and streaks of green lightning, the great declaration of the stage he now stands upon. He waits a moment, letting them truly understand the power they now face. Letting them know that the howling storm and raging lighting belong to Izuku Midoriya to use as he pleases.

Izuku holds out both arms in supplication to the law, an invitation to handcuff him.

“Arrest me if you must but let there be no more violence.”

It is also a taunt for the world now knows simple cuffs can’t hold him. Simple steel won’t make him any less lethal, not when the shadows and wind belong to him. Not when All Might’s power runs through his veins. Not when the heart of the Strongest Man Alive beats strongly in his body, a sharp staccato running counter to the heart he was born with.

To the world, he is the most powerful quirk user by virtue of his quirks alone. One boy with the power to face the world and possibly win.

“In the words of the Great Tyrant Stormwind, where there is good, uplift it.”

Sensei once created a hurricane a paltry five kilometres. Nothing special and nothing of note.

Right now, without thought, a violent storm brews in the sky for hundreds, maybe thousands, of kilometres. People from different cities will look to the sky and see a raging storm. And through it all, the only constants are the streaks of lightning and the layer of impenetrable darkness above it, blocking out the promise of a brighter future.
This is the power he holds now, the power to control the weather itself, the power to cleave a mountain with a kick. Most of all, it is his right to drown the world in darkness should he choose it.

“I see no good here to uplift.”

The winds calm, the roiling stormfront dissipating. It takes with it the chaotic storm of green lightning. Finally, light returns as the darkness fades.

He doesn’t wince when they tighten the cuffs. Doesn’t show weakness when they shove him forward. No, he walks with his head high, back straight and a small smile on his face.

Whatever comes of this, he will face it and accept the consequences.

*****

This is how it feels to be alive today.

You are Crawler, a vigilante and one of the few keeping the peace now that the war is over. You wear a lightning bolt and are considered a leader amongst the fledgeling group. You wonder what you will become now that your rallying symbol has revealed the truth of his power. And you know you will be helpless to influence the future.

You are Kohei Horikoshi, exalted of your order. On a little island off the coast of Japan, your experimentations have finally borne fruit. A thousand sacrifices over centuries have weakened the barriers between real and abyss. Now, you have a memetic nightmare trapped to use as a beacon for something greater, a true god. You laugh, surrounded by the corpses of those forgotten by war. Soon, your gods will arrive and oh, how they will sing.

You are Vice Admiral Yosuke Kadomatsu of the Japanese 2nd Fleet. You have ascended in rank through the death of your commanders and now stand at the ultimate realm of power. Now you have learnt the secret laws that kept Japan at peace, the accords that bound the ultimate powers and now bind you. You swallow nervously. All For One broke those accords and his acts led to an unprecedented war. Now, a boy with a power greater or equal is unbound by the accords. You make contingencies. You are a navy man through and through. If the navy must flee Japan to survive, you will order it if only for the sake of your marines. If you and yours must become pirates to survive a new ear, then you will.

You are Ghost Fox, one of the few remaining members of the Great Ten. You are struck by terror at the idea that this one boy wields the power of All Might, greater than you will ever be, and All For One who personally killed three of your seniors, your lover included. You do not know what counsel to give the Premier. How do you decide to attack a walking disaster? Yes, Japan has been weakened by the last war. But so has your nation and you know Russia is still a threat. No, stand down, you tell the Premier. Consolidate what remains and prepare for Japan’s future aggression.

You are Ejirou Kirishima. All you can see is the power of the villain that killed your closest friends. You see the power of the villain who killed your family in a landslide when they should have been safe. All you can hear are the words of Stormwind echoed in someone you called a friend. How much of this is your fault? Can you trust Izuku Midoriya to be a friend once more? Deep in your heart, you know your paths have diverged.

End of Season IV: Ascension

Chapter End Notes
Well, it's been a fun ride. This season was an absolute rollercoaster of emotions and explosions. Things have changed and we're entering a brave new world.

I'll be back at the end of December with the next season. In many ways, it will serve as a very extended epilogue (even though it has 5 epilogues) that will tie up the loose ends from this arc and answer questions from the very beginning of this story.

Some people asked me what the next threat is going to be. All the way back in the first few chapters, you caught a glimpse of them. This story is called The Dark Below. Did you think it was going to be anything less than terrifying?

Brace yourselves for Season V: Apotheosis.
Season V: Apotheosis, Chapter 57: Dance Once More For Us

Chapter Notes

Is this what we call a Christmas Miracle?
My discord server can be found at the following: https://discord.gg/4YvCTYR

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Season V: Apotheosis

Chapters 57-70

‘I worry that you will not understand. I worry that you will fail to comprehend. I worry that you will ignore the truths you see. I must go on believing you will understand, otherwise, this will all be for nothing. I am not the hero you believe me to be. I am just a man who could not resist knowledge. This is the first truth I shall speak. Nothing ends. No war, no battle, no death, no quest. It is all one step forward, another part of this endlessly changing cycle. When you reach out and touch another with your influence, you change the fabric of the world. In my youth, I thought it was I who reached out. Have you ever considered that it was not your choice to reach out? Have you ever contemplated that you are not the writer of your story, but merely a puppet on strings?’

—The First Letter from a Renegade as translated by the World Walker.

Today is a good day for Himiko Toga. The weather in Victoria is beautiful, defying every thought she had of Canada being a frozen hellhole, and she’s just stolen a dozen blood packs from Victoria General Hospital without being caught. It always feels good to commit a crime successfully.

She takes the bus disguised as a middle-aged man and heads towards a theatre, her ticket burning a hole in her pocket. She’s excited to finally see the play. The occasional police checkpoints don’t bother her much, even if it means being creative about hiding her blood packs.

The McPherson Playhouse was built in the twentieth century. Following the emergence of quirks, it had been burnt down and rebuilt three separate times, each time getting larger and larger. Now it seats double its original capacity of seven-hundred odd souls.

Himiko knows this because her disguise would know the basic facts about the playhouse. He’s not a person who understands theatre, but rather someone who attends it to seem cultured and cultivate the image of an educated gentleman. He’s also a pretentious prick.

She speaks to some of the more noteworthy people attending the play tonight, some whom even know her disguise. None so much as notice any discrepancies. There are many villains in attendance today. Well, it is the opening night of Compress’ play. ‘The Vanguard’s Last Dance’ is an odd title, but not one she thinks too much on as she makes her way to the private booth. She parts the curtains and almost loses her head.

There is a warp gate around her neck before her eyes adjust to the darkness. Kurogiri is accompanied by Magne and Tomura. With Compress directing the play, that leaves on Himiko and Magne as the remaining members of the Vanguard, the rest dead, or in the case of Spinner, a traitor.
“I told you I’d be in a disguise,” she says, letting it fade away. “No need to chop off my head.”

The warp gate vanishes. Kurogiri bows his head slightly.

“We cannot be careless. Our numbers have waned and we lack access to most of our resources.”

Magne scoffs. “Compress is directing a play. How much money did you give him for that?”

Himiko takes her seat next to Tomura who has been quiet for the last three months. He’s lost a lot of the fire that made him entertaining, but he’s become harsher and more analytical. Maybe he’ll be interesting later.

Or maybe Himiko will have to ditch these losers.

“I heard some of the villains call you the Mist Warlord, the first Warlord since the Dark Ages.”

Toga gives Kurogiri her most innocent smile. “You shouldn’t be scared of anything.”

“I don’t deserve that title.”

“They call Sensei the Third Great Tyrant,” she prods, enjoying how Tomura’s fists clench. “The last Tyrant was two centuries ago. The last Warlord over a century. You guys became legends. And now Compress is going to make money off your story.”

The lights dim as the play begins.

With technology, plays aren’t as static as they once were. Hidden subwoofers make the seats vibrate as mist appears on stage. The screen behind shows a stylised map of Japan.

Two actors enter the stage from opposite ends. One wears a pitch-black suit, the other in grey slacks and a jacket.

“The League of Villains led by the Third Great Tyrant All For One, played by Akio Otsuka, and the Mist Warlord Kurogiri portrayed by Takahiro Fujiwara. Together, with a hundred faithful allies, they battled a country and shattered it.”

The narration is being done by Compress which makes Himiko roll her eyes. He might not have taken a leading role, but if the rest of the play has this much narration, then he definitely took the most important part.

“This is their story,” Compress continues as the two actors bow. “This is the story that defined Japan. This is the story of The Vanguard’s Last Dance.”

To her mild amusement, after the actors leave, two others enter from opposite ends of the stage. Half of the stage is cast in a green light, the other in red.

The two fight on stage. An image of UA’s tournament ground serves as the backdrop. The fighting is well choreographed, the green lighting becoming more prominent as Izuku’s actor pushes back Todoroki’s red.

More than anything, their battle resembles a dance. Their blows flow together seamlessly, their motions like water. There is grace in the actions of the actors.

It’s also fucking hilarious that two are being portrayed by girls. Compress has an odd sense of humour.

“It was on this day that Tomura Shigaraki set in motion the greatest war in Japan’s history.”
Tomura scoffs when the theatre rumbles, sparks and smoke filling the stage. The backdrop changes to the stadium after the explosion. “He gives me too much credit.”

“You should have listened to Sensei,” Kurogiri says sharply.

Oh, there’s a story there, Toga thinks. Tomura is one long line of tension and Kurogiri looks ready to get up and pace nervously.

She observes the two as they have an entire conversation without saying a single word. All she really gets out of it is that Tomura is apologetic? Or maybe just resigned? It’s hard to tell given that Kurogiri is made up of gasses and Tomura isn’t the most expressive person alive.

“Compress doesn’t like you much,” Magne says when the Vanguard are brought together. Kurogiri’s actor is distant and cold, almost callous.

“Scared of him,” Tomura says.

Himiko finds it entertaining that her character and Mustard's enter together, holding hands. Which is a blatant lie. She might have liked Mustard well enough, and perhaps wanted to fuck him or kill him, maybe both, but she hadn’t loved him.

“I guess I have a dead lover now,” she mutters.

“At least you’re not a flamboyant bastard like Dabi,” Magne says. “I would have thought Compress' role would have been more prominent.”

Outside of giving his introduction, Compress' actor hasn’t said much. Which is nothing like the chatterbox that is the real person.

“The strength of the Vanguard could not be defeated. Despite the losses of honoured Mustard and Muscular, the Vanguard exited stage left with their prizes.”

The actors do so. Izuku, Momo, and Kouta’s actors have thick ropes binding them together. Toga smiles, remembering how Izuku had come out of his marble kicking and screaming defiance. How the room had gone unnaturally dark. How his green lightning had promised death and misery to everyone who opposed him.

The stage lights come on and the curtains close. An intermission. Good. Himiko hasn’t eaten all day. This is a good a time as any to get food.

“I think he started it,” Toga says cheerfully.

Tomura grunts. “Hm?”

“The war. Think about it. Compress follows orders. There was no reason to take Izuku. He could have taken his redhead friend.”

“He doesn’t act like a warmonger.”

“He’s a performer,” Himiko says, gesturing at the performance below them. “He loves telling stories. Wars are the stories people like the most.”

Tomura shakes his head. “Too ridiculous. You’re trying to say that Compress led to the League’s destruction, Sensei and All Might’s deaths, most of the top ten heroes gone, millions of civilian deaths, and an invasion from China. That’s too convenient.”
Toga shakes her head, knowing to her blood that it’s true. There’s something she’s not getting, one piece of Compress’ character that she’s missing.

“It’s a fun theory anyway.”

She makes a quick run to get something to snack on. She wears a different disguise this time, a younger lady who stands a head taller than most others in the area. The food is weird but at least she also gains her disguise’s affinity for burgers and fries.

Getting back takes her a little longer than she wanted because of some guy who tries flirting with her. He’s young so it’s adorable, but her heart belongs to one man. One day, Izuku will love her just as much as Toga loves him. And together they’ll paint the world red.

First, she just has to break him out of prison.

This time Kurogiri doesn’t have a warp gate prepared to kill her. She takes her seat and distributes the snacks she brought to the others.

“The Great Tyrant All For One answered the call of his allies in Vancouver. The Great Ten of China and the greatest collection of heroes this world has ever seen fell to his strength. They could not withstand the blows of the Strongest Man Alive.”

It is a short sequence, mostly conducted through the background screen and some artistic interpretations of that fight. It ends with Sensei punching a man with a Chinese flag and raising his hand in victory.

Himiko hopes these events are accurate. She wasn’t there and had nothing to do with the events that shaped the city she’s living in now.

The city is still tense with no one really knowing what will happen now. The villains won the battle. There aren’t any heroes in the Pacific Northwest, Montana and Alberta. The region will likely become its own country, but first, it needs to suffer some growing pains.

“Go forth, my Warlord,” All For One’s actor says a few scenes later. “Show Japan our power. Show them the strength of villains.”

Six masked villains and four in costumes resembling the Nomu enter the stage. They bow before Kurogiri as he gives them orders.

“That didn’t happen like that,” the real Kurogiri says. “I didn’t order them to murder everyone in sight.”

Tomura shrugs. “How many did your squad kill.”

“Twelve thousand combatants. A tiny fraction of what Sensei did. Compress is making me out to be a sociopathic monster.”

Himiko chuckles. “Some people think that. And maybe some people will see a man grieving the death of a boy he shouldn’t have recruited. Your actor did have an entire soliloquy over Mustard before getting Sensei.”

Kurogiri’s gasses snap and hiss. “That didn’t happen.”

“Who cares? This story right here is the one that people will believe. Our words don’t matter anymore.” She closes her eyes. “Compared to the things I’ve read, at least we aren’t total
monsers.”

“They sent forth the most powerful heroes of Japan to battle the Great Tyrant of Japan. All Might the Perfect Fighter and Endeavour the Hellfire led the coalition. Together they could win any battle. Supported by their peers, they were unstoppable.” This time, All for One’s sinister laugh punctuates the narrator’s words. “And so, he split them apart. He made their strength a weakness.”

All Might alongside Mirko and Gang Orca split off from the group and exit stage right. The lighting changes, red for Endeavour instead of All Might’s gold.

The heroes battle through the base, Endeavour at their lead. They are split up by the arrival of some Nomu.

“Win,” Hawks’ orders, his hand cover his chest. “We will find each other again, fire of my heart.”

“Wait for me, my angel.”

Himiko cocks her head. She’s pretty sure Endeavour is an asshole but being unfaithful isn’t one of the things he’s done. Another stylistic choice for the audience’s sake. One that’s overly dramatic at that.

Endeavour breaks down the door on stage, fire consuming the backdrop.

“Your villainy ends today,” Endeavour roars, the flames on screen intensifying as well. “I will bring you down.”

“Boy, you are not ready to stand on my stage.”

The punch sends Endeavour stumbling back. He falls off-stage, the thud resonating across the theatre. All For One chuckles deeply as Endeavour forces himself up and returns to the stage.

Against All For One, it isn’t even a fight. He beats down Endeavour with contemptuous ease.

The other heroes enter the stage to the sight of All For One standing above a defeated Endeavour.

“I have seen empires rise and fall. I shaped history, fought wars alone and broke nations with my fists. I witnessed Hero’s final battle and spoke to Hawkmoon as an equal. What have you children ever achieved?”

He battles the other heroes. He does so easily. It isn’t perfectly accurate. Himiko watched the recording and knows they inflicted multiple injuries on him. But the spirit of the battle is honest. A few injuries to defeat six heroes is an acceptable outcome in any situation.

Actors in military gear stream in from both sides of the stage. All For One merely laughs as they surround him, their bullets doing no harm even as the bang makes Himiko nervous.

“I am the Strongest Man alive!”

The theatre rumbles and the soldiers fall dramatically. The lights turn off, leaving only All For One illuminated.

“Is there no one to challenge me?” All For One asks. “Is this the power of heroes? Can no one stand on my stage?”

For a long moment, the stage is silent.
Thud!

“Never fear.”

Thud!

“I am here.”

When All Might enters, it is to trumpets. The music is glorious and makes even Himiko want to stand up in support of a hero. She smiles despite herself as gold light floods the stage, dispelling the darkness.

The battle between All For One and All Might is cataclysmic and thunderous. With each blow, the theatre vibrates violently. When All For One summons his wind, a high-pitched whine grates against Himiko’s ears.

In the end, All For One only falls after an attack from Izuku. All For One sends the boy flying away, but it is enough for All Might. He strikes a blow to end it just as All For One retaliates.

Together, the two legends who defined this era fall to the ground, dead.

Izuku’s actor makes her return. She takes All For One’s hand and cradles his head in her lap. The great hero whispers something, but the words belong only to Izuku. Himiko knows the words, the whole world knows the words.

Stand tall. You are next.

She watches in silence as Izuku’s actor carries All Might away. There is no music to punctuate this event. As Izuku exits stage right, nameless and faceless actors pick up All For One’s body and cart him away.

“What happened to his body?” Tomura asks harshly.

“Safe,” Kurogiri says. “I buried him in the one place he would appreciate.”

Spinner’s actor enters stage left. He has a short sword in hand and moves through a series of forms. They appear more like a kagura dance than anything else. The screen in the back shows Compress turning Toga and Mange into marbles that he then gives to Spinner.

The stage darkens until only one spotlight shines on Spinner who slows in his dance. Then he kneels, almost as if in shame. Toga knows this is the moment he left the marble carrying her and Magne.

Finally, the screen changes to show the hill the war started.

“And thus, the story ends. On the hill the Vanguard started the war, the Vanguard would escape. Spinner the Traitor would fulfil his final act of loyalty. The Vanguard would dance no more.”

For a moment, Himiko wonders if this is how the play will end. There’s still more that needs to be said and if there isn’t then she’ll punch Compress in the face.

“For the better part of a century and a half,” All For One says from everywhere at once, “I have been called the Strongest Man Alive. Today, I will show you why. Eyes up. If you call yourself a villain, then stand tall and never bend your back.”
Slowly, the cast playing the villains and the Vanguard stream in. First is Tomura who set things in motion followed by the dead members of the Vanguard.

“You are stronger than you think. There is no hero more powerful than you. Show no fear and always be strong.”

The surviving members of the Vanguard enter, Himiko and Magne walking together. They are followed by Kurogiri who stands ahead of Tomura.

Himiko winces, knowing how angry that slight will make Tomura later.

“Remember that we are patient. Remember that we endure. And when we are ready, we strike, even if only to destroy the weakness within us.”

The other actors enter, standing behind the villains. It isn’t a subtle metaphor in the slightest.

Finally, All For One enters, the brightest lights on him. He is an overwhelming presence compared to the rest.

“Tonight, I will show you the meaning of power. Tomorrow, remember my strength. Remember my glory. Hold it tight to your heart and make your own future.”

All For One bows to the audience. The other actors follow suit as the lights even out, allowing everyone to be seen.

The screen shows an image of Kamino Ward after the war. Much of the city is flattened to the ground, skyscrapers tipped over and thousands of deep gouges throughout the city.

More images appear, one city after another. Each shows the devastation wrought by the war. Bridges that are collapsed. People drowning in the aftermath of tidal waves. Towns shattered by rockslides. A long stretch of coastal cities in Okinawa now underwater.

Finally, a number shows up in the middle of the screen.

12 361 002

Eight innocuous figures. Pocket change for the wealthiest in the world. But each number has a life attached to it. Names show up on the screen, the largest amongst them ‘All For One’ and ‘Toshinori Yagi’. The others are innumerable and illegible. But still, that number stands out.

This is the cost of the war.

The stage darkens, obscuring the actors. But still, that number is an ominous and looming presence in their minds.

The applause from the audience is thunderous. It isn’t only the villains, but the general audience as well. The only people not particularly enthused are those who lived through events. Tomura will need to be restrained before he kills Compress. Magne as well.

Then she asks a question she’s wondered for months. “How did our marbles get to that hill?”

“Spinner.”

“Why didn’t Compress just take them himself? Even then, why that place? Why the place the war started?”
“Because he wanted to make a statement.”

“Exactly,” Himiko says. “And what statement is bigger than that number? Then an era ending?”

“Oh shit,” Tomura says slowly. “He started the war.”

“And he got away with it.”

Himiko can’t help but laugh hysterically.

*****

The first student to grace both the hallowed walls of UA academy and the besmirched grills of a Tartarus Prison cell is Izuku Midoriya, shadowking of the abyss and the most controversial boy to ever live.

His name is known across the world and always for a different reason. Some called him the most exciting prospect at UA’s Sports Festival. Others called him a hero after defeating Stain when the pros failed. After his interview in Hokkaido, some called him an exemplar of peace and compassion and others still claimed him a misguided political puppet.

What will they say after his latest stunt? The world knows he is heir to the Fourth Great Tyrant, All For One, and the hero who slew him, All Might. He revealed some of the greatest quirk secrets without a moment of hesitation, upturning whatever views they had of him. Maybe they’ll call him a villain and maybe they’ll call him a hero.

Izuku could leave his tiny isolation cell anytime he wants. The walls certainly won’t hold back his strength and his immortality negates the fear of an explosive collar. In his first few hours, he had met an admiral who had offered him immediate release—an offer Izuku laughed at—before his father had entered.

“Come home,” his father had said. “Kouta’s crying.”

“Tell him I’ll be back when it’s time. Tell him to be strong for me.” Had he smiled to hide his pain? Maybe. “Tell him this is part of my promise.”

“We just got you back. Three months isn’t long.”

“No, it isn’t. I risked a lot for one kid. Make sure he’s treated well. And…” He swallows, hesitant. “Tell mum I’ll see her again when I’m a free man.”

That had been two days ago. Since then he has had a tiny cell for company. It’s an easy circuit, six steps in one direction before hitting the wall. Another four steps and you hit another wall. The toilet is technically clean but he picks up some acrid scent from it. The bed isn’t terrible but meditating is much more comfortable.

You’re so boring now, Mikumo says, shuffling a deck of cards in Izuku’s head. You’re just being lazy again.

“Oh, fuck off.”

The grate slides open. A mechanical actuator delivers his food with cold, unfeeling precision. There is enough food to last an entire day. A rather simple precaution. Feed a prisoner once a day and you only need to worry about one possible security flaw. Use only foods that require no utensils and you remove their potential to use a fork as a shiv.
Seven days pass in isolation before things change. The lights flash between yellow and green, a quiet alarm playing. He cocks his head, sensing the shadows of six—no, that’s seven—guards approaching his cell. Two break off and stand on either side of his cell.

“Kneel down and place your hands behind your back,” someone orders from a speaker. “This is for your own health and safety.”

Izuku rolls his eyes but complies with the order. A few moments later, the fibres of his clothes stiffen. They pull back uncomfortably, reminding Izuku all too much of Aizawa’s capture equipment. His trousers do the same. For anyone else, this might count as being immobilised. For Izuku, he’s got One For All in his soul. There are no restraints that can ever hold him.

The door hisses, clicking and clacking as it opens. The two guards are in full riot suppression gear, their weapons non-lethal but powerful: spray-foam to immobilise, tasers and stun-batons to paralyse, rubber bullets arming their guns. All of it utterly futile in the face of a god’s strength.

Quickly, they move behind him and train their weapons on his back.

“Prisoner secured.”

“Permission granted to move him,” the voice from the speaker says once more. “Izuku Midoriya, you are to be released into the general prison population. Misconduct will result in isolation time. Do you understand?”

“I understand that I’m being held without trial.”

“Do you understand the consequence of misconduct?”

“Yeah, sure, whatever. Let’s get this over with.”

They wheel the contraption in. Izuku regrets his life decisions immediately. It looks like the lovechild of a wheelchair and a torture device. They strap him in securely.

They push him forward, their aim always unerringly accurate. Once the second gate unlocks, he sees the other guards. They encircle him, weapons trained on his still form.

Izuku smiles at them. The amount of work just to move him a hundred metres is commendable even if it is wasteful. It does show how much they fear him. And maybe, just maybe, they respect him as well.

Chaos is what he expects when he enter
ts the general area. Order greets him instead. The tables are in neat rows, warm light from large windows cascading down on them. It makes some areas much darker, but the vibrancy of genuine sunlight is startling after a week in isolation.

The prisoners are grouped together by their affiliations. He recognises many of them from All For One’s files, vigilantes and villains of immense reputation imprisoned by heroes. Many more are foreign to him. What he does know is that no child should be in this place.

He counts five who appear younger than he is.

Hate sparks in his chest, deep and bloodcurdling. This is hatred that will see the world change, hate that threatens his faith in humanity. Every step he takes seems to reveal the worst that humanity has to offer and it is never hidden.

He walks forward, unburdened by his clothes being stiffened. He notices that only a few of the
prisoners have explosive collars around their necks.

Everyone watches him so Izuku keeps his head high and his back straight. He chose to come here, to stand undaunted against the world if that is the cost of a better future. What have they achieved compared to him? What right do they have to gaze at him with contempt?

More and more he is coming to understand Sensei’s contempt.

Someone extends their leg to trip him. Izuku activates a fragment of One For All and steps on his boot. He ignores the screams of pain. They need to understand quickly that he isn’t prey.

The table is occupied but only one person holds Izuku’s interest. Without his armour or red cloth, Stain looks painfully normal.

His smirk is arrogant and his eyes dance with malicious humour.

“‘Izuku Midoriya as I live and breathe. How does it feel being one of us?’”

Izuku rolls his eyes. “Stop being a condescending prick.”

“Coming from the man looking for good to uplift.”

“Yes, yes, yes, you were right about Stormwind.”

Stain bares his teeth but gestures to the free chair. Izuku takes it, ignoring the started looks from the others at the table.

“What brings you to my humble abode?” Stain gestures broadly, encompassing Tartarus itself. “For a hellhole, it isn’t so terrible.”

“I want to win at their own game,” Izuku says, uncaring that everyone is listening to their conversation. “The rules are rigged and the deck stacked, but I don’t give a damn. Do you know what it means if the government lets me walk free after I spat on everything they uphold? They’ll legitimise me and my words.”

Stain… No, his name is Chizome Akaguro. Izuku is the only person with permission to call him that. He’ll show him that much respect at the very least.

Chizome snorts. “You think they’ll give you a chance? You’ll be just like every other failed revolutionary.” Chizome looks around and finds someone in the back. “Hey Shinobu, how’s freeing Shikoku going for you?”

“Your mother’s a whore!”

Izuku rolls his eyes. Katsuki knew worse curses when they were six.

“Oh, they made a mistake. They put me in here without trial. Me.” Maybe it’s arrogance, but he knows the weight his name carries. “In three months, everyone will know Japan’s government believes in imprisonment without trial. In six months, every case will be reopened. Within a year, I’ll walk free. Maybe a lot of you will as well.”

Chizome stares at him for a long minute. Then he laughs, dry and raspy and filled with amusement.

“I’ll take you up on that bet.” He flicks a finger at the woman beside Izuku. “Introduce yourselves.”
They do so and Izuku commits their names to memory, refusing to let them be forgotten. They all have a story and it takes a bit of work to pry even the smallest portion of it out of them.

They fall silent as someone approaches the table. By his shadow and footsteps, the man is massive. He stops right behind Izuku. Chizome simply raises a brow, refusing to involve himself.

Izuku sighs. “You think because I have a shock collar that you can take me on because you’re bigger than me?”

The man doesn’t respond with words. He brings his fist down over Izuku.

His arm stops in Izuku’s palm, all momentum arrested. There are gasps from some around him, but Izuku ignores them. Instead, he looks at Stain.

“What’s the usual procedure for this?” he asks, ignoring the man as he squirms, trying to pry his arm free.

Chizome grins. “Beat the shit out of each other. The guards don’t particularly care.”

Izuku grins back. There’s a spot two rows ahead that looks pretty clear. Casually, Izuku throws the brawny man across the room. In the process, he finally gets a look at his mutations, ox-like and built for pure strength.

“I excuse me,” he says to the table. “I have to relieve some stress.”

Izuku stands and walks towards the man calmly, utterly relaxed. The mutant has only just gotten up when Izuku backhands him across the face.

Blood and teeth come out from the blow. Izuku frowns. He’d thought the mutant could handle five percent of One For All. It’s so little that the collar’s usual shock is instead an annoying buzz.

Distracted, Izuku doesn’t dodge the fist as cleanly as he’d like. He dodges the next blow and slides around the mutant. He kicks the man in the back of the knee.

He collapses to the ground, grunting in pain. At least with him on his knees, Izuku doesn’t need to jump to knee the mutant.

