Blues Drive Monsters

December has come and the city is sick.

As U.A.'s second term draws to a close, Musutafu City is plagued by strange happenings at night. Young heroes are found brutally beaten, with no memory of their assailant. Buildings and storefronts burst apart and collapse. Entire city blocks go mad, their inhabitants attacking everything in sight before calming down just as quickly. The perpetrators are unknown. The League of Villains is silent. The city begs for answers.

The faculty struggle to maintain normalcy, but when Class 1-A is caught in one of the incidents, Katsuki Bakugo decides to take matters into his own hands. In doing so, he sets off a chain of events that will lead the school to question everything it has stood for. One of the darkest secrets of the Hero Society has been unearthed, and what's crawled out intends to shatter the nation's fragile peace for good.

Spoilers up to Chapter 185.

Part 1 (Chapters 1-15) - "The Yard"
Notes

Forgive the kids, for they don't know how to live.
- St. Vincent, "Cruel"

Blues Drive Monster, won't you crush our melancholy world?
I'll wait forever.
- The Pillows, "Blues Drive Monster"
Part 1: The Yard

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

U.A. High School, birthplace of heroes and the place to which so many heroes returned, was in many ways a hero itself. Everyone looked to it; its place in the city’s skyline was as familiar and unmistakable as the sun, and when the school year began its students were usually emboldened by the way that four-pronged building gleamed like lapis in the daylight, surrounded by its lush gardens. But as the second term ended and the winter air stripped the trees and turned every shadow skeletal, the school, too, seemed to grow gaunt, especially at night, when the sodium-vapor lamps printed their sweltering orange light on the windows. Viewed from a distance, and at the right angle, the school’s towers in that light resembled the barrels of four massive syringes plunged deep into the earth, a dark inoculation against the criminal influences strengthening their grip on society since All Might’s retirement.

And if the school was some kind of vaccine, then it mostly worked for Musutafu City. U.A.’s prestige leaked into everyone’s property values. Most of the neighborhood was shining and pristine, and even in these grimmer days, aspiring villains didn’t feel like pushing their luck anywhere near the school itself. But every neighborhood had its dingier side, the streets which housed the people who had to scrub everything else so clean, and Mosei Ward was one such place. Not a slum by any means, but home to plenty of trash-strewn alleyways where thick tendrils of mist curled and squirmed serpentine, where passersby would sometimes feel unseen eyes on them that only grew more vicious as the sun went down. Many of the heroes assigned to Musutafu centered their patrols in places like these.

So it was for Tarou Chikaze, hero name Kamaitachi, a recent graduate of U.A. itself. His Quirk was called “Breeze” and it was less innocuous than it sounded—moderate control and generation of wind, including the ability to gather it up and fling it out as numerous blades of cutting force. He was a wiry kid, his costume predominantly sky-blue with a cowl and cape specially balanced to catch the updrafts of his winds. He’d been at the job long enough to regret missing the Noumu assault on Hōsu and express quiet relief at missing the League of Villains raid and the recent assault on the Yakuza. He was still strictly a second-stringer and knew it. He was ambitious but humble.

Right now he was sprawled out in an alley, cheek against the pavement, his costume almost glowing in the dingy night. Slowly, he raised a hand and touched the other side of his head. It was warm and wet. Through his swimming vision he saw his fingers come away red.

He struggled back to his feet, breath coming out in white jets. He tried to be sanguine about the whole thing. Couldn’t keep missing out on trouble forever. He’d wind up as a headline if he wasn’t careful now.

The alley was crisscrossed with clotheslines, and the few clothes they still hung up had soaked in the moisture and were limp and still as discarded skins. There was no wind. Nothing moved. He didn’t even feel anyone watching him.

Then, a low scrape. Metal on stone, but from where he couldn’t tell. It was strangely muffled. Maybe he’d suffered some kind of hearing damage after that blow to the head.

“Show yourself,” he said. He didn’t sound very intimidating. He’d never gotten a handle on the authoritative-voice part of the job.
Another scrape. No way to know if closer or further. A needle caught in a record that only played dead air.

Chikaze flung out a hand and the stonework to his side was crosshatched with gashes as the wind howled. He struggled for his phone, to send his location, get backup like he should have had in the first place, but his movements were clumsy and his head was full of fog. The side of his cowl was staining crimson. Finally he got his fingers on the phone, but then there was a hotness on the back of his neck, a great light bursting like a star behind his eyes, and then nothing.

From the mouth of the alley came a series of crunching thuds. They went on for some time. Then they stopped, and there was only Chikaze’s body, left among the surrounding rubbish like a piece of broken bottleglass.

* * *

“How many times do I gotta tell you to walk behind me, goddamn it!”

Not even strangers on the street turned their heads at that voice anymore. Word got around.

The afternoon sun was hatefully bright and most of the pedestrians in Musutafu’s shopping district had to shade their eyes just to keep from bumping into something, but that didn’t dampen anyone’s spirits any. The place was getting an early start on Christmas decorations as if to defy the recent spate of bad news. Tinsel was in abundance. Trees were delicately frosted. All of it had apparently made Bakugo’s legendarily bad mood even worse.

The procession: Shouto Todoroki leading the group, pointedly ignoring Bakugo’s voice. Bakugo stomping behind him with Kirishima in tow, the latter apologetically smiling at everyone, the former trying to hate-stare a hole through the back of Todoroki’s head. A loose group further behind – Midoriya and Uraraka marveling at the decorations, Kaminari and Mineta glancing down at their phones. And at the very back was Tokoyami, doing his best to look like all of this was beneath him.

“Hey, Icy Hot, I’m talkin’ to you!”

“If you want to walk ahead of me then speed up. I’m not going very fast.”

“Screw that! You slow down, asshole!”

“Really getting into the Christmas spirit, huh, dude?” Kirishima remarked, and then he shut up when Bakugo whirled on him, steam jetting from his nostrils like an overheated boiler.

“Is he like this every year?” Uraraka muttered to Midoriya. “I mean, he’s always like this, but lately it’s just, like, yikes.” No response. “Deku? Earth to Deku!”

He blinked. “Oh. Sorry. Zoned out for a minute.”

“Could’ve fooled me. You weren’t doing that muttering thing.”

“It’s about something different.” He smiled a little and tried to run his hand through the mad tangle of his hair. “Just wondering what to get my mom for Christmas, is all.”

Kaminari butted in. “Hell, dude, if you manage to go a full term without your skeleton exploding I think she’d be plenty happy with that. Saves money, too!”

“Uncouth,” Tokoyami said.
“What? It’s true! He hasn’t messed himself up too bad since that whole thing at summer camp.”

“Will you nerds shut up?” Bakugo growled. “You’re giving me a headache.”

“Pot and kettle much?” Mineta said, not looking up from his phone.

“I’ll pop you like a zit, you goddamn midget!”

Uraraka had a point – Bakugo seemed to be on edge even by Bakugo standards. And none of them needed Midoriya’s brainpower to understand why.

They were headed for Jon-X, a department store in the heart of the district. It had been Uraraka’s idea. She’d said it would help to get ahead of the Christmas shopping and blow off some steam before finals, but in truth it was more like these decorations, an act of defiance against current events. A noose was tightening. The crimes popping up at night still hadn’t been solved and were only getting worse. Aizawa had reluctantly signed off on this little outing provided they stick together, meet curfew, and remain in crowded places. Here the streets were absolutely mobbed, but they all still felt anxious. Kirishima did his best to change the subject.

“Yo, Todoroki, what’re you gonna get? I don’t think I’ve ever seen you do anything for fun.”

“I never learned how.”

“Ouch. Harsh.”

“It’s fine. There are a few small things my mother and Fuyumi would like. I have a list.”

“What about dear ol’ dad?” Bakugo sneered, but Todoroki didn’t rise to the challenge.

“There’s a huge sale on hiking boots I gotta get on top of, myself,” Kirishima said. “Me an’ Bakugo are gonna hit the mountains hard soon as the weather thaws, right dude?” Bakugo spat out something unintelligible. “How about you guys in back?”

“Shoes,” Uraraka said. “It’s a cliché, I know.”


“Better hope not,” Bakugo said. “I don’t think they can stack shit any higher.”

“I intend to purchase keychains, mostly,” Tokoyami said, quietly enough so that no one could hear him.

“I’m just window-shopping,” said Kaminari. “I do most of my stuff online anyway. How about you, Mineta?”

“Plebians, all of you.” He kept swiping through his phone, and Kaminari leaned over and saw him going through an exhaustive gallery of pictures he’d taken of girls on the street. “I’m people-watching. Some of us appreciate the finer things in life.” He panned the streets and his eyes lit up. “Ooh, look at that one. We match!”

He raised his phone and took aim at a somewhat disheveled girl with bruise-colored hair and matching overcoat. Kaminari groaned and pinched his nose. Asui was with a bunch of their classmates on a study group set up by Yayorozu and Iida, and the whipcrack of her tongue was sorely missed.
The girl didn’t notice them. She was staring at one of the jumbo TV screens embedded in the panoply of colors on the buildings above. Many others were looking at the same screen.

“-age twenty, was found severely beaten in an alley in the Mosei ward of Musutafu City, home of U.A. Academy. During his time in school, Chikaze was praised as a dedicated if unassuming student, and had already begun to amass a small fanbase despite his brief tenure. He remains in critical condition.”

The newscast flashed Chikaze’s graduation photo – broad smile, handsome features, if slightly rodentine. None of them had known him, but then they hadn’t had much of a chance to meet any U.A. graduates anyway.

“God damn, another?” Kaminari said. “This is like the eighth one so far.”

“The tenth,” said Tokoyami. “This is becoming untenable.”

“The police had no comment. However, Osamu Nakayama of the Ministry of Individuality offered the following statement.”

The screen now flipped to show a man who could have been anywhere between thirty and sixty, face weathered but curiously unlined, tousled black hair, hands folded in front of him but twitching like a pair of trapped birds. He spoke eloquently but his voice was a strange faint rasp, like a burlap sack dragged across the dirt.

“I want to offer my sincerest condolences to U.A. Academy for their recent tribulations,” said the man, “and express my full confidence that the criminal or criminals responsible for these attacks will be brought to justice. While neither the Hero Association nor the police have reached out to us – quite understandably, in my opinion – I wish for them to know that our door, so to speak, is always open. It is my hope that, in these uncertain times, a new kinship between heroes and the State may yet be born. We are prepared to offer assistance with any resources we can muster.”

“So it’s true,” Midoriya mused. “The M.o.I. really is making a comeback.”

“Who’re these guys again?” Kaminari asked. “I remember them coming up as an extra-credit question on an exam once, but it stumped me then, too.”

Todoroki cut in. “Back when Quirks were still in their fledgling state, the government created a new division responsible for their study and regulation, the Ministry of Individuality. The law against using Quirks in public, for example – that’s enforced by the police, but it was initially proposed and drafted by the M.o.I. Over time their responsibilities shifted to the police force and the Hero Public Safety Commission, and when All Might showed up they all but disappeared entirely. Looks like they’re on the rise again, now that All Might has fallen. I haven’t seen this Nakayama before.”

“I have,” said Midoriya. “I mean, not on TV. But he’s been their head for a while now.”

“Greasy prick,” Bakugo snapped.

“I don’t know, he seems nice,” Uraraka said hesitantly. “At least he’s trying to be helpful, right?”

The unspoken answer: And we might need the help.

It had started a month ago. A jewelry store had exploded in the dead of night, scattering its pieces across the street in brilliant constellations. No char marks or any other sign of an actual explosive; the building had simply detonated like an overfilled balloon. The first hero victim had been found a few days later, to be joined by nine others, all of them artlessly bludgeoned into unconsciousness but with
no recollection of the attacker. Some of them were still in the hospital. Some of them didn’t know when they would leave.

And then there was the third thing. None of them liked to talk about it. Even the news didn’t dwell on it for very long. As though it was some kind of curse, so that speaking of it would draw its attention. The smashed windows and the charred and pitted brickwork. The gibbering in the streets. The sirens screaming into the dark.

A few members of Class 1A had insisted that they be allowed to investigate these happenings like they had with the Yakuza incident earlier than year. Bakugo, as usual, had been the loudest and swearest among them. But Aizawa had shut them down hard.

“If you think running after villains is more important than your education at this school, then speak up now so I can expel you and do us both a favor,” he’d said. “While events this year might have given you the wrong impression, U.A. still exists to protect its students, not the other way around.”

No one had spoken up. Bakugo had quietly fumed, his knuckles clenched white at his desk. And ever since then he’d been even more sullen and snappish than usual.

“Come on, sweetheart, turn this way,” Mineta whispered. “Little more…just a little more…”

He was still taking photos. The girl glanced their way, and he managed to squeeze off one more before Kaminari grabbed him by the ear and pulled him along. Other people looked their way as they walked. Not all of the stares were friendly.

“I’m kind of starting to regret going out like this,” Uraraka said, pulling her coat around her.

“These crimes have been committed under U.A.’s watchful eye,” Tokoyami said. “It is understandable that the populace would harbor some resentment.”

Bakugo spat. “Fuck ‘em.”

“Mr. Aizawa’s been looking even more strung out than usual, I know that much,” said Kirishima. “I don’t really blame him for popping off on us like that, but come on, we’ve done more work than like half the teachers this year. It’s like, put me in, Coach.”

“When Kacchan got captured it seemed like everyone was going after U.A.,” Midoriya said, and ignored the muffled scream from Bakugo. “But after All Might and All for One fought, public opinion of us actually evened out for a while. Maybe because everyone was waking up to how serious the villains’ threat really was. This feels like an escalation. Striking as close to U.A. as they possibly can.”

“Poking our eye, basically,” Kaminari volunteered.

“Tweaking our nipple,” Mineta contributed.

“It’s a fool’s errand in any case,” said Todoroki. “The dragnet here is very wide and sifts very fine. Whoever’s doing this can’t stay hidden for much longer, even if they’re affiliated with the League of Villains.”

“Why don’t you tell that to the D-lister on the news today.” Bakugo spat again. “Bet it’d be a real load off his mind.”

No one could muster a reply to that.
Their spirits had dampened by the time they got to Jon-X, but the place’s décor perked them up again some – the store was four tiers high and glittered like the inside of a geode. The greeters smiled and bowed. Kirishima smiled back and waved. Kaminari deftly shoved Mineta’s phone back in his pocket.

They elbowed through the crowd until they reached the escalators and entered a huddle, Uraraka setting the timer on her phone.

“So the rule is for us to stick together, so I guess we’d better keep in pairs at least. Deku, we’re both basically looking for the same things. I can. Go. With you. Maybe?”

“Yeah. That sounds. Uh. Good.”

They’d both flushed around the collar. Kaminari and Mineta sniggered.

“Me n’ Bakugo’ll head off ourselves,” Kirishima said. “Anyone wanna come with?“

“You try and I’ll kill you,” Bakugo said.

“He won’t actually do that, no worries.”

“I’ll just stick with Mineta,” said Kaminari. “Make sure he doesn’t get collared by security for… y’know. Being the way he is.”

“That leave us,” Todoroki said to Tokoyami. “Want to come with? Sorry, but I’m not shopping for anything terribly interesting.”

“Er. Yes. That sounds reasonable.” He scratched the side of his beak and stole a nervous glance at the Darth Chic on the third floor. “I, too, have mundane tastes.”

“Meet back here in two hours or so, then.” Uraraka started the clock. “Okay, break. And Bakugo, try not to assault anyone.”

Bakugo threw a molten glare her way as she turned and left with the others.

“This is such bullshit,” he muttered.

“Why’d you want to come in the first place, man? I figured it’d help you blow off steam. Doesn’t seem to be working.”

“I ain’t gotta blow off steam! I’m calm as hell!”

“Yeah, sure. Exactly as calm as hell. What’re you looking at now?”

He’d turned back to the frosted wall of glass that made up the building’s front doors, squinting hard. Kirishima followed his gaze and saw nothing there. The crowd chattered and seethed and checked their phones. Christmas music seeped through the speakers. Everyone was smiling.

“Forget it.” Bakugo turned on his heel. “Let’s get going already. And you’d better walk behind-”

Something was wrong.

The light had changed. The sunny bulbs off all that glass. It was dim and gray and slanted. The world was slanted. The world was sideways. His face pressed against shattered linoleum. Warmth trickling down his skin. Teeth full of grit. The air was solid with dust. Sunlight where it shouldn’t be. Slanted and sideways. Through the holes that hadn’t been there. He couldn’t hear. Couldn’t hear.
All through his skull a singing. A high ringing note. The explosions he made sometimes rattled his bones but this sound was insufferable, it filled him to the brim. He wanted to crack his skull open and let it drain out. He tried to stand and couldn’t. Too hard to breathe. Kirishima over him like a planetoid, coat ripped, hair patinaed with grime, his skin cracked and hardened, screaming desperately in words he couldn’t hear. Bakugo shoved him aside and staggered upright and fell to his knees.

The department store was cracked like an egg. Bodies motionless and scattered like the baubles from the shopfronts, the ground a minefield of broken glass. As the ringing in his ears abated the screams and sobs came through like the sunlight through the newly ripped holes in the building’s façade. Everything gone gray with dust.

Not everything. As he lurched forward he saw. Past the spasming and sparking escalators the roof had caved in. Concrete taking quite a tumble. Uraraka there on her knees, screaming and clawing at the rocks. Bakugo stopped, wracked with tinnitus, eyes bloodshot and watering, and saw Midoriya’s shoes sticking out from the fallen masonry, bright as splotches of blood.

* * *

Mosei again. Nightfall again. It had happened again.

These scenes, marking the streets like obscene graffiti: flashing police siren-light pooling in the marks on apartment walls, gouged out, blown out, cracked with clawmarks or pocked with what looked like ball-bearings fired out at a great velocity. A street corner frozen solid, ice hanging from a lamp like a roosting bat. Windows shattered inward. Windows shattered outward. Fires burning through windows, their witchlight printing the ground. The sirens called and called. Two children shuddering beneath blankets, one of them charred all along half their body and the other with their cheek torn open. A man lying on his back as if stargazing, his face all red. A woman being guiding to a squad car, shivering and pale, hands grasping at something unseen.

Through these tableaus walked a figure, face hidden beneath the furred hood of a parka pulled low. In its arms was bundled something sleeping. Its step was unhurried and steady. It went unnoticed by all. At one point it passed a running officer close enough for the sleeves of their coats to brush together but the officer didn’t slow or glance behind. People wandered bloody through the ruin as if waking from awful dreams. The trespasser let them be.

The bundle in its arms stirred and moaned and it stopped and rocked it until it quieted. The trespasser stole a glance behind, taking in the devastation. The wind blew and carried the smell of iron and char. It inhaled deep. Then it was gone, and there were only the sirens, their senseless howls trailing up into the night sky.

Chapter End Notes

This fic was originally published in late May, but difficulties with outlining led me to take it down until I got my work in order. Now I have a better handle on things and have built up a bit of a buffer, so updates should be consistent.

This is a hypothetical end-of-term arc that assumes nothing catastrophic occurs between the Culture Festival and the year's end. Please enjoy.
Chapter 2

The next day was overcast and ghostly gray light pressed on U.A.’s windows. It looked like the day of a funeral, and the faculty assembled in one of the school’s conference rooms, with their folded hands and downcast eyes, came off as mourners themselves. Principal Nezu took the head of the table (in his customized quarter-sized chair, as always), and while he was still as dapper as ever, his fur had definitely lost some of its sheen. To his sides were Aizawa, Cementoss, Snipe, Recovery Girl, Midnight, Present Mic, and finally All Might, who sagged like he was ready to break apart under his own weight.

“Is this everyone?” Nezu asked.

“Thirteen and Ectoplasm are still assisting with cleanup,” said Cementoss. “Hound Dog is looking after Eri. As for Vlad…well, life goes on. Class 1-B still has lessons.”

“So it goes.” Nezu nodded at Recovery Girl. “And thank you, ma’am, for taking time out of your own busy day to be with us.”

“I work here, Principal,” she snapped. “Kindly drop the pleasantries and get on with it.”

He sighed. “Fair enough. First order of business, then. The children?”

“I finished the last of their examinations earlier this morning. Bakugo has some lingering tinnitus, but I expect that to clear up shortly – his Quirk would have left him deaf as a stump years ago if his hearing was that vulnerable. Uraraka, minor lacerations. Kaminari had a broken arm and fractured ribs, but he’s on the mend. Mineta, minor concussion, he’s already up and about. Todoroki, Tokoyami, and Kirishima are right as rain. And then…Midoriya.”

All Might winced.

“Don’t sugarcoat it,” said Aizawa.

“The best I can say is that he’s probably done worse to himself.” She shook her head. “He’s built like a slab of iron and his Quirk was active at the time of impact. Still, the boy had a couple tons of rock fall on him from quite a height. I healed him up the best I could, but he’ll be in and out of consciousness for a while and I want to monitor him very closely for a while after that. Crushing damage is not something you can take lightly. There could be internal hemorrhaging…or, God forbid, a brain bleed.”

All Might covered his face with his hands.

“That child just has no luck at all,” Cementoss said.

“Luck had nothing to do with it,” Aizawa retorted. “His reflexes failed him. He didn’t get out of the way in time.”

“As it happens, you’re both wrong,” said Nezu. “Interviews with victims at the scene revealed that he pushed two civilians out of the way immediately after the blast. Presumably, that’s why his Full Cowl was active. He was able to save them, but not quick enough to leap out of danger himself.”

Snipe grunted. “Boy’s got sand. It’ll be the death of him.”

“Please refrain from such comments at this meeting, Snipe.”
“Sorry, sir.”

“The civilians are another concern,” said Midnight. “That store was packed. Casualties were…not insignificant.”

“And the news is making noise again for certain,” said Present Mic. There was a distinct droop to his coif. Maintaining his usual cheer was too big an ask, lately.

“Which brings us to the next item on our agenda,” said Nezu. He placed his paws on the tabletop and leaned forward. “Presently, this city is being attacked on three different fronts. Over the last twenty-four hours, all three have advanced in a significant way. Eraserhead, if you could—”

“Just Aizawa for now, please. Sorry, Principal. I’m not in the mood for needless pageantry.” He straightened in his seat; the veins in his eyes stood out like the cracks through a dry lake bed. “To summarize: we have the spontaneous destruction of buildings, the nighttime assaults on patrolling heroes, and the…well, for lack of a better phrase, the insanity attacks. Occurrences of all three have popped up lately. And there’s a definite pattern being established, with one major exception.”

“We could figure that much out for ourselves,” Cementoss said. There was a grinding of stone on stone as he shifted in his seat. “I remember Chikaze. He was a bright young man. Now it’s in question if he’ll even be able to walk anytime soon, let alone return to hero work.”

“Feels like Stain all over again,” said Snipe. “But without the craftsmanship.”

“A vulgar way of putting it, but yes. There’s something infuriatingly amateur about these attacks. The victims are struck repeatedly with a blunt instrument – likely a crowbar or a pipe of some sort – without any precision or intent. In Chikaze’s case the ground around him was chipped. Like his attacker was swinging so wildly they didn’t even hit their mark on several blows. How can someone so clumsy catch our alumni by surprise time and again?”

“Whoever they are, they’re not completely inept,” said Midnight. “None of the victims have had strength-augmentation or area-of-effect Quirks that could catch this individual off-guard. They’re deliberately picking targets that can be laid out by one good blow.”

Nezu nodded. “Our solution there, at least, is obvious. Mandatory patrols of at least two heroes, preferably with complementary Quirks. Our mysterious midnight bludgeoner clearly has some kind of stealth Quirk, but their physique is average at best. Patrolling in groups will neutralize them completely.”

“I agree,” said Midnight. “Except that spotlight-guzzling cow Uwabami’s already thrown a wrench in that idea.”

Everyone present averted their gaze; Midnight had developed a distinct tic under her eye. Uwabami had made a quick appearance on the talk-show circuit to announce that she would be taking the hero assaults personally from here on. She was confident, she said, that she could catch this villain single-handedly.

“She likes to talk, but she’s no fool,” said Aizawa. “I doubt she’d be walking into the lion’s den like that without a plan. Let’s leave her to it, for now.” He turned to the others. “Unfortunately, that individual is the least of our troubles. We’re still surveying the damage from last night’s outbreak.”

Even now they talked around the edges of it. Everyone in the room was a veteran hero, but some things were just too much to stare right in the face. The summary was this: ordinary people went stark raving mad at night, attacking each other with their Quirks, with makeshift weapons, with bare
hands if they had no other options. Tearing their fingernails as they scrabbled at doors and poured into the streets in pop-eyed, gibbering fury. The riots could be heard for blocks around. First responders found themselves consumed by the same poisonous rage. But then, as soon as it began, it would end, leaving the victims to stare catatonically at the blood on their hands and the wreckage of their homes. Exploding buildings were nothing new, and heroes being attacked was just part of the job, but this – this was unusual. It didn’t discriminate. It grabbed hold of everyone. The paranoia kept them awake at night.

“Miraculously, no one’s yet died from these incidents,” said Recovery Girl. “But last night had some very, very close calls. To say nothing of other trauma, or property damage…it’s the children that break my heart the most.”

“No kidding,” said Present Mic. “Imagine some little kid’s parents going after them like that…it makes my throat close up.”

“Or vice-versa.” Snipe’s goggles glinted. “We’re in the age of Quirks, after all. And the little kiddies got some awful potent ones of their own. Ain’t no guarantee they couldn’t shred their folks just as easy if they weren’t holdin’ back.”

All Might shuddered. For some reason, the lean specter of Tomura Shigaraki flashed through his mind.

“What’s even more concerning is that these attacks are deliberately growing worse with each new occurrence,” said Aizawa. “The first one was about a month ago. Lasted five minutes. The next one was around ten minutes. Then fifteen. Last night was twenty. And they’re gradually moving further into residential districts, so more people are affected. The radius seems unchanged – it’s about four blocks in all directions – but duration and location? The pattern is undeniable. Not only that, but they’re targeting lower-income areas of the city, which is just increasing tensions further. No time like Christmas to divide between the haves and the have-nots.”

“The assaults, too, have increased in frequency,” said Nezu. “Which brings us back to the final front – the property damage. No doubt it’s being caused by some sort of force-manipulation Quirk, given the lack of char marks or chemical residue at the explosion sites. But the Jon-X bombing breaks this gradually worsening pattern in several ways. It happened in broad daylight, for one. It was in a far more upscale district than usual. And the sheer scale and audacity of the attack was an enormous leap from before.”

They nodded. The previous blasts had mostly been unoccupied shops or garages – the one before Jon-X had been worryingly close to a hospital, but that was all.

“There is only one factor I can see that would motivate our bomber to step up their plans in such a dramatic fashion,” Nezu continued. “And it confirms our worst fears about all of these incidents in general.”

The pall over the group deepened. They all knew what he would say next:

“Class 1-A. They were deliberately targeting our students.”

“You can’t tell them that.”

They turned to All Might; it was the first he’d spoken since sitting down. His scarecrow face was drawn and tight. His eyes burned like pilot flames.

“You can’t,” he repeated. “I’m sure they already suspect it themselves, but to hear it from us? The
guilt would ruin them.”

“Those children should be commended, not blamed,” said Recovery Girl. “Todoroki stabilized the building beautifully after the blast and Tokoyami safely guided out as many victims as he could. And if it weren’t for Uraraka’s Quirk, many of the victims would have suffered even more damage during transport. Midoriya included.”

“Never should’ve let them go,” Aizawa muttered.

“And then what?” said Snipe. “Toss ‘em in the pokey and throw away the key? You make ‘em feel like they’re locked up in here, they’ll leave of their own accord. The dorms were pushin’ it to begin with.”

“This certainly has been a war on our morale,” Cementoss sighed. “And we have no leads? Are we absolutely certain the League of Villains isn’t involved?”

“They’ve fallen silent since Kurogiri was apprehended,” said Midnight. “He’s still in custody and he’s not talking. This Gigantomachia character remains at large, but I doubt he’s behind any of these incidents. Since All Might’s retirement there have definitely been other villains fighting for the spotlight, but none of them have stepped forward either. There aren’t any registered Quirks in the whole of Tokyo that perfectly match what we’ve seen on display here.”

“And meanwhile this Nakayama chump talks and talks,” Present Mic grumbled. “Hey, Principal, you gotten in touch with this guy at all? If he offers any more well-wishing I’m gonna ralph all over the airwaves.”

“We’ve had some tentative correspondence, but it doesn’t appear he can offer us much,” said Nezu. “His offer, at least, seems genuine. I’ll keep him in mind going forward. For now, we should tighten curfew and redouble our efforts to find the perpetrators. Stay in touch with Uwabami and put out a request for any heroes with tranquilizing and healing Quirks in case another riot starts. I’ll continue my research. Is there anything else?”

“Midoriya.” All Might’s voice was a hoarse whisper.

“What of him?”

“Has his mother been informed?”

Everyone except Nezu flinched at that.

“She has,” Nezu said levelly. “We made it clear that his condition is stable and visiting hours are available. She said she would come to see him when he’s more lucid.”

“Guess I’ll do the same.” He rose from his seat. “Apologies for the silence, everyone. I don’t have much to contribute.”

“We’ve all been pushing ourselves too hard,” said Midnight. “Get some rest, okay?”

“Yeah.”

He limped out the room and shut the door behind him. Aizawa was next to stand. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to tell my students that they aren’t allowed outside the campus walls anymore.” He stalked to the door. “We’re looking awfully sorry to the world at large right now. It needs to be solved. Immediately.”
He left. Present Mic removed his glasses, pinched his nose.

“Guy’s been sending bad vibrations all month,” he said.

“He’s working himself to death,” said Cementoss. “And for good reason. I can’t remember a villain that evaded us so completely. And right in our own backyard.”

“Something’s gotta give,” said Snipe. “One way or another. Best prepare to take shelter for when that happens.”

“We all have jobs to do.” Nezu hopped off his seat, unsmiling. “Thank you for your time, everyone. Meeting adjourned.”

* * *

The tension carried into U.A.’s classrooms. Students sat stiff-backed in their chairs, ready to flinch. Up until this point many of them had managed to convince themselves that the recent troubles were only happening around them, not to them – their proximity to U.A. itself was an unfortunate coincidence that would be quickly remedied. Yesterday had changed that notion.

Aizawa hadn’t come with his sleeping bag in weeks. He took his place behind the podium every day, growing more and more bent as though he were dissolving in the vitriol of his exhaustion. The undercurrent of chatter in Class 1-A stopped dead as soon as he hobbled in.

“I know how rumors like to spread, so I’ll nip them in the bud now,” he said. “Your classmates are fine. Kaminari and Midoriya are still recuperating, but they’ll pull through.”

Iida bolted upright. “Thank you, Mr. Aizawa! As class representative, I am ashamed not to have accompanied them on such an errand my-”

“Sit. Down.”

Everyone tensed up; Aizawa had spoken through grit teeth. Iida blinked, then took his seat, looking ashamed and a little hurt. Aizawa let several seconds pass before speaking again.

“There’ll be a formal assembly later this afternoon, but I’ll mention the relevant parts now. Starting today, all students are hereby forbidden from leaving the school campus until this crime wave in Musutafu has been halted. Exceptions might – might – be granted for hero work officially sanctioned by class faculty and the police, as per your provisional licenses, but I wouldn’t hold my breath. Anyone found leaving campus grounds without permission will be immediately punished in the harshest possible way. Is that clear?”

Uraraka’s hand shot up. Everyone stared at her like she’d just pitched a rock at a sleeping bear. Everyone except Kirishima – he kept his eyes on Bakugo, who was looking straight ahead, his eyes half-lidded and dull. There was a pencil delicately clutched between his thumb and forefinger.

“Speak up, Uraraka,” said Aizawa, and she rose from her seat. Her arms and face were still bandaged in places from where chips of rock had sliced her up. After Jon-X’s destruction she’d used her Quirk to help transport the victims, their weightlessness ensuring that broken bones wouldn’t be damaged any further.

“With all due respect, sir, shouldn’t we be helping with this investigation ourselves? We’ve already shown that we’re capable, after the Overhaul raid. And we have a personal stake in this now.” She trembled like a leaf under Aizawa’s glare, but stood her ground. “It doesn’t seem right for us to just huddle together behind the school’s walls like this. We’re supposed to be heroes!”
“I think this year’s given you an outsized view of your own importance,” he said drily, and she flushed red. “You are not heroes. You are heroes-in-training, not even finished with your first year at this academy. The fact that you’ve gotten involved with actual hero work time and again over the last several months only shows that the rest of us aren’t doing our jobs properly.” He stopped, let out a bone-cracking yawn, and continued. “Serial killers. Kidnappings. Yakuza. You might have done well up to this point, but the world’s getting harsher by the day. You’re not fit to handle it as it is now.”

“That’s not fair! We-”

“Fair has nothing to do with it. It’s the facts.” He yawned again. “Or was yesterday not proof enough?”

For a moment, Uraraka looked ready to explode herself. Then she slumped, and hung her head. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. Take your seat.” He turned to the board and paused. “That said. Those of you who were caught in the attack did well during the rescue efforts. I’m glad you remembered your training.”

Kirishima hadn’t looked away from the pencil during all this. He was transfixed by it. Any second, he was sure that it would snap like a twig between Bakugo’s fingers.

Aizawa picked up his chalk. “Now, to business. We still have finals approaching.”

The pencil didn’t break.

Somehow, that was even worse.

* * *

The class had an informal meeting of their own after last bell, gathering around the TV in their dorm’s common area. The Jon-X bombing was smeared across the news like roadkill – ugly, garish, and already starting to stink. Class 1-A’s presence at the scene was mentioned repeatedly.

“Yeah, keep bringing it up,” Sero muttered darkly. “Wouldn’t want anyone to get the wrong idea, or anything.”

“The place wouldn’t have gotten blasted if people from our class hadn’t been there,” said Asui. “Tsu, what the hell!?"

“I get that you don’t like it, but it’s true. Everything went boom almost as soon as you guys stepped inside, right?”

“Within minutes,” said Todoroki. “But I didn’t see anyone following us. Certainly no one that looked like a villain.”

“Our guard was down.” Tokoyami’s arms were crossed, his sharp face somehow even more severe than usual. “An unforgivable oversight.”

“That’s dumb,” Asui replied. “Can’t stay on guard 24/7. You’d go nuts. And the teachers signed off on you guys leaving, anyway. So it’s really their fault. They probably know it, too.”

“It’d explain why old man Aizawa had such a bug up his ass over things,” said Satou. He glanced over at Iida, who was still shaken from the rebuke; Yaoyorozu was trying to buck him up, without
Strange, how a few words could change things. The dorms’ luxuries had impressed them all when they’d first moved in – climate control, plush couches, top-end TV’s, buttery overhead lighting – but after Aizawa’s announcement earlier that day, all the softness had turned stifling. The school had formally announced the policy to the press and many of their social media feeds were melting down; Jirou and Ashido had barely looked up from their phones all evening. Many of the comments were unkind. U.A. was catching flak from all sides.

The TV babbled on.

“-asked for comment, Minister Osamu Nakayama again expressed his-”

“Would someone please mute that shit?” Kirishima growled.

“Who is this guy?” Ashido asked, glancing up from her phone. “Been hearing his name all over lately.”

“Ministry of Individuality,” Todoroki said. “They’re on the rise.”

“Oh God, right, those people. You know they’re even building an HQ in Kasumigaseki now? Place practically popped up overnight.”

Iida’s hands clenched. “As our fortunes fall, theirs improve. It pains me deeply to even suggest it, but could they be somehow involved with these attacks?”

Todoroki shook his head. “Can’t say for sure, but at a glance I’d doubt it. Look at him. Even on TV you can tell he’s exhausted.” And indeed, there were purple grave-ditches dug out under Nakayama’s eyes that even the makeup crews couldn’t cover up. “This is becoming a problem for everyone, not just U.A.”

“Hey. Uraraka.”

That had been Kirishima again. At the sound of her name, Uraraka, who’d occupied the corner of a couch all to herself, jumped guiltily in her seat as if waking up from a doze. “What is it?”

“You been to see Deku yet?”

She fidgeted as everyone turned to her. “Um, not yet. He’s still not really conscious. Tomorrow for sure, though. Does…does anyone else want to come?”

“Yes,” said Yaoyorozu, after an overlong pause. “Not all at once, though. I think we should let you see him by yourself, since you’re…” Another pause, this one excruciating, as she grasped for the right words. “Good friends.”

“Yeah. Okay.”

Kirishima also had receded into himself, and while everyone knew why no one wanted to say it out loud. Bakugo hadn’t spoken to him since yesterday; in fact, he hadn’t spoken to anyone except Mineta, which was a whole other mystery altogether. Mineta had sauntered into the dorms after classes with a bandage around his head and his usual chipper attitude, and then Bakugo had driven him into a corner and had a long and uncharacteristically quiet conversation that had left Mineta glassy-eyed and pale. They’d both locked themselves in their rooms after that and hadn’t emerged all night. Kirishima said it was fine, that they all knew what happened if you tried to prod the guy when he was keeping quiet – it was about as wise as taking a nap next to lit dynamite. But it still ate at him.
“Everything will be fine,” said Iida. “The heroes will take care of it. We need to trust them.”

No one answered him. And through the glass doors at the dorms’ entrance, the cityscape darkened as the jaws of nighttime closed around them.

* * *

Not many of Bakugo’s classmates had seen his bedroom. Most of them believed, quite reasonably, that it’d look like a bomb had hit it. But as it turned out, Bakugo kept his space clean with the same barely contained fury he applied to everything else. Wrinkles were not tolerated. Dust was eradicated. His books, clothes, and weight set were all arranged in parallels so straight it looked like they’d been fixed in place by magnetic leylines. And if some luckless spider was found crawling on his walls, he’d crush it and then immediately scrub the wall clean of its remains. Not even the creature’s shadow would be left.

But now it was in disarray. His bedspread was rumpled and his uniform roughly tossed into a corner. His barbells were on his dresser and in serious danger of tumbling off. And tacked up on his wall was a map of the Musutafu metropolitan area, in front of which Bakugo himself paced. He went back and forth between the map and his computer, typing in vicious machinegun bursts, slamming his mouse on the desk whenever the load screens flickered. As he worked he emitted a constant stream of disjointed profanity under his breath like a coffee pot on boil.

He unscrewed a red marker and circled a spot on the map. There were several such circles, mostly downtown; the one exception was a certain spot in the shopping district, which had a large X slashed through it. The circles were mostly clustered together. The X stood far apart, like an orbiting star.

He stepped away from the map and stared like a portrait artist searching for flaws in his subject’s smile. After a few minutes, he unscrewed the marker again and X’d off several more spots. Outside, night had fallen completely; the campus grounds’ lights stood alone in the black like lonesome ghosts.

Bakugo dug his phone out of his pocket and scrolled through the photos.

Mineta had been thorough. As they’d walked down the streets yesterday he’d taken almost three dozen pictures, many of them blurry and ill-rendered. Bakugo had forced him to transfer them all to his phone and threatened apocalyptic reprisal if he ever breathed a word of it to anyone, but in truth he was only interested in the last five or six. These were much easier to make out; he’d snapped them while everyone was standing still, looking up at the news broadcast that had played less than an hour before Jon-X had burst apart like a carcass in the sun.

The girl in purple had been still for the entire broadcast. She stood straight but strangely loose, head lolled, arms limp. Mineta had been grabbed and dragged along by Kaminari just as he’d taken the last picture, when the girl had turned to face them. Her face was obscured by a smear of haze. But the eyes under that distortion were cold and dark as two holes gouged into wax.
True to her word, Uraraka visited U.A.’s infirmary after class the next day. Kaminari had been officially discharged, so it was just Midoriya, alone in his usual bed beside the doorway. The clouds had cleared and dusky light seeped like honey through the lone window.

“He’s still a bit out of sorts, dear,” Recovery Girl had said as she’d escorted Uraraka in. “Be patient with him, please. And don’t agitate him.”

He was bandaged from head to toe; it reminded her of how Kirishima had looked after the raid on Overhaul’s headquarters, but Midoriya wasn’t able to shrug his injuries off quite so easily. His skeleton had crumbled like a cookie under the impact of all that rubble. Even with several administrations of Recovery Girl’s Quirk (she’d made an exception for him this time, on the grounds that letting his wounds linger could cause permanent damage or worse) he was doped up nearly around the clock. The eyes that turned to Uraraka as she approached his bedside were unfocused and dim.

“Hi, Deku,” she said, and tried to smile.

“Hey, Ochako.” Her cheeks burned at the casual use of her first name, but he didn’t seem to notice. “Is anything floating? Feels awful…floaty.”

“It’s the medicine. You’re in the infirmary.”

“Ohh, yeah. That place. Here again.” A slow blink, like a cat’s. “Think my mom came to visit. She was floating. Like a balloon. Heh. Kinda balloon-shaped.” His mother had not, in fact, stopped by. “Don’t tell her I said that.”

“I won’t.”

“What’d I do this time, anyway? Thought I. Made a promise not to.” His eyes widened as he remembered. They filmed over with tears. His breathing started to hitch.

“Oh no.” She tried to comfort him but there wasn’t anywhere she could touch. She ineffectually hovered over him, trying not to cry herself. “Shh, shh, it’s okay! Everyone’s okay. We rescued everyone, just like we were taught.”

“I saw… I saw everyone…I couldn’t do enough…”

“You saved those people, Deku.” He was sobbing freely now, and it looked like it hurt – his face had turned white as a sheet. “Same as you always do. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Kacchan. Where is he?”

“Huh?”

“Gotta tell him.” His gaze was feverish. “It wasn’t his fault. Have to let him know.”

“No one’s blaming him for that! He couldn’t have made that kind of explosion even if he wanted to. Trust me, I’d-”

“Tell him.” He struggled to reach out to her. “Not his fault. You gotta…need to say…”

His eyes hazed over again and that was about all she could take. She turned and cried for the nurse.
and Recovery Girl hobbled in as fast as her legs would allow. She checked Midoriya’s pupils and shook her head.

“He’s out again. I asked you not to work him up, Uraraka.”

“I’m sorry. He’d forgotten why he’d ended up in here.”

“Is that it? Must have come as a nasty shock.” She heaved a sigh. “In another day or two I’ll take him off the painkillers, but don’t expect to see him upright again for at least another week. I don’t want him out of my sight until he’s completely healed.”

“Nurse? Ms. Shuuzenji?”

“Dear me, how formal.” She turned to Uraraka. “What is it?”

“Be honest with me. You must have seen hundreds of students come and go at this school. Are we… being hurt more than usual? With everything going on?”

She timidly plucked at her blouse as Recovery Girl’s squint turned piercing. Then she looked back to Midoriya.

“This one skews things quite a bit all by himself, but yes, I’d say so. At least since All Might’s heyday. Things were a lot bleaker before he entered the scene. Why do you ask?”

“I’m not sure, to be honest. Mostly it’s something Mr. Aizawa said yesterday.”

“I wouldn’t put too much stock into anything coming out of that man’s mouth until this wretched crime wave is cleared. He’s normally reasonable but he gets snappish when he’s overworked, and he’s been working himself to the bone lately.” She reached out and patted Midoriya’s arm. “But don’t worry. Even antiques like myself will be around a while yet. You can still depend on us.”

“I’m starting to wonder if that’s enough,” she said quietly.

She sighed again. “So do I. Off you go, dear. Night’s falling.” She looked out the window. “I hate this time of year. Every day we have less and less sun.”

* * *

Musutafu, Santo Ward. The apartment faces of blank brick and the billboards scarred and torn. Like Mosei, this part of the city couldn’t precisely be called crime-ridden, but it was far enough from U.A. for crime to fester like toadstools out of the sun. The evening had brought a chilly mist suffused with lamplight that made the world look as though it had been dressed in old newspaper. A veneer of dampness clung to everything.

She sat against an alleyway wall like an unstrung puppet, limbs sprawled, her bruise-purple coat puddled around her. Her hair was unkempt and growing thick with grease; droplets of condensation nestled among the locks. She may have been dead. Her stare was unblinking and fixed on nothing and her eyes were a slate gray so deep that iris and pupil bled together into an unsettling black-on-black that floated like oil on the bloodshot bed of cornea. A thin rivulet of drool ran from the corner of her mouth.

In her head was endless sound. Frying fish, crooning sirens, the crunch and crackle of her marrow. The least twitch brought new melody. She submerged herself in it.

From further down the alley a figure approached, the hood of its urban-camo parka pulled up against
the cold. It was male, solidly built, its stride easy and unhurried. A duffelbag was slung over its shoulder and in one hand it held a small takoyaki boat that trailed thin wisps of steam. At the sight of her it paused, hooked a thumb into its hood to get a better look, and then flung it off.

The young man was square-jawed, heavy-lidded, his eyes somehow a color that was no color at all, a drab blue-grey like rainwater in a dish. His hair was a neck-length mess that hung in rattails around his head, and his face was riddled with scars, their shapes odd, their distribution seemingly random—coin-sized circles and bandage-sized strips on the cheeks, on the forehead, catching this dirty light in strange ways like pieces of caution tape. He walked over to the girl. Her head did not follow his movement. She didn’t react when he sat down next to her, balanced the food on his lap, and started to eat.

He was halfway done with the first piece when her eyes swiveled in his direction. It was the only movement in her. It made the eyes look independent of the rest of her, something parasitic.

“*You shouldn’t sneak like that,*” she said. Her voice was breathy and broken, like one long yawn. “*I might have killed you.*”

“*You’re the one who called,*” he said around his mouthful, and then swallowed. “*Took me a while to get here. Takoyaki almost got cold.*” He speared the last bit with his chopsticks. “*Plenty of stalls even in this neighborhood. Even now. Got to love it.*”

He offered the rest of the food to her. She turned her head and regarded it with empty curiosity.

“*You eat today?*” He put it in her lap. “*Still warm.*”

“I need very little.”

“You need to eat so that you don’t die,” he said, slowly, like he was imparting some hidden wisdom. “*Come on, chew and swallow.*”

She obliged and ate languorously, picking it up with her fingers, smearing her face with grease and sauce. He wiped his own hands on his jacket and flipped the hood back up.

“I missed street food,” he said. “*I dunno about you, but I sure didn’t get to eat like this in the Yard.*” He waited for her to finish, and then said, “*He’s not happy.*”

“No. He’s always so sad.”

“What do you think we’re talking about?” No response. “Whatever. Acting out on your own was a big deal, but it turns out some of those 1-A kids got caught up in it so it’s basically a wash. He was willing to let things slide based on that alone. But then you don’t call in? That’s insult on injury.”

“You didn’t see it,” she said. “You didn’t hear.”

“I’m glad I didn’t. Crowds like that make me nervous.” He pulled a battered cell phone out of his jacket pocket. “Anyway, we’re getting back on schedule. Tomorrow night you’ll—”

“No.”

He stopped and looked at her.

“No,” she said again. “I’d like to be alone now.”

The only sound the hiss of steam from some distant grate.
“Deciding to go off on your own, huh?” he said at last. “Guess that stunt was basically your resignation letter.”

“The ones from that school. I saw them. I wanted to see what they’d do.” She absently licked grease from her fingertip. “But in the end they weren’t anyone. The same as everyone else.”

“You know that you won’t last long, right? You kind of stand out.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Well, it’s not like I can stop you. No regrets and no hard feelings.” He stood up. “I’ll pass it along. Meanwhile I’ve got other stuff to do tonight. Take care of yourself, Mirai. Don’t forget to eat, at least.”

His boots creaked as he walked off, and then she said, “Shin.”

He stopped and looked over his shoulder. “ Hmm?”

“Where do you think you’ll go?” She regarded the wall. “After all this.”

“It’s not really my concern.”

“No. That’s the wrong answer. You’ll go nowhere. Because there’s nowhere for you to be. You. Or him.”

His eyes narrowed, and he turned and flipped up his hood. “We’ll see.”

She watched him go and then he was gone. Not gone in the sense of leaving the alley – one minute he was there and then his sleeve was a rough angle in the stonework, the fur trim of his hood just more of the fuzzed light in the air. The faint impressions of his bootprints on the moistening ground turned abstract to her eye.

After a while she rose and staggered away like a drunk, filth-crusted hair rasping across her shoulders. Her head was a distant shore upon which waves beat ceaselessly. That deep-fryer hiss, the percussion of her heart, the cellophane crackle of the cartilage in every joint. The city was too silent; nothing from outside could drag her out from the riptide of that noise. She let herself be carried away and drowned.

The asphalt rumbled under her feet and a distant whistle pierced the night air. Still walking, her footprints an irregular tempo, she closed her eyes and imagined a silver streak on suspended rails, a train’s lights cutting through the dark. She imagined those rails bursting apart and the train flying free through the air until the world remembered to tug it down and reduce its cars to so many crushed soda cans. The thunder and the roar. The chorus of lamentation. She shivered at the thought of it, and decided her thoughts would be enough, for now.

*             *             *

The dark outside Bakugo’s window was impenetrable. His phone said it was one in the morning. That seemed late enough.

Bakugo had gone to bed as soon as classes had ended and then woken up an hour ago with many of his preparations already laid. His lights were off and he maneuvered mostly by touch. His wallet – enough cash in there for several days’ provisions if he paced himself. His phone – fully charged, with a portable battery and cable that would perk it back up when it ran low. Provisions – he’d nicked as much as he could from the cafeteria, but he’d have to figure out the rest. Toothbrush.
Something soft to lay his head on. He thought about fresh clothes and then figured this wouldn’t be the smartest time to give a shit about his fashion sense.

He tore the map off the wall, balled it up, and held it between his palms. His hands glowed and a moment later the paper was charred beyond recognition. He dropped it in the wastebasket and pulled a beanie over his ears. The fabric strained against the chaotic mess of his hair but he figured that without a hat the chill outside would be hard to stand.

He’d never done anything like this before. But all his life he’d pointed himself to what seemed like a good idea at the time and then shot towards it like a ballistic missile. It was a philosophy that rarely let him down.

He slung the bag over his shoulder and slipped out into the hall, locking the door behind him. The dorm was a tomb. He didn’t see light under either of his neighbors’ doors – Kirishima had been turning in early, and he didn’t know what the hell Shouji did in his room but “stay up late” wasn’t it. He lingered in front of Kirishima’s room, raised his fist, almost knocked, then cursed under his breath and turned away. As he went down to the first floor he only saw two other people apparently awake – Kaminari (who had checked out of the infirmary and seemed to live on catnaps) and Mineta (always a night owl, no one knew why, no one dared ask). He figured he wouldn’t have to worry about anyone seeing him leave from the windows, at least on this side of the building. When he’d called out Midoriya to fight him a few months and a thousand years ago he’d plotted out the cameras’ blind spots, and far as he knew they hadn’t been upgraded so far.

The lobby brooded, its lights off. But on the couch at the far end of the room, he saw a spot where the shadows were wrong. He moved closer, squinting, and then stopped.

Once his eyes adjusted, that fire-engine red shade practically shone in the dark. Kirishima sat in his pajamas with his hands on his knees, his hair down, his feet bare. The face under his bangs was pinched and grave. Bakugou grit his teeth and approached.

“Hey,” Kirishima said.

He stopped a few paces away from the couch and said nothing. Kirishima shrunk a little under his silent glare.

“Don’t worry,” he continued. “Nobody told me, or anything. Just got a hunch you’d be ducking out soon. Guess I’ve gotten to know you pretty well, huh?”

Still no reply.

“I know you’ve got your reasons.” He clicked his knuckles together, a nervous parody of his usual self. “But don’t do this, man. Please. You’ve been on thin ice at this place practically since day one. You do this and they’ll kick you out so fast that your head’ll spin.” Bakugou’s glare seemed to demand more. “But it’s not just that. Look, I know you’re tough as hell. But when that place got wrecked…I haven’t seen anything like that since that crazy bastard in the suit turned up last summer. It’s that same feeling. I blinked and everything was just gone. Even if you do catch up to whoever did this, I don’t think it’ll go well for you.” The glare intensified. “Look, I’m not dissing you. But Aizawa had a point about one thing. We can’t handle all this shit by ourselves. And I…this place really need you to stick around, I think. One way or another.”

“You gonna come with me?”

Kirishima blinked. His jaw hung open. In the deep shadow he thought that Bakugo’s features had softened somewhat. But the question came too fast, and he was too slow to answer, and then
Bakugo’s face hardened up again and he turned away.

“Then go to hell,” he said.

He pushed open the doors and left. The draft of cold air stung Kirishima’s bare skin before the entrance hissed shut. He stayed where he was, hands shaking, and then he raised his fists high and slammed them down on his knees. He would walk with a limp for the next two days.

Outside, Bakugo walked on, forcing himself not to think. He weaved around the topiary on the way to the campus’ outer wall. Through one of the dorm’s unlit windows, a darker shadow appeared. Then it faded, and Bakugo faded, and the night was quiet and still.

*             *             *

Dawn broke by the time Shin returned.

His boots were new and the best that money could buy (or at least he figured; Shin had never actually paid for anything in his life), but he already felt like the soles were being worn down. He’d gotten used to that unpleasant jellylike feeling in his muscles from long nights of stomping around Musutafu with no sleep, but that didn’t mean he liked it any better. The dufflebag had turned into a lead weight around his neck hours ago, and even with his hood up he couldn’t feel his face.

These were the city outskirts, where the buildings became stubby and worn like eroded teeth. He rubbed his face to shake off the cold, and then realized to his horror that he was grinding his own teeth. Hard.

“Shit. Shit.”

He fumbled a pill bottle out of his coat pocket, gave it a quick shake, then popped it open and produced a pale blue capsule that he immediately dry-swallowed. He didn’t know if it was just stress getting to him, but better safe than sorry. He picked up the pace on his way back to the apartment.

The complex in which he slept (he wouldn’t go so far as to say he lived there) was a drab and dreary place, but to a certain select portion of Musutafu’s population it was as prime as real estate could get. Five different realtors held sway in this part of town, and each of them thought the place belonged to one of the other four. It was a bureaucratic shell game with rigged cups, and anyone on the sticky side of the law who needed somewhere to stay for a while appreciated the illusion. Right now, the entirety of the building had only two occupants. He tried not to think about how much that cost.

The front doors opened with a dull clack as he shoved his way inside and started to climb. No elevators, and he was on on the top floor. By the time he got there he felt like his knees had been replaced with blocks of wood. He paused before the apartment’s scarred doorway, fumbled the key into the lock, and opened it quietly as he was able.

The people who stayed here weren’t interested in luxury, and it showed. The furniture was as gouged and unsightly as Shin’s own mug; there were mysterious and ineradicable stains throughout the kitchen; the fridge’s compressor rattled like an ossuary caught in an earthquake. But it had heat, and it was probably the only place he could leave the kid alone with any confidence.

A child was curled up on the threadbare recliner, head on the armrest. A sad and colorless shape, like something scraped out of a fireplace. He was dreadfully pale, dressed in a drab gray hoodie and sweatpants, and his ashen hair was a tangled mop that blocked his eyes from view. A pale ray of dawnlight through the nearby window bisected his sleeping form.

Shin locked the door behind him, untied his boots, then set them aside and dropped the dufflebag on
the kitchen counter. The crowbar inside clinked as he rummaged around it. He withdrew a small wrapped box (already dented, he’d jostled it around too much), put it aside, then took out a much smaller metal box that gleamed like quicksilver even in the morning’s dim light. He set it down, went through the cabinets, and took out rubbing alcohol and cotton swabs. All this had become routine.

He approached the recliner and gently nudged the boy’s shoulder.

“Hey. Koh. Wake up.”

He stirred and opened his eyes – and this is where all the color in him had gone, like they’d leached it out from his blood. The irises were a fiery yellow-orange that gleamed like beaten brass. His pupils shuddered and dilated as he tried to focus. Shin took some relief in that, at least; his grinding teeth before really had been just nerves.

“Shin?” He blinked. “Is it morning?”

“Just about, yeah. Why aren’t you in bed?”

“The bed’s yours.”

“No, it’s not. We talked about this.” He turned back to the counter. “If I’m not around at night, take the bed. Don’t sleep like this, it’s bad for your neck.”

“Sorry.” Shin turned to him with that small and gleaming box, and the kid’s face somehow fell further. “Already?”

“Better safe than sorry. Pull up your sleeve, I’ll be fast.”

Koh sat up straight and pushed his sleeve up as Shin laid the box, the cotton, and the alcohol down on the windowsill. He popped the box’s hinges and flipped it open. Inside was a syringe full of liquid, faintly reddish, like water through rusted pipes. He withdrew it and looked at Koh’s arm. He didn’t like looking at Koh’s arm. The track marks he saw there always made his gorge rise up. The kid was barely old enough to tie his own shoes and he already had the forearms of a twenty-year smack addict. It didn’t help that the ugliest scars were Shin’s fault; the first few injections had been a learning experience.

“Here we go. Let me know if it hurts too much.”

The kid turned watched the lightening sky outside the window and accepted the needle. The only sound he made was a thin whimper as it entered his skin. Shin pushed the plunger, withdrew the syringe, and set it down.

“Want a Band-Aid?”

“It’s fine.”

“Alright.”

He replaced the syringe in the box and the box in his bag.

“We’re free today,” he said, zipping it up. “Anywhere you want to go?”

“I’ll think about it.” A pause. “Were you working last night?”

“Yeah.” He glanced over his shoulder. “Don’t look at me like that.”
“I wasn’t.”

“Yeah, you were. Knock it off. We talked about this.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine.”

Shin didn’t tell him about Mirai. He doubted it would have mattered, anyway. The three of them had only been together once, as they’d left the wreckage of the Yard, and even in his slightly addled state it had only taken Shin one look at the girl’s vacant stare to know that Koh would never, ever see her again if he could help it. He almost pitied this town now that she’d finally decided to slip off her leash.

“I got you a crepe,” he said, waving the other box at Koh. “Might be a little squished, though. I’m going to sleep for a bit and then we can go out. Nudge me awake if I’m not up by ten, okay?”

“Okay. Can I watch TV?”

“Sure. Just don’t turn on the news.”

He left the box on the kitchen table and headed for the bedroom as Koh snapped the television on. The gaudy noise of morning cartoons filled the apartment. He paused at the doorway, turned, and saw the kid watching the screen with that same gaunt and unsmiling expression. An old man’s face.

The bedroom was just as spartan, uncarpeted, the bed itself one step up from a military cot. There was a small nightstand lamp and a taller one in the corner; Shin unzipped his coat and tossed it at the second one’s general direction as he staggered over to the mattress. He wore a plain white tee underneath and the scarring up his own arms and around his neck was no less extensive than the marks on his face. His right palm was a mannequin-smooth plane of pink flesh; the fingerprints had been scoured clean off. He rubbed his cheek again with that unsettling doll’s hand, then fell towards the bed. He was asleep before he hit the pillow.

*             *             *

Day broke. Sunlight washed over the city. Coffeepots were set to boil and school bells started to ring. At U.A., a certain amount of commotion was forming at one particular student’s sudden absence.

The sun crept into one particular alley in Mosei not far from where Tarou Chikaze had fallen. It was a mass of yellow caution tape, police cars scattered around the adjacent streets like fallen dominos. A chalk outline in the shape of a woman was scrawled into the pavement. It suggested a body badly twisted, its delicate hands sprawled out.

Shouta Aizawa had been right about one thing – Uwabami was no fool. On the cameras she’d put on a big and confident show, the Serpent Heroine with one of the highest capture rates around, certain she could take on the nighttime hero-hunter all on her lonesome. She’d strutted down the misty streets, high heels echoing through the night. And anyone who saw her there wouldn’t have seen the meticulously organized police escort flanking her entire patrol – gargoyles bearing night vision goggles, IR scopes, and taser rifles with impressive range.

Shin hadn’t seen them either. He’d just followed in her wake, keeping his footfalls soft as possible, bouncing his crowbar on his shoulder. He went unheeded by all. Uwabami’s snakes hissed and snapped but didn’t point in his direction; the scopes and goggles glazed right over him. He trailed her until the eastern horizon began to lighten. He watched her raise a finger to her ear and declare the all-
clear to the police. Then he’d waited a little longer, and when he no longer felt unseen eyes on his scarred skin, he’d beaten her until she couldn’t walk.
“Did you hear?”

“You hear what happened?”

“Someone snuck out.”

“-went and walked off campus the freakin’ night after the announcement, can you-”

“-didn’t even notice for a while, even the cameras could barely-”

“It was Class 1-A.”

“Guess who it was?”

“Three guesses for who pulled this shit and the first two don’t count.”

“That Katsuki Bakugo kid.”

“Mr. Anger Management himself, that mouthy piece of-”

“Even his own class hates him, he doesn’t have a single-”

“If he wanted to get expelled he could’ve just mooned someone or something.”

“He won’t get expelled.”

“Hell no he won’t get expelled, it’s Class 1-A.”

“-how it goes, one rule for them and another for the-”

“Guy’s been a pain in the ass forever, this had better be the last straw.”

“-faculty’s always been useless, can’t even catch these-”

“I heard he’s blackmailing the principal or something, nothing else explains-”

“Never gonna come back.”

“He’ll come back in cuffs or not at all, I bet.”

“Hope he gets expelled.”

“Can’t wait to see him go.”

“Did you hear?”

“Hey, did you hear?”

“Guess what happened last night?”

“Hey-”

“-guess what-”
“-someone snuck out last-”

The bells rang and rang like sirens.

* * *

All Might’s desk was an unsightly spray of paper and his wastebasket was so full of bloody tissues that it smelled like a handful of loose change. He tended to cough up more when he was under stress. This had been a stressful morning.

He was alone in the office. The other teachers were either off with their classes or continuing the crime wave investigation, but he wasn’t good for a whole lot these days. He’d been working on the lesson plans for exam prep, typing in sporadic and hesitant bursts, but when Aizawa had made a brief phone call and left without a word, he’d sat back in his chair and waited for the inevitable. After a while his screensaver flickered on and he stared at his hollow-eyed reflection as if expecting it to give him answers.

“Yagi.”

He looked up. Aizawa’s shadow had reappeared in the doorway, clutching the frame for support. He was possibly the only person in the school who looked worse than All Might himself right now.

“Principal’s office,” said Aizawa. “Now.”

It was kind of surreal. Suddenly he felt like one of the students about to be disciplined. He got up and silently followed Aizawa.

Nezu’s office was a sunny space in the academy’s upper reaches, with several potted plants and plenty of sitting room for guests. His desk was hand-carved, beautifully varnished, and approximately toddler-sized. For security reasons, and to appease Nezu’s own whimsical frame of mind, it was also bolted to the floor and lined with a particular alloy that could shrug off bomb blasts in the case of an emergency. Rumors that it was equipped with a tiny elevator that descended into a private panic room were completely unfounded.

Nezu sat solemnly, paws folded under his muzzle. His computer (custom-made, also tiny) was switched off. The tea in his private cup (tiny) had gone cold.

“Welcome, All Might,” he said, and gestured to one of the chairs. “Please, sit.”

He obliged. Aizawa went around and stood beside Nezu, suppressing another yawn.

“Katsuki Bakugo broke curfew last night and fled the school grounds,” said Nezu. “I called you here to inform you than an appropriate punishment has been determined.”

“We’ll be calling the police,” Aizawa said bluntly. “Soon as he’s found he’ll be detained and brought back to U.A., at which point he’ll be stripped of his provisional hero license and then expelled. Furthermore, if there’s any evidence that he activated his Quirk while off school grounds, he’ll be arrested and prosecuted for unlicensed superpower usage.” His gaze flicked away from All Might. “Frankly, depending on whether he tries to resist arrest, he could easily wind up in juvenile hall.”

“Don’t I have a say in this?” All Might said, hating how weak his voice sounded.

“It was decided that your history with the student in question would cloud your judgement on this matter,” said Nezu.
“Stop hiding behind the officious language, Principal. It’s beneath you.”

He half-smiled at that. “Was that a joke about my size?”

“The choice was mostly left to me,” said Aizawa. “And I stand by it. Bakugo and Midoriya have both skirted or outright broken the rules again and again in only two terms, and Bakugo has a lengthy history of antisocial behavior on top of it. Then he goes and flagrantly defies us when the city’s in this kind of shape. I’ve had enough.”

“You’re throwing away some of the greatest potential this school has ever-”

“This is U.A., Yagi. We have more ‘potential’ than we know what to do with.” All Might grit his teeth at the sarcastic half-quotes Aizawa dropped around that word. “All I know is that I now have to deal with this idiocy on top of final exams and Musutafu getting picked apart by villains we can’t even name. You heard about Uwabami, I assume?” All Might nodded. “So you’ll forgive me for not having much patience with Bakugo’s rampant personality issues.”

All Might’s hands balled into fists, and Nezu took notice. “Mr. Aizawa, please temper your language. This hostility is unnecessary.”

“We’re all adults here,” Aizawa said, not taking his eyes off All Might. “Unlike this one’s little protégés.”

All Might’s vision flashed red, he hacked up blood and shot up from his seat, contriving to look as intimidating as a gutted half-man with a gory chin possibly could. Aizawa didn’t seem impressed.

“Remember that I’m the one who’s had to actually teach these kids while you were off showboating,” Aizawa said. “It’s easy to tell when someone becomes a lost cause.”

“Sleep deprivation’s screwing with your judgement!” All Might snapped. “You don’t even know why he left in the first place. Shouldn’t you care about his reasons, too!?”

“Given everything I know about him, his ‘reasons’ probably consist of feeling personally slighted by an attack that caused several casualties and wounded dozens. So now he’s off to find and bring down this villain himself. What do you give for his chances if he actually finds them?” All Might went pale. “He might be a pain in my ass, but I don’t want him dead. But if we keep letting him get away with things like this, he’ll eventually hurt himself in a way that can’t be fixed. The same with Midoriya.” He rubbed his reddened eyes. “One boy seems to have taken the hint. The other hasn’t. So here we are. It has to end, Yagi.”

He slumped back into his seat, holding his head in his hands. “I just…after he went through so much, for his time here to end this way…”

“I don’t like it, either,” said Nezu. “But I have to agree with Aizawa’s assessment. First and foremost, U.A. must be concerned with the safety of its students. If we need to remove them from U.A. to ensure that safety, then so be it.”

“Do you think he’ll be any safer once he’s kicked out? You said yourself these people were hunting down our students personally, they won’t care if he’s suddenly off the roll!”

“Obviously we’ll allow him to stay on the grounds until this matter is resolved. But we cannot indulge this willful behavior any longer.” He tried to sip his tea and grimaced; it had gone sour. “Honestly, Bakugo is so willful that I’m not sure how to fix it. This is the best we can do, for now. Maybe consequences this severe will humble him a little.”
“I doubt it,” Aizawa muttered.

“Well, hope springs eternal. I’ll leave it to you to inform his classmates. I just hope that the gossip around this news won’t be too cruel.”

“Again, doubt it.”

Nezu sighed. “What a difficult winter it’s been.”

“Do you still need me for anything?” All Might asked quietly.

“No, All Might. You’re dismissed. Thank you for your time.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Both Nezu’s and Aizawa’s eyes widened. They exchanged a glance and looked back to All Might. He’d lowered his head; his suit hung off him like a funeral shroud.

“You’re going to resign in protest?” Aizawa said. “Really? It’d just make morale around here suffer further.”

“Don’t take it the wrong way. But this whole mess is making it clear that I’m not good for much around here, anymore.”

“Have you discussed it with Midoriya?” Nezu asked.

“I haven’t…I mean, he’s still under sedation…”

“Perhaps bring this up to him first. I don’t say this to coerce you into staying, All Might. I’ll accept your decision no matter what it may be. But in my view, it’s plainly obvious that there’s at least one student who benefits tremendously from your presence here.” Nezu hopped onto the desk, walked over, and extended a paw to All Might. “All of us are trying to do our part. Make no mistake. You, too, have one to play.”

A long pause. Then he nodded without looking up, then stood from his seat and left the room. After a moment, Nezu lowered his hand.

“That could have gone better,” he concluded.

“When are you calling the police?” asked Aizawa.

“Soon. Very soon. I’ll give them as much detail as I can to narrow down their patrols. They don’t have many people to spare, either, what with everything going on.”

“I’ll leave you to it, then.” He headed for the door. “Thank you for your time, sir.”

When the door clacked shut Nezu stood there for a while longer, head low, tail drooped. He cut a strange figure in the bright daylight; hardly anyone had ever seen him look this crestfallen. Eventually he returned to his seat, and then he picked up his tea and gulped down every bitter drop.

* * *

Bakugo’s classmates didn’t take the news much better than All Might himself. It was generally agreed among them that he was a rampaging asshole, but over the months they’d almost centered themselves around his behavior, learning from it, getting stronger, like how a pearl forms about a speck of grit. There was a lot of whispering about Midoriya, too. Class 1-A had largely adopted the
unspoken belief that Midoriya and Bakugo were somehow a vital balance for the whole class, the N
and S poles to their compass. They didn’t know what would happen if one of them was removed and
the other stayed. The needle would just spin and spin.

They retreated from the other classes’ piercing stares and stuck to the dorms to fret among
themselves. Several others retreated even from that. Kirishima shut himself up in his room.
Tokoyami, never a social butterfly to begin with, brooded in a corner, apparently lost in thought. The
tension quickly became too much for Uraraka as well, and she murmured an apology and turned in
early. As the horizon began to tinge orange she sat at her desk and vainly tried to study, unable to
silence the memories from a week ago, when she’d first proposed the day trip to Jon-X. Everyone’s
faces, Bakugo’s excepted, had lit up when she’d raised her hand and announced the idea over
dinner. She couldn’t get those faces out of her mind.

Knock, knock.

Her head snapped up so fast that she nearly flew out of her seat. The knock was quick and timid but
sounded loud as a gunshot to her frazzled senses. She waited for her pulse to slow down and then
opened the door.

It was Kirishima. He’d let his hair down again. His hands were held stiff at his sides.

“Hey, Uraraka,” he said. “Could we talk, really quick? In private?”


She returned to her desk chair as Kirishima stepped inside and shut the door behind him. He stood
next to her TV in that same ramrod pose, eyes darting around the room. She couldn’t remember ever
seeing him so nervous. He looked like a tourist that’d gotten lost on the way to the bathroom and
ended up interrupting a meeting between the Prime Minister and the Pope.

“I guess this is about Bakugo,” she said.

“Heh. Yeah. Guess it’s pretty obvious. Whole situation’s pretty screwed up, huh?” She nodded her
agreement. “Hey, if the school’s gonna send the cops after him, you think he’d…you know, come
quietly?” Her expression apparently indicated that this was not likely. “Yeah. I figured.”

“You heard Mr. Aizawa. And everyone takes that whole ‘no unlicensed Quirks’ thing really
seriously. They were even going to rake Todoroki over the coals for using his Quirk against Stain
and he’s the son of the Number Two hero.” She corrected herself. “Number One, I mean. That still
feels weird to say.”

“No kidding.” Kirishima stared at his feet. “He’s got himself down a pretty deep hole.”

“I know. I’m worried for him, too. But it’s out of our hands at this point.”

He looked back up. “Actually, that’s why I wanted to talk. I had an idea.”

He approached her, hesitantly. Something about the look in his eye made Uraraka want to back
away.

“My thinking is, Aizawa said that we can still break curfew if it’s for hero work, right? And this
manhunt for Bakugo’s a police investigation. So, if we talked to the right people, we could maybe
take on this whole mess ourselves, yeah? If one of us dragged him back, then at least he’d have a
good chance of getting outta this without being arrested for anything.”
“He’d still be expelled, though. Do you really think he’s going to come back to that just because you asked?”

“No,” said Kirishima. “I want you to do it.”

The ventilators droned on and on. She was positive she’d heard incorrectly.

“Look, I know that I ain’t got a hope in hell of fighting that guy one-on-one,” he said. He was getting more worked up as he talked. “The Sports Festival, remember? The guy cracked me like an egg once he got serious. But you gave him more trouble than anyone there. Even Todoroki didn’t make him break a sweat like you did, I think. And then there’s what you said to Aizawa yesterday, about us havin’ to take responsibility for this whole mess too. Todoroki’s too uptight and Midoriya’s still in the hospital, but you…maybe you could…”

She’d started shaking her head before he even finished. “Kirishima, it’s not possible. Even if I had someone to cover for me-”

“You do! There’s All Might and that Tsukauchi guy he’s always pallin’ around with. Aizawa said the cops and the faculty, right? I know they’d green-light you if you just asked!”

“I can’t.” His face collapsed like a melting snowbank. “I just can’t. It’s…it’s way beyond me. I’m sorry.”

He remained where he stood, fists balled, knees shaking. For one terrifying moment she thought he was going to say what had been running through her head all day – this whole mess was her fault, it happened because she couldn’t keep her mouth shut, it was time to make up for it. And then, a flash to Midoriya in his hospital bed, clinging onto reality by his fingernails, vehemently telling her that it wasn’t Bakugo’s fault either. So much blame to go around and none of it ever landing anywhere.

But he didn’t speak. Instead he slowly dropped to his knees and folded up, putting his forehead to the ground. Uraraka’s chair thumped against her window as she shot up to her feet.

“Wait, Kirishima, don’t do that! That’s not-”

“I gotta tell you one more thing.” His voice trembled. “I was there. Last night, when he left. Tried to make him stop. I couldn’t talk him out of it. I didn’t go after him. Screwed it up again, yeah?” He tried to laugh and it broke apart in his throat. “You’d think that after that high-flyin’ rescue we pulled when the League of Villains snatched him I’d finally be able to man up. But I couldn’t do it. So please. I’m begging you, here. This is all I can do.”

He was sobbing freely now as he groveled; his tears spotted the hardwood floor. Uraraka tried to move but couldn’t. Everything had taken on a dreamlike sludginess. She couldn’t find her breath.

“Please!” he wept. “I’ll make it up to you somehow, I swear. But I don’t know what else to do!”

She finally got her brain and her muscles lined up long enough to grab Kirishima by the shoulders and force him to rise. They knelt on the hard floor, their foreheads almost touching, eyes reddened and wet. After a moment Uraraka set her jaw; she tightened her grip on Kirishima.

“Aizawa can’t know,” she said, her voice quiet and firm. “Understand? You’ll have to cover for me. Tell everyone I’m sick, or something. We’re only going to have one day to pull this off before he catches on and drags me back.”

He nodded with almost pathetic eagerness. “Yeah. You got it.”
“I’m not promising anything. There’s like a million different ways this can go wrong.”

“Story of our lives, right?” He shrugged her hands off and rubbed his eyes. “We keep catchin’ hell for sticking out necks out when we’re not supposed to. But it’s better than doing nothing. Now more than ever. All Might ain’t around to fix everything anymore.”

“I’m going to talk to All Might now. Try to pull yourself together a little bit, okay?”

He slapped his cheeks and attempted a grin. “No kidding. I’m a freakin’ mess, lately.” His lip trembled again. “It’s really gonna suck when he’s gone. Especially right before finals. I’m short a study partner, now.”

“That’s the least of our worries. Focus on one thing at a time.”

“Yeah. Gotta man up. I hear you. You need me for anything else, I’m there.” He stood up and bowed. “For real. I can’t thank you enough.”

“Again, haven’t done anything yet.”

“No, but this is good. This is enough.” He was stammering now. “Just knowin’ other people give a shit. That’ll hold me over, for now. Uh, I’m feelin’ a little floaty, too. Do you think you could…?”

“Oh, right! Sorry.” She pressed her fingers together her and hands glimmered green. Kirishima’s muscles seemed to settle. He nodded.

“G’night,” he said.

He practically sprinted out of her room. Uraraka was left on the the on the floor, her legs still sprawled out beneath her, trying to assemble the pieces of what she’d just gotten herself into.

* * *

“There are some days,” Tsukauchi said, “when I wish I was a drinking man.”

They were on a video call and Uraraka could make out the exhausted lines in the young man’s face. True to her word, she’d sought out All Might – who was still alone in the teacher’s offices, looking forlorn – and quietly brought up Kirishima’s plan. He’d taken her to one of the unused offices with hardly a word and then set up this call. From what she could gather, he’d been given a sneak preview of what U.A. had in store for Bakugo, and it had been weighing heavily on his mind.

Tsukauchi propped up his head in his palm. “I wasn’t feeling all that optimistic to begin with when I woke up this morning, but you just keep dropping fresh bags of manure at my feet, Toshinori. What’d I ever do to you?”

“This call is between you and me, Detective,” said Uraraka, trying to sound authoritative.

“Uh-huh. That’s why you’ve got All Might’s elbow sticking out just to your left, I assume?” All Might smartly stepped away. “Look, I get that he’s concerned, but enlisting one of his own students to do the police’s job is just-”

“This was my idea, not his. It’s not hard to figure out what’ll happen if any of you actually catch up to Bakugo. And I doubt you have many people to spare, anyway.”

“Musutafu’s not my beat, but you do have a point. We’re too busy trying to maintain what little calm we have left over there. These mystery villains have people scared. Especially whoever’s making
them go nuts after the sun sets. Even All For One didn’t have that in his bag of tricks.” He angled his head to the side. “Hey, Mr. Symbol of Peace. You ever see a Quirk like that?”

He groaned and leaned back into the frame. “Quirks that affect people’s mental state aren’t common, but I’ve come across a few. We have a promising one right here in General Studies. But over that large an area, and with such a dramatic effect? Even I’d be reluctant to go up against someone like that.”

“You’re not alone. We had a few officers on the scene during the second incident. Two of them shot each other. They just returned to duty yesterday.” He glanced over his shoulder, as if checking for eavesdroppers. “But, back to the subject. Short-handed or not, I can’t just blithely sign off on an assignment like this. If it backfires then I’ll get burned, too.”

“Please, Detective. I know that Bakugo comes off as…” She fought for a diplomatic phrase and gave up. “Okay, he’s basically horrible. But in his own screwed-up way, he does have good intentions. I don’t want his future to be totally ruined over this one stunt.”

“It’s not ‘one stunt,’ is the thing. The kid’s caused trouble for himself over and over again. You know he’s probably the most recognizable face from U.A. at this point? That’s not a compliment to your school, no matter how good his grades might be.”

Uraraka’s eye twitched. She’d had her doubts about this whole plan an hour ago, but Tsukauchi’s casual condemnations were getting on her nerves. When she spoke again there was deep steel inlaid in her voice.

“He’s our classmate. And for better or worse, we’ve always had his back. Right now I can’t think of any other way to help him out of this mess.” She leaned into the screen and Tsukauchi actually flinched. “To put it another way, Detective, I’m not asking your permission. I’m giving you a chance to let this happen by the books, before I end up causing even more trouble for the police and the school. Otherwise there’ll be a whole fresh mountain of shit coming down in the next few days, and some of it is bound to splatter on you. Understand?”

Then the spell broke. She blinked, jaw slightly open as if the words she’d just spoken had jimmied open her mouth and forgotten to shut it again on the way out. Tsukauchi looked bemused. All Might had taken several cautious steps away from the desk.

“You’re not lacking in resolve, at least,” Tsukauchi deadpanned. “But resolve alone doesn’t count for much. I think one of your other classmates has a pair of mangled arms as proof.” He sighed. “But, I’ll see what I can do. If nothing else it’s clear you’re way more passionate about this than any officers that would wind up on the case. I doubt anyone’d be thrilled about the prospect of trying to slap cuffs on that kid.”

“Thank you, Detective.”

“The paperwork’s going to take some time. I’ll let you know when it’s cleared, but odds are you won’t be able to go out until tomorrow morning, at the earliest. We’ll keep you on the wire and let you know if there’s any sign of Bakugo. As the assigned hero you’ll be treated as the first responder on the scene, so you won’t receive backup unless you call it in. If you try to go this all by yourself, then on your own head be it.”

“One other thing,” she said, and his eyebrows rose up. “Would I be able to patrol in plain clothes? I know it’s unorthodox, but…”

“It’s technically just this side of illegal, but I see your point. If one of these villains really is on the
prowl for U.A. students it’d be best if you stay as inconspicuous as possible. Bakugo must think the same thing, because if he was acting his usual self out there then we’d have found him already.”

“I appreciate this, Tsukachui,” said All Might, still in his corner.

“Uh-huh. Don’t do this again, Toshinori. Otherwise I might sic my sister on you. Death would be a relief, trust me.” He reached out to the screen. “I’ve still got another half-shift to suffer through. Take care of yourselves.”

The screen went dark. Uraraka fell back in her seat, breathing deep. The skies outside were flame-orange, turning purple.

“Are you sure you’re up for this?” All Might said.

“Little late to go back now.”

“Was this really your idea?”

“No,” she said plainly. “It was Kirishima’s. He…he was pretty broken up about this. I mean, the best-case scenario now is that Bakugo just gets kicked out. Without his license he’ll have to start his whole education over from scratch, if another academy would even take him.” She tried to picture him in one of Shiketsu’s caps and her imagination chuckled weakly and died.

“Sometimes you reach a point where the damage is so bad that all you can hope to do is get a tourniquet on things,” he said, and hacked up blood as if to illustrate. “Just think, a year ago I still believed I was unstoppable. Now I’m barely able to hold my own against bureaucracy.”

“All Might…”

“Oh, don’t worry about me. You kids have enough troubles without listening to us grown-ups whine.” He wiped off her chin and gave a thumbs-up. “Just do the best you can. Go beyond, right?”

She smiled weakly and returned the thumbs-up. “Plus Ultra.”

* * *

Dusk crawled over the skies like a bloodstain. The city became awash in neon. Even the busier streets thinned out a little, everything approaching that brief and sleepy lull between the rush hour home and the rousing of nightlife. Musutafu’s shopping district was still lively, many of the pedestrians smiling in spite of everything. Jon-X had been gouged out of this area like a cyst and still that veneer of normalcy hadn’t quite cracked.

Shin and Koh walked down those still-peaceful streets, hand in hand, nibbling on a couple of yakitori sticks that Shin had swiped from a nearby cart. They carefully avoided any passersby; occasionally someone would brush against Shin’s coat or nearly stumble over one of Koh’s small feet and look back, confused, before shrugging and going on their way. The constant rumbling noise of their surroundings enveloped them like a warm bath.

“I want to bring you to Osaka sometime,” Shin said to Koh. “The food there is way better. More variety, too. I don’t think the stuff I’m getting you is all that healthy. Still good though, right?”

“Mhm.”

“You were born in Bunkyō, right? You ever go down to Shibuya or someplace? It’s way more crowded than this.”
“I wasn’t allowed.”

Shin bit his lip as conversation dried up. He’d reflected on this nasty bit of irony before; he could get his hands on pretty much anything that anyone could want, and here he was trying to please someone who didn’t seem to want anything. Koh looked this way and that, taking in the sights – the jewelry storefronts, the rows of chattering televisions, the distant lights of a passing train – but those molten irises never lit up with any sort of interest. He wouldn’t even let Shin get him new clothes. He went everywhere looking like he’d stepped out of a black-and-white photo of shellshocked war refugees.

He bit the last chunk off his yakitori, snapped the stick in half and pitched it into the gutter. “We should head back. It’s going to get busy around here soon.”

“Are you going to work?”

“Not tonight. I’m staying in. We can play checkers or something.”

“Okay.” A pause. “Shin?”

“Yeah?”

“When you have time, do you think you could bring me to school?”

He stopped and looked down. Koh was staring at his feet, his half-eaten stick still in one bony hand. His mouth was pursed like he was trying to spit out his words.

“It’s just. I never got the chance to go. We can just stand in the back somewhere and watch. It wouldn’t bother anyone, right? Just one day?”

After a long moment, he said, “I don’t think it’d be a good idea. Kids your age run around a lot. They’d wind up bumping into us for sure.”

“Okay.” No change in his tone or posture. “Sorry. It was a stupid thing to ask.”

Shin groaned internally. He was so bad at this.

“Hey, c’mon. Look at me.” He guided Koh away from foot traffic and knelt down, so they were more or less face to face. His eyes were even spookier at this distance; they seemed to glow in the deepening gloom. “It’s just a few more weeks, okay? Then you won’t have to worry about any of this stuff anymore. You can go to school with everyone else.”

“After winter?”

“Well, you might have to wait a little longer, but at least you can stop sneaking around everywhere with me. You can talk with other kids.” He plucked Koh’s hoodie. “Maybe start wearing some clothes that fit. Seriously, kid, sometimes I think that if the wind blows hard enough it’ll pick you up and carry you- What is it?”

Koh was watching something over his shoulder, wide-eyed. Shin followed his gaze and blanched. They’d stopped in front of another TV bank, and the evening news was playing. Uwabami’s battered form was splashed across the screens for all the world to see, the concerned newscasters recounting her deeds, her accomplishments, how she’d been found in an alley after confidently promising to catch the hero hunter. He turned back to Koh.

“What is it.” His voice had hardened considerably. Koh flinched.
“Nothing. It’s just…she looks like my mom.”

“Oh, for God’s sake!”

Koh cried out as Shin stood up and pulled him hard, dragging him away from the televisions. Heroes on the news, heroes on billboards overhead, heroes pushing everything from perfume to sneakers to a brighter tomorrow. The scenery hit him all at once. He was grinding his teeth viciously.

“I’m sorry! I can’t help how she looks!”

“Then why’d you have to say it, huh? You think I picked her because I wanted to hurt your feelings?” No reply. “Answer me!”

“No. I didn’t, I-”

“She was going on every goddamn morning show she could find bragging about how she’d catch me. Talking about us like we’re garbage. Like we’re stupid. She brought it on herself. I didn’t even damage her face, so I bet it’ll be no time at all before she’s back up and doing more fucking commercials for all these idiots.” Koh winced at the curse; around them people were cocking their heads in confusion like they’d heard a cicada buzzing around their ears. He was getting too loud. “I keep trying to get this through your head but you keep getting on my case about it, even though you-”

And that was when his better senses finally got a stranglehold on his rage. He slammed his jaw shut so hard he nearly bit off the tip of his tongue. And when he looked down again Koh was still clutching his stick, breathing hard, eyes wet.

This was the worst part. He was losing his grip on his temper more and more as time went on and he couldn’t separate out how much of it was stress and how much was the kid. Those awful nights, huddled beside a locked doorway or some forgotten eave with Koh clutched to his chest, as the city raved and howled itself to pieces around them. On those nights Koh’s pupils were shrunk to pinpricks, that burning gold all that could be seen. Shin ground his teeth every time for as long as they lasted, even with the pills; he’d grind until his jaw ached and he thought he could almost taste the acrid grit of powdered bone. He’d wait until time was up and then fumblingly inject Koh in the dark, missing the vein over and over until the kid was openly weeping from the pain. That anger followed him wherever he went.

He wanted to blame all of these outbursts on Koh himself, but the truth was obvious. He hadn’t come out of the Yard as crazy as Mirai, but damage had certainly been done, in his head as well as on his skin. And if he wasn’t careful he was going to render this kid even more broken than he was. Bringing him to “work” was bad enough. Last time he’d slipped Koh a sedative, just so he couldn’t have to suffer through the noise, and carried his sleeping body out of the pandemonium they’d created.

“I’m an asshole,” he sighed, and wiped Koh’s tears. “I’m sorry. I don’t blame you for being upset.”

“It’s my fault,” he hiccupped. “I can’t make it stop…”

“No. No, that was me. I don’t want to be doing this either, okay? I want it to be over too.”

He rubbed his face with his sleeve. “Just a little longer, right?”

“Yeah. I think we should just go right to bed when we get home. I really didn’t get enough sleep today.”
“You take the bed.”

“No, it’s your turn. I’ll take the recliner.”

“But it’s bad for your neck.”

“I’ll be fine. Got a big, strong neck.” He gathered the kid in his arms. “C’mon, up we go.”

He hoisted Koh up with his chin on Shin’s shoulder. The yakitori slipped out of Koh’s grip and clattered to the pavement as he nuzzled the fur ruff on Shin’s hood. He rocked him a little bit and then set off for the apartment. Koh’s breathing steadied against his chest. The news spewed its idiot noise in his face. He walked as fast as he was able, and thought how badly he wanted to be rid of all this, to go somewhere he’d never have to see these people again – these billboard heroes, their unmarked faces, their pretty, petty lives.
Chapter 5

The next day was overcast and damp, the air filled with promises of rain. Parts of Mosei had gone eerily quiet. The spots where those waves of madness had taken hold had been cleared of police and declared safe, but they were still mostly empty, and people walked around cautiously for blocks around, as if some lingering curse had seeped into the very concrete. At the periphery of one such place, a young woman sat on a stoop, smoking a cigarette. She was rangy, gangling, her hair cropped close to her head and her face studded with piercings that winked like pearls in the gray light of dawn. Her left palm was crosshatched with thin scars that continued halfway up to the elbow.

Her name was Akane Kitae, but everyone who knew her just called her Metalhead. She was one of a small but vibrant class of criminals that didn’t pull anything too extravagant but still had a long history of bad doings trailing in their wake (in her case, to name a few: public intoxication, robbery, aggravated assault, assault on an officer of the peace, conspiracy to cause an affray, and several low-profile and yet-unsolved cases of pre-meditated murder), so that they just drifted through the lower echelons of society like wild blood cells, benign for now but ready to turn cancerous. Crime in Musutafu wasn’t developed enough for anyone to call themselves a kingpin, but she had most of the thugs in the city on her contacts list and many of them owed her enough favors for her to keep a gentle but convincing grip on Mosei’s and Santo’s underworld. People had tried to depose her before. It had gone poorly for them. Anyone who assumed she’d gotten her nickname just because of her taste in accessories wound up horribly surprised.

The cigarette had already burned halfway down; she pinched it with her scarred hand, felt no heat through the mangled flesh of her fingers. She dragged deep. She threw it down and ground it out beneath the toe of her boot. Only then did she acknowledge the shadow that had fallen over her.

“Pretty stupid, just walking up to me like that,” she said. “You know how many friends I got in these parts?”

“I don’t give a shit.”

Something about that voice rang a bell, but she couldn’t place it. The kid looked fifteen or sixteen at most, his hair covered up beneath a lopsided beanie, eyes red and bloodshot. There was a rumpled bag slung around his shoulder. She wondered for a moment if she’d done something to him personally – he looked so pissed off that his head might pop. He surreptitiously worked out a kink in his neck and she noticed the stains on his otherwise clean clothes, the sheen of grease on his skin. Upper-class kid who’d been sleeping rough. He wasn’t used to it. Maybe that was why he was in such a foul temper.

“Couple of those friends gave me a call,” she said. “Had a busy night, did you?”

“They came at me first.”

“Can’t blame ’em. You don’t look like such a nice guy.”

“Fuck you.”

Not much of a conversationalist, either. Though he was apparently good with his hands – Metalhead’s friends in question had been accosted by him last night, didn’t like his tone when he’d started asking questions, and when they’d tried to teach him a lesson he’d laid them out flat. One of them had lost teeth. Apparently he hadn’t even bothered using a Quirk. The one who’d had his bicuspids knocked out – a guy who, incidentally, had at least six inches and sixty pounds on this...
punk – had dropped her name just to make the beating stop and given her advance notice. And so she’d stepped outside this morning and sat down, waiting.

She got out another cigarette and lit up.

“So who are you, anyway?” she asked, blowing smoke. “Some Quirkless kid with a chip on his shoulder?”

“Doesn’t matter. Heard you got answers.” He flashed his phone at her. “You seen this girl anywhere?”

She didn’t bother looking at the screen. “It’s hard for Quirkless, you know. ‘specially ones that don’t have proper respect.”

“Answer the fucking question.”

“My friends answer your fucking question?”

“No. So I beat ‘em until answers fell out.” The knuckles of his free hand cracked.

Smoke jetted out her nostrils. “I wonder how much easier things would’ve been for you if you’d learned to ask nicely. Or are you just trying to toughen yourself up? Guess I wouldn’t blame you. There’s tough times ahead.”

She rose, slowly. The kid took a step back as she descended the steps, the cigarette smoldering at the corner of her mouth. All around them, half-seen shapes pressed up against windows, fogging the glass with their breath.

“Alright,” said Metalhead. “Hold up that phone and let me see.”

The kid didn’t hold up his phone. Instead he shoved it into his pocket, tossed the dufflebag aside, and dropped into a defensive position.

She smirked.

“Guess you’re smarter than you look.”

She closed the distance between them so fast that he felt the air of her charge whisper against his cheek and then her hand was out, palm gleaming silver, the knife on an upward arc towards his face. He dodged and dodged again but he was on the balls of his feet and she was serpentine-quick, slicing in measured beats and stabbing wherever he was off-balance, and by the time she relented he’d backed off nearly halfway across the street and was breathing hard. She smiled wider, held out her scarred palm, placed the blade against her skin and cut.

He was well over two armlengths away but he still ducked and that was all that kept him from losing his eyes. A flash of red on silver and the knifeblade stretched, turned thin as a spiderleg and curved as a crescent and whipped through the air with a silken hiss. She pulled her arm back and the warping blade retracted and then javelined forward, and as he sidestepped it curved and sliced out again and cut his hat almost right down to the scalp. He stumbled. She was certain of it.

The knife now gleamed quicksilver-bright, her blood running free across its surface. She held it to her face and it warped again, caressing the constellation of piercings. It sliced her cigarette down to a nub.

“My Quirk’s called Forge,” she said. “If my blood touches metal, then the metal does what I want it
to. Wears off once the blood dries, but no one’s ever lasted long enough for that to be a problem.”
The knife snapped back into shape. “You’re not bad. Maybe I’ll just take your nose. You can tell
everyone you wanted to be just like Stain.”

He didn’t say anything. His hat was barely hanging on.

The knife glinted again and he blurred, much faster, too much faster, and her eyes widened as he
threaded his way around the thread-thin blade until she finally leapt back and snatched her arm
forward so that the changed metal whiplashed against the asphalt with such speed that it turned
invisible, and she was sure it had split his head clean in two but he was fine, he was right in front of
her, it must have missed him by an eyelash, and then his palm clamped over her face and the world
turned on its side as she was slammed into the street hard enough for stars to come out behind her
eyes. Her wrist shrieked as his other hand grabbed and twisted and the moment she loosened her grip
on the knife he kicked it away and held her down. Her one eye wide and quavering around his
fingers. Her piercings cool against his skin.

All around them windows slid open. Doors rattled on their hinges.

She held up her hand and it all went silent.

“You are good,” she said, voice muffled. “Who are you really? I’ve heard stories about Quirkless
vigilantes, but you’re way too young to… wait.” His had had come off, exposing a blond starburst of
hair. It was like the last piece of a jigsaw. “You’re that U.A. kid. The one who kept showing up on
the news.” He glared and tightened his grip, but she grinned through the pain. “You’re not supposed
to be outside, schoolboy. What are you doing here?”

“I’m asking the questions,” he growled.

“Yeah. You’re looking for someone.” Her expression turned thoughtful. “Wait. This have anything
to do with you and your buddies getting blown up?”

His palm started to hiss. The hand against her face became quite hot. “Your asshole friends wasted
my time, too. I’m not gonna repeat myself again.”

“Yeah. Yeah. I’ll see what I can do. Just let me go.”

“How stupid do you think I am?”

“Kid, this is my street. If I wanted to get you off me then your head would’ve been rolling in the
gutter by now. Just let me up.”

A long moment passed and he released his grip. She sat up, rubbing her cheeks.

“Man, everyone saw that, too. Gonna take forever to build my reputation back up. So you gonna
show me or not?” He held up his phone and she peered at the picture on its screen. The girl in
purple, the distorted face, those black-on-black eyes. Metalhead’s lip peeled back like a dog’s. “Oh.
God dammit, I knew it.”

“You know her?”

“No. But I’ve seen her around.”

She rummaged another cigarette out of her coat. This time he waited patiently for her lighter to strike.
His palmprint had been lightly singed into her face.
“People know each other pretty well around these parts, so when strangers turn up they get noticed,” she said. “Especially strange strangers. I kept hearing about that one for the last couple of months. But not often. She’s like a cryptid. Been popping up a lot more since that thing at Jon-X, though.”

“What’s her name?”

“No idea. No one’s talked to her, no one’s gone up to her.”

“Bullshit. Someone like that’d get jumped at least.”

“Yeah, you’d think so. I couldn’t believe it either, but I saw her myself once. She goes around walking like a drunk but there’s a vibe around her. How do I put it…like, imagine you were me. If you saw All Might just strollin’ around here – before he got his shit kicked in last summer, I mean – would you try to just run up and take him down?”

“Yeah,” he said simply.

She blinked. Then she grinned. “I like you, kid.”

“So you’re tellin’ me she’s some kind of badass?”

“I don’t know what she is. But if she really did cause that explosion…kid, I wouldn’t fuck with her, if I was you.”

“Where is she?”

“And he ignores me,” she sighed. “She tends to hang around spots that get hit with that craziness virus or whatever it is. The most recent one’s about six blocks west from here. You’ll have better luck around dusk. Just make noise. She seems to hang around where there’s a lot of commotion going on.”

“Fine.” He put his phone away and retrieved his bag, then started off.

“Hey. Bakugo, right? One more thing.”

He stopped and glanced around. Metalhead was still sitting in the street, twirling her cigarette between her bloody fingers. She winked.

“After your school’s finally had enough of your shit, how about you come and see me? We got plenty of dead-enders down here. You’ll fit right in.”

“Go fuck yourself,” he spat, and walked on until the mists swallowed him.

The night she’d spoken to Tsukauchi, Uraraka had tossed and turned in bed, agonizing over how she’d leave the U.A. campus. She hadn’t scoped out the cameras the way Bakugo had – and even if she did, it wouldn’t have meant much, since the faculty had figured out his absence within hours anyway. She thought about going to the roof and using her Quirk to just float outside, but a single student looking up would blow her cover. She contemplated disguises. She entertained the notion of grappling hooks.

In the end she just signed out and left through the front gate. Sometimes the simplest solutions were best.

Tsukauchi had told her that most of the attacks centered on the Mosei-Santo region of the city and so
she’d gone there, the collar of her overcoat turned up, her handpads covered with thin gloves and jammed in her pockets. She hit the streets at noon and started to pace, always watching out the corner of her eye. She was ashamed to admit it, but she felt anxious here. She’d grown up poor, but her parents’ optimism and encouragement had shielded her from the worst of it. Here in these gray estates everything was crammed in too close. Pavements cracked, trash left uncollected. She thought she could taste the desperation in the air. She felt the weight of unseen eyes.

Then again, maybe she had the wrong idea. Money wasn’t the only root of this malaise. At one point she walked past a block with the brickwork burnt and pitted, huge gashes torn out of the asphalt streets, smashed windows hastily covered over with balsa wood. It was as though a very small and very brief war had broken out. She’d stood amidst the ruin and heard nothing but the murmur of the wind. Another building she’d passed had been completely gutted, collapsed in on itself like cardboard in the rain. Those unseen villains were turning up the pressure on this neighborhood, waiting for everything to crack apart.

The skies had just begun to dim when her phone buzzed. She tucked into an eave and put it to her ear, waited for the other line to speak first.

“Uravity.” It was Tsukauchi. “We have an update.”

“Talk to me.”

“Disturbance of the peace. It’s in Mosei, like we thought.”

“Is it him?”

“Oh, it’s almost definitely him. You’ll know once you get there. And you might want to hurry. He’s…not being subtle, by the sound of it. I had to call off two patrols already.”

“Got it. Send me the coordinates and I’ll head over.”

“Watch yourself. He’s not doing this on a lark. We couldn’t track his phone and we’ve gotten no reports of his Quirk being used. He’s being careful. He’s determined to see this through to the end.”

“Bakugo doesn’t do anything by halves.”

“What I mean is that he’s probably not going to let anyone stop him from trying to finish this little errand of his. If he resists, you’re cleared for use of non-lethal force.”

“I’m sure he’ll listen to reason and allow me to resolve this situation in a non-aggressive manner,” she said, keeping her voice carefully neutral.

“Uh-huh. Sending coordinates now.”

The location was close – almost right on the border between the two districts, less than ten blocks from her location. She set off at a fast walk and as she did she noticed something strange. The streets had been fairly empty but as she approached she saw more and more pedestrians headed in the other direction, young and old, many of them ragtag, trying to look innocuous but moving just a little bit too quick. It reminded her of something. She couldn’t quite place it.

Then, as she drew closer, she heard it. That guttural bandsaw of a voice was unmistakable, especially when it cranked up the decibels.

“Hey! Purple Hair! I said get your ass out here now!”
“You have to be kidding me,” she muttered.

“Purple Hair! I’m not fuckin’ afraid of you! I know what you did!”

Purple hair? Her first thought was what the hell Mineta had done this time, but it was followed by another image – something about television screens, too quickly forgotten, crowded out by the nightmarish jumble of the Jon-X attack. And as Bakugo continued to shout, she realized what that strange procession she’d just passed had reminded her of. All those people, leaving this area. Like animals fleeing some impending disaster.

“I know what you did, Purple Hair! I’m not afraid of you!”

She wondered what the hell Bakugo’s throat was made of. Someone who screamed like that ought to be spitting blood worse than All Might. She had to resist the urge to cover her ears as she traced the echoes to their origin point.

(Incidentally, it was around this time that Shota Aizawa wrapped up his classes and settled down to prepare lesson plans at his desk. He’d been too tired to question Kirishima’s claim that Uraraka was out with a stomach virus, but there was still a sliver of suspicion nagging at him for reasons he couldn’t entirely place. Wisely, he decided to check the school’s sign in/sign out register. Unwisely, he did so while taking a big sip of coffee.)

She turned a corner and there he was, his back facing her, his hair somehow even messier than usual – it looked like a couple of spikes had been lightly shaved off one side. He was dressed like he was going camping, a ragged dufflebug bouncing against his shoulder. He took large, stomping steps, still calling out for this mystery person, and then turned and went into an alleyway. She took a deep breath and followed.

He was waiting for her.

The alleyway was cleaner than most but also painfully narrow, and it ended in a solid brick wall five stories high. Bakugo had stopped about halfway down, his bag already slung aside, posture hunched, fingers bent. They faced each other like desperadoes.

He sneered at her. “Wasn’t expecting them to send you. What, is Deku still in traction? Or did he just not have the stomach for it?” She said nothing. “Hey. Teacher’s pet. This is where you tell me if I’m gonna come quietly.”

Midoriya in his hospital bed, reaching out to her with those feverish eyes. Kirishima bent and sobbing into her floor.

She carefully unzipped her coat, folded it up, and set it against the wall. Then she plucked off her gloves one finger at a time and set them on the coat. Bakugo watched, his leer twisting into a scowl.

“You forget what happened the last time you tried to take me on? And I’ve gotten a hell of a lot better since then.” His knuckles cracked. “C’mon. Maybe you’ll be a decent warmup. I won’t even need my Quirk to put your ass down.”

He hadn’t even finished speaking when she started to walk toward him, taking careful steps, feet splashing lightly at the scum of moisture on the pavement. It was the only sound to be heard. The buildings loomed claustrophobically over them both.

Then Uraraka was off, full-on sprinting at him, her footsteps pattering like raindrops, but there was far too much distance to close and she was still glacial compared to Metalhead’s knife. Bakugo grinned and prepared to counter, and then she hunched low and made a strange gesture, like cleaning
dust off her palms; her skin gleamed pink and she blurred and was gone.

“Wha-”

His head snapped up and to the side and there she was, clinging to the brickwork ten feet up like a spider, and her legs tensed and she shot toward him. He raised his hands to grab her and smash her into the ground but she’d overshot her mark, or so he thought, her shoes grinding across the ground behind him, and when he turned again to face her Uraraka closed the distance and clapped her hands right in front of his face. The sound was deafening in the tense atmosphere, he could almost feel it in his teeth, and in the split-second before he could recover her hands parted, and gripped the sides of his head, and then drove his face right into her knee.

There was a wet *crunch* and Bakugo roared and staggered back, blood oozing from his nose. The fury in his eyes was incandescent. His hands glowed and hissed. He stepped forward and swung, the explosion cradled in his palm already unleashed-

-and then he rocketed into the air fast enough for the pressure to settle on his skull like a metal cap. He cursed again; she’s finally gotten him with her Quirk, something she’d desperately tried to do for their whole fight at the USJ. He was weightless, his momentum was all wrong. But that didn’t matter. He flung his arms back, about to reverse the recoil and maybe send a few airbursts down at Uraraka for good measure-

-but she was already here, she was flying up to meet him again, she grabbed him and kneed him in the face *again*, and she somehow kept her grip even as he let out a wordless scream and started firing off explosions wildly, so that the backlash twisted the two of them around like an absurd centrifuge until she somehow took all that momentum and used it to hurl him right back down to earth. He dimly heard another handclap as he spread his palms flat to the ground, ready to buoy himself up-

-and then struck the pavement. Hard.

The impact knocked the wind out of him. The alley twirled and warped in front of his eyes. She’d restored his weight in mid-fall, screwing with his timing, ruining his rhythm. He was falling into her pace.

*Wait,* he thought. *If I’m back to normal, then that means she’s-

And that was when Uraraka crashed back to earth feet-first, landing squarely on Bakugo’s chest.

He felt his whole ribcage distend and let out a sound like a badly treated balloon, but it still wasn’t enough to stun him. He swung up both hands, his palms crackled and popped, and the resulting blast sent up a geyser of smoke that could be seen for blocks around. But just before it fired, Uraraka did that strange dusting-off motion again and bounded away, gliding on the shockwave, and then she clapped her hands and skidded to a halt.

He clawed back to his feet and stood, panting. The whole skirmish had barely taken thirty seconds but both of them were already in poor shape, Bakugo bruised and bloody, Uraraka looking green. She still hadn’t quite gotten the hang of levitating herself. But Bakugo could see her trick. She’d evolved past that careful, awkward finger-clasping motion to release her Quirk – those handclaps were reverting his gravity and removing hers too fast to leave her vulnerable. His shoe scuffed across the pavement. This time his stance left no openings.

“I’ve been spending a lot of time around Ojiro,” said Uraraka, dusting herself off. “Between practicing with him and my internship with Gunhead, I think my reflexes have gotten a little better. Maybe that’s why this is so hard for you.” She started to advance. “Or maybe you’re just another
bully who can’t handle someone getting right up in his face.”

He didn’t rise to the bait. He didn’t even blink. She could almost see the demarcation between them, a line that meant instant death to cross.

“And by the way,” she added. “I only came to get you because Kirishima got down on his knees and begged me.”

Bakugo’s eyes widened.

No gravity tricks this time; she closed the remaining distance by pumping her legs as fast as she could and then she hit Bakugo with a ringing slap that twisted him a full one-eighty degrees, but even with his back to her he just reversed his hand and fired off a blast that coursed down the alley and left a sootstain on the far wall, but she’d sidestepped, gripped him, and for Bakugo the next several seconds were full of incident as she twisted him and reversed him and turned his every increasingly desperate attack into another g-force midair whirl in her hands. By the time she grabbed his ankles and bullwhipped him face-first to the ground, his head was spinning so badly that he had to spit just to figure out which way was up. Then she was on top of him, that hateful knee digging into his spine, his arms twisted agonizingly backwards.

“I practiced his hold for a long time,” she whispered in his ear. “Go ahead and use your Quirk. In this position, the recoil will blow your arms off like a pair of bottle rockets.”

“You’re bluffing,” he snarled.

“Try me.”

A long and difficult moment passed. Then, almost imperceptibly, Bakugo’s tension eased.

“Just hurry up and call the cops,” he said.

“Are you going to behave?”

“Don’t push your goddamn luck.”

She released his wrists and backed away quickly, but he just sat up and wiped blood away from his nose. She pressed her fingers together, restored his gravity. Then she finally took a look at the alley itself. Aside from that scorch mark on the dead-end wall, none of the buildings were so much as singed. No rubble. He’d mediated his explosions to cause the absolute minimum of collateral damage. And he seemed no worse for wear, even after she’d dropped that three-story stomp on him. Maybe that wasn’t too surprising. He’d tanked a blow from All Might, after all.

She thought about pointing out that he’d gone easy on her. Instead she just took out her phone and dialed in their coordinates.

“Why’d you do this?” she asked. “Everyone’s worried about you, believe it or not.”

“Who gives a shit. My ass is grass when I get back there, anyway.”

“Deku’s going to be heartbroken.” He grunted, and then she remembered something. “I visited him, you know. He was still loopy from the meds but you were the first one he asked about. He wanted me to tell you that what happened at Jon-X wasn’t your fault, whatever that—”

“What the FUCK does he know!?”
She flinched away from him, eyes wide, face pale. He’d whirled on her and screamed loud enough for the veins to pop out in his neck. The alley caught his rage and echoed it back, turning it into a paranoiac’s mutter: *Does he know? Does he know? Does he know?*

“How much time before the cops get here?” he asked, suddenly quieter. She was still keyed up from that mood swing; she had to stammer out her reply.

“Th-they’re close. Real close. Shouldn’t be m-more than five minutes? Maybe five minutes?”

“Then I’ll have to make this quick.”

She stared uncomprehending as he stood up and faced the alley’s mouth. That tomblike silence still encased them. This entire part of the city had gone dead.

“Hey!” he shouted. “I can see your shadow, you idiot! Get your ass out here!”

Uraraka blinked and peered around him. He was right – it was hard to spot in this weak daylight, but there was a streak of deeper dark cutting across the alley’s entrance. As she watched, a hand emerged around the corner. Thin, shivering, fishbelly-white. It gripped the building’s stone side, pulled its owner into view.

The girl emerged by inches. Uraraka still didn’t recognize her at first. She’d become far more unkempt over the last couple of days, her hair almost paralyzed in place with grime, clothes ragged at the hems, her moonlike face marred with acne and grease. That hair had darkened, turned almost black. But she still remembered that bruised shade.

“Wait,” she said. “Isn’t that-”

Then the girl looked up and Uraraka’s breath froze in her throat.

She walked strangely. Steps slow and uneven, like she was picking her way barefoot across broken glass. Her limbs and joints shuddered and twisted as if she were being steered their way by an amateur puppeteer. But her face was far worse, her glassy stare had all the humanity of a shark’s, and indeed there was something predatory in her lopsided smile, something filled with hunger and bloody anticipation. A streak of silver ran down the corner of her mouth, and with dim horror Uraraka realized she was drooling.

“Beautiful sounds,” she said, that breathy voice clear as a bell in the quiet. “The thunder and the roar! I’ve gone looking for them. Everywhere.”

Uraraka got to her feet. “Bakugo. I’m, uh, following your lead here.”

“Shut the hell up and watch.”

He flung his hand to the side and blasted out a chunk of the nearby wall. Before the debris had finished clattered he charged at her, hands out and sparking red.

“Flash Grenade!”

Uraraka flung an arm over her face at the burst of light and smoke and when she lowered it she saw that Bakugo had already sent himself airborne, streaking towards the girl in a lethal arc, and when he entered the smokescreen there was a vast flat *bang* like a door slamming shut that rattled Uraraka’s bones and almost send her skidding back on her heels; the smoke blew away, forcing itself into her eyes and down her throat, and by the time she finished coughing she gaped at what had become of him. Bakugo suspended and spasming in midair, his mouth open in a silent scream. Bakugo’s clothes...
tearing and his body twisting and he was cocooned in noise, further smaller explosions like a string of firecrackers, and the girl looked up at him with her grin turned rictus and her arms spread wide like a deranged evangelist. She was blasting him apart. His skeleton would shatter like glass.

Uraraka’s thoughts had turned sludgy. The girl wasn’t paying her any attention but she doubted that would be the case if she rushed in. Bakugo was dying. He must have had a plan. He was dying. He always seemed so pissed off that he could barely think straight but he was almost as good at strategizing as Midoriya, he wouldn’t have just rushed in. He was dying. He’s going to die!

Shut up and watch. That was what he’d told her. Had it just been an empty boast? And then he’d blown out that wall. Bakugo didn’t make unnecessary movements, it was part of what made him such a nightmare to fight. She looked at the pile of rubble and stone chips on the ground, then back at that girl. She hadn’t blinked once. The cracks of Bakugo’s bones were growing louder.

Uraraka charged.

She came with her head low and one fist clenched at her side, she passed under Bakugo and stepped over his seizing shadow and when the girl’s eyes flicked down to her she nearly felt her heart stop, she would have sworn she’d felt death’s cold weight settle on her shoulders. But instead her arm whipped forward, and she hurled a handful of debris right into the girl’s face.

The girl screamed and stepped back with hands over her eyes and Bakugo’s body struck the ground with a meaty thump, but before he even finished falling Uraraka grabbed her and spun her ‘round and smashed her facedown into the concrete with one arm twisted behind her back, the other hand keeping a deathgrip on the girl’s head. The explosions ceased. The echoes faded.

“I don’t know what the hell is up with your Quirk,” she said through grit teeth, “but its weakness is simple enough, isn’t it? You need to see whatever you want to destroy. Use it now, if you like. It’ll blow us both sky high.”

The girl giggled but didn’t stop struggling. The movement of her almost made Uraraka retch – she wasn’t strong, practically emaciated, but she just wouldn’t stop, so that it felt like Uraraka was holding on to a sackful of worms. She’d had another crazy girl in a position like this before, Toga Himiko with one bloodshot eye fixed on her while she gushed about boys, but she knew that if this girl made eye contact then she would be gone from the waist up. Turned into gory graffiti on the alleyway walls.

“My bones are bending,” she said, still laughing. “They creak. Like an old door!” And then, her voice queerly flat: “It’d be easy to kill us both.”

“Go ahead and try. I’ll land on my feet.”

Jolly again. “You’re not scared! Who are you? I like you. He never told us about you. You’re not supposed to be important.”

“So you are taking orders from someone.” She bent the arm further. “Give me a name!”

“Ohh, the creak and crackle. But why ask me? Ask someone else. I know who to ask! He’s so big. He’s everywhere you go! He has a voice like a stranger’s hand on your cheek.”

“What the hell are you-” But then she recalled it. The way this girl had been fascinated by that news broadcast, the bureaucrat offering condolences on all those screens. “Are you talking about Nakayama?”
“He talks and talks but it’s always the same sound.” The laughter turned higher, jagged. She bucked and squirmed beneath Uraraka’s knee. “Ask him about the quiet place beneath the cold mountain. Ask him about the _Yard._”

Before Uraraka could say anything else the girl wrenched and her arm came free of its socket with a sickening pop. She got her head up from the ground. Just a fraction. It was enough.

The apartment building across the street exploded and Uraraka’s senses jangled and shrieked at the rush of noise and the sting of rubble and the discordant music of falling glass, Jon-X all over again. She instinctively raised her arms to shield her face and then felt another arm around her throat, gripping her and hurling her aside.

The shockwave of the explosion high above her was so tremendous that for a moment she felt pressed into the ground, like a finger making a divot in pastry. Warm sunlight lanced through a gash in the clouds overhead. If the girl had caught her with that it would have killed all three of them. But apparently she didn’t care. She was rising again. Looking down at her.

Bakugo slid between them, palms ablaze. He swiped one hand in front of the girl’s face and produced a flash of noise and light so bright that Uraraka could see his silhouette through her closed eyelids, and before the girl even had a chance to cry out he pressed his other crackling palm against her stomach.

“Blast off, you bitch!”

The resulting explosion sent Bakugo rolling across the ground and the girl flying skyward so fast that a second later she was an unrecognizable speck. She’d been rendered weightless, too. Uraraka had a horrible vision of what she could do to the city now, if she was still conscious. That kind of view with those murdering eyes. She clapped her hands, released her power. The speck paused in mid-flight, then fell. When it passed the city’s skyline there was a distant rumble, like rolling thunder.

“Uraraka.” Bakugo had crawled up beside her. He was mangled. One of his feet was pointed in entirely the wrong direction.

“Bakugo! God, don’t move! The police’ll get here any-

“Shut your trap for a second. She’s not done. She broke her fall. Old trick. _My_ trick. Fucking copycat.” He hacked blood. “Tell them to keep looking. In that direction.”

“Look, take it easy. You’re going to be fine, okay? Don’t die on me!”

“I said shut up and do your job, idiot,” he snapped, and passed out. The police found them like that – Uraraka hunched over Bakugo’s broken body, the sirens ripping through the dying day.
Chapter 6

Bakugo’s injuries were so severe that the police chose not to transport him to U.A.’s infirmary. Instead he was hurried to a proper hospital and Recovery Girl was escorted in, hobbling on her cane, her wispy hair askew. It was almost an hour between Bakugo’s arrival and hers and in that intervening time his expression did not change once, even though X-rays would later show that his ribs were fractured, arm broken, one ankle smashed, his knees covered in cracks like a pair of dropped snowglobes. He told himself that the pain was so great that it might as well not have been there at all.

“That’s all I can do, for now,” said Recovery Girl, after her lips detached from his cheek. “If you ever wondered what Midoriya felt like after one of his suicidal escapades, this should give you some idea.”

He didn’t say anything. Bound in casts, staring at the ceiling. The room was empty besides them and smelled of antiseptic and new paint.

“What in God’s name were you thinking?” she asked plaintively. “The last time you wound up hurt anywhere near this badly was because that idiot Toshinori didn’t know how to hold back. I know you like to bluster, but I’d thought you had better sense than this.”

“Is Deku out of bed yet?”

He’d asked the question without even looking at her; she spluttered a little before answering. “He’s lucid, but still healing. His injuries are still worse than yours were. Be thankful you weren’t bleeding internally.”

“I want out of here tomorrow.”

“It’s not my decision, but I’ll pass it along. Another round of healing should make you well enough to walk, at least.”

“Good,” he said. “Don’t tell Deku I was here. Don’t let anyone tell him. Got it?”

Her confused look intensified. Uraraka had looked the same way, when a gasping, semi-conscious Bakugo had sworn her to secrecy before being packed into an ambulance. They’d gone their separate ways but he believed he’d gotten the point across.

“I assume you want to let him know yourself,” she said. “Well, he’s open to visiting hours. For whenever you get back.” Her voice dropped. “Bakugo…I shouldn’t spread this around, but there’s rumblings around the faculty. I don’t quite believe it myself, but you may want to prepare for-”

“They’re gonna expel me. No shit.” His dull red glare turned on her. “You think I’m stupid? Any dumbass would’ve seen it coming.”

“Then…why would you-”

“Doesn’t matter.” He looked back at the ceiling. “Thanks for patching me up. Now I wanna sleep.”

One consequence of Bakugo rarely hospitalizing himself was that Recovery Girl had even less experience dealing with his relentless personality than the rest of the school’s staff. Her mouth pursed in disapproval, but she couldn’t think of anything else to say. Instead she limped out of the room, and gently asked a passing nurse to please turn off the lights for him.
Several policemen saluted her at the hospital entrance. One of them was Tsukauchi.

“Ma’am,” he said. “Thank you for coming on such short notice.”

“Likewise, though I don’t know why you decided to shuttle yourself all the way here.” She passed him without slowing and he awkwardly fell in step behind her. “If you want to speak to young Bakugo, he’s already resting.”

“I arrived too late, then. Uraraka debriefed us all as best she could when she got back to U.A. Apparently the local police weren’t able to apprehend the villain they encountered.”

“Poor show, Detective.”

“I’m far more ashamed than you, trust me. From what Uraraka told me, the girl was badly injured. She also left an impact crater about twenty feet in diameter when she landed, but we still couldn’t track her down. She must have taken off at a sprint as soon as she touched ground. We’re combing the city now for any sign of her.” He sighed. “I thought Bakugo deserved to know at least that much, though he probably wouldn’t have taken the news well.”

“He wouldn’t have, but that’s unimportant now. Let us know if you find anything. And while I’m making wishes, I’d dearly appreciate it if my esteemed colleagues told me why a pair of children accomplished in one day what they couldn’t in two months.”

They paused by Tsukauchi’s squad car in the hospital parking lot. Musutafu twinkled around them in the frosty night. Though she wouldn’t admit it out loud, Recovery Girl felt relieved knowing that at least one of the people who’d been terrorizing the city had been disabled, even after seeing Bakugo’s shattered body. And then there was that other piece of information Uraraka had managed to extract – something about a backyard, or whatnot. She was too weary to process it now.

“I should have known this would happen,” she said, clasping her cane. “Uraraka seemed terribly ill at ease the other day. I tried to reassure her. But how can we give these children hope if we’re being driven into a corner ourselves?”

“I wish I had an answer to that.” He opened the passenger door for her. “For now, the best I can offer is a ride back.”

“We need to do better.” She took Tsukauchi’s hand and he helped her in. “For their sake, if nothing else.”

They rode back in silence, flanked by the cars of Tsukauchi’s fellow officers. Back at U.A., Uraraka slipped into her mittens and pulled her covers over her head, exhausted to the bone after hours of interrogation by the faculty, haunted by memories of tarry black eyes. And Bakugo remained awake, itching madly as his bones knit, forcing himself not to think of anything until that sensation bore him down to sleep.

*             *             *

Recovery Girl showed up at the hospital again early next morning. After she’d treated him again, he was discharged and able to walk out of the hospital under his own power, albeit with a limp. She told him that it would take another few days before he was able to properly move, and that was all they said to each other before returning to the campus.

Aizawa was waiting at the entrance.

“Dorms,” he said. “We’ll be speaking shortly.”
He walked on without even acknowledging the man was there.

It was Sunday and most of his classmates were still sleeping in, but a few of them – Iida, Kouda, Ashido, Tokoyami in the corner with his arms dramatically folded – were in the lobby as he entered. The only one who looked ready to say anything was Iida, and one look at Bakugo’s face stopped him short. He lurched into his room, shut and locked the door, sat on his bed, and waited. It was sunny today, the brightest it had been since their excursion to Jon-X, and his shadow migrated slowly across the room as time passed.

Finally he heard a knock at the door.

“Bakugo? It’s me,” said Uraraka. “Mr. Aizawa wants to-”

The door flung open and she winced as she got a full-on view of his scowl. It nearly scorched her silhouette onto the far wall.

“He wants to see us,” she finished, eventually. “At Principal Nezu’s office. I’ll, um, wait outside for you. In case you need to get ready.”

He closed the door without answering, returned to his bed, and took out his phone. He let five minutes pass. Then he stood up and left the room. In that time the lobby had mostly emptied out, his classmates scattering like frightened birds. Ironically enough, the only one left was Tokoyami, who’d assumed that cross-armed stance against one of the couches. Bakugo noted that, despite his tryhard pose, his nails were digging nervously into his forearms.

“Bakugo,” he said. “A word, please?”

Bakugo approached him like a magma flow. Tokoyami’s face was too stiff for him to betray any real fear, but his grip on his arms tightened. None of them were used to him being this quiet.

“I have a confession to make,” he said. “I, too, knew that you had absconded from the campus that night. It would appear that my suspicions regarding your intentions were proven correct. You sought to apprehend that villain yourself.” Bakugo said nothing. “I just want to say that, regardless of what others may think, there are people here who believe that your course of action was the correct one. So there is no need to feel ashamed of- *Hrk!*”

Bakugo’s hand shot out, grabbed Tokoyami by his hoodie and pulled him in and up, hoisting him off the ground. They were so close that Tokoyami could have taken out Bakugo’s eye with his beak.

“The only reason I didn’t just bash your head in is ‘cause I don’t know what part of your fucked-up face to hit first.” He dropped Tokoyami and turned away. “Don’t talk to me again, freak.”

Tokoyami was left leaning against the couch, breathing hard, as Bakugo walked out. He stormed through the doors and left Uraraka scrambling to catch up. Tokoyami looked down, carefully bunched up his hoodie in his hand.

“He stretched it,” he said forlornly.

A mass of fuzzed dark slithered out from underneath Tokoyami’s collar, its glowing yellow eyes two sad crescents.

“Don’t feel bad, Fumi,” said Dark Shadow. “You tried.”

“I brought this from home, too.” He looked back to the entrance. “I don’t understand him at all.”
Aizawa and All Might were there, seated against the wall beside Nezu’s desk. So was Hound Dog, his hulking frame awkwardly squeezed into another chair across from where Nezu sat, meaning that he was just behind Bakugo and Uraraka as they stood in front of the principal. He was a good ten feet away but Uraraka thought she could feel his hot breath on her neck.

“Thank you for joining us,” Nezu said. “First order of business. Ms. Uraraka, we have reviewed your actions yesterday evening and determined that, under the guidelines established regarding curfew, you technically did not break any rules. However, your homeroom teacher wished me to convey his displeasure with your methods.” Aizawa’s eyes had gone almost completely red, which didn’t make his glare any more pleasant. “In response, we have updated those guidelines. Until these villains are apprehended, any further requests for hero work must be approved by no less than three faculty members, including myself and your homeroom teacher. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I also thought you should hear the latest regarding your encounter with our mysterious bomber,” Nezu continued. “Unfortunately, she remains at large.”

Bakugo’s knuckles cracked. “Are you shitting me?”

“Bakugo,” Aizawa warned, but Nezu dismissively waved a paw.

“It’s fine. I share his frustration. All available heroes and police are searching downtown Musutafu now. That part of the city is a bit of a labyrinth, but now more than ever, we need to act urgently. If these villains are working together – and I believe that they are – we can expect another insanity attack shortly, if only to cover this girl’s retreat. We must work to prevent that if nothing else.”

“What about Nakayama?” Uraraka asked. “She said that-”

“Yes, I’m aware. I contacted Minister Nakayama with a question about this ‘Yard’ last night.” Nezu’s beady eyes narrowed. “His response was swift. And his tone was quite a bit different from our usual correspondence. Rather terse, I would say.”

“So do you think he’s involved?”

“Mm. He knows more than he initially let on, but something still doesn’t sit right with me. If he truly were the mastermind behind these attacks, I would expect outright denial, or at least a stalling tactic followed by some covert measures. Instead he’s scheduled a follow-up with me tonight, with a request to meet U.A.’s faculty tomorrow to discuss the issue further. We’ll have to see where it goes.”

“And we have another question, Uraraka.” Aizawa leaned forward. “Answer honestly. During your pursuit of Bakugo, did he at any point use his Quirk to either resist arrest or otherwise act in his own benefit?”

She stared straight ahead. “No, sir. We argued a little, but he only used his Quirk to defend the two of us against that villain.”

She felt Aizawa’s glare drill a hole into the side of her head. After what felt like an eternity, that invisible pressure abated.

“Fine,” he said. “That’ll be all, then. You’re dismissed.”
She glanced over at Bakugo. Their eyes met. After a moment, he twitched his head towards the door. She nodded, bowed to Nezu, and stepped out. The door clicked shut. Silence followed.

Nezu tapped his claws on his desk. He straightened his tie. He looked as though he were running through every way to stall before saying what had to be said next. But, finally, he spoke.

“Bakugo. First, I want to point out that your academic and athletic performance during your time here has been extraordinary, and we have been proud to count you among our student body. However, we also have not overlooked your infractions and breaches of conduct. And your actions this week have been by far the most egregious.”

“You were nearly killed,” Aizawa said bluntly. “You nearly got Uraraka killed. That scuffle of yours left yet another residential building in ruins and probably accelerated the villains’ timetable even further. And what do you have to show for it? One small piece of intelligence, which so far appears to be of questionable use. Irrational, in the extreme. There is nothing that would make me consider your little vigilante spree to be acceptable.”

Nezu gripped his desk. “For reasons stated by Mr. Aizawa, it is with considerable regret that I have chosen to revoke your provisional hero license, effective immediately. Your expulsion from U.A. will be formalized at the end of the term.”

All Might carefully watched Bakugo’s face for any sign of impending catastrophe. Not a twitch. He hadn’t even blinked.

“However, we’re not about to simply toss you out the door,” said Nezu. “Since these villains are clearly targeting U.A.’s students and the school itself remains secure, you will remain on campus until they’ve been captured. You may also continue to attend classes, and even take finals if you so wish – your grades can be used as credit for whichever school you choose to pursue in the future. Hound Dog will also be available for counseling and career advice, which is why we’ve invited him here, as well.”

“Your parents have been informed of the arrangement already,” Aizawa said, and that earned him a harsh jab in the ribs from All Might’s elbow. He swayed in place like a scarecrow from the blow, expression unchanging.

“While I will no longer be your principal, I will continue to follow your exploits with utmost interest,” said Nezu. “I hope that, in time, you will view this as one more opportunity to learn. Build on this experience, and use it to weigh your actions more carefully in the future.” He cleared his throat. “Is there anything you’d like to ask, before we let you go?”

“Yeah,” said Bakugo. “How’re you gonna fuck things up next?”

Nezu blinked. Hound Dog stiffened. Bakugo’s tone had been casual, but in this office the curse clanged like a dropped gauntlet.

“I beg your pardon?” Nezu asked.

“You heard me.” He stepped up to the desk. “The only break you’ve gotten in this case was ‘cause of what me and Uraraka did. Now that you’re putting everyone away nice and safe again, how’re you gonna fuck up next? Because it’s real obvious you big-shot heroes can’t do shit without us helping you.”

Nezu stood. “That is completely-”

Bakugo smashed his foot into Nezu’s desk and he squeaked in shock and sat back down, hard
enough for his chair to rock in its legs. His pint-sized computer jumped on the desk and chattered like teeth. Hound Dog’s growl reverberated in the air. Aizawa shot to his feet.

“Bakugo! Get ahold of yourself now! I’m not in the mood for this crap!”

“Fuck you.” He kicked the desk again, harder, and even though it was bolted to the floor the shock was enough to send Nezu’s monitor dangerously close to the edge.

“That’s it.” Aizawa gripped his capture tape. “Get out. Or you’ll spend the rest of the term in restraints.”

“Yeah, that’s about all you can do these days, isn’t it? Keep us under lock and key so all of you can go out and fall on your faces. You think I haven’t noticed? How fucking stupid do you think I am!?” Shouting now, his head snapping back and forth between Aizawa and Nezu. “Ever since what happened to All Might, every goddamn thing you’ve done right has been because of those b-rate assholes in our class! That fucking nerd Deku beat down that Yakuza prick and stopped that lameass culture festival from getting busted up by those loser villains. You couldn’t find those two, either! How the hell couldn’t you find them? They were posting videos of all the shit they did, for fuck’s sake! The only thing holding this place together was All Might, and now look at him!” He stabbed a finger at All Might’s shaking form. “And that’s my fault! That happened because of me!”

The teachers were all frozen in place now; even Aizawa looked unsure of what to do next. Bakugo had gripped the sides of his head like someone in the throes of migraine, nails digging madly into his scalp.