Like a sack of forgotten potatoes, the mutant collapses to the ground. It is the only sound in the common area. Neither the prisoners nor the villains speak.

“All Might put a lot of you behind bars. I get that you’re angry and upset, but I’m not him. I may have inherited his legacy, but I’m not Toshinori Yagi.” Izuku smiles. “I’m nowhere near as nice. He played by the rules because he had a goal that he could only achieve by following them. My only goal is to break the rules.”

He grips his collar. “This? This is nothing.”

He summons a large portion of One For All which makes the collar activate. He grits his teeth through the sudden surge of electricity through his system, shunting as much of One For All as he can to counteract the spasms.

His hand covers the explosive portion of the collar and then he squeezes.

Boom.

With deliberate ease, he pulls the collar off and drops it.
“You know, the funny thing is that All For One used these exact collars.” He enjoys their surprise. “I’m not here because they can hold me. Please, don’t make the mistake of assuming I’m weak and defenceless.”

He may happen to be looking at the security guards when he says that.

Things settle into a rhythm after that. Izuku Midoriya is someone no one knows how to deal with. He follows the schedule to avoid disrupting things too much. The conditions aren’t horrendous: three meals a day, though he only eats every few days; indefinite shower time and clean clothing; and a library with a stock of new books on all subjects.

Over the next few weeks, he learns those who wore his lightning bolt proudly before finding themselves here. There aren’t many but with him here, they’re the most powerful faction. He goes about collecting the younger inmates and making sure they’re protected.

You’re forcibly recruiting them into your gang regardless of how they feel, Mikumo says one evening.

“I’m not. I just won’t leave kids younger than me to get hurt.”

But you gave them no choice.

“I’ll save them regardless of how they feel about it.”

If that’s your wish, young Warlord.

Izuku sits up in his bed, livid. “Fuck you.”

Mikumo doesn’t respond. He’s long gone, hiding somewhere deep in the recesses of Izuku’s mind. Izuku wants to scream and rage at his brother but forces his anger down, refusing to let the entire prison know he talks to the voices in his head.

“You’re a dumbass for thinking things were like this before,” Stain says caustically the next day. “Things were shit then you got sent here. And now we have an overabundance of supplies. Well, us at least. I don’t know what Tartarus is like.”

“This is Tartarus.”

“No, this is a general holding facility. You haven’t seen Tartarus. That’s below the water.”

Izuku blinks, startled. He’d thought this entire time he had seen what the prison had to hold. Terrible for the way it is used to hold people without trial, but not horrendous in and of itself.

“Do you know anyone who came out of Tartarus?” Stain nods. “Show me.”

If Stain himself didn’t get into Tartarus, then it must truly be reserved for the worst villains. Maybe people who have decimated cities or directly attacked the government. In Izuku’s case, he has too many powerful allies for anyone to treat him badly.

“This is the one.”

What he doesn’t expect is a teenager. Izuku looks at the boy. He’s not much older than Izuku should be, no more than seventeen.

He’s also terrified from the way he flinches away from Stain singling him out. He masters it quickly, affecting a semblance of composure.
“You wanna hear my dark and tragic backstory,” the boy says. “You’ve been asking everyone else.”

“I’d prefer the abridged version,” Izuku says dryly.

The teen laughs. “Fine. I saw the world was wrong so I got some of my friends and tried to start a revolution. It failed. They sent a military battalion. Killed my friends. I killed them back. Now, I’m in prison. Short enough for you?”

Izuku nods, his throat tight. That could have very easily been him. What would he have done if they’d rolled in tanks instead of accepting his peaceful surrender? If they’d threatened his mother and Kouta?

*You would have torn their hearts out.*

Even Izuku can’t refute Mikumo’s claim.

“Tell me about Tartarus.”

The boy stiffens, frozen by terror.

“No.”

Izuku kneels beside him and offers the kindest smile he can. It is the same smile All Might would give; the kind that makes people stand taller. It makes people forget their fears and weaknesses. It is a smile that asks for you to try and will forgive you no matter how often you fail.

All Might is gone. It falls onto Izuku to offer that kindness in this new world.

“I know what it’s like to be afraid of the dark,” Izuku says. “I know what it’s like to be scared and alone. I don’t know you but I think you know me. I promise you that you’ll never go back there. Just please, I need to know.”

“I don’t know how far down it is,” the boy says haltingly. “It feels like the underworld. The clothes make it so you can’t move a single muscle. There’s something wonky with the gravity because you’re kept in the middle, unable to touch anything.”

“You’re doing great.”

“There’s no sound. No touch. Nothing to see. Nothing to hear.” The boy looks up, something feral in his gaze. “Do you know how fucking loud your heartbeat is?”

“Oh,” Stain says slowly. “Tartarus is a sensory deprivation chamber.”

“No fucking shit.”

Izuku smiles. “Don’t worry, I’ll make sure no one ever goes to Tartarus again.”

That’s a promise he doesn’t mean to break.

****

Inko Midoriya doesn’t know how to feel as she watches UA suffer. She wanted revenge, yes, but it tastes like ash without Izuku here beside her. And no matter how much she likes Kouta, he is no substitute for her son. Oh, she’ll care for him and protect him as fiercely as she did Izuku, but he’ll never be Izuku. If not for her son, she wouldn’t even know Kouta’s name.
That bitterness extends to Mitsuki Bakugou. They may have made amends and done their best to move on, but Inko can never forget the fact that Katsuki Bakugou is at home, safe and protected, despite all he’s done. She can’t ever forget that Mitsuki’s family is fine and that they hardly suffered compared to the Midoriya family.

“I knew they were doing terrible things but not like this,” Mitsuki says, watching the newscaster speak on Nezu's institute.

“Fifty-one UA students have been placed in this institute over the last two decades. The institute was built in a hidden wing of Musutafu Psychiatric facility after extensive donations from UA. None of the patients were harmed during the Kamino Ward War, however, two have been missing since before then. Unfortunately, with casualty counts as they are, contacting next of kin has proven a challenge for the authorities.”

She knows the names of the two students that went missing. Hagakure and Mineta's Nomu corpses are currently held in a testing facility jointly held by the Imperial Household and the navy, which she only knows because of Hisashi.

“This isn’t the worst of it,” Inko says, watching as the staff are arrested. “But at least now the world knows. At least now UA won’t ever commit another crime.”

“They still haven’t found Nezu.”

Inko forces her fist to unclench at the reminder. “No. Him and Snipe and Midnight all escaped during the war. Any of the staff that survived are being interrogated right now.”

“Recovery Girl’s been blacklisted by the JMA. She won’t ever be able to practice in a tiny clinic on some random mountain.”

“That’s the least that will happen to her. Within a week, she’ll be in prison for the rest of her short life.”

Mitsuki glances at her, saying nothing for a beat. Then she picks up her glass and takes a sip of water, gathering her words.

“Intake for hero courses has dropped dramatically. Ketsubutsu had to lower the admission age and they still couldn’t get a full-sized class. It's even worse with second and third-year students across the country. They're refusing to come back after what happened to the UA classes.”

“Good. People forgot being a hero meant being willing to die and now they’ve been reminded of that cost.”

“I don’t think heroics is going to survive,” Mitsuki admits sadly. “Because of what we’ve done.”

“No, not us. Powerful people like Nezu and All For One and all the rest, people who weren’t ever held accountable. People who did as they pleased.”

“Like Hisashi.”

“I'm fully aware of my own hypocrisy, Mitsuki. But we need allies, no matter how imperfect they are. Hisashi isn’t a good man, but he’ll listen to me. And you’ll tell me if I’m doing something wrong.”

“I can’t be your moral compass. I’m not a good person as well.”
“You’re better than most.”

Being able to admit your wrongdoings makes you better than most people in the world as far as Inko is concerned. And being willing to stand against an organisation as powerful as UA, an organisation with a seat in the highest echelons of power, makes you a good friend.

“...Amidst growing unrest following the incarceration of Izuku Midoriya, the Lightning Bolts have issued a statement censuring the judicial system and the remains of the heroics industry.”

Inko keeps calm at the reminder of her son’s imprisonment. He could walk out anytime he wanted, but for some unfathomable reason, he thinks this is necessary. He thinks playing along with the farce of a judicial system they have is important. Winning by their systems would legitimise him further, but Inko disagrees. The greatest form of legitimisation is overwhelming strength.

Stormwind. Titan. Hero. Hawkmoon. All For One. Each a legend and each legitimised through their power. They may have all perished, but they all changed the world.

“And Izuku?”

“What about him?”

“You can’t protect him anymore. He made an enemy out of everyone in power. He made an enemy out of Hisashi—”

“Hisashi is a lot of things but he’s loyal to me and Izuku first.” She meets Mitsuki’s gaze with her own, one heavy with the weight of the abyss. “We've reached an accord with them. We’ll steer Izuku clear of them and they’ll ignore him.”

“You know he won't accept that forever.”

“No, but he'll be strong enough to win against them by then.”

When she thinks of the strength he’ll need one day, she hears the chittering of a thousand spiders. She imagines fangs that will eat the world and poison to spoil the world’s lifeblood.

“... only three of the top-ten heroes alive, vigilantism has seen a surge in popularity...”

“Katsuki still wants to be a hero but he wants to try something different. I didn’t think the bastard could read but there’s a stack of history books in his room. A lot of stuff on Vancouver.”

She smiles. “He wants to make something new out of his broken dreams and shattered hope. Just like Izuku did. All we can do is guide them as best we can.”

Later, when Mitsuki is gone, she cracks open the door to Izuku’s room. Kouta is sleeping, clutching Izuku’s favourite hoodie. She can just barely make out the salt trail running down the boy’s cheek.

She hears Hisashi long before he places his hand on her shoulder, squeezing softly. She permits him to run his hand down her arm and even lets him clasp their hands together.

“I feel sorry for Kouta,” she says softly. “Loving a Midoriya man isn’t an easy thing. They’re headstrong and secretive and once they decide on something, they chase it relentlessly, even if it means they leave those that love them behind.”

The grief in his eyes is old but she will never mistake the depths of his love.
“I love you,” he croaks out. “Everything I did was for this family. For you. I chased after you.”

“And you still left me for a decade. You might have been born Hisashi Atakani, but you behave like all the Midoriya men. My father died because he couldn’t leave well enough alone and learnt things that got him and my mother killed. My grandfather died saving some random stranger in a fire. My great-grandfather and his brother fought to the death playing at vigilante. And now my son is going to force the world to change. Kouta has no idea what it means to be part of this family.”

He smiles, nervous around her as always.

“You broke one of the three greatest hero institutes in the world and ordered an Emperor. You raised the boy who succeeded All Might and All For One. You’re just as headstrong as the rest.”

“The difference is that I know when to stop. I don’t leave my family.” She let’s go of his hand and takes a step back. “Like you’re about to leave.”

“I’ll stay if you need me to, but I’ve ensured Kouta is protected. Fumikage has agents making sure Izuku is treated well.”

“You’re a terrible husband.”

“I know. But once I got my first taste of the abyss, I could never stop chasing after new secrets. I need to know the first truth. I need to know why the abyss ever touched our world.”

She sighs. “Go. I'll be here, waiting for you as always.”

“I love you.”

I love you as well, you fool.

“Kouta will miss you.”

He barks out a laugh. “The little shit won’t even notice I’m gone.”

*****

Hisashi Midoriya doesn’t leave that evening. There are still things that need to be settled, promises to keep and warnings to give.

His first destination is Vancouver Island, the seat of a budding nation. The first thing he notices is the heightened police presence and the rather silent streets. It takes him a moment to see a group of soldiers arguing with a villain. They look ready to fire, but they must know how foolish that is. That villain likely took part in the battle against the Hero Conglomerate.

It’ll take time before people are used to the new normal. A nation claimed by villains for villains isn’t something the world has ever seen. But when he thinks about it, every nation was built on who could spill the most blood. A compromise will have to be found. The villains might have the power to destroy the island, but no one wants to destroy their home.

It won’t be easy or comfortable, but it is what needs to be done. Peace can only be had by people willing to set aside their differences and realise more unites them then divides them.

Finding his target is the work of a few hours. All For Once's informant network is still operational here and Hisashi's authorization codes still work. And looking like a spitting image Izuku in fifty
years helps quite a bit.

His target is hiding amongst the peaks of Mount Washington, dressed in a simple vest and crisp shirt despite the cold.

Kurogiri has a warp gate around Hisashi’s neck the moment he fully materialises.

“We had an accord,” Kurogiri warns. “I did what your family asked. I stuck to my end of the bargain. And don’t you dare ask me to come back. I am never working with them again.”

Hisashi smiles. “You know as well as I do what it means to be part of that family. But no, I just came to see the first Warlord of the last century.”

Kurogiri’s gasses snap and hiss. The warp gate threatening to decapitate Hisashi vanishes.

“Tell me why you’re here and get out.”

Hisashi smirks. “My son’s better than yours. Even All For One thought so.”

“You son’s in prison.”

“You think he can’t walk out anytime he wants?”

“I think he won’t.”

Hisashi opens a doorway and leaves before he does something he regrets. Maybe needlessly antagonising Kurogiri hadn’t been necessary, but it had been worth it for a few precious seconds. And it had served the purpose of reminding the former villain that the world is a very small place.

His next destination is the Imperial Villa. The damage to the heart of the Imperial City is negligible compared to the rest of the country. With the Emperor himself here during All For One’s attack, the damage had been greatly mitigated. The power to destroy mountains can sometimes be used to protect and build.

Regardless, the Villa itself is quieter than usual. From the casualty reports, half of the household’s combat agents suffered casualties from battling China’s invasion force and the Vancouver Island Villain Association. They won’t be remembered or praised, but without their contribution, Japan would be under foreign rule.

“Fumikage.”

The young god doesn’t look up from the game he’s playing with a bunch of children. Hisashi doesn’t know them, though all are mutants. They’re likely new additions to the household under Fumikage’s authority. And whilst Hisashi is important, his status amongst the household has waned greatly. Doors once open to him are barred and information he could pull up a month ago is hidden. He wonders if it is Itinerant stymieing him or someone else amongst the royal lines.

It doesn’t matter. He hasn’t had any true loyalty to the Chrysanthemum since he met Inko and certainly not after Izuku was born. In truth, his loyalty to the household died with his parents. After Izuku’s birth, he had done everything to become his own entity, to become someone capable of sitting at the same table as the Strongest Man Alive.

Now, his son is a god. No matter what happens going forward, his son will be strong enough to rule the world. With Fumikage as an ally and Shouto as… not hostile, then nothing will truly stop them.
“Did you at least say goodbye?”

He startles, meeting Fumikage’s patient gaze. Despite the time they spent together in the abyss, it surprises him that Fumikage is taller than him now. Nowhere close to Shouto’s height, but tall nonetheless.

He decides against deceit. “I did.”

“What do you need?”

“I need another favour from you.”

“Yes?”

He removes the envelope in his jacket and hands it to Fumikage. Dark Shadow materialises a claw and takes the envelope.

“Give it to the Emperor’s daughter and tell her… I guess that I’ll visit when I’m back.”

Fumikage blinks. “As you say, Hisashi. Godspeed.”

Hisashi huffs. From anyone else, it would be an empty platitude. From Fumikage, someone who can affect the universe itself, well, it feels like a benediction—a genuine blessing from god. With that protection, he travels to the abyss without fear.

The world resolves in a flash of green lightning. Where once the floor was endless and reflected the light of creation, it is now a lattice of black flames. The creatures that fought for a tiny chance to survive a never-ending cycle are gone and nothing has replaced them.

This place is a strange land, one under the control of the godflame which shouldn’t happen. He’s far too deep for the flame of creation to have any sway over this land. But, then again, the three kings changed the very nature of the abyss.

The important part is that the train is still present. The purple locomotive doesn’t seem to care for the flames beneath it, refusing to burn or crack against their power.

He takes his time inspecting the train and learning more and more about his son’s journey through the abyss with Shouto. Here is a train cart flooded and with a few dozen punctures. There is a kitchen broken by raw strength. Blood splatters and teeth and crystal shards on the floors, in the walls, and hidden in random nooks and crannies.

That doesn’t concern him as much as the fact that one thing is missing, the same thing that’s been bothering him for so long.

“It should be here;” Hisashi says for the umpteenth time. “In every reality, his body is always with his train. So why not this one?”

Hisashi would be satisfied if he could at least find Master Railroad’s clothes, but no, nothing remains of his body.

Unknown, the World Walker hiding in the depths of his mind says. *Interference of shadowking and scorchking a possibility.*

He rubs his face. “I just want answers.”

The train shudders, nearly making Hisashi trip. He runs towards the front of the train as it speeds
up, pausing only once to see it chew up mile upon mile of distance in the span of a few seconds. In the conductor’s cabin, he finds the train operating itself.

On the seat is a single sheaf of paper. He reads it, letting the World Walker deal with translating the ontological grammar clauses, before setting it down.

*The train will guide you, Operator.*

“I know, but who the hell is the Renegade. I thought we knew all the players on the board.”

*Perhaps the one who stole the corpse. The abyss is infinite in its possibilities.*

Hisashi leans back and puts his feet on the console. “I guess we’re gonna get answers.”

*****

Izuku Midoriya isn’t afraid of being in prison. The other inmates are terrified of him, yes, and the guards aren’t willing to get near him. Well, given that the local weather pattern changes when he’s annoyed, it is a reasonable fear.

He has a legal team courtesy of the Yaoyorozu family, which reminds Izuku that he will need to thank her personally. They’ve never really interacted and already she’s doing this much for him.

The court proceedings are happening in private given the complicated and tangled web he’s involved in. All For One. All Might. His father and the Imperial Household. Even the navy and military. It’s as volatile as it gets without actual bloodshed. From what the lawyers tell him, there’s a major push to get him released for his power if nothing else. Whoever manages that expects Izuku to owe him a favour.

Izuku barks out a laugh. “I walked in here of my own volition. I can walk out if I want to. I don’t want that. I want the courts to proclaim my innocence. I want them to legitimise my cause.”

A week later, Izuku is hauled away from the general area and carted towards a meeting room. It is plain and unadorned but for two stools and a titanium table. They cuff Izuku to the table, which he thinks is cute, but says nothing.

*You’ve become arrogant in your strength,* Mikumo says.

“Shut up,” he mutters.

The door slides open with a long-drawn hiss. A man enters the room dressed in a simple uniform. Izuku has met him before. Right after the end of the Kamino Ward War when he was a guest of the army, this man had been his main interrogator.

“If you’re here to offer me a deal then you’re a few months late,” Izuku says casually. “The navy offered some great benefits.”

The interrogator doesn’t react to that but for a minor twitch in a neck muscle. Good self-control. Very good.

“Are you completely incapable of not stirring the pot?”

“I have a strong personality.”

The interrogator scoffs. “A recent development. UA records show that you were emotionally unstable, suffered extreme symptoms of psychosis and schizophrenia that ultimately culminated in
a psychotic break.”

Izuku grits his teeth, hating the reminder of what he was like before. He’s come so far since then that to have a stranger open that old wound is a grave insult.

“What’s your point?”

“That you weren’t always a headstrong ideologue. That’s a learned behaviour. Last time we spoke you kept the secret of your wind quirk.”

“It wasn’t your place to know.”

“I think it is. No one person should have that kind of power. When that happens, we get Warlords and Tyrants.”

“And you get Hawkmoon and Hero and All Might.”

“Yes, the only three most people can remember. We’ve had Three Great Tyrants and you inherited power from one of them. Do you understand what your actions did to the international community?”

Izuku shrugs. “Not my main concern.”

“I have it on good authority that every nuclear power now has a protocol just for you. If you fuck up, the entire world is willing to see Japan burn before they allow another Great Tyrant to rise.”

“I’m not a—”

"Your Sensei influenced a quarter of the world. Twelve nations have been loyal to his cause for the last century. In one year, he destroyed the two largest hero collectives in the world. Soon enough, a new nation built by villains will rise in the Pacific Northwest. There’ll be more bloodshed. Maybe it won’t be as terrible as what happened here, but we came this close to a World War.”

“Maybe the issue is the world that gave rise to him.”

“You think the system is the issue. Don’t be an idiot. Ever since quirks came about, villains and Warlords have existed.”

Izuku rolls his eyes. “Yeah, and heroes rose with them. If we change the nature of the power structures, then one day we’ll move past heroes and villains. And I’m willing to fight to make that change.”

"Can you listen to yourself for one moment? Japan just went through a war. Twelve million people dead. Twelve million. That was only six months ago." The man shakes his head. "And now you want to start another war for your fucking beliefs."

“Yes.”

The man stares at him incredulously. "You're insane. You're genuinely insane. You have no concept of human life."

“That’s all I’m fighting for.”

“No, you’re fighting for your ego,” he snarls. “Izuku Midoriya, the man who brought change. You just want to be remembered. The man who brought peace on the corpses of millions.”
Izuku narrows his eyes. “The only people who will fight me are those benefitting from the system as it stands.”

“I can say with complete certainty that you aren’t a villain.” He pauses for a bit. “You’re much worse. They’ll call you a Warlord and then a Tyrant. You’ll earn those titles one life at a time.”

“People can be better. People can lay down their arms. I’ll show them that path.”

“No, you won’t. Izuku Midoriya, you are an enemy to Japan. An enemy to peace and stability. I hope you prove me wrong. I hope you’re more All Might than All For One.” The interrogator stands. “For the sake of the world, I hope you don’t look up to Stormwind.”

Despite his hard expression, that conversation shakes Izuku. He’d known since the very beginning that he would have to fight but he never considered all the suffering that would occur in the process. No, he only saw an end goal and walked towards it unerringly.

The others don’t know what causes the change to his personality or even how to pull him out of his shell. He may still observe the prison and events surrounding it, but he isn’t as loud, charismatic and bombast as he was.

He is like that for a month before he gets his second visitor. It is a simple visitation room, steel and ballistic glass keeping inmate and visitor from one another.

“Fumikage.”

He’s grown up since Izuku last spoke to him eight, maybe nine months ago. It had been the final exam if he remembers correctly, the same day Fumikage was expelled. Back then, Fumikage had been awkward in his own skin, uncertain of his place in the world. Now, however, he wears his white coat proudly, the Chrysanthemum seated in the centre of his black uniform.

His loyalties are evident and he bears the weight of them with dignity.

“Hello, my friend.”

Izuku startles. “Your voice is deeper.”

“Oh?” Fumikage twitches awkwardly. “Maybe it is. You’ve… I can’t say your appearance has changed much.”

“Well, I hope you don’t get tired of seeing the same face.”

“I think a piece of familiarity over the centuries will do me good. All of us, really.”

“Are you happy? With them?” Izuku nods towards the emblem on his chest.

“Are you disappointed?”

“Is this the path you want to walk?”

“I believe so.”

Izuku smiles. Finally, an answer.

“Of course, I’m not disappointed in you. I should be asking you that. Here I am in prison and it’s been what, nearly a year since we last talked.”
“A bit less, but yes.” Fumikage sighs. “I had worried distance would make us drift.”

“You and me and Shouto till the very end. That was the promise, right? I don’t mean to break it.”

And just like that, they are friends again. Izuku talks and Fumikage listens. He is like an anchor keeping Izuku in place in the churning sea of his self-doubt. Fumikage’s endless patience hasn’t changed and it leaves Izuku breathless knowing that his friend will be with him forever.

“I don’t want to cause more suffering but I can’t stand the world right now.”

“It’s impossible to change things like that without death. People won’t just lay down as you break the system they benefited from.”

“And the innocents?” Izuku asks.

“Maybe you fail to save one person today if it means ten more are saved later.”

“How many have you watched die?”

“Too many.”

“That’s you trying to deflect.”

“I suppose I don’t want to disappoint you.”

Izuku sighs. “I think I could have saved the Pussycats, but I gave up on them from the beginning. Do you really think I wouldn’t forgive you?”

Fumikage smiles. Izuku has always been so simple at his core. He’s kind and forgiving, even if it’s been tempered by violence, anger and hypocrisy.

“The abyss corrupts humans so easily. And when it happens, you just have to burn away the infection.”

“I told you that.”

“Yes.”

“I led you down this road. All of it. Aizawa. The Guard. Everything you’ve done since then.”

Fumikage frowns severely. “Do not attempt to take away my free will, Midoriya. When China invaded, I fought at the forefront so you would have a home to come back to.”

Izuku winces, but nods once, accepting the rebuke.

“I made my choices because they were right,” Fumikage continues. “Our stories are intertwined, but we are always free to make our own choices.”

The lights flash, cycling between green and orange. Their time is coming to an end.

“I need a favour from you.”

“Anything.”

“Tartarus, the prison beneath this prison, is a sensory deprivation chamber of the worst kind. It needs to be stopped.”
"I’ll see to it."

Izuku watches him leave, feeling cold and uncertain. It’s all so big, bigger than any one person should carry. But he has friends and allies whom he can trust. Most of them are outside the prison, but some are stuck in here with him.

Chizome Akaguro, Stain, is a constant in his life. Not as a protector or friend, but maybe two equals who respect each other. They debate anything and everything. Were Titan’s death squads given an unfair punishment since their families were held hostage? The navy’s rise to power since the Dark Age and how they shaped the future. Stormwind’s Sacking of Minsk.

All the while he learns the stories of those in the prison. Many are unrepentant criminals but some are here without cause, incarcerated by an almost draconian government.

“I’ve never seen him before,” Stain says, pointing at an elderly man.

“New inmate?”

“No, we’d know if that was the case. Unless…”

“Stain?”

Stain doesn’t respond to him that day. As the week goes by, more and more people start showing up. They’ve been here before by the way they fall into certain cliques or go off on their own. Prison routine is something they all know how to deal with.

“They’re from Tartarus.”

It is the boy who told Izuku the truth of Tartarus that speaks. He’s fallen in line with the other people Izuku’s keeping safe.

“Oh.”

“Here five months and you’re already changing things,” Stain says. “Though I’m still going to win our bet.”

Stain does win. Six months pass by and no prisoner cases are reopened. Izuku accepts the loss with dignity, deciding to use it as a learning experience. Sometimes things are messy and unpredictable, plans often going off the rails. You just have to take the blow and keep walking.

He does his best to keep appraised of things happening in the rest of the world. Canada and America are on the verge of a civil war after the Vancouver Island Villain Association won. China’s military and navy are being mobilised. Europe is suffering from civil unrest and all of it has to do with Izuku’s power and his words. To hold a wind quirk equal to Stormwind and then to quote her had done some odd things to the European psyche.

He receives his third and final visitor in prison at the end of his sixth month. The woman is one he knows from one interaction. At the end of his trip to Hokkaido, he had accepted an interview from Quirk News Network. He’d laid bare his heart and soul to a stranger just so his words could be heard.

“Hello again, Izuku. You will still let me call you that, won’t you?”

"You've already taken the liberty." Despite that, he respects her. "How did you get here? I know they're not letting the press see me."
“Your friend. The avian mutant. I wasn’t going to say no to the opportunity.”

“Will you listen to my story?”

“I think the entire world wants to listen to your story.”

Izuku sighs.

“Which story do you want first? Do you want the story of my illegal imprisonment? Last I checked, our laws require trials before incarceration.” He grins. “Do you want the story of why I drew a line in the sand and said no.” He swings his arms out, gesturing to encompass everything. “Or maybe you want the story of All For One, the Great Tyrant of our age.”

“No. I don’t want any of those stories.”

He tilts his head. “Then what do you want?”

“I want Izuku Midoriya to tell me his story. I want the kid crying after visiting Hokkaido. I want the kid who cares so much he started a movement with his words. I don’t want the grandstanding or arrogance. I just want your story. Not the story you think will sound right.”

That drains him of his bombastic energy. His arms fall to his side, lifeless. She’s watching him and telling the truth.

“Alright, I’ll tell you.” He takes a shuddering breath.

“Tell me your story, Izuku.”

For a moment, he isn’t certain where to begin. Then he realises the beginning is the only appropriate place.

“It starts two centuries ago, on the day of Hero’s final victory. This is the day a young child sees her victory and decides the true meaning of strength is the power to kill your enemies. This boy will one day become All For One, the Strongest Man Alive, founder of the League of Villains and the first vigilante of Japan. All For One and One For All defined the last two centuries. Can you imagine that? An argument between two brothers reshaped history, broke nations, and killed millions.

“One For All failed to kill his brother. He passed down his quirk for generations, all in the hope of one day finishing an act of fratricide. Nana Shimura the Brave. All Might the Perfect Fighter. Me. Maybe one day I’ll earn a name.” He snorts, surprised by his arrogance. “I know All For One better than anyone else alive. He took me, and in me, he saw someone willing to fight the society he had failed to change. He hoped I would succeed in his beliefs. It would his downfall.”

He speaks of All For One’s great struggle to change things, to gain power and reshape the world to his beliefs. He speaks of All For One’s failings, his inability to adapt to the present, to uphold human dignity and be empathetic.

“It was Hawkmoon who changed him. She taught him to set lines he wouldn’t cross.” Izuku shakes his head. “In the end, even those teachings fell to the wayside. People can change, I believe that. I wish All For One had been a good man. I sincerely hope he found some measure of peace before the end.”

She smiles at him. “Maybe he did when he gave you that quirk.”
“Maybe. Or maybe he had just given up. Maybe he washed his hands of it all. Living isn’t easy. Living for centuries breaks you down. All Might was in his fifties and he was so tired. I can’t imagine carrying that burden for two centuries.

“Those two centuries are the legacy I have to carry. Within me is the weight of every moment of grief and agony those two brothers caused by their foolish argument. All For One and One For All. Nana and Toshi. Hawkmoon and Stormwind. I think every hero and villain carry bits and pieces of their legacy. I’m not even seventeen, but somehow, I’m expected to decide the future. All because I refuse to let people suffer silently. What kind of world is that?”

“It’s the world we have.”

“My name is Izuku Midoria,” he says softly. “My only dream in life is to make this world a better place. I want to see Hokkaido prosper. I want kids in Shikoku to never know a military curfew. I want a Japan where we can trust the government. I want heroes who aren’t in it for wealth.”

He wipes away his tears.

“Is that so wrong?”

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the fifth and final season of the Dark Below. This, in many ways, serves as an extended epilogue for this story. Things are gonna get wild. We’ll be picking up on plot threads I think most of you have forgotten.

We're working towards an ending I wrote 2 years ago.

Get ready. It's finally time to end this.
In which the rest of the cast makes an appearance.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

‘My quirk made me different. It let me see the world in its glory. That is a lie. There was no glory, only bloodshed, cruelty and death. It was the first of its kind. Not the original quirk, but the first quirk tainted by the dark. How could I have known that my very existence would mark me as the most important man to ever live? Not for it made me a hero, that role was simply one I played out of ignorance. No, it was my quirk that granted the dark a foothold unto this planet. I do not know if the world will still stand once this is read, but if it does not, please forgive me the failings of my birth. If it does stand, forgive me the failings of my acts.’

—The Second Letter from a Renegade as translated by the World Walker.

Hisashi wakes up, startled by the train’s violent transition. He looks around and sees sunlight. Odder still, the air seems too warm despite the frost forming on the windows.

“There’s no darkness,” Hisashi says. “None. I’m the one with the most darkness and I’m mostly godflame. Are we in a different reality?”

*Unknown. Possibility that we are. Timescale is different in every reality.*

He tries prying the train’s door opens but finds them sealed shut. He sighs, banging his fist against it. Hisashi hates being trapped.

The screams of a new-born pierce the air.

The sound is coming from further back in the train. Hisashi walks down it cautiously, searching for the screams of a child.

A flicker in the corner of his vision makes him turn abruptly. The frosted window shows a hospital room. Hisashi watches as the nurses in the room continue their work, unbothered by the presence of a train.

The babe screams again.

Hisashi shudders. Not because of the sound, but because of how reality shifts. It is darkness, a tiny pinprick of his son’s kingdom in this untainted world. It is barely perceptible and Hisashi only recognises the tiny sliver of darkness curled beneath the baby’s godflame soul because of his experience in the abyss.

“I don’t understand,” Hisashi says. “That child’s the first time this world has seen true dark but I’m here. This train is here. We’ve opened a way to the abyss but at the same time, it’s like it doesn’t matter. Like we’re just lightly skimming the surface and not actually affecting the world below.”

The train lurches forward, flinging Hisashi to the ground. He groans, rubbing his chest gingerly. It takes him a few minutes to get up because old age is not fun. His body is a patchwork monstrosity
of scars and failing organs and abyssal deals keeping him functioning. He’ll be lucky to see seventy if he keeps going at this rate.

As the train journeys, he sees moments of the boy's life like reels of memory perfectly preserved. Hisashi watches the boy get beaten when he looks hardly older than five and the suffering he endured working in a mine. Each moment of pain hardens the boy’s resolve, forces him to learn cunning and trickery.

With puberty comes the boy’s quirk. One day, the building anger is unleashed and Hisashi's train slams through a mountain, tearing through tonnes of rock as though they were wet paper. Even as the tunnels collapse, the boy only smiles, awaiting death.

The train stops just before it hits the boy. Hisashi watches in shock as the boy boards the train with complete indifference, driven by some unknown instinct.

“This is a paradox,” Hisashi says.

The boy doesn’t hear him, walking forward in shock. Hisashi reaches out to touch the boy.

His hand dissolves to mist and passes right through the kid. Though the boy shivers, he doesn’t notice Hisashi.

Following the kid is the only option he has. The child finds the conductor’s cabin easily enough. The boy is confused, unsure of what buttons to press.

Then Hisashi feels his body stiffen, losing all autonomy. His legs take a step forward even as he fights his hardest to stay where he is.

*Foreign intrusion detected*, the World Walker says, and tries to take control. It’s forced down to the very depths of Hisashi’s soul.

With no choice in the matter, Hisashi lays his hands over the boys and guides them. It must be strange for the kid, feeling as though invisible hands are guiding him. Soon enough, the train sets off.

Control of his limbs returns and Hisashi takes a cautious step back. He stares at his hands even as the World Walker awakens once more.

They pass through a warp gate and the train splits. Two trains occupy the space of one before they split off, Hisashi carried by one and the young Master Railroad in the other.

“Why am I seeing this?”

*Unknown, Operator. We cannot escape this train regardless.*

“You tested this?”

*Whilst you slept. Our presence on this train is an immutable fact. This is the train he will summon. Should we leave, a future set in stone will be altered.*

He follows the boy as he is drafted by the UN and meets Hawkmoon. The legend is young, unsure of her place in things to come, but willing to fight. More than anything, she seems to relish the idea.

“Fighting is never worth it,” he says, placing his hand through her heart.
She clutches at her chest, not knowing why she feels uncomfortable. Perhaps she was always destined to peace, but Hisashi likes to tell himself that he nudged her towards a brighter future.

Every battle they wage is catastrophic though none of Master Railroad's allies are ever surprised. Death, chaos and destruction were constants of the Dark Age. Hisashi watches a man of fifty accept Stormwind's surrender. It is a victory even if she summons violent wind and sends the train flying dozens of miles away in annoyance.

As he grows older, the years weigh down on him. A friend stops his suicide attempt but his grief never truly leaves. Even as he fights in Berlin against the Empire, all he wishes is to sleep and rest.

The end comes eventually. Master Railroad, greying now, climbs a mountain alone. Mount Kilimanjaro is the last challenge he will ever surmount. This day is remembered in legend as one of the Seven Great Mysteries, the day Master Railroad disappeared.

“You don’t want to go down that road,” Hisashi says but knows he won’t be heard. “I’ve tried. Walking the abyss is walking sorrow’s road. Don’t make the same mistake as me.”

The man doesn’t listen. Instead, he buckles down and starts the train, determined and grim.

"This won't change anything. You might be the only warp quirk, but there will be more later. Just stay here and be happy. Trust me, this isn't worth it."

Instead, they travel through another warp gate. One with no destination but the void. The darkness is familiar but Hisashi isn’t focused on it. He extends his senses back through the warp gate as much as he can, feeling as droplets of darkness find purchase in the world. Just like each time Master Railroad used his quirk, but this time there is so much more.

“You changed the world and you didn’t even know.”

With a ponderous groan, the train slows down. Master Railroad’s past ghost has been awake for days, staring at the madness of the abyss with indifference, unaffected by the sight of gods and demons and unholy abominations.

The train stops in the same spot Hisashi first found it. Or rather, it stops in the location Hisashi will one day find it.

Master Railroad takes his coat and exits the train. He doesn’t care that nightmares are swooping around him. He doesn’t flinch when a giant serpent lands in front of him. The man is implacable, an island in a churning sea of uncertainty.

Hisashi follows a ghost of the past, unsure of what he will find, but unable to resist the allure of secrets. Inko was right. He’ll follow this path even if it destroys him.

All for the sake of the first secret.

*****

In the shadow of the sun, Eijirou Kirishima sees the future unfolding, blossoming as lotus petals. Once, nearly a year ago, he saw the secrets of time stripped naked, pliant and vulnerable. Time is vulnerable and must be held gently.

It certainly shouldn’t be burnt to ashes on the whims of one asshole. Shouto Todoroki is cruel, indifferent, and completely inhumane. The course of destiny should not be held in his hands.
Eijirou can see the endless stream of possible futures now as well. Not anywhere close to the extent of Todoroki, but he can see branching paths. Sometimes, he can see further and see the result of a decision. It’s kept him alive since the war.

He can’t say the same of many others.

The shrine is old, dating back to the resurgence of religions after quirks manifested, and has been the site of funerals for their family for generations. The last time he had set foot in the shrine was his grandmother’s funeral when he was a toddler, an event he hardly remembers. There had been little reason to visit since. Eijirou is someone who cares about the present, not the past.

He traces his fingers along the last stone pedestal. Coarse and rough stone scratches the pads of his fingers, reminding that he is alive.

The names of his mother and sister and grandfather remind him that they can never be reached no matter how much it hurts. All those months ago when the war reached their grandfather’s home, Eijirou had gone out to fight.

He fought in the rain and mud, slipping and sliding between bullets and bodies. It had been one close call after another. He hadn’t even hesitated in taking a life. Knowing how gods view humanity had made it easy.

Fire and smoke greeted him on his return, blood dripping down his arms. There hadn’t been a point in braving the smoke. His family had ready been burnt to a crisp by then.

He wonders if they cursed him in their final moments. It had been his suggestion to hide in the cellar what he fought. He’d locked it tight and secure, knowing no one could enter.

He hadn’t thought they might need to leave.

Now, he kneels in his and shrine and remembers them.

“I’ll fight so no one ever suffers again. Can you forgive me if I don’t give up? If I fight till the very end, will you be proud of me? I don’t know if I can win. I just need to know you’ll forgive me.”

Silence answers him. It is the only answer he will ever receive for his failings.

“I get it. I’m asking too much.” He bows his head. “But I refuse to stand by and let them do what they please. I want to make my own destiny.”

The words sound hollow and empty. He can’t help but remember the infinite futures collapsing. He can’t forget the majesty of it all and how unimportant he was in even the smallest decision.

“We’re not their playthings.”


If he doesn't then it will all come crashing down. His fears and insecurities, the grief wrapped tightly in his throat and the anger that's burrowed deep in his chest, all of it will spill if he doesn’t stay in control.

There is nothing else to be done here. His vows have been made. He’ll fight the good fight even if no one else does.

“This is where you’ve been hiding.”
The voice is familiar and alien in equal measure. It used to belong to someone he knew well. Now, though, he doesn’t know where they stand.

"I don't hide," Eijirou says.

Mina Ashido, his childhood friend, crosses her arms. Her black blazer hangs loosely over her frame. The strength of her limbs is gone, thinned by grief. Eijirou understands all too well the results of grief. He’s gone the other direction. His height might not have increased, but he’s packed on muscle. With his red mane and massive frame, he’s earned more than a few dirty looks. The scraggly beard hasn’t helped at all.

“Looks like hiding to me,” she says, stepping closer. “Every Wednesday we meet up. You’re the only one who doesn’t come.”

“Because none of you can see it. They’re not our friends and they’re not our allies.” He smiles bitterly. “There’s no such thing as a perfect society. What do you think will happen once Midoriya realises that?”

“He’ll ask us to be better.”

“What tyrant has ever asked people to be better? He’s All For One’s heir and he had every opportunity to end the war before everyone died.”

She shakes her head. “He’s a kid. We’re all kids.”

“We’re fucking adults who went through a war,” he snarls, looming over her. “We’ve all done shit we’re not proud of. How many nightmares do you have because I’ve stopped counting mine?”

“Don’t act like—”

“Let me tell you the difference between me and Izuku. I’m not fucking insane. I know right from wrong and he’s wrong. You might not see it now, but he’s a monster. And one day, he’ll let his boyfriend off his leash and then we’ll all be fucked.” Eijirou shrugs broadly, gesturing to encompass the world. “Maybe the one who turned traitor and works for the Emperor—and let me remind you that twenty million deaths are on them—will decide killing us quietly is better.”

She firms her stance, unintimidated by his posturing. “You’re wrong.”

“I’m not. I can show you.” He extends his hand. “Come with me.”

“Don’t go. He’s not a bad person.”

He shakes his head, hating himself for being too cynical. She’s seen bloodshed and death. Of all people, she should be following him.

Her expression falls before he says a thing.

“Stay safe,” she settles on.

“When you see the truth, I’ll come find you,” he promises. “Don’t you dare die for them.”

He disappears, shaking off the people stalking him. He’s learnt how to be strong in the mountains of his grandfather’s home. The fighting hadn’t ended after the earthquakes and the sky shattering. No, it had only become bloodier and crueller.
His classmates didn’t really see the horrors of war first-hand. Yes, they’d witnessed death, but they’d never known the pain of watching your neighbours die in the mud. They don’t know what it means to fight as your grandfather’s village burns down. They don’t know anything about being ambushed and fearing for the worst.

He had managed to save someone well connected. He picks up his new identity from a homeless man in a train station the next town over. By the time he’s in Okinawa, he has a new name and looks different. The dock authorities look the other way when he gives a countersign and he sneaks his way onto a freight crater designed for castaways like him.

When it’s time to disembark, it’s been three weeks of port hops and freight changes. He feels grubby and sticky when he’ picked up by an official and dragged down into a military installation.

A woman enters, features fierce. “We risked a lot bringing you here.”

“You’re willing to fight them? Those monsters?”

“Your imperial family aren’t the only ones who’ve fought with the abyss. If those creatures are even half as dangerous as we think, then we need to find a way to permanently end them. Help China and we can help you.”

He doesn’t consider this treason. What loyalty can there be for a government that’s already fallen? Japan belongs to Midoriya and Todoroki and Tokoyami. Even if it takes the rest of his life, Eijirou will see it free once more.

“I’ll tell you everything about those monsters.”

Momo Yaoyorozu spends her days learning the workings of her family’s business empire. She spends hours going over their finances or meeting their business partners. More than that, she’s taught policy by way of how it affects tariffs and the stock market.

She hates it. All her life she wanted to be a hero but that dream is dead with UA. She could certainly go to another school, but it seems so useless after all they’ve gone through as a people. All For One, the Hidden Great Tyrant of Japan, and the Strongest Man Alive had left a scar on the collective psyche of Japan. He had shown just how weak heroes are by battling the top ten and winning. In a world like that, what point is there in being a hero?

In a world where Izuku Midoriya, her classmate who suffered every indignity to save her is sent to prison for refusing to let a child suffer, is there even a point in going to a hero academy? Doing so is the same as being complicit in the government’s failings. Just as Izuku said, there is a line that must be drawn. Momo knows which side she will stand on.

The intake of new students to hero academies is at an all-time low, and some, like Seiai, are merging two, sometimes even three years together to have a stable class size, she isn’t the only one with reservations. Especially with Japan’s premier quirk school coming under fire, teachers currently detained, and a dozen horrifying secrets being revealed each week it seems like.

So, Momo is stuck learning how to run a business empire instead of playing at a hero. And she loathes her family’s business the more she learns. At the very least, she can direct some of their money to Izuku’s goals and force the secrets of Tartarus Prison to light.

“We’re profiting off suffering,” she says to her mother.
They’re sitting in the solarium, the sun keeping them warm and the air-filters working silently to deal with the smog and carcinogens in the air. Despite their wealth, the Yaoyorozu empire can’t control the weather itself. But they can control the environment in every building of their palatial estate, including the horse stables and extensive aquarium.

Her mother is impeccable as always, radiant in her beauty. The sunshine reflects off the silver net in her hair laden with opals, the only jewellery she wears. Her sharp features are unadorned with makeup and despite her best efforts, Momo knows she won’t ever be as stunning as her mother.

“That’s a simple moralistic conclusion you’ve reached, my dear. Your tutors would be disappointed with how you’ve wasted their time and effort.”

The rebuke stings enough that Momo can’t think up a response. It gives her mother time to lift her cup of tea. Even that simple action is filled with silent condescension and disappointment.

“It’s a fact, Mother. We could be doing more to help and instead, we’re lining our pockets with wealth. Wealth that we’re stealing from the government.”

Her mother scoffs. “Do more? My dear, the government is in dire straits. They’re permitting companies and individuals to bid for an endless stream of reconstruction jobs. Remember that a government has exactly as much cash as it needs so it isn’t theft. They pay us to set our massive conglomerate towards reconstruction. And in the process, our workers are required to receive a minimum wage equivalent to hazard pay. This ensures families have money to spend on food and supplies.”

“That money could be spent elsewhere,” she snaps. “Instead of going towards building a new estate.”

“I knew sending you to that hero academy was a foolish idea, but your father has always indulged your whims.”

“Maybe because he wants something better than this endless capitalism. He wants a daughter to do something meaningful.”

“Tell that to every hospital patient saved by Yaoyorozu medical equipment. Tell that to everyone who has a home thanks to Yaoyorozu workers. Tell that to our dock workers who can feed their children even as they unload food and supplies that will be distributed across the country. Our family is only as wealthy as it is because our business practices align with national interests.”

“It’s a corrupt nation you’re supporting.”

“Better a corrupt nation than complete anarchy. Your friend is in prison because he committed a crime and resisted authority. Your friend wants a revolution and I assure you that it won’t be peaceful. I lived through the anti-quirk riots. My family and friends were not so lucky. Midoriya’s empty platitudes mean nothing in the grim reality of this new era.”

Her mother gestures wide enough to encompass the solarium and the estate itself, comprised of staterooms and ballrooms and five separate dining halls—though Momo has only found four—and much, much more. Momo knows her parents’ wing has its own swimming pool and sauna and dining facilities. The grounds themselves are large enough to host any sport and a section of the forest has been modified for her father’s dirt rallying pastimes.

That’s only the estate proper. It doesn’t consider that they own the surrounding lands, many of their businesses are based there and a large swathe of their electronics manufacturing employs tens
of thousands who live in the area. Kesennuma had been a city northeast of Sendai destroyed in the Dark Ages. Yaoyorozu wealth had rebuilt it. That had been two centuries ago. Now, they own Miyagi prefecture.

Their wealth is like a ravenous beast, eating and consuming everything in sight, growing larger and larger. They own all the manufacturing plants in the prefecture and fund the police. There isn’t a single piece of land that isn’t owned by their family one way or the other. They even own the local government. She’s seen her father dictate local policy to the mayors of the prefecture.

Momo likes to pretend their defence company is nothing more than a rather large security firm with access to military-grade hardware—which, of course, they manufacture—but maintaining that lie takes too much effort when she’s seen their deployments over the past twenty years: Malaysia and Georgia and Canada and every other conflict region. The money they make from ostensibly guarding mining operations—or plundering natural resources as she calls it—and working with government officials—so corrupt it’s a wonder they haven’t stolen every resource her family has given them—is outrageous. It leaves her feeling sick and horrified and angrier than ever.

A few months ago, she would have done something stupid to reveal it to the world. Now, after having been kidnapped by All For One, she knows how futile it is to do so. Getting the world to change requires the kind of willpower, charisma, and fame that she lacks. But she does have the wealth to support someone with those qualities. Someone who saved her through a plan of absolute brilliance. Someone who brought an end to Japan’s Great Tyrant and Strongest Man Alive.

“You’ll hide behind our wealth when the revolution comes knocking,” her mother continues, unaware of how very wrong she is. “We’ll make a suitable heiress out of you one day. Some days I wished you had another sibling.”

Momo smiles blandly. “Unfortunately, I’m your only child.”

“Unfortunately.”

One of her family’s servants knocks on the door. It’s already open, so Momo can see Aimi at the door. Aimi is Momo’s favourite amongst her parents’ staff, not least because she’s already swapped her allegiances to Momo.

“Yes?” her mother demands, frustrated at the interruption.

“Your daughter’s presence is requested in the Blue Room.”

Momo blinks, bewildered. Her father only uses that room for foreign dignitaries or people that important.

Her mother sighs. “Go, child. We’ll continue this discussion later.”

“No, we won’t.”

Her mother is unconcerned. “So long as you live under the aegis of my family name, you will not run wild.”

Momo says nothing to that, unwilling to get dragged back into an argument after such a convenient retreat. The Blue Room is on the other side of the estate. She knows for a fact that it would be faster to simply walk outside, take a cart, and drive to the east entrance. Making her father wait on her is worth it.

“Did you see who it was?” she asks Aimi.
Her friend shakes her head. “But I saw the helicopter. Military insignia.”

Momo frowns. Any dealings between the military and the Yaoyorozu family go through her father. She’s never been invited to one of those meetings, unlike the social events her father parades her through.

She pushes down her worry when she reaches the door to the stateroom and enters.

Her father is engrossed in a hushed argument with a man in a formal military uniform, his blue suit covered in awards, pins and crosses. They don’t notice her entrance.

Navy, Momo realises worriedly. They had suffered losses during the war, but they also held back China whilst outnumbered two-to-one. Naval recruitment had surged whilst the army's dwindled.

“Father, you called for me?” she asks loudly.

They pull away from each other. Her father doesn’t offer her his usual smile whilst the navy man inclines his head.

“My name is Fleet Admiral Kadomatsu, Naval Chief of Staff. It is a pleasure to meet you, Ms Yaoyorozu.”

He isn’t trying to be charming which she appreciates. He has the bearing of a man trying to get his job done without being rude or insulting. Or condescending.

She nods and dismisses Aimi with a gesture. “Is there a reason I need to meet you?”

“No, there isn’t,” her father snarls, moving closer to Momo. “As far as you’re concerned, the admiral was about to leave.”

“Usually, I would have sent someone else to deal with this but the situation is unique and time-sensitive. And politically charged.” He glances at her father for a split second.

“This has nothing to do with politics.”

The admiral completely ignores her father. “Momo Yaoyorozu, you have been officially drafted to the Fifth Fleet’s Special Operations Group.”

She cocks her head, then sighs. “I take it I’m not allowed to refuse.”

“You have no right to do this,” her father snaps. “Fuck your laws.”

The admiral tries his damnedest not to roll his eyes.

“We are still under martial law with all that entails. We have the power to draft her. Not only that, but we have the approval of the Diet. You run a massive conglomerate, sir, but you aren’t more powerful than the government. You may have twelve thousand soldiers and advanced equipment, but I have three hypersonic jets ready to scorch your bases. My allies in government are ready to pull your contracts and have your assets frozen for treason against the state. You, alongside every high-ranking member of your Conglomerate, will be placed in prison indefinitely, waiting for a trial that will never happen. Your lawyer's offices will be raided for dealings with the League of Villains and the state will sell your Conglomerate piecemeal to the highest bidder.”

“You bastard.”

“Now that we know where we all stand, please do leave whilst I speak to your daughter.”
She watches her father run through a gamut of emotions. Rage in large part, but also a significant amount of embarrassment. It’s not very often that one of the wealthiest men in the world is told to leave.

“Father, think of the family.”

Momo doesn’t know what he will do, but she can’t risk him doing something stupid. She needs her family’s wealth in the future. If that means working with the navy, then fine. On the bright side, it means a contact that doesn’t belong to her father. This Admiral might one day be an ally when she takes control of her family’s empire.

“Why me?” she finally asks once her father is gone.

“Yes, because a strategic asset mandated your presence to take part in an operation. Right now, Japan is still at war and we won’t survive another attack. For all that he hurt Japan at the end, All For One was instrumental in ensuring our sovereignty. Now, we can’t rely on his reputation.”

“He was a villain.”

“A villain you didn’t know existed until he kidnapped you. A villain who fended off All Might, Endeavour, the military and the rest of the top-ten heroes. You may not have known him, but China feared him. Without him, we need to go on the offensive. We need to win the next war before it even begins. And to do that, we need the help of a strategic quirk asset.”

“Who?”

“Your former classmate, Shouto Todoroki.”

Katsuki Bakugou is angry but that has never changed. His anger is immutable and constant. You could set time to the tune of his anger and find you have five seconds to spare.

Today, he’s angry with the social fabric of Japan. He’s angry with the government and All For One for letting his country reach this point. Most of all, he’s angry with Edgeshot for having the audacity to die. In the short time he knew the hero, he learnt more lessons than he could ever expect.

Now that his teacher and mentor is gone, he must find a way to make him proud. And that starts with protecting Edgeshot’s home.

Katsuki spends days at a time in Shikoku, learning what keeps people divided. He protects civilians from the ragtag crooks and stops a large battle between Lighting Bolts and villains by the threat of explosion.

“You think this is fucking worth it?” he snarls, choking the leaders of both groups. “You think one damned block of territory is worth catching innocents in the crossfire. You fucks keep doing old shit but this is a new world.”

He’s not Izuku who can convince people with words alone but he’s lived his entire life convincing people with his fists. He takes on over a dozen opponents, battling them with raw fury and explosive force. It might end with a few broken ribs but he forces both groups to retreat. Not a terrible way to spend his seventeenth birthday.

The back-alley clinic he gets treated in is where he meets a familiar face.
“Bakugou?”

He looks up and sees someone with green hair. No, she has vines for hair and looks familiar.

“Ibara?” he ventures.

She smiles. “In the flesh.”

“But how?”

“The Lord was not done with me.” She brings her hands together, bowing over them slightly. “His Holiness took an interest in my recovery. I had the privilege of being treated in the Vatican.”

Katsuki shrugs. Last he heard the Vatican had burnt down, but that might have been centuries ago. Not like he cares much for Europe.

“What are you doing here?”

“This is my home. The Lord cares that we help as much as we can, not the way in which we help.”

He’s never really spoken to her, but there’s something earnest and pure in her desire to help others. Listening to her, he can understand how people have faith in a God they can't see.

“Edgeshot was from here,” he says, unbidden. “He was my mentor. They’re fighting over stupid shit when they should be working together.”

“What do you plan on doing?”

“I don’t know, but it needs to end.” He swallows. “I need all the help I can get.”

“Nothing is a coincidence. The Lord set you down this path for a reason. Perhaps He had me volunteer at this hospital so I could meet you.”

That is how he gains his first ally in this... he's not sure what it is, but it means something to everyone who doesn’t suffer any further. Katsuki gets hugged by a kid for stopping his two siblings from fighting, both waving stupid ideologies against each other, by punching their faces in. A mother is grateful when he blasts away a stupid girl running with the wrong crew.

Ibara isn’t pleased with how violence is his first resort so he lets her try. Sometimes she talks people down from doing stupid things, but when that fails, she doesn’t hesitate to wrap them in vines.

Staying there indefinitely is impossible. Ibara tells him to spend time with his family. The old hag who claims to be his mother needles and prods for every detail about his trip. He refuses because it has nothing to do with the bitch.

When it gets too much, he packs his bag and leaves in the dead of night. Ibara greets him and he meets their newest recruit, some upperclassman from Ketsubutsu called Shindo.

Bakugou doesn’t trust him the moment he lays eyes on him, so when they’re somewhere private, he grabs the guy by the collar and shoves him against a wall.

“The heck—”

“Listen to me and listen carefully, you fuck. I’ve met liars better than you so I fucking know a mask when I see one. Ibara might not notice, but I won’t trust some bastard who can’t be honest.”
For some reason, the threat only makes Shindo laugh.

“What was that? Five minutes?” Shindo shoves Bakugou back roughly, a calculating gleam entering his gaze. “I thought you were the dumb muscle.”

They don’t talk much but Shindo adds a level of deviousness Bakugou appreciates. He also happens to be an absolute powerhouse with his quirk. Katsuki could break him in half, but he lets Shindo think he’s their heavy hitter. No point in breaking his fragile masculinity.

No one knows how to deal with them. The police leave them alone because they’re stopping violence from occurring, but they’ve made enemies out of various splinter groups from the League and the Lightning Bolts and even some vigilante groups. The three of them can’t fight off dozens of enemies and soon they’re targeted directly. They barely manage to escape but Katsuki takes the brunt of the injuries with a few broken ribs.