“Damn it!” he screamed. “I knew that bitch was trouble the minute I saw her! I felt her fucking eyes on us the whole way to that goddamn store, and I still didn’t do shit about it ‘cause I still thought the pros had it under control! What the fuck was I thinking!? That idiot Deku even had to get his ass crushed flat again. Who the hell does he think I am? I got the point just fine without seeing him like that! Damn it. God damn it!” He turned to the ceiling, teeth grit, fingers clutching at nothing. “I should’ve figured this shit out months ago! Even when those League shitstains snatched me, those idiots were the ones who bailed me out. Not even All Might could help me then! Now it’s just you assholes locked up in this fucking school, and what’re you gonna do when the pieces of shit out there march up to your doors, huh? You promised you’d protect us? That you’d keep us safe? You can’t do shit. You can’t do shit! FUCK YOU!”

His voice broke and when he kicked the desk one last time it sounded like something else broke too, because his leg dropped back to carpet like a stone and he stood hunched and gasping with his face milk-pale. But he rallied once again.

“I can’t believe Deku wanted to come here so bad,” he said, quieter. “Go ahead and throw me out. You’ve got nothing left to teach me.”

“Are you done?” Aizawa asked. Bakugo sucked wind but said nothing. “Good. You’re dismissed. And see someone about that ankle.”

For a moment it looked like Bakugo might rush him. But then he turned on his heel, limped out of the room, and slammed the door behind him. A full minute passed before Aizawa slumped back into his seat. Nezu trembled behind his desk; his computer had nearly fallen into his lap.

“Principal,” said Aizawa. “Are you alright?”

“Er? Hm? Yes! I’m fine. I’m f-fine.” He rose and lowered his hands as if momentarily unsure of what they were and gingerly moved his monitor back into place. “I, um, do n-not approve of the
language used, but I, I do sympathize with Bakugo’s criticisms. To an extent. Perhaps we could have
an additional meeting about some alternative disciplinary measures, something that—"

“No,” said All Might. “You heard him. His pride is wrapped up in this, now. Even if we did offer
leniency, there’s no way he’d accept it. It’s over.”

Nezu nodded, slowly. “I suppose so.”

“Inui,” said Aizawa. “You’ve been awfully silent. Anything you care to add?”

Hound Dog looked between the three of him. As usual, his muzzle and the copper-colored slits of his
eyes made it impossible to guess what his expression might be, other than “furious.” Still, when he
rose and spoke, his voice was perfectly clear.

“We’re making these kids grow up too fast,” he said, and left the room.

The door’s latch clicked. The remaining faculty were at a loss.

“You two can leave as well,” said Nezu, after a while. “I need to wait for Nakayama’s follow-up and
inform the other faculty about his visit tomorrow. Formal wear, please. He is a government official,
regardless of his intentions.”

“Understood.” Aizawa rose and left. All Might wordlessly followed, shoulders slumped. Nezu was
left alone in the sunny office, his heart still thumping wildly in his chest. He eventually got up and
went to make a cup of tea, but then he stopped and stared. The edge of his desk had been scuffed
from the sole of Bakugo’s shoe. Nezu looked at that mark for a long time. He couldn’t seem to take
his eyes off it.

* * *

He didn’t return to the dorms. Instead, he headed for the infirmary. There was a sick heat in his
busted ankle that only got worse as he placed weight on it. He could see heads turning and
whispering out the corner of his eye wherever he went. The rumor mill already spinning into
overdrive. He refused to start hobbling and give them something else to chatter about, but by the time
he finally made it to the wing that housed Recovery Girl’s office and climbed the stairs, he had to
grip the banister and suck wind for a while before continuing on. He pushed open the stairwell
doors, lurched into the hall, nearly crashed into someone, and came very close to reducing the
luckless interloper to a thin smear of ash before realizing who it was.

“Oh…hello, Katsuki.”

Inko Midoriya. Her eyes red-rimmed, the lapels of her overcoat wet. Evidently she’d just gotten back
from speaking to her son. She struggled to smile at Bakugo as he carefully choked back the profanity
he’d nearly unleashed.

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it?” she said. “I think I was taller than you the last time we met face to face.
Did you come to visit Izuku?”

“Oh. Yeah.” He peered past her, down the hall. “Is the nurse there?”

“Yes, she’s with him. She says that he can take off the casts in a couple of days. Don’t be too hard
on him, okay? You know how much he looks up to you.”

His mouth twisted like he’d just chomped on a lemon, but she was preoccupied with her coat, trying
to wipe off those damp stains. Weepiness ran in the family, apparently.
“He’s disappointed in himself, I think,” she said, voice trembling. “He was doing so well this term, too. After I heard about how he saved the Culture Festival with barely a scratch, I started to think he’d be tough enough to handle anything, soon. Silly me, right?” She looked back up at him, her eyes overbright. “I suppose that’s just the world we live in now.”

Still no answer from Bakugo. Even he knew how ill-equipped he was to handle this situation with any sort of grace. Inko seemed to realize it too, because she chuckled a little, gave him a gentle pat on the shoulder, and stepped away.

“I shouldn’t be bothering you with this,” she said. “Merry Christmas, Katsuki. Take care.”

The door clacked open and shut behind him. He waited until the sound of Inko’s footsteps died away before he started down the hall again. The fluorescents’ idiot buzz drilled into his ears. The pain in his ankle had traveled up his whole leg. When he finally reached Recovery Girl’s office he ripped open the door and staggered in before he could accidentally overhear whatever they might have been talking about.

They stopped in mid-conversation and turned to him, jaws agape. Midoriya’s face also had the telltale blotchiness of someone who’d gotten a good cry in recently. Recovery Girl took one look at Bakugo’s broken posture and looked like she couldn’t decide whether to guide him to a bed or smack him with her cane.

“Bakugo! What on earth did you-”

“Ankle hurts,” he said. “Can you help?”

“Yes. Yes, of course! Sit down, sit down…” She led him to the other chair and pulled up his pant leg. “Dear lord, look at this swelling. What did you do this time?”

“Nothing I shouldn’t have done,” he said.

Midoriya sat straight, tried to crane his head over to see. “Kacchan, what-”

“Shut the hell up or I’ll kill you.”

“Language, Bakugo.” Recovery Girl glared up at him. “I don’t care what kind of relationship you two have, I won’t tolerate that kind of talk in my office.” He flushed, scowled, and looked away, and after it became clear he wasn’t going to apologize she just sighed and planted her lips against his injury. The pain started to ebb. “There. Don’t let it happen again, or I’ll strap you to a bed next.”

“Thanks,” he said. “Wanna talk to Deku. In private.”

She looked doubtful. So did Midoriya, but he smiled and nodded.

“It’ll be okay, Recovery Girl. He probably just wants to know how I’m doing.”

“I supposed stranger things have happened this week,” she muttered. “Fine. I have some filing to do, anyway. Let me know if you need anything.”

She tapped her way out and gently shut the door. Bakugo stood and experimentally placed weight on his bad leg. No pain. She worked fast, at least. Then he went over to the bed next to Midoriya, sat down, and stared. And continued staring. The silence went on for far longer than was comfortable. Midoriya started to fidget like he was stuck under the hot sun.

“Hope this is your first visit,” he said. “Uraraka told me I was really out of it for a while. I must’ve
“Heh. Yeah. It’s pretty pathetic I’d let a couple of falling rocks take me out after Overhaul, right?”

“That’s not what I meant, idiot,” Bakugo snapped, and he looked up again, confused. “You really piss me off, you know that? You can’t even be original with this shit. You screw up the exact same way every goddamn time.” He pounded his knee. “It gives me a headache, damn it!”

“I don’t-”

“If you’d been stupid enough to have just gotten pasted at that store without even seeing it coming then you wouldn’t even be worth my time. But instead you turned on that annoying-ass Quirk and reacted faster than any of us. Faster than me! You trying to make me look bad!?” He cut off Midoriya’s attempt at a reply. “But then you went and got splattered anyway because you wasted all that time bailing some other idiots out. The hell’s wrong with you, huh?”

“Kacchan, they would’ve died if I hadn’t jumped in!”

“And what if you’d finally gotten your dumb ass killed ‘cause of this? How many people would be fucked then? Huh? Mr. All Might Wannabe!?” Midoriya was stunned; Bakugo had leaned in so much he was almost bent double, fists clenched and shaking at his sides. “You keep doing the same shit over and over again, you idiot! You can flash that stupid goddamn grin and go ‘aw shucks, guess my body moved without thinking again’ and have everyone here kissing your ass, but it doesn’t work that way anymore. You’re not strong enough to keep pulling this shit off!”

“Then what should I do?” he asked, clutching his blanket. “I can’t just refuse to save people, you know.”

“That’s not what I meant! Listen to me for a change!” He breathed deep and kept talking, quieter. “Even if you do stupid shit, you still gotta think about it first. Spend time with it. Say to yourself, ‘fuck, this is a really stupid thing I’m gonna do but I guess my dumb ass is gonna do it anyway.’ That way at least you’ll know if you’ve got a chance of pulling it off.” He averted his glare. “And when the consequences come, you’ll have no one to blame but yourself.”

“Huh.” He smiled, a little hesitantly. “That’s…actually pretty good advice. Thanks. I’ll try to-”

“I mean it.” He stood up and loomed over Midoriya, who quailed in his shadow. “Don’t think I’m just gonna forget about you, moron. No matter where I end up, if I hear you pulled this stupid crap again, I’ll track you down and beat you so bad you’ll wish those rocks had killed your ass! Get it!?”

“Y-yeah. Sure. Loud and clear.” He laughed again. “And I’ll really have to watch my step. We’re stuck together for the next two years, after all.”

Silence.

“Kacchan?” His smile drained. “What’s wrong? Was it something I said?”

The anger had left Bakugo’s face and in its place was something flat and pale and almost unrecognizable. It was shame, lost among the harsh geography of his features. His mouth puckered like he was about to start spitting up seeds. Instead he turned on his heel and walked away, leaving
Midoriya to strain against his casts, now sounding close to panic.


Those plaintive cries trailed after him. He stomped as hard as he could, raging down the halls like a piece of siege machinery. He didn’t even care if his ankle broke again from all this pressure; it would be worth it, just to drown out that pleading, desperate voice.

*             *             *

It was dusk and Nezu was still in his office, checking his computer approximately once every fifteen seconds. His tie was loose, his fur haggard. He’d drunk five cups of tea since his meeting with Bakugo and Uraraka and his tail twitched from the caffeine rush. He didn’t like cooping himself up in one space for this long. It brought back memories.

He pressed his face against the windowpane, eyed the U.A. campus and the cityscape beyond. Something malignant was brewing in those streets and for once it felt like something entirely out of his reach. Nezu’s mind was never still – new and daring ideas bubbled and fizzed inside like a can of shook-up cola – but this time he couldn’t find an easy solution to this problem no matter how he came at it. He was lacking too much information. A jigsaw puzzle with none of the edge pieces.

His computer dinged and he nearly fell over from shock. That last cup of tea had been way too strong.

He nearly tripped over his own feet as he hopped back into his chair and brought up his mail. Finally, Nakayama had messaged him. He scrolled down, reading intently. His face creased in puzzlement. Then he clicked, and clicked again, and went very still.

The wind gossiped and moaned around his school. Somewhere, a crow cawed. Principal Nezu stayed frozen for so long that for a while he appeared to not even breathe. Then, very slowly, he raised both paws and placed them over his face.

“Just once,” he groaned, “I would like to be wrong about something.”

Osamu Nakayama’s email remained on his screen. It read:

Principal Nezu,

My sincere apologies for the delay in response. I had suspected this subject would come up between us soon, but your earlier query nevertheless took me by surprise. I wanted to get my materials in order before advising further.

Please note that, for purposes of confidentiality, this message will self-terminate in fifteen minutes.

The facility you referred to earlier is a Ministry of Individuality research lab that had suffered a critical security breach last autumn. I would like to discuss the exact details of this facility, the breach, and the resultant loss of Ministry assets with you and your faculty no later than noon tomorrow. Please keep this conversation strictly between ourselves and whichever U.A. staff you deem trustworthy.

Due to the sensitive nature of this topic, I am unable to state anything further within this message. However, I have attached two classified images of the facility’s entrance, before and after the breach. I hope that these will suffice to reveal my suspicions regarding the culprits, and why this matter must be resolved as soon as possible.
Looking forward to speaking with you.

Best regards,

O.N.

The pictures were clear enough. They displayed a forest clearing from which a smooth half-circle of concrete rose from a dirt lot like an open mouth, sealed by a solid steel doorway large enough to fit four men standing side-by-side. In the first photo the forest was green, the door shut. In the second, the trees had turned aflame with the onset of fall. The dirt lot was chewed up by tire tracks – a large truck, maybe, inexpertly parked and departed. But the most obvious sign was the door. It was gone, its remains powdering the surrounding earth; all that remained of that thick metal was a rind of jagged rust along the entrance’s edges. It had been completely decayed.
Chapter 7

The trepidation hanging over U.A. the next morning was so heavy that the sunlight creeping over the grounds felt like the onset of sickness. All of the villains in Musutafu were still at large and the looming threat of another nighttime assault festered in everyone’s minds. The city quavered with reluctant activity. In a distant apartment, Shin left Koh’s breakfast on the stained kitchen counter and slipped out the door, his aura of silence already enveloping him. Mirai stood in her own private rainstorm, chewing her knuckles in quiet ecstasy as water pattered against her skull, her shoulder aching like a rotted tooth where she’d wrenched her dislocated arm back in place. Akane “Metalhead” Kitae furiously chain-smoked with one hand and sent text messages with the other, the rumble of police patrols under her feet. A sleek and anonymous black car purred through the streets, heading to the school like a stray bone chip in search of a ventricle to pierce. And at U.A. itself, announcements were made, classes were postponed, and the students huddled in wary incomprehension as their teachers prepared for a visit from the State.

One of the school’s larger conference rooms had been reserved for the occasion, dominated by a thick crescent table that faced a single lectern; with the faculty taking their place, it felt like a military tribunal, albeit one from some kind of fever dream. The heroes were a strange sight out of costume. All of them had at least one decent suit laid aside for special occasions, but some wore it better than others. Accessories were retained – Snipe’s mask, Midnight’s and Present Mic’s eyewear, Hound Dog’s muzzle. Cementoss and Hound Dog’s suits look like they’d been roughly stitched around their bodies, rather than worn. Ectoplasm’s scowling skull poked out from above his shirtcollar; Power Loader was almost unrecognizable, a small, sallow man with a mouth that cut too deep into his face. And Thirteen was the oddest of all, switching out their bulky space suit for a slimmer and solid black version that nevertheless contained a full visor and respiratory gear. The regular hiss of their breath marked off the seconds as they awaited Nakayama’s arrival.

“I don’t like this,” said Snipe, for the third time. “Just don’t. Got a bad feeling from the guy.”

“We’ve only ever seen him on TV,” said Thirteen. “And we’ve all been on edge lately. Why don’t we give him a chance?”

“Our feelings about him are irrelevant.” Aizawa looked to be fighting just to sit upright. “He has the only intelligence we can find relating to these villains. It’s only rational for us to make a good impression.”

Vlad King placed his elbows on the table. “Is it too late to bring in some coffee, or something? Eraserhead looks like he’s about to keel over.”

“I’m fine, thanks.”

Nezu, for once, was the quiet one. The sight of that corroded doorway was still burned into his thoughts. When the intercom in front of his seat buzzed nearly everyone jumped, but he just calmly reached out and dialed in.

“This is Nezu.”

“Sir, Minister Nakayama has arrived,” said the receptionist. “Shall I send him in?”

“Yes, thank you. Could you escort him? These halls can be a bit of a maze.”

“Right away, sir.”
“Moment of truth,” All Might muttered. “How often do you all receive visits from state officials, anyway?”

“Not often,” said Cementoss. “U.A. has always prided itself on its autonomy. And Nakayama is a fairly low-level functionary, when all is said and done. Still, best foot forward, eh?”

There was a polite knock at the door and Nakayama stepped inside.

He really did look more haggard now that he wasn’t on the news – with his pale skin, dark hair and slightly stooped posture he resembled a hard-worn bird of prey, or maybe Aizawa with better grooming. He clutched a briefcase in both hands and his grip noticeably tightened as Nezu got up from his seat.

“All rise,” said Nezu, and the other teachers followed suit and bowed deeply. “Thank you for visiting our school, Minister.”

Nakayama’s eyes went wide. His pallid complexion made his sudden blush very noticeable.

“Oh no, please, that’s not at all necessary! You can…wait, wait a moment.” He hurriedly set the case down beside the podium, hustled over to Nezu, and offered his hand. “The gratitude is entirely mine, Principal. The gratitude, and the honor, and…y-yes, thank you very much.”

Nezu, after a tentative moment, held out his paw and Nakayama shook it delicately. He then started making his way randomly around the table, that whispery voice stuttering its praises the whole way around.

“Vlad King, sir, it’s an honor, it’s- oh, Midnight, ma’am, I still remember your rebuttal to the Uniform Obscenity Act, I personally saw the reason in your position right away, a shame the legislators couldn’t- Recovery Girl! Please, I know how badly your services are required, don’t hesitate to excuse yourself if need be, I’ll try to take up as little of your time as possible. Thank you…th-thank you…”

The heroes were quietly bewildered; Nakayama’s gushing sounded sincere, his handshakes were firm and decisive, but right now he reminded them less of a government bureaucrat and more of someone else, something they couldn’t quite place. They figured it out once he approached All Might with a nervous, trembling reverence. They hadn’t met someone this breathlessly awed by heroes since Izuku Midoriya.

“All Might,” he said, clearly struggling to stay composed. “An honor, sir.”

“Er, yes.” He shook Nakayama’s hand. “Thank you for coming. I’m sorry, have we met before?”

“Only once, at the HPSC conference in Kasumigaseki. This would have been five or six years ago, you wouldn’t have remembered me. I was just another face.” He stepped back. “I’d always hoped we could meet again in better circumstances, but…well, I suppose this is the hand we were dealt.”

“On that note,” said Aizawa. “I believe you had some information for us. Do you have any materials to share?”

“Yes, yes, of course. Well, not share exactly, but I’ve prepared a presentation. You know what they say, you can take the bureaucrat out of the office but et cetera et cetera…” He retreated to his briefcase and withdrew a sheath of papers, a small remote, and a flat square of metal about the size of a credit card. Power Loader’s eyes lit up at the sight of it.

“Hoo, boy, been a while since I saw one of those. They’re a stretch even for our budget.”
“Haha. Had to do some real bowing and scraping to requisition one for private use. But this is my master record for the entire Ministry. I knew that someday I would be able to reveal our work to the wider world, though my colleagues always said it wasn’t the time, never the right time…” He frowned into the device’s polished surface. “Well, the hard times have come. And so.”

He dragged the lectern aside and went to the room’s far wall. Someone obligingly dimmed the lights as Nakayama affixed the square to the wall’s center and pressed down. A sequence of tiny clockwork clicks sounded from its inscrutable insides, and the whole wall turned dead black like an open cave mouth, the stark gray logo of the M.o.I. hovering in its center.

“You’re all teachers,” he said, stepping away. “But yes, now are the hard times. The strange times. So let me teach you. About what we in the State have done while you toiled in our streets.” He turned to them, hands folded behind his back. “You heroes. The leading lights of our society, forging a path to the future. We are here to build something better from the rubble you leave behind.”

The image behind Nakayama was fully three-dimensional, the logo’s lettering with depth and weight so convincing that they thought they could see their faces reflected in that polished gray. The hologram warped and shifted as he withdrew a small remote from his briefcase, wielding it like a conductor’s wand. Guided by this picture, he began his lecture.

The Ministry of Individuality, he explained, had landed on its feet. After the Hero Society took shape its responsibilities changed from legislation to mitigation – to research how to prevent the illicit use of Quirks, these powers that had struck the old world like a meteorite. Their budget was modest but, he insisted, their work was valuable. He pointed out that Aizawa’s own capture tape was partly developed due to the M.o.I.’s findings, something that left Aizawa himself surprised and faintly impressed. When he said so, Nakayama’s sheepish grin almost lit up the whole room again.

But, he added. As with all things concerning the government, much of their work was classified until further notice. And that went especially for the Research Center for Aberrant Individualities – the facility his colleagues had casually, mysteriously, referred to as the Yard.

The wall behind him shimmered like a mirage. It opened up into the same field whose picture Nezu had stared into the previous night, with that oblong bunker rising from the soft earth. The teachers experienced brief vertigo as the hologram lurched forward, carried them through its doors, into a labyrinth of cool white halls and further doors sealed tight with further locks, keycards, biometrics scanners turned to a fingerprint or an eye. Stern-faced men and women passed through these halls like ghosts, sometimes glancing into the room beyond as if they’d glimpsed another time and place entire.

The Yard, Nakayama said, had been established under his predecessor; he’d inherited it, become its supervisor, though by that point it was largely self-sustaining. The facility itself was a repurposed fallout shelter based in the mountains near Saitama Prefecture; it had been built in the pre-Quirk days, reserved for heads of state. It was then refitted with enhanced security measures and staffed with some of the finest biologists, pharmacologists, and psychiatric staff the government could find.

“What’s the origin of the Yard’s nickname, Minister?” Nezu asked. “If you don’t mind.”

“I wish I could tell you. By the time I’d begun working there, it seemed to be one of those things everyone said but no one was quite sure about. Perhaps because it’s based in Tokyo’s backyard, so to speak? I confess the full name is something of a mouthful.”

“Aberrant individualities,” Cementoss mused. “I take it that’s a euphemism for dangerous Quirks?”

Nakayama shook his head and said that while he was broadly correct, ‘dangerous’ by itself wasn’t a sufficient criterion – otherwise, most of the teachers themselves would apply. Candidates were instead chosen based on a number of factors, including the Quirk’s volatility, its potential for study, and its threat to the general populace or the security of the State. Their Quirks were studied, that research used to help develop countermeasures for any similar Quirks that might develop. The government took this very seriously, he said. Every generation’s powers outpaced the last. The ‘Quirk Singularity’ theory became more of a certainty by the day.

“Which,” he said, waving the remote again, “is why this was such a loss.”

The halls turned horrorshow. The walls and floor had blackened, steel dripping and warped with char. Several of the faculty paled as they saw blood splashes dried to the point where they resembled streaks of rot, bodies turned skeletal by the heat. Several doorways had crumbled to rust. All of them recognized right off whose handiwork – whose hands – had been responsible.

The League of Villains had acted with incredible precision, said Nakayama. On October third, a truck scheduled to deliver supplies had pulled in on schedule, but instead it had spewed out Tomura Shigaraki and his entourage. They must have been planning it since their strike on Kai Chisaki, possibly even earlier; they’d swept through the halls like a brushfire, bypassing, decaying, or burning everything in their way. Medication had been stolen. Blood and tissue samples had been destroyed. Entire dossiers on the facility’s history and its subjects had gone missing. It was impossible to tell just how much they’d gotten in the raid; Dabi had burned out their trail. But what Nakayama knew for a fact was that the Yard’s latest three test subjects had gone missing and were now at large.

Yes, he repeated – three. The Yard could only house at most two or three test subjects at a time; every Quirk needed to be contained differently, and the M.o.I. didn’t have nearly enough resources to match the facilities of Tartarus. But at the same time, there were few other places suitable for holding those with such destructive Quirks.

“For example,” he said, raising the remote again. “Our first escapee.”

The face that loomed in front of them all was so detailed they could make out individual pores like gopher-holes. A girl with a ragged neck-length tangle of purple hair, her face riddled with pubescent acne. But her eyes didn’t quite have that mindlessly ravenous glaze that had so badly unnerved Uraraka – they were half-lidded, the mouth curved into a contemptuous smirk.

Mirai Horooka. Age fifteen, first admitted to the Yard at age thirteen. Her Quirk: “Noise.” The power to convert sound into blasts of force, destroying anything in her line of sight. But there was a catch, said Nakayama, as Mirai’s face dissolved into a riot of scientific figures and diagrams that went right over most of their heads, though Power Loader’s interest definitely seemed piqued. This “absorption” of sound never stopped, and there was no upper limit to the power she could store. Merely walking down a busy street, Nakayama went on, could very well give her the power to ruin it – a capacity she’d demonstrated time and again before the State had finally caught up to her.

She’d been orphaned before her Quirk could even develop, her parents killed in a villain attack – the Babylon Stalker, Nakayama added offhandedly, one more hoodlum that All Might had finally brought down. From there she’d gone from group home to group home, antisocial tendencies growing until she’d finally been sent to a juvenile detention center and then leveled it flat. To say she used her Quirk irresponsibly would be putting it lightly. The M.o.I. actually found her endorphins spiked every time she released her power, though it was hard to tell if that was due to the Quirk itself or merely her joy of breaking things. She’d even beguiled them, for a time, playing along with their interviews and their experiments, until, one day, she’d finally stored enough power just from the sound of the overhead ventilation and buzzing fluorescents to nearly break out of the Yard itself.
“Sounds like quite a handful for one so young,” Aizawa said dryly.

“I agree,” Nakayama replied. “So we had to get creative.”

The projector now displayed a room, windowless and maybe ten meters on a side, unadorned save for a simple cot bolted to the wall and a vacuum toilet in the corner. It was undoubtedly a prison cell, but something was wrong with it. The first thing everyone noticed was the straps on the bed. The second was the walls and floor, not smooth metal but a mass of jagged polygons that rendered the whole chamber into a Giger-esque optical illusion. Most of them were confused by it but Present Mic shot up from his seat, glasses slipping, his skin the color of cheese.

“Whoa, whoa, hold the phone for a second. That’s an anechoic chamber, isn’t it?”

“Looks like a good one, too,” Power Loader said. He also looked troubled, but Nakayama beamed.

“I should have known the Voice Hero would recognize it right off,” he said. “Would you care to explain to the others?”

“I mean…yeah, sure, but…” He looked at the assembled heroes. “Those walls, they basically drink sound, get it? All the stuff we’re hearing now is being bounced back at us from all over the place, but any noise that hits those walls stops flat. You’d barely be able to hear anything at all ‘cept what was going on inside your own head.”

“A very tidy summation,” Nakayama said. “And with this design, we were able to restrain Horooka’s power output to an acceptable—”

Present Mic smacked the table. “People can go nuts after spending an hour in those things! How long were you keeping her in there!?”

“About eighteen months,” he replied offhandedly. “Not counting her time spent in the labs, to prevent atrophy and such. There was some psychological deterioration, of course, but she was still able to conduct herself well enough in follow-up interviews with our staff. The most troubling after-effect appears to have been severe tinnitus, though that didn’t inhibit her Quirk. Once all this is declassified, medical journals would likely be interested in the full details…but, that’s neither here nor there.” He stared at Present Mic with polite interest. “Was there anything else?”

He slowly took his seat again, shook his head. The unease around the table had deepened considerably; many of the heroes had started eyeing the door. Aizawa wasn’t among them. His monotone voice knifed through the tension.

“Minister,” he said. “Judging by your treatment of these people, I assume they weren’t intended to ever leave the facility?”

“Naturally. They’re effectively considered assets of the State by that point, and nearly all of them lack any close relations, so there’s no objection. Quirks like Horooka’s tend to alienate their users. The rigor of our testing usually means they become physically or mentally unable to participate after two or three years, but we study their remains for some time afterward.” Nakayama was becoming more animated; for a bureaucrat, he was clearly interested in the sciences. “So many Quirks persist even after life-signs expire, you know. For that reason, we’d be most grateful if you could bring Horooka’s body back to us intact. We had narrowed her power-storage capabilities to somewhere in her muscular-skeletal structure before the escape. It could have exciting ramifications for battery technology, energy generation…you name it!”

Midnight’s voice was faint. “Minister…are all of your subjects children?”
“They’re generally juveniles, yes.” That same enthusiastic tone. “If only because the nature of their Quirks means they’re discovered soon after their powers manifest. As you can see, there was no other possible way to keep Horooka imprisoned – she had neither the will nor the restraint to exercise her power responsibly, and no other facility save Tartarus was equipped to adapt to her power. Now that she’s been exposed to the world at large again, there’s no telling how much damage she may cause before she’s terminated.” He raised the remote again. “Especially with this one helping her.”

The next mugshot was of a young man with close-cropped black hair and the beginnings of stubble, glaring hard at them with an angry defiance that didn’t quite cover up his fear. His face was unscarred.

Shin Yuurei. Age seventeen, age fifteen upon processing. The Ministry suspected his name was actually an alias; though he claimed to have grown up in Osaka there was no trace of his parentage or any evidence of someone with that surname attending the orphanages or group homes in the region. They’d called his Quirk "Incognito," the power to avoid being noticed. It sounded innocuous, Nakayama explained, but there was a crucial difference between someone invisible and someone unnoticeable.

The wall dissolved into another cell, though this one lacked the nightmarish jagwork that made up Horooka’s. Instead it was accessorized with four long shackled chains hammered into the room’s center. The shackles trailed onto the bed, apparently empty. But as the heroes watched, the image broke and flickered before their eyes. It was headache-inducing, like trying to follow a mote of dust on their cornea, but the recording changed, the chains switched position – not unoccupied, but clapped around the wrists and ankles of the same young man, who was huddled on the thin mattress, clutching his head.

Nakayama appeared pleased by the strain and surprise on everyone’s faces. Audio-visual recordings weren’t totally fooled by Yuurei’s Quirk, he said, but otherwise he slipped through the world like he’d never been there. Sight, odor, even brief physical contact – all disregarded by those around him. He could even pass through infrared and electromagnetic tripwires with relative ease. Only sound made it through, and that was heavily dampened. His power activated effortlessly. It could be maintained indefinitely. As the chains in his cell showed, it could also be conveyed through prolonged physical contact. And so the Yard’s escapees had drifted undetectable through Musutafu, sheltered by this grim-eyed boy’s hands.

His history was as phantasmal as the rest of him. Unusually, he’d turned himself in – one night he’d smashed all the shopfront windows on a street in Osaka’s upscale district, disabled his Quirk, sat down on the road and awaited the police. Once they took down details of his ability they were understandably concerned about security measures, so they put his name out on the wire. The Ministry had intercepted their message, and then quietly come and carried him away. Research on him had been exhaustive; his Quirk potentially revolutionized everything they knew about stealth. His escape had been a tremendous loss of knowledge.

Something wasn’t adding up here, the teachers thought. All Might was the first to speak this time.

“Minister Nakayama,” he said. “Do you mean to say you imprisoned this young man on a charge of vandalism?”

“Oh, no, not at all!” He held up his palms. “That’s probably the least of his crimes. It’s the nature of his Quirk, you see? There’s no telling what he’s done, or what he could do in the future. You could hardly imagine someone better-equipped to compromise national security than him. He’d be the perfect spy.” He looked back at the screen. “Fortunately for us, simple physical barriers are enough to deter him. The chains sufficed. His attitude became problematic, however-"
“That’s not the point!” He was becoming heated. “Our society is supposed to focus on rehabilitation. You can’t lock someone up for life based on something they might do!”

“All Might, this is not the time to debate ethics,” Nezu said coolly.

“But Principal, I—”

Nezu turned to him, his scar a livid slashmark. “It can wait until after Minister Nakayama has finished, understand? I apologize for the interruption, Minister.”

“It’s fine,” said Nakayama. “In any case, Yuurei’s history made him unlikely to be a contributing member of society. It’s as I said before. We merely pick up what others have left behind.” He smiled in what he thought was a disarming way. “Though I’ll admit I’m surprised by your concern, All Might. After all, how many of you give a second thought to the villains you’ve dispatched?”

Maybe it was the dimness of the room. But he seemed heedless to the how many of the heroes’ faces had changed from stern curiosity to growing horror, the silence and wide-eyed glances that passed between them, Thirteen’s harshening breath. And all of that paled in comparison to when he introduced the final escapee of the Yard, and clicked the remote.

This last face, again dominating the room. His hair hadn’t grown out to that wild mop at the time the photo was taken, though it was dirty, lopsided with bedhead, like he hadn’t had a chance to clean himself in days. Those gold eyes, almost totally bereft of pupil, burned through them, the whites bloodshot. His mouth was twisted like he was struggling not to cry.

As Nakayama introduced him, there was a faint scraping sound from the side of the room. Hound Dog, dragging his claws across the table hard enough to gash the wood.

Koh Kyoumoto. Age six, processed by the Yard at age four. His Quirk, Nakayama said, was simply called "Rage."

“So by process of elimination,” said Aizawa, as All Might shook wordlessly beside him, “I suppose this is the culprit for our insanity attacks?”

“Yes. But not insanity. Just anger. Simple anger. Though taken up to a most unacceptable degree, as you’ve no doubt noticed.”

Kyoumoto’s Quirk was a mutation, an aberration in the truest sense of the word. Between him and Eri, Nakayama said, the Quirk Singularity theory may have already been vindicated; there was no precedent for powers like this. His body produced a signal similar to radio waves that stimulated the amygdalae of everyone in his vicinity, inducing uncontrollable aggression. It was extraordinarily hyperactive – no amount of chemical sedation, mood alteration, or stimulation physical or mental made the transmission cease. It was constantly growing – at manifestation it took several days of constant exposure for the rage to overwhelm someone’s higher thought processes and had a radius of about twenty meters, and now it took less than a minute, with an area of effect over ten times larger.

His parents had been the first to succumb. The wall flashed with further images: a home cleared of bodies but not of bloodstains, great tacky splashes across the kitchen tile and the refrigerator, a bedroom door mangled with bloody knuckle-prints and fingernail carvings not unlike the ones formed by Hound Dog’s trembling hands. Kyoumoto had survived by hiding in his room and been retrieved by the police (this was said with brief indifference by Nakayama; the teachers were left to imagine them hoisting up his shellshocked form, trying to shield his eyes from whatever had transpired outside), only for the police themselves to suffer the same effect as they sheltered him. They’d been trying to find next of kin to contact. They had taken too long. Agents of the State had
arrived to find almost half the officers in the department already dead.

“That was passed off as another villain attack,” said Nakayama. “Routine procedure. But containing him! What a challenge. Possibly our finest achievement. A margin of error that could be measured in minutes, if that. I wish I could claim responsibility for it, but it was all thanks to quick thinking by the Yard’s staff. It makes me regret the League’s attack all the more. What a terrible loss.” He smiled regardless. He was staring at some vague point over their heads.

Kyoumoto had nearly driven his “rescuers” insane as well; by the time they’d arrived at the Yard they were grinding their teeth to stubs, scarcely able to think straight. It had been a minor miracle that they’d recently disposed of someone with a similar area-of-effect Quirk – that last subject’s cell was still available, lined with material akin to a Faraday cage. It had been enough to contain that malicious signal. Kyoumoto had been placed there, locked in, and communicated to only via remote link, his meals hastily provided through the door.

“Did you ever tell him what was happening?” Recovery Girl asked. Her hands were shaking quite badly.

“Eventually. He became far more compliant once we explained that his Quirk was responsible for his parents’ deaths. A model subject, really.”

In the sterile dark Nakayama had seemed to change before their eyes. That pale face stretched rodentine, his blandly exuberant words ceaseless as a mosquito whine. All Might’s breath had acquired a queer whistling pitch. Froth bubbled at the edge of Hound Dog’s muzzle. Even Aizawa’s indignation was starting to show. All of this and more Nakayama never noticed. He was occupied in some distant world full of triumph that had gone too long unspoken.

No one justified the Yard’s existence like Kyoumoto, he said. The boy’s Quirk could barely be called such; it was more like a virulent disease that had turned him into a walking disaster zone. Nakayama had to refer back to his written notes just to rattle off all the pharmacopeia they’d pumped into his veins over the years. He’d spent much of his time there in a drugged stupor, speaking little, asking for less, the Quirk effortlessly shrugging off any experimental suppressants they could develop. The best the M.o.I. had come up with was a tranquilizer that gave momentary protection against the loss of reason Kyoumoto’s power caused, but its effect was short-lived – a few hours at most – and they didn’t know the side effects of long-term use. It had not, Nakayama said, been potent enough to allow for surgical intervention. Several teachers shuddered at the euphemism.

“Most of it was lost in the League’s raid, anyway,” said Nakayama, rifling through his briefcase again. “Still, I had my own samples…not here, not here…aha. Principal, if you would?”

He placed a plain manila folder and capsule bottle in front of Nezu, the latter containing a few cool blue pills that shone like lapis in the murk. Nezu peered at them, then opened the folder and scanned its contents.

“I take it this is the drug’s formula?” he asked.

“Yes, sir.” Back to that shaky, reverent tone; his wrung his hands nervously. “I know that U.A. has its own R&D, and given our recent tribulations, you may well be better-equipped than us to develop more of the medication. If needed.”

“Better than you’d know.” He flipped the folder closed. “Still, that raises the question of how the League has been able to keep that child hidden so easily. I take it you’ve arrived at the same conclusion I have?”
Nakayama was about to agree, but Aizawa stirred first. When he spoke again, all the apathy had dropped out of his voice.

“Eri.” He put a hand to his forehead. “Oh, God. They’re already manufacturing it.”

Nakayama nodded. “Yes. The Quirk inhibitor used by the Eightfold Cleansers. There’s almost no doubt that’s what’s finally keeping Kyoumoto’s power under control. Trust me, I wish that we’d had a supply of it ourselves. It would have made our work so much easier.”

They all envisioned it – Kyoumoto being smuggled across the city in the wintry midnights, from place to place, injection to injection, Eri’s strange blood gradually working its way out of his system until his Quirk burst out and reduced everyone around him to howling madness. They knew from Amajiki’s and Togata’s own hard experiences that the drug’s effects were nearly instant once applied; Yuurei would wait until the allotted time had passed, inject him again, and disappear, smothering that power until Shigaraki decided the time was right. A child reduced to a dirty bomb.

“Has it entered the black market?” said Nezu. “Have you seen any evidence of international use?”

“No. It would appear that they’re devoting their entire supply exclusively to Kyoumoto. Which, of course, is just one more reason his termination is of paramount importance.”

The temperature in the room plummeted. Aizawa looked up sharply. Under the table, Ectoplasm placed a firm hand on Hound Dog’s knee before he could lunge forward.

“For obvious reasons, we weren’t able to conduct many thorough experiments on the boy,” he continued blithely. “We think his Quirk’s origin is somewhere in his thoracic ganglia – there’s some bizarre electrical activity going all the way up and down his spine – but even death might not be enough to stop the signal. For safety’s sake, I’d personally recommend complete destruction of his remains. Endeavor’s power should be more than enough if you could ask him to assist. With Kyoumoto terminated, the League will have wasted a tremendous amount of resources and lost their most crucial asset taken from the raid.” He clapped his hands. “Together, I truly believe we can win this battle.”

He strode over to the entrance and turned on the lights. The faculty winced and grimaced at the sudden illumination. All of them had grown several shades paler; Recovery Girl had turned almost see-through, insubstantial as the now-blank hologram.

“Everything has value.” Nakayama removed the projector from the wall and replaced it in his case. “All Might’s retirement has been a blow to everyone, but I hope that, from this latest tragedy, we can foster a new era of cooperation between heroes and the larger government. We’re all in this together, after all. We have to help one another, for the sake of a harmonious society.” He beamed. “Are there any further questions?”

Deathly silence. Then, All Might leaned forward.

“Minister,” he said quietly. “This boy. Koh.”

“Yes, what of him?”

“What did you expect to gain by…experimenting on him like this? He’d committed no crime at all. Not willingly.” He coughed, wiped his mouth, and went on. “With all the resources at your disposal, surely you could have instead worked to cure his Quirk? Tried to find another way?”

Nakayama tilted his head. “With all due respect, that would have been a terrible waste.”
“I see.” No emotion at all. “A waste.”

“His Quirk is tragic on its face, but imagine the possibilities if it could have been refined! Behavioral modification on such a large scale... we could attain a peaceful world overnight.” He spread his hands. “I’m not at liberty to name names, but several people with far more influence than myself were quite taken by the idea. Still, we have to write it off. We simply won’t have the funds to restart our work for another few years, at least.”

“Thank you, Minister,” Nezu said hastily. “We are most grateful for your assistance, and now we... All Might, please take your seat. All Might?”

“Yagi, stop,” Aizawa hissed, but All Might had already risen from his chair and limped around the table. He stooped in front of Nakayama, his skeletal frame all sharp angles. Nakayama smiled warmly and offered his hand again.

“Again, sir, it’s been an honor. I know it’s not much, but I’m glad to have helped the Symbol of Peace.”

“I am no longer the Symbol of Peace.”

Nakayama’s smile faded. He looked puzzled.

The last embers of One for All had faded from All Might’s spirit months ago. While he’d still been able to regain his old physique afterward, it was for seconds at best, a parlor trick -- and that trick, too, had grown less unreliable, his time reduced further from seconds to fractions of a second as the heat of those embers dwindled. But he had enough time for one punch.

Many of the teachers had been waiting for it and they still almost missed it. A shutter-snap moment, All Might shrunken and bent and then hulking over Nakayama like a mountain of wrath, followed by a blur of motion and a flat crack, and then Nakayama was staggering backward, mouth agape and eyes agog, All Might’s knuckles tattooed in bruiseflesh on side of his face and already welling blood from lacerations; his arms flailed wildly, he grabbed at the lectern, and then they both collapsed to the floor with a crash and a clatter. All Might hacked out a fresh gout of blood but didn’t bother to wipe it away. When Nakayama looked up from the ground, the man’s silhouette seemed impossibly tall.

“So that was your lesson, was it?” All Might said, spitting every word. “I haven’t been a teacher long, but I can tell you this. Above all else, you must strive to understand your students. You don’t seem to understand us very well at all, Minister.” He took a step forward and Nakayama desperately scuttled back, holding up his case like a shield. “But I’ve encountered men like you before. And you have absolutely nothing to teach me.”

None of the other faculty came to his aid. Nakayama turned to them as if seeing them for the first time.

“That’s quite enough, All Might,” said Nezu. “Minister, my sincerest apologies for his outburst. Assaulting a government official is a paramount offense. He will be disciplined most harshly.” He placed a hand protectively on Nakayama’s files. “Will there be anything else?”

Nakayama rose, shivering and whey-faced. For a second, he appeared ready to speak. But then he turned on his heel and fled from the room. All Might faced the assembled teachers. He knuckled blood from his chin.

“Principal, I—”

“Take your seat, please.”
He meekly obeyed. Time passed. Midnight had bent over in her chair, one hand covering her mouth. Ectoplasm was murmuring something to Hound Dog, whose growl was now reminiscent of a rapidly shortening fuse. Finally, Nezu reached over and pressed his intercom again.

“Reception? This is Nezu. Has Minister Nakayama left the building?”

“Yes, sir. Just now. Did something happen? He was in an awful hurry, and his face…”

“He just had a bit of a spill. Over-excitement. Think nothing of it.”

“…understood, Principal.”

He released the button and leaned back, his expression contemplative.

Snipe said, “I hate to say I told you so, but…”

“Yeah, yeah, don’t gloat about it,” Present Mic said. “I got thrown off by the whole fanboy routine. All Might might’ve broken that crazy son of a bitch’s heart.”

“He’s lucky that’s all that got broke.”

“And now we’ve made ourselves an enemy of the State,” Aizawa said darkly. “Well done.”

Nezu shook his head. “No. I don’t think so. On some level, Nakayama understands his culpability in all this. It’s why he took so long to reveal the truth in the first place. His department has been gutted. His career is in jeopardy. And if he should try telling anyone that the Symbol of Peace laid him out flat, it would likely raise some questions he’s not prepared to answer.”

Thirteen had been silent through the whole presentation, their helmet rendering their emotions opaque as always. But then they raised their head, and said, “Oh.”

“What is it, Thirteen?”

“I just realized something.” That featureless visor took in their reflections as it turned. “The Yard. Nakayama said he didn’t know what it meant, and given how oblivious he seemed otherwise, I might even believe him. But…its prisoners were all children, where people learned from their Quirks. Do you think it might have been short for schoolyard?”

And with that, the room exploded.

“Why weren’t we told about this!?” Vlad King roared, smashing his fists on the table hard enough to send fractures spiderwebbing through the wood. “We’re public servants too, goddamn it! Who approved of this atrocity? Who’s funding it!?”

“The taxpayers, probably,” Snipe said.

“Twenty years of operation,” Ectoplasm said. “How many ‘research subjects’ does that add up to, do you think?”

“I don’t think I can face the students today,” Recovery Girl said weakly. “Oh no, oh no, oh no…”

“Everyone, please, control yourselves!” Cementoss cried. “We’re supposed to be professionals. We’ve dealt with similar.”

“Twenty yeeearrrrs,” Hound Dog was fighting to get the words out. “So soon after All Might’s debut. By ourrr people. Under our nose. That…bastard…”
Ectoplasm stood. “He’s right. This isn’t some criminal organization torturing these children, like what happened with Eri. This was done by our government, under the auspices of the peace that we provided. We’re as culpable for this as anyone!”

“If that’s how you feel then quit,” Aizawa said. “Plenty more heroes waiting to fill your place.”

“And meanwhile Nakayama and the people he serves will still be in the shadows, waiting for us to give them fresh victims!”

Nezu shouted, “That is enough!”

The noise ceased at once. Even Thirteen’s breath stopped short. In the seconds that followed, every hero in the room cast back in their memories for a time they’d heard Principal Nezu raise his voice in anger, and found nothing. He inhaled deeply and continued.

“This is the League of Villains’ work,” he said. “Their goal has been clear from the very beginning: to demoralize and divide the Hero Society. If we begin to question our purpose here because of this attack, then that means they are winning, do you understand?”

Murmured, hesitant agreement.

“Power Loader,” Nezu said. “And you too, Recovery Girl. How much progress have you made with Eri?”

The two of them looked around nervously. Power Loader cleared his throat. “I’ve got the chemical specialists in Support working on it, but we’re nowhere close to making the cure for that Quirk suppressant. She’s been freely giving blood, but…”

“Her power is still weak,” Aizawa said.

“Yeah, but it turns out that doesn’t matter. That horn of hers is like a valve, you know? It lets her power out. But just because the water pressure’s weak doesn’t mean there’s anything wrong with the water.”

“With that said, progress is still slow,” Recovery Girl added. "We've just been taking blood in the ordinary way, not liquefying her like that monster of a Yakuza. I understand this means it takes far more effort to produce the serum. But it's progress, nonetheless."

“Have you made any more of the suppressant itself?” Nezu asked.

“Yeah, some. In retrospect it’s a good thing Amajiki got hit with it, we got some solid data from what was still in that dart. But it’s all we’ve got. Our plan was to refine the unfinished product into the permanent suppressant and then reverse-engineer that into the cure, but it’s like a hundred steps between here and there.”

“How long could you disable someone’s Quirk with what you have on hand?”

“Uh…two or three weeks, tops. Assuming ours is as potent as what Overhaul used.”

“It’ll do.” He rose. “We’re calling a general assembly. Vlad King, Eraserhead, Class 1-A and 1-B should be present as well. Ectoplasm, contact all available hero agencies in Musutafu and the greater Tokyo area. The police aren’t sufficient. I want every willing volunteer, pro and trainee, to patrol the city and locate these children. Kyoumoto especially. I’ll give this tranquilizer’s formula to Yaoyorozu and the Support Department for manufacturing, but we don’t have time to wait.”
Aizawa shook his head. “Principal, I—”

“This is not a debate,” he retorted. “We’ll tell everyone a truncated version of events. It’ll suffice for them to know that Kyoumoto’s yet another child being used as a weapon by a criminal organization. The Yard can remain unspoken, for now. The next insanity attack is imminent. If Shigaraki is aware that we’ve obtained this information – and right now I believe he at least has an inkling – he’ll want to maximize casualties to divert our attention as much as possible. I’ll deal with Nakayama later, but if another night is allowed to pass like this then there will be a massacre in our streets.” He turned. “And as for you, All Might.”

“Yes, Principal,” he said, head hung low.

“You assaulted a government minister in full view of your peers and colleagues. As your superior, I am obliged to terminate your employment and immediately turn you over to the authorities.” A pause. “So don’t do it again.”

“Yes, Principal.” He raised his head. “But I’m telling Bakugo and Uraraka everything.”

“That is not what—”

“If you take issue with it, then fire me. But they know about the Yard, and they’re not fools. If we withhold information from them now they’ll just act out on their own again.” He got up and went for the door. “I’m not much use as a hero anymore, but I still have things to do. Daylight’s wasting.”

He left before anyone else could speak up and barely made it six steps before he collapsed against a wall, holding his chest. The fresh air was searing his lungs. He could taste fresh blood in the back of his throat. Outside, the sun had already started its descent. Nakayama had talked for even longer than he’d thought.

Aizawa emerged into the hall before All Might could scurry away. His glare could have stripped paint.

“Save your energy,” All Might said, and resumed his walk down the hall. “You don’t look like you’ve got much to spare.”

“When are you going to tell them?”

That stopped him short. He turned. “As soon as I can. And then I have another appointment to make. Someone I need to speak to.”

“And who’s that?”

“None of your business.”

“So it’s not Midoriya, then.”

All Might stepped back as if struck. Aizawa’s expression was fighting a quiet battle between contempt and pity, and right now there was no clear winner.

“You haven’t visited him once, I know that much. Even though he’s perfectly lucid. And you’re going to keep him out of the loop now?”

“You know what’d happen if he found out,” All Might said defensively. “He’d chew through his casts if he had to, just to try to do everything himself.”
“Uh-huh. And who can blame him, with a role model like this. I don’t know what’s suddenly made you too ashamed to visit your prize student, but Nezu was right about one thing – if there’s any good reason to still keep you on staff, it’s Midoriya. Maybe think about that before you go around endangering this school.”

“You heard Ectoplasm,” All Might shot back. “The Yard’s timeline practically matches up to mine. For all I know, I was responsible for-”

“Your wounded ego is not sufficient reason to attack someone we ourselves invited. No matter how much of a bastard he might be.”

“You can’t tell me you didn’t want to do the same.”

“I did. But I knew better.” He shoved his way past All Might. “That’s what it means to be a teacher.”

His footsteps faded. Shortly after, it was replaced by the intercom’s chopped, mechanical voice, requesting all available students to gather in the assembly hall. All Might fumbled for his phone, remembered that his only student contact was Midoriya, then groaned and took off for the dorms as fast as he was able. The sun continued to crawl across the sky, its light across the horizon clear as a falling blade.

* * *

Tokyo lay under the noonday sun, colorful and noxious as an oil slick. Here, things progressed more or less as they always had, with the siege of Musutafu safely quarantined to the news; humanity seethed and roiled, business went uninterrupted, smiling faces were everywhere. You practically had to elbow heroes out of the way to get down the street. It was like a magic eye picture, in a way. Look at it one way, and you saw a peaceful world. But stare long enough and with the right pair of eyes, and it’d reveal itself as a police state with a candy-colored coating.

This was contemplated by a tall man in a dark wool overcoat striding down Minato-ku, cigarette smoke trailing behind him in a thin ribbon. His stride was unhurried and his expression was jovial, but he couldn’t quite hide the flash of irritation that passed over his face like bad weather whenever he saw one of the city’s numerous costumed crusaders on patrol. Draped around his shoulders was an outrageously expensive scarf that looked unsettlingly like an intestinal tract, spooled from the guts of some textile monster.

This was one of the city’s pricier areas, and the restaurant "L’esprit" was among the priciest of the pricy – it was a squat little building, and it should have been humbled by the surrounding skyscrapers, but it seemed to shame those towers instead, made it look as though they were clustering around it like unwanted paparazzi. Here the food was French, the furniture was teak and mahogany, the waiting list was gargantuan, and each member of the staff could destroy ten strong men with a single condescending glare. But when this man passed in, he didn’t even put out his cigarette; the maître d merely nodded, guided him past the ranked arrays of candlelit tables and one-percenters studiously ignoring them both, and let him into a private room. Then he accepted a thick sheaf of bills the man produced from his coat, and disappeared.

Money talked. And Giran’s arguments were concise, but persuasive.

The single table had already been provided with a strong drink and a good ashtray. He took off his coat and made use of both while he waited. It wasn’t long before the door creaked open again and someone else came in. Giran was seated facing the entrance, but he neither heard nor saw the newcomer, not even when he took the seat opposite him.
The air inside the restaurant was warm but Shin kept his coat on anyway. He didn’t like to linger here. It wasn’t his scene.

He got out his phone and dialed. Giran paused mid-drink as his own phone vibrated in his pocket. He answered with a gaptoothed grin.

“Heya,” he said. “You there?”

“I’m here.”

“I know I’ve said it before, but I still get a kick out of this. Real cloak-and-dagger.” He chuckled. “So how’ve you been, anyway?”

“I heard Mirai got hit.”

“Yeah, well, so it goes. She’s still out and about, though.” Giran blew smoke, his grin fading. “What, you planning to go and bail her out again? I never met her myself, but from what I heard she’s not the grateful type.”

“She made her choice,” Shin said. “Here. Coming your way.”

Shin produced the small, shining box that had held Koh’s syringe, and passed it under the table. Giran felt its weight, then wordlessly took it and made it disappear. He passed another, identical box Shin’s way.

“There you go. Another few days’ worth. You’ve just about burned through the last one, right?”

“Yeah. Should be tonight.”

“He wants you to put on another show. Here’s the venue.”

Another under-the-table handoff, this time a slip of paper from Giran. Shin took it, unfolded. His lips moved as he worded out the address. “This is…pretty crowded. Wait, forty-five minutes?”

“Yeah, so you might want to bunker down somewhere safe. Gonna be a rowdy audience. Put the kid to bed early like last time.”

“He knows when he’s being doped up. The last time was bad enough. He’s getting really uncomfortable with this whole arrangement. Getting on my case.”

Giran frowned. “Do I hear second thoughts?”

“From me? No. Fuck ‘em.” Giran snorted, but Shin didn’t look amused. “I need to know there’s an end in sight. Koh still trusts me, but he’s smart enough to know what we’re doing here and I’m feeling real shitty stalling for—”

“End of the year,” said Giran. “At the latest.” Shin stared. “Fair warning, there’s gonna be a big encore performance after tonight’s show. I’m still setting it up. But by year’s end, the kid can safely retire. They wanted me to pass that along.”

“You think Shigaraki’s going to follow through?”

“You know, it’s funny. If you’d asked me that six months ago I wouldn’t have been sure. But he’s gotten a lot better about treating people right. And he likes you.” He shrugged. “I mean, I’m pretty sure he doesn’t actually like anyone, but you do your job and you don’t complain. That counts for a lot.”
“I still haven’t spoken to him since the Yard. Only to Sako. Or whatever he goes by…what was it.” He gestured irritably with that skinless hand. “Compound, Compact…”

“Close enough, close enough.”

The door opened again and Shin jumped, but Giran just turned and smiled. A slim and plank-faced waiter padded in and placed another drink at his side.

“Ready to order, sir?”

“Give me another fifteen minutes, okay?”

“Yes, sir.” The waiter nodded and turned. On the way out his trained eye noticed some strange footprints still impressed upon the plush burgundy carpet. He saw this, and then promptly made himself forget. The door clicked shut.

“You really oughta try the food here sometime,” said Giran. “Mind-blowing stuff.”

“Not my type.” He was still trying to get his heart rate under control.

“Your loss. Where were we? Oh, right.” He leaned over and stubbed out his cigarette. “You know, I wouldn’t be surprised if they offer you a full-time position at the end of all this. Might be worth thinking about. Awful lot of money in this line of work.”

“Why the hell would I need money?”

“Heh. Point taken.”

“But,” Shin said, pulling his coat around him, “there is something else I’d like to ask. If you’ll hear me out.” Giran motioned for him to go on. “Do you offer…like, relocation services? Moving people?”

Giran tilted his head. “Sometimes. But the people I move generally don’t want to move, if you get my saying. Is it the kid again?”

“He’s going to need a home after this. Not a group home. Keep him the hell away from the foster system.”

“Ooh, do I detect a little sordid history there?” Shin glowered, and Giran’s expression turned thoughtful. “Hrm. He got any relatives overseas, anything like that?”

“Doubt it. He was born in Tokyo. Why?”

“Because once you two are done ‘touring’ I wouldn’t recommend raising a kid ‘round these parts. Maybe nowhere in the whole damn country.” He sipped his drink. “I’ll look into it. But I need to have an idea where he wants to go. And I need to know if you’re coming with him. Seems like you two have gotten pretty close.”

“What do you expect? The Yard took everything else.” He sighed. “All right. That’s better than I was expecting.”

“Chin up, big guy. You’re doing good! Definitely better than you had any right to, considering where you came from.” Giran got out another cigarette. “We’ll see each other again, if all goes well. And if it doesn’t…eh, it’s still been a pleasure. I always like to meet talented up-and-comers. You’ll go far.”
Giran couldn’t see it, but Shin grimaced. Suddenly he was back in that soaking alleyway, Mirai’s gaze running him through. *You’ll go nowhere. Because there’s nowhere for you to be.*

“Thanks,” he said. “Enjoy your meal.”

He replaced his phone and left. Giran tried to wave goodbye, but he was too slow – the door had already shut again before he could even get his hand up. The cold air outside was a welcome relief, even if it was strange against his face, a patchwork sensation, the scarflesh feeling little of it.

Shin didn’t like these little trips into the city proper. It was too crowded, and Koh was too far away. But the League wasn’t eager to venture into Musutafu, lately. As Giran had bluntly put it on a previous rendezvous, they didn’t shit where they ate. Shin had only lingered here once, early on – he’d left Koh all his meals for the day and then ventured up to Kasumigaseki after picking up his medicine. The seat of Japan’s government, a place so clean it was almost lacquered, all wide sweeping plazas and glassy towers that embraced the surging populace like welcome arms. Shin’s reflection had passed unseen through countless windows as he’d walked among the people and stopped in front of the Ministry of Individuality’s new headquarters. Only ten stories high then, but getting taller all the time, a great glass rectangle with new girders jutting like bones from its unfinished upper reaches. In that moment, more than anything, he’d wished for Mirai’s power to destroy anything she saw.

But this time he just returned to the train station, hood pulled low, doing his best to avoid pressing into the crowd. Fortunately it was still midday; he had a seat to himself. That meant no one noticed when his phone buzzed and made him jump all over again.

He got it out, glared hard at the number, and raised it to his ear.

“Hey,” he said. “I told you so.”

“Yes. You talked. And you talked.”

Shin’s eye twitched. Mirai’s voice was even more aggravating over the phone. In person her blank expression made her words sound meaningless, like exhalations from a corpse, which was creepy but at least bearable. On the phone she always sounded like she was enjoying a joke at Shin’s expense.

“You didn’t even last a week,” he said. “What did I tell you about keeping a low profile?”

“Low? Oh, no. High. So high. I flew, Shin. It was a different sort of silence.”

“Make sense or I hang up.”

“I need you here. You and me.”

He pulled the phone away and swore loudly enough for several of the other passengers to look around, confused. Outside the horizon was already beginning to stain red. At this point Koh would be looking out the window, waiting for the phone to ring. How much longer until the latest dose wore off? he thought. It wasn’t precise. A little past midnight? A little before?

He brought the phone back to his ear. “This is the last time, get it? I have other people to take care of.”

“Yes. You do.”

“Just text me where you’re at, or something. And watch out for the cops. Everyone’s on the hunt for you.”
“I’m waiting.”

Dead air on the line. Moments later, an address popped up. It was in Santo. She hadn’t even bothered to run that far. He shook his head and dialed again. The other side picked up half a ring later.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Koh. It’s me.”

“Hi, Shin. Are you coming home?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m on my way. I’ll bring dinner. But…look, I might be a little late. Something came up.”

“Do you have to work?” His voice turned hurt and small.

“No. Well, kind of. I need to go see Mirai.”

“Is she okay?”

Shin shuddered. The first and last time the three of them had been together, in the rattling metal cab of the truck leaving the burned and gutted Yard, he’d asked the same thing, in the same tone. Mirai had been sprawled out across from them, spittle glistening on her chin, staring at nothing. But at the sound of Koh’s voice, those eyes had rolled wetly in her head, and fixed on him. Shin had barely known the kid then, but he’d still felt the need to shield him from that stare.

“She’s in trouble. I shouldn’t help her, but I still gotta. We all came from the same place, you know?”

“I think so.”

“Listen. If I’m not back by the time it gets dark, you need to call Mr. Sako. Tell him where I went, and that I’ve got your medicine. They’ll take care of you. But not until it gets dark, okay?”

“Okay.” He heard a dozen unanswered questions hanging over the phone line, but Koh either didn’t want to ask them or couldn’t find the right words. “Come back soon. Please?”

“I’m gonna try. Just sit tight. See you soon.”

“Mhm. Bye, Shin.”

He hung up and checked the board. His stop was coming up. He instinctively reached for his duffelbag and the comforting weight of the crowbar inside, before remembering that he’d left it at the apartment today. To reassure Koh. He clapped his scarred hand over his face and groaned. The people around him looked down at their phones. Their own faces slack and clean.

It was like making a fist. That was how Shin had described his Quirk, when they had asked. Quick and effortless, something he could release at any time. But he hadn’t been able to explain how, and so they’d decided to find out. His power had been a source of endless fascination for them. They’d taken blood, drugged him up, peeled his skin in strips, scoured his hand blank. Where was the Quirk? they asked him, as if his bleeding body was some mound of dirt hiding unseen treasure. Was it here? they wondered, as they drove a needle into his spine and took out the marrow. Was it here? they pondered, compressing his limbs until his bones shrieked. He’d stopped answering their questions; in turn, they’d stopped using anesthetic. He was sealed away beneath the cold mountains, with nothing to do but exercise his abused and mangled body, hating all of them, using that hate to
bury the ever-greater certainty that he’d never be able to leave.

He disliked Mirai. In truth, Mirai scared him shitless. But that was fine, as far as he was concerned. Let her terrorize the rest of them, too. He had no use for the world these people lived in.

It was half past two when he got off the train, started weaving through the throngs of commuters. The weight of Giran’s parcel was comforting against his chest. He still had to rescue Mirai, go home to Koh, quietly drug his dinner, wait for him to fall asleep, and smuggle him to the appointed location. In the Yard time had lost all meaning, broken up only by the interrogations and the ever-more brutal surgeries. But lately, he’d felt the preciousness of every second. There was still so much left to do.

Shin Yuurei got to work.
Nezu acted fast. His plummy voice was already calling the assembly by the time All Might made it out of the building. He shambled across the grounds and towards the dorms, unmindful of the strange looks that got thrown his way. He could have crossed the distance in ten minutes at a light jog, but by the time he made it there the wound in his side was a sac full of acid and he was spitting blood every dozen steps. He leaned up against a lightpost and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. This time last year he could have cleared the entire campus in a single bound.

“Suck it up,” he wheezed. “Worst possible time for self-pity.”

He coaxed Uraraka out of the throng leaving the building; she looked deeply confused, but the events of the last few days were apparently enough for her to give him the benefit of the doubt. When they made it to the dorms the place was already mostly empty. Uraraka waited outside while All Might approached Bakugo’s door and knocked with all the delicacy of someone dismantling a land mine. It was a distressingly long time before it opened, and in the moment after it did, Bakugo looked ready to rip off someone’s head and punt it down the hall. But then he saw who it was, and his features softened as much as they were able.

“All Might.” He took in the reddish tint on All Might’s chin, the suitsleeve already grown tacky with blood. “You, uh, might wanna see someone about that.”

“I’ll live.” On cue, he coughed again. “I need to speak to you in private.”

“Look, if this is about-”

“It isn’t. Uraraka will be joining us. Consider it a follow-up to the debriefing Nezu provided you. We don’t have a lot of time.”

Bakugo didn’t often look confused. Confusion was weakness, and the ever-present filter of his anger usually managed to twist it into a dark and suspicious glare, as if he was anticipating a trick and ready to punish someone for it. But he couldn’t seem to muster it up as he looked at All Might’s expression. He turned back to his desk.

“Just let me grab my phone.”

“Was I interrupting something?”

“No. Fuck it. It can wait.”

Uraraka maintained a healthy distance from Bakugo as All Might led the them to the teacher’s lounge. The campus was eerily lifeless, nearly all of the students and faculty now having gathered to hear Nezu’s version of events. He’d feared running into Eri when he made it to the lounge itself, but that place, too, was abandoned – Aizawa must have escorted her someplace else. The three of them sat down on the same couches where, in previous months, All Might and Midoriya had solemnly talked about secret happenings past and future. He went into another coughing fit after sitting down and Bakugo surreptitiously pushed a box of tissues his way.

“Our meeting with the Ministry of Individuality just ended,” he said, wiping his mouth. “We learned a great deal. Your fellow students are being given a heavily edited version of it now, along with a new mission.”

“Gonna finally go out and hunt these shitheads down, huh?” Bakugo crossed his arms and put his
feet on the coffee table. “Looks like I was just ahead of the curve.”

“No, that’s not—”

“Forget it. Just talk.”

He sighed, tented his fingers. “It’s out of respect for both of your efforts that I’m telling you this. And because I know that Principal Nezu’s version wouldn’t convince either of you. For starters, he makes no mention of the Yard.”

“What? Why?” Uraraka looked indignant. “That’s the whole reason any of this was able to happen in the first place!”

“I’ll tell you now. Listen well.”

He talked. They listened. The strip of sunlight that lanced through the nearby window crawled steadily across the carpet as All Might summarized Osamu Nakayama’s grisly presentation. Before he was halfway done Uraraka had clamped both hands over her mouth, her face gradually growing paler. Bakugo, however, showed little reaction at all – he stayed still, staring straight ahead, rarely even blinking. For a little while All Might was fearful of another meltdown from the boy, but this stillness was subtly different. He’d seen Bakugo like this in class, on the rare occasion he’d actually felt the need to apply himself. Committing every word to ineradicable memory.

The schoolbell chimed just as All Might was wrapping up, causing both him and Uraraka to jump. He glanced at the clock; it wasn’t the end of any class period.

“I take it that means the assembly’s concluded,” he said. “At this point your classmates will know about those three, but not the M.o.I.’s involvement. Tonight, they’re going to throw everybody they can into the city in an effort to track those children down. But Kyoumoto takes top priority. We need to get him out of the League’s hands. And we need to keep him out of Nakayama’s.”

“Horrible,” Uraraka whispered. Her eyes shone overbright. “That’s the most horrible thing I’ve ever heard. I mean, how…why would they…”

“They did it ‘cause they could.” Bakugo swung his feet off the table. “They knew nobody’d give a shit. Ain’t that right?”

“That may have been true before,” said All Might, “but the facts are laid bare now. Nakayama was apparently deluded enough to believe we’d accept his atrocities as necessary evil. Though even that would be too generous. He didn’t find them evil at all.”

“He has to be stopped,” Uraraka said fiercely.

“He’s effectively been stopped already. The League saw to that. Now it’s up to us to clean up his mess.” As if to demonstrate, All Might gathered up the tissues on the table – they’d piled up quite high, over the course of his speech – and threw them in the wastebasket. “His crimes festered in secrecy and darkness. But now they’ve been brought to light. And we are here.”

“I’ll do whatever I can,” said Uraraka. “And Mirai…Horooka, I mean…I’ll find her, too.”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Bakugo retorted. “Your ass’ll get splattered if you try.”

“Speaking from personal experience?” she said, before realizing the words had come out of her mouth. A vein started throbbing in Bakugo’s forehead.
“Settle down,” said All Might. “Especially you, Uraraka. Of the three of us, you’ll be the only one going out tonight. And I have to trust the both of you not to spread this around. I understand if you’ll be tempted. Secrets like this don’t like to stay in one ear for long. But it would cause a national panic if this somehow reached the wider populace before we can tamp it down.”

Bakugo leaned in. “I’ve just got one question.”

“What is it?”

“All the time you listened to this asshole speak,” he said, “and not one of you just went up and beat the shit out of him right there?”

“Bakugo, lay off already,” Uraraka snapped. But Bakugo kept staring forward. He saw All Might avert his gaze, briefly shield the knuckles of one hand.

“Fine. Never mind.” He stood up and went for the door. “Anyway, thanks for letting me know. What are you gonna do next?”

“There’s something I need to confirm,” said All Might. “I may step away from campus for a day. It depends on how things go tonight.”

“Tch. Everyone marchin’ out without me or Deku.” He swung open the door. “Better hope they don’t fuck it up.”

The door shut, but Uraraka didn’t get up right away. “He’s taking this whole expulsion thing better than I thought he would.”

“Don’t be so sure,” All Might sighed. “He’s quite good at concealing inner turmoil.”

“I guess so. There’s definitely enough outer turmoil to cover it up.”

“I agree with him about engaging Horooka. Of the three, she was the one with the worst criminal record prior to her incarceration. And I’m certain that Nakayama has made her more unstable by far. It’s extremely unlikely that you could make her stand down without resorting to force, and that’s not an encounter I’d wish on anyone.” Those pilot-light eyes burned through her. “Rely on your classmates and accomplish the mission, understand? Don’t make yourself a martyr.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Alright. You can go. I need to make a few phone calls.”

She stood, bowed, and left. She had to take a few deep breaths after emerging into the hall. She felt punch-drunk, vaguely ill. All Might had not spared them the more lurid details of how Horooka, Yuurei and Kyoumoto had been treated in the Yard. The images were still flashing in her head as she walked, which was partly why she walked right past Bakugo and nearly hit the ceiling when he called out to her.

“Where’re you going?”

“Augh! I mean, who? I mean…” She whirled on the spot and saw him leaning against the wall, hands shoved in his pockets, giving her his best interrogator’s scowl. “I was gonna go back to my room. Get psyched up, you know?”

“Not yet, you’re not. Come on.”
“Huh?”

“The fuck are you waiting for?” He was already halfway down the hall. “Move it already!”

“Wait, slow down!” She jogged up beside him, feeling like a paper bag caught in a gale. “Where are you going? Where are we going? Wait, why the hell am I following you?”

“Shit, you ask a lot of dumbass questions.”

“Yeah, well, maybe you ought to answer one of them!”

“That story All Might just told us.” They pattered down the stairwell. “There’s someone else that’s gotta hear it.”

“Oh. Oh, no. No way. If you think I’m gonna let Deku in on this then you’re out of your mind.”

“Why the hell would I tell that idiot anything? He’s so goddamn smart, he can figure it out himself.”

“We shouldn’t be telling anyone this! We just said we wouldn’t!”

“It’s my idea. What’re they gonna do, expel me twice?”

He practically tackled open the front doors and they emerged into the sunlight, which had already gained a distinctly rusty shade. Several other students were already back on the grounds. Uraraka felt their eyes on her. Bakugo went at a rapid, stomping gait, his head jutting out like a battering ram.

“Don’t think I was kidding about taking on that crazy bitch, either. You’ve gotta get in close to do any sort of damage fast enough to matter and she was willing to pop her damn arm out of its socket just to take a shot at you. You might think you’re hot shit just ‘cause you took me down—”

“Yeah, except you let me win,” she muttered, and he wheeled on her, eyes blazing.

“Fucking say that to my face!” She stayed quiet. “A loss is a loss, get it!? Only mistake I made was not blowing your ass up soon as I got a look at you. And it ain’t one I’ll make next time. The fuck are you looking at, asshole!?”

She glanced around and saw another student scampering away. Someone she didn’t recognize, possibly the Business class. Which reminded her.

“In case you’re wondering, word got around so fast because someone in Business was around to hear you losing it at Principal Nezu and the others. Though what you said’s probably gotten twisted pretty good by now.”

“Like I give a shit.” He spat and continued forward.

“Somehow I get the feeling it’s part of the reason why the teachers are suddenly willing to let us help, though. So, there’s that.” She paused. “Hey. You said ‘next time.’ What, do you think we’re going to have a rematch?”

“Count on it.” His palms hissed and popped. “You said you’re training with Squinty? Then you’d better keep training ‘til he cries blood, if you wanna have a chance.”

She didn’t know how to answer that. She thought it might be a compliment, but Bakugo approached compliments from bewildering and unpredictable angles. They were coming up on the dorms, which was where, she noted with chagrin, she’d wanted to go anyway. Bakugo stopped and glared up at them.
“He’d better be in his room. I got no idea where else that dumbass mall goth would hang out.”

“Mall-goth…?” She blinked. “Wait, you don’t mean Tokoyami?”

He meant Tokoyami.

A few of their classmates were huddled in the lobby again, apparently discussing the assembly. This time the group included Mineta. He’d taken one look at Bakugo and Uraraka standing side by side and his leer had nearly split his head in two. Luckily for him, Tsuyu had also been present, and when she’d seen the bubbling volcano on both their faces she’d whipped her tongue around Mineta’s throat and choked off whatever *bon mot* he’d prepared so vigorously that his skin had nearly matched his hair color. They’d taken their leave before anyone could ask any questions and made their way to Tokoyami’s room.

Silence beyond the door, but that wasn’t unusual. If Tokoyami ever made noise, he did it elsewhere. They still weren’t totally sure where or when he’d picked up how to play guitar.

“What’re you waiting for?” Bakugo said. “Knock, already.”

“Huh? This was your idea.”

“Just do it, dammit.”

“Ugh, fine.” She rapped on the door. “Uh, Tokoyami? Are you in? It’s Uraraka. And Bakugo, for some reason.”

No response. She was ready to shrug and ditch him right there. But then a familiar staticky mass of darkness pushed its way out from under the doorframe and took shape in front of them. Dark Shadow didn’t have much of a face, but when it turned to Bakugo it somehow did a good job of looking contemptuous.

“Fumi’s busy,” it said.

“The fuck’s he doing?” asked Bakugo. “Polishing his keychains?”

“None of your business. Didn’t you get expelled? Maybe you ought to go back to your room and think about what you-”

Dark Shadow squawked and fled as Bakugo brought up his sparking hands and unleashed a blinding flash right in its face. Uraraka jumped back in shock as he pushed forward, bashing his fists against the door.

“I’m not in the mood for your shit, birdbrain! Get your grimdark ass up and open the door! The *fuck* are you looking at, huh!?” he shouted at Shouji, who’d poked his head out of his own room. “Piss off unless you wanna find out if you can grow back heads too, asshole! *Open the door, you beak-faced fuck!*” He was now smashing against it hard enough to rattle its hinges. “I said fucking open it! OPEN IT NOW!”

“Holy shit, Bakugo, relax!” She grabbed his wrist. “You’re gonna have an aneurysm at this rate!”

“Let me go, goddamn it!”

“How the hell can you even think straight if you’re this worked up all the time!? Lay off him,
already. He didn’t do anything to you!”

He grit his teeth. “I ain’t gonna ask again.”

“Oh yeah?” She brought his arm down and twisted. “You want to have that rematch right now? Because I’d be happy to re-introduce you to the ground.”

“Bring it on, gravity girl.” He grinded his forehead against her own as his free hand started to hiss. “We’ll see how tough you are once I blast you into orbit.”

The door opened.

Bakugo and Uraraka, still locked together, turned slowly. Tokoyami stood just inside the flickering dark of his room. He’d taken off his jacket and tie and his undershirt was untucked and rumpled. His emotional range was always limited, but right now it appeared to be hovering somewhere between "perplexed" and "disappointed."

“Hello, Uraraka,” he said. “Can I help you?”

“I, uh, I’m not sure actually. It was – let me go, you moron – it was Bakugo’s idea to come here. Apparently he wants to talk to you about something?”

Tokoyami’s stare persisted long enough to make her squirm. Then, finally, he turned back to his room.

“I suppose you should come in,” he said. “Don’t touch anything.”

Bakugo had only ever heard of Tokoyami’s décor secondhand, so when he took in the dingy purple lighting, the twinkling keychains, the array of night-glo death metal posters and the replica claymore in the corner, he looked as though choking back his opinion on the place was causing him physical pain. The two of them carefully sat down on Tokoyami’s bed as he turned his rococo velvet-upholstered desk chair to them and sat like a king taking court.

“I admit you’ve piqued my curiosity,” he said. “It’s not often one dares to trespass on my domain.”

“Fuck’s sake,” Bakugo groaned, and Uraraka elbowed him sharply.

“So what is this about?” Tokoyami asked.

“You just came back from Principal Nezu’s assembly, right?” said Uraraka.

“Indeed. Dire portents abound. It appears we have quite a mission to undertake.”

“Yeah, well…it wasn’t the whole story. Bakugo and I kind of got the director’s cut. And it’s ugly.” She fidgeted under his stare. “We’re really, really not supposed to be telling you this. All Might asked us to keep it a secret. But Bakugo wanted to let you in on it, for some reason.”

“Hmm.” He angled his head to Bakugo. “So? Speak, then.”

“Fine,” he growled. “Just shut up and listen. And that goes double for that mouthy imaginary friend of yours.”

They relayed All Might’s story as succinctly as they were able. Bakugo did most of the talking, or at least tried – Uraraka often had to cut in when the profanity started to crowd out the actual information in his speech. Expressive gestures were used. A brief digression on what Bakugo would have liked to do to Nakayama using both thumbs and the man’s necktie was hastily quashed.
Throughout all of this, Tokoyami was even more stoic than Bakugo had been when he’d taken in the story. A certain narrowing of the eyes was the most reaction they got from him, and when they finally wrapped up, he gave a curt nod and that was all.

“I see,” he said. “I can understand why all of this was omitted.”

“Yeah. Well.” Uraraka threw her hands up. “Now you know. I’m not too worried about you blabbing it, Tokoyami, you’re good with this sort of thing. But I’m just kind of the messenger here. This was all his idea.”

“Yes. You said.” He tilted his head to the doorway. “You can go, if you like.”

“Yeah. Something I just decided I’ve got to do.” She and Bakugo got up. “See you tonight. Don’t worry, we’ll take care of-”

“Not him. Bakugo, a moment, please?”

They exchanged a glance. Uraraka shrugged. “Have fun, you two. And Bakugo? Maybe just ask me next time you want me to be your personal ambassador, or whatever.”

She practically evaporated, she left so fast. Then it was just the two of them in the faintly incensed dark of Tokoyami’s room, Bakugo still standing, Tokoyami with arms crossed.

“I accept, if that’s what it was,” Tokoyami said.

“What?”

“Your apology.” Bakugo’s face twisted, but Tokoyami went on. “I assume that’s why you deigned to share this with me, correct? For what it’s worth, I didn’t take offense at your behavior earlier. It was probably unwise of me to speak to you at such a delicate time.” He tilted his head again – this was his best way of actually changing his expression, angling his beak this way and that to catch different patterns of light and shade. “With that said, your way of going about it was characteristically tactless. I hope my door isn’t damaged.”

“The next time you wanna shit-talk me, do it to my face. Not through your little sockpuppet.”

“I thought you told me not to speak to you again.”

“I had a lot of shit going on, okay!?” He quieted. “I still do. I might be a dead man walking at this place, but I still got stuff to take care of.”

“Have you spoken to Kirishima yet? I saw him at the assembly. He looked distracted.”

“The hell did I just say?” He went for the exit. “If he wants me, he knows where to find me.”

The door opened and slammed shut. Tokoyami stayed where he was. He scratched his beak. He drummed his fingers a little on the armrest.

After a while, Dark Shadow slithered out from his chest and loomed. His room was dim enough for it to manifest far more strongly, and sometimes it could get rambunctious, but now it just slumped in front of him, a many-angled patch of deeper darkness that surged and crawled like a horde of insects in vaguely avian shape.

“What a jerk,” it concluded.

“He could have simply broken it down, I suppose. Maybe that was his way of being polite. I can
almost see why Midoriya tolerates his company. Every interaction with him is like a small puzzle.”

“Hey, Fumi?”

“Hm?”

Dark Shadow shrank a bit. “Do you think we might've ended up at that place? If things had gone differently?”

“No, I don’t.” He reached out and cradled the side of its head; it felt a bit like the aura of electricity around a balloon. “Our parents were a little…concerned by us, true. But they wouldn’t have allowed anyone to take us away. I’m certain.”

He stood and opened the curtains (light blocking, double-layered). Outside, the sky was beginning to bruise. They had maybe an hour before the call to assemble.

“Still,” he said. “If things had gone differently…who can say.”

*             *             *

Uraraka decided that being around Bakugo was bad for one’s health.

Not just in the obvious, “combustion imminent” way. His habit of doing whatever he felt like as loudly and brazenly as possible rubbed off on you. If you hung around him too long then eventually you’d find yourself doing something incredibly stupid no matter how much your brain yammered at you to stop. This was the only explanation she could find as to why she was going to the infirmary instead of back to her room.

Well, not the only explanation. Just the most convenient one.

Midoriya was alone, still confined to his bed. He had, however, regained his schoolbooks, and judging by the way they were sprayed around him he’d been going back into his studies with a vengeance. She could hear his trademark muttering even before she stepped into the room. And it wasn’t the only change in him – his casts were now decorated with a kaleidoscopic mélange of trees, stars, rainbows, and what looked like a badly scrawled rendition of Aizawa with a wholly unrealistic smiley face. Apparently this was where Eri had stayed during the faculty’s meeting with Nakayama.

She coughed, cutting off Midoriya midway through a digression about calculus. He yelped and looked up. She figured the slight reddening of his cheeks was just a trick of the light.

“Oh! Uh, hi, Uraraka.”

“Hey, Deku. They leave you all alone in here?”

“Kind of. Eri came and went and Recovery Girl’s gone, too. She looked sort of frazzled.” He knocked on his casts. “But hey, some good news. She said I can finally get out of here tomorrow morning. Hope I didn’t miss much. Ha ha.”

“Ha ha,” she repeated.

“Um. Do you want to sit down?”

She wiped a few apple crumbs off the other bed and took a seat. In the corroding daylight, both of their faces were stiff, their body language quick and perfunctory. The manner of people struggling to leave things unsaid.
“I heard the assembly announcement,” said Midoriya. “And that they were postponing classes today. Does this have something to do with what Kacchan did?”

“You heard about that, huh?”

“He told me.” His smile was brittle and much too wide. “Or as much as he could, anyway. I think he was embarrassed. Never seen that before. Kind of makes the whole thing worth it, right?” Uraraka didn’t answer, and he looked away. “Yeah. Guess not. Anyway, Recovery Girl told me the rest. Including what you did. Can’t believe you managed to drag him back here.”

“It wasn’t that simple, trust me. I did get a look at the one who put you in here, though.”

“Oh. Bad?”

“Real bad. Probably.” She recalled All Might’s description of Horooka’s prison cell. Silence beyond silence. “But that’s kind of complicated, too.”

Midoriya listlessly sorted his textbooks. “Sounds like I really have missed a lot.”

“Has anyone else visited you here?”

“Oh, sure. My mom…that got kind of emotional. Iida and Todoroki, too. There might have been others, but the first couple of days are sort of hazy.” He regarded the far wall. “That’s probably when All Might stopped by. He must be too busy to follow up, that’s all.”

A long silence.

“Hey, Uraraka?” he asked quietly. “Did I screw up, somehow?”

“No. Someone sure did, but I’d put you way at the bottom of the list.”

“That’s kind of reassuring. I just feel…locked out, since Jon-X. I can tell there’s an awful lot going on. But everyone’s keeping it away from me. Even Mr. Aizawa’s acting weird. When he came to pick up Eri he almost looked like he was going to cry. I’ve never seen him like that before.”

Uraraka clasped her hands together and clenched. Her nails cut into her skin. She felt lighter as her Quirk accidentally triggered; she hadn’t bothered to watch her grip.

“It must have something to do with these villains. They’re planning something big. And if Principal Nezu got everyone in the school to talk about something then I bet he’s gonna throw all of us into the city to catch them. But if that’s what he’s planning after all that work to keep us secure in here, then they must’ve learned something really bad. I can’t really figure out what. But for some reason I keep thinking of Minister Nakayama. Seems like his face popping up everywhere and all these villain attacks started at the same time. If the government’s involved somehow then that’d definitely be a good reason for everyone to freak out, but how? What did they do? What did we do?” He turned that freckled face back to her, and the look on it was faintly pleading. “Am I missing something? Or am I on the right track?”

She didn’t know what she’d expected. They had locked Midoriya away in here with nothing to do but think. It was a wonder that he hadn’t figured out the three escapees’ names, location, and blood type by now.

“Yeah,” she said. “You’re on the right track.” She shook her head, canceled her Quirk and then hunched forward. “The hell with it. I’ll fill in the blanks. Just listen, okay?”
A secret never stayed in one ear for long.

* * *

Noise on the aerials. Human voices reduced to electric snarl.

“Dispatch, this is Car 17. You got any leads for us?”

“Car 17, this is dispatch. Please provide location and status.”

“Uhh, 2-9-203 Kashiki Ward, presently northbound. Goose egg over here so far, dispatch.”

“Dispatch, this is Car 3, currently in Takodana Ward. I am westbound with Cars 5 and 22, and we have not yet found this little psycho blowing up our city. Please advise, over.”

“Noted, Car 3. We have our ear to the ground here, rest assured.”

“Yeah, except we’re the ones actually on the ground and it’s starting to feel real unfriendly around here. Who’s on Mosei-Santo right now?”

“Car 3, Car 14 here, currently in downtown Mosei. Ghost town. Even the usual suspects have gone. Can’t ask-”

The eavesdropper got a noseful of smoke and hacked until his eyes watered. He was pale, flabby, sitting crosslegged on the pavement like some strange fungus. From the nap of his buzz cut protruded a long, thin metal antenna, just behind the ear, and it waggled a bit as he turned to the offender with a grimace.

“Akane, can you lay off those fucking things for, like fifteen minutes? I can’t focus with that smell.” He turned back and tapped the antenna. “They’re bad for you, anyway.”

“Are they? Darn. Guess I’ll never retire to a cottage in the countryside.” She pointedly blew smoke in his direction. “Quit your bitching and tune in, Mainichi.”

As Nezu had noted, Mosei’s huddled architecture could get downright labyrinthine in places, devolving into a craze of barred doors and blind windows that twisted in on themselves in dizzying ways. And like any maze, there were occasional dead ends – pokey little lots where not even the neediest realtor could find a reason to build further. These weedy squares of concrete were often populated by the city’s derelicts and hardlucks, but some of them were discreetly marked with vivid graffiti of a silvery, bloodstained gear. Those places were left alone. Those places were Metalhead’s territory.

She stood there now, leaned up against a brick wall, her rangy figure one of numerous menacing silhouettes turned amorphous this place’s heavy shade. Cigarette ashes were scattered around her like funereal offerings. Mainichi saw another little snowfall of stinking debris and scooched away a bit. She only chain-smoked like this when she was in an exceptionally foul mood.

He lowered his head again, closed his eyes, and listened.

“-well understood, Car 22. Received notification that heroes are inbound. Relief should be coming soon.”

“I sure as hell hope so. Haven’t slept in three days.”

“Ah, hell,” he said. “Here come the heroes.”
“Great. Knew that was gonna happen as soon as that U.A. kid got involved.”

“Gotta respect the stones on him, though. At least he…wait, wait, shut up.” He put a finger to his ear.

“Calling all cars, calling all cars, this is Dispatch. Potential lead on the whereabouts of suspect. Santo 8 Beru-chôme 4-0-401. Noise complaint was filed at approximate time of original suspect altercation.”

“Going to need more than that, dispatch.”

“Complaint was followed by neighbor reporting break-and-entry. Neighbor called it in but did not investigate further. Apartment resident has not been seen in past 48 hours.”

“Oh, hell. We got a body here?”

“Unsure. But it’s the best lead we have. All officers on scene re-route and proceed.”

Mainichi reached up and pushed the antenna down into his head. “Not a lot of time.”

“Get something juicy for me?”

He repeated what he’d heard to her. “Like they said, it’s the best we’ve got. We have to move fast if we want to get there before the cops. Girl’s probably moved on by now, though.”

“I don’t think so. She’s been strutting around here like she owns the place. And then she started tearing it up.” Metalhead spat out her cigarette, took out her phone, and prepared a brief text. “Getting the police and the heroes on us, wrecking my town…I should’ve done this a while ago.”

When she hit Send the city seemed to stir. Across Santo and Musutafu, dark shapes rose up behind windowglass. Doorknobs rattled. Pedestrians glanced at their phones and suddenly changed their routes. The police cars’ sirens couldn’t be heard yet where they were, but their sound was in the air, joining with Metalhead’s wicked signal. She strode out of the lot; wordlessly and as one, those other shapes followed behind her. Her scarred hand twitched with anticipation.

She said, “It’s time we paid our new neighbor a visit.”
Chapter 9

One disadvantage of Shin’s Quirk was that he couldn’t get a cab to save his life.

He took the elevated train that went from Dagobah Beach to Kashiki Ward, which stopped just short of the Mosei-Santo area (and felt more than a little nervous while doing it; Mirai had spoken incessantly of this train’s rumble whenever he was escorting her, and anything that actually caught Mirai’s attention usually had a bad future in store), then hauled the rest of the way on foot. His boots were too heavy and he was already worn out from the trip to Tokyo. He had a miserable stitch in his side and Girai’s parcel kept jabbing him in the chest like a persistent but very weak mugger. Stress and fatigue were the only reasons he could think of why he didn’t notice how so many of the pedestrians he passed were headed in the same direction, with the same humorless expressions, many of them fondling objects unseen within their winter clothes. Going his way.

“Oh, shit,” he panted. “Oh, no. What the hell did she start now?”

He didn’t recognize Metalhead when he saw her. She was almost as good at staying out of sight as he was, and he’d been too busy running errands to pick up on the finer points of Musutafu’s criminal hierarchy. But as he drew close to the apartment in which Mirai was allegedly hiding, he noticed how so many of these people coalesced around the wiry young woman with a hand even more chewed up than Shin’s face, staring hard into her phone. One of the other thugs – a slim and sharp-chinned man with abnormally long, many-jointed fingers – was running his hands across the brickwork in the alley adjacent to the apartment building. As Shin peered closer he saw that the man’s fingertips looked to be spraying paint. Marking the wall with a bloodstained gear.

He’d started sprinting as soon as he saw this call to war for what it was; he still had some time to knock sense into Mirai’s head, grab her and go. But not much. And trying to engage all of these people was out of the question – even with his stealth up he’d be mulched as soon as his presence was detected.

He went to the front door and placed the flat of his hand against its worn surface. With the other hand he got out his phone and dialed.

“Come on,” he said as it rang. “Today is the day you learn how to answer a damn phone, you spacy psycho. Pick up. Pick up…”

“I’m here.”

“Oh, thank God. It’s Shin. Buzz me up. And do it fast, we’ve got a lot of company out here.”

An agonizing pause. Then the entrance unlocked. Shin opened it, stepped through, and closed it, his hands on the door the whole time, his Quirk quietly erasing it from the others’ attention.

Outside, Metalhead looked up. The sound of sirens scraped across her ears like a nail file.

The stairwells weren’t much different from the one in his own building – lots of pitted cinderblock and drab blue paint. He hustled up the stairs, his cramp burning so badly that for a couple of flights he had to drop to all fours and climb like a dog. And when he reached the apartment itself, he saw how the doorhandle was broken and distended, the door itself slightly ajar. She hadn’t even bothered to prop it closed with something.

He swallowed, breathed deep, and stepped inside.
Nothing remarkable. A bachelor pad, probably – the décor was minimal and small piles of clutter had been left to fester in every spot that wasn’t immediately within eyeshot. Aspirin scattered across an end table like rice. The walls mostly bare, several of them cracked and bleeding brown from water damage. And in the living room, sitting on a gashed moss-green couch directly across from the small TV, was Mirai.

For a second Shin was certain she’d died somehow and he’d been admitted entry by a poltergeist. She didn’t even appear to breathe. She was naked from the waist up and horribly emaciated, the bent birdcage of her ribs clearly visible above her concave gut, the filigree of her veins tattooed from her wrists to her heart. Her increasingly ragged coat had been thrown into a corner, laying there like a heap of necrotized flesh. There was a livid bruise around one shoulder and as Shin stared that arm twitched and spasmed, and then, finally, she blinked. He let out a sigh of either relief or disappointment. She’d cleaned herself up, too, at long last. Her hair was free of that greasy sheen. But otherwise all it did was make her pallor more obvious. Even her lips were somehow pale, almost blue.

He kept his Quirk active and stepped around her, into the kitchen. Here was the bachelor, it looked like. A stocky man sprawled out on the ground, face-down in a pool of blood whose coppery reek made his eyes water. His flesh lay loosely on his bones. If the smell was any indication then he’d been dead for a while.

The kitchen was a separate room in this place; Mirai couldn’t see him here. Shin wiped sweat off his brow, turned away from the body, and released his Quirk.


He waited until his hands stopped shaking before he peeked around the corner. “Hey. Your ears are, uh, pretty sharp, aren’t they?”

“There’s a pulse from the living. You haven’t felt it?” She continued staring straight ahead. “Maybe that’s no surprise.”

He stepped up between her and the television set. There were less than five paces between the two of them. She still had that vacant look in her eye. Like she was gazing right through the world and into another one entire.

“So. Guess you killed that guy.” She didn’t even dignify that with a response. “At least you finally showered.”

“I’d have done it earlier, if I’d know what it would be like. The drops against my head. In my head.” Her mouth twitched. “Pitter-patter. Pitter-patter. Do you hear thunder, too?”

“We’ve got to move now. There’s a small army waiting for you outside and I doubt the cops are far behind.”

“I know. But there’s time. They want to fight me out in the open where there’s no chance of the ceiling falling on them. They’ll drive away the police as long as they’re able and try to smoke me out if they must. Meanwhile, they’ll wait. They can’t do anything else.”

He blinked, jaw slightly open. That was the most coherent he’d heard Mirai since they’d met.

“There’s a time to listen and a time to speak,” she said, as if answering an unsaid question. “When I flew, I realized the time had passed. You can’t imagine the world like that. Gliding over all.”

“Did those U.A. kids do it?”
“There was one. She had such gentle hands. She pulled out my arm, a little bit. So I had to put it back.” Her bruised arm spasmed again. “There was a lovely click in the bones, and for a while everything turned soft and gray.”

He shuddered just imagining it. “Look, is there somewhere you want to go? Someone I can call? You’re going to get killed before the new year at this rate, Mirai. I can’t-”

“Shut up.”

He closed his mouth so fast he nearly severed his tongue. Suddenly her eyes were drilling right through him.

“You think you came here to help?” There was a vicious note of sarcasm curling through her voice. “That we’re two of a kind, just because we crawled out of the same hole? No. It’s time to stop pretending, Shin. I’ve caught up with myself a little. It was long overdue. Now it’s your turn.”

He kept his expression stern and his hands jammed in his pockets, but he was now very aware of how exposed he was in here. Even if he activated his Quirk again and bolted, it would do little good against someone who could rip this building in half with an eyeblink. Sweat beaded on his brow.

“If you didn’t need my help, then why’d the hell you call me here?” he said. “I’ve got my own work to do.”

“I know. That’s why you’re here. That’s what I’ll ask.”

Slowly, she rose from her slack and sprawled position. She straightened her back, put her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands. She smiled, a little. It was almost charming, if you overlooked her wasted frame.

Mirai asked, “Where’s Koh?”

The silence that followed was very loud.

“No,” Shin whispered.

“No? Koh, my dearie-oh.” Her voice became deadly flat. “I asked you a question. Where is he?”

“Mirai, I am not afraid of-”

He cried out and flinched at the machine-gun burst just behind his head, the drywall shrapnel stinging his neck. When he turned he saw the wall behind him lined end-to-end with dents the approximate size and shape of his own head. There was just one, very conspicuous gap, where he stood. He was struggling to breathe.

“You think he’s your responsibility?” Mirai continued. “That you’re each other’s keys to a different world? He’ll never go anywhere besides where he is now. The same as you. And you’re not a good person, Shin. You’re not even bad in an interesting way.” His throat worked uselessly; that black-on-black stare transfixed him. “Little Koh, so strange and sad. It’s not right that he should be silenced like this. Everyone should hear his message. There’s nothing left for anyone. Not even him.” She grinned and spat out the next four syllables like pieces of hard candy: “Shi-ga-ra-ki.”

“You’re declaring war on the League.” He took a half-step to the door. “You’re completely- Fuck!” The television’s screen cracked open and it flew back and buried itself in the wall.

“The world and I are one.” She started swaying in place like a cobra. “I am nothing more than what
“Mirai, for God’s sake, get a grip! I know that place fucked you up, the Yard fucked all of us up, but we got out! We don’t have to be like this forever!”

“Oh, really?” Her voice rose. “Then you tell me, Shin. What else can we ever be, other than what we are? Do you really think they just peeled away your face when you were down there?” He didn’t answer, and her smile turned feral. “Little Koh knows. I saw it on his face right away. Ask him sometime, what he thinks of the future you’re begging from that lot. From the Pale Hands Man. Ha ha. Aha ha.”

She stood. Shin backed away until his shoulderblades pressed into the ruined wall. Mirai’s arms dangled limp, her hair a twisted net, head shuddering from noise only she could hear.

“Go tell them,” she said. “All of them. A message will be spoken. From me. From those sad strangers below. All of us who know there’s no tomorrow. There won’t be alleyways enough for you to hide in when we come. Koh will carry that broadcast. His voice will ring out. We will scream you deaf.”

“I knew you were insane the minute I saw you,” he said. “And you were insane before you even got captured, weren’t you? They didn’t bring out anything that wasn’t already there.”

Her grin faltered, for a second.

“I don’t remember,” she said. “And it doesn’t matter.” Shin’s legs buckled as the wall beside his knee burst apart. “Now run. Or I’ll make you crawl.”

He ran.

He took the stairs two and then three at a time, his Quirk already up, heart jackhammering, gut twisted in knots from stress. He thought he’d known fear but being in Mirai’s crosshairs was something else. The world simply broke apart under her gaze. And he didn’t know if it was intelligence or just lunacy that had suddenly made her so chatty, but in that room he’d felt a terrible purpose radiating off her like the vibration of a loudspeaker, a pressure that went right into his bones.

A time to listen and a time to speak, she’d said. Had she been playing them all from the start? Just following Shigaraki’s script until she’d gathered enough noise to destroy all of them with a thought?

No point going in through the front again. He looked around for a back exit, already getting out his phone. It took him three tries to actually bring up his contacts list and hit the number he needed. It rang and rang and finally picked up. Nothing but dead air on the line.

“It’s me,” he said.

“Shin, my boy.” A male voice, smooth and congenial. “You sound shook up. Is everything all right?”

“Mr. Sako, we’ve got a problem. It’s Mirai, she- oh, please open, please open…”

“Slow down, Shin. Take a breath. What happened?”

He tackled open a door beside the garbage bins and emerged into the cold air. “Mirai called me. She’s gotten pinned by the cops and some sort of gang so I figured she needed help. Instead she just declared war on you. She told me that she’s coming for Koh.” No answer. “Look, I couldn’t do anything! By the time I figured out what was really happening she’d already seen me, even if I’d
“Relax,” he said. “This is concerning, yes, but you made the right call. In more ways than one. We’d already suspected trouble ever since she was intercepted by U.A. Now we know for certain.”

“Is Shigaraki going to move out?” He was in a side alley; Metalhead and her entourage were visible at one end. He headed in the other direction.

“We can’t tip our hand just yet. But we’ll take appropriate measures. Did you receive the parcel?”

“Yeah, I’ve got it. Look, if you want me to go out tonight I’ll do it, but I’m waiting until the last possible minute before I hit the streets. Mirai will tear down half the city if she even gets a whiff of me out here. I can’t hide from that. I can’t hide Koh from that.”

“Understood. But you’ll still hold up your end, correct?”

“I’ll do my…oh, no.”

“What is it?”

The other end of the alley was blocked. Not in the sense of being walled off or full of debris; Shin could see the street beyond, bright and inviting. But when he tried to step out, the air was full of a spongy resistance that shoved him back. It was like trying to push through a stocking. He looked around and on the nearby wall he saw more of that graffiti – that dripping red gear.

“I’ve got to go,” he said. “They’re boxing her in. I’ll be caught with her if I don’t move.”

“Then go, and quickly. There’s still a lot depending on you.”

“Yeah. I’ll be in touch.”

He put the phone away and went for the other end of the alley, the one adjacent to the front door. The pierced woman and her entourage were crammed in around the entrance, standing or squatting around yet another piece of graffiti, but when he cautiously reached out to the street he encountered no resistance. He didn’t bother to question it. There were too many hostiles here. Too many Quirks.

He risked one last look around and saw one tubby guy who looked like an overturned flan on the asphalt, his head bearing a skinny antenna like a vintage TV. He was saying something to the woman with some amount of urgency. Shin couldn’t make out the words, but he saw the man’s mouth form the word “League.” He saw the woman’s face contort so severely with rage that her piercings nearly snagged on one another. She was so furious that she bit right through her cigarette.

For just an instant, he thought that her eyes met his.

Shin took off. It took no time at all for his cramp to come back but he just kept sprinting through the pain. He ran until he puked. And then he ran some more.

* * *

Rajio Mainichi’s Quirk was called “Wiretap.” When that ridiculous antenna of his was extended, he could clearly intercept any cell or radio transmissions within a five-kilometer radius, and unclearly intercept them for a little ways past that. The only downside was that he couldn’t pick and choose what he heard, so he had to get very good at filtering out distractions, such as his terrifying friend constantly hovering over his shoulder with her tire-fire breath. He’d been sitting beside the apartment building, listening to the increasingly panicked transmissions from the incoming police, when Shin’s
“You’re shitting me,” he said.

“What?” Metalhead leaned in. “Who was it?”

“Hold on.” He looked down the alley. “No one there… Akane, is there another exit from this place?”

“Probably. I got Yasuhiro casing the block. Why?”

“Then again, he’s probably got some sort of stealth Quirk…”

Her cigarette flared. “Mainichi, quit being vague right this second or I’m gonna put this out in your eye.”

“Some kind of phone call. The girl’s up there, all right. She got a visit from someone and freaked him out bad. He got in touch with his bosses.” Mainichi looked up at her. “He name-dropped Tomura Shigaraki. Akane, this bitch was working with the League.”

Everyone around her immediately backed off. Half of Metalhead’s cigarette hit the floor. Veins stood out in her throat like cables.

After the mutual fall of All Might and All for One, the League of Villains had worked to consolidate its power in the resulting chaos. Villains and hoodlums had gotten a big pick-me-up from the Symbol of Peace’s collapse, and Shigaraki, the grapevine said, was on the prowl for new recruits. Metalhead hadn’t been interested; she’d survived as long as she had by knowing she was a small fish in deep and treacherous waters, and she cared more about keeping things under control in her neighborhood than any kind of new world order. But then she’d learned about another little wrinkle in Shigaraki’s recruitment drive. Before they’d had their disastrous tête-à-tête with Kai “Overhaul” Chisaki, at least one of his more rambunctious underlings had decided to strut around burning “lesser” criminals alive. Some sort of social Darwinist thing, it always was with people like that. But several of the people Dabi had turned into kindling were from Metalhead’s circle.

She didn’t think of herself as a leader in any real sense – every now and then she called in favors, people showed up, and then they dispersed. But she hadn’t taken the news well, and she’d followed Shigaraki’s future exploits with great interest. When the news got out that he’d crippled Overhaul and made off with his life’s work, increasing the League’s infamy all the more, Mainichi had personally seen her rip the television out of its mounting and pitch it through a wall.

“You said ‘was,’” said another girl, crouched low to the ground – she had a hunched back and overlarge eyes that made her look goblin-like. “What about now?”

“From what this other guy was saying, she’s turned heel on them. Lot of names were dropped, I didn’t recognize any of the others. But she’s not on their side any more. She’s got them worried.”

“Sounds useful.” This was grunted by a gentleman with a solid three feet on Akane herself; he had an elongated head and an eerily skinny body, like some kind of strange bamboo shoot.

“The cops?” asked Metalhead.

“They got a big surprise. But they’re coming back with reinforcements. And that probably means every pig in the city.”

“Super.” She got out her phone and dialed. “Yasuhiro, are your tags up?”
“Working on the last one now. Did the chickie leave her coop yet? Clock’s ticking.”

“Did you activate the one right beside this place’s front door?”

“Uh…no. Why? I can only have so many active at once and you were right there already…”


“Can do.”

“Akane, what’s the play here?” Mainichi asked as she hung up. “This girl might have it out for the League but all the other shit she did still happened.”

“Thanks for the observation. Knew I kept you around for a reason. I’m kidding,” she said as his face screwed up. “You need to get out of here. It’s going to get hot, one way or the other. Just look out for Yasuhiro’s marks and you should be alright.”

“You’re not going to storm this place, are you?”

“Someone ballsy enough to tell the League to go fuck itself isn’t going to bunker down when they know there’s a fight to be had. She only stuck around this long to recover and pass on her message to our mystery caller. Wouldn’t be surprised if she’s on her way outside now.” She turned to the others. “Plan B. Stay close but stay out of sight. Wait until we’ve got the drop on her.”

“And then what?” Mainichi asked.

“Then whatever happens will happen.” She stepped out into the street. The sun was already halfway beneath the city’s skyline. “It’s turning out to be one hell of a day, don’t you think?”

* * *

The world flooded through Mirai Horooka.

The ocean of noise that buzzed and swirled inside her head had turned into a backbeat long ago. She’d learned to distinguish between it and the sounds from outside – the click of a door latch, Shin’s frantic breath, the leathery crunch of this apartment’s former owner as she’d slammed him into the edge of his countertop hard enough to distend his skull. They pattered on the sea’s surface and the ripples made her shiver. In the early days she would walk down the streets scarcely able to stay upright from the rapture of this sound.

That was her Quirk. The voice of all things, purified by her spirit and reforged with terrible purpose. The little people she passed by couldn’t withstand it any easier than they could hold up the weight of the world itself.

The broken tempo of her footfalls down the stairs echoed in the empty halls. She’d clothed herself again, but her clothes had seldom been changed since she’d left the Yard and both her coat and her shirt had become badly threadbare. Still, she barely noticed the chill when she stepped out the building’s front door. The streets outside were empty. In the far distance were police sirens like someone whistling her home.

Mirai’s posture had changed. Her steps were slow and slightly drunken, but she no longer had that crippled-puppet gait that Uraraka and Bakugo had witnessed earlier. Her head felt somehow distended, like a painless migraine, but the pressure kept her awake. When Bakugo had pressed his hand against her chest there had been a great heat that had pushed the breath out of her, and then nothing but cold air and quiet. But it had been a living silence, not like the heavy and suffocating
dark of the Yard; she’d felt the slipstream playing teasing about her ears, the impossibly distant complaints of traffic below. The city reduced to slender geometry, each building smaller than her pinky finger. She could have reached out and scooped it all into the palm of her hand. She could have crushed it all. In that moment she’d never felt more at peace.

Then the world had remembered her and pulled her down. She’d caught herself, stayed conscious even through the twisting knives of her abused and dislocated arm. In the end her journey skyward had just been a momentary diversion. But it had been enough to jar her out of her sleepwalking.

The streets turned in on themselves. The sidewalks were totally abandoned. But all around her was the pulse of other lives. The seas inside her roiled with sounds that others thought had gone unheard. When she finally tried to go down a side street she encountered that same spongy resistance that had deterred Shin. She pressed her face against the barrier and smiled at the sensation.

Behind her came the click of a lighter. Slow, deliberate.

Mirai turned, still smiling, and spread her arms wide. The dust in the twilit air struck the barrier in odd ways, forming a crooked halo behind her head.

“My friends,” she said. “Here again.”

* * *

They assembled in U.A.’s courtyard, in the last vestiges of day.

The faculty were all present, with Nezu standing in front of the school’s gates. The students were in rough groups according to class and year, all of them in costume, nervously talking amongst themselves. Only the hero classes were present and only 1-A and 1-B had all in attendance, Midoriya and Bakugo excepted; the second- and third-years were far sparser, many of them apparently studying abroad or for other internships. Amajiki and Hadou were there, at least, and greeted 1-A when called, but even Hadou’s cheer seemed a little wilted around the edges.

Present Mic ran up to Nezu and handed him a small tablet. “Here’s the list of pros we got ahold of, sir.”

Nezu swiped through it, frowning. “This is it? Where is everyone?”

“It’s been a difficult evening,” said Aizawa. “There’s a huge fire in Hōsu and a number of other incidents across the major Tokyo area. Somehow I doubt that’s a coincidence.”

“I’d hoped to keep the students away from high-risk areas, but it looks like we can’t even grant them that much.” He handed the tablet back to Mic. “Have the police been given a proper welcome?”

“Yes, sir. They’re waiting outside.”

“All right. Mr. Aizawa, Vlad King, please make the announcement.”

The two of them nodded and stepped out in front of their respective classes. Vlad King cleared his throat.

“Atten-SHUN!” he boomed, and everyone immediately shut up and stood straight.

“Nice,” Aizawa deadpanned. “Mic’d be proud.”

“The operation discussed at today’s assembly will begin shortly!” Vlad King went on. “Once
outside, you will be provided communicators and a police escort to your designated patrol route! Your objective is to recover Koh Kyoumoto from the League of Villains and deliver him safely to U.A.!”

“You’ll be working in pairs,” said Aizawa. “You’ll have ten minutes to group up as you see fit. Once you’re out in the field, your comms devices will have two channels – one paired to your partner, and the other to all other devices in range. Do not use the second except in critical situations. And remember, this is, above all else, a rescue operation. Should you encounter Mirai Horooka or the League of Villains themselves, do not engage them in combat unless you have no other options available. And *stick together.* We’ve seen Shin Yuurei bring down enough young heroes already, and if you’re caught by him alone out there you’ll have no recourse.”

“Mr. Aizawa, sir!” Iida’s hand shot up.

“What is it, Iida?”

“If the worst-case scenario occurs and Kyoumoto’s Quirk activates, what should we do?”

“I was getting to that part. Bear in mind that this is, absolutely, the worst-case scenario. We have every indication that this attack would be the most intense yet, and due to the *rushed nature* of this mission,” he said, throwing a sharp look back at Nezu, “we currently have no way to defend against it. If you believe another insanity attack has taken place, you are to contact all your classmates, send whatever other signals you can, and cordon off the area immediately. No one in, or out.”

“But…the people still inside the area of effect, they would-”

“Almost certainly die, yes. It would be a tremendous loss and an indelible stain on the school’s reputation. But Yuurei is Kyoumoto’s escort. He most likely won’t leave without the boy. Our only chance of capturing him in this case would be to ensure he can’t leave the region where Kyoumoto’s Quirk has activated. If the two of them escape, however, all of this would be for nothing. So, those are your orders. Are they understood?”

Murmured agreement.

“Good. Pair up. Principal Nezu will be addressing you once you’re done.”

The students fell to talking amongst one another. Amajiki and Hadou were the first to decide – they didn’t even need to speak, just smartly stepped in each other’s direction.

“You ready for this, Tamaki?” Hadou asked.

“Mhm. I ate a balanced breakfast this morning.”

“It’s weird, yeah? This is our first big op without Mirio, and I dunno where he is, even. He didn’t come back to see Eri, did he? I hope he’s not in Musutafu or anything, what with-”

“Nejire. Not now.”

“…yeah, all right.”

Hadou wasn’t the only one trying to keep their spirits up. Hagakure gave Aoyama’s armor a gentle poke. His expression was the same faintly smug grin as always but his teeth were chattering like a cupful of dice.

“You okay, Aoyama? Maybe you should’ve put some thermal underwear on beneath this thing.”
“I’m quite fine, thank you. But…er, Hagakure, ma chère?” He struggled for tact. “Are you certain that your usual attire is quite, um, appropriate given the-”

“Oh, no worries! I had Hatsume rig up a little something-something that does the job almost as well.” Hagakure’s boots and gloves contorted into what was, one had to assume, a sexy pose. “I’m still not totally sure about the fit, but it’ll do!”

“Ah. C’est bon.”

Yaoyorozu had taken more traditional precautions against the cold, generating her own coat over her costume. Said coat was a sable mink-trimmed number that would probably cost as much as a modest two-bedroom home, but her classmates couldn’t blame her for her tastes. Todoroki, at least, didn’t comment as he sidled up to her.

“Yaoyorozu.” His gaze was firm and steady.

“I assume you want to partner up?”

“We have prior experience from the midterms.”

“That’s fair.” She looked worriedly out to the city. “Mr. Aizawa said I have another important job to do once this is over. I really hope it ends well.”

“Let me make one thing clear,” Todoroki said. “I know we were told to keep together. But in case things get messy out there, we’ll have to trust our own judgement. Understand?”

“Yes. You don’t have to worry about me.”

“Fine.” He breathed vapor. “Until then, let’s back each other up.”

Some of the students were also shivering, though it was hard to tell how much of it was the cold and how much was plain nerves. At least one was obvious – poor Kouda’s knees were knocking like castanets. Jirou crept up on him like she was afraid a stray footstep would cause him to explode.

“Looks like the scholarship students are sticking together as always,” she said, glancing back at Yaoyorozu. “You sure you’re up for this, Kouda? I mean, no offense, but in this situation your Quirk is kind of…”

“N-no, I g-g-get you.” His voice barely a whisper. “But there’s stray c-cats, and things…they might notice something that people couldn’t.” He turned to her, hugging himself hard. “And everyone’s here. I want to h-h-help, too.”

“Gotcha.” She smiled and lightly punched his arm. “Don’t worry, I’ve got your back.” Kouda nervously grinned and gave her a trembling thumbs-up. “And you’re right, it looks like everyone else really is here. Isn’t that right, Mineta?” Mineta started and turned; he’d already hooked up with Kaminari. “I heard you were creeping on Horooka before everything went to hell. I hope you’re not getting your hopes up too high.”

“Blew us up, Jirou. I kind of took the hint.” Jirou’s grin faltered. “Don’t get me wrong, I really, really don’t wanna be here right now. But that doesn’t mean I’ll leave everyone short when it counts.” He popped two of his balls off and pressed them together, then pulled them apart, leaving them joined by a thick, gooey rope of whatever unidentifiable adhesive made up his hair. “Got a trick I’ve been wanting to try, too, if it comes down to it.”

“Well. Um.” She coughed. “Good for you. Sorry if I was being unfair.”
“It’s cool.” He turned. “She’s flat as an ironing board, anyway.”

“What was that?”

“I’d just spend the night being bored, anyway!”

Tokoyami was standing slightly apart from the group, staring at the exit. His cowl twitched and fluttered in the wind. Shouji had started to approach him at first, but then had backed off – he had more experience reading Tokoyami’s expressions than most, and his permanent glower seemed deeper than usual. This went unnoticed by Iida, who came up to him with all the grace of a locomotive.

“Tokoyami! Have you not yet found a partner?”

“No yet. Shouji or Tsuyu should—”

“Unacceptable!” He chopped the air. “We cannot afford to dally on such a critical errand! I insist on accompanying you. We’ll need to keep each other focused on the task ahead!”

“You?” He tilted his head. “Why haven’t you found anyone?”

“Well…er…most of my experience lies with Yaoyorozu and Midoriya. The former has already chosen to ally with Todoroki and the latter is indisposed. We must be open to new experiences! Besides, Tsuyu’s already paired with Ashido.”

“Ah. So she has.” Ashido’s skin stood out like a traffic cone at this time of day. “Fine, then. Shouji, will you be alright?”

He reassuringly waved Tokoyami off. “No worries. We can talk about it later.”

“Hm?” Iida looked between the two of them. “Talk about what?”

“Nothing important,” said Tokoyami.

The two that had found each other first, however, were among the last to speak. They’d just silently approached one another and watched the others, stern and unsmiling, neither wanting to be the first to stumble into what promised to be a minefield of awkward conversation.

“How’s Deku?” Kirishima finally asked.


“Yeah. Sucks that he’s missing this. But he’d be the odd one out, I guess.” Kirishima’s breath emerged in a thin white jet. “So. Heard that you and Bakugo were talking.”

“I’m pretty sure everyone heard that. Surprised you haven’t gone deaf, hanging out with him.”

“Heh. Yeah, he’s intense.”

“You talked to him yet?”

“Nah. Gotta let him cool off, you know?”

“Yeah.”

“Way too soon for that. You get a feel for these things.”
“Okay.”

“That’s if he doesn’t try talkin’ to me first. It could happen, right?”

“Sure.”

A pause. “I ain’t gonna let it distract me, don’t worry.”

“It’s okay,” said Uraraka. “I’m feeling pretty distracted, myself.”

“Students!” called Principal Nezu. “I assume everyone’s found a partner?”

They all wordlessly paired off and lined up as Nezu approached, paws clasped behind his back. His diminutive shadow grew long and lean as it passed over them.

“I know it’s not what you expect of me, but I shall keep this brief,” he said. “Ever since All Might’s retirement, I have endeavored to keep the future bright for all of you. It’s why I insisted upon the Culture Festival even amidst society’s growing unease. Now more than ever, everyone’s spirits must remain high.” He shook his head. “However, the approaching darkness is deeper than I had feared, and so I must selfishly call upon you to aid our cause. Still! You are but students in our care. Please do not forget this!” He gestured at the assembled teachers. “The pro heroes will be communicating on their own channels, but you will have an open line to them as well. This task belongs to them above all else. I ask that you do not place yourselves in harm’s way while we are here to aid you!

“And do not fret about the state of this school while you are away,” he went on. “Hound Dog and Ectoplasm will remain to keep the campus secure, and of course Recovery Girl’s services will be available as well. The Hero Society endures! We will not allow these incidents to rattle us! Be confident in that strength, and do not forget to place trust in your elders, as we have placed our trust in you!”

The final strip of daylight bled away into the horizon. Somewhere, Midoriya and Bakugo gazed out their windows, their reflected faces impassive. All Might remained in his office, teeth clenched, his phone against his forehead like a hot compress. Shin Yuurei frantically drew the blinds all around his apartment while Koh Kyoumoto huddled in a corner, shaking with fearful incomprehension. Mirai Horooka staggered down the street, fingers splayed, howling laughter into the skies.

Principal Nezu raised his paw.

“But U.A. High School!” he said. “Go forth!”
Chapter 10

Darkness fell on Musutafu like a guillotine. In the city’s more upscale wards the streetlights and glittering shopfronts did an admirable job of beating away the shadows, but out on the city’s periphery, especially in the Mosei-Santo region, civilians locked their doors and drew their blinds and huddled shivering under their blankets as nighttime forced its way in. The escapees of the Yard had brought back childhood, in a way. Everyone had re-learned to be afraid of the dark.

U.A.’s students were dispersed all across the city, with seeming buckshot randomness. Their patrol routes, however, had been drawn up by Nezu himself, who was peerless when it came to logistics. Certain regions had been quietly designated “hotter” than others based on previous attack patterns and other criminal activity, and Mosei-Santo was burning red, especially after the police had shamefully informed U.A. of their failed raid on Horooka’s supposed position – they’d expected a tense showdown and run smack into a mob of hoodlums that had driven them away like pigeons at a park, only for the thugs themselves to disperse just as quickly. These were the badlands, reserved for the pros and the most accomplished of U.A.’s students. Most of Class 1-A had been assigned to the region’s border nearest to U.A., while the pros pushed in from the opposite side, the two factions steadily bracketing the wards, all of them on the lookout for any sign of Shin Yuurei or the human WMD he’d been assigned to protect.

It was a lot of ground to cover. The streets were desolate. The city’s slumped geography turned menacing in the streetlights’ weak glow. The students numbered less than a hundred all told, and while the ones assigned to the city’s more populous regions saw plenty of civilians out and about, the ones in Mosei-Santo wandered an asphalt desert. No pedestrians, no sign of the criminals who had rebuffed the police. Even most of the apartment buildings’ windows were blackened.

The students all took it differently. Kouda and Mineta practically had to lean against their partners just to stay upright; Uraraka and Kirishima fought hard to keep from shivering from both the winter cold and the oppressive atmosphere; Todoroki kept his head up and his stride steady, confident that there was very little out here more intimidating than himself. But all of them had one gnawing fear in the back of their minds. Koh Kyoumoto, sequestered somewhere among these buildings, his Quirk held in check by Eri’s serum but growing stronger all the while. What would happen if it broke loose and that malicious signal washed over them. Would there be a moment’s warning before they lost their minds. What would happen to their partner. What could their partner do to them.

…need my reason to do anything, if Todoroki can’t control himself I won’t have a chance…

…gotta have sugar to use his power and I bet he wouldn’t even know how to eat it if he went nuts, I’ll just tie him up and get us outta the way, I can handle it, I can…

…should’ve maybe partnered up with Mineta, he’s used to taking hits from us anyway and I’d definitely rather lose it on him than get my face melted…

…promised, Jirou, please don’t hurt me, I promise I won’t try to hurt you…

Iida, for his part, did his best to keep spirits up. He took very energetic high steps like a one-man marching band, his armor clanking through the alleys. Tokoyami, appropriately, shadowed him, his Black Ankh adding an extra layer of dark to his already black-on-black attire. The lighting out here was so poor. If he closed his eyes then he may disappear completely.

“This is pointless,” Dark Shadow snapped. “We’re out here looking for an invisible man.”
“That is why we must be diligent!” said Iida. “Even someone such as Yuurei could not have erased his presence completely. He must have lodgings somewhere in this city. We must be on the lookout for anything suspicious!”

“Suspicious how?” Tokoyami asked.

“I’m sure we’ll know it when we see it!”

“Fumi, why’d you hook up with this idiot?”

“Hush,” he said. He was keeping a grip on Dark Shadow’s temper – this darkness was nowhere near as complete as the woods where it had last gone wild – but he couldn’t do much about its attitude.

Iida heard it anyway. He stopped walking and for a moment Tokoyami was afraid he and Dark Shadow would argue, but when he turned back, the voice from his helmet was far more somber.

“I will admit there is a definite wrongness in the atmosphere,” he said. “It is often said that heroes on patrol are meant to inspire and reassure those simply going about their day. Yet look around. The entire ward seems abandoned.” He gazed at the drawn and opaque windows. “As if the people here have already decided further disaster is inevitable. Why else would they barricade themselves like this?”

“Didn’t the police send an advisory that we would be on patrol? They could be trying to stay out of our way.”

“All of them? Without exception? No. I suspect this has been going on far longer than just tonight. These villains have sapped the hope from them.” He clenched his fist. “How despicable. We must apprehend them and turn them over to the authorities posthaste.”

Tokoyami said nothing, but for a moment, Dark Shadow’s form warped into something ugly.

“Iida.”

He looked back to Tokoyami. “Hm? What is it?”

“I believe we should split up,” he said. “It would be the prudent thing to do.”

“But...we were given explicit orders to-”

“I am aware. However, exceptions may be made in our case. Your costume and my Black Ankh would adequately protect us from any surprise attacks by Yuurei. Your mobility is the highest among any in our class and I am capable of traversing alternate routes, so we would be much better served going our separate ways. And something else.” Dark Shadow crawled and roiled along his skin. “If we were to fall victim to Kyoumoto’s Quirk, you would undoubtedly perish by my hand. I would like to avoid this, if possible.”

Iida took a hesitant step back. Tokoyami’s expression hadn’t changed during his explanation, but Dark Shadow loomed large behind him. Its burning yellow eyes followed his every move.

“Tokoyami...have I done something to offend you?”

“Not at all,” he said, and heard Dark Shadow growling inside his mind. “I am merely stating my assessment of the situation. The night is full of terrors. There is no need for you to risk facing another.”
“I see.” He raised one slightly shaky hand. “I’ll be off, then. But I must insist we remain in radio contact. Tell me if you see anything even remotely amiss.”

“Oh, of course. Take care.”

Iida took off running — faster than necessary, Tokoyami thought. He hunched over, bent his knees. Dark Shadow shifted like clay around him.

“Come, Dark Shadow. Tenebrous Wings.”

The film of grime on the streets blew in swirls and eddies as great black crow wings erupted from Tokoyami’s back and flapped once, twice; he felt the gentle hand of air pressure through his headfeathers as Dark Shadow bore him aloft, over the city’s skyline, and settled him down on one of the apartment buildings, five or six stories up. He didn’t quite stick the landing. He was grateful no one saw him stumble. One thing he had learned from his internship with Hawks was that flying was much, much harder than it looked. He was still too embarrassed to tell his classmates about his early attempts.

There was even less light up here. Dark Shadow dug its hooks into him. He felt it trying to gain control, shove its tendrils beneath his skin.

“They don’t understand,” it hissed. “None of them do. Not even the teachers.”

He held fast. “You don’t even trust All Might’s judgement? He struck down the lout who imprisoned these children.”

“And what will he do when they’re brought back? They’ll be put into the same hole as before.” Its voice dripped poison into his ear. “All these so-called heroes let this happen. They’re the ones who should be dragged into the dark.”

“Enough,” he said, and there was steel enough in his voice to make Dark Shadow relent. “It will all be for naught if we can’t find them. Rampaging here will solve nothing.”

“And later?” it asked, but Tokoyami felt its hooks loosen. The two of them flowed across the rooftop like a streak of ink, cutting a silent path from building to building — he couldn’t yet properly fly, but Dark Shadow’s wings allowed him to cover the distance just fine.

It had always been this way.

He sometimes thought that Dark Shadow’s power didn’t actually increase in the darkness — it just became more comfortable with itself, more willing to express a rage that was always there. In the light it was sweet, reassuring, even timid, but he could still sense that kernel of anger deep inside it, ready to burst out. It didn’t have any angst about its existence; it spoke and acted on its own but freely admitted that it was just another part of Tokoyami. In some ways, that had made things harder. He’d had no one to blame but himself.

The real problem was his face. As a child his beak had been blunter and his feathers more stubbly, but he’d still had that expression permanently nailed onto his head, a gloomy disdain for the world at large. Making friends had been difficult, so he’d been best friends with his own shadow. That had only alienated him further. And when night fell, Dark Shadow’s comforting words became the same snarl he heard now, vicious spite against the children who taunted him, the parents who wouldn’t come for him, the teachers who turned a blind eye. It was the two of them against an unfair world. Tokoyami hadn’t argued with these rants, because they’d always been in his own head — the seething inchoate resentment everyone felt, but given eloquence and form by his Quirk. He had early
memories of his parents’ sharp-edged silhouettes in his bedroom doorway, their voices quavering, unwilling to step into the boiling dark of his room where his shadow’s lamplight eyes burned.

Quirk counseling had helped a little, but there was only so much his counselors could do when Dark Shadow was always back in his ear the same night. The bullying got worse. He started coming home with bloody knees and notches in his beak. One day another boy had chased him down his school’s halls and into a boiler room that Dark Shadow had quietly unlocked earlier; Tokoyami had waited for him to come in, then shut the door and turned out the light. The teachers found them soon after the screams started.

He didn’t like to think of what might have happened to him if that state of affairs had continued. He’d been receding further and further into darkness, spurred on by nothing but Dark Shadow’s twisted encouragement. But then something had changed. As with so many others, All Might had saved him.

He might have had a death glare etched onto his face since kindergarten, but Tokoyami was no less awed by the Symbol of Peace than any other child. He even brought Dark Shadow out to watch him on TV together – Dark Shadow knew and saw everything Tokoyami did anyway, but they’d still sit in the television’s glow side by side, raptly admiring All Might’s latest feat of heroism. All Might had put out a three-alarm fire with a single stomp of his foot. He’d replaced the support beam of a collapsing building long enough for everyone to run out, and then casually let the rest fall on him and walk away from the rubble. He’d stopped the swing of some luckless villain’s blade with nothing more than his winning grin, the sword literally shattering on his teeth. And shortly after Tokoyami had been suspended for his ambush on that schoolmate, glumly sitting in his room with Dark Shadow over his shoulder, All Might had turned to the screen and spoken:

“I’ve been getting a lot of fan mail lately about my Quirk, you know. So many people want to know the secret of my power. To which I say: why spoil the mystery? Ha ha! But more importantly,” he’d added, “in the end, a Quirk is not what makes a hero. Right now, I’m sure there are countless kids with Quirks far different than mine, who believe they could never match up to the Symbol of Peace. And that, boys and girls, is utter nonsense! Because what you really need is this!”

All Might had thumped his chest, and at this point Tokoyami and Dark Shadow were both leaning forward so close that their beaks almost scratched the screen.

“A heart filled with compassion and justice! If you have that, then the rest will follow! If you wish to better the world for others, if you desire to relieve the suffering of those in pain, then you, too, can be a hero! The world can be a cruel and frightening place. But a hero is someone who stands up amongst that darkness, and shouts: Do not be afraid, for I AM HERE!”

It was then Tokoyami had realized he was crying.

They couldn’t go on like this.

So his path had changed. And it had brought him to U.A., and now to these ashen rooftops where Dark Shadow surged and snapped, still channeling his anger as always, but at least trying to put it to use.

Mosei passed beneath them like a sea of tar. Even from his vantage point he couldn’t see anyone below, hero or villain. Anxiety’s noose tightened. He was keenly aware of every passing second. Yuurei might already be on the move.

And then he was on fire.
It happened when he was leaping midway between buildings and he cried out in shock and struck the latest rooftop sprawling. Dark Shadow had snaked into him again, it was raking him raw, he felt like he’d injected himself with kerosene and swallowed a match – but even Dark Shadow seemed to be in pain, contorting and spasming, its shape looking less avian and more like some mutated sea urchin as it sprouted spikes and broken angles. It didn’t make any sound but he could still hear its agony in his head.

“Dark Shadow, what happened? What’s wrong!?”

“Noise...hurts...can’t think...!”

“What noise? I can’t hear anything!”

“It’s all over me...Fumi, I’m scared. I don’t like this!”

That unnerved him more than anything. Dark Shadow was normally fearless with this little light to suppress it. But he knew that if he panicked it would just echo back into Dark Shadow and make things even worse. He fought to stay calm. He soothed it as best he could. And little by little, its desperate grip on him loosened, even though its shape was still irregular, its outline a jagged umbral waveform.

“Are you all right? Is it gone?”

“Still here. But a little better. It caught me by surprise...” Its shape convulsed again, and it whimpered. “Fumi, we need to get away. Makes me want to break something...everything...”

“Wait. You’re angry?”

“It’s not the same. It’s from somewhere outside. Hard to make it stop.”

A wicked signal.

A radio wave that drove you mad.

But the rest of the city hadn’t followed. He didn’t hear any signs of a riot. People would have been flooding out into the streets tooth and claw, their Quirks tearing apart the night. Dark Shadow was anomalous in so many ways. Was it possible that not even Eri’s blood could totally silence Kyoumoto’s voracious Quirk? Was he emitting some thin remnant of that evil sound, just enough for Dark Shadow to hear?

“Listen,” he said. “You won’t like this idea. But we need to get closer to whatever’s making you feel this way.”

“Ohh, I knew you were going to say that.”