“You dumbass,” Shindo says. “I could have handled it.”

No, you couldn’t, Katsuki thinks bitterly. He’s the only reason Shindo isn’t dead and they both know it.

“You’re a slow fucking bastard.”

Shindo calls over two more of his classmates and that’s how their group expands to five. Makabe and Nakagame are decent enough people, even if they only listen to Katsuki after Shindo nods. It pisses Katsuki off enough that he drags Kaminari so they have numerical parity.

Ibara only laughs at Katsuki’s attempts to assert dominance because Kaminari has the spine of a wet noodle. They’ve found an abandoned building with access to underground tunnels that they’ve decided to use as a base. Kaminari had made the very reasonable suggestion of using a randomized entrance each time they come here, though it had been shot down immediately by Shindo.

Kaminari finds himself vindicated a few days later when Shindo is followed into their base by a girl who calls herself Saiko Intelli. By the end of her first sentence, Katsuki hates her and decides he’s going to have her distract Shindo and his plans.

It works out. Intelli is brilliant and is amazing as mission control. She also sees through Shindo’s plans and opposes them with a fervour that Katsuki can appreciate. They’re a ragtag bunch with too many enemies, no assets, and no real plan. But they’re all united in making society better, even if they fight and argue every step of the way.

Jirou finds him the next time he’s at home. She looks him up and down and glares.

“You haven’t been around.”

“You only now just noticed.”

Jirou pokes him in the ribs. Katsuki hisses and slaps away her hand.

“We noticed from the very beginning,” she says. “You think a warehouse is just conveniently empty.”

“Fucking Momo,” he says without heat.

“Now tell me what you’re doing.”
“I’m trying something new, bitch. Heroes are dead. Get it in your fucking head.”

She punches him in the shoulder, hard enough that it’ll bruise. “Thanks for stating the obvious, you ass.”

*Why can’t she get it?* He thinks, almost to the point of pulling out his hair.

“Not heroes as in people—”

She scowls hard enough that it makes him pause. “Yeah, heroes as in pets, right?”

“No, heroes as in the fucking idea. One god damned villain just showed us how weak the idea of a hero is. They’re calling him the Third Great Tyrant and you know who beat him? Not Endeavour and Hawks and the other top ten heroes. It wasn’t fucking All Might.” He glares, his bad arm twitching with his frustration. “It was Izuku. Our Izuku. The same Izuku who called everyone out. The dumbass that has the whole world watching him. He’s willing to be called a villain if it means doing the right thing. And if someone both All Might and All for One chose as a successor thinks there’s a problem with heroes, well, heroes are fucking dead in that case.”

“Damn, you’re not joking about this.”

Katsuki shakes his head. “No. That’s why I need you. I’m putting together a team and we’re gonna try and be something different.”

“What about the Lightning Bolts? They’re Izuku’s group.”

“No, they aren’t. They’re mimicking him, but they don’t know shit. They can be just as bad as the villains.”

“The two of us can’t do it alone.”

“Not alone. I already got Kaminari and Ibara—”

“She’s around?”

“Back in action. Her treatments were done at the Vatican so she was fine.” Katsuki grins. “Got some bastards from Ketsubutsu and Seiai.”

“That’s not as bad as I was expecting.”

“And with Momo—”

Her bewildered expression cuts him short because he’s never seen Jirou look that confused.

“You don’t know,” she says hesitantly.

“Know what?”

“It isn’t my place to tell. I thought she’d talked to you already.”

That bothers him enough that he hunts Momo down to her home on the other side of the country. Trying to enter her estate almost earns him a bullet to the head. The only reason it doesn’t is that his name is apparently on a list of people not to hurt.

He’s stuck waiting in a cell whilst they find Momo. The darkness gives him time to think of everything, and the more he does, the more he realises how futile it is. This formless plan of his for
a better tomorrow is so much bigger than eight kids can accomplish. Edgeshot was a pro hero and he couldn’t do much. Not even All Might could do it. He died trying.

He doesn’t look up when the cell opens.

“You could have just called,” she says, disappointed.

“Yeah.”

She pulls him up. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know what to do,” he whispers, bitter and tired and just fucking done with it all. “They’re trusting me to lead them but I’ve got no fucking idea what I’m doing.”

Momo pulls him close. He doesn’t fight against the hug. All he wants, for a single moment, is to forget that he’s a failure, that his dreams mean nothing.

“You’re trying and that’s all that matters.”

“It’s not enough. I need you with me.”

“I’m going to be away for a while,” she says gently.

Katsuki clenches his fists. “Why the fuck are you leaving me?”

“There’s a mission and I can’t say no. I’m sorry. Take care of Jirou for me, alright. I’ll be back soon.”

Watching her walk away is like watching his hopes and dreams walk away.

Then he remembers Izuku standing tall against the world. His childhood friend, the same person he spent years bullying, now strong enough to stand against the world. If he can do that, what fucking reason does Katsuki have to give up before he even tries?

“Momo!”

He gives her his best grin, all violence and anger and sheer confidence. It’s the kind of grin Izuku would have. And maybe trying to be like him isn’t such a bad thing.

“I’ll fill up the last spot if you take too long.”

She smiles. “Keep my seat warm.”

*****

Fumikage Tokoyami forgets about Hisashi’s letter almost immediately. There is too much work that still needs to be done. Training new recruits take up too much of his time. Finding new recruits proves difficult as well though Mei Hatsume proves to be a gem when she can be focused on something for more than a few hours.

He comes to learn more about the members of the Imperial Household, especially those his age. Whatever reverence they have for him goes out the window the moment he’s drenched in water by a prank perpetrated by the kids he’s looking after. It becomes easier to talk to them without the barrier of reverence if he’s soaking wet and he learns a lot that isn’t in official files like which royal lines are in ascendance and which ones are fighting.
The remaining Guard are an eclectic bunch. Itinerant is caustic now that he doesn’t need to help Fumikage wade through tons of work and Ryujin is missing. Ra offers him a smile but doesn’t speak to him. Maya is an ally as always but she’s busy with things overseas right now.

The archives are a massive set of underground servers with multiple redundancies. They serve as a central database that Fumikage can access. He’s searching through abyssal inventory and updating their records. Doing so has been his primary duty ever since the war ended.

**Fumikage, this one,** Dark Shadow says, handing a file to Fumikage.

He reads through it quickly, recognising the image on the paper. “We know this knife,” he says. “And now it’s missing.”

It had been the knife that set him on the path to join the Imperial Household. The same knife that cut through his morals and allegiance to UA. A knife that had been used in ritual sacrifice.

The imperial cell in charge of the weapon is dead, he learns, as are their supervisors and the two cells they worked closely with. No one has followed up with them in the wake of the war but the record of their last mission remains.

His hand lashes out suddenly, grabbing the hand reaching for his files. He grips it tightly for a moment before he notices the white dress and crown on the child’s head.

“Ow, you big meanie,” she says, freeing herself of his grip, and stepping back. “Do you know who I am?”

Fumikage glances at the security guards who have emerged from the shadow and gestures them away, observing the girl for a moment longer.

“No, I do not.”

She points an accusatory finger. She can’t be older than eight, so any gravitas it would have is erased by her chubby cheeks and delightful pout.

“Well, I know who you are.”

He cocks his head. “Oh, who am I?”

“They call you Inquisitor and you work for me.”

A strong voice cuts through the archives. “He works with us, daughter.”

Fumikage meets the Emperor’s gaze and nods in greeting. The old man with his long beard is imposing, but now that Fumikage can match his height, he isn’t so intimidating.

The girl smiles at the Emperor. “He’s being mean to me.”

“Is he? Or have you disturbed the Inquisitor’s important work?”

She scowls. “No.”

The Emperor smiles at his daughter, patient as the mountains. “We must be willing to admit our faults and ready to ask forgiveness when we wrong those we work with.”

“Fine. I’m sorry. There, are you happy?”
He remembers then the letter Hisashi gave him. It is easy to reach past spacetime and place it in his jacket without anyone noticing. He retrieves it and raises it up, catching the girl’s attention.

“I was asked to give you this by Hisashi Midoriya. But I suppose you don’t want it.”

She darts forward and grabs it, not willing to argue with her any further.

The girl stares at the letter uncertainly.

“From Uncle Hisashi.”

“From Hisashi, yes.”

She looks at her father. The old man smiles. "Go. We'll resume your lessons tomorrow."

She dashes out, followed immediately by four guards. Fumikage notes that the archives are empty save for the Emperor’s guards and wonders when they evicted the few people working down here.

“Uncle?”

“Hisashi is not our brother. She simply calls him that. And no one refutes Princess Mayuko.”

“I suppose one does not refuse royalty.”

He turns his back on the Emperor and places the files in their rightful place, because whilst this man is Emperor of Japan, Fumikage is king of much more. This Villa that the Emperor calls home could be destroyed in a matter of seconds if Fumikage wished it. Without a doubt, the Emperor is aware of that.

“Your line is in ascendance, Inquisitor.”

He turns back, brushing his sleeve. “I have no family line.”

The Emperor tilts his head slightly. “Oh, so those children aren’t named the heirs to your estate should you perish? Inquisitor, the Throne only cares that you are of Japanese descent. For your actions during the war, you have been raised in precedence.”

“I don’t want that Throne.”

“Neither would we like you to take it. Should that occur, all the Royal lines will have been slaughtered. Despite their bickering and ineptitude, we would not wish their deaths. Nor we would we ever hope our Mayuko die before taking the Throne.”

He realises something. “She hardly looks older than eight. How would she know Hisashi?”

“She’s fifteen this year.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“As did we,” the Emperor says. “Her quirk is pure vitality. She’ll reach two, maybe three centuries. But her growth period is stretched out as well. Her incubation period lasted nearly two years. She’ll be a child still for another decade. Her memory, however, is almost perfect.”

“How interesting.”

The Emperor’s features soften. “We shall go now, Inquisitor. A proud father may speak on their
children for hours.”

“A proud father would do anything for his son,” Fumikage says.

The Emperor stares at him, discomfited by the reminder of the secret that binds them. A child who committed genocide and one of the greatest secrets they keep. A secret that would divide Japan worse than the war.

“Indeed.”

Fumikage watches him leave.

*Your father never spoke about you.*

“Don’t try to manipulate my thoughts, Dark Shadow. I am not in the mood for it.”

*Is it manipulation if it’s true? When you take that throne, you must be ready to deal with manipulation constantly.*

“I’m never taking it, old friend. I do not wish to be bound to a mortal power.” He flicks Dark Shadow aside, reaching for another file. “Nor do I wish to murder my allies.”

*One day they will die and you will be no older. What of then, when you look at a new generation and have no relation to them?*

“I will endeavour to love those that come after and those that come after them. They will be what tethers me to humanity."

Dark Shadow says no more and allows him to keep cataloguing their files. He finds something interesting about a Horikoshi cult that he flags for another group to start investigating when they have time. If they have time, given how busy they’ve been lately.

Later, he tracks down the location of the cell that had the abyssal knife. It is an abandoned island off the coast of Japan. None of which surprises him.

The lack of wildlife smarter than a mosquito worries him. Neither bird nor rabbit disturbs the silence almost as if they were teleported away.

He follows his nose, tracking the scent of blood and darkness to where it is strongest. In a clearing overlooking a rock formation, he finds his missing agents.

They are all dead, yet their bodies are preserved in the final moments of their deaths. There is a woman in the middle of taking her last breath. Here a man stuck in his death rattle. Further ahead, a man floating in the air, the blood from his ruined chest floating with him.

He walks between the frozen bodies, careful not to touch them just yet. In the centre of the clearing is a pedestal. He reaches out and immediately pulls his hand back when the air glows pink.

He taps it again and listens to the not-sound it makes, like this silence had a musical register dedicated to it. It smells like endless summer or a corpse frozen for centuries during a long winter.

Time itself bars his way.

He stares at the translucent wall of time, unsure of what manner of abyssal ritual or creature could produce. There are too many that hold some dominion over time.
Including his hounds.

He summons a pack of twenty. The quicksilver hounds sniff at the wall, their crystal fur bristling at the foreign scent. One even dares to lick the wall with its acidic tongue. Fumikage watches as the wall is eroded slightly.

“Listen,” he demands. The hounds swivel their heads in unison, focused on him. “Follow this scent. Find who did this.”

The hounds howl.

Then they fade away between the angles of time and hard corners of space to execute his will.

He types up a report and prepares the bodies for cleansing. It takes him twenty minutes to find the sacramental water and fragments of sunlight used to immolate the corpses.

Maya taught him how to wash them to clear the skin and spirit of corruption. While Fumikage could quite literally rip out any sort of corruption, the motions of ritual are soothing and it gives him time to discuss his newest game with a captivated audience.

When the bodies are prepared, he places a fragment of the sun on them and watches them burn.

Hours later, enjoying the weather of the island and lack of annoying animals, he receives a call.

It is Maya.

“Yes?”

“Hey, I need some help.”

Fumikage cocks his head. “I thought you could handle this alone.”

“I need you. I’m sending you the coordinates. Get here as soon as you can.” She takes a breath. “Otherwise, we might not be able to contain this outbreak.”

That chills him to the bone.

*****

When Admiral Kodamatsu enters their home, Shouto Todoroki isn’t surprised. The man had exuded competence in their limited time together and he hardly seems the sort to bury his head in the sand.

Endeavour speaks to the Admiral cordially, every word said with crisp formality. His interest wanes when they continue exchanging pleasantries.

“You said we had the wrong deterrent,” the Admiral says to Shouto, drawing his attention. “I haven’t forgotten.”

“Admiral, do not make an enemy of this family,” Endeavour warns.

"If he wants to play at being an adult then I'll treat him like one. If he’s as powerful as either of his friends then I won’t coddle him.” The Admiral gestures at the TV where two news anchors are discussing Izuku. “The three of you represent Japanese dominance on the international stage.”

“He’s not a weapon.”
Shouto resists the urge to roll his eyes. “One condition.”

“Name it.”

“Momo Yaoyorozu.”

The Admiral nods and they seal the deal.

His parents argue the decision for days as if they still control his life. His mother doesn’t realise that Shouto is bored and fighting in a war seems a fun way to relieve that feeling. Maybe a few million dead will fill the emptiness in his chest.

“I don’t want you to go,” his mother says.

Shouto shrugs. “I must. Will you take care of Fuyumi?”

“She’s my daughter,” she says as if that’s all the answer in the world. Perhaps it is.

He squeezes her hands once more. “Tell Touya I said hi. And remind Natsuo that dad’s changed.”

“What?”

“They’ll both be here soon enough.” He smiles ruefully. “I’ll miss it.”

He spends his last day with his sister, putting up with her dragging him everywhere and nowhere. Her love is clear and he appreciates her even more.

When the day ends, she brings their foreheads together, her hand bunched up in his hair.

“Come back.”

It’s an order. Shouto smirks. It was one he intended on following anyway.

“Always.”

A helicopter takes them to the navy base. Endeavour glares at everyone which frightens a few people.

More interesting are all the people he healed months ago—obvious by the marks on their souls—who look at him in reverence. Some even thank God for Shouto which he finds stupid and circular. Why thank God for God existing?

The meeting room is deep underground past a dozen security checks and body scans. The air smells recycled, almost stale.

He meets Momo's gaze. There’s confusion and just a hint of bitterness in it. Endeavour takes a seat beside Shouto, blocking her from view.

The Admiral enters last and offers a nod.

“I won’t waste time with pleasantries. I thank you all from the bottom of my heart. Without you, this plan is not possible.”

His gaze lingers on the representative of the Royal Family who has a soul that tastes like lightning.

“This is the situation as it stands,” Admiral Kadomatsu continues. "The war with China didn't end
and we certainly didn't win. With half their Great Ten dead and their naval invasion broken by a tidal wave, China pulled back to reinforce their borders with Russia, India and Kazakhstan. The world sees the loss as a sign of China’s weakness. Russian quirk regiments have been mobilising and India’s army has been conducting military exercises on the border. This could very easily lead to war.”

Shouto looks through a dozen possible futures, finding the threads of commonality amongst them. Given that he’ll be working in the region, he can’t observe China directly, but he can observe the reactions of a future Toga or Kirishima...

“Excuse me,” Momo begins, “but isn’t a war on mainland China a good thing for us?”

The admiral shakes his head and taps the screen. A map of Eurasia appears and the nations on it are divided by Japanese blue and Chinese red and Soviet green. A few nations are greyed out, but most are aligned to one of the blocks.

“Korea, the Philippines and India are our closest allies in the region. If India goes to war, then we’re obligated by treaty to aid them.”

“Did they help us?” Endeavour asks.

“There’s a reason we were only outnumbered two-to-one instead of ten-to-one. A war between China and Russia is acceptable, however, Russia won't attack unless they're certain China can't defend itself. And that's where we come in.”

The map shifts, showing India’s border with China. “We’re burning through all of our political capital to force a heightened state of military readiness with China’s southern and western neighbours. We’re doing this as a simple distraction from our true objective.” The map pans over, showing Beijing. “We’re going to scorch one of their major military installations.”

In a flash of insight, Shouto finally understands the composition of the team assembled today. And it takes everything he has not to smile.

“Tianjin is a fortress,” his father says. “You'd need two armies to do anything there.”

“Yes, we’re aware the region is a fortress but the reason it’s a fortress is the same reason we’re attacking there. Approximately one-hundred and thirty years ago, during the Third Sino-Japanese war, All For One decimated the military presence in the area. They vowed that the city would never be attacked.”

The map focuses on the Yellow Sea.

”Right now, three of Russia's premier quirk users are in a diplomatic meeting in Seoul. They have quirks involving pyrokinesis, geokinesis, and generating massive concussive blasts.”

“This is a false flag operation,” Momo says suddenly. “You’re going to pin this attack on Russia. But China wouldn’t accuse them first.”

“Not unless they were attacked by Russia beforehand,” Shouto says, standing. “That’s why you have the Royal Guard supporting us. Because they have someone who can attack from an area Japan couldn’t conceivably have a hand in.”

Shouto walks towards the screen and points at the Amur river. “It connects China and Russia together. It’s close enough to Tianjin that it’ll be seen as a first strike against China’s capital region. Russia’s large enough that they could have a macro-hydrokinesis quirk.”
The Guardsman nods once. “Did Tokoyami tell you?”

Shouto shakes his head. “No, but it makes sense. Japan should have been broken in half by All For One’s attack but it wasn’t. The Emperor’s quirk is powerful, but not to that extent. A tidal wave ate up China’s invasion force at the same time. The only person who would have a reason, who would be able to manipulate earth and water to that extent, is Japan’s former Imperial Heir, supposedly dead for twenty odd years. He’s alive and well.”

He can see the disbelief in Momo's eyes—and more than a smidge of revulsion—and the calculating gaze his father gives to the Royal Guard.

Ryujin sighs. “You are all privy to a state secret that would unify the world against Japan. Mentioning it carries the death penalty. But yes, Shouto is correct. We intend to flood the Amur River and direct the resulting water down the Songhua River. If done correctly, analysts believe the flood will hit Harbin city before evacuation orders can be carried out.”

“Their quirks will halt the flood,” Endeavour says calmly, though Shouto can see the rage he’s carrying.

“Not unless they’re distracted by an attack on their capital city. Done correctly, China will have no choice but to go to war with Russia.”

They continue discussing the matter, but Shouto can see that the Royal Guard and the navy are onboard with this plan. Momo and Endeavour have no choice but to agree, not if they wish to keep their families safe. He can see that understanding in their eyes.

The moment the meeting ends, Momo storms out the room. Shouto follows after her.

“This is madness,” Momo says to him when they’re alone.

The air is chilly and he tastes salt on his tongue. They’re alone, relatively speaking, on a deck of the ship being worked on. The hustle of technician’s and the sound of power tools hides their words.

“No, this is the new normal.”

“You like saying that.” She shakes her head. “Why did you ask for me? I have no reason to be here.”

“Because I wanted to teach you about your powers.”

He summons the godflame to his hand. The infernal flame oscillates as he spreads it amongst both hands.

“This is the godflame, the fire that birthed entropy and time and this universe. It brought light to the darkness and it will burn everything away at some point. In my hands, I hold creation and destruction.”

“That’s not—”

He lets one flame die and struggles to twist the flame to his will. It takes him a while, but eventually the black flame turns white, multi-coloured sparkles.

“Does this look familiar to you?”
She takes a step back in fear. “That’s not... that’s my quirk.”

“No, technically it’s my quirk. You just happened to steal a portion of it. You, Momo Yaoyorozu, quite literally stole fire from the gods. And I want to show you the full potential of your power.”

He has a vision for her at his side, a Goddess of Creation to his God of Destruction. Perhaps not his lover because his heart is owned by others, but a friend.

With Iida dead, he needs a new best friend.

Chapter End Notes

It is 4 fucking AM as I am posting this.
I'm not bitter even though I sound bitter and clearly am.
‘Humans were never meant to touch the dark. We are creatures of the god’s fire, tiny and insignificant, moths flocking to an unobtainable flame. This earth and everything the light boundary touches is protected from the unreal logics of the dark. This was the equilibrium reached by Disparity, by the rise of light and the banishment of true dark. This uppermost layer was never meant to be touched by the dark and neither was the light meant to touch the foundation of darkness. Unfortunately, I am the one who bridged that gap.’

—The Third Letter from a Renegade as translated by the World Walker.

Hisashi Midoriya follows a man who lived centuries before Hisashi’s grandparents had even met, walking through a fixed past in a place where time has no meaning.

The ghost of the past—or perhaps Hisashi is a spectre of the future—walks across universes as easily as fish swim. Train tracks appear wherever there is empty space. One time, Hisashi watched him walk through a black hole easier than Hisashi would walk up a single flight of stairs.

“I don’t understand how you’re sane.”

They’re in an underwater city. Somehow, Master Railroad had simply walked into the middle of a ritual to summon a great old one and asked for directions to the library, uncaring for the lack of oxygen or the fact that the creatures speak through ripples in spacetime.

Hisashi watches Master Railroad read through books that would leave the average man’s brain bleeding.

As they journey from one layer of the abyss to the next, Hisashi realises something stranger. Nothing ever tries to harm the man. No matter what he speaks to, Master Railroad always gets help, be it from dragons or elder trees or things that can’t be described without four-dimensional writing systems.

The man only lifts his head when the summoning ritual is complete and they summon a godling of the ocean depths. It rampages, destroying the city and leaving nothing behind. Nothing, that is, except for Master Railroad’s nook.

Master Railroad questions the godling, understanding it in a way that Hisashi with the World...
Walker struggles with. He nods once the conversation is done and chooses another path, walking down a set of train tracks.

Each step leads them deeper and deeper through the abyss. All influence of the godflame fades away and they travel through realms of disparity where neither light nor dark truly rules. They cross those lands and enter the realms of darkness, lands where nightmares and infernal engines rule. This is a region where the laws are dictated by the strongest entity in the region.

Finally, they come upon a doorway built in a space of pure darkness. It is larger than the universe but no bigger than a regular door, made from crystal nightmares at the same time it is made from simple wood. He knows what is behind this door.

“The Singers.”

Hisashi hasn’t thought about them in what feels like an eternity. They exist in the very depths of the abyss, locked by seals of darkness and godflame and disparity.

At least, that’s what they should be. The godflame locks are gone. No, worse than that, hellfire itself ate through them. And where true darkness should form a foundation for the locks, instead green lightning is present—living lightning that creatures of the abyss can feast on. And with neither true dark nor godflame, disparity cannot exist where it once formed the final binding.

“You boys changed the immutable. You made yourselves gods and changed every law of the abyss without knowing it.”

The lock seems to exist outside of time if future events have affected it. Or perhaps they’re bound by the timeline of the gods, tethered to their power.

Hisashi shouldn’t be able to get this close to the door. There are so many entities that will see this door shut forever. They’ll destroy Hisashi for simply daring to look at it. And yet, he knows nothing will happen.

The song that will end all life, the anathema-chant and choir of the undying, is silent today. The natural enemy to order and life is nowhere to be heard. These creatures, only one step below the three kings, are silent.

Master Railroad walks through the locks, never once seeing them.

Hisashi has no choice but to follow.

The door opens easily and reveals something that he can never describe. To see the Singers in their true form and live is impossible. They are there, each a multitude of universes unto themself, but there is nothing majestic or beautiful about them. And yet, Hisashi can’t perceive them. Not truly. They are there, but he can’t be alive if they are.

To gaze upon a Singer is to experience death.

To commune with a Singer is to experience death.

To hear a Singer is to experience death.

Hisashi isn’t dead, so he can’t hear the Singers, he can’t commune with them nor can he gaze upon them. All he can do is follow Master Railroad as he walks the realm of these god-nightmares. The realm is endless, unbound by petty constraints such as time or space. Each step spans a galaxy though he doesn’t move forward. They walk past eternity and take a break at infinity before
continuing with their journey through a place that should be death to anything lesser than one of the kings.

Even that, however, is left behind and they enter a space devoid of… of everything. Nothing exists. No, It is the absence of nothingness, a place existing where none should. He turns back and even the presence of the Singers is gone, their anathema presence vanished with the concepts of light and dark and disparity.

Only Master Railroad exists in this no-space.

He doesn’t stop walking. He is driven by something greater, something that can’t be explained. His desire to journey is ceaseless and endless. This is a man who walked the length of the abyss and kept walking towards something new.

“Stubborn bastard.”

Time, for some reason, finally affects the ancient hero. His beard, static for however long the journey took, comes in. He doesn’t care that it soon enough reaches his waist alongside the hair on his head. Nothing matters to him.

Master Railroad walks even as he ages, wrinkles and liver spots marking his skin. His muscles fade away as old age takes place. That is soon replaced with death. Driven only by his burning desire, the corpse of Master Railroad continues its journey through this no-space.

It might be hours or days or aeons that Hisashi follows. He has no need for sustenance, hasn't had any need for food or water since he first boarded that train. It's like his body doesn't truly interact with anything.

Eventually, the skeleton stops.

“Do you yet understand?”

The voice is deep, rich with experience and raspy from age. Fitting, he supposes, for a walking skeleton.

Hisashi stares at the skeleton. “I don’t know why you dragged me along with you.”

“This is the corpse you searched for many times.”

He narrows his eyes. “No, that’s not possible. I’ve been with you since the very beginning. You would have had to return the train to leave your hat.”

“That is your responsibility, walker of worlds. You will set yourself in motion for this to happen. Listen, father to the shadowking. Listen carefully for this is your only chance.”

Hisashi sighs. “Alright, I’m listening.”

Talking to a skeleton doesn’t even rank amongst the ten weirdest things he’s done.

*****

Izuku Midoriya’s seventeenth birthday passes with more fanfare than he expects. There are well-wishers from his followers in the prison, the Lightning Bolts specifically bringing together their minuscule funds for a present of sorts. It’s mostly just supplies but he appreciates the sentiment.

The only person truly indifferent to this day is Stain. Chizome barely opens his eyes when someone
wishes Izuku a happy birthday.

“Does this mean your balls have finally dropped?”

Izuku throws a plastic knife at him. Chizome catches it between two fingers and flings it at the person approaching Izuku from behind.

From the sudden yelp, the pointy end probably landed in his eye. Izuku glances over and sees the man clutching his bleeding eye, a poorly constructed shank in his hands.

“Didn’t we go over this on day one?” Izuku asks tiredly, letting others deal with the man.

It feels good to have followers who do the fighting for you. Izuku and Stain continue their conversation even as a violent beating occurs no more than five metres away from them. Brutality is nothing new to Izuku. He beat the shit out of Shouto repeatedly for months and killed his first person a year ago.

In the late afternoon, he receives a visitor. One he hadn't been ready to face.

Kouta is just as grumpy as the last time Izuku saw him and wears the same cap. It had been a gift from his parents and he’ll likely never part with it.

“You’ve gotten big,” Izuku blurts out.

He has. The boy is taller than Izuku remembers and a lot of his baby fat has fallen off. He even carries himself with more grace, the same grace Izuku learnt from martial arts.

Kouta glares at him but there are spots of pink on his cheeks. “You never called.”

“I didn’t think I had the right to call you.”

“It’s been eight months without you. You’re supposed to be my…” Kouta wipes away his tears before they form.

Izuku knows the unspoken word. Brother. They aren’t related by blood but by bond. Izuku took responsibility for him. First for his safety when they were held captive by All For One. And then for everything else when they were reunited.

It doesn’t have to be said that Izuku will protect Kouta from everything in the world. It doesn’t matter what the threat is because Izuku will deal with it. But seeing the brokenness in Kouta makes him realise that not being present is just as bad.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking about you when I made this plan.”

“I don’t understand why you have to do this. You don’t even know that kid?”

Izuku hums, understanding Kouta’s frustrations. For all his bluster, he’s still a lonely boy who doesn’t know how to share very well.

“I would have done the same for you,” Izuku reassures. “Most of this is for you. I want a better world for you to live in. But if I’m a criminal then they’ll come after you and mum. I need to do this so they legitimise me. If I do this right, then the government will let me go free without violence. It’ll be like they’re saying I’m right.”

“But you didn’t do anything wrong.”
Izuku nods. “Yes. But they don’t see it like that. We just had a war and I’m holding the power of both sides. They want answers and reassurances. And I can give them. It might take weeks or months, but once they know the truth, they’ll come to trust me again.”

“You’ll have to tell his story,” Kouta snarls. “He took them from me.”

“Yes. I know it better than anyone else.” He wants to hug the kid so much. So little separates them. “He’s not a good man. And what he’s done can never be forgiven. But it gave me the push to stand up for that kid. I’ll never ask you not to hate him. He took my mentor and friend from me. I know the pain better than you. But I just want you to listen. And maybe, just maybe, you’ll understand what made him who he was. You said you wanted to be a historian, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Sometimes you have to tell the story of people you don’t like.” Izuku forces a smile. “And maybe if you do, you’ll learn that even the worst villains are just people who made some bad decisions. People with too much power that they used for wrong ends, but just people.”

“I hate him,” Kouta croaks. “I’m choking on it and I don’t even have you with me.”

Izuku lays his hand on the glass barrier separating them. “I’m sorry.”

Kouta hesitates and that, more than anything else he’s experienced, stings.

“Promise you’ll be back soon.”

“I promise.”

“I turned seven and you weren’t there.”

“I know.”

Kouta lays his hand on the barrier. For a moment, Izuku can imagine the glass is gone. His brother has small hands despite his huge presence in Izuku’s heart.

Seeing Kouta lights a fire in Izuku’s soul. He’s been hesitating, using this stint in prison to ignore his responsibilities. But his brother needs him back.

You never asked what I needed.

“You never needed me,” Izuku tells Mikumo.

He works with the lawyers more now, telling them to speed up proceedings. He uses his father’s influence and coerces Fumikage to expedite things. Money and influence can do amazing things, especially when people are rioting in the streets for his freedom. It’s the Lightning Bolts and their network, moving to Izuku’s will. The riots are peaceful most of the time, but they drain the police of limited resources.

Things come to a head when international support comes through. Brazil’s ambassador to Japan publicly denounces his imprisonment as illegal, threatening to cut billions in aid. There is pressure from the scientific community and many companies.

With everything arrayed against them, the judges involved in his case, judges he still hasn’t seen, decide that moving him to house arrest is the best option for everyone involved.

His one friend doesn’t stand from his customary seat. It isn’t the oddest thing calling Stain a friend,
but he’s glad he was right about that idea so long ago. In another time and under different circumstances they could have been great friends.

“Chizome?”

“Yeah?”

This is the last day of his stint in Tartarus. There is something fragile about this interaction. It may very well be their last. Izuku refuses to let it end like that.

“Your cases are being reopened. All of them.”

Stain doesn’t fall out of his chair or anything so dramatic. But his eyes do widen. In them, Izuku’s sees a flicker of hope.

He scoffs. “You still lost that bet.”

Izuku laughs joyfully, the sound filling the room. Everyone pauses what they’re doing to watch one stupid kid laugh his head off.

Before he is dragged away, Izuku bows to the room.

“Thank you for the lessons you’ve taught me.” And because this is still a prison, he adds, “If you fuck with my people, I’ll break you.”

That is the last Izuku sees of Tartarus prison. He’s shoved into a helicopter and flown to a new location. It takes a few hours, made more annoying by all the restraints they place on him. They’re uncomfortable and useless. Not like the six rifles trained on him will do much as well.

The home is hidden away in a forest. The head of security spends a long time explaining every security measure they have from motion sensors to pressure plates in the inner areas to the mines and turrets in the outer perimeter.

Izuku gets bored at one point and punches a tree. It disintegrates into a million sharp splinters. They’d be harmful if not for the churning wind serving as a barrier.

There is an incessant beeping sound and it takes Izuku a moment to realise it’s his explosive collar. He rips it off, keeping the explosion contained in one hand.

“I hope you understand that nothing you do can keep me here.”

It isn’t the private retreat he hoped it would be. The home may have been provided courtesy of the Yaoyorozu family—I really need to thank Momo—and is utterly secluded for miles in every direction, but everyone is given access to his life.

Two members of his legal team are always present, ready with dozens of questions and new developments relating to the case. Apparently, the government is facing legal pressure from those who lost someone in the war, and that number is in the tens of millions. His interview and the tireless work of his bloodthirsty lawyers have spun the story to make the war seem utterly preventable.

There are more interviews then he would like. The same lady from Quirk News Network spends four hours speaking to him each week on one topic or another, telling his story honestly. It propels the network from irrelevancy to supremacy, their offices expanding greatly.
“All For One genuinely did respect Hero and Hawkmoon,” he tells her one chilly afternoon.

They’re walking in the water garden, enjoying the autumn weather. He’s dressed in a suit as always. His father apparently sent his measurements to a tailor in Italy and now he has a wardrobe full of formal clothing. This one is pale grey, not his best colour, but why not?

“Why, though? From everything you said, he hated heroes with a passion.”

“He hated modern heroes. You need to understand that his childhood was at the end of Hero’s Golden Age. It was Hero and her allies, Siren, Legion, Skybreaker, and all the rest that truly popularised the concept of heroes. Hawkmoon, Graviton Lance, and Master Railroad were their predecessors, and we call them heroes now, but they were mercenaries and part of the UN military.”

“So, you’re saying he couldn’t adapt with the times like old person?”

“He was in his thirties when his brother became one of Japan’s first heroes. It isn’t a matter of age, but his perception of worthiness. Do you think anyone has come close to being equal to Hero’s legacy?”

“All Might did.”

Izuku smiles. “I believe he is equal to her legacy. He did take down a Great Tyrant. But it took centuries for him to arrive. All For One never saw anyone come close in all that time. Can you imagine how lonely that would be? Standing alone at the summit with no one to call a peer.”

One day, he finds out that he is to be awarded a Nobel Prize for his contributions to the field of physics. Izuku blinks at the letter and reads it again and again. He’d been so busy with other things that he mostly forgot about submitting his grand unifying theory.

You’re going to accept that, Mikumo says as if he has any say in the matter.

“Fuck no.”

He doesn’t want this. Releasing the Theory of Everything had been motivated out of spite and a need to change the narrative surrounding him. People are doing more important work than him who genuinely care for their research.

Izuku contemplates the letter for days at a time, staring at the small lake on the edge of the property. He comes here when he needs time alone from everyone. Perhaps one day he will understand why the sight of water still his heart and brings some measure of peace to his soul.

In the end, his decision is simple. He requests a camera and records a simple message.

“I believe strongly that the body of knowledge should be shared freely and without cost,” he begins slowly. “When we work together, we achieve more than we can ever imagine. And that is why I must decline. I kept this knowledge to myself longer than I had any right to do so. There was no good reason for it. If I accept this prize, then I must willingly betray my convictions. My convictions which led to me being unable to decline in person. There are others more worthy of this achievement than I am. Thank you for your consideration. It will forever be an honour.”

He sends the video and ignores the absurdity of his life.

Today, nine months from the day he was arrested and a year since All Might fell, Izuku enters a courtroom for the first time.
From what he understands, in cases this high profile, public proceedings over the next few weeks are nothing more than a review of the evidence and the final opportunity to bring forth a witness. It is mostly for the benefit of the public who had no access to the evidence.

A decision has already been made. It won’t be told for weeks, maybe months, but the judge has already made a verdict.

As he takes his seat in the courtroom, Izuku hopes that they will see him as innocent. Because if they don’t, the cost in bloodshed will be high.

If they find him guilty, Izuku will have to become everything he fears.

*****

Shuichi Iguchi, once a vigilante turned villain, is now defined by his loyalty to a boy—no, he’s a man now—imprisoned for the sake of his ideals.

Long ago, he followed Stain's beliefs blindly. He refuses to do the same with Izuku because Izuku would think less of him if he simply parroted someone else’s words. He’s learnt the flaws in Izuku’s ideals, each instance of hypocrisy and every answer that doesn’t account for the reality of the situation. It reminds Shuichi that everyone, no matter their power, fails to reach perfection. Izuku is a man striving for an impossible dream, a man trying to overturn a violent world with peaceful words. It will fail but Shuichi finds it admirable.

Izuku Midoriya tries to reach that impossible standard ceaselessly. That makes him worth following. A day will come soon where they must resolve things with violence. He can feel it in his bones. When that day comes, Shuichi will be ready.

For now, Kouta is his main responsibility. Protecting him had been the last order Izuku gave him in person. Since that day that redefined how the world saw Izuku, the day that showed the world someone entrusted by the greatest hero and the greatest villain to change the world, since that electrifying day, Shuichi has not spoken to Izuku. Had his master wanted to speak to him, then it wouldn’t be that difficult to contact him.

Shuichi follows the boy on his way home from school. He’s with a girl with a long horn protruding from her forehead. The girl is vaguely familiar and stirs up a memory of a news report. Something about All Might and the Yakuza? They both take the same route home, but they’ve decided not to return home immediately. Foolish. Things aren’t safe yet and the marks of the war have yet to fade.

The park they play in wasn’t there a year ago. It had once been a shopping mall and apartment complex shattered by All For One’s power. Someone had found it simpler to lay grass, hire Kamui Woods, and convert it to a giant park.

Following Kouta and avoiding detection from him and from any other group is a nightmare. There’s still a bounty on his head, a minor one, but money is money when you're starving. Thankfully, there isn't a kill-order on him.

Shuichi takes the long way around to the park, keeping Kouta in his sight as best he can whilst avoiding detection from the people following the boy. They’ve been stalking the boy the last few days, following him from school to the bus. They always back off then.

There’s four of them dressed casually, acting like two couples. It’s a good disguise, one that he missed for a few days.
A moment comes when the park is empty and Kouta is vulnerable. Easy enough to snatch him with only a little girl as a witness. The stalkers move with precision, breaking off from their pairs.

Shuichi takes that moment to slip out of his hiding spot behind a tree and slam his elbow into a woman’s throat. She makes a pained groan, alerting the others. By the time they turn to face him, Shuichi has her pinned to the ground, his boots keeping her pinned by the neck.

“Don’t go near him,” Shuichi warns. “Do you really think Izuku Midoriya’s sworn brother isn’t protected?”

The other three say nothing, two moving in a circle around him. Classic tactic. One in front. Two in the blind spots.

Shuichi pulls his longsword from its hidden place and readies it. This isn’t his original sword. That one broke trying to fight a mutant with diamond-hard skin after the bounty on his head. That fight had only ended by Shuichi clawing out her eyes and leaving her to bleed out.

Her screams still haunt him. He pushes his discomfort down. Izuku gave him an order and he will follow it, no matter his personal feelings.

“We just want the girl,” the man ahead says. “Stay out of this.”

Shuichi stabs the woman below him.

He leaps away, avoiding something fast and sharp. He fades amongst the trees, taking advantage of the overgrowth to circle back around them.

“Look, I’ll kill all four of you. I’m giving you one last chance to back off.”

They don’t. They never do.

A few minutes later, Shuichi has four corpses to deal with.

*****

Fumikage Tokoyami crosses the distance between Japan and a small town in rural America with one gigantic stride. Night changes to day with the shift in time zone. He sniffs, nose stinging from smoke and something foreign.

Finding his allies is a matter of following the immaterial chains that bind them together. They are always there for him to perceive. It is part of his domain to see the chains of obligation that bind people. Some days, he is tempted to manipulate those chains. On those days, he hates himself a tad.

It takes a few minutes and getting lost before he finds Maya Yotsuba, Izanami of the Royal Guard. Her uniform is rumpled and one sleeve torn to shreds.

Maya meets him with no greeting. “Get to work.”

“How bad?”

“This is the seventh site. The infection has been spreading from a central node we’ve just localised.”

He clenches his fist. “How have you contained information from the public?”
She points at the plume of smoke. Thick, acrid stacks of smoke obscure the horizon. “The army started the fire. They’re using it as cover.”

Fumikage turns his head slowly. “They know of the abyss?”

“We had to, little crow. There’s a coalition of world leaders we’ve put together in secret to contain the abyss. I kept you out of things, but even with their help, we’re losing the fight to the abyss.”

That chills him to the bone. For things to be so bad that they need to resort to an information reveal, limited though it is, breaks every tenet of secrecy that has been drilled into him.

He follows where she leads, down a weathered road with cracks and pits marring the dark tarmac. Burning flesh greets them quickly. Bodies upon bodies of the dead, stacks of corpses burning amidst the destruction.

“There’s no point to heroics,” he says, looking at the corpses. “Not with this happening. I thought... I thought I could support Izuku.”

“I gave up my right to the Throne for you,” she says. “Just to force the household to follow your ideal, I had to give it up. Don’t you dare lose hope before you even try.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t have much interest in your internal politics, but I am sorry for forcing you down that route.”

She smiles and it is radiant. “I rather like not being a bargaining chip for my father.”

She leads him and he sees the devastation wrought by soldiers in white uniforms. Some have quirks that they use to unearth a massive network of glowing roots, pink and sickly and dripping a corrosive fluid. Others use their quirks to burn away the infection from a safe distance.

With a flick of his wrist, he summons Watatsumi. He doesn’t permit the dragon to reach its full, towering height. Instead, it is only as large as a bus.

The dragon slinks towards the roots, displacing the soldiers. It opens its maw and incandescent purple flames spew forth, blinding in their intensity.

“Obey their orders,” he commands once the dragon is done.

It bows its head before setting off to follow the soldiers. They’ve seen the dragon before, but their apprehension is evident.

“There’s a reason I hired you.” She points at the burning structures. “This is just the outskirts.”

The main town is worse. The root network has spread to the point that it connects buildings together like tendons. Thick pustules dangle from them. An arm sticks out of one. Fumikage forces down his wave of disgust as they walk across the pink crystals that have replaced the road.

One of the pustules pops and a dark shape falls to the ground. It is bipedal, yes, but those scales and glass feathers do not belong to a human.

Before he can assess it further, a beam of light bisects the creature in half. A dozen more and it burns in pure light, screeching in its final moments.

“And this is the seventh site?”

“In the region. More across the world. The more time we waste here, the worse things will get
elsewhere."

It isn’t technically a command but it carries the same weight. He was inducted and stolen away from UA for this very reason. Inquisitor is what they named him. Battling the abyss is his role. Finding weakness and cleansing it are his duties.

He searches his soul for something appropriate to deal with the pustules.

It is a child of mist and fire, formless and transient. Its smoky form splits apart to a dozen streams, each heading towards a pustule. On contact, a sickly fire manifests and chews through the pustules, leaving less than ash.

They continue further into the city, avoiding the area where the roots have grown thick. It means to detours but better that than destabilising the foundation any further.

As they head in, crystal growths sprout from the ground. The miasma surrounding them is thick and pungent. Fumikage chokes at one point, the smell overpowering.

“Survivors?”

He can’t even see pets or birds. It the roots make a sound, an odd vibration deep in the bones with each pulsation.

“Maybe.”

They continue, passing homes ruined by raw force and scorched black by fire. It’s a scene out of a horror movie, a state of carnage that he hates staring at. Even the pets have been put down, cats and dogs and birds, all manner of them piled up and burning.

Fumikage stops at the sight that greets him. It is so startling that he has to blink multiple times to ensure he’s seeing correctly.

He takes a step forward, space distorting around him. At the end of the step, there is a young woman in his arms.

“I apologise for their acts,” he tells the dazed woman, setting her down gently.

He sets her down gently and turns to face the group of five in white uniforms. He knows them all which is why he’s so surprised. None of them is crazy.

He cocks his head. “Have you all gone mad?”

Their leader, a middle-aged man that Fumikage’s spoken to often steps forward. “We were to execute the last infected.”

Maya smiles sadly. “I am so sorry you had to see this.”

“Please don’t kill me,” the woman begs, scrambling back. “I’m not like the rest. I’m fine. See.”

Past the soot and ash, she looks like a healthy woman on the outside. Perhaps a bit overweight, but nothing makes her anything but a normal quirkless woman.

Look closer, my prince. Feel her in the depths of your soul.

Dark Shadow is a looming presence over the woman, the blade of disparity held in its shadowed claws. The blade is pointed at the woman, one wrong move will mean her death. He hadn’t even
noticed the demon manifesting.

It is good then that Dark Shadow is not governed by biological reactions that might cause him to twitch.

He closes his eyes and touches that place in his soul that binds the endless hordes to his will. It is the power of his kingship, the endless sea of tribute from which he can draw power. And with it, he can feel more than his mortal senses would entail.

With those senses, he can feel her. Humans are, fundamentally, creatures of the most orderly portions of the godflame. There is little difference between his dragons and humans other than the portion of the godflame they touch. Humans are firmly entrenched in orderly godflame, just beyond the reach of disparity.

But there, coiling around her brain stem and spine is a parasite. It has taken root, spreading and infecting her with the same crystalline logic that infected the other and the earth. Except, this part of the root network is smarter, adapting to hide better. It may very well not be detected for years until she becomes a conduit to something truly abominable.

He opens his eyes to the light of the mundane world. Smoke and ash make his eyes water, and perhaps that is a good excuse for his tears.

Close your heart to the pain.

He knows what must be done, knows the cost of protecting people. He fought in a war and saw what needed to be done to protect his country.

There are only two options left: be weak now and spare her, and let others die, or pay the price now for potentially millions. It should be a simple choice.

“Don’t,” she pleads.

He still hesitates.

He looks around and sees the devastation wrought by the endlessly mutating infection, the odd crystal spires and glowing blue lattices incubating a thousand thousand abominations that will burrow through the earth and make a massive network connecting the pulsating heart of the colony to the rest of the continent.

It may take years or decades, maybe centuries. He can’t be certain of the timescale, but in the depths of his chained soul, he knows it to be true.

Behind him are those who wear the same uniform that he does. There's maybe entirely white, but he bears the same emblem, the same mark that binds them together in this not-so-secret mission to protect the world.

He hears the woman scramble away and raises a hand to forestall Dark Shadow attacking her. The demon obeys, though he feels the annoyance through the bond they share.

“I don’t want to make this choice,” he admits to those who have seen more and done worse.

People have died because of his decisions and orders, because of his naivete and inexperience. During the war to defend Japan, his hounds had killed those impeding him and he had sunk ships with his strength. He had taken the life of one of the Great Ten regardless that the man begged for mercy at the end.
But they had all been enemy combatants willing to destroy his nation, people willing to harm his family and friends. Not an innocent woman in the first stages of pregnancy.

He can sense that child, that budding potential for human life. It is tiny and glorious and should be protected. It shouldn’t be snuffed out.

Maye sends a beam of hardlight to a crystal growth that suddenly starts glowing, burning it in her light.

“It’s not an easy choice,” she says. “None of us here will think less of you. I failed the first few times I had to make it, and I was bred and trained to do this. I was raised to be a ruthless killing machine and I still couldn't do it. Fight this war how you can and let others be strong where you are weak.”

He gazes at her soldiers—at his soldiers for he stands as second-in-command—and sees the understanding. They will not think of him as weak for preserving his innocence. Maybe it’s something they wished they could do as well.

I don’t understand the choice as you do, Dark Shadow says. I only understand it through the lens of your experience. I have no interest in the lives of millions, let alone one who will kill many more. But choosing to let others do this is your right as king.

He swallows and turns once more. The woman is still fleeing, running strong against the inevitable. She is weak and defenceless. He can justify it as much as he wants, but this is an execution. Doing this means spilling innocent blood. Something fundamental will change. If he takes this step, then he’s taking a step towards a future filled with violence and death.

With his powers, who will hold him in check when murder is the expedient option? It certainly won’t be Shouto who only cares for a few. Perhaps Izuku will stop Fumikage from purging a larger town or city or country out of convenience.

Perhaps.

“One innocent life now for a million innocent lives later.” He laughs bitterly, remembering his father’s words. “Necessity is the death of morality.”

Yet, if she lives, won’t he be responsible for everyone else who dies later. People will judge him for his acts, and when they don’t forgive his acts, Fumikage will only find joy because it means they are alive to judge him.

He closes his heart to all empathy and kindness.

Maya stands beside him and lays her hand on his shoulder. Another does the same beside him. Soon, the soldiers he came with stand in a line with him at the centre. They stand in solidarity with his choice.

From his soul comes forth a deluge of crows, dozens of the abyssal creatures chained only to his will. They fly in silence, the usual discordant note gone with his grief. The flock catches up to her soon, and though her screams for mercy reach him, he does not listen.

He does not turn away from what they do. If nothing else, he will see the results of his actions.

“Let’s get you home, Inquisitor,” Maya says when the deed is done and the infection cleansed.

“Not yet.”
He walks towards the beating heart of this infection, thrumming with pent up rage. His steps blacken the ground though he hardly notices.

Dark Shadow clothes itself around Fumikage, granting him the physical strength and knowledge to wield the Blade of Disparity. He draws upon the reservoirs of energy, the lines of tribute from the dragons and godlings and entire worlds consumed by his quest for power, and channels it through the blade.

It emits a churning miasma of true dark, and on its edge, he can see a blazing inferno of energy. It encapsulates disparity, the fine equilibrium between infernal flames and endless darkness.

He raises the blade.

With a single slash, a wave of death surges forward, consuming the town. It incinerates the heart of the infection in purple light and chews through the future of this creature with the inky black smoke.

The destruction continues through the root network, finding every spot they burrowed into. Heat and darkness consume the infection until only ash remains.

When it is done, and the wave dissipated, he lets the blade and Dark Shadow return to his soul.

“Now, we can go.”

He walks away from the burning crater where the town once stood, miles upon miles of pure destruction, and heads home.

Hours later, he finds himself staring out the window of his room, still dressed in his uniform and armour. It is stained with soot and smells like ash but he doesn’t care. Why should he care that black marks cover the formerly pristine floor and walls?

Maya enters without knocking. She sits beside him and shoves a glass in his hands.

He fumbles, fingers slow and unresponsive.

She pours till both glasses are full. The waft of alcohol hits his nose harshly.

“I don’t drink,” he says as she raises her glass. “I’m a child.”

She scoffs. "You're a Special Asset of the Imperial Household, granted the Mandate of Heaven. You can drink as much as you want. Besides, it's a tradition."

Tentatively, he takes a sip. It tastes vile, burning from his tongue all the way down his throat.

“Disgusting.”

“You’ll get used to the taste.”

“Why subject yourself to this?”

Her smile widens. “You know that feeling you’ve had like the worlds’ closing in and getting too large? That new feeling you got when you killed her? This makes it feel slightly less bad.”

He hums. Then he takes the bottle and pours another glass. Maybe it will drown out the screams haunting him.
“In the beginning before beginnings, there was darkness,” Shouto Todoroki says in the dead of night.

They have been sailing for two days now. Shouto has come to learn that his father gets seasick easily and that Momo is a terrible swimmer. He’s so come to learn the layout of the ship and the nature of the people onboard. It’s slightly more entertaining than the base they’ve spent months training and planning.

The lap of waves against the hull steals his soft words that Momo listens to attentively. The bustle of the crew organising the decks does the same.

The alcove they’ve sequestered for themselves in hides them from sight. Messing with time means that no matter how long their conversation is, only a few minutes will pass.

“It was the only force that mattered. Darkness was laws defined by strength, infernal engines and sword logics. Life did not exist but there were still creatures birthed of nightmares undreamt, gods of desolation and the Singers that must never be freed for they will annihilate all heat and life.”

He lifts his hand and summons the godflame. It burns a path to the depths of the abyss and shows images of shambling monstrosities that no human language can ever begin to describe. He shows her realms of infernal logic and areas untouched by time and entropy.

Momo takes it all in bravely, unwavering in the face of creatures that defy explanation. There is fear and apprehension, yes, but steel resolve as well.

Being kidnapped has done wonders for her as far as Shouto is concerned.

“And then came the first spark of light as the godflame was reborn. That light spread, burning away the darkness with its might. You might call this event the true Big Bang but it is the start of Disparity.”

A projection appears. One end is bright as the sun but the other is the absence of light. They battle, one gaining strength before losing it.

Eventually, the two forces reach an equilibrium, the gap between them widening as a new force fills it.

"Disparity was born from this equilibrium. The first forms of true-life grew from Disparity. It is neither opposed nor controlled by light or darkness. Disparity is complementary to the two, a force in its own right, but its strength is governed by the equilibrium. Should one side gain too much strength, then Disparity will rise to dominance until the cycle begins anew.”

The image shifts, showing their universe in all its glory. The sweeping tale of the suns singing his name in praise fills the air and the warm glow of every living thing wards off the chill.

“Our universe is the highest layer of the abyss. The suns are anchors of the godflame, protecting you and countless forms of life from the spread of darkness. The darkness of the abyss should never have reached so far and neither should light have reached the depths.”

An image of Izuku appears, perhaps idealised by the broadness of his shoulders and the arrogance of his smile. The lightning is accurate and serves as a reminder of the electric potential in Izuku holds.
It reminds Shouto of the day they fought. The day Izuku saved him without knowing him. The day Shouto took his first step on the path to godhood.

“Izuku’s lightning should belong to the godflame but it permeates the foundation of the abyss. That lightning is One For All, and like all quirks, it belongs to the godflame, but Izuku gave it life past that. His living lightning is a manifestation of his right to change the laws as he pleases. The king is a law unto himself and his lightning is his power to enforce the laws.”

Shouto pulls his sleeve up and shows a deep scar where an infection burrowed its way in him.

“Even I am not immune. I spent too long in the depths of the abyss and brought some back with me. My broken soul was filled by the power of the first flame and I gained its sight. I don’t know what Fumikage changed, but we’ve entered a new era in Creation itself.”

He falls silent, falling out of the trance he built up explaining everything. Momo watches him, waiting for him to speak again, but he has said everything he needs to.

“I want to call bullshit on your story.”

Shouto smirks. “But you won’t.”

“I won’t.”

He stands and helps her to her feet, not that she needs it. But it does seem the polite thing to do.

“That was the lesson. You need to know the history of everything to know what you’re manipulating.” He touches a hand to his chest. “To me went entropy and energy, creation and destruction in equal measure. If you aren’t limited by what you believe your quirk to be, perhaps one day you’ll be able to rewrite the laws and see the future. Perhaps one day you might be a Goddess of Creation.”

They head to the quarters they share. Space had been tight and putting the two UA classmates in the same room had been the only compromise.

She trusts him to behave appropriately, not that he has any interest in her physical body. The metaphysical aspects of Momo Yaoyorozu are far more interesting.

They split off, Momo going wherever she’s been assigned—learning, apparently, never stops when you’re Momo—and Shouto to the planning room.

He listens to the convoluted plan for a few more before clapping his hands together. Something about their ship being the navy’s latest experiment in true stealth capabilities. It all sounds like something Izuku would love—though the thought of him leaves Shouto bitter and empty because they can’t be together, perhaps won’t for another year or more, so that Izuku can see his plans through.

He smirks at the attention. “Your plan is stupid. I can warp.”

Momo knows, so she doesn’t react. Neither does the Admiral. The others, though, revaluate his presence here. After all, one warp quirk brought Japan to its knees.

Because of that revelation, they stop their absurd attempt to sneak into China over weeks. Any idea of using barges and diving equipment and a hike through the middle of nowhere dies.

“Follow my lead,” Endeavour commands when the meeting is done.

“Scout the area. Find a hidden place overlooking the base.”

Shouto burns a path to the skies above Tianjin. The city was once a thriving metropolitan area. Following the attack on it nearly a century ago it has become a fortress of a city built in the crater left behind.