“I won’t do it if it hurts that much. We’ll think of something else.”

“No. There’s no time. And we don’t trust anyone else to get the job done.” Its shape stabilized a little. “I’ll point the way. Just don’t go too fast. I can handle it if it doesn’t hit all at once.”

They didn’t have to move far; the range of Kyoumoto’s signal was the same as ever. He came to a squat apartment building indistinguishable from all the others, the blinds drawn across every window. But when he stood on its rooftop, he felt Dark Shadow squirming beneath his skin. They were right on top of it.
“The top floor?”

“Here. Right here.” Dark Shadow undulated again. “How do we go in? Through the roof? Tear it open?”

“No. Still too easy for Yuurei to escape in the confusion. We do this the polite way.”

He leapt off the rooftop and his wings spread and slowed his fall. The front door was locked but that was no bother. Dark Shadow slithered underneath like an unwanted letter, opened it from the inside, and then oozed over the latch, so that it closed with silken silence. The fluorescents here were flyspecked and dim, and he maintained Black Ankh as he walked up the stairwalls. Dark Shadow snarled wordlessly when they came to the guilty apartment. He opened it in the same way.

The hallway lights knifed through the gloom inside. Tokoyami stepped in quickly, and as he did Dark Shadow’s tail rose up and stitched itself across the shut door, sealing it. Now if Yuurei wanted to leave he’d have to brave a four-story drop.

The room was shabby and smelled, oddly enough, of confectionary. Scattered crepe crumbs were still on the counter. He neither saw nor sensed the presence of anyone but Dark Shadow still buzzed inside his head. He passed the threadbare recliner and the silent TV. The hallway light beyond was off and he leaned forward and squinted, trying to make out the shapes in those further, skulking rooms.

Something rustled by his side.

He turned and a child was there, hiding behind the reclinors. Terribly thin, pale-skinned and pale-haired, his burnished bronze eyes reminiscent of Dark Shadow’s own. His nails dug into the upholstery. He was shaking like a leaf.

Tokoyami had always been sensitive about his appearance. He knew that Dark Shadow cast a frightful sight. So it was sheer instinct that caused him to release Black Ankh. A moment’s error. But that moment was enough.

There was no pain, at least not at first. Just a great pressure on the back of his head and then his knees turning weak, distant stars bursting into light behind his eyes. Dark Shadow yammered and screeched in his thoughts but those thoughts were spinning, he couldn’t assemble them long enough to call him back out, and then came a second blow and a deeper darkness that fell over everything.

*               *               *

Tokoyami struck the floor with a thud, blood oozing from beneath his feathers. Shin stood over him, trembling, whey-faced, still brandishing the crowbar. He couldn’t seem to loosen his fingers from it. Koh was on the verge of tears.

“They found us,” he whispered.

“I know.”

“Shin, you hit him really hard.”

“I know.”

“He’s bleeding—”

“Just shut up for a minute!” he shouted, and Koh recoiled like he’d been slapped. He finally lowered
the crowbar and ran a hand through his hair; he was dripping sweat. “Okay. We’ve gotta leave. Coat, where’s my coat...stop standing there and put your coat on!”

Koh darted out from his hiding spot and ran to the bedroom. Shin heard him click the lamp on as he grabbed his parka off the floor and tried to slip into it. It was hard going. His one hand still wouldn’t release the crowbar. He finally threw it down, narrowly missing Tokoyami, flipped up his hood, then swore, put it down again, and got out his phone.

“Hold on. First I’ve gotta call them. God, what a fucking mess...”

They’d been sitting in excruciating silence all night, Shin still wracked with paranoia from Mirai’s earlier threats and Koh too afraid to ask him what was wrong. He’d just about been ready to feed the kid and slip him the pills to help him sleep (and that just stressed him out even more, measuring the dosage of these meds was a nightmare even for someone who hadn’t spent the last year and a half getting shot full of more drugs than a lab rat), but then they’d watched that tendril of dark slip under the doorsill and grip the handle. Using Koh as a distraction had been a brilliantly horrible idea, and he expected Koh to hate him for it later, but it was the best he could have done in the moment.

Again, that dead air on the line.

“Mr. Sako? Mr. Sako!”

“Shin. Another problem?”

“Big problem. The heroes found us. I don’t know how, I’ve got one on the floor already...oh, shit.” He bent in close and pulled the communicator from Tokoyami’s ear. “He’s been making radio contact. He’s not alone.”

“These sorts do tend to travel in packs. We tried to divert as much attention from you as possible, but it looks like it wasn’t enough.”

Shin glanced back to the bedroom and spoke quieter, so Koh couldn’t overhear.

“Look, we need to call tonight off. Can I please give the kid his shot and just run? Heroes, Mirai, it’s too hot out there right now even for me. We can’t stay here anymore.”

“Could you describe this hero for me, please?”

“What? Uh...he’s got a crow’s head, for starters. Short, skinny, wearing some kind of black cloak...”

“Listen to me,” he said, and now there was an urgency in his voice that froze Shin’s blood. “That’s Fumikage Tokoyami, one of Class 1-A’s students. And he’s arguably one of the most dangerous. You need to keep him in the light, at all costs. His powers are nearly unstoppable in the dark.”

“Then we’re leaving! I’ll find somewhere safe, bunker down, and-”

“No. Shigaraki has a personal interest in this one. We’ll come to you.”

“What, from Tokyo? I can’t wait that long!”

“We’ve taken additional measures since your earlier call. You can expect us to be in touch very shortly. I’ll contact you again once we’ve arrived. In the meantime, remove that boy’s cloak and keep him restrained and in the brightest light you can find. If he wakes up then do not, under any circumstances, let him manifest his Quirk. It’s a lot to ask, I know. But we need to salvage something from this situation.”
“What about Koh? I have the syringe right here.”

“**As I said, we have to salvage something. We’ll extract you and cut our losses, but we need Tokoyami.**”

“Okay. All right. But hurry. I’m doing my best but I’m barely holding it together over here.”

“I understand. Stay strong, Shin. We’re coming.”

He hung up. Shin replaced the phone, then looked back to Tokoyami’s body. Koh’s silhouette appeared in the bedroom doorway, his hoodie on and zipped.

“Shin? Are we leaving?”

“No.” He grabbed Tokoyami’s ankle. “Make way.”

Koh leapt out of the way as Shin dragged Tokoyami into the bedroom and dropped him onto the planks like a sack of flour. He tossed the crowbar onto the bed, undid the taller lamp’s lampshade, and moved it so the bulb was right over Tokoyami. He undid the cloak and cast it aside; underneath, Tokoyami wore a black bodysuit that to Shin’s addled mind was reminiscent of a movie-theater ninja. Shin motioned for Koh to move and then ripped the sheets off the bed and bound Tokoyami’s arms and legs. The knots were poor. Shin’s face was drawn and pallid. The pink of his scars stood out among that bloodless flesh as if all his wounds had turned fresh again. He went to the smaller bedside lamp, turned it on, and the bulb popped and went dead.

“No. No, no, you _motherfucker_!”

He tore the lamp out and hurled it against the wall, heedless to the ceramic shrapnel that sliced his face up further; Koh cowered in a tight little ball on the mattress, his hood pulled up, one eye gleaming balefully. Shin could hear him trying not to cry as he tried to get back some semblance of calm.

“Okay.” He turned to Koh and the child flinched. “Mr. Sako’s coming to pick us up. Once he does you’ll get your shot and we’ll find somewhere to hide. We’ve just got to sit tight until then.” Koh said nothing, but that visible eye flicked down to Tokoyami. “Don’t worry about him. We just have to keep him in the light until they show up. They’re going to take him somewhere else. He’ll be fine.”

“You’re lying,” Koh said.

“I’m not.”

“They’ll kill him.”

“Koh-”

“They’ll kill him!”

“So what!” he screamed, and Koh backed off so fast he cracked his head on the wall. “It’s because of people like him that we ended up here in the first place! You think I want to be here any more than you do? I could have left anytime! It’s not like anyone could have ever found me. I’ve been doing all this horrible shit for _you_!” He stabbed a finger at Koh’s trembling form. “Out of all of us, every single person who got sent to that fucking place, you’re the only one who has any chance of making it out of this okay. Mirai’s lost her mind and I look like fucking hamburger meat, but at least you can go back to something normal. But first we need to get the goddamn Quirk out of you. That’s
why I’ve been working so hard. Why can’t you just appreciate that!?"

“Because I don’t want it!” Koh screamed back, and now it was Shin’s turn to flinch. “It’s just like what they told me. I don’t have anyone anymore. No one remembers me! Everywhere I g-go, all I do is h-h-hurt people.” His throat had begun to work furiously; he pulled at the hair beneath his hood. “And even if my Quirk was g-gone, I’d still r-re-remember it. I hurt people, and I’m hurting you, and I don’t want to do this anymore! I don’t want us to be bad guys. I want my mom!”

That last word trailed out of him in a long, thin wail and it was followed by the kind of crying only young children could do, where air was gulped and screamed out over and over until it seemed impossible that Koh’s lungs hadn’t yet burst. Shin stared dumbly at him as he convulsed on the bed, then walked over. Koh fought him at first, feebly; he pushed and scratched as Shin sat down. But finally he allowed Shin to hold him.

“I’m sorry,” Shin said, and he sounded close to tears as well. “But you’re wrong about one thing. I know I’ve done a bad job taking care of you. But that doesn’t mean you don’t have anybody. Okay?” He pushed Koh’s face against the fur of his parka. The boy was feverish with anguish; Shin’s palm burned on the back of his neck. “Doesn’t matter where we end up. Whenever you need me, as long as you need me, I’ll be there. Because this isn’t your fault. You don’t deserve to be like this.”

Koh twisted in his arms, about to say something else. But then he froze, and gasped. Shin followed his gaze and saw it – Tokoyami awake, one piercing red eye staring up at them.

“Villains don’t often comfort crying children.” His voice was slightly slurred, but clear. “But then, you’re not a typical villain. Are you?”

“Yeah?” Shin released Koh and scooped up his crowbar. “And what gave you that idea?”

“Horooka. After my classmates confronted her, she told them about the Yard. We learned the rest from there.”

He chuckled bitterly. “Of course she did. They should’ve just left that crazy bitch where they found her.”

Tokoyami’s head hurt quite badly now. He felt wet warmth beneath his feathers. The lamp’s glare made his eyes swim. But contrary to what Shin believed, this light was nowhere near enough to keep Dark Shadow contained – his earliest training had allowed it to stand up to stadium floodlights, and the knots binding him were so weak that it could easily sever them even in a lessened state. He could feel it begging for release. But he kept it hidden.

“Let me ask you something,” he said. “What do you know of the injections the League has been providing you?”

“They’re expensive and they let the kid pretend to be normal for a few days. I don’t care beyond that.” He pointed the crowbar at him. “You should stop talking.”

“The serum keeping his Quirk suppressed is actually from a Quirk itself,” Tokoyami went on. “A girl who’d been taken hostage by a Yakuza boss. He’d constantly disassembled and re-assembled her, using her blood and tissue as the basis for the drug.”

“So what?” he said, though Koh blanched. “You expecting me to feel guilty about it?”

“I wasn’t finished. That girl is now in the custody of U.A. We have our own serum. So you’re wrong. The League of Villains aren’t the only ones who can help him.”
Koh’s eyes widened. “Shin, is he-”

“Of course he isn’t,” Shin snapped. “You expect me to believe that shit?”

“It does sound too convenient. But it’s all I can offer.”

“And what about me, huh? You and all your fellow heroes’ll just shrug your shoulders and let me walk?”

“You’ve committed grievous crimes,” Tokoyami said evenly. “But not without cause. My Quirk, too, is difficult to control. It rampages in the dark. I’ve nearly killed my own classmates on at least one occasion. It’s not impossible to believe that I could have been yet another prisoner of the Yard, under different circumstances. We heroes are meant to protect the vulnerable, not abduct and torture them for our own purposes. And so I find the Ministry’s offenses far less sympathetic than your own.” Shin sneered, but Tokoyami’s gaze held firm. “What happens to you is your own choice. I cannot overlook your acts of violence against the innocent. But it’s as you said. The child is blameless. And even you should not be left entirely without hope.” For a moment, his voice broke. “Doesn’t matter who you are. It shouldn’t be a crime to live.”

A long silence. Then Shin stood up, the crowbar dangling from his fingers.

“Gotta give you heroes credit,” he sighed. “You always know the right thing to say. They teach that at U.A., too?”

“It may be an elective somewhere.”

“With that face I can’t even tell if you’re joking.” He shook his head. “Before the Yard snatched me I saw heroes everywhere I went. Seems like you got freakin’ idolized by everyone. Whenever one of you came up on TV – God forbid if it was All Might – the cheering nearly made my head split open. Not to say it wasn’t fun to watch, from time to time. Were you at the Sports Festival?”

“I was.”

“Damn. Must’ve just missed it.” In the corner, Koh had started to relax. “But yeah, it was like a screwed-up parade some days, there were so many heroes out and about. I remember asking myself once why there were so many of you.”

“There’s always a need for more,” Tokoyami said. “You would make a fine one. Your Quirk truly is impressive.”

Shin grinned a little and turned to Koh. “Sheesh, now he tells me.”

Koh almost smiled back. The tension started to drain from the room. Tokoyami tried to raise his head up from the floor. And that was when Shin turned back, his face a twisted, grit-tooth deathmask, and smashed the crowbar into Tokoyami’s chest, and again, and again.

Tokoyami’s breath erupted in a susurrus that burned his throat and every breath in was on fire too; he’d felt his ribs crackle like cellophane under Shin’s assault. He curled up fetal as Koh cried out Shin’s name and Shin stalked around him, those colorless eyes livid and bright.


He hit him again and the crowbar rebounded off Tokoyami’s hip. He let out a choked gasp and rolled onto his back, Dark Shadow struggling, but the pain was too much and the bulb suddenly bright as the sun.
“It wasn’t until the Yard that I figured it out.” His words calm and measured. His phone buzzing unheeded in his pocket. “You’re not around to protect people. You’re there to put a clean and happy face on how things really are. All those people smiling brainlessly at each other, everything nicely organized into hero and villain, while the ones in between get chewed up and spit out. You never gave a shit about us before. And you don’t care now.”

“Not true,” he managed to say. “We didn’t know...”

“You think that’s a fucking excuse!?” His latest wild blow glanced off Tokoyami’s arm. He felt something inside snap. Koh lurched to the edge of the mattress, on hands and knees like a dog.

“Shin, please stop!” he shouted. “You’re killing him!”

“I never wanted to hurt anyone. I never bothered anyone. I just wanted somebody to look at me. And this is what they did. Every time I see my reflection I’m back down there. And every time, I remember what I’ve learned.”

Shin straddled Tokoyami, knelt down on his chest. Tokoyami let out a strangled scream as his broken arm ground together, but it was cut off by the cold metal of the crowbar against his throat. Shin laid it there crosswise and put all his weight on it, sealing his windpipe. The world narrowed to the soaked rattails of his hair, the madman’s scrawl of his scarring.

“Heroes are never there when it matters. That’s what I learned. And how about you?” He pressed harder; Tokoyami’s vision began to dim. “What have you learned up at that school? What did you learn, while they were cutting us up like animals in the dark!?”

And as Tokoyami’s eyes rolled back into his head, Koh jumped off the bed, ran over, and unplugged the lamp.

From outside, at just the right angle, the merest sliver of light could be seen around the blinds covering Shin and Koh’s bedroom window. Then the light went out, rendering the window as black and featureless as all the windows surrounding.

A moment later, the entire wall of the apartment exploded.

Tokoyami emerged in a writhing amoeba of black, Dark Shadow roaring its indignation. His good arm held tight onto Koh Kyoumoto as his wings extended and guided them to the street. He was weak and hurt and the boy was so terrified he threatened to vibrate right out of his grip, and his shaking only worsened when he touched down and looked up as the monstrous expanse of darkness digging its way into Tokoyami, pulling his beak into a rictus.

“Don’t be scared,” he said, but his head was still swimming and Koh’s terror was plain to see. “I am-”

The street behind him burned blue. Lacy trails of fire carved a crescent around him and reduced Dark Shadow to screaming vapor. He twisted his head around and saw a someone in the blaze, hands in pockets, its skin a nightmarish patchwork like an ill-treated doll. Then in front of him came the roar of an engine, and a pair of blinding headlights that banished what little remained of Dark Shadow and erased the world from view.

He held Koh tight to his chest as his eyes adjusted. A semi truck was parked less than ten meters away, its engine idling, its grill a glittering maw. He couldn’t see the windshield but in the sudden silence he heard one its doors open and shut loud as a shotgun blast.

The silhouette that stepped in front of the headlights was bent and skinny as a spider’s leg, and there
was something else arachnid in the way his restless fingers twitched and snapped at his sides, in the
jerky and too-fast tilt of his head. His trenchcoat waved in the sweltering heat from the flames behind
Tokoyami. Through the clutching fingers on that raddled albino’s face, one bloodshot red eye stared
and stared.

“Evening,” said Tomura Shigaraki.
Many students of Class 1-A had become experienced with pain; Tokoyami was not one of them. With Dark Shadow acting as his sword and shield, his physique was among the frailest in the class and he hadn’t sustained any severe injuries during his brief time at the school. Shin and his crowbar had opened the door to a whole new world that he was not in any condition to deal with right now. He wanted to pass out from the pain in his chest and head but the pain in his arm kept jabbing him awake. Shigaraki had apparently noticed this; his eyes wrinkled with amusement.

Tokoyami had only seen him once, briefly – a glimpse during the League’s very first assault at the USJ, before Kurogiri had warped everyone to different corners of the facility. He’d picked up details later from Midoriya. The man (or boy, the face beneath that hand was so wrinkled and weathered he could be anywhere between sixteen and sixty) was constantly ill-tempered, hellishly fast, capable of unmaking anything with a touch. That last one meant that he couldn’t stop focusing on Shigaraki’s hands – they snapped and twitched, restless and vicious but strangely delicate, like fighting birds.

Still, he held on.

“Had a feeling something’d gone wrong when he wouldn’t pick up the phone.” The truck’s engine and the crackle of Dabi’s flames counterpointed his words. “We were about to go in ourselves, but it looks like you stuck the landing just right.”

“Yuurei worked him over pretty good,” Dabi said.

“He sure did. Arm looks broken. I didn’t want him to go that far, but I guess he’s had a stressful day. How is he, by the way?”

Tokoyami didn’t answer. Dark Shadow had flooded out from him the moment Koh unplugged the lamp; if Tokoyami hadn’t scooped the child up with his one good arm there was no telling what might have happened to him. Shin had been struck a glancing blow that had flung him out of the room and down the hall, and that was the last Tokoyami had seen of him before his shadow bore him and Koh out of the building in a crash of rubble and dust.

“I hope he’s not dead, at least,” Shigaraki said. “He’s been through enough already. Don’t you agree, Koh?”

Tokoyami felt the boy jerk in his grip.

“I don’t think we ever met face-to-face. You were asleep, remember?” Shigaraki’s demented rasp of a voice was totally unsuited to gentleness, but he was giving it a try anyway. “We’re the ones who took you from the Yard. Hi.”

Koh clutched Tokoyami closer. “Then you’ve been telling Shin to hurt people?”

Tokoyami expected anger at that, but Shigaraki just laughed and waved it off. “No, nothing like that. It’s grown-up stuff. But I’d be happy to talk more about it once we get you and Shin somewhere safe. We have more medicine, too. Everything’ll be fine.”

“You’re not taking him anywhere,” Tokoyami said.

“Oh, you can talk after all? About time.” He idly scratched his neck. “If you’re so concerned about his safety then you’re welcome to come along. We were trying to make you an offer, back at that summer camp. The offer’s still open.”
“Go to hell.”

“Shigaraki!” A garish reptilian head leaned out the truck’s driver-side window. “Stop toying with this punk and grab the kid already. We’re sitting ducks out here!”

Shigaraki’s head twitched. “In a minute, Spinner.”

Tokoyami didn’t know it was possible for lizards to turn pale, but there was a serrated edge in Shigaraki’s words that definitely lightened Spinner’s scales by a few shades. He retreated back into the truck. Tokoyami risked a glance around. They were at an intersection here – open road just to his left – but there was no one in sight and no way of getting out in time. Dabi could have the route totally blocked off in a heartbeat.

“Tell you what,” said Shigaraki. “It’s Christmastime and all, so I’ll make you a different offer. Hand over the kid and leave us here, and that’ll be that. No tricks, no take-backs...hell, I’ll even give him a dose of the serum so you don’t have to worry about another outbreak tonight. We’ll go and you can live to fight another day. I think it’s a pretty good deal. Dabi, would you take that deal?”

“I’d take that deal.”

“You see? Dabi would take that deal. And he’s got a good head stitched on his shoulders.” He held out his hand; Tokoyami had to resist the urge to flinch away from his fingers. “Then again, if you make me take him from you...well, you seem to know how that’d turn out. Think about the kid. Do you really want him to spent the night washing what’s left of you out of his hair?”

He didn’t answer. He could barely breathe. Dabi’s flames were creeping closer, he was sure of it; his beaten body was hardly able to stay upright in this sweltering heat. Koh’s arms around him grew looser, uncertain.

Shigaraki said, “I’ll give you to the count of three.”

But he never got the chance to start, because that when everyone realized the truck’s engine wasn’t the only one they heard.

All of them turned their heads at the approaching sound and all of them were too late. Speed such that even the Doppler effect was left in the dust. The approaching figure’s feet ripped divots into asphalt turned soft as chocolate by the broiling heat of his engines and the gale of his approach sent Tokoyami’s cloak up into his face and made Dabi’s flames dance wildly, spewing sparks in all directions. It was a distant purr and then a pointblank scream and underneath that noise was a battle cry impossible for any but its crier to make out, but spoken anyway because Tenya Iida was a stickler for protocol and calling your attack names was simply how things were done:

“Max Recipro: JET BLUE!”

He came in a comet-trail of blue and orange flame and smashed into the cab of the truck hard enough for it to pop up and to the side like a frightened dog. Its headlights smashed and their beams swung away from Tokoyami, flickering in and out. The impact sent Iida careening back the way he’d come and made Dabi’s flames sputter like birthday candles and turned Spinner into a green blur plastered into the passenger-side door, but Shigaraki was unruffled, he was already on the move, except that was when the ground grew its own clenching hands that grabbed him by limbs and throat and squeezed.

“Koh, cover your eyes!” Tokoyami shouted, and as the boy complied Dark Shadow rose up in a snapping octopoid mass and flung Shigaraki up and over Tokoyami’s head; darkness flowed across
Shigaraki’s arm, forced his arm out and his hand open, and sent this improvised human missile flying towards Dabi, whose eyes went so wide his sutures almost split.

“Shigaraki, wait, don’t!”

The hand clapped over his face and Dabi’s cries dissolved. Shigaraki was left pinned to the street in a pool of ooze where Dabi had once been, utterly still.

Iida limped over. His armor was crumpled like a soda can. The body underneath hadn’t fared much better – he was limping badly and one arm dangled limp as Tokoyami’s own.

“I told you to keep in radio contact,” he wheezed.

“You hit the truck?” Even Dark Shadow was shocked. “Why did you hit the truck!”

“It was the biggest target. At that speed, I can’t aim...But as for you, Tsukuyomi.” Hero names now. He turned to where Dabi had been. “What have you done?”

“I did what was necessary,” he said, and pointed to Koh, still with his hands over his eyes. “Understood?”

A long silence. Then Iida nodded. Shigaraki still wouldn’t move or speak.

“Good. Take the boy and call everyone to this location. I’ll cover your escape.”

“My engines are in ruin after an attack like that. It’ll be a while before I can run properly. And despite the shock-absorption properties of my costume, my body appears to be-”

“You’re still in far better shape than I am. Hurry. Yuurei could be on his way any moment.” He bent down to the boy. “Koh, you can open your eyes now. Go with him. He’ll keep you safe.”

Iida gave a thumbs-up. “Ingenium, the dashing Speed Hero! You don’t have to worry about a thing, young man!”

Shigaraki started to giggle.

Koh hobbled over to Iida and let himself be scooped up. His mouth was a bloodless line and those gold eyes were unblinking. He looked shell-shocked.

“Don’t hurt him,” he said to Iida.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Shin. Please don’t hurt him. He was trying his best.”

“On my honor as a hero, I swear that he’ll be treated fairly,” Iida said. Tokoyami had to give him credit – he had the necessary bravado down pat. “Now let us be off!”

Tokoyami watched him go. Then he struggled back to his feet. Dark Shadow bore him up, raised him on a seething column of shadow. The truck’s lights continued to flicker behind him but they barely inconvenienced Dark Shadow now; he hovered over Shigaraki’s prone form with darkness wisping around him like some malevolent djinn.

“Using me to kill my own subordinate,” Shigaraki said. “You’re so scary, Tsukuyomi. Sure you don’t want to join my team?”
“Silence. You’ve lost your most trusted soldier. Your plan has ended in failure. Just sit tight and wait for the other heroes to come.”

Shigaraki’s grin glinted behind the hand. “You really are dim, aren’t you?”

An approaching sound.

“Scary, so scary...you U.A. brats learn so fast I’m not sure I can handle it! But we’re learning, too. Like Twice! Have you met Twice? He can make doubles of things! He could only copy two things at a time, for a while. But he worked at it, harder and harder, and now he can do it to three! Level up!” It was getting louder. “Heroes, heroes, this city’s crawling with them...do you really think I’d try to pick those two up in a truck? Do you really think I’d do it in person?”

Another approaching engine. New headlights scything across the streets.

“Don’t think you’re getting away so easily!” Shigaraki shrieked. “Be afraid, heroes. Because we are here!”

A bloodred convertible burning rubber down the road, and in the seats were Spinner, Shigaraki, Dabi, all fresh and new, all with gnashing grins, and while Tokoyami couldn’t make out the riders from where he stood he knew the car was already close and gaining fast. The Shigaraki in Dark Shadow’s grip bucked and spasmed and cackled, and then the tendrils gripping him went murderously tight and with a series of snaps like breaking branches the body went limp. It dissolved into mud. The same ooze that Dabi had become on contact with Shigaraki’s fingers.

“Fumi, we need to go!”

But he couldn’t figure out where. The approaching headlights entrapped him. Dabi stood up in the car, braced his foot against the back of Spinner’s seat, and raised his hands up. They burned blue and as Dark Shadow screamed his name again Dabi flung both palms forward and the street became awash in a roiling tsunami of flame whose light turned Dark Shadow to fog and whose heat made Tokoyami faint, and for a moment he just hoped the end would come too fast for the pain to start-

And then there was a sudden jerk, a rush of cool air, and a tremendous pain in his arm as it dangled free. The street lit up and burned. Far below.

“Hey, Tsukuyomi. How’s my favorite little edgelord doing?”

He looked up into a stylish pair of shades and a familiar, lopsided grin. “Hawks?”

“That’s me.” Hawks stabilized, his great wings flapping. He had Tokoyami cradled in his arms like an infant. “Last-second rescue! It’s a hero thing.”

At least the air up here was bracing. Some of the fog blew out of Tokoyami’s head. “Listen, you need to leave me and pursue that vehicle. The League’s cloned themselves. There’s no telling how many of them are hunting down Iida and Kyoumoto right now.”

“Already called it in. Things started popping off soon as you busted out of that building.” He gently raised up Tokoyami’s arm. “Looks like someone busted you up pretty bad, first. Sorry about the snatch-and-grab, I was going a little too fast. Least I can do is fly you back to U.A. so you can get patched up.”

“No! Your mobility is unmatched among the pros, you can’t waste your time on me!” He started struggling, to Hawks’ alarm.
“Whoa, whoa, hold up. I don’t wanna drop you.”

“And I don’t want to make you.” Dark Shadow glared out from beneath his collar. “But I will, if I have to.”

“You’re being an eensy bit suicidal here, kiddo.”

“My injuries are my own responsibility.”

“Hey, props, that’s a pretty cool line.”

“And I can make my way back to campus on my own,” Tokoyami finished. “Dark Shadow will help me across the rooftops. We’ll be able to avoid any conflict that way. Just set us down and go help Iida.”

“Ugh, fine. Not like I can take you back myself with you kicking and hollering the whole way.” He glided down to a rooftop a block away from Shin’s blasted apartment and set Tokoyami down. His wings kept beating, kicking up dust and grime. “Don’t die, okay? I’d feel super bad if you did.”

“I’ll be all right. And thank you for the rescue.”

“’s what I do. Keep in touch.” He lifted off into the sky. “We’ll get lunch or something!”

Tokoyami and Dark Shadow watched him go. When he was just a speck, Dark Shadow turned back to him. The look in its eyes was not kind.

“Why wouldn’t you let me out back in that apartment?”

“You already know.”

“I want to hear it from you.”

“That boy has every right to mistrust us, after what was done to him.” The world wavered alarmingly around Tokoyami; he shook his head, tried to get it back into focus. “Yuurei has been his only source of support these past months. If we had just smacked him aside and grabbed Koh, then it wouldn’t have been a rescue. It would have been a kidnapping. He needs to believe we can offer him better than what he has.”

“Yeah, well, you almost got us killed. And now Iida’s barely holding himself together, too.” It groaned. “Do I really have to carry you all the way back? It’s miles between here and there.”

“It might be wiser for me to stay and rest.”

“On second thought, no. Just don’t move around much.” Shadows stitched across Tokoyami’s broken arm, forming a rough sling. The darkness swaddled him, lifted him up, and rough wings burst from Dark Shadow’s back. “And don’t make a habit of this. We’ve got it hard enough without you pulling a Midoriya.”

Tokoyami stifled a laugh. “Uncouth.”

“Hey, I only say it ‘cause you think it!”

Dark Shadow only functioned while he was conscious, so he wasn’t able to sleep as it began to leap from rooftop to rooftop, cutting a path to the black horizon and the U.A. campus above. But the rocking motion within his shadow’s cocoon was soothing, and he still felt himself drifting off – until he heard the snarl of further engines, and the fusillade of combat below.
“Kid’s busting my balls, I swear.”

Hawks’ vermilion wings could be sighted over Mosei like a wayward star as he glided over the city, arms crossed sulkily across his chest. He’d lost track of the convertible that was no doubt hunting down Iida, but in the distance he saw another pair of headlights converging on the same point. Shigaraki had laid this out well in advance. But even Hawks couldn’t attribute everything happening beneath him to just Shigaraki.

The city’s oppressive silence had become wracked with pops and rumbles and bursts of light – in the last several minutes it had turned from a tomb into a small warzone. And while Hawks couldn’t make out any of the perpetrators from this distance, none of them appeared to belong to the League. Not a hint of bright blue flame to be seen. He halted and gained more altitude over the writhing streets. Lots of little anonymous figures suddenly on the move.

The last couple of months had been difficult for Hawks, albeit for different reasons than the beleaguered heroes and terrorized citizens of Musutafu. After the hero rankings had been revised he’d been all set and ready to start proving his worth to the League of Villains, but all of the contacts he’d wrangled out of Dabi had suddenly gone dark. It was like the earth had just opened up and eaten the lot of them. His superiors had gotten on his case, probably even suspected for a little bit that he’d gone quadruple-agent and was actually assisting the League in earnest, but then the Yard escapees’ campaign had gotten rolling and everyone had realized that the League really was nowhere to be found. He’d almost felt personally insulted. Dabi hadn’t sent so much as a text message.

So this latest sweep of the city had left him between a rock and a hard place. He had to keep up appearances to the other heroes, but if his first contact with the League in ages consisted of thwarting their latest dastardly plan then whatever weak relationship he’d built with them could be considered dead and buried. So now, with the sounds of tentative warfare breaking out all around him, he didn’t know whether to feel worried or relieved. If a third party had gotten wind of Kyoumoto, then that was all sorts of bad. On the other hand, it let him do some actual work while leaving the League to the other heroes. He just had to hope Iida had already handed the kid off to someone with an intact skeleton, so that he could track him down and get him out of harm’s way like he’d done with Tokoyami.

He beat his wings and braced himself. Some of the thugs down there were about to get a horrible surprise.

That was when the air beside him exploded. A tremendous handclap of sound that knocked his glasses askew and sent him corkscrewing down to earth. He pulled out of his tailspin and fought to right himself, wings flapping madly.

“The hell was-”

The next several bursts were surgical. They caught him in the gut, the ribs, beneath the chin; two further handclaps sounded off and snapped his wings at the base so they dangled limp and useless. His body spasmed and stilled. His glasses went flying. A final, whimsical explosion burst them into sky-blue shrapnel. Hawks plummeted, and struck a rooftop with his wings draped across him like a bloody cloak. He did not rise again.

Iida had only made it a block before his upright posture started to sag. Tokoyami had been certain that, of the two of them, Iida was the less injured – he might have been right, but Iida had rammed
into that semi with enough force to reduce a normal person to part of its paintjob. His costume itself had impact resistance and crumple zones on par with the average automobile, but his arm was a loose glove full of knives and every breath scribbled acid calligraphy all through his guts. Even with his helmet up his pain was obvious enough for Koh to catch on.

“Are you okay?” he said, still in the crook of Iida’s arm. “We can rest if you need!”

“No need... at all,” he panted. “This...is nothing...for a hero!”

But funny-colored lights were going off in his vision, and for a moment he was afraid that he would pass out. But then one of those funny-colored lights drew closer, and grew horns and raccoon-print eyes and a garish disco ensemble.

“Ingenium!” Ashido said, skating to a halt. “Are you okay, your suit’s all- oh my God, he’s adorable. Is that Koh?”

“I’m fine, Pinky,” he said, as Koh flushed. “But he could use a more capable escort. Where’s Froppy?”

“I don’t know! A bunch of guys came out of nowhere and just started taking swings at us. I mean, I say ‘taking swings’ but one of them was literally breathing fire, it was more than we could handle. She went down an alley to get a better angle on them and then she was just gone.”

“Did you try to make radio contact?”

“I got in touch, but she’s halfway across Mosei all of a sudden. I barely got away in time. Who the heck are these people, anyway?”

“I haven’t encountered any myself. Please, if you could...”

“Oh sure, sure.” She took Koh from him and held him to her shoulder; he gripped her fur ruff like a lifeline. “Nice to meet you, little guy. I’m Pinky, the Acid Hero! Don’t worry, it’s not as nasty as it sounds.”

“Keep heading to U.A.,” Iida said. He was feeling very faint. “And continue to build your escort if possible. We’re too vulnerable all by ours-”

The shriek of motors behind them.

The convertible whipsawed around the corner and nearly smashed into a shopfront as its tires painted the asphalt with rubber; in the moment before acceleration the two of them saw its occupants, Shigaraki and Dabi grinning wide, Spinner desperately spinning the wheel. Ashido’s shock and horror was plain on her face, but it wasn’t half of what Iida felt.

“That’s impossible. He was dead!”

“Who was what!”?

“It doesn’t matter! Go, quickly!”

The tires caught. The engine roared. Ashido turned and skated away as the car sped towards Iida; he lurched and jumped out of the way and landed right on his shattered arm. For a moment the world became a cage of excruciation filled with alien colors. He pulled off his helmet and struggled not to vomit from the pain.
The car didn’t stop. Dabi casually lobbed a couple of fireballs his way and they came distressingly close to hitting their target. He forced himself to crawl away from the blistering heat, helmet abandoned, hand to his ear.

“This is Ingenium,” he said. “Kyoumoto’s been handed off to Pinky. Mosei 2 Niima-chōme 7...don’t know the rest. Headed east. League of Villains in pursuit. Most likely clones. Additional threats present.” His voice grew weaker. “I’m hurt and unable to assist. Provide backup to escort. Please, provide...”

He fell forward, his receiver still buzzing in his ear. The signal spread out across the city. It snagged on a derelict apartment where the walls were crumbling and the only furniture was a single sink jutting out from the wall with snaggletooth skewness. Sitting crosslegged in that ruin, his face awash in the ghostly light of the cellphone set before him like a space-age totem, Rajio Mainichi grinned.

*             *             *

Ashido didn’t toot her own horn, but she liked to think she was among the most agile of 1-A’s students. Not as fast as Iida, and she considered the holy trinity of Bakugo, Midoriya and Todoroki to be living cheat codes anyway, but her acid skating and nimble maneuvers could confound just about any opponent. But even she didn’t give much for her chances with a terrified kid in tow and about four hundred horsepower of wrath breathing down her back.

The streets beyond flashed with combat but the one she skated down was totally deserted, and the headlights behind her stretched her malformed shadow down half the block. Every time she glanced over her shoulder the car was a little closer. Shigaraki leaned over and waved; his grin threatened to split his head in two. They were toying with her. Well, she knew how to play, too.

“Koh,” she said. “Hang on tight as you can!”

Koh flung her arms around her neck and squeezed so tight she almost gagged, but at least that meant this latest stunt wouldn’t jar him loose. Ashido’s academics weren’t the best but at this point everyone in 1-A had a working knowledge of combat tactics. Dabi was their only long-range option and he wouldn’t risk cooking them both. They probably intended to get close enough for Shigaraki’s touch of death to do its work. That meant they couldn’t divert course, and that meant she could do this.

She breathed deep, tensed her knees, and did a half-pirouette in mid-skate; her balance shifted alarmingly and she almost toppled over but then she was back on her feet, skating backwards, Koh still hanging on tight. She saw Spinner’s eyes widen as she held out her palm.

“Rough road ahead, you jerks!”

Acid jetted from her hand and ate deep potholes into the asphalt just ahead of the car. The tires struck, and screeched, and the convertible spun out. She could hear Spinner and Dabi’s curses as she turned back and picked up speed.

“Ha! You see that, kid?”

“I was closing my eyes!”

“Oh. Well, that’s a good idea, too!” Ahead she saw a gangly figure dash into a nearby alley, long fingers trailing behind it. “Hey, you! Stop in the name of the-”

She struck the force field head-first.
It had been the same kind of spongy barrier that had almost entrapped Shin earlier that day, and lucky for her, because if it had been rigid then she’d have split her head wide open. Instead she bounced out and landed hard on her bottom. Koh’s grip on her was so tight that it didn’t even shake him loose. His thin, worried face popped in front of her.

“What happened?”

“Uh...I guess the road’s closed?” She got back to her feet and looked closer. The entire length of the road was covered in some kind of rough graffiti – a thin helix that looked like barbed wire, with a single bloody gear tangled in its center. She gave the barrier another poke. It didn’t seem to budge.

“Um. Miss Pinky? They’re coming back!”

The headlights snapped onto them. Spinner had gotten the wheel straight again. There was only one other street headed away from them and Ashido took it, one arm around Koh, trying to build up as much speed as she could, but she’d lost her momentum and Shigaraki wasn’t playing nice anymore. The engine became deafening. She looked over her shoulder again and saw Shigaraki lean over and reach out, his spidery fingers twitching, grasping.

Then she turned back and saw a woman emblazoned in the headlights. Wiry, rocking some kind of punk-haircut-and-piercing ensemble that would make Jirou jealous, a cigarette at the corner of her mouth and a metal pipe bouncing on her shoulder. She locked eyes with Ashido and jerked her head to the side: Move.

Ashido didn’t need telling twice. She ducked and swerved. And as the car closed in, Metalhead squeezed her fresh-cut hand tight over the pipe, and blood droplets skittered across its surface like grease on a hot pan. Her cigarette flared. It reflected off her piercings like war paint. She cherished the split-second of confusion on Spinner’s face.

She gripped the pipe and swung down and suddenly the car was in two halves that barely missed ripping her apart as they passed. Ashido cried out and ducked, clutching Koh to her chest. The bisected convertible lit up the streets with the sparks of its impact and spewed its reeking fluids everywhere. Its passengers were already no more. Metalhead’s swing had taken off a good chunk of Dabi’s head and both Shigaraki and Spinner had been pulped by the impact of the car crash. For a moment Ashido was horrified at their remains spraying from the wreck, but then looked closer and saw no actual bodies, just thick and muddy ooze.

Metalhead had noticed it, too. Her ear-to-ear smile wilted somewhat as she took it in. She and Ashido exchanged a glance.

“Are they supposed to do that?” Metalhead asked.

“They’re clones,” Ashido said, voice quavering. “I think. You hear that, Koh?” she whispered to the boy, who was close to weeping from terror. “They’re like...extra lives in a video game. No one actually got hurt. Please don’t cry!”

“Now you’re just rubbing it in,” Metalhead sighed, and blew smoke. “I was really proud of myself for setting that up, too. Oh well.”

Her stance and tone were casual. But Ashido’s nerves, already keyed to a fever pitch, helped her see the predatory glint in the woman’s eye.

“Koh, run!” she cried, and turned, and then Metalhead’s pipe whipped out ribbon-thin and cinched around her neck. Koh scrambled down the street and to a lightpost but didn’t go any further; he
clutched and held onto it like a ship’s mast in a storm. Ashido realized with horror that he couldn’t think of anywhere else to go, and with the altered pipe biting deeper and deeper into her throat she couldn’t speak. She sprayed acid at her binding but the blood-infused metal didn’t so much as corrode.

“Relax, I won’t kill you,” Metalhead said as Ashido dropped to her knees. “Sooner you go to sleep, the sooner I let go.”

Then the pipe stopped squeezing.

Ashido’s acid drip severed its length and she turned back to Metalhead, wheezing, the remainder of the pipe still around her neck like shoddy steampunk jewelry. Metalhead’s cigarette drooped as she stared down as her weapon. She gave it a shake, like someone trying to turn on a dying flashlight. Then she stopped, and gaped, and Ashido saw her mouth Shit! as she spun in place, her free hand diving into her jacket.

Ashido hadn’t been present for Shouta Aizawa’s one-man assault on the ragtag villains who’d attacked USJ, but even if she had, it wouldn’t have made what she saw any less shocking. The man was half-dead from exhaustion and he still came down like a thunderbolt in photo-negative. Metalhead herself was no slouch either, she managed to dodge his initial blow and her knife moved with viper quickness, but an eyeblink later she was face-down in the street with the knife clattering away and Aizawa’s capture tape trussing her up like a turkey.

“Kitae,” he said. “You picked a bad night to cut loose.”

Ashido’s face screwed up in confusion as Metalhead laughed. The woman sounded downright delighted. “The great Eraserhead actually knows me? Big-time, here I come. God damn, you’ve got some moves!”

“You’re going to tell me why you and your friends are out here. Now.”

“Aren’t you that Bakugo kid’s teacher? I can see where he got it from.” Aizawa grunted in surprise. “Yeah, we met. Who do you think pointed him towards Horooka in the first place?”

“Irrelevant.” The tape tightened. “Answer my question or something breaks.”

“You’re not listening. I just wanted to ruin the League’s day, myself, but I knew you guys were all way too badass for us to handle. Lucky for us, we got some extra muscle. Steep cost, but worth it.”

Metalhead wormed one hand out of her bindings and started grinding the bare flesh against the street, lacerating it. “Big storm’s coming, Mr. Hero. Can you hear the thunder?”

Rumbling in the distance. Lightless explosions. Aizawa looked up in alarm. But Ashido was still fixated on Metalhead. She saw her hand raise up, and out.

The bloody palm smacked down on the discarded knife and it came alive, its blade turning thin as a hair. It spun, and sliced, and Aizawa fell back as the pavement splashed red. He hit the street on his elbow, hand clasped over the wound on his side, and saw Ashido hosing down the still-prone and screaming woman with her acid.

He was ready to pull her off, but then he realized that Metalhead’s screams were the frustrated kind, not the “flesh melting off the bone” kind. The goop spraying from Ashido’s hands cocooned her from the shoulders down, plastered her into the road. It stretched like rubber cement as she fought for escape, and as Ashido kept covering her up, it stopped stretching at all.

“How do you like that?” she said. “Don’t worry, Mr. Aizawa. I figured out how to change my acid’s
pH level and its, uh...” She turned to him. “It starts with a ‘v.’”

“Viscosity,” he croaked.

“Yeah, that! I can change it enough to trap people for a little bit. There’s a reason I wanted to call myself Alien Queen at first, after all.” She stopped spraying and clapped her hands in mock apology. “I can’t make the stuff totally pH-neutral, though, so by tomorrow morning you’re probably going to feel like you’ve got the worst case of poison ivy in the world. Sorry-not-sorry!”

“Ashido. The boy.”

“Oh, right!” Koh was still shivering by the lamppost. “It’s okay, little guy! He’s on our side. This is our teacher, Mr.-”

“Eraserhead,” Aizawa said, walking over to him. “The Erasing Hero. All these kids answer to me.”

Koh blinked owlishly. “Shin was right. There really are a lot of you.”

“And right now every one of us is here to keep you safe. Are you still scared?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Good. That means you’re smart.” He held out his hand. “But we’re going to keep you safe, anyway.”

He crept closer to Aizawa and saw the darkening stain across his side. “You’re hurt.”

“ Barely a scratch. Takes a lot more than this to slow down a pro.” He tugged his capture tape. “I need you to hold really still for me, okay?”

Koh nodded and then gasped as the tape gripped him, lifted it up, and fastened him to Aizawa’s back. Ashido saw the six-year old strapped onto her dour-faced teacher like a novelty book bag and dearly wished she could take a picture.

“Good work, Ashido. How long will she be restrained?”

“An hour, maybe?” she said, and Metalhead cursed behind her. “It’ll dry out and break apart after that.”

He nodded and put his finger to his ear. “Attention, all in vicinity. This is Eraserhead. I have recovered Kyoumoto and am now en route to U.A. There’s a possibility our communications are being tapped, so be cautious with whatever you share. Out.” He lowered his hand and glared at Metalhead. “Your interception of Ashido was a little too convenient for my liking. You’ve got somebody listening in. Lucky for you, that means I can’t give away our location. But I’m sure someone will be along to pick you up anyway.”

“Better hurry, then.” Metalhead smirked. “From what I figure, you’ve got a hell of a time bomb ticking down over there.”

“She has a point. Ashido, I assume you didn’t separate from Asui on purpose?” She shook her head. “Then locate and support her. This nonsense may go on until daybreak.”

“Yes, sir!”

He lashed his tape onto the lamppost and Koh yelped as they swung off. Ashido looked back at Metalhead one last time, winked, waved, and skated away. Metalhead was left in the goo. Maybe it
was just because of what Ashido said, but she already felt itchy.

Beaten down by little kids twice in one week, she thought. And she hadn’t even managed to kill Shigaraki. By all accounts, this was a terrible night. But even now, she felt amazing. Wide awake and light as a feather. Like someone walking on air.

* * *

Metalhead’s social circle was vast, and it had burst out of the crevasses and hidden places of Mosei-Santo like a swarm of termites. Their level of skill was about on par with the hapless goons who’d attacked the USJ several months and a thousand years ago, but this was their home turf, and they were united by an eerie sense of purpose that sharpened them in a way the USJ crew couldn’t match. They had synchronicity. They covered each other’s backs.

Still, after their initial surprise attack, they had mixed success. Pro heroes were also on the prowl and any thugs who ran into them got cut down quickly. Todoroki encountered a squad of them, with predictable results. Asui also kept up her hit-and-run even after being mysteriously warped through that alleyway (its mouth marked with another bloody gear, this one at the heart of a spiral, the paint already bleeding away to nothing), and soon joined with Shouji and Ojiro, the latter of whom had horribly surprised one young man with a reflex-boosting Quirk that still hadn’t let him foresee Ojiro’s tail wrapping ’round his ankle and whipping him into the pavement hard enough to dislodge teeth. The city trembled in the melee, as revving motors and distant thunderclaps tore apart the night.

Kirishima and Uraraka had run into several gangsters of their own. They hadn’t even gotten to show off their Quirks before being smashed flat; both kids were eager to work off their stress. As bursts of communication sounded off in their headpieces, they focused on message conveyed by the original – Iida telling everyone where he’d handed off Koh to Ashido, and requesting they lend assistance. But they didn’t go looking for Koh. The pain in Iida’s voice had been plain to hear, and Tokoyami had gone totally silent. The two of them needed help more than anyone.

But their patrol routes had been far apart, and shortcuts were out of the question if so many of the alleyways were apparently booby-trapped. They ran down the middle of the street side by side, the sounds of combat around them gradually quieting as the villains (or so they hoped) were picked off.

“Uraraka, hold up,” Kirishima panted. “You sure we’re going the right way?”

“Pretty sure. Sure enough. But everything looks the same when it’s this dark.”

“I got an idea. I’ll harden and you can use your Quirk and toss me up. I’ll get our bearings and when I fall down again the impact won’t even-”

“No.” She halted. “Out of the question.”

“Huh? Why not? I can handle it!”

“Falling down, sure. But Horooka’s Quirk uses line of sight. If you floated up that high and she got a bead on you then she’d probably blast you to kingdom come.”

“Oh. Damn. Didn’t think of that.” He caught his breath, tapped his foot. “This city’s going to be a mess after tonight. What the hell is she looking for?”

“Your guess is as good as mine. She wasn’t making much sense when I met her- what? What is it?”

Kirishima held up a hand, head cocked to the side. “Do you hear that?”
An approaching engine. The two of them suddenly felt very exposed.

By the time they made it to the sidewalk new headlights had already glassed the street. It was a van, and inexpertly driven, slaloming wildly back and forth across the dividing line; if it was the League at the wheel, then either Spinner was drunk or Shigaraki and company were also starting to feel the pinch from Metalhead’s crew. Uraraka and Kirishima couldn’t find a place to hide in time. The headlights passed by them for a heart-stopping moment. But the van kept on its drunken course. Uraraka remembered to breathe.

Then the van slammed on its brakes and stopped at the far end of the road. The back door opened. Shigaraki stepped out. The van drove off again and left the three of them alone.

Absolute silence, for a time. Just enough to make it clear no one was nearby to help them.

His advance on them was casual. More like a saunter. His footsteps were very loud as the engine’s echoes died. He held out his arms like he was ready to embrace them. In that posture with his billowing coat he resembled a ragged scarecrow. Uraraka’s blood rang in her head. She could hear Kirishima breathing behind her. He sounded like he was fighting back tears. She guided one numb hand up to her communicator.

“This is Uravity,” she said. “We’re…somewhere in Mosei, I don’t know where we are, but we need backup. Need backup immediately! Shigaraki is here and we-”

Shigaraki’s footsteps changed to one long hiss like the wind blowing through dry leaves and Uraraka’s message turned into a terrified scream as he was upon her, one hand raised high; Kirishima grabbed her by the waist and flung both of them out of the way, as Shigaraki’s palm slapped down onto the pavement. The effect was immediate, concrete dissolving into dust, an urban leprosy that spread a dozen feet in every direction. Shigaraki nimbly hopped away as the remaining sidewalk crumbled down to basement level and followed the two of them into the road.

““Ever play one of those games where they’ve got audio logs everywhere?” he asked. His tone was light, practically jolly. “And how every now and then, you get one that cuts out midway, and when you find the person who made it there’s nothing left of them but a big red smear? Always thought that’d be a really embarrassing way to die.”

The two of them were struck mute. His speed had been unreal. And even then, his palm had hesitated at its apex, right before he’d brought it down. He had deliberately given them time to get away.

“You’re Midoriya and Bakugo’s besties, right? Just between you and me, these stupid mobs everywhere were not part of the plan. They’re ruining everything. I was almost ready to just take the loss and move on.” He spread his arms again. “But it looks like it might be my lucky night after all.”

“Uravity,” Kirishima whispered. “What’s the plan?”

“Yes, Uravity, what’s the plan?” Shigaraki leaned over and giggled at the two of them jumped. “I’ve been lying low for ages while those three ran amok. It’s been driving all of us up the wall. So I want to keep this interesting! Come on, make a move. And by the way.” He pointed to Kirishima. “That little hardening Quirk of yours? It won’t help.”

They tried to get into a defensive stance. Shigaraki moved with animal speed and his hateful aura boiled right through these mocking pleasantries, but most of all it was the fear of his Quirk that made their knees go weak. No room for error. No idea how painful it may be. And both of them were hand-to-hand fighters against someone who literally had death at his fingertips. His scuttled toward
them and grinned wider as they flinched.

“Make a move,” he said. “Or I will.”

Then the streetlight beside him broke.

It went with a delicate *pop*, its orange glow winking out. It was followed by another. Then a window cracked. A doorframe splintered. Shigaraki’s grin faded and he looked around for this apparent troupe of invisible vandals. Potholes opened. Walls fissured. The sounds’ frequency increased like popcorn in a bag.

A familiar chill ran down Uraraka’s spine. She looked down the road. It went a long way and it was hard to see, but in the distance she thought she saw a darker speck, steadily approaching.

“Kirishima. Harden.”

“But it won’t hold up against—”

She clapped her hands, grabbed his arms, and spun him around, taking shelter behind his back. “Harden!”

For just an instant, Shigaraki couldn’t seem to decide whether to kill Uraraka and Kirishima or go after the approaching figure. In that moment of hesitation were two flat cracks and what remained of Shigaraki flew back in a spray of brown gunk and Kirishima heaved up spittle as his crenellated stomach turned dented, concave, but he’d managed to unleash his Unbreakable form and it barely resisted the force. The buildings blurred as their weightless bodies were thrown away and Uraraka spun in midair and smashed Kirishima face-down onto the street, his shocked face spraying up gravel as the friction slowed them down. Once she could put her feet back on the ground she heaved him up, leapt after him, de-activated her Quirk, and sent them both crashing onto a rooftop, out of sight, out of breath.

“Kirishima!” She crawled over to him; he was coughing hard, one hand over his stomach. “Are you okay?”

“Feels like I got hit with a frickin’ cannonball…” He turned to her and there were tears in his eyes. “Uraraka, we were dead. I saw my life flash by.”

“Me too,” she lied. “But we’re fine.”

“We’re not fine! I thought that Rappa guy was bad news but I was *useless* down there! I talk a big game but I can’t do shit!” He was getting hysterical. “We’re not cut out for this. I can’t handle this—”

“Get a grip!” she shouted. “Your shield’s the only reason he’s gone and we’re not. What would Bakugo do if he saw you like this?”

That snapped him out of it. He blinked, wiped his mouth. “Oh, man. He’d make sure to outlive me just so he could shit-talk me at the funeral.”

Their ears rang and the edge of the building nearly gave way as another great wave of noise and devastation rolled down the street; it was as though something titanic had burrowed beneath the ground, heaving up chunks of rubble in all directions, the road rippling like fabric. Mirai Horooka, making her advance. Uraraka clapped her hands again.

“Listen. There’s something I have to do. Just get to where the roof’s stable and I’ll be right back,
okay?"

Before he could respond she turned and ran for the neighboring rooftop. By alternately activating and de-activating her Quirk she was able to make her way across without trouble, though her muscles were still jellied from what she’d encountered below. The street continued to self-destruct. There was something almost bored in its annihilation. She ran to its origin point, leaned over the building’s edge and, feeling keenly that she was about to do something very stupid, shouted:

“Horooka!”

The blasts stopped immediately. Stray chunks of rock pattered earthward. Mirai’s spindly silhouette jerked and straightened and her black gaze turned up to Uraraka. Then, she smiled wide.

“You came back!”

Uraraka hadn’t known what to expect – other than, possibly, instant death – but it wasn’t this. Her voice was crystal clear, without any slur, and there was real joy in it.

“You came back and you know my name!” she said. “Did you do like I asked?”

“I did. I know everything. Listen, you don’t have to do this. We can get you help!”

“Now you have to tell me your name. What’s your name?”

“It’s Ochako Uraraka. Horooka, please-”

“U. Ra. Ra.” She mouthed the syllables and clasped her hands. “It’s like skipping down a bumpy road!”

This was useless. She seemed to be carrying on an entirely separate conversation. Behind Uraraka, Kirishima limped over to his own building’s edge.

“I must have acted strange before,” Mirai said. “But I was asleep then. I’m wide awake now! It’s all because you lifted me up.” She raised her arms high like a child entreating its mother. “Will you do it again? Raise me over everything? I want to hear that quiet again.”

“Uraraka!” Kirishima screamed. “What the hell are you doing!? Get away from her and let’s go!”

“Listen to me,” she said. “I can’t just forgive you for everything you’ve done.” Her arms still outstretched, Mirai’s smile withered. “But I can’t forgive what those people did to you, either. You can still surrender. Come to U.A. and we’ll work something out. But only if you don’t hurt anyone else!”

She pushed away from the lip of the rooftop and fled. Mirai stared dully at the empty space where she had been. Uraraka expected the place to rip itself apart in her wake – and only then realized what would become of the people inside – but only silence trailed after her. Kirishima’s sharptoothed snarl flashed in the darkness ahead of her.

“Were you trying to negotiate with that psycho? What were you telling her?”

“Something stupid.” She leapt over, touched him, and picked him up. “Blame the company I keep. At least it made her stop ripping everything apart for a little while.”

Midoriya and Bakugo, she thought, as she leapt down with a protesting Kirishima slung over her shoulder. One too nice for his own good, one suicidally over-confident, and both reckless beyond
belief. She’d been hanging around them way too much.

Down below, Mirai kept staring skyward. Eddies of wind shifted little bits of the rubble she’d created. Her arms dangled limp at her sides.

After a little while, a tall and lean shadow approached, its massive feet unseasonably encased in sandals, its thin head waving stalklike on its shoulders. This was the same man who had been with Metalhead earlier that morning, and who, in his laconic way, had first proposed allying with Mirai herself.

“Are you done?” he said. “You shouldn’t run off alone.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Not hearing anything from Metalhead. We should leave.”

“No. Koh.”

“They’ve probably made it to Kashiki by now. Out of our territory.”

“I just need to see.” She angled her head towards him. “Raise me up. You’re not good enough. But you’ll have to do.”

*             *             *

The van that had dropped off Shigaraki swerved down the road. Its driving hadn’t improved. As Uraraka suspected, Spinner really wasn’t good at handling this kind of vehicle – in fairness, his skills with any vehicle were mediocre at best – but there was also the fact that Dabi wouldn’t stop kicking the back of his seat.

“Could you try to keep this thing straight for more than two goddamned seconds at a time? I’m about to puke back here!”

“I wouldn’t be having – ow – so much trouble if you’d just cut it out! Shigaraki put this plan together so fast I didn’t get time to practice with every car. Come on, lay off!”

Dabi slumped back and gingerly massaged his stomach. Riding in this car was like being trapped in a busted fairground ride.

Everything had been going fine right up until the point that Horooka decided to split. Shigaraki and Compress had assured everyone that it was nothing to worry about, she’d flame out in no time without their support, but oh my, how quickly the dominoes fell after that – Bakugo going rogue, Horooka apparently spilling the beans (a Ministry car had paid U.A. a hasty visit soon after those kids had found her and it didn’t take much effort to put two and two together), and now Tokoyami miraculously penetrating Yuurei’s so-called flawless stealth and getting away with the Kyoumoto brat. The fact that all this was caused by the same two students they’d tried to snatch at the summer camp was just galling. Shigaraki had thrown together what he called his “advanced extraction” plan as soon as it became clear that word of the Yard had gotten out – credit where it was due, he’d had some inkling of where this disaster was headed – but Dabi had been in a bad mood well before they’d started, and the way everything kept unraveling fouled his temper further and further. The minute Shigaraki had decided to just pull the ripcord and abandon the car entirely to play with U.A. instead, he’d started taking it out on Spinner.

“I had plans of my own, you know,” he said. “I put ‘em on hold so Shigaraki could do this crap with the Yard instead. If it all goes sideways at the last second I might just ditch the League completely.
Maybe torch the place while I’m at it.”

“You can’t say that! Shigaraki would—”

“I won’t tell him and neither will you. It’s not like either of us are gonna live past tonight anyway.” He leaned in. “The distraction squad’s busted, the pickup squad’s gone dark, haven’t heard anything from the backup either…we’re probably the only ones left. I doubt we’ll be able to get the kid and make it back to the rendezvous with all these heroes and trashy little crooks running around. Where are you going now?”

“See the blood?” Sure enough, there were bright red splatters in the road, as uneven and spread out as the van’s own trail. “We’re on the main road from Mosei to Kashiki, too. I memorized all the maps. Someone’s trying to make it out of here in a hurry.” He hunched over the wheel. “I don’t know about you, but if I’m going to die then I’ll make it a death Stain would be proud of. Kamikaze!”

Dabi smirked. Privately, he’d always believed Spinner was just a glorified gofer – every ladder needed a bottom rung – but his sheer determination could be endearing.

The blood splatters became thicker and more numerous as they progressed, and eventually their random distribution around the street thinned out, concentrated in its center. For whatever reason, their quarry had been zipping back and forth across the road for a while before giving up and deciding to just run down its middle instead. Maybe the bleeding had put a halt to their acrobatics. The streets grew better-lit, the buildings less dingy, but the neighborhood remained abandoned. Once Metalhead’s crew had made their move the police had put out a city-wide advisory to remain indoors, and even the shopping district, quite a ways away from here, was now a glittering sepulcher, its inhabitants watching nervously from the other side of shopfront windows and from rooftop cafés. So when the road curved and Spinner laboriously swung the van straight again, the people standing at its far end were clear to see.

Aizawa was there, one hand over his side. A tiny head popped up over his shoulder, two gold flecks burning. Midnight was there, too – it looked like they’d been interrupted mid-conversation. And standing with her was Todoroki, his two-tone hair instantly recognizable.

Dabi grit his teeth.

“Sure. Why the hell not.” He clamped his hand over the top of Spinner’s head. “Floor it.”

“We’ll never make it in—” He cut off mid-sentence and screamed as Dabi’s hand burned white-hot.

“I said floor it!”

The engine revved and the car shot off as a gout of blue flame ripped open its roof and Dabi emerged, hands held high, with what appeared to be a small star cradled in his palms. He was fast but not fast enough. Todoroki’s foot scraped across the ground and Aizawa’s eyes widened. An instant later, the flame Dabi held fizzled out. An instant after that, the people huddled in the flanking buildings found their windows darkened by a monolith of shimmering ice whose jagged edifices crawled like ivy across their walls, the van sealed in its mass like a bug in amber. Todoroki himself was sheened with blue and strangely stiff. His skin hissed. The frost on him melted away. He shivered.

“I overdid it,” he said.

“That was desperate of them,” Aizawa remarked. “We may finally be in the clear. Koh, do you want
“Yes, please.” The boy couldn’t look away from the ice.

Aizawa untangled him and Midnight helped him down. The heroes had been disorganized for a while, but Uraraka’s transmission had galvanized everybody – her terrified call for help after Shigaraki’s appearance, followed by her relieved (and far too delayed) announcement that they’d made it away safely, had forced a mutual change of strategy among the Mosei-Santo patrols. It didn’t help that Uraraka’s savior had been Mirai Horooka, of all people, one more human disaster strutting through the roads. Many of them were now linking up into one solid group on their way to Iida’s position to rescue their fallen comrade. Yaoyorozu had personally joined with Jirou’s squad, now half a dozen strong, to find other injured students and offer aid where necessary. Only Todoroki had chosen to split off on his own, but not for long – his intent had been to double back to the Mosei-Kashiki border and intercept anyone pursuing Aizawa. It had paid off. Running into Midnight had been a happy accident.

“Right now the pros are cleaning up any remaining villains while the students help their own,” said Midnight. “Is anyone besides Tokoyami unaccounted for?”

“No, but his absence is worrying enough. You’d think Iida would have said something in his final transmission, but given the League’s prior interest in him…” Aizawa pinched his nose. “I’ll go back out and assist in the search after dropping off Koh here.”

“You’re hurt,” Todoroki observed.

“Like I told the boy, it’s nothing.” Aizawa gave him a pointed look. Todoroki took the hint.

“If you say so. But Midnight and I can finish the escort, if you like. U.A.’s about two miles from here if we take the most direct route. Shouldn’t be long.”

“Nod yes, Eraserhead,” Midnight said. “Otherwise I’ll make you nod off.”

He grumbled, but looked down at Koh. “Would you be okay with that?”

“Uh-huh.” He clung to Aizawa’s pantleg. “What’s his name?”

“Shouto Todoroki.”

“I mean his hero name.”

“Just Shouto,” said Todoroki. “It’s complicated.”

“Okay.”

Up until now, Todoroki’s experience with little kids had mostly consisted of his afternoon with the ones from Masegaki. Koh’s almost painful meekness was a serious shift in gear from that crew. He also wouldn’t stop staring at Todoroki’s scar.

“It doesn’t hurt,” was all he could think to say.

“Huh?”

“Uh, nothing. Never mind.” He sought refuge in Midnight. “What will you do?”

“I’ll stick with Eraserhead. His tape can double as makeshift bandages in an emergency but he’ll still need proper medical attention at some point.” Aizawa glared sideways at Midnight; right now, all
eyes were on her. Koh watched the ice. He blinked repeatedly. Terror sheened his face. “Shouldn’t we worry about whoever was in that van?”

“I saw flame go off in there after I captured it,” said Todoroki. “More clones. Looks like Dabi’s attack backfired. Either that or they didn’t want to be taken alive. Mr. Aizawa, are there any other…” He turned to Aizawa. “He’s getting away!”

“Who do you—” Aizawa looked down and stared dumbly at the sudden vacant space beside his leg. Koh had released him and taken off at a full sprint down the road. He didn’t make it far; Aizawa’s tape shot out and wrapped around his wrist, but the boy tugged and clawed against its with such frenzy that they thought he was having some kind of seizure.

“Koh, it’s okay!” Midnight cried, stepping forward. “What’s wrong?”

“Let me go! It’s getting darker!”

“It’s ten p.m.,” said Todoroki. “Not getting any darker than this.”

“You don’t understand. It always gets darker right before it starts! Please run! It’s starting and I don’t know how to make it stop!”

That’s when they saw it. The street was dim and made dimmer still by Todoroki’s ice shattering all the lamps, but Koh’s eyes still burned. In this poor light his pupils should have been dilated wide. But the iris was slowly closing, so all that was left was a sea of gold. The same solid shade as his photo from Nakayama’s macabre presentation – the mugshot taken of him after his Quirk had first manifested and driven everyone around him insane.

Todoroki, and the two teachers, and all the anonymous people taking refuge in the apartments and cellars above and below, were grinding their teeth.
Todoroki remembered clearly the days after the teakettle. The sudden absent spaces where his mother had been. The endless, maddening itch beneath the gauze. The point where he’d finally boiled over and vented his loathing towards his father, only for that confession to crumble to ash in the face of his indifference. He thought he’d known anger then. But the worst of all had been several days later, when he’d woken up in the middle of the night (the itch, the itch, like ants chewing through his cheekbone) and gone to the bathroom for water. He’d turned on the light and seen himself in the wide mirror, the hint of mottled flesh that the dressing didn’t quite cover up. He’d then realized that he would always be this way, that the horror underneath his bandages would never leave him – that, in short, he’d be reminded of these days whenever he saw his face. And in that moment the rage that had bubbled up from him had been cosmic, it had made his display towards Endeavor a cinder in comparison; it was untempered wrath not just for his father but for this palatial tomb of a house and the city that abided it and the society that abided the man who kept it safe, and that marked face of his had twisted and shattered and then everything was swallowed by red, red light. It was fortunate that Endeavor had been away on business that night. In some disused corner of the bathroom was a scorched mark that his sister hadn’t managed to scrub clean.

Todoroki had kept himself in check since then; Fuyumi’s distress at his smoldering body had been incentive enough. But as Koh’s pupils diminished, the red light came back. Some unseen hand dredging it from the primordial meat of his brain. He was already encased in it up to the chest. His teeth grit until they nearly cracked.

Then, all at once, the sensation was gone. He gasped and jerked like he’d been splashed with cold water. Midnight didn’t look any better. But Koh blinked, and rubbed his eyes, more confused than anything.

“Listen very closely, Koh,” Aizawa said. “Right now I’m erasing your Quirk. It’s why I’m called Eraserhead. I can keep it from hurting anybody, but only when I’m looking at you. I can’t help you if you run away. Are you going to run away?” Koh fiercely shook his head. “Good. Come back over here, slowly.”

“Attention all heroes!” Midnight had taken the initiative, finger already to her ear. “This is Midnight. The serum has worn off and Kyoumoto’s Quirk is active. I repeat, Koh Kyoumoto’s Quirk is active! Eraserhead is keeping it in check, but we’re over three kliks from U.A. and we need transport. Anyone who can cover a lot of distance in a hurry needs to get here now!” She looked at Todoroki. “I won’t bother with coordinates. We’re sending a signal from our location. Follow the flame!”

He got the hint. He raised his palm skyward. The ice behind him hissed.

“You should back away,” he said. “It’s going to get hot.”

The fire that burst from Todoroki’s hand was like the wick of a mammoth candle, a thin orange streak that towered over the squat skyline of Mosei-Santo. It painted all their faces bloody and Todoroki at once began to sweat. Even with all his temperature regulators, he wasn’t accustomed to sustaining fires of this magnitude. Usually one sharp burst sufficed. He started to sink into the puddling asphalt.

Still, he held on. His body turned wraithlike with smoke and vapor. Every head in the dwindling warzone behind them looked up at that flame. And every time Aizawa blinked, the red light roared back, a rage that corroded their reason like a fever.
Metalhead’s offensive was disintegrating fast. At this point Mainichi had figured out that the woman herself was A.W.O.L. and his ability to coordinate their forces was reduced practically to nil as heroes and the League alike started picking them off. Horooka was still out there somewhere like some implacable slasher-flick monster, but the rest of Metalhead’s crew now concerned itself with either disappearing into the wards’ hidden places or running like hell from anyone who still knew they existed.

The two young men dashing down the streets fell into the latter group. One looked relatively normal except for two extra pairs of eyes that dotted his face like bizarre acne, and the other had a fleshy shark’s fin rising from his back and choppers to match. They’d been part of a group ten strong that had gotten the drop on a pint-sized senior citizen in an oversized cape shuffling aimlessly around the ward. A heartbeat later, half of them had been on their faces. Three more had been taken down before they’d made it to the end of the block. It had been like fighting a pinball with an attitude problem. Six-Eyes had been able to track his movements and Sharkboy was beefy enough to shrug off a single blow, but that had been all.

“Freakin’ heroes, man!” panted Six-Eyes. “We’re not cut out for this. Even the kids and old people are nightmares!”

“Hasn’t been great,” Sharkboy agreed.

“Dunno what the hell Metalhead was thinking. She’s tossing us into a goddamn meat grinder here!”

“Then why’d you sign up?” He, at least, wasn’t out of breath. “Not like she’d know or care if you just sat it out.”

“Yeah, man, but it’s Metalhead. It’s obligations and shit.”

He had a point. Every neighborhood had its share of dropouts and dead-enders who preferred to rob cash registers instead of rot away behind them, but things had been tough for that kind of petty crook in Musutafu before Metalhead and her tubby friend had come along a couple years ago. Mainichi’s Quirk kept them safely out of sight from the cops, and she herself was able to dissuade anyone sketchier from muscling in on her territory. She stayed small-time enough to prevent any of the walking disaster areas like All Might from taking notice, and as the months passed other villains began to mistake her discretion for fearsomeness. Watch out for Kitae, they’d say. She’s right in the shadow of U.A. and no one gives her any shit. If you go to Mosei-Santo, stay away from the bleeding gears.

Then the League of Villains had come. The League had thrown everything out of balance. Every shiftless putz with a chip on their shoulder suddenly thought they had a shot at Shigaraki’s ranks and all of them started making noise enough for crackdowns to start everywhere, especially in Musutafu. Mainichi had spent sleepless nights trying to keep everyone in the police’s blind spots, and for that alone Metalhead had been eager for a chance to bloody the League’s nose even before Dabi had paid a few of her friends a house call. But it wasn’t going quite to plan. They’d gone big-time and now the big-timers were stomping them flat.

Six-Eyes sputtered to a halt, bent double and heaving for breath. Both of them knew better than to say something like “I think we lost him.” The old bastard had given them a really nasty grin after pasting all their buddies.

“Safehouse is near here, I think,” Sharkboy said. “Are any of Yasuhiro’s tags still up?”
“Haven’t seen ‘em. The guy’s got to be near-dead after all this, he’s never tried to cover both wards in one night.”

“Then we’d better hustle. Metalhead’ll be fine. What about explosion girl?”

“Takenoko’s babysitting her. Far as I’m concerned they deserve each other, that guy’s creepy as shit.”

That was when Six-Eyes felt a tug on his sleeve. He turned and followed Sharkboy’s pointing, trembling finger. Perched on one of the streetlights was the old man, his cape dangling and his legs hanging free like a kid on a swing set. He still had that grin.

“Listen to you huff and puff,” he said. “That’s what happens when you kids spend all day playing on your phones, instead of getting out in the healthy fresh air.”

“Run,” Sharkboy suggested.

They broke off into a nearby alley and nearly ran smack into him. A wall of deeper dark shot through with splotches of ivory, his suit a barricade of pinstripes, engulfed in the stench of a long-dead sea. A saline acridity. When he bent down to them they saw a mouth full of teeth like carpenter’s nails.

“Villains,” it growled. “I must tell you something. Listen closely.”

From the alley came a short, sharp shriek, and then two thuds. Gang Orca strode out, the runaways slung over his shoulders.

“You really get your rocks off makin’ these punks piss themselves, don’t you?” Gran Torino said.

“One must maintain one’s image.” He gave Six-Eyes’ limp body a shake. “Get them scared and they’re no more effective than any other hoodlum.”

“It’s just as well. For a little while there it was like fighting trained guerillas, they were way too coordinated. What are they, some kinda gang?”

“Crime gets odd this close to U.A.,” said Gang Orca. “Any attempt by these people at formal organization would only give us a single throat to choke. They’re more like a glorified clique roughly built around a high-school dropout by the name of Akane Kitae. Some of them get arrested here and there, but Kitae keeps moving and they all move with her. She’s had a worrying aptitude for villainy but not much ambition. Seems that the latter’s changed.”

“Not hard to tell what might’ve brought that on. Any signs of Horooka?”

“No, but I’ll keep searching. Do you have any spare handcuffs?”

“Left ‘em in my other pants, sorry.”

Gang Orca grunted. “Suppose I’ll have to escort these two myself, then.”

That was when their headpieces blasted out Midnight’s desperate call for aid. A moment later, Todoroki’s signal lit the horizon up orange. The two of them turned toward that light. Gran Torino’s lackadaisical expression had fled completely; Gang Orca’s eyes had opened into that infernal pinprick glare.

“Torino. Any chance you can make it in time?”
“No harm in trying.” He hopped to his feet and tensed his knees. “Keep mopping up these young 'uns and send us a prayer!”

He streaked off. Gang Orca contemplated the two unconscious young men weighing him down, then sighed, tossed them into the gutter and ran in search of bigger prey.

* * *

The gremlin-like girl who’d squatted beside Metalhead during their attempted ambush on Horooka was like most people in one respect – once Shigaraki touched her, she didn’t take long to die. Usually their hearts stopped well before the rest of their bodies started to rot. In seconds she was nothing but dust and runny red liquid filling in the asphalt’s cracks. Shigaraki straightened and carefully wiped his hands off on his coat.

“Good aim, but not that bright,” he said. “How’re you doing, Dabi?”

“All finished here.” Dabi stood in front of a gently glowing pile of blackened angles. Flashes of teeth could be seen in the char. The air was alive with firefly sparks.

“I guess it’s your turn to steer. Though you might want to clean the seat off a little, first.”

“Should’ve just let me do it in the first place. Why’d we bring that idiot, anyway? Wasted a good clone.”

“We need a driver.”

“I can drive!”

“You’re our artillery,” Shigaraki said patiently. “You need your hands free. Meanwhile, I can’t hold a wheel, Compress is still getting used to his prosthetic and Twice is his own worst back-seat driver. Unless you want to give Toga a shot?”

Dabi shuddered. “Pass.”

The van idled further down the block, its driver’s seat saturated in brown slime. They’d been making their way through Santo Ward, Spinner handling it about as ineptly as his recently-deceased clone, when that bug-eyed girl had popped out of nowhere and flung what looked like a ball bearing clean through the window, Spinner’s headrest, and Spinner’s head. He’d dissolved on the spot, which, like Metalhead, that girl and her entourage apparently hadn’t expected. What they’d expected less was for the car to screech to a halt and its remaining passengers to burst out like homicidal cargo. Shigaraki wondered, briefly, what kind of Quirk that girl must have had, then decided it didn’t really matter.

“Since we probably won’t make it through tonight anyway, I’ll just come out and say it.” Dabi ambled up to him. “Really losing confidence in your leadership after this whole mess, Shigaraki.”

“Heh. That’s fair.” He scratched his neck. “It’s a setback, to be sure. But we can still work around it. I get your frustration, I really do. That’s why I let you light up Hōsu, after all.”

“It was nice to stretch my legs for a change,” Dabi said wistfully.

“Only thing I didn’t really expect was these gutter-punks coming out of nowhere. The rest I can deal with later. Still, it’s disappointing. Horooka’s gone rogue, Yuurei’s failed, and the brat was never really loyal to us in the first place. Good help is hard to find.”

“Gonna be honest, I kind of miss Magne,” Dabi sighed. “Magne, Muscular, Mustard, Moonfish…”
seriously, is this some kind of curse? You piss off someone with an alphabet-powered Quirk?"

That was when Todoroki’s flame shot up and got their attention. They could only see the very tip from where they were, but its warm nuclear glow discolored the streets and threw the burned and liquefied remains of their unfortunate attackers into sharp relief. Dabi scowled at the sight. Shigaraki stared up like a child at a fireworks display.

“So much commotion,” said Shigaraki. “Think of this as a preview. I’d love for Kurogiri to come back to a country in ruins.”

“You still sound awful confident that we’ll pull this off.”

“Master was always confident. Even on the very brink of failure. If you can’t at least believe in yourself then you’ve already lost.” He turned to Dabi and his eye narrowed. “Ah. Looks like you won’t get to drive after all.”

Dabi followed his gaze. There was another squadron heading toward them, half a dozen strong – and these were pro heroes. Edge Shot led them up. The flame glinted red off Snipe’s goggles.

“Oh, I do not give much for our chances here,” Dabi groaned.

“Want to give it a try?”

“Nah. That bargain-bin ninja’ll take us alive for sure. Besides, always kind of wondered what this felt like.”

“Aren’t you morbid,” Shigaraki said, and clamped his fingers around Dabi’s neck. He let out a strangled gasp and collapsed in his grip. The other heroes took notice; Snipe had already drawn. Shigaraki removed his decorative hand and smirked.

“Not this time,” he said, and touched his own face. Snipe’s bullets streaked through falling ooze, and the discarded hand landed in the slime and melted easy as wax.

* * *

The flame had been up for two minutes. Todoroki’d needed to move before he submerged himself in boiling tar. Aizawa held Koh to his chest, staring down at his scalp. His eyes watered and stung. On a recent blink a window above them had shattered, one resident losing control and ready to fling themselves out into the street before the signal had halted again. Koh sobbed apologies again and again until they merged into meaningless noise, as though he believed chanting his regrets long enough would satiate his Quirk, lull it back to sleep.

“Let me sedate him,” said Midnight. “He’s terrified.”

“I know. But we’re not in the clear yet. Wait until we can be sure that he’s safe.”

“What should we do if no one gets here?” Midnight asked. She was trying to keep her voice steady. Nakayama’s cheerful advice loomed large in her mind: *For safety’s sake, I’d personally recommend complete destruction of his remains.*

“Someone will come,” said Aizawa.

“But if they-”

“Someone,” Aizawa said, “will come.”
Ten more seconds passed. Aizawa blinked. The flame flickered as Todoroki choked back the urge to turn it on something that could writhe and scream. And then a darker, malformed shape swung between the buildings, skidded across the ice, emerged into the light of the signal fire, and revealed itself to be, in fact, two shapes.

“I hate this!” Mt. Lady wailed. “I hate everything about this!”

“I know. You can come down now,” Kamui Woods said.

He’d been swinging around with her on his back, the slit eyes beneath the bark of his mask serious as always. The roots he’d used to cinch her in place loosened and she got down, slipped on the ice, landed on her bottom and whimpered. The flame went out like it was too embarrassed to stick around.

“Tell me that’s not Yu Takeyama I’m hearing,” Aizawa said.

“Okay,” said Todoroki.

“That’s Mt. Lady to you! Hero names on the job, smartass!” She unsteadily got back to her feet.

“Never fear, for we are blah blah blah. Let’s hurry the hell up and move. I didn’t come all the way to this dump for nothing!”

“Horooka’s Quirk rendered her own power a liability,” Kamui Woods explained. “She’s been upset at her ineffectiveness during this operation.”

“Yeah, but at a full sprint at my full size, I can get you all to U.A. in seconds flat. Don’t everyone thank me all at once.”

“Horooka is still out there.” Aizawa blinked again and they all recoiled as the red light dropped. “If she has line of sight on you then you’ll be broken to pieces before you make it ten steps.”

“Let Kamui deal with that.” Her voice was softer now, more serious; she pushed off the ice and slid over to them. “I took one for the team back in Kamino, too. We can handle anything that girl dishes out. Midnight, Shouto, the two of you coming?”

“I’ll stay behind and join the others,” said Todoroki. “Good luck.”

“Then back away, kid. Midnight, move closer to Eraserhead…yeah, good, like that. All right, here we go. Kamui, do the thing!”

Kamui Woods slung an arm companionably around Mt. Lady’s neck and let his other arm dangle limp. She tensed, and braced herself, and her arms cradled Aizawa and Midnight and Koh as her Quirk activated, the ground rushing away, the city stretching into a mass of anonymous polygons, and they heard a great creaking of bark as roots rushed from Kamui Woods and formed a protective bed all along Mt. Lady’s back. Far in the distance, the quadruple towers of U.A. shone.

Before she could even step forward, Horooka struck.

From across the wards Mt. Lady felt the hammerblow, a pulse of hateful force right between her shoulderblades that knocked her breath out and made Kamui Woods’ hoary barrier buckle. Windows splinters and doors shivered in their frames as thunder rolled along her skin like malicious chiropracty, blasts without number or hesitation, and the vibration almost drove her to her knees but she grit her teeth and started to run forward, her feet leaving massive craters in the streets, Kamui frantically replenishing the shattered roots, and Aizawa keeping his grip tight and his eyes open even as the vibration shook him apart. Midnight was pressed right up against him. She looked down and
saw his blood’s growing stain on her suit.

* * *

In one direction was U.A., the lit towers of shining glass. In the other a grim silhouette gashed the horizon, a slender behemoth that swayed in place like some obscene weed. Its clothes were little more than scraps on its grotesquely elongated limbs. Two full-sized men on each other’s shoulders could have occupied the space between its nose and its beady eyes. Hanging from its belt was a pair of worn sandals.

Hiraku Takenoko. His Quirk: “Vantage.” A gigantification power with only the merest increase in strength and endurance, just enough to keep him from collapsing under the weight of his stalklike frame. Ordinarily all it could do was give him a bird’s-eye look at the surrounding area and severely unsettle anyone around him, but clutched now in his hands like a carnival prize was Mirai Horooka, dangling limp, her killing stare cutting across Musutafu and to the fleeing shade of Mt. Lady beyond. She neither breathed nor blinked. She was a bell tolling murder across the seconds.

The heroes congregated to their location. With Metalhead’s entourage and Shigaraki both dispatched they had only one target left. A five-man team, Fatgum and Gunhead among them, ran to Takenoko from behind, intending to fell him like a tree, only to skid to a halt in shock when his taffypulled Moai head spun one-eighty degrees and fixed them with his stare. His torso spun accordingly, Mirai’s limp limbs swaying, and the heroes ran for cover as the city burst to pieces around them. The two of them were fending off the entirety of the heroes’ offensive all on their lonesome.

Mirai’s head swelled and whirled. The top of her skull full to bursting. Tinnitus lashed through the dying echoes of her destruction. When Takenoko rotated her back to her original alignment Mt. Lady was almost invisible, the distant dark and the city’s light pollution erasing her silhouette from view.

“No you don’t.” She grabbed her hair and pulled. “You don’t get away from me. No one ever gets away! No one gets to go home!”

Another fusillade of noise and the building tops all across the wards burst open and sprayed their mortared guts skyward. Top-floor residents screamed and ran for cellars as their homes collapsed around them. Barricaded by rubble, her head bloated with painless pressure, Mirai poured everything she was into Musutafu’s annihilation, even as she felt the shattering voice inside her finally grow weak.

* * *

The children of Class 1-A didn’t join in the assault on Mirai. Even their bravado had its limits. Uraraka had been fairly close to Iida’s location, but Kirishima’s injuries had hobbled her pace. They ran into Ashido on the way, then into Satou and Sero. The latter two had barely seen any action at all, they’d said; they’d almost been disappointed about it at first, then they’d heard Uraraka’s message about the one-two punch of Shigaraki and Horooka, and decided they’d probably been better off.

“I’m pretty sure we first met somewhere around here,” Ashido said, leading them down the streets. “See all the tire tracks? They were really peeling out.”

“Guy’s costume won’t be hard to spot,” Sero said. “At least it’s not Tokoyami. Does anyone know where he ended up?”

“Haven’t heard a peep from him all night,” Kirishima said.
“Shouldn’t we be worried about that, too? Like, really seriously worried? Shigaraki already tried to
snatch the guy once!”

“Focus on one thing at a time,” said Uraraka. “Maybe Iida can tell us something…wait. There he
is!”

He was leaned up against a pitted stoop beside a half-melted patch of asphalt, helmet off, head down.
His shattered glasses twinkled nearby. Satou hunched down beside him and smacked him a couple
times, as politely as he was able.

“Really, dude?” Sero asked.

“You got a better idea?” said Satou. Iida groaned and stirred. “See? It worked.”

He opened bleary eyes, gazed around at them. “Ashido? And…others. Did we complete the
mission?”

As if in answer, the city thundered itself to pieces in the distance.

“Mission’s kind of still ongoing,” said Uraraka. She knelt down and studied his crumbled form.
“Yikes. Did you get hit by a truck or something?”

“Something like that.”

“We’ll carry you the rest of the way, don’t worry.” She touched him and removed his gravity.
“You’re still in decent shape compared to what happened to Deku. Do you know where Tokoyami
went?”

“Left him behind with the truck. Don’t know where…” He stopped and straightened, eyes wide.
“Wait. The truck!”

“Hold on, there was actually a truck?”

“He had Shigaraki at his mercy, and Dabi’s clone was dispatched, but the last one…it must have
been Spinner. He’s still coming. I saw it pass by just before I lost consciousness.” His confused
friends restrained him as he attempted to rise. “You don’t understand. We need to warn them!
Spinner’s still coming!”

* * *

“Mt. Lady!” Kamui Woods cried. “Are you okay!?"

She either wouldn’t dignify that with a response or was in too much pain to answer. Kamui’s powers
were exhausted; his root bed had grown thin long before Mirai’s assault had finally spread away
from her and towards the city at large. U.A.’s campus loomed but Mt. Lady’s step had turned
hobbled and uneven. Midnight and Aizawa felt her cradling arms tremble.

U.A. was ringed by Musutafu on all sides, the buildings growing sparse as they opened up into the
campus proper. Mt. Lady almost made it to the edge of that perimeter, then she let out a thin moan
and dropped to her knees. Kamui Woods guided her escorts down to the street as she shrank.

“You need to hurry. We’re being followed!”

“I imagine so. We’ve attracted enough attention.” Aizawa’s own arms were shaking badly, even
under Koh’s sparse weight. “Midnight, take him and run ahead. Just keep him in view.”
“Got it. Come on, sweetheart.” Koh was stiff, catatonic from nerves. She picked him up as gently as she could and slung him over his shoulder. All their heads were spinning, made worse by the ever-growing interval between Aizawa’s Quirk erasures. Koh’s power was rampaging fully, now. Unseen hands sinking into the raw clay of their brains.

Kamui Woods shouted another warning but it went only half-heard, Midnight and Aizawa now at a dead run to U.A. Two hundred meters, if that. Koh’s gold-eyed stare was pinned wide over Midnight’s shoulder and Aizawa held his gaze there, kept his own expression calm, reassuring, even as the pavement behind him streaked with dripping blood.

It didn’t work. Koh’s eyes went still wider and all remaining color dropped away from his face. And Aizawa couldn’t risk looking behind him, but he had an inkling what the boy had seen. He heard the engine’s scream and saw the headlights print their lurching shadows on the ground as the last of Tomura Shigaraki’s vanguard emerged – the semi-truck, dented and burned and corroded and with one mangled wheel spewing sparks, its engine licking flame like a chariot fresh-risen from the slagheap of Hell.

*             *             *

Shuichi “Spinner” Iguchi was not having a good day.

The League of Villains didn’t have a formal hierarchy, but rough ranks had still established themselves, circles of influence like the pattern on a dartboard. In the bullseye was Shigaraki himself, of course, with his inner circle consisting of Kurogiri (now sadly disposed) and Mr. Compress, the cool-headed strategists of the group. A little ways apart from them was Dabi, reliable but aloof, and full of hidden agendas. Further apart from him were Twice and Toga, invaluable allies but less than stable and uncomfortably weird. Giran whimsically flitted in and out, loyal but mercenary, happy to keep the supplies flowing as long as Shigaraki poured All for One’s seemingly limitless inheritance into his pockets. Gigantomachia skulked somewhere on the extreme edges of the circle, an inscrutable x-factor who’d been safely hidden away during Shigaraki’s latest scheme. And even further than that – possibly off the board entirely – was Spinner, with his ever-more dated Stain cosplay, his clumsy swordsmanship, and a Quirk that didn’t seem to do anything but make him uglier. Dabi was the only one who didn’t bother to mask his contempt, but on some level several other members of the League still found him faintly embarrassing.

But Shigaraki still kept him around, and not just because he’d with the League almost since the beginning. Under the dress-up and the halfbaked morality, Spinner had a fanatical determination that outstripped just about every one of his allies. His clone’s earlier declaration to Dabi hadn’t just been empty boasting. He would gladly go to his death to see his task through. And right now, that’s exactly what he was doing.

He’d cracked his head when Iida had smashed into the truck, and it had knocked him out but still failed to kill him, fragile as this cloned body was. By the time he woke up the street was long deserted, and without hesitation he’d gotten back behind the wheel and threaded his way in pursuit of quarry he could no longer even see. He’d attracted attention. He’d sustained damage. Among them – bullet holes and a blown tire from Gunhead, a kick from Gran Torino that had nearly tipped the truck over, a blown suspension from narrowly avoiding Cementoss’ barricades. He’d outpaced them all. He’d kept driving even as the dashboard lit up with festive warning signs and the gasoline-stinking heat in the cab became unbearable. One of Gunhead’s shots had pierced him somewhere in the chest and he felt himself melting away, his fingers tacky on the wheel, his own thoughts turning to sludge. But when Mt. Lady had risen up he’d still followed, swerving between the falling rubble of Mirai’s assault, unwitnessed, unappreciated, and undaunted in his goal.
By the time he finally closed in on Aizawa and Midnight he was half-dead and half-mad. Any larger designs Shigaraki might have had for Koh Kyoumoto had dripped out of his head. Only one thought remained – if the League of Villains couldn’t have this child, no one could. So he smashed on the gas even as flames licked the windshield, meaning to run them both down.

The pursued heroes weren’t fast enough. The gate of U.A. was open and several Ectoplasms ran through, but they weren’t fast enough either. The truck snarled at their heels.

Then a writhing mass of darkness sprang off the periphery of buildings surrounding U.A., vaguely avian at first, then bursting open into an amoebic horror that descended on the truck like a carnivorous blanket. Only Koh was close enough to see the white-eyed and grimacing figure of Fumikage Tokoyami at its nucleus, before Dark Shadow swallowed him whole and drove its knife-edged flagellae into Spinner’s seat.

* * *

Dark Shadow had kept to its promise. They hadn’t fought anyone, even as the combat around them intensified and the streets lit up with his classmates’ unleashed power. Their progress was careful, deliberate. They skirted around major conflicts and made sure not to touch street level. With his radio destroyed he didn’t hear the panicked announcements over the airwaves from Uraraka or Midnight. But when Todoroki’s flame gashed the horizon, they took one look at that light and quickened their pace. Then they’d quickened it further when they saw Spinner’s truck bearing down on them, crippled but still alive.

There hadn’t been time, before. Mt. Lady and Kamui Woods had arrived on the scene well before all of them and Mirai’s attack had complicated their path, destroying the adjacent buildings to which they could most easily fly. As they got closer to Koh his Quirk ate away at Dark Shadow. Its shape began to warp into something unrecognizable as it dug into Tokoyami’s broken and aching bones. He entreated it. He pled with it. And he very nearly kept it under control until Mt. Lady collapsed, and the runaway truck blew past them and towards his teachers, at which point he shut his eyes and surrendered himself to it completely.

The epidermis of dark giving it the rough approximation of Tokoyami’s form broke and what spilled out was an inchoate flood whose shriek rent apart the air. Formless rage with teeth and claws, pulsing out further every time Koh’s signal broke loose from Aizawa’s grasp. It gripped the truck and flipped it on its side and tore the tires and slashed the cab and dragged Spinner screaming and flailing out through the windshield; Koh saw it hold him up against the backdrop of the city lights, saw the agony on his face as he struggled to die. The dismembered truck’s pieces ground together and produced sparks that set its fuel alight, and just as the gateway to U.A. slammed shut behind them there was a great exhalation and orange glow from beyond as its tank caught and exploded in a flash that banished Dark Shadow and flung Tokoyami, smoldering and unconscious, from the flaming wreck.

They had an entourage waiting in the courtyard. Nezu and Hound Dog and Ectoplasm and Recovery Girl. None of them looked any clearer on what happened than Midnight and Aizawa. Koh made thin and hurt animal noises as he struggled in Midnight’s grip; there was warmth seeping through his pants.

“What was that?” Midnight cried. “I couldn’t look back!”

“Smelled Tokoyami,” Hound Dog growled.

“Then what the hell are you waiting for?” Aizawa said. “Get back out there and help him before he burns to death!”
Koh pushed away from Midnight and there was a heart-stopping moment as he dropped between her and Aizawa, blocking him from Aizawa’s view. Everyone in U.A. felt the pulse of hate that followed. Even Nezu bit clean through his lower lip in his attempt to resist it. Koh crawled away on hands and knees and vomited clear strings of spittle and collapsed in the mess, whey-faced, hyperventilating.

“Shh, honey, it’s okay.” Midnight bent down to him and tore her costume. “Breathe. Breathe…”

Pink mist spilled from Midnight’s skin and enveloped Koh’s head. His breathing stilled, steadied. His eyes fluttered and closed.

Aizawa’s conjunctiva had gone completely red; the world through his eyes was now little more than color and shade. Recovery Girl rushed to his side, withdrew the syringe, pushed back its sleeve, and injected him.

There was an endless pause. Aizawa didn’t dare release his Quirk.

Finally Midnight propped up the unconscious Koh and opened his eyelid. The eye beneath rolled loose, but she could still see the pupil, back to its normal size. She nodded to Aizawa. He blinked. The red light did not return.

“It’s done,” she said.

Beyond the gates of U.A., Ectoplasm’s copies dragged Tokoyami away from the wreck. The city’s collapse had ceased. The air was redolent with gasoline fumes.

“We need to get him to the infirmary,” said Recovery Girl. “Get him cleaned up, if nothing else.” Nezu wiped blood away from his mouth. “The other students must be retrieved as well, but that can be left to the heroes at the field. Well done, everyone. I can declare this mission completed.”

And with that, Aizawa fell over.

Hound Dog got to him first. The man lay limp, breathing shallowly, his capture tape splayed in ragged loops. Hound Dog sniffed, cringed, and touched Aizawa’s side. His hand came away soaked in blood.

“He needs a transfusion,” he said. “Right now.”

“He was cut even before we found each other,” said Midnight. “Refused treatment, the idiot. I knew it had to be worse than he was letting on.”

“Ectoplasm, Midnight, get both of them to the infirmary,” said Nezu. “Clear out Midoriya if you have to. We can’t risk a proper hospital yet. Do we have Type B in stock?”

“Fortunately yes,” said Recovery Girl. “I’m on my way. Woe betide you all if this old woman gets there before you do. Move!”

Nezu and Hound Dog watched them go. The doors opened and two more Ectoplasms arrived, Tokoyami’s body in tow. He was stained with char and what remained of Spinner’s clone, his broken arm at a sickening angle.

“Going to need more beds,” said Hound Dog. Nezu nervously kneaded his paws together.

“Injuries extensive, but easily treatable,” he said. “At a glance. I can only hope his classmates fared better.”
“The boy. Smelled his fear. So strong I could hardly stand it.”

“He’s been through more than anyone his age deserves,” said Nezu. He looked up at Hound Dog, head tilted. He appeared to be thinking about something. “Are you…feeling quite all right?”

“No.” His voice was perfectly coherent. “I’m angry. Our kids are hurting themselves for our sake. Should be the other way around.”

“Ah. Yes. Of course I agree.” He looked back to the city beyond the school’s gates. “Please let this be the worst of it.”

* * *

Mirai had at last fallen silent.

Weeks of noise expended. The world’s voice gone mute. She felt a strange hollowness, like her bones were blown glass. She stared and stared but nothing would break. She couldn’t even protest when Takenoko shrank down and gently set her aside.

“It’s over,” he said.

They were surrounded by steep piles of broken glass and stone on all sides, but the heroes were making short work of it by the sound. Fatgum’s squad tore away at one pile; another was shrinking even faster, courtesy of Thirteen, who was leading their own rescue squad. Soon they would spread out through Mosei-Santo and beyond to assist the wounded. But apparently they’d decided to prioritize Mirai’s capture first.

“I don’t think I’ll like jail,” Takenoko mused. He didn’t look too bothered by the idea, or by the fact that he was standing barefoot amongst a fallen sleet of sharp edges.

“Back in the hole again,” Mirai said. “No, no. They can’t hold me long. The Yard is burnt. Nothing else can keep me in.” She focused hard on the sparse sounds around her, lapped them like someone dying of thirst would suck the dew off stones. Enough for one last shout. The first one who approached her would find themselves with a broken skull.

“Get over here now, you morons!”

They both turned to a side alley that was half-choked with debris. Leaning against the pile, so pale he was almost translucent, was the long-fingered man who had confounded Ashido earlier. Beside him was a patch of graffiti – another rough white spiral adorned with Metalhead’s gear, but this one with a red slash through it still dripping paint.

Iga Yasuhiro, one of the original members of Metalhead’s little clique. His Quirk was called “Tag,” and it was one in which the Yard might have taken an interest. The designs sprayed from his fingers allowed him to warp and control the spaces they marked – this one for a barrier, this one for a tripwire, this one for transportation. The spiral design took whoever crossed the threshold it marked and dropped them to another, random threshold of similar dimensions within half a mile. The gear meant that it only marked those Yasuhiro recognized as part of Metalhead’s circle – usually, it excluded them from the tags’ effects, but this red line inverted the effect, limited it to her allies only. In other words, he’d just drawn them an emergency exit.

His ability had as many drawbacks as advantages. His repertoire of designs was limited and it took considerable time drawing and redrawing a new tag to make its power work consistently. The tags didn’t last long after activation, dripping away to nothing within an hour at most, and the larger the tag, the shorter the duration. And most importantly, the “paint” he sprayed was partly composed of
his own blood plasma. Overuse left him anemic, and he’d been marking up all of Mosei-Santo today. He could barely stand.

“She said you had to rest,” Takenoko rumbled.

“Fuck what she said. We’ve lost enough people tonight already, I’m not letting you get pinched too. Hurry up!”

Mirai didn’t need telling twice. Yasuhiro stood aside as she dashed into the alley, Takenoko lurching close behind. The graffiti’s paint emitted a soft light as they passed it, and their outlines resonated in turn, shimmering and growing dim before they disappeared entirely. Yasuhiro sighed in relief and tried to make the world around his blood-deprived head stop spinning.

“Was afraid the girl wouldn’t count,” he said to himself, and made for the alley.

A yellow streak bounded up and over the rubble and smashed into Yasuhiro foot-first and hard enough to send them both skidding down the road. Gran Torino squatted on him like a great wrinkly frog. He didn’t look pleased. Once he’d seen Mt. Lady rise up he’d abandoned his attempt to rendezvous with Aizawa and doubled back to trace the source of Mirai’s explosions, and now it looked like he’d been too late for that, as well. Normally around this time of night he would have been peacefully snoring in front of the TV.

“First they were here and now they’re not,” he said. “I guess you’re responsible. Tell me where they went!”

He didn’t answer. His head hung to the side and his breathing was quick and shallow. Gran Torino’s interrogating glare softened; people came in all shapes and colors these days, but he had a sneaking suspicion that Yasuhiro wasn’t supposed to be this pale. He squeezed his wrist, checking his pulse. The beat was very faint.

“You stupid punk,” he said, and turned back to the shapes breaking through the debris behind him. “We lost them. Somebody get this kid to a hospital!”

“…doesn’t matter…”

He turned back to Yasuhiro. “What was that?”

“She’ll be mad. But it doesn’t matter.” His mouth twitched. “We’ve got someone so much scarier, now. And Akane’s got a taste for this. Heard it in her voice. You’d better get ready. Heroes never gave us nothing but grief. Time to return the favor.”

Before Gran Torino could retort, Yasuhiro’s eyes unfocused and rolled back. Now he was sure the kid was in trouble. His pallor was so extreme that spiderwebs of blue veins were visible in his cheekbones.

“What’s wrong with him?” That was Present Mic. He hadn’t been of much use during this op either—he’d been understandably wary of making loud noises in the presence of someone who could repurpose them as artillery.

“Blood loss, I think. And it’s bad. I have the feeling you could chop his head off and get maybe a trickle at most.” He looked up at Mic. “You’re a little skinny to carry him, son.”

“I can handle it. Wanna do something useful tonight, at least. What about Horooka?”

“Gone. I’ll keep sweeping the city. Thirteen and the other rescue heroes oughta get rescuing, though.
That was one hell of a temper tantrum she pitched at the end.”

“Yeah.” He looked back in the direction of U.A. “Hope they made it alright.”

“If they didn’t we’ll find out awful quick. I’m off. Just get this one some treatment. And make sure to radio it in.” He rose. “He made it sound like he was important to this Metalhead character. I’d like whoever’s eavesdropping on us to spread the good news.”

He bounded off without waiting for an answer. Present Mic picked up Yasuhiro – it’s true that he wasn’t the burliest hero, but the young man weighed about as much as a bundle of sticks – and put the word out on his headset. News of Yasuhiro’s capture snaked into Mainichi’s hideaway, and from the musty darkness of that apartment came a low, despairing moan.

*             *             *

Someone had gotten to Metalhead, too. Fortunately for her, it had been her own people.

She’d been stuck in Ashido’s cocoon and listening to the crash and rumble in the distance, tensing up whenever pattering footsteps got close to her location. Any attempt at wriggling loose from the goo had just made her less comfortable. The stuff trapped heat like crazy and she was sweating even in the December chill. When shadows finally fell over her, shortly after Mirai’s assault had stilled, she’d almost been ready to surrender just to break free of the stuff, but instead she’d found herself looking up at several quizzical and slightly amused faces that she at least half-recognized. Acquaintances of acquaintances who’d gotten away from one of the heroes’ counter-assaults. One of them had a Quirk that let him desiccate non-living things with a touch, and he’d reduced the goo to a substance with the approximate strength and consistency of pie crust. She’d broken loose in no time.

They’d scurried back through the mazes of Mosei and into one of the vacant lots she’d claimed. There was always a chance of heroes coming this far, but she figured they were safer here than in most other places – their pursuers were staying cautious, and there were way too many blind corners and cramped spaces on the way to this patch of scrub. She’d reclaimed her knife and her pipe. There had been no saving her cigarettes. She sat against a brick wall and scratched at her arms as the city quieted.

“Fuck me sideways, I itch,” she said.

“Then you shouldn’t fuck people sideways,” someone said. There was a general sniggering.

“Glad to see you’ve all still got a sense of humor. Except you and you.” The laughter stopped immediately as she pointed – the first lean and with a strangely triangular head, all his features pushed up front, and the second a plain-looking kid who kept producing colored sparks with restless snaps of his fingers.

“You two have the look of people with bad news to tell,” Metalhead said. “You gonna let me in on it, or do I have to make poor Mainichi drop it all at once?”

They exchanged a glance. Sparky was the first to speak.

“They got Yasuhiro,” he said. Everyone flinched as Metalhead straightened up and bent forward, like a wildcat about to pounce.

“Who got him?” she asked. “The League or the heroes?”

“The heroes. The cops.”
Then she relaxed, and they relaxed, and she clasped her hands as if in prayer. “At least that means he’s not dead. What happened? I told him to stay put after he marked off that whole street.”

“He didn’t listen,” said Triangle. “Went back to bail out Takenoko and Horooka.”

“God dammit, that’s exactly the sort of thing I was afraid of. All right, hold on. I’m making the call.”

She dialed Mainichi. He picked up with impressive speed – it barely rang for a full second.

“Akane?”

“Mainichi.”

“What happened? I thought we’d lost you.”

“I got the crap beat out of me by Eraserhead himself and then I was covered in acid snot by a bright pink girl with the world’s shittiest fashion sense,” she said pleasantly. “How’s your evening been?”

“Did you hear what happened to Yasu?”

“Yeah, I heard. Did Horooka and Takenoko make it out okay, at least?”

“Dunno yet. Haven’t gotten anything about her being captured. But Akane, we got our shit kicked in tonight. It’s hard to tell exactly but I’d guess at least a third of us got taken down, probably more. And at least some of them must’ve run into the League. Shigaraki doesn’t take prisoners.”

“I know. But they all knew what they were getting into. It’s not like I make you guys sign loyalty contracts, we all wanted the same thing tonight.”

“Did we even get it? Apparently all the League bastards were just clones, and Kyoumoto got away. Horooka’s gonna be pissed.”

“Horooka can take a flying fuck at the moon. I bet she used up all her mojo tonight anyway, so it’ll be a little while before she can even pretend to be scary at us again.” She stood up and gestured at the others. They nodded and fell in line. “We’re going to have to be very quiet for a little while. Then we can see what happens next.”

“What do you mean, what happens next? Yasu was half the reason we were able to keep ahead of the police, and that was when they weren’t taking us seriously! Now that they actually see us as a threat they’ll be on the warpath for sure.”

“That’s right. This is war, now. And we might not have won this battle, but we sure as hell didn’t lose it.” She turned back to her followers. “Any of you guys got a smoke?”

Mainichi stayed on the line in silence bewilderment as Sparky handed her a cigarette and lit it up. She dragged deep and moved on. They snaked through the bowels of Mosei.

“Word will get around,” she said. “We got into a free-for-all with the League of Villains and the Hero Society’s finest and lived to brag about it. Tally up our safehouses and keep track of the ones the cops haven’t found. I think we’re gonna make a lot of new friends in the next few days.”

* * *

Nighttime sidled away like an unwelcome guest. At U.A., a very confused Midoriya had his casts removed and was politely hustled out of the infirmary as Aizawa, Tokoyami, and Koh were brought...
in. He got a vague glimpse of a child with the build and complexion of a half-burnt stick before the door closed and Nezu reassuringly told him he could sleep in his own bed. In the surrounding city, the heroes continued their cleanup and tallied their wounded. Iida was escorted home by an ever-growing retinue of his classmates. Hawks sat disgruntled on the rooftop where he’d landed, his broken wings dangling sadly behind him. Metalhead and her crew, Horooka included, retreated into Mosei-Santo’s alleyways and let the wards swallow them all whole. And the apartment building in which Shin and Koh had taken up uneasy residence all autumn was investigated, and found to be vacant.

The trains continued to run, albeit under tighter security. The police manning their checkpoints became swamped with displaced residents seeking refuge in Tokyo. As dawn broke, a tall man with a neat goatee and a disarming smile was waved into a packed train bound for Yokohama. Had the police been less overworked, they might have questioned several details on the man’s ID, or the way he kept his left hand tucked into his overcoat pocket. But their attention was too divided.

The key to any good disappearing act was to make your audience look elsewhere.

He disembarked and walked through the brightening streets. The TV news already jabbered and squawked with tales of last night’s operation. Helicopters hadn’t operated in the area – Nezu had warned them away, anticipating they’d be blown out of the sky by Horooka – but there was still plenty of freely provided cell phone footage to go around. The random skirmishes. Mt. Lady’s appearance. The barreling truck and Tokoyami’s interception. Koh himself remained unseen; the video-takers had been attracted instead to the sound and fury happening elsewhere, and by the time his Quirk awakened no one was able to focus long enough to capture video. Just as well.

The man withdrew his hand from his coat pocket. The glove it wore hung far too loose. He stopped in front of a burnt slate of blank brick with its windows and doors all boarded up. Whistling, he took the stairs down, dislodged several loose planks, and slipped inside.

The bar had been totally gutted after All Might’s raid. They’d even pulled up the stools and ripped out the shelves. Only the counter remained, a darker shape in the dusty murk. Several candles had been set up among its surface, and in that flickering firelight was Tomura Shigaraki.

“Such a fine old establishment,” said Mr. Compress. “I regret being unable to spend more time here, before it all went to pot.”

Shigaraki said nothing. He sat on the bar, fingers laced together, that lacquered hand erasing his expression.

“We’re lucky,” Compress continued. “He was just sitting amidst the ruin of the place. Didn’t even bother to activate his Quirk. The building itself is a complete loss, of course. I dread the forthcoming invoice by Giran.”

“I’ll handle that,” Shigaraki rasped. “Show him to me.”

Compress shrugged, then fished a small blue marble out of his pocket and flicked it up. An airy pop and a burst of smoke later and Shin Yuurei was there, kneeling between them, arms limp and hands splayed at his sides. A penitent’s pose. He didn’t move or speak.

“He is alive, right?” Shigaraki asked, after an awkward moment.

“Most assuredly. I think he’s taken tonight’s events rather hard.”

“I don’t blame him. I’m a little annoyed as well.”
Shin said, “Just get it over with.”

Shigaraki tilted his head. Shin still wouldn’t look up and his voice was a broken croak, but the words had been clear enough.

“I know how this ends,” he said. “Don’t waste my time dragging it out.”

Shigaraki looked at Compress. “What the hell is he babbling about?”

“I believe he expects to be executed.” Compress leaned against the doorway, arms crossed. “Possibly after a cryptic but threatening monologue about how he failed you.”

“Hm. I guess I do give off that impression, don’t I.”

There was a rustle of cloth as he slid off the bartop. Shin saw his shadow approach, heard the slow footsteps. But the killing touch he anticipated never came. When he looked up he was face-to-face with Shigaraki – actually face-to-face, because he’d bent down and removed his hand, smiling faintly, his chapped and scarred skin plain to see. They weren’t exactly the same patterns that had been scoured into Shin’s own flesh. But the resemblance was there.

“Yes, you failed,” said Shigaraki. “So what? All that means is you have to keep trying. Again and again, until you get it right. We’ll be trying right along with you.” He stood up and put the hand back. “Compress, could you help him up? I’d do it myself, but…” He waggled his lethal fingers.

Compress took Shin’s arm with his good hand and brought him to his feet. Shin swayed slightly in place. His expression was that of someone waiting to wake up. Shigaraki took his seat on the bartop again, his posture looser, slightly bent.

“We botched a couple story events and jumped onto a different branch, but we’re not locked into Bad End just yet,” he said. “There’s still time to get back on track. Unfortunately, it’s going to require you to work harder than ever.” He pointed to Shin. “If everything had gone well last night, you and the kid would have finally gotten a break. But, so it goes.”

“I think he’s done fairly well, considering,” said Compress. “But all the isolation must be taking its toll.”

“You think so? I don’t mind it, myself.” He shrugged. “Still, Compress has a point. No reason to keep you at arm’s length anymore. I think it’s time you joined us at our headquarters. Got properly introduced to everyone. Then we can think about our next step together.” The red eyes between those clenched fingers shone. “That sound all right to you?”

No answer, for a moment. The candlelight etched cancerous patterns on Shin’s dumbfounded face.

“Yeah,” he said, and his voice broke. “That sounds fine.”
Chapter 13

Midoriya woke up to find All Might staring in his face.

He yelped and jerked upright before he remembered where he was. Back in his room again. He’d gotten used to the pale and unadorned walls of Recovery Girl’s office. After he’d been banished from there he’d tried to stay awake long enough to greet his classmates on their way back, but it appeared that he hadn’t quite lasted long enough. The first thin light of dawn was visible outside his window.

Things had gotten very hectic, before he’d been moved out. There had been a great burst of orange light outside his window, and a few minutes after that everything had turned red red red and he’d snapped out of it to find the tattered shreds of his sheets clutched in both fists. He’d been slightly frantic, trying to find a way to hide and replace them while still hobbled by his casts, when Recovery Girl had burst in with her new patients in tow. She’d summarily divested him of his casts and banished him from her office. He’d been too relieved by the feel of his own bed to stay awake long after that.

He shuffled out into the hall still in his Plus Ultra-adorned PJ’s, rubbing his eyes. The dorm was silent. Everyone else would be too worn out from their mission to rise this early – or so he thought, anyway. Turned out he was wrong.

Mineta was in the common area, sitting at one of the tables and munching cereal with his phone in his free hand. He glanced over as Midoriya walked in, and gave him a little wave with the spoon.

“Hey, you’re back,” he said matter-of-factly. “Probably not the welcome party you were expecting, huh?”

“Morning,” he said. “I got kicked out, actually. Aizawa and Tokoyami needed the room. And there was this little boy. Was that Kyoumoto?”

“Oh, you know their names? Guess someone filled you in. Yeah, Aizawa apparently fought some other villain that almost sliced him in half, so he’ll be out of commission until…what do you think, lunchtime? At the latest?”

Midoriya had to concede that this was probably true. Mineta kept talking as he went to the fridge and grabbed milk and a glass. He gave it an experimental slosh and poured.

“And Tokoyami almost got blown up or something. I hear Dark Shadow went nuts and started eating people.”

Midoriya stopped mid-pour and looked back across the room. “He did what?”

“Hey, don’t take my word for it. Just what I heard through the grapevine.” He grinned around his latest mouthful. “Heh. Grapevine. See what I did there?”

“I saw what you did there.” He replaced the milk and took the seat opposite Mineta. “I’d rather hear it from him, if you don’t mind. But everyone’s okay?”

“They’re not dead, at least.”

“How’d things go for you?”
“Ehh.” He grimaced and made a seesaw gesture. “I was actually trying to get psyched for the whole thing, but turns out me and Kaminari's patrol route was pretty much right on top of where Horooka showed up. You know, the girl who exploded us?” Midoriya gave a grim nod. “It was traumatic. Kinda took the wind out of my sails. We mostly ran and hid after that. It was nuts out there, seriously. All these randos came out of the woodwork, the League had clones everywhere…I was too keyed up to sleep. Go figure, right? They’re tired, I’m wired.”

“You been awake long?”

“Since before dawn. Figured I’d go back to bed eventually, but then Yaoyorozu popped by to get water.” He leered. “Got myself a nice eyeful and it perked me right up. Better than espresso. You ever seen her with her hair down?”

He said nothing and sipped his milk. Mineta was agreeable enough most of the time, but eventually you learned to avoid touching such comments like dog turds on the sidewalk.

“Bakugo came down, too,” he said, putting his spoon aside. “In case you’re wondering.”

“Not really,” he lied.

“Uh huh.” He sounded unconvinced. “You heard that news already?”

“His expulsion. Yeah.”

“He gave me the hairy eyeball but didn’t talk or anything. Seemed distracted. Maybe this whole thing finally knocked some sense into him. But hey! First big mission without either of you to help. I think we did pretty good, all things considered.” He raised the bowl, gulped down the remaining milk, then lowered it. “You okay?”

Midoriya blinked. “Huh?”

“I don’t give a crap about the guy, but I know you two had this whole rivalry thing going on.” He set the bowl aside. “It’s just you and me right now, so if there’s anything you want to get off your chest…”

“I don’t know. Still working it out in my head. Place is gonna be a whole lot quieter when he’s gone. But this was bound to happen. Less than a year and he flamed out already? Guy just couldn’t tuck it in.”

“No! I mean, sometimes. But I didn’t mean-”

“You don’t have to explain, I wouldn’t get it anyway.” He reclined in his seat. “But speaking personally, it was a real pain in the butt walking on eggshells whenever he was around. And yeah, okay, I was a little jealous of everyone giving him leeway all the time. Meanwhile, I can’t get away with nothin’ around here.”

“You could always try being less…” He struggled to find a polite way to say it. “Just, less. In general.”

“Nah. I persevere. ‘tis my burden.” He sniffed. “But yeah, I kind of understand what you mean about being used to him. Place is gonna be a whole lot quieter when he’s gone. But this was bound to happen. Less than a year and he flamed out already? Guy just couldn’t tuck it in.”
“I think he was just trying to be a hero,” Midoriya said quietly. “In his own way."

“That so.” Mineta stared down at his knees. “Yeah, maybe. Now that I think about it, he must’ve
gotten a good long look at you after you got squashed. Wonder if it made him crazier than usual for a
little while.”

“It’s not always easy to tell what he’s thinking. But he does try to do the right thing.”

“He did sorta-kinda attempt to murder you once. That I know of.”

“Yeah. Finding out I had a Quirk really messed with his head. But he learned from it. I guess I just
have to hope he’ll learn from this, too.”

“Cheers to that.” He tapped the edge of the bowl with his spoon. Outside, the sun had breached the
horizon. “Can’t believe we’ve still got classes after all this. You and Bakugo are gonna be the only
ones who aren’t dead on their feet.”

“That reminds me. Have you seen All Might around, lately?”

“He went to grab Uraraka for something right before that big assembly. He looked real shook up. I
doubt he took that Jon-X thing better than anyone else.” Mineta shrugged. “That’s all.”

“Okay. Thanks.” He rose. “Just…I don’t think he visited me, at all. After I got hurt.”

“I wouldn’t take it personally. Everyone knows you’re still his golden boy.”

Midoriya smiled. “I, uh, wouldn’t put it that way.”

“Look at that, he’s bashful,” Mineta said flatly. “Get outta here already. Wish I could make the ladies
blush like that…”

He poured out the rest of the milk and went back upstairs. He paused by his door, then carefully
climbed the extra two flights and stopped by Bakugo’s door. Not a sound to be heard. The floors
were too heavily carpeted to creak but he had the impression someone was listening hard. He stayed
there a while and then retreated. He was leaving something unsaid, he knew. But he couldn’t figure
out what was left to say.

* * *

Aizawa was ambulatory again before the first bell.

U.A. had other medical facilities on campus beyond Recovery Girl’s modest office, but she’d wanted
to keep Aizawa, Tokoyami and Koh as close as possible despite not having enough beds. Koh, who
was still deep asleep with trauma that was mostly psychological, was given a makeshift bed in the far
corner of the room. Tokoyami’s arm was re-set and his bones were mended with Recovery Girl’s
Quirk. Aizawa received his transfusion and had his cut stitched up and bandaged (and just like
everyone thought, it was much deeper than he’d let on – Metalhead had come within a hair of serious
organ damage). The other injured students, Iida among them, were transported to proper hospitals,
and Recovery Girl spent a sleepless night shuttling herself across the city and tending to the ones
who needed it. Secretly she wished that One for All wasn’t the only Quirk that could be inherited; far
too much depended on her, these days.

The early light roused Tokoyami. The muttered arguments woke him up the rest of the way. He
groaned and stirred, then opened his eye a crack to see Aizawa tucking Koh into his own bed, with
Recovery Girl cursing his stupidity every step of the way.
“…going to die one day and so help me, if I’m alive to see it then I’ll put your remains on display as a warning to future idiots. What kind of example do you think you’re setting for the children, running yourself ragged like this?”

“Seems like it’s too late for that. They’re already eager to throw themselves into danger, consequences be damned.” He turned to Tokoyami. “Speaking of which.”

Tokoyami stiffened. “Good morning, sir.”

“We still have a bit of time before homeroom.” He stalked toward the door. “If you feel like getting up, I’ll be in my office. You can make your report of last night’s events to me personally.”

Recovery Girl watched him go. Her face when she looked at Tokoyami was despairing. “You’re leaving now, aren’t you.”

“I’m feeling much better.”

“Your arm doesn’t agree. It’ll need to remain in a sling for the next couple of days, at least. And visit me again later today. I’ll keep healing you until you’re well.”

“Thank you.”

“If you really wanted to show gratitude you’d stay in bed.”

“No. I have to give my report.” He sat up and swung his legs off the mattress. “And I shouldn’t be here when Koh wakes up.”

She looked puzzled but didn’t pry any further. One sling and change of clothes later and he was sitting before Aizawa. The other desks in the teachers’ office were vacant – they were either still on cleanup duty in Musutafu or preparing for classes. Aizawa spent far longer than necessary organizing his own desk before turning his chair to Tokoyami.

“Very well,” he said. “Report.”

He gave the bullet points – his initial patrol with Iida, his recommendation they split up (at this Aizawa’s eyes narrowed dangerously and stayed that way), his initial encounter with Shin, what he’d overheard when he’d regained consciousness (it had been about halfway through Shin’s rant to Koh, notably when he’d stressed that everything he’d done was for the boy’s sake). The further beating, with the details of Shin’s rant carefully omitted. The escape. Shigaraki and Hawks and his trek across the city. Then the semi-truck and Dark Shadow’s final burst of wrath. When his words dried up, Aizawa checked the clock, went to his computer, silently composed and sent a brief email, then turned back to Tokoyami. When he spoke, every word was like a coffin lid slamming shut.

“I told you not to abandon your partner,” he said. “I gave clear, explicit, and unambiguous orders. I said it was for your own safety. Do you recall this?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And then you disobeyed.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Would you agree that this placed you in harm’s way? That yours and Iida’s injuries, which could have very easily been fatal, were directly because you chose not to listen to your orders?”
“Yes, sir.”

“Then I hope you understand my curiosity. Please explain why you chose to act so recklessly.”

“I have no excuse.”

Aizawa blinked. Tokoyami’s beak was angled down; his good hand was clenched against his knee.

“You have no excuse. Nothing at all.”

“No, sir. There was no justification for my behavior. And I will accept any consequences for my decision.”

Aizawa pinched his nose and reflected on how badly Midoriya and Bakugo had broken him. Over the last six months he’d been forced to swallow one rationale after another for his students taking on risks. Now he’d finally gotten a straightforward apology and he didn’t know how to handle it.

“I think,” he said, voice strained, “that given your history of good conduct, we can overlook it this one time.” Tokoyami looked up, his beak slightly agape. “And your information regarding Yuurei and Kyoumoto will be useful. For all of Iida’s good qualities, he’s sometimes too assured of his own righteousness. That attitude may have backfired badly, had he encountered Yuurei alongside you. You showed good judgement there, at least.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“After classes today I want you to rest. Is that clear?” Tokoyami nodded. “As for Kyoumoto, Principal Nezu is already developing a response for whenever he wakes up. But it might be a good idea for you to give him a wide berth, for a little while.”

“I understand,” he said quietly. “My behavior outside of U.A. was…unsightly.”

“That ‘unsightly’ behavior probably saved all of our lives, so don’t waste energy feeling guilty over it.” He sighed. “The boy never should have seen it in the first place. Midnight wanted to sedate him back in Kashiki but I thought it would leave him too vulnerable. So it looks like neither of us made flawless decisions yesterday.”

Shock didn’t come easily to Tokoyami’s expression, but it was there now. Aizawa was actually trying to be conciliatory.

“Children his age tend to be resilient to psychological trauma, but I suspect his endurance has been sorely tested over the last few months. In any case, we can hope that it was over with quickly enough for him to believe it was partly a bad dream. A week or two of keeping your distance should be enough time for him to get over it.”

“Yes, sir.”

“One last thing,” Aizawa said. “You seemed very certain that you had to convince Kyoumoto to place his trust in you and your fellow heroes. Almost as if you believed society had wronged him in some way. Why would you think that, exactly?”

“I don’t know, sir.” That bloodshot stare ripped through him, rummaging around for secrets. “It was just a hunch.”

“Hmm.” A few excruciating seconds passed, and then he relaxed. “Fine. You’re dismissed. I’ll see you in homeroom.”
“Yes, sir.” He stood and turned to leave.

“Tokoyami.”

He looked back. Aizawa didn’t bother to meet his eye; he was back on his computer, typing away. His voice was casual.

“When you want to tell me the whole story,” he said, “I’ll be here.”

He retreated.

Tokoyami didn’t go to the dorms right away. There was a persistent itch in the back of his mind that needed taking care of. He strode down U.A.’s corridors, his pace measured and unhurried. Eventually he came to a door marked “UTILITIES” and his shadow bent and swung in its direction, passing underneath. There was a click as the lock popped open. He stepped inside and shut the door and stood in this cramped space smelling of dust and solvent.

He’d only had to do this once before, after the sports festival. He’d taken his loss to Bakugo in stride and kept his cool during the awards ceremony, but after All Might had hugged him and congratulated him in front of that vast and cheering crowd, he’d felt the need to go somewhere quiet and be alone with his feelings for a little while. Those feelings were now taking shape in front of him, the eyes downturned crescents, gripping one arm as if feeling Tokoyami’s broken bone in sympathy.

“I’m sorry,” said Dark Shadow.

“You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I lost control. Worse than ever. Fumi, what did I turn into? I couldn’t even recognize myself.” It clutched its head. “Is it on the news? It must be on the news. Everyone’s going to be scared of us all over again.”

“We were desperate. That and the influence of Kyoumoto’s Quirk must have pushed you over the brink. But you heard what Mr. Aizawa said. They wouldn’t have gotten away if it weren’t for us.”

“It’s hard to remember. But I saw Koh’s face. I was a monster.” It whimpered, crumpling on itself. “We were doing so good, but then there was that thing with Shouji, and I gave you trouble all night long, a-and now I’m scared with Koh around your friends won’t be safe if I lose c-c-control all over aga-”

Tokoyami stepped forward and held Dark Shadow as best as he was able. Like gathering up a handful of stormcloud. When he spoke again his voice was low and trembling.

“I’m the one who’s sorry,” he said. “You only feel this way because I’m pushing it all onto you. It isn’t fair. We should be sharing the guilt.” He clutched Dark Shadow tighter. “We performed the duty required of us. Maybe Koh has a new bogeyman for a little while. It could have been much worse. If that signal hurts you again, we’ll endure. The same way he’s enduring now.”

Dark Shadow sniffled into his shoulder. Then it said, “We should really see a therapist someday. Just to watch them try and figure us out.”

Tokoyami chuckled. “It would be an entertaining diversion.”

“I already feel a little weird. Like there’s bugs crawling all over me. But I can handle it for now.”
“I know you can. Let’s be off. I need to puzzle out how to take a shower with this cast on.” He released Dark Shadow. “Maybe I should ask Midoriya first.”

“Yeah, he could probably do that in his sleep by now.”

“Hopefully no one will say anything too uncouth about last night.”

The closet door opened and Tokoyami emerged into the hall lights alone. His face, as usual, betrayed nothing. He wiped his eyes, wiped the lingering dampness on his blazer, and made his way to class.

* * *

Spirits were raised a little once Class 1-A finally got together for homeroom. Iida’s absence was felt and everyone’s exhaustion was clear, but no one had died and they’d accomplished their mission. Ashido was on cloud nine after her own adventures. Midoriya was buried in welcome-backs; even Todoroki cracked a smile at the sight of him. Tokoyami walked in, exchanged a curt nod with Shouji, and took his seat. It was about half a second before someone called his name.

“Tokoyami, man!” Sero beamed. “Already up and at ‘em, huh?”

“I heard you and Iida bailed out Koh,” said Ojirō.

“Yeah, me too,” said Midoriya. “And that…other things happened…”

“Dark Shadow ate people,” Mineta said, eyes on his phone. Tokoyami looked uncomfortably at his desk.

“What? No!” Ashido fumed. “It’s already all over the news. Dark Shadow saved Mr. Aizawa right at the last minute. Classic heroic rescue. Sure, it was a little PG-13, but…”

“It was awesome,” Tsuyu said plainly.

Tokoyami looked up again. “Er. Thank you?”

“Yeah, man, that was like a super mode or something.” Satou leaned in. “You got a name for it yet?”

“I’ll. Have to think about it?” He could feel Dark Shadow’s bewilderment clanging in his head. Jirou scuttled over to Mineta’s seat and whispered something in his ear. Judging by the way he blanched, Tokoyami guessed it was a polite reminder not to spread baseless rumors.

The door slid open. Aizawa shambled in.

“Settle down and look forward,” he said. “Your teachers are all present, with the exception of All Might. Classes will continue on schedule.”

Midoriya raised his hand. “Mr. Aizawa, where is-”

“Private business. He signed out and is expected to return by the end of the day.” He picked up his chalk and turned to the board. “We’ll spend the rest of the week prepping you for your finals.”

“Mr. Aizawa?” That was Uraraka. “Bakugo isn’t here yet.”

“Classes are no longer compulsory for him in light of his forthcoming expulsion. If he wants to sequester himself in his room, that’s not my concern.” The chalk began to scratch. “Get your notes together. All of this material will be on your exams.”
The students marshaled what remaining energy they could and took in Aizawa’s lecture as best as they were able. Kirishima's note-taking was irregular and distracted. Midoriya kept side-eyeing Bakugo’s empty seat. Todoroki’s phone buzzed in his pocket; he glanced quizzically down at it and chose to disregard it until the end of the period. The school stirred sluggishly back to life as the day wore on. Five minutes before the end of the period, Aizawa set his chalk down.

“Now then,” he said, turning to the class. “Regarding the events of last night.”

Several of them stiffened. A different kind of lecture was probably forthcoming.

“Your mission turned out to be more dangerous and far larger in scope than originally anticipated,” he said. “That’s typical for professional hero work. I would tell you to get used to it, but if I have my way then you won’t be sent out on operations that vast anytime soon.” He yawned. “Nevertheless. While some of you may feel that you contributed more or less to our objective than others, remember that it was a collaborative effort. In that scenario, it’s victory enough just to survive, to be there for your fellow heroes. With that in mind, I would like to congratulate all of you on a job well done.” He shuffled toward the exit. “Class dismissed.”

The door shut. Class 1-A was a sea of dumbfounded faces. The bell rang like a punchline.

As the class exploded into excited gossip around him, Todoroki took out his phone and checked recent texts. What little good cheer that was visible on his expression evaporated immediately when he saw the number.

Call me. It was Endeavor.

“-you especially, right? Todoroki?”

“Hm? What?” He looked over to Yaoyorozu. “Did you say something?”

“I said that Mr. Aizawa probably referred to you especially when he said some of us contributed more than others. You were the most visible of everyone, after all.” She didn’t look too put-out about it. “I probably could have created a signal flare or something similar, but I think offering my support to Jirou and the others was the right move. It would appear trusting our own judgement paid off.” Concern clouded her features. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. Just have to make a quick call. Everyone should go on to next period without me.” He panned the class; people were already trickling out, though Kaminari looked to be taking his time. “I won’t be long.”

“If you say so,” she said hesitantly. “Don’t be late.”

“I won’t.”

He waited until they were out of earshot and dialed, hunched low over his desk. For a moment he hoped it would go to voicemail, but no such luck.

“Shouto.”

“Father. What is this about?”

“I’ve been watching the news.” His voice was gruff. “Seems you put on quite a spectacle.”

“I did what was necessary. Where were you?”
“I was needed for rescue operations during the Hōsu fire. Heat doesn’t concern me much.” Todoroki conceded the point. “It would appear my presence wouldn’t have been required anyway. You had things well in hand.”

“I’m not interested in your evaluation of my performance. The mission was completed. Everyone contributed. That’s what matters.”

“Is that what you think.” A pause. “I also heard about Katsuki Bakugo.”

“What of it?”

“By all accounts, he’d been one of the rising stars of that school alongside you and Izuku Midoriya. His absence will be felt. Consequently, you should expect closer scrutiny. I suggest that you weigh your actions appropriately going forward.”

“I don’t share your obsession with rising to the top of some idiotic hierarchy,” he said. His free hand was gripping the edge of his desk very tightly. “We’ve both seen where it leads.”

“It’s more than just being number one. It’s about providing an example to all those around you.” Endeavor wasn’t rising to the bait. “Hate me if you like, Shouto. But in these uncertain times, we must both consider the sort of hero we choose to be.”

“Is that all?”

“There is one other thing.” An uncomfortable pause. “You did a good job last night. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

He hung up and shoved the phone in his pocket. His breath came out in a thin white jet.

When his father had officially claimed the number one position, with his bold announcement to the world at large, Todoroki hadn’t been sure what to expect next – fury, bravado, despair. But it had been none of the above. In the time since then Endeavor had been unusually subdued. On patrol he was the same permanently scowling slab of barely-contained aggression as always, but in private he’d become quieter, almost reclusive, as if haunted by the shade of some disaster barely avoided. Natsuo had stopped by in October and shared a brief and horribly tense conversation with the man (there’d actually been frost forming on the walls by the time he’d left), but that had been all. Todoroki wanted to call it an improvement on before, but he felt strangely rudderless now. Endeavor no longer had enough presence to even hate properly.

If he lingered here much longer he’d have to deal with some confused students from other classes showing up. He got up, left the room, turned down the hall, and almost walked face-first into Kaminari.

“Whoa! Crap, okay, no worries, no harm done.” He stumbled back and tried to grin. “Didn’t mean to ninja into you like that.”

“Kaminari. Why are you still here?”

“Waiting for you. When you checked your phone you looked like Christmas had been canceled. I mean, I know you said the holidays aren’t really a big deal for you anyway, but you know what I mean.” He settled down. “Are you all right and everything?”

“Why do you care?” he said, more sharply than he’d intended.

“I’m just trying to do my part to hold everything together here. Our luck’s been crap lately, you
know? That Jon-X thing and everything that went down before it. Now we finally got a break with finishing things up nice and clean last night and it’s like the scales are all out of wack. I’m waiting for a piano to fall on somebody’s head or something. I’m rambling.”

“Yes.”

He cleared his throat. “I’m just kinda worried about everyone in general right now and it’s making me nosy. That’s all.”

“I see.” There wasn’t a hint of guile in Kaminari’s expression; Todoroki somewhat doubted that Kaminari even knew the meaning of the word. “I’m fine. It was just my father checking in.”

“Oh. That explains it.”

“Yes. But I’m fine.”

“Cool! Cool, that’s cool. You, uh, wanna walk to next period together?”

“Okay.”

Kaminari kept chatting as they went down the halls. He seemed over-tired; there were deep purple bags under his eyes and one of them kept twitching intermittently. Todoroki pointed this out as delicately as he could.

“Yeah, I’ve been better. Like you know how Aizawa just dropped that whole pep talk on us? Kinda feel like it was for guys like me and Mineta. We didn’t do jack during that whole operation.”

“You didn’t encounter any of those other villains?”

“Oh, we did! We did. Did we ever.” He let out a shrill little giggle. “That freakin’ Horooka chick. We saw her step out into the road. Like, within spitting distance. If she’d seen us then I’m pretty sure I’d be haunting this place right now.”

“Oh.” He didn’t have much experience with commiseration, but he felt that some was warranted here. “That must have been stressful.”

“She was with this huge skinny guy and I’m almost positive he saw us but he didn’t give us away. I was real grateful Mineta’s so damn tiny. Had to carry him for like four blocks. His knees went out. I don’t even blame him, that girl can apparently pop you like a balloon soon as she looks at you. Can’t believe Uraraka got the better of her twice. Ever since she fought Bakugo at the sports festival she’s gotten way too gung-ho about wrecking people. You hear she’s basically using Ojiro as her personal training dummy?” He shrugged. “Meanwhile I can’t go that hard on anyone without giggling and drooling on myself after. It sucks.”

“We all have our limitations,” said Todoroki.

“Pfft, says you. Not to kiss your ass or anything, but you’re a one-man wrecking crew.”

“I know,” he said simply. “But I have weaknesses, too.” He paused. “I don’t think I want to be the kind of hero who does everything alone. It sets the wrong expectation for people.”

Kaminari blinked, then grinned. “Well, hey. If you ever need something electrocuted, just give me a shout.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”
And they could have ended things on a positive note, if it hadn’t been for the voice:

“Well, well, well.”

The voice was behind them. It was loud. It carried the supremely self-confident tone of someone who believed they could unironically say “well, well, well” without sounding like a complete tool. For a moment Kaminari and Todoroki had the exact same pained expression.

“God, not today,” Kaminari groaned. “Let’s just keep walking and maybe he’ll- oh, okay, you’re turning around. That’s cool. That’s an option.”

Neito Monoma was down the hall, smirking so hard he looked to be in danger of pulling a muscle. Off to the side were Tsuburaba and Honenuki. Monoma must have thought they were acting as some kind of posse, but Honenuki had one hand clapped over his face and Tsuburaba kept silently mouthing apologies at the two of them. Some of the other straggling students had paused on their way to class. Everyone appreciated a good show.

“It appears the great Class 1-A grows sparser by the day,” Monoma said. “Haven’t seen that hyperactive class president of yours around lately.”

“He got hurt,” Todoroki said.

“Did he? Tsk, tsk. What kind of example does that set for the rest of you?”

“Dude, could you please lay off?” Kaminari said. “It’s been a shitty week for all of us. Do you just wait for Kendo to go to the bathroom or something before doing this?” Honenuki nodded, hand still over his face.

“First Midoriya, then Bakugo, then Iida,” Monoma said, spreading his arms wide. “One by one the star students of 1-A come falling down. It’s enough to make you think they were unfit for heroics in the first place! Must be a trial suffering their presence, eh, Todoroki?”

Kaminari looked around. “Is someone, uh, playing with the thermostat around here?”

“We knew the risks,” Todoroki said. “Your class was stationed at Kashiki, correct? Away from most of the fighting.”

“Yup,” Tsuburaba said, and Monoma elbowed him sharply.

“I suppose our teachers didn’t consider the situation dire enough to request our services as well,” he retorted. “It must have been a rather minor operation, all things considered. Otherwise I’m sure we would have seen your illustrious father out there.”

Todoroki’s eyes narrowed and Tsuburaba looked ready to tackle Monoma to the ground; even some of the onlooking students’ expressions grew concerned. Few people knew the full details of Todoroki’s family, but at this point most everyone knew it wasn’t a subject to bring up lightly. Kaminari had started to sweat and shiver at the same time.

“Hey, Bakugo!” someone behind Monoma said cheerily. “Glad to see you around. Did you get a haircut?”

Monoma scoffed and turned. “Are you blind? Do I look like-”

“Go to your room.”
They saw Monoma go limp. A second later he shuffled away, his expression vacant. Hitoshi Shinsou watched on impassively, then turned to Tsuburaba and Honenuki.

“Sorry,” he said.

“No, it’s cool,” Tsuburaba said. “Better than what Kendo would have done. She’s put his crap on a zero-tolerance policy ever since that department store bombing. She held a seminar about it and everything.”

“He tried to start something the day after and Tetsutetsu nearly put him through a wall,” Honenuki added. “Just one thing – is he going to his dorm room, or his bedroom at home?”

A pause.

“Ah,” said Shinsou, pensively. “Hmm.”


They ran off. Shinsou watched them go, then walked up to Todoroki and Kaminari. The other students dispersed as well, whispering to each other; the rumor mill had already started to grind.

“That wasn’t necessary,” said Todoroki, as the temperature regulated.

“I know. I’ll probably catch hell for it. But it was satisfying.” He looked askance at them. “They really put you all through the wringer, didn’t they.”

“Nothing we couldn’t handle!” said Kaminari. “Come to think of it, man, you probably would’ve been great out there before everything started popping off. It was basically a hostage situation.”

“The notion had occurred to me.”

“There’ll be a vacancy once Bakugo leaves,” said Todoroki. “Will you apply?”

“I might. Still thinking it over.”

“You didn’t seem to need convincing during the sports festival.”

“I know. But nobody wants to achieve their dream on a technicality.” He looked directly at Todoroki. “Don’t you agree?”

After a moment, Todoroki nodded. Kaminari looked confused; a whole conversation appeared to have just passed unsaid between the two of them.

“Anyway, I’m not the only one who wants to support you guys,” said Shinsou. “You have more sympathizers than you think.”

“Seriously?” said Kaminari. “Because it feels like we’re getting the stinkeye everywhere we go.”

“Not from what I’ve heard. General and Support have been on the warpath since Jon-X. Even Business is trying to figure out what they can do to help. This is our school, too. Someone who targets one of us targets all of us. That idiot probably thinks so, as well, though I bet his brain’s too broken to let him admit it.” He looked back in the direction Monoma had walked. “I should probably help those two out. Make sure he doesn’t walk into traffic or something.”

“You’ll miss the bell,” said Todoroki.
“I’ll live.” He set off. “Anyway, that’s my piece. Take care of yourselves.”

After he turned the corner, Kaminari said, “Do you buy that? About people rooting us on? Really not the impression I was getting.”

“Maybe they were just too intimidated to say it outright,” said Todoroki.

“Hey, I’m super approachable!”

“I know. It’s one of your better qualities.”

Kaminari looked gobstruck at the sudden compliment, but before he could recover, the sound of the next bell pierced the air.

“And we’re late,” he sighed. “Race you there?”

Todoroki mulled it over. “Fine. Don’t break your neck.”

Kaminari lost handily. Some things never changed.

* * *

Last night’s victory was felt most strongly during lunch period; people were laughing more and louder than they’d done in weeks. Some of that awful tension had finally been alleviated. Koh was safe (if still unconscious), the League had been driven off, and while Shin and Mirai were still at large the latter had also been forced to run and her rampage had ultimately caused few casualties. For a little while the students were able to feel like students again, and not pariah dogs.

Kirishima didn’t share their cheer. He wandered the tables with his laden tray, frowning. Bakugo was still nowhere to be found. He was trying not to take it personally – there was still plenty of pent-up resentment against the guy from the whole student body, and now that his expulsion was inevitable people weren’t bothering to gossip quietly anymore – but the last time they’d actually spoken had been the night Bakugo had decided to strike out on his own. It hadn’t been a good ending. Kirishima still wasn’t entirely sure how he’d be able to make things right again, but rolling the dice felt like a better idea than letting that night be the end of things between them.

Uraraka and Tsuyu waved him over but he half-smiled and shook his head and kept walking.

Tetsutetsu was also a no-show, which was a shame; he was usually understanding over things like this. Then he saw Amajiki. He was sitting alone in a far corner of the cafeteria. That much was common enough. What worried Kirishima was Hadou’s conspicuous absence from the seat beside him. What worried him more was the fact that Amajiki appeared to be listlessly picking at a bowl of plain noodles in broth. The guy lived and died by his diet. Alarm bells started to ring in Kirishima’s head.

He sidled up to Amajiki. “Hey, man. Mind if I sit here?”

Amajiki looked up and Kirishima’s heart sank further. The guy wasn’t a social dynamo at the best of times but he looked as though he hadn’t gotten a wink of sleep all night.

“Sure,” he said, and that was that. He went back to staring into his bowl like someone at the edge of a ruined balcony.

Kirishima set down his tray and sat across from him. The aura of noise from neighboring students enveloped them as he tried to think of a diplomatic way to broach the subject. Then he decided diplomacy wasn’t really his style and charged right through.
“Where’s Hadou?” he asked.

Amajiki’s chopsticks shook between his fingers. “She’s not here.”

Alarm bells ringing very loudly now.

“Shit, man, I’m sorry. I hadn’t even heard-”

“Not spreading it around too much. We’re Class 3-A. It’s embarrassing.” His voice was dragging and dead.

“What happened? The League?”

“No. We weren’t that unlucky.” His eyes flicked up to Kirishima and down again. “She was doing good for a while. We were cleaning up some of those low-level guys, and she decided to float up a little bit. To get our bearings, you know? I guess she went too high.”

“Oh no. Oh, shit. Horooka again?”

“Kind of funny, isn’t it? There must have been dozens of those punks running around but the only ones who did any real damage were their boss and Horooka. That girl had the entire ward’s airspace locked down. Even Hawks got taken out by her. But Nejire can’t take a hit all that well.” The chopsticks scraped across the bowl. “She’s going to be fine, they said. But she’s not awake yet.”

His food was getting cold but he didn’t much care. “At least that’s some good news. She got me and it hurt like hell even though I’d hardened up.”

“Sounds like you handled yourself well.”

“Nah, it was all Uraraka. I bet that you kept your cool, though.”

“Sort of. I guess. But…after what happened to Mirio…”

He’d messed up. Amajiki’s breathing had started to hitch. “Hey, I didn’t mean-”

“No, I get it. I almost took it too well. I wasn’t even surprised. She was just floating there, and there was this loud crack sound – you ever heard a tree give way in an ice storm? – and she just…laid flat. Her hair spilling all around her head. And my first thought was, ‘Well, that’s it. I guess I’m alone now.’” He took another shuddering breath and steadied his throat. “At least I didn’t puke. That really messes with my Quirk.”

“If there’s anything you need…”

“No, it’s fine. You’re my underclassman anyway, it’d be crappy of me to lean on you like that. It’s just been a really bad year.”

“Tell me about it.”

“I heard what happened to you. Shigaraki and Horooka back to back. I’d never tell by looking at you, though. It’s kind of incredible.”

Kirishima laughed a little. “I guess you get used to it.”

“You shouldn’t, though. Otherwise you’ll get taken by surprise.” He paused, then pushed his bowl aside. “Haven’t seen the shouty one around. I heard what happened to him, too.”
“Yeah. Pretty sure everyone has, by now.”

“Are you still friends?”

The question was blunt enough to send him rocking back on his seat. “What? Yeah! Sure we are.”

“You don’t sound sure.” Amajiki’s side-eyed stare had turned intense. “Are you sure?”

After a moment, he quietly said, “It’s been weird lately.”

“You should make sure,” Amajiki said. “It’s not really my business, I know. But things keep getting more and more dangerous out there. The next time you go out, you shouldn’t have any regrets.” He stood up, taking his bowl with him. “Anyway, thanks for talking to me. It helped.”

“Yeah. No problem.”

Amajiki stalked off and left Kirishima alone. He sat at the abandoned table, watching the animated faces around him. The clouds had cleared and the cafeteria was flooded with daylight; long shadows cross-hatched the floor around him. After a while he bent over his tray. The food had gone stone cold and he was no longer hungry, but he forced himself to eat anyway.

*             *             *

Classes concluded. The bells fell silent. The sunlight began to rust.

Koh Kyoumoto had stirred several times in the last hour or so. His eyes opened but they were sightless and dim and closed again soon after. Struggling out of sleep was like fighting through quicksand; his dreams were formless and menacing things that grabbed at him and wouldn’t let go. But eventually he did wake up, and found himself in an unfamiliar bed with clean and mismatched sheets, wearing pajamas that looked too new to be his.

He was still too groggy to panic at the unfamiliar scenery. But when he turned his head, the smiling rodentine thing standing across the room did give him pause.

Recovery Girl had alerted Nezu as soon as Koh had showed signs of regaining consciousness, and four of the faculty had assembled here – Recovery Girl, the principal, Midnight and Aizawa. They all smiled, except for Aizawa, for whom it had been decided that smiling would probably not achieve the desired effect. Nezu raised his paw and waved at the boy.

“Good afternoon!” he said. “I know what you’re thinking: am I dreaming? Is this thing wearing a costume? Is it a mouse, a cat, or maybe some kind of badger? The answer is: none of the above! You’re at U.A. High School, and I am its principal, Nezu.” He bowed. “And it’s very nice to finally meet you, young man.”

“Hi,” Koh said faintly.


“Like I said,” Aizawa grunted. “Nothing a pro can’t handle.”

Koh hesitantly touched his face, near the eye. “Does that mean I got medicine? I can see.”

“Yes. We’ll be able to take care of you here.”

“You tell us if you ever need anything,” said Midnight. “Okay, Koh?”
A long pause. Then Koh asked, “What about Shin?”

The teachers glanced warily at each other. Fortunately, Nezu picked up the slack.

“Mr. Yuurei has disappeared,” he said. “We assume he got away. But that also means that he’s probably safe and well.”

“But you have to catch him,” Koh said. “Don’t you.”

“Yes. I’m afraid we do.”

“Because we’re bad guys.”

“Honey, no,” Midnight said, and started to move to his bedside. But Aizawa put up an arm and stopped her short.

“It’s true that Shin Yuurei had committed several serious crimes that he must answer for,” he said. “But it also looks like he took good care of you. We’re willing to take that into account. And you, Koh, are not a villain. Have I lied to you at all since we met?” Koh shook his head. “Then do you believe me now?” Eventually, Koh nodded. “Good. Because it’s the truth.”

Recovery Girl took his hand and helped him out of bed. He stood in his bare feet, the harsh angles of his bones poking through his pajamas. He looked lost. But the fact that Nezu was beside him and somehow shorter than he was did seem to amuse him a little.

“We have a room all made up for you,” he said. “You can decorate it however you like, of course. But first, I’d like to introduce you to someone. During your time on U.A., until we can fix your Quirk, you’ll have a chaperone to help you around the school grounds. He’ll help you with anything you need.” Nezu faced the door. “You can come in, now!”

A hulking shadow blocked the doorway. It had to duck its head to get inside. Nezu and Recovery Girl backed away. Koh backed up until he bumped into his bed.

Hound Dog stepped in, his leonine thatch of hair bloody in the fading daylight, his muzzle clamped tight over his head. Koh’s milky complexion went even paler at the sight of him. But Hound Dog’s approach was cautious, almost timid; he got down on one knee in front of the boy and held out his hand. Koh could have comfortably sat inside his palm. He looked from the hand to that slit-eyed face, his terror draining away.

“It’s okay,” said Hound Dog. “You can relax, now.”

Koh’s shivering subsided but he didn’t step forward. He didn’t seem to understand.

Hound Dog said, “It was hard, wasn’t it?”

Silence. Then Koh’s lip started to tremble. The rest of his face followed. It collapsed like calving ice. He stared at his feet, hair in his eyes, his tiny hands balled into fists. His breath turned to hiccupping. When he started to cry, in great gasping sobs that wrenched at his whole body, Hound Dog gently gathered him up in his massive arms and held him to his chest. Koh clutched at the fur criss-crossing his costume and continued crying, the sound like a distant birdcall.

Hound Dog looked over his shoulder at the assembled faculty. “Could you leave us alone?”

They complied. Nezu led them to a disused classroom nearby and they scattered themselves around the empty tables, Aizawa at the podium like he was about to lecture. Midnight’s eyes were red.
Recovery Girl leaned hard on her cane.

“That went about as well as I could have hoped,” said Nezu.

“I can understand the practical reasons for choosing Inui,” said Aizawa. “His senses might be sharp enough to deter even Yuurei. But Koh was definitely rattled, at first.”

“He does look rather intimidating. But he actually volunteered for this. He’s our guidance counselor for a reason, after all. You’d be hard-pressed to find anyone here who cares more deeply for the children. No offense meant.”

“None taken. I’ve been neglecting Eri as it is. Still, his temperament…he wears that muzzle for a reason.”

“I consider that a point in his favor,” Nezu replied. “No one is more aware of Hound Dog’s temper than the man himself. It’s why he takes steps to mitigate it. I’d rather Koh be protected by someone familiar with anger, rather than someone for whom it might come as a surprise.” He touched his injured lip, where Koh’s Quirk had compelled him to chomp right through the skin. “When the boy momentarily escaped your sight last evening, I noticed Hound Dog was among the least affected by his Quirk.”

“It makes some amount of sense,” said Recovery Girl. “In that split-second even Midoriya had ripped his bedsheets clean in half. But Hound Dog barely budged.”

“Principal, what happens next?” said Midnight. “Our supplies of that Quirk suppressant won’t last the month.”

“I’m well aware. Power Loader is diverting Support’s full resources to finalizing the serum. In the meantime, I’ve given Koh a room on the third floor of the campus’ north wing. All entrances, including his bedroom door, are equipped with keycard locks. We’ve also installed pressure sensors in the room itself that we’ll activate at night. They’re calibrated to Koh’s own weight. If anyone else tries to go in there, we’ll know.”

“Not very thorough, considering Yuurei’s infiltration skills,” said Aizawa.

“Trying to over-prepare against Yuurei is useless. For all we know, he could be right in this very room, listening to every word.” The others glanced around uneasily. “There are only two measures I believe will be effective against him. One is simple physical barriers. The second is Koh himself.”

“How so?” asked Midnight. Nezu turned to her, paws folded behind his back.

“Tokoyami’s intelligence on Koh’s relationship with Yuurei was most enlightening,” he said. “The young man’s other moral failings aside, I believe that his feelings for Koh are genuine. I further believe that, so long as Koh is happy here, Yuurei will leave him be. The League of Villains has no other leverage on him and he knows it. He could slip out of Japan tonight and none would be the wiser. The only thing tying him to their cause is a dedication to Koh’s well-being. So it’s important that we don’t make him feel like a prisoner here. Minimal security measures and emphasis on psychological care are our best resources.”

“At the very least, he’s been trying to keep the boy away from physical harm,” said Recovery Girl. “I didn’t see any signs of abuse aside from those ghastly needle marks on his arms. He’s malnourished, but that’s all.”

“I’ll assemble the rest of the faculty later to outline our new security policies,” said Nezu. “But in short – take care of Koh, retain the student body’s quarantine, and do not allow word of this to get
“Keeping Nakayama at bay, I assume,” Midnight said.

“He messaged me before dawn today, asking about the escapees’ status. His intentions are fairly clear.”

“He’s a cornered dog with broken fangs,” Aizawa said. “Fairly low-priority on our current list of threats. But I agree. He can’t be allowed to know we’re sheltering any of them here. The sooner we nullify Koh’s Quirk, the sooner we get the Ministry of Individuality off our backs and can go on the offensive.”

“I want to see him hang,” said Midnight. “The utter nerve of that man…”

“I already instructed the students to keep details of this operation private in our previous assembly, so we’ll just have to keep an eye on their media presence and hope they follow suit,” said Nezu. “But I trust them. They understand the gravity of this situation.”

“I hope you’re right,” said Recovery Girl. “For all our sakes.”

“We’ll commence as soon as All Might returns,” said Nezu. “I believe he’s the only teacher unaccounted for.”

Recovery Girl’s expression darkened. “Still? Where on earth is that man? Midoriya’s been up and about all day and he still hasn’t gotten in touch!”

“He actually just messaged me before we went into Koh’s room. He’s on his way back now.” Nezu shrugged. “As for where he’s been…well, he is entitled to his secrets. And I wouldn’t think of revealing them. I am nothing if not a trustworthy whatever-I-am.”

“How very enigmatic,” Aizawa said drily.

Nezu beamed. “I do my best!”

“I’ll leave Inui to it, then.” He looked out the door. “I agree with how he acted in there, at least. Between the Yard and Yuurei, I think it’s been a very long time since that child felt like he was allowed to cry.”

* * *

The walls here were full of insects.

Even on the bridge between here and the mainland, he thought he could hear them – the chitinous click of camera shutters and relays ticking over his every move. Scanners for pulse and temperature, lenses of every spectrum, switchboards relaying these reams of data to central computer bases for confirmation and corroboration. The hair on his arms stood on end from their electromagnetic whine.

The building itself was a joyless polygon far out to sea. One could not even see it in the distance without drawing instant attention from inquisitive and heavily armed men. The surrounding waters were mined. Airspace was restricted. Three forms of identification were needed just to pass the first checkpoint and two of them were unknown to the general public. The solidity of the prison seemed to bleed into the surrounding atmosphere, turning the brightest morning gray and surly and cold.

He’d told himself that he would never come here again. But these recent days had made liars of
everyone.

At the end of the bridge was a second checkpoint where a voice mangled into electrical gibberish screeched precise instructions were to park his car. The gates locked moments after he passed and upon parking hidden magnets buried in the ground anchored his vehicle to the spot. Tartarus was the unholy intersection of cutting-edge technology, government extravagance, and public fear. Unfathomable amounts of money dumped into every measure, and even more into ensuring that they all meshed precisely, forming a vast clockwork cage that would annihilate any interlopers between its gears.

All Might was wearing his usual pinstripes today. No cape and costume for him. He stepped out and was escorted by two plank-faced guards to the front gate – really just a blank black expanse of wall that hissed open into a lightless hole. He heard the mechanical swarms of sensors buried in the prison chitter and chitter as he came to a bulletproof booth whose fogged glass made the shape inside amorphous and dim.

“All Might.” The voice that emerged through this speaker was female and surprisingly pleasant – good receptionists were a treasure no matter where you went.

“Thank you for seeing me on such short notice,” he said.

“Not at all, sir. Please note that our previous restrictions apply. Go only where directed. Keep discussion of the outside world to an absolute minimum. Your visit may be no more than three minutes in duration.”

“It may go on longer this time.”

“I must insist that you-”

“This isn’t a courtesy call. I’m here for information. And I don’t intend to leave until I get what I need.”

“…one moment, please.”

The shape receded. He felt the swarm’s eyes on him. A few minutes later, the shape returned.

“Your request has been granted,” said the voice. “However, I regret to inform you that my supervisors will lodge a complaint with your own superiors.”

“That’s fine. Nezu probably has a form letter made up at this point.”

“Please accept this communicator and proceed with your escort.” A small earpiece slid out from under the window. “Please return this communicator upon your departure.”

“Thank you.”

He put on the earpiece and followed the guards. On this path one could be forgiven for thinking the building had no prisoners at all. The walls were windowless and smooth, the pulse of life smothered by the clatter and click of the swarm. They entered an elevator that descended for a long time and felt as though it traveled across unfamiliar vectors, the g-forces making his ravaged stomach lurch. He exited and was guided through several more doors locked by keys and cards and complex biometrics.

Finally he entered a room alone. Sterile and white, containing a single chair in front of a thick pane of what appeared to be glass but had nanotubes winding like worms across its length to make it
unbreakably strong. He sat and waited. The swarm intensified. It screeched like a thing in pain.

On the other side of the window a fusillade of doors hissed open. All Might’s fists clenched.

He was carried in by conveyors. The building itself slowly vomiting him up. His bindings were white and his restraints were white and his skin a sickening fishbelly white but in all that pale absence it was his smile All Might saw first, a gnashing rictus grin gleaming even through the fog of his ventilator. The smile emerged formless out of the shadows of Tartarus. Dark Cheshire, soul-taker. All for One, here again.
Chapter 14

The machinery ferrying All for One wheezed to a halt. He stopped on the other side of the glass, the fluorescents shining sickly on the mutilated dome of his head. His smile was like the grille of an oncoming truck. The communicator in All Might’s ear hissed dead air.

“Are these visits going to be a regular occurrence?” asked All for One. “If so, we should really see about getting some refreshments next time.”

All Might said nothing.

“How’s the coffee here, do you think? I can’t remember the last time I had a decent cuppa.”

All Might said nothing.

“I hope you didn’t come all this way just to have a staring contest.” His voice stayed infuriatingly amiable. “Because you rather have me at a disadvantage in that regard.”

“I came to ask you something.”

“He speaks!” The walls chattered with unease as All for One tilted his head. “And I’m hearing quite a bit left unsaid, as well. Most of my sensory Quirks are nullified by this place, but I can hear your heartbeat loud and clear, All Might. It’s jackrabbit-quick. And no costume this time! Has your bravado fled so quickly?” Silence again. “Ahh, you’re no fun. What is this about, then? It must be terribly important, for you to drag yourself all the way back to this dreary little hole.”

“It concerns Tomura Shigaraki.”

The grin widened. “You don’t mean Tenko Shimura?”

“No. I don’t.”

The grin faltered a bit. “No reaction at all, hm. How cold of you. Very well, what of him?”

“We researched him as best we could, after your incarceration. Records on Nana Shimura’s descendants have become sparse. No doubt thanks to your influence. However, there were some scant mentions of a possible grandchild of hers who disappeared at the age of four, coinciding with the apparent deaths of his parents. I say ‘apparent’ because no recognizable remains had been found.”

“Quirk awakenings can be so traumatic,” said All for One.

“And what a coincidence that you were there to spirit him away.”

“Wasn’t it, though?”

All for One’s smugness was palpable. Even though his expression was wholly consumed by scar tissue, All Might could see the anticipation on his face – he was expecting to be asked about his involvement in Shigaraki’s upbringing, his recruitment. His education. The man had been the head of a criminal empire spanning generations but he had a cawtoring goblin’s sense of humor and would gleefully lie to him all day if he could get away with it.

“I imagine you filled his head with all sorts of poison,” said All Might. “About us. About the Hero Society.”
“One man’s toxin is another man’s truth.”

And at the last moment, All Might feinted.

“So my question is this.” He leaned forward. “What did you tell him you were saving him from?”

The grin disappeared. The gashed mouth twisted in puzzlement. And as the communicator muttered wordlessly in the background, All for One bent his head down and laughed, long and low.

“Well done. That actually caught me off-guard.” He sneered through the glass. “So he’s gone to that place already, has he?”

All Might’s eyes widened. All for One had already jumped several steps ahead.

“And there’s the skip in your pulse I was looking for. My, my. The young man has certainly shown initiative.”

“All Might,” buzzed the communicator. “Again, refrain from sharing.”

He ripped the earpiece out and stuck it in his pocket. He half-expected the door to open and the guards to drag him away, but there was no response. Tartarus’ wardens must have been scrambling, too.

“I freely admit it,” All for One continued. “I was the one who told Shigaraki about that facility. It was just one of many things I told him, but that’s the rub about being an educator, isn’t it? You can never be quite sure which lessons will stick. I’m glad this one did, though. The grisly truth of it all lent it an inimitable weight.” His ventilator fogged and dripped. “Surely you’ve already imagined it for yourself. The research that could have been gained from young Shigaraki would have been tremendous. Strides in material sciences, anatomy, shielding, the list goes on and on. How fast does this material decay, compared to that? How fast does this subject perish if touched here, rather than there? How may we mitigate it? How may we nullify it? And of course, once his usefulness had been expended – snip, snip, off with the hands and leave the bones to bleach, alongside those of all who’d come before.”

“You knew.” He felt like his throat was full of cotton. “All this time, you knew. Were you responsible for its establishment in the first place?”

“You flatter me, but no. Its creation was entirely organic. Inevitable, even, especially once you arrived on the scene. When a society begins running out of enemies without, it turns its attention within.”

“I don’t believe you. You’re a kleptomaniac for Quirks. How could you have let it run unchecked for so long, without going there to harvest them for yourself?”

“A fair point. But the sorts of Quirks hosted there were just too volatile for my liking. My body was always so terribly delicate. I could never be quite certain of how all these powers would interface with one another.” The grin returned. “But that was just one reason, and rather minor in the grand scheme of things. You said ‘harvest.’ Very apropos. Why would I nip such a place in the bud, when results could be so much grander from just allowing it to thrive?”

“You predicted all this would happen?”

“The finer details, no. I’m not a clairvoyant. Alas, that Quirk escaped my grasp.” His teeth flashed as All Might’s heart skipped again. “But I’ve been alive for a long time, and after a while one notices how certain stories repeat themselves. That facility is an old saw – a seed of evil planted by hubristic
men assured of their own righteousness. Its ilk have risen and fallen, again and again. Shigaraki was simply there to take advantage of it this time. I can only guess what he’s extracted from there. If it’s gotten you desperate enough to speak with me, the results must have been tremendous. ” What remained of his face became softer. Disappointed, even. “You surely must have suspected something like this was happening, under the glittering peace you offered. Did it come as such a surprise?”

He tried to come up with a retort but couldn’t. He gripped the arms of his seat; the whole room seemed to rock and sway around him like a ship in a strong gale. The coppery taste of blood bubbled in the back of his throat.

“Breathe, All Might. Your heart’s racing. In your condition you might keel over right here, and even I wouldn’t wish for something that ignominious.”

“I’m leaving,” he said.

“Wait,” All for One said, and the mocking edge to his voice was gone. “You’ve provided a nice break in the monotony around here. So let me confide something in you, too.”

“I don’t want to hear anything more from you.”

“And yet there you sit. So kindly listen.” His restraints creaked as he tried to get comfortable. “I’ve seen countless heroes come and go. Sent quite a few of them off myself, obviously. And one thing I always noticed was how grim so many of them were. Oh, they put on those brave smiling faces, like the ones your dear mentor was so proud of, but when backed into a corner the gnawing desperation underneath always came through. Never happy. Never satisfied.” He frowned as if troubled by the memory of it. “When I was at my peak I thought it was understandable enough. Things weren’t pleasant for heroes back then. You were sad little underdogs scurrying around in my shadow. But as the Hero Society grew, and my foes gained power, wealth and influence to rival my own, their attitudes still never changed. Those who fought on the side of good remained a miserable lot. And that includes you, All Might. Even before I killed Nana Shimura, I saw in you the same unhappiness that had plagued all who came before. What was its source? Why did heroes seem so out of place in this world compared to myself and my kind?”

All Might wanted to leave. He wanted the door to open and spew forth someone to drag him away. But the communicator had gone dead and no help was forthcoming, either out of respect or spite on the part of Tartarus’ wardens. He was frozen in place as All for One’s smile returned.

“The answer,” he said, “is this – because the world is, and always has been, an evil place.”

The relentless, bitter laughter of the swarm.

“It was one of those revelations that seemed too simple to be true. But the greatest truths are often simple ones. The world is evil. It isn’t kind, or even indifferent. Left to its own devices, it will bend every arc towards cruelty. All virtues are drunk from a poisoned cup. All the struggles and sacrifices of good people inevitably fuel the same misdeeds that have persisted since there was life to commit them. Heroes don’t want to put it into those words, of course. But they are close enough to these evils to recognize the truth. That facility is just one more example. It’s a seed that could only have grown in the soil you nurtured, All Might. In the greatest peace the Hero Society had ever known, it was at last free to debase and torture its own people, with no fear of discovery or consequences. I’m glad Shigaraki appears to have realized this. It’s far more valuable a lesson than any of the ones taught at that ridiculous school of yours.”

“You call that a revelation?” All Might managed to say. “You can’t seriously believe you’re the first megalomaniac to monologue about original sin.”
He was undeterred. “The ubiquity of evil and the futility of goodness – Schopenhauer meets Sisyphus, eh? Now there’s a dismal marriage if I ever saw one. No, I’m not the first, just as you’re not the first to offer a retort. And yet here we are. I’m rather confident in my position, All Might. After what you’ve just learned, how confident are you in yours?”

He knew he’d have an answer, if given enough time. But the faces of those three children and the mutated cadence of Osamu Nakayama’s words were smothering it all.

“I suppose it doesn’t really matter,” said All for One. “We’re just a couple of relics, at this point. What we say or think has little bearing on what’s to come. Shigaraki’s improvement will continue apace. The old ways will persist. And the heroes you struggle to raise will struggle themselves, and be consumed by the wickedness around them – if not by some extravagant act of villainy, then by the endless small cruelties flourishing where they don’t look. Right in their own backyard.”

He had to leave. The air here was unbreathable. It was dragging razor blades across his lungs. He coughed and spotted the windowglass with red, then stood up on shaking legs, grasping the chair for support.

“We’ve come to the end of our time,” All for One sighed. “Don’t be a stranger, All Might. Putting our prior hostilities aside, I enjoy our talks.”

“Go to hell,” he croaked, and turned to leave.

“All Might?”

Against all better judgement, he stopped.

“There’s something I’d like to ask as well,” he said cheerily. “We’ve spent all this time discussing my protégé, and none at all catching up on yours! Tell me, how is Izuku Midoriya doing?”

He didn’t move, for a time. Then he continued heading for the exit without turning around. When the doors hissed open All for One began to laugh. A low burping chuckle that splintered and heightened into peals of hatefully happy cackling that seemed to soak into the walls and join with Tartarus’ chorus of surveillance as though the building itself were infected by his mirth. All for One didn’t laugh like this. All Might knew it was just to spite him. But even when he returned to the daylight, that cackle kept echoing in his head and pursued him all the way back to U.A. High School. It wouldn’t leave him.

*             *             *

Dinnertime came ‘round at U.A. and it was easy to see that many of the students would be turning in early tonight. Nearly everyone from the heroics classes was fighting not to fall face-first into their food. Midoriya’s table was one of the few exceptions – he’d wound up eating with three people who were too stoic to show any hint of exhaustion. Todoroki, Tokoyami, and Shouji ate in silence (Shouji kept his mask on and no one watched him too closely; chewing and swallowing occurred in his vicinity and that’s all they needed to know). Several tables away, Uraraka and Kirishima huddled together. Midoriya had quizzically passed them by and they’d given a friendly wave and gotten back to conspiring.

Todoroki had just finished telling them about his and Kaminari’s encounter with Class 1-B. Monoma hadn’t been seen since then. Rumors of Itsuka Kendo dragging a large and heavy sack down to the school’s basement were completely unfounded.

“I’m glad Shinsou’s doing well, at least,” said Midoriya, picking away at his katsudon. “We haven’t
really caught up since the sports festival.”

“I’ve seen him with Aizawa from time to time,” Shouji remarked.

“He has his own challenges to deal with.” Todoroki slurped his noodles. “It would be interesting if he wound up replacing Bakugo, though. It’d cause quite a change in the class dynamic.”

“Todoroki,” Shouji said. Todoroki looked confused, then noticed Midoriya staring morosely into his bowl.

“Oh. Sorry.”

“No, it’s okay. I’ve got to deal with it at some point, right?”

“*Sheesh, talk about insensitive.*”

All four of them jumped at that flanging voice, especially Tokoyami, who’d suddenly found Dark Shadow poking out of his shirt collar. It jabbed one finger at Todoroki.

“You have to read the mood better! He just got out of the hospital, no need to remind him his crazy frenemy’s getting the boot!”

“Does your shadow normally behave like this?” Todoroki asked, after a contemplative moment. Even with his limited emotional range, Tokoyami looked mortified.

“Maybe he’s still psyched up after that rescue last night,” Midoriya said.

“Yes! I kind of freaked myself out at first, but now that I think about it, we were really cool! Fumi, we’re gonna workshop attack names tonight, right?”

“Workshop…?” Shouji turned to Tokoyami, whose eye had begun to twitch.

“He puts a lot of thought into them. Black Ankh took, like, six hours.”

“They don’t need to know that,” Tokoyami said, in a desperate little singsong.

“Interesting,” said Midoriya. “I thought Dark Shadow was just an extension of Tokoyami’s mental state whose mood and intentions were affected by latent light. This level of autonomy doesn’t really fit, though. Is it just stress? Or maybe Dark Shadow’s being agitated by some environmental factor?” Tokoyami and Dark Shadow exchanged a panicked glance as Midoriya rummaged through his bag. “Where’d I put that notebook…”


He followed Shouji’s finger and his whole face lit up. All Might was wandering the cafeteria, looking like a runaway scarecrow.

“All Might!” He waved. “Over here!”

All Might saw him, and smiled, and beckoned. Midoriya grabbed his food and his book bag and scooched out of the seat, all his prior rambling forgotten. Shouji noticed Dark Shadow’s quiet look of relief as it receded into Tokoyami, but said nothing.

“Did anyone else see that?” Tokoyami asked.

“I think everyone did,” Todoroki replied. “Dark Shadow didn’t exactly use its indoor voice.”
“Marvelous.”

“Doesn’t look like they care much,” Shouji said, scanning the room. “And with Monoma indisposed, it’s not as if we have to worry about any malicious gossip. You’ll be fine, Tokoyami.”

“Yes, I know. Long day.” He scratched his beak, then stopped and jerked up. “Oh, damn. I needed to ask Midoriya how to deal with this sling. Is he still here?”

Shouji saw him stepping out with All Might. His expression had become far more solemn.

“He just left,” Shouji said.

Tokoyami sighed. “Truly a banquet of misfortune.”

* * *

They shared a pitiful dinner, All Might with nothing but some rice and pickled vegetables and Midoriya’s katsudon rapidly congealing. They’d gone to 1-A’s homeroom to eat rather than the teacher’s lounge, shoving a couple of desks together into a makeshift table; Aizawa was currently having his own heart-to-heart with Eri, now that someone roughly her own age was now interred on campus. The darkness outside the classroom’s windows was unfamiliar, unnatural. All Might had returned from Tartarus and Nezu’s assembly with the faculty, and couldn’t do much to hide his exhaustion. The air was heavy with unasked questions.

“I’ll come right out with it,” All Might said. “How much do you know about Kyoumoto and the others?”

“Pretty much everything,” Midoriya said hesitantly.

“I see. Who told you? No, there’s no need for that,” he said, as Midoriya looked nervous. “I’m the one originally responsible for this whole sordid story getting out. It’d be foolish to think I can discipline anyone for spreading it further.”

“It was Uraraka,” he said. “But I’d guessed a lot of it myself already. It’s not like I had much else to do except think it over.”

“Does anyone else know besides you two and Bakugo?”

“Kacchan told Tokoyami. I don’t think there was anyone else.”

“Tokoyami, hm. That must have complicated his encounter with Yuurei somewhat.” He took an obligatory bite of his food. “We’ll have to fill in the rest of the students eventually. In my opinion, sooner rather than later. But, for the principal’s sake-”

“I know. I’ll keep it to myself.”

Silence, then. The idle tapping of chopsticks.

All Might said, “I was ashamed.”

Midoriya’s expression didn’t change.

“First you. Then young Bakugo. I’ve felt my powerlessness keenly over the last week. I didn’t want to come back to you empty-handed, I suppose.”

“Is that why you went to Tartarus?”
“I can’t even claim that much. Whatever I gained there was worthless. Of course Shigaraki learned about that place from All for One. Where else could he have possibly come by such information?” He put a hand to his forehead. “I guess I needed to re-center myself. Encounter a more familiar evil. This business with the Yard has us all shaken. But the way I am now, there hasn’t been much else I can do besides wallow in it.”

“You’re not responsible for what happened there, All Might. I don’t believe so, anyway.”

“And I appreciate it. But I can’t only take credit for the good things that happened under my watch. So much centers upon the Symbol of Peace. The Hero Killer, the League of Villains, and now Nakayama and the Yard…all of them had my name on their lips. All Might. All Might.” He sank into his chair. “I knew One for All would come with a heavy burden when I passed it on to you, but I didn’t have the least inkling it would be this bad. Hard to believe all this has transpired in less time than it took you to clean up that beach.”

Midoriya tried levity. “Sometimes I kind of wish I was still dragging refrigerators across the sand.”

“Your growth really has been extraordinary, Midoriya.” Heat rose in his cheeks as All Might looked up at him. “It’s been one trial by fire after another, hasn’t it? But it’s not right. I thought I’d witnessed enough of the world’s evil to know what I was getting you into. Now I’m not so sure.” He hung his head, voice shaking. “The world isn’t what I thought it was.”

The mosquito buzz of the clock over the door filled the silence between them. Midoriya nursed his bowl, looked out at the wall of dark beyond the classroom.

“It’s not like I thought the world was all fun and games before I met you,” he said quietly. “That’s one thing I learned being around Kacchan so long. It’s not easy, trying to be better. To make anything better.” He looked back at All Might. “But I’m handling it the best I can. I think you need to do the same, All Might. Everyone still believes in you. You say there’s nothing you can do, but you can at least try to believe in yourself, too.”

He lifted his head just enough to meet Midoriya’s earnest eye, then snorted. “It’s a sad day when I’m getting a pep talk from my own protégé.”

Midoriya didn’t smile back. He stirred his bowl. It was little more than mush.

“All Might?” he asked. “Do you think Kacchan did the right thing?”

“When he went out after Horooka?” he said. Midoriya nodded. “I don’t think he deserved to be expelled, at the very least.”

“That’s not what I asked. Was it the right thing?” He slumped further. “Was it something a hero would do?”

All Might sighed and set down his chopsticks. “I can’t pretend to guess at his intentions. For someone who boasts so much, he keeps his cards very close to the chest. It’s true that without him, we likely never would have gotten this far in alleviating this crime wave. But if he’d just been left to his own devices, he would have died out there. It was Uraraka’s intervention that saved him.”

“Yeah. When I first applied here I thought that being a hero just meant doing what you thought was right, no matter what. But I guess it’s not that simple.”

“What is a hero, what isn’t a hero…you can go insane pondering that question too long. Just look at Stain. He had his little vision of how society should have been and then chose to go out into the world and cut off away the pieces that didn’t fit.” All Might pointed at him. “But good intentions
alone aren’t sufficient. Those arms of yours are testament enough to that.”

“Kacchan said so, too. More or less. He told me that jumping in without thinking wasn’t going to help. But that’s the reason you gave me this Quirk to begin with, wasn’t it?”

“Part of it. I saw in you the same pain I experienced before encountering my own mentor. And not just the pain, but the need to alleviate the pain of others.” He straightened, voice growing firmer; he seemed to be uprooting something in himself. “We all suffer in our own ways. Perhaps heroes are just those of us who possess the strength and the will to relieve others of that burden, however they can. As you do, Midoriya. Your scars are proof of that, as well. Your strength may yet be insufficient, but your will is unimpeachable.”

“And Kacchan’s plenty strong,” said Midoriya, still stirring. “But who knows what he’s thinking half the time. I think he’s getting better, though. Same as me.” The chopsticks stopped. “All Might?”

“What is it?”

“I just realized. What the League of Villains did, when they broke into the Yard, it was horrible. They killed all those people and then just turned the prisoners into weapons for themselves. But if they’d done things a little differently…it would have been pretty heroic, don’t you think?”

All Might didn’t answer. He was dumbfounded. And Midoriya looked up, and gave him that familiar, reassuring half-smile.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “I’m just thinking out loud.”

Their conversation turned to trivialities and then dried up entirely. Midoriya’s dinner had at this point become a greasy, uniform mass similar in consistency to porridge. But he bent over it, and ate as much as he could.

He needed to keep his strength up.

*     *     *

Bakugo hadn’t eaten.

He wasn’t a procrastinator by nature. In his mind, anything that he didn’t want to do right away generally wasn’t worth doing in the first place. But he’d known that he had to do this since his meeting in the principal’s office and ever since then had circled it like a jungle cat around its prey. He’d found excuses to put it off. First All Might had interrupted him, then there had been the thing with Tokoyami, and then he’d told himself it would be stupid to go ahead with it while everyone was out risking their idiot lives outside, but now the mission was over and no one seemed to be dead and he had to put his foot down. He’d paced and stomped and cursed and starved himself to force it to happen. It wasn’t even particularly scary. It just lent everything that had happened this week a finality that he knew couldn’t be taken back.

Around the same time Midoriya and All Might had finally met up again, he’d snatched his phone off his desk and dialed.

“Was wondering when you’d call,” said his mother.

Bakugo was hunched at the edge of his bed, phone to his ear. No part of him moved except his mouth.

“Waiting for me to make the first move, huh.”
“Figured if I’d tried to call you myself then you’d have just ignored it.” Mitsuki Bakugo sounded tired, faintly distracted, like she was taking this call while doing her bills. “We’ll be seeing each other in a few weeks anyway.”

“And then you can smack the shit out of me, right?”

“What would be the point, Katsuki? You don’t change.” She said it without rancor. “You know, when your school first called me I thought it had to do with that bombing you’d gotten caught up in. Then they drop this on me instead. The expulsion was the least of it. They tried to sugarcoat what this mad-bomber bitch did to you but I’m pretty sure you almost died. Did you almost die?”

“I’m fine.”

“Uh-huh. Your father looks like crap, by the way. He’s barely slept.”

“What about you?” he asked.

“What do you think? You’re not an idiot, Katsuki, I’m sure you already knew how we’d react to this.” Bakugo’s grip on the phone tightened. “Just answer me one thing. Do you regret what you did?”

“Fuck no.”

“Then it’s done,” said Mitsuki. “Now we have to figure out what to do next. You’re still interested in hero training, I assume.”

He took longer to answer than he should have. “No shit I am. Not about to quit now.”

“All right. I’ve already gotten in touch with Shiketsu and Ketsubutsu but they told me they’re not accepting any new applications until after the holidays. Maybe they’re blowing smoke up my ass but I won’t know until the time comes. There’s other schools. Even if they’re not King Shit the way U.A. is. But at the bare minimum you’re going to miss a term, and with how competitive these places are…” She sighed. “I don’t know. We’ll figure something out. After everything you’ve been through, some bureaucracy shouldn’t be a problem. Just keep safe, okay? And you should keep in touch with your friends. They’ll miss you when you’re gone.”

“I don’t know if-” he started, and then realized what he was about to say and strangled the rest of the sentence. “Fine. Whatever. They’re not letting me do shit around here until they kick me out anyway so it’s not like I’m gonna get in more trouble. Anything else?”

“I’ll call you if anything comes up. Otherwise I’ll see you at Christmas. All right?” He didn’t answer. “Bye, Katsuki. Love you.”

“Yeah. Okay.”

He hung up and tossed the phone aside and remained where he was, hands on his knees.

He was sick of being wrong.

He’d expected to get chewed out. Some colorful threats for when he got home – his mother could be a wordsmith when the mood took her. But she’d been mercilessly sympathetic. She wouldn’t even give him anything to get pissed off about. He tried to get pissed off that he didn’t have a reason to be pissed off, but that wasn’t working. He gazed around the already-familiar geography of his bedroom, feeling numb. He tried to think when would be a good time to start packing. Probably when finals had started and everyone was in class. That way no one would hear the noise. Before that it would
just be a matter of avoiding everyone long enough to get out and be done with it.

He realized his hands were clenched tight enough for the nails to cut into his palms. His face felt much too hot. Slowly, he raised his knuckles up to his face and grinded them into his forehead.

After a little while, Bakugo started to cry softly into his fists.

There was a knock at his door.

He jerked upright and his face was suddenly volcanic in its rage. “Eat shit and DIE!”

“It’s Kirishima, man.”

He froze and then faced the sky with clenched teeth and fingers curled as if entreating to an absent God, then scoured his face dry with his shirtsleeve and used his phone’s camera to check for any hint of redness around the eyes. He paced back and forth for another few seconds just to make sure and then ripped the door open. Judging by the way Kirishima stepped back, he hadn’t been entirely successful at hiding it. Kirishima’s hair was up but his blazer was off and his shirt was wrinkled as if he’d been kneading it between his hands. He faced Bakugo like he was a dragon at a cavern’s mouth.

“You, uh, mind if I-”

“Shut the fuck up and get in already.”

He stepped inside and Bakugo slammed the door shut and locked it and pushed past him towards the balcony. He leaned against the glass, furiously rubbing his scalp. He saw Kirishima fidgeting in the reflection.

“So what is it? Spit it out.”

“No one’s seen you all day. Wanted to make sure you’re alright, is all.”

“Yeah, I’m alright,” he snapped. “I’m alright, you’re alright, everyone’s alright. You had your little mission and everyone’s okay. Round of fucking applause.”

“Oh, you heard what happened?”

“Of course I didn’t,” he said, glaring over his shoulder. “I’m a dead man walking around here. I’m persona-fucking-non-grata. Even the goddamn chat’s gone dark, unless these assholes started another one without me. There was some big explosion outside the gate and then nothing. But if anyone was dead they’d have made an announcement or something, so whatever. Who cares.”

Kirishima didn’t react the way Bakugo had expected. He suddenly looked extremely nervous.

“Yeah, you’re right,” he said unconvincingly. “Things got kinda nuts at the end, but that was it.”

Bakugo turned fully and his glare ran Kirishima through. “What happened.”

“Huh?”

“If you’re gonna hide shit from me then just get the fuck out. I’m not in the mood. Did Deku pull something again?”

“No! Nothing like that. It was just…me and Uraraka were paired up, everyone was sent off two-by-two, you know, and things got a little. I mean, we kind of.” He averted his eyes and gripped his
shirtsleeve like a safety blanket. “We ran into Shigaraki.”

Silence. When he looked back to Bakugo his face was indescribable. An identity crisis between suspicion, anger, disbelief and one smothered but bright-burning spark of concern.

“Yeah, it’s true,” said Kirishima. “It’s more like he ran into us. Or a clone of him, anyway. Apparently he was kinda pissed about losing that Kyoumoto kid so he thought it’d be funny to take the two of us out, since Uraraka is Midoriya’s friend and I’m... anyway, we’re okay.”

“How the fuck are you not dead?” he breathed.

“Horooka showed up at the same time,” he said, and Bakugo’s uneasy expression intensified. “She tried to kill us all but just got Shigaraki. Uraraka used me as a human shield and then basically rode me like a surfboard on the shockwave, it was pretty wild.” He tried to laugh. “I froze up, honestly. Didn’t do a whole lot.”

Bakugo looked like he was trying to say something but the words were getting logjammed in his throat. He settled for turning to his desk and gripping his chair and staring at the wall. For some reason Kirishima found this much more threatening than if he’d just started yelling again. The atmosphere felt full of firedamp.

“I’m sorry, man,” he said quietly.

“What?”

“I’ve been batting zero lately. Couldn’t help Uraraka, ditched you when you left that night. I’ve gotta man up, I know. I should have gone with you when you asked. I’m sorry.”

The chair creaked as Bakugo pushed off of it. “You’d have just ruined everything, moron.”

“Huh?”

“You can’t go undercover to save your life. Remember when you went to Kamino with Deku and the others?” he said, getting closer. “You looked like you’d walked out of some shitty host club. And your hair’s like a goddamn traffic cone. If you’d have been there then we’d have both gotten busted before the sun rose.”

“Hey, I didn’t think my getup was that bad.”

“And Uraraka only dodged this shitshow because she cleared it with the teachers first. You’d have gotten kicked out right along with me.”

“Oh. Right.” He half-smiled. “I didn’t really think of that.”

Bakugo was now within arm’s reach. “Yeah. You don’t think of a whole lot, do you.”

In one quick movement Bakugo grabbed Kirishima by the shirt and spun and smashed him into the wall. Kirishima’s teeth clicked together as the back of his head hit the plaster. He was so close to Bakugo’s gnashing scowl that he could make out the spit shining on his teeth.

“Bakugo, what the hell! What’d I-”

“Shut up.” Almost whispering now, the anger in his voice boiled down to a white-hot core. “Here’s something else I bet you never thought about. You ever wonder where those Nomu freaks came from?” Kirishima trembled, uncomprehending. “Because I did. I thought about it a lot. And I think
that if your dumb ass hadn’t gone to Kamino that night, then I’d be out there somewhere right now, ten times uglier, with the top of my fucking head sawed off.” He hitched Kirishima higher up on the wall, his face sheened with sweat. “I don’t give two shits what any of these idiots say or think about me, but I will not walk out of here with you feeling guilty over what I did. So I shot my fucking mouth off. Big deal. It was my decision, not yours!” Getting louder. “If I see you moping around like this again then I’ll drag you outside by your stupid fucking haircut and give you something to really feel sorry about! Get it!?”

“I get it! I get it! Just relax!”

Bakugo dropped him and staggered away, hands clapped over his face. Both of them were panting like they’d just sprinted uphill. Kirishima’s mind crawled with images of exposed brain tissue.

“You really think that’s what would’ve happened?” he asked. “Fuck, man.”

“No one told me,” he said through his palms. “That bad-touch bastard tried to take you out himself and no one fucking told me! They think they can just write me off that easy!?” He flung his arms out, grinding his teeth at the ceiling. “Uraraka, too. I knew she’d get cocky after beating me! I bet her and Deku laughed their asses off about it. I’ll show them. They’re gonna regret underestimating me.”

His back was turned to Kirishima and his shoulders had started to shake. There was some kind of stuttery growl coming out the depths of his throat. Kirishima realized he was laughing. Eyes wide, he carefully headed for the door.

“Don’t you fucking move,” Bakugo said, and Kirishima locked up. “Listen. Aizawa and Nezu made a big show about letting me take finals even though they were kicking me out. They probably just said it to twist the knife. But they’ll regret it.” He turned back to Kirishima and his fierce grin took up half his face. “Because I’m going to smoke these assholes. Deku, and those scholarship punks, and all the rest of these b-list losers! I’ll stomp them into the dirt before I leave! And you will, too!” Kirishima watched goggle-eyed as Bakugo’s hands lit up and spit sparks. “You’d better brace yourself, dumbass, because you and me are gonna cram until your fucking ears bleed. We’ll murder them all. We’re gonna be the absolute champions of this school!”

Kirishima ran forward and hugged Bakugo tight.

Bakugo’s palms fizzled out and he made a sound like a lawnmower failing to start. Kirishima’s breathing was ragged in his ear. After a few seconds, when it was clear that point-blank annihilation was probably not forthcoming, Kirishima released him and stepped back, smiling and rubbing his eyes.

“Sorry,” he said. “Got caught up in the moment.”

“It’s fine. Whatever. Who even cares.” He dusted off his shoulders. “Ain’t like you stopped clinging to me practically since day one. Why is that, anyway? You pitying me?”

“What? No, man. How can I put it…hanging out with you is like exercise. It feels good and you wanna keep doing it, even though sometimes it just kind of sucks and makes you want to die, you know?”

Bakugo snorted and turned away. “Fuck you, asshole.”

Kirishima grinned. “Guess I’d better get my notes in order.”

“You’d better learn from that fucking mess last night, too. Your Quirk’s decent but it’s got no versatility. If you don’t learn how to make up for it then you’re gonna get killed. And that would
really piss me off.”

“Yeah. Seems like I’m best on a team. Maybe when we both turn pro we can partner up, or
something.”

“Oh, fuck off.” He waved him away. “We start tomorrow.”

Kirishima left and shut the door and leaned up against it, one hand on his chest. His nerves were so
keyed up that he felt shellshocked. But then he saw Uraraka timidly leaning around the corner at the
end of the hall. She gave him a shaky, inquisitive thumbs-up. He grinned and returned the gesture.
She almost collapsed with relief.

Meanwhile, Bakugo had gone out to his balcony. The campus outside was quiet as the grave. He
sucked in the freezing air until he was wide awake. Ignoring the growls from his stomach, he set his
jaw, went back inside, and got his textbooks out.

U.A.’s impossibly lavish grounds sometimes gave lie to the fact that they had more mundane
amenities for their students, as well. Sure, they constructed entire hollow cities for the sake of a
training exercise, but they also had a few plain old gyms on campus. They were big and airy, with
top-of-the-end weight equipment customized for any variety of strength-augmenting Quirks, and a
few of Cementoss’ constructions for agility and ballistics exercises – concrete obstacle courses and
thick walls to test the impact of new moves. They were also open until late at night, and while most
of the students were too drop-dead tired to take advantage of that today, Rikido Satou wasn’t one of
them.

He strode across the grounds amidst the phantasmal shine of the arc-sodium lamps, his gym bag over
his shoulder. He’d been one of the teams that hadn’t seen much action last night (to Sero’s
considerable chagrin – he’d said over and over that his Quirk was perfect for immobilizing lots of
small fry and now he’d totally missed his chance) and still had energy to burn. In his bag was his
gym uniform, a protein shake, and a “protein” shake with about half a pound of sugar mixed in. He
sipped the first as the gym building loomed in the distance.

Satou stopped and looked over his shoulder, eyes narrowed. He felt like he was being watched but
the lamps showed nothing but mist. He groaned and walked on.

They would have to get used to this, now, thanks to Kyoumoto. Satou hadn’t met the kid. By all
accounts he was nice enough – Ashido in particular had gushed about him all day – but now that
he’d been taken out of the city, Shin Yuurei would follow like the curse from opening a mummy’s
tomb. The school’s front gates remained invitingly open, probably because two feet of reinforced
steel would give the wrong impression to an already-irascible public, but Satou sort of doubted that
shutting them would have deterred the guy much anyway. He’d gotten the drop on Tokoyami even
though they’d been right in the same room with Tokoyami able to literally watch his own back.
Some of the students were already feeling the paranoia. An uncomfortable fact occurred to them,
namely, because Yuurei could be anywhere, he felt like he was everywhere.

He unlocked the gym’s front doors and went in. The lobby was empty and still. He ignored its
powerful resemblance to the early acts of a horror movie, headed for the locker rooms, and stopped.
There was a sound in there. A deep and guttural rasp.

It would have been optimal at this point to just turn and run away and spend a quiet evening in his
room with a pillow over his head. Instead he took a deep chug of his emergency shake and crept
inside. The ranks of lockers formed a rough W shape, flanked by benches. The rasp was coming
from around the corner.

Satou gulped, set down his bag, and carefully peeked around the lockers.

A moment later, he stepped out the rest of the way, totally nonplussed.

Midoriya was seated on one of the benches in gym uniform, bent double. He was drenched in sweat – the blue of his jumpsuit was soaked almost black, and droplets sparkled in his hair like a crystal chandelier. His body heaved with every hoarse breath. His knuckles were bloody and raw.

When Satou cleared his throat, Midoriya squeaked (actually squeaked, Satou would swear he heard an “eep!” come out of that mouth) and jolted upright so fast he nearly fell off the bench.

“Whoa there, dude. Just me.”

“Satou! I didn’t…I mean, y-you weren’t…” He tried to hide his hands. “You’re here late.”

“Sick gains wait for no man.” He flexed and grinned in what he hoped was a reassuring way. “Gotta work hard to keep up with that Quirk of yours.”

“Ha ha. Yeah.” His eyes darted around. “Um, look, I’d been out of commission for a while and I had some stress to work off, so I kinda overdid in there. You might want to use a different gym. Oh, geez, they’ve probably got cameras on the place too, I’m going to be in so much trouble…”

“Relax, man. We exploded like five buildings for our first field exam, I don’t think they’re gonna worry about a couple of busted machines or whatever.”

“Busted machines. Right. You’re right.” He grabbed his bag. “I’d better get going.”

“Shouldn’t you wash up first?”

“I can do it at the dorms. Just one thing.” He clasped his hands together, expression pleading. “If you go in there, just keep what you saw to yourself, alright? It’s a little embarrassing.”

“No problem. These big ol’ lips are sealed.”

That got a genuine smile out of him. “Thanks. I mean it.” He sidled past. “See you tomorrow!”

A bemused Satou watched him leave. He knew Midoriya was tough as nails – and not just because he’d exploded his own skeleton over and over again for the first term or so – but sometimes the guy looked like one big flinch. He guessed that was what growing up around Bakugo would do to someone. Pop a paper bag near him and he’d probably jump through the ceiling.

He got changed and brought his shakes out the locker room and down the hall, then shouldered open the door to the gym proper.

“Wonder what he was so worried about,” he muttered. “Did he drop a couple of barbells or… some…thing…?”

Gym Beta had floors of smooth stone, the better for Cementoss’ Quirk, and contained its machines and equipment on one end with the concrete constructions of Cementoss taking up the rest of the space. The machines were totaled. Some still spitting sparks. One treadmill had been ripped clean out of the ground – Satou saw the concrete still clinging to the rivets – and hurled clean into another, crumpling them both like soda cans. Barbells had been smashed into the floor with their weights still on; they stuck halfway out of the stone like strange plantlife. One dumbbell was embedded in the far
wall, all the way up near the ceiling. The concrete barriers were pulverized and their dust hung heavy in the air; some had been smashed to pebbles and further into divoted craters. The crown jewel of the lot, a ten-foot reinforced monolith that even Bakugo would have had to work to destroy, was crazed with cracks and had a deep hole in it about five feet up. Getting a closer look, Satou saw two familiar shoeprints in the center of that hole where Midoriya had drop-kicked it, possibly at ICBM velocity.

Pebbles pattered to the ground as Satou returned to the entrance. His face was blank. He went over to one of the smashed barbells and gave it a firm tug. It didn’t budge. He flexed and regarded his bicep as if it had answers to offer.

“The guy doesn’t even watch his diet that much,” he said plaintively.

U.A. settled down to sleep. The night and whatever ghosts it may have hid stretched over them. And Satou leaned up against the wall to finish his shake, pondering, in a good-natured way, the manifold unfairnesses of life.
“My friends,” she said. “Here again.”

When Mirai turned to face them after running into Yasuhiro’s barrier over the alleyway mouth, Metalhead kept her hand on her hip and her knife undrawn. The girl was so erratic that this may not have helped much, but Metalhead suspected Mirai could out-draw her even if she’d attempted a sneak attack. She’d led up this group for the sake of morale and had a few friends with projectile Quirks watching from nearby windows; still, she’d accepted in a zen sort of way that she might die tonight. But she hadn’t expected this.

“I don’t think we’ve met,” Metalhead said, after a pause.

“You’ve seen me. I’ve seen you. Even when you try to stay invisible. And now we’re here. What’s your name?”

“Akane Kitae. Friends call me Metalhead. You’re not one of them, though.”

Mirai’s smile twisted like she’d just smelled dogshit. She made a harsh clicking noise in the back of her throat. Metalhead and her entourage looked at each other uneasily.

“Aka. Ki. Kuh-kuh-kuh. It could be polished but it’s so full of rough spots. Cuts me up.” Her outstretched arms fell, her head lolled. “But it’s enough.”

A change of subject was needed. “I know you’re with Shigaraki.”

“No. Never. He thought different. He was wrong.”

“Not what he did. What he wants. What he is.” She took a shuddering step forward and everyone in attendance recoiled. “I was in a cold, quiet place. He pulled me out. I was interested, then. But then he talked and talked of the tomorrow he wanted. What does he want?”


“He makes it sound a lot more high and mighty than that, though,” Metalhead spat.

“Yes,” Mirai hissed. “All just empty noise. I know a hollow sound when I hear it.” Another step, her hair hanging loose like that of someone drowned in a well. “What would that world look like? Would you be able to see a difference, down where you are? No. Echoes that can never reach. One more lying future. I hate them. Hate them. Hate them all.”

Metalhead was now beginning to understand just how badly she’d under-prepared for this. It wasn’t just the girl’s Quirk. There was a sick intensity radiating off her. The pressure of inscrutable purpose. She’d known a couple of guys, little skinny things, who could barely do a push-up but when pressed would fight with nails and teeth until their bodies were nothing but dripping ground beef. Mirai reminded her of that now. There wasn’t any stopping someone like this until you broke them beyond all repair and there was no way Mirai would give them that opportunity.
She really needed another cigarette.

“Sounds like you’ve got your reasons,” she said, keeping her voice steady. “We’ve got our own for wanting that bastard dead.”

“Want. Want? No. I don’t want someone who wants things.” Several people whimpered as one eye shone through her swinging hair. “The ones with backs to the wall. The ones with rope around their neck. The forgotten. The sad strangers. I think what you want is nothing at all. You don’t have to stop at Shigaraki, you know. You can break and break and break. What’s there to lose?”

“This is my town. You’d better not forget that.”

“A broken place is still a place. Maybe you’d like it better in pieces.”

“I’m running out of patience for your bullshit, sweetheart.”

Mirai giggled. “I’m sorry. I’m still waking up. Little by little. But I’d prefer something broken to what’s out there now. The all-together world, filled with those talking screens. It’s the same one that put me underground. The wonderful Hero Society. Burying all the little children who don’t have the voices to scream.”

“Metalhead, what the hell is she talking about?” someone asked. He sounded badly spooked.

“I don’t like this,” Takenoko grunted. “It’s rotten.”

“One of those little children made it out with me,” said Mirai. “With him I can shatter everything. A sound louder than even I could ever make. The heroes are coming for him. The League is coming for him. Pious men. Dirty fiends. Will they hear us ones in between?”

She grinned, and held out one alabaster hand.

“Let’s be friends,” she said. “This is your town, right? Let’s make it a noose. Then they can all feel it around their throats. Strangle their sick voices, all.” Her grin widened. “And while we wait for night, I’ll tell you a story about the cold mountain.”

Metalhead looked at that hand, then at the people around her. None of them appeared ready to give her an answer. Several had gone very pale; only Takenoko seemed unshaken. The police sirens in the distance were rapidly growing closer.

“What the hell,” she answered.

---

The convenience store was an isle of normalcy amidst the growing strangeness in Mosei-Santo, the white tile and fluorescent lighting and brightly colored brand names the same you’d find anywhere else. But it was empty, save for the cashier, a girl with a tight ponytail and a face sunken from sleeplessness. She toyed with her phone as the refrigerators hummed, the snacks brooding under the lights. When the doors hissed open the look on her face glittered with dread.

The customer didn’t pay her any attention. He was a tall young man with a long face and a few pale spikes of hair jutting out from his upturned hood, his hands clad in black leather gloves that might have looked classy once but were now scuffed and threadbare. He stalked around the shelves without a word. The girl stared straight ahead.

He bought a pack of gum and a carton of American Spirits. He had delicate pianist’s fingers and a
delicate way of touching things, pinching and plucking at the boxes and his receipt, movements quick and precise like a bird tearing worms from the ground.

“Thanks,” he said, pocketing the receipt and tucking the cigarettes under his arm.

“Please come again.”

“Is it usually this quiet?”

He had a restrained sort of voice, as if the store was a crowded library. The girl didn’t respond.

“I’m new in town. Anything happening around here?” The girl wouldn’t meet his eye and he bent down and stared directly at her. “Is something wrong?”

“Please come again,” she repeated, while every part of her contrived to say the opposite.

The man held his gaze for a few seconds longer. Then he straightened and walked out. He looked back behind the glass and saw the cashier with her elbows on the counter, her face in her hands.

The sun was setting on Mosei and the mist was tinged with gore. He removed a stick of gum with those same quick pinching movements and chewed as he walked to the end of the block. Loitering there was a group of a half-dozen people and all turned to look as he approached. They were late teens, early twenties, mostly hard-worn – one with plus-sized eyes in searing oily colors, one with a craggy crustacean exoskeleton, one with holes up and down his arms that pooched open and shut like the suckers of tentacles.

“What’d you find out?” one of them asked.

“Nothing. No one there except the cashier and she was scared stiff. Something’s off about this place, all right.”

“We’ve got people watching us all over,” said the one with multicolored eyes. “Heat signatures through windows. They’re just standing there. It’s creepy. Is this really supposed to be the home of U.A.?”

“Guess the rumors are true. Never saw anything like this in Yokohama.” He chewed thoughtfully. “Any of you guys been here before?”

The crab-skinned one raised his hand. “I used to crash at my sister’s place before she cut me off. That was in Takodana, though. Classier.”

“Sister, huh. How’s she doing now?”

“She moved. We haven’t kept in touch.”

“Oh. Might be for the best.”

“Are we really doing this?” another one asked. “I feel like someone out there’s looking for a victim.”

“We’ve got directions and the password. And I brought a present.” He held up the carton. “ Couldn’t hurt. But if we get jumped it’s every man for himself, got it?” They appeared to generally agree. “Then let’s go.”

A few days had passed since the assault on Mosei-Santo and the wards had gone silent. Asphyxiated by a miasma of hostility and fear. While the heroes had cleaned the place up admirably, the presence of Mirai, Metalhead, and her remaining crew was keeping the general populace locked up tight and
off the streets. People moved out. Metalhead’s people moved in. These apartments were being converted into her headquarters, little by little. And while the heroes and the police kept up their arrests, it was like trying to punch fog. Metalhead herself kept eluding them, and as she’d predicted, word of her exploits had gotten out.

They walked through the bruising streets. What pedestrians they passed were harried and quiet. Eventually a voice emerged from a nearby alley and they turned to see a darker shape skulking in those shadows, restlessly snapping its fingers. Bursts of colored sparks emerged with every snap.

“Do I know you?” it asked.

“We just got here,” said the gloved man.

“What’re you doing here?”

“Storm-watching,” he replied. “Know any good spots?”

The stare from out of that darkness become penetrating. Then the figure jerked its head. “Come on. Quickly.”

“We weren’t followed.”

“Yeah, you were. By us.”

Another unsettled glance exchanged between them. But in the end, they stepped into the alley, and the carnivorous neighborhood closed its jaws around them. Far in the distance, the train made its circuitous journey, its mournful whistle like a gash through the quieting dusk.

* * * * *

By the time Koh stopped crying in Hound Dog’s arms the sunset outside the infirmary window had begun to bruise. He got ahold of himself in fits and starts, his sobs breaking up into snifflies before he finally wiped his soaking face with his pajama sleeve and quieted. He still wouldn’t look up at Hound Dog. He wasn’t sure of what to expect. The hero was a monolith blocking out the sunlight and the face behind that muzzle was locked in perpetual fury, even though his grip was incredibly gentle.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“For what?” Hound Dog asked.

“For hurting people.” He clutched the fur on Hound Dog’s costume. “Shin said feeling bad about it doesn’t fix anything. But I can’t help it.”

“Do you always feel sorry?”

“Uh-huh.” His voice was already cracking again. “Because it never stops.”

Hound Dog angled one clawed finger under Koh’s chin and tilted his head up. The boy wasn’t an attractive sight. That gaunt little face was streaked and crusted with snot.

“I know we just met,” Hound Dog said. “But can I ask you to do something?” Koh nodded. “I’d like you to stop being sorry for what’s happened. Just for a little while.”

“I don’t think I can.”
“Do your best. Just so you can see how it feels. Can you do your best?”

Koh sniffed and wiped his nose again. He didn’t accomplish much more than smearing the mess around. “I’ll try.”

“Thank you,” he said. Koh wouldn’t stop staring at him now. “Do I look scary?”

“Uh-huh. But that’s okay. Nice people can look scary. And scary people can look nice.” His jaw set a little firmer. “I learned that.”

“All by yourself? They told me you were smart, but I didn’t know you were that smart.”

Color rose in Koh’s cheeks and he looked away. “I’m not, though. I never even went to school.”

“You’re in a school right now. Would you like to go to a few classes with the other students? The teachers won’t mind.” He remembered the gnashing abomination that Dark Shadow had become, Koh lying in a pool of his own terror-vomit. “Maybe not Aizawa’s. But there are plenty of others.”

What he could see of Koh’s face contorted and spasmed. He recognized this from Eri. It was what happened when someone was trying to smile with muscles that no longer remembered how.

“If that’s okay,” Koh said, barely audible.

“It will be. But I think we should go to your room first. Class is finished for the day anyway.”

“Okay.” He looked back up at Hound Dog. “And you don’t have to worry about leaving me alone when you go to work. I’m fine by myself.”

“I’m working right now.”

“Huh? But you’re a hero.”

“Heroes do lots of things. Right now, my job is to take care of you.” He rubbed Koh’s cheek clean. “And in case something does come up, one of the other heroes at this school will be with you instead. Understand? As long as you’re here, you’ll never be alone.”

Koh stayed in the same pose, hair over his molten eyes, shivering like a stray cat left out in the rain. Then, slowly, he raised his hand to his mouth and bit down. And bit harder. By the time Hound Dog realized what he was doing and tried to get him to stop he whimpered in pain and pulled his teeth back, the skin dashed with grooves already welling blood.

“I’m sorry.” He’d started crying again. “I’m sorry. I was supposed to wake up.”

Hound Dog huffed through his mask and stood, cradling Koh to his chest. The boy kept touching his wounded hand. Keeping the pain fresh. Reminding him this was real. The acrid smell of his shame burned Hound Dog’s nose. He looked for bandages with his free hand and thought to himself that Nezu and the others had better purge this child’s Quirk fast, because as difficult as that task might be, it was just the beginning. There was sickness here that ran deeper than medicine alone could cure.

* * * * *

News from the city trickled back to U.A. little by little, and not all of it was positive. While the city’s cleanup was already mostly complete and casualties were thankfully low, its ringmasters – Shigaraki, Horooka, and Akane “Metalhead” Kitae – were all still at large, and Mosei-Santo was succumbing to
worse degradation than ever. Civilians had begun to evacuate completely, many of them staying with relatives in Tokyo or beyond until they could be assured the danger was past. Public unrest had been quelled somewhat now that Koh Kyoumoto (his name and appearance withheld) had been “brought to justice,” but it was just a momentary calm, and Musutafu’s outer wards grew ever more malignant.

The students tried to remember how to be normal. Gossip turned to less apocalyptic topics. Efforts towards final exams were redoubled. The remaining injured returned to campus – Nejire Hadou was greeted with a brief and sublimely awkward half-hug from Amajiki that she would cheerfully hold over his head until the end of recorded time, and Iida was buried in both congratulations and cake, the latter thanks to Satou, who’d doubled up on his baking for both Iida’s and Midoriya’s recovery.

Then there was Bakugo. He’d unceremoniously shown up at class, slouched in his usual seat as if the last two weeks had never happened. He and Aizawa had exchanged a single hard and icy stare before lessons began and that was all. No one commented on it, except maybe for Mineta, who’d looked ready to say something suicidally witty before Sero had gagged him. Even Midoriya had kept his distance, as if Bakugo had been a mirage and focusing on him too close would cause him to disappear completely. The only thing heralding any of this had been some unusually restrained shouting from Bakugo’s room the previous night, but only Kirishima and Uraraka had the full details, and neither of them were talking.

That didn’t stop people from badgering them anyway. Uraraka was out walking the grounds with Ashido, Jirou, and Asui, enjoying a rare sunny day that wasn’t too horrendously cold. Asui was tactful enough not to pry, but Jirou had been asking her what had happened between Kirishima and Bakugo with a casual indifference that grew more and more frantic. Ashido, with her usual subtlety, just said “deets” over and over again. It no longer sounded like a word, or even half a word.

“You two do realize you’re just giving her incentive to never talk to you again, ever,” Asui said.

“I’ve gotta know, though,” Jirou said hungrily. “Those two were studying together last night. At freaking battlefield volume. Did he get un-expelled, or what?”

“No deets,” Uraraka said serenely. “Ask him yourself.”

“Never. Deets!”

“Deets!”

“Never. Deets!”

“As far as I know his number’s still up. But that doesn’t seem to have slowed him down any.”

“He’s been awfully quiet in class,” said Jirou. “I keep wondering what’ll happen if that Koh kid shows up.”

“Oh my God, can he?” Ashido said, all deets forgotten. “Can he, please?”

Koh and his moderately terrifying chaperone had already been sighted several times in the halls, and he’d allegedly sat in on a few classes with General Studies. He’d been cleaned up and dressed properly (which really just meant a nicer hoodie and new shoes; a proposal to give him his own uniform had been vetoed by Hound Dog as too much, too fast), and while he hadn’t lost that haunted look on his face, the few glimpses they’d gotten of him at least looked like a normal kid at a distance. The only insight they’d gotten into him otherwise came from Shinsou, who’d bumped into Todoroki again and said in his usual laconic way that he’d been quiet but nice enough.

“Wonder why they’re sticking with General Studies for him,” Jirou said. “Maybe our stuff is too advanced?”
“It’s Tokoyami,” said Asui.

“Huh? What about him?”

“Remember how he looked really nervous when he came back from the infirmary? I think he felt guilty about Dark Shadow going wild like that. Koh must’ve gotten a full-on look at him. Not to mention what Iida told us. Don’t know what went down between him and that Yuurei guy, but it must have been bad. And Koh was watching the whole thing.” She rubbed her chin. “The teachers are probably keeping them apart so the kid doesn’t get traumatized.”

“That’s so unfair,” said Uraraka. “Tokoyami puts on that broody act but he’s really sensitive about his appearance. And now there’s this latest weirdness with Dark Shadow on top of it.”

The outburst in the cafeteria had not been an isolated incident. Dark Shadow was getting restless. It wasn’t dangerous, or even particularly mean – it just kept popping out at inopportune times to loudly voice its opinion like a bratty younger sibling, and every time Tokoyami reacted a little less gracefully. They’d actually seen him fighting to keep it down the morning Bakugo had come back, and during classes it had interrupted Aizawa twice with answers to rhetorical questions, prompting Aizawa to erase Dark Shadow and threaten Tokoyami to leave if he couldn’t keep it under control. It had stayed quiet after that. But after class Uraraka had trailed him for a little while and glimpsed him muttering to a yellow-eyed patch of dark threading from his shirtsleeve, both their faces ashamed.

“Maybe it’s just evolving, or something,” said Jirou. “He’ll get the hang of it.”

Ashido groaned. “Evolving, great. As if he wasn’t overpowered enough already.”

“Eh. We got a few guys right in our class that can shut him down hard.”

“Not me, though! Don’t get me wrong, I could do some really badass stuff with my Quirk too, but I can’t because it’d be totally villainous and that’s not my thing. Did I tell you about that night with Koh and the car, when I-”

“Yeah, you told us. Like four times now.”

“Speaking of which,” said Asui. “Look.”

They followed her finger. Walking amongst the skeletal trees on campus was the familiar Neanderthal silhouette of Hound Dog, his breath jetting white through the holes in his muzzle. Koh, bundled up in coat and scarf, was perched on his shoulder like an underfed owl.

“Aww, that’s cute,” said Uraraka. “Right, Ashido? …Ashido?”

Ashido didn’t answer. Her jaw was clamped shut, hands pressed to her heart. She seemed to vibrate in place. From the depths of her throat came a squeal so high-pitched that Hound Dog looked around in puzzlement.

“Back off, everyone, she’s gonna blow,” Jirou said drily.

“I’m going to hug him,” said Ashido. “I have to hug him. I will literally die if I don’t hug him.”

“Hey, you do you. I’m keeping my distance. Hound Dog is crazy intense.”

“Kind of wish we could take a picture of this,” Asui said, as Ashido ran up to them. “But we’re not allowed. Does that seem a little weird to anyone else? They didn’t tell us to keep Eri a secret like they are with Koh.”
“Maybe it’s because the League never got their hands on Eri in the first place,” Uraraka said, grateful that Ashido was occupying most of their attention.

“Maybe,” Asui said. Ashido was now openly pleading. “I wonder if Yuurei’s seeing this.”

“Screw him,” said Jirou. “He had his chance.”

“He can’t be all bad, though. Right?” Uraraka said hesitantly. “At least he tried to look after him.”

“We don’t know that. But I guess he’s better than Horooka, at least. I bet if she somehow made it on campus she wouldn’t be able to go five minutes without trying to kill all of us.”

“Yeah,” said Uraraka. “You’re right.”

From where they stood, they watched Hound Dog turn his head and consult with Koh, who gave a small nod. He heaved a sigh and acquiesced, plucking the boy off his shoulder and handing him down. Ashido beamed and held out her arms. And in that pose Uraraka remembered how she saw Mirai, arms outstretched on the street below and her smile bright and crooked as a cracked mirror and somehow desperate, as if she’d been beseeching Uraraka for something she couldn’t understand well enough to give.

* * *

Shigaraki’s room was a graveyard of game consoles; he’d largely abandoned the habit for more worthwhile pursuits, even if he couldn’t quite drop the metaphors. The irregular lumps of glass and plastic sat in piles and gathered dust, looking like calcified fungus in the poor light. Most of the illumination here came from Shigaraki’s laptop, which he pecked at with stumbling, amateurish bursts – Shin guessed that his Quirk made keyboards a constant headache. There was a shabby cot obscured somewhere in the teetering heaps of junk. Somewhere else, he knew, were the files that the League of Villains had liberated from the Yard.

Mr. Compress was here with him, both his masks removed. He’d guided Shin to a chair and left him to stew at Shigaraki grumbled at his computer. Compress watched Shin the whole time. They still didn’t trust him not to use his Quirk.

“You wouldn’t gain much by peeking, in any case,” Compress said, causing Shin to jerk guiltily in his seat. “Shigaraki just likes to keep a diary of each day’s events. It keeps one’s mind on task.”

“He doesn’t need to know that,” Shigaraki said peevishly.

“We trusted him to come this far. What’s another secret or two?”

“Whatever.” He pushed back from the computer and turned his chair to Shin. “So, like we discussed. Your new job’s to infiltrate U.A. and gather intel. As much as you can, indefinitely. I’ll tell you when you can stop. Don’t expect that to happen anytime soon.”

“We’re primarily interested in young Kyoumoto, of course,” Compress added. “Particularly the schedule on which U.A. provides his injections. But you shouldn’t limit yourself to him alone. Explore the place. Mingle! Record anything that sounds useful and bring it back to us. We’ll find a use for it, somewhere, somehow.”

“They’re not idiots,” said Shin.

“Debatable,” Shigaraki retorted.
“What I mean is, they’ll know I’m around. I don’t think I’m going to pick up any real bombshells just listening to them chit-chat in the cafeteria.”

“I don’t expect anything earth-shattering,” said Shigaraki. “I have my own eyes and ears on that place where it counts, anyway. But I’d like to know the general mood there. They might be feeling all high and mighty now, but that’s going to disappear fast when the medicine starts to run out. No way can they get a finished serum in time.”

“And if they do?”

Shin’s voice was hushed and flat. Shigaraki and Compress exchanged a glance.

“We know where your priorities lie,” said Compress. “On the extremely slim chance that they do successfully remove the boy’s Quirk…well, it would be a serious blow. But we would hope to retain your services in the future, on the condition that we let Kyoumoto be.”

“Ugh, and I’ve already paid Giran in advance. But fine. There are always more plans to be laid.” Shigaraki shrugged. “Still, I wouldn’t hold my breath. You’ve seen it yourself. Heroes always fail when it matters. Why would they change now?”

“Just so long as we understand each other.”

“Fine, fine. Just do what I say and patrol the grounds. I bet you’ve always wanted to see U.A. for yourself, anyway.”

“I never gave a shit about that place.”

Silence. Then Shigaraki looked up at Compress. “He’s making it really hard not to like him.”

“You’ll be coming back here to rest,” Compress said. “Don’t over-exert yourself. And get to know the others. They’re an eccentric bunch, but quite personable in their way.”

“Just not Toga.”

“Ah, yes. Do show some caution around Toga. Her affections can be…hazardous, when it comes to new people.”

“Can’t be any worse than the other crazy girl I’ve dealt with,” said Shin. “What are you planning to do about her, anyway?”

“Nothing, for now,” Shigaraki replied. “Killing Horooka at this point is too much of a hassle. We’ll just keep our distance.”

“Don’t need to tell me twice.”

“Speaking of keeping your distance. Compress, get the thing, would you?”

Compress nodded and flicked up another marble. It burst into a small wooden box that he deftly caught in his artificial hand. With a certain amount of aplomb, he presented it to Shin.

“That crowbar of yours must feel like an old friend at this point, but you may desire something a bit more potent going forward,” said Compress. “Please accept this, as a token of our continued good relations.”

Shin took the box from him and opened it cautiously. Nestled inside, gleaming like a smear of oil, was a .38 revolver. Six bullets twinkled in a neat little row underneath.
“Even with my connections, these things are a pain in the ass to get ahold of,” Shigaraki said. “More trouble than they’re worth for most of us. Still, you might get some use out of it. Don’t ask for more ammo. You’re not there to go on a shooting spree.”

Shin gingerly took out the gun. It was far heavier than it looked.

“And make sure you know how to use it,” Shigaraki added. His teeth glinted around the lacquered palm on his face. “If you kill someone, I want it to be on purpose.”

* * *

Classes persisted. The teachers were merciless. Ectoplasm’s lessons in particular threatened to boil their brains inside their heads. Even Yaoyorozu appeared to be struggling, though that may not have been due to the lesson plan. Nezu had approached her privately for help in manufacturing the M.o.I’s tranquilizer, and while no one had gotten to see the fruits of her labor, it was definitely taxing her endurance. Meanwhile, Bakugo was burning through the material and Kirishima didn’t seem as lost as he usually did. It was becoming a cause for concern.

Midoriya didn’t notice. He jotted down notes with perfunctory ease. His mind was on other things. It had been two days since his little “training session” in Beta Gym, and the only indication that the teachers had noticed was a gentle rebuke from All Might not to abuse his body too much. He was being granted leeway. This didn’t improve his mood. His usually sunny expression was unsmiling and taut. It stayed that way even when Class 1-A was dismissed from Ectoplasm’s lesson, and Bakugo emerged from the throng like an apocalyptic horseman.

“Deku, you bastard!”

He didn’t respond to that, even as Bakugo’s palm smashed into the lockers beside his head. Coming from him, “you bastard” could be an insult or a friendly hello.

“Don’t think I didn’t see you daydreaming back there,” he snarled. “What, you think you’re so much better than me you can half-ass everything right at the goddamn finish line!?”

“Sorry, Kacchan. It’s been a long week.”

“Dumbass, if I can stay focused after the mountain of shit that got dropped on us then you’ve got no excuse!”

“Hey, Bakugo, might wanna lower your arm there,” Sero said. The others were already rolling their eyes and walking off. “You look like you’re about to ask him on a date.”

“Piss off, flat-face.”

“Kirishima’s gonna get jealous,” Mineta added.

“You too, zit!” He turned his attention back to Midoriya. “You better come at me with everything you’ve got, Deku. If you sleepwalk through this shit like Icy-Hot did at the sports festival then you and me are gonna have a proper showdown after I’m gone. Doesn’t matter how hard you punks try, me and Kirishima are gonna stomp holes through every goddamn one of you!”

Midoriya raised his head. That cool green gaze met Bakugo’s. The air felt alive with latent electricity.

“Bring it,” he said.

Bakugo’s grin gnashed like a combine harvester and he pressed off the wall and stomped away. The
locker was charred where his palm had been. At this point the hall was mostly empty; Bakugo’s little outbursts were old news.

“You two are supposed to be friends?” said Shin. “Geez. Even I’m not that desperate.”

He was leaning beside a window opposite from Midoriya, the sunlight twinkling off the fibers from his hood. Unlike U.A.’s students, this display of aggressive pageantry was new to him. For a minute there he’d seriously thought Bakugo was going to try and maim someone.

He had taken an interest in Class 1-A for obvious reasons. He didn’t attend their homeroom – being in a closed space with Eraserhead would have been a colossally dumb move – but he stalked through the rest of their classes, pacing amidst the desks, peeking at their notebooks. He reserved an especially deep scowl for Tokoyami; that one looked to have his own troubles, his notes scrawled and distracted. Shin didn’t feel much sympathy. He had his own notebook tucked in his coat and kept anything of interest jotted in there, which, as he’d predicted, hadn’t amounted to much. Even with the city outside in ever-greater turmoil, finals were finals. Students and teachers alike were focused on prepping for the exams. Nothing short of actual Armageddon could break that spell.

He’d seen Koh. He’d seen his new guardian. He’d seen the way Koh clung to the fur on Hound Dog’s costume, and he’d touched the fur trim on his own jacket and felt a rotted anger rise in his gullet. But he’d choked it down. The kid needed someone to care for him. At least this place would feed him right. But trying to get closer was useless – at one point he’d taken a cautious, experimental step on some loose gravel near where they’d walked and Hound Dog’s head had immediately twitched in that direction. Even with his Quirk’s sound dampening, the guy’s senses were just too sharp. Shin was just glad that his power erased his scent. Compress had told him there was almost no fooling the Hound Hero’s nose.

He ploughed the seas of tension around the faculty as Mirai continued to elude them. He attempted to breach the principal’s office, but Nezu had locked his door – and God only knew what other precautions he’d set in place, so Shin let him be. He watched Koh receive his shot at the infirmary and marked the date and time. He followed Koh to his room as the sun set, only for Hound Dog to deliberately turn and barricade the elevator’s entrance with his bulk. He went outside and watched the window-light turn on, then off, and sent up a feeble hope that Koh’s sleep would be restful and without dreams. He watched Midoriya, the inheritor of One for All, and he wasn’t impressed.

Midoriya started down the hall, head down, gripping the straps of his book bag. Shin fell into step behind him.

Shigaraki had spoken of him with exceptional venom, but at this point Shin figured that was more because of what the kid represented than who he actually was. He’d seen All Might on television like everyone else, and this neurotic pipsqueak with his gorse-bush haircut projected none of the unstoppability the Symbol of Peace had possessed. Maybe he could throw a mean punch, but that only got you so far.

The hall was empty, now. Shin trailed him like a wintry revenant.

“Explosion-boy had one thing right,” he said to Midoriya’s back. “You do seem distracted. Worried that he’s getting kicked out? Or maybe you’re smart enough to keep your mind on bigger things.”

Those ornate red shoes kept walking. Their step was steady and measured.

“I guess a whole lot of shit did come falling on you this month. In more ways than one. You can blame Mirai for that, but she’s not really one to say sorry.” He scratched his scarred cheek. “You’d better smile while you can, kid. You can’t stop what’s coming.”
Midoriya turned around and looked at him.

His gaze hit Shin like a battering ram; he shoved his fist in his mouth to keep from screaming and wheeled back, his booteels squealing on the tiled floor. Images of disaster sprayed across his mind like playing cards, cover blown heroes arriving plans undone the League’s fury the coming vengeance Koh forever out of reach the M.o.I. alive and waiting the Yard the Yard the Yard, until he realized that even though he’d flung himself to the side of the hall Midoriya’s eyes hadn’t followed him. He’d seen nothing. Shin pressed up against the lockers, hand to his jackhammering heart. His unmarked skin was milk-white and waxy.

“Didn’t see,” he panted, and told himself to stop talking. He was being ridiculous. Maybe the kid had though he’d heard a friend calling to him or something. He’d almost exploded Shin’s heart in his chest by accident.

Midoriya’s expression remained neutral. He looked down at the floor. Shin followed his gaze and his heartbeat snarled up all over again.

He’d left a scuffmark on the tile when he’d freaked out. A small, inconspicuous black streak among many others. It was unnoticeable. But Midoriya noticed it. As Shin watched, he rose his head again, turned, and continued down the hall without a word.

It could have been a coincidence. It was no coincidence.

Shin thought back. The kid hadn’t done anything like this before but he hadn’t kept his eyes on Midoriya the whole time he was here. Had he been pulling stunts like this for the last few days? Turning at random, grabbing at air, checking mirrors and listening close? In any case, he didn’t stop again. As Shin’s pulse returned to normal, that bobbing head of green hair turned a corner and disappeared from sight. A little while later, the bell rang. Class was back in session.

Shin slipped his hand into his coat and took out the revolver and opened the cylinder. The bullets inside shone like promises. He looked back down the hallway.

“Izuku Midoriya, huh.”

The cylinder snapped shut.

* * *

They were led to a small, sad laundromat where the machines were nicotine-stain yellow and the tiles haunted by the ghosts of spilled detergent. The machines were all still and the flyspecked lights overhead didn’t shine bright enough to cast reflections; the front-loaders’ windows were round and dark as gunshot wounds. The fingersnapping kid opened the door for them. Metalhead waited inside.

They knew about the piercings and the hashmarked meat of her arm; they knew about the compulsive smoking. They’d expected bodyguards. But she met them alone, seated on one of the rickety plastic tables between the machines, and barely glanced up from her phone when they trickled in.

“Hey,” she said. “Give me a second, just updating some people.”

They side-eyed each other as she finished texting. Then she got up off the table and approached them, hand held out.

“Kitae. Metalhead. Call me whatever. Don’t worry about the cops, this place is owned by one of my friends’ aunts or something, we won’t be bothered. You got a leader?”
“That’s me,” said the young man in the hoodie. “Not a handshaker, sorry. But I brought this.”

He held up the cigarettes and her eyes lit up. “Ooh, I’m getting presents now. That’s my brand and everything.” She took the carton and turned it over in her hands. “Gloves. No handshakes. This a Quirk thing?”

The man blinked in surprise. She’d barely even glanced at him but she’d already pieced it together.

“Yeah, it is.”

“Show me?”

He shrugged and walked over to the table and pulled off one of the gloves. The hand underneath was normal, if a little clammy. He pressed two fingers to the surface, waited a second, and then swiped them across. The material tore apart like it had gone weak as butter, leaving a sharp-lipped fissure running down its length. Metalhead whistled.

“Not bad. What’s it called?”

“Gash. It’s not as good as it looks.” He put the glove back on. “Takes a little bit to warm up, only works if I drag my fingers across something, doesn’t affect all materials equally. And I get blisters if I do it too much. When you get right down to it, it’s just a watered-down version of Tomura Shigaraki’s Quirk. I never even bothered with the League.”

“Yeah, well, we’re not that discriminating. Everyone’s got a use. But if you know somebody with a Quirk that lets them transport people over long distances really fast, I’d appreciate it. We lost our guy and it’s been a real pain in the ass.”

“I could look around.”

“So you’re in?”

“Not sure what this whole operation is just yet.” He looked around at the silent machines. “Whatever you’ve done to this neighborhood is freaking my guys out. We don’t want to get in too deep without knowing what we’re in for.”

“We’re just gaining a foothold. Little by little.” She pushed open the front doors. “Come on, you’ll want to see this. It’s not too far from here.”

The fingersnapping kid had already evaporated. Metalhead led them through the streets, lighting up a fresh cigarette. She walked with an easy, confident stride. Thread of smoke haloed her head.

“By the way, what’re you called?”

“Yori Kizutatchi.”

“Thanks, but not what I meant. I mean your group. You all got a name?”

He glanced back at them and was met with confused looks. “I don’t think so.”

“Great. I like you better already. We keep getting these weirdos who sound like shitty punk bands. Lots of dogs, for some reason. Reservoir Dogs, Plague Dogs, Dogs of War…don’t think I’ve even seen any dog-looking guys with them, either. Bugs the hell out of me.” She stopped. “Here we are.”

It was an apartment building like all the rest, but many of its windows were blown out and the façade was pitted and cut. Collateral damage from Mirai Horooka. Some of the original residents left. Some
of the others had already been on Metalhead’s side. The latter group let in more of their friends like an infestation of rats. When she knocked and the front door opened, they were greeted by throngs of people on the steps, in the halls, in the cramped apartments beyond. Nearly every door was wide open. People came and went freely. It felt like a cross between a house party and a war room.

“Someone take this up to my room!” Metalhead shouted, and tossed the cigarettes into the mob. A hand grabbed it and pulled it down. She led them up the stairs, voices bursting like fireworks from around them.

“Metalhead!” someone cried. “The guys in Safehouse 2 are complaining they’re almost outta booze!”

“So tell them to suck it up! What do they think this is, a vacation? We keep looting to a minimum until we’ve got better control of the territory.”

“Hey, Metalhead, bad news. Cops are closing in on Safehouse 5. You know, the arcade near Santo?”

“Shit, I like that place. How many people we got there? Are they already busted?”

“Nine or ten guys. They’re nervous but no one’s breaking down the door yet.”

“Tell them to keep quiet. If the cops don’t have heroes with them they’ll probably just move on. If they actually go inside then fight ‘em off and run like hell.”

“Yo, Kitae. Speaking of running like hell…uh, you know that building we’ve got by the Beru district? Just got word that Mirko’s closing in.”

“Fuck me, I was wondering when the Ragin’ Rabbit would show up.” She hissed out smoke. “Okay, have everyone there hide and lay low. If she comes knocking then don’t even bother trying to fight, and don’t run out into the open. She’s almost as good at covering distance as that asshole Hawks. Break down walls, stick to the sewers, do whatever, but don’t let her get a bead on them. We’ve got a distraction coming up soon, so hopefully they can hang tight ‘til then.”

“Got it. Mainichi tipped us off on that one, by the way. He’s starting to look pretty worn-out.”

“I told him to get some sleep hours ago. Let him know that if he doesn’t lie down I’ll knock his fat ass out myself. Goddamn top-tenners, I swear,” she muttered to an increasingly bewildered Kizutatchi and crew. “We figure that pretty soon they’re going to drop Endeavor on us. Trying to batten down the hatches for it.”

“You, uh, seem to be doing pretty well,” he said.

“It’s a lot of spinning plates. But thanks. I think I’ve found my calling. Never did like Career Day at school.”

“We heard you’re taking orders from a fifteen-year old,” one of the others said.

“She’s not really an ‘orders’ type.” They rounded another stairwell. “She just clears a path and I hold things together going forward. Is she the leader? Yeah, maybe. Not sure I’d call her that myself, though.”

“Then what would you call her?”

The door to the rooftop was ahead of them. Metalhead paused, her scarred palm on the crash bar.
“Since you caught me in a poetic mood… she’s a nuclear bomb with big ideas.”

She pushed open the door and they emerged into the dying sunlight.

There were more people here but they stood still and stayed silent, assembled like petitioners around a figure at the far end of the rooftop. Mirai Horooka sat crosslegged, head down, hands splayed. A cheap plastic pair of headphones was clamped around her ears. In the quieting night, they could hear the screech and snarl of the music even from where they stood.

“That’s her?” Kizutatchi said. He whispered it and didn’t know why.

“Mhm. She’s recharging. I had my buddy Mainichi make her a playlist and everything, but she turns it up so high I doubt she really notices.” Everyone watched as Metalhead hunkered down in front of Horooka and waved a hand in front of her face. The black-on-black eyes rose. Her face was stern. Metalhead gazed into it without fear.

“Five-o-clock train’s coming up,” she said, after Mirai took off the headphones. Mirai looked at her uncomprehending. The noise in her head screeched and lashed too loud for the words to make it through. Metalhead pointed behind her, where the train tracks paralleled the horizon, and then she understood. She got to her feet and threw the headphones aside. They clattered on the cement.

“U.A. says the kid’s with the cops,” Metalhead said, louder. “No idea if it’s true, but I’m pretty sure you missed your chance. What’re you going to do now?”

“There is nothing for us to do,” said Mirai. “There is no one for us to be.”

Kizutatchi and his friends huddled together. There was an eerie fascination on the faces around them. A religious devotion. Their destroying idol, back on her feet.

“But the signal doesn’t stop,” she continued. “The message will be heard. In the end of days are no more tomorrows. The sound… rings out…”

The train’s whistle rent the air. Its lights streaked down the tracks before them. Careening obliviously to oblivion. The ashes from Metalhead’s cigarette caught the wind and spiraled in their stinking incense. The growing dark turned her piercings to alien constellations. And as Mirai stepped up to the rooftop’s edge, and Shin Yuurei stalked through the shadows of those with lives more kind than his, and Koh Kyoumoto held his new caretakers close and waited to awake from the dream, and Osamu Nakayama feverishly composed emails like evil incantations, and All Might looked into the deepening dark and the vicious shapes that resided there, and Izuku Midoriya and Katsuki Bakugo and all their fellow students struggled to think of things more mundane as the malignant strangeness of Musutafu festered around them, she heard it – the decayed pulse, the destroying heartbeat, the black ocean of noise that would buoy her away from this world and into the shattered world to come.

Mirai Horooka raised her hand.

“The thunder,” she said, “and the roar.”

Chapter End Notes
Part 2: Melancholy World

Chapter Notes

Long black night, morning frost
I'm still here, but all is lost.
- The Mountain Goats, "Cry for Judas"

How did we get here, and how do we leave?
- Everything Everything, "A Fever Dream"

What about me?

During the long weeks spent beneath the cold mountain, staring up from his cot at the camera lenses that shone like beetle-shells in the steel walls, his fresh scars itching beneath gauze, Shin decided his troubles had begun with that question.

The orphanage in which he’d grown up had been nice enough – varnished wood, clean sheets, three meals prepared as well as meals could be for entire hordes of ravenous children at a time. Japan had stepped up their budget for the caretaking of parentless children since the pre-Quirk days, for the sake of its image if nothing else. The general populace got anxious enough over the constant threat of villain attacks without the media trotting out photos of the rail-thin, dirty-faced kids that would be left in their wake. But no matter how much money the country poured into its foster system, the people themselves didn’t change. Good luck getting adopted when you were a living reminder that the Hero Society let far too much fall through the cracks. Good luck staying out of trouble when you were surrounded by other bitter children who could see their futures turning to dust before they were old enough to shave.

They’d been sorted into different wings by gender and age, around two dozen to a wing. Shin and his peers must have been about seven or eight at the time, old enough so that their Quirks had ceased to be a novelty, when some of them would begin thinking up mischievous possibilities on how to use their powers. The orphanage staff, overworked and stern but generally well-meaning, had given them a lesson on Quirks. Their usage, the laws around them. Shin and the others were told that harsh punishments were in store for anyone who used their power without permission; it was what separated normal people from the villains. And even more than that, a Quirk was ultimately just another function of the body. Anyone who used theirs too much would almost invariably suffer some terrible side-effect.

And that was when little Shin’s hand had gone up.

What about me?

He was one of the lifers, someone left to the orphanage before he’d learned to speak full sentences. A furtive, huddling rodent of a child, the kind who sought out unused and dusty corners to get away from the noise. In that respect his Quirk had suited him just fine. He was already so quiet and unassuming that the staff just assumed it was a basic invisibility Quirk – they had so many children to process and register and the fine details of their powers often went unnoticed until later. All he had to do was think about it, like closing a fist, and he’d be gone. And he could stay that way for as long as he liked. He stayed out of trouble. People didn’t look at him much anyway.
The teacher had brushed it off, said that Shin needed to be careful no matter how safe he thought his Quirk might be. But then the other boys’ heads had turned and he’d felt their gazes prickle him like the spines of some venomous plant, and even at his age he’d felt the shift of something irrevocable in the atmosphere.

The start of his troubles. Broken windows and vandalized walls. Toys and homework stolen and turning up beneath his bed. Kids running to the staff with bloodied noses and lacerated knees and every finger always pointing to Shin. He protested his innocence even as all the eyes around him grew harder. His caretakers, suspecting what Shin already knew, gently told him not to use his Quirk anymore and placed him on closer supervision. But it didn’t help. Suddenly every petty grudge the other children held found a common target. His desk was carved up and his bedding was stolen. Thumbtacks in his shoes. The words DISAPPEAR scrawled over and over in permanent marker on his shirts. The staff couldn’t hold all of it back. He wanted to disappear. He wasn’t allowed.

No better scapegoat than a child who can’t be seen.

One day one of the older boys, a gangling thirteen-year old, fell down the stairs. A broken arm and a concussion. Between his wails of pain he’d blamed the invisible kid, swore up and down that he’d been pushed. It was the last straw. Guilty or innocent, Shin couldn’t stay there anymore, not with that sort of accusation hanging over him. He’d been transferred to another orphanage across Osaka, escorted out with a suitcase holding what few possessions the other children hadn’t destroyed. He’d said nothing when the staff had told him the news.

(Here was the truth: he hadn’t pushed the older boy but he had watched him fall. Listened to the soft thumps of his flesh against the stairs and the strangled screams of pain. His wide wet eyes staring, incognito. Waiting for whatever would happen to happen.)

He didn’t remember much of the second home. Smaller and dimmer than the first. Information about his Quirk had to be shared with everyone, but this time the fatal detail – the fact that he could stay unseen indefinitely – was omitted. But everything was still wrong. The other children, whose parents had left them at doorsteps or been pulped by villains or just plain left home one day and never came back until they’d been forced to dial the police and ask for help through their tears, could still smell the outcast on him. Ten years old and he was treated like something diseased. One day something in the new orphanage had been broken. A lamp or a vase. No one said his name but he thought he felt once again the prickle of those poisonous stares.

He didn’t wait this time. He lay in his bed wide-eyed and electrified with resolve and fear, and when everyone’s breathing had gone deep with sleep he’d quietly packed some clothes and slipped his invisibility on like an overcoat and disappeared into the night.

Most children think of running away from home, at some point or another. Most don’t follow through, and most who do rarely make it to the end of the block before the enormity of their action dawns on them and they run back to whatever punishment they tried to flee from. For the few who shake off that fear and continue on, the future is usually dim; the world has no end of unkindness for someone so vulnerable. But Shin, homeless and unmoored and unnoticeable, took to it fairly well. Whatever he needed, he stole; even if someone was looking directly at the food at some street stall or café table, all he had to do was lay hands on it for a little bit and it would fade from their attention as surely as he did. Any unoccupied room or bed or shower was his for the evening. He took handheld video games and comic books and spend his time in public parks and abandoned alleys, as stray cats and creeping strangers alike passed him without a second glance.

Shin never did learn who his parents were. He’d asked, of course, and gotten the usual cautious half-answer the staff reserved for such children. All they’d said was his mother had brought him to them.
As he got older and meaner he put together the pieces and figured that either she’d been a drunk or he’d been unwanted or both; a father had never been part of the story they’d given him. Unfettered as he was, he’d had the potential to become something truly horrific. There was no end of wickedness he could have wrought with his Quirk.

But he never did. In this way too he was like a ghost, aimlessly drifting among the living in search of something he could sense but not name. Between his experiences at the orphanage and the subsequent years on the streets, he was wracked by paranoia. He tried to hook up with various street gangs and his power always aroused their interest, but all it took was one suspicious glance from someone before the old memories flared up and he faded out of sight again. His own crimes were banal – he stole whatever he wanted but he never wanted much, and he never physically hurt anyone, if only because he flinched away from other people’s touch as if their skin was radioactive. He would follow mothers and salarymen home and slip through their front doors behind them, haunting the rooms of their families, watching them eat and laugh and argue, the hollowness in him gnawing with sharp teeth.

So his Quirk had come with a consequence after all.

He felt himself receding further into someone he’d never wanted to become.

Five years of living like that, bouncing aimlessly around the cities of Japan – Osaka to Tokyo to Kyoto but always pulled back to where he’d been raised, as if the familiar architecture had become his foster family. The weather cooling and warming again, the people’s fashions shifting, the TV news spitting out the same noise. Heroes smiling down at him from every billboard and every screen. All Might’s grin resplendent. Sometimes he’d look at that face and feel something venomous twist in his gut. His body grew. His lip prickled with stubble. And one day just after the air began to bite, with a mind tranquil and blank as a pond beneath midwinter ice, he took a crowbar and wandered an Osakan street and smashed every shopfront window he saw. The glass rendering new constellations on the asphalt. The alarms’ profanity rending the night. And as those sirens blended with the sirens of the approaching police cars, he sat on the curb with the crowbar on his lap, only one thought swimming through his head: someone, please look at me.

The police were not bad people. They took the crowbar away and led him into a car’s backseat with no twisted wrists or “accidental” thumps on the head. Maybe it was something in Shin’s face, or the vague, hoarse answers he’d given to their questions, but they knew it wasn’t some hardened criminal sitting amongst all that glass. But then they processed him, and took down information about his Quirk, and what Shin said so alarmed them that they put the news out on the general band for further instruction regarding the proper containment measures for someone who could just fade out from the world on a whim. The signal went out, and found its ways into the ears of the Yard.

His transfer was abrupt. People with serious voices and comforting smiles. They gave him soda in the backseat of their car. At first he was almost grateful for the attention, though the room was small and unfurnished and windowless. It wasn’t until claustrophobia started to brush his neck like insect legs, and the eyes of his “counselors” turned darting and evasive, that he began to worry. Then the Yard stepped up their experiments. The compressed limbs and the long knives. The roadmap of his scars growing larger. No one would abuse a body like this if they ever planned to let it see daylight again. He bit and kicked. He kept up his Quirk and exercised tirelessly in some vain hope of building muscles strong enough to fight them off. Instead they stripped away his cushions, and dimmed his lights, and clapped chains around his wrists and ankles. Shin went quiet again. For a little while.

Then he heard them speak it. One technician muttering to another during routine bloodwork: “maxillofacial biopsy.” He didn’t understand most of it but he recognized the key syllable and he saw their scalpels gleam. He fought. He screamed. He begged for them to cut anywhere but there.
But the needle went into his neck and the world went dark and when he stirred again his face itched madly under gauze. He spent days curled on his cot and sobbing like a child ten years younger.

It was the final humiliation. He still couldn’t put it into words. It was like the Yard had taken him and carved him into the freak that everyone else had always seen, so that he would always see himself the way they saw him. He could glimpse the malformed flesh in the shining edges of his cotframe. And so it went, buried beneath this sneering apathetic nation, suffering invisibly in a life where it seemed nothing would ever again be possible.

* * *

The alarms woke him up.

He’d never heard the Yard’s klaxons before but they blared loud enough to shake his teeth in their sockets. He grimaced and clapped his hands over his ears, the chains’ jangling drowned out by the alarm. He could see a line of bloody light beneath the door, thin as pencil-lead, pulsing with the noise. He huddled on his cot and waited for it to end.

It didn’t end. Instead the door began to rot. The center of it stained like old fruit and crumbled to flakes of rust. Shin watched dumbfounded as the thick metal decayed to nothing, and saw lean shadows beyond. The fist clenched. He made himself unseen. With all this unexpected sound after so much pained quiet, he felt untethered, like someone dreaming.

The people who stepped into the cell didn’t do much to change his mind. One was a tall figure in an overcoat and top hat, his face covered by a mask of abstract curved lines resembling a jolly grin. The other was a desiccated scarecrow of indeterminate age – Shin had no idea someone could look so old and young at the same time – with his face covered by a smooth and clutching prosthetic hand. The eyes that glared from between those fingers were baleful and bloodshot as a leper’s.

“I really hope this is the right room,” he said. “That damn noise is giving me a headache.”

The man in the top hat produced a thick manila folder and leafed through it. “According to the file, we have arrived.”

“Hey,” the man/boy rasped. “If you’re here, let me know. Everyone else is dead.”

He dropped his Quirk, more out of surprise than anything, at the thought of all those gentle torturers suddenly gone. Both his visitors actually jumped, then the man/boy’s sickle grin flashed around that hand.

“Holy crap,” he said. “I had no idea. Did you, Compress?”

“Not the foggiest.”

“Hee hee. Total game breaker.”

“I think we should introduce ourselves. This young man must be quite put out by the two of us.”

“You first. I’m bad at this.”

“As you say.” With his free hand, the taller man removed his hat and bowed with a flourish. “Mr. Shin Yuurei, I presume? An utmost pleasure to make your acquaintance. Though not quite the right atmosphere for a greeting, what with this irritating alarm.”

“All dead?”
Shin’s voice was a thin creak. It had been a while since he’d let himself say anything.

“You killed them?” he asked, as the tall man straightened up. “All of them?”

“Give us another ten, fifteen minutes,” said the man/boy. “Still smoking some of ‘em out. Their defenses suck, though.”

“They probably chose to devote most of their resources to tormenting you and your fellow prisoners,” said the taller man. “Unwise, in my opinion.”

“Who are you?” Shin asked.

“Yes! Introductions. I am Atsuhiro Sako, known to some as Mr. Compress, and this esteemed personage beside me is—”

“Shigaraki,” he said. “We’re villains.”

“Well. Yes. Ahem. Forgive him, he’s never been the tactful sort.”

“Like I said, I’ve got a headache,” Shigaraki said, and stepped forward. “You. Don’t move and don’t use your Quirk. I’m going to get rid of these stupid chains.”

As Shin looked on, Shigaraki bent low and brushed his fingers against the chains pounded into the floor. The rust spread as fast and smooth as spilled ink on paper, rushing across the links and onto Shin’s manacles. Within seconds, the metal had crumbled to powder. Shin took his free wrist with a shaking hand. He pinched the skin until he saw stars. Shigaraki went back to the entrance, scratching his neck.

“We’re going to take you and the others out of here,” he said. “We’ll drop you off at Tokyo. I don’t feel like leaving you to starve in this pit.”

“But we could also use your help with something, young man,” said Compress. “If you’re willing.”

“If I were you right now, I’d be pretty pissed off,” Shigaraki added. “We can put that to use. Just make it quick. I seriously can’t stand all this noise. Seriously, Compress, why haven’t they cut the alarms yet?”

“What do you want me to do?”

They both turned their heads at that. Shin didn’t need to say anything more. In this pulsing, bloody light, his scars did the talking for him.

“Good, he didn’t need convincing.” Shigaraki elbowed Compress. “We need you to make a little trouble in Musutafu, for starters. Nothing too gruesome, though you’ll have to get your hands dirty. But the really important job is playing babysitter.”

Compress sighed. “He may wish for more detail than that, Shigaraki. Mr. Yuurei, you are one of three inmates currently held at this facility. We think that of the two remaining, one can take care of herself reasonably well. But the other will require supervision. He’s quite young, and we can make considerable use of him. Look after him for a time, and in exchange, we’ll do our best to fulfill whatever wishes you may have. Shigaraki’s resources are quite vast. I’m sure we’ll be able to accommodate you.”

“I’ve been alone,” said Shin. “For a long time. Never had to look after anyone but myself. I don’t really think I’m the guy you need.”
“You’d do a better job than any of us, believe me,” said Shigaraki. “And your Quirk will be necessary. I don’t want any heroes catching a whiff of the brat.”

“Like you, this boy has experienced some… difficult circumstances,” Compress added. He produced the folder again, flipped it open, and pointed out a particular passage to Shin. “This should include all the pertinent facts. Give it a skim, and let us know if it influences your decision at all.”

Hesitantly, Shin took the folder and read. And kept reading. Shigaraki started to fidget. In the dim light the two of them could see Shin’s lips moving laboriously.

“You think he needs help with the big words?” Shigaraki muttered.

“I heard that,” Shin snapped. “It’s not like I’ve been to school lately, okay?”

But he made his way to the end. And they saw the shift in his face. The thinning of his lips, the way he clenched the edges of the paper hard enough to make them crease. Compress started talking again, casual, thoughtful, as if discussing something with the air.

“There’s so much wearisome debate over what makes a ‘hero’ these days. Maybe because they’ve been such a disappointing lot. Do they fight for justice? Do they protect the weak and downtrodden? Then explain this place. The Japanese government gave these men and women its blessing to butcher people down here. Where were the heroes then? What, exactly, is their purpose?” He put his head to the side. “And for that matter, what makes a ‘villain?’ Scarcely anyone seems to ask. A shame, really, because the answer is quite simple. A villain is someone who fights the established order of the world.”

Shin closed the folder.

“It’s someone,” said Compress, “whose heart overflows with rage at the way things are.”

* * *

Shin’s car struck the highway’s guardrail at over 90 mph and then there was no helping him. There was a screeching of metal and shattering of glass and the car flipped over the edge and careened end over end until it smashed into the road below. The engine sparked. The fuel caught. His limp body was already dangling halfway out the windows and the explosion blasted it out the rest of the way, nothing but charred and mangled meat, and then everything went black.

“Man, you suck at this,” Spinner said.

“Give me a break,” Shin replied. “I’ve barely even held one of these controllers before.”

“You’ve got to decelerate going into the turn and accelerate coming out of it. You’ll never get away from the cops if you keep crashing into everything.”

“So what? I just respawn.”

“But you won’t make any progress that way!”

“Play nice, you two,” Dabi drawled.

The League of Villains had inherited a great deal from the dregs of All for One’s empire: a fearsome reputation, allies like Giren, practically unlimited wealth (even now Shigaraki hardly batted an eye at all the money he’d spent in the last several months). Then there were the safehouses, disused corners of Japan’s cities that had been hollowed out and repurposed as bases for All for One’s numerous
subordinates. Most of them had been found and sealed, but not all. Japan was a crowded place. You could do a lot with a handful of real-estate deeds and a few dozen generators. Overhaul had practically made himself a subterranean fortress right beneath a major thoroughfare.

Shigaraki had currently set up shop in a similar series of tunnels near Tokyo’s docks – the only entrance was an inconspicuous door in a disused warehouse, so weak that Shin could have crowbarred it open with a little elbow grease. Compress had expressed concerns about the lack of security, but Shigaraki had countered that, if the heroes actually did choose to come knocking, then no amount of locks would keep them out. And even if they had, there wasn’t much here worth taking. The common area was large and low-ceilinged and dingy, much of the furniture stained and secondhand, scattered haphazardly around the floor. The overall aesthetic was somewhere between a rumpus room and a homeless shelter. Their private rooms were in the tunnels beyond, and most of them weren’t much nicer. No one in the League was interested in the soft life.

In the long months since the Yard had broken open, the villains had entertained themselves as best they could. Twice spent long hours at a table in the corner, rapidly duplicating and dismissing spare change, apparently practicing his Quirk. Dabi, to the others’ mild surprise, turned out to be a voracious reader. And Spinner kept borrowing Shigaraki’s old video game consoles and playing long into the night, awash in the bluish glow of the hideout’s chipped and crummy TV. He’d roped Shin into his hobby right away. He seemed glad to finally have someone he could condescend to.

Shin, who’d just come back from his first spy trip at U.A., didn’t mind it too much. Spinner could get obnoxious but he was easily the most approachable of the League – Compress was too old, Dabi too intense, and with Twice he always felt like a third wheel in the man’s conversations with himself. Toga had gotten uncomfortably close to him when they’d first met and her grin had reminded him way too much of Mirai’s, but then she’d suddenly lost interest and wandered off to annoy Dabi instead.

“It’s probably ‘cause of your face,” Spinner had quietly explained to him. “No fun cutting you up if someone else beat her to it.”

Toga wasn’t here. She’d gone to Shigaraki’s room. He kept summoning them and dismissing them again, still laying his plans. Twice had told Shin that the guy was a real scatterbrain lately, and more focused than ever. As usual, Shin hadn’t been sure which half of the sentence to agree with.

“Anyone checked the news lately?” Dabi asked. He was sprawled out in a tattered tartan recliner whose fabric was almost as patchwork as he was. His defeated books lay in piles at his sides. Right now he was working his way through *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, bitterly complaining about the translation.

“Sure, all the time,” Twice said. The coins multiplied and divided under his hands. “Who cares, I’m busy.”

“Cell reception sucks down here. Spinner, turn that stupid game off and let me get the remote.”

“In a minute! I’m showing the newbie how to steer.”

“I’ve got a name,” Shin said.

“Yeah, but if you’re going to be one of us you should call yourself something cooler.” He’d taken the controller and didn’t look away from the screen. “Something like Geist, or *Phantom*.”

“That’s practically his name already, you idiot,” Dabi said.
“But that’s just his name. It’s not the same thing!”

“It’s the one I have,” said Shin. “That’s enough for me.”

Dabi almost cracked a smile. “Finally, someone gets it.”

“Whatever,” Spinner said. “I’ll let you have the TV in just a sec, Dabi. Okay, newbie, like I was saying, you can accelerate as much as you want as long as you’re going straight, but as soon as you see a turn coming up you’ve got to lay off the gas and then—”

The car crashed and exploded.

“Nice one,” Shin deadpanned. Spinner didn’t answer. When Shin looked over he realized why, and nearly jumped out of his seat.

“You boys having fun?” said Toga sweetly.

She’d practically materialized out of thin air. She was hanging over the back of the couch, one arm draped over Spinner’s shoulders. His scales had gone so pale they were almost yellow.

“Spinny. Have you been practicing those moves I taught you?”

“Y-yeah! All week!”

“Good!” The flat shine of a knife pressed up against Spinner’s cheek. “Because tonight, we’re going to have a quiz.”

Shin had missed a lot during his two years underground. The fall of All Might was the big one, but a close runner-up was the appearance of the serial killer, Stain. Someone who went around murdering heroes who didn’t meet his standards, Shin couldn’t quite grasp the details. But Shigaraki spat the name out with nearly as much venom as All Might’s, and Spinner just wouldn’t shut up about him. Even the lizard’s costume was basically just Stain cosplay. And during the League’s downtime, he’d asked Toga for lessons on how to be a more effective knife fighter. “To better follow in Stain’s footsteps,” he’d said.

Toga, for her part, was happy to teach him. Sometimes she taught him so happily that he’d needed to lie in bed all day until his wounds clotted.

The girl radiated jolly insanity and was constantly enveloped in a miasma of talcum powder and fresh blood. Shin had no idea how she snuck around so well. Still, he didn’t flinch when those sparkling eyes turned on him. It was still better than Mirai.


“Don’t call me that.”

“Mistake,” Spinner said. The knife was still pressing down on his face. “Now she’ll never stop calling you that.”

Toga giggled. “Me and Shiggy are done talking. He wants to see you now. Something about your diary?”

“It’s not a diary, but I’m going.” He rose and headed for the corridors.

“Don’t worry, kid,” Twice called after him. “He’s a stand-up guy. But he’ll totally kill you if you piss him off!”
The tunnels leading out from the main chamber were cramped, stone-walled, dark with condensation. The fluorescents overhead buzzed and hissed. Some of the League had their bedroom doors marked (Toga’s was awash in glittery heart, rainbow, and smiley-face decals, Dabi’s had the words KEEP OUT charred right into the metal), but Shigaraki’s was unadorned, and practically always shut. It was slightly ajar now; there was nothing but darkness visible through the crack. Shin knocked.

“I kept it open for a reason,” Shigaraki said. “Get in here already. And close the door behind you.”

Back in this dimly-lit cemetery of a room. Shigaraki was at his desk, delicately flipping through Shin’s notebook in the glow of his laptop screen. He was still wearing that prosthetic hand. He didn’t bother to look up when Shin stepped inside.

“There’s a chair here someplace. Sit down.”

“We’re not waiting for Mr. Sako this time?”


“Giran, huh. Been a while since I saw that guy.” Shin dragged a folding chair out of the detritus and flipped it open. “Where’s he been lately?”

“America.”

“Why-”

“You’re out of questions,” Shigaraki said, and Shin sat down and shut up. “Down to business. I read through this as best I could. And here I thought my handwriting was bad.”

“I’m out of practice.”

“I found the important part anyway.” His eyes finally flicked up to Shin. “Kyoumoto’s injection schedule. Says here that he gets a shot every three days?”

“Yeah. Almost to the hour. They’re a lot more punctual about it than I was.”

“Who cares, you were doing just fine until the heroes butted in.” He turned another page. “Guess this means they’re using larger doses than us, too. Good to know. So that’s your main objective already complete. Everything else is just a bonus.”

“Mind telling me what you’re doing with this information?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.”

“I want to know. For Koh’s sake. I said that-”

“I know what you said.” His voice got rougher; he was becoming irritated. “I’m trusting you to do right by us out there. Maybe reciprocate it a little, hmm?”

“Fine,” Shin said, after a moment. “I’ll drop it.”

Shigaraki grunted and handed over the notebook. Shin took it from him quickly. He still didn’t like being near those killing fingers.

“What else can you tell me?” Shigaraki’s chair groaned as he settled back. “General atmosphere, security…anything that seems interesting.”
“It’s tense. They keep trying to act normal but it’s easy to tell that it’s not working. Mirai and her new fan club won’t let anyone relax.”

“Hmph. Got to admit, derailing that train was a hell of a statement.”

“As for security, you were right about Hound Dog. I can’t get close to Koh as long as he’s around, and whenever he’s not they’ve got someone else watching him instead. I’ve tried eavesdropping on the teachers but they’re good at keeping their conversations vague. Guess they know someone might be listening in.”

“Any luck spying on that rat principal of theirs?” Shigaraki asked.

“He hardly ever leaves his office and he keeps his door locked.” Shin held out his hands in apology. “Not much I can do about that. Maybe I should get a lockpick set or something.”

“No, don’t bother. If Nezu’s already acting paranoid then there’s probably nothing you could do that he hasn’t already accounted for. What about their R&D department? Always had trouble getting eyes on that place.”

Outside the entrance to U.A.’s research lab, some enterprising students had painted a mural. A wall-sized illustration of a scorched and pockmarked battlefield, riddled with pressure mines and skeletons ensnared in barbed wire. Amidst this devastation stood a fiercely grinning pink-haired girl with arms crossed, and at her feet was spray-painted the legend: MAKE MY DAY, INVISIBLE MAN.

“Security’s probably too high,” Shin said.

“Damn. Fair enough.” He sighed. “So…what’s your impression of that place? The cradle of heroism. There’s people who’d give up limbs to get through those gates.”

He shrugged. “It’s big and shiny and the food’s decent. Like I said before, it’s not my scene.”

“What is your ‘scene,’ then?” Shigaraki asked. Shin’s expression turned puzzled and Shigaraki waved him off. “Never mind. Just something to think about. But you’ve been keeping it together out there? Your Quirk doesn’t function when you’re asleep, right? You’d better not be pulling all-nighters. Ruins your judgement.”

“I’ve been dozing in the bathrooms, actually. All the cleaning crap they use in there hides my scent from Hound Dog. And if anyone did walk in, they’d be loud enough to snap me out of it. Don’t get me wrong, I’m still on pins and needles, but I feel a hell of a lot safer in there than I would outside. Mirai’s turning that city into a war zone.”

“I’m aware. Still, not bad.” He tilted his head. “You said everyone suspects you’re there, but does anyone actually know?”

Silence.

“Be honest,” Shigaraki said. His tone was mild but there was the edge of a threat underneath, like razors sewn into felt.


Shigaraki shifted in his seat. The wrinkled skin around that hand rippled and creased. To his amazement, Shin realized that he was grinning.

“Ahh,” he said. “I thought so.”
“I was shadowing him for a while, but it turns out he kept checking his perimeter whenever he was alone. It...made me jump, once. I left a mark on the floor. Pretty sure he noticed it. But he didn’t do anything.”

“All Might’s little acolyte. How’d you like him?”

“He doesn’t look like much.” Shin clasped his hands. “I don’t know. I can’t get a read on him. He comes off as kind of a wimp. But he saw through me when no one else did.”

“It’s good that you learned not to underestimate him.”

“Yeah. You said before how much trouble he gave you.”

“I underestimated him, once. Then I lost my men. Lost my Master.” Shigaraki’s hands clutched and spasmed. “It’s too bad that Horooka didn’t just kill him, but that’s fine. I’ll tighten the noose on him, little by little. Him and all his precious friends. See how much good that secondhand Quirk does him then. He just...ruins everything...”

A sudden commotion from the hall beyond. Intermingled voices shouting. Shin jumped again, hard enough for his chair to almost skate out from underneath him, but Shigaraki just looked up, vaguely annoyed – the noise had snapped him out of his hateful reverie.