With his sight, he makes out three separate air bases. Garrisons dot the landscape, blurring the line between city and army camp. The extensive network of AA encampments overlooks the city and the docks with their dozen-odd ships. Some of the ships bear the scars of damage from the last war. Others are being built in preparation for the new war.

In the middle of all this is a mountain looming over the city. It isn’t natural by any stretch.

Soldiers patrol it, and it even has a few artillery platforms. But the peak, inaccessible without climbing equipment and getting past a few dozen soldiers, is unwatched.

Shouto warps back, startling the crewmen on the deck. “Found a spot.”

The Admiral nods. “Godspeed, Endeavour. Godspeed, Shouto. The fate of your country depends on this. The attack on the Russian side will begin in six hours.”

Hours later, Shouto finds himself uncomfortably close to his father. He’s standing over the man who sits in meditation, unconsciously breathing in tune with the pulsing of the sun.

They’re hidden by a tarp, courtesy of Momo, which shares the same light-bending properties of the navy ship. With it in place, no one will see them.

They don’t speak to each other. Everything that needs to be said has already been said.

Exactly six hours later, his father stands. Shouto mimics the act, surprised as always that he’s nearly as tall as Endeavour.

His father brings his hands together as if in prayer. The fire surrounding his father dies down. Shouto sees the spark of fire he concentrates in the very centre of his palms, an incandescent orb of bright fire.

Shouto watches him concentrate more and more fire to his hands. And do the same thing for a few more minutes. Yes, it’s a bit impressive that it’s as hot as a star.

“Okay, so what’s special about this?” he asks snidely. “It’s just condensed fire.”

His father scowls. “Follow the air, boy.”

He cocks his head and *sees* with his right eye. And then he sees the currents of heated air, almost like whips, emanating from that small orb of fire. It takes him a moment to understand that Endeavour is moving slightly heated air by generating a temperature gradient. It’s like what he did with the grand cage to trap All For One, but infinitely more subtle.

Shouto decides he can’t *see* his father’s subtle use of the fire well enough, so his sight transcends his body. He watches from a throne in the sky, built purely from his desire to witness his father’s intricate power.

His father is like the mouth of a river. There is one main branch of heated air travelling through the
fortress city, but it splits off, winding its way to every part of the base. The streams travel close to the ground, each dropping a minuscule spark of hellfire on the way.

When the fortress city is seeded, when every critical location and artillery platform and AA battery has a spark of hellfire beside it, his father inhales. His breath pulls layer upon layer of fire from the compressed orb.

Shouto watches as his father breathes in a small star. And then, he feels his father draw on a tiny aspect of the godflame, supercharging the sun lodged in his throat. Shouto allows his father access to copious quantities of godflame.

The fire goes from being as hot as the surface as the sun to something far in excess of that. This heat is something he’d expect from a star going supernova.

With one great exhale, Enji does something truly amazing. Every stream of warm air wrapped around the fortress city becomes a guiding channel for the heat of a collapsing star.

It is a flash of heat and light that tears through the fortress city. In the span on an instant, entire chunks of the base are vaporised and those that don't catch fire. The sudden shift in temperature pushes the air away, a sheer blast wave that sends men flying and tanks toppling, buildings crumbling and streets collapsing.

It takes a long few seconds before the blinding light dies down, revealing the raging fire consuming the fortress city. Alarms blare and every security system in the region activates, but it doesn’t matter.

The main base, built on the centre of a crater as defiance against a prior attack, will be a smouldering ruin once more. Tens of thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands, will die because of his father’s attack.

And the world will blame Russia for this.

It makes Shouto smile. This is a form of strength he’s never considered. The power to kill and affect the geopolitical landscape as he pleases.

*I’ll build you a throne, Izuku. I’ll build it with fire and blood and bone.*

He wonders how happy Izuku will be when Shouto hands him his society, all rebellion and dissent tidied up without Izuku getting his hands dirty. He can be a shining hero. Shouto will do the actual work.

“Boy, we’re done here.” Endeavour's voice is gruff, but there’s a shred of vulnerability in it.

“That wasn’t fire, not really,” he whispers. “You were controlling heat and temperature. The fire was just a by-product. You didn’t just become stronger by fighting All For One. You completely shattered past the barrier of fire manipulation. This is just a few steps away from controlling energy itself.”

He stares at his father, truly looks at the man. For the first time, he looks at his father’s potential for power. And what he sees astounds him more than the supreme act of heat manipulation.

Enji Todoroki’s potential is limitless. He was marked as a potential bearer of the godflame at birth, and those marks are still there. The godflame belongs to Shouto, but Enji’s soul is still a receptacle for greater power. His soul is like a new lake that has only just experienced its first rains. So long as his father keeps fighting stronger opponents, then he’ll become stronger.
Staring at his father, he wonders if this is how gods are born.

*Given the right circumstances, he might be my equal one day.*

“Do you think this is what Fuyumi meant by us spending time together?” he asks instead, hiding his worry.

“You’ve become even more of an ass.”

Shouto shrugs. “Yup. At least I’m not contemplating genocide, which, I can do at leisure.”

Endeavour grunts. “Don’t be stupid, boy.”

“I think you might be stronger then All Might now.”

Endeavour merely glares at the burning city. “This isn’t strength.”

Shouto disagrees. The power to choose who lives and dies is the greatest power.

“Well, I’ll finish the job now.”

He takes one step forward, feeling the sparks of godflame his father seeded across the fortress. With a thought, they become a twisting inferno once more. Thick columns of fire that engulf the city, fire so hot it vaporises concrete and gives third degree burns to anyone still alive. It is fire so bright that it blinds anyone looking towards it.

It isn’t enough. Endeavour had focused on the military targets, the fortress itself and the army camps. The fires haven’t affected the rest of the city. It hasn’t burnt down the skyscrapers or suburbs or schools or hospitals.

Shouto wants to see it all burn. He wants to watch hear the screams of the damned. He wants to change the world with his fire. Who cares about a few million human lives?

He extends his hand and searches for living souls with his abyssal sight. He finds the spark of godflame within them, the spark that gives them life. Just as his father used sparks of hellfire to channel his power, Shouto can do the same with the godflame in people’s hearts. He can set eight million people aflame with a single twist of his power.

“Stop.”

Endji Todoroki knows that one day he’ll be called to account for his sins. Today, he’s stained his soul red with so many more deaths.

All for Japan as he tells himself. It’s a lie, a poor one at that. There is no justification for this act of destruction. Too many will die because of this. More still as the Songhua River is flooded.

Worse than all that is his child. Shouto, unfortunately, takes after Enji in all the wrong ways. He doesn’t have his mother's kindness or patience. His kid is a little shit, and it gets worse with each passing day.

“Well, I’ll finish the job now.”

The boy says it casually, as if more death is necessary. Shouto says it with a level of indifference that no human should ever have. It horriﬁes Endeavour, makes him hesitate. That moment of
hesitation is a mistake. In that moment, fires engulf the fortress once more, hotter than those Enji spent hours stoking.

The thunderclap from the displaced air deafens Enji as more of the city collapses, concrete vaporised and steel melted. Humans, living and dead alike, catch on fire from the temperatures. Shouto reaches out with his hand and Enji sees what his son plans to do. Enji doesn’t know how many people live in this city, but he knows his son will kill them all.

“Stop,” Enji commands.

Shouto freezes immediately, his body still conditioned to obey Enji. Then he cocks his head and glares at Enji.

“Not like this,” Enji says before his son can get a word in.

For a moment, he wonders if the boy will listen. There’s no chance in hell of winning a fight against him. The gap in power is too great. Enji knows very well how big it is. He engineered it, after all. Everything he did, he did so that his son could hold the power of God.

Now, he can’t truly command Shouto. He placed his trust in the boy, and now he’ll have to see if it will be reciprocated. Enji set him on this path and moulded him. The city is engulfed by the strongest flames in the world. And yet, what has Shouto done but imitate Enji? Staring at Shouto is like seeing himself, the worst parts of himself, all the cruelty and hate and spite embodied in one person.

Enji taught Shouto to fear the flame. He showed Shouto how to be strong. Now, he'll have to see if he hasn't made the greatest mistake in his life.

“Fine.” The little shit smirks. “We’ll try your methods, old man.”

Together, they warp away from the burning city.

Chapter End Notes

Well, things are getting freaky with the abyss. HItsashi learning new things, Fumikage seeing how bad things are on Earth and Shouto... well, Shouto being himself at this point.
Convergence of Darkness

Chapter Summary

In which, people discuss the value of life.

“This plan is older than eternity and I have no choice but to take part. Each use of my quirk weakened the boundaries and let darkness spill unto the world. Tiny, infinitesimal droplets of darkness, yes, but aspects of the depths of the abyss nonetheless. They would take root in the world, hiding in certain quirks, and growing greater and greater. Once it began, it could never be stopped. Not if I existed. That's why I disappeared. One day, I walked away from it all and journeyed to the depths of darkness. I've lived here for aeons, learning the deepest secrets of darkness and light and the disparity between them. If you find this, you are worthy of knowing the truth. Finally, at last, I trust you to understand. Perhaps this is the wrong gamble. It does not matter. My choices were never my own. Everything has led to them. Three kings to the great domains: scorch to godflame, slave to disparity, and shadow to dark.’

—The Fourth Letter from a Renegade as translated by the World Walker.

Fumikage Tokoyami has come to appreciate the comfort alcohol offers. It helps to silence the screams of those he has killed for the sake of saving more. It obscures the sight of those who died confused and in agony because he was too slow. It stings his nose so he doesn’t smell burnt flesh.

The weeks since that mission to America have passed by in a daze. His frustration is evident to everyone and no one speaks to him a moment longer than they need to. His expectations for the new batch of recruits is absurd but no one is willing to confront the man who can summon a dragon and flatten a town.

“You should be nicer to them. No one likes a mean crow.”

No one, that is, except for Mei Hatsume. She’s leaning over his shoulder, indifferent to Fumikage’s frustration. She points to one of the trainees.

“That one’s gonna have a permanent injury if you keep pushing.”

Fumikage sighs and raises his hand, calling a halt to the training. The trainees collapse to the ground, breathing laboured, and some even muttering a few prayers to good.

Their actual trainer, the same man who taught Fumikage how to wield his knives—a knife now that Shouto has the other one—exhales sharply.

"Lord Inquisitor, I believe they would be better served by studying tactics for the next few days.”

The suggestion is insulting because it seeks to remove Fumikage from the process. These are his soldiers that he’ll lead into battle one day. And if they aren’t good enough, then they’ll die young.

Still, maybe he has been pushing them too hard.

“I expect to see your training plan by the evening.”
The man nods. “Inquisitor.”

“You really like that name,” Hatsume says after the man has left, poking him. “You’re just like every teenage boy who gets a bit of responsibility.”

Fumikage rolls his eyes. “Is there a specific reason you are antagonising me?”

“Those equipment modifications for the rookies took a while to integrate with existing manufacturing infrastructure, but it’s done.”

Those modifications are minor changes to deal with abyssal monsters. The emphasis has changed from defence against guns to defence against bladed and blunt weapons. Constant light sources and multiple communication protocols had also been part of his requirements.

The other major change had been the abyssal weapons he’d had forged from dragon teeth and cleansed with his powers. Those will be able to harm some of the lesser powers of the abyss. It isn’t much, but it’s significantly better than before. Maybe he won’t need to write as many letters to grieving parents.

“You’re not too bad for a crow.”

She smiles and it is radiant, lifting Fumikage past his dark mood and into joyful realms. He watches her retreating form and wishes, suddenly and strongly, that they were friends. She may not have been in a heroics course, but she still represents a part of his life that he misses. Seeing her always leaves him feeling like he is drowning because she is happy and energetic despite the war and the rebuilding that came after.

He keeps to his work, writing reports and organising missions. He doesn’t hesitate as he once did over possibly ordering men to their deaths. Once he would have been terrified of sending out a small squad of four to a combat zone and overfilled it to six or eight members. Now he knows that is a waste of soldiers and an insult to the training they’ve gone through.

The news surrounding China takes him by surprise. One moment everything is normal. The next, evacuation orders are being given to every town and city along the Songhua River. Only hours later and Tianjin suffers an attack of such proportions that an accurate body count is useless.

A part of him, the part that remembers fighting and bleeding against China during the war, is glad that they’ve suffered the same pain Japan has. The feeling is infectious. It is also fleeting and temporary. Whatever cruel satisfaction he found fades away and leaves ash.

It takes him a few minutes to figure out what happened. The former Imperial Heir had likely flooded the river with ocean water and directed the flow towards the city of Harbin. The devastation from that would be catastrophic, but the damage done to the crops and soil from saltwater would be even worse. The river itself might even be toxic to anything that relies on freshwater.

Tianjin burning could only have been orchestrated by either a spectacular series of thermobaric explosions—which would have been detected before they could be set off—or a quirk that can set a city on fire.

He is a king, Dark Shadow says, watching Fumikage closely. It is his right to use his powers as he pleases. The Earth is part of his domain, not yours. If he wishes to set the universe alight,
what right do you have to stop him?

“I have every right to stop this madness. This is my home as well.”

Fumikage takes a giant step and finds himself above the Yellow Sea, watching the destruction from the comfort of his dragon’s back. It rumbles, agitated by his own worry.

He waits patiently for Shouto to detect him. Fumikage can sense him somewhere over the ocean, likely on a ship.

Then there is a flash of infernal flame and Shouto appears, floating in the air before Fumikage. With a thought, his dragon vanishes, leaving only the two of them. Two kings floating over a burning city.

“Shouto. Why?”

His… friend seems too premature, especially not when he just committed this atrocity. Fumikage doesn’t reach for his sword but it is a close thing.

Shouto’s lips quirk. “Orders.”


“Did you want another war? Now, Russia and China will aim their weapons at each other. They won’t shoot at us.”

“You think geopolitics matters? We’re fighting a losing war with the abyss.”

Shouto nods. “I know. I saw what would come months ago.”


“Because Izuku wants to change the world. We’ll cull the worst enemies now before the final test comes.” Shouto walks closer. “Fumikage, soon enough, mankind will have to fight for its right to stand tall. I’ll make Izuku a king. I’ll give him a new society no matter the cost. I’ll forge his crown out of blood and bone if I must.”

“You’re mad.”

“No, I’m not.” Shouto smirks “This is the new normal.”

A thought strikes Fumikage. He can end this cleanly. The godflame was bound once. It can be chained again. All he must do is remove it from Shouto’s soul. In simple terms, he needs to alter a god’s soul.

Impossible for anyone but another god.

Fumikage is very intimate with the structures of souls and the bonds that form them. He can see the towering potential in every lifeform and knows how to alter them with a thought. With his power, he can do the same to Shouto by breaking his connection to the godflame.

His sword is in his hand immediately, the edge dark and ominous. Shouto has a split second to understand before Fumikage has crossed the distance between them.

“The godflame’s protection is gone!”
Fumikage stops his blade inches away from Shouto’s neck. “Explain.”

“We changed it,” Shouto explains placidly, unafraid of the blade. “The three of us changed everything. Dark and light and disparity are all mixed up now. There’s no hard boundary.”

“Then rebuild it.”

“I’m not willing to lose you or Izuku,” Shouto says, his voice cracking. “If I do that, if I push back all forms of darkness and disparity, then I’ll lose you. If I rebuild the light barrier, then that means I have to send Izuku to the very depths of the abyss and I refuse that future.”

Fumikage gnashes his teeth together because of fucking course Shouto would damn the world for Izuku. He’s never met people who love each other as violently and cruelly as Shouto and Izuku. A part of him was glad that they were separated by Izuku going to prison. He’d hoped that it would break some of their co-dependency.

Now, though, he sees how futile that goal is. They’re bound by something twisted and monstrous.

There is another flash of dark flames. A white knife falls into Shouto’s hand. The same knife Fumikage gifted him a year ago.

“We three kings,” Shouto says, naming the promise they made.

Fumikage closes his eyes. “We three kings.”

He lets his blade fade away and return to his soul. Shouto smirks.

Just for that, Fumikage punches him. He watches Shouto fall, playing up his humanity for the sake of it. Fumikage rolls his eyes when Shouto hits the water.

With another gigantic step, he returns to the Imperial Villa.

The paperwork in his office seems to have bred with another stack, and now there are four where there’d been only one before. Banging his head against the desk seems an appropriate response for a few minutes. When that is done, he picks the first report.

Over the next few days, he learns how much Shouto just fucking geopolitics. The Imperial cells focused entirely on international events have been working overtime. The war between China and Russia has stuck mostly to border skirmishes, certainly terrible for the people who live there, but nuclear weapons haven’t been suggested. Small mercies.

The abyssal incursions are only getting worse. Maya sends updates constantly. Small towns and villages across the globe burning to contain the spread of the infection. In Pakistan, they have to support a coup because members of the government are affiliated with a cult. In France, they barely deal with an army of the dead in the catacombs. It had only required one explosion that razed a few city blocks and started a wave of ensuing riots.

The state of the world weighs on him as he continues searching for information in the Imperial Archives. Why now? There are records of abyssal events occurring for the past two centuries, almost since the dawn of quirks. But not to this extent.

Fumikage buckles a bit at the sudden weight on his shoulders, unable to see with small hands covering his eyes. He sighs and settles the child more appropriately on his shoulders. Not that a fall will hurt the kid.
“Little Tanuki, how did you get in here?”

“Oh, come on, you didn’t even see me.” The hands vanish and Fumikage’s vision is filled with red hair and bright green eyes.

“I should stop indulging your every whim.”

“That’ll be the day you use my name.” His snout scrunches in frustration. “I have a name. Gaara. Say it with me.”

“Nope.”

Fumikage lurches forward suddenly, throwing the child off his back. There is a whoop of delight that makes him smile. Just before he would hit the ground, Fumikage grabs the child by the ankle.

“You’re skipping your lessons. Go on.”

“But they’re boring. Come play with us.”

Fumikage rubs his forehead, matting down his feathers. “I’m busy.”

The child’s mouth presses to a thin line. “You’ve been busy for a year.”

The chains in his soul rattle suddenly, dozens of them snapping all at once. He almost trips over and loses control because that’s never happened. It feels like something in his soul has snapped off and died.

“Go,” he says, straining to keep his composure. “I’ll make time for you later.”

Fumikage keeps calm as the child leaves, ignoring the worried glances he receives.

A hound manifests from a sharp angle of time, crystalline fur bristling. It hobbles towards him on three legs, dripping bright ichor from its missing leg with each step. This is the first time he’s seen one so injured since the war and even then, they had turned to mist and returned to his soul to heal.

He listens to the story it tells, fists clenched so tight he almost breaks his knuckles. When it has finished speaking, Fumikage returns the hound to his soul. Then he walks to his rooms and wears his armour. A dark vest with armour plates running sideways on the front and black. Comfortable trousers with armour over the thighs and shin, tied by a thick belt with three pouches.

Finally, he takes his cloak. It is thick and heavy, white fur for a hood. One side is pitch black, the other a perfect white. For what he is to do, the white side is appropriate. He shrugs it over his shoulders, watching as the cloak reflects the light around him and wreathing him in a halo of light.

You are ready, Dark Shadow says. Go forth, my prince of crows.

With another gigantic step, Fumikage finds himself in the Amazon rainforest.

The hot air is thick with moisture and drenches his feathers but there is frost on the ground that crunches with each step he takes towards the small hamlet. The frost turns to ice structures that spread toward the river. It smells putrid and fetid, the water grey and lifeless.

Mist shrouds the docks of the fishing hamlet. He can’t see more than a few metres in any directions. Only a gigantic hill in the distance is vaguely visible, a large smudge on the environment. Surrounded by the grey void, he should make an easy target.
He will never be prey.

The creatures, whatever they are, move silently across the ice. They circle him as he walks through the small building, making a show of checking them for any signs of habitation. Along the way, he finds his hounds. A dozen of them staked as warnings, ichor spewing from their wounds. He wonders what they must have thought in their final moments. Did they even have thoughts?

When he is in the centre of the hamlet, surrounded by all sides, they make their move.

Fumikage summons his knife. It weighs more than a great sword and leaves sparks of blue as he swings it.

His blade cuts cleanly through the creature’s leathery neck, purple blood spurting in a disgusting arc. It stains his gloves and splatters on his goggles. Still, Fumikage finishes his stroke and decapitates the creature cleanly.

His blade glows blue, pale and hungry from that one kill.

There is power within him, the power to reshape the universe. He summons the tiniest bit of it and releases a blast of cleansing air. It disperses the mist and the influence of darkness in the area, allowing sunlight to pierce the grey void once more.

He stands in the warmth of the sun, his cloak reflecting its light and revealing his foes.

The humans are gone, changed by the power wrought forth this day. They resemble amphibians now, webbed feet and gills and chilling yellow eyes. They screech and charge forward.

Fumikage closes his heart and focuses on the mission. No matter how much his heart goes out to those who were transformed against their will, confused as their bodies were twisted, he must focus.

The crows will be enough to deal with them.

Fumikage leaves the fighting to them. They screech and tear through the twisted humans mercilessly, showing not a single ounce of hesitation. One gets past the crows and charges Fumikage.

He throws his knife. It flies true and embeds itself in the creature’s skull. He continues.

The hill he saw isn’t a hill. No hill should have seven fingers and ribbed growths. It is the cause of this infection.

“This realm does not belong to you,” Fumikage intones deeply. “It will never be a safe harbour for your ilk.”

The giant fingers flex and the ground shakes. It is thunderous and resounding. The mammoth effort of a giant awakening will not go unheard.

Fumikage will not give it that chance.

He summons his longsword and lets Dark Shadow surround him. The blade is dark and ominous, wrought from an infernal engine and shaped with the godflame. It balances light and dark on its edge. Perfect for Fumikage.

With a thought, energy rushes along the length of the blade. The edge turns bright and it’s like
holding a sun in his hand. He summons more and more energy, a dark fog coming out of the blade’s etched patterns.

He swings and a beam of raw destruction surges forth. It eviscerates one of the larger fish-people and keeps going. It leaves a deep crack in the earth and vaporises the water it touches. The beam cuts through the giant’s hand.

Gargantuan fingers tumble to the ground. Everything lurches on impact. Fumikage’s teeth rattle from the impact but he takes a step toward it, covering the vast distance.

“**Size is a weakness. It makes you slow and predictable.**”

The giant has barely risen. For all the destruction it would have caused if left unchecked, this thing is no threat to him.

Chains rise from the earth and wrap around the giant, bringing it down. The ground rumbles and the hamlet shatters from the localised earthquake.

His dragon manifests without prompting. It is just as large as the giant, scales gleaming magnificently in the sunlight. It roars once.

Then it raises its head. Fire coalesces in the back of its throat. When it opens its mouth, it is like a second sun manifesting. Endless waves of purple fire gush out, incinerating the dragon and setting the rainforest alight. Those flames burn through the infection in the water and the earth, cleansing the world of abyssal influence.

When it is done, the dragon fades away, leaving behind a blackened crater from its power. There is no way to hide this. The only option is to blame someone else.

He makes a call. She answers on the third ring.

“What’s wrong?” Maya asks.

“This secret war of yours? This attempt to hide the abyss? It’s going to fail.”

She stays silent for a moment.

“Well fuck.”

*****

The sight of Tianjin burning keeps Shouto up at night with excitement. Every memory of those flames is a memory of his power, of his ability to change the world from the background. With the careful application of fire, he can very well change the world. Maybe he’ll get better at starting wars without destroying cities?

Whilst their mission with the navy is technically complete, no one has been discharged. Something to do with waiting for possible retaliation. Which means he's stuck on a secret naval stealth ship in the middle of the ocean, bored out of his mind.

He makes a game evading the Admiral’s attempts to have Shouto undergo a medical exam and quirk assessment. Flashing away in a burst of flames always leaves people surprised. The admiral wizens up after a week and leaves Shouto alone.

Momo, however, is anything but bored. Unfortunately, it directly affects Shouto since they’re
sharing the same room.

The stack of books has only gotten bigger, taking up every surface. Shouto has to carefully navigate his way around the stacks if he ever wants to reach his bed. Which has books on it as well. Momo has graciously given him a tiny space to sleep.

“Molecular biochemistry,” he reads. “Why are you reading this?”

Momo glances at him then returns to her book, the cover blocked from sight.

“Because I like learning.”

Not the whole truth. “Why that subject?”

“You’re not going to let this go.” He shakes his head. “I liked it when you were quiet all the time. My parents want to purchase some biotech firms. I have to do all the background research and give them options by the time I get back.”

“But why?”

Pink splotches appear on her face. “Because it was the first thing I said when they asked me what I wanted for my birthday. I wasn’t even paying attention but now I’m getting a biotech company for my eighteenth birthday.”

That makes more sense. He knows how wealthy the Yaoyorozu family is. Momo’s the only person he knows who could probably bankroll a company from the ground up and still have money left over for a new business venture with only her allowance.

“Did you ever see Fumikage's dragon?” he asks, deciding against embarrassing her further.

“Dragon?” she asks quickly, eyes bright and energetic. “Those arms from the Sports Festival?”

“There isn’t much difference between you and it.”

She glares. “My mother is the cold-blooded reptile, not me.”

“Metaphysically, you’re pretty close. Your soul is made from pure godflame just like most dragons. There isn’t a hint of darkness or disparity to you.” In his right eye, he can see the structure of her soul brimming with potential. ”Your souls are more static and orderly, but if I swapped them around, there wouldn't be much of a change.”

“If you compare me to a reptile again, I’ll slap you.” Her tone is lighter than her words imply.

A few days later, there is an accident with one of the giant heat sinks. Shouto is napping when it happens so he misses Endeavour dealing with it by directing the heat straight to the ocean. Instead of a big chunk of the ship exploding, only a few crewmen had suffered injuries. By the time Shouto woke up from his nap, seven were in intensive surgery.

The alarms and constant movement keep him up so Shouto decides to deal with it himself. He rolls out of bed and shambles in one direction hoping for the best. He must look a sorry sight, barefoot and in boxers, but if anyone has any words, they choose silence today.

The medical wing is filled with people scurrying around, trying their best to coordinate supplies and treatments for the injured. A nurse stops the moment she sees Shouto, nearly dropping her stethoscope.
“You can’t be—”

Frost spreads across the ground, freezing everyone in place. He walks past the screams and protests until he reaches the first patient, a middle-aged woman with extensive third-degree burns.

It takes Shouto twelve minutes to heal her, though much of that is spent waking up fully. The next five take a few minutes each. The last, a boy no older than Shouto, is blind from his burns and much of his arms blackened by heat. He’s mumbling in his sleep, terrified even there.

Shouto takes his time healing the boy, ensuring that nothing goes wrong. He holds the young sailor’s hand the entire time. He isn’t totally heartless.

After the boy is healed—and maybe laced with a few genetic markers for rampant mutation down the line—Shouto takes his leave. It is the sight of a dozen nurses, field medics and naval doctors all staring at him in awe that freezes him in place.

“What?” he asks. Last time he checked, healing people wasn’t a bad thing.

Then he’s swarmed with one too many questions being asked. Shouto can’t keep track of it all. The dizziness hits him quickly and he learns that he doesn’t do well with crowds. Whatever self-control he has vanishes when a dozen different people are so close to him. It leaves him nothing more than a stammering youth, humbling given how easily he had saved seven humans.

The Admiral, alerted to the commotion, saves him.

“I expect this behaviour from my godchildren,” he snaps. “Back to your posts.”

"Sir, yes sir," they respond in unison.

“Don’t let them take advantage of you,” the admiral says once they have left the room.

“Same way you don’t?”

“The difference is that I pay you.”

“I get paid?”

The admiral’s laughter is the last he hears of the man for a few days. Things are quiet. Shouto spends most of it napping though some days he explores the bowels of the ship. One time, he finds a tiny shrine. The incense sticks are held in a cup decorated with snowflakes.

Shouto smiles bright and clear having discovered a shrine to him. What god doesn’t want to be worshipped and loved?

He spends the rest of the day making a few shapes out of weird metamaterials. They’re all pretty boring shapes even if the materials themselves are incredibly rare. Night comes quicker than he anticipates. He debates the merits of sleeping in a comfortable bed before deciding that the weather is warm enough to sleep outside.

“You’ll catch a cold.”

“Physically impossible.”

Momo joins him, lying on the deck just like him. She’s facing the opposite direction, so only their heads are near each other. The sky is clear and the stars bright and vibrant.
“Rigel in Orion,” he says softly. “There are no aliens there. Not anymore.”