“You’re a twitchy one, aren’t you,” he said as Shin straightened the chair again. “What are those idiots up to now?”

“Not sure. Dabi and Spinner were fighting over the remote when I left.”

Shigaraki stared. “We’ve definitely been cooped up here too long.”

“You want me to check it out?”

“I don’t care. We’re done, anyway. You’ll stay here for the night. Enjoy sleeping on something other than a toilet while you can, because you’re going back to U.A. tomorrow. We’ll call whenever I need you here again.”

“Got it.”

He stepped out, rubbing his eyes, and returned to the common room. The League was clustered around the TV. No one appeared to have been lit on fire, but Dabi stood stiffly in place with his fists clenched.

“What’s going on?” Shin asked.

“It’s nothing special,” Twice said. “They beat Endeavor!”

“What? Who?”

“Your friend Horooka,” said Dabi. “Come and see.”

On the day Mirai had derailed Musutafu’s elevated train, Mosei-Santo was already mostly occupied by Metalhead and her ever-growing forces. Now, it was almost gutted. The country couldn’t choke off the steady flood of delinquents and low-level criminals entering the wards, and the civilian population couldn’t possibly live among so many villains, more and more of whom had no love for the neighborhood in the first place. Against that many enemies, Endeavor was the heroic equivalent of a tactical nuclear strike. The Hero Association must have counted on him reducing entire blocks to
char, smoking out Metalhead and her lieutenants with no fear of endangering innocent people.

But Metalhead had planned for that, too.

Shin saw grainy footage of roads reduced to glistening swamps of tar. Glass turned to slag and bricks to ash. The new Number One Hero had marched alone down Mosei-Santo’s streets and dispersed the terrified, disorganized villains wherever he went. Shin tried to picture it – the man wreathed in smoke and haze, burning hot and bright as the sun. Even Mirai would have trouble sighting down an enemy like that. But it hadn’t been Endeavor Mirai aimed for.

Metalhead’s influence spread out far. So much, in fact, that she was now pushing into the neighboring ward of Kashiki – higher-class, still full of civilians. She didn’t have many friends there yet. But she and one of her lieutenants, the eerily elongated Hiraku Takenoko, had baited Endeavor to that border, and then Mirai had unleashed hell across those formerly-peaceful apartments. No wild assault like she’d committed during Mt. Lady’s escape across the city; these had been precision demolitions, aimed at the cornerstones and foundations, turning those towers of stone and glass into matchstick constructions threatening to topple at any second. The police had been thrown into disarray. Endeavor had suddenly found himself torn between saving those in need and destroying those who threatened him. His fires had dimmed, for fear of endangering Kashiki any further. And in that time of indecision, Mirai, held aloft in Takenoko’s mutated grasp, had rained down her pulverizing force on him again, and again, and again.

He wasn’t dead. He wasn’t even severely wounded; the shaken newscaster announced he’d be back to work in days. But he had been forced to retreat. And as soon as he did, Metalhead, Mirai, and all the survivors from Endeavor’s assault had dispersed like smoke.

The newsframe was now frozen on a blurry shot of Mirai herself – her coat was more tattered than ever, but that shade of purple was still unmistakable. She wasn’t smiling. Not the feral, drooling grin Shin had known for weeks, or the sharp and purposeful one she’d sported on that final day. She looked exhausted.

“Hey, Shinny,” said Toga. “You ever meet this Metalhead lady?”

“I saw her once,” he answered faintly. “We didn’t talk or anything.”

“Hmm. She’s pretty good! I’d like to meet her someday. Her and your little friend.”

“We’re not friends.”

“Their tactics were despicable,” Spinner said. “Endangering innocent people like that isn’t Stain’s way at all. But on the other hand, if it was to get rid of Endeavor…that guy’s the lowest of the low. Now everyone can see him for the useless coward he is!”

Toga gently elbowed Spinner, unsmiling. He looked confused for a second, then turned ‘round and noticed the way Dabi was glaring at the screen. He settled down and stayed quiet.

“They didn’t really beat him,” Dabi said. “Not properly.”

“Wonder what they’ll do next,” Shin said.

“What’s everyone wondering, now?”

They all turned and saw Shigaraki lurching across the room. He yawned, which was quite a sight with that hand over his face.
“You got me curious,” he said. “Someone tell me what all the fuss is about.”

Spinner and Toga did most of the talking. Shigaraki, for his part, didn’t react much to the news, though he did start scratching himself again when they got to the part about Metalhead’s ambush. While they were summarizing, Dabi reached down to the couch, grabbed the remote, and muted the TV.

“Interesting,” Shigaraki said. “I thought they’d burn out early, but it looks like everyone else got burned instead. Heh heh. I might have to pay them a visit. Twice?”

“What’s up?”

“Do we still have that housewarming present Giran brought us?”

“Nah, it’s long gone. Compress has it in his room.”

“Goody. I’d like to have a chat with them.”

“Mirai hates your guts,” Shin said. “You won’t get two words out before she blows you to pieces.”

“If that happens, it happens. Right, Twice?”

Twice gave him a thumbs-up. “No way!”

“Can I go out for a little bit?” Shin asked. Suddenly all eyes were on him.

“You’d better not try to make contact with that girl again,” Dabi said.

“I’m not going anywhere near Musutafu unless I have to. I just want some air.”

“Fine.” Shigaraki turned back to his room. “Just don’t stay out too late. Remember, you’re-”

“Going back to U.A. tomorrow. I know.”

“Bring the gun, too,” Dabi said. “Never hurts to be prepared.”

“Alright.”

His parka and the revolver were back in his room, which wasn’t furnished much better than his cell at the Yard — cloth-covered box instead of a nightstand, single flyspecked lightbulb in the ceiling. But the mattress was softer and the door’s lock was on the inside, and that was the important part. His things were strewn across the bed, and he strapped on the holster and zipped up his coat and left the hideout with a wave and a muttered goodbye. The League watched him go.

“He’s a nice kid,” Twice said. “I don’t trust him.”

“If he was going to snitch he’d have done it by now,” Dabi said.

“I hope he stays,” Spinner said. “He’s no different than the rest of us!”

“Speak for yourself.”

“I’m hungry,” said Toga. “Spinny, let’s eat together.”

“Sure!”

“And then we can start your quiz!”
The sun had already set. The ranked warehouses stood empty and cold. Winter mists curled around Shin’s ankles as he walked, the fist clenched, his Quirk erasing him from the world. In places the shadows loomed and he reflexively grabbed for Koh’s hand, trying to protect someone who was no longer there.

Eventually he made his way to neon-stained civilization and fell in with the surging crowds, shadowing them into the subways. Tokyo bustled and seethed like always but even this far from Musutafu there was a barbed twist of anxiety in the idle chatter around him. People’s phones and the TV screens overhead flashed with old pictures of the derailed train. Shigaraki was right; it had been quite a statement. After Mirai and Metalhead had been so thoroughly routed during U.A.’s operation in Mosei-Santo, everyone had expected them to lick their wounds for a while. Then came the thunder and flame of the train, its shell crumpled and blasted clean off the tracks. It had taken days to finish tallying the dead. The petty crooks of Musutafu had effectively declared war on the whole of Japan but somehow they were still holding their own, and every day they survived they inspired more to join their cause. The black holes of Mirai’s gaze sucked everything in.

He got off at Chiyoda and made his way aboveground. He passed an imperious woman walking three large dogs, a group of high-school students raptly gathered around a single phone, two drunk salarymen clinging to each other as though the unsteady could steady the unsteady. He stole a crepe and ate it in three tasteless bites. He watched shadows move in the glowing windows high overhead. Somewhere around here was Akihabara. He’d often thought of taking Koh there someday, when the kid had finally lightened up a little. But it never came – neither the day, nor the light.

He was headed elsewhere, where the towers were sharp-angled and austere and the streets gave way to plazas where the concrete was so clean it shone like quicksilver. Where the architecture was interrupted by another building under construction, that black-glass polygon with the skeletal girders on its upper floors jabbing obscene gestures skyward. Kasumigaseki, the seat of Japan’s government, soon-to-be residence of the Ministry of Individuality.

Shin slipped past the construction barriers and his boots crunched the rough grit underfoot. He stopped just outside the tower. It had grown again. Thirteen or fourteen stories at a glance. He couldn’t imagine what they hoped to put in there.

He couldn’t see inside. The glass only showed his reflection. He lowered his hood and looked at the thing underneath. After the lost years and the surgeries, he still had trouble recognizing this face as his own. A portrait of bleakness. His frown carved gutters into his cheeks. This was how Mirai had looked, in the wake of Endeavor’s defeat.

You’re not a good person, Shin. You’re not even bad in an interesting way.

She’d said over and over again that the two of them were headed to the same place and that the place was nowhere at all. Bound for desolation from the beginning. Maybe she’d finally started to take her own advice.

The gun chafed against his chest. Behind him the sounds of life continued. He didn’t want any part of it anymore. Even though he was finally around people who tolerated him – seemed to like him, even, in their own weird ways – it didn’t seem to leave any kind of impression. So maybe she had been right, after all. Maybe the Yard’s knives had cut away more than just his skin.

But there was still Koh. Laboriously reading through that file, learning of how the kid had been
sequestered in that hole and left to rot, Shin had felt the fury rising him inside him like vomit. Even now, that anger persisted. It felt like the only thing in him that was still solid. He’d lost touch with the person he’d been before. But whatever he was now still knew what it wanted. Make sure Koh was safe. And then…

Shin drew the revolver and pressed it up against the glass, square in his reflection’s forehead.

“Maybe I’ll be back,” he said. “For all of you.”

*             *             *

Midnight came. Those still awake watched the minutes pass like the countdown of a bomb, especially in Musutafu, where the Yard escapees’ injuries were still keenly felt. But the hour passed, and the night darkened, and people went uneasily to sleep only to awake more tired than ever. Osamu Nakayama’s voice still invaded the airwaves, quieter and sharper, jabbing little spears of concern into the heroes of U.A. and the way they’d failed to protect their city.

A growing wrongness. A open wound in the nation. In the midst of that unease was Shin Yuurei, strutting around the cadavers his fellows left in their wake.

He tried to believe he’d put his grudges aside. He thought of himself as someone devoted to a single cause. But as he returned to the League’s hideout, he once again watched those clean and worried people holding each other close, and saw the heroes on patrol watching for the faces of those in need, and he pictured them laid out and trembling in the country’s filthy places, the old anger, the upraised crowbar, and the backbeat in his mind that would accompany every blow: what about me? What about me? What about ME?
Chapter 17

I remember the sounds

Every one different at the moment of ending Raindrop patter of broken brick Sharp surprise of shattered glass The tickticktick of roofbeams ready to collapse And the cries of those who did not hear as I heard The shapshot scolding that rose and broke as they realized they too were breakable Such a fine melody

The rest unimportant Smells, tastes, patterns of light allthesame allthesame But the sounds oh I went looking for them everywhere

Remember a tremendous sound A terrific collapse and clatter Coughing of dust thick in my throat The wails of people and wailing of sirens beyond Then something different

A silky chrome smoothness over all A hum of air from invisible pipes Gentle voices asking about the voice only I could hear The voice of all the world

Stored those smooth smooth sounds within me Let them boil and bubble And then released

Then smoothness turned to rasping A wonderful alarm A redlight blare scraping over me Like biting an apple and rubbing your juice-rough tongue on the roof of your mouth That harsh sweetness

And then

Silence

Forever and everywhere silence

What do I remember Can remember lying still too long Bed slowly taking my shape A room all sharp with sharpness that ate every sound and left only the sounds inside

An ocean in me The thump and the suckle Long days spent disappearing into the thunder of my heart

Went so deep into silence I broke through Into something beyond The voice in me so much richer now The noise outside the sharp and hungry room so colorless and thin I floated on a bed of quiet I felt above everything

Then the harsh-sweet blare again The quiet interrupted Lean shadows with thirsting voices And the names I don’t remember All but one

Shi ga ra ki

Little rocks tumbling down a hill

Pale hands man, do you believe yourself an avalanche

He talked and talked Of breaking the world that was The one that had buried us Locked us away so deep How would a world sound if it tumbled off a shelf I wonder A snowglobe smash and flood

But then he Shi ga ra ki Made more noise Of a society without heroes A world that lay beyond
this one

I had seen  heard  the world beyond both  The tomorrow beyond his tomorrows  And what I heard was nothing at all  He sounded so much like the gentle voices  The same certainty

Shigaraki I thought then  What sound will you make  When I break you

I let them take me outside  Past the red light and red noise  Through the hissing steel that had first carried me down  And there was  And there was

Patterns of light through leaves  All through the air a shivering  Heard the rustle and the roar  The scuttle of small things through the earth underfoot  Birdsong and animal shriek  Everything alive in such a way I had never known  I raised my arms and laughed  and  could  not  remember

Could not remember days before the quiet  Or the faces of those who had been outside this hole  Could not remember my older thoughts  The dreams that would wake me gasping in the night  My face in the mirror before I was grown  The long silence had drowned everything in the waters of myself  All of it lost and never to be recovered

Could not remember  when laughter  turned to screaming

Doesn’t matter

It doesn’t matter

* * *

“Snipe here. Finally in position.”

“You satisfied with the vantage point? We still have a little time.”

“I’m happy with whatever you provide, darlin’.”

“Keep it in your pants.”

“Both of you, shut up. I don’t want to hear another word that’s not relevant to the mission.”

Mosei-Santo, for all intents and purposes, had fully become hostile territory. And while Snipe had never been in a proper war, he imagined this is what it felt to be stuck behind enemy lines – overwhelming hostility, like the air was full of crosshairs.

He’d made his nest on a high window of one of the fire-gutted apartment buildings caught in Endeavor’s recent march – creeping up the stairs with revolver in hand, his thumb jumping at every shadow. The floorboards here were partly ash and he wasn’t at all confident they would continue to hold his weight, but it would have to do. He pushed the window open and unslung the long rifle he’d brought just for the occasion. In its chamber was a dart carrying a payload of Eri’s Quirk-smothering blood.

Perpendicular to his position was Aizawa, goggles down and tape out, hiding behind a building that had partly collapsed, the open corner showing its guts within. The two of them were in touch with Ghillie, the Camouflage Hero, currently on loan from her office in Kobe. Her Quirk, appropriately enough, was “Camo,” a photo-reactive glaze to her skin that hid her from view. It wasn’t nearly as potent as Shin’s Incognito, but she was a lot more mobile. Her costume (a proper sniper’s ghillie suit but far more streamlined, making her resemble a masked leaf insect) was all but unseen on the city streets; her hands were equipped with carbon-fiber climbing claws and she leapt from wall to wall,
her silhouette just a momentary warp in the air.

She and Snipe had history. No one cared enough to ask about the details.

Far off, staking out the region from a still-intact watertower, was Farsight, the X-Ray Hero, a tanned and square-jawed gnome of a man, peering hard through his custom binoculars. His Quirk, “Lens,” allowed his eyes to apply a number of beneficial filters, x-rays or nightvision or infrared, hardening like helpful cataracts on his corneas. He was primarily on support, but he’d trained his body well enough to punch through solid wood with little effort just in case anyone tried to get in close.

Snipe’s earpiece crackled. Their transmissions were encrypted – they’d learned about Rajio Mainichi’s eavesdropping – but they still hadn’t spoken much until Snipe had finally gotten to his vantage. Too much noise of any kind could give them away.

“She’d better be coming, Ghillie,” said Snipe. “We spent some of that little tyke’s medicine on this caper.”

“She’s a real pain to track, and from what we’ve learned, she’s been showing her face less and less often. But she does seem to like the trashy parts of this town. And it doesn’t get much trashier than this.”

“We put out a false bulletin that teams of high-level heroes were descending on several locations where Metalhead was thought to be holed up,” Aizawa said. “They’ve been extremely careful about changing position at the least threat. And the safest route away from danger cuts through this area.”

“Better say ourselves a prayer, then. Farsight, we good?”

“All good.” The man sounded like a croaking frog. “Got some folks on their way now.”

“Repositioning.” Air hissed through Ghillie’s earpiece. “Confirmed. Horooka, Takenoko, a half-dozen others.”

“No sign of Kitae?” Aizawa asked.

“Negative.”

Snipe clutched the rifle tight and peeked over the sill. “Soon as I see her, I’ll take the shot.”

“Will you make it at this angle?” Ghillie asked. “I still remember when you botched that job in Sapporo.”

“We’re older and wiser, darlin’. Ammo’s different so I’ll have to compensate for the tumble, but I’ll get her, don’t you worry.”

“I’ll be on standby,” said Aizawa. “Worst case scenario, I can suppress her Quirk long enough for you to retreat.”

Endeavor’s assault on the wards had not been good for P.R. The Kashiki buildings Mirai had targeted would have to be totally demolished and replaced, and not everyone inside had been evacuated in time. Quite a few people were expressing the opinion that Endeavor’s use of indiscriminate force had only made the situation worse. So now they were trying something more surgical.

The dart in Snipe’s gun contained enough serum to shut down Mirai’s Quirk for six hours. More than enough time to get her tied down and locked up. If things got especially desperate, he had
plenty of regular bullets. When he’d been tapped for this operation, he’d made a point of having those bullets. He’d argued at length that they would certainly be more practical than wasting Koh’s ever-dwindling supplies of medicine on this lunatic. But Nezu had vetoed the idea. Let the Hero Association bring the fire and fury if they must, he’d said, but we at U.A. will not become assassins. Not now, of all times.

Snipe was curious how they actually intended to contain this girl once they pulled her away from the private army she’d assembled around herself, but he guessed Nezu had accounted for that, too. At least U.A. had way more money, space, and scruples than those ghouls at the Yard. They’d think of something, assuming they got out of here in one piece.

So here he was. Behind enemy lines, with just the one shot. His goggles glinted in the ashen room.

“Farsight,” he said. “We still clear? No surprises?”

“No surprises.”

The city block tight and tense as a held breath. Snipe’s breath fogged through his mask.

“On your position,” said Ghillie. “Approaching line of sight in five…four…three…two…”

Around the corner. That rotted purple hue. Snipe had never seen her in person before and her shambling gait sent ripples of unease through him. She moved like someone pulled by fishing-line. At her side was a towering gentleman gaunt as something freezer-dried – Hiraku Takenoko. And as Farsight had said, they were accompanied by more hoodlums, bent low with hands in pockets, their dirty faces craning this way and that. They were suspicious of the silence.

Snipe made a mental note to tell Nezu later that this was no right behavior for petty crooks. Kids like this usually had less sense for danger than a newborn puppy; they should have been giving away their position from blocks away, whooping it up and telling dirty jokes. But the postures of this bunch were tensed like piano-wire. Maybe it was just Horooka’s presence. Annoying her would be a good way to earn a speedy trip to the hereafter.

He breathed deep and said, “Taking the shot.”

He prepared to lean out.

After that, things happened very quickly.

The building façade opposite Snipe rent open with a shrapnel spray of masonry, and greasy smoke flooded out with a monstrous boiler hiss and swallowed up Horooka and her entourage. Snipe recoiled away from the window and felt the whole building rock as the ground further away rattled and roared, the din echoing in his earpiece, Aizawa struggling to make himself heard:

“We’ve been bracketed! I repeat, it’s an ambush! I’ve got Gigantification Quirks here and I-”

Another crash and his voice was buried. The sulfurous fog devoured the street. Silhouettes of gargantuan hands clawed at the end of the block where Aizawa had been. Snipe gripped the rifle in one hand and drew his revolver, sighting down at the doorway behind, but no one approached.

“God damn it, they were onto us from the start! Ghillie, what’s the score?”

“I’m still in position, they can’t get to me from here. Farsight, you stupid son of a bitch, you told us we were safe!”
And through their earpieces Farsight started to laugh, a burping chuckle that wormed through all their radios, and as his mirth leapt up his voice bubbled and warped like wax into that of someone wholly unfamiliar.

“Shit,” he said. “A voice-mimic Quirk, too? They must’ve got to him.”

Aizawa’s voice snarled back into life. “We have lost control of this situation! We have to retreat! I repeat, get out of there now!”

“Hell with it.” He threw the revolver aside, took up the rifle and spun back to the window. “Won’t let this be for nothing. I’ll blind-fire if I have-”

Through the twisting smoke, Takonoko’s lean hand emerged. And pointed.

Snipe glimpsed those black-on-black eyes.

The building imploded inward as through a great vacuum had sucked it up from the other side. The bricks and the beams, already much-abused, collapsed at once. From the other side there could be seen a dark shape tumbling through the opposite window, and then Mirai’s annihilating voice ripped through after it and tore apart the next building, and the ones beside it, and the streets below, a thundering beast that lashed its tail and raked its claws across the burnt neighborhood until Takenono put a hand on her shoulder and the noise all stilled at once.

“That’s enough,” he said.

Mirai said nothing.

The air was unbreathable with dust. The heroes could not be seen; minutes later, the villains had all dispersed as well. Near a dripping water tower several blocks away, Farsight lay still with eyes open and glazed and a deep red gash across his throat. And Yori Kizutatchi – who, not two weeks earlier, had bought cigarettes and gum during his first trip into Mosei-Santo – stood beside the body, wiping his fingers clean, the eyes beneath his hood watching the dust rise from the city’s skyline like a breaching leviathan.

That evening.

This building was humble, even by Mosei-Santo’s standards – if the lingering smell was any indication it had been a barbecue joint once upon a time, the countertops bare and the tables discolored with uncleaned sauce. But, there were still apartments on the second and third floors. People in this part of town lived in whatever spaces they could find. So it went too for Metalhead and company, who’d regrouped after neutralizing the heroes’ latest attack. Wet heat strained and hissed out the radiators; the wards’ power hadn’t been cut off just yet, but they all knew that day was soon coming.

They were a motley bunch, these malformed shapes. They gathered around a coffee table in the largest apartment’s grease-patinaed living room, everyone grabbing whatever seats they could. On the couch was Metalhead, her cigarette making little firefly-trails as it traveled around her mouth. Rajio Mainichi was at her side, and seated further away on a scrounged kitchen chair was Kizutatchi, surrounded by several of the boys he’d brought from his stomping grounds in Yokohama. Takenoko was on the floor in a corner, silent and swaying, hands cupped in his lap like an emaciated Buddha.

The table was mostly covered by a roadmap of Musutafu. The Mosei-Santo wards were scrawled in red. As everyone watched, Metalhead uncapped a black marker and scribbled rough zigzags over the
city’s southern border, where Mosei-Santo opened up into the wider world.

“They’ve totally shut down all traffic,” she said. “Trains won’t stop there, the roads are blockaded. If it has an engine, it’s not allowed in here. So, we’ve got a problem.”

“Gonna get ugly when the booze runs out,” someone said.

“Not just supplies,” said Metalhead. “We won’t be able to count on numbers like we used to. Up until now we’ve only survived because we’re too big a target for the heroes to hit all at once. If they choke off any pathways for newcomers, they’ll whittle us down fast. So we need to push into here.” She took the red marker and scribbled up from Mosei-Santo into the Kashiki ward’s east and west borders, making a shape somewhat like a crab’s claw. “Kashiki’s got a few highways into the rest of Japan and they’re still open for business. We lock down the surrounding region, we can give everyone safe passage for a day or two at least.”

“You’ll be spreading yourselves thin,” said Kizutatchi. He was chewing more gum; his jaw champed between words.

“If the southern border’s a lost cause, then we can move pretty much everyone up from there unless we really need someplace to bunker down.” She blew smoke. “At this point we’re gonna be tap-dancing on hot coals no matter what we choose. They tried Endeavor, they tried Snipe. He dead, by the way?”

“No,” said Mainichi. “Ghillie saved him. But he’s out of commission, from what I can tell.”

“Good. That guy’s bad news.”

“What next?” Takenoko said.

“From the heroes? I’m guessing it’ll be kitchen-sink time pretty soon. Squads of high-level heroes hitting us from every direction, especially ones who specialize in urban combat like Mirko and Washer.” She sighed and tapped ashes on the map. “That’s assuming they don’t just start to carpet-bomb us. With that dumbass minister jabbering on the TV every day I keep expecting the words ‘national emergency’ to pop up.”

“But the endgame’s still the same?” Kizutatchi asked.

“Yeah.” She ground out her cigarette on the map's center. “U.A. High School.”

The room shifted and muttered, but Metalhead paid it no mind. She scratched her scalp, unearthing a brief snowfall of dandruff; she hadn’t had much time for self-care the last few weeks.

“The plain fact is that we’re in death-or-glory territory right now,” she said. “The longer we live, the more glory we soak up. And the more people we pull over to our party out here. If we make it far enough to rally everyone we’ve got and hit U.A., then maybe—”

“Akane, that place isn’t just full of heroes,” Mainichi protested. “It’s full of the best heroes. You said yourself how tough Eraserhead was, and he’s just one of them. Even their students are monsters!”

“I know. But we’ve got a monster of our own. And she’s scarier than the rest of them put together.” She glanced up at Takenoko. “Where is she, anyway?”

“Downstairs. Recharging.”

She grunted. “Anyway. It’s our only shot. If we topple that school, then forget the League. We’ll be
the hottest names on the criminal circuit. Or am I wrong?"

“Doubt it,” said Kizutatchi. “I’ve been keeping my ear out. People are real interested in this project of yours. You secure U.A., we might get enough recruits to start our own little nation.”

“And then I’ll ram the whole body politic right up Shigaraki’s ass,” she said darkly.

“Our people might leave, too,” said Mainichi. “Or double-cross us. There’s a lot of them, Akane. And we’re not exactly micro-managing anybody.”

“They want to leave, they can leave. Nothing’s keeping them here. As for traitors…there’s not a whole hell of a lot they can offer the heroes’ side, unless they’re one of the people in this room.” She looked around. “Any of you guys feel like betraying someone?” Shaking heads. “Well then.”

“He still has a point,” said Kizutatchi. “There aren’t many open lines of communication between ourselves and all the new blood. We can’t rely on Mainichi’s Quirk for everything. The guy needs sleep.”

“There’s still enough of my people spread around to give me regular updates,” said Metalhead. Mainichi, for his part, didn’t look amused by Kizutatchi’s concern.

“Yeah, and I’m doing my best to keep on top of things as well. Still, something to consider. As for supplies, I know a couple of people who do a little smuggling here and there. They might give us a hand, tide us over for another few days. Raiding everything in sight won’t cut it much longer.”

“Payment?” said Takenoko.

“If I sweet-talk them they might do it for free. Like I said, people are taking an interest in what’s going on here. Meanwhile we’ve got to figure out what we’re going to do when the utilities get shut off. There’s bound to be a few folks around with heat generation Quirks, but as for water and power-”

“I want to say something,” said Mainichi, and all eyes turned to him.

Of all the people in Metalhead’s circle, he’d changed the most since her campaign had started. Sleepless nights, missed meals, and time spent running from one safe zone to another had given his rotund frame an oddly sculptured cast, like a weathered boulder. Stubble had crept across his jowls to match his patchy crew cut; the antenna behind his ear glinted in that mess like a coin stuck in dryer lint. A little while ago, someone might have snorted or sighed when he’d decided to speak up – Mainichi’s neurotic protesting got on people’s nerves. But there had been a minor incident several days ago where Metalhead had made it exceedingly clear that wisecracks about Mainichi’s weight or attitude would not be tolerated. Her switchblade had been involved.

“The heroes are trying to encrypt their comms, but I’m still able to hear the police,” he said. “The ones who get close enough, anyway. They’re saying that the people who used to live here aren’t just getting forced out anymore. Bodies are showing up. I can hear some of the newcomers bragging about it.” He looked up at Kizutatchi. “And it started around the same time you came here.”

Muttering around the room. The pale stripe of Kizutatchi’s face didn’t change.

“I don’t know who you are,” Mainichi went on. “You and your friends are the only ones here that weren’t with Akane from the beginning. Do any of you even know this city?”

“Hadakai had family around these parts,” he replied, gesturing to the crab-skinned man, who sheepishly waved at them. “The rest of us, not so much. But you know we’re not the only outsiders,
right? This was bound to happen.”

“I don’t like it. The civvies might not be on our side, but this is still our neighborhood.”

“No, it isn’t,” he said patiently. “Not anymore. It’s not mine, either. It’s something completely new.” He spread his gloved hands wide. “You’ve got to realize you’ve kicked up a mighty storm. If people don’t take shelter fast enough, they’re going to get hurt. I’m not responsible for it. I don’t even want it to happen. But I’m not going to slow down just because it does.”

Mainichi turned to Metalhead. “Akane, please…”

“Rajio,” she said. “He’s got a point.”

She tented her fingers and breathed deep. Her studded face went thoughtful before she spoke again.

“I want the word to go out,” she said. “No more killing civilians, unless they really put up a fight. That goes double for when we push into Kashiki – mess them up and clear them out, but only as much as you need to. This little war is between us and the heroes. If we start playing sick little games with the people caught in-between then we might start attracting people like Dabi to join, and you all know my feelings on that sadistic fuck. Are we clear?” Heads nodded, including Kizutatchi’s. Only Takenoko remained still.

“Horooka thinks different,” he said. “Horooka doesn’t care.”

“I’ll talk to her myself. She lost the plot once we failed to get ahold of that kid. No one’s going to give her a moment’s peace after the shit she’s pulled. So she’s stuck with us, unless she wants to get jumped and dragged back to those fine people at the M.o.I.” She rose. “Make no mistake. We are well past the point of no return. All of us will either fly, or sink. So let’s keep at it.”

She strode out, the rest of them already starting to gossip. She shut the door, leaned against the stairway banister and allowed herself a brief coughing fit – she’d been chain-smoking more than ever lately, and her breathing came heavy and thick. When she wiped her mouth and looked up again, Mainichi was there, his round somber face shining like the moon.

“We haven’t talked in a while,” he said. “Just the two of us.”

“Yeah.” She went for her cigarettes. “I keep trying to make time. But you know how it is.”

“I’m not much good to you anymore, huh? My Quirk doesn’t spread out far enough.”

She flicked her lighter and her latest cigarette flared. “I still trust you more than anyone else here. Kizutatchi’s pulling his weight, but you’re right, the guy’s sketchy as hell. And Takenoko’s brain is halfway to Mars most of the time.”

“You can’t seriously think this is going to end well, can you? Taking on U.A., it’s completely-”

“You’re worried, I know.” Smoke wreathed her head. “You should be. This is an insane, suicidal thing we’re doing. Sometimes I think half the reason we’ve gotten this far is because no one thinks it’s really happening. Like I’m going to send out a text that just says ‘sike’ and we can all go home. But Horooka was right about one thing. There’s no tomorrow for people like us. Nothing to look forward to. So I’m going to make as much noise as I can, while I still have the chance.”

“I don’t want you to die,” he said quietly.

“Yeah, I’m not thrilled about the idea either.” Her cigarette drooped. “You thinking of leaving?”
Mainichi was silent.

“[Characters], you could do it. Me and Horooka take up all the spotlight around here. The cops and the heroes don’t know your face. You could slip out and disappear into Tokyo or something. I’d give you enough cash to get yourself set up.”

His jaw set. “I’m not gonna abandon you.”

“Then that’s where we stand, right?”

“Yeah. I guess so.”

“I’m going down to the boiler room,” she said. “Get some sleep, Rajio. Seriously. I don’t want you of all people dying because of this adventure.”

She headed down the stairs without waiting for an answer. Mainichi stood alone and crestfallen in the hall. He examined his hands as if uncertain as to their purpose, then turned and slunk away.

The basement of this place was as unattractive as one would suspect. Wet shadows and cracked concrete, so neglected that even the cobwebs didn’t bother to form. Metalhead’s cigarette tip guided her as she went down the last flight of stairs and picked her way around the scattered detritus of the room, long-disused mop buckets, cardboard rendered to anonymous pulp. The boiler was a growling and rusted iron lung in the room’s far corner, and slouched amongst those dripping octopoid pipes was a darker shape. Mirai, head down, sandwiching herself between the intelligible screech bursting out from her headphones and the metallic din of the boiler nearby.

She hadn’t let herself go quite as badly as she had in the days since escaping the Yard. At least she’d showered a few more times recently. But her habit of squatting in the grimmest corners she could find still made her resemble something spat out of a tailpipe, and she seemed loathe to actually change her clothes no matter how bitter the winter air became. Soon her overcoat would be nothing more than a cloak of loose thread. Her splayed hands were so pallid they resembled chalk drawings on the cement floor. Only the merest twitch of a finger gave an indication she knew Metalhead had approached.

Metalhead squatted down in front on her and gently poked her forehead. Those eyes rose up. For the first week Metalhead had felt the same way everyone did when that gaze hit her – that moment of icy existential uncertainty, the brief understanding that she could be killed in an eyeblink. That trepidation had faded with time. She’d gotten more used to danger.

She held up her phone. The message app was open, and text blinked on the screen. This was usually now they communicated now. Mirai rarely took off her headphones, and her tinnitus was growing worse. It read:

> South edge of town is a lost cause. We’re moving up to Kashiki.

> Going to bring the thunder again.

> Problems/questions/concerns?

Mirai stared. She reached out, grasping for the phone like a newborn at its mother’s face. She took it and typed languorously and held up the screen for Metalhead to read.

> Shin.

Metalhead’s puzzled expression was clear in the phone’s cold glow. Mirai typed again, and held it
If he comes, let him in.

Then she set the phone down and pulled her knees up again. She had dismissed Metalhead from her world.

Metalhead irritably blew smoke and stood, replacing the phone. The girl had been full of piss and vinegar when she’d first turned on them in that alleyway mouth, but after losing Kyoumoto she’d grown steadily more withdrawn, her airy rants about the futility of all things slowing to a trickle. Now she was near-mute, a ghost of what she’d been, and while she followed Takenoko and blew up what Metalhead asked her to blow up it was still a worrying trend.

Metalhead wondered if maybe she was getting bored with the whole mess. She honestly didn’t think her campaign to take U.A. was all that coordinated – no matter how many people congratulated her on fending off this hero or that hero, she still felt like she was making this up as she went along – but it was certainly different than just gallivanting around the city and breaking whatever you pleased. Kids these days had no attention span.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said, knowing Mirai couldn’t hear. “This is where we are now. Like it or not.”

She turned and left. Mirai remained in the dark, her playlist running on, head awash in cheap noise.

*   *   *

Witness Mosei-Santo.

The wards have changed. Not long ago the neighborhood was full of quiet activity: spiced with the crisp scent of street meat, laundry flapping like beckoning hands on their clotheslines, the people modest and exhausted but still hoping that tomorrow would be kind. Now it has become alien and inhospitable as the surface of the moon, quiet only in the way that a stone is quiet even when sharp-jawed fire ants swarm underneath. Trash piles up uncollected in the alleys and beside the stoops and freezes before it can start to stink. The convenience stores are gutted, their shelves cleared and their registers cracked open. The police enter only in squadrons five cars deep and leave as quickly and silently as they enter, feeling ranks of eyes watching from every window. A festering hostility that renders the very air unbreathable for them.

These are no right criminals, think the police and the heroes. Two-bit thugs such as the ones which populate these streets should not display such unity. There should be petty squabbles and raucous partying, wayward children abusing Mosei-Santo’s sudden anarchy to have their fun before the law inevitably crunches down on them. The neighborhood has become host to pickpockets and spree killers alike, sharing apartments, nursing their drinks in the dark hours. They come from Musutafu and Tokyo and Kamino and Hōsu and Osaka and Chiba, the castoffs and the strays, drawn by curiosity. Such a disparate alliance cannot possibly hold, think the police. But it holds. They become stitched together by a common rage that those comfortably within the law still cannot fathom. They put aside their differences and strike at interlopers with ever-sharpening precision.

Witness Akane Kitae, the fulcrum of this growing nation. Witness Metalhead, at last fit to be called a kingpin and still waving off the title like an unwelcome bug. She struts across the carcass of civilization, smoke trailing from her mouth, the dragon at the gates of Mosei-Santo. Her vision is as singular and lethal as the blade she palms – to reduce the whole of Japan to stepping stones, one stolen border and smashed district after the next, all the way up to U.A. itself, which will at last let her stand tall enough to grasp Tomura Shigaraki’s throat. She neither knows nor cares if she will
reach this conclusion, nor what may come after it. She loses herself in the growing spectacle of her vengeance. Amidst the embers of Endeavor’s retreat she too felt a monstrous flame burning within her. People gather in the light and warmth of her destructive passion, as the one who first sparked it sits in the dark and dwindles.

Her confidants go their separate ways. Hiraku Takenoko, inscrutable as the Moai he resembles, awaits his orders and remembers the faces of the lost. Many of the people he knew have already gone and he is surrounded by strangers; nonetheless, he carries on. Rajio Mainichi continues to immerse himself in the city’s electronic gossip. Unbeknownst to all but a few, he shows prodigious skill with his Quirk, casting his net out ever farther, effortlessly sifting through hundreds of voices for the pearls of intelligence buried within. He does not think highly of himself. He feels the life he knew slip irrevocably out of his grasp. Sometimes he hears mutterings of betrayal or revolution among the newcomers in Metalhead’s ranks, and then the voices fall silent and their owners disappear. Others assume they simply gave up and left; meanwhile, Yori Kizutatchi sends a brief message on his phone and goes on his way as his own allies clean up the bodies. He, too, is listening in. He is an enigma even to the police, a minor gang leader from Yokohama City with several counts of murder and grand larceny to his name. His expression remains tranquil. His quiet ambition is a stabbing backbeat to Metalhead’s own.

Witness Mirai Horooka. Already her name has become legend. The girl who unbalanced the Hero Society, rendered Metalhead and company a power to rival the League and the heroes themselves. Musutafu remains scarred by her earlier rampage. Those who share the buildings in which she dwells dread her wandering shadow passing their doorways. And while Iga Yasuhiro remains imprisoned, graffiti once again creeps across Mosei-Santo, jagged renditions of this pallid waif with shattered holes for eyes.

TAKE UP ARMS AND RAISE YOUR HEAD / DID YOU HEAR WHAT THE THUNDER SAID?

She no longer speaks and it no longer matters. Her earlier proclamations of the joy in violence and the futility of tomorrow continue to echo in the minds of others. A schizophrenic catechism that has broken loose from her throat. Before she sauntered through the shivering city and drank in the sounds of all that oblivious, bustling life; now she is buried in the arid wastes of her own creation, the wards starved of all but the silent and hard-eyed people waging Metalhead’s war. Her hearing continues to erode beneath the music in which she immerses herself. Once she flew. Now she sinks ever further.

Her attacks provide great entertainment to the wards’ new residents; the defeat of Snipe’s strike team provided ample gossip for the whole day. For all other times, there’s the news. They hold their phones like chalices and watch the bulletins on their exploits, note the growing panic in the newscasters’ eyes. Osamu Nakayama continues to appear. He no longer needs makeup to cover his bruises. In his slithering cadence he extends his greatest sympathies to the overworked and beleaguered Hero Society, and especially U.A., which, he takes care to note, seems increasingly unfit to handle the threat at its gates. Before, his words went largely ignored. But as Metalhead’s influence expands, so too does Nakayama’s. The refugees of Mosei-Santo witness the deprecation of their meager homes and their resentment boils ever hotter. They flee to the inner wards of Musutafu or to family in other cities, and slowly raise their voices, asking the government to take hold of all this chaos.

The students of U.A. feel the noose tighten even as their studies continue. Snipe is carried out on a stretcher. Aizawa finds himself in the infirmary once again, staring hollowly out the window. All Might bends double beneath the weight of his inadequacy. Nezu climbs to his school’s highest reaches and eyes the dark patch on the horizon. And as Mirai’s headphones buzz and scream, the
damaged and the dispossessed grow in number, and their anger grows inside them.

* * *

Where have I gone

Thought I had finally caught up with myself  The person I was supposed to be, but now  Must have misplaced it somewhere  This body  this head  all wrong

Noise all different  Stabbing into me  Sometimes sleep won’t come through all the ringing  Won’t seem to go no matter how I drain it  I pour always but never any less  And yet  Mustn’t stop refilling  Can’t run dry like before, with Koh dearie-oh so near

Where is he now  Police  That school  Holding hands with the girl whose name skips down a long road  U ra ra ka where did you  Where did I

Where are you  Shin

Shin you coward  Chopped meat dragging your silence wherever you went  Looking for worth where none could be found  Begging for scraps of tomorrow from those pale hands  You are nothing and were never anything  I should have sent you back to nothing when I had the chance  Burst your knees like paper bags and painted the room with you  You we would have all been better off

But Shin  Shin  I think I miss you terribly

No one else here understands  Not the girl with all sharp edges  Not the quiet giant who leads me on  You felt this even as you denied it  Deafened yourself to it  This empty space inside of us  Carrying it wherever we go  I remember how you would pause in the street and lift your head  Like an animal scenting the air  Knowing that we were wrong things  That we were hunted forever and always

I hear you  too  always

You yes you  Through every screen and speaker  Even far gone as I am  how could I forget the one who put this quietness in me  You who insisted we had to remain buried for the good of all

For the sake of a h a r m o n i o u s society

Hey you there  Tall television man  Mister Sinister Minister  Tell me what audience would hear a song like that

If your harmony demands this of us  Tell me  What is there for us to do except break  What is there for us to be except broken

I am so  I am so

It doesn’t matter

Witness
Chapter 18

His bedroom carpet was blue like the sky. When the sun came in through the window over his bed it would fall on the carpet in four bright squares so that the blue went almost white, flecks of dust dancing overhead. He liked to lay in bed and watch those squares move with the sun, caterpillar-slow. But one day the light and the color was wrong. Everything dimmer than it should have been. He got out of bed and went to his mom, and for a moment he was scared by the look on her face before she smiled and led him to a mirror. There he saw his eyes, glowing gold.

His mother: slim and pretty and blonde, with a Quirk that let her regulate her own body temperature; one time he’d come down with a fever and she had cooled her hand and lay it on his forehead like a compress. His father: bespectacled and blocky, always looking slightly nervous in his skin, his Quirk the ability to extend his limbs and neck by up to six inches. Neither of them knew what to make of Koh’s new eyes. They brought him to a doctor, a man who constantly hummed and had a rash of iridescent scales on his scalp instead of hair. He took blood and shone light in Koh’s face. Koh sat very still and quiet, even when the needle went in.

“Looks to be a mutation,” the doctor said. “They’ve been getting more common lately. Mix and match Quirks across enough generations and eventually something unexpected pops up. This one seems to be strictly cosmetic for now, but come back if he starts to show any other powers. And he may need glasses. There’s some delayed pupillary response.”

The doctor had named his Quirk “Goldeneye” and bid his family good day. His parents were sanguine about the whole situation; sure, their son wasn’t going to make it into any hero programs with a power like that, but their own Quirks hadn’t been likely to create anything extraordinary to begin with, and those eyes were very striking. They’d taken Koh out for ice cream and started shopping around for glasses. Life went on as normal.

They woke up the next morning with pains in their jaw. All through the night, they’d been grinding their teeth.

The next couple of days were hard for Koh. At daycare his teachers had noted him to be shy but generally friendly, and he enjoyed the compliments they gave him for his eyes. But everyone became very short-tempered. The other kids shouted and hit. Lessons derailed as the teachers struggled to calm everyone down, themselves tempted to scream at the children to just shut up and stay quiet. Koh retreated to a corner, at one point narrowly dodging a wayward notebook. When his mother came to pick him up and found out what had happened, her own temper flared immediately. She threatened to transfer him to another facility. The caretakers retorted that she wouldn’t be the first. Noise from the adults gathered above Koh like thunderheads. When his mother drove home, she kept a white-knuckle grip on the steering wheel the whole way. Dinner was silent and tense. Koh excused himself and went into his room and locked the door, hugging his toys and waiting for it to end.

The noise outside the door only intensified. Every time the volume jumped, Koh’s pulse jumped with it. He waited in the dark, those gold eyes burning, the irises constricting his pupils like a pair of snakes. He heard the clatter of furniture. The cymbal-smash of broken pottery. And the voices of the people he’d loved rose and warped into something snarling and animal and his mother screamed in
broken syllables, a feral tempo underscored by the sound of something soft and wet, and as Koh retreated further to his bed and the blackening window and buried himself under his pillows there came the rapid patter of footsteps and the door’s thunder and rattle as she hurled herself into it again, again, nails scrubbling on the wood until they tore, an unseen blade stabbing and scraping, and he wanted to cry out and beg her to stop but there was a red-hot ball in his throat and his jaw was wired shut and he could only sit and listen and feel the hot tears on his cheeks as his mother’s howling turned pained as though she were begging in that deranged tongue for alms from something unseen and the noise at his door quieted and the footsteps lurched away and he heard one final bout of crunching percussion, bang-bang-bang-bang, four great raps followed by a meaty thud and then only him in the silence and the dark.

Neighbors heard the commotion. The police sirens came soon after. Their lights flooded his carpet red and blue. They broke open the front door and their voices bubbled like a distant river. His doorknob rattled and then cracked and their shapes flooded his room and he heard them ask questions but couldn’t understand, couldn’t speak, and someone swept him up in their arms and pressed his face into their neck and carried him away through the cold. They didn’t tell him about his father lying face-up on the kitchen tile with stab wounds all through his chest. They remained haunted by the sight of his mother slumped against the table, her skull misshapen from the impact of her smashing her head into the corner hard enough to crater the bone.

They took him to the station and put him up in the lounge with as many pillows as they could find. They gave him hot chocolate that he wouldn’t drink and put out an all-points bulletin, mentioned the child, the family, some new and vicious Quirk. The message went out and the Yard perked its ears. It found Koh wailing amidst the bullet-riddled bodies of the policemen, begging wordlessly for someone to explain why this was happening to him.

The Yard obliged.

His room had a cot and a desk and a television set. The walls and floor and ceiling bristled with an unseen mesh. There was neither a carpet nor windows. When they took him there they slid food through the door on a tray and then showed him something on the TV. The police had taken photographs of the grisly scene at Koh’s home; the Ministry of Individuality had confiscated them. The images of his parents’ bloodsoaked corpses flickered on the small screen. In gentle voices they told him over an intercom that they had died because of his Quirk. So this was where he would have to stay.

As Nakayama had enthusiastically explained to U.A., it was the right move. Koh’s compliance was ensured from that day forward. He lay wordlessly in bed for days at a time. The occasional books and toys brought into his room went untouched, but he continued to eat and drink, which meant his body could accept the drugs the Yard administered in doses appropriate for his age and weight. Vague shapes flitted in and out of the room brandishing their needles, skilfully injecting him before the rage could take hold of their minds. If he ever resisted the shots they would leave and show him the pictures on the TV. Silvery pains in his arms, all the time. Sometimes the drugs made him laugh until he vomited. Sometimes they made him scratch himself until his fingertips came away bloody. One injection locked him entirely in place, unable to do anything but breath or blink for hours; fortunately it had worn off before he’d needed to use the bathroom.

But mostly he felt tired all the time, if not from the drugs they shot into him then from the blood they constantly drew out. The mattress took on his shape as he lay on his side, growing up and growing thin, leaving his meals half-touched. The Yard was delighted at the breakthrough of their tranquilizer, at last giving their counselors the opportunity to speak to the boy face-to-face. But he averted his gaze and told them little. The gold had wholly devoured his eyes, leaving the world blurry and dim. It was no matter. They continued their research and left him in his room, caged with that malicious
He’d gotten used to the difficulty of waking. Even when sleep left him his lids would refuse to open for long minutes, and his head was always full of fog. For the last two years it had often felt like he’d lived underwater, fighting to breach the surface before the Yard’s shots bore him down again. He didn’t mind it, after a while. When he was awake he couldn’t do anything but use the bathroom and pace around and then lie down again, waiting for the memories to go away.

But the room was wrong, now. It was filled with rumbling, and shook and rattled like an amusement-park ride. He thought for a second that he was dreaming, even though dreams were rare in his chemically-induced sleep. But then he recognized the sensation of warm arms wrapped around him, and that woke him up all at once.

His head snapped up and he had an impression of a small and dim metal room whose corners were seamed with light before an unfamiliar face eclipsed his vision, something with scraggly hair and great patches of darker mottled skin on its cheeks, and he cried out and struggled as the arms’ grip tightened. The stranger’s words came out in a panicked rush.

"Hey, hey, relax! You’re safe now! I’m not gonna-"

He kicked and jackknifed and finally broke free and scrambled to the far end of the room where there was a great metal shutter blocking the way. He could find no way to open it and his limbs were too weak to try. He huddled in the corner and watched but the stranger hadn’t started to scream and froth yet. He just knelt in place, hands out and palms flat, as though they were separated by an invisible wall.

"It’s okay,” he said. “I won’t hurt you. Your Quirk’s gone.”

He blinked. He stared. And only then did he notice how bright and vivid the thin light around this room was; even in the murk, it was an intensity he hadn’t witnessed in years. His eyes stung when he tried to focus on it.

“Can you understand me?” the stranger said – a young man, Koh could see now, younger than his parents. His face was horribly scarred and he must have noticed Koh’s gaze focus on it, because he touched his own cheeks and tried to smile.

“I was trapped there too,” he said. “They did this to me. Do I look scary?”

The children at the daycare lunging over the tables at each other’s throats. His mother’s gibbering sobs as she shambled away from his bedroom door.

“No,” he said. His voice was colorless and weak. “I’m not scared.”

“Good. That’s probably good. Come back over here, it’s not safe on that side. We’re in a truck. Don’t want you falling out.” His voice lowered. “God knows that’d happen, with my luck.”

He carefully crawled back over to the man. It was cold in here and his clothes were thin. When he shivered the man gestured to his lap and Koh sat down, sharing the warmth. The hands that enfolded him again were also scarred and the patches of damaged skin felt like plastic that had been left out in the sun.

“My name’s Shin,” he said. “You’re Koh, right?”
“Uh-huh.”

“Some people broke us out of there. They have medicine. It turned your Quirk off, for a little while.”

“It’ll come back?”

“Yeah. But they can make it go away for good. I just need to help them with a few things, first.” The truck lurched and Shin’s grip tightened on him as they slid to the side. “I’m gonna take care of you until then. I might not be that good at it. But I swear I won’t let anyone hurt you. Okay?”

On the other side of the truck’s trailer, Koh saw another shape. A girl with a cascading mess of tangled hair, arms and legs carelessly splayed out. Her expression was vacant and her chin was shiny with drool. She didn’t move even as she stared but the darker spots of her eyes swiveled towards him. His heartbeat quickened under Shin’s hand.

“Who is she?” he asked. “Is she okay?”

“I don’t know. Don’t look at her.”

The road beneath them smoothed out. They’d turned onto the main highway.

“It might be a little longer,” Shin said. “You can sleep if you want. I’ll carry you when we get there.”

“Where are we going?”

“I’m not sure. But it’s somewhere better than where we were before.” He bent low, so that his breath tickled Koh’s ear. “Things are going to get better, okay? For both of us. I promise.”

In the long days beneath the cold mountain he’d been too tired to think. That dreamless quicksand sleep drowned it all. He would have laid there and let the days flow past until they finally stopped. But now Koh was awake, and he tried to think of where they were headed, and he thought of his Quirk gone and the things he would have to do after, and he pictured his house and the nap of his carpet underfoot and the sun’s slow pace across his bed, and then his breath hitched and his face grew hot, because the house would be empty now, his family all gone now, and it didn’t matter where he went because he had nowhere left to go. He buried his face in the crook of Shin’s arm, numb with a loneliness he did not have the words to explain.

* * *

When putting Koh’s new room together, there’d been a brief but lively debate on how to best decorate it to suit his needs. Hound Dog had eventually stepped up and said to keep it plain as possible. For a nose as keen as the Hound Hero’s, people’s scents were as unique and revealing as fingerprints, and when he’d held Koh the day after the Mosei-Santo raid he’d smelled the deprivation on him. Like ashes in rain. Koh had nothing, and whether that was because he hadn’t been given anything or hadn’t wanted anything was a moot point. What he needed was warmth and light. The rest could follow.

So the room was mostly white and unadorned, but the window at the far end took up almost the whole wall – no balcony, but a sturdy curtain that would block out the glimmer of the city below when he needed to sleep. The bed was soft and the sheets were clean. And per Nezu’s instructions, security was minimal, with all the locks on the inside of every door. He could have walked out himself if he wanted, though Hound Dog would have been on him like a shot if he’d tried. U.A.’s students learned fast that he could catch your scent from halfway across campus if he wanted to track you down.
Koh didn’t spend much time there anyway. Hound Dog escorted him everywhere, touring the frosty grounds, sitting in on classes when they could. Nezu had shut himself away in recent days and Aizawa was too consumed with his work, but the other heroes and students would still greet him as they passed (especially Ashido, who would sprint down a long hall just for a chance to ruffle his hair). The injections of Eri’s serum came at regular intervals. His Quirk stayed quiet. He still wouldn’t smile, but Hound Dog listened to his pulse calm, little by little. Socializing was doing him good.

Still, he did have to stay indoors when everyone else was busy. For those times, they had a different chaperone in mind.

“Do you have red?” Eri asked. She wouldn’t look up from her drawing. Koh was hunched against the bed, coloring laboriously inside the lines. He looked at the ranks of crayons by Eri’s side.

“Um. Don’t you have one already?”

“It’s the wrong kind. I need a bright red.”

He pulled a crayon from his own box. “Like this?”

“Like that, like that! Please?”

He rolled it across the floor and Eri snatched it up and went back to work.

“What are you drawing?” Koh asked.

“Secret.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“You can see when it’s done!”

Anyone sneaking a peek into the room would get the brief impression that the two were siblings. They had the same bleached appearance, pale of skin and hair, and though smiling came easier to Eri these days, both of their faces seemed to be those of people far older. Aizawa had given Eri the briefest and most family-friendly summary of Koh’s circumstances as he’d been able – he’d said that Koh, in a lot of ways, was just like her. And Eri, who was far more perceptive than a girl her age should have been, took one look at Koh’s gaunt expression and understood what he’d meant. They spoke little and there was always a wide gulf of carpet between them when she visited, but Koh never objected to the visits.

The coloring book Koh was working on had JAPAN’S GREATEST HEROES emblazoned on the front. Predictably, All Might was a regular feature, but you also had Endeavor (THE FLAME HERO), Hawks (THE WING HERO), and so on. To Koh’s surprise, there was also a page dedicated to Nezu, who had no epithet at all. His 2D image stared out of the page with the same blithe cheeriness he’d shown when Koh had first woken up here. He was working on that page now, even though coloring around the little buttons on his suit was a challenge.

“There,” Eri said, with satisfaction. “All done. See?”

The page she held up was compellingly abstract. A riot of red, white, and blue, with jagged yellow triangles shoved somewhere up top. After a few seconds’ squinting, Koh could vaguely make out a face, pie-eyed like an old cartoon’s. It was easy to see why she’d needed his crayon. Its sweeping red cape took up most of the page.
“What is it?” he asked.

“It’s my big brother Mirio! He’s a hero too. His costume’s like All Might’s except better. It’s got more fwoosh.”

“Fwoosh?”

“You know.” She mimed sweeping a cape behind her. “Fwoosh!”

“Oh. Is he at this school, too?”

“Yeah! I mean.” She wilted a little. “Sort of. He used to be.”

“What happened?”

Eri’s mouth pursed and she set the drawing aside. “There were bad people. Using my Quirk to take other people’s powers away. Mirio lost it ‘cause he wanted to save me.” She touched the budding horn on her forehead. “He got hurt ‘cause of me. A lot of people did.”

“You too?”

She looked up. Koh had set the coloring book aside, drawn his knees up to his chin. His irises burned beneath the fringe of his hair.

“Uh-huh,” Eri said. “Um. Can I ask you something?”

“Okay.”

“Did your mommy and daddy…?”

She couldn’t finish it. But when the silence rolled out long enough, Koh nodded.

Eri said, “Me too.”

More silence. The sunlight crawled across the jagged rendition of Mirio.

“But we’re not bad,” Eri said. “That’s what Mr. Aizawa told me. It’s not our fault.” She looked downcast. “Even if it feels like it, a lot.”

“Your Quirk’s not bad,” Koh said.

“Really?”

“Really,” he said. “You let me be normal. For a little while.”

“What’s your Quirk do?”

“It hurts people. It can’t do anything else. And I don’t know how to make it stop.”

“Oh.”

“I want it to go away,” he said, and bit his lip. “Even if I have to go away.”

“Nuh-uh.” She scooched up to him, her face set. “They’ll help you. ‘cause that’s what heroes do.”

“You mean it?”
She held up her pinky. “I swear.”

After a long moment, Koh held out his pinky too. Their fingers hooked. Eri beamed. The half-colored drawing of Nezu smiled blankly at the ceiling. Koh didn’t smile, but from the way his mouth shook, he was at least making the effort.

*             *             *

It had been a little over a week since Koh had passed through U.A.’s gates. The teachers evaluated him as best they could. Before his Quirk had activated he’d likely been bright for his age, but two years of what was effectively solitary confinement had left its marks. His reading and writing needed improvement and his arithmetic was non-existent. His anxiety was crippling; he rarely spoke even to familiar people and every time he entered a room he instinctively searched for find new places to hide. When left alone he bit and scratched himself, often unconsciously, as if trying to anchor himself with the pain. The faculty were good at their jobs, but a case like Koh’s needed special care, and anyone who could give him the help he really needed was outside these walls, where the M.o.I.’s tentacles waited patiently.

Hound Dog did what he could. For all his barking, he had a reputation for being supremely gentle and understanding with problem children. In fact, the contrast between his looks and his methods might have one of the reasons for his success. Aggressive or delinquent kids stomped into his office expecting to get snarled and slobbered at and would instead find Hound Dog hulking behind his desk, hands folded, hearing them out and responding with gruff but well-meaning advice. It confused people into letting their guard down.

But Koh was a challenge even for him. Hound Dog listened to his pulse, gauged his mood, took care not to push him too far. It was like trying to coax out some rare and sensitive plant, liable to wilt at the least provocation.

Unfortunately, that included Tokoyami. Hound Dog was waiting for Koh to thaw towards him, but every time Tokoyami got within eyeshot his pulse spiked and his scent turned bitter with saline. Hound Dog didn’t even think he was conscious of it. Probably just the sight of Tokoyami was enough to send all the memories of that night crashing back into Koh at once. They needed more time, even though the medicine was starting to dwindle.

Today he took the boy to the hind edge of the grounds where the gardens were planted, even though most of them were just bare branches and stalks. There was a blinding winter sun overhead and the plants’ bent shadows interlaced and turned the earth into a drab mosaic. They sat on a bench and watched the skeletal trees shiver. Koh, bundled up as usual, huddled in the fur ruff of Hound Dog’s costume.

“Are you all right?” he asked. “Not too cold?”

“I’m fine.”

“It looks much nicer here when it’s warm. Everything in bloom.” He sniffed. “Gives me awful hay fever, though.”

And with that, conversation dried up. Children Koh’s age were usually chatterboxes, but Koh had few interests to speak of and a past that he’d either mostly forgotten or kept in a padlocked box in his mind. The only subject he seemed willing to discuss at length was Shin Yuurei – his taste in food, his long nights “working,” his mercurial and often fearsome temper. He seemed more concerned about that young man than himself. In Hound Dog’s experience, that didn’t speak well of how Yuurei had looked after him.
“Mr. Hound Dog?”

He blinked and looked down. Koh was still curled up in his lap, watching the dead trees. “What is it?”

“I wanted to ask something.” He was wearing heavy mittens but still tried to nervously scratch his hand. “If it’s okay.”

“Of course.”

“Everyone keeps saying all those things that happened weren’t my fault.”

“They weren’t,” he said. “You’re not responsible for-”

“But if that’s true,” said Koh, “why didn’t anyone come to help me?”

A hollow sighing of the wind. The sun’s hateful glare. Hound Dog gripped the bench’s armrest as he struggled for an answer.

“We should have,” he said. “We try to save everyone. But we don’t. And people get hurt because of that. All we can tell ourselves is that we’ll try to do better. But that doesn’t help the people we failed. And it doesn’t help you. I’m sorry, Koh. We should have been there.”

“Would All Might have saved me? If he’d known?”

“Yes. He absolutely would have.”

“I asked him to,” said Koh quietly.

“When?”

“I don’t know. I’d been down there for a little while. I didn’t know who else to ask. All Might said on TV that if someone was in trouble, they’d just have to say his name, and he’d be there. So I said it. Over and over. I think I got too loud.” He sank further into his coat. He sounded ashamed. “They talked to me on the radio and told me to stop.”

“Who did? The Yard?”

“Uh-huh. They said All Might wouldn’t come. Because heroes don’t help bad people.”

No answer to that. U.A. sparkled gaily in the sunlight. Somewhere, a bird trilled. Koh looked up and only saw the underside of Hound Dog’s muzzle. A faint creak emitted from the side of the bench.

Then, Hound Dog laid his hand atop Koh’s head, pressed him into his chest.

“But you’re here,” he said. “They were. Wrrrong.”

“Are you okay?” Koh had felt that last word rumbling through Hound Dog’s insides.

“Fine. I’m rrfine.” His slit eyes blazed. “We should go inside. Have somewherrre I need to-”

“How many times I gotta tell you, you idiot!? You get the x variables on one side and the y variables on the other! Divide and conquer! DESTROY THEM ALL!”

“And that squiggly thing gets rid of the letter-d thing, right?”

“The integral, dumbass! The differential’s just a bunch of puny-ass little numbers, but when the
integral pulls ‘em all together, they annihilate those shitty equations like nothing!”

“But the differential’s the one that gets, uh, annihilated…”

The smells were even clearer than the voices. Hair gel and something like an acidic crème brulee – the unmistakable caustic-cloying aroma of nitroglycerin. Those two came as a package deal around here. Koh yelped as Hound Dog scooped him up and set off in the direction of the noise. He made sure to turn Koh away so that he wouldn’t see the bench’s armrest. The wrought iron had bent under Hound Dog’s grip like clay.

Bakugo and Kirishima were en route from the library to the dorms, and the latter’s hair stood out like a beacon. Hound Dog beelined for it, and the two of them stopped and stared as they noticed he was coming. Kirishima turned a shade paler. Even Bakugo took a cautious step back. When Hound Dog spoke his voice was calm, but there was a thin foam of spittle around the edges of his mask and a prominent vein throbbed in his forehead.


“Uh. Sure,” Kirishima said. “What’s up?”


“Yeah, no problem. Bakugo knows where it is. Right, dude?”

Bakugo wheeled on him. “The hell’s that supposed to mean!?”

“Here. Key.” He held out his hand and there it was, gleaming in his massive palm. Kirishima plucked it out like someone disarming a beartrap. Hound Dog let Koh down and knelt in front of him, quickly wiping the froth off his mask.

“Won’t be long,” he said to Koh. “Be good. Okay?”

Koh nodded and turned to Kirishima, who grinned invitingly. “No worries, little dude. You want me to carry you?”

“I’m fine.”

“C’mon, it’s no problem…whoa, geez, you really need to eat more. I could lift you one-handed.”

“What’re you waiting for?” Bakugo said to Hound Dog. “You gotta take off, right?”

Hound Dog stood and pointed; his movements had become jerky, too quick, like a malfunctioning windup toy.

“One more thing. Ba-grrr-go. Wanted to say. Was opposed. To your expulsion.”

Bakugo’s eyes narrowed, but he nodded. “Alright. Thanks, I guess.”

“Did I do something wrong?” Koh asked, as Hound Dog took off. He was moving fast enough to leave divots in the dirt.

“Nah, he’s just intense. Same with Bakugo here. Don’t worry about getting him mad, because he’s always like that.”

“Screw you. And gimme that key!” Kirishima offered it and Bakugo snatched it away and stormed
off. “Move it already!”

“See what I mean?” he said to Koh.

“He’s going really fast.”

“Yeah. Guess we’d better catch up.”

In fact Kirishima practically had to jog to match Bakugo’s pace. He stomped forward like someone ready for war, and when they arrived at the entrance to U.A. Building Three he didn’t even bother to hold the door, just tackled it open and let it swing. Kirishima ducked inside with an exasperated sigh. As far as he knew this was Koh’s first face-to-face meeting with the guy. He wasn’t making a great impression.

Kirishima and Koh rounded a corner and saw Bakugo already rattling Hound Dog’s key in the lock. He opened the door just a crack and glared at them. “The hell are you waiting for? Get in!”

“Alright already. Geez, dude.”

As they approached, Bakugo opened the door just wide enough for them to enter, and then immediately spun on his heel, hand out and blazing. Kirishima turned around just in time to see the searing white glare of Bakugo’s Flash Grenade, and then Bakugo stepped in and slammed the door shut and locked it tight behind him. The echo of his explosion faded away.

“What’re you staring at?” he snapped. “Had to get rid of that invisible fu-” He snapped his jaw shut, swallowed hard and started over. “That invisible guy.”

“Oh,” Koh said.

Hound Dog’s office was often used for group counseling, so it was quite spacious compared to most of the other teachers’. The middle was dominated by two plush couches flanking a squat coffee table, its surface marred by numerous interlocking waterstains. His desk was in the back, papers strategically scattered to hide the clawmarks. Stress toys and magazines littered the place. Puppy posters covered the walls. The shelves and desk bore up a small armada of ceramic dog figurines, Shiba Inu and Labradors especially. When people came here, the décor tended to catch them off-guard as much as Hound Dog himself.

Bakugo flopped down on one of the couches and put his feet up with a practiced air. Kirishima carefully let Koh down on the opposite couch and then sat down next to Bakugo. Several awkward seconds passed.

“So, do we just wait for him to come back?” Kirishima asked.

“Probably. Might as well dig out your workbooks if he takes too long.”

“We didn’t even really introduce ourselves to the little guy, now that I think about it.” He waved and pointed at himself. “Hey. Eiji Kirishima.” He pointed to Bakugo. “Katsuki Bakugo. We’re in Class 1-A.”

“I know,” Koh said.

“Oh, you’ve seen us around?”

“Sometimes. I can hear him yelling.”
“Heh. Yeah, pretty much everyone can.”

“Shut it, Pointy. Just ‘cause the brat’s here doesn’t mean you get to run your godda-” He stopped short again and groaned. “Your stinking mouth.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Koh said drily. “I know what swear words are.”

That got Bakugo’s attention. He turned to Koh, eyebrows raised. “That’s a load off my back. Ain’t like my mom ever bothered to cover up her shit-talking around me.”

“Yeah, and look where that got you,” Kirishima muttered.

“I’m articulate as hell and you know it, jackass.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Kirishima leaned forward. “So…guess the League of Villains didn’t mind their manners around you, huh?”

“I never saw them. Not until that night.”

“Oh. Guess it was Yuurei.”

“Uh-huh. He got mad a lot, too.”

“He never…hurt you, did he?”

Koh shook his head. “No. Never.”

“That’s good, at least.”

“Didn’t stop him from beating the shit out of other people,” Bakugo grunted.

“I know.” He pulled his legs up to his chin again. “I didn’t want him to. But he kept saying he had to do it for me. At least I’m not around anymore. That way he doesn’t have to keep hurting people.”

Kirishima and Bakugo exchanged a glance. There was a lot to unpack here.

“You know the stuff that guy did isn’t your fault, right?” Kirishima asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” Koh said. “I hurt people, too.”

“It ain’t the same thing, you little dumbass.”

Bakugo’s feet thumped the carpet and he half-lunged across the table at Koh, who nearly jumped out of his skin. Kirishima started to protest but Bakugo waved him off and stabbed a finger at Koh’s face.

“That crazy Quirk of yours is what screwed all those people up,” he said. “And one of the first things they drill into your head at this place is that you ain’t just your Quirk. What’re you gonna do when they finally get it outta you, huh? You gonna grab a crowbar and start smackin’ people around the way Yuurei did?”

“No!” His voice almost squeaked; he wasn’t used to raising it like that. “I’d never-”

“Then calm the hell down already.” He settled back, crossed his arms. “People who can’t stop whining about how everything’s their fault piss me off. It’s like Deku all over again.”
“Hey, yeah,” Kirishima said. “Have you seen him, Koh? His name’s Izuku Midoriya, but Bakugo calls him Deku. Frizzy green hair, kinda tiny?”

“I think so? Maybe?”

“He didn’t even have a Quirk until, like, a year before he joined this school. Late bloomer, or something. Didn’t stop him, though!” He flexed and grinned. “So it’s like Bakugo says, you’re more than just your Quirk. Everyone here thinks you’re a great kid. Once that crazy power of yours finally goes away for good, you’ll be able to prove it!”

“Maybe Deku could give him a couple pointers about being Quirkless,” Bakugo muttered.

“That’s actually not a bad idea. We should set up something for him and Koh one of these days. Between Kota and Eri he’s got a little fan club already. And no offense, man, but you scare the hell out of kids. They cry.”

“He ain’t crying!”

“I’m not crying,” Koh agreed.

“And you shoulda seen me at those remedial lessons with the Masegaki brats. I was a goddamn saint!”

“You know, Todoroki said the same thing and I still don’t really believe-”

A knock at the door. Everyone flinched and the conversation stopped short. Bakugo rose first, fingers flexing, and unlocked and opened the door cautiously. Then he grunted, and stepped back, and let the visitor make his way in.

“Afternoon, all.” It was Blood Vlad, his tusks glinting in the rusty sunlight. “Sorry it took so long. Just got the message from Ryo – Hound Dog, I mean. He’s going to be a little longer than he thought.”

“Is he okay?” Koh asked.

“Oh, he’s fine, young man. Couldn’t wait to get back to you, but these meetings tend to run long… Kirishima, could you come here a moment?” Kirishima approached and Vlad King bent low to his ear. “Did something happen? When he called me he could barely talk straight.”

“No idea,” Kirishima whispered back. “He was real worked up, but if it was because of Koh’s Quirk then we’d be going nuts too, right?”

“Hrm. Something I’ll have to discuss with him later.” He straightened and coolly regarded Bakugo. “As for you…heard you’re keeping up with your studies.”

“Got a problem with that?” Bakugo said.

“None whatsoever,” he said, and dismissed him. “Koh, it’s nearly dinner time. How about we eat while we wait for Hound Dog to come back?”

“Okay.”

“Make sure the little dude gets his protein,” Kirishima said.

“Oh, I’m sure we can accommodate him.” He held out his hand and Koh got up and grasped it. “Good luck on your exams, you two.”
Koh turned and waved – to Bakugo, specifically. “Bye. And thanks.”

“See ya around, Koh!”

“Yeah, whatever.”

Vlad King led him out. Bakugo and Kirishima stood awhile in the empty room.

“Asshole,” Bakugo said at last.

“I don’t blame him for being stressed out. He’s got 1-B to deal with on top of all that Mosei-Santo crap. Can you imagine being stuck with Monoma all day?”

“I’d kill him.”

“Yeah, well, there you go.”

“Haven’t seen Aizawa around either.” Bakugo turned to the window, his starburst hair silhouetted against the sunset. “Shit just keeps getting worse out there.”

“If you’re thinking of going off on your again I’ll knock your ass out myself.”

He snorted. “Like to see you try.”

“We’ve got that mess outside and Koh in here. He’s nice and all, but sometimes it feels like we’re on a damn time bomb.” He sighed. “Guess we’ve gotta just stick to studying and hope for the best.”

“Hmph.” He looked over his shoulder and that fiery red eye ran Kirishima through. “What year was the Kōshū Protocol for Quirk usage in infrastructure ratified?”

“Uh-”

“Too slow, dumbass! Five laps around the dorm!”

“Shit!”

* * *

Between the cold and the quarantine, the woods at the outer edge of U.A.’s campus had been abandoned for weeks. Nothing there now but drifts of dead leaves and bare trees standing straight and ranked like grave-markers. Somewhere around here, back when everything was still green, Izuku Midoriya had intercepted the livestreaming villains Gentle and LaBrava from gatecrashing the school’s Culture Festival. Hound Dog had marched through the woods to find them huddled on the ground and reeking of truths they didn’t want to say.

Now a patch of these woods was in ruin. Trees snapped like matchsticks and crushed to splinters. Some of the younger trees had been torn out of the ground in one whole piece, their roots trailing behind them like cornsilk as they were hurled in every direction. The air smelled of sawdust and churned loam. In the midst of this devastation knelt Hound Dog, his costume filthy and his breath coming out in sharp gasps. His hands were bloody, filled with splinters.

Shin Yuurei hadn’t traile Bakugo and Kirishima. Instead he’d come here, revolver in hand, idly contemplating the possibilities. But when Hound Dog had started to rage Shin had given up any fantasies of shooting the man. Too hard to draw a bead, no guarantee that even a headshot would put him down. And besides, Koh liked him.
Shin sat now on a fallen trunk, hood up, revolver in one dangling hand. His face was impassive as he watched Hound Dog reach up and claw feebly at his muzzle. The dripping stalactites of his fangs flashed within. His growling, heaving breath sounded close to sobbing.

“Don’t worry about it,” Shin said, unheard. “That’s how I felt, too.”

* * *

U.A. was uneasy, and few were more sensitive to its anxiety than Koh Kyoumoto. Grim and ashen child, always waiting for the anger of others. But the school stood firm against the growing threat outside and took its time to treat him kindly. He was carried, coddled, shown patience at every turn. Recovery Girl administered his shots with expert, painless precision. His color improved and his cheekbones became less prominent as he started to eat more balanced meals. Little by little, he worked to bury the memories of the cold mountain.

But the signal continued.

The Quirk, “Rage.” Created by the mutated and misfiring nerves deep within Koh’s vertebrae, it lay dormant in its own drugged sleep. But it was quick to wake. And whenever it did – when Shin had taken him out to Mosei-Santo’s streets and waited for the serum to expire – it roared out, eating Koh’s eyes with gold and driving itself deep into the brains of everybody near.

The signal was Shin Yuurei’s scars, his mangled reflection. The signal was Mirai Horooaka’s tinnitus and devoured past. The signal was the Yard’s cruelty ringing in Hound Dog’s ears. The signal was Fumikage Tokoyami’s restless shadow and the ones who persecuted it. The signal was Shouto Todoroki’s burn and the news of his father’s failure. The signal was All Might’s weakness. The signal was Aizawa’s exhaustion. The signal for Ochako Uraraka was Mirai’s upturned smiling face. The signal for Nezu was Osamu Nakayama’s voice and for Nakayama the signal was Nezu’s intransigence. The signal for Tomura Shigaraki was all the world. The signal for Izuku Midoriya was something he still struggled to name. The signal was the burned food, and the empty table, and the cupboards filled only with mice. The signal was the cold rain on holiday and the loved ones carried away in the flood. The signal was the stolen money. The signal was the money that wouldn’t come. The signal was the sleepless nights and the nights shattered by unwelcome sound. The signal was the family that wouldn’t visit and the family that would not leave and the family that had departed too soon and for once and all. The signal was the beggar in the street, the mewling and insatiable poor, the aloof and self-serving government, the sneering and thieving rich, the rot beneath the veneer of society, the criminals that undermined society at every turn, the heroes and lawmakers who left the world’s unwelcome and unwanted to fall into that rot until they had no choice but to become part of it. The signal was the friction, the spark and the scream from the gears of society’s machinery grinding against themselves, the elemental rage that gnashed in the hearts of all. The signal was relentless. The signal would not be ignored.

The scientists and counselors of the Yard had held fierce debates over the true nature of the evil sound that boiled in Koh Kyoumoto’s back. Was the signal the cause of the rage that consumed its victims’ minds, or was it merely the instigator, an electro-chemical open-sesame that opened the vault on a lifetime of fury? In the end, they settled on the former. They believed the best of people. They were, after all, optimists at heart.

They lay in ashes now. Koh, ashen as he was, still lived. He clung to his new guardians and watched the school’s empty places for Shin. And all the while, the signal lay patiently, awaiting the day its message would once again be heard.
Chapter 19

Aizawa had an awful torture for students who wound up in his office. Their nerves would already be shot as soon as they sat down – when you had a one-on-one with Eraserhead it was rarely good news – and they would then have to endure anywhere between thirty seconds to five minutes of dead silence before Aizawa acknowledged them. Sometimes he would be reading papers. Sometimes he would write an email. He would never emote beyond a dismayed sigh or shake of the head. By the time he actually turned those bloodshot eyes on his luckless victim, they’d eagerly swallow their own tongue just to make the agony stop.

Now Nezu was doing the same thing to him. He didn’t appreciate the irony.

In the principal’s defense, he seemed to have genuinely forgotten that Aizawa existed. His pint-sized desk was engulfed in files and stacks of paperwork; his tiny computer clattered every few seconds and when he wasn’t typing he was referring to either the papers or a personal tablet he kept at his side, those chunky paws moving with unnatural dexterity. His fur was spiky and unkempt. He’d been chugging so much tea that his office smelled like a tannery. Every so often he would mutter under his breath, and that was what worried Aizawa the most, because Nezu’s Quirk-boosted brain had the kind of processing power that would make a supercomputer’s circuits burst like popcorn. If he was this out of sorts then it meant he was going through an inconceivable volume of information, and barely anyone knew a thing about it.

Nevertheless, he’d taken enough time to request Aizawa’s presence, using an increasingly frazzled Recovery Girl as a messenger. Aizawa, who’d sustained three broken ribs and a sprained knee in his getaway from Snipe’s disastrous raid, had let himself heal and then limped up to Nezu’s office. The door had been locked. He’d heard tiny scampering feet move to the door and unlock it, and by the time he’d stepped in Nezu was already back to work.

He stared dully ahead in the tea-soaked silence. He was so far beyond exhausted that even sleep felt like too much effort.

“How is Snipe?” Nezu asked suddenly. Aizawa didn’t jump. He was made of stronger stuff than that, at least.

“Alive. Ghillie tells me that he managed to run to the other side of the building and shoot out the windows before it collapsed. She caught him as he was jumping out. A split-second later and he’d have been dead.”

“And his injuries?”

“Extensive. He still has crush damage, the same as Midoriya did earlier this month. His eyes are also injured. Something about his mask shattering.” He rubbed his own eyes in sympathy. “He’s expected to recover, but it’s going to be a while before he can shoot straight again.”

Nezu kept typing. “A serious loss.”

“I should have-”

“No,” said Nezu. “Not another word.”

He pushed his keyboard aside and at last regarded Aizawa fully. It was an unnerving sight. Usually whenever Nezu talked he liked to look up – not just because most people had a good two or three feet on him, but also so that his smile was visible. Now he angled his muzzle down, so only those
beady, bulging eyes could be seen.

“That operation was the brainchild of the Hero Association,” he said. “I had no input on it, but I offered the use of my staff as a show of goodwill. The culpability for its failure does not lie on you. Is that clear?” Aizawa nodded. “Since Snipe is indisposed, I’m letting you know first. Due to this loss, I have declined any further cooperation with the Hero Association’s involvement in the Mosei-Santo crisis. Effectively, I’ve declared U.A. to be sovereign from the larger hero network. We’ll have to look after our own.”

He was too tired to get properly outraged but he made the effort anyway. “That’s insane. They’ll take it as an insult and leave us for dead. Kitae is already pushing into the Kashiki ward. She and Horooka will be at our gates by New Year’s at this rate.”

“It’s quite possible. I don’t intend to make it easy for them, however.”

“Is that all this is about?” He gestured to the mesas of tea-stained paperwork. “You used to have an open-door policy. Now people are wondering where the hell you’ve been. Teachers and students alike are asking questions. How can we trust you if you’re shutting us out like this?”

“We all have our part to play. The important thing now is determining where those parts lie. Some of us have done too little in response to this growing threat. And some of us,” Nezu said, “have done too much.”

Aizawa glowered. “So that’s what this is about.”

“Eraserhead—”

“Aizawa. And if you think I’m inept, then come out and say it.”

“I don’t, so I won’t,” Nezu said levelly. “But I will remind you that you’re a teacher, not just a hero. Your students care for you, and not merely because you grade their papers. I might have cooped myself up in here but that’s still plain to see.”

“I know. And I’m trying to protect them the best I can.”

“Then maybe you need to reconsider your tactics. There are no classes today. I’m asking you, respectfully, to rest, and then devote the rest of the term to your duties at this school. No more excursions into the city.”

“Those kids would be much better off if you’d just let me do my—”

“How did you feel when Jon-X collapsed?” Nezu asked. “When we all thought Midoriya was dead?”

Aizawa’s words dried up. His mouth hung open uselessly.

“I thought as much,” Nezu went on. “Would you force those children to go through the same thing? Or Eri, for that matter? I believe we’re all willing to risk our lives to protect the things we care for, but we must consider the circumstances at hand. Our students have already seen the collapse of one icon this year. And I think you badly underestimate just how much they admire you, as well. There is nothing to be gained by taking on so much of this burden alone.”

He seized on the one retort he could find. “Speaking of icons, have you had this little chat with All Might as well? Or is he still sulking?”
“He’s helping me with a few little things,” Nezu replied smoothly. “Just to keep the ennui at bay. For all his troubles, he’s still here. I’d very much like the same for you.”

“Fine,” he said, through grit teeth. “It’s not as though I can go against you anyway.”

“I am, of course, willing to hear any further arguments you may have. Consider my door open. Figuratively speaking.”

“One last thing,” said Aizawa. “You’re aware this little pantomime around Kyoumoto can’t go on much longer. From what I’m hearing, the students were suspicious of the media blackout we enforced on him from the start, and Nakayama is waiting for his chance. Something will leak. I hope you’ve accounted for that.”

“Ah, yes. How does that charming aphorism go? ‘Three can keep a secret, if two of them are dead.’ I suppose we’ll see how it bears out.” He went back to his keyboard. “In the meantime, U.A. endures.”

The typing resumed. Aizawa ceased to be a part of Nezu’s world. He rose, stiffly, and made for the exit. He could feel the hot flush in his cheeks. He dearly hoped no one would be around to see.

“What’s up?”

He didn’t even know why he bothered.

Present Mic was leaned up against the wall, hair down and wearing civilian clothes (something like a well-to-do beatnik ensemble, his garish shades swapped out for horn-rimmed spectacles). He at least had the decency to keep that smile off his face.

“Not in the mood, Yamada,” Aizawa said.

“I know. Want to grab some breakfast?”

A long silence. Then Aizawa turned and stalked off. Present Mic fell into step beside him.

“Just coffee for me,” Aizawa muttered.

Present Mic patted his shoulder. “You’re getting decaf.”

* * *

News of Snipe’s and Aizawa’s defeat quickly trickled down to the student body, and their already-dismal morale sank further. It was getting harder to find bright spots in the day, between the encroaching forces of Mosei-Santo, the hectoring voice of Osamu Nakayama, and Yuurei’s unnoticeable presence hanging around school like a bad stench. Weekends were hardest; during classes they could at least take some comfort in routine, but when left to their own devices the anxiety set in fast. The only one who seemed undaunted was, ironically, Bakugo, who could be seen around the school mercilessly drilling Kirishima as if his expulsion notice had never happened.

Uraraka, meanwhile, had her own way of working out stress.

U.A.’s gyms had a number of smaller training rooms for one-on-one sparring, with cushioned floors and high ceilings for maximum mobility. There were a lot more students exercising over the last couple of weeks in preparation for whatever insanity the practical exam might have in store, but Uraraka wasn’t training with her grades in mind.
She stood now across from her opponent, both of them limbering up. Uraraka was in her standard-issue jumpsuit, but her training partner wouldn’t be caught dead without his gi – the Martial Arts Hero had to stay on-brand, after all.

“Ready?” said Ojiro.

Uraraka raised her hands. “Ready.”

The bright pops of Ojiro’s bones could be heard as his fists clenched. He and Uraraka began to circle each other, slowly, bare feet scuffing on the mat. They’d used this room exclusively for almost two months now, and this opening maneuver had been repeated so many times that the canvas was worn smooth from their soles. Ojiro’s face was blank, his stance steady, but his tail twitched and wavered behind him like it was catching her scent.

Ojiro got a lot of grief for his no-frills aesthetic – compared to most of U.A.’s students, the kid was like a bowl of unflavored tapioca – but he’d spent time in dojos since he was old enough to walk, and outdoing him in hand-to-hand combat was a tall order. Not only could his tail catch you at unpredictable angles, it greatly enhanced his sense of balance, making it far easier for him to counterattack. His stamina was impressive. He ruthlessly punished missteps and never, ever took risks. And he hit hard – even if you discounted the tail, a single good punch was like getting shot with a load of rock salt. Uraraka didn’t keep close track of her win/loss ratio against him, but when starting out he’d thrashed her so often and so soundly that she knew she had a lot of catching up to do.

Still, he was patient with her. Maybe he just appreciated the attention.

One thing she’d learned was not to watch the tail. That tuft on the end was hypnotic, and he loved to feint her out with it. The trick was his feet. The moment his balance shifted…

She rushed at him and he was ready with a quick jab that would have left her gasping on the floor but instead she clapped her hands and did a cannonballing lunge past him, into the wall where she landed weightlessly and braced herself and pushed off, rocketing to him again, missing him again, dodging the whipcrack of his tail as he tried to catch her on the pass, and then she shot off the opposite wall and towards his blind spot and saw the tail shudder and caught it, wrapped her arms around it as it thrashed like a frenzied gator and when her fingers pulsed pink against Ojiro’s skin she planted her feet and spun and heaved his newly-weightless form skyward.

Then Ojiro’s hand shot out, gripped her collar and pulled her up with him, and then her joints were aflame and her breath was locked in her throat as he bent his arms and legs around her in a spiderlike embrace and cinched her legs back with his tail, a five-limbed submission hold that only tightened as the world around them tilted and spun. There was no leverage up here. The nausea was overpowering. She struggled as long as she could and then made a choked noise of surrender.

Ojiro let her go. She canceled her Quirk and they tumbled down. She was still fighting for breath as he dusted himself off, clasped his hands, and bowed his head.

“Thank you for the match,” he said.

“Really…not…feeling it today,” she panted. Ojiro walked over and helped her up.

“You like to get your opponents in the air, don’t you?” he said. “Leaves them disoriented. But it doesn’t work as well if they see it coming. You’re vulnerable to being grappled yourself.”

“Am I really that obvious?”
“Well, you beat me with that tactic a few times already.” He grinned sheepishly. “I’m not a natural genius like some of our classmates. I’ve got to win the old-fashioned way, by losing over and over again until I figure it out.”

“Don’t sell yourself short.” She hobbled over to the wall and slid down. Ojiro joined her, coiling up his tail like a cushion.

“You’ve definitely been improving, though,” he said. “And I think I’m getting better too. Especially considering you managed to beat Bakugo, of all people.”

“Like I keep saying, he went easy on me.”

“I’m not sure he even knows how to go easy on someone. He probably did the best he could, considering the environment. Stuck in that alley, close quarters, no collateral damage allowed…it’s a tough matchup for Mr. Killsplosion or whatever he calls himself.” He gestured to the gym. “On the other hand, a place like this is practically my home turf.”

“I guess you have a point.” She wiped sweat off her brow. “Hey, could you see me when I was zipping around like that? I was trying something new.”

“Yeah, caught me off-guard. But I could still track you. You were just blurry.”

“Damn.” She thumped the floor. “Gotta fix that, somehow.”

“What, hitting people’s blind spots? It’d be handy considering you’re mostly melee, but…” He leaned over, his face suddenly concerned. “Wait. This isn’t about Horooka, is it?”

She grunted and looked away. That didn’t reassure him any.

“Uraraka, seriously. I think you’re pretty badass and all, but that girl took out Endeavor. She’s a walking death sentence. Don’t make her your responsibility.”

“Yeah, God forbid,” she muttered.

“What?”

“Sorry. That was crappy of me.” She put a hand to her forehead. “Just been distracted lately.”

“We all have, I think.”

“It’s just…you’ve thought about where villains come from, right? It’s not like most of them just wake up one morning and go, ‘I’m gonna be the shittiest person ever!’ You’ve got headcases like Stain in there, yeah, but how many villains got that way because the heroes were a little too late?”

Ojiro didn’t look any less confused. “Too late for what?”

“I don’t know. To help them. To help someone else. Everyone’s got a tragic backstory somewhere, right? Lots of bad guys try to use it as an excuse. But maybe sometimes they only get that excuse because of us. ‘Never fear, I am here.’ Well, we’re not always. And then we only show up when it’s time to punish them, because if we don’t, they’ll hurt someone else, and give them an excuse, and…” She trailed off and groaned. “I’m giving myself a headache.”

“It sure sounds that way.” Ojiro had scooched away from her a little; her gestures had become quite animated. “But you can’t be telling me you feel sorry for Horooka, can you? How many people you think she’s killed so far? Jon-X, that train…hell, she tried to kill you a couple times. You can’t just
blame all that on heroes."

“Sure. You’re right.” She got up and smiled at him. “Sorry. I’ve pretty much turned you into a training dummy already, it’s not fair that you’ve got to be my therapist on top of it.”

“Maybe you should talk to Hound Dog. He’s supposed to be good at that sort of thing.”

“Haha, maybe. I’ll think about it. I’m gonna take it easy for the rest of the day, alright?” She made for the exit. “Good luck with finals.”

She stole one last glance behind her as the door swung shut. Ojiro was still sitting there against the wall, his tail wrapped protectively around him.

She showered and changed and by the time she stepped into the freezing outdoors she still wasn’t feeling any better. A few other students were walking through campus, collars and scarves pulled up, their breath white steam. Their tension increased with every passing day – Mirai pushing ever closer, Koh’s medicine running low. She’d thought about talking to Tokoyami or Midoriya but they looked neck-deep in their own troubles, and so she’d let them be.

She’d also seen the newscast of Endeavor’s failed attack on Mosei-Santo. The single-frame shot of Mirai, staring out from the screen as though caged behind it.

Uraraka knew her feelings on this whole mess were irrational – Aizawa would definitely call it that, she thought, and probably throw in some harsher language for good measure. Mirai’s circumstances had been horrific, but everyone struggled and everyone suffered and vanishingly few of them had a body count pushing triple digits. Uraraka thought of the victims of the train crash, their families. How they would react if she tried to argue that even Mirai deserved some understanding.

But the plain and awful truth remained. The Yard had ultimately been what spawned all this misery and it had used the Hero Society as its shield, and Nakayama was still on the airwaves even as public opinion against heroes turned sour. The heroes fighting for calm and Mosei-Santo swollen with hate and the Ministry’s hands grasping for them and all the people caught in between not caring about any of it, only crying out for someone to return law and order, bring back peace and quiet. Silence it all.

This time last year Uraraka had been worrying about cram school and her parent’s faces when the bills came in. Now she felt untethered, drifting further away from land. When she’d first fought Bakugo at the sports festival something hot and bright had woken up inside her. The sensation of pushing her body until her muscles felt like they would burst out from her skin, waking up later without even realizing she’d lost consciousness. Since that day she’d cared less and less about the rankings, or even about the money. She’d wanted to get stronger like everyone else. But all this strength had to mean something. What exactly was she training for?

She found herself at the front gate, still wide open. Musutafu glittered in the distance. But there were a few people at the entrance, most of them older, bundled up and shivering but not looking as if they were in a hurry to be somewhere else. She was alone on this part of the grounds and when one of them noticed the thin scratch of her silhouette she saw them bend over to their fellows and murmur something. Their expressions at this distance were hard to make out, but their body language was not friendly.

She turned, stiffly, and headed for the dorms. It felt like a retreat.

*   *   *

The cafeteria was open around-the-clock, though at this time of the year it was nearly empty except
at mealtimes – no one wanted to ruin their chances at the practical exam by snacking too much. But there was never a bad time for a hot bowl of soba.

“Man, you’re really going at it.” Fuyumi watched him slurp, chin in her hand. “Never saw you eat like this at home.”

“Eat yours before it gets cold.”

“I did. It’s mostly broth, now.”

“That’s the best part.” He grabbed the bowl and tilted it back. Fuyumi rolled her eyes and obligingly followed suit.

She’d called earlier that day to tell Todoroki she was coming to visit, and even though Todoroki had very strongly advised against it, here she was. She’d made sure to enter the city from Takodana Ward to the north, well away from Mosei-Santo, but even then she’d realized what her brother had meant – the city felt unpleasant, like the air was full of latent static, and when she’d made it to the gates she’d needed to show two forms of ID and then slink in while several strangers nearby cast dull and silent glares. They’d been loitering around the entrance, standing just far away enough to keep its tripwire from triggering and locking the place down. Refugees, maybe. After Snipe’s defeat, public opinion towards U.A. had broken a new floor.

Todoroki set his bowl and chopsticks aside. “You could have done this over the phone.”

“I wanted to see you.”

“There’s video chat.”

“It’s not the same thing and you know it, Shouto.”

“I do,” he said. “I just don’t want you to get hurt. No telling how far this problem has really spread. They could have sleeper cells in Takodana as well.”

“There’s no point arguing about it now. Also, just want to say, this place’s food is amazing.”

“It is,” he said. “So how’s Father?”

She wanted to pound the table. He knew that was the real reason for this visit, she knew he knew, and he’d still beaten her to the punch. And his poker face didn’t even slip.

“He’s out of bed but it’ll be another couple days before he can patrol again,” she said. “His ribs-”

“I know about his injuries. That’s not what concerns me.”

“His temper, I know. I was getting to that. I was all set to say a prayer for his training room when he got back home – figured for sure he’d just blow up like he did after All Might retired – but he’s been quieter than ever. And not in a scary way either. He just seems exhausted.” She sighed. “That was technically his big debut as the Number One Hero, you know. Definitely could have gone better.”

Todoroki grunted, face still neutral. The cafeteria’s soft light glistened on his scar.

“Shouto, can I ask a big favor? I know you’re under quarantine and all, but maybe if you visited home then-”

“No, sis.”
She threw up her hands. “Fine. Had to give it a try.”

“I’m not doing it to be cruel,” he said. “But you know it wouldn’t make a difference if I was there or not.”

“You’re right. Of course you’re right. But after that thing with Natsuo, and now this… I thought that after Mom started getting better, everything else would just sort of follow, you know? And for what it’s worth, it does look like Dad’s trying to find a way to make up for…you know. Everything.”

“He’ll be searching for a while, then.” Todoroki started idly tapping the table. “He made it to the first rank. He got what he wanted. Now he needs to decide what to do next. It’s not my responsibility to help him with that.”

“Hasn’t he called you?”

“Not since the Mosei-Santo operation.”

“Huh. I overheard him talking to someone from your school, so I thought…”

“It wasn’t me.”

“All right.”

“And I have other reasons for staying here,” he went on. “You saw me at the Sports Festival. It was a turning point, I think. Or I want to believe so.” He gingerly touched his scar. “This school, and the people in it… I care about them, too. Even the ones I don’t particularly like.”

“Like who?”

Monoma. “Can’t think of any right now.”

“Hmm.” Her eyes narrowed behind her glasses. “I think you should slow down a little, Shouto. You’re getting way too mature for your age.”

“I learned from the best.”

Fuyumi smiled. “All right, you made your point. I’m still glad you’re here, even with all the craziness going on. Speaking of which, Dad told me something strange.”

“What is it?”

“You know how pro heroes all have patrol routes. The Hero Association gives recommendations about who can go where but the agencies mostly get to pick their own, only downside is that some other hero might issue a complaint if there’s too much overlap. But last week, Dad said that they’ve been changing their routes. All at once.”

“Who has?”

“Everyone. Heroes in Tokyo, Hōsu, Kamino… they’re being pretty tight-lipped about it, too. Even Dad’s stopped talking about it. There’s something real weird in the air right now, and not just in Musutafu.”

“How are Natsuo and Mother?”

“Natsuo’s staying with his girlfriend up north. Mom’s fine, but she took the news about Dad pretty hard.”
“There’s worse things.” He regarded the rows of empty tables. “You should stay away too, sis. Far away. It’s good to see you again, but…”

“No, I understand. Good to know you have your priorities straightened out. Now I just wish Dad would do the same.”

The fragrance from the cafeteria counter wafted over. Fuyumi’s nose wrinkled. Her stomach growled. She hadn’t eaten at all on the trip over.

“Want another bowl?” she asked innocently.

“Do you?”

“A little.”

“Well, then.” He clicked his chopsticks. “Let’s have at it.”

Mezo Shouji’s room hadn’t changed a lick since he’d moved in. His bedroll brooded in the corner, immaculately clean; the rest of the place was a featureless wooden box. His schoolbooks were tucked away in his closet with his uniforms, out of sight. The lack of any furniture turned the whole place into an echo chamber, where the least creak rang out with gunshot clarity. Since Shouji was among the quietest students in Class 1-A, it raised certain questions as to what he actually did in there all day.

Right now, at least, he was playing Go.

“Take your time,” Shouji said. Tokoyami’s hand hovered over the board, his stone (black, naturally) shaking between his fingers.

The Go board was one of Shouji’s very few possessions, though he mostly had it for Tokoyami’s sake. Over the last several months their games had become a semi-regular occurrence, though they were often brief, because Tokoyami was a horrible player. Children could have beaten him handily. Still, he didn’t complain, and in fact came to play most often when he was under stress. These gentle losses helped take his mind off more serious problems.

Though this was something of a special case. His problem wasn’t going away. In fact, it was pacing around the room like an anxious puppy. As Tokoyami deliberated over his moves, Dark Shadow was out and literally climbing the walls.

He put the stone down. Shouji politely waited a few seconds before countering. Tokoyami groaned, rubbed his beak. Those red eyes were bloodshot and dim.

Dark Shadow hadn’t interrupted class since getting on Aizawa’s nerves (probably for good reason; for a sentient Quirk, being erased must have been unpleasant), but Tokoyami still visibly strained to keep it held in whenever he was in public. It could be seen wisping out of his sleeves or collar; that dark umbilical sometimes pushed out from his back like a sudden boil. When it did emerge, Dark Shadow wasn’t aggressive or violent but still acted bizarrely hyper, always moving and darting about like a child on a sugar rush. It wordlessly muttered and panted as it scampered around Shouji’s room. Tokoyami had asked if he could let it stay out while he was here, and Shouji didn’t mind, but Tokoyami seemed acutely embarrassed by it anyway.

Tokoyami put down his stone. Shouji countered, surrounding one of Tokoyami’s pieces with his own and capturing it. Tokoyami then captured the piece that Shouji had just played – an illegal
move. And this was one even kindergartners knew. Shouji glanced between Tokoyami’s face and the board, but he didn’t appear to notice.

“Tokoyami, that’s ko,” he said.

“What about him?” Tokoyami murmured.

“Excuse me?”

“What?” He looked at Shouji as if he’d just noticed him, and then shook his head and took back the stone. “Right. Sorry. My mistake.”

“You’ve had something on your mind ever since the Mosei-Santo raid.” Out of courtesy Shouji usually kept his extra appendages to a minimum during their games – people found them off-putting – but now several fresh eyes emerged from his shoulders, watching him with concern. “Ready to talk about it yet?”

Tokoyami sighed. “It’s rather personal. And complicated.”

“Problems at home?”

“No, nothing of the sort.” Dark Shadow gripped his shoulder, leaned into his ear.

“You need to tell someone,” it hissed.

“Hush.”

“I’m not offended,” Shouji said, and put down another stone. “Your business is your business. But you do seem…at odds with yourself.”

Tokoyami rolled his latest piece between his fingers like he was polishing it. Then he set it aside, and clasped his hands. Dark Shadow resumed pacing.

“Could I ask you something first?” he said.

“Go ahead.”

“You’ve said before that you were used to others being frightened of you. When did you make peace with that?”

Shouji didn’t show any reaction to the question, but fresh eyes and teeth rippled across his skin as he pondered. “Hard to say. Several years ago, at least.”

“It must have been troublesome.”

“It wasn’t so bad. I was always big for my age. They just left me alone.” He looked at Dark Shadow. “I know that you weren’t so fortunate. Is this about what happened that night?”

“Koh still won’t come near us,” Dark Shadow lamented.

“I said hush.”

“I think he’ll warm up to everyone in time,” said Shouji. “Especially when that Quirk is dealt with. In any case, you did what needed to be done.”

Dark Shadow’s formless flood impaling Spinner like a shrike with brush-thorns. Shigaraki spread-
“Did you think that becoming a hero would make people look at you more favorably?” Tokoyami asked.

“It did cross my mind.” Shouji plucked at his mask. “That’s one of the advantages of the agencies’ branding. People like Ectoplasm and Gang Orca have pretty healthy followings because of their looks. For a hero it’s distinctive, but for anyone else…”

“They would merely be pariahs.”

“There was actually a time when I became quite interested in stories of Quirk discrimination. Those with abnormal bodies or sizes, and how society accommodates them. There wasn’t much good news to be found. I wouldn’t be surprised if some villains turn to crime because their looks make legitimate work too difficult. You’d think that, once Quirks became common, the sudden variety of physical appearances would make discrimination harder. But apparently it just changed targets.”


“Same as it ever was,” Shouji agreed. “I’m not sure that people ever really change. The question is, do you punish them for it, or help them in spite of it?” He spread his arms. “So I chose this.”

Tokoyami and Dark Shadow both stared. The latter had gone wide-eyed; there was something awestruck in its limited expression.

“That said,” Shouji added smoothly, “I get the feeling that whatever’s worrying you is a little bigger than just Koh.”

“Yes and no,” Tokoyami said.

“You have no idea,” Dark Shadow added.

“I’m always here if you want to chat. But surely there must be someone else you can confide in?”

Tokoyami’s face didn’t change. But Dark Shadow jolted as though an electrical current had passed through its umbilical, and it swooped down and gripped his shoulders from behind.

“You can’t be serious,” it said. “You’re not thinking of-”

“Hold your tongue or I shan’t let you roam like this again,” Tokoyami said.

“It sounds like you’ve made a decision,” Shouji said. “I’m glad. Want to finish the game?”

“Might as well.” He picked up the stone. “The abyss shall claim my remaining pieces shortly.”

He moved his hand to the board, but then Dark Shadow zipped over again and snatched the piece out of his fingers and laid it down with a sharp clack. Shouji blinked. He regarded the board. He thoughtfully rubbed his chin.

“Well,” he said. “That’s an interesting move.”

“You’re welcome,” Dark Shadow said, and returned to the ceiling.

* * *

The sun had just started to kiss the horizon when Jirou went to the Support Department, a paper
lunchbag clenched in one fist. She stopped in front of that bellicose new mural and admired it, in a bemused sort of way. She didn’t know anyone who could paint but whoever’d volunteered to slap this thing up had really put their back into it. She could even see the shine on the barbed wire.

“They’re not kidding, by the way,” she said, in case anyone unseen happened to be listening. “There’s no end to the horrible shit this girl would do if she got her hands on you. So maybe go elsewhere, yeah?”

The development studio’s reinforced steel double doors were nearby. She knocked and then immediately stood clear; she’d heard what had happened to Midoriya the first time he’d come here. But no explosion arrived. Instead something slammed into the doors from the other side, followed by a voice that was perky and squeaky and yet somehow full of menace, like a chipmunk with a chainsaw.

“Speak at once!” it shouted.

“It’s Jirou from 1-A. I called ahead.”

“Oh.” Jirou heard several deadlocks being drawn back. “I guess you’d better come in.”

The doors opened just enough to permit her to enter and Mei Hatsume slammed them shut again the moment she was on the other side. Jirou had a few baffled seconds to look at what had become of the studio – she hadn’t been here since demoing her new hero tech and didn’t remember it all that well, but she was certain it hadn’t been this chaotic. The floor space had been devoured by piles of esoteric machinery so thick and tall that they almost blotted out the lights. She saw clenching mechanical fingers, LED’s blinking in ineffable code, a pile of silvery material that looked like mercury frozen still. Then Hatsume’s face eclipsed her vision and she yelped and nearly dropped her bag.

“Don’t mind the babies,” she said. “There’s no one around to organize for me here, so the nursery’s a bit crowded.”

“Nursery…?”

“That’s what this is now. It is my domain. I have laid claim to it!”

Hatsume came off as unsettlingly manic at the best of times, but now there was a glassiness to her grin and a twitchiness under her skin that made Jirou want to keep her distance in case she exploded. She had a mug of coffee in her hand so big it was more like a fishbowl with a handle, and Jirou kept a cautious eye on it as Hatsume led her into the scrapyard labyrinth the studio had become. Printed on its side in English were the words: “BE MAD. IT HELPS.”

“Power Loader and the rest have all abandoned me in favor of pharmaceuticals,” she went on. “Heresy. Foolishness. Chemical assistance is such a dead end. Our fleshly bodies are ever so sensitive to overclocking. Oh, the stories I could tell you about black-market enhancers like Trigger. The blood curdles! Sometimes literally. But show my babies the proper love and they’ll last you for a hundred years. The Mei Hatsume guarantee of excellence. Certain restrictions apply.”

“Good to know.” Here was a dripping chrome chassis that felt like it was staring at her. “Is she in here someplace?”

“I’ve cleared a space for her, don’t worry. Just a bit further!”

There was a sound in the distance. A soft and steady patter, like dripping water. It grew louder as they approached, and finally exited the maze.
Yaoyorozu didn’t look up. She was seated at a table in the corner of the studio, hunched intently over a transparent plastic screwtop bottle, like the kind for holding multivitamins. But the pills this one was meant to hold were plain to see – large blue capsules emerged from her fingers like pustules and dropped in. More bottles were ranked along the table’s edge. There had to be at least a dozen of them. Yaoyorozu herself looked bone-weary, thinner, her upswept cockscomb hairdo reduced to a bedraggled ponytail.

“How long has she been at this?” Jirou whispered.

“Do you mean just today?” Even Hatsume’s voice had dropped. “Either way, the answer’s ‘too long.’ I like to work as much as the next girl, but my job doesn’t literally suck the calories out of me. Hope whatever you’ve brought is the pick-me-up she needs.”

“You and me both.” She crept closer. “Yaoyorozu. It’s Jirou.”

“Thank you, just set them down over there,” she said wanly. Jirou blinked. Several seconds passed. Then Yaoyorozu squeaked and whirled around in her seat, her cheeks brick-red.

“Hey,” Jirou said, for lack of anything better.

“Jirou! I was- You didn’t- Oh dear, I must be in such a state…”

“Whoa, chill. I’m not gonna take pictures or anything.” She held up the bag. “No one’s seen you around lately. Figured you could use a snack, with the work you’re doing.”

“Oh, how thoughtful! But it’s really not as bad as it looks.”

“Uh-huh.” Yaoyorozu was so skinny that if someone gave Jirou a couple of sticks she could play a jolly tune on the girl’s cheekbones.

“It’s the truth.” She brushed hair away from her face, tried to recover some dignity. “I’m manufacturing quite a lot of these but they’re so small that they require very little energy. But the molecular structure is terribly complicated, so I need to concentrate fully the whole time.”

“And this is the place you chose to concentrate? Hatsume’s not exactly an indoor-voice type.”

“I heard that!” Hatsume trilled. She’d already returned to the machine-maze.

“It’s for security. With Yuurei about, we can’t be too careful. And you learn to tune her out after a while.”

“I heard that, too!”

“Anyway, I’m very grateful.” She took the bag and removed its contents. Inside was a thermos of hot black tea and a slice of cake in a plastic container. The pastry’s black-and-white marbling was so rich it seemed to glow, and when Yaoyorozu removed the lid the fragrance overpowered even the studio’s latent smell of cordite and engine oil. “Oh. Oh my goodness.”

“Yeah, I asked Lunch Rush if he had any ideas, and this was what he gave me. Better pace yourself.”

Lunch Rush’s special brownie cheesecake. Only made to order, and only attempted by the adventurous or suicidal. It was a calorie Tsar Bomba; just the sight of it could bring up someone’s blood sugar. Yaoyorozu manifested a gilded sterling-silver fork and took a careful bite, visibly holding back tears.
“It’s magnificent.”
“Yeah. Well.” Jirou coughed. “Happy to help. I made the tea myself, so it might not be up to snuff…”

“I’m sure it’s fine.” She sipped, paused, emitted a brief stream of sugar from a fingertip, stirred, and drank deeper. “I can keep going the rest of the evening on this alone.”

“Maybe get some real dinner while you’re at it.” Jirou stepped over to the table and eyed the ranks of pill bottles. “This is what the principal’s got you working on, huh?”

“Yes, we took a few days to confirm that I was creating the proper formula, but it should be identical to the tranquilizers that he received from the Ministry. I’d like to finish at least one more crate before the day is out.”

“I’d go stir-crazy sitting here all this…wait a second, crates?”

“One hundred pills to a bottle, fifty bottles to a crate, twenty-two crates and counting!” Hatsume singsonged.

Yaoyorozu smiled. “Just doing my part.”

“Has Nezu lost his damn mind?” Jirou said. “We’ve got finals coming up and he’s using you as a freaking pill mill!”

“I still find time to study. And he’s offered school credit for this service. A simple arrangement, really.”

“It’s still messing up the class. You know that jackass Bakugo is gunning for your spot. And then there’s this crap with Mineta…”

“I am aware of the situation with Mineta,” she said stiffly. “I’d rather not discuss it.”

“Right? You think you know a guy.”

“Foul waters run deep, I suppose.” She took another bite of the cake; it was already half-gone. “That aside, I haven’t much room to complain. I’m not the only one the principal has conscripted. Support is also working overtime, as Hatsume is well aware.”

“Overtime doesn’t exist in my vocabulary,” Hatsume called. She now sounded like she was bludgeoning one of her “babies” with a pipe wrench, and it was fighting back. “But some of these other bums are finally learning what real work is like.”

“Even Business and Management are working with him, I hear. They’re running drills of some sort, but I’m not privy to the details. There’s quite a bit of activity going on beneath the surface of this place.”

Jirou worriedly tugged her ear-jacks. “Wonder what he’s got in store for the rest of us.”

“Merely being an ardent student is contribution enough for him, I’m sure. Some of us merely have a bit extra on top.”

“Oh, that reminds me,” said Hatsume, between swings of the wrench. “I looked over those designs you gave me, Yaoyorozu. They seem functional enough. Though that should have been obvious, given their simplicity. How could you allow such blasé blueprints to pass beneath my eyes? You offend me.” Clang. “You disgust me!” Clang-clang. “I say that in a very caring way.”
“What the hell is in that coffee she’s drinking?” Jirou muttered.

“I dare not speculate.” She sipped her tea. “Though I believe I saw her using it to de-grease an engine.”

“What’s this about a blueprint?”

“During the Mosei-Santo operation, Kouda was a bit crestfallen about his lack of contributions. I was thinking of ways he might be able to assist in the future. Need to keep my mind on something while I’m in here.”

“Yeah, not to mention we’ve got a friggin’ army marching to our gates. And that’s on top of the whole thing with Koh.” She gestured to the bottles. “So, what, is Nezu planning to make us all gobble these things down when the serum runs out?”

“No, no, that’s all wrong.” Hatsume emerged, oilier than before. Her coffee mug had apparently been lost in the melee with her machines. “Mitigation of that kid’s Quirk is my business. And it’s already solved. More or less.”

“What, that easy?”

“Er. Yes and no.” Suddenly all the cheer had left her. “Power Loader tells me that crazy signal of his can be blocked by Faraday cages, so I developed a malleable mesh frame based on that principle that should lock his power up tight. Problem is that it needs seamless 360-degree coverage to function properly, and I can’t make it portable, so… I’m basically helping to build a prison cell for a grade-schooler.” She sighed. “Don’t get me wrong, work’s work, but this is not what I thought I’d be doing when I signed up for U.A. Some of my bidders are even drifting away because of this Mosei-Santo mess. Dirty welchers. I’ll remember their names.”

“Wow. Heavy.” Jirou gingerly picked up one of the pill bottles. “So what the hell are all these for?”

“You got me. All I know is they’re going underground.”

“What?”

“You didn’t know? This campus has a subterranean level for shelter in case of emergency.” Hatsume stomped the ground. “It’s like a panic room for the whole student body. There’s even tunnels opening up into Musutafu for covertly shipping supplies, stuff like that. Wouldn’t be surprised if some of these tranquilizers are going out that way. God only knows where they’re headed, though.”

“Geez, this place really does have everything,” said Jirou. “And I bet that’ll be where Koh’s going if we can’t nuke his Quirk in time.”

“Yes,” Hatsume said quietly. “Most likely.”

“I wish I could make more of that serum,” Yaoyorozu said. “But Eri’s blood is the x-factor. It’s beyond my capabilities.”

Hatsume waved it off. “Don’t be so hard on yourself. You’d already be a damn legend if you’d gone into Support instead of heroics.”

“Yes, I’ve heard something similar from Business, given my background.” She stared morosely into her tea. “While my track record in hero exercises has been less than stellar.”

“Come on, not this again,” Jirou said. “You just…work at a different pace than us, that’s all. That
Quirk of yours is incredible, you’ve just gotta learn how to use it on the fly.”

“It’s not only that. Look at what I’m doing now.” She held out her palm and another pill rose through her skin. “I could have just as easily put my powers to use for more mundane ends. Imagine how much good could be done creating rare parts or medicines on demand. But, of course, it wouldn’t have me in the spotlight. Sometimes I can’t help but think my selfishness does a disservice to everyone.”

“Speaking as someone who’s actually been in a spotlight recently,” Jirou said, “that’s pretty damn hard work too.”

“Yaoyarozu does have a point.” Hatsume leaned up against a perilously teetering pile of junk. “Heroism’s equal parts marketing and magnanimity. You know how much yen All Might merch pulled in last year? Your jaws would hit the floor.”

“Who gives a shit?” Jirou was getting heated. “Yeah, you’ve got glitzy crap like the hero rankings and everything, but what do you call what you’re doing here?” She shook one of the bottles. “This is hero work, too. We’d all be screwed without you around, Yaoyorozu. You too, Hatsume.”

Hatsume tossed her hair. “It is known!”

“Perhaps I should keep to the backstage for a bit, so to speak,” Yaoyorozu said, smiling. “A bit of preparation can go a long way. And I’m nothing if not well-prepared.”

“Hell yeah. And it’ll set you up even more when you’re ready to be front and center.”

“Consider my spirits lifted, then.” She finished off the cake and stared at her fork. “Hmm. Perhaps I should have made a disposable one.”

“Just give it to me, I can use it for something,” said Hatsume.

Jirou said, “There is one other thing bothering me.”

Their heads turned to her. She’d taken Yaoyorozu’s latest pill and pinched it between her fingers. She held it up to her eye like a spyglass.

“If you guys need to do all this just to prepare for Koh’s Quirk coming out,” she said, “where the hell was he before the villains got ahold of him? He can’t stop using his power, right?”

“The question did occur to me.” Yaoyorozu nervously clutched her ponytail. “Quirks manifest no later than age four, excluding very rare cases like Midoriya. But Koh’s was a known factor. His power’s influence must have been felt somewhere.”

“The mountains, maybe?” Hatsume suggested. “Though, hm, there’s the question of how the League got close enough to snatch him in the first place. They might have had that tranquilizer, but they’d have to get it…from the government…”

The machines chittered in the long silence that followed.

“No photos,” Jirou said faintly. “The faculty don’t want anyone to know he’s here.”

“And Minister Nakayama’s language has become rather accusatory in recent broadcasts,” Yaoyorozu said.

“Think I need to have a little confab with Power Loader,” Hatsume mused.
“No,” said Yaoyorozu. “Not yet."

“But we-""

“If this is true – and that is a considerable ‘if’ – then the faculty must be suppressing it for a reason. If Koh’s Quirk is successfully eliminated then all of it is rendered moot.” She cracked her knuckles. “It just gives me the motivation to work even harder.”

“That little rat better know what he’s doing,” Jirou said.

“This school has always striven to work in our best interests. For now, I think we should return that trust.”

“Tell that to Bakugo,” she said. “On second thought, don’t. I don’t even wanna know how he’d react.”

“All the more reason to keep this to ourselves. We can’t afford chaos in such a troubled time.” She turned back to the table. “Thank you again for the visit, Jirou. I really must get back to it.”

“Come on,” Hatsume said. “I’ll show you out. Watch the babies. I’d say they don’t bite, but, well, I had a thing for hinges the other evening…”

She was far more solemn as she escorted Jirou back through the maze. When they reached the door she paused, and her crosshair-pupil eyes bore through Jirou’s.

“And don’t go thinking you’re dead weight in all this,” she said. “Horooka, the League, maybe even Nakayama…there’s a lot of unfriendliness hanging around this school lately. When the time comes, we’re going to need someone to bring the goddamn thunder. You get me?”

“I get you,” Jirou said.

“Don’t be a stranger. I’ve got backups of everyone’s equipment and innovations galore. You need some extra oomph, you come to me.”

“Appreciate it.”

“Rest up. Long nights ahead.”

The doors clanged shut behind her. Jirou gazed down the empty corridor, holding her overcoat close. When she stepped outside the sun had long gone and the silhouette of U.A. seemed somehow askew. She walked the grounds alone to the tower that held Koh’s room and stared at the lit windows that ran up that plane of glass.

“You know we’re on the same side,” she said, in case someone was listening. “We want to help, too. If you could just get that through your head.”

She skipped dinner; she’d lost her appetite. She went to her room and didn’t sleep. Darkness dragged itself across U.A. and the school itself remained restless, its residents working feverishly into the night.
Chapter 20

The clocks approached midnight. From Nezu’s office window, the lights dotting the darkened school campus made it an inverse of the starry skies overhead. He wasn’t able to appreciate the view; he hadn’t looked up from his work in some time. The caffeine perking through his bloodstream had hit diminishing returns sometime by mid-afternoon, but he still felt he could wring a few more hours out of his brain before its performance dropped to unacceptable levels.

His computer screen was so crowded with meticulously organized tabs and windows that it resembled a game of Solitaire. He opened a digital map of Tokyo’s Bunkyō ward and pulled a file from the stationery topography that had overtaken his desk. He flipped it open and traced a claw down its contents, humming tunelessly to himself.

Somewhere amongst the papers, his phone rang. He ignored it. The call went to voicemail. A full minute passed. The phone rang again. He huffed, reached over, put the call on speaker, and went back to typing.

“I am extraordinarily busy, Minister,” he said.

“I know,” said Nakayama. “Apologies for troubling you at this hour. But you haven’t been responding to my emails.”

“There’s nothing more to say at this time. I gave you all the facts.”

“With all respect, Principal, I remain dubious.”

He hadn’t given Nakayama his number but that clearly hadn’t mattered much. Like all heroes, Nezu was a public employee, and the minister still had access to government records. His emails – relentless, badgering, roundabout questions about the school’s welfare, Nakayama’s concern, and, ever more frequently, Kyoumoto’s whereabouts – kept the same stiffly obsequious tone as they had since Nezu’s first contact with him, but the calls were new, and with every one, some of the wheedle dropped out of Nakayama’s voice. Nezu thought that he could glimpse the man’s true intentions lying underneath, like sharks breaching dark water.

“Koh is being held at a secure location under full watch of Musutafu law enforcement, with regular checkups from my staff,” Nezu said. “He has the serum, he’s being given psychiatric care. The conditions aren’t optimal but they’re the best we can do.”

“I know you’re aware of the growing threat outside your gates. We have to work together in order to-”

“We are working together, Minister. The tranquilizer is being produced and your notes were most helpful.”

“I thought the quid pro quo during that meeting was clear. Kyoumoto is a state asset. Horooka and Yuurei are lost causes at this point, but surely you must agree that-”

“I agreed to no such thing.” Nezu smacked the keys harder. “What you made clear during your visit was a belief that rehabilitating those children was impossible. Humor me the opportunity to prove otherwise. I am directing U.A.’s full resources to solving this problem. Once that Quirk is fully suppressed, Yuurei will effectively be neutralized and we can direct our efforts exclusively to Horooka and Kitae.”
“You honestly expect me to believe that you’re organizing all this without Kyoumoto on the campus grounds? Someone with your intelligence would never permit that kind of security hazard.”

“I mean no offense in saying this, but your beliefs do not factor in my decision-making.” He grasped for his teacup and, to his quiet despair, found it empty.

“Maybe not mine, but what about others'? The public is becoming restless. We need to show them some progress. This secrecy is untenable.”

“I’m aware. Though I’m sure the public appreciates your regular updates on the matter.”

“You’re not the only one who has to keep up appearances.” That blandly pleasant veneer was cracking. “The Ministry of Individuality is in crisis right now. I have good people at risk of losing everything. Right now the onus is on you to produce tangible results. How am I at fault for calling attention to that?”

“I never said you were at fault.”

“Our citizens have a right to know about the situation. If you stay locked up in your towers, how can they possibly trust you?”

“You’re absolutely correct,” Nezu said calmly. The sound of his keyboard drowned out the surprised grunt from the phone. “I’ve drafted a full explanation of the incident at the Yard and my own culpability in suppressing it. I am prepared – with your permission, of course – to send this to all major news outlets and law enforcement. We can have a full press conference ready within the hour. Of course, I will have to resign my position immediately and hand myself over to the police for further questioning, but for the sake of ending this crisis it’s a sacrifice I’m prepared to make.”

He had almost thirty blessed seconds of quiet before Nakayama spoke again, haltingly, as if reading his words off the wall:

“I believe that would be unwise,” he said. “Given the volatile public mood, and for the sake of national security...Principal, it would be much more beneficial if you could just turn Kyoumoto over to the custody of-”

“Yes, I understand. Good night, Minister.”

He ended the call. After a moment’s thought, he yanked out the phone’s plug as well. He turned off his cell phone for good measure. Then he went back to typing.

“Reprehensible primate,” he muttered.

He reviewed several more files before the knock at his door came. He pushed away from his computer, rubbing his eyes, then tottered over to the door. He had to stand on tiptoe to open it, and he’d been sitting for so long that he almost fell over in the attempt, but he managed to preserve his dignity.

“Good to see you,” he said to his visitor. “Keeping well?”

“Been worse,” said All Might. His voice was frailer than ever, a thin whisper like trickling sand. “I could ask the same to you.”

He smiled. “Fair point.”

“What’s this about?”
“I thought we could both use a break. Step back out into the hall and stand against the door, would you? I just need to fetch a few things.”

All Might complied and Nezu returned to his desk. From the drawers he withdrew a crinkling cellphone packet and a matchbook and tucked them into his vest pocket, then returned outside. After the dry perfume of paper and depleted tea, the fresh air made him dizzy.

“Lock the door, would you?” He held up the key. “Would rather not have Yuurei rifling through my things.”

“What if he follows us?”

“Oh, this is just a chat between friends. I wouldn’t mind at all if he tagged along. Come, there’s a little terrace garden I like to visit. Usually during the warmer months, but it still offers a lovely view.”

The corridors of U.A. held a sepulchral quiet at this time of night. Nezu’s footsteps were a staccato counterpoint to All Might’s lurching gait. With their unkempt suits and pale silhouettes, they drifted through the empty corridors like a pair of severely mismatched ghosts.

“How goes it?” All Might asked.

“I hear Mt. Lady has recovered.”

“That’s good to know.”

“Always perplexed me, that woman’s patrol route. She’d be better off somewhere with wider roads and fewer bridges. I suppose she wants to maximize her own visibility. And so efficiency suffers.” He huffed. “At times like this I appreciate Eraserhead’s style. Low-key, results-oriented. I’m told Ghillie has a similar approach to her own work. Do you think she would be interested in teaching?”

“You’d have to ask Snipe.”

“Something to ponder, then. Here we are.”

U.A.’s towers were dotted with terraces like these, full of planters and raised flower beds that would, in the warmer months, give students a pleasant place to sit in the sun, so long as they watched out for bee stings. Now the planters were gone and the beds full of nothing but frozen dirt. Nezu grabbed a stepladder by the side of the door and, with a practiced air, dragged it to the glass-and-steel railing and climbed on top so he could look out at the campus below. All Might stepped up beside him.

“How’s your throat?” Nezu asked. “Not too much bleeding?”

“No. Must have gone through a whole box of lozenges today, but other than that it’s about the usual.”

“Then I hope you won’t mind.” Nezu took the packet out from his vest, flipped it open, and extracted a cigarette as slim and delicate as a lollipop stick.

“Been a while since I’ve seen you with one of those,” All Might said.

“Well, I’m still not entirely sure about my lifespan. Don’t want to shorten it unnecessarily.” He struck a match and lit up. “But I think the situation calls for it.”

He inhaled deep and blew smoke. All Might watched it drift off, the frigid breeze pulling it apart.

“Trying times,” Nezu said.
“Yes.”

“Minister Nakayama was in touch just recently.”

“Ah. That explains the cigarette.”

“It’s a contributing factor.”

“Has his tune changed at all?”

“Only in the sense that he’s becoming less interested in playing his part.” Nezu tapped ash over the railing. “I imagine his unseen benefactors are losing their patience with him.”

“So he needs Koh’s body to salvage his career.”

“I think he’s passed the point where his career is all he stands to lose. Still, he probably does think he’s acting in the nation’s best interest, which has made him rather intractable.”

“Is there really no one else in the government we can go to?”

“I have a few names. But we don’t know how deep the corruption runs. I strongly doubt that Nakayama is the only remaining civil servant who’s invested in the Yard. Any request for aid might well fall into their ears. And that would give them leverage. It’s a dilemma.”

“I wish there was something more I could do.”

“You’re doing plenty, trust me.”

All Might shivered. The scarred meat of his insides throbbed and burned. He forced himself to ignore it and watched the skyline. Past the lights of Kashiki was now a great darkened plain. The power and utilities to Mosei-Santo had been cut off this morning.

“It must be cold,” he said. “Out there.”

“I argued against it. Said that taking away their heat and light would just give them reason to push into Kashiki with double the ferocity. But it looks like the government thought it more important to produce ‘tangible results.’”

“Never saw anything like this,” All Might said. “Not in all my years. So much resentment, among so many people. Makes me wonder what the hell I’ve been up to all this time.”

“Then let’s recap.” He puffed his cigarette contemplatively. “You served out two and some-odd decades as the most prolific and successful hero in world history by an enormous margin, continued to work after sustaining numerous mortal injuries, and then retired after dealing a crippling blow to Japan’s most infamous villain, saving several of my students in the process. Hardly a comprehensive summary, but it’ll do.”

“I don’t appreciate the sarcasm, Principal.”

“I’m very sincere.” He gave All Might a sidelong glance. “Your retirement has taught us that you held back the tide of violence in this country, rather than removing it completely. That says more about the problem we face than it does about you. Not even the Pillar of Justice can support an entire nation on his own.”

“This has all been brewing since well before my retirement.”
“There will always be those who fall through the cracks, by chance or choice,” Nezu said. “And if someone spends too long with nothing to believe in, then eventually they’ll believe in nothing. Once they do, it becomes very hard to break them free of that belief.”

“And that’s what you believe is happening in Mosei-Santo?”

“Mm. A pathogenic nihilism. Mirai Horooka is likely Patient Zero for that region, but it’s spread far beyond her. And the further it spreads, the more virulent it becomes. This might be the very first time that many of those people have actually been offered a vision of the future. Even if it’s just a broken, ruined one.”

“It sounds like you sympathize with them.”

“Don’t misunderstand me.” His cigarette’s light pooled in the ragged canyon of his scar. “I’m not about to let them have their way. But it helps to know your enemy.”

“It’s not just the people out there who have been losing faith,” All Might sighed. “Young Midoriya was very troubled when we last spoke. I didn’t have much to offer him then, either. These children are grappling with questions too large for even career heroes to handle. How can we consider ourselves role models when we can barely protect our own territory?”

“It’s true that our performance has been lacking. And yet, Koh is here,” Nezu smiled. “At the crucial moment, we were still able to unite and work towards a common goal. Students and teachers alike.”

“It never would have succeeded without Tokoyami and Iida.”

“Yes. They went beyond. The younger generation is outpacing us. Bakugo was correct on that point. But that’s why I believe in this school more than ever. Even in the midst of relentless cruelty, we must stand for the possibility of better things.”

He ground his cigarette out on the railing and clenched its smoldering remains in his paw. His sleek bullet of a head angled up to the pinprick stars.

“The inferno of the living is not something that will be,” Nezu spoke. “If there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.”

He looked at All Might. All Might blankly stared back.

“Calvino? No?” Nezu asked, then shook his head. “Maybe this isn’t the right audience. Cementoss would have appreciated it better.”

“Sir?”

“Don’t worry about it, I was just waxing literary. But that’s U.A. for you. This is the space in which those precious few may endure. Here they can nurture their foolish dreams of something better, and carry them forth. The world will be in for quite a surprise, once they’re matured.” He clambered down from the stepladder. “Don’t discount your own role in that, All Might. So many were drawn here because of your guidance. And they look to you still.”

“Yes, sir.”
“Come inside. Even with my fur I’m feeling the chill, can’t imagine how you’re coping.”

“Are you going back to your office?”

“For a bit. I feel quite invigorated.” He paused at the entrance, tail twitching. “I’d like to have you on the phones again tomorrow. We’re making good progress.”

“I’ll keep it up as long as I can,” said All Might. “It’s better than sitting around and wallowing in things.”

“Just so.” Nezu returned to the warmth inside the school. “We, too, must stand fast.”

*             *             *

Many of the faculty had homes outside of U.A., but in light of the quarantine they’d instead sequestered themselves in their private apartments huddled in a lamplit corner of the campus. Each teacher got two rooms and a kitchen to personalize as they saw fit, and while they often worked too much to really enjoy the space, there was still a fair amount of gossip and socializing going around the halls in the quieter months.

These were not quiet months, or at least, it was the wrong sort of quiet. A silence that choked out everything. Even if you disregarded the stress everyone was under, the mere implication of Shin Yuurei’s presence was enough to turn the place hushed and solemn as a temple. Most of the teachers spent their off hours prepping for exams. Aizawa had been spotted shambling into his own disused crevice of an apartment early that morning and he hadn’t made a peep since; his colleagues made a reminder to check in on him the next morning in case he’d died. Other than that, no one really bothered to make social calls. Until tonight.

Vlad King knocked. It was more of a formality than anything. Their host would have smelled them coming.

“Maybe he’s still getting ready?” Ectoplasm suggested. He was quite a sight in civilian clothes – while Vlad King was a burly fellow with wicked tusks in or out of spandex, Ectoplasm, with his dainty spectacles and wild thatch of hair and nebbish ensemble (he owned five different sweater vests) looked like a Halloween decoration that had been caught attending a chess club.

“Or he’s just having second thoughts.” Vlad King held up a bottle of rich amber liquid and gave it a gentle shake. “No biggie. He’ll chew through the door once I pop this open.”

The door swung wide. “Pop what open?”

Vlad King had known Hound Dog for a while, but he still had to resist the urge to take a step back. The man wasn’t any less intimidating out of costume – his eyes still had that burning reptilian cast, and the loss of his muzzle just meant his near-permanent scowl was in full view. His own civvie outfits favored plaid flannel and combat boots like some wartime-hardened lumberjack.

“Evening, Ryo,” Vlad King said mildly.

“Sekijiro. Kazu.” He took the bottle and stared hard at the label. “Wild Hunt 17 Year? You’ve been holding out on me.”

The door swung wide. “Pop what open?”

Vlad King had known Hound Dog for a while, but he still had to resist the urge to take a step back. The man wasn’t any less intimidating out of costume – his eyes still had that burning reptilian cast, and the loss of his muzzle just meant his near-permanent scowl was in full view. His own civvie outfits favored plaid flannel and combat boots like some wartime-hardened lumberjack.

“Evening, Ryo,” Vlad King said mildly.

“Sekijiro, Kazu.” He took the bottle and stared hard at the label. “Wild Hunt 17 Year? You’ve been holding out on me.”

“Call it my emergency stash.”

“Don’t get too hammered. There’s classes tomorrow.” He turned away. “Come on. I’m finished setting up.”
Hound Dog’s quarters were untidy, mobbed with canine tchotchkes like his office. There were a few framed certificates and pictures of himself standing with the other teachers. One photo on an end table had been taken with a couple of graduating third-years some time back; they had him in a genial headlock, and even with the mask on it was plain to see his grin wrinkling his snout. In the middle of the living room was a card table and three chairs. On the table was a stained pack of cards and a box of matches. Vlad King and Ectoplasm removed their shoes and took their seats as glassware clinked in the kitchen.

“Go ahead and shuffle,” Hound Dog said. “Anyone take ice?”

“Yes please,” said Ectoplasm.

He returned to the table and set the glasses down and poured. They toasted, perfunctorily, and drank, Hound Dog delicately lapping at his own glass. The redbacks flashed in Vlad King’s hands.

“Same rules as usual?” Hound Dog asked.

“Sure,” said Vlad King. “I don’t have a hope in hell either way.”

“Not with that attitude,” said Ectoplasm.

They’d had these poker games on and off for several years now, gruffly gossiping over their drinks. They played for matchsticks instead of hard cash, more out of charity for Vlad King than anything, because he really was at a brutal disadvantage – Ectoplasm’s poker face was impenetrable and Hound Dog’s nose rendered bluffing useless. This game was the first one they’d held since the school year had begun. There had never been time. There still wasn’t time now, but after Vlad King had retrieved Koh from Bakugo and Kirishima he’d diplomatically suggested one anyway, and Hound Dog had agreed with almost suspicious eagerness.

“Rotten weather,” Vlad King said as he dealt. “Your legs holding up alright, Kazu?”

“Can’t complain.”

“How’s Rennie doing?” Hound Dog asked.

“I’ve got a neighbor looking after him, but he misses his papa,” said Vlad King. Renfield was his bulldog.

“Maybe you should bring him to campus one of these days.” Ectoplasm tossed his matchsticks into the pot. “The kids would probably enjoy it.”

“He does love to meet new people. I ought to introduce him to Koh. We already know he likes dogs.”


Ectoplasm set his cards down. “Fold.”

“Already?” Vlad King grumbled. “You play like an old woman.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment. You never saw my nan at cards.”

“Relax, Seki.” Hound Dog glared over his hand. “It won’t hurt. Much.”

Their conversation meandered. The bottle’s contents dwindled. They waited to get drunk but they all seemed too tightly wound for the liquor to loosen them. Vlad King’s share of the pot became scarce.
At one point he ran a queen-high straight right into the jaws of a four-of-a-kind lackadaisically constructed by Ectoplasm and nearly flipped the table. Hound Dog drank little and spoke less.

“Hey, Ryo,” said Ectoplasm.

“Hey, what.”

“Aizawa’s not decomposing, is he?”

“Probably not. Hard to tell. His room always stinks.”

“Hell, everyone knows that already,” said Vlad King. “Yamada needs to talk the guy into doing his damn laundry. You can smell it through the door.”

“He probably has other things on his mind,” said Ectoplasm.

“ Heard Nezu read him the riot act this morning after that shitshow in Mosei-Santo.”

“He’s been working too hard,” said Hound Dog.

“Sometimes I wonder why he’s even here.” Vlad King folded and then sat back, arms crossed. “Guy’s trying to juggle all this hero work on top of teaching? It’s plain masochism. Not fair to the kids, if you ask me.”

“He’s handled it fine up until now,” said Ectoplasm. “Usually it doesn’t wear him out this much, but we’ve had some…challenges this year.”

“1-A’s been a real handful, that’s for sure.” Vlad King sighed. “There’s also the little matter of All Might’s retirement. And the League.”

“And Horooka and Yuurei,” said Ectoplasm.

And Koh, said no one.

“How’re classes going?” Hound Dog grunted.

“Was wondering how long it’d take before we started talking about work,” said Vlad King. “Guess there’s no avoiding it.”

“It’s not so bad on my end,” Ectoplasm said. “Honestly, the first-years are impressing me. Usually my pre-finals lessons make their brains leak out their ears, but…”

“No, I get you. My students have been going full throttle lately. I’m worried Monoma’s going to give himself a conniption, the way he’s trying to keep up with 1-A.”

“I should really have a talk with him sometime,” said Hound Dog. “That inferiority complex is going to become a problem.”

“I agree he’s a little over the top, but it feels justified this time,” Ectoplasm said. “1-A’s leading the charge in a big way. And Katsuki Bakugo’s right at the front of the pack. It’s like everyone else is putting in twice as much effort just to spite him.”

“And my guess is he’s trying to get the number-one place to spite us,” said Vlad King. “No wonder Aizawa’s at death’s door. That kid’s seriously exhausting.”

“I call,” said Hound Dog.
Ectoplasm started. “Oh. Uh, raise.”

“All in.”

“Damn it. I fold.”

“I hate to do this to you,” Hound Dog said, sweeping up the pot.

“Has Nezu told either of you what his plans are for the practical?” Ectoplasm asked, as Hound Dog started to shuffle. “We’re coming up on the deadline.”

“Good luck getting two words out of him,” Vlad King said. “Wouldn’t be surprised if we skipped the practical portion entirely this year. God knows the kids have gotten more than enough live-fire experience already.”

“He’s been talking with All Might a lot.”

“That’s their business. This shit with Nakayama and the Ministry hit us hard. All Might especially.”

“Aren’t he and the principal old friends?”

“Yeah, so I don’t blame him if he needs an itty-bitty shoulder to lean on.”

Hound Dog dealt. Their cards went untouched.

“I had to resist the urge to cheer when he laid that son of a bitch out,” said Ectoplasm. His skull face was set in the same expression as always but he clenched the edge of the table tightly. “If I recall, the three of us were the angriest at that nightmarish presentation.”

“Nezu was livid,” said Hound Dog. “He just kept it hidden.”

“Really?”

“Makes sense to me,” said Vlad King. “Why else would he have just let All Might skate like that?”

“I always wondered where he got that scar over his eye,” Ectoplasm said.

“We can take an educated guess.”

“Are we playing or what?” Hound Dog said.

Ectoplasm and Vlad King shared a glance. Then they looked back to Hound Dog.

“Ryo,” said Vlad King. “About the other day, with Koh…”

“ Took you long enough,” Hound Dog said.

“I saw what you did to the grounds,” said Ectoplasm. “What the hell happened? It wasn’t his Quirk, right?”

“No.”

“If you need to blow off steam now and then, Cementoss could probably set something up for—”

“It wasn’t that.” He tapped the rim of his empty glass. “Koh just opened up to me a little more, is all.”
“About the Yard?”

“Mhm. Said that after a while, he’d started praying for All Might to come rescue him.” Hound Dog’s scowl remained set. “Eventually the people who worked there told him not to bother. Because he was a killer, and we don’t help bad people.”

The wind outside blew cold.

“Well, there’s my evening gone to shit,” said Vlad King thoughtfully. Ectoplasm hastily filled his glass.

“Couldn’t think of anything to tell him,” said Hound Dog. “And by the time I could…well, you know what happened. Lucky thing Bakugo and Kirishima were there.”

“What about you? You doing alright?”

“Take a wild guess.”

“Thought I was too old to be surprised like this,” Ectoplasm said. He’d drained the whole glass in a shot.

“It’s like you said before,” Vlad King pushed his cards aside. “This is being done by our own people. Makes sense they’d know how to twist the Hero Society’s language in their favor.”

“What the hell was the point? He was in solitary! They couldn’t even let him have that little sliver of hope?”

“Could be they thought disrupting his emotional state would affect his Quirk. Or maybe they were just sadists. No way of telling now.”

“I don’t want to think about what’s on that master file Nakayama keeps.”

“We’re going to find out. Even if we have to pry it out his cold dead hands.”

Hound Dog got up from his seat. The other two watched as he paced the room, glaring at his photographs as though these frozen images would speak some reassurance. His breath was heavy but he hadn’t started to growl or drool.

“Seriously, Ryo, you should take a break,” said Vlad King. “Any one of us would be happy to watch him for a day or two.”

“If I can’t do this then what good am I?” He wouldn’t meet their eyes. He lingered by the photo of himself and the third-years. “These kids are trying to take up the burden because they don’t think we’re capable. Look at what’s happening to them. It’s a miracle none of them have died this year. And now there’s Mosei-Santo, and the League, and All Might gone, and for decades all this and worse happening beneath our feet…” His claws scraped the tabletop. “It’s like I’m standing hip-deep in a world of shit. Sometimes I wonder what I’d turn into if I didn’t have this job.”

Neither of them said anything. Nothing they could think of felt adequate.

“Sorry,” Hound Dog said. “I know you two set this whole thing up for me. I’m just spoiling the evening.”

“Don’t even start with that,” Vlad King said. “Especially considering your own responsibilities.”

“Who counsels the counselor?” Ectoplasm pondered.
“I’m going to get some air. Finish off the bottle if you want. I’ll be back in a minute.”

He put on his boots and stomped out the apartment. The other two watched him go. They didn’t even bother with their cards. The time for games had ended.

Ectoplasm asked, “How old is he, anyway? I never asked.”

“Thirty-three, I think. He graduated a couple years ahead of me.”

“He has a lot of passion. I hope he makes it through this okay.”

“I hope we all do,” said Vlad King.

* * *

Tokoyami’s studies weren’t going well.

Half the problem was his room. The dingy violet candlelight was wonderfully atmospheric but awful for reading; his workbooks were giving him a stabbing headache. The common room was an option, but then Dark Shadow couldn’t roam. It was spread out across his ceiling like a thunderhead, occasionally extending its head over his shoulder to peer at his notes. He was attempting English tonight, and the sentences he needed to diagram broke apart and skittered around his vision like fleas.

“I don’t suppose you can help me with this?” he asked.

“Sorry, Fumi. Nothing’s sticking.”

“And if you’re saying that then it bodes ill for me.” He winced as the pain in his head flared. “I’m going to fall behind Kaminari at this rate.”

“You should go to sleep. It’s really late.”

“Our mind’s always sharpest at night. It’s now or never.”

“Come on, that’s not why you’re staying up. He’s not gonna show.”

“I’m willing to give him another half hour.”

Dark Shadow loomed behind him. “This is already a terrible idea. And it’s just distracting you. You shouldn’t even bother trying to study if you’re just going to sit and wait around for him.”

“I am perfectly capable of doing more than one thing at a time,” Tokoyami said.

“Why’d you ask him of all people? He would never—”

Tokoyami slammed his fists on his desk and Dark Shadow recoiled as the candlelight guttered and shook. “You know why! For the last time, stop telling me to explain things you already know!”

Dark Shadow spoke no more. Tokoyami lowered his trembling hands.

“I’m sorry,” he said hoarsely. “That wasn’t your fault.”

He looked above. Only shapeless dark roiled there; Dark Shadow had turned its eyes away from him. He returned to his work, lowered his head to the desk until his beak nearly scraped the paper, forcing the words to stay in focus. Dark Shadow’s quiet agitation crawled through him like ants through their tunnels.
The knock came shortly after.

It was brief and restrained and rapid, conveying impatience without noise. Tokoyami’s head snapped around at the sound of it and Dark Shadow became all sharp edges. He felt it looming behind him as he got up and answered the door, the hall light outside searing him, forcing him to squint.

“You look like shit,” said Bakugo.

Tokoyami didn’t answer him. He supposed it was probably true.

Bakugo held up his phone, on which Tokoyami’s brief request for this visit was displayed. “So the hell’s this about?”

“Let him in or tell him to piss off already,” Dark Shadow growled.

Bakugo’s face twisted; he might have stormed off right then and there. But something about Tokoyami’s stooped shoulders and bloodshot stare made him stay long enough for Tokoyami to turn and gesture for him to follow. He crossed the threshold into the absinthe-scented dark of the room, locking the door behind him. He sat on the bed with arms crossed, the same way he’d done when he’d first shared the secrets of the Yard, as Tokoyami clumsily dragged his chair out and around and sat across from him. Dark Shadow jutted out from the ceiling. Its outline buzzed and writhed.

“First thing,” said Bakugo. “What’s up with the sockpuppet? Everyone’s wondering.”

“It’s because of Koh,” Tokoyami said, as Dark Shadow hissed at them both. “His Quirk is so ferocious that it even resists the effects of Eri’s serum. The signal is weak. But Dark Shadow is agitated by it. Made restless.”

“And that’s why it won’t shut up?”

“From how he described it, remaining dormant is like trying to sit still when you’re suffering from a bad itch,” Tokoyami said. “But we’re handling it. Please keep this to yourself. I don’t want anyone else to know.”

“Gotta keep up the brooding edgelord routine, huh?”

“It’s not that. Koh’s extremely anxious about harming others. And he’s still wary around me. I don’t want to be any more of a bother.” He slumped in his chair. “Uraraka, too, appears to have her own worries. You, her, and myself…we’ve already kept the secrets of the Yard. So one more couldn’t hurt.”

“Deku knows too.”

“What? Have you talked to him?”

“Don’t have to. All Might couldn’t wait two hours before spilling his guts to me, so he definitely told him everything.” He snorted. “That little nerd probably figured out half of it from his damn hospital room.”

“It would certainly explain why he’s been so withdrawn,” said Tokoyami. “But that’s not why I asked you here.”

“So spit it out, already. It’s late.”

Tokoyami stared and Dark Shadow seethed. His face had gone masklike. He gave the impression of having fallen asleep with his eyes open. But then he laced his fingers and leaned forward, shaking
slightly, as if struggling to hold up his own weight.

“What sort of hero do you think I’ll be?” he asked.

Bakugo blinked. His scowl passed through a number of different permutations – it started at frustration, jaunted past suspicion, flirted briefly with amusement, and finally settled on confusion. Dark Shadow’s avian body dripped down.

“If you want to laugh at him, then just do it and get it over with.”

“I ain’t laughing,” Bakugo snapped. “What, do you think it’s funny?”

“It’s hard to explain,” Tokoyami sighed. “We share a mind, but it’s…interpreted differently. My words aren’t any or more less valid than Dark Shadow’s. For a time I wondered if he was the ‘true’ individual, and I was merely a shell to ferry him around.”

“His parents got real uncomfortable when he told them that.”

“Dark Shadow speaks of his own accord. But he said that because, on some level, I am expecting mockery. I know it’s an odd question.”

“He wouldn’t open up to Shouji and he doesn’t want to talk to Iida or Midoriya, even though they’d be a hell of a lot better than you.” Dark Shadow jabbed a talon dangerously close to Bakugo. “He thinks there’s nothing they can tell him he couldn’t just get off one of All Might’s old speeches. So I guess Koh’s driving him crazy, too. It’s just taking a lot longer.”

“It’s no one’s fault,” Tokoyami said. “I’m just tired.”

“Yeah, you’re not even doing the gothy talk anymore. Get out of my face, asshole.” He irritably waved Dark Shadow away. “So, what, you’re stressing out because you wanna be like Hawks? Keep dreaming. Smug son of a bitch looks like a damn pop idol compared to you. It’s not gonna happen.”

“I knew that much already.”

“More like Aizawa, maybe. Spooky prick who does everything at night. Maybe you and the sockpuppet can be urban legends or something.”

“I see.” No clear emotion. “Thank you. You can go if you—”

“Uh-uh. You’re not getting rid of me that easy.” He uncrossed his arms and cracked his knuckles. “Are you still angsting over going all blob-monster on that truck? I heard everyone kissing your ass about it. You should’ve figured out from Deku that nothing gets these idiots off like watching some moron blow themselves up.”

“I killed someone that night,” Tokoyami said quietly.

That stopped Bakugo short. He sat up straight. “What’d you say?”

“The League ambushed us outside of that building where Yuurei was keeping Koh,” said Dark Shadow. “Fumi had to get rid of Dabi so the fires would go away. So I grabbed Shigaraki and forced him to touch Dabi. He died screaming.”

“Vividly put, thank you,” Tokoyami said. “It was a clone. But I didn’t know it at the time. Only Iida saw and I don’t think he’s told anyone.”
“Probably doesn’t even think it was a big deal. Just clones, after all.”

“Okay, fine, I guess that’s kind of heavy,” Bakugo said. “But who gives a shit? I would’ve blown every member of the League to hell myself when they grabbed me from that summer camp. You do what you gotta.”

“Dark Shadow and I sometimes disagree on the best course of action. And in full darkness, as you’ve seen, his will overrules my own.” Dark Shadow shrank guiltily. “But on that act, we were in perfect accord. United in violence. And it only came to that because of my earlier failure. I couldn’t reassure him.”

“Who? The brat?”

“Yuurei.” He lightly touched his arm, where the crowbar had struck. “He had me at his mercy. I tried to commiserate with him. Told him I knew of the Yard. Dark Shadow would have also been of interest to them. I thought I could talk him into allying with us. It didn’t work.” He touched his throat, where the weight had pressed down. “The hate in his face…”

“Fumi, that’s probably enough.” Dark Shadow’s earlier animosity had gone. Tokoyami kept talking. He stared at his knees.

“I frighten people,” he said. “Part of the reason I wanted to be a hero was so they could see me as something better. But it’s not working. The summer camp, Mosei-Santo…ever since the sports festival, I’ve only distinguished myself by how well I can destroy. Almost killed Shouji. Koh won’t come near me. And I think about what we’ve inherited, all of this anger…” His voice cracked.

“We’ve only just started school but everyone outside despises us. We’re being condemned for the mistakes of the whole Hero Society. What will happen to us when the Yard comes to light? How can we fix it? I don’t know. I don’t know.” He clutched his head. “It’s too much.”

Dark Shadow receded, its eyes those morose crescents again. It protectively embraced Tokoyami, patted him on the back. Bakugo watched impassively.

“Sounds like you walked into this school with your ass hanging out,” he said. “Well, you’re not alone there.”

“Easy for you to say,” Dark Shadow shot back. “You just want to be number one.”

“You think it’s that simple?” he snarled. “You don’t know shit.”

“It’ll sure be a lot tougher for you now that you’re getting expelled.”

“Dark Shadow, please stop.”

Bakugo’s palm hissed. The light from his smoldering skin lay on his face like war paint. But no explosion came; he just held it there, his hand a dim beacon.

“Maybe both of you oughta shut up for a second and use that brain you’re time-sharing,” said Bakugo. “After everything we’ve found out, do you seriously believe being number one’s just about punching out some losers in crappy costumes and smiling for the camera? ‘cause if you do, then you don’t know a goddamn thing about All Might.”

His palm started to spark. Dark Shadow cringed at the light. But Bakugo himself remained still, jaw set, spitting every word.

“It’s about always winning. The world’s a shitty place. And you ain’t gotta be a villain to make it
even shittier.” Something like guilt flashed over his features and was gone. “Being number one’s about making all those idiots out there think different. Deku’s trying to get that part down, but he can’t do anything for anyone if he’s always in pieces. All Might wasn’t like that. All Might kept on his feet ’til the end. Victory after victory after victory.” He closed his fist and snuffed out the light. “It ain’t just bastards like that wrinkly shitstain from the League you have to watch out for. The whole world’s trying to knock you over, all the time. Being number one means fighting all of that, always, never losing. And then maybe you can convince a few other idiots they can fight it too. That’s one thing Icy Hot’s dumbass dad can’t pull off. He better hope he’s retired when I go pro. Doesn’t matter what b-lister school I graduate from, if he’s still between me and the top spot I’m gonna tear right through him.”

“That’s…surprisingly eloquent of you,” Tokoyami said faintly.

“Yeah, well. I learned some things, too. We’re all having to figure this hero stuff out a lot faster than we should. That’s because these so-called pros keep dropping the ball.” He averted his gaze. “So maybe quit moping so much. Pisses me off.”

“What do you think I should do?”

“Fuck should I know? I’m getting marched outta here in two weeks, I’ve got my own problems. But if you’re tearing your feathers out over how to be a half-decent hero, then that just means you’re ahead of the curve. Everyone’s gonna have to face it now that All Might’s gone. Better sooner than later.” He craned his head over to look at Tokoyami’s workbook. “You can start by not flunking the exams. None of this soul-searching will mean shit if you can’t even keep your grades up.”

Tokoyami almost smiled at that. “I guess there’s worse advice.”

“He’s doing his best, okay?” Dark Shadow said.

“Who cares. Deku’s been having a nervous breakdown since day one and the little bastard’s grades haven’t dropped since.”

“For God’s sake, would you listen to yourself?” Tokoyami started as Dark Shadow snaked out from behind him and pointed accusingly at Bakugo again. “Deku this, Deku that. When’s the last time you even talked to Midoriya, anyway? If you want to kiss and make up with him so bad you’d better do it while you’ve got the mmmphhh mmpf mmph!”

Bakugo was very still as Tokoyami desperately lunged at Dark Shadow and clenched its beak shut. His chair rocked and nearly fell as they flailed at each other and they only stopped when they heard the sound. Bakugo had covered his mouth with his fist. He was laughing. Not loudly, but it was an actual, sincere chuckle.

“Fuckin’ priceless,” he said, as they stared at him aghast. “I’ve always wanted to know what it’d take to pull the stick outta your ass, and it turns out to be your imaginary friend.”

He got up. Dark Shadow slipped free of Tokoyami’s grip as Bakugo went for the door. He paused with his hand on the knob.

“You repeat any of this to anyone and I’ll kill you,” he said, without much hostility. “And maybe study with me and Kirishima sometime. You’re almost as stupid as he is, you could use the help.” The hall light blazed across Tokoyami’s room as he stepped out. “Just stewing in here by yourself doesn’t do shit, trust me.”

The door shut. The two of them were left in the dark.
“That could have gone worse,” Tokoyami said, after a long while.

“He didn’t really help.”

“Not much genuine advice to be found, no. Mostly just profanity.”

“So why do we feel better?”

“I don’t know.”

“Can we go to bed now?”

“Okay.” He regarded his notes. “We can deal with this in the morning.”

* * *

U.A.’s library was as well-stocked as one would expect – it took up two floors and the basement level of the southward tower, a cozy labyrinth of glass and oak that housed everything from mystery novels to microfilm. There was a small theater whose archives housed notable footage of heroes spanning decades, with All Might’s escapades taking up nearly a full shelf on their own. There was a sun-drenched antechamber where the front desk looked out on the ranked computers and conference tables for group projects. The library was predictably packed around exam time, and offered extended hours for especially dedicated students, but as the hour approached midnight most of them ran out of stamina.

This wasn’t for lack of trying. As Ectoplasm and Vlad King had noted elsewhere tonight, the student body and Class 1-A in particular was pushing themselves as hard as they could go. Bakugo had been the main reason. But there was also the incident with Mineta.

Most of 1-A had treated Bakugo’s hi-volume study sessions as a necessary evil. He’ll be gone soon anyway, they thought; let him have his fun. But Mineta had visibly been getting more and more fed up with Bakugo shouting lesson plans into Kirishima’s ear, and the other day, as they’d been going at it in the common room, he’d dramatically stood up and stomped off in full view of half the class. He’d returned with a tottering pile of schoolbooks half as tall as he was, slammed them on to the table, and started to study. They’d found it amusing at first, until Hagakure had taken a peek and found to her utter horror that all of his work was flawless. He’d already shocked them by making it into the upper half of the class at midterms despite putting in absolutely no apparent effort, and now it looked like he’d actually decided to apply himself. Everyone else redoubled their own efforts. Conceding the top rank to Bakugo would be embarrassing. Losing it to Mineta was unthinkable.

Midoriya could have been competition for both of them, but he’d ignored it all. He had other things on his mind.

He might have been the only one left in here, but it was hard to tell. A lifetime around Bakugo had given him a prey animal’s instinct for finding secluded, well-guarded spaces, and when he studied he often set up in the basement’s Civic Law wing, where the shelves were stocked with thick tomes about heroic case law, zoning records, and copyright disputes. The material here could put a cup of coffee to sleep; even Business and Management only perused these books when they absolutely had to. So early on, Midoriya had found a little booth in a dim corner of this wing and marked it as his own. He was there now, amidst a riot of paper. When the librarians came around to usher the last few students out for the night, they would find him by his muttering. But for now, he was alone.

His work wasn’t organized. Schoolbooks and notepaper were scattered like totems around such oddities as a record of Japan’s census and a population density map of Tokyo. Midoriya bounced
rapidly from subject to subject and referred to his phone almost as often. His notes were aimless, their margins crowded.

He’d always been smart but scatterbrained; in the years he’d spent assembling his dossiers on Japan’s heroes he would compulsively mark down everything he saw, just in case a random detail about a hero’s costume or persona would be a vital building block for some yet-unseen whole. He’d learned about Ectoplasm’s prosthetics months before they’d become public knowledge from a three-second clip of the man’s gait. It didn’t always work. His habit of chasing down every detail sometimes led him to dead ends, and sometimes to places he didn’t want to go. Recently, he’d started a personal project where he’d outlined everything he knew about the League of Villains and compared them to his notes on his classmates and pro heroes, trying to determine the best matchups for each. He’d been cross-referencing his data on Dabi, Todoroki and Endeavor when he’d felt his mind brush up against the edge of something monstrous and dark. The project had been abandoned, the notebook shoved under his bed, cut off mid-sentence.

Likewise, he was not entirely sure of what he was studying or why, only that it was connected somehow to this constant gnawing unease he’d felt since last speaking with All Might. Demolishing Beta Gym hadn’t helped this foreboding. He sensed terrible imminence in the atmosphere. A chorus of sharpening knives.

“Most recent was in Kashiki…flashpoint here, effects were felt from here to…here?” He tabbed through his phone and then went back to the maps. “Twelve hundred square meters approximate? Might be right or wrong. Still nowhere near enough. So where could they…unless it was intensified. When was it. The Kuroiwa cases…”

From between the shelves came a series of muffled thumps like dull thunder. Midoriya squeaked and spun. Nothing but shadows behind.

“Hello?” he called. No response.

He went to the source of the noise and found several books had fallen. Another one, suddenly unbalanced, tumbled down as he regarded the pile. He looked around the dusty archives. His expression was suddenly dour. He went to the books and replaced them as best he could.

Before he was halfway done there came a long, low hiss. He sighed and replaced the last book and followed the noise to the bathrooms. When he pushed open the door the source was clear – all five sinks were on full blast, their taps sounding like a nest of snakes. The ivory tiles and overhead lights were blinding after the archives’ murk. Midoriya stood beside his reflection, and his fingers flexed and cracked.

At last he went to the faucets and twisted them shut. He went down the row one at a time. At the final one he paused and looked at his face in the mirror. The stall behind him was empty and open wide. He took a deep breath. He shut off the water. The bathroom was silent.

In that silence, the revolver’s hammer was very loud.

Seated on the toilet behind him was a young man with a greasy rat-nest of hair and a network of scarring on his face like an abstract tattoo. The scars and the stains on his coat shone in the fluorescents. The hand holding the gun was a doll-like mass of lineless pink flesh. His face was utterly without humor. Slowly, Midoriya put his hands up.

“You don’t have to do that,” said Shin. “But no sudden movements and no loud noises. Are you faster than a speeding bullet? I don’t want to find out any more than you do.”
“Was this really necessary?” Midoriya asked.

“The gun? I wouldn’t go anywhere in this school empty-handed.”

“I meant baiting me here. You could have left a note.”

Shin tilted his head. “And you’d have just come in? You really are something else.”

“What do you want, Yuurei?”

Shin blinked. The stare reflected at him in the mirror was weary and grim. It wasn’t much different from the look that had nearly given him a coronary in the school halls.

“I want to apologize, for starters,” he said, and now it was Midoriya’s turn to look surprised. “That thing in Jon-X. That was Mirai going off on her own. I hear it caused you and your friends an awful lot of grief.” He shrugged a little, making sure not to take the gun off Midoriya. “Not to say things would have turned out any better for you, in the end. But Jon-X wasn’t part of the plan. Sorry.”

“What about Tokoyami?”

“Had a feeling you’d jump right to that.”

“You could have killed him,” Midoriya said tightly.

“He could have killed me,” Shin replied. “But he didn’t.”

“That’s all you’ve got to say?”

“Don’t bother trying to guilt me. I’m not an idiot. I know how I looked during all of that.” He paused. “It’s why Koh left me.”

The hostility drained out of Midoriya’s face. Water dripped. Shin appeared to sag into his coat.

“I knew it would happen,” he said. “Sooner or later. I couldn’t get him the help he needed. I don’t think you can either, but at least you’re taking decent care of him in the meantime. I’m just here for what comes after.”

“Yuurei, listen. I know what you’ve been through. We can-”

Shin looked back up at him again and Midoriya’s heart jumped, because that scarred hand had tightened on the gun and Shin’s eyes had gone dark and chilly as iron. For a moment Midoriya was certain Shin would shoot him.

“You,” he said, “have no idea what I’ve been through.”

“I meant the Yard,” he said slowly. “I know what happened in the Yard.”

“You too, huh.” Minutely, his grip relaxed. “Not much of a secret, these days.”

“You’ve been spying on us. You must know how everyone’s reacted to it. We’re not on the Ministry’s side any more than you are. The League of Villains has the finished serum, right? If you just brought it here, we could cure Koh and-”

“I thought you were supposed to be smart,” Shin said. “They haven’t exactly told me where it is. And even if they did, why would I turn on them? When did they let me down? What did you ever do for me?”
“We didn’t know. None of us did.”

“Yeah. That’s what Tokoyami said too. You’re really lucky I was expecting it this time. Otherwise I might have flown off the handle again.” He raised the gun. “What would All Might think if he saw you laid out in a place like this?”

Midoriya was undaunted. “You left Koh with us. You must want something better for him, at least. Even if the League does cure him, what do you think the cost will be? Do you think he wants to pay it?”

“No,” Shin said. “That’s why I’m here. To be the bad guy for him.”

“I don’t blame you for being angry,” Midoriya said. “Even after what happened to Tokoyami.”

“Awful generous of you.”

“But how far do you really want to take this? You don’t have to be this way just because of the Yard. There must have been something else you wanted, before all those horrible things happened. Am I wrong?”

Shin’s mouth thinned. “Funny. I asked Mirai the same thing.”

The lights buzzed and the ventilators hummed. For a time that droning sound was all that could be heard. Still no one approaching the bathroom. Eventually, Shin started to talk again.

“Maybe you can understand this, at least. I know that you got your Quirk from All Might. Relax,” he said, as Midoriya stiffened. “Shigaraki put two and two together during that huge blowout with All for One. We’re not going to shout it from the rooftops or anything. But just think. Do you feel like the same person you were the day before you got that power?”

Midoriya didn’t answer. He remembered pavement under his knees when he collapsed, wailing, in All Might’s scarecrow shadow. The ocean’s relentless tempo as he dragged rusty appliances across the sand. His body hardening, turning unfamiliar.

“There are moments,” Shin went on. “We can change so fast. Who you were before isn’t who you were after. But for the three of us that moment went on and on. I didn’t have any real way of marking time down there, you know. No clocks. Just the places where they’d cut me. Scars like tally marks. I forgot everything except how to be afraid of the next time that door opened. And I stopped wanting anything but to get back at the ones who did that to me. Once I got out, I couldn’t see who I’d used to be anymore. The moment went on too long.”

“So you can start again,” Midoriya said. “It’s still possible.”

“And do what? Be a hero? You think Nakayama would let that happen?”

“He’s outnumbered. He’s not on our side. Even All Might-”

“Oh yeah, I remember All Might’s speech during that last fight of his. All the news crews caught it. Innocent people, who just want to live peaceful lives. All the kids here are trying to keep that peace going. Well, this is what it did to me.” His free hand pointed to his scars. “This is what I am now. Someone with no sense of the past and no hope for the future…they’d make a pretty good villain, right?”

“It doesn’t have to be this way.” He was grasping at platitudes now. He had better arguments, he knew it. But they were all withering under Shin’s exhausted glare.
“You’re right,” he said. “Times are changing. All Might can’t hold it all in place any longer. That’s why I’m talking to you instead of him. The next generation. Whatever happens from here on out is on you.” His voice gained a pleading edge. “Hey, Midoriya. Deku. What sort of world would you build, if you had the chance? Could you promise me that it wouldn’t have a Yard of its own?”

His only answer was the water’s drip. Midoriya was parchment-pale, his freckles dark as the revolver’s bore. Shin stood up, leaned against the edge of the stall. His stare was without judgement.

“It’s okay if you can’t answer,” he said. “More honest, that way.”

“What are you going to do?”

“The deal hasn’t changed. Koh can stay as long as he wants. But when he doesn’t, I’ll be there. And you won’t be able to keep him from me.” He prepared to step out. “Either way, I doubt you’ll see me again.”

“Wait,” Midoriya said, and Shin stopped, blinking. “I wanted to ask one more thing.”

Shin gestured with the gun. “Go ahead.”

“Tomura Shigaraki. What’s he like?”

“Know your enemy, huh?”

“Can you tell me or not?”

Shin thought it over. “He’s…unfriendly, I guess. Not in the way your loud asshole of a friend is. Whenever you’re around him you get the feeling he’d kill you just to end the conversation sooner. But there’s something about him that makes you want to stick around anyway, just to see what happens next. Like getting caught in a riptide.”

“Like what he does and what he is are the same thing.”

“Yeah, I guess you could put it that way. I don’t get the feeling from you at all. Whatever you think you are, you’d better figure it out fast. Because you don’t have much time left.”

“I’m a hero,” he said. “Or I’m trying to be. But Shigaraki’s the one who saved you.”

“Yep,” Shin said sardonically. “He’s my hero.”

And then he was gone. The effect was immediate and came without warning. Midoriya’s body instinctively relaxed as it no longer felt the gun’s intangible weight. He watched the door but his eyes insisted it stayed closed, though he knew Shin had already stepped out. When he pulled his hands away from the countertop the grease of his fingerprints shone bright on the laminate. He was drenched in sweat.

He gathered his schoolbooks and returned aboveground. When he passed the front desk he took careful steps to hide his knocking knees. The winter air hit his wet skin and set him shivering all at once. He went to the dorms and cleaned himself up and went to bed. It was a long time before his overheated mind would let him sleep. Data points scattered like constellations. He knew that somewhere was the connecting line – between Shin and Koh and Shigaraki, between Mirai and Mosei-Santo, the Ministry, the League, right and wrong. But Shin was right. They were running out of time. And across U.A., everyone fought their insomnia, as the dark parts of the city crawled with new fires and the stars overhead struggled to hold on to their axis.
Chapter 21

Mosei-Santo froze. The wards’ few remaining connections to polite society had been severed with the flick of a switch. Now the streetlights were all blacked out and steam no longer billowed through the sewer grates. Frost crept over heaps of garbage, their silhouettes turned anonymous and menacing in the smothered starlight.

Through some apartment windows could be seen the flickering of trashfires, the previous owners’ belongings hacked up for kindling. Their new inhabitants wrapped themselves in blankets and kept all doors open to avoid choking on the smoke. They tried to share the warmth. As Kizutatchi had predicted, the few heat-generation Quirk users among their number suddenly commanded high influence, and worked overtime creating shelter and hot water for the people mobbing their quarters. And as Nezu had predicted, none of the wards’ residents were deterred in the least by this fresh immiseration. Instead they nursed their hatreds, and set their sights on the electric glow at Kashiki’s border.

But for tonight they huddled and shivered. The nights held bogeymen for them as well – the trundling of police cars in search of new safehouses to hit, or the heavy thump of Mirko’s patrols, the Rabbit Hero moving too fast through the fuzzed dusk for even Horooka to sight down properly – but even those sounds were absent tonight. Something far worse walked their streets. The first to see it had dismissed it as a hallucination caused by the cold and the choking firesmoke, but then other had seen it too, and they’d called each other about it, and confirmed one another’s tales, and the growing franticness of their chatter reached Rajio Mainichi’s ears. From him the news finally came to Metalhead, squatting in her own private patch of sticky dark surrounded by blinded machinery, and when she heard about their visitor she bared her teeth in a spitless grin.

He moved at an easy pace, the click of his booteheels echoing down the road. His clothes were all black but the briefcase at his side shone silver and the numerous hands clutching him all had the same dead pearlescent sheen, so that to the onlookers he appeared to be not one solid man but a swarm of small ghosts, these pale parts of him bobbing and shuddering with his step. His breath strained white through the fingers over his face. Trash blew and scraped around his feet. He appeared in no hurry to be anywhere.

It was past midnight when he finally stopped, just at the border into Santo. His head turned the merest fraction to the maw of a nearby alley.

“Finally,” said Shigaraki.

They emerged around him, all at once – this one spindly and four-armed, this one with toothy spheres orbiting him like satellites, this one dirty-faced with the capillaries beneath her skin aglow like rare ore. At least a dozen in number, and none of them got within a dozen paces. Shigaraki promenaded on the spot, exposing all of them to his grin, grinning wider whenever one flinched.

“What else? I want to meet Kitae.” He held up the case. “I brought a present and everything.”

“What is it?”
“She can tell you once she sees it for herself. And no, I’m not letting you peek.”

“You’re awfully cocky coming here all by yourself,” one of them said.

“That’s because it’s another clone, idiot,” another growled.

“I sure am. Better safe than sorry.” He took a step forward. They all took a step back. “But I’m not here to start trouble. I just want to see Kitae. One villain to another.”

“She doesn’t want to see you.”

“I’d like to change her mind about that.”

“Why the hell should we trust you? For all we know you’ve got a bomb in that case.”

“If I was coming down here to kill someone I wouldn’t need a bomb,” he said, and held up his free hand – they all shrank back at those fingers. “Far as I’m concerned, you’re catching enough grief from the heroes already. Why would I want to make things harder for you?”

“Ask your shithead friend Dabi,” someone else snapped.

At that, Shigaraki tilted his head. He seemed genuinely confused. But before he could speak again, someone else interrupted:

“She’ll see you.”

They all turned and saw someone bathed in the light of his cellphone screen, a skinny young man in a raggedy pea coat whose eyes were too big for his head and swam in colors like the film on a gasoline puddle – this was, in fact, one of the people who had first accompanied Yori Kizutatchi on his trip to Musutafu, but now he was just another face among many, having assimilated into the general seethe of criminals throughout the wards. He put his phone in his pocket and nodded to Shigaraki.

“You’ve got her number?” one of them asked. They sounded jealous.

“Kizutatchi does. He just passed it on to me. Only for emergencies, he said. This sure sounds like an emergency.”

“So where is she?” Shigaraki asked. “I’d like to get indoors. It’s chilly out here.”

“An arcade in Santo. We’ll show you the way.” He panned the group with his unsettling eyes. “All of us.”

“Works for me,” said Shigaraki. “Anyone want to hold my hand?”

None of them rose to the bait. As one, they turned and continued down the streets, all of them keeping a healthy distance from Shigaraki as though magnetically repulsed by the man. Shigaraki was unperturbed. He followed their step without another word. On the way, his head swung this way and that, taking in the icy desolation around them, his raddled and pockmarked face alight with childish wonder.

* * *

At the League of Villains’ hideout, the lights had gone off and much of the common room was a cavernous black. The sole isle of light came from the muted television’s glow. It was tuned to the news and the lack of sound made the program oddly surreal, the screen flicking between the
broadcaster’s carefully neutral faces and panning shots of food festivals or happy people on busy streets or the smoke-belching ribs of a crashed train without apparent connection or meaning.

Dabi was the only one here. He sat on the couch, his book open but unread. He kept glancing up at the screen. The lack of cell reception here drove him crazy; if he wanted to get a proper signal he had to go outside and upstairs, and even with his burnt-out nerve endings it was just way too cold. Meanwhile the cable broadcasts were carefully inane, burying fresher tragedies with already-dated ones like the train crash, or worse yet, plastering the screen with that weaselly minister’s face. His eyelids grew heavy. He was a night owl by nature but the boredom of the last few months had forced him to start sleeping more just to make time pass faster.

The room was utterly silent. Not even the wind could be heard. But he still didn’t know he had a visitor until the couch cushion beside him sagged, and he felt a head leaning on his shoulder.

“Whatcha doin’?” asked Toga.

“One of these days I’m going to kill you for that,” Dabi said.

She flashed a winning grin. She was barefoot and wearing teddy-bear print pajamas whose suspicious pinkish stains were all but invisible in the TV’s dim light, and her hair was down and fell around her shoulders like a mess of thin cables. Dabi pushed her off and went back to his book.

“You’ll hurt your eyes reading in the dark,” Toga said.

“Shouldn’t you be asleep? Or hassling somebody else?”

“There isn’t anyone else. Jin’s asleep, Shinny’s working, Compress and Shiggy are doing their thing right now.”

“What about the lizard?”

“Spinny didn’t do so good at his quiz. I stitched him up, though! He’ll get better in no time.”

“Well, buzz off anyway.” He turned the page. “I’m not in the mood.”

“Aww, you never are.” She peeked over his shoulder. “Those are some big words.”

“Not really.”

“Yes really! I checked out some of your other books and they made me dizzy. I guess you were the intellectual in your family, huh?”

He turned to her. “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

Dabi’s glare was unblinking and his voice was soft but with a murderous harmonic underneath. Her smile almost faltered at it, but she rallied, albeit after backing away to the far end of the couch.

“Come on, Dabi. Like you said, we’ve been cooped up together all this time. It’s not really a secret anymore.”

“Spit it out. Now.”

“I wanna hear you say it first.”

“Well, then put it on your Christmas list.” He looked at his book again and grimaced; the paper under his thumb had charcoaled. “But don’t act like you know who I am or what I want. Nothing pisses me off
more.”

She pouted. “You’re just like everyone else here. Nobody wants to talk about where they came from.”

“Maybe they just don’t want to talk to you.”

“Sure they do! I’m super friendly!” Her fangs twinkled.

“A lot of us wound up in this two-bit organization because we wanted to get away from who we were. If you really want to be friendly then don’t go around trying to open up old wounds.”

“But old wounds are the best. They bleed and bleed and bleed.” She crawled up to him again. “Hey, hey, wanna know something? I got to talk to Shinny after he came back here the other night. He’s actually really nice!”

“Don’t kill him. We still need him.”

“Nah, he’s not my type. But he talked a lot about Koh. Seems like Shin’s really got that little guy on the brain. I want to meet him, too! I think they really like each other.”

“I’m sick of hearing about that kid. We’ve spent this whole time trying to find ways to babysit him. This stupid plan would’ve been so much easier if you could just copy his Quirk.”

“You know it doesn’t work that way.” She poked his shoulder. “Hey, Dabi. Who do you like?”

“Nobody.”

“Don’t be such a grump. What about Stainy? We joined up because of him in the first place!”

“Stain, huh.” He rubbed his chin, wrinkled and dry as old gauze. “Has it really been that long? If it weren’t for Spinner blathering about him all the time, I might have totally forgotten him.”

“Really? So you don’t like him anymore, either?”

“It’s not about liking or disliking,” said Dabi. “His time passed with All Might. Stain’s vision of the Hero Society only worked because he had All Might as a measure for everyone else. Now he’s gone. No one’s sure of what to do next.” He regarded the television; Mirai wasn’t displayed, but for the last few days she’d been a near-permanent fixture on the news. “Maybe that’s why Horooka is suddenly so popular. She’s filling the space he left behind. A Hero Killer for a faithless age.”

Toga sprawled out, idly swinging her feet. “I guess you have a point. It’s not like I can get at him wherever he is now, anyway. I’m more of an Izuku girl these days.”

“Good luck with that. If Shigaraki gets his way there’s not going to be anything left of him.”

“I’m sure he’ll let me keep a bottle or two if I ask real nicely. Shiggy’s been great ever since we took down those Yakuza.”

“He’s less of an embarrassment than he was when we first met, at least.”

She lunged at him and he almost lit her on fire out of sheer reflex. “I knew it! You like him, don’t you?”

“Get the hell off!”
“Never! Confess!”

He shoved her away and touched his sutures to make sure nothing had torn. Toga took a lotus position on the couch, her grin expectant. He could either incinerate her or tell her what she wanted to hear. After careful consideration, he settled, reluctantly, on the latter.

“I think he’s a stuck-up asshole with too much to prove,” Dabi said. “But he’s the only one out there who’s got any vision. Everyone else is like those lowlifes in Mosei-Santo, trying to tear everything down for the hell of it. If I wanted to do that then I could’ve just stayed solo.”

“Then you’re friends!”

“We’re not friends.”

“It’s okay to say you like him. I like him! I just don’t love him. Wouldn’t want to be *him* at all. He’s got it so hard, taking on all this work.”

“We’ll see how this Yard thing finally turns out. If it all goes to shit then I might just cut myself loose. I’ve wasted a lot of time twiddling my thumbs here.” His eyes narrowed. “If you’re so curious about all of us, how about you share a little more about yourself? I know you’re not really a high-schooler, for starters.”

She stuck her tongue at him. “Nuh-uh. Not telling.”

“See? Hypocrite.”

“Yep! And I’m okay with that. ‘cause I’m a *villain.*” She bounced up to her feet. “But I’m sleepy now. Nighty-night, Dabi. Hopefully it’ll be more exciting soon.”

“Put some socks on next time you walk out here. You’re going to get sick.”

She giggled. “You’re such a softie.”

Dabi watched her bound away and disappear into the room’s outer dark, then looked back at the TV. A whole night wasted. He’d been waiting for one particular story and it still hadn’t shown.

“Guess it’s too embarrassing for you,” he said. “Well, the best is still to come.”

He turned off the TV and the darkness that fell was absolute. After a moment a single brilliant flame sparked at Dabi’s fingertip, its spectral light rendering him more corpseslike than ever, glimmering against the staples that pinned his ruined flesh in place. He rose and made his way down the halls with that makeshift candle held out. No signs of life. Even Toga had already fallen silent. When he reached his own room he glanced behind him as though looking for footprints, marking his trail, and then he snuffed out the flame and went to bed.

* * *

When Metalhead’s forces had first established a foothold in Mosei-Santo, they’d squatted in the abandoned apartments and left the front doors propped open, as a sign of solidarity. People marked their private territories with whatever little things they’d brought from their own meager homes but otherwise came and went as they pleased, swapping and bartering for the drink and furniture they’d stolen from the previous inhabitants. It was a decent arrangement, except for the unlucky few who shared a building with Mirai Horooka. When she wasn’t squatting beside boilers she would haunt the upper halls, and they quaked in religious fear of her shadow stopping by the entrance to their homes. And while her caretaker Hiraku Takenoko wasn’t as dangerous, he was every bit as unsettling.
His bent stick of a silhouette glided now past these entryways, with those still awake drawing their blankets close or glaring daggers into the hall. Metalhead still commanded loyalty, Kizutatchi’s own faction grew, and Mainichi was considered a tiresome but invaluable member of their forces, but Takenoko just creeped everybody out. Ghastly and taciturn, always barefoot in his sandals no matter how bitter the weather became. His gaze stayed fixed on something above or beside the people he looked at, as though he were peering through the city and into another world entire. But no one spoke against him, partly because, even moreso than Metalhead, he seemed most in tune with Mirai herself. In the outcasts’ ever-more superstitious dread, some had begun to regard him as an idol in his own right, a slouching priest to Horooka’s calamitous gospel. They didn’t want to know whose wrath they may invite if they raised their voices against him.

Takenoko, unaware of all this, made his way up the flights of stairs. His scalp brushed the ceiling under every eave. His skin refused to shiver. At last he pushed open the rooftop exit and strode out, where the stars had been set free of the city’s light pollution and blazed overhead like judgements.

Two people were already there. Seated at the rooftop’s edge with his legs dangling free was Yori Kizutatchi, his hoodie now nested inside two more. Hadakai, the one with the crustacean skin, was nearby, leaning against one of the now-useless ventilation units. He hadn’t layered up; apparently his exoskeleton didn’t feel the cold. He gave Takenoko an amiable wave.

“Oh, shit. Look who it is.”

Kizutatchi turned around. “Hey there. Didn’t know we were sharing a building tonight.”

“Me neither,” said Hadakai. “How’d we miss him?”

“I stay quiet,” Takenoko said.

The plates on Hadakai’s face creased. “Wait. Does that mean Horooka’s here too?”

“No. She’s with Kitae tonight. They move around.”

“Works for me. Hard enough to sleep already without that chick haunting the place, right, Kizutatchi?”

“I’d get by.”

Kizutatchi had already returned to the murky geometry beneath them. In the velvety dark Mosei-Santo’s decrepitude was harder to see. The buildings’ slumped and stubby outlines were clear but gone was the scarring on their facades, the broken windows, the cold-cracked asphalt and growing mounds of trash. Further away, Kashiki glittered with carnival gaudiness.

“So what brings you out here?” Kizutatchi asked.

“Watching town. The same as you.”

“I don’t blame you,” said Hadakai. “I’ve already taken a few pictures.”

Kizutatchi nodded. “There’s no place quite like this.”

“You’re glad you came.” Takenoko didn’t say it as a question.

“Home got small,” Kizutatchi said. “This is something new.”

“Me and some of the other guys here were just tagging along,” said Hadakai. His carapaced fingers
clicked together nervously. “I wasn’t expecting things to get this big this fast. Enemies of the State. It’s a whole other level.”

“Metalhead and Horooka caught them all flat-footed. Now she has to keep pushing the advantage.” Kizutatchi pointed to the skyline, to U.A. beyond. “Do the job until the job is done.”

Takenoko’s scratch of a shadow loomed. Hadakai’s stammering made Kizutatchi glance behind him; for a moment it seemed as though Takenoko would reach out and push him over the edge. But instead he stood still and swaying, beady pinprick eyes looking down at Kizutatchi.

“Can she trust you?”

“Easy, big guy,” Hadakai said. “We’re all friends here.”

“By ‘she’ do you mean Metalhead or Horooka?” Kizutatchi asked, unruffled.

“They’re the same. For now.”

“Fair enough.” His gloved fingers flexed. “We want the same thing. I’m just...simpler, I guess.”

“Simpler?”

“Shigaraki is in this game for the sake of his ideology. The collapse of the Hero Society, or whatever. Metalhead’s more goal-oriented. She’s doing all this to get back at Shigaraki. Me, I just want movement. I don’t care what happens, as long as it keeps happening.” The wind picked up and his hoods fluttered around him. “You either keep moving or you freeze.”

“We were dead-enders where we came from,” Hadakai said. “All of this is scary as shit, but it’s better than just staying where we were until we get clipped by the heroes or somebody like Shigaraki. Hey, Kizutatchi, how long have we been at this anyway?”

“Four, five years.”

“Wow. Time flies.”

“It gets away from you,” Kizutatchi said. “What about you, Takenoko? What are you hoping to get out of this?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he replied. “The view changes. I’m still the same.”

Hadakai whistled, or at least tried his best without proper lips. “That’s pretty zen.”

“Maybe that’s why he and Horooka get along so well. I don’t think anyone would last long around her if they rubbed her the wrong way.” He stood, his stiff knees popping. “For all her talk of how there’s no future for anyone, there’s an awful lot of people investing their futures in her. Is that a paradox, Hadakai?”

“Hell if I know, man. You’re the one who finished school.”

“Either way, I’m not going to backstab Metalhead. She’s the one leading us forward. I don’t want anything to derail the ride.” He stepped around Takenoko and made for the exit. “I’m heading back in before I get frostbite. Hadakai, you coming?”

“Yeah, I’m beat. G’night, big guy. And seriously, put some damn socks on before your toes fall off.”

The door swung shut behind Takenoko. He still remained insensate to the cold. Whether this was an
odd side-effect of his Quirk or if he was simply too passive for his flesh to notice the chill, he neither knew nor cared. He stood at the building’s edge like a strange monument, his sculpted skull tilted heavenward, regarding the constellations turned alien by their new light, the light come untethered by the freshly dead lights of civilization below.

*   *   *

The arcade Club Geonosis had been one of Santo’s hidden attractions. Nearly as old as U.A. itself, it had held fast through the ward’s deprecation and gentrification, Musutafu surging around it like a river around a hardy stone. Its owners (both generations of them) had their own apartments in the building’s top floor, and while they had gone and Metalhead’s forces had moved in just like everywhere else, this place was left relatively untouched, bereft of the discarded bottles, askew furniture, and petrifying smears of food detritus that infested the wards’ other apartments like mold. Even Mosei-Santo’s delinquents had liked it here. It was something close to sacred ground.

Every screen was blind now, the arcade’s once-gaudy colors turned gangrenous in the murky room, the pinball machines’ glass obsidian-dark and the air hockey tables standing like plastic sarcophagi. The front door hissed open. Shigaraki stepped in alone.

He’d been escorted and then abandoned, though he had no doubt his retinue had taken up position at every exit just in case. He, too, was impressed at the outcasts’ coordination. Though they’d been sullen and scared out of their wits, they’d brought him here without delay, easily navigating through the city’s huddle. Other eyes had been on them the whole time. Every window held an audience.

At the far end of the arcade was a candle’s glow. He walked toward it, his suitcase twinkling, and there was Metalhead, waiting for him.

She was seated on top of the prize-exchange counter, candles spread around her like offerings. Several of them were being used as ashtrays. Predictably, she was smoking. Her switchblade lay shining in her hand. Her face was stony. She gestured to a cheap plastic chair set up just where the ranks of game machines ended, about ten paces away.

“Have a seat,” she said.

“Gladly. Been walking forever.” He sat down and put the case at his side. “Nice place. Though I’ve always been more of a home-console guy.”

“You’re here alone?”

“I am. The same as you.”

Metalhead took the cigarette out of her mouth and pointed with the lit end. Shigaraki looked into the darkness at his left and saw the deeper dark congeal into something roughly human. Seated there was Mirai Horooka, the frayed purple of her coat bleeding into the gloom. Her headphones were off. The steam of her breath wreathed her head. Besides that, no part of her moved.

“Fair enough,” he said.

Metalhead replaced the cigarette. “What do you want?”

“I decided to swing by after seeing what happened to Endeavor. And then you took out Snipe as well, just in case I needed more convincing.” He laced his killing fingers. “Very well done. This is really something special you’ve got going on here.”

“What,” said Metalhead, “do you want?”
Shigaraki’s teeth flashed. “You don’t like me very much, do you?”

Her face betrayed no emotion but she sucked down the rest of her cigarette in one harsh breath. She flicked its smoldering remains into candle-wax and took out another. The flame of her lighter lay livid on her skin.


“I don’t. But judging by the way you said them, I’m guessing those are the people Dabi killed,” he said. Metalhead stopped mid-drag. “One of your escorts let it slip on the way here. I knew about his little recruitment drives before all that trouble with the Yakuza, so it wasn’t hard to piece everything together. Had no idea he came all the way to Musutafu for it, though. That guy’s got issues.” Shigaraki scratched his neck. “So, what? Is this war?”

“Eventually.”

“I don’t believe in that ‘survival of the fittest’ crap, for what it’s worth. This is a big country. Plenty of room to share.”

“It’ll be even bigger once you’re not in it.”

“Look, at least give me the chance to show this to you.” He lifted the case. “Can I open it? Or is she going to kill me when I try?”

“You’d have to ask her. Speak up, though. She’s a little hard of hearing these days.”

He glanced at Mirai. Mirai didn’t look back. Her stare was fixed on the far wall. She gave no indication that she was aware of anyone else in the room. At last he huffed steam and popped the locks on the suitcase and opened wide. Metalhead raised an eyebrow at what she saw there. Ten vials no larger than her pinky finger tucked deep into plush felt, filled with a sickly urine-colored liquid.

Shigaraki asked, “Ever heard of Trigger?”

“I have.”

“I’ve got a guy with connections right into the United States labs. Best of the best. I don’t have any need for it, but if you’re marching on U.A. then maybe you could use the edge.” He closed the case and set it down in front of him. “Take it or don’t. Just be careful with it. From what I hear, this shit can really knock you for a loop.”

“So that’s your idea of a peace offering?”

“I’m not interested in being enemies,” said Shigaraki. “The League is small. We can’t speed-run all the way to the final stage like you are. I tried it once at that idiotic USJ thing and got my shit kicked in. But I’m impressed with how you’re set up out here. You’ve severed all ties to the Hero Society. Your subordinates are acting on your will, even without you saying so. It reminds me of someone I respect.”

“They’re not my subordinates.”

Shigaraki’s head tilted. “Excuse me?”

“I’m not interested in playing supervillain. We’re just people moving in the same direction. That’s
“Uh, no. Wrong.” Shigaraki wagged his finger. “I was afraid of something like this. You’re not as bad as that worthless midboss Overhaul, but you’ve still got to change your attitude.”

Metalhead’s lip curled. “Who the fuck are you to lecture me, you little freak?”

“Someone who’s made this kind of mistake before,” said Shigaraki. “You don’t have time for the reluctant-leader schtick. Maybe that worked when you were stealing beers out of convenience stores, but right now you’re at war with the heaviest hitters in Japan. These people are following you into hell. Don’t act like they’re just there by coincidence. Show them some damn respect.”

“Like you respected my friends?”

“Like I respect Dabi. You’ll notice I haven’t killed him yet, even though he’s a gigantic pain in my ass.” He glanced over to Mirai. “You take people for granted and they’ll make you regret it. Right, Horooka?”

Mirai didn’t reply.

“From what I understand she was never on your side,” said Metalhead. “You were just too stupid to notice.”

“Maybe,” said Shigaraki. “Are you sure that she’s on yours?”

“You can kill him any time you want, you know,” Metalhead said loudly, and for the first time Mirai stirred. Her languorous gaze found Shigaraki. She straightened in her chair.

“He’s not real,” she said, and was quiet again.

Silence at that. Both Shigaraki and Metalhead were nonplussed.

“She’s not doing too well, is she?” he asked.

“You tell me.”

“My help doesn’t have to stop with the Trigger, you know. Got anything else you want to ask? Any information you need?”

“Oh sure, I’ve got loads of questions,” she said acidly. “You want me to ask them from over here, or get right up close so I can speak into that wire you’re wearing?”

Again Shigaraki’s grin flashed. “Wow. You really are sharp.”

“There’s no way someone like you would come all the way here without hoping to get something in return,” she said. “And if you’re trying to bait more info out of me then what you’ve already gotten isn’t enough. So why don’t you do me one last favor.” She brandished her switchblade. “Sit real still and I’ll make it quick. I can do that, at-”

Mirai asked, “Where’s Shin?”

Their heads snapped around. She’d gotten up from her chair and stood with head jutting forward and arms limp like someone hanged. Metalhead almost bit through her cigarette. Shigaraki looked back and forth between them, beaming.

“‘Well now. Horooka’s still interested in Yuurei? They parted on pretty bad terms, last I heard.’”
Metalhead remained mute. “He’s fine. Honestly, he’s kind of a pain too. He has me over a barrel and he knows it. I’ve practically got to kiss his ass to make him do anything. But he gets along with everyone and he’s keeping a close eye on U.A. Sorry, Horooka. He barely talks about you at all.”

She didn’t respond. That moonlike face devoid of expression.

“I’ll give you a freebie too,” Shigaraki went on. “You were after Koh Kyoumoto, right? That’s why you ruined my day when U.A. came knocking.”


“Stop talking, Horooka,” Metalhead said, but far too quiet for her to hear. She pierced the pad of her thumb with her knife.

“Obviously Yuurei’s wanted to track him down, but the brat’s dropped off the face of the earth. He’s not at U.A. which means he’s nowhere else in Musutafu – there’s no place more secure in this city than that damn school – and if he was being held in Tokyo I’d have heard about it myself. My guess is he’s with the cops somewhere in Chiba, but it’s a total shot in the dark. Even the teachers won’t blab about it.” He spread his hands. “Sorry I can’t tell you more.”

“I bet,” said Metalhead, and the knifeblade shot out filament-thin and whipped through the top of Shigaraki’s head. He collapsed into mud before he had time to gasp. His remains dripped onto the suitcase, stained the linoleum.

“I’m gonna have to clean that up now,” she said. “Thanks, you wrinkled prick.”

Mirai had already gone behind the counter. Headed for the basement. Metalhead watched her go, the distaste clear on her face, but she didn’t say anything. The odds were good Mirai wouldn’t even understand what she’d done wrong. Even worse, maybe she did, and just didn’t care. Their whole movement still hinged on her. That wasn’t changing anytime soon.

There was the suitcase, dripping with clay-smelling muck. The transmitter Shigaraki had been wearing shone in the mess. She went to it, dropped it on the floor, and stomped it into pieces. Then she went looking for a mop, hacking her lungs out the whole way. When dawn broke and light crept through Club Geonosis’ front windows, the gaily printed mascots and fingerprint-smudged screens looked out on a clean room. The mud was gone. The candles were gone. The suitcase was gone.

* * *

The claw that Metalhead had carved into her map some days ago took shape. Kashiki was assaulted. Buildings belching smoke. The residents fled and joined the growing and furious throngs. The highways were left open. The newcomers came. The people in the center also felt the pinch. They drank coffee and slurped noodles and talked about TV but no one was really laughing. Faces drawn and waxy. Mosei-Santo eating all.

In an alley at that border Mr. Compress relaxed, unmasked, his phone to his ear. The early rays of dawn rashed the horizon. His mechanical arm held the light. Sometimes he thought he felt his pulse in the metal.

“So that’s where we stand, is it?” asked Shigaraki on the other end.

“Indeed. Terribly hostile. Hard to believe she’s going all this way on a simple grudge.”

“I can sympathize, a little bit. I felt that way about All Might.” He paused. “But it’s not enough. You need something bigger to work towards, or you burn out. Seems like that’s what’s happened to
“A pity you couldn’t have advised Miss Kitae of that yourself.”

“She wouldn’t have listened.”

He clinked something in his coat pocket. “Her influence is expanding with frightful speed. I was accosted three times, even all the way out here. I was able to convince the first two groups I was a new arrival, but the third proved rather more stubborn. At this rate, her fangs may actually reach U.A.’s throat.”

“Let them. If the heroes’ attention is divided it makes things easier for us. As for what to do later… you said that Horooka’s still hung up on Yuurei?”

“I believe so. You did your best out there but the conversation was still hard to make out. The signal was poor, even at this range.”

“So annoying. I’m paying Giran a fortune and the best transmitter he could get is one step up from a damn walkie-talkie.”

“A pity we aren’t heroes, eh? I’m told they have an emergency band right in Japan’s telecoms infrastructure. Tap into that and we could have heard you clear as a bell all the way from Hokkaido.”

“There’s really no end to their handicaps. I guess we’ll see how much it actually helps them.”

“So we shall.” He peeked out of the alley and down the empty street. “What would you have me do now? Little use for this body anymore.”

“Up to you. If you can die quietly and out of the way it’d be easier for us, but if you feel like hiking all the way through Takodana then my Quirk can switch you off pretty painlessly.”

“Ahh, no need for that. I wouldn’t want to put you to the inconvenience.”

“It wouldn’t bother me any, but whatever,” said Shigaraki. “Thanks for tonight, Compress. It was productive.”

“Happy to be of assistance.”

He hung up and stepped out into the road, headed for Santo, whistling as he went. His shadow grew long as dawn broke. His arm went uncovered, here. The police presence had dwindled this close to Metalhead’s influence. All around, the Hero Society was buckling.

He stopped at a sewer grate and withdrew the contents of his coat pockets. First was the cell phone, which he dropped into the darkness. Then were several marbles, containing the inquisitive people who’d accosted him earlier as he listened in to Shigaraki’s meeting. Down they went. Finally he took out a small switchblade of his own, and with a whirl and a flourish and a click of his heels, he looked out at the city and put the edge to his throat, smiling wide.

“To a bright future,” he said, and drove the knife into his artery.

The blood rushed out and soon turned brown. He dissolved and dripped into the stinking rushing dark. By the time the sun rose fully, all that remained of him was a thin crust on the iron grate, already flaking away.

Life went on. The sun pulled the day behind it. At U.A. there was a rumbling that went unfelt under
everyone’s feet and the students’ distraction and teachers’ exhaustion grew; the Business classes were said to mumble inscrutable numbers under their breath as though speaking code and Support re-checked their supply of serum seven times before accepting the truth of how little remained. The Hero Association by and large abandoned Musutafu to its fate, Nezu’s earlier statement of U.A.’s sovereignty going over exactly as badly as Aizawa had predicted. Shigaraki and Metalhead circled around their territories like jungle cats, eyeing each other’s throats.

Those were the factions, each one waiting for the other to attempt something spectacular enough to finally break this sick stasis and begin the chaos in earnest. But there was one who went yet unnoticed. On a day when the sky was the color of nickel and the wet cold air crawled like centipedes beneath everyone’s skins, Osamu Nakayama made his move.
“Where will you go?”

Koh had been practicing his handwriting (the characters sloppy, but already a far cry from the palsied scribbles he’d been copying at first) when Eri asked the question. She asked it without warning or explanation. He was seated on his bed and she was on the floor, surrounded by her drawings, looking up at him like a supplicant.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“After. When your Quirk’s gone. Are you gonna stay here?”

“I haven’t thought about it. I guess it doesn’t matter.”

That didn’t appear to satisfy her. She frowned and got up and hopped onto the bed next to him. Koh watched, bewildered. This was the first time the gulf of space between them had been breached. The light from his window was steely and between that light and the white linens and their own bleached appearances, Eri’s artwork and their own eyes held the only color in the room, claret and gold.

“You should think about it,” she said. “It won’t be much longer, after all.”

“How do you know?”

“I just know.”

“Okay,” he said, conceding the argument. “But I don’t think I’ll be allowed to stay anyway.”

“Why not?”

“It’s a hero school. It’s for people with Quirks.”

“Then where will you go?”

“I don’t know!”

“Then you should think about it!” she snapped, then looked glumly at the floor. “I wish you’d think about it.”

“Did I do something wrong?” Koh asked.

Eri shook her head. “No. I just wanna help somehow.”

“Help with what?”

“You’re sad,” she said. “You’re so sad, all the time.”

“I’m not-”

“You are. You can’t smile. Don’t lie.”

He didn’t say anything to that. Eri had started to nervously knead at her skirt. Her speech had the awkward start-stop cadence of someone who’d been rehearsing the words in their head.

“I was like that too. I hurt people. And it might happen again.” She reached up and touched her horn,
lightly, as if expecting an electric shock. “Whenever I meet people, they look at this first. They see it before they see me. Even Mr. Aizawa does. They think I don’t notice.”

“But your Quirk’s not bad.”

“I know. But I didn’t always. Mr. Aizawa and Mirio had to teach me first. Even when Mirio rescued me it took a while before I wanted to think about what would happen next. Instead I just wanted to disappear.” She looked askance at him. “You, too?”

He looked away, which was answer enough.

“Don’t disappear,” she said. “You’re really nice. And there’s still things we can do to help. Everyone says my Quirk might be able to fix Mirio, someday. And then there’s Recovery Girl. Maybe if I get really good at controlling my Quirk, I can help everyone the way she does. Mr. Aizawa actually smiled when I told him that.” She paused. “At least, I think he did. It’s hard to tell sometimes. So what do you want to do?”

“I want to help Shin,” he said quietly.

He put his pencil in his workbook and closed it and set it aside. He put his hands in his lap, scratched his arms under the sleeves. His nails rasped over the stippling of needlemarks on his flesh.

“He’s still out there,” Koh said. “Watching me.”

“Is he like your big brother?”

“I don’t know. I never had one. But he’s tired and he’s lonely. I think that’s part of why he was always so mad.” He scratched harder. “I think if he knows I’m okay then he’ll be okay, too. But you’re right. I don’t know how to show him that. I’ve been here a while but I’m still the same.” His voice shook. “I don’t know what to do.”

Eri stared. Then her jaw set. She got off the bed and smoothed out her skirt and walked across the room with a confident stride. Everything she did just confused Koh more.

“Now what are you doing?”

“Put your shoes on,” she said.

“Huh?”

“We’re gonna go see someone.”

“Who? Why? I don’t. I mean!” His hands flapped uselessly. “We’re not allowed!”

“Not by ourselves. But now we’re together.” To illustrate, she pointed at herself, then at Koh. “So that’s fine.”

There was a flaw somewhere in her logic but she was moving too fast for him to work it out. “Where are we even going?”

“The dorms. My friend Izuku’s there.” She painstakingly bunny-eared her shoelaces. “Do you know him?”

“No. Maybe? I don’t know.” The name vaguely flitted through his memory. “Why him?”

“He and Mirio saved me. Over and over. I couldn’t smile either for a while. But then Izuku made it
so I could again. It’s still hard. But he helped me. He’ll help you too.” She stood, holding up Koh’s sneakers like war trophies.

“Can I say no?” he asked weakly.

“Uh-uh. I’ll bother you forever and ever and ever.”

He considered this, then sighed and got off the bed.

Outside the usual chill was suffused with a miserable damp that promised rain. The two of them had layered up and their teeth still chattered. Eri took Koh’s wrist and dragged him along. The campus was empty and to Koh the buildings seemed larger than ever without an adult nearby. But there was a sound. Like a distant ocean. He couldn’t place where it was coming from until they passed between the towers on their way to the dorms, and then he saw. He tugged her to a halt.

“Eri. Look.”

The front gate was closed. The smooth stone walls had been encased by three layers of reinforced steel. From the other side of that barrier came the sound, many voices mingling. They couldn’t make out any of the words but every now and then emerged a sharp exclamation from the throng like jagged glass. It made them both flinch.

“I’ve never seen them closed before,” Koh said.

“Me neither.” Eri huddled closer to him. “Are there people on the other side?”

“I think so. They sound really mad.”

Eri’s cheer had left her all at once. Her face was pinched and small. She pulled Koh along and he followed without complaint. They passed the towers and went to the grounds’ outer periphery, where the Heights Alliance dorms stood. They eagerly pushed their way inside, out of the cold.

The common room was busy. At a glance they could see Asui, Ashido, Iida, Sero. The TV was on and babbling. Everyone had their phones out. Eri slipped off her shoes and padded inside, looking this way and that, still with Koh by the hand. They made it all the way past the foyer before Asui finally noticed him, and when she did her already-bugged eyes threatened to eject from her skull entirely.

“Uhh, guys? Guys? We’ve got company!”

All heads turned to them. All jaws dropped. Eri smiled brightly and waved.

“Hi, everyone!” she said.

The silence rolled out just long enough for her smile to wilt. Ashido managed to snap out of it and run up to them before things got any worse. She knelt down to eye-level with the two of them. Koh saw the strain in her expression.

“Hi, guys!” she said. “Sorry, we’re kind of disorganized, finals and everything. Iida, didn’t you have somewhere to be?”

“What? Erm? I mean yes. Yes, of course I do!” He strode robotically past them and all but stomped into his shoes. “Terribly sorry, everyone, but I must be off!”

“Koh, Eri, come sit down. You must be freezing.”
Ashido put her hands between their shoulders and led them forward. Koh stole a glance behind him as the front doors swung shut; though the weather clouded the glass almost immediately, he glimpsed Iida moving at a dead sprint. Sero snapped the TV off as they approached. Eri looked more stressed than ever, but then she finally found what she was looking for and her face lit up all over again – that familiar thatch of green hair, hunched at the edge of a couch.

“Izuku!” She dragged Koh over. “I thought you’d be here!”

He put his phone aside. “Hi, Eri! Did you guys come here all on your own?”

“Uh-huh. But it’s okay.” She held up Koh’s arm. “Buddy system!”

“That’s great.” He looked at Koh. “I, um, don’t think we’ve actually talked. But I saw you the night you came here. I’m Izuku Midoriya. You’re Koh, right?”

He nodded; now he remembered. “They told me about you. The one with red hair and the one who yells a lot.”

“Haha, yeah, that sounds like Kirishima and Bakugo. I don’t think they’re here.” He turned to Ashido. “Are they here?”

“They’re not here. Neither is…you know.” She surreptitiously traced the shape of a bird’s beak.

“Okay. That’s good, I think. So what brings you guys all this way?”

Eri hopped onto the couch and took Koh with her. From here, they both had a view of the building’s entrance and the frosty grounds outside.

“I thought you could cheer Koh up a little,” she said. “Like you did for me.”

Asui approached them. “Kinda spur-of-the-moment, isn’t it?”

“She was trying to help,” Koh said.

“No, no, it’s fine!” Midoriya said quickly. “Um, are you worried about being Quirkless? Because I actually have a little experience with that, haha.”

“I know.”

“It’s really not so bad. Twenty percent of the population is still Quirkless, after all. That’s millions of people.”

Sero tried to contribute. “And it’d still be a lot better than your situation now, yeah?”

“There’s a whole bunch of really cool people out there without Quirks,” Midoriya said, as Ashido shot a murderous look Sero’s way. “If you like, I could take some time and put together a list for-”

“What’s happening outside?”

Koh’s quiet voice knifed through the room. Midoriya froze up. Koh had shaken off Eri’s hand.

He felt the tension here. His perpetually anxious mind had picked up on the forced jollity among these people from the start and the discordant jangle of it was nauseating. He fixed Midoriya with his stare.

“The gates are locked. People are yelling. It’s because of me, isn’t it?”
“That’s not true, little guy,” Sero said. “It’s just—”

“It’s always because of me.”

Ashido, who’d been casting repeated looks at the entrance, saw the approaching shadows through that fogged glass. She desperately tried to change the subject but she was too late. The doors flung open, and Aizawa and Hound Dog stormed in and came at the children so fast that Eri grabbed Koh’s wrist again and squeezed until it hurt. Midoriya and the others cleared away but Ashido still tried to offer some words in their defense.

“Sir, it’s okay, they were only trying to see—”

“Iida told us all we needed to know.” He knelt down to Eri and hugged her and then held her tight by the shoulders. “Eri. You cannot go out like that again without permission. Understand?”

His voice was the same lifeless monotone as always but Eri was shaking now, on the verge of tears. Hound Dog’s eyes too were rimmed with wet as he picked Koh up off the couch. He wasn’t growling but his speech was broken and brief.

“Not mad. Just worried. Don’t cry.”

“I’m not crying,” said Koh, and it was true – he felt a cold calm inside him. “She was trying to help.”

“I’m sorry,” Eri whispered. She was starting to hiccup. “I thought…thought I could make him smile…”

“That’s good. You tried to do a good thing,” Aizawa said. “But we need to go back. Right now.”

“What about us?” Asui asked.

“Stay indoors. We’ll talk later.”

“I’ll visit you later, Eri!” Midoriya called after them, but it didn’t seem to help. Eri was grasping Aizawa’s shoulder tight, sniffling into his capture tape. They stepped out and the gray light swallowed them. Ashido had already gone back to her phone.

“Iida probably didn’t need to find them that fast,” said Asui.

“Dude must have popped his Recipro,” said Sero. “Over-eager as always.”

“They must have been on their way back to Koh’s room already. Talk about awful timing. A couple minutes earlier and Hound Dog would’ve sniffed them out himself.”

“You think they saw the gates?”

“They definitely saw the gates.”

“Ashido,” said Midoriya. “Is it slowing down at all?”

Ashido shook her head. “Keeps getting worse. There’s no stopping it now that the major networks have picked it up.”

Sero groaned and turned the TV back on. “This is all gonna get a lot worse before it gets better.”

“If it ever does,” said Asui.
The news was long on outrage but short on detail. No one knew yet who had lit the first spark, but it had been signal-boosted by a couple of tabloid networks and latched on by people brimming with anger and desperate for answers. In recent days, everyone in Musutafu had looked at the silence monolith of U.A. High School with growing resentment. A society like bone-dry brush, waiting to catch fire. And the spark, wherever its origins, had leapt, and caught.

The TV news was gentler than the furious text crowding their phone screens, but still asked the same basic question: VILLAIN SHELTERED AT U.A.?

* * *

From the upper reaches of U.A.’s towers it was possible to see the crowd that had gathered outside the gates, a fist-pumping sea of humanity that nearly consumed the sizable bare space between the campus and the city proper. The dispossessed of Mosei, Santo, and Kashiki Wards were here, having been left with nothing better to do but stew in their loss and nurse their grudges, but they were far from the only ones who had reason to be here. People were coming all the way from Tokyo to join in. The mob grew larger and more restless by the hour.

It was disorganized. There were no signs or chants – just a sea of formless noise from which the occasional exclamation bobbed up like dead fish before sinking back into the churn. Shin, who leaned against the wall beside the sealed gate, hood up and hands clenching, heard them all.

“Bring those monsters out here!”

“Blood on your hands, U.A.!”

“How would you feel if it was your homes that got wrecked!?”

“If you don’t have the guts to give those bastards what they deserve then send them out! I’ll kill ‘em myself if I have to!”

He’d watched Koh and Eri cross the grounds and didn’t bother to follow. He hadn’t wanted to see the truth sinking in for them. And besides, there was no way to get him out of here with the gates shut.

He very badly wanted his crowbar back. For something to crunch and beg and bleed.

His phone buzzed. He took it out and checked his messages. Two brief texts.

> Saw the news. It wasn’t us.

> Call ASAP.

Shin stepped away from the gates, away from the mob’s roar. He dialed when he was about halfway between the gates and the towers. It had started to drizzle. He paid it no mind.

Compress picked up. To his credit, he didn’t bother calling Shin “my boy” this time.

“Shin. How is it over there?”

“You can see for yourself. I’m sure it’s on the news.” His voice was flat and dull.

“I meant inside the walls. Does Koh know what’s happened?”

“He knows. Guess he won’t want to stick around now. Sure is convenient for you.”
"Shin, I swear to you, it wasn’t us. We had a contract, we would not betray your trust after all that has-
"

"Stop kissing his ass and hand it over, you idiot!"

There was the sound of a scuffle and Shin pulled the phone away from his ear, wincing. When he put it back again Shigaraki was already halfway through a sentence. He sounded breathless, vehement. Shin could almost envision the spittle coating the receiver.

"-so I’ll set you straight right now. We had nothing to do with this shitshow. How stupid do you think I am!?"

“What’s stupid about it?” Shin asked, but now he felt less certain – Shigaraki had always been irritable but this degree of fury was new. “Our deal was that Koh could stay as long as he wanted to be here. Doubt that’ll be the case now that these people are banging on U.A.’s doors. Like I said, it’s convenient for-"

“It’s not ‘convenient’ at all, moron!” Shigaraki screamed. “I had it all worked out! Yeah, I thought for sure that these worthless U.A. brats would leak the news, I’d planned for that, but after the first week I figured that they had somehow learned to keep their mouths shut. Great! Plan B it is! Our next phase was set for when the medicine ran out, and going by your notes that’d take another week. And now this happens! It’s too soon. My plans don’t allow for sequence-breakers, understand!?"

“Not really, but okay.” He’d needed to hold the phone at a distance during that rant. “If not you, then who? No one here seems likely. I’d expect it from that Bakugo kid, it’d be a nice fuck-you to this place on his way out the door, but instead he’s just studying.”

“Who the hell else? Those two bitches downtown, Kitae and Horooka. For once I try to play nice with somebody and this is what I get!”

“What? Why them? Why now of all times?”

“I swung by their neighborhood a couple nights ago with a peace offering,” said Shigaraki. “Given everything they’ve done this month it felt like the smart option. Turns out Horooka still misses you, Yuurei. Asked for you by name.”

“I don’t care.”

“That’s what I told her. Then I thought I’d try misdirecting them. Said that Kyoumoto wasn’t in U.A. at all. Looks like Kitae called my bluff.” His voice had dropped; he almost sounded embarrassed. “So that was my fault. I couldn’t keep my damn mouth shut. Now they’ve totally fucked our operations in U.A. and cleared their own path up to campus. It’ll be easier than ever to topple that city when it’s close to rioting already.”


“You have to get out of there and into Takodana. I’ll send you an address. You have a rendezvous tonight.”

“I can’t get out while these gates are shut.”

“Tough luck. It has to be tonight. We can still turn this to our advantage but we are on razor-thin margins here and we used up all our continues in Mosei-Santo. Do you hear me? We are out of do-overs. If we let this sit then the government will come knocking and drag the kid right back into a hole in the ground, for good this time. His next injection is tomorrow, right?”
“Yeah. Not many left. I heard the nurse talking about it. Koh’s got maybe a week’s supply, like you said.”

“Do you have a way of contacting him?”

“Not unless he comes to me.”

“Then figure something out. I won’t lie, the next twenty-four hours are going to be hell. But it’s our only chance.”

“I’ve got to wait for Hound Dog to leave first and I don’t think that’s going to happen anytime soon.” He looked up at the blank window where Koh’s room lay. “But yeah, I’ll manage it. Pull the doors open myself, if I have to. Is there anything else?”

Shigaraki took a deep, shuddering breath, and now that his voice was back to normal Shin realized how much raspier it was. He must have been raging about this all morning.

“There is one thing. After what you did to Tokoyami I’ve been worried about you flying off the handle. When this shit dropped, part of me didn’t expect to hear from you again until you put that revolver to the back of my head. Not like you would have succeeded, and I’m not giving you a damn trophy for keeping your cool long enough to see reason, but…whatever. I’m not great at this. You’re improving, that’s all.”

“Thanks. I guess.”

“We’re going to need you. Indefinitely. How long you want to stick around is up to you.” His voice turned faint, like he’d turned away from the phone. “Compress, are we doing this or not? Hurry up and get the thing!”

The signal cut out. Shin pulled the phone away and saw droplets spattering the screen. He hadn’t even noticed the rain getting worse. His hood was already soaked, the trim bedraggled and dripping.

The glass on U.A.’s towers was one-way; he wouldn’t be able to see if Koh was up against it, looking out. If he switched off his Quirk for just a moment then Koh might glimpse him, know that he was still there for him. But there were still cameras everywhere and the school would be on high alert. He stayed there anyway, for a while, getting steadily more soaked, the concrete staining dark as the mob continued to shout undaunted. There was nothing else to do. Both of them were trapped here.

But then he saw someone else striding across the empty campus. Headed towards the gates. It was impossible to mistake that silhouette.

Shin hissed steam through his teeth. A hero had arrived.

* * *

The rain did nothing to dampen the mob’s ire. If anything, their voices only grew louder, nurturing their anger to fight off the cold; the air was thick with the swelter of numerous heaving bodies. Among their number could be seen dripping animal muzzles and skins gently aglow from inner luminescence and hulking individuals with limbs like telephone poles and fists like small boulders; someone hurled a small fireball that sailed over the crowd’s heads and struck the gates to leave a smear of tumbling soot.

Functionally, U.A. was helpless against the mob. It had always been true that a sufficiently large number of sufficiently determined people could topple any social institution like a playing-card
tower, and in the post-Quirk age, where your average citizen might be able to spit poison or lift ten times their weight or explode small trees with an ill-timed sneeze, this was more the case than ever. The school’s gates were impressive, but if the mob wanted to overcome them, it would.

“This city’s a fucking war zone because of you!”

“Down with U.A.! Tear this place to the ground!”

“You want to see the dead? You want to see their faces!?”

They fed off each other’s grievances; every new arrival had something to say and all the people nearby latched onto it, shouting it forward, carrying the noise up to U.A.’s doors. The cries reached fever pitch. The atmosphere crackled with imminent disaster.

Then, with a sound like a tremendous vacuum cleaner switching on, the gates all lowered.

The shouting up front immediately dropped into shocked silence and that quiet spread throughout the rest of the mob like ink in water. They weren’t being greeted by a menacing phalanx of heroes or the diminutive principal pleading for calm. Standing stern-faced, suit darkened and hair dripping, was the emaciated frame of All Might.

For a time the only sound in the whole courtyard was the impatient tap-tapping of the rain. But at least one person hadn’t been totally stunned – a woman shoved and elbowed her way to the crowd until she finally broke out in front. She was tall and sharp-nosed, with a prominent mole under her lip. She’d probably been prim and proper when she’d woken up but her hair was disheveled and her blazer crooked on her shoulders. She held out a small silvery voice recorder, her face imploring.

“All Might! Makoto Tsukauchi, with the Naruhata Times. Please, can you give a brief statement? We want to hear U.A.’s side of the story!”

Tsukauchi. The resemblance was clear enough. All Might coughed into his fist and spoke.

“I’m not certain how many of you can hear me, so please convey my words to the others as best you can,” he said. “I’ve come to make it clear that U.A. recognizes everyone’s right to congregate and protest. We won’t ask you to disperse, and we’ve requested that the police keep their distance as well. You can stay as long as you wish.”

The faces up front turned uneasy. As All Might’s words rippled through the crowd, that unease also spread. Smashing against a huge metal door was one thing. An unarmed sick man was quite another, let alone one who’d been the single most adored person in the nation. Camera flashes snapped off in between the mass of humanity before him.

“Does that mean you confirm the rumors regarding a villain at your school?” Makoto asked.

“We deny the rumors. There are no villains being housed at U.A.” His pilot-light gaze swept over them. “But I know that’s not the only reason you’re here. Since these attacks began, we have failed this city time and again. You’ve been driven from your homes. You’ve lost people you care for. And while we have attempted to drive back this growing threat, our efforts have not been enough. Heroes should be able to assure people that tomorrow will be peaceful. If we fail, then your anger is righteous. And we deserve to receive it.”

“And why did they send you out here?” someone shouted. “Where’s the principal gone? You’re barely even a teacher!”

“I volunteered,” said All Might. “Because my failure is the greatest of all.”
In the silence that followed, those words were telephoned to the mob at large. The outrage twisting people’s faces dampened. Some of them argued amongst themselves. Yet others began to struggle through the crowd, trying to get a glimpse of All Might himself. Makoto stood at its head, jaw slightly agape, her recorder still running, forgotten.

“I called myself the Symbol of Peace,” he said. “But I gave no thought to how that peace would endure after I had gone. I allowed everyone to rely on me, even as my health started to fail, because in my heart of hearts I couldn’t envision a world without myself around to protect it. I allowed myself to become blind.” Rainwater coursed down the hollows of his face. “Now I see things more clearly. The perils and anxieties you all must endure, day after day. Had I come to this realization sooner, this current crisis may have never come to pass. The fault for all of this falls on my shoulders above all else. After placing myself so highly in the Hero Society, I can’t simply refuse that burden.”

“You’re goddamn right you can’t.”

A newcomer forced his way through the crowd, with considerably more success than Makoto and for good reason. He was one of the telephone-pole people, graybearded and seven feet tall, his overcoat tailored to make room for the clusters of wicked ossified spikes jutting from his back. Unease turned to alarm. This stranger could smash All Might flat with the palm of his hand.

“It’s not just us,” he said, in a voice like a grinding millstone. “Our families have been glued to your face for years now. We’ve got people quoting everything that you ever said like it’s gospel. I remember what it was like before you came along. Now you’re gone and we’ve got to worry about being blown up in our beds like it’s the bad old days all over again, and you’re standing there in the rain saying that you never had a damn clue what you were doing? What are we supposed to tell the people who believed in you? How are we gonna fix this?” The stranger advanced on All Might. “Answer me, damn it!”

All Might stood bent in his shadow. The crowd murmured; several looked ready to leap to someone’s defense but none of them were certain who. Makoto’s recorder ran on and on. And then the man’s spiky shoulders slumped, and he fell to his knees, his massive body quavering.

“My grandkids were on that train,” he wept.

A fusillade of camera shutters snapped as All Might reached out. One was lucky enough to catch them both in profile. In the next morning’s papers, this would be the dominant image – the former Symbol of Peace embracing this stranger, barely able to place his arms around that thick neck, the rain making it impossible to tell where either man’s tears began or ended.

“I’m sorry,” All Might said.

“It’s not enough,” said the man. “But you know that.”

He shook off All Might and slunk away from the crowd, pushing through its outer edges and breaking free of it, returning home. All Might regarded them all once more.

“As I said, you’re free to stay. But please be mindful of the weather. Don’t let it make you ill.” He hacked out more coughing and frowned as the concrete spattered red. “And please be ready to disperse quickly. Akane Kitae is still on the move. If she arrives at U.A., she’ll come here. It won’t be safe.” He looked to Makoto. “Are there any other questions?”

There were none. Makoto looked at her recorder as though she’d just noticed it was there, and shut it off. All Might nodded and turned his back on the crowd. The gates didn’t shut behind him. Maybe they had been disarmed; maybe they wouldn’t activate again until someone set off the motion
sensors. But no one bothered to try.

Over the next hour or so the crowd dispersed. Several of them made promises to return when the weather was fairer, but for now their outrage had turned damp as their clothes. Even the ones far in the back, where All Might’s voice had gone unheard, had felt the transformation among them. Many of them had captured his words on their phones. Over the course of the day, those uploads would compete with the ever-more vicious rumors that had first brought them here. As they left, another slipped out with them – unnoticed and unnoticeable.

* * *

One lesser-known advantage of Nezu’s size was that people couldn’t get mad at him without feeling a little ridiculous. But Aizawa was more than willing to try.

They were standing in the middle of Nezu’s office, which only further emphasized the height difference between them, but Nezu had the strong impression that if he tried taking refuge behind his desk then Aizawa would grab one of his paperwork stacks and beat him to death with it. The man’s eyes weren’t any less bloodshot for the day he’d spent in bed and his usually sedate voice was barely keeping itself level.

“Eri genuinely thought she was being helpful by taking him to Heights Alliance,” he said. “By the time we got back to her room she wouldn’t even look me in the eye. You know how fragile her mental state is. How much progress do you think we lost today?”

“I’d view it as an encouraging sign,” Nezu said, but he didn’t sound entirely convinced. “For her to take responsibility of Koh’s well-being after all she’s been through just shows how far she’s-”

“Take the hint, goddammit!” Aizawa shouted, and Nezu flinched. “Over and over again we’ve had people putting themselves in harm’s way because we can’t do our jobs right, and now a traumatized child decides she needs to play caretaker for Kyoumoto because he made no progress, none, since the day we brought him here. How the hell were they allowed to leave in the first place? Why didn’t you have anyone watching the door!?”

“We went over this, Aizawa. Minimal security measures were-”

“There’s a difference between ‘minimal’ and ‘nonexistent.’ You did it because you trusted that he’d keep himself locked up with no one to supervise him. You put too much faith in people and this is where it’s gotten us!”

"You’re right, there hasn’t been enough progress. Power Loader told me recently that we won’t be able to make the finished serum in time. We were headed for a crisis no matter what. But we can still recover.”

“Don’t pretend that you weren’t blindsided by this.” He gestured at Nezu’s laden desk. “You’ve been playing your games and telling the rest of us you have things under control. Now we have people threatening to riot at our gates, and I’m sure the M.o.I. will be along shortly as well. What’s Nakayama saying now?”

“I’ve tried to contact him, but all of a sudden he’s willing to drag his feet. We have a conference call scheduled tomorrow morning, after Koh’s injection. But I’m sure he’s ready to take advantage of the chaos.”

“For all we know he’s the one who leaked this in the first place.”

“I don’t think so,” said Nezu. “Nakayama is concerned with two things, his own position and
national stability. Revealing Koh’s presence here threatens both. If the least detail of the Yard came to light then it would destroy public faith in our government, and the Ministry of Individuality along with it.” His tail curled anxiously around his feet. “But…I’m not sure. This whole thing smells rotten.”

“If it’s not him then it’s the League. They’re the only other ones with reason to believe he’s here. Now Yuurei has every reason to bring Koh back into their clutches.”

“It doesn’t add up. None of this adds up” Nezu’s paws kneaded together; standing like that in the middle of the carpet, he looked lost. “They’d lose Yuurei’s cooperation if they endangered Koh like this…”

“Or maybe you think too highly of someone who just tried to beat one of our students to death,” Aizawa snapped. “Either way, Kyoumoto’s position here is now threatened. The school is under complete lockdown. Metalhead and Horooka will probably push forward harder than ever. We’ve lost almost all outside support because of that idiotic statement you made to the Hero Association. Is there anything else? Any more fallout from your incompetence that I’ve missed?”

“All Might is handling the situation up front,” Nezu said quietly. “If all goes well, it should buy us another day at least. The rest we’ll have to take as it comes.”

“Very encouraging. If you’ll excuse me, I need to go and see how much of the damage I can fix myself. Assuming I can even find out where to start.”

Aizawa stormed out and made it down the hall and two flights of stairs before he was able to stop and catch his breath. The rest he’d been forced to take had done nothing to help his exhaustion. His head felt stuffed with burning wool. Taking his frustrations out on Nezu had done nothing to calm him down.

Before coming to U.A. he’d stuck to street-level, working out of disused shopfronts, warehouses, places where the downtrodden and the hard-worn would congregate. He’d rubbed shoulders with sketchy characters and small-time villains to secure shelter and helpful gossip on his latest quarry. He was used to skulking around the edges of things, nibbling away at his targets one bit at a time, until they were finally small enough for him to spring in and string them up. But nothing was ever small at U.A.; this garish behemoth of a campus had problems to match. Too much politics. Too many people looking to him for guidance. And everyone else, these heroes who’d taught and lived at the school twice as long as him, seemed totally unprepared to deal with any of it.

The chilly rain helped wake him up a little. Campus stood empty and sodden; the gates were open again and the mob already looked thinner. All Might had accomplished that much, at least. Aizawa turned away and lurched in the direction of the teachers’ dorms. Classes were on hold again. He’d have to notify 1-A and then get his bearings.

“…don’t know a…”

He stopped and cocked his head. There was a voice under the rain’s patter. And it was carrying quite a long way, judging by the echo.

“…because you b-list shiteheads need someone to…”

“Oh no,” he said.

It was coming all the way from the far side of the opposite tower, in the direction of the library. Bakugo’s voice always liked to throw its weight around, but it usually didn’t get this far.
“Wipe that fucking look off your face! If you think I’d stoop that low just because I call you idiots out on your shit then you’re even more stupid than I thought. It wasn’t me, goddammit!”

Aizawa’s brow creased. Then his eyes widened as he realized what they were talking about. A certainty as cold as the rainwater on the back of his neck. He started to run.

“Fucking say it again! Give me a reason, you bastards! Say it again and I swear I’ll snap your fucking necks!”

That threat was way more specific than Bakugo’s usual bluster, and his voice had hit that splintering octave someone normally reached right before blood began to spill. He moved at a dead sprint, skidding on the concrete as he turned, and there was Bakugo, beside the library entrance with three larger boys clustered around him. Aizawa didn’t recognize them, probably second-years – one plain enough, one marked with blemishes like a leopard’s coat, the third and biggest with a craggy appearance similar to Kouda. The splashing underfoot gave him away. They all looked at him and all their expressions shifted at once.

Bakugo was breathing hard, red-faced and his red eyes red-rimmed; he looked like he was about to catch fire inside. But as Aizawa stepped up to them, he looked entirely calm, except for a small fleck of froth at the corner of his mouth. This was infinitely more terrifying.

“Good afternoon,” he said, his tone flat as a frozen lake. “I only caught half of this conversation, but let me guess what it was about.” The boys quivered under his stare. “You three just accused one of your fellow students of leaking Koh Kyoumoto’s location to the public. Does anyone have the nerve to tell me that I’m wrong?”

They didn’t.

“Good,” he said. “I will be clear. Under any other circumstance, all three of you would have been immediately expelled, ejected from this school, and then blacklisted from every hero program in the country. Instead, you may consider yourselves on the thinnest possible ice until I forget your faces, and I have a long memory. Is this understood?” Mute nods. “Get out of my sight.”

They scampered off, one so fast he slipped and nearly fell face-first onto the pavement. Aizawa and Bakugo were left alone. Aizawa half-expected to be the latest target for the boy’s rage, but Bakugo just gave him a defiant stare, fists clenched and lip trembling.

“It wasn’t me,” he said hoarsely.

“I know,” Aizawa replied. “You should get back to the dorm. We’ll be having another assembly tomorrow to clear this up. And this time, I’d like you to attend.”

“What about the kid? Does he know about all this shit?”

Aizawa was taken aback. He waited for some kind of feint or insult but none come. There had been a lot of insanity today, but Katsuki Bakugo showing naked concern for someone else’s well-being made him wonder if he was still comatose in bed.

“He likely does, yes. But we’re taking care of it.”

Bakugo emitted a creaking wheeze that might have been a laugh. “You’re taking care of it. Great. That’s a real fucking load off my mind.”

He shoved his way past Aizawa and stomped off. Aizawa watched him pass beneath the shadow of U.A.’S towers. He felt his cheeks burning and waited for the sensation to pass. The rain did not
abate. The school’s windows reflected only gray. Everything looked depleted.

Finally he turned and went into the library. This altercation had started inside, and Bakugo had been thrown out and banned for good measure. Aizawa spoke to the staff and had it reversed. He could do that, at least.

*             *             *

The half-demolished buildings where Horooka had struck down Endeavor had become a sort of base camp for Metalhead’s forces – they were extremely perilous and their broken walls let in horrible drafts, but the area was still relatively empty and, more importantly, this part of the city still had power. Most of the furniture was missing from these rooms and it had taken a lot of hunting to find some working outlets, but once they did they were at least able to charge their phones. Their entire communications infrastructure was rooted in their data plans right now. Mainichi speculated that the only reason those hadn’t been canceled too was because there were simply too many people on their side to make it effective.

He was with Metalhead and Takenoko on the second floor of one such creaking building, where the walls had gone putty-soft with water damage and brighter in spots where paintings and mirrors had been removed. It was important to keep a roof over one’s head at this time of day, even without the rain. While the flow of heroes into the city had slowed down to a trickle, Hawks and Mirko were still on patrol and they were both nearly as dangerous and a lot more agile than Endeavor. Metalhead didn’t know about the Hero Association’s tiff with Nezu, or that the Wing Hero and the Rabbit Hero had cheerfully thrown them the middle finger and disregarded their instructions to let Musutafu be. Hawks could cover the distance between his usual patrol route and Kashiki Ward faster than your average train, and Mirko wasn’t going to pass up an opportunity to crack skulls unless she absolutely had to.

Mainichi was seated on a springworn mattress they’d dragged in from another apartment, Takenoko in his lotus position in a shadowy corner. They both kept a healthy distance from Metalhead, who was leaned beside a cracked window, heedless to the spitting rain. Her expression was foul. Cigarette ash powered the ground around her feet like a line of salt to keep out evil spirits. Her hairdo had gone rat-tail and her skin sallow and drawn, and with her piercings she resembled some new generation of wicked witch, a punk-rock Baba Yaga. The skies outside were pig-iron dark. No streetlights shone here, even if electricity still flowed.

The apartment doorknob rattled. Someone knocked.

“Let him in,” said Metalhead.

Mainichi got up and ran over. He’d gotten even thinner but his gait hadn’t quite adjusted to his reduced girth and in the half-light it made him look like an optical illusion, as if his lost bulk would re-materialize around him if viewed from the proper angle. He opened the door and in stumbled Kizutatchi, also haggard, more out of sorts than any of them had seen him before. He doubled over, breathing hard, hands awkwardly hovering an inch away from his knees just so he wouldn’t accidentally trigger his Quirk and slice them off.

“Sorry I’m late,” he gasped. “Thought I heard the rabbit thumping around, had to take the long way…” He looked up and saw Takenoko. “How the hell did you get here so fast? We were in the same building when we got the call.”

“I move around,” said Takenoko. He failed to elaborate.

“So what’s going on? Not a lot of phones active downtown anymore. I’m getting a lot of hearsay.”
“Tell him, Mainichi,” said Metalhead.

“Shigaraki came around the other day,” Mainichi said, taking his place on the mattress. “Some kind of peace offering. He dropped off a lot of Trigger and then told Akane that Kyoumoto wasn’t anywhere in Musutafu. Then…well, you know what happened this morning.”

“A villain in U.A.,” Kizutatchi said. “I assume that’s meant to be Kyoumoto? Haven’t heard anyone mention they’re a grade-schooler.”

“Idiot children everywhere,” Metalhead snarled. “One of those stuck-up students probably blabbed too much online and the tabloids ran with it. The news just mentions they were involved with the insanity attacks. That’s all anyone needs to know.”

“But isn’t this sort of a good thing?” Mainichi said. “Now at least we know Shigaraki wasn’t playing straight with us.”

“I knew that much from the start. But because Horooka couldn’t keep her mouth shut, now he’s got leverage on us. I can’t wait to hear him try and dangle Yuurei in front of her face to bait her back over to his side. She doesn’t care about anything else.”

“I’m missing something here,” Kizutatchi said.

“Horooka wants to see her friend,” said Takenoko.

“Friends my ass.” She ground out her cigarette on the sill. “She tried to murder the punk. There’s no take-backs on that, whether she wants it or not. Where is she now?”

“Basement.”

“Of course she is.”

“Do we still have that Trigger he gave you?” Kizutatchi asked.

“Yeah, I’m going to ditch it tonight. The shit’s probably poisoned.”

“Let me take care of it. I dealt Trigger a little back in Kamino. There’s ways to tell if it’s been cut with anything. And the pure stuff is really valuable.”

She waved irritably. “Fine, whatever. If your skeleton explodes or something because you shot yourself up with a bad batch, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“I can barely use my Quirk tonight, it’s been so loud,” said Mainichi. “Every time my antenna goes up it feels like my head’s about to pop. People are mad and the cops are barely able to handle it all. This might be a good time to take a breather, see what we can do next.”

Metalhead pushed off from the wall, kicking up the ashes. She stomped into the middle of the room, intersecting all their gazes. Mainichi trembled as she turned to him.

“Take a breather? You’ve got to be fu-” She cut off and let off a wet, heaving cough that ended with her spitting something brown into the planks. Mainichi stood, face creased with concern, but she held out her hand, fended him off.

“I’m fine,” she said, wiping her mouth. “No breather. No rest. We stop for even one night and we’re finished. This thing needs to keep moving or it all falls apart. Can’t give anyone time to get cold feet.”
“What next?” Takenoko asked.

“We’ve flanked the ward. Now we pinch. Consolidate the space in between and keep pushing forward. And I want some boots on the ground in Takodana. We’ve got the south almost completely locked down, we need some presence in the other directions as well. Not a lot, just enough to keep the cops spread thin. Mirko and Hawks can’t beat us all down, no matter how hard they try.”

“I’ve made some calls to the folks who can still take them,” Kizutatchi said. “They’re ready to go. With everything in disarray like this, if we move tonight we can probably take ten, maybe fifteen percent of Kashiki’s remaining territory. But only if we’re not gentle about it.”

“Fine,” said Metalhead. “Takenoko, drag Horooka back up here and get her marching. Every shop, every home, if they’re not with us then they get the hell out. And if they fight back, we paint the fucking streets with them.”

“Akane, what the hell!?” Mainichi cried. “Remember what you said? If we just go around butchering people then we’re no better than Dabi!”

She shook her head, groped for her cigarettes. Her hand came out crumpling an empty packet and she hissed and threw it into the apartment’s darkened recesses.

“I am not in a reasonable mood tonight,” she said. “I’ve taken over half this stinking city and everyone’s still talking about U.A., and meanwhile that smug fucking manchild Shigaraki thinks he can pull the goddamn wool over my eyes like I’m one of the halfwit lunatics in his good-for-nothing League. I’m done playing nice. The League, the heroes, the cops, every last one of them is going to learn exactly what it means to fuck with me. Now get to work!”

*             *             *

Nightfall at the dorms. The common room was packed this time. The only one missing was Bakugo, who’d gone to his room and slammed the door hard enough to shake the walls. Nearly everyone was clustered around the TV, though Mineta still hung around the tables at the back, schoolbooks in hand. Everyone knew he was just studying to spite them, but this was taking it a little far.

The newscasts showed Kashiki in flames. The picture and reporting were both fuzzy – it was hard to get accurate news whenever Horooka was around, helicopters had a limited lifespan around her and there were very few places to hide – but apparently a gas main had broken or something, belching fire out into the center of the ward. Through tendrils of twisting smoke some of the students believed they saw the pale smears of bodies in the streets. Asui had stepped outside and come back in shaking, saying she could hear their destruction’s echo, like fireworks.

“Can we maybe turn this off?” Kaminari said weakly. “I’ve seen enough.”

“It’ll be coming to us soon,” Todoroki said.

“Thanks, man. Thanks for that.”

Tokoyami, Midoriya, and Uraraka were clustered together on the same couch, Kirishima and Ashido across from them. They all looked more shaken than the rest of their classmates. Kirishima in particular had tried to get Bakugo to come down with everyone else and had only been met with silence.

“I heard what happened with Koh,” said Uraraka. “Was it as bad as I think it was?”

“Probably worse,” said Ashido.
“I’m just glad I wasn’t present,” Tokoyami sighed.

Ashido glanced at him. “Hey, yeah, Tokoyami, where were you anyway?”

“I was taking some remedial lessons with Ectoplasm. Or an Ectoplasm, at least. I’ve seen him rather a lot, as of late.” He tented his fingers. “I was not even aware of this dire news until my tutoring had concluded.”

“What happened with Kacchan?” asked Midoriya. “Does anyone know?”

“Aizawa emailed me about it,” Kirishima said dully.

“Just you?”

“Yeah, probably ‘cause of this whole study-partners thing. I was at the gym when it happened, but apparently a few second-years accused Bakugo of starting the leak. To get back at the school on his way out, you know?”

“They did what!?” Ashido stood and stomped the table, arm flexed. “Tell me who it was. I’ll punch their teeth down their throats!”

“You’ll do no such thing!” Iida cried.

“Ashido, I get that you’re mad, but settle down!” Hagakure agreed. “We can’t be fighting with each other at a time like this!”

“So much for what Shinsou said about everyone having our backs,” said Kaminari. “This is getting scary real fast. Kouda, dude, you okay?”

Kouda was curled up on a recliner, his stony body quaking. He squeaked out something that might have been a very unconvincing “I’m fine.” Aoyama knelt by his side.

“You should retire to bed,” he said quietly. “Perhaps some time with ton lapin can take the edge off your nerves, yes? I wouldn’t mind an evening with him myself.”

“He’s right,” said Todoroki. “Nothing good can come of just working ourselves up down here.”

“But what about tomorrow?” Kouda whispered.

“Seriously.” said Satou. “I ain’t gonna get a wink until I have some idea of where that leak came from, at least. If it wasn’t one of us, then who? The League? Took their sweet time, didn’t they?”

“More likely it was Horooka,” said Shouji. He was off to the side with Yaoyorozu and Jirou, the latter of whom had bent her head, fists shaking. “She saw Koh being carried here, after all.”

Kaminari shook his head. “Nuh-uh. You didn’t see Horooka the way me and Mineta did. That girl was like the living dead, she ain’t gonna rumor-monger anything.”

Mineta looked up, unamused. “Are you for real? You don’t know that it’s-”

“For God’s sake!”

Everyone’s eyes snapped over to Jirou. She’d shouted loud enough to crack her voice and now she stomped forward, her earjacks waving and snapping like serpents. Yaoyorozu made a token effort to hush her but it was already much too late.
“Are you kidding me with this shit? Think about it for two seconds. It’s obvious who leaked it.” She stabbed her finger at the TV. “We’ve had to put up with his face for weeks!”

Stunned silence. Uraraka, Tokoyami, and Midoriya became very interested in the floor. Sero got his jaw unstuck first.

“Nakayama?” he said. “That no-name Minister?”

“Well, duh,” said Mineta. “Sorry, I thought everyone had figured it out already. He’s been feeding everyone that I’m-so-worried routine forever. Looks like he was just softening them up so they’d get nice and mad at U.A.” He went back to his book. “The teachers probably know, too, they’re just trying to find a way to say it that doesn’t cause a riot.”

"If you knew already then how the hell are you so calm?” Jirou snapped.

"Because if I think about it for more than ten seconds I feel like I’m going to piss myself." The book shuddered in his hands. "I think we're kind of screwed."

“Why would the government set themselves against us?” Todoroki asked, and then his eyes narrowed. “Wait. Unless…”

“Jirou and I speculated about this earlier,” Yaoyorozu said. “There is…rather a high chance…that Koh’s sordid past, and by extension Yuurei’s and Horooka’s, are the fault of the Ministry, and not the League.”

They processed this.

“Ohh shit,” Kaminari moaned.

“When it rains it pours,” Ojiro concurred.

“It does explain quite a lot,” said Shouji.

“Unthinkable. Grotesque,” Iida said. “But…if this has, in fact, been a three-prong assault on U.A. – from the League, Horooka, and the government itself – then suddenly all this puzzling secrecy and paranoia from the faculty makes sense. The school has taken it upon itself to shelter Kyoumoto from even the nation’s clutches. Dear God, we’re utterly bereft of allies.”

"Screwed," Mineta repeated.

“Were you and Yaoyorozu seriously the first to work this out, Jirou?” Kaminari asked. He leaned over to Midoriya’s seat. “Hey, Midoriya, did you have any-”

He recoiled as Dark Shadow burst out of Tokoyami’s back and hovered between them, growling.

“Geez, man, tell him to give some warning next time. Thought he was gonna bite my face off.”

“But nothing’s for sure yet, right?” Hagakure said desperately. “We’re all just spitballing, right?”

“There’s an assembly tomorrow,” Uraraka said. “If they’re going to spill the beans, it’ll happen then. We were almost at pitchforks and torches this morning. They can’t keep it a secret any longer.”

Todoroki stepped forward. “And if it is true…if this is an attack on us by the M.o.I., while Musutafu
burns and the League of Villains is still at large…what will we do then?”

No one had an answer.

Outside, the night trembled with distant thunder.
Chapter 23

Here again. Clean white walls and smell of antiseptic. The crinkle of paper under his seat. The brief, bright pain in his arm and firm stickiness of the bandage on top. Recovery Girl discarded the needle and took Hound Dog aside, and they spoke privately for a time. Koh remained where he was, the words trailing around his head formless and thin as wisps of smoke. He muttered a thank-you as Hound Dog took him by the hand and led him away.

The skies were still gray and yesterday’s rain had turned to a mist that left one soaking before they realized they’d gotten wet. The front gates remained open but the crowd had again begun to grow. Hound Dog deliberately took them the long way so that Koh wouldn’t see, but just because you couldn’t see something didn’t mean it wasn’t there.

When they got back inside, Hound Dog stopped to make a quick text and then moved on. Ding of the elevator. Hiss of the door. These halls already grown familiar and silent as the ones in Shin’s apartment. They went into his room, awash in drab gray light, and Koh took off his shoes and sat on the bed with his feet dangling free and did not move again. Hound Dog scratched his muzzle and looked awkwardly askance.

After the events of yesterday morning, Hound Dog had sat with Koh for as long as he was able, but he was good enough at reading a room to know that small talk at this point was impossible and Koh’s muteness was oppressive. Some awful truth had settled into his flesh, something he couldn’t articulate but nevertheless radiated like a miasma. Hound Dog was getting desperate. He wanted to find something to salvage from the wreckage of this boy but all he came up with was handfuls of ash.

“I need to step out again for a little while,” he said. “But I’ll be back.”

“I’m fine. There’s nothing for you to do here, anyway. You have work.”

“This is my work. Like I said, my job’s to take care-”

“I remember,” he said. “And I’m fine.”

Koh climbed fully onto his bed and lay against the pillows. He rubbed his band-aid through his sleeve. He turned his head away, so that his eyes were no longer visible to Hound Dog; the effect was eerie, the colorless child now indistinguishable from the colorless room.

“There’s not much left, is there?” he asked.

Hound Dog knew what he meant and figured it was pointless to lie. “No. There isn’t.”

“What’ll happen to me when it runs out? To everyone?”

“We have another place for you to stay. It’ll keep your Quirk under control until they’re finished making the medicine. I’ll still be there.”

“It sounds like the Yard,” Koh said, and then he felt Hound Dog’s hand on his shoulder.

“No,” Hound Dog said vehemently. “Never like that. You won’t be alone like that again.”

“The people out there are scared of me,” Koh said. He didn’t react to Hound Dog’s touch. “Shin and Mirai and all those bad guys from the League are still here, but I’m the one they’re scared of. So it’s
okay. I don’t mind being by myself.”

“Don’t give up on yourself, Koh. No one here is giving up on you.”

“I’m not giving up. I just wish there was something I could do.” He rolled over, dislodging Hound Dog’s hand. “I like the people here. You and Eri, and the principal, and everyone else. But you keep doing things for me and I just sit around and make it worse. I should be able to do something, too.”

“Just you being here is enough. No one’s asking anything more of you.”

“Okay,” he said. “You can go now.”

Hound Dog huffed. He reached out again. But his hand paused, and withdrew, and turned for the exit.

“I won’t be long,” he said, and left.

Ectoplasm was down the hall. His frozen face tilted in concern as Hound Dog shambled towards him.

“Not going well?” he asked.

“Going worse and worse. He knows the serum’s almost out and doesn’t even seem to care.”

“We’re up against a sea of troubles right now. He seems intent on taking responsibility for every one.”

“I know,” said Hound Dog. “Just hope I can keep myself in check during this call. That Nakayama bastard gets my hackles up.”

“Well, I’ll be there too. You know the drill, hand on your knee means heel.”

“Woof woof,” he said sarcastically, and headed for the elevator. “Check up on him every so often, alright? I’ll be back soon as I can.”

“No hurry.”

He took the elevator down and left the building. Posted at the front door were two more Ectoplasms, standing stiff and straight as stakes pounded into the earth, condensation glistening on their coats. They should have been here from the start, Hound Dog thought. But then again, what could be done? Their every attempt to make Koh safe just turned this campus into more of a prison. And then there was his final destination. Down in the sub-basement levels, in the panic complex that Mei Hatsune had described to Jirou and Yaoyorozu not a week ago. The new mesh-lined room was already prepared, and it had a soft bed and all the comforts one could ask for, but Koh was right, it was just his cell at the Yard with brighter lights and less outright torture. It was still an obscenity.

He felt the growl rising up in his chest and strangled it. Odds were already good Nakayama would push him to his limit, he didn’t want to start slobbering before he even walked into the room.

At the window, three stories up, Koh watched him leave.

He’d sat up again as soon as Hound Dog left so he could look outside instead. The campus was empty, washed sterile by the wintry mist. His room didn’t face out to the front gates but if he craned his head just so he believed he could see the crowd roiling at the edges of his vision. The molten gold of his irises was printed in his reflection. He couldn’t get away from it.
He stayed there a long while. He thought of Eri. He hadn’t asked what had happened to her but he figured that she wouldn’t be allowed to visit anymore. Which was fine. He had caused her enough trouble already. In his time at U.A. he had seen so many faces and he mentally thumbed through them one by one. Every one marked with kindness and concern but also so many with that initial flash of fear, the spike of anxiety that made Koh’s own pulse jump. Like Eri, guiltily touching her horn, telling him that for many people it was all they saw. Not everyone had looked at him that way. Eri hadn’t. Ashido had only ever been delighted. Bakugo had just looked annoyed that he was even there. But they were few.

Someone knocked. “Koh? It’s Ectoplasm. You all right in there?”

“I’m fine.”

“Just let me know if you need anything.”

“Okay.”

The click-click of peglegs down the hall faded.

On the grounds below he sometimes had the impression of a shadow. Like a dustmote in his eye, flicking in and out of sight. It looked like someone familiar. Koh’s hands knotted like restless animals in his lap. Then they clenched.

He got up and went to the window. The latch was up on the side, too high for him to reach from the floor. He climbed onto the sill, balanced himself, then reached up; his shoulder burned until it felt like it would pop out the socket but then his fingers brushed the latch and he gripped it and yanked down. It popped open with a clack that to him sounded loud as a shotgun blast and he nearly lost his footing as it gave way. He leaned against the side of the sill, panting, waiting for the sound of Ectoplasm’s footsteps again. But it was all quiet.

The window was supposed to slide open like a patio door but no matter how hard he tried it wouldn’t budge. He yanked until his arms shook with the effort and then finally braced his foot against the side of the window’s recess and pulled. The seal broke and he lost his grip again and tumbled from the sill, striking the ground belly-first. He lay on the tile gasping, winded, hearing that staggered click-click come closer again.

“Me again, Koh. Something happen in there?”

He gulped air. “No. I’m just reading. Trying to.”

“Sorry to be a pest. Thought I heard a noise.”

“I didn’t hear anything.”

“All right.”

He waited and then climbed back up. The damp cold air from outside made him shake right down to his socks. He should have gone to put his shoes and coat on first. But if he turned back now he knew he would lose his nerve.

There was a thin layer of mulch and topiary around the building but past that was solid concrete. The wind moaned around his ears. He heard the distant murmur of the crowd. Koh’s heart was pounding so hard he feared it might burst and his knees had gone rigid and insensate as wood. But he thought of all those faces, of Hound Dog’s helpless and beaten concern, of the growing mob at the gates and the dwindling medicine and the return of the red red light, and he breathed in and breathed out and
then closed his eyes and jumped.

* * *

Another conference room. No face-to-face meeting this time. The teachers sat around a table at the center of which lay a plain black telephone like a sacrificial offering. No one spoke. Hound Dog had been among the last to enter and several of his colleagues had looked at him with their questions clear on their faces, and his stance and the shake of his head had told them all they needed to know. Nakayama was expected to call any minute.

“When’s this latest assembly?” Cementoss asked.

“Three o’clock,” said Nezu. It was ten in the morning.

“Leaving it a bit late, aren’t you?”

“Depending on how this call goes I may need some time to deal with the fallout.” He regarded the room. “I don’t like to admit this, but he has the advantage over us this time. Let me do the talking.”

Aizawa grunted. He appeared to be dissolving into his costume. He’d slept badly last night.

At last the phone rang. They all watched its red light flash. Nezu folded his paws on the table.

“All Might, if you please,” he said.

All Might nodded and reached over and picked up the call. Nakayama’s reedy voice crackled out of the phone. He sounded no different than before.

“Good morning, Principal. Everyone.”

“Minister,” said Nezu.

“I’m sure that you’re no less busy than I am, so I’ll get straight to the point,” he said. “In light of these troubling rumors regarding your school, I am arranging a State audit of campus for any suspicious persons. It’s progressing smoothly. I don’t have an exact date yet, but you can expect their arrival within the week. Three days, most likely.”

“I understand your wish to take the initiative, Minister, but that seems like rather a large waste of resources for all parties involved.” Nezu’s voice was smooth and level but several of the other faculty already weren’t taking this well; Thirteen’s breathing started to rasp and Midnight had clasped her hands tight enough for her nails to draw blood. “As I have said, Koh Kyoumoto is not here.”

“I never mentioned Kyoumoto.”

“I am aware. For the sake of conversation, let us presume that he is the subject in question.”

“Nevertheless. The accusation is serious enough, especially given Musutafu’s instability, to warrant deploying the best resources that the government has to offer. A full scan should take less than a day. Including the sub-basement levels, of course.”

“Are they aware of who they’d be searching for?”

“It’ll be a simple enough matter, with the quarantine and all. Anyone who’s not currently enrolled or employed by U.A. will be taken for questioning and processing. This excludes the girl liberated from the Eightfold Cleansers. For now.”
At those last two words, Aizawa’s eyes narrowed.

“You’re proposing to spend funding and manpower to sweep a location that’s currently besieged by one hostile party and surveilled by another,” said Nezu. “Surely this can wait until after the situation in Musutafu has been resolved?”

“You have continually failed to resolve that situation. We can’t wait for your cue any longer. If I may be frank, Principal, your performance throughout this ordeal has been extremely disappointing.”

“And if I may be frank,” Nezu said, voice tightening, “you have better things to do than to send in a strike team to apprehend a frightened child.”

“You lack perspective,” Nakayama said. “Even with all the other threats currently facing the country, Koh Kyoumoto is an unacceptable risk to national security.”

“What risk? He’s six years old, for God’s sake!”

“Principal, don’t let him get under your skin,” Cementoss muttered.

“And someday he won’t be,” Nakayama said. “Consider the full scope of the situation. After what Kyoumoto has experienced, what are the chances of him ever becoming a productive member of society? Even if his Quirk were somehow removed, he would be an unacceptably disharmonious element in the future. At best he would merely become a shiftless thug, at worst an active agitator against the government itself. There is simply no positive outcome in letting him be.”

“Such stunning pragmatism,” Nezu spat. “Forgive me if my sympathies lie elsewhere after what I’ve learned.”

Nakayama sighed. “And I’m sure your own history plays a part in it as well. I know that you were subjected to experimentation against your will, Principal, but I thought someone of your intelligence would be able to put aside his prejudices for the sake of the common good. It seems I was mistaken.”

Nezu’s teeth, several of the teachers realized, were quite sharp. They’d never seen him bare them like that before. Hound Dog gripped the edge of the table, claws digging in. Nezu took a deep breath, but before he could speak Aizawa leaned over and interrupted.

“Minister Nakayama, this is Eraserhead speaking. You may not remember me, I don’t leave much of an impression.”

“Oh, not at all.” For a moment the giddy hero fanboy was back with them. “It was a pleasure to finally see you in person.”

“Then I hope you’ll listen to what I have to say.” He looked square at Nezu as he continued. “As Principal Nezu stated, we’re in the middle of our own conflict. It’s a two-front war with the League and Akane Kitae’s forces, and both fronts are heating up fast. This rumor is probably another gambit from one of those two parties to weaken our position further. You’d just be playing into their hands if you followed through on it now.”

“Oh, contrary,” Nakayama said. “With the threats you face, this may be the last opportunity to reliably secure Kyoumoto. A bit of short-term instability is worth seizing that chance.”

It took a second for this to sink in around the room. Several of the teachers had to act fast. Midnight clamped her hand over Present Mic’s mouth before he could let the curses out. Cementoss nearly dove in front of Vlad King before he could rise. But Ectoplasm’s steadying hand couldn’t stop
Hound Dog, and there was a splintering crack as a chunk of the table broke off in his grip. His muzzle was dripping. His voice was clotted with fury.

“It was you,” he snarled.

“I have no idea what you’re accusing me of, whoever you are,” Nakayama said. “Principal, please keep your employees under control if you wish to continue this call.”

“That was our guidance counselor,” said Nezu. “He is my colleague, not my employee. And someone would have to be exceptionally foolish to think they could challenge my school with an historic scandal hanging over their heads.”

“I don’t appreciate your-”

“This double-talk is putting me to sleep,” Aizawa said. “For all our sakes I’ll speak plainly. Kyoumoto is not here. We would never give him to you if he was. And if you started this rumor because your paymasters are getting antsy without another child to vivisect, then you, Nakayama, will soon find yourself facing consequences you are not prepared to handle. Is that understood?”

“It is,” he said coldly – the hero-worshiper had left the room once more. “I’ll contact you when we have a date set, Principal. As for you, Eraserhead...if Kyoumoto really isn’t present, then I’d be happy to propose that Eri be escorted off campus instead. For her safety, of course.”

“Your transparent attempt to provoke me is noted. Is there anything else?”

“I just want to say that I’m severely disheartened by how our relationship has turned out,” Nakayama said. “I had truly hoped that All Might’s retirement would lead to a new era of cooperation between the Hero Association and the larger government. Instead, it just appears to have exposed critical weaknesses in the former. When this is all over, you should all expect increased State oversight of your activities. U.A. itself may have to be-”

All Might reached over, disconnected the call, and sat back, his face emotionless.

“Thank you, All Might,” said Recovery Girl. “I believe we’d heard all we could take.”

“At least Eraserhead got him to practically admit that he’s the one behind the leak,” Power Loader said. “That was almost too easy.”

“The man is an idiot,” said Aizawa. “That’s been obvious since the last time we talked to him. His benefactors, whoever they are, keep their mouths shut and faces hidden while he goes around eagerly divulging all his greatest secrets to complete strangers. Now that we’ve made an enemy of him, we can’t expect him to act rationally. That’s probably why he blindsided you, Principal.”

“Are you all right, sir?” Cementoss asked Nezu.

“My feelings are irrelevant,” Nezu said, in the voice of someone trying very hard to control their feelings. “What we need to do now is decide how best to convey this situation to-”

Hound Dog leapt up and grabbed the phone and smashed it under his fist. Several of the teachers winced as he pounded the table again, and again, and again, with steady metronomic precision until plastic shrapnel sprayed and the wood beneath fissured and the whole table cracked and collapsed down the middle. He stood there amidst the ruin and the smell of sawdust, shoulders heaving with every breath.

“-to our students,” Nezu finished.
“I can clean that up,” Thirteen volunteered.

Aizawa brushed dust off his costume. “Self-controlled as ever, Inui. Make sure you settle down before you go back to Koh.”

Ectoplasm cleared his throat. Every teacher turned their head to him.

“About that,” he said, in a timid sort of way that put a tiny sliver of ice into everyone’s blood.

“What happened,” said Hound Dog.

“Let me say first off that he’s fine. He’s not hurt.”

“What happened.”

“About ten minutes ago I checked on his room and he wouldn’t answer. Had to let myself in. It turns out that he jumped out the window, but I- Ryo, stop!”

But he was already out of earshot, he’d ripped open the door and streaked down the hall and when he reached the stairwell he leapt over the rail and fell four stories to crater the tiles where he landed, bounding outside on his knuckles in a frenzied gorilla’s gait and then running through campus on all fours, his claws gashing grooves into the concrete with every step and foam blowing off his muzzle in flecks, and when he reached the entrance to Koh’s tower and the two Ectoplasms at the door tackled him he was moving so fast that their prosthetic legs almost broke off as they braced against the ground. Hound Dog’s jaws snapped and flailed as they strained to hold him back.

“Ryo, calm down! You’re acting rabid!”

“Let me go!”

“How do you think he’ll react if you show up like this? Wipe yourself off and breathe!”

He breathed, and breathed again, and then slumped against them so suddenly that for a second they thought he’d gone unconscious. But then he pushed off from them and sat down hard, grasping feebly at his mask.

“Better leave that thing on,” one Ectoplasm said.

The other Ectoplasm unbuckled his coat. “Here, take this. Clean up a little.”

Hound Dog took it and wiped away the drool, then looked at the stains. “What a mess.”

“It’ll turn to smoke with the rest of me when I’m canceled, don’t worry.”

“That’s not what I meant.” He got to his feet. “What happened? How did it happen? Why wasn’t the window locked?”

“It was. From his side, at least. Not easy for someone that small to get it open.”

“He did it quiet, too,” said the other. “I was patrolling the hall outside and barely heard a thing. But he wouldn’t answer when I checked in, and…well, that’s how I found out. It should have been barricaded from the outside as well, but no one thought of it. We’ve been too distracted.”

“The more we slip up the worse it gets.” Hound Dog rubbed his eyes with the coat and handed it back; the Ectoplasm declined to put it back on. “You said he’s okay?”
“He’s fine. He was sitting by the bushes near the wall. Says that Yuurei was there. Caught him before he could hit the ground.”

“If that’s true then why is he still here?” said Hound Dog. “Why didn’t Yuurei take him back to the League?”

An uncomfortable silence. Eventually Ectoplasm said, “He made the offer, but Koh said no. On one hand that’s a good thing, but on the other…”

“…if he didn’t mean to escape, then there’s only one other reason he could have jumped,” the other finished.

“Are you watching him now?”

“I am. I’ll stay there until you’re ready to go in.”

“Don’t know what I can even tell him anymore. But put a lock on that window. And we should get rid of anything sharp, anything he can use to… I don’t know. I don’t want to think about it right now. I’ll go see him. Is the meeting over already?”

“It’s wrapping up. Things got pretty lively after you ran out.”

“But not in a constructive way,” the other added. “Mostly just swearing. Didn’t know Recovery Girl had such a foul mouth on her.”

“You can go now if you want,” the first one finished. “Are you calm?”

“Yeah. I’m calm.” He pushed past them. “But I swear I’ll have that Minister’s head on a platter before this is done.”

His nose picked up Koh’s fresh trail as soon as he entered the foyer. The scent was subtly off, under the smell of Ectoplasm and the earthy spice of mulch. Maybe despair had an aroma all its own, or maybe his senses were just failing him. One more failure on top of countless others.

Koh’s doorway was now scarred on its side; Ectoplasm had broken it down after he’d refused to answer his call. It no longer shut properly but Hound Dog knocked anyway, and Ectoplasm stepped out and showed him in and went into the hall. Koh was up against his bed, head down, holding his knees, utterly motionless. He didn’t move when Hound Dog’s shadow fell over him, or when he knelt down and picked up him and pressed him to his chest. He might have been holding a warm ragdoll.

“Listen to me,” he said softly. “I know it’s been hard. But you’ve said over and over how you don’t want to hurt other people. Everyone here cares about you. When you do things like this, it hurts them more than anyone. We all need to try and be strong together. Okay?”

“I’m sorry,” Koh said.

He wasn’t crying. He showed no clear emotion at all. When Hound Dog let him go and looked at him closer, he seemed more washed-out than ever. Even his eyes appeared to have lost their luster.

“It’s our fault too,” he said. “We’re trying to keep you safe and we haven’t done a good enough job. But we’re still trying. Please.” Despite his best efforts, his voice broke. “Please don’t hurt yourself anymore.”

Koh looked down again, so that the fringe of his hair blocked his eyes from view. He put his hand in
his hoodie pocket.

“Shin caught me,” he said. “I didn’t think he would.”

“I heard. Why didn’t you go with him?”

“Because it doesn’t matter. I can’t change.”

As Hound Dog tried to find an answer to that, Koh held out his hand. In his palm was a small flash drive.

“He wanted you to have this,” he said.

The drive had that same odd, dusty smell he’d picked up in the foyer. That must have been it. Shin Yuurei’s smell. One way or another, he’d managed to get inside after all. Koh still wouldn’t meet Hound Dog’s gaze.

“This is me, isn’t it?” he asked. “This is all I’m ever going to be.”