Momo takes the revelation of aliens calmly. “What happened to them?”

He casts his gaze to the distant past and sees what once was. “Nothing special. It was a dozen different little things that eventually killed them. Things die and that can’t be avoided.”

“Even you?”

“Maybe.” He reaches out to grasp the stars. “I want to go there. I want to see them for myself.”

“Can’t you?”

“Me. Shouto. Not the god. Just me.”

They watch the stars together, lulled to comfort by the ocean. He stares at stars, listening to the song they weave across the tapestry of the universe. Stars do not have feelings like humans do, but they find grace in observing the bodies orbiting them and purpose in the giant barrier they maintain against the darkness.

Maybe one day he’ll take the time to walk amongst them and speak to the stars. He’s certain they have an interesting story to tell.

Momo sits up suddenly, startling Shouto. Shouto sits up as well, watching her curiously. There’s something intense in her gaze.

“I have something interesting to show you.”

It is a test tube filled with a murky green liquid and a thicker film on top. It looks like a sample of contaminated water about to be sent for testing.

“This has what to do with me?”

“Look at it.”

He slips past the mortal bounds of his sight and peers closer at the water, zooming in till he can see the water on a cellular structure. The green film is a simple organism with cell walls. A plant of some sort.

“Algae?” He gets a nod. “But there’s none near this part of the ocean.”

Momo grins. “Unless you make it.”

“Unless you...” His eyes widen slightly, genuinely surprised. “How?”

“When you showed me the beginnings of everything, it kinda just fell into place. I don’t know why I thought I couldn’t do organic material.” There’s a spark of light then some device appears in her hand. “Do you know how complicated the circuitry is in a tracking device is? And all the other components as well. The human mind can’t visualise it all.”

“Your quirk was doing the heavy lifting.”

“And now that I know what it really is, it’s become a lot easier. Non-organics will always be a lot easier—I could probably make a smartphone if I spent a few weeks researching—but I can also
make life.”

He smiles, genuinely happy. It probably looks hideous and uncomfortable, but it’s something honest.

“Simple, unintelligent life,” he mocks but there is no malice to it.

“Still smarter than you.”

She helps him up and together they return to their cabin. He sees Endeavour speaking to the admiral. It doesn’t look like either man is enjoying the conversation. After nearly tripping on a stack of books, he stumbles onto his bed. His pillow has been replaced by thick textbooks but he makes the best of it.

Momo sits beside him, somehow finding a spot in the mess of books. Her weight makes the bunk dip but he’s more interested in how she trusts him so much. Even after everything, she’s willing to speak to him. To sit near him and treat him like a person.

“Why couldn’t you use electronic books?” He frowns. “How did you even get them on a secret naval stealth ship?”

She grins. “I’m rich.”

“That… yeah, that makes sense.”

“This has been bothering me for a while.”

“Hm?”

“Shouldn’t you hate him because of his nature? Izuku, that is.”

He considers that for a moment. “Perhaps. But it’s more complicated than that.”

“Because you love him?”

Shouto winces. He doesn’t like that term much anymore. It’s too simple and assumes too much.

“Everyone keeps on saying that. I never did.”

“We’re on a secret naval stealth vessel and we just started a war between Russia and China. You revealed the Imperial Family faked the death of someone who sunk Taiwan.” She turns her head and they’re so close, barely anything separating them, that it’s dizzying staring into her eyes. “You’ve told me the secrets of creation and you can’t tell me that?”

In the face of all that, his hesitance seems a bit pathetic.

“I miss him so damned much,” Shouto admits. “I also hate him. Maybe it’s because darkness and light are opposites forever drawn to each other.”

“Oh, please, he showed you the tiniest shred of attention and you followed him like a lost puppy.”

“I think destroying a stadium is a bit more than a shred of attention.”

The corner of her mouth quirks upward. “For Midoriya, that’s him getting to know you. He sees broken people and takes them in, gives them a home and tames them whether they like it or not. Bakugou when they were kids and then everyone else.”
“That includes you?”

“I’m not broken. Maybe that’s why we’ve never talked.”

“Never?”

“Never,” she agrees, her smile small and sad.

For a moment, he wonders how close Momo and Izuku could have been. Would she have towered over light and fire and creation if Izuku had shown interest in her? Would their roles be reverse? Shouto the mortal of middling power and Momo the Goddess.

The idea doesn’t bother him as much as he expects. Staring at her, memorising each twitch of her features, Shouto realises he already thinks of her as a goddess in his mind.

*****

Inko Midoriya ducks beneath a line of police tape and walks towards UA.

UA is a ghost town, even from a distance. The pristine nature of the building is gone, replaced by the devastation of war. The fire that killed Aizawa wasn't put out quickly enough, leaving behind a blackened husk right in the middle of the central building. Windows are shattered and the glass is strewn around.

The teachers who hadn’t fled during the middle of the war are currently detained. Some like Hound Dog and Cementoss are merely facing having their credentials removed whilst Power Loader, who actively took part in scrubbing records and destroying digital evidence, are facing prison time. Inko hates that Nezu escaped alongside Snipe, Midnight and Present Mic. Perhaps they died, which she sincerely hopes for. Regardless, Inko won her war.

UA will never exist again. Every treaty and agreement they made will never be honoured again.

This is something that Inko Midoriya, a simple housewife, has done. Not by herself, but she set it into motion.

Unfortunately, it is entirely overshadowed by Tianjin burning. She refuses to let herself be weighed down by those deaths. They would have shown no mercy towards her country. As far as she is concerned, this is entirely justified.

She won’t even let the giant spider resting beside her ruin her mood. Those bulbous eyes watch her and her actions, have tracked her during her trek. Apparently, it is invisible to normal humans, but those that had looked at the weird patch of air wound up with headaches and nosebleeds.

//Mother, mother, shadowking mother, we come to arbitrate for the last time. Let there be peace between shadow and spiderkin//

“Oh, fuck off.”

//Unto you, we shall give all tribute. The genocide of the shadowking shall be forgotten. Accept this peace//

"My son wouldn't commit genocide. So, get the hell out of here."

//A thousand million spiderkin the shadowking has slain. Peace we offer this final time//

She faces the spider. It towers over her, legs furry and sometimes disappearing in higher
“Is that a threat?” She crosses her arms. “I’ve put up with your presence but I will not put up with your threats.”

//A favour is a bargain owed, great mother. We come to collect. Arbitrate peace between spiderkin and shadow. Or the war must begin again//

It takes little effort to cast her powers towards the gate. Lesser still to remove the bolts silently and raise it above their housing.

Her lips curl. “I hate being threatened.”

It doesn’t get to say anything more before the gate slams into it at high-speed. It emits a blood-curdling screech as it is smashed against a wall, dozens of legs curling around the grates of the gate. Orange ichor flies everywhere, splattering the wall and ground with the giant spider’s lifeblood.

Inko wipes town her skirt and walks towards the heap of spider and metal. Its legs still twitch, but the red core at its centre is exposed and cracked.

She stares at the spider as it dies, though death and the abyss behave strangely. Death may very well be the next evolutionary step for it.

“My name is Inko Midoriya and I don’t take kindly to threats against me. Against my son. Scurry away and never return to the light.”

It fades away slowly, vanishing from the real world and slipping towards the abyss through unknown paths.

That done, Inko heads towards the grocery store. Kouta had shyly asked for castella and she absolutely refuses to disappoint the boy. He might be a rude shit towards everyone else, but he’s never been impolite to Inko. Admittedly, he’s probably terrified after seeing her cow Hisashi or someone else into submission.

Dinner with Kouta is a quiet affair. Without Hisashi and Izuku, their home has been much quieter. Hisashi had been wrong in assuming Kouta wouldn’t notice if the crying at night after he left is anything to go by. The boy has stabilised slightly, but there’s a nervoussness whenever he looks at Inko as though he’s afraid she will leave as well.

The TV is muted but occasionally Inko focuses on it. Something about a few towns in America that have been destroyed, burnt to the ground with only a crater left. More still about a massive tract of forest burnt down in South America as well.

“He’s leaving there soon, right?” Kouta asks around a mouthful of castella.

Inko smiles, knowing he’s speaking of Izuku’s final hearing. “Yeah. You just have to wait a bit longer to punch him in the crotch again.”

Kouta flushes, ducking his head. “I only did that once.”

“Don’t mumble, it's rude.”

They talk of nothing important a while longer. Kouta tells her about his day at school, grumbling a bunch about the teachers treating him unfairly.
“Which teachers?” she asks quickly, already thinking of how to make their lives difficult. The moment Izuku invited Kouta into their lives he received every ounce of Inko’s protection.

Kouta drops his fork. “No, you’re going to embarrass me if I tell you. It’s nothing important anyway.”

“Really now?”

“Just got into a shouting match with this girl, Eri, and the teachers didn’t like it. From the way they weren’t saying anything, she sounds pretty messed up.” Kouta shrugs. “We’ve all got stories like that, now. No reason to treat her differently. That’ll just make her feel alone.”

She sets her fork down, observing the boy. He’s got that stupid cap on and has the same arrogant tilt to his shoulders, but beneath that and the youthful vulnerability, there’s a river of something she hadn’t noticed. Empathy.

“You know, for someone with a predisposition to cursing and punching people in the balls—”

“—Once—”

“You can be quite sweet.”

He sticks his tongue out at her. She just smiles back, realising right then and there that she does love Kouta. Maybe this is what adoption feels like. A child doesn’t have to be of your own blood to be someone you love.

Kouta helps her with the dishes, drying them once she is done washing them. Hisashi would have complained and suggested Kouta have fun, which contributes to him not having any say in the decision-making process of her household, and Izuku would have just taken over and cleaned their home in a frenetic storm.

“I don’t know why they can’t see Izuku is a good person.”

She inspects a glass. Finds a smudge. Cleans it again.

“It’s complicated.”

“Don’t treat me like a child.”

“You are a child and it is a complicated matter. It’s not just that Izuku defended that child. That’s not important. It’s a matter of power and perception. The world knows he has power, but too many think he’s a would-be conqueror or another villain.”

“But his followers—”

“Are part of the problem. They’re people with quirks refusing government authority and getting into fights.” She rinses another glass. “At least people knew how to deal with villains and vigilantes. They don’t know if these guys follow the same rules.”

“They’ll listen to Izuku.”

She smiles. “Yes, they will. Even if he has to beat them down.”

It takes every bit of conniving she has to get Kouta to sleep at a reasonable time. Hot cocoa and a promise to take him shopping over the weekend finally seal the deal just before eleven. He’ll be tired and groggy all morning.
Later, with only a week bearing down before Izuku’s final hearing, Inko finds herself with Mitsuki Bakugou, her only friend it seems like. They’re watching the news. Every day for the last week and every day for the week to come will only show something relating to Izuku’s trial. Whether it’s the Sports Festival or the war, his time in Hokkaido or protecting that little boy, or something else entirely.

The funniest had been Izuku winning a Nobel in prison, regardless that he hadn’t been able to accept it. Her son, ridiculous and hilarious, had declined it with a heartfelt speech. His refusal had been noted and rejected. Given the odd circumstances, it’s still waiting for him to formally take it for his contributions to the field of physics.

“Are you nervous about the trial?” Mitsuki asks.

“Of course, I am,” Inko says honestly, her amusement vanishing. “I don’t know if they’re going to see a boy who was kidnapped or a villain in the making.”

Her friend nods sagely, looking ridiculous. “Katsuki isn’t taking it well. In his own way, Izuku is the person he looks up to most.”

Inko raises a brow. Much of her anger is gone but there will always be bitterness at what Katsuki did to her son.

“Really now?”

“I never said it was healthy but Izuku's always been the only person who defied him. Someone without a quirk always stood his ground against Katsuki. It was like his strength never mattered, because no matter how much he had, Izuku would still be ahead of him.”

“That doesn’t—”

“Justify what he did? No, it doesn’t. But kids aren’t like us. They aren’t old and set in their ways like us. I mean, he’s been picking fights for the last few months. But he’s also been talking even if every third word is a curse. He’s trying to figure out who he should be because he sees Izuku has chosen a path. And Katsuki wants to match that and finally stand on the pedestal he put Izuku on years ago.”

“I still find that hard to believe.”

“So did I at first. But he hasn’t been home in months. He’s trying to keep the peace in his own way.” Mitsuki takes a long sip. “He admired All Might. And the only way he knew how to deal with that was by dethroning him. He’s gone now, but Izuku’s there. Izuku whose always been stronger and is now so far ahead that Katsuki has no chance of catching up.”

Inko knows Katsuki never will catch up to her son. Izuku is someone so far removed from the ordinary that a normal human will never catch up to him. No human will ever match a god.

“It’s sad that despite everything, Katsuki basically became me. I never could keep up with you, Inko. You were always better. A better boxer. A better wife. A better person. It might be cruel, but when Hisashi left, I thought maybe I might have something I wasn’t trailing behind in. But no, you wound up being a better mother.”

“I’m sorry,” Inko says, her heart breaking. “I never knew how cruel I was.”

“It’s not your fault you’re a good person.” Mitsuki raises her drink in a toast. "To sons."
“To sons,” Inko agrees. “And to being better people.”

Maybe, just maybe, if she holds that idea close, then things will be better. In a world without UA, in a world where Izuku is strong, maybe she won’t have to be strong and hard and threatening.

Maybe, in this brave new world, Inko Midoriya can relearn what it means to be kind.

*****

The world is changing. Creation itself has entered a new stage. This is what it means to be alive in the opening hours of that change.

This is what it means to be TinasheMpisaunga watching as something abominable consumes your parents. It has too many arms, though they shift and fade between realities. Claws like unending nightmares tear through the flesh of your younger sister. Its fourth mouth chews your father’s arm off almost delighting in the agony they feel. You would run, but the creature has taken a perverse interest in forcing you to watch. When it is your turn, you shed tears of joy because the pain is to end.

This is what it means to be Ademi, the warper of Madagascar. Your body burns from the inside out. Warp portals open and close uncontrollably, your flesh ripping and popping and reforming. You scream and scream but no one can ever hear you. And then you stop, interrupted by the crystal erupting from your chest. You die alone, impaled on a glowing crystal overlooking the ocean. It will be a beautiful site for whatever grows from your corpse.

This is what it means to be Kohei of the Horikoshi Cult. You have lost followers to the bastard crow but it does not matter. That was the final sacrifice ground. After centuries of work started by your predecessors, a network of blood connects the earth. Soon, it will be time to summon the true lords, all that remains is one final sacrifice. With their strength, you can displace the false kings. Soon, your subtle knife will cut through the barriers between the earth and the darkest depths of the abyss. Oh, how you long to hear the sweet song of your gods.

The world is changing. Soon, there will be no more secrets.
The First Secret

‘I am not human though I believe you know this truth, or at least, understand it in a fashion. Fire and dark and disparity have tainted my soul, reworked it with indifferent hands for a plan so simple and yet so monstrous. I hope you forgive me. Perhaps you won’t. Perhaps this is a mistake, and no one will hear my words. But if you do read these last words, remember, that to be human is to be powerless. To be human is to be a plaything for the gods. If you have the opportunity, flee where I could not. If you still have a choice, take your own life as I will. And if you find yourself controlled and helpless, accept your fate and bow your head.’

—The Final Letter from a Renegade as translated by the World Walker.

Hisashi Midoriya is lost in a land beyond time with only a skeleton for company. A talking skeleton. One that had been a person a few minutes ago. Though what do minutes mean in a place where eternity passes every so often.

“I’m listening. Now tell me your story. Tell me the first secret.”

The skeleton sits on no-space, his legs dangling off an edge that doesn’t exist. Hisashi stands right next to him, and if the laws of creation held, he should be falling. But no, in this land that couldn’t-shouldn’t-wouldn’t exist, such concepts are irrelevant.

“My name is lost to memory, but I remember that I was Master of the Railroad. Unintentional though it was, I am the renegade who forged the first paths between godflame and dark through the road of disparity.”

“I thought you might be some living memory of the man,” Hisashi says to the skeleton. “But you’re something different.”

The endless no-space shifts and morphs. Where before there was an absence of everything, of light and darkness and nothingness, now there is a forest. It floats in the air, drifting calmly across the realms of Disparity. There, in the distance, he sees giants walking towards a pilgrimage. Below, an eye the size of a continent. Nearby, dragon flying calmly.

He knows this place and this forest. This is the home of Dark Shadow, whole and hale. It isn’t an endless pyre as it should be.

The vision zooms into a copse of saplings, the oldest of the trees. In the very centre, the eldest tree, nothing more than a seed at this point, is being reborn. Dark threads erupt from the seed, reaching unerringly towards the cauldron of godflame in the centre.

Just before it can touch it and create something new, the sky above breaks apart. A massive crow reaches through with a human’s hand and picks up the newborn Dark Shadow, stealing it from the copse.

“I witnessed a babe reach out past the barriers and enslave an elder tree. It was I who acknowledged him as slaveking and accepted his oaths heard as the wailings of a newborn babe.”

Things shift once more and they’re on a beach somewhere in Japan. No, Hisashi knows this beach intimately. It’s in Mustafu, close to their home. This beach was where he took Izuku as a child, back when he and Inko were happily married. He taught Izuku to swim in calm waters. When he couldn’t be consoled by human means, the water always set Izuku at peace.
It makes his heart clench. This beach was where they made their happiest memories as a family. He wonders if Izuku remembers playing in the water with him and Inko. Perhaps not.

“It was I who joined a human corpse to the foundation of darkness and the lines of tribute.”

Hisashi watches his son die for the first time. It is a fridge that does him in, ignoble and pathetic. It makes Hisashi sick to witness. His son dies alone and afraid with no one to save him.

His son’s soul somehow touches the darkness, finding a connection to the lines of tribute from ruinous throne worlds deep in the abyss. A simple human soul touches this foundation of darkness and reshapes it, drawing strength and power from that death.

In the real world, a creature that must never be seen rises from his son’s corpse. It destroys the fridge as retribution before settling beneath his son’s skin, finding a home in the infernal engine at the base of his son’s spine.

“He was born to a father who wields godflame, but the connection to the abyss was there to be used, birthed by the murder of a sibling and an unintentional act of sword logic.”

Hisashi feels his gorge rise and can’t hold it back, puking to the side. His hands tremble as he thinks on the matter because Mikumo was not murdered. Certainly not by Izuku.

“That’s not possible,” Hisashi roars. “He’d never hurt his brother. Especially not as a baby.”

“I warned him the dangers of his path,” the skeleton says, indifferent to Hisashi, “and yet he still walked towards his throne. The contract was sealed by the third death and can never be undone. The body of the shadowking is the very foundation of the abyss, endless and eternal. The contract gave that human soul dominion over true dark and the shadows cast before fire existed.”

Things shift once more, and they find themselves back in the forest. The cauldron of godflame roars, black flames threatening to spill out and incinerate everything. A boy no older than fifteen sits before it, communing with the first spark of light.

Shouto Todoroki, son of Endeavour, speaks directly to the godflame. And it listens. A force that gave rise to time and gravity and entropy listens to a boy. A force that is one-third of all reality stops and listens to a child.

“The last was the most interesting. Hellfire was something outside all three domains, something different and new, borne in the far futures that will now never be. It was borne from the first ending and the final beginning, outside the grasp of godflame. It was simple enough to weld it to the framework of godflame for the infernal fire always sought to be unified with all flame.”

He listens to Shouto Todoroki broker a deal with the godflame, uncaring that he is doing the impossible. A child is convincing Creation of his right to rule. A child is making a deal with something that shouldn’t even notice him. Against all logic, the godflame accepts Shouto’s words.

“It was love, purely human and insignificant love, that changed the eternal and unchanging. It was I who translated the words of the godflame for that boy to understand as he ascended, the heart of the godflame and wielder of its sight.”

Shouto Todoroki ascends, his hellfire now godfire. He rises above the forest, surveying the universe at his fingertips. As his first act, he commits genocide on a forest of sentient trees. Trees that did nothing but help him.

It all fades away, the visions of kings rising above mortality passing away like mist at the dawn.
The no-space returns, leaving Hisashi alone once more with a skeleton.

“You were the weak point,” Hisashi says almost reverently. “You became the conduit. But why? Why did any of this have to happen? If it was preordained, then they’re not really gods.”

For the first time, the skeleton looks up at Hisashi. Those empty eye sockets are disconcerting because even though they are empty, Hisashi can see the eldritch knowledge within them.

“My duty is done,” the skeleton says. “I am dead and gone. My life is ended and my role as renegade rendered obsolete. I am merely a recording of a man driven to insanity by the truth. Hear these words well. This would always happen. For a god to exist, they must always have existed and they will always exist. The three of them were gods before they were born. The past is the present is the future, a perfect loop with no breaks. Time exists because they willed it. Their mortal forms exist for they wished for them. They wished to be able to articulate change and thus the nature of reality became intertwined.”

“Why them? Why not someone else. Why not any other reality?”

“All others are simply fractal designs of the godflame, endless iterations of the same events, played a million million times in each possible configuration. This iteration is the true iteration, the one chosen by the gods to hold their mortal vessels, but their mortal vessels chose the nature of their power. It is the beginning and end and middle without break or joint. The gods wished to exist so dark and light and disparity were born. But these forces wished to be observed and thus they found form in the gods to be who have always been that shall always be.”

“That makes no sense. You’re saying it was preordained and random at the same time? That this was an act of fate for those who make fate?”

The skeleton rises silently. It faces Hisashi, observing him intently.

“This does not matter,” the skeleton says. “All our actions are in service to them. We are theirs to be toyed with. They will not care.”

It removes the conductor’s hat on its head and extends it towards Hisashi. They may be there for minutes or hours or years, but nothing happens until Hisashi takes it.

Then the skeleton collapses. Its bones fade to dust and are carried away by a wind that does not exist and can never exist in this no-space.

Once more, reality shifts and warps. The no-space collapses in on itself, the endless expanse devoid of nothingness shattering to a million million pieces. Hisashi feels himself dragged away and thrust to a different location, thousands of layers of the abyss passing before he can even process what is happening.

Then he finds himself on Master Railroad’s train in the conductor’s cabin. In the far distance, a shower of lightning heralds his arrival in the past.

Hisashi observes himself from over a year ago, uncertain of what to do next. Not that he has a choice. He can feel the universe itself pushing him towards what must be done for it must always be done.

“The past is the present is the future.” He lays the hat on the chair. “Good luck. Being a good father is harder than you can imagine.”

The universe pulls him away and sends him to his own time.
Izuku Midoriya enters a courtroom for what will hopefully be the last time.

The court proceedings have gone on for weeks longer than they should have. The fervour and uncertainty surrounding China had distracted everyone. Worse still are the shots being fired by Russian and Chinese quirk regiments. Thankfully, no one is suggesting nuclear weapons. An international task force has been dispatched to the region to observe the situation and provide humanitarian aid to the civilians caught in the crossfire.

It is one of many task forces across the world. America has one investigating the towns burnt down recently. Three in total are observing VIVA territories and trying to bring the villains to a negotiating table with the American and Canadian governments. Which would be possible if there weren’t strong secessionist movements occurring across both countries at the same time.

Something is going on deep in the Amazon. The fires affecting it have come too early and they're concentrated in certain areas. Odd events are happening in Africa and Europe, weather events that shouldn't be possible: a torrential rain in the desert; freshwater lakes suddenly becoming acidic overnight; long-dormant volcanoes showing signs of eruption.

*What was it that you told Fumikage?* Mikumo asks. *When the void infects the real world, the only option is to burn it away. You three changed the order of things. Is It truly so absurd to think the abyss has bled into the real?*

“I don’t want a world like that,” Izuku mumbles as they all stand for the judge’s entrance.

He knows Kouta and his mother are in the room watching anxiously. Hisashi's absence isn't surprising after all the years he spent absent. None of his classmates is here but the room is filled with important people: the Yaoyorozu family who funded much of his legal team; Endeavour and Mirko who fought in the war; Tamaki Amajiki, last of the Big Three and a witness who was there at the beginning and supposedly distinguished himself during the following months; Admirals and Generals from the Joint Chiefs.

The judge is an ageing woman, her hair white but her eyes sharp. She hasn't had any interest in theatrics and ejected people from her courtroom repeatedly until people got the idea that she would not entertain nonsense.

“This court stands ready to pass judgement on the criminal case of Izuku Midoriya. The crimes currently stand at one count of quirk-related murder and one count of police defiance. Step forward.” Her voice is clear and confident.

Izuku takes a deep breath and approaches the high table. He loathes the idea that this one woman holds the power to delegitimise his entire cause before it gets off the ground. What right does she have to judge him when she works within a corrupt system?

Still, he lets none of his contempt show. He’ll play by their game and win by their rules.

“You have readily acknowledged your hand in the villain Muscular’s demise. Your testimony agrees with the coroner's report. As an S-rank villain, this would be fully accepted as an act of self-defence. However, the investigation shows that this ranking was given after the fact. You killed him without authorisation as a hero and utilised your quirk to do so. Do you acknowledge this as true?”

He nods. “Yes.”
“Under any other circumstance, this would constitute quirk-related murder. However, the nature of a full villain attack and the character testimonies of your classmates has given context to your act. Izuku Midoriya, you are found not guilty of quirk-related murder against the villain Muscular.”

He doesn’t react to that. There is still more to come. No one is surprised by the decision. Muscular was a villain with a known body count.

"This court finds your actions in resisting arrest to have been reckless and foolish, easily capable of harming civilians in the area. As many rightfully claimed, they were two steps short of treason against the state. However, the court acknowledges the reasons for your actions. In conjunction with the ten months you have spent incarcerated as a model inmate, this court believes you have served an adequate sentence."

Izuku almost wants to laugh. He broke more bones in prison than he ever did experimenting with One For All. The only difference is that he had broken other people’s bones.

There are murmurs in the room, some surprised by the leniency of the decision and some sounding angry. Angry for what, Izuku can’t tell.

"In light of the ongoing class-action suit of Tartarus Inmates v. the State, your incarceration will be stricken from all records pending a final decision from the Supreme Court. Should the State be found guilty of illegal incarceration, you will be compensated for your time in Tartarus."

“Finally, an investigation into your possession of three quirks will begin three months henceforth. This tribunal will determine the legality of your possession of One For All, and how you received your wind quirk. It will determine the extent of your relationship to the Great Tyrant All For One and your part in the Kamino Ward War. Do you have any final words?”

Izuku exhales. He had known that investigation would occur but in the grand scheme of things, it won't matter. He plans on drowning the legal system by attacking everything from top to bottom. The current constitution was extensively modified by a government that held onto power using emergency time authority. He will see it, and the punitive anti-quirk laws, dismantled and overturned.

“I am glad that the Supreme Court has found my actions legal and legitimate in these trying times. It is an honour to know that the law can still find justice and uphold human compassion.”

He bows before the high table and wonders if this is what the world saw when kings were crowned by archbishops. It might as well be the same thing. By letting him go free, they’ve set in motion something that cannot be controlled.

Izuku Midoriya is lightning and they’ve just unleashed him unto the public domain.

His eyes sweep across his enemies, the military and navy. Their expressions run the gamut from frustration to explicit anger. He smirks at them. They all know what’s just happened. Undoubtedly, they’re all making plans to threaten him or stymie his influence.

A guard leads him to a private room once the judge has left

Don’t be arrogant, Mikumo warns. They’ll go after our family first.

Izuku raises a brow. “Our?”

Yes. You won’t be rid of me so easily.
The door opens before Izuku can respond. In rushes Kouta like a bullet. Izuku catches him easily.

“Hey. I told you I’d be fine.” Izuku smiles at Kouta. “Just in time for your eighth birthday.”

“But they’re going to investigate you.”

Izuku sets Kouta down and offers his mother a smile. She’s watching from the doorway, her expression odd. There’s happiness there, but also… sorrow? Grief? Regret?

“And they’ll find me innocent. I’ve done nothing illegal in their own words. Well, they have to decide how legal my quirks are.”

“They shouldn’t be allowed to. Quirks belong to us.”

“They’re not technically protected by any laws in Japan.” Izuku kneels, setting him down. “They wouldn’t usually do this but they don’t see it as a simple matter of bodily integrity. We just had a war and I’m holding the power of both sides. They want answers and reassurances. And I can give them. It will take more time than I wanted, but I’m willing to try.”

“You’ll have to tell his story,” Kouta snarls. “You’ve already fucking said enough about him.”