*             *             *

Hound Dog gave the flash drive to Ectoplasm, who gave it to Nezu. He took Koh to his office and stayed there the rest of the afternoon, futilely trying to get on with his work while Koh stayed listless on the couch, clutching a stuffed Labrador. The mist outside thinned. Lunchtime came and went. Around one-thirty, shortly before the scheduled assembly, All Might and Ectoplasm received a message from Nezu to meet him in 3-A’s homeroom, and to tell no one of where they were going.

They arrived. The classroom was empty – Snipe taught here, so it had even less reason to be populated than most. Nezu stood on top of the desk, smoking. Judging by the contents of the ashtray beside him, this wasn’t his first cigarette of the day. He looked worse than ever; even his pelt appeared stained, like that of an ill-used plushie.

“Thank you for coming,” he said.

“Is this about Yuurei’s little present?” Ectoplasm asked.

All Might turned. “What’s this now?”

“I asked Ectoplasm to keep it a secret,” said Nezu. “Yuurei left a message with Koh after saving him from his…fall. I’ve reviewed it here, after thoroughly isolating this room’s computer from the network, of course. Can’t be too safe.”

“Shouldn’t Hound Dog be here, then?”

“He’s prioritized watching over Koh. I respect his decision.” He bent over the keyboard and clicked; the projector screen appeared at the front of the room. “I assume you both know why I’ve elected to share this with you, and not the other faculty?”

They exchanged a glance.

“You’ve had some extra-curricular work too?” All Might asked.

“I’m at it right now, as a matter of fact,” Ectoplasm replied. “Another half-dozen of me. Had a migraine all week keeping up with it.”

“You’ll get some relief at the assembly. Business and Management will also attend,” said Nezu. “But
first, you need to see this. Ectoplasm, please draw the blinds and dim the lights."

When the room had gone dark he clicked again and All Might’s throat closed up at what the screen showed. Printed across the front of the room in flickering color was Tomura Shigaraki, seated on a plain folding chair against a concrete wall. The image was shaky and poor, probably a handheld camera, and Shigaraki’s own restless twitchiness gave the video a judder that made both of them feel faintly nauseous. The hand over his face glistened wetly. He stared them down for a long time before he began to speak.

“Hello there, U.A.,” he said. “How’s your week been going? Pretty lousy, I bet. If it’s any consolation, mine hasn’t been much better. If you’re watching this video, then Shin Yuurei’s finally made contact with little Koh, and the brat has, against all reason, decided not to let him take him out of your shiny shithole of a school. And since I can’t force either of them to do anything, that leaves all of us in a tight spot. Feeling the heat where you are? Rumors online can be such nasty things.”

“He certainly sounds more confident,” All Might murmured. On the screen, Shigaraki theatrically crossed his legs and sighed.

“Here’s the thing. Yuurei’s a grouchy jackass, but he gets along with everyone here and he does his job well. I want him to stick around, and that means keeping him happy, which means keeping Koh happy. So, because we can’t expect that dumbass kid to know what’s best for him, I will make you a deal. Are you listening, Principal Nezu? How about you, All Might? Much as I’d love to have a proper conversation with all of you, I’m bad enough with tech as it is. Just getting this stupid camcorder working was a pain in my ass. I’ll just have to imagine the looks on your faces right now, I guess.”

“Enjoying this a little too much, isn’t he?” Ectoplasm said. All Might didn’t respond. He tasted blood, rusty in the back of his throat.

“Here’s the deal,” Shigaraki continued. “Give Koh to the League of Villains, and we’ll remove his Quirk ourselves. One dose of the completed serum, it’s gone, never have to worry about it again. I’ll get someone on my end to send him way the hell away from anywhere the Ministry of Individuality will even think to look, to people who will take proper care of him, and then maybe he’ll be something close to normal in five or ten years. In exchange, Yuurei’s promised to stay with the League full-time. I can tell just the thought of it is tearing him up inside, he’s real attached to this kid. But he keeps his promises. And after the last few months of watching him work, I’d be absolutely delighted to have Incognito permanently on my side.

“Now I know what you’re thinking. How can you take me at my word? You can’t, of course. But what you should really be thinking is, can I really be any worse than what the M.o.I. will do if they get him back? I was there myself, after all. In the Yard. Whatever you’ve been told about that place, trust me when I say that the truth is way more unpleasant. You wouldn’t believe the stench in some of those rooms. And I don’t want that dipshit talking head Nakayama to get what he wants any more than you do. So, there’s your choice.”

Nezu said, “You may want to brace yourselves for this next part.”

Even with advance warning, they still jumped when it happened. Shigaraki leapt out of his seat sudden enough to seat it clattering across the ground and the camera did a sickening vertiginous whirl around the room as he snatched it from its unseen holder and held it up to his face, close enough to see the scummy shine of spittle on his teeth, the inflamed canyons of his chapped flesh. Judging by the shouts in the background, the cameraman hadn’t seen this coming either, and when Shigaraki spoke again all trace of suaveness had gone from his voice, replaced by the jagged quavering rasp they already knew:
“Are you watching? Can you hear me? Do you finally see the bigger picture? Why you’ll never do anything but lose and lose and lose? There’s no mystery about what I am. When I came for your students or torched the Yard or sicced that brat on your disgusting city, everyone went, of course he did, he’s a villain, that’s what villains do. But you. You stupid, simpering hypocrites. No one knows what the hell you’re about anymore. And you can’t figure it out yourselves, can you?” The camera pitched and yawed as he raised it up, looking down on him from above. “Take a look at this world you’re trying to protect. See what happens to it when Koh Kyoumoto’s signal lets loose. That Quirk doesn’t bring out anything that wasn’t already there. It just shows all those peaceful, law-abiding citizens for what they really are – witless slavering monsters that want nothing more than to tear down everything around them. You’re trying to help people who would rip you limb from limb if they got the chance. And it looks like they might just get it.

“I wanted to see it again so badly. For that veneer to be stripped away. But I’m fine with waiting. I’ll win eventually.” He giggled and swung the camera back down, held it out; they heard his spidery fingers scraping on its shell. “Funny, isn’t it? No matter what you do, I still win. What it comes down to is this – either you save the kid, or you let him sink with you. If you want to help him so bad, leave him outside that tower at midnight and Yuurei will do the rest. His fate is in your hands, heroes. Say hello to the M.o.I. for me. Bye!”

And with that, the video cut out. The three of them were left in darkness. Nezu’s cigarette end glowed.

“Ectoplasm,” he said. “The lights, please.”

He got up and turned on the lights. He sat back down. His skull face betrayed nothing but after he took his seat again he neither moved nor spoke, and All Might’s clenched fists shook against the desktop. Nezu puffed away the last of his cigarette and dropped the stub into the ashtray.

“So there you have it,” he said. “Questions? Comments?”

“You’re not thinking of taking him up on his offer, are you?” Ectoplasm asked.

“No. But the fact that he stated it so confidently, I think, shows how strong he believes his position to be. And his belief is not unfounded. While we deal with everything here, the League continues to work, unnoticed by all. That just makes our work all the more important.”

“He’s wrong,” All Might said fiercely. “About everything. I saw it for myself yesterday. Those people are just frightened.”

“On the other hand, we have this vile business with Nakayama,” said Ectoplasm. “Principal, what are you planning to do about him?”

“My opinion of the man was already low before today. There will be an appropriate response.” He left the details unsaid, which was probably for the best. Ever since the conference call, Nezu’s calm tone of voice had concealed something old and hungry thrashing underneath.

“That’s all fine and well, but in the meantime there’s this situation with Koh,” Ectoplasm said. “We need to either suicide-proof his room or keep him under constant supervision. Preferably both. Until we can find a way to actually improve his mental state we have to expect a relapse, and right now we’ve got nothing. Even Hound Dog’s becoming despondent. I don’t expect things to get any better when he’s finally relocated to the anti-Quirk room down below.”

“I’m aware. It’s on the schedule. First we have the assembly.”
“What are you planning to tell them?”

“Everything,” said Nezu.

“That might not be—”

“Everything.” He stomped the desk, once, and Ectoplasm shut up. “No more secrets. We continued this masquerade because we were afraid the students would lose faith in our society if they learned the truth. After all I’ve seen and heard, that has ceased to be a factor in my mind. Are either of you familiar with the story of Omelas?” They shook their heads. “Suffice it to say that I reject a world that only continues to spin upon an axis of cruelty. I will not permit it. Not in my school.”

“How do you think they’ll take the news?” All Might asked. He remembered their faces – Uraraka’s horror, Bakugo’s grim acceptance, Midoriya staring down into his stew as if in divination.

“I don’t know,” said Nezu. “But this has been too long in coming. However they judge us, we’ll just have to bear it.”

They were excused. Ectoplasm returned to his office and All Might went to the empty teacher’s lounge and took his usual seat where he’d spent the afternoons confessing his secrets to Midoriya. He stared at the wall as Shigaraki’s cracked and gleeful face loomed large in his mind, his dripping mouth so alike All for One’s as he’d monologued about the immutable wickedness of all things. The flash drive on which Shigaraki’s message was stored was locked in Nezu’s desk, buried beneath yet more paperwork. Nezu never watched it again. But in the coming days, as he worked late into the night and his caffeine-basted brain fizzled and sparked, he thought he heard that crazed little giggle in the silence of his office, Shigaraki still broadcasting a hateful signal of his own.

* * *

The students gathered.

It was much too cold to assemble outside this time – they were directed to one of the auditoriums outside the main towers, trooping through the damp grounds without smiles or conversation. Nezu’s announcement had been clipped and weary, totally devoid of his usually mellifluous delivery. When they took their positions on the auditorium’s planks and Nezu stepped up to the podium, the ones close enough to see him noticed the scragginess of his fur and the misalignment of his tie. It was even more worrisome than the mob outside their gates. U.A.’s principal could be a silly little thing, but all the students knew him to be the central pillar of the school. If he was showing cracks, it meant the whole edifice was in danger.

He regarded the ranks of U.A.’s student body. The teachers were seated, flanking the podium – all except Hound Dog, still supervising Koh. Aizawa kept his eyes on Class 1-A as Nezu adjusted the microphone, and spoke.

“Thank you all for coming,” he said. “The week is still young, but I know that it has already been hard on all of us. I myself have fallen back into some bad habits lately, so if you hear me cough every now and then I hope you will forgive the interruption.”

“Even now he still can’t get to the damn point,” Present Mic said under his breath.

“I’ve called you here today in light of recent events concerning a damaging rumor spread U.A.,” Nezu continued. “As many of you have probably surmised, it also involves our newest arrival, Koh Kyoumoto, who was liberated from the League of Villains’ clutches in the Mosei Ward earlier this month. Prior to that operation, you were briefed on the origins of both Koh and the League’s other
two recent accomplices, Shin Yuurei and Mirai Horooka. And now I stand before you, as your principal, to confess something. The briefings you received were false. Those three children were not merely affiliated with the League. The truth is far more damning, both towards the perpetrators, and to myself for helping conceal it. But as we now stand threatened, I feel you are all entitled to that truth.” Below him was a sea of rapt faces. He swallowed hard. “We may begin with the incident at the Jon-X department store, where Class 1-A was attacked.”

Nezu spoke. The rotted tapestry of the M.o.I.’s history and the Yard’s rise and fall rolled out through the auditorium. He talked about Nakayama’s visit, the details of his experimentation and the tortures inflicted on the escapees, the League’s intervention and the campaign they had devised against Musutafu. He made it clear that both the tranquilizer manufactured by Support and the anti-Quirk cell waiting for Koh were adaptations of the Yard’s own designs. He mentioned how he’d severed U.A. from the Hero Association’s aid after Snipe’s own failed attack, leaving them stranded in the face of Metalhead’s advance. At last he brought up the morning’s meeting with Nakayama, the high probability that he had spread the rumor after Nezu’s continued attempts to stave him off, the fact that government agents would likely be at their gates before the week was out. The students listened. They didn’t feel the stiffness in their knees as the minutes rolled by. Many showed outrage, or horror, but Aizawa kept watching 1-A and saw nothing but stern resignation – except for a few faces in particular, which looked almost guilty.

“Finally, there has been a new incident involving Koh, which we believe was an attempt at self-harm due to the stress of this situation,” said Nezu. Mutters rippled through the auditorium. “This, too, is because of my negligence. I had intended U.A. to be a place of refuge from the dangers outside, but in light of recent events I no longer believe that is the case. So, effective today, I am lifting the quarantine. Any students who wish to return home may do so, without penalty. Final exams, assuming the school itself is not shut down, will be postponed until a later date, and I will of course honor any transfer requests you wish to make. As this school’s administrator, I would not want any of you to face the troubles I have invited to our doorstep. I wish only the best for all of you. If a brighter future can be found outside these walls, then so be it.” He raised his head. “Are there any questions?”

The auditorium was thick with the kind of volatile silence that could swing at any moment towards either mass depression or mass rioting; the students all eyed each other, nobody wanting to be the first to light that spark. But when a voice did ring out, it was a crackly electronic wheeze so loud that many of them almost fell over out of sheer shock:

“Screw that noise.”

Nezu blinked. The teachers blanched. Aizawa fired a thermobaric glare at the culprit – Kyouka Jirou, stepping out of rank and holding a red-and-white megaphone up to her mouth. No telling where she’d gotten the megaphone, but Yaoyorozu was nearby and innocently watching the ceiling.

“Yeah, hi everyone, this is Jirou from 1-A,” she boomed. “Now, I’m not gonna speak for everyone here, but my class sort of figured a lot of this out last night. And after all we’ve just heard, there is no chance in hell I’m going to let that son of a bitch have his way with our school!”

The agreement was quiet and hesitant but there were more than a few nodding heads in the crowd. Yaoyorozu stepped up and daintily took the megaphone from 1-A’s hands.

“This is Momo Yaoyorozu, also from 1-A. As its representative, I agree whole-heartedly with everything Jirou just said. We have already toiled to rescue young Kyoumoto from the clutches of evil. Whether it’s the League or the government itself, I will not simply abandon him to that fate again.”
“That Nakayama always did piss me off,” someone said.

“He’s been trash-talking U.A. for weeks!”

“We’re not gonna ditch you, Principal!”

“Hey, All Might! We’re with you, All Might!”

Nezu looked totally lost. He gripped the podium like a ship’s captain struggling to command the wheel. Another voice, almost as loud as 1-A’s even without the aid of a bullhorn, carried over the rest, buoyed on its own hot air:

“How utterly crass! I suppose we can’t expect anything better from 1-A.” Neito Monoma swaggered out, smirking so hard his mouth threatened to turn sideways. “But, much as it pains me to admit it, their sentiment is admirable. We’ve already placed ourselves in harm’s way to uphold U.A.’s ideals. Who among us could possibly back down now, and still call themselves a hero?”

Even the non-hero classes were getting in on it now; the auditorium began to shake with their rally. And now here was someone literally rising to the rafters, Hadou Nejire hovering above the crowd, waving excitedly with one hand while pointing at a mortified Amajiki with the other.

“Hey! Hey, everyone, look! Did you know that Amajiki twiddles his thumbs a lot whenever he gets fired up about something? He’s doing that now, so that must mean he’s right there with all of you. And he’s technically our number one hero student ‘til Mirio gets back, so that really means something!”

“Someone please kill me,” Amajiki said, as his classmates slapped him on the back.

Nezu kept trying to stutter something into the microphone, but every time he managed to form a coherent syllable or two, it was drowned out by more cheering from the students. He looked more frazzled than ever, but his smile was creeping back onto his snout, shaky and hesitant but definitely there.

“Everyone…everyone, if you could please, if you’d settle down for a…this is certainly…I hadn’t expected such an outpouring of…” He sniffled. “Oh dear. I need a minute…”

“Principal,” said a leaden voice behind him. “I’d like to take the podium.”

The dark figure behind Nezu all but chased him away and adjusted the mic. The harsh screech of feedback scythed through the auditorium, silencing the students. They looked up to see the insomniac specter of Aizawa, glowering down at them like an angel of wrath.

“You all certainly seem to be fired up,” he said, in icewater tones. “But talk is cheap. You say that you’ll stand in U.A.’s defense. Well, any day now, Akane Kitae and her private army may very well be standing at our gates. That’s on top of the Ministry of Individuality and whatever government support they can muster. All of them will be after Kyoumoto, and possibly the future of this school as well. Envision that, for a moment. Do you really think you can face them? Would you stake your lives and your futures against this very country, just for the sake of your ideals?”

The roar that erupted from the assembled students was enough to rattle the roofbeams and made several teachers clap their hands over their ears; it all but blew Aizawa’s hair back, but his dour expression did not so much as flinch.

“You all certainly seem to be fired up,” he said, in icewater tones. “But talk is cheap. You say that you’ll stand in U.A.’s defense. Well, any day now, Akane Kitae and her private army may very well be standing at our gates. That’s on top of the Ministry of Individuality and whatever government support they can muster. All of them will be after Kyoumoto, and possibly the future of this school as well. Envision that, for a moment. Do you really think you can face them? Would you stake your lives and your futures against this very country, just for the sake of your ideals?”

The roar that erupted from the assembled students was enough to rattle the roofbeams and made several teachers clap their hands over their ears; it all but blew Aizawa’s hair back, but his dour expression did not so much as flinch.

“The roar that erupted from the assembled students was enough to rattle the roofbeams and made several teachers clap their hands over their ears; it all but blew Aizawa’s hair back, but his dour expression did not so much as flinch.

“Then you’ve made your position clear,” he said, and looked down at Nezu. “Is there anything else, Principal? No? Then you’re all dismissed. Expect further details as they become available.”
He shuffled away from the podium as the students’ ranks broke up. The gossip was flying freely now; from where the teachers sat, the kids looked more animate than they had since the Mosei-Santo raid. Vlad King smirked at Aizawa as he passed.

“That backfired a little, huh, Eraser?”

“Did it now,” he deadpanned.

The smirk faltered. “So, what, was that supposed to be reverse psychology or something?”

“No. I just stated the situation plainly. If the students rally against an outside enemy, then they’re less likely to turn on each other.” He panned the mingling crowd below; as he watched, the second-years who had harassed Bakugo yesterday meekly approached him, hanging their heads. Bakugo didn’t look impressed. “It doesn’t change the fact that they’re up against impossible odds. But that will sink in soon enough.”

“Well…good job, either way.”

“Yes. I’ve inspired a group of children to declare war against the government. What a good job I’ve done. Now I need to go speak with Shinsou before everyone leaves.” He stepped in front of All Might. “And as for you.”

All Might, too, hadn’t been able to hide his grin at everyone’s raised spirits, but now it dampened in Aizawa’s shadow. The man wouldn’t even turn to face him.

“What is it?” he asked.


A fatal moment’s hesitation before he said, “What about them?”

“Fine. Don’t tell me.” He stalked off again. “I’m very close to the limit of my patience for this place.”

Meanwhile, 1-A had formed a private huddle of their own. Jirou was getting equal parts admiration and admonishment for her stunt; poor Iida was so apoplectic his glasses were fogging up.

“Absolutely unacceptable! And for you to enable her like that, Yaoyorozu…it’s like I barely know you anymore!”

“Desperate times call for desperate measures,” she said breezily.

“It worked, didn’t it?” Jirou said. “And after hearing all that, there’s no way I was going to just let everyone shuffle away. “

“If our parents knew what we just did I’m pretty sure they’d kill us themselves,” Asui said. Todoroki raised his eyebrows and then turned away, getting out his phone.

“You kidding?” Jirou scoffed. “There’s nothing more punk rock than standing up to shiteheads like Nakayama. My dad would be doing cartwheels.” She worryingly tapped her earjacks together. “Now we just have to try not to…you know, die. But we’ve put our necks on the line plenty of times already. At least now we get to decide when and where we take a stand.”

“I’ve had some ideas for defending the campus,” Yaoyorozu said. “Perhaps a few private meetings would not go amiss.”

As the chatter went on, the secret-keepers had their own little nucleus away from the larger group.
Bakugo had waved off the second-years and returned to join them, scowling, hands jammed in his pockets.

“Secret’s out,” he said. “Fuckin’ finally.”

Tokoyami sighed. “Our position has hardly improved. Still, I feel like a weight’s been lifted.”

“Not me,” said Uraraka. “Is everyone just kind of glazing over what Nezu said about Koh?”

“Goddamn idiots, all of them,” Bakugo spat. “This ain’t something you can just cheerlead away.”

“Kacchan’s right,” said Midoriya. “U.A. is still subservient to the larger government. They could dissolve the entire school with a couple of signatures. It’d be a public-relations disaster, but…”

“The Ministry already dwells in darkness,” said Tokoyami.

“Yeah. They’d just disappear from the news again and spread the blame in as many directions as they could.”

“And while everyone’s jerking each other off in here, the kid’s busy cracking up,” said Bakugo.

“Probably not something we can fix with a concert this time,” Uraraka agreed.

“I think it’ll be a matter of getting the public on our side long enough to fend off the Ministry’s smear tactics,” Midoriya said. “Then we’d be able to at least take Koh somewhere safer. Maybe even reveal his identity to the world at large without worrying about the government swooping in and taking him away again. From that perspective, it’d almost be a blessing if Metalhead got here before Nakayama did. A big victory against those villains would really help…Kacchan, would you fight? If you were allowed to? You’d make a real difference.”

“Blow it out your ass, Deku.” He turned away and stomped off.

“…was that a yes?” Uraraka asked, as he headed for the exit.

“Maybe,” said Midoriya. “Give it time.”

Night fell. The anxious defiance that had been sparked during the assembly followed all the students into the cafeteria and went on long after it got dark. The teachers informed everyone that classes would continue on schedule, unless interrupted by unforeseen events. Everyone knew what they meant by the euphemism.

Yaoyorozu had officially been released from her duties in the Support department that evening (Hatsume, her own fires stoked by everyone’s call to war, had barely even noticed her leaving; she’d been engulfed in a nebula of sparks with her face behind a welding helmet and her hands working so fast that they’d seemed to multiply clutching their array of bizarre tools, a mad-scientist bodhisattva). She celebrated by enjoying a quiet cup of tea in the common area, but as the tea dwindled, nearly all her classmates seemed to get pulled into hushed conversations with her that involved a lot of thoughtful glances and nodding heads. Even Mineta got in on it, with Asui’s careful supervision, and while he emerged from the whole affair several shades paler he hadn’t even tried to grope anybody.

Midoriya stayed in his room, reviewing his notebooks. Ever since his meeting with Shin he’d been wary of staying at the library after dark. The plasticine menagerie of All Mights on his shelves grinned blankly as he flipped through the pages. Even from where he sat, it was clear that there were
far too many variables in the crisis bearing down on them. The Ministry, Metalhead, the League of Villains, the impending exams, Koh’s deteriorating mind, the school’s wavering morale, even Bakugo’s expulsion, all of them whirling, whirling, and as you kept your eye on one the others drew ever closer. U.A. wouldn’t be able to weather it all, and with all the school represented, if it collapsed so soon after All Might’s fall then it just might take the entire Hero Society with it.

Someone knocked. He was so engrossed in his work that he didn’t even flinch this time.

“Door’s open,” he said.

The knob turned and Kaminari poked his head in. “Yo, dude. Sorry to bug you so late, but the world’s scariest guidance counselor is downstairs asking for you.”

He looked up from his notebook. “Hound Dog’s here?”

“That’s what I said. Want me to tell him you’re asleep?”

“No, it’s fine! Just give me a second.”

“Gotcha,” he said, and closed the door. Midoriya shoved the notebooks back under his desk, checked the mirror, futilely attempted to fix his hair (a few stray cowlicks ate his fingers and he tugged them loose after a bit of pain and effort) and went down to the common room. Hound Dog was in the back near the kitchen nook, hands knotted in his lap; he looked almost bashful, but the others still down here gave him a wide berth. Ashido threw a quizzical look Midoriya’s way. He shrugged and approached Hound Dog’s table.

“Midoriya,” he said. No trace of growl or slobber. “Hope I’m not interrupting anything.”

“It’s fine, I was just about to turn in. Um, if this is about what happened yesterday, I don’t blame you for-”

“It’s not that,” he said, and paused. “Well, sort of. Koh’s asking for you. Yes, you,” he clarified, as a bewildered Midoriya pointed at himself. “Says he wanted to talk to you before he went to bed.”

“What about?”

“No idea. But this is the first time he’s ever asked me for anything.” Those clawed, hoary hands squeezed together. “If you could give him just fifteen minutes…”

“I’ll give him all the time he wants,” Midoriya said.

“Thanks. Really.”

“Just let me get my coat.”

“Bundle up. Wind’s started to blow.”

It had, and the gale chewed right through Midoriya’s sweatpants as he and Hound Dog stepped outside. The cold had chased off the crowd at the gates; there weren’t any stragglers left, but he expected they’d be back when the sun rose. In the distance, Horooka’s thunder sounded off. Closer than ever.

“Kashiki’s being evacuated, little by little,” Hound Dog said. “It’ll make it all the easier for them to get here.”

“You heard what happened at the assembly?”
Hound Dog made a disapproving sound deep in his throat. “I don’t like you kids putting yourselves in danger. Willingly or otherwise.”

“Yeah, you kind of made that clear when I fought Gentle.” He still remembered the vertigo from when Hound Dog had sent him flying afterward.

“But the situation’s changed,” he said. “Whatever happens, I’ll be there with you. I can guard just as well as I can hunt.”

The towers gleamed blackly, drawing closer. He could make out Koh’s lit bedroom from here.

“So what happened?” he said. “Principal Nezu said there was some kind of incident…”

“He jumped out the window.”

“Oh. Oh no.”

“It’s clear why he did it, too. If it hadn’t been for Yuurei catching him he’d have been hurt or worse,” Hound Dog said. “Right now I’ve got Ectoplasm standing in there like the damn Grim Reaper, which can’t be doing either of them any favors. I know it’s asking a lot, but I’d be grateful for anything you can do to cheer him up. I’m not so sure I can, anymore.”

“That’s not fair. You’re a great counselor.”

“Nice try,” he said good-naturedly. “I don’t need my nose to pick up on flattery.”

“Still true, though. You know, in the national rankings for adolescent counselors and therapists you’re actually mentioned in several different-”

“Allright, alright, I don’t need to hear the stats. But this is outside my area of expertise anyway. We can’t get him the help he really needs until U.A.’s not choked off by all these bastards outside. Until then, we do what we can with what we have.” He stopped at the tower entrance. “Let’s get you out of the cold.”

Through the lobby, up the elevator, down the hall. Hound Dog knocked and Ectoplasm poked his head out, glanced between the two of them, and then nodded and stepped outside. Hound Dog led him in to the bedroom, white walls, white sheets, soft edges. Koh was on the edge of his bed in his pajamas, the clothes’ soft blue standing out like a shout in all this starkness.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hi,” Midoriya answered.

“I’ll leave you two alone,” Hound Dog said. “Let me know when you’re done.”

The door softly latched shut behind Midoriya. He and Koh were left to stare each other down. The wind blasted frost into the edges of the windowglass, thorny fingers grasping out.

“Can I sit down?” Midoriya asked.

“Go ahead.”

He went over and sat on the mattress beside Koh, whose hands had also turned restless, rubbing and scratching at one another’s skin. His hair hung heavy over his eyes.

“Sorry about how things turned out yesterday,” Midoriya said. “It was just bad timing.”
“What were we talking about, again?”

“You don’t remember? I guess you were as distracted as we were. Eri said you were worried about being Quirkless.”

“I don’t think so,” he said. “It’d be better than this. Anything would.”

Midoriya frowned and looked behind him, at the window. The frost was spreading fast.

“They told you what happened this morning,” said Koh. It wasn’t a question.

“They did. Koh, listen, I know you’re scared, but—”

“Hound Dog said everything already. And I can’t do it again anyway. They put something on the window so it won’t open anymore.” He bent low. “Besides, it didn’t work. Nothing does.”

“Then why’d you want to see me? If there’s anything I can do…”

Koh angled his head towards him and his hair fell a little, enough to expose that dull gold shine. Midoriya had to try not to shiver at that face. It seemed, for a moment, to belong to someone much older, more calculating.

“I think Eri brought me to you because you helped her,” he said. “You try to help everyone, don’t you? Even when you think it’s a bad idea.”

“Well, yeah.” He tried to grin. “That’s what a hero does, after all.”

“But what would you do if there was someone who couldn’t be helped? If it was better to just…let them go away. Not even easier. Just better for everyone. When do you know when to give up?”

Midoriya was starting to wish Hound Dog had stayed. There were dark shapes with sharp teeth snapping at the edges of this conversation, and he was dreadfully afraid of taking a wrong step. But he did his best.

“I’m not so sure that it’s a choice we can make,” he said. “Heroes are supposed to be there. Even when we mess up, or get there too late, we still need to pick ourselves up and do our best the next time, again and again.”

“Are you doing your best with me?” He asked it without reproach.

“I know we haven’t helped you as much as we should. Especially before, with the Yard. But that’s my point. Everyone knows about it now. Even though it was horrible, and we feel terrible for not saving you sooner, we’re going to do everything we can to help you. For as long as it takes.” He laughed a little. “You know, everyone was cheering for you earlier today. They were ready to take on the whole country to keep you safe. So don’t be scared. No matter what happens, as long as you’re here, you’ll never be alone.”

Koh chewed his lip. He appeared to be thinking it over. Then he lunged forward and threw his arms around Midoriya, who seized up from the sudden movement but relaxed as Koh’s thin heat nuzzled into his chest. The boy was squeezing as hard as he could through their clothes his arms still felt terribly frail. He hugged Koh back, mussing his hair a little.

“Feeling a little better?” he asked.

Koh detached from him, rubbing his face. “Think so. Just tired.”
“I can come back tomorrow, if you like.”

“I would. Everyone here talks about you all the time.” He looked up at Midoriya. “I want to know more about you.”

“I’ll go tell Hound Dog. Goodnight, Koh.”

“Goodnight.”

He left the room, turning the lights off as he went. Hound Dog was in the hall, pacing up and down like an expectant parent. He stopped and dashed up to Midoriya as soon as they made eye contact.

“How’d it go?”

“It went well,” Midoriya said. “He wants to keep talking. I can visit again when my classes are over, just let me know where to show up.”

“He should be in my office. So he’s doing better?”

“It’s hard to tell, but I think I got through to him a little. The assembly helped. As long as he knows that everyone here is on his side, I think he’ll be able to get through this.”

“Good. That’s good.” He breathed deep, hand to his chest. “Thanks, Midoriya. I owe you for this. Ectoplasm’ll stay out here just in case, but…at least this is one thing that’s starting to go right.”

Midoriya beamed. “Happy to help.”

“Get back to bed. Classes start again on schedule tomorrow.”

“Got it. Goodnight, sir.”

Midoriya bundled his coat around him as he stepped out and into the gale. The noise from Musutafu had quieted, at least for now. He turned back to the darkened window and waved, and then went in the direction of Heights Alliance, the weight that had been hanging around his chest finally a little lighter.

Koh watched him leave.

Even in the dead of night the colorlessness of this room suffused everything with a soft glow that gave the bed and walls a cloudlike unsolidity and made Koh himself more phantasmal than ever; standing there against the window, his fingers slowly opening and closing, he looked as if he may break apart into wisps and disappear into the ventilation. He pulled up his sleeve and ran his finger along braille-bumps of his scarring. He experimentally tugged a lock of his hair. Then he pulled out the blankets and settled into the mattress, turning his face into the pillow. He brought his shirt up to his nose, breathed deep, and smiled.

“He smells so nice,” Koh said, and closed his eyes. “Nighty-night, Izuku.”

*             *             *

“Answer me just one thing, and then we won’t talk about it anymore.”

“Okay.”

“Did you know I would catch you?”
"You said you’d always be there."

"…you’re right. I will."

* * *

Earlier that day, while Nezu was making his confession to the students of U.A., things were getting tense in the League of Villains’ hideout.

"Compress. Check your phone again."

"There have been no new messages in the last forty-five seconds, Shigaraki."

"Then keep an eye on it!"

"I am, Shigaraki."

Dabi leaned back in his recliner. “I liked it better when he stayed in his room.”

Everyone was present in the common area except Shin. Shigaraki had been able to play it cool earlier in the morning, but at lunchtime he’d emerged from the cavern of his bedroom and started anxiously hanging around here, and about an hour ago the pacing had started, a rodent-feet tempo that was getting everyone else’s nerves on edge. Spinner had muted the TV; Toga and Twice hung out at one of the tables, looking on disapprovingly. Dabi had given up all hope of getting any reading done today.

“Of all the goddamn times he chooses to leave me hanging it has to be now,” he spat, gouging away at his neck; his fingernails were chewed into jagged points and blood was starting to well up from the skin. “Does he really think he can get away from me now? One backstabbing lunatic was bad enough!”

“Show a little more faith in him,” said Compress. “He’s given us no reason to doubt him so far.”

“Then where the hell is he!? What, did he get lost? Is he sightseeing?”

“Maybe his phone died,” Spinner said meekly. “It’d explain why he can’t message us. And no GPS means he probably got turned around a few times.”

“Spinny’s right,” Toga said, hand in her chin. “Plus I bet he hasn’t slept in a while.”

Twice nodded. “Seriously, you’re stressing us out. I’m relaxed.”

“Far as I’m concerned, you should all be stressing out right along with me. If this doesn’t go right then everything we’ve worked for all this time will go totally sideways. Giran hasn’t even gotten back yet. This is not the kind of plan that goes to shit at the last second!”

“You’re not inspiring much confidence, acting like this,” Dabi said. “Get yourself under control.”

Shigaraki’s shoe scraped the concrete. His hands fell away as he turned to Dabi, and the way he advanced on him made everyone’s muscles knot up, Dabi’s included. He got out of the recliner and stepped back, making sure to keep the furniture between the two of them.

“Self-control,” Shigaraki said. “You want to lecture me about self-control? You really want to have this conversation now?”

“Drop the threats and spit it out,” Dabi said.
“You’re the reason we’re in this mess, you idiot! If you hadn’t gone around lighting people on fire for shits and giggles, that bitch from Musutafu wouldn’t be fucking with our plans right now!”

“It’s not our plan,” Dabi said venomously. “And it wasn’t my idea to take a chance on that drooling lunatic with the fetish for wrecking everything she sees!”

“I’ve had a pretty good track record with drooling lunatics,” Shigaraki shot back, as Toga looked offended. “With a few exceptions.”

Dabi cracked his knuckles. “Man, you really are stressed. I’d be happy to relieve some of that for you.”

“Kurogiri’s not here to save your ass this time,” Shigaraki said.

“Um, boys? Hello?” Toga raised her hand. “Just saying, it’d look real bad if Shinny got here only to find a bunch of dead people.”


“At least she knows how to shut up and do her-”

Someone knocked.

Every head snapped to the hideout entrance, all grudges forgotten. Shigaraki’s jaw hung open behind the hand clamped to his face; all he could do was flail his arms stupidly in the direction of the door until Compress took the initiative and answered it. When it opened and they saw who was there, Shigaraki went so limp he almost collapsed, head lolling, knees buckled. He wiped blood off his neck and grinned wide.

“We made it,” he said.

Spinner was right – Shin hadn’t slept in almost thirty-six hours. He too was knock-kneed, deathly pale, his scars mingling with the graveditches of bruiseflesh under his eyes, hair and skin slick with grease and city soot. But he was still standing. In his arms, wide awake and staring, was Koh.
The League stood still as Shin lurched inside and put Koh down; there was almost something religious to their posture, a cathedral silence. Koh stayed close to Shin’s knee as those burning gold eyes panned the room and took each of the villains in, one by one. He didn’t appear impressed with any of them. Shin was bent and slack-faced, his breath a thin gurgle in his throat. His unscarred skin had a deathly, hypothermic pallor. In the time since he’d last come to this place looked as though he’d aged fifty years.

Then, Toga’s delighted squeal rent the air.

“Look at the little boy!” she cried, and rushed forward, hands held out. She was stopped dead by Shigaraki’s outflung arm.

“I think he’s had enough of your company for one day,” he said, and Toga crossed her arms and pouted. “So what happened? Is everything set up?”

“Think so,” said Shin. His voice was like a tree branch scraping a windowpane.

“You look like shit,” Dabi remarked. He’d returned to his recliner, leaning up against the armrest. He appeared to have forgotten that he’d been ready to commit murder less than five minutes ago.

“He looks great,” said Twice. “Like microwaved death.”

“So much for U.A.’s security, huh?” Spinner grinned. “So how’d you get him out? Did you nab someone’s keycard, or maybe-”

“Can we talk later?” Shin croaked. “I’m not feeling too good.”

“Yes, perfectly understandable,” said Compress. “I’m afraid we don’t have any other spare rooms, but I didn’t think you’d mind sharing with Koh at any rate.”

“Okay. Koh, you can take the bed.” He took Koh’s hand. “This way.”

“Come see me when you wake up,” Shigaraki said. He was trying to sound gruff, but the hand over his face couldn’t hide his grin. “We’ll knock out the finishing touches on everything then. Endgame’s in sight.”

Koh tugged himself out of Shin’s grip.

“No,” he said.

All eyes turned to him, not in the least Shin’s, who looked at Koh as if he’d just grown another head. Shigaraki’s grin disappeared. His bloodshot glare met Koh’s golden one.

“Excuse me?” he said.

“You have the finished medicine, right?” Koh asked. “That’s what Shin said. That’s why I’m here. Fix me.”

“Wow, someone’s gotten awful pushy. Guess U.A. spoiled you too much.” Shigaraki was trying to sound jovial but his hands snapped and shuddered. “The deal hasn’t changed. Yuurei’s just got to do a few more things for us, and then-“
“No,” he said, louder, and Shigaraki’s words broke up into a guttural snarl. Shin stood there in a dreamlike stupor. Compress looked ready to fling himself between the two of them. Koh’s fists were balled at his sides and his knees were knocking but his voice stayed firm.

“Shin did everything you asked,” he said. “He’s done enough. He’s not going to relax until you fix me. The heroes couldn’t do it. Only you can. I don’t want any more medicine unless it’ll make my Quirk go away for good.”

“Koh.” Shin reached out to him. “You really need to shut up.”

“I’m not afraid of him,” Koh said. His gaze stayed locked on Shigaraki. “At U.A., no one talked about him. They were all talking about me. Whether my Quirk would come back, what would happen if it did. All those people were outside because of me. So I’m not afraid of you. I’m scarier than you.”

A pause. Then Shigaraki scoffed.

“This is cute,” he said, and raised his hand. “But you really should—”

No one saw it happen. Not speed but invisibility, a split-second clench and unclench. One moment Shin was behind Koh and then he was between him and Shigaraki, his brow beaded with sweat. One hand was tucked into his coat. Something rustled in his grip. The hideout’s atmosphere had turned explosive. Everyone was hesitant to breathe. Spinner was huddled behind the couch, claws tearing furrows into the upholstery.

Then, from the side of the room, an unpleasant sound. A halting, broken whistle like an old radiator. Dabi was leaned up against his chair, body convulsing. By the time they realized he was laughing he’d staggered back and lay across the recliner like a lounging housecat, legs kicking, that horrible creaking wheeze filling the air. Shin and Shigaraki glanced at each other; they both seemed equally confused.

“Majorly creeped out right now,” Toga said.

“Is he dying?” Spinner asked hopefully.

“You wish, lizard,” Dabi hiccupped, sitting upright again. He was still stifling giggles. “Oh shit, I needed that. Hey, am I bleeding? My face isn’t supposed to move that way.”

“You look fine. Ugly as ever,” Twice said. Meanwhile, Shin had discreetly removed his hand from his parka, but he still kept Koh behind him.

“Gotta have a drink of water or something.” Dabi wiped his eyes and grinned at Shin. “Hey, Yuurei, I like this kid. Can we keep him?”

Shin didn’t answer. Instead he looked pleadingly at Compress, who nodded.

“I think our guests are both badly in need of sleep,” he said. “I’ll escort them to their room.” He got down at one knee and smiled at Koh. “Hello, young man. I’m Mr. Sako. Shin might have mentioned me?”

“Uh-huh.” He was clutching Shin’s leg now; all his earlier bravado had gone.

“Then you know that you can trust me, at least. Right this way.”

He led them out. Shigaraki and the others watched them go. Then Shigaraki started, and dug out his
“Shit,” he said. “Giran’s been messaging me too. Hey Compress, get back here when you put those two to bed!”

“Work, work, work,” Compress lamented from the hall.

“That’s the first time I’ve seen that kid awake,” Dabi said. “Didn’t know he was such a hardass.”

“He’s not,” Shigaraki snapped. “Not from what Yuurei told me. Guess his little stint with the heroes changed that. But we’ll deal with it. First I’ve got to talk with Giran. No one leave this hideout. And Twice, this should go without saying, but if anything happens to Toga’s clone you let me know.”

“Gotcha,” Twice said. “I bet she’s got it locked down over there anyway. She doesn’t know a damn thing about this kid!”

“Shinny told me all about him,” Toga said smugly. “And he said Koh doesn’t talk much, so that makes it even easier. I’ll have ‘em all fooled, no problem.”

“Just the thought of you pretending to be that kid’s giving me the creeps,” Spinner muttered. She stuck out her tongue. “I’m adorable and you know it.”

Now the two of them were on the bed, Shin on his back and staring up at the ceiling, Koh sprawled out on his chest. When they’d come inside, Shin had taken off his parka and taken off the holster and the gun and Koh had looked at it and said nothing. Shin had forced himself to wash up first (the hideout’s sole bathroom as harshly spartan as a fallout bunker’s, the concrete floor pitted, showerhead rusted, drains periodically emitting a sinister hiss), and when he’d returned to the room, black blotches blooming in his vision, Koh had pointedly been sitting on the floor. He refused to let Shin cede the bed. This was their compromise.

“You can’t be comfortable like this,” Shin said.

“I’m fine.” In fact he was – Shin’s arms were draped over him, and the gentle rhythm of his breath was soothing.

“What were you thinking?” He was so tired his tongue felt foreign in his head, the words were syrupy, but he forced them out. “Shigaraki’s dangerous. You can’t make him mad like that.”

“He won’t hurt me. He needs me. And he can’t hurt you either. You said it yourself. You can just walk away.”

“And leave you behind?”

“I’d be fine.” His nails scraped across Shin’s chest. “And even if I wasn’t, that’d be fine too. At least if something happened to me it’d finally make my Quirk go away.”

Shin had spent a freezing night enduring Toga’s toxically bubbly personality; he’d watched her turn into a smiling parody of Koh and held that repulsive simulacrum’s hand all the way through Takodana and past the gates of U.A. itself. They’d stood like that for hours, exhaustion chewing into the edges of Shin’s mind as they waited for some miraculous opportunity to present itself. It had, and the jolt of terror-laced adrenaline Shin had felt when he’d seen Koh step up to that windowsill had kept him going all the way back to Tokyo. But now he was fading fast. He couldn’t think of a way
to make Koh stop talking like this.

“I know it’d make you sad,” Koh went on. “But why? You barely know me.”

“I know you better than anyone else I’ve ever known.”

“What about these people? Mr. Sako and the others. I don’t like them. But they’re trying to be nice to you, at least.”

“That’s because they need me. It won’t last. It never does.”

“So you’re not happy here.”

“Don’t know. Don’t think so.” Too tired to lie. “Not sure I can be. Not anywhere. But it doesn’t matter. Long as you’re safe.”

“It does matter.”

He pushed Shin’s arms off him and raised his head. His face had changed since they’d last seen each other – less gaunt after a few weeks of proper meals and less fearful too, at once closer to a proper child’s and yet further away from it than ever.

“You need a home too, Shin,” he said. “You need someone to take care of you. I don’t think I can do it. Not all by myself.”

Shin sat up, his back against the cold stone wall. For an alarming moment his eyelids fluttered and his gaze unfocused but he clawed himself away from unconsciousness just a little longer.

“You’re all the home I need,” he said. “It doesn’t matter where I go. If you’re somewhere else, safe, even if it’s away from me…that’s enough. I’ll keep going, just to make that happen. Like I said. I’ll always be there.”

“Are you glad I left U.A.?”

“No. I wanted it to work out. But I knew it wouldn’t. Everything…the world…it’s all so rotten. You can’t hide from it in a place like that. I’ll find something. But I don’t know what else to do.”

He was barely talking sense and he knew it. Koh didn’t look convinced at all. But then Shin smiled a little, put his scarred hand atop Koh’s head.

“Hey,” he said. “Want to know something neat?”

“Okay.”

“That girl, Toga. She’s the one who took your place. Remember, how there was another you?”

“I remember.” Shin had released her hand right after catching him. He’d been dumbfounded, already made invisible in Shin’s clutching arms, but that doppelganger had smiled and put a finger to its lips and curled itself up in the hedges around the building, waiting to be found.

“She can copy how other people look. But she can’t copy their Quirks. So, when she first turned into you, her eyes were normal. She has to use contact lenses to get them looking like yours. Do you remember how they looked, before your Quirk appeared?”

He couldn’t. He’d tried before. Surely he’d looked into mirrors before that day, but it had been such a long time ago and between then and now was the great gray waste of the Yard, covering
everything that came before it with fog. The loss of it suddenly hurt like a toothache and he felt his lip tremble, but Shin was already crying, the rivulets of his tears catching on the broken topography of his face. He was still smiling.

“They looked nice,” he said. “Kind of, I can’t think of the color...blue turning brown? Hazel? It was nice. I’d, I’d like you to see that again. More than anything.” He hugged Koh tight. “I’m sorry I keep messing up. I just want something better. For any of us.”

Through the rough fabric of Shin’s shirt, Koh heard his breathing rattle, then smooth out, grow regular. He’d fallen asleep.

They were far away from the common room. Nothing could be heard of the other villains. From the confines of Shin’s embrace Koh regarded the blank room, the stained bulb, the revolver glinting in that dirty light like a wicked artifact. He reached up and wiped Shin’s cheeks dry, and then rested his head and let that breath lull him until the dark covered up everything.

* * *

The rest of the League was having a miserable afternoon, forced to sit through the minutes in silence. They were all awaiting Giran’s return and too anxious to go to their rooms and miss it, but they couldn’t keep themselves busy here either, not with Shigaraki hovering around them like a neurotic vulture. Twice kept fumbling his coins and Dabi wasn’t reading so much as staring at a page for several minutes at a time. Compress had been all set to go outside and escort the man to their hideout, but then Giran had sent a hasty message telling him to stay put and so he was forced to stew with the rest of them, his masks off and his coat unbuttoned.

“You’re sure he’s on his way?” Shigaraki asked, for the ninth time.

“He was determined to make it here by himself,” said Compress. “Who are we to argue? If I attempted a rendezvous at this point then I’d just cause a scene, even if I did find him.”

“Maybe he’s jet-lagged,” Spinner said timidly. No one dignified it with a response.

“I don’t know the guy too well but he seems pretty on the ball,” Dabi said. “If something went wrong out there he’d have told us, right?”

“Who the hell knows,” Shigaraki growled. “If we finally got the brat back, only to lose this one final piece...”

“You worry too much.”

“Um, really quick?” Toga piped up. “If you two start fighting again, I’m gonna stab you. Just F.Y.I.”

“She’d do it,” Twice said.

They sank into sheepish silence after that. Shigaraki resumed pacing. And not long after, when the sun had splayed out across the horizon like a great discolored eggyolk, the knock arrived. This time Shigaraki got the door himself.

“You’re back,” he said, barely hiding the jubilation in his voice. “What took you so-“

“Outta my way, please and thank you.” Giran shouldered his way into the room, scowling. He wore a deep purple overcoat that reminded some of them unpleasantly of Horooka and he’d swapped out his scarf for a broad-brimmed hat; he scowled around his cigarette and the eyes behind his spectacles were sunken and lined. In one hand he held a metal briefcase and Shigaraki looked at it after he shut
and locked the door.

“Is that it?”

“That is it,” Giran replied. “And I’m gonna say up front: I’m not doing this again. Usually I like a nice business trip overseas as much as anyone but my heart’s been in my damn mouth all week. I had to burn bridges to get this shit for you.”

“So what. You’ve got your money, right?”

“Money ain’t everything, kid. Though that ain’t to say you’re getting a refund if this all goes south.” He took off his hat and flicked it toward the couch. “So everything’s set up here? Yuurei and Kyoumoto are back?”

“Why don’t you ask him yourself,” Dabi drawled, and pointed to the corridor. They all looked and saw Koh standing there, palms against the wall like he was trying to sink into it. He flinched under their gazes.

“What’re you doing?” Shigaraki started to ask, but then got cut off by Giran, who’d set down the briefcase and stomped out the cigarette and advanced on Koh, grinning ear to ear, all his earlier surliness disappeared.

“Hot damn, is that who I think it is? Little Koh, right?” He hunched down in front of Koh. “I’m Giran! The guy who brought Shin your medicine. He mentioned me, right? Is he around?”

“He’s asleep,” Koh said. He looked like he couldn’t decide whether to relax or run; Giran’s sudden good cheer had confused him.

“Ah, rats. I really wanted to catch up with him. He’s grumpy as hell but he’s a good guy. Talked about you plenty, too.”

“He did?”

“Why wouldn’t he?” Giran reached out and ruffled Koh’s hair. “He’s practically your big brother, right? He looks out for you. I like that. Don’t see it too often in my business.”

“Speaking of business,” Shigaraki said, and gestured to the briefcase. “Can we get on with this?”

“Keep your pants on, Shigaraki. Anyway, Koh, you know that Shin asked me to take you two somewhere nice when all this is over, right? Anywhere you wanna go, just name it. I’ll make it happen.”

“I can’t really think of anyplace,” he said quietly. Giran’s smile faltered.

“That so. Guess I shouldn’t have just dropped it on you like that. But think it over, yeah? Talk it out with Shin, too. He might have some ideas.”

“Okay,” he said. “Um. Mr. Sako?”

Compress leaned over. “What is it, my boy?”

“Where’s the bathroom?”

A pregnant pause. Dabi snorted. Shigaraki looked ready to put all five fingers to his own throat.

“Dabi, Compress,” he said. “You’re with me and Giran. The rest of you show the kid where he can
“Take a piss.”

“A most vulgar way to phrase it,” Compress sniffed. “Toga, please don’t be too rough with him.”

Toga peered over the couch, her sharktooth grin gleaming. “I won’t pinch his cheeks unless I really, really want to.”

“It’s about time for dinner, too,” said Spinner. “Is he hungry?”

“I bet he is. Jin, check the fridge! I’m in an omelet kind of mood tonight.”

“You see?” Giran said, gently nudging Koh further into the room. “They’re a weird bunch, but they’re okay. Mostly okay.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Shigaraki grumbled. “Compress, let’s do this in your room. Mine’s cramped enough as it is. Dabi, take the case.”

“Uh, no, Dabi, don’t take the case.” Giran picked the briefcase up. “No one else touches this thing ’til I say so.”

They left Koh to the mercies of Spinner, Toga and Twice, padding through the corridors and into Compress’ room. It was the same windowless stone cell as the others but somehow appeared far more spacious, in no small part because Compress actually knew how to decorate – there was a carpet and a chest of drawers and a plush armchair with a tasteful antimacassar. Smuggling in heavy furniture was no problem for his Quirk.

“Little snobby, don’t you think?” was Dabi’s verdict.

“We all have our own preferences. I shudder to think of your own quarters, Dabi.”

“They’re better than Shigaraki’s man-cave at least.”

“I’m really feeling the love in this room,” Giran said. “All of you get inside and shut up.”

They took their places, Compress on the armchair, Dabi on the bed, Shigaraki with his back to the door. Giran popped the latches on the case, his expression grim once again.

“So how long’ve they been here?” he asked.

“A few hours,” Shigaraki replied. “And they’re already being a pain in my ass.”

“That little pipsqueak pretty much walked inside and told Shigaraki to go fuck himself,” Dabi said. “Thought I was gonna bust a gut.”

“He’s resistant to any further involvement in our plans,” Compress explained. “And he doesn’t want Yuurei to cooperate with us unless we provide the finished serum. I have to say, it’s understandable from his perspective. That young man looked like he was on the brink of death when he came back here. And Koh was already becoming quite distressed at the damage his Quirk has caused.”

“He hasn’t seen anything yet,” said Shigaraki. “Giran. Show me already.”

Giran opened the case. Inside was a spray of business papers, a laptop, a small obsidian paperweight. He took them out one at a time and flipped open the false bottom – the felt concealing an odorproof, flameproof aramid weave that would shrug off any X-ray scan in any civilian checkpoint in the world. Inside the hidden compartment was another small steel box, not unlike the ones that he and Shin had traded back and forth during this long, strange winter. His hands shaking like someone
defusing a bomb, he lifted out the box and opened it. It contained a single vial, slim as a pencil, full of pale red liquid. He held it out to Shigaraki.

“Here it is,” he said. “Fresh from the best Trigger lab in North America. Don’t drop it, don’t shake it, don’t even look at it too hard.”

“Think I’ll let you hold onto it for now,” said Shigaraki. “So they got the job done?”

“They said so, at least, and these people don’t tell fibs. They filled the order and then said they don’t want to do business with me anymore. That’s my main Trigger connection, gone with the wind.” He snapped the box shut. “Had to deal with that piece of happy news all the way through customs. Even with what you’re paying me, I’ll be lucky to break even, the business I just lost.”

“Sorry.”

“I’ll give them a little while to change their minds. But I get where they’re coming from. Trigger’s supposed to be a street drug. This shit is so potent it could win wars. It brings attention from the wrong people.”

“And the secret ingredient?” Compress asked.

“Yeah, it’s there. Just a little bit of the antiserum mixed in. You inject the kid with this, it’ll nullify whatever’s left of the Quirk removal drug and send his power roaring back.” He cast a fretful glance at the door. “I don’t even know what’s gonna happen to him. Even normal Trigger has some freaky effects on basic Quirks, if it’s pure enough. This sample here makes the top-grade street stuff look like tapwater.”

“Will it kill him?” Shigaraki asked. “Better question – will he survive long enough for it to work?”

“If he was older then probably not, but my contacts said it’d be safer for someone his age. Genetic plasticity, or something. Still, it’s a coinflip. You ever put a grape in the microwave? That’s what’s gonna happen to this kid’s DNA.”

“This is a delicate situation, Shigaraki.” Compress primly folded his hands, his prosthetic whirring. “You saw the way Yuurei jumped to Koh’s defense. Their relationship is no passing whim. Those two truly love one another. You won’t be able to drive a wedge between them.”

“Like I said, I’ll handle it,” said Shigaraki. “That dumbass brat thinks he can still get something for nothing. Yuurei knows better. I’ll talk to him.”

“And then what?” asked Dabi. “After this is all over. You just hit him up with the Quirk eraser and send them on their way?”

“He doesn’t need to be awake for any of it,” Shigaraki said. “By the time he realizes what happens, he’ll be long gone. What happens to him then is none of my business.”

“Well, hold on. Here’s an idea.” Dabi ran a thumb across his staples, grinning impishly. “How’s about we just give him another dose of the incomplete serum instead? Then, a few days later, when he and Yuurei are both a long ways away, his Quirk activates. It’d take care of ‘em both. Tie up loose ends, right?”

Silence. As Shigaraki and Compress stared, Giran took out his cigarettes and custom revolver-lighter. The flame that shot out of his barrel glinted red off his glasses.

“You’re a real fuckin’ peach, aren’t you, kid?” he said.
“I’m surprised, Dabi,” Compress added. “You seemed rather taken with the boy when he stood up to Shigaraki.”

Dabi shrugged. “Stand up to someone bigger and stronger than you and you might get hurt. He’s gotta learn that lesson sooner or later.”

Shigaraki’s spindly shadow loomed over him. “The answer’s no.”

“Come on,” said Dabi. “Don’t tell me you haven’t thought of doing the same.”

“I haven’t,” he said flatly. “We had an agreement with Yuurei. If he holds up his end, we hold up ours. That’s how Master lived.”

“He’s got you there,” Giran said. “I didn’t deal much with All for One directly, but that guy was always good for his word.”

“It’s the heroes who let people down,” Shigaraki continued. “Isn’t that right, Dabi? But not us. We can do better.”

Dabi’s face twisted, but he huffed and looked away. “Fine. You’re the boss. But then what’re you going to do about Yuurei after this is all done? He’s not gonna forgive you for shooting up the kid with this stuff.”

“It’s not going to be my decision. For the last time: I’ll take care of it.” He turned back to Giran. “The whole party’s assembled. Now it’s time to work out our strategy for the last stage. You want to stick around?”

“Thanks but no thanks. I’m going home.” He set down the briefcase and tapped out his cigarette on the surface; Compress winced as the ashes spilled onto the furniture. “And then I think I’ll go on a long vacation. New Zealand or something. It’s gonna be tough to do business in this country for a little while if everything goes according to plan. But don’t forget, I’ve always got an open line reserved for you and the League. How are you for cash, anyway?”

“We’ll get by. And it won’t matter much longer, anyway.” Shigaraki nodded. “Thanks for the help.”

Giran waved and stepped out. When he returned to the common room, Spinner, Twice and Toga were all clustered around the TV. Koh was nowhere to be seen.

“Hey old-timer,” said Twice. “That was quick! You took forever.”

“Sure felt like forever, at least.” He looked around. “Where’d the little guy go?”

“He grabbed his dinner and went back to his room. Didn’t want to talk much. He’s awful friendly, isn’t he?”

“Problem is he’s a little short on friends.” Giran watched the other two – Spinner wouldn’t look away from his game, and even Toga was oddly subdued. “Did I interrupt something?”

“It’s just been a long day,” said Spinner. “You want something to drink? For the road?”

“Nah, I’m just gonna take off. Good luck with what you’re doing.”

“Yeah,” Spinner said. “Good luck.”

“Hat,” Toga said, and flung it in Giran’s general direction. He snatched it out of the air and put it on as he left the hideout.
The warehouses on this section of the docks were largely disused, and hulked ominously through the salt-stinking mists that rolled off the bay’s steely waters. The mad panoply of Tokyo’s lights studded the distance, and as Giran walked back to civilization he felt unburdened. Carrying that suitcase had involved way more risk than he was comfortable with. At least Shigaraki seemed to have everything under control.

He got out his cigarettes and saw that he was down to just one, wrinkled and damp. He sighed and put it back, nursing the stump of the one still nestled at the corner of his mouth. The stray wisp of its flame bobbed through the dark. He’d been disappointed that he couldn’t catch up with Shin, but right now he was glad that he was still out cold somewhere underground, and getting further away with every step.

“Don’t hate me,” he said. “Business is business.”

* * *

As Shigaraki had palavered with Giran and the others, the remaining members of the League’s attempt to entertain Koh had gone about as well as one could expect. He’d returned from the bathroom and retreated to a far corner of the common room, answering their questions monosyllabically or not at all as the smell of slightly-off eggs filled the air. He’d taken his plate with a hushed thank-you and scurried back to Shin’s side. Toga had looked heartbroken as Twice commiserated with her; Spinner just wolfed down his food and then returned to his video games, saying nothing.

“It’s not fair that Shinny gets to hog him all to himself,” she said. “He’s not even awake!”

“It’s alright, Toga,” said Twice. “I bet you’re great with kids. You’re a total-”

“Jin, do yourself a favor and don’t finish that sentence.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“And Shiggy’s cutting us out of the loop too.” She flounced over to the couch and theatrically draped herself over it beside Spinner. “Why’d he invite Dabi? They hate each other.”

“They hate everyone,” Spinner said. “Guess it cancels out.”

“Guess we’ve got a little time to ourselves,” she said, and turned to Spinner with a wicked smirk. Then she saw his face, and the smirk disappeared. “Spinner, what’s wrong?”

The controller’s sticks clacked. His scaly face was wan and drawn in the television’s dismal glow. He wouldn’t meet Toga’s eye, even when she climbed over the couch and sat next to him.

“Come on,” she said. “I won’t tattle.”

His thumbs paused on the sticks. Then he picked up the remote, turned up the TV’s volume, and went on playing.

“I don’t like this, Toga,” he whispered. She leaned in to catch the words. “What the hell are we doing here?”

“I figure Shiggy’s going to wrap up his plan pretty soon. We’re probably gonna-”

“I’m not talking about Shigaraki. I mean us. You and me. We both joined up because of Stain, right? Would Stain have wanted any of this?”
His voice dropped lower; he hunched down low, as if trying to hide behind Toga’s scrawny frame. Twice casually leaned up against the back of the couch, keeping one eye on the hallways.

“I was okay with that whole thing we had with the mafia,” Spinner said. “They were a disgrace. Killing the police…that made me a little uncomfortable, but I bet even Stain couldn’t have seen his mission through without a few bystanders getting hurt. But this?”

“It’s not so bad,” Toga said, but hesitantly. “What Shinny was doing kind of reminded me of Stain. Bopping all those heroes over the head and everything.”

“But that’s all just a distraction. It’s Koh we’re really using. He doesn’t do anything but hurt innocent people. And we’re forcing him to do it.” The GAME OVER screen popped up; he didn’t bother to continue. “I don’t know exactly what Shigaraki’s got in store, but he keeps talking like we’re going to destroy the entire country. How can you build a better society out of nothing but ashes?”

“Don’t know, don’t care,” Twice said.

“That’s fine,” said Spinner. “Everyone had their reasons for joining the League. But this…it’s just…”

“You wanna leave?” Toga asked, and Spinner twitched guiltily in his seat. “It’s okay. I came here ‘cause I wanted to do whatever I felt like. If you feel like leaving, I’ve got no problem with that.”

“It’s not you. I know what everyone here thinks about me. Dabi especially. He’d love a chance to burn me up like he’s done to all those other people.”

“Ohh, you can just leave Dabi to me.” Her fangs flashed. “I can just remind him that he’s got a few dirty little secrets he definitely doesn’t want to slip out.”

“I think I know what you mean. But still. I’m just not-”

“Someone’s coming,” Twice said, and Spinner immediately went back to his game. Giran stepped in. They chatted. He said his goodbyes. The door opened and shut. It was a while before Spinner worked up the nerve to speak again.

“Toga,” he said. “What should I do?”

She reached out and ran a fingernail across his hoodie. He shuddered; somehow she was perfectly tracing the scars she’d left over the course of all their training.

“I think you should do whatever you want,” she said. “But I don’t want you to die. Not after we’ve had so much fun.”

“You’ll be safest here,” Twice said, and this time he didn’t contradict himself.

“Jin’s right. If Shiggy’s plans really do go off, then the best place to be is next to him. At least for a little while.” She pulled her hand away. “Besides, you’ve already come this far. What’s a little further?”

“I don’t know,” he whispered. “I wish Stain was here.”

“But he’s not. Someone’s gotta fill in for him. Maybe Shiggy’ll be the one.”

“I hope so,” he said. “I really do.”

Miles away, safely behind U.A.’s walls, Izuku Midoriya had just put what he thought was Koh
Kyoumoto to bed.

* * *

Shin woke up with his neck at a crooked angle and an unspeakable taste in his mouth. He took a moment to remember where he was and then groaned and sat up, or at least tried to. Koh was in the crook of his arm, curled up and breathing deep. Carefully, Shin reached for his phone on the box beside the bed and checked the time. 1:30 in the morning. And there was a message for him.

> Come see me when you wake up.

> Doesn’t matter when. I’ll be around.

Unidentified number. That was Shigaraki’s phone.

With infinite care – it was like trying not to dislodge a sleeping cat – Shin unknotted his arm from Koh and got off the bed, rubbing his face. Even after all this time he still wasn’t used to the strange textures of his mutilated skin. He regarded the gun and its holster by his coat, contemplated them, and then put them both on and left, closing the door quietly behind him. Koh had already rolled over on the mattress, feebly grasping in his sleep for a warm body that wasn’t there.

At this time of night all that could be heard was a rumble and gnash from somewhere in the walls, probably the generators that kept this place lit. For some reason, there was a faint aroma of cigarette smoke in the air. Shin made his way to Shigaraki’s door, which, once again, was slightly ajar. This time he opened without knocking.

“There you are,” said Shigaraki, not looking up from his laptop. “Don’t bother sitting down.”

“If this is about what happened-”

“It isn’t. I mean it is, sort of. We’ll talk outside. I haven’t left this place in days.”

“Don’t you ever sleep?”

“Yeah, probably.” He shut the laptop and pulled open his desk drawers. Shin heard the shuffle of paper as Shigaraki rifled through their contents, pinching at the unseen objects inside like a crippled crab.

“You could probably wear gloves, or something,” he said. “Maybe with a couple fingers cut off. It’d make things easier.”

“I could. And you could’ve come in here without that gun under your coat. But we like to be prepared, don’t we?” Shin stiffened but Shigaraki paid him no mind. He withdrew a small, silvery object like a cigarette case from the desk and set it down, then got up and pulled his trenchcoat from the detritus at the back of his room. He was just wearing the one hand over his face right now. Shin wondered, fleetingly, where he kept the others when they weren’t clamped to his body.

“Come on,” Shigaraki said, slipping the object into his coat pocket. “Better zip up, too. It’s cold as hell.”

They walked through the hall and the darkened common room and Shin immediately shivered at the stinging draft that rushed in when Shigaraki cracked open the hideout’s entrance. He followed Shigaraki up the stairs and out of the building. Even this late, the city sparkled in its hallucinogenic palette. The silhouetted hulks of the other warehoused around them rose malformed from the earth around them like the death-bloated bellies of buried giants. The Tokyo Bay’s putrid salinity made
Shin’s nose wrinkle but Shigaraki took the hand off his face and breathed deep.

“You’re not worried about being out in the open like this?” Shin asked.

“All eyes are on Horooka and U.A. right now. I don’t need your Quirk to stay invisible.” Shigaraki’s exposed face was all wrong in these shadows; the wrinkles turned it amorphous, unreadable.

“Look, I know you called me out because of what Koh said. I wasn’t expecting it either.”

“I could tell.”

“And about the gun-”

“Being awake for that long would make anyone stupid. And you never would’ve gotten it out of the holster anyway. I’m over it. Let it go.”

“Then why’re we out here?”

“Like I said, I needed the air. Giran showed up and now the whole place stinks like an ashtray. You missed him, by the way.” He tucked the prosthetic hand into his coat. “He was heartbroken.”

“So he came back from the States.”

“Yes. With the last thing we need to make all this end for good.”

“Last time I met him, he said that Koh was going to have to use his Quirk one more time,” Shin said. “That’d be the worst outbreak yet. And then we’d be done.”

“That’s right. Looks like the kid thinks differently.”

Shin was silent.

“But you know better,” said Shigaraki. “Don’t you.”

Still no answer.

Shigaraki took out the silver case he’d gotten from his desk. He flipped it open and showed its contents to Shin. Lined up inside were five opaque vials, smaller than a thimble.

“After everything that’s happened, I thought you might like some assurance,” he said. “This is what was promised. The finished Quirk-erasing serum.”

“They look like bullets.”

“They are, sort of. The dose to make them take effect is extremely small. Probably even smaller for someone Kyoumoto’s size. There’s a gun that’s customized to shoot them. Sorry, but I’m not gonna let you have that one.” He counted the bullets and snapped the case shut. “But the minute my plans are finished, I’ll fire one into Kyoumoto and that’ll be that. No more Quirk. At that point, I won’t need it anymore.”

“What’re you going to do?”

Shigaraki leered at the glittering horizon.

“Tokyo in ruin,” he said. “Imagine it for yourself.”
Nothing to be heard but the soft susurrus of the water behind them.

“He doesn’t have to know,” Shigaraki said. “You’ll put him to sleep, just like all the other times. All the better, because this stuff Giran got is going to seriously throw the kid for a loop. But that’ll all be over once the bullet is fired.” He turned to Shin. “You know, you could’ve stolen one of them when I showed them to you just now. It would’ve been a real stupid idea, but you had the opportunity. Grab the drug and the kid and just run.”

Shin didn’t reply or meet Shigaraki’s gaze. He flipped up his hood and looked out at the city. The fur trim hung limp as an animal carcass, this saltwater air and months of filth weighing it down.

“Of course, even if you had gotten away from us, then you’d be right back where you started. Alone with the whole country turned against you. But if you stick with us, you still have our support.” Shigaraki’s grin widened. “And you get to see this shithole society finally get what it deserves, right?”

Shin’s cold breath jetted out. The shadow of his hood ate his face completely; there was nothing of his head but a hole.

“It’s all right to hate them for it,” said Shigaraki. “All those happy, peaceful people All Might loves so much, and everything they love, and the society that pretends to love them back – all of it makes me want to puke. So let’s destroy it all. Let everyone see each other and themselves for what they really are. There’s a horizon more beautiful than this one, waiting for us.”

“And then what?” Shin said quietly.

“In the old days, when my Master still ruled, there wasn’t any Hero Society. People moved according to his will. They looked out for him, and for those who followed him. Their strength became all that moved society forward.” Shigaraki’s killing hands twitched. “It’ll be chaotic and it’ll be violent, but will it really be worse than what we have now? I don’t think so. But I’ll need people to get things moving in the right direction. It’ll be a long time before the work is done.”

“And you want me there with you?”

“If you’re waiting for an engraved invitation, this is the closest you’re going to get,” Shigaraki replied. “Yeah, I want you to stick around. But that’s up to you.”

Koh scratching at the back door of the truck. Koh asleep and warm in his arms. Koh flinching away from his hand when his temper flared. Koh snuffing out the lamp and leaving him to Fumikage Tokoyami’s ravenous dark. Koh always with his eyes on the distance as if searching for his shadow. Koh returning with his face somehow strange, begging for him to find something better, never understanding, always trying to make sacrifices that weren’t his.

“If I see this through to the end,” said Shin, “I don’t deserve to be around him anyway.”

“Is that a yes?” Shigaraki said.

“I told him from the start I was there for him. To do the things that someone like him shouldn’t have to. We’ll see how this all turns out. But if you can bring him somewhere safe, away from what this country’s going to become…then I’ll be his villain.”

Shigaraki took the hand back out of his coat and affixed to his face once more. It didn’t entirely hide his smile.

“It’ll all work out,” he said. “You’ll see. All for the sake of a brighter future.”
“Are we done here?”

“Almost. There is one last thing I want you to do before the final stage begins. It’s easy, but you probably won’t like it. Sorry about that.”

“What is it?”

Shigaraki asked, “Do you still have Horooka’s phone number?”

* * *

They had gone through Kashiki Ward like a brushfire. When such flames caught and raced forward, gorging themselves on vegetation grown dry and brittle, the mere pressure of their approach could be enough to cause lakes to steam and hair to smolder long before the firelight caught up to them. So it went here, the city emptying itself out in anticipation of their approaching menace. Horooka’s storm gathered and roared. The bent shade of Metalhead walked among her killing sound, enshrouded in cigarette smoke like a freight of ghosts, ignoring the heaviness and corrosion in her guts. She, too, was burning up.

Metalhead’s forces moved from the desolation of Mosei-Santo and into Kashiki’s light and warmth, their phones lit up once more. And at the periphery of their chatter were other voices, the frightened citizens too stubborn or feeble to leave, the scant and abandoned police. The heroes were nowhere to be heard. After another day’s fallout from Nakayama’s scheming, the Association had severed ties with U.A. completely. They had sent one curt message to Nezu, a signal as slender and lethal as an arrowhead – recant, resign and evacuate U.A. Only then will the Hero Society come to your aid.

That message went unheard. But the boil and froth of the other signals persisted:

said it’d snow soon I can feel it in the air out of saké what do you think no time like the present make it through this and I’ll see you in Kobe maybe hear that new single I’ve been missing out on so much since I window is cracked down the fucking middle never thought I would miss hey keep this to yourself but is Kitae looking a little been living here for the last twenty goddamn years and I’m not about to leave for a bunch of Mom I’m so scared but I can’t go outside I can hear them screaming in the night not even Hawks anymore how are we going to I don’t know I don’t know

This apartment was mobbed by framed pictures of smiling grandchildren and pottery in exotic mosaic colors – retirees, maybe, who’d taken to collecting knickknacks in their twilight years. They had fled but left their things behind and their presence made Rajio Mainichi feel more like an intruder than ever. He was on the top floor, alone on the bed, every entrance shut and locked. Metalhead was just below him and Mirai Horooka sat and festered in the cellar. His antenna was up and these wasp-nest voices made the inside of his skull itch.

* * *

There was a hot meaty tearing sensation behind his eyes and then he felt warmth dripping down his nose and down to his chin; he stifled his cries and wiped away the blood with a towel that was already tacky and copper-stinking. He was so lightheaded he could barely see. The nosebleeds were
coming faster and faster and he hadn’t eaten anything all day. He threw up anything more substantial than water.

His Quirk cast out its net and pulled in troves of meaningless babble that filled his head to bursting; it was already well past midnight but still the noise wouldn’t stop. He sifted through it the same as always, but he no longer cared about information on the heroes. He was listening for Yori Kizutatchi.

Metalhead was getting worse by the day, disintegrating under the intensity of her own terrible will, and Horooka was a speck of her former self even though the city continued to tremble in her wake. Takenoko remained the same silent, passive giant as always. But then there was Kizutatchi, the man from another place, whose influence just kept growing. He was seldom ever mentioned in the voices Mainichi caught, even though so many of the strangers joining Metalhead’s forces seemed to defer to him, moving at his command – and it was at his command, even though he was using Metalhead to speak it. The bodies were piling up, the violence she’d originally tried to avoid was spiraling out of control, and in the midst of all of it was Kizutatchi, whispering calamity into everyone’s ears. He had to be plotting something. But Mainichi was killing himself in his efforts to hear it and all he got was inanity and dead air.

The nosebleed had slowed down. He tried to focus again.

hear the news lately never thought I’d be a celebrity got those manga volumes I lent you I’m climbing up the fucking walls here still awake this late at night got a fucking toothache you know anyone with some decent painkillers knew I would hear your voice again no doctors no stores no goddamn movie theaters don’t know how long this can on Shin are you coming in you remember the last time you asked for help Mirai I’m in no hurry to

Mainichi’s eyes flew open wide. Those names, flitting through the swarm. He couldn’t recognize the voice that spoke Horooka’s but he could make out the creaking whisper of her own on the other side of the conversation. He clutched his head, heedless to the fresh blood clogging his nose, unraveling all the other noise until all that remained was this single thread.

“You can’t just pretend it never happened. Actions have consequences, Mirai.”

“Please be louder. There’s so much ringing in me now. Nothing gets through.”

“Guess that Quirk is finally taking its toll.”

“Yes. Like that. No one’s voice sounds real anymore, Shin. But it’s strange. If I close my eyes in this dark place, it sounds like you’re right next to me. Maybe you’ve been right at my side all along.”

“I haven’t. I’m very far away. And so is Koh.”

“It doesn’t matter. You still don’t understand. You can’t run away from yourself.”

She was having this conversation right under Mainichi’s feet. Ever since the start he’d been terrified of what might happen if Horooka decided to act out on her own; her power could flatten all of them, even with their current numbers. That fear had ebbed away in time to be replaced with dread of Kizutatchi, but now this other monster too was starting to stir. Still, when she spoke again, her voice was quavering, almost tearful.”

“Shin,” she said. “Can you come get me? I don’t like it here. All the sounds are wrong. Nothing feels good anymore.”

“You kept saying none of us had a future,” Yuurei said, after a while. “And maybe you were right.
But did you think that meant that none of us would change? This is where you’ve ended up now, Mirai. You and me."

“I lost myself somewhere. If I flew again then maybe I could find it. But I just keep falling.”

“This was my fault, too. I thought I could help all three of us get out of that hole. But some people are just beyond help. Do you understand?”

“It’s all the same, Shin. Everything’s just another hole. I can still climb out again. Do it all again, from the beginning. And this time…and this time…”

“Listen. Shigaraki wants to see Metalhead again. He can’t deal with a war on top of everything else. She doesn’t want to meet with him, but she’ll listen to you. If you get her to meet, then you’ll see me there. I can’t promise anything else.”

“I’ll do it. I will.”

Now more than ever Mainichi regretted that his Quirk only worked one way. No, he wanted to scream, loud enough to drill it into the ears of all these buzzing voices. It’s a trap, it’s obviously a trap, you can’t do this to us now, not when we’re so close…

“I’ll see you,” she said, oblivious to Mainichi’s panic. “And I’ll see Koh. And when all three of us are together, then we’ll start again. I’ll find who I was again. And this time I’ll do better.”

“…goodbye, Mirai.”

The thread snapped. The voices went silent.

Mainichi slammed down his antenna and bolted up from the bed, wild-eyed and blood-slicked; he took two steps and then his knees gave out and he smacked forehead-first into the hardwood floor. The world careened and gyred around him but he got back to his feet and staggered out of the apartment. Metalhead was sleeping down below. He had to warn her before Horooka got there. Not just about Shigaraki’s offer – she had to know that Horooka was done, that she was looking for an exit just as Metalhead had feared, and if this meeting was agreed to then it light a fuse that would inevitably blast them all to pieces. It was so much worse than the police and the heroes, all these serpentine voices coiling around them, so many unseen fangs dripping their poison.

He half-stumbled half-slide down a flight of stairs, hoisted himself back up on the railing, turned a corner and kept going and then standing before him in the darkened hall was Horooka.

She stood in her hangman’s posture, limbs and head lolling, her grease-choked hair cloaking her face like black mold. She still had her phone in one hand. She must have been ascending the stairs even as she finished her call with Yuurei. Mainichi couldn’t speak; dimly he thought he would vomit if he had anything left to throw up.

Slowly, Horooka raised one finger and pressed it to her lips. Then she turned, went to Metalhead’s door, pushed it open, and went inside.

He could follow.

He never could.

By the time he returned to his room he had to crawl on hands and knees, head spinning too badly to keep his balance. He curled himself up among all these abandoned mementos and wept like a child until he finally lost consciousness. All around him, unheard but relentless, the signals went on.
Kashiki’s shopping district was no more. Metalhead’s forces, still growing and voracious for supplies, had swept in and gutted it, and what few citizens remained either fled or were left to rot among the sharp-edged mosaics of broken glass that now littered the streets. The jumbo TV’s scattered about the ward still had power but many of them had been vandalized, the screens cracked and speakers mute, leaving them to spew meaningless color. Even now, the outsiders’ uncanny focus persevered – entire shopfuls of food, drink, and clothing now stood empty, but jewelry still glittered in its cases and cash registers lay untouched. Money did them little good, at this point. They were a locomotive roaring up from the badlands of Musutafu, and all the city’s remaining bounty was fuel for its engine, until it could finally collide into U.A. High School.

The day was early and the sun was out and the broken ward shone with ferocious zirconia intensity. Glass crunched underfoot as two dark figures made their way up the same street where, less than one month ago, Izuku Midoriya and his friends had first glimpsed Mirai Horooka. The figures’ identities were easy to make out, even from a distance. The clutching hands, the upturned hood. Shin and Shigaraki had been smuggled down here by Mr. Compress like before. Once they’d crossed the border between Takodana and Kashiki, they hadn’t encountered a soul. But they still felt the malevolent weight of unseen gazes.

“I wonder what she’s like,” Shin said.

“Who cares,” said Shigaraki. “You’re not going there to talk. If our info’s anything to go by, every single person here hates our guts. Try not to screw this up.”

Shin’s teeth flashed in the shadows of his hood. “When have I ever let you down?”

“Mm. You’ve got a point. Shut up anyway. We’re almost there.”

Shin had gotten the text from Horooka shortly after their call the previous night, saying that Metalhead had consented to another meetup. At first Shigaraki had been nonplussed at her choice of location, but after giving it some thought, he had to admit it made sense. It was deep into her new territory, with plenty of room for sentries if they didn’t mind a little risk, and of course there was also the symbolic value. In a way, this whole messy situation had started here.

Jon-X was a crumbling shell of its former self, its façade largely pulverized, letting the dusty sunlight shine on the heaps of rubble within. After the police had recovered the injured, they’d cordoned the place off and left it to rot; the city had bigger things on its mind than rebuilding a shopping mall. Shin let out a low whistle when they stepped inside, even as the ranks of vague shapes on the mall’s upper reaches turned their heads towards them.

“Nice,” he said.

“I said shut the hell up,” Shigaraki snapped. “They’re already on edge.”

He was right. Many of the sentries had their hands extended; around some of their fingers could be seen heat-hazes, rimes of frost, glinting shards of metal. Several parts of the floor looked suspiciously clean in a way that screamed “booby trap.” Metalhead was taking no chances. Even with Shigaraki’s speed, he’d be annihilated in a blink if he so much as yawned the wrong way. Shin pulled his hood lower over his face and fell behind Shigaraki as they advanced toward the ashen figures at the back of the store.
Metalhead sat on a throne of rubble, haloed by smoke. The morning sun wasn’t doing her any favors; her face was a studded fistful of craggy clay. But even deep in the morass of her exhaustion, that sparking determination and her plain hate of Shigaraki’s presence kept her stare alert and sharp. Mirai stood some ten paces to her side, her hair choked with dust, her coat utterly in tatters. Even the sleeves were a wreck now, hanging in ribbons up to her forearms. There were other people down on the ground floor, all of their postures tense, but Metalhead and Mirai stayed apart.

“Stop,” said Metalhead, and they stopped. In the hollow store could be heard the crunch of grit as the sentries shifted their posture, ready to spring.

“I’m impressed,” Shigaraki said.

“You said that last time, too.”

“I was expecting to see you behind a wall of cannon fodder. But instead it looks like you’re trying to keep everyone safe, even if this little chat of ours goes sour.” Shigaraki’s head swiveled, taking in the room; even the people on the upper floors felt a chill when that hand’s featureless stump turned to them. “I guess that’s the reason you made it this far.”

Metalhead turned her own hand slightly; her knife winked at them. “You won’t have time to blink before I cut both your heads off. And I know you’re just more clones anyway. So stop kissing my ass and get to the point.”

“Sorry, but there is one thing I promised to do first.” He gestured to Shin. “Go ahead.”

Shin nodded and lowered his hood. The face underneath was both weary and wary. He took a step forward, hands up.

“I’m gonna see Mirai,” he said. “That alright?”

“Take a wild guess,” Metalhead growled.

“Look, I’m not carrying. See?” He unzipped his coat, heedless to how nearly every sentry at once aimed at him, and pulled it open. No weapons underneath. “And it’s not like she couldn’t blow me away if I tried anything. I only came here because Handyman over there told me to, so let’s just get this over with.”

Metalhead blew smoke, then pointed her knife at one of the nearby guards. “Frisk him.”

“Uh, no. Don’t touch me.”

“You don’t have a choice in-”

“Let him in,” Mirai said.

Metalhead stopped, and stared, and then spat her cigarette out in disgust and waved him forward. Shin walked slowly, hands still raised. He got close enough to Mirai so that they could reach out and touch each other if they wanted, but neither of them did. Mirai stood and shivered. The eyes behind her hair were rheumy and dark.

“You haven’t changed,” she said.

“I’m not so sure,” said Shin.

“What a nice reunion,” said Metalhead acidly. “Now let the adults talk. So why’re you really here?”
“It’s exactly what Yuurei told you. I have enough pains in my ass already without worrying about all this,” he swept his arms around the mall, “coming for my blood on top of it. I want to bury the hatchet. Preferably without killing anybody.”

“You have nothing to offer us unless you’d like to send me Dabi one tiny, dripping piece at a time,” said Metalhead. “And that’d just be for starters.”

“How about information? Reliable, this time.”

“Because your last tip was so honest.” She pressed the knifeblade to her thumb. “Here’s some info for you, shithead. If you’re trying to negotiate with someone, it helps if you don’t assume they’re as stupid as you are.”

“I was stupid last time, I admit it. I got greedy. But at this point the whole situation at U.A. is beyond repair, and if I had to choose, I’d rather you win instead of the heroes.”

“He really would,” Shin said.

“Here’s the thing,” said Shigaraki. “U.A. is in full damage control mode now. They’re fighting off the government with one hand and your forces with the other, all while trying to keep Kyoumoto away from the Yard. In two days they’re going to smuggle him out, I have no idea where or how. There are places in that school even Yuurei couldn’t reach, who knows what little hidey-holes they’ve got. You can smash it up whenever you want, but if you’re interested in the kid, that’s your timeframe. You guys really made it harder for yourselves when you called my bluff.”

“What do you mean, called your bluff?”

Shigaraki stopped short and tilted his head. “What do you think? When you leaked Kyoumoto’s location to the press.”

“How the fuck could I have known he was there? This Frankenstein-looking asshole was the one spying on the place.” She jabbed the knife in Shin’s direction. “Do you seriously believe I was the one who dropped that bomb? It was probably one of the dumbass kids running their mouths too much.”

“What? No, no, that’s not right.” He looked around as if one of the random thugs stationed around this place would give him answers. “I’d have known if one of the U.A. brats was responsible. But they’d all circled the wagons, no one was talking.”

“Shigaraki, what’s going on?” Shin said, and now he sounded uncertain too.

“How should I know!? We’re not the ones who leaked it, and if it wasn’t you and it wasn’t U.A., then who else?”

“He’s always there.”

All eyes on Mirai again. She barely spoke above a whisper, but the words came out bright and clear as fresh-spilled blood.

“Who is?” Shin asked.

“Who else.” She raised her head. “Sinister…minister.”

“Why the hell would he leak Kyoumoto’s location?” Metalhead said. Some of the rage had gone out of her voice; Shigaraki’s sudden confusion had shaken her. “He’s just painting a target on his own back.”

“Maybe he was hoping everyone would start pointing fingers at each other instead. Like I was doing now.” He looked at Shin. “This changes things. There’s really no way we can afford to fight amongst ourselves now.”

“Is that so,” said Metalhead.

“Listen. I know you’re pissed off at me, and you’re right to be. That idiot Dabi’s almost been more trouble than he’s worth. But we need to work together on this. I’ve got my own plans where I’m located, but I’m more than happy letting you take as much territory as you want.” He held out his arms beseechingly. “Musutafu, U.A., you can have it all and more, I don’t care. Hell, if my plans work out, this’ll be a better place for your type than ever. We can’t let ourselves get sidetracked by someone like Nakayama, of all people.”

“It’s always the same noise,” Mirai whispered.

“Easy,” said Shin. “It’s almost over.”

“I can’t hear you. Something wrong with the sound.” She clutched at herself. “Can we go now? You said we could go.”

“And there it is,” said Metalhead. “The same as last time. You just came here to poach Horooka.”

“What? No. I don’t want to be in the same zip code as that one.” Shigaraki looked at Mirai with naked distaste. “If she wants to go nipping at Yuurei’s heels after all this, then that’s her.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

Metalhead retrieved another cigarette. Her lighter clicked. The flame caught. She rose to her feet, and everyone around her sighted down on Shigaraki once more.

“You still don’t get it,” she said. “There is no ‘after.’ You can swagger around all you like with your big dreams of changing the world, but I started this war for just one reason.” She sliced her palm with the knife and the metal shifted and warped. “You still think you’re the adult in the room, don’t you? Coming in here and trying to play diplomat to all us little people. Horooka had it right when I met her. We’re not the heroes or the bigshot supervillains like you. We’re the ones caught in between. And the thought of ripping all of you apart is enough to keep me going forever. That school. This city. I’ll light the whole country on fire if it means you burn with it. If your new lackey knows what’s good for him, he’ll get away while he still can.” She held out the blade; its edge quivered in anticipation. “Come at me as many times as you like, you little freak. I’ll out-draw you every time.”

Shigaraki’s arms lowered. He gazed around the room. They had every angle covered, and odds were that the floor around Metalhead was trapped too. Little chance of going on the offensive.

He sighed.

“Fine,” he said. “Back to Plan A.”

Shin’s arm swung up.

A silver flash and a silken hiss and then everyone’s heads snapped around at the shriek that rent the
air, Mirai staggering back with her hands clapped over her face and blood oozing through her fingers and the gleam of another blade in Shin’s upflung hand, and Shigaraki stepped forward and may have killed a half-dozen of them or more right then if Metalhead hadn’t outdrawn him as promised, her own knife a hair-thin javelin that punched a hole right through his forehead and swung out and snaked ‘round and cleaved Shin in two. But as they dissolved and muddied the ground with their remains the noise went on, Mirai thrashing about as if beset by phantoms unseen, and when she lowered her hands several of Metalhead’s guards had a glimpse of the red canyon where Mirai’s eye had been before the air thumped and the mall blasted apart, walls cratering, ceiling spitting rubble like rain, quite a lot more commotion now as the sentries’ bodies flew and the others either ran for cover or stood paralyzed with indecision and so Metalhead had to take the initiative again, grabbing Mirai from behind and forcing her head up so that her single maddened eye could only fire her wrathful Quirk uselessly through the gouged ceiling and into the blue skies above. She cinched an arm around Mirai’s throat and squeezed until her screams became a rusty creak.

“Calm down or I’ll kill you myself,” she said. She felt oddly tranquil, even as the other shouts around her became more coherent.

“Metalhead, we’ve got bodies over here!”

“Fucking Shigaraki, I knew we couldn’t trust him! Why did you let him come here?!”

“Hurts! It hurts! Someone pull me out! Pull me out, pull me out, pull me-”

“Hurry up and finish that bitch off, Metalhead!”

She answered none of them. Mirai had started to slack in her grip.

“Someone get Takenoko over here,” she said. “He’s the only one I trust with Horooka right now. Do it. I am not in the mood for arguments.”

In the sifting dust, someone pulled out their phone and started to dial. The pained cries around her had already dimmed to low sobbing; some of them had stopped completely. Impossible to tell the number of dead right now. The building had been unstable to begin with; the whole edifice could now collapse at any moment.

She lowered her mouth to Mirai’s ear. “Are you done? Say yes and I’ll let you go. We’ll get that eye bandaged up.” A pause. “You can’t even understand me, can you.”

She released Mirai and pushed her away. She stumbled, fell, and stayed there on the ground, her hair gathering grit from the ruined floor, blood still dripping from her gashed eye. Her body shook with sobbing. The sound was utterly desolate.

“You got your reunion,” Metalhead said. “Hope it was everything you wanted.”

* * *

“Great news, boss!” said Twice. “You died!”

“About time,” Shigaraki said.

The rest of the League finally relaxed. Since yesterday, Shigaraki had stopped pacing around the hideout’s common room like a caged rat, but he was still uncomfortable to have around, and he’d been regrettably spending more and more time around the rest of them now that Koh was back in their hands. Spinner and Compress were glued to the news broadcasts with Toga draped over the arm of the couch like a raggedy quilt, playing with her phone; Twice practiced with his coins and...
Dabi was in his recliner like usual. Shin didn’t join them. At least, as far as they could tell.

“Think you got the message across?” Dabi asked.

“Who knows. If the clones got killed then I’m satisfied enough already. Horooka won’t react well to Yuurei dying in front of her.” He looked at Toga. “Especially if you played your part well enough.”

“I totally did,” Toga said, not looking up from her phone. “Sucks that real-me had to stay here, though. I would’ve liked to meet her.”

“Either way, that’s my last loose end to tie up. A little thank-you to Kitae for interfering with our plans.” He delicately tented his fingers. “Now we just watch the news and see how it’s affected their movements.”

“There likely won’t be anything until this evening at least,” said Compress. “But I, too, expect that this will disrupt their campaign somewhat. They’ve balanced their entire organization on a terribly unbalanced individual.”

“And now we probably broke her heart,” said Toga. “I feel kinda bad.”

“I don’t,” said Dabi. “From everything I’ve heard, girl was overdue for a little hurt. So, what now? Can we finally get going?”

“Let’s see if they take our bait first,” said Shigaraki. “If we can synchronize our movements with their own big assault on U.A., all the better. We still have a couple of days before Kyoumoto’s latest dose wears off. Yuurei’s keeping him quiet in the meantime.”

Spinner turned. “And he’s fine with this? Knowing what it might do to the kid?”

“He knows there’s a risk,” Shigaraki said smoothly. “We don’t have to discuss it any further.”

“But-”

“You heard him,” said Dabi. “Why’ve you been so antsy lately, anyway? Everyone’s noticed.” He smirked. “Getting cold feet?”

Spinner said nothing. Beside him, Toga looked up and hoisted herself off the couch.

“Lay off him, Dabi,” she said. “I don’t wanna be in a bad mood when we finally get to go play.”

“He should quit sulking and take a lesson away from all this,” said Dabi. “Wannabes like that Metalhead chick might look impressive for a week or two, but they never last. A weak society spreads weakness everywhere. Even in its villains. Stain knew that.”

“Don’t talk about him,” Spinner growled. It was barely audible, but Dabi’s smirk widened.

“Think about it. If Stain was still around today, would he have made any real progress? You can’t just carve the rot out of society one shitty hero at a time. You need to gut everything at once.”

“You don’t know a damn thing about what Stain wanted!” Spinner’s voice cracked.

“Dabi, that’s enough,” said Compress. “You’ve been the cause of entirely too many arguments in these recent days.”

“Not my fault no one else around here wants to see the truth,” Dabi said. “Remember what Stain said, lizard? ‘All Might is worthy.’ But All Might isn’t here anymore, is he?” Spinner bared his teeth
but said nothing. “There’s nothing salvageable about this country anymore. There’s no such thing as collateral damage with what we’re doing. Everyone’s accountable for the trash heap this world’s become. If it had a single throat to cut, don’t you think Stain would have done it? Because that’s the opportunity we’ve got right now.”

“You’re so cool, Dabi,” said Twice. “You’re seriously the worst.”

“This almost sounds like a vote of confidence,” Shigaraki said dryly.

“Why not? We’ve gotten this far. Might as well see what lies on the other side.” He wouldn’t take his eyes off Spinner. “We’re the ones who’ll destroy this world. Everyone gets what they deserve.”

“Yeah,” Spinner said. “Maybe they will. Hey, Toga?”

“Hmm?”

“I want to train tonight. The hardest you’ve got.”

She grinned ear to ear. “You mean it?”

“Just make sure I’m still able to fight after.” His slit eyes sparked off Dabi’s icy blue. “I’ll show this punk who’s the true inheritor of Stain’s will.”

Dabi sneered. “Give it your best shot. You can’t do any worse than those losers in Musutafu.”

* * *

“Do you think she’s okay?” Koh asked.

“She was never okay,” Shin replied.

As the League squabbled, they’d holed themselves away in Shin’s room. Shin wasn’t eager to let Koh interact with the other villains and the feeling was mutual; since Giran’s arrival they’d only caught glimpses of him, like a nervous cat. He stayed curled up on the bed, eating little, speaking less, as Shin passed the time on his phone, watching the Ministry of Individuality grind ever closer to U.A.’s gates. Koh never seemed to get bored. It made sense; this was probably how he’d spent most of his time in the Yard.

Koh was still determined not to take any more serum unless it rooted out his Quirk permanently. Shin was trying to convince him that he was still negotiating with the League, but it was a hard sell. To get some relief from Koh’s needling questions he’d mentioned the call with Mirai, and that had been an even bigger mistake.

“I just feel like we should do something for her,” he said. “You keep trying to help me. Why not her?”

“You weren’t there the last time we met. She was going to kill me.”

“I’m going to kill you,” he said quietly. “If they don’t give me the medicine in time.”

Shin looked up. Koh had his knees pulled up to his chin, staring at the far wall.

“You can’t trust them, Shin. They’re probably going to hurt her, somehow.”

“They might,” he said. “But she said she was going to hurt them first. She made her choice.”
“You keep saying things like that.”

“Like what?”

“That you don’t really want to hurt people. That it’s their fault they get hurt. But you keep doing it. Or you keep letting other people do it for you.” His voice was dead. “Are you going to hurt me someday, too?”

“Not you,” he said fiercely. “Never.”

“Maybe you should,” Koh said. “Before it’s too late.”

He should have run up and held him again, coaxed out this poisonous thread of doubt choking both their minds. But instead he just stayed where he was, gripping his phone until the screen threatened to crack. He thought of what Mirai had said to him last night, before he’d hung up on her for good – that he was right by her side, even though in truth he was miles away. Koh just lowered his head and spoke no more, waiting for whatever might come.

*             *             *

Now she was in two places and neither place was any place she could name. In one was bursting light and wet and warmth grown cold on skin but now one the other was heat that dripped and stung and all was black as black. Air full of barbs and shadows and shapes all wrong and flat. She tried to cry her questions but any movement in her face made more warmth and wet and the new and uncharted place burnt and bit all the more.

Everything less familiar. Every day she became harder to find.

Through the gibbering streets she was cradled in the rough dinnerplate palms of the quiet giant. Bugeyed stick of a man with no wavelength she could name. Through all these strange days he had led her on and now he brought her to a place of bursting white and sat her down and pressed to her face a new cold raw and stinging wet. She gnashed and moaned and could have killed him where he knelt as she always could in all those days before. But what pleasure was there in breaking a stick. What use of violence against one so passive. Even when he held up a thin silver needle in his spindly fingers and stuck it in her face where it flitted and pinched she remained still.

The giant rumbled in her ear as the needle nipped at her.

“I came from the mountains too,” he said. “Then I was here. It wasn’t much different. Just more noise. That’s all.”

The silver arc. The shift in Shin’s face. What change had come. What visitation.

“I was with Akane near the start. I saw a lot of people come and go. I don’t see any of them anymore. I think they’re mostly dead.” His rough-sculped face orbited around her. “I might die soon, too. But that’s all right. I am where I stand.”

Her eye rolling wetly. The world coming into focus. Kitchen with carved stone countertops and conspiratorial fridge. The treasure-trail dots of her blood on the linoleum.

“I don’t have to change.” He tugged the needle and her flesh shrieked and pulled shut like a curtain. “But you’re different, now. You’re so sad, all the time. Did you know that?”

He put the needle aside and took up a roll of gauze, and then held up her hair and began to wrap. The cool cloth itched against her stitches.
“We can do anything we want now,” he said. “I don’t want anything. But why are you doing this, if it’s not what you want to do? Why are you coming here, if it’s not where you want to be? I don’t think your friend is going to come back. I think you should find somewhere you’d like to go. While there’s still time.” He tore off tape and sealed the dressing shut. “That’s all.”

He gathered up his things and stood and stood, until his head was at an angle against the ceiling. She sat with palms on knees like someone at a confessional.

“I have to leave now,” he rumbled. “Everyone is here.”

Through the surging noise in her head she heard a door shut and then she was left with the noise and the newly flattened world. Her coat was gone and her bare forearms were crusty with grit. There was a cut on her lip from where she had fallen and as her mouth pursed and stretched it opened anew and oozed down her chin.

In the few minutes she had seen Shin again she had remembered their last meeting. How it had felt to have him against the wall and trembling in the face of her power, and before that, when she had been launched skyward and for a moment woken fully and glimpsed a freedom she couldn’t name. But then as Shigaraki and Metalhead had murmured their static around the two of them something had settled into Shin’s flesh and he had turned wholly unfamiliar. And then, the division. Everything now further away than it had ever been.

Where did she want to go? She wanted to go back.

She stood and gripped the fridge for support until her knocking knees steadied, and then lurched out of the apartment and up the stairs, head tilted, listening for breaks in the static. She made it up two flights before new words brushed their wings against her:

“…lying…hear them all…”

“I don’t…I for this. Enough…kids…knock it…”

“…phone…never tell…what are you…”

She traced the sound skyward. All these signals everywhere, spiraling up into the air. At the top floor she rested her head against the door from which the sounds emerged and tried the knob and found it unlocked. She stepped into a living room drenched in afternoon light. There was a burgundy leather-upholstered couch. There was a large flat-screen TV. There were smears of color caged in picture frames. There was Metalhead at the back of the room, Takenoko sitting lotus in the far corner, Kizutatchi against the wall with phone in hand and Mainichi advancing on him with arms held up limply as if bound by marionette strings. They all turned to face her.

“Well, look who it is,” Metalhead said. The couch around her was powdery with cigarette ash. “Why aren’t you resting?”

She swayed in place. At the corner of her remaining eye she noticed her reflection in picture-glass. The stark white of the gauze against her head. This mark would last her forever. Unless. Unless.

“She’s still technically your leader,” Kizutatchi said. “She has a right to be here.”

“She’s still technically your leader,” Kizutatchi said. “She has a right to be here.”

“I’ve got half my guys freaking out over this latest disaster at Jon-X and I’m not in the mood for her word-vomit.” Metalhead pointed at Mirai with her lit cigarette end. “Did you hear that? I did everything you asked me to, and this is where it got you. There’s no Quirk anywhere that can bring your eye back. Maybe now you’ll take the hint and start living in the real world with the rest of us.”
“I don’t need Quirks,” she said.

Metalhead’s face twisted. Kizutatchi leaned forward, curious. Mirai’s voice had come through loud and clear; despite her mangled appearance, she sounded healthier than she’d been in weeks.

“I know where we’re going,” she said. “To Koh. Dearie-oh.”

Metalhead crushed the cigarette between her fingers. “You’re shitting me.”

“Before he leaves. We go. Walk up to their doors. Where everyone can see. Everyone will be counted and accountable. I’ll take him by the throat and hold him up. Shin will come. All of us together. As it was in the start.”

“It’s a trap.” Mainichi had to spit the words out through chattering teeth; he was a wasted parody of his former self, stubble-specked flesh draped loose over his shivering bones. He nearly fainted when Mirai’s eyes flicked over to him, but then they returned to Metalhead.

“Trap or not, she might have a point,” Kizutatchi said. He’d gone back to his phone, ungloved hand texting rapidly. “It looks like the M.o.I. is going to hit U.A. within the week, and once they do, I don’t think the school will survive. There won’t be any glory in taking the place down if the government does the job first.”

“You’re not the goddamn boss of us!” Mainichi shouted, voice cracking. Kizutatchi didn’t even look up. “Akane, please. These two are going to get us all killed. You can’t—”

“Shut the fuck up, Rajio,” she said mildly, and Mainichi did. Metalhead rose from the couch, staring Mirai down. “And now you listen. We’ll be hitting U.A., all right. But we’ll do it on my terms, with my plans. And to hell with Kyoumoto and Yuurei.”

Mirai asked, “What are you?”

“I’m the one who’s been doing all the work around here,” Metalhead retorted. “All these out-of-towners kiss your ass, the news won’t shut up about you, but none of them know that you’ve just spent this whole time crying in a basement while I’m keeping us all alive. What did you think this was going to be like? You’re not just walking around Mosei breaking windows for shits and giggles anymore, you stupid brat! Kyoumoto’s gone, Yuurei hates your guts, and without us the heroes and the government will jump on you and drag you right back into the hole where you—”

It was as though they had all been standing inside a paper bag that had been blown up and burst. A single mammoth thunderclap of sound that shook the building down to its foundation and raised every head for blocks. Mainichi recoiled with arms over his face; Kizutatchi fumbled and almost dropped his phone; Takenoko remained in his corner, unblinking. Metalhead, now whey-faced, stood with her back to the clear blue sky. The entire far half of the room had been annihilated, its detritus pattering on the concrete far below. The couch blasted into two pieces and flung out bleeding its stuffing. She stood on an outcropping of hardwood that creaked like a pirate ship’s plank. It bent dangerously under her weight but she couldn’t move. Stepping back would send her down a five-story drop. And in front was Mirai, advancing.

“What are you?” asked Mirai. “What are you? What are you? What are you? What are you? What are you?”

Mainichi’s knees tensed, ready to lunge, but Metalhead held out her hand.

“Don’t move,” Metalhead said. “All of you stay where you are.”

“You’re an echo.” Mirai’s hair twitched in the fresh breeze, brushing against her bandages. “That’s
all. You’re something I shouted out. That’s why no one cares for you. Who pays attention to what’s already been said? I was the speaker. The shattered places are mine. That is where you stand.”

Metalhead’s mouth twisted into something between a smile and a snarl. “Whatever you say, you crazy bitch.”

“Yes. Whatever I say. My words break the world into shape. And we are going to that school. Everybody you have. Every direction at once. Crush it completely. The last safe place. Ruin it all.” Spittle flecked her chin. “Then we can all start again. Even you.”

“I’ll put out the call,” Kizutatchi said calmly. “It’ll take a little while for us to get ourselves organized, though. We can move out the day after tomorrow.”

“I reject every tomorrow. They have no claim on me.” Below, people had started shouting – they could see Metalhead on the precipice.

“Then go ahead and try,” Metalhead said. She didn’t flinch, even as the floorboards threatened the crack. “I guess we’ll see just how far that Quirk takes you in the end.”

“It’ll take us all.” She finally turned away. “All of us will rise above. I promise.”

She shuffled out of the room. Metalhead stayed put. Her legs seemed paralyzed. Then Mainichi crept forward and offered his hand, and she took it and half-stepped, half-fell off the plank and into the room proper. She could feel herself bleeding from numerous splinters.

“Here we are,” Takenoko said.

“Everyone get the hell out,” Metalhead said hoarsely. “I want to be alone.”

Mainichi was the last to go and he left rubbing his scalp furiously. Even with his antenna down he thought he could hear it – the frenzied mob of voices, in ecstasy over the coming destruction.

*         *         *

The signals had always tortured him.

Mainichi’s Quirk had set off red flags the day it had been diagnosed. It wasn’t as handy for spying as something like Shin Yuurei’s “Incognito,” but with the flick of a finger he could become privy to every private communication for blocks around. Quirk counseling for him had been iron in velvet, gentle admonishments about respecting others’ privacy coupled with foreboding descriptions of Japan’s surveillance laws. That thin, fragile rod of retractable alloy, sitting in his skull like a tick, had turned him into a pariah. Other kids his age were on their phones constantly; they wanted nothing to do with someone who could eavesdrop on them all. His weight problem didn’t help matters. And so came about the usual, self-fulfilling conclusion – without anyone to turn to, he started using his Quirk more and more, retreating into the banal babble of other people’s lives.

He didn’t spread rumors but it didn’t matter in the end. He’d survived, more or less, until high school, and then someone saw or thought they saw him with his antenna up and decided to get a few friends together and rectify the situation permanently. He’d been ambushed in the men’s room by four kids, one with bolt cutters, and they’d thrown him down and pinned him in place and stuffed rags in his mouth to muffle the screams. He’d still struggled loud enough for someone to hear. She’d ducked into the bathroom next door for a smoke, and the acrid stink of it had followed her in as she’d stepped up behind the boys. Mainichi remembered hearing one of them ask what she was doing here and that’s all they had managed to say. Blood on the walls. Porcelain shrapnel scattered amidst bloody teeth.
He’d glimpsed Akane Kitae time and again since middle school but never got close to her – she was one of those people for whom it seemed impossible to get close, a jagged scrawl of “Here Be Dragons” on the social map. Surly, silent, and constantly suspended for her ever-growing personal galaxy of piercings, she nevertheless had a rattlesnake poise that made bullies reluctant to torment her too much. But after she’d dealt with the would-be amateur surgeons who had pinned Mainichi down, he wouldn’t leave, even after she told him to get lost before the teachers and the cops showed up. He’d watched her wash the blood off her hands with awestruck eyes.

“I’ve had enough of this shit,” she’d said, twisting off the faucet. “You wanna go?”

His own parents hadn’t been much use. They worked in advertising and were seldom home. Sometimes he wondered if they’d hoped he would just disappear into a river somewhere and spare them the distraction.

“Then let’s go,” she’d said, and that was that.

They had retreated into the outskirts of Musutafu, where U.A.’s shadow buried everything. Kitae, now Metalhead, had been stoked to finally put her Quirk to full use, and Mainichi listened to the police blotters until his skull vibrated, always keeping them one step ahead of the law. Some days he’d thought they could run forever. Him trotting in the footprints she left behind.

Now the path was lost and the air was full of poisonous noise. He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t think. Kizutatchi had texted throughout their entire meeting, even during Mirai’s tirade. Signals that Mainichi couldn’t hear and couldn’t track. He didn’t know what messages were being sent but like a magic spell they always made someone disappear. And now Mirai had broken loose as well, thinking that she could batter down U.A.’s gates as easily as she’d derailed that train.

He thought that if he’d been able to speak to Metalhead last night, tell her of the conversation he’d heard between Horooka and Yuurei, this all could have been prevented. Or at least delayed, until the Ministry destroyed U.A. for them and finally freed them of this fatal obligation. So it was equal parts fear and guilt that drove him to wait until nightfall, grab a duffel bag and fill it with whatever supplies he could pull out of his stolen apartment’s cabinets, and rush down the stairs for the exit, throat in a vicegrip, chest full of thunder.

But even then, he wasn’t surprised when he saw her waiting for him.

She was beside the apartment building’s entrance, her cigarette a single bright spark. The hallway lights had been broken – by her? by Horooka? everything was going darker these days – and what could be seen of her face in that bloody light was unreadable.

“It’s late,” she said. Her voice was a ragged croak.

“I know,” Mainichi answered. He descended the last few stairs and stood across from her. He had to grip the banister to stay on his feet.

“Had a hunch I’d see you down here eventually. Glad to know I was right about something else today.” Her cigarette flared. “We’re finally about to storm U.A., and you flake out on me now?”

“Call it off. I know you can.”

“I can’t. This is moving by itself now.” She sighed. “There’s so many these damn outsiders. Seems like they all answer to Kizutatchi these days. I’m getting outnumbered.”

“I kept telling you. You can’t trust him. I’ve been listening for him day after day but I can’t hear anything. He’s hiding from you.”
We still want the same thing, in the end. Which is apparently more than I can say for you."

"Please come with me, Akane. Let’s just run. You said it yourself, everyone’s paying attention to Horooka instead. We can go somewhere else. Start over."

"Start what?" She hissed out smoke. "Face it, Rajio, we always going to be dead-enders. I never planned to live that way for long. One way or another. All I can do now is try to hold this plan together for as long as possible. And now, here you are."

The smell was making him gag. The air was soupy with it. Her cigarette did a slow orbit around her mouth and he caught a glimpse of her eyes. They were half-lidded, dull as stones.

"You’re the single biggest liability here, you know," she said. "You were in on all our meetings. You’ve probably got dirt on everyone around here stupid enough to make a phone call. Where are you gonna go, if you skip town? The heroes? The cops?"

"I wouldn’t."

"You would. Because you’re not stupid. It’s the only way you could get out of this alive." She put her hand in her pocket. "God, it’s been a long day."

She advanced on him. The click of her shoes on the linoleum was like a pistol hammer drawing back. Mainichi’s guts were hot and loose and his eyes were watering, but he clenched his teeth and pushed away from the banister, staring her down.

“So this is how it ends,” he said.

She walked up to him. And walked past him.

“Probably,” she said. “But not here.”

Mainichi heard her exhale. He didn’t turn around. He couldn’t seem to move at all.

“I can buy you a couple of hours with our people, but I can’t make any promises with Kizutatchi’s,” she said. "Ditch the bag, it makes you look too obvious. And stay away from the highways and from U.A., they’ve got eyes on all those places. Stick to the alleys, keep your antenna up, and get to Takodana. Go to the cops. They’re your only chance."

When she had saved him in that bathroom he’d blubbered like an infant at her feet. He felt himself about to do that now, but he choked back his tears as best he could. He turned to face her, his sunken cheeks shining greasily in the wasted light.

“I knew it was a trap,” he said. "I heard Horooka calling Yuurei last night. I was going to tell you but she caught me eavesdropping. I was too scared."

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Oh, Akane.” He was sobbing now. “I wish we’d never met that girl.”

“Yeah. But you know what?” She flicked away her cigarette and leaned forward, so her own lined and exhausted face was clear, and then pushed up the corners of her sagging mouth. “For some reason, I’ve never felt better.”

That was all he could take. He threw the bag at her feet like an offering and ran out the door. Above was the jagged mouth of the hole Mirai had blown in the apartment wall; the street was an exhibition
of debris, the broken glass and bent picture frames and dim outline of the couch like a curled corpse. He pulled up his antenna and winced as the din of voices stabbed into his head. Then he turned the corner and ran, into the predatory night.

* * *

Metalhead had understandably moved out of the apartment that Mirai had demolished, but it hadn’t stayed empty. After the building doors had all shut and the halls had gone quiet, its new resident had gone up there. He sat at the edge of the smashed wall, his feet dangling over empty space. The searing light of his phone screen was sleet with messages.

Kizutatchi hadn’t seen Mainichi flee but he’d gotten the news fast. All news came to him quickly, these days; his fingertips jumped and skittered around the screen, never remaining still for long lest his Quirk trigger and split the phone in two. Every breeze numbed his bare skin but he paid it little mind. It was worth the view.

His messages went dark. The phone buzzed in his palm. He raised an eyebrow, then answered the call.

“Kizutatchi. We got another one.”

“I said not to do this over the line. Messages only.”

“Does it really matter anymore?”

“Guess not.” The wind picked up and he tugged his hood lower. “Just take care of it like the others. We’ll have to pull an all-nighter.”

“I think you’re gonna want to be here for this one.”

“Why?”

“Just come. We’re sending you the address now.”

“Fine,” he said. “Give me a little bit. Something I have to do first.”

“He’s not going anywhere.”

He hung up and stood and retrieved something neatly folded on the floor behind him. A bolt of fabric rendered anonymous in the lightless room that he draped over his arm like a waiter’s towel. He left the apartment and descended the stairs. None saw him pass. No open doors anymore; anyone who still remained in this building after Mirai’s outburst had locked themselves up tight. He went to the first floor and then lower, where the cellar entrance stood ajar, revealing a stripe of shadow so deep it seemed to leak. He prepared a message on his phone and then pushed the door open and went in.

These apartments were newer, cleaner. Their boilers ran with a contented hum. There was little noise to be found here and so when he ventured deeper into the impenetrable blackness he tilted his head at the sound beneath the machinery’s monotone. A low, meaty, metronomic thump. He glassed the room with his phone screen until its glow showed what he was looking for. Mirai knelt on the ground, hands clamped over the headphones on her ears. There was a dark stain on the floor in front of her and when she looked up and that single eye transfixed him, shining like that of a rodent caught mid-scavenge, he saw the open wound on her head. She’d been banging it against the floor, a lacerating prayer. He waited a moment, relishing the rise in his pulse, and when it appeared that he wasn’t going to die he walked up to Mirai and crouched down, phone held out. Words blinked on
He offered her the cloth on his arm. She stared at it for a long time and then took it, felt the presence of stitches, sleeves and hem. Its bruised purple hue was clear in the screen’s glow. It wasn’t an exact replica of her old coat, but it was close enough. Kizutatchi had scoured half of Kashiki to find something similar. He composed another message, and then showed it to her.

> There’s something sewn into the lining. Right where your heart would be.

> It’ll make you stronger. For a little while.

> You can use it for U.A. if you want.

She touched the contours of a syringe sewn into the coat’s lining. The fogged liquid inside was the color of rusty water. She looked back to Kizutatchi and saw nothing. His hood was up and the shadow over his face was so complete that his head was a hole.

> It’s our secret, ok?

He rose and left without waiting for a response, but as he swung the door shut he heard the rustle of cloth and the hitching of breath as Mirai clutched the coat to herself and softly wept.

A city altogether changed. These buildings rendered into silent hulks somehow far grander than they had ever been, temples in worship of something for which there was not yet a name. He walked the streets’ dividing lines and breathed in this new strangeness. The wind was tinged with promises of snow.

As he approached the address that had been sent to him he saw the cracks and clawmarks in the asphalt leading to an alleyway mouth. He rounded the corner and stepped over a slumped body whose face was a red mask. The stone of the walls was malformed, bearing growths like grasping hands. At the other end was the cursing of a familiar voice. Shadowed figures stood to attention at his approach.

“ Took you long enough,” one of them said.

There were three of them, all young men. One was burly and had mottled grey skin like a badly forged blade, another was squatting low to the ground and had a forehead so harshly jutted that it buried his eyes in darkness. The third, the one who had spoken to him, was a blade-faced boy who wore something like a janitor’s jumpsuit and had forearms grey with ash. Kizutatchi had dealt with him before in his prior life. He’d kept things clean, for a price, but now he was working pro bono.

The wall behind them had more of those limblike growths, grasping arms that had gripped a struggling body tight. The captive’s scaly carapace glinted in the streetlights beyond – it was Hadakai, the crustacean youth who’d first accompanied Kizutatchi to Musutafu.

“ Is that Kizutatchi?” he cried. “Hey, Yori! Tell these dipshits to let me go already!”

“ We lost a guy to this bastard,” grunted the stone-skinned man. “He’s tougher than he looks.”

“ He’s always been a survivor.” Kizutatchi said. “Is that ironic, Hadakai?”

Hadakai’s struggles stopped. “Huh?”
Kizutatchi stepped in front of him. The look in his eye was pitying. Hadaki made a weak, punctured sound at the sight of it.

“No,” he said. “No way, man, come on. I’d never rat on you guys. You don’t have to do this!”

“You’re deeper in this than almost anyone else here. You’ve been to Metalhead’s meetings and everything. How do you think it would look if you got away now?” He sighed. “You picked a bad time for this.”

“There’s no better time to get the hell out! I heard what happened with Horooka. We’ll get mulched if we just charge at U.A. the way she wants!” He strained against his bonds but the stony arms didn’t budge. “Look, I was fine with what you’d been doing before, taking out anybody who didn’t wanna go along with Metalhead was a good move, but I’m not a traitor. I just don’t wanna die!”

“You still don’t understand,” Kizutatchi said.

The wind picked up again and in these close quarters it ripped across them all like a bandsaw. Kizutatchi’s hood ruffled; the face beneath was gentle, unlined. He looked no different than he had since the day he’d come to Musutafu.

“We’re changing things,” he said to Hadakai. “There will always be people who fight us. Heroes, police. But the real problem is the ones who are comfortable with staying still. They come to the dead end and lean against it and rest, and they become another obstacle to break through. You don’t want to die? Then what kind of life do you think you would have lived, if you’d gotten away? Would your death have been any better than this?”

“Yori, please!” Hadakai’s tears were flowing freely now, dripping down his craggy face. “We’ve known each other since we were kids!”

“But we’re not kids anymore,” he said patiently. “And we’re not the only ones who have changed, either. Nothing is the way it was.”

He tugged off his gloves. Hadakai tried to scream for help but the stone-skinned man clenched a fist and the arms over Hadaki’s chest squeezed the air out of him. He could only whimper as Kizutatchi pressed the middle and pointer fingers of one hand to his rough throat.

“I remember you telling me you had a sister around here,” he said. “You want me to let her know what happened to you?”

“Please,” he sobbed. “Please.”

“Yeah, you’re right. It’s better if she doesn’t know.”

He swiped across Hadakai’s neck and his body jerked as a deep black furrow opened up beneath Kizutatchi’s touch. His blood gushed and pooled at his feet and Kizutatchi stood and watched until the gurgling sounds ceased and the body was finally still. Then he put his gloves back on and turned to face the others.

“Does anyone have gum?” he asked. They shook their heads. “Damn. Just take care of this one like the others. And keep an eye out for Mainichi.”

“He’s long gone by now,” said the blade-faced boy. “I bet Metalhead’s guys are helping him, too. Fatass coward.”

“She’s slipping,” the stony man grunted.
“She’s tired,” Kizutatchi said. “Take him out if you see him, but no fighting with Metalhead’s friends. We’re already on shaky ground after what happened this morning. I don’t want a civil war right before we hit U.A.”

“What about after?”

“We’ll deal with that when it comes,” he said. “Let’s just get Horooka where she needs to be. She’s the only one who can pull this off.”

“She must be pretty fucked up,” said the ashy man. “After Yuurei double-crossed her and everything.”

“It probably wasn’t him,” said Kizutatchi.

“Huh?”

“Heard a rumor that Shigaraki’s got a shape-shifter on hand. Wouldn’t be surprised if he decided to bring them along instead of taking a chance with Yuurei himself. But she doesn’t need to know that.” He glanced behind him and stepped away before the spreading blood could reach his shoes. “Especially now that she’s finally motivated.”

They all stared as he walked past them and to the other end of the alley, into the wide and empty road.

“We don’t stop,” he said. “Do the job until the job’s done.”

The ashy man nodded and put his hands to Hadakai’s corpse. A greyness spread from his touch and the suspended body too became colorless and indistinct. A minute later and it was powder, blowing away in the bitter wind. So it had gone for many of the voices Mainichi had heard fall silent. Bodies in the air, bodies flowing down the gutters, bodies pulled down and merged with the very foundations of the city. The architecture of Musutafu was now suffused with ghosts. There was no place quite like this.

Dead-enders. That was what Hadakai had called them, how Metalhead herself had described this grim and disparate army. But when Kizutatchi had witnessed the elevated train fly off the rails and collapse in its grinding din of steel and flame, something had opened up within him. The dead end had cracked. Behind was a lovely and creeping dark hiding something that he would have otherwise never known. If the birthplace of heroes fell, he knew that wall would collapse with it and he would at last see the shattered world to come. His phone buzzed and buzzed, the sound of a pupating anarchy that would soon swarm over the civilized remnants of this city and turn it all to rubble.

*             *             *

There is an itching a buzzing a scraping all within me   Will not go no matter how I grind   Must I crack the bone to drain it out   Cannot hear  see  find myself   Where have I   Where have I broken broken so broken so broken so oh so so broken

Nowhere to go   But if you go nowhere long enough you must end up where you were   Sense it makes sense it must   Second verse same as the first   I can’t  won’t be this way forever   So broken broken oh so

I know what must be done

Shin Shin what came over you   In that moment what was that strangeness in your scars   What mark
did the pale hands man leave on you  What sounds did he whisper into your ears  You were not the one I knew  But you too will be returned

I remember the sounds

The brilliant rattle of steel on my skull  The living world just beyond that door  As we three sat within that truck stinking with our freedom  It was the beginning of everything

My first mistake  Not killing you all when I had the chance

Little Koh dearie-oh behind those tall tall walls  I will pull him from that school’s steaming guts  Make him scream until you come to answer  Then the three of us will again be together  And I will once again be as I was  And we will all be healed  And my mistakes will not be repeated  And I will rise heavenward once again  And I will hear the living silence beyond  And I will

This awful noise

All of you sing along

Hear now this rotted melody within me  This buzzing howling ocean where the tide never goes out  The voice of this unbearable unbroken world  Raise your voices in chorus  Scream one another deaf  You can run or hide or try to fight but this song  this song  this song will always find you  This song is right beside you  This song will never leave you

Now everybody-
Chapter 26

The next day brought a frigid gray light that lay on the city like a shroud. Takodana Ward still hadn’t succumbed to the deprecation that the rest of Musutafu had suffered, despite the steady influx of refugees forced northward by Metalhead’s march, but the icy dawn and the foul weather still left everything muted, stripped, like a house long vacated – the greenery on the plazas and footpaths all withered, the shopfront advertisements somehow more drab. Nevertheless, life went on; the streets bustled with commuters, and one woman in particular clacked briskly down the sidewalk.

She wore a bark-colored woolen overcoat and a heavy scarf, and her thick black hair was brushed over one eye; the actual person under all that garb was hard to see, but the thin visible slice of her face was youthful and her one eye was sharp and alert. That eye darted about, scanning everyone she passed. They all looked like normal pedestrians but even as they talked and laughed or perused their phones or waited at the stoplights there was a sick undercurrent of suspicion in all those faces. Metalhead might not have actually attacked this ward, huddled as it was behind U.A.’s campus, but her forces had poisoned it all the same. At this point hardly anyone doubted that some of her people weren’t skulking in Takodana, waiting for their chance to strike. Her tendrils reached everywhere.

The woman stopped at a corner and waited for the light to change. She watched the high windows around her.

Musutafu’s police headquarters was located here, a brutalist chunk of concrete and glass bristling with security cameras. When the woman paused at its front doors she felt a bristling on the back of her neck. She was being watched, all right. The only question was by whom.

The interior was a cacophony of ringing phones and patient-but-harried voices and the waiting area was mobbed to the point where it looked like the beginnings of a homeless encampment. Some of the people here were refugees, some were Takodana residents, and the animosity between these two groups was apparent; the woman stepped through resentful stares like tripwires. She breezed past them all and up to the front desk, where one paunchy and bewhiskered officer gave her a look that said: unless you’re ten seconds away from bursting into flames, I don’t have time for you.

She gave it a shot anyway.

“Good morning, officer,” she said, leaning on the counter. “I’m here to see Chief Mokikara.”

“He hasn’t said anything about you, ma’am,” the officer said – she was impressed by how well he held onto his patience. “Whatever it is you need, you’re going to have to take a number like all the others.”

“It’s a bit of a secret.” She tapped the side of her nose. “Just give him a ring, will you? Tell him Nemu’s waiting.”

After a long moment, the officer sighed, swiveled away, and grabbed a phone. The ensuing conversation was hushed and brief, and when he swiveled back, he’d gone wide-eyed and wheedling.

“Er, yes. Sorry, miss. What with everything happening at U.A., I wasn’t expecting-”

“Shh.” She put a finger to his lips. “Walls have ears. Where can I see him?”

“Downstairs. In the cells. Do you need an escort?”
“You’re a dear, but I can find my own way. Hang in there, okay? This’ll all be over soon.” She stepped behind the desk and further into the station. “One way or another.”

As she walked she pulled away her scarf and swept back her hair, and the officers she passed who weren’t busy enough to disregard her entirely recognized her well enough to nod and let her go on her way. She passed the desks groaning under paperwork and gibbering ranks of telephones and into a stairwell, and the sounds quieted and the walls became cold cinderblock as she descended. When she entered the holding area, she smiled at that familiar, forbidding, simian face.

“Goro,” she said. “Always a pleasure.”

Police Chief Goro Mokikara frowned as only a gorilla could. “Funny thing, Midnight, but I’m not feeling too pleased.”

Around two a.m. that morning, Nezu (who no longer appeared to sleep at all) had woken up Midnight with the news. A patrol car trundling through Takodona had been stopped by a hysterical young man who’d all but thrown himself into the windshield, begging to be taken into custody; the officer in question had thought at first he’d just been drunk, until he’d calmed down long enough to introduce himself as Rajio Mainichi, a major figure in Metalhead’s army. His apprehension had been swift after that, not in the least because Mainichi had made it very clear that his former allies were out for his blood. When Mokikara had gotten the news he’d sealed Mainichi in a holding cell and dialed U.A. at once, because now his station had a building-sized bullseye painted on its side. Even with all the school’s troubles, he reasoned, it would be better-suited to safeguarding their new prisoner than his own forces.

Nezu had agreed. He’d put Midnight on the task, asking her to get whatever information possible out of Mainichi and then escort him back to the school. She’d accepted the task and slept poorly the rest of the night, because even though she was eager to finally do something constructive after all this hiding away, there were now certain risks to being a hero on the streets of Musutafu.

“How’s your new guest doing?” she asked.

“Poorly. He wouldn’t eat his breakfast.” Mokikara cast a fretful look down the prison corridor. “I’ll tell you now, Midnight – when you talk to this kid, give your usual schtick a rest. He’s not in the mood.”

“Neither am I,” she said. “Has he told you anything?”

“He could barely put two words together when he got here. I didn’t want to push him any further.”

She believed him. Japan’s police force was far from perfect – there was constant friction between them and the Hero Association, more than ever since All Might had retired – but Mokikara had a reputation as a good egg, especially when it came to interrogations. His Quirk gave him an unexpected edge when it came to questioning people, because nothing could express stern sympathy, quiet doubt, or cosmic disappointment quite like a gorilla, and a few days’ quiet conversation with most criminals was enough to crack their defenses. He tried to instill the same gentle, subtle methods in his men, and came down hard on anyone who attempted violence or blackmail. If he was being this sympathetic towards Mainichi, then the kid couldn’t be all bad.

“All right,” she said. “Take me to him. And keep an eye outside.”

“You got an exit plan?”

“Out the front door and down the street. There’s not much room to be sneaky here. We’ll just have to
hope for the best.”

He grunted and gestured for her to follow. The holding cells consisted of ranked and vacuum-sealed steel doors with electromag deadlocks, an unfortunate necessity in an age where prisoners could turn to liquid or gas on a whim. There was apparently a growing market for Quirk-suppressant gear that was supposed to be more humane, but walking down this hall, Midnight couldn’t help but shudder. It gave her flashbacks to Nakayama’s presentation of the Yard.

“This is it,” said Mokikara. He took out a keycard.

“Goro. One other thing.”

“What is it?”

“Thanks for coming to us first. I know that U.A. hasn’t been putting our best foot forward lately, but—”

“Don’t insult my intelligence,” he snapped. “And have a little more self-respect. U.A.’s been helping to keep the peace in this city from the beginning. I’m on your side no matter what that little pukestain of a minister says. To the bitter end.” He swiped the card and the door unlocked. “Mainichi! You got a visitor.”

He let her in and shut the door behind her. She took in the sorry sight. Huddled on the cot in the corner of the cell was a man like an ill-sculpted figurine, his features pinched and misshapen; from the way his clothes hung on him, he must have lost a staggering amount of weight, and as Mokikara had said, his breakfast rice was on the floor, stone-cold and untouched. His face was stubbly and crusted with dried blood from nose to chin. She didn’t want to step further into the room. She feared the least movement would give him a heart attack on the spot.

“Who’re you?” he whispered.

“Midnight,” she said. “From U.A. High School. Chief Mokikara asked us to speak with you.”

He blinked. “You’re…I didn’t know.”

“Well, that’s why they sent me.” She smiled. “Most of my co-workers are pretty noticeable even out of costume. Me, not so much. Rajio Mainichi, right? Can I call you Rajio?”

“No,” he said, harsh enough to wipe the smile off her face. “I’m sorry. Don’t want to sound rude, but…no. Not that.”

“Alright. Don’t worry. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“I know. I know.” He took a deep breath and bowed his head; she saw something silvery glinting beneath his hair. “So why’re you here?”

“First things first.” She walked forward and leaned against the wall opposite Mainichi’s cot. “I’m assuming that you’re no longer a part of Akane Kitae’s forces?”

“Yeah. I left. I got out. Akane, s-she—”

“Shh, you don’t have to explain yourself. That’s all I need to know. We’re going to get you somewhere safe. Out of Musutafu.”

“But first you want to ask me questions, right?”
“That’s the idea. But if you don’t feel like talking, that’s fine too. I won’t just leave you here.”

“Yeah. Whole station’s in danger with me around, isn’t it?” He gulped and raised his head. “It’s fine. I’ll talk. Whatever you want.”

“Just like that?” she asked.

“I was with Akane from the start. So I know how bad things have gotten. Horooka, and Takenoko, and Shigaraki, and that fucking psychopath Kizutatchi, they’re all…they keep making things worse…”

“That’s a lot of names,” she said, and her pulse jumped at the mention of Shigaraki’s. “We should be fine in here for a while. Why don’t you tell me your side of the story. It might help calm you down.”