“Kouta,” his mother reprimands sharply.

The boy winces and ducks his head. “Sorry.”

“I wish I didn’t have to tell his story. Sometimes the dead should be allowed to be forgotten.” He hugs the kid. “He’s not a good man. And what he’s done can never be forgiven. But it gave me the push to stand up for that kid. I’ll never ask you not to hate him. He took my mentor and friends from me. I know the pain better than you.”

His mother steps forward, laying a hand on Kouta’s shoulder. “Izuku, don’t make this a contest of your grief.”

Izuku nods. “I’m sorry, Kouta. Do you remember when I told you the story of Hero? Back when he had us.”

“Yeah.”

“Did you like it?”

“Yeah.”

“He’s the one who told it to me.” Kouta flinches back but Izuku is undeterred. “In a roundabout way, he showed you kindness. You can learn a lesson from your enemies and even villains can be compassionate. It was a hard lesson to learn and maybe it wasn’t the right lesson, but I think it’s why I can forgive people so easily.”

Kouta steps away from Izuku, his expression furious. “He took everyone I loved from me.”

“I’m here. I promise I’m not going anywhere. No matter what.”

The anger leaves Kouta. He deflates, wiping at his tears. “You better keep that promise.”

Izuku extends his pinkie finger. Like they did so long ago, they seal a promise that will last till the end of the universe.
“Let’s go home,” Inko says to the silence.

They leave the courtroom confidently. Izuku has a grin on his face.

It almost fades at the crowd of people outside. The press is easy enough to recognise, but so many people are carrying signs supporting him whilst just as many are denouncing him. The police presence down the middle is keeping the two groups from one another but only barely.

A roar erupts from the crowd when the notice him. There are questions and accusations and even a few ‘I love you’ being thrown around.

He steps in front of Kouta without thought, shielding the boy from sight and harm.

“Say something!” someone roars above the crowd, voice so loud it causes a collective wince throughout the crowd.

Blessed silence reigns. The shock between noise and quiet is disconcerting, but now he can hear himself think.

_Speak to them. You owe them that much._

Sound is nothing more than the vibration of the air. With a thought, his second heart comes to life and beats once more. Instinct guides his actions as he suppresses the vibration of air molecules from the crowd and amplifies the ones from him.

It would be impossible if he couldn’t sense each air current and disturbance as well as he could sense shadows. But he feels the air for miles upon miles, and though his sensitivity might degrade, the sky itself bows to his commands.

“I would like to thank all of you, critics and allies alike, for being here today,” he says strongly, his words carried to the crowd and past them into the streets and buildings. “It was your continued presence that gave me the strength to walk forward. I never had a shred of doubt that I’d walk free, but your support is still appreciated. Now, are there any questions?”

Immediately, everyone shouts. Or at least, they try to. Then they realise that their words are nothing more than whispers. Horror and awe are common expressions right now.

“One at a time please.” Izuku points to a younger lady. With a thought, he removes the limitations of her words and instead amplifies them.

“What did you just do?”

Izuku almost rolls his eyes. “Manipulate the wind. Next.”

“Do you think anyone will believe you didn’t coerce the judge to find you guilty of your crimes?”

“Yes, I resisted police arrest but the circumstances justified it. I refused to let another child be labelled a villain and forgotten by the system. I ask you to look around and tell me this society works. Tell me that this is the pinnacle we can reach. If you say it is, then I want to know who told you to stop dreaming for a better future. So long as we try, our future is bright.” He smiles gently. “I cannot claim to know the mind of the judge, but I sincerely believe she upholds the law as best she can.”

He points at a news anchor.
“You betrayed All Might and—”

He glares imperiously at the reporter, the force of it strong enough to force him silent.

“Did you know Toshinori? All you knew was the legend you made of him. You didn’t know the man he was. He looked around daily at the corruption and knew it had to end. But it couldn’t end until All For One was dead. He gave his life so that you, so that I, so that all of us, have a chance for a better future.”

He allows another question.

“How did you get that wind quirk?”

“In his final moments, the greatest villain of this era saw that his methods had been wrong. His ideals and motivations had been broken. He chose to accept his death with dignity. He gave it to me because I was the closest person there. Nothing less.”

And then he walks forward, indifferent to their attempts to question him any further. Kouta follows closely in Izuku’s wake whilst his mother is utterly undaunted by the sea of humanity.

Together, they return to their home victorious.

*****

Katsuki Bakugou is angry, not that anyone is surprised by that anymore. But that anger runs cold and bitter, tempered by loss and the struggle of finding a new identity in a different world.

He wonders if this is how old people feel. You live your life doing things a certain way, and then something happens and everything you’ve ever known changes. What does it mean to be a hero or a vigilante now? What does it mean to rebuild when villain-owned corporations—and hadn’t that been a fucking delightful surprise to learn—are the ones rebuilding the most.

Katsuki from a year ago would have said that the Katsuki now is a vigilante for fighting without a license. Katsuki from a year ago isn’t the same Katsuki that’s known by communities in Shikoku who treat him fondly, grandmothers who offer him snacks and fathers who never rat him out when he loses a fight and needs to heal. Katsuki from a year ago wouldn’t have the charisma or force of will to bring together a motley crew of people with similar ideals and he certainly wouldn’t have known how to treat them well.

Yes, he treats Shindo like a conniving shit but that’s because he is one. There’s no malice there. Just honesty.

“I’m not fucking bailing you out if you get in trouble.”

Katsuki has assigned them the simple job of eliminating a quirk group smuggling weapons. It can go wrong so many ways. Last they tangled with the group, Makabe had taken a bullet to the arm.

Shindo, deep in conversation with Intelli, gives him the middle finger. “Just go to your bullshit reunion with your murderous friends.”

He’s tempted to jump over and strangle the bastard. But that’s what he’s expecting, so Katsuki reigns in his temper.

A world where Katsuki Bakugou isn’t outwardly angry is one that would give anyone pause. It certainly makes both Shindo and Intelli go wide-eyed.
“Don't be a fucking arrogant prick,” Katsuki says with a level of calm he doesn't feel. “I chose you as my second for a reason.”

He glares at Shindo, cold and hard. He might not like Shindo but he’s strong and cunning. Not as lethal as Katsuki or as smart as Intelli, but he’s got a knack for putting people in the right place for their skills.

He never puts anyone at risk. More likely, Shindo will put himself in the line of fire first. Just like Katsuki.

“Go,” Intelli says. “I’ll make the plans.”

That’s as much a promise that they’ll behave as he’ll get. Shindo is too proud and unyielding to say anything.

Nothing more needs to be said. He leaves them be, hopeful that they will stay safe.

The meeting is in Mustafu, a place he used to call home. Last time he came by was months ago and Izuku hadn’t even been in prison for more than three months.

Just thinking that thought is still so weird that he pauses in the middle of the street, getting a rough shove in return. Obviously, he doesn't take that lying down. Yes, there’s screaming and cursing so bad it sends the rude kid—*when did fourteen make someone a kid*?—crying down the road, but really, he had it coming.

By the time he gets to the meeting point, a café that’s been rented out for the day, he’s almost composed. Seeing a cat perched on the back of one of the seats isn’t that shocking. He’s heard about this cat café from Momo when she went there after the Stadium attack a year and a half ago.

Momo sees him first, looking stunning in her red dress.

“Katsuki,” she calls waving.

That draws everyone else’s attention.

He hasn’t seen all these fuckers together in what feels like years. It certainly has been a long time. The war ended over a year ago but that time passed so quickly just trying to keep his dumbasses alive in Shikoku.

The missing are the ones that spark the dying flames of grief. He has Momo and Jirou and Kaminari, but the others are gone—the insomniac from general studies and the vicious floating bitch who probably thought they’d be together forever; the tadpole chick and off-brand Spiderman; stupid four-eyes and those three who vanished after USJ: Hagakure, Mineta and Koda.

Kirishima is nowhere to be seen. Not that it surprises Katsuki when he remembers the bastard’s cowardice. Even Aoyama is here and he nearly fucking died. Admittedly, he’d rather not see Ashido because that bitch fucked their mission and got someone killed—from the way Ojiro is pretending she doesn’t exist, he feels the same.

Once, their affiliations were simple. All of them loved UA and that was that. Now, Tokoyami can’t hide the fact that he’s the Emperor’s bird through and through even if he doesn’t wear white. Izuku is divisive, the heir to a villain and a hero, and only declared innocent in the past week.

And yet, despite all that, there's still a bond between them. It may have only been a few months, and so many of them were taken too early, but the grief and loss have only made the connection
stronger. Even if he'll never admit it, there's no one here he wouldn't go the distance for.

“The fuck you all staring at.”

That’s enough to break the tension and people go back to talking. For now, at least, they can pretend that they’re all just former classmates meeting up once more.

Momo starts chatting his ear off about her family, not that Katsuki cares. How is he supposed to care that her mother is a cold bitch who profits off suffering and misery or that her dad is a spineless coward who spends his time driving on their private rally track?

“That spot’s still open,” he tells her, cutting past the bullshit.

Her eyes widen. “I thought—”

“You thought wrong. Fucking do something good if you’re sick and tired of your parents. Besides, I could use your money.”

“Would that make you my boy toy?”

If she thinks he’ll get flustered then she has another thing coming.

“Considering you can buy a country; I’d marry you right now.”

She flushes and Katsuki knows he’s won. He leaves her like that and finds himself in a conversation with Ojiro. He's been making a name for himself in the mutant martial arts circuit, having recently placed second in the national tournament. Which is enough for him to have placed in the junior bracket for an international tournament. Apparently, it's the most prestigious martial arts tournament and placing in the top twenty is a lifetime achievement, the kind all the people who couldn't win brag about well into obscurity.

“You better fucking win,” Katsuki says. “None of that second-place nonsense.”

“You have a weird way of saying nice things.”

“He’s always been like that.”

They both look over to see Izuku approaching. He’s got an odd expression on his face, relaxed and calm even when surrounded by people who might not be his closest allies anymore.

“I’ll leave you two to talk,” Ojiro says, smart enough to not be caught in the crossfire if things get rowdy between them.

The pang of guilt at Izuku’s burn scars is present and will likely never leave. Thank fucking god the sealed red order which he got from that incident mysteriously disappeared from the databases during the war. It’s the only reason he hasn’t been sent to prison for the rest of his life for acting without a hero license.

That and no one thinks hero licenses are useful anymore. When Gang Orca and Mirko both retired after the war, there hadn’t been much of a top ten. Sure, Kamui Woods and Mt. Lady got bumped up, but they certainly aren’t respected like Hawks or All Might. And with Endeavour not making public appearances, there’s no one to look towards as a new pillar amongst the heroes.

Everyone's looking toward a new generation. They're looking at birdbrain for all he did during the war. People are watching Izuku for being who he is. Fuck, there's even internet forums dedicated
to Katsuki and what he's doing—and no, he won't be taking that interview with Quirk News Network no matter how much Intelli prods.

“Hey, dumbass,” he says, putting his internal thoughts aside. “How’s not being a fucking criminal feel? How the fuck do you even get arrested when you can beat the shit out of everyone, you stupid fuck?”

Izuku dares to smile. "I genuinely did miss your cursing."

He says it as smoothly as he wears his dark suit, the only hint of colour being his blood-red tie. He looks ominous and foreboding, nothing like the awkward Izuku he grew up knowing. Katsuki feels underdressed in his off-white jacket that he paired with sneakers and a rather rude red shirt.

“Fuck off. You gonna do something about your stupid ass followers who don’t know jack shit about you.”

“Well, I hear your group is doing that for me.” Izuku squeezes his shoulder. “I’m glad you found your own path to be a hero.”

Katsuki bats his hand away. “Fucking bleeding-heart pansy. Grow a pair and stop getting captured.”

Izuku’s laughter follows him as he walks away. There’s nothing malicious there, only fondness and genuine mirth.

It comes suddenly, the yearning in his chest for them to be friends. And Katsuki knows they can’t. Not after everything.

He finds Ibara and Jirou by the bar, both with cups of coffee. Katsuki can smell that alcohol in Jirou’s so far away it almost worries him.

“Alcohol and cigarettes don’t suit you.”

She bares her teeth. “Fuck you, mum. And I don’t do cigarettes.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, it’s your third boyfriend that does the smoking for you?”

“They’re not my boyfriends. They don’t even know about each other.” She fucking retrieves her flask from her jacket and takes a swig. “Look, if you’re uptight because you haven’t had sex in… ever, I’m sure one of them likes guys as well.”

He rolls his eyes and decides rehashing this argument isn’t worth it. Katsuki isn’t her mother and doesn’t control her. Besides, he doesn’t give two shits about how she lives her life.

He drowns them out as he scans the room for anyone he hasn’t spoken to. There’s Shoji but who knows if he even actually speaks. Aoyama is a bust because that means dealing with flamboyance and Katsuki doesn’t deal with such on the best of days. Besides, getting close to Aoyama means walking past the fucking birdbrain who has blood on his hands, a lot from how the media portrays him as a war hero.

“Stop glaring so much,” Jirou says. “It’s rude.”

“There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not repent,” Ibara says softly. “Only the Lord knows a man’s heart and innermost secrets. Be at peace, Katsuki. It is not our right to judge without knowing. That does not
excuse you, Jirou. We know you very well.”

“Are you my mother as well, now?”

Katsuki grunts, glad that he’s not the only one who gets the annoying mother treatment as well.

“You know I don’t believe in your god.”

“As you’ve told me many times. But, as Blessed Pope Francis once said, the Lord redeemed all of us, not just the Catholics.” She smiles and his throat tightens at the raw faith in her words. Faith in her God, yes, but faith in Katsuki as well. “I believe you do good in your own way, Katsuki. And that is more than enough.”

He works his throat, trying to find a rebuttal. But fuck if he doesn’t get confused when people treat him as something other than a villain about to happen.

Jirou punches him on the shoulder, chuckling, before taking Ibara to mingle with the others. They accept her easily enough and Aoyama manages to get a laugh out of her with his antics.

No one has come by the bar in a while. Not since birdbrain reached over and grabbed a bottle of vodka that he’s steadily been going through with Jirou. At least he didn’t try to speak with Katsuki because that would have led to a fight.

“Hey, Katsuki,” Denki broaches cautiously.

Katsuki glares at Kaminari. He honestly thought he'd beaten out that hesitance by now.

“The fuck you want that you gotta whisper for?”

Denki winces. “Are we gonna have to fight Izuku?”

The piece of shit in question is talking to bird-brain—and, incidentally, mostly draped over half-and-half—far away, but his head is tilted towards Kaminari. Fucker heard everything most likely.

“Not unless he starts anything.” He is tempted to gesture rudely. “If he does, I’ll punch him in the face until he behaves. Don't give two shits about his quirks. I’ll do it with my bare hands.”

“But you have to use your hands to punch someone.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

Things stay much the same for hours on end. Katsuki keeps out of the stupid drinking games because teenagers with access to an open bar are idiots. At least they shoot down Jirou’s drunken suggestion of an orgy, though she makes up for it by taking Aoyama out back. Katsuki hadn’t even noticed the pair were missing until they stumbled back in, both flushed but thankfully wearing clothes, even if Jirou’s bra is missing and Aoyama has more hiccups than clear skin.

“I’m adding you to my list,” Jirou slurs, poking Aoyama.

Katsuki walks Momo out before Jirou can make any more advances. It's dark out and the air is chilly. He regrets not bringing a jacket, unlike Momo who sports a thick black shawl over her red dress. She looks the part of a rich heiress, which never really changes. How mismatched they must look, the wealthy heiress and her poor friend.

He takes her hand and pulls her aside just before she stumbles over a hidden depression that he only knows about from living in Mustafu all his life. They’re close to the park he spent a big part of
his childhood in. The hill hiding the park looms over, a familiar and comforting sight.

“I’ve been told you’re quite the mother hen.”

“Fucking Jirou.”

“No, that was Izuku. Which Ibara corroborated.”

He takes a breath and pushes down his frustration. There’s a car down the road with two men outside. Momo gestures to her driver and bodyguard who both nod and get back in the car.

They walk a while longer until they find a comfortable bench to sit on, the only one of five that wasn’t destroyed by the war. Too much of the country bears the marks of devastation. Too many buildings flattened and ravines bisecting cities. Broken bridges and sunken neighbourhoods. Broken families and crying children.

He stretches out languidly, hoping to annoy her and stop thinking of his damaged nation. Instead, she sits right next to him, leaving almost no space, and places her head on his shoulder.

“What happened?” he asks.

“I saw it happen,” she says, staring in the far distance. “Tianjin burning. I saw it.”

He inhales sharply and wraps his arm around her. “I’m sorry?”

The fuck is he supposed to say to that? ‘I understand’ would be such bullshit he won’t even try. Worst he’s ever seen is a forest on fire and his classmates dying and the earth trembling as a natural disaster in human form unleashes his power. No, he certainly has no experiences like that.

And if he does consider it, then he might start trembling and find it hard to breathe. Having a panic attack when the woman beside you is crying is some pussy ass shit for beta males or secondary characters no one likes.

She darts her red-rimmed eyes over to him, contemplative. They soften slightly and she leans into him.

“Never change, Katsuki.”

She takes his free hand and laces their fingers together. It’s a beautiful night to be with someone you care for. He wishes he could say everything deep in his heart but those words are fragile, delicate as the agreements that kept Japan in peace. Katsuki worries that his bumbling words will shatter everything between them.

“Katsuki?”

He must have been lost in thought a moment too long. “Anyway, you wanna get married. I do need that fucking money.”

She huffs into his shoulder, amused. Better than the tears that have left a wet spot. Better this distraction than her knowing how he feels.

“You’re so needy. Women don’t like that in men.”

Yet, she doesn’t move. They stay like that a little while longer.

*****
The reunion has ended, leaving Shouto Todoroki incredibly pleased. Of everyone who had come, only Momo had been someone he had wanted to see. Unfortunately, she had walked off with Bakugou before he could corner her and chasing after her would have meant displacing Izuku who looks comfortable on Shouto’s lap.

They haven’t spent any time together since Izuku was arrested. Over a year without seeing him almost made Shouto forget what being with Izuku is like. It’s almost like gravity. Easy to ignore but undeniable when you’re about to jump out of a plane.

Izuku’s return is like the ground rapidly approaching.

Shouto walks beside Fumikage as they follow Izuku. He’s talking a mile a minute, bits and pieces from everything somehow intermingling. Shouto has no idea how some petty dictator from South America that died a century ago has to do with modern hero trends or the relationship between Australia’s military junta and the economic situation in Botswana.

A glance and Fumikage is just as confused, but at least he has a flask—Is that Jirou’s?—of vodka to indulge in. Drinking habit aside, Fumikage hasn’t changed any more than Shouto has. Maybe a bit more blood on their hands, though Shouto is sure he still holds the highest body count—and he isn’t letting that record go—but still the same.

Izuku, however, seems different somehow. Brilliant and magnificent, yes, but there’s something almost old about it. It’s like the glory of yesteryear somehow embodied in one person.

Eventually, they reach the waterfront. Izuku jumps onto the railing gracefully, not pausing in his torrent of words. He faces the water, taking it all in. And, as the minutes pass, so too do his words slow down.

“Sometimes I wish I had a water quirk. Then maybe I could just…” Izuku reaches out, almost trying to grasp the ocean in his hand. “You know.”

“Perhaps you would be happy,” Fumikage says without slurring. “But I feel it would chain you down. The ocean is not as free as the wind. It doesn’t search unerringly to the future as lightning does.”

“I nearly gave up a few times. You guys always know what to say to push me forward. Without you, getting out peacefully seemed impossible.”

“Some would say the hurdles we overcame are impossible. The three of us, gods in our own right. Who would believe that story?”

“Honestly, it seems a lot easier than being a hero. But if I’m with you, being a hero sounds easy.”

Thankfully, Izuku’s focused on the water, drawn to the endless blue as always. It means he doesn’t see Shouto’s thunderstruck expression.

Shouto and Fumikage share a look, one that speaks of disappointment. Izuku isn’t ready, not really, to face the harsh realities of the world. Maybe he never will be. Not if he still believes he can be a hero.

“Izuku.” Fumikage says it like he’s trying to soothe a wounded animal. “Why do you say that?”

Their friend turns back to face them, his grin still there but it is dimmed by his confusion. It tugs at his scars uncomfortably.
“That’s what we were gonna be, the three of us. That was the promise. We can show the world what heroes look like in a new era.”

He’s so painfully earnest that even Shouto’s empty pit for a heart is nearly moved. Nearly. Because he loves Izuku, but it hurts to see someone you love lie to themselves.

“We three kings,” Shouto says, his voice breaking. This very beach is where they made that promise. “That was the promise. That’s not the same as being a hero.”

Izuku’s smile cracks. “Isn’t it?”

It takes him a moment to understand. And it genuinely leaves him shocked. Izuku isn’t being naïve, not in the sense that he thinks change can be wrought without bloodshed and violence, but somehow his goal to change society is built on the back of being a hero. Maybe a different type of hero from the norm, but still a hero.

*You’d be killing in a war if we didn’t burn down Tianjin. Maybe then you’d understand that the age of heroes is dead and you killed it.*

Fumikage saves him from having to say anything.

“I have one duty, my friend. I am to fight the abyss and protect humanity. Heroics has nothing to do with that.”

“But—”

“And I stopped caring about that as a goal before the war started,” Shouto says. “Before the internships. You saw how I changed after the abyss. The things I did aren’t things a hero would do.”

“I forgive you.”

“Not if you really knew.” Shouto summons a spark of godflame to his hand. “The things I’ve done with this fire would make you sick. And if they would make someone like you who forgives as easily as breathing, sick, then the rest of the world would never accept me as a hero.”

“But—”

“No,” Fumikage interjects, summoning his sword. “I wish you could see the blood I’ve shed with this sword to protect Japan. Against China. Against the abyss. The only reason the Chrysanthemum stands in the light is to be a deterrent. Not because we’re good and just people, but because we’re the best killers out there and the world knows it. I earned a dozen awards and medals because I sank ships and killed, not because I am a good person.”

Izuku frowns. “I’m not stupid. But you’re my friends and I refuse to let you walk down that road anymore. We can be better.”

“Is that philosophy the reason you didn’t end the war quickly?” Fumikage asks caustically. “Were two lives really worthy everyone who died?”

Izuku’s eyes narrow and for a moment, Shouto hears a song that will end life. It fades quickly, but it’s the only indication that Izuku has gone from frustrated to rage.

“Momo and Kouta are their names. You think their lives weren’t worth it?”
Not Kouta, Shouto thinks, but even he is smart enough to not say it.

“I think only you can make that justification with your moral system which is, quite clearly, insane by every meaning of the word.”

“Fuck you. The way we live is more important than the goals we achieve.”

“And the twelve million Japanese people who are dead will never get to answer that question.” Fumikage takes a step forward, his sword burning with energy. “That’s on you. Grow up. Our morals don’t matter when lives are on the line.”

Izuku jumps down and the shadows follow him, engulfing him in darkness. “The way we act when no one is looking matter more. One life now becomes a thousand down the line.”

"In your case, it's already in the millions."

Fumikage dodges Izuku’s wild punch. They're both summoning power, enough to break the city of they're allowed to escalate. Any other day, he'd watch on the side-lines. But his family lives in the city. Momo is still in the city.

Shouto slides between them before it escalates, grabbing Izuku by his tie. “Calm down and take a walk.”

Izuku throws his hands in the air. “Fine. I didn’t come here to fight.”

He waits until Izuku is out of range before turning back to Fumikage. His disappointment must speak volumes as Fumikage doesn’t glare back at Shouto. That’s as close to an acknowledgement of wrongdoing as Shouto is going to get.

“Unnecessary.”

“I should have stayed my tongue,” Fumikage says, surprising Shouto. “Was he always so…"

Shouto nods. “I’ll keep him moving forward.”

“I’ll place my trust in your… love, to keep him whole.” He almost spits the word out in distaste.

“Thanks for making him angry,” Shouto says. “Now he’s too angry at you to be annoyed with me.”

“You’ll make it worse.”

Then Fumikage turns his back on Shouto. He takes one step forward and spacetime collapses around him, swirling and rising to Fumikage’s intent. Between one step and the next, he is gone, vanished to parts unknown.

It’s an interesting technique to twist the godflame’s hold over reality and make it malleable. Shouto doesn’t do that and would likely struggle with it. What Fumikage does is a subtle balancing act. Shouto would rather just burn down the barriers.

He gives Izuku time to stew in his thoughts, unwilling to disturb him just yet. Not when every shadow in the area is vibrating and the smell of ozone is so dense. When the world stops being so unnaturally dark and the pinpricks of light from the stars reach them, Shouto approaches him.

He sits right next to Izuku and they watch the waves lap against the pier, the biting wind forcing him to squint.
“I didn’t mean to throw that punch.”

“I think you did. You’re an angry person, Izuku. Violent, even. Especially when someone calls you a hypocrite.”

*Which you are. You don’t even realise you place those you love above your morals. You’re willing to forgive me even though you know the truth deep down.*

Izuku turns his head. “I didn’t even—”

Shouto takes that opportunity to silence him and lifts his hands, bringing them to Izuku’s face gently. His thumb brushes the outline of his burn scar, reaffirming his memory of every bump and ridge. He presses his forehead against Izuku’s, breathing in his presence as a drowning man would his first breath of air.

In the darkness of the abyss, Shouto came to learn that Izuku is the air and sun and gravity. Izuku promises a brighter future each time he smiles. It’s why so many follow him. It’s why he can change terrible people and make them want to try and leave something better.

Without Izuku, Shouto and Fumikage wouldn’t be friends. Perhaps there wouldn’t even be three kings without Izuku simply being himself.

Believing in Izuku is like a prayer in the deepest recesses of his soul. Mortals can pray to gods and sometimes they listen. What happens when a god prays?

*I’ll give you your society, just let us be with you. We’ll make the terrible choices so you don’t. They’ll hurt you and break you. Let us make them.*

He doesn’t say any of this out loud. He simply lets the weight of this unheard prayer permeate every iota of his being, every spark of his godflame heart, and every forgotten memory of his mother. That prayer is a promise, one that collapses endless futures in the vision of his right eye changed by godhood.

Izuku takes his hands gently. There is strength in his callouses and scars, a testament to all he has survived.

“I’m right here,” Izuku says earnestly. As though he accepts love and devotion as easily as breathing. But then again, he gives it just as easily.

That dichotomy between the human Izuku in his left eye, his human eye where Izuku is kind and compassionate and peaceable, and his right eye, his godflame eye where the shadowking is a towering bastion of impossible logics and beautiful cruelty, always leaves him dizzy.

“You’re my…” he trails off. Friend feels too weak. You aren’t simply friends with someone after carrying them on your back for months. You can’t simply be friends with someone willing to go the distance for you. With someone who will forgive your atrocities without words needing to be said.

Izuku laughs. “I’m yours. I always will be, no matter what you do.”

“You give yourself to everyone,” Shouto whispers, bitter but not sad.

“Because everyone’s worth it.”

“No, they really aren’t.”
“Believing they are is what being a hero means.”

Izuku smiles, and Shouto has never seen this one. He thought he knew every permutation those scars could take when his lips stretched. But this is different, fundamental to Izuku. It’s like seeing him stripped bare more so than even his dark eye can see.

It hurts Shouto that he’ll have to take away that smile.

“I need to say something you won’t like. Maybe you’ll punch me, but I think it needs to be said.”

“Say it.”

For a moment, he hesitates, tempted to change his words and make it more palatable. But Izuku’s green eyes are watching him intently, searching for deception or manipulation. They won’t let him retreat but neither will they let him lie.

With no other choice, Shouto tells the truth

“The age of heroes is dead and you killed it.”

Each word is like a physical blow to Izuku. By the time he is done, the distance between them feels vaster than the oceans. He could physically reach out and touch him, but the gap is too great. He tries so anyway.

Izuku punches him hard enough that he falls into the water with a broken jaw. Lightning burns his nerves and thunder breaks his bones, unending darkness flaying his skin.

He doesn’t know how long it is before he can function again. He’s at the bottom of the ocean, broken but healing. He rises above the water, seeing only the violent winds of Izuku’s rage.

Izuku himself is long gone and the sun is rising. He must have spent hours trying to fix himself. And yet, he knows his pain is nothing compared to the agony in Izuku’s heart.

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