“Okay. I’ll try.”

His speech was stammering and distracted, and he had to start over several times. He’d first told her about the train crash, Horooka slowly raising her hand as if to crush the horizon itself, then stopped and backtracked to their encounter with Horooka outside the Mosei-Santo apartment, and then even further, to Dabi’s murder of their friends, the genesis of Metalhead’s grudge. That seemed to do it – he traced the thread of her hate all the way to the end, from their alliance with Horooka to the heroes’ raid on Mosei-Santo and the growing alliance between them and the scattered criminals of Japan, and then to both of Shigaraki’s visits, the first one foreboding, the second disastrous. But even more than Shigaraki, he focused on Yori Kizutatchi, spitting the name with more venom every time he said it.

His story ended with Metalhead letting him go, and his furtive, terrified trip into the taken-over wards. He’d used his Quirk the whole time, even when he’d started getting woozy from the freshets of blood bursting out of his nose; at several points he’d been sure he’d been less than a block away from Kizutatchi’s people, all of them looking to shut him up before he could get to safety. At this point he was clutching himself tight and rocking back and forth like a child. His face was too old and too young at the same time, wet with tears, resting uneasy on his skull. It was an expression Midnight had seen far too often in recent months.

“I think that’s enough,” she said.

“Okay,” he croaked. His voice had been rasped down to almost nothing. Midnight asked if he needed water and he shook his head. Then something else occurred to her.

“I heard Eraserhead complaining about Kitae every now and then,” she said. “He was always pissed off how she kept evading the authorities. He figured she had a whole network of informants keeping her one step ahead of us. But it was just you, all this time?”

“I just listen. That’s all. It gets easier with practice, same as anything.” He rubbed his scalp where the antenna rested. “I can still hear them. Especially after Kizutatchi started getting his way, and everyone started dying…”

“There’s that name again. Who is he, exactly?”

“I don’t know. He’s just this guy from out of town. But it all started going wrong after Akane let him in. Even more than Horooka.” He locked eyes with Midnight and she almost flinched at that feverish glare. “You have to watch out for him. Horooka’s crazy, but Kizutatchi…Akane always hated Shigaraki but he’s just as bad. He pretends like he wants to help, but then you let him in and he poisons everything…”

“All right. It’s all right,” she said soothingly. “I’ll let the school know. For now, we’ve got to get you
Midnight bit her lip. “I get that you two have history. But half this city’s in ruins because of her and Horooka. You can’t chalk that up to a couple of bad influences.”

“I know what people thought about her,” he said quietly. “I could hear what the police said, when they were looking for us. She really got under their skin. But she was the only one who figured it out.”

“Figured out what?”

“That no one was going to help us,” he said. “Not ever. Heroes can’t save everyone, I get that. I was just some loser in high school, so who was ever going to save me? But I never would’ve had the guts to just…walk away from it. Akane did. She showed us there was another way to live. Even if it wasn’t much, and it wouldn’t last, it was enough for me.” He stared at the floor. “But I guess it wasn’t enough for her. She must have been tired of staying quiet for so long.”

Midnight said nothing. She thought of the noise ripping through the city, that nightly thunderstorm, growing ever closer.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do,” Mainichi said. “What should I do?”

“I wish I could tell you,” Midnight replied. “But you might have more friends than you think. I assume you know about Horooka’s history.”

“The Yard, right?”

“Nakayama decided to share all the details with us,” she said acidly. “In all his wisdom. You might be right that there’s no place for you, the way things are. But things can’t be allowed to stay this way anymore. I’m still not sure how we can change it, but this can’t go on.” She turned to the door. “Let’s start by getting you out of here. U.A. has secondary exits across half of Musutafu. Once we get to campus, smuggling you out of the city will be easy.”

She hammered on the door and the bolt drew back. Mokikara poked his head in. “You done?”

“We’re done. Anything on your end?”

“Haven’t seen or heard anything suspicious around the station.” He glanced at Mainichi. “Give that one a chance to wash and shave before he heads out. He looks like death warmed over. I got some clothes out of the lost-and-found that ought to fit him better, too.”

“Thanks,” Mainichi said timidly.

Mokikara grunted. “You sure you’re gonna be okay, Midnight? I can give you a ride. Or a plainclothes escort, at least.”

“We’d be sitting ducks in a squad car and your boys have been through enough already,” she said. “Don’t worry about me. I brought a little insurance policy of my own.”
Half an hour later she stepped out of the station with her scarf up and her hair swept down, Mainichi trailing in her wake. He was now wearing a shabby green windbreaker covered in suspicious but probably benign stains, and had a baseball cap pulled over his eyes, hiding his antenna. He slouched and fidgeted in a way that drew attention to himself, and Midnight told him so.

“Sorry,” he said. “I’m nervous.”

“I don’t blame you.” She kept her eyes forward. “But it’s still too conspicuous. If we are being trailed then they’re going to notice you looking all over the place. Just keep your eyes on me.”

“Yeah. Okay. Maybe they’ll think you’re my mom, or something.”

“Do I look that old? No, on second thought, don’t answer.”

She scanned the streets. Flecks of snow were drifting through the air but the pedestrians around them paid little attention. Mad-eyed pigeons stared from telephone wires and lampposts. Midnight had been seeing a lot of them lately, despite the weather; Present Mic had told her yesterday that after the school assembly Kouji Kouda had taken a particular interest in the ones on campus, gathering them up for reasons unknown. She did a better job of keeping her composure than Mainichi but she felt just as nervous as he was acting. A return to normalcy seemed impossible at this point. Everyone was drafting their own plans for war.

“You ever been up to this part of town?” she said, trying to keep her voice light.

“Not much. Mostly ‘cause of Akane. Her face would really stand out in a place like this.”

“Come on, you just got tossed in the pokey by a man with a gorilla’s head. Takes a lot to stand out these days.”

“Quirks are different,” he said. “You can’t help those. Her piercings, though, that was a choice. She always got in trouble for them at school and after she dropped out she kept piling them on.” Above them, the pigeons took flight. “I always kind of liked that about her. She wanted everyone to know exactly what she-”

Midnight turned and grabbed him by the collar and hurled him to the ground and as he fell he felt a cool puff of air kiss his cheek and heard a sharp crack as he struck the pavement; the world tilted and the falling snow stung his face and he saw the still-vibrating metal shaft quivering in the concrete wall just behind where he’d been standing, shot with enough force to bury half its twelve-inch length into the rock. From a third-story window across the street there came a scream and a flailing shape but Midnight couldn’t pay it any mind, there was someone standing still among the fleeing mob of pedestrians, a scruffy-bearded trenchcoated edifice of a man around whom the crowd flowed like a stream past a sharp rock, and his midsection bulged and tore and burst open like ill-treated cloth and from the hole he had become poured another four men and one woman as the man who’d carried them here fell limp and deflated and breathing shallow.

Their faces were grimly set; they prepared to unleash their own Quirks, sharp appendages bulging from one assassin’s wrists, a toxic sheen spreading across another’s hair. They didn’t get the chance. Midnight’s booteheels clacked and already she was upon them and the last thing they saw was her extended hand, her hanging sleeve, the glint of a nozzle from the darkness beneath her wrist, and then came five quick jets of pink mist and their bodies hit the ground like unstrung slabs of beef.

Midnight’s “Somnambulist” Quirk was infamously best-used in the nude, but she had ways of taking advantage of it even when layered up. Under her heavy coat was an apparatus that stored the soporific gas her body produced, concentrated it, letting her unleash it directly through the nozzles
stored in her sleeves. It wasn’t much good for area-of-effect attacks, but against this lot it was more than enough. The men collapsed instantly; the sole woman caught herself, teeth grit even as her eyelids fluttered, and what looked like a razor-edged mantis claw began to burst from her elbow before Midnight cupped a hand behind her head and primly drove a knee into the bridge of her nose, shutting off her lights for good.

Mainichi was screaming.

She turned and saw why. The street behind them was liquefying, reduced to dripping tar that made a hole maybe ten feet across, and from the hole burst six grotesquely long multi-jointed arms that each dangled more of these thugs like puppets; the arms dropped them onto the street, they latched onto the edges of the hole and pulled their owner up (a twitching form of indeterminate gender in a filthy smock, their hair covering the entirety of their head like a bizarre parasite) as the other assassins moved in. Mainichi scrabbled desperately across the pavement but couldn’t get to his feet. One burly man with a mouthful of grinning teeth sharp and misaligned as a moray eel’s suddenly charged, skating across the asphalt with chains that had manifested on his soles and chewed up the ground in his passing, more sharp chains revving down his arms as he bent low and reached out to Mainichi—and then something unseen struck the side of his head with such tremendous force that it launched him over Mainichi and down the sidewalk where he smashed through a shopfront window and lay twitching and insensate atop the scattered merchandise beyond. His fellows looked stunned for a second and a second was all that was needed; there came a series of thuds and snaps as they jerked and shuddered like people struck by lightning in quick succession, arms twisted and snapping, heads smashed into the ground before they could even find the breath to scream, and finally the spiderlike thug who had brought them here twitched and cried out as their arms were bundled behind them and their body was piledrived down into the street, where they lay covered by their splayed limbs and did not move again.

The whole affair had taken less than a minute. The snow fell gently on heaps of unconscious bodies. Midnight walked up to Mainichi, trying to get her heartbeat steady.

“Can you stand?” she asked. Mainichi whimpered something unintelligible. “Here. Let me help.”

With care, she got him to his feet. His knees were buckling and there was a tendril of spittle at the corner of his trembling mouth. Midnight figured it was probably a good thing he’d gone to the bathroom before leaving the station.

“You alright?” she said to the empty street.

To Mainichi’s further shock, someone materialized beside that melted hole. They were spindly, a full head taller than Midnight herself, and clad in a green camo bodysuit complete with a ruff of leafy material draped across their shoulders like a feather boa. The face was hidden behind a full mask and a pair of red-lensed goggles that turned from Midnight to Mainichi.

“Let me introduce you,” Midnight said to him. “This is Ghillie, the Camo Hero. Thought I could use a little bit of backup.”

“You thought right,” said Ghillie. Her voice was husky, faintly muffled behind her mask.

Midnight nodded. “Thanks for the assist. Uh, is that guy dead?”

“Who?” She turned and noted the sniper, still laying flat on the street where Ghillie had hurled him out the window. “Oh, him. No, he should be fine. Just three stories. Lucky he was the only ranged attacker.”
“You had it under control.”

“Barely. I’ve seen trained hit squads that weren’t coordinated this well. Town’s really gone to shit.” She stepped up to Mainichi. “Hey, kid. Maybe take a lesson away from all this. Little thing they don’t tell you about being a villain – it’s got a seriously crappy retirement plan.”

“Lay off him, Ghillie. He’s been through enough.”

“Whatever. I only came here so that when that jackass Snipe wakes up he can’t say I never did anything for you.”

“You going to keep watch over this bunch?”

“I already pinged Mokikara, he’ll deal with these assholes while I keep tailing you. But as soon as you reach U.A. I’m getting back to Kobe before this whole place explodes.” She gave a half-hearted salute. “Good luck with whatever you’re doing.”

Her bodysuit rippled, bled out its color, and was gone. Mainichi stood in place, fists clenched at his sides.

“She’s a prickly one,” Midnight sighed. She put a hand on Mainichi’s shoulder. “But she got there just in the nick of time.”

“Don’t touch me!”

He spun and smacked her hand away and she flinched, stepping back. His face was slick with tears and snot and there was an almost feral cast to his eyes; for a second Midnight was sure he would lunge at her, but instead he tore the hat off and clutched his head, fingernails digging into the scalp.

“You’re wrong,” he sobbed. “You’re too late. You’re always too late.”

Midnight pursed her lips. She looked at the gouged street, the sprawled bodies, the bolt embedded the wall, and couldn’t think of an answer.

* * *

While Midnight ran her errands, the students of U.A. had their own troubles. The whole country had their eyes on Metalhead and Horooka’s death march, and that included their parents. The already-overburdened faculty did what they could to smooth things over, but for the most part it was left to the students to keep their families from storming the campus’ gates themselves and dragging them away before Horooka made contact. It wasn’t an easy prospect. They still had to keep the M.o.I.’s atrocities a secret. Instead made appeals to the school’s reputation, to their friends’ safety, to their own budding careers as heroes. Many of them, to their acute disgust, found themselves falling back on what Monoma had said during the assembly – what good would they be if they ran away now? It would haunt them forever.

Eventually they were all successful in assuaging their parents – in the end, U.A.’s gates were still locked, and that defeated all arguments – but it was a mixed success. Kaminari had slunk by Midoriya’s room and overheard a mutually weepy conversation between him and Inko before plugging his ears and running off. Bakugo sent a single terse text to his own mother and then turned off his phone before she could respond. Kouda was so frazzled that his voice left him again; he’d put his laptop to facecam and frantically signed out his resolve to his sobbing parents.

Todoroki sat lotus in the middle of his floor, phone in his hand. He had been in this position for the last fifteen minutes. His scarred eye stared back at him from the black screen.
Finally, he dialed. It rang three times and then picked up.

“What is it, Shouto?”

His father never did bother with pleasantries.

“Am I interrupting anything?” he asked.

“I’m on patrol. I can walk and talk at the same time.”

Todoroki had kept his cool during Fuyumi’s visit, but when he’d first seen the news broadcasting Endeavor’s defeat and hospitalization at Horooka’s hands he’d been dearly grateful no one else had been in the room. The footage had been too blurry to make anything out, just the roaring flames and the sudden pounding blasts of force that for all he knew were reducing his father to pulp; he’d actually collapsed to his knees when the hysterical broadcaster had cried out that Endeavor was still alive. Now it seemed he’d rolled out of bed and gotten back to work as if nothing had happened. Todoroki felt a flutter of relief in his chest and pushed it away as hard as he could.

“Shouto. Are you there?”

“Yes. Sorry. I assume you’ve seen what’s happening at U.A.”

“I have.”

“I’m staying here. To defend the school grounds. I thought I should let you know.”

“Fine.”

Silence.

“That’s it?” Todoroki asked. “You don’t have anything else to say?”

“You made your choice. Are you asking me to criticize it?”

“No! I mean…it’s just…” He ran a quick hand through his hair. “Is this really all it took? Now that All Might’s gone, you don’t care what we do or what could happen to us?”

“My concern for your well-being is not relevant.” If the background noise was any indication, Endeavor had stopped walking. “Nor is my opinion on the choices you make. I think I’ve lost any right to manage your life at this point, wouldn’t you agree?”

He was dumbfounded. Of all the ways this call could have gone, he hadn’t expected this.

“I’ll ask you this much. As improbable as it seems, I assume you’re not planning to fight Horooka because of what happened to me?”

“No. It’s for the school. This place…it’s been good to me. Good for me. I don’t want to see it fall.”

“Then that’s where you make your stand,” said Endeavor. “This country is changing, Shouto. You were right about that much. The rankings, the hierarchy…it’s all become very quaint. I don’t mind telling you that the number one position tastes like ash in my mouth.”

“Are you saying that you feel guilty for what you did to us? To Mother?”

“I’m not going to make some big show of apology. I doubt you’d find it believable if I did. But I intend to keep moving forward nonetheless. If nothing else, I’m interested in seeing your own
growth, now that you’ve finally gotten away from me.”

He swallowed hard and steadied the phone against his ear. “I suppose that means we both need to stay alive.”

“Yes. Is there anything else?”

“Yes,” said Todoroki. “There is.”

“What is it?”

“Why is Nezu changing all the heroes’ patrol routes?”

Todoroki would have liked a pause, or a surprised grunt, or any indication at all that he’d caught his father off-guard. Instead Endeavor flatly said, “How’d you learn this?”

Even now, he could really be a bastard sometimes.

“When Fuyumi came by earlier, she said that someone from U.A. had been in touch. Then she talked about the changing routes. I just connected the dots. Nezu said that he cut us off from the Hero Association, but it doesn’t make sense for him to leave himself that vulnerable. It’s more likely that he’d bypass the central association and contact the hero agencies directly.”

“Mostly correct. Well done. But I can’t tell you any more.”

“Why not?”

“I made a promise,” he said. “It’s one that I’d really prefer not to keep, but the decision is out of my hands. Suffice to say that you and your classmates aren’t the only ones who have decided to put yourselves at risk. All of us are readying ourselves for what’s to come.”

Todoroki thought, This might be the last time we speak to each other.

He said, “Alright. Goodbye, Father.”

“Goodbye, Shouto.”

The call disconnected. Todoroki his phone, got up, and waited for his knees to stop wobbling. Despite everything, speaking with his father still made him tense up like spring steel. There weren’t many places left in U.A. to relax – the common area had been almost totally taken over by Yaoyorozu, who was holding constant palaver with a rotating cast of students while flipping through a tall stack of shabby and strangely familiar notebooks – but he thought a walk would help clear his head a little. He left his room, went down the stairs, went down another flight, and then stopped.

In the hallways outside the stairwell he could hear the percussion of pacing footsteps and a low, persistent mutter. Not Midoriya’s – this was more guttural, a sound like a shortening fuse. Only one person in this building had a voice like that.

Todoroki pushed open the door and found himself face-to-face with Bakugo, who couldn’t hide his shock quite fast enough.

“Good morning, Bakugo,” he said, diplomatically.

“Fuck do you want?” Bakugo said, characteristically.

“Just haven’t seen you around lately. And I’m pretty sure this isn’t your floor.” He peered beyond
Bakugo, down the hall. “Are you looking for someone?”

For a moment Bakugo looked ready to slug him, but then he growled and relented. “Was gonna drag Beak-Face out of his room to hit the books. Distract him from angsting over all this shit going down. I just… wanted to know if he was asleep or something, that’s it.”

“I see.”

“What, you got somethin’ to say about it!?”

“Only that you missed him,” Todoroki said. “We talked at breakfast. He was planning to get extra tutoring from Ectoplasm. He’s probably at his office right now.”

“Oh.” His scowl relaxed a millimeter. “Yeah, I guess that makes sense. Skull-headed prick’s probably the only one who can make time for us right now, with all the clones.”

“He seemed more relaxed. Tokoyami, I mean. If that means anything to you.”

Todoroki couldn’t quite read what happened to Bakugo’s expression then. His eyes narrowed, then he touched his brow like someone suffering a headache. “Was the sockpuppet staying quiet?”

“Dark Shadow? He didn’t come out when we talked, if that’s what you mean. Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Fuck it. I’m fine.” He lowered his hand. “Head’s all over the place. Anyway, if he ain’t here then I’m just wasting my time talking to your half-and-half ass. I’m plannin’ to be on the frontlines of this showdown with those Mosei-Santo losers whether this school wants me or not. Horooka’s due for a whole fuckload of payback.”

“Wait,” Todoroki said, as Bakugo started to leave. “I did want to ask you something.”

He glared over his shoulder. “Spit it out.”

“Assuming we all make it through this, have you found a school to transfer to? After your expulsion?”

Bakugo turned fully and the atmosphere took on a greasy, volatile feel that usually heralded his Quirk going off. “The fuck business is it of yours?”

“If you want, I can get my father to provide a recommendation. It’d guarantee enrollment wherever you chose. Don’t take it the wrong way,” he added, as murder flashed in Bakugo’s eyes. “This isn’t for charity or anything. I just thought it’d be nice if my family’s name was used for something worth a damn.”

That greasiness in the air receded a little. “I don’t need your help.”

“Probably not. But it wouldn’t hurt. And I still owe you for screwing up our fight at the sports festival.”

That actually got the corner of his mouth to twitch up. “Damn right you do.”

“Just think it over.”

“Doesn’t mean shit now anyway. Enrollment’s closed.” He huffed. “Only other place that ain’t packed even more full of d-listers than this one is that tightass shithole Shiketsu.”

“That one girl seemed laid-back enough. The one who was taking remedial lessons with us.”
“I guess. Whatever.”

“You’d probably look decent in their uniform too,” he said, the picture of innocence.

“I’ll light your other half on fire, smartass.” He shoved open the stairwell door. “Screw this. I’m going to the gym. Don’t get in my way when shit starts popping off.”

The door clacked shut. Todoroki was left alone in the empty hall. He checked his phone; he’d gotten a few more messages while talking with Bakugo.

> **FT:** dad just texted me
> **FT:** tbh i’m worried sick by all of this but I could tell last time we talked that you’ve made up your mind on everything
> **FT:** and I want to tell mom but don’t want her to freak out but she probably knows already but she can’t text you and yeah my brain’s going a mile a minute
> **FT:** basically what I’m saying is
> **FT:** I love you
> **FT:** kick some ass

> **NT:** Heard what you’re doing.
> **NT:** We’re all proud of you. Even the asshole, probably.
> **NT:** I’ll visit when it’s over.

Six months ago he’d been suffocating to death in his father’s shadow and treating everyone around him like pieces of unattractive furniture. Now All Might was gone, Endeavor was making some crippled attempt at being decent, he was preparing to lay his life on the line for people he’d just recently met, and he’d had a semi-civil conversation with Katsuki Bakugo. It was amazing how quickly things could change.

Outside, it had started to snow.

* * *

“We’ve got to stop meeting like this,” Present Mic drawled.

The teachers had assembled yet again, this time in the same conference room where they’d gathered after the Jon-X bombing, approximately one month and a million years ago. Present Mic absently slapped a thick folder on his palm; Power Loader’s claws scratched abstract patterns on the tabletop. Only Midnight, Hound Dog, and Nezu himself were absent.

Vlad King leaned forward. “Hey, All Might. Nezu tell you the latest about Nakayama?”

All Might shook his head.

“What, cat got your tongue?”

All Might shook his head again, and tapped his skinny throat.

“He’s saving his voice,” Recovery Girl added helpfully. “I’ve been burying him in lozenges all week.”

“Huh. Well, he did manage to call off that mob the other day. Try not to push yourself too hard.”

All Might gave him a long-suffering look.
The door opened and Nezu tottered in, followed by Midnight. The other teachers murmured their greetings as he pulled out his chair and clambered up. Midnight hadn’t had the time to change into her hero costume. She tossed her coat into the corner and sat down, the complex series of valves and tubes that controlled her gas-delivery weapon plain to see.

“So you finally got some use outta that thing,” Power Loader said. “Was it helpful?”

“It saved lives,” she said. “We were ambushed. If it wasn’t for Ghillie then Mainichi wouldn’t have made it.”

“And yet he did,” Nezu said crisply. “We just finished questioning him in the holding area beneath the school. Hound Dog is watching over him for now. After the events of our last meeting, he informed me that he did not wish to participate in this one today. Could someone fill him in after we’re done?”

“No problem,” said Vlad King. “He’s got nothing to be ashamed of anyway.”

“Down to business. We may now be certain that Akane Kitae and Mirai Horooka will be at our gates by tomorrow. According to Mainichi, Horooka has all but usurped Kitae’s alliance, eschewing any tactics in favor of a direct assault on the campus. I believe we can expect attacks on our other three flanks as well as the front gates, especially since we now know that Kitae has established a foothold in Takodana. We still lack details, but given our previous encounters with these villains, we can expect our assailants to number in the triple digits, possibly as many as several hundred.” He folded his paws; every face in the room was grim. “There was one member of this group that Mainichi seemed particularly fixated on. Present Mic?”

“Gotcha covered.” Present Mic flipped open the folder. “Yori Kizutatchi, age twenty-seven, born in Naruhata. His Quirk was flagged as potentially dangerous during registration – it’s one of those always-on tactile types, kinda like Ochako Uraraka’s except it slices things up instead of making ‘em float. His record’s clean through high school, but after he graduated it looks like he got involved with the Trigger trade. It was bigger in those days, right, Eraser?”

“A lot bigger,” Aizawa said. “There was one ongoing incident around Naruhata especially that involved random civilians being exposed to Trigger. I was involved, as was All Might.” All Might nodded. “After it concluded, Trigger faded from the streets for a while. The stuff had just become too hot for most gangs to bother with.”

“Yeah, it doesn’t look like Kizutatchi was involved with that mess, but he was caught up in the dragnet after the fact.” He turned another page and grimaced at what he saw. “When the cops pinched him and the rest of the people he was working with, it didn’t go so well. Seven officers and two of the suspects were found hacked to pieces, and Kizutatchi himself disappeared. I’ve got photos here, it ain’t pretty. After that his name popped up a few times on the wire in Yokohama, but never anything big. Fast forward to today, where he’s apparently one of Kitae’s lieutenants.”

“Mainichi says that he’s the one most responsible for the escalating violence in Kashiiki,” said Midnight.

“You wouldn’t know it from his dossier,” Present Mic said. “Looks like a typical small-time crook, except for that part where it goes all slasher-flick at the end.”

“Kitae herself isn’t much different,” said Aizawa. “The criminals are coming into their own. Becoming organized. The bad old days are here again.”

“I can’t guess at his intentions,” said Nezu. “But Horooka’s are quite clear. The annihilation of this
school, and the retrieval of Koh Kyoumoto. I doubt she’ll show us any quarter.”

Present Mic closed the folder. “Well, hey, it’s not all bad. Girl’s as subtle as a sledgehammer. If she’s just waltzing right up to us then we should have a fighting chance, right?” He looked at the downcast faces around him and sighed. “Alright, who wants to be the first to say I’m wrong?”

“This is the worst-case scenario,” Aizawa muttered.

“I’m with Eraserhead on this one,” Vlad King said. “If Horooka’s a sledgehammer, then this will be like trying to block a sledgehammer with your bare hands. We won’t get out unscathed. There will be casualties, and if our students choose to fight, then they’ll almost certainly be among them.”

“I’m not sure we can win without them,” Thirteen said timidly.

“And we can’t possibly flee,” said Recovery Girl. “I have one more dose of the serum left, but it’ll only buy him a few days at best. There’s no one else equipped to contain Koh’s Quirk, aside from those monsters in the Ministry of Individuality.”

“That’s the other thing,” Aizawa said. He tugged his capture tape like it was choking him. “This won’t end with Horooka, even if we win. Nakayama will swoop in and hold up every corpse as proof of our incompetence. There have always been certain voices in the government who disliked the Hero Association’s autonomy, and after that idiot shared everything about the Yard with us, they’ll be more eager than ever to shut us up.”

“You’re making it sound like this is the end of hero work,” Present Mic said uneasily.

“It’s a tipping point. After All Might retired, this country was bound to change. It’s only a matter of who grips the reins first. When the dust clears, that will almost certainly be Nakayama. He’ll use the war at our gates as proof that heroes can no longer be allowed their independence. Every agency will be absorbed by the State. They’ll dictate the work we do and punish anyone who steps out of line. And after that, who knows where things will go. We may have facilities like the Yard opening all across Japan.” He paused. “I don’t see any way out.”

A funereal silence descended on them. Nezu had bowed his head, eyes closed. Several of the teachers turned to him and still he didn’t move. Cementoss spoke up, hesitantly.

“Sir, are you feeling all-”

Nezu held up a paw, cutting him off, and then put it down again. More time passed. The snow pressed up against the windowglass like an eavesdropper. At last Nezu opened his eyes.

“I see,” he said.

“I assume that means you’ve finally run out of options,” Aizawa said.

Nezu replied, “All of you, please contact your respective homeroom classes in the hero course and tell them that we will mobilize tomorrow. All of it is strictly voluntary, and all who decline will be kept safely in the basement levels and evacuated if necessary. Cementoss, I’d like you to retrieve the school’s blueprints, particularly those for the courtyard around campus, and pay close attention to the depth of the paving stones. Midnight, escort Mr. Mainichi to the rendezvous point by six p.m. tonight and no later. Ectoplasm, set up a quick meeting between Hound Dog and Jurota Shishida from Class 1-B – they may be able to collaborate on the school’s defense. As for you, Eraserhead,” he said to a stunned Aizawa, “I would like a word with Momo Yaoyorozu, if you’d be so kind to bring her to my office. Our latest intelligence from Mainichi could assist in her tactical planning. And I assume your ‘tutored’ student has made his decision?”
“He has,” Vlad King said, after Aizawa failed to answer. “I doubt we could talk him out of it at this point. We’re not putting him on the field without a solid escort, though. I’ll volunteer myself if that’s what it takes.”

“Proposal accepted. As for the attack itself, I hypothesize that Horooka will make contact with U.A. in the early or mid-afternoon. We must be prepared for everything by then.”

“How do you figure that?” Present Mic asked.

“Mainichi said that shortly before he fled, Horooka was determined to ‘start again.’ Given her psychological profile and her current dismal circumstances, I take that to mean she wishes to recapture an earlier moment of glory. The Jon-X bombing happened around two in the afternoon, while the train bombing occurred at four. It’s irrational, yes, but we are not dealing with a rational actor. Our opponent tomorrow must be seen and engaged for what she is – a hurt and angry child who has been ill-treated by the systems meant to support her. And that is why she is not our true opponent.”

Nezu stood up his chair and straightened his tie. He looked more dignified now than he had in weeks, but his tail was lashing back and forth in a way that made All Might edge away from his seat.

“Eraserhead was correct,” he said. “This is a tipping point. A reckoning that has been too long postponed. But so many seem to misunderstand the goal of this school. They think we’re here to raise good little soldiers for society, ardent defenders of the status quo. This is only true so long as society may be deemed worth preserving. If it is not, we will instead by the lever by which it is toppled.” His scarred eye swept over them. “This is not our final moment. This is the time when all of us show this country that, even if the Symbol of Peace is no more, the world he sought to build has not fallen with him. I won’t let Nakayama’s vision of the future come to pass. Are you with me?”

“To the end,” said All Might, voice weak but firm. The other teachers chorused in agreement. Only Aizawa and Midnight didn’t join in.

“There’s one thing you’re missing,” said Midnight. “Tomura Shigaraki. From what Mainichi told me, he’s the one orchestrating Horooka’s final push. He must have an angle. Probably planning to use the chaos as a way for Yuurei to sneak in and grab Koh again.”

“I’ve had an eye on Shigaraki from the start,” said Nezu. “Leave him to me.”

“And Koh himself?” Aizawa said, in leaden tones. “Do we even know where he is right now?”

“He’s being chaperoned by Midoriya,” Cementoss said. “It seems to have helped calm him down a little.”

“From Hound Dog to Izuku Midoriya. One more example of our students covering for our failures.” He got up, chairlegs scraping the floor. “It was a stirring speech, Principal. Let’s see if you can bring results to match.”

“Eraser, come on,” said Present Mic. Aizawa ignored him and went for the exit. “Shouta!”

Aizawa slammed the door behind him and stomped through the hall, fists clenched, breath hot in his lungs. Through the ranked windows at his side the snow was already slowing again, but it had still frosted the grounds white.

“Aizawa.”

He stopped and looked back. All Might had followed him out. Recovery Girl hadn’t been fibbing
about his voice – he was so hoarse he almost buzzed, like a broken fan vent. From the way he grimaced, even breathing was causing him pain.

“Don’t worry,” Aizawa said. “I’ll be out there tomorrow with everyone else. And assuming I live, Nakayama won’t get to celebrate his victory for long. I haven’t forgotten what he said about Eri.”

“He hasn’t won yet. Nezu is-”

“Nezu is trying to cover up a hopeless situation with a lot of pretty language. Forgive me if I choose to look at things realistically.” He turned back to the hall. “You might be happy serving as that pompous rat’s prop, but I have a job to do.”

“We’re all trying to do our part! We can’t-” He hacked blood and clutched his chest, but went on talking anyway. “It’s no wonder you think everything’s hopeless. You keep trying to do everything yourself! I couldn’t change this country alone, so how could you!?"

Aizawa smashed his fist into the window and the glass fractured. His shadow on the far wall turned crazed with bright faultlines. When he withdrew his knuckles they were cut, dripping blood.

“You should say your goodbyes to Midoriya,” he said. “While you have the chance.”

He strode off. All Might watched him leave, wiping his mouth clean.

“There’s no need,” All Might said, though there was nobody to hear. He looked at the blood on his own hand. “We’ve said everything there is to say.”

* * *

Looking after Koh turned out to have unexpected challenges.

Midoriya didn’t regret taking on the job – he’d seen how stressed Hound Dog had been the other night, and the teachers appeared to be at a genuine loss as to how they could give the boy some peace of mind. In a way, the enormity of what he suffered made him way less of a burden than Eri, because while Midoriya had run himself ragged trying to break Overhaul’s influence on her, he didn’t have any illusions about being able to heal Koh all by himself, especially with everything else going on at the school. And so, his “babysitting” mostly consisted of just going about his daily routine, with Koh hanging around nearby like an anxious housecat. He stayed in his room during Midoriya’s increasingly brief classes, but as for everything else – the dorms, the cafeteria, the library – he was there, orbiting him, impervious to Midoriya’s feeble attempts at small talk.

That was one challenge. Koh’s patient silence sucked the oxygen out of the room. Midoriya found himself alone except for occasional company from Ashido, who was able to power through the oppressive field that Koh seemed to produce. He wore that quiet like a cloak, to the point where it erased his presence; Midoriya had already experienced a few heart-stopping moments where he’d glance to where Koh had been sitting or standing only to find him gone, having moved elsewhere in the room with an oiled stealthiness. Another challenge was his stare – those burnished gold eyes were glued to him, and the boy’s gaze was like ants on his skin. Sometimes Midoriya thought it almost looked hungry, but he dismissed that as a product of his own overheated mind.

And that was the last, biggest problem. He wasn’t able to give the kid the attention that he deserved. There was still a gnawing, boiling anxiety in the core of him, ever since All Might had told him about what happened at the Yard, and its distraction had become severe enough so that he’d long given up on competing with Bakugo in the exams – at the rate things were going, he’d be lucky to place in the upper half of the class. Instead he pored over the library, gathering his data, trying to
tease out what was producing this awful heat in him. He’d first tried to exorcise it by pounding Beta Gym into dust, but that had only made things worse.

He was in the library now, bent over one of the reference computers. There were three dozen more in this corner of the building but he and Koh were the only ones here. He’d glanced at a mass email from Aizawa announcing Horooka’s imminent arrival and shrugged it off; he’d already predicted that Metalhead’s forces would attack sometime in the next forty-eight hours, probably in early-to-mid afternoon given the difficulties of mobilizing such a large group, the importance of visibility for Horooka’s Quirk, the general pattern of her larger-scale attacks. The whole dorm had buckled down for this battle; Yaoyorozu had already approached him earlier that week and asked to use the notebooks he kept on his classmates’ powers. Under any other circumstances he’d have been mortified at the idea – his research was decent, but some of those notebooks still had his prototype All Might sidekick uniforms doodled in the margins – but he’d been so preoccupied that he’d just handed them over and gotten back to work.

He was researching criminal case law now, back-tracing years of stultifying judicial opinions and comparing them to Japan’s history of white-collar crime. His goal was to find the origin of the term “villain.” If asked why he wanted to know this, he would have just blinked and looked sheepish, same as if someone had asked why he’d been obsessively studying urban maps and government zoning law last week. But it felt very important, to know this.

Koh was in the chair next to him, idly swinging his feet. His own computer screen was blank. For his sake, Midoriya forced his mouth shut – Koh would probably find his muttering unnerving – but his brain spun and spun, spitting out fragments of thought like the shorthand that had flooded these courtrooms.

“Villain.” Originally a term meant to apply to crimes perpetrated with one’s Quirk, especially back in the pre-Destro days where the term “Quirk” itself hadn’t been formally codified. Understandable. But then Quirks proliferated. Eighty percent of population and counting. The term “villain” becomes de facto synonymous with “criminal.” But far more baggage, regardless of severity, nature, or intent of crime. Reminiscence of Gentle Criminal, stamped and shunned because of illicit rescue attempt. Good-intentioned, yes. But intentions only carry so far.

And yet. White-collar crime rarely so public. Takes place behind office glass-slash-computer screens-slash-doors of government power. Upper-class, naturally. Those who committed atrocities with pen and ledger often escaped consequences and ostracization. Focus of research obvious – witness contrast between standard criminals (e.g., ones bearing down on present location) and those responsible for the Yard. Injustice in this contrast, also obvious.

But that wasn’t enough. It didn’t solve the conundrum in him.

He tried, unsuccessfully, to run a hand through his tangled hair. He brought up an image of the Ministry of Individuality’s new headquarters, that featureless black monolith. He kept coming back to it. It rose up in his dreams, U.A.’s towers turning photo-negative.

Double back. Look at cases for repeat offenders. Those previously branded as villains were judged more harshly if they were arrested again. Prosecution used prior conviction in arguments in nine out of ten cases researched thus far. Were there any examples of the opposite? In a clash between villain and hero, did the former ever come out looking cleaner? Would the public even abide such an idea? No evidence. Dig deeper.

“What are you looking at?”

Midoriya shot up out of his seat with such vigor that he thought he felt his head brush the ceiling.
Koh had gotten out of his chair, moved to Midoriya’s other side, and peered over his shoulder without a sound. It was like dealing with Yuurei all over again.

“Oh! S-sorry, Koh, I got caught up in things…it’s just research for exams. Boring stuff. Did you want to go somewhere? I think we’ve been here for…” He looked at the computer’s clock and boggled. It had already been over two hours.

Koh didn’t pay him any mind. Instead he reached out and touched the screen. “I know what that is.”

His finger rested on the M.o.I. building. Midoriya hadn’t closed the window in time. He sighed and gave up on the white lies – if Koh’s and Eri’s brief trip to his dorm had been any indication, Koh always saw right through them anyway.

“I guess Shin told you about it,” Midoriya said.

“Uh-huh. He didn’t like it much.” Koh’s finger withdrew. “Are you still trying to find ways to help me?”

“Sort of. But that’s not all.” He pushed the keyboard away. “I’m trying to figure out the difference between heroes and villains. Good guys and bad guys.”

“Isn’t that an easy question?”

“It’s not so easy for me, I guess.”

No answer from Koh. Midoriya turned and felt his heart skip again at the sudden absence beside him. Koh’s voice emerged among the dead computers, drifting around him like a wayward spirit.

“I think I know,” he said. “The good guys have to win, right? That’s what All Might did. He always won. Right up until the end.”

“That’s true,” he said uneasily. “Kacchan – Bakugo – he always liked that about All Might best.”

“But you’re not All Might. No one is. And even he couldn’t help everyone.”

Koh had re-appeared at the end of the desk and Midoriya fought the urge to shudder. Everyone else had always thought the boy was a little eerie, but something about his dull gaze now made Midoriya’s skin crawl. It was emotionless as a gaffed fish.

“Hey, Izuku. You’re going to win, right? When Mirai and the others come?”

“Yeah. Of course.”

“Okay.” He looked to the darkening windows at the front of the library. “I hope so. Because if a hero just loses and loses and loses, I don’t think you can really call them a hero anymore.”

Midoriya’s head was throbbing terribly. It must be all the reading, he thought. He snapped the computer off and got to his feet.

“It’s getting dark,” he said. “Let’s get dinner, all right?”

“Okay.”

Midoriya offered his hand and Koh gripped it tight, grabbed up halfway up his arm like someone drowning. He clung so tight that Midoriya almost tripped when he stepped out of the library and onto the crunching, unbroken snow.
“You’ll keep me safe,” Koh said. “I know you will.”

* * *

During his time here, he’d keenly felt the passing of every minute, though this room had no clocks and Shin’s phone was the only way he had of telling time. Curled on the bed, hearing Shin come and go, he felt an itching in his back and imagined it was the signal waiting to break free. He wouldn’t let himself sleep for long; now and again he’d snap his head up, feel that familiar soreness in his muscles and then pace about and pinch himself until the gogginess left him. Shin was gone, had been gone all night, but Koh heard the doors open and shut in the corridors outside and knew the game was almost over. The serum’s effects were almost gone. They would have to try something soon, and he guessed that if they hadn’t given him the finished drug in the last two days, then they were never going to. If someone came in here he intended to go out kicking.

He watched the light, squinting into the lamp’s dingy bulb. When the lights grew dim the signal burst out. So he squatted on the bed, holding his knees, hoping against hope that the bunker would once again go silent and these people would just give up and leave his Quirk to rampage somewhere where no one was around to hear and the sea was close and cold.

Then Shin was there in front of him, without warning or reason, like someone in a dream. His coat was on, his hands shaking, his mouth a bloodless gash. He wouldn’t say anything for the longest time and Koh began to think that he was indeed dreaming, that any second now he’d snap awake to find the lamplight dimmed and the air full of screams.

“Sorry I left you,” Shin said at last.

“You should have stayed gone. It’s dangerous around me, now.”

“No. Not anymore.”

Shin reached into his coat and withdrew a syringe. Koh frowned at it.

“I said no more. Are you going to force me now, too?”

“I kept telling them to give me what you wanted. They wouldn’t.” He uncapped the syringe. “So I had to take it.”

Koh unfolded his knees, eyes wide. “So that’s-”

“I don’t know. I hope so. We’ll find out here. And then we need to leave. Run as fast and far as we can.”

“My eyes. That’s what you said, right? It’ll make my eyes change back.”

Shin blinked, then nodded. “Yeah. That’s how we’ll tell.”

Koh scooched up to the edge of the bed and rolled up his sleeve as Shin approached. Shin kneeled down and in this dirty light the plethora of needlemarks that had left so much pollution in Koh’s blood almost glowed, a constellation of scarring. He traced a vein with his fingertip and readied the syringe but his hand was trembling so badly that he couldn’t break the skin. Then Koh clasped his hand over Shin’s, the fingers fragile and warm, and Shin looked up into that small, worn face. Koh nodded, and helped guide the needle. Shin pressed the plunger. The fluid rushed in.

“How long will it take?” Koh asked.
“Not long. Just try to relax.”

“And then we run away.”

“Yes.”

“Everyone keeps asking me where I wanted to go.” Koh rubbed his eye; his arm felt heavy. “But I couldn’t think of anything. Let’s just go someplace where you can be happy. Okay, Shin? I want you to be happy. You’re so…you’re always so…”

He shook his head. The light was wrong. Hazy and swimming about. This leaden feeling in his bones was much too familiar.

Koh slumped to the side, elbow sinking into the thin mattress. Everything was so heavy. He could barely hold up his own weight. Shin wasn’t looking at his eyes. He’d turned away completely.

“Shin,” Koh said weakly. “What did you…?”

His elbow gave way. His eyelids fluttered and shut, and then he was still.

Shin stood there, for a little while.

He’d tried to think of something comforting to say to Koh in their last moments together. Maybe even explain himself, in words that Koh would remember through the passage of years. But he’d failed at that, too. He hadn’t even been able to do the injection without help.

Koh would hate him, Shin thought, and that hatred might turn him hard and unkind. But that might serve him well in the hard times to come. Whatever shattered world that the signal might bring about, whatever new marks it might carve into them both, they’d still have more of a future there. He thought he could go a long time hoping that, one day, Koh would understand.

He gathered the sleeping boy in his arms, pressed him to his chest. Outside, Shigaraki was waiting.

“This is the best I can do,” he said. “It’s all for you.”
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The League of Villains waited in the common room, all of them ready for travel. Shigaraki and Dabi both wore their trenchcoats, the former’s coat decked out with his full entourage of hands, the latter’s specially fireproofed and still charred at the edges. Mr. Compress was looking dapper with his rakish hat, his mask’s smile thin and coy like someone with a secret. Spinner had abandoned his clubful of strapped-together cutlery for a pair of wickedly serrated knives half as long as his arm; he’d practiced long into the night with Toga, and his face was marked with fresh cuts. As for Toga herself, she’d worn thermal stockings in preparation for the cold, and was just tugging on her blood-sucking mask when Shin walked in, Koh cradled against his shoulder. She clapped her hands in delight.

“Aww! He’s even cuter when he’s asleep.”

“Toga, could you not?” Spinner said under his breath. “This is hard for him.”

“I’m fine,” Shin said. “I just wish you’d have let me measure the sedative.”

“You needn’t worry about a thing,” Compress said briskly. “What I gave him should be just right for his age. Taking into account his eating habits, of course. The poor lad’s been fasting a bit these past few days.”

“That’s not what I-”

“Enough,” Shigaraki rasped. “It’s done. And just in case there was any doubt, I’ve got the follow-up right here.”

He pulled aside the folds of his coat. Holstered under was the dart gun, containing, Shin presumed, the much-treasured dose of the Quirk-erasing serum. A syringe was holstered on his other lapel and Shin’s eyes lingered on it.

“That’s the Trigger,” he said. “It’s what’ll give his Quirk the boost we need.”

“Everybody’s gonna get the message this time,” Dabi said, grinning. He extended his hand to Shin. “Smile, big guy. What’s about to happen is long overdue.”

Shin’s face twisted, lip peeled, incisor bared. For a moment he wasn’t in this bunker, standing among these motley anarchists; he was in a broken apartment with a cooling corpse in the kitchen and Mirai’s naked, reclining frame before him like a queen taking court. I’ve caught up with myself. It was long overdue.

“I think he’s a little sick of listening to us,” Shigaraki said, as Dabi frowned and retracted his hand. “Our lives are going to be in your hands for this next part, Yuurei. I’m counting on you to bring us to the rendezvous point.”

“Don’t worry,” said Shin. “I’ve made the trip before.”

“Then hurry up and set him down.”

He stepped forward and laid Koh at the League of Villains’ feet. Koh’s hair was in his eyes, one arm folded across his chest, mouth slightly open. His breathing was slow and regular. Shin wondered
when he’d last slept this soundly.

“Twice,” Shigaraki said. “We still good up at U.A.?”

Twice popped his thumb up. “Fine and dandy. Toga’s still kicking.”

Toga radiated smugness. “Told you I could do it.”

“The news is buzzing all over,” Shigaraki went on. “Kitae’s little soldiers are getting into position. It’s happening today. All that’s left is to watch the end sequence.” He raised his head to look at Shin. “You did good.”

Dabi snorted. “Doubt we’re gonna hear him say that again anytime soon.”

“You ready for this?” Spinner said. “If there’s anything you wanna say…”

He’s not wearing shoes, Shin thought. I should have gotten him some shoes, first.

“Let’s go,” he said.

“My thoughts exactly,” Shigaraki said. “Shall we, Compress?”

It was nine in the morning. The sun was shining. All across Tokyo, people were starting their day.

* * *

Daylight crept over U.A. and the students commenced their private rituals. Now, on the eve of battle, events had progressed far beyond the faculty’s ability to coordinate, and the heroes-in-training were by and large left to their own devices. Some rested; others worked. Yaoyorozu was among the ones at rest, finally at rest, reclining heavy-lidded in her seat at the dorms’ common room with Midoriya’s notebooks scattered around her like talismans. Bakugo was shut up in his room. Ojiro was in the gymnasium where he and Uraraka had trained, meditating on the battle-hardened mats. Mineta and Asui were in a different gym, Mineta frantically practicing his aim under Asui’s unforgiving eye – ever since a certain conversation with Yaoyorozu he’d been almost ecstatic with terror, but he continued anyway. Kouda was nowhere to be found at all. Kirishima and Todoroki had been seen heading for Class 1-B’s dorm with the air of generals bearing terms of surrender. Amajiki and Hadou ran drills with their classmates while Ectoplasm watched; he’d been everywhere lately, all his duplicates running their own inscrutable errands. As for the students who weren’t able to fight, they packed what little supplies they could in preparation for their trip to the basement levels, where they would wait out the war and evacuate if necessary. In those same chambers, shining like a Lucite block, Koh’s new lodgings awaited.

All of them felt the gravity of what was to come. U.A. no longer felt like a school at all; the students’ movements had cut mystic lines across the campus, transfiguring it into something for which there was no right name. Equal parts temple and war room.

Tokoyami was also at rest. Shouji had offered to bring out the Go board again, but Tokoyami had gently waved him off and decided to spend their remaining peacetime by himself. Of course, in his case, just because he was by himself didn’t mean he was alone.

He’d turned his ornate desk chair so its back was to the window and sat with his guitar in his lap. He hadn’t seriously practiced since the culture festival and at first his fingers were clumsy and slow, but he soon remembered the movements and was plucking out disconnected snatches of melody, the unplugged strings buzzed like a cicada in his ear. Dark Shadow, too, was buzzing about; it twitched aside the curtains and looked at the grounds beyond. The sky was clear and the sun was up, the thin
frost on campus sparkling like a crust of salt.

“I wish they’d make the announcement already.” Dark Shadow grumbled.

“In time.” Pluck, pluck.

“You got your costume ready? The last one kind of, uh, exploded.”

Again Dark Shadow was asking what it already knew, but Tokoyami let it slide. These questions were just another kind of rehearsal, familiar little movements to calm their shared, jangling nerves.

“It’s in storage at the Support Department. Under Mei Hatsume’s watchful eye, no doubt.” Pluck, pluck-pluck. “I imagine there will be a queue forming soon.”

“And if we live through this, you’ve got finals. Ectoplasm’s lessons made me feel like our head was gonna pop.”

“One thing at a time.”

“I know, I know.”

Dark Shadow let the curtain fall. It drifting to Tokoyami’s bed, kneading its claws together. It floated to the ceiling like a loose balloon. Tokoyami felt its anxiety through the umbilical of darkness tethering it to himself, a signal passed through an open wire.

“Are you feeling all right?” he asked. “I know it’s been difficult, but you’ve seemed calmer.”

“I’m okay. I mean, not okay-okay, but you know.”


“Feels like that crazy Quirk hasn’t been bugging me as much lately, too. Actually, I…” Dark Shadow stopped short and ran its hands over its body. “Um.”

The guitar squealed. Tokoyami looked up. For some reason that last syllable had carried a lethal payload of foreboding.

“What is it?”

“I, uh. Now that I think about it, I can’t really feel it at all.”

“Wait.” He straightened in his chair. “You’ve been like this for days. Do you mean to say that all this time-”

“Maybe? I don’t know!” Dark Shadow dropped in front of Tokoyami, looking mortified. “Koh’s been here practically all month, so I thought I was just getting used to it, and then we didn’t have to keep the Yard secret anymore so that was a load off, and then you were busy getting tutored and I didn’t wanna bother you, and-”

“All right, all right. Think back. How long has it been since Koh’s ability last troubled you?”

“Uh. Less than a week, probably. ‘cause I remember really wanting to bust out during homeroom last week but I knew Aizawa would just zap me again.” Its eyes flared. “Oh! It was just around the time of Nezu’s big assembly. You know, when he spilled his guts about the Yard.”

“It was a time of great import, to be sure.” He paused, stroking his guitar’s neck like a frightened
animal. “If you’re no longer affected by that Quirk, then it was either weakened or finally suppressed entirely. And considering what happened to him…”

“Yeah, Midoriya said he flung himself outta the window or something.”

“If suicidal despair was all it took to finally de-activate his Quirk then I imagine it would have taken hold long ago,” Tokoyami murmured. “It’s not as though I’ve been keeping tabs on him. Maybe Recovery Girl would know something.”

“Or Midoriya,” said Dark Shadow. “Koh’s not leaving the guy alone.”

“True. He’s seemed quite infatuated with Midoriya since the incident.”

A long, deep silence. Tokoyami’s face, as usual, betrayed very little, but Dark Shadow wasn’t so reserved. Tokoyami’s thoughts were transmitted through the wire, and Dark Shadow’s crescent eyes turned full-moon, saucer-sized, and it turned and tore the door open and Tokoyami threw the guitar aside and ran out into the corridor. The instrument produced an offended squeal upon hitting the ground and by the time that sound died away Tokoyami was already down half a flight of stairs and all but leaping the rest of the way, Dark Shadow retracted back into him, his human skin pale as marble. He came into the common room so fast he all but skidded on the carpet. Several heads turned, Uraraka’s and Sero’s among them.

“Whoa, dude, where’s the fire?” Sero asked. “We ain’t at war just- hey, back off!”

Tokoyami lunged forward and grabbed Sero by the lapels. He was close enough for Sero to make out every pinfeather, every popped vein in that red-eyed glare.

“Where is Midoriya?” he said hoarsely.

“Tokoyami, what the hell’s-”

“Where is he!?”

“He’s with the Kyoumoto kid! Hound Dog brought him in and asked him to take him to the basement in Support, it’s probably in Hatsume’s lab or something. Come on, let go!”

“Ashido went along too,” Uraraka said. She’d gotten up from the couch, her face drawn tight. “You can still catch them if you hurry.”

Tokoyami threw Sero aside and ran for the exit. Dark Shadow burst out and flung the doors open ahead of him, leaving a stunned Sero to rub his throat and gawk.

“What in heaven’s name was that about?” Yaoyorosu asked.

“Hell if I know,” Sero said. “He didn’t even bother putting on his shoes. Should we go after him?”

“Leave him,” Uraraka said.

“You sure about that? You know he’s been awful flaky this month…”

“Leave him,” she said again, firmer. “We’d just get in the way, whatever it is. Where’s Bakugo?”

“What? Where’d that come from?” Sero asked, and then Uraraka turned to him and he instinctively flinched. “He’s in his room, I dunno! Go check for yourself!”

“Thank you,” she said, and went for the stairwell. Sero collapsed on a couch, hand to his chest.
“Are you all right?” Yaoyorozu asked.

“Gimme a sec,” he panted. “Sheesh. Since when did our classmates get so damn scary?”

*             *             *

U.A.’s subterranean chambers had entry points all over campus, most of them discreetly hidden behind panels and passwords known only to the faculty. Right now it was generally agreed that the most secure of them was in Support, since anyone who wanted to get there also had to brave Hatsune and whatever tomb of horrors she’d converted the studio into. Hound Dog had come into 1-A’s dorm with Koh’s tiny fist held delicately in his own and asked Midoriya to provide escort into that savage territory, explaining that he’d go himself but he had preparations of his own. Ashido had been there too, and cheerfully volunteered to tag along. She’d been a little puzzled at how Koh had grabbed Midoriya’s arm and buried his face in his side. The boy wouldn’t meet her eyes.

Still, it was an uneventful walk. Bitterly cold, of course, enough to make them both wish they’d put on something heavier than their uniform blazers, but it wasn’t a long walk to the towers. The rime of snow shone bright. The city outside was tranquil. You could almost forget that disaster was mere hours away.

There were a few other kids in the corridors on the way to Hatsune’s domain, mainly other Support students trying to wrap up their own errands before they took cover. Koh was silent for the whole trip, and Midoriya wasn’t making any attempt to cheer him up. Ashido tried to contribute.

“Don’t worry, Koh,” she said, bending low to him. “We’ll handle everything. Just like in Mosei-Santo.”

“I’m not worried,” he said.

“Oh. Well. That’s good, then.”

“But you have to stop Mirai. That’s important. I don’t think she’s ever going to stop by herself. Someone has to make her.” He tugged on Midoriya’s sleeve. “You’ll do it, right?”

“Yeah,” said Midoriya. “We won’t lose.”

“Okay.”

Hatsune’s mural was coming up. Ashido wondered what would become of it if they actually made through all of this – the girl had been here less than a year and she was already remaking the entire Support Department in her image. Muffled crackles and thumps could be heard on the other side of the reinforced concrete. She was still working, even now.

“I’ll knock,” Midoriya said. “Koh, you should stay here with Ashido. The last time I tried to open that door, it. Um. Exploded, a little.”

“Wait, hold on,” Ashido said, and turned back the way they came. “You hear that?”

Slapping footsteps. Ragged breath. Broken syllables roughly assembled into Midoriya’s name. The three of them and the handful of students elsewhere in the hall looked confused and concerned as Tokoyami skidded into view, his socks slipping on the linoleum so that he nearly collided with the far wall and shoved himself off before limping the rest of the way to them. He doubled over, hands on knees, gasping breath. Ashido ran over to him as Koh hid behind Midoriya’s skinny frame.

“Tokoyami! Holy crap, where’d you come from?” She took his hand; his skin was ice. “You didn’t
even put your jacket on. What, you wanna call out sick before Horooka gets here?”

“Koh…Midoriya…Koh’s…” He coughed, tried to stand up straight and failed. There was a monstrous stitch in his side, like sea urchins drifting through his guts. He’d run at a dead sprint all the way here, heedless to the frost underfoot chewing up his socks. He hadn’t bothered to think of what he’d say if he actually caught up to them. He only had moments before the concern on their faces turned to dismissal.

Then, he realized the answer.

“Had to ask.” He kept his eyes on Koh. “Has Kyoumoto received his injection lately?”

Midoriya and Ashido glanced at each other, then to Koh. Only Tokoyami saw the split-second look of panic flash across the boy’s face.

“It’s fine,” Koh said. “Hound Dog said it was fine.”

“Right, his quarters underground are supposed to keep his Quirk under control,” Midoriya said. “They probably don’t want to waste what’s left of the serum.”

“How can we be certain that it’s secure?” Finally he’d massaged away the pain in his side; he tried to look composed, reasonable. “If Koh’s Quirk were to activate during our battle, it would be catastrophic. Surely they can spare enough to last us the rest of the evening?”

“He’s got a point,” Ashido said, as Koh chewed his lip. “Better safe than sorry, right? The nurse’s office isn’t too far from here. And, I mean, he hauled ass across campus just to let us know about it.”

“It’s a legitimate concern,” Midoriya agreed. “You mind taking a little detour, Koh?”

“No! I mean, yes! I mean, I’m fine. I said I was fine.” His voice was cracking. Tokoyami watched stonily as he ducked out from behind Midoriya and approached, his small hands making aimless gestures that were probably just nervous twitching but also, from a certain perspective, looked as though he wanted to throttle someone.

“I know you,” he said to Tokoyami. “I remember you.”

Tokoyami said nothing.

“You saved me. Back then. Did I thank you? I don’t know if I ever thanked you.” His voice was cracking. Tokoyami watched stonily as he ducked out from behind Midoriya and approached, his small hands making aimless gestures that were probably just nervous twitching but also, from a certain perspective, looked as though he wanted to throttle someone.

“I know you,” he said to Tokoyami. “I remember you.”

Tokoyami said nothing.

“You saved me. Back then. Did I thank you? I don’t know if I ever thanked you.” He clamped those shaking hands and bowed. “But I’m okay. No more shots. I just want to go.”

Tokoyami’s shoulders slumped. His head lowered under the tip of his beak touched his chest. Ashido was more confused than ever; he looked resigned, even remorseful.

“I didn’t save anyone,” he said quietly.

And before anyone could ask him what he meant, the jagged shape of Dark Shadow erupted from his back and snatched up Koh in one massive talon and pinned him, kicking and wailing, to the wall beneath Mei Hatsume’s painted grin. Koh’s screams were animal, they chilled the blood of everyone who heard, and Ashido frantically started pounding on Dark Shadow’s arms as the stragglers in the halls shouted and fled.

“Tokoyami, what’s going on!?” Midoriya cried. “Let him go!”

“It hurts!” Koh bawled. “What did I do wrong!? I’m sorry! I’ll fix it! Don’t hurt me anymore,
Dark Shadow wouldn’t even acknowledge Ashido’s blows; she changed targets. “Get your Quirk under control or I’ll wring your goddamn neck, Tokoyami! Count of three!”

“Listen to me,” Tokoyami said.

“One!”

“I said listen! That isn’t Koh!”

Midoriya blinked. “What?”

Koh’s screams had dampened to choked, heart-rending sobs, his face slick with tears and snot. He kept babbling apologies, pleas for Tokoyami to release him. But he kept talking, calmly, the sound scything through Koh’s voice.

“I’ve been keeping it a secret,” he said. “Dark Shadow was able to feel Koh’s Quirk even with the serum in effect. It’s why he’s been so erratic these past two weeks. I didn’t want word to get out. I didn’t want to be a burden. But just recently, Dark Shadow realized the effect had gone, just after Koh’s incident. Just before his sudden interest in you, Midoriya.”

“Sound familiar?” Dark Shadow growled.

“I remember the stories you told about the license exam. Someone who could change shape. Someone with a terrible attraction to you.”

“Himiko Toga,” Midoriya said. His face had gone waxy.

“I don’t know who that is!” Koh cried. “Please let me go. I can’t breathe!”

Midoriya looked about to speak, but then Ashido held up her palm. Her skin had a wet, pearlescent sheen; a drop of that moisture condensed, fell to the floor, and hissed.

“You are way past the three-count,” she said.

“Ashido, please trust me,” Tokoyami said desperately. “If the League has him-”

“Last warning.”

Tokoyami bared his teeth, but Ashido’s gaze was unwavering. He relented. Dark Shadow released his grip and Koh fell to the floor, curled and panting. It was at that moment the Support studio door’s array of locks flipped open and Mei Hatsume came out, something deeply ominous cradled in her arms – it looked like a cross between a drain cleaner and a bazooka.

“Morning.” She flicked a switch and the device emitted a tooth-aching hum. “Who should I point this at?”

Midoriya jumped between her and the others, palms held out. “No one! No one point anything at anybody! We just…we need a minute to..”

“Shush, Midoriya,” Ashido said coolly. “Koh, are you okay?”

He inhaled, retched, sniffled. “I think so.”

“Good. Hold still.”
She swung her outstretched hand away from Tokoyami and unleashed a brief torrent of colorless goo onto Koh before he had a chance to cry out. The mass cemented him to the wall and he struggled for a moment before looking up to her, his eyes saucer-sized and already leaking fresh tears.

“Wh…what did I…”

“Should be easy enough to tell if this is Toga,” said Ashido. “We don’t even need the injection, right? Just get Aizawa here and have him use his Quirk. It’d take two seconds.”

Koh’s voice was in splinters. “You don’t believe me either?”

“If I’m wrong then everybody can hate me all they want,” Ashido said. “But I trust my classmates. More than anyone.”

Koh’s lip trembled. Then he sighed, and lowered his head. When he raised it again all of them took a hasty step back and Hatsume hoisted up her inexplicable weapon once more. They’d never seen him smile and the smile was all wrong, a lopsided crescent that warped his flesh like clay from eyesocket to cheekbone, and when he spoke his voice was the same but with a confident tenor that the true Koh had never been able to manage. Every aspect of him turned grotesquely uncanny.

“And I was doing such a good job,” said Toga. “God, you people suck.”

“Oh, I’ve been dying to get my hands on this one,” Hatsume said, and Midoriya had to jump in front of her again, almost holding her back.

“Wait! We can’t kill her!”

“Kill her? You insult me. I just want to rummage a bit.”

“She’s got to be a clone. They’re more fragile than the people they’re made from and I think Twice can tell if they’re killed, too. If she dies then the whole League will know we’re on to them!”

“He’s so cute when he’s being analytical,” Toga sighed, and then yelped as Ashido’s palm smacked the wall beside her head. The concrete hissed, smelling like a burst battery.

“Don’t speak unless you’re spoken to, bitch.” Ashido’s voice was gentle, her face serene. “Clone or not, I’m pretty sure that I can make you hurt really bad without killing you.”

“If you don’t want her dead then you’d better think fast,” said Hatsume. “The racket you guys made, we don’t have long before one of the teachers show up and it’s almost definitely gonna be Hound Dog.”

Toga stayed quiet, but she’d trained that wry, twisted grin directly on Tokoyami. She wouldn’t stop using Koh’s face. Even without the signal at work, he could feel Dark Shadow banging against the walls of his mind, screeching to finish the job.

“Midoriya,” he said. “This is bad, isn’t it?”

“The League’s got the kid,” Hatsume said. She kept her voice level but her weapon shook badly in her hands. “So, yeah, kind of a red-alert situation. We’ve got Horooka on the march for someone who isn’t even here!”

“And given the timing involved, Koh would’ve been taken just after his most recent injection,” said Midoriya. He’d plunged his fingers into the tangled mat of his hair like he was trying to dig the knowledge out. “So they’re planning another outbreak. But this level of forethought wouldn’t justify
something on the scale of Mosei-Santo…Hatsume, are there any ways to amplify a Quirk like Koh’s?”

“Geez, way to put me on the spot. Uh, let’s see…when you get right down to it, it’s just a jacked-up waveform-emission Quirk like Aoyama’s, only with radio waves instead of light. You need some pretty sophisticated tech to alter a power like that. Easier to just use, bleh, pharmaceuticals. Chemical enhancement.”

“Like Trigger.”

“There’s alternatives, but yeah, Trigger’s the easiest to get and the most potent. Mainly ‘cause the more legitimate ones don’t make you explode if you shoot up a bad batch.”

Toga giggled. Ashido’s face had darkened several shades, from pastel to strawberry.

“Is that it?” Tokoyami said to Toga. “That’s your plan?”

She stuck out her – Koh’s – tongue. “Not gonna tell.”

“Don’t bother questioning her,” said Midoriya. He’d started scratching his scalp. “Assuming exponential growth, in a high-density area…the damage would be immeasurable. But the location…”

“But where!” Ashido cried. “They could be anywhere in the country by now. And with that Yuurei creep helping them out they could be standing right behind us and we’d have no idea!”

“I know where,” Midoriya said.

He turned out his heel and looked down at Toga. Everyone else was agape. Toga had stopped smiling. Tokoyami looked over his shoulder; somewhere, he knew, Hound Dog would soon be catching their scent.

“You couldn’t resist pointing it out,” Midoriya said, and Toga’s frown deepened. “But it was obvious enough already, wasn’t it? Shigaraki wouldn’t be able to resist the statement it’d make.” He turned to the others. “It’s Kasumigaseki. They’re bringing him to the Ministry of Individuality’s headquarters.”

Toga’s lip curled, Koh’s face turning feral. Then she shrugged, or as best she could with Ashido’s acid binding her, and smiled brightly again.

“Nope, can’t stay mad at you,” she said.

“We need to tell the teachers,” said Tokoyami. “Immediately.”

“No. It’s not enough. Wouldn’t work. Too many factors. He’ll have accounted for it all…need something more lateral…exploit mentality…”

Hatsume leaned in. “Uh, is he doing okay?”

Midoriya had bent low, now scratching at his scalp so fiercely that they feared his fingers would come away bloody. He muttered at such a high clip that his lips barely moved, the sound just a low rumble in the back of his throat. Toga looked disturbingly pleased at the sight. Perhaps a full minute passed like this, and then he extracted his fingers and raised his head, those green eyes wide and staring wildly at something beyond them all.
“Is that it?” he said, and groaned. “That’s it. Can’t be it. Ohh, I think it’s the only way.”

“Mind giving us the Cliff’s Notes of whatever just went through your head?” Ashido asked.

“No. I’m sorry, but there’s not enough time. Hatsume, do you have my costume ready?”

“Yup, everyone’s. Lined up and labeled.”

“Good. Tokoyami, I-”

“Don’t waste words,” Tokoyami said. “Whatever you require me for, I am there.”

“It’s dangerous,” Midoriya said. “It’s going to be so dangerous.”

“Irrelevant. Darkness encroaches from all sides. And as you said, we have no time.”

“Fine. Okay. We need to get changed. Ashido, keep an eye on Toga until the teachers get here. Hound Dog or whoever. Can you handle it?”

“Leave it to me,” Ashido said.

“Tokoyami, you go to the woods at the northeast edge of campus and wait for us there. Take cover among the trees, I’ll call out for you.”

“Us?” Tokoyami asked.

“I hope it’s us,” Midoriya said. “I really do.”

“I need to see if one of my babies can pacify two hundred and fifty pounds of furious dog-man,” Hatsume said. “C’mon if you’re coming."

“Fine,” Midoriya said. “Tokoyami, follow me!”

They all disappeared into the lab. Toga watched them go, then looked back to Ashido.

“Shiggy spent all winter setting that plan up and he puts it together in five minutes,” she said. “You know, I was never super-into the brainy ones, but I’m totally willing to make an exception.”

Ashido wordlessly leaned against the far wall, staring down at her, arms crossed.

“Hey, you’re besties with Ochako, aren’t you?” Toga said cheerfully. “Is it true Izuku’s always making kissy-face at her? I wanna know if I’ve got competition.”

Ashido remained stone-faced.

“You’re no fun,” Toga pouted. “’You’re supposed to be the fun one!”

Midoriya and Tokoyami really did move fast. Toga wasn’t able to get another jibe out before they burst back into the corridor, Tokoyami’s cloak askew, Midoriya frantically tapping his shoes into place. They’d been modified yet again, the pile bunkers in the soles upgraded with airjet emitters for increased maneuverability and long-range offense (He hadn’t gotten much of a chance to practice with them; he just had to hope that Hatsume’s engineering would be enough). In one hand he clutched an enormous metal briefcase, slung over his shoulder. He had to have his Quirk on, Ashido thought. The case looked like it would crater the tile if he dropped it.

“I’ll wait for you,” Tokoyami said to him, and ran off. He wouldn’t even acknowledge Toga’s
presence. Midoriya turned to Ashido and looked ready to speak, but she cut him off.

“Just move your ass,” she said curtly. “And get him back safe.”

“Maybe I’ll see you soon, Izuku,” Toga said sweetly, but when he turned to look at her she actually recoiled. A queer pall had settled over Midoriya’s face, an icy dispassion that didn’t fit at all with those soft features.

“If you think you’ve won,” he said, “then you don’t understand Shigaraki very well.”

That wiped the last vestiges of Toga’s smile off Koh’s face, and he charged off before she could ask what he meant. She and Ashido were left alone, Hatsume’s machinery clanging and jangling like a summons to war.

* * *

Midoriya’s Quirk was on, all right. Not much, just ten percent or so, but still enough so that he was little more than a green blur leaving divots in the paving as he returned to Heights Alliance. It was just past ten in the morning. There hadn’t yet been any announcements, though students from General Studies were already making their way to the underground level – according to the instructions they’d been given, Lunch Rush would be there waiting for them, to supervise and lead them to safety if necessary. Some of them were on the grounds as Midoriya passed; he zoomed by so quickly that they did double-takes, thinking that he was just a trick of the light.

He’d hoped that the dorm would be mostly empty. He should have known better.

Uraraka, Yaoyorozu, and Sero were still there. They’d been joined by Kirishima and Todoroki (freshly returned from 1-B’s building) and Jirou (who’d heard the bang of Tokoyami’s door from upstairs and arrived just in time to see the front entrance swinging shut). All of their gazes were trained directly on Midoriya.

“Let’s review,” Jirou said, breaking the silence. “Tokoyami tears out of here looking for you—”

“So I guess that really was him,” Kirishima interrupted. “He was running like his ass was on fire. I almost followed him. Kind of glad I didn’t.”

“-and now you show up in full costume, looking like All Might just died,” Jirou finished. Her voice turned apprehensive. “Oh shit, did All Might die?”

“No,” Midoriya said. “I can’t explain. I wish I could but there’s no time. There’ll probably be an announcement, but…” He looked around beseechingly. “Where’s Kacchan? Has anyone seen him?”

“He should be in his room,” Uraraka said. She was sitting in the same place she’d been when Tokoyami had run downstairs. “I tried to drag him out but he’s not answering the door. So either he jumped off the balcony, or…”

“Or he’s sulking,” Kirishima said. “He’s, uh, been doing a lot of that lately.”

Sero glanced at the case. “I know you’re busted up about the guy leaving, but what the hell is this about? You planning to get expelled with him or something? Blaze of glory? What’s with the luggage?”

“No, it’s not like that. I need to see him. But first. I, um.” He swallowed, dropped the case, and bowed. “Thank you for everything!”
The students regarded one another warily.

“Have we done something?” Todoroki asked.

“Of course you have! When I came here, I never would have…I mean, I n-never thought I could be…” He looked up at Uraraka, throat working furiously. “E-especially you, Uraraka. I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for you. Not just because I probably would’ve fallen to my death during the entrance exam, ha ha.” He tried and failed to smile. “I d-d-didn’t think I’d make it, before. But you said hi, and that meant…I mean, it probably made a lot of difference. In the end. So thank you. All of you.”

“You’re talking like we’re never going to see you again,” Uraraka said quietly.

“Something happened. It’s really bad.” Now his voice hit a familiar octave – that feeble crack when he was holding back tears. “So I need to try…”

Uraraka stood up. “Just shut up, Deku.”

“Uraraka!” Yaoyorozu exclaimed. Midoriya looked like he’d been slapped. But there wasn’t any anger in Uraraka’s expression – if anything, she looked like she was trying not to cry herself.

“You’re not the only one planning to do something really stupid today, alright?” she said. “So quit standing around here and do it. And when you come back, come find me.” A fire-red flush crept up from her collar. “I’ll be looking for you.”

The others were in rapt attention; Kirishima and Jirou had moved to the edge of their seats. They were clearly expecting the two of them to embrace. But Midoriya just nodded mutely, and picked up the case, and went upstairs. Uraraka sat back down, shaking like she’d just narrowly avoided a bomb blast.

Midoriya took the stairs two at a time all the way to the fourth floor. This time, and for the first time, he didn’t hesitate to knock.

“Kacchan!” he called. “Are you there?”

“Fuck off, Deku!”

“Oh, thank goodness,” he sighed, and then ripped the door off its hinges.

The dorms’ doorways were built to last, and Bakugo’s took a decent chunk of the casing along with it. Woodchips pattered at Midoriya’s feet as he set it aside (handle warped like putty, overall frame slightly bent) and stepped into Bakugo’s room, dropping the case between them. Bakugo was on his bed, wearing his uniform pants and undershirt, phone in hand. He looked utterly dumbfounded, a rare sight, but any second now the compass-needle in his brain would swing due Homicide.

“You told me to think before I do something stupid,” Midoriya said. “At first I was sure that I didn’t have enough time. But then I realized. I’ve been thinking about this for a while, even if I didn’t know it.” He undid the clasps on the suitcase and flung it open. “I need your help.”

Bakugo stared. Inside, neatly folded, was his hero costume – or at least a derivative of it, modified for colder temperatures with full-body coverage and turtleneck, his gauntlets and smaller explosives nestled in the fabric. He looked at the costume, then to Midoriya, then back to the costume, then back to Midoriya again.

He said, “I ain’t getting changed with you watching, dipshit.”
“Oh. Um. Good point.” He turned away awkwardly. “I’ll just, uh, explain through the door. After I put it back.”

*             *             *

“He’s wrong, in case you were wondering,” said Toga. “It’s waaaaay too late to stop this now.”

She hadn’t even waited for Midoriya’s footfalls to die away before starting again. Ashido still wouldn’t rise to the bait, but that just seemed to encourage her. She delighted in warping Koh’s face into ever-more disturbing configurations, all leering grins and lolling tongue.

“Shinny told me about you. How you got all huggy with the little guy. I don’t blame you! Sometimes when I was alone in his room I’d just pinch these cheeks with my own two hands. You like cute stuff, right, Mina? Can I call you Mina? I can, right? Please say yes!”

“I wonder how often you got hugged as a kid,” Ashido said. “I bet no one else in the League can stand you.”

That flipped her smile upside-down. “Hey, screw you. Just ‘cause you’re all grouchy at me doesn’t mean you can diss my friends.”

“A bunch of mental patients killing people for kicks. Did you get squeamish when Shigaraki decided to put child torture on his to-do list, or was that just another turn-on?”

“Sorry, remind me real quick – who was it that fucked these kids up in the first place, again?”

Ashido remained silent. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. How do you think I stayed in this body so long? They had bagfuls of Koh’s blood stashed at that place. And that was just the tip of the iceberg. I can see why Shinny wants to help him so bad. It’s not like anyone else ever did.”

“After we take care of you, those bastards at the Ministry are next.”

“Uh, no. Bzzt. That’s our job. Shiggy’s gonna wipe out you, them, and everyone else all in one go. And it’s no big loss, in the end. I meant what I said before. All you hero-types really suck.” She licked Koh’s lips. “But, Mina? It’d be nice if you and your friends get to beat Horooka, at least. We’re gonna be crazy busy today, but when it’s all over, I’d be super-stoked for the chance to see you all die.”

“Right back at you,” Ashido said. “You know you only screwed this up because you couldn’t stop hanging off Midoriya’s ass, right?”

“Worth it!”

“And you still don’t understand him at all,” she said. “You’ve got no idea what he’s like when he gets mad. I wish I could be there to see you on the receiving end for once.”

Toga gave her a contemptuous little smirk, but Ashido wouldn’t blink, and little by little, Toga’s mirth drained away. Ashido thought she saw a flicker of doubt on Koh’s face. But then, in the distance, was a flat slamming noise, a tinkling of glass, and Toga’s smile sprang up wider than ever.

“Uh oh,” she said. “Daddy’s home.”

Ashido slapped her palms on the wall like someone bracing for an earthquake, and sure enough, the ground was rumbling underfoot, Hound Dog stomping hard enough for the vibration to carry all the way over here. She stole a panicked glance to the open lab door, where Hatsume’s equipment still clattered.
“Hey, Hatsume! Could use some help here!”

No answer, except maybe the clattering becoming more frantic. And then it was too late. Hound Dog was at the far end of the corridor, muzzle lathered and dripping with spit. He hadn’t dropped to all fours but his gait towards them was as deliberate and unstoppable as a lava flow.

“Hound Dog, wait!” she cried. “It’s not what it looks like! That’s not Koh, it’s-”

“He already knows.”

She looked back to Toga, who’d smoothed Koh’s face back to its familiar melancholy, his voice to that furtive whisper. She looked up at Hound Dog as though she’d disappointed him. Hound Dog stared back, veins popping on his trunk-thick arms. Ashido could see his fangs flash inside his mask.

“I’m good at playing pretend, but Koh’d be stinking with fear right about now,” Toga said morosely. “And you’d smell that, wouldn’t you? So I’m busted. Phooey.”

Slowly, Koh’s face twisted into a horrible, corpse-like sneer.

“Still,” she said. “Thanks so much for taking such good care of me.”

Hound Dog couldn’t speak, and Ashido couldn’t tell if he’d even tried. His growling had acquired a new vibration, an undertone like a burning fuse. She wanted to throw herself between the two of them but she didn’t think she’d get away with all her limbs. Instead she kept talking, forcing her voice to stay level.

“You can’t let her get you worked up,” she said. “If she dies, the League will know. Okay? Hound Dog?”

Hound Dog made no indication he’d heard. And Toga just wouldn’t stop talking.

“Koh liked you. Shinny told me!” Half of Koh’s face warped and dripped, became that of a lank-haired adolescent with a hideous patchwork of scars. “But I guess you just weren’t good enough to keep him around. It’s okay. You’re probably used to screwing up by now.”

Ashido would have glued the little psycho’s mouth shut if she wasn’t worried that she’d seal her airpipes too. But Hound Dog was now exuding an aura of fury so thick it almost had physical force, and Ashido was paralyzed, stock-still, throat sealed, like a prey animal caught in a predator’s eye – or maybe in the headlights of a speeding truck. Toga’s face became a sickening mélange of gluey flesh, pockmarked scars and ashen skin and black-on-black eyes, the gold contact lenses falling to the floor as her eyesockets warped and shifted, the children of the Yard gleefully taunting.

“It’s okay to make a mistake! Everyone makes mistakes. A little mistake never killed anyone!” she cackled. “It’s all the other ones that’ll get everybody killed!”

Ashido cracked her jaw open and screamed Hatsume’s name and from the lab came a shout of exertion and a tremendous crash, as though Hatsume had upset a tottering heap of junk in her efforts to pull something out, but Toga’s laughter was deafening, and Ashido’s limbs were stiff, and just as Hatsume’s shadow emerged from the lab Hound Dog’s growl became a diesel-engine roar and he hunched down and bared his claws and pounced.

* * *

Bakugo had an audience when he and Midoriya returned to the common room. There were whistles.

“Hopefully they let you keep it,” said Sero.

In the last several minutes, Yaoyorozu had produced a cup of tea. She took a delicate sip and regarded the two of them impassively. Midoriya kept his head down, almost hiding behind Bakugo. Maybe he couldn’t bear to say goodbye again. Maybe he just didn’t want to explain what had happened to Bakugo’s door.

“I suppose you’re off,” she said.

“Still don’t know where you’re going exactly,” Kirishima said. “But at least you’re not alone this time. Progress.”

Bakugo didn’t answer her. He looked at Uraraka and a great deal seemed to pass between them, like a wireless transmission from eye to eye. She gave him a small nod and he nodded back. Then he went to the exit, Todoroki and Kirishima flanking it like sentinels.

“You what you have to,” Todoroki said. “We’ll take care of things here.”

Bakugo glared. His throat worked. He made a few guttural sounds like he was gagging on whatever he wanted to say. But he finally spat it out.

“Don’t fuck it up,” he said.

Kirishima raised his fist. “Fucking wreck ‘em.”

Bakugo bumped it on his way out the door. “Fucking right.”

They broke into a run as soon as they were outside. For once, Bakugo didn’t snap at Midoriya that he was going too fast, or too slow, or breathing too hard or too little. He’d been dead silent from the moment that Midoriya had revealed his costume. But his jaw worked furiously, like he was trying to unearth a pip from between his teeth.

The scanty, skeletal woods at the edge of campus were already in view. From here it was a short and concealed trip to the school’s outer wall, and then a hop and a run to the trains in Takodana. But Tokoyami wasn’t there. They entered the woods’ periphery and saw no trace of him.

“Did that beaky bastard ditch us?” Bakugo growled.

“He wouldn’t,” said Midoriya. “Tokoyami, are you out there!??”

He realized his mistake too late and Bakugo didn’t react fast enough. Two pairs of heavy hands fell on their shoulders, gripping gently but with the promise of far less gentleness if they tried any sudden movements. From the crosshatchings of trees bobbed several rictus skull faces like gruesome will ‘o wisps. Ectoplasm copies. It didn’t take genius deduction to guess that he’d gotten behind them, too.

“Gentlemen,” said the Ectoplasm behind Midoriya.

“Let’s go meet your friend,” said the Ectoplasm behind Bakugo.

They were led to the clearing where Hound Dog’s rage had smashed the flora to powder only a week before. The frozen earth was cratered from the impact of his fists. Tokoyami was there, looking cowed, hangdog, as if he wanted to disappear into his cloak. More Ectoplasms were here, too. But most worrisome of all was Shouta Aizawa, standing at the far end of the crater, limbs all tensed like a
gunslinger ready to draw. His goggles were up. Their homeroom teacher was not present. They were
trapped out here with Eraserhead.

“So it’s come to this,” Aizawa said. His voice was like the wind over frozen steppe.

“I’m sorry, Midoriya,” Tokoyami whispered. “They saw me on the cameras. I wasn’t able to conceal
myself.”

“Tokoyami kindly filled us in on the general details,” said Aizawa. “Out of morbid curiosity, would
either of you care to provide specifics?”

Midoriya stepped forward. “Koh’s been taken.”

“I am aware.”

“We have to-”

“No,” Aizawa said, flat and sharp as a razorblade. “You do not have to venture alone to wherever
you think he is being held to stage a rescue mission without notifying any of your families or
guardians. The fact that you even think otherwise says to me that this school has taught you nothing.
Or worse, that it’s taught you all the wrong things. Is the menace at our doorstep not enough for you?
You need to pitch yourself into something even more self-destructive?”

“We’re the only ones who can do it!”

“There are thousands of heroes in the Tokyo metro area alone-”

“And they’re all useless!” Midoriya shouted. “Listen to me! Shigaraki could have started the final
phase of his plan any time in the last three days. The only reason he’s waited this long is because he
wants it to coincide with Horooka’s attack. But that doesn’t mean he can’t speed things up!” He
flung his arm out to the assembled Ectoplasms. “There’s nothing stopping him from using whatever
Quirk booster he’s got in store for Koh, Trigger or otherwise, and once he does, that’ll be it. We
won’t be able to recover. The whole country won’t be able to recover! He’s not going to take any
more risks at this point. If any other heroes even breathe in his direction, he won’t hesitate to end
everything!

“Unless it’s us.”

All eyes were on him now, a splotch of green in the dried and sleeping woods. Aizawa hid his
expression behind his goggles and Ectoplasm wasn’t much for emoting to begin with, but Tokoyami
and even Bakugo seemed fascinated, hypnotized by the uncoiling chain of Midoriya’s frantic logic.

“He hates us,” Midoriya said. “I think right now he hates the three of us more than anyone, except
maybe All Might. I’m his…what I mean to say is, Kacchan and I ruined his plans at the summer
camp. Tokoyami kept him from retrieving Koh back in Mosei-Santo. And we only pulled it off
because we kept breaking the rules! He’ll put off his endgame. He wants to see us fail. We’ll have a chance to get Koh away
from him and the rest of the League. It’s a slim chance, I know. There’s too many assumptions. But
it’s the only chance we have!”

“Toga sounded very confident,” Tokoyami added grimly. “Make no mistake. This threat is
imminent.”

“I’m sure it is,” Aizawa said. “And that’s why none of you are clearly in your right minds. I’ve dealt
with one piece of insanity after another this month, but to believe the entire fate of the nation hangs
on a suicide mission you’ve concocted in thirty minutes is utterly—"

“I know you’ve felt it too!” Midoriya’s voice cracked; he stabbed an accusing finger at Aizawa. “It hasn’t just been this month. It’s been getting worse ever since All Might retired. It feels like everything’s coming apart! The Hero Society’s hanging on by a thread right now. If Shigaraki lets Koh’s Quirk loose in the capital, there’s no way it’ll survive, and people like Nakayama will step in to take over whatever’s left. Call it a suicide mission if you want. I don’t want to live in a world where they get to win!”

“Your families might disagree,” Aizawa retorted, through clenched teeth. “Did you spare any thought to them?”

“I did.” Bakugo held up his phone. “Got my mom’s number right here. Go ahead and call her yourself, if you like. She’ll rip your throat out.”

If it was a bluff, it was a good one. Aizawa hadn’t shifted posture but somehow looked like he was on his back foot, casting his hidden eyes over the ranks of Ectoplasms circling them. None of them seemed in any hurry to back him up. So he changed targets.

“I’m surprised by you most of all, Tokoyami,” he said, and Tokoyami winced guiltily. “Are you really going to let them push you into this?”

Tokoyami blinked. He angled his head so the dappled shadows of the treebranches cast half his face in darkness – they lay uneasily on his beak, making him look more sharp-edged than ever.

“I needed no convincing,” he said. “I agree with Midoriya’s assessment. I also agree with Bakugo’s earlier claim.”

“Which is?”

“That you so-called professional heroes are no longer suited to defend this country yourselves,” he said, and Aizawa’s fists clenched. “But more than that, I must face my own culpability in this matter. Yuurei, Koh…I tried to help them both. But in the end, I could offer them nothing, even though I should have known Koh was gone from the very beginning. My failure, my ignorance…I have to atone for them. And I will.” Dark Shadow erupted from his back, talons outstretched. “Even if I have to go through all of you!”

The dead leaves crunched beneath Midoriya’s shoes. Bakugo’s neck cracked. The dread on all their faces, even Tokoyami’s, was plain to see. The argument had now escalated to a point where no one could see a safe way back down.

Aizawa raised a hand to his capture tape.

“That’s quite a theory.” He tugged. “Let’s test it.”

“That won’t be necessary!”

They all froze. The voice, slightly muffled, had emerged from the Ectoplasm nearest Aizawa. As he stood still, a small lump on the back of his coat wriggled up. Out from his collar popped Nezu, lying atop his smooth pate like a jaunty toupee.

“Good day, everyone,” he said.

Dark Shadow slid back into Tokoyami, a trifle bashfully. If Aizawa’s slack jaw was any indication, Nezu’s appearance had not been part of the script. He clambered onto Ectoplasm’s shoulder, hopped
down, and assumed that familiar pose – one paw behind his back, the other raised high, as if waving hello.

“Forgive my intrusion, but when this latest incident came to light and Tokoyami was spotted by our surveillance, Eraserhead rightly assumed that he would lead us right to the heart of things,” he said. “And with Ectoplasm’s Quirk, concealing myself was as simple as it was tempting!”

Aizawa spoke, his voice basted in venom. “Why are you here?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I, too, was interested in hearing young Midoriya’s rationale for this rash course of action. And I must say, his testimony was rather convincing. A bit too reliant on psychoanalytic conjecture, perhaps, but certainly reasonable given the information he had to work with.” He lowered his other paw and smiled at Midoriya. “Though there was one critical omission in your assessment.”

“What is it?” Midoriya asked.

Nezu said, “Me.”

His shoes kicked up little clouds of dust as he walked to the crater’s center and spread his arms out wide. Standing there, his sleek head bent and his oil-spot eyes shining wetly in the sun, he suddenly appeared to be the most threatening thing in the woods; the trees rustled and bent as if tied to his fingertips, following his every gesture.

“Remember that I am not simply the administrator of this esteemed academy,” he said. “I am the hero Nezu, no further appellation required. My backstory is a secret! My genus is genius. And I had taken measures to counter-act the League of Villains well before this latest bit of treachery was revealed.”

“Sorry, Aizawa,” Ectoplasm said. It was the first time he’d spoken since guiding Midoriya and Bakugo to the woods. “We had to keep it under wraps.”

“Keep what?” His composure was failing fast. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“You recall that I formally severed U.A.’s ties with the Hero Association over the crisis in Musutafu,” Nezu said. “But informally, I’ve kept in touch. Contacted the agencies individually, rather than through the central governing body of the Association itself. My goal was to establish a task force, of sorts. A rapid-response unit. Tokoyami, do you recall the instructions we gave you during the Mosei-Santo operation, should Koh’s Quirk have been activated?”

“To identify and cordon off the affected area,” said Tokoyami. “Until the rampaging within finally fell silent.”

“Just so! It was simply a matter of applying this tactic to a far larger area. I suspected from the very beginning that Shigaraki was using Horooka and Metalhead’s advance on our school as a diversion for his own sinister acts. And the best way to counter a diversion is with another diversion.” His paws flexed and clenched. “We have marshalled our forces to against those who would threaten us. But at the same time, professional heroes have quietly gathered, poised to strike down the League of Villains the moment they showed their faces. Hence the need for all this tiresome secrecy. Saving U.A. is my chief priority, of course. But I knew that, regardless of whatever happened to myself or to this school, Shigaraki could not be allowed to triumph. If he should regain Koh, or if he attempted some other act of terrorism, I had carefully arranged the patrols of each hero for optimal response capacity, ready to organize and neutralize the League with all possible speed.

“And yet,” he sighed, “it appears that it still wasn’t enough.”
There’d always been a touch of the theatrical in Nezu’s gestures. Maybe it all tied back to his size – small as he was, he tried to appear larger than life. But when he lowered his arms and curled his tail around his feet, all that grandiosity was gone. Maybe, some of them thought, this was how he’d looked long ago, huddled in the corner of a cage.

“I, too, am to blame for this crisis,” he said. “If I hadn’t been so careless, Nakayama may not have outflanked us, and the League never would have gained this opportunity. My plans are adaptable, up to a point. But if the Rage signal sweeps across all of Tokyo, that point will be well past us. With so much at risk, I am willing to grasp every advantage I can.”

Aizawa looked ready to strangle him. He’d read ahead of the conversation and could see how it would end, clear as the light of an oncoming train.

“You’re completely insane,” he said. “You can’t possibly agree with this!”

“By Midoriya’s own reasoning, you’ll be lacking support,” Nezu went on. “Though there is some assistance I can offer, you will have little choice but to-”

“Stop talking! Ectoplasm, say something, for God’s sake!”

“I agree with him,” Ectoplasm said. “It’s like you said, Eraser. This is what we’ve come to.”

“They haven’t even had a full semester of training yet!” Aizawa shouted. Tokoyami backed off warily towards the other two boys; none of them had ever seen him this animated. “You’re saying they can save the Hero Society? If we need to send three novice children to fight one of the worst terrorist organizations this country’s seen in decades, then the Hero Society’s already dead. And you!” Tokoyami and Midoriya both recoiled as he wheeled on the students. “I’m so tired. I’m tired of you and all your classmates getting hurt because of our failures. Since the first week you came here I’ve been forced to watch all of you break yourselves on threats you shouldn’t have seen for years. What good are we if we can’t keep our own students safe? What am I even here for!?”

That final question echoed through the woods. Aizawa stopped, red-faced and panting; on his pallid deathmask of a face, the rush of blood in his cheeks looked unnatural, diseased. For a long time his only answer was his own voice, the echo gossiping through the trees. And then:

“It’s not your fault,” said Bakugo.

Midoriya and Tokoyami turned. They weren’t entirely sure it was him who’d spoken. Without the shouting, without that buzzsaw growl, he sounded like a totally different person.

“I get it,” he said. “Even when I was losing my shit in Nezu’s office, I got it. You still want to think this is all gonna turn out okay somehow. Eventually the League’ll go away and take all these other d-list villains with them and we can go back to a normal school life. But it’s not happening. We came to this place expecting to graduate into one kind of world, and then all of a sudden everything changed. It’s all going to shit. It’s not your fault and it’s not ours either. But we’ve still gotta do something about it.”

“You already tried,” said Aizawa. “It nearly killed you.”

“Yeah. And I’d do it again. If I’d been the one to figure out the League’s plan instead of Deku then I’d have gone out here by myself if I had to. No matter how many times I get my ass kicked I’m still gonna come back for more. Because that’s what it’ll take to keep those bastards from winning.” He cast a withering eye at Midoriya and Tokoyami. “It looks like these idiots had the same idea. They need your help too, you know. You’ve gotta make sure they have someplace they can come back to.
But we can’t just sit on our asses and let you help us. We need to help each other.”

“My earlier encouragement aside, I hope you’re quite aware that your chances of success are distressingly low,” said Nezu. “And if the unthinkable should happen, and Koh’s Quirk should be in danger of activation, you may need to…take drastic measures. Are you prepared for that?”

“Fuck no,” said Bakugo. “But I’m going.”

They looked back to Aizawa. He’d turned away. He’d pulled down his goggles, was rubbing his eyes.

“I understand,” said Nezu. “Ectoplasm?”

One of the Ectoplasms crunched up behind them and they turned and saw what he offered. In one hand was a pill bottle; in the other, a small metal box. Midoriya took it and opened it. He saw the syringe inside.

“He made a supply run to the nurse’s office during this little encounter,” Nezu explained. “One tranquilizer pill for each of you, and the last of the anti-Quirk serum. I’d suggest taking the pills before engaging the League, as a precaution. Once you rescue Koh, give him the injection. It should buy you enough time to return to U.A., assuming, of course, that we are still here.”

Tokoyami took both items and concealed them beneath his cloak. “Is there anything else?”

“I’m going to put out a general advisory for villain attacks in Tokyo. It shouldn’t be enough to fully alert Shigaraki, and Kasumigaseki’s administrative offices have evacuation protocols in place for that sort of warning. Hopefully it’ll ensure that you won’t have to worry about civilians. Once you retrieve Koh and get out of the immediate area, it shouldn’t be long before pro heroes arrive to escort you to safety.” He eyed them severely. “That said. If the unthinkable should happen, and Koh’s Quirk should activate, you cannot expect backup. All heroes on site will have more pressing concerns. Even I can’t offer any tactical advice if that signal is unleashed.”

“Then we’ll just have to make sure it doesn’t happen,” Midoriya said.

Bakugo was still watching Aizawa. He took his hand away from his eyes; the familiar redness in his corneas was deeper than usual.

“The three of you have little experience working together.” Through a mighty effort, he’d forced his voice back into its monotone. “Bakugo, Midoriya – your last team exercise was during midterms, and it was frankly disastrous. Tokoyami, your Quirk is vulnerable to Bakugo’s, so you’ll have to keep your distance. Work out your offensive and supporting roles before you engage the target.”

“Yes, sir,” Midoriya and Tokoyami chorused.

“People are evacuating Takodana in droves because of Kitae’s forces. The trains will be mobbed. You’ll have to get creative if you want to board one quickly.” A pause. “Well? Get moving.”

“Don’t wait up,” Bakugo told them, and charged ahead. Tokoyami followed, the leaves flying up in their wake like clouds of disturbed insects.

“Midoriya,” Nezu said, before he could take off as well. “There are two more brief questions I’d like to ask. First: did you have any contact with Shin Yuurei during his espionage?”

The overhead fluorescents and the drip of the bathroom sink and the blackness of the revolver’s bore. Shin’s exhausted face as he asked questions for which there were no answers. What sort of world
would you build, if you had the chance?

“I did,” Midoriya said hesitantly. “But I didn’t learn anything. And it was right before Nakayama leaked that Koh was here, so with all that happened…”

“It doesn’t matter,” Nezu said. “Rather, it doesn’t matter as of yet. Thank you for letting me know.”

“What else?”

Nezu asked, “Is there anything you want me to tell All Might?”

He didn’t have to think about it for long.

“No,” he said. “I think we’ve both said everything we can.”

“Deku, move your ass already!”

“I believe that’s your cue,” said Nezu. “Good luck.”

Midoriya ran off. A minute later, there was a distant boom. Bakugo’s explosions carrying him over the wall, and into the city beyond. The Ectoplasms around them faded into curling mist, until only one remained. He walked up to Nezu, his peglegs spearing the leaves underfoot.

“Is the special unit ready?” Nezu asked.

“They’re finishing their drills now. I’ve already told them about the new situation. They’re nervous, understandably. But it shouldn’t change anything.”

“And what of Toga?”

“Dead. The clone, I mean. Apparently she goaded Hound Dog into it. Mei Hatsume had to put him down with some kind of souped-up cattle prod so he’d stop wrecking the halls. Physically he should recover in a half hour or so, but mentally…”

“He’ll be fine. Or rather, he’ll be fit. He’s used to directing his aggressive impulses at more deserving targets. Still, this means the League is now aware of our discovery.” He huffed. “So we’ve fallen as far as we can go.”

“Speaking of fitness…Eraserhead, are you going to be all right?”

“I’ll fight,” Aizawa said dully. “Don’t worry about that.”

“There’s something I need to say to you,” Nezu told him. “All the criticisms you’ve given me over these last months, the doubts, the rebukes…they’ve all been correct. I’ve let you down. But I still intend to make up for it.” Aizawa said nothing. “We’re at the bottom of the hole now, Eraserhead. All that remains is ascension, or burial.”

“I have something to tell you, as well,” said Aizawa. He was hunched over, staring vaguely at the direction of the school. “If the impossible should happen, and we all live to see tomorrow, then I’m resigning. I can’t do this anymore.”

He walked off without waiting for an answer. Nezu watched the shape of him fade between the trees, turn ghostlike, as if his exhaustion had deepened to the point where he could no longer remain entirely in this world.

“That’s going to hurt,” said Ectoplasm. “He’s a good teacher.”
“Yes.”

“There’s a lot of students here with family in Tokyo, too. Should I put out a call?”

“I took care of that last night,” said Nezu. “It was a security breach, but a necessary one. Hopefully they’ll be out of danger, at least. I’ve also called in some favors and acquired access to the Association’s emergency comms band. You and the rest should be good to go.”

“Guess that means there’s nothing left but to mobilize.”

“There is one thing. It involves All Might, naturally. Sorry to impose, but there’s something I need you to ask of him.”

“I’m listening,” said Ectoplasm.

Nezu told him.

* * *

Aizawa hadn’t been exaggerating about the evacuation. Takodana Ward was a sterile wasteland, a memorial in the shape of the city. Every shopfront they glimpsed had its sign swung to Closed; the clean-swept sidewalks were unmarred by footprints; the only sounds were Bakugo’s explosions and the rushing of wind in their ears as they bounded through the deserted streets. They stuck to streetlight-level or higher, elevating themselves with their Quirks. Bakugo had the easiest time of it, buoying himself with blasts of force that rolled through the ward in what must have sounded to its new inhabitants like hollow parodies of Mirai Horooka’s own. Dark Shadow warped and twisted itself in its attempt to keep Tokoyami airborne, though the sun beating down made it hard; it grew weak wings and shot out its limbs for handholds, clambering across the building faces with eerie, insectile grace. Midoriya stuck to parkour, his gymnastics second nature after the months he’d spent practicing Full Cowl. He could have just run along at street level but didn’t want to risk it. They couldn’t waste time with an ambush.

“Where the heck are the cops?” Dark Shadow asked.

“They were probably asked to withdraw by Nezu,” Tokoyami replied. Dark Shadow didn’t have lungs and it was doing all the physical exertion for him, so they were able to speak easily. “He seems determined to bear the full brunt of Metalhead’s assault himself.”

“I really hope he knows what he’s doing.”

“We’ve got other things to worry about, morons!” Bakugo barked, and then snapped his head to Midoriya. “And where the hell do you get off keeping up with me like this?”

“During…our last fight. Your midair attacks…too hard to dodge,” Midoriya panted. “Been training…my vertical movement.”

“Keep dreaming! I could dodge that sluggish-ass shit in my sleep!”

“Good to have you back, Bakugo. Except not really.”

“I’m watching the road,” said Tokoyami. “Dark Shadow, please look out for any threats.”

“You got it!”

The buildings got shorter as they approached Takodana’s outer reaches, trendy restaurants and
lacquered condos, all their windows empty and blind. They kept to the rooftops, and in the distance, they could hear the rumble and hiss of trains arriving or departing. Dark Shadow’s head craned this way and that, and then its lamplight eyes widened. At the mouth of a nearby street was a huddle of strangers standing beside a Stop sign. Dark Shadow couldn’t make out the details, but it could see one of them crouch and unhinge a serpentlike jaw that chomped off the sign at its base as though the metal were made of biscuit dough.

“Uh, guys?”

Another of the strangers hoisted the sign. Their arm bulged, veins running through the muscles like tunneling worms.

“Guys, to the left!”

Midoriya’s head snapped to the side as their would-be attacker hurled the sign pole-first like a scrapyard javelin. It streaked towards him but his legs tensed, his shoes hissed, and with a leap that fissured the stony roof underfoot he shot towards the spear and corkscrewed his body and snatched it out of the air; his shoes coughed further, suspending him, twisting him ‘round, and he clenched the sign hard enough for the metal to bend like rubber in his grip and hurled it back the way it came. There was a distant crack and then a stream of terrified cursing, but neither Tokoyami nor Bakugo could see if it had actually hit anyone, and then Midoriya was already with them, already leaving them behind.

“Hatsume’s upgrades work,” he said.

“What the hell was that!?” Dark Shadow squawked.

“They’re fine. At least they won’t try to follow us now.”

The train station was visible. The tracks were a dark line stenciled through Takodana’s glimmer and the mass of humanity around the station’s overhang spilled like out a stain. They could hear the crowd’s clamor. It looked as though half of the ward was currently waiting for a train out of Musutafu and into Tokyo. Straight into Shigaraki’s clutches.

“This is going to be difficult,” Tokoyami said.

Dark Shadow was blunter. “There’s no way. Not unless you want Bomb Boy over there to crack a few heads.”

“Follow my lead,” said Midoriya.

“Huh? Hey, wait!”

He shot off the last rooftop and onto the overhang; several people in the crowd looked up in puzzlement at the thump of metal on metal above their heads. The train’s doors slid shut. It began to depart, computerized voice merrily announcing its destinations. Both Tokoyami’s and Dark Shadow’s breaks dropped open as Midoriya sprang off the overhang and landed on the train’s smooth-topped roof, Bakugo right behind him.

“He’s lost his mind. They’ve lost their minds!”

“Follow them. Quickly.”

Dark Shadow’s claws gripped the overhang’s lip and it threw them both onto the train. There were shouts and camera flashes that would capture nothing more than a blur. What little remained of
“You’ve lost your minds!” Dark Shadow shouted. “Once this thing picks up speed we’re gonna fly off like a couple of gnats!”

“I have an idea!” Midoriya called back. “Tokoyami, get ahead of us. Dark Shadow can protect us from the wind!”

Tokoyami peered up at Dark Shadow. “Can you? My cloak can provide some shelter from the daylight.”

“This just had to happen on a bright sunny day,” it groaned. “Give me a sec.”

It pulled the two of them in front of Midoriya and Bakugo. Tokoyami faced them, his back to the train’s nose, and Dark Shadow planted its claws into the train’s roof and expanded, thinned, a sheet of fuzzed dark that made a bulwark against the growing gale. Midoriya and Bakugo grabbed its wrists like lifelines.

“You’re lucky that me and Fumi did all those endurance exercises. And that I can’t get hypothermia. You’re lucky we’re here in general, honestly.”

“Can it, sockpuppet,” Bakugo said.

“Nuh-uh. You can’t stop me now. I might talk for the whole trip!”

“Please don’t,” said Tokoyami.

“Party pooper.”

It was strange here, under Dark Shadow’s aegis. The train was already moving at well over a hundred miles an hour, but thanks to Dark Shadow’s bizarre biology they might as well have been standing still, if not for the blurring scenery and the fluttering noise just beside their ears like laundry on a line. Midoriya and Bakugo were practically shoulder-to-cheekbone. They were both achingly aware they’d be stuck like this for a while.

Surprisingly, Bakugo broke the silence first.

“How long did you spend thinking up this dumbass plan?” he asked.

“The train or everything else?”

“Both. Either. I don’t care.”

“I don’t know. A while. I’m still thinking about it now.” He turned to look at Bakugo. “Hey, Kacchan?”

“What?”

“Why were you still in your room? I thought for sure you were going to fight with everyone else.”

“Yeah, well.”

He stayed quiet for a very long time, color slowly blooming in his cheeks. Midoriya didn’t pry; pushing his buttons here might have well send them all flying into the wild blue yonder. But eventually he did start talking again.
“I was planning to,” he said. “But everybody else was running around figuring their shit out. Meanwhile all the wimps in the other classes were gonna be underground with freaking Lunch Rush. What’s he gonna do if Horooka and her goons bust in, throw a spatula at ‘em? Thought I’d be better off down there instead. At least no one’d get in my way.” A pause. “Doesn’t matter now. I’ve owed that bad-touch shithead an ass-kicking for a long time.” Another pause. “Calm the fuck down, Deku.”

“I didn’t say anything!” Midoriya protested.

“If the sockpuppet had bones then his arm would be powder,” Bakugo said. Midoriya looked at his hand on Dark Shadow’s wrist, saw how tight he was clenching. He tried to relax his grip, with limited success. “Plus there’s that guy you almost impaled five minutes ago. I dunno what’s been going through your head since you got out of the infirmary but you’ve been acting even weirder than usual. We can’t deal with it now. So get your shit together, alright?”

“Fumi, are you hearing this?” Dark Shadow said gleefully. “Bakugo’s giving a pep talk!”

Bakugo snarled some threat but Midoriya didn’t catch it. He stared down at the train’s polished carapace. It held no reflection. Maybe that was for the best.

The poisonous unease that had appeared inside him ever since All Might had divulged the truth about the Yard was still there, throbbing like a cocoon against his ribs. He’d nearly choked on it when Toga had finally let the mask drop, mocking them in Koh’s voice. He was familiar with anger – it had seethed in him when Bakugo had cornered him during middle school, burned hot when throwing Todoroki’s tortured past back in his face, roared out when he’d smashed himself to bits against Muscular and Overhaul. But this was something deeper, elemental, and he still couldn’t put a reason to it no matter how hard he tried.

He held this secret rage up against an image of Shigaraki, but that wasn’t the cause. Shin Yuurei’s weary, resigned face made it stir, but it still wasn’t enough. He had too many pieces and no time left to assemble them into the whole. As Tokoyami and Bakugo tried to quell their own anxiety by focusing on the task ahead, Midoriya delved into himself, tried to shine a light on his tangled thoughts, but he still only saw murk, as black as a certain half-finished spire in Kasumigaseki, where another sort of anger was waiting to be born.

* * *

Shin set out with the League of Villains in his pocket.

This was the last time, he thought. The bustle and chatter, the unceasing parade of screens. People hailing cabs. People walking dogs. People eating sushi. People checking their makeup. People with their children. The children with their toys. The children with food clenched in chubby fists. The children’s parents wiping their mouths. The mouths that flapped and glistened. The unblemished faces. The quick and easy smiles. The smiles nailed to the screens overhead. The screens showing pictures of Christmas. The screens promising fine weather. The screens’ color and light. The people around the screens. The movement and the bustle and the color and the light and the smiles and the children’s clean faces.

He was so tired of it all.

He took the train and was somewhere near Shinagawa when his phone squealed, making him jump; the passenger nearest him threw a puzzled glance at a sound that shouldn’t have been there. He pulled his phone out and saw all the people around him pull theirs out too. He saw them read, their clean easy faces curdling into alarm. The messages flashed across his screen:
They sleeted down with idiot repetition and the peacefulness in the train car eroded under the deluge. The people started whispering to each other. They sent hasty texts of their own. The train lurched and the conductor’s polished voice bled from the overhead speakers.

“Attention all passengers. A city-wide alert has been issued for impending villain activity. This train to Kasumigaseki has been canceled. Please disembark at the next stop and seek shelter as instructed. We apologize for any inconvenience.”

The passengers groaned, Shin among them. It was almost an hour’s walk to the M.o.I. tower from here. One last obstacle the heroes were throwing in their way. Inside his coat, the League clinked expectantly.

He stepped off the train and into the streets. Most of the city wasn’t paying much mind to the advisory – the cars were honking with rather more urgency than usual and he passed by pockets of frantic gossip, but otherwise the routine went on as the sun continued to crawl across the sky, reaching its peak. He could almost hear what they were thinking: it couldn’t be here. It couldn’t be me. What about me. What about me.

Flashes of heroes in the crowd. Smears of unnatural color. More than he’d remembered. He gave them a wide berth, even with Incognito cloaking him. As he approached Kasumigaseki he suddenly felt like someone walking against a tide. The cabs had been replaced with a lot of sleek black cars and all of them were headed in the other direction. The people here, in their neat suits and heels and ties, didn’t look as blasé as the ones earlier. They jabbered into their phones and fled their offices like fleas from a cooling corpse.

The tower loomed. That skeletal-topped obelisk of black glass. It couldn’t have possibly grown since he’d last been here but for some reason it seemed taller than ever. He wondered what the Ministry of Individuality had planned to do in there – maybe after construction was finished, all the offices set up and the computers switched on, it would quietly gain a few basement levels. New rooms with soundproofing and sturdy locks. He stepped onto the plaza and cast his eye around, at the tower, at the two towers flanking it, a swept concrete desert with the three buildings laid out like points on a triangle, all of them barren. He’d worried the whole trip that the heroes had somehow pinpointed his destination, but for the first time he thought it might actually be true.

Shin stepped past the construction barriers and paused at the front. The glass once again held his reflection. He stared into it until it became a stranger’s. He went in.

During his years spent homeless he’d squatted in buildings under construction from time to time – the construction crews’ arrival would always wake him up, give him time to switch on his Quirk. This one wasn’t much different. The ground work was mostly done, the place high-ceilinged, floor swept clean, the pipes and struts looking like a pupating state for the cubicle walls that would have one day stood here. Otherwise it was wide-open as a parking garage. They hadn’t put in the electrical yet, and as he approached the room’s center and the sunlight from outside dimmed, everything turned fuzzed and dreamlike.
He reached into his pocket and withdrew a small drawstring bag. Marbles clicked together inside. He withdrew the top one and tossed it out. When it hit the floor there was a sudden pop, a brief rush of air, and Mr. Compress stood before him, the face on his mask an assortment of crescents – downturned sickle smile, upturned eyes.

“Shin, my boy. Well done as usual.”

“We have a problem,” Shin said, and told him about the alert. Compress listened and ran a hand over his mask, as if wishing to adjust its smile into something more appropriate.

“Hmm. That’s not ideal. But it doesn’t appear you were followed. Let’s hear what our leader has to say about it. Hand me the bag, if you would.”

Shin gave it to him and with a flourish Compress whipped it through the air, dislodging the rest of the marbles. They clattered to the ground and burst open, revealing the rest of the League. And then there was Koh, still unconscious, laid out in the middle of their group.

“That was great! Let’s never do it again,” Twice said, stretching. Then he stopped, and his own, far more expressive mask went wide-eyed. “Uh oh.”

“Throw your back out?” Dabi asked.

“No, everything’s fine. Toga died.”

“Aaw, crap,” said Toga. “I was doing so good, too!”

“Shin just told me a city-wide alert’s been sent out,” Compress explained. “No way of knowing how much they learned, but it appears the jig is up. Perhaps we should accelerate things a bit?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

That was Shigaraki’s voice, low to the ground. He was crosslegged on the floor, looking down at Koh’s sleeping form. Just as in Mosei-Santo, the porcelain shine of the hands clutching him all over were rendered more solid in this ill light, and as they waited for him to speak it made him seem more solid, more real than the rest of them, like they were little more than stray fragments of his own, inscrutable thoughts. Several of them furtively touched themselves as if trying to remember their own presence.

“All of you saw when All Might fell,” Shigaraki said. “That lovely speech he gave. How he condemned my master for manipulating and terrorizing all those poor, innocent people trying to live ordinary lives. As if they weren’t responsible for any of the injustice that their Symbol of Peace fought so bravely.” He raised his head. “But we know better, don’t we?”

He got to his feet. Rowdy as they could be, no one else in the League interrupted this moment. Even Dabi kept his mouth shut; he hung at the back of the crowd, smirking wide.

“It’s all been a lie,” Shigaraki went on. “Everything All Might promised. The world he tried to build was dead from the start. We’ve all gone through our own lives choking on the stink. And all those so-called innocents know it, too. They hate us for showing them the truth, they hate the heroes for failing to shut us up. They hate themselves and each other for being a part of it. So much rot, just waiting to be revealed. The Yard was just one place where it finally bubbled to the surface. What was it you said back there, Compress? A villain is someone whose heart is full of rage at the way things are.” He held out his destroying hands. “Today, we’ll make villains of them all.”

“That’s great to hear,” said Dabi, after a minute, “but what are we gonna do about this alert? Could
“Have heroes knocking on our door any second.”

“Head out to the plaza, all of you. Make your stand there. If you see anyone, let me know and I’ll inject the Trigger right away. But only if you see anyone. I want this to wait until that addled bitch Horooka tries to storm U.A. When the ashes settle, everyone can see that the seat of heroism was busy protecting itself while their country died.”

“All of us, huh.” Dabi nudged Shin. “Guess that includes you, newbie.”

“Remember,” Shigaraki said to him. “This is what you chose.”

“You don’t have to remind me,” said Shin.

“And if anyone does show up, try to contribute a little.” He pointed one raddled finger at Shin’s chest, where the revolver rested inside his coat. “If you want to be one of us, you’ll have to shoot someone sooner or later.”

“Can we watch when it happens?” Toga asked. “I don’t wanna just stand outside all afternoon.”

“Sure. We can go up to the roof and watch it all end.” He waved them away. “Take your pills and get in position. This is where it all comes together.”

Compress clapped his hands. “You heard him, lady and gentlemen. Off we go, step lively.”

Shin didn’t linger. He walked off with the rest of them. As the exit drew near he felt a tug on his sleeve and turned to see Spinner’s narrow, worried face.

“You alright?” he asked.

“He will be,” Dabi said, and clapped a hand on Shin’s shoulder. “Shigaraki will hold up his end of things. Once the kid’s out of the picture you won’t have to worry anymore.”

“You think so?” Shin asked.

“Take it from me. I know you like him and all, but once you cut these people loose, everything gets easier.” He pushed away. “Hey, Twice, let’s get some clones going! Me and the bloodsucker oughta be more than enough.”

They left without turning back, Shin included. For a time Shigaraki stood still in the half-finished chamber. He prodded Koh with a foot, turned him onto his back. He lay with his thin arms at his sides like someone ready for the autopsy table. Carve him open and cast around his entrails. Augur the shattered future.

Shigaraki touched the hand over his face. He fondled it. Around those clutching fingers his childish giggles strained out. His body trembled with mirth.

“I did it,” he said. “I learned everything you taught me. Father…Master…can you feel it? The moment when it’s all finally gone.” He spread his arms wide, a scarecrow waiting for the carrion birds. “It’s coming. It’s coming…”

* * *

She’d coughed up blood this morning. The last few days, her spasming chest had shot her out of what little sleep she could find, but this was the first time when the now-expected gobbets of phlegm she hacked into the bathroom sink had been accompanied by stardust flecks of red. She’d stared
dully at the porcelain and tried not to think of it as a sign.

She was on the front stoop now, smoking. Despite everything, she couldn’t think of a reason to stop.

At last, Kashiki had gone through the same alien transformation as Mosei and Santo – the ward was empty, everyone fled in light of their advance. The city’s life had been cut out of it so quick that in places it was still gasping, like a freshly gutted fish. Alarm clocks still buzzed in uninhabited bedrooms. Cooked food congealed in the kitchens of restaurants they hadn’t managed to raid. Adding to this unnatural atmosphere was Hiraku Takenoko. His Quirk was on and his mammoth, emaciated frame strode among the buildings like a vagrant hallucination. In his hands was Mirai Horooka. Ready to lead the charge.

Behind her, Metalhead heard the door swing open and shut. Yori Kizutatchi sat down beside her, withdrew a stick of gum from his hoodie pocket, put it in his mouth and started to chew.

“Nice weather,” he said.

“It’s too bright.” She tapped ash. “Worried it’ll fuck up Horooka’s eyes. Eye.”

“We’re approaching from the south. It shouldn’t be a problem.”

“You got a headcount yet?”

“Somewhere north of four hundred. I’m hoping it’s closer to five, but I can’t be totally sure.

“Assuming all the teachers and hero students get involved, that’ll be…what, about four or five of us for everyone one of them?” Smoke drifted out the corners of her mouth. “Not the best odds. I thought we had a lot more.”

“We did. The heroes got a bunch. Then more of them left, especially in the last couple of days. But the ones still around are the true believers. They’ll be in it to the end.”

Haven’t seen your friend lately, Metalhead didn’t say.

“But we have Horooka,” Kizutatchi continued. “We keep them away from her, she can knock the place over single-handedly.”

“You sure have a lot of faith in her.”

He shrugged. “She won me over.”

“Can you even fight? I’ve never seen you do anything but text.”

“I can hold my own alright,” said Kizutatchi. “But in case you need a little extra, take this.”

He held out a capped syringe. It was oddly small, making her think of a snub-nosed revolver. The liquid inside was familiar.

“That’s the shithead’s Trigger?” she asked.

“Yeah, it’s legit. The syringes are custom, I had them brought in from home. Sturdy. You won’t have to worry about it breaking open on you.” He set it down between them and pulled another one out of his pocket. “Be careful with this stuff, though. It goes right to your head, and you can’t be sure how it’s going to affect your Quirk.”

“Sounds like you’ve used it before.”
“Once. I’m lucky to still be in one piece. I wouldn’t suggest giving this to anyone else unless you really trust them.”

“At this point that’s pretty much just Takenoko. Let him have one. He’s useless in a fight as it is.”

“Sounds fair. But keep your distance. Transformation Quirks get real unpredictable when Trigger’s involved.” Kizutatchi looked out at Takenoko’s silhouette, a black scratch across the skyline. “He sure seems attached to Horooka.”

“He likes to help people. I never got much of a read on him past that.”

They stayed quiet for a while. Metalhead’s cigarette burned down but she didn’t toss it out. She wanted to make this one last.

“What’ll you do after?” Kizutatchi asked.

“Nothing’s changed. Start another recruitment drive and go for Shigaraki. Maybe I’ll put out a message of my own. Make it clear what a conniving little shit he is.” She ran a mangled thumb over the switchblade in her coat. “Everyone knows Tomura Shigaraki’s name. But that’s not always such a good thing. Horooka’s learned that herself.”

“You going to let her move on?”

“I don’t care what she does after this. What, you gonna go off with her? Start a little movement of your own?”

“I just keep my mind on the task at hand,” Kizutatchi said. “Whatever comes after, can come after. Worry too much about things and you’ll start to get cold feet.”

Mainichi’s unspoken name unspooled in the air around their heads.

“I know you tried to kill him,” Metalhead said quietly.

“And I know you let him go.” Kizutatchi stood up. “Maybe just leave it at that.”

Metalhead’s mouth twisted around her cigarette. She finally understood exactly why this man had driven Mainichi so crazy – even more than his tendency for casual violence, it was the way he turned everything around on you, cut you off before you could properly hate him. The same, unspoken words counterpointing everything he said: don’t blame me. You were the one who let me in.

She got off the stoop and went around the step, and found what she was looking for. She’d sent a message out for someone to get her this last night, as Mainichi ran the streets. Seeing it quietly show up was gratifying, in a way. But then again, it hadn’t been a complicated request.

Kizutatchi watched her step out into the road, bouncing the crowbar in the palm of her hand.

“New weapon of choice?” he asked.

“Thought I’d take a page out of Yuurei’s book. Might help me get in the mood. It doesn’t matter much either way. Once my blood gets into it, it’ll take whatever shape I want.”

“Is your blood in these streets?”

She gave him a sharp look. That sounded out of character for him; it was the same sort of ominous non sequitur Horooka might spout. But he just stared back, chewing his gum, and she turned her attention in the direction of the school.
She ached all over like she was in the jaws of a long flu, her chest hurt with every breath, and from the stabbing pains in her face she was pretty sure her piercings were infected. Almost everyone she’d known had been either subsumed by this mass of strangers or disappeared entirely. But the city had gone silent from end to end and that silence was hers, and even now the thought of what was to come electrified her awake, filled her head with fire. Metalhead knew she wouldn’t ever be able to walk away from this. She would always come back to breathe it in.

She spat her cigarette out into the gutter, where it flickered and died.

“It’s time,” she said. “Let’s go change the world.”

* * *

They flocked to the shape of Takenoko. He was a roving landmark, a lodestone magnetizing them all to where he stood. Every so often his elongated head would spin on his neck and note the gathering specks. Mirai lay in his palms like a doll, limp as a doll. Her own head lolled, noting the shapes of the buildings around them. Not high enough. She had gone so much higher.

When he finally stopped, and shrunk, and set her down, she almost folded bonelessly to the asphalt, unsure of how to stand. But she did stand again. Her fine new coat curled around her ankles and it was the only part of her that was clean. Her hair was once again blackened with grime, the face it framed like something staring up from a freshly dug grave. The bandages over her eye were already stained. Whatever was underneath itched and burned.

Takenoko knelt before her, cupped one palm against the ruined side of her face. She still barely came up to his chest; his voice rumbled at some vague point above.

“You need to keep these clean. You’ll get sick.” He rubbed the gauze, skin rasping cloth. “Can you hear me?”

She didn’t know.

“Everyone is here. Is this where you wanted to be?”

Who was here? Was she here? Who was hearing this? Whose ears were these? What noise was in this head?

“You said you wanted it. So I’ll believe you. I’ll be where you are.”

Were those her words? Was this her throat? Was she standing here? Was she sleeping?

She turned and looked at the assembled shapes before her. She didn’t see the awe on their faces. She didn’t see faces. The ocean of noise had closed over her. They were here because of something she’d said but it must have echoed back wrong somehow. Even the person she’d been yesterday could no longer be found.

Then she realized. This must be the time that came before the time before. She’d found her way back to the days before the quiet room and the cold mountain, the days she’d lived that had been swallowed by the Yard. It was no wonder she couldn’t recognize herself. This was someone she no longer could be. But those days would now re-emerge. The earth would vomit up its dead. Somewhere ahead was Koh, and Shin, and the wide unbroken sky where, just for a moment, she had glimpsed the person she had maybe once wished to become.

Akane “Metalhead” Kitae and Yori Kizutatchi stepped to the front of the crowd, the former with a crowbar against her shoulder, the latter with hands in pockets. Metalhead wordlessly handed
Takenoko a syringe and he wordlessly took it. They went past him and stopped just behind Mirai and took out their phones, then raised them high and sent their message. Their signal went out through Musutafu, and the people who had gathered at U.A. High School’s periphery roused.

They made no sound except their shoes scraping the asphalt. The gutted neighborhoods shivered with the syncopation of their advance. Mirai walked at their head, back straight and hair swaying, this disparate, desperate army pushing her up from behind like a storm front. She led them to glory. Or maybe she was led.

* * *

“It’s all ready for you,” Ectoplasm said to All Might.

U.A.’s central security room reminded him a little of the monitor room where, once upon a time, he had watched Class 1-A during its very first training exercise, battling over papier-mâché bombs in pre-fab towers. The room was empty now, and had been for some time. A thin, greasy dust had developed on most of the consoles. U.A.’s security had been automated for years, and manual control of all its counter-measures was usually left to emergencies these days.

The darkened screens at the head of the room reflected All Might tenfold. Ectoplasm instead led him to one of the side terminals, dotted with several other, much smaller screens. He flipped a few switches and they lit up, giving him a crystal-clear view of the U.A.’s gates in all four directions. The students were mobilizing. Some of them already stood within the cameras’ view. When the time came, they would leave campus and stand before the gates, shoulder to shoulder, waiting for whatever might come.

“This here’s the manual control for security, if you want to drop or raise the gate barriers,” Ectoplasm said, tapping a lever. “Though I doubt they’ll be of much use if things get that bad. Cameras shouldn’t need much tweaking, you’re going to have a lousy view of the action anyway. And last but not least…” He slid a microphone in front of the terminal’s chair. “I’ve got it hooked up to the central intercom. Just flip that switch on the side and you’ll be good to go.”

“You’ve been busy,” All Might said faintly. His voice hadn’t come close to recovering.

“We all have. You included.”

All Might sat down. The chair’s disused upholstery creaked. He looked out at the rest of the chamber; his seat was just one of at least a dozen. He wondered just how many people had been needed to man this place.

“Excessive, isn’t it,” Ectoplasm said. “Even back in the day it was never really full, unless Nezu needed me to work double-time.”

“How long have you been working here, anyway?”

“A while. Nezu poached me, I guess you could say. He must have figured my Quirk would solve a lot of staffing issues.”

“He can be convincing that way.”

“You don’t know the half of it.” He pointedly tapped the floor with a peg leg. “I needed a little time off my feet.”

He swallowed and pulled the microphone in. His throat felt like it had been used as the mold for a slugful of hot iron.
“You’ll get it right,” said Ectoplasm. “Don’t overthink it.”

“What do you think about all this?” he asked. “Not just today, here. Everything that might come after, for all of us. Everyone else seems to be at their breaking point.”

Ectoplasm’s skull face was rigid as ever. But when he spoke, he sounded relieved, like he’d been waiting for the question for a long time.

“Most of us break,” he said. “One way or another. This job breaks pieces off you. But I don’t need to tell you that.”

“I guess not.” He pressed his hand to his ruined stomach. “People like Gran Torino are the exception, not the rule.”

“You need to make a decision eventually. Whether to quit while you’re still mostly in one piece, or keep throwing yourself at the job until there’s nothing left of you to throw. Even after I got hurt, I figured the consequences of retiring would be worse than going on. So I got a couple pairs of fake feet and kept moving forward. These kids are making the same choice. They’re just doing it way earlier than us, that’s all.”

“Hound Dog said something like that, during Bakugo’s expulsion hearing. He said we were making them grow up too fast.”

“I get his point. But it’s not just us forcing this on them. And I’d prefer they grow up too fast instead of never getting the chance to grow up at all.” He sighed and looked to the front monitors, all of them filled with nothing but shadow. “I’m not giving up either way. And I’m definitely not going to give up on them.”

“Neither am I.”

“He was amazing, you know,” Ectoplasm said. “Midoriya. I could see a fire burning in him when he stood up to Eraserhead.”

“It was always there,” he said. His voice wavered. “Always.”

Ectoplasm laid a hand on his shoulder. “But he’s still not up to par with you. Despite what you said before, you’re still the Symbol of Peace. There’s parts of the hero you were that haven’t gone just yet.”

“I hope so. I’ll need all the strength I can muster.”

“Your voice has been ringing in these kids’ ears since they could walk. You’ll do fine. And as for the rest of us…we’ll do what we can.”

All Might felt the hand lift, and Ectoplasm’s legs clack across the floor, growing distant. The exit hissed open and shut. He was alone, face bathed in the terminal’s light.

Talk of Tokoyami’s outburst in Support had already spread far and wide, carrying a heavy freight of rumor. All Might had only gotten to hear a few whispers of it before Ectoplasm had showed up to tell him the full story. He’d taken it with leaden acceptance. Of course this had happened. Midoriya attracted crises like moths to a flame; it stood to reason that even in these dark times, he’d save the biggest and most apocalyptic crisis for himself. What was Toshinori Yagi doing at his age? Still struggling to lift a barbell without blowing his back out? Every one of these children were running ahead of them, further away than they could reach.
But he could still do this, at least. He’d had these words roiling in his head, half-formed, for a while now. Time to give them a voice.

He flicked on the mic. Its crackle was heard all throughout U.A., and All Might’s voice followed in its wake.

* * *

“To my students: this is All Might speaking.”

They paused on the grounds, in the halls, in their rooms with costumes still half-worn. They flung open windows and leaned into the freezing air to better catch the sound. His voice, broken and thin as it was, had been magnified a hundred-fold by the intercoms. It rolled around the campus and curled like mist into the empty city beyond.

“By now you may have heard rumors of an incident outside the Support Department development studio. Because of this incident, we received some terrible news. Koh Kyoumoto has been abducted by the League of Villains. He is currently held in Tokyo, where they likely plan to unleash his Quirk. Three students have chosen to aid in his rescue: Fumikage Tokoyami, Katsuki Bakugo, and Izuku Midoriya. For this reason, you will not see them among your ranks today.”

The truth washed over a sea of grim faces. They had all been numbed by the winter’s torrent of bad news. Uraraka and Kirishima stood outside, Uraraka staring skyward as if watching for an oncoming meteor.

“Mirai Horooka will soon arrive. She seeks to take something we do not have, and wreak vengeance for wrongs that we did not commit. We’ve all lost so much since the start of this school year. Strength, innocence, maybe even hope. But even now, my colleagues and I find ourselves emboldened. Indeed, we feel stronger than ever. And why?”

“Because you are here.”

The students jolted as if from a bad dream. This wasn’t All Might’s usual bravado, the bellows of encouragement that had come out of their TV sets. Tired and solemn as he was, he spoke those words with a sincerity that made their knees buckle, and as he continued to speak his voice built, leapt, shedding exhaustion in layers until they felt what was shining bright underneath.

On Musutafu’s streets, Mirai Horooka approached, her head a hive of shrieking ghosts; Metalhead’s crowbar gleamed in the hateful sun as the dispossessed marched in step. Further away, a bullet train gashed a course through the nation, wheels roaring beneath Izuku Midoriya as he clutched Dark Shadow and felt this inexplicable rage pulse inside him. Further still, Tomura Shigaraki’s shuddering frame held vigil over Koh’s sleeping body with the poison that would loose his signal like thunder across Tokyo, and Shin Yuurei stood outside and struggled not to think of the child behind him or the world that was soon to come.

“The truth about the Yard shook us to our core. The society built upon my deeds had suddenly revealed itself to be hollow. In that dark hour, we almost lost faith. But time and again, we have been raised up by your devotion. Young as you are, we’ve seen you place your lives at risk in service to your ideals, the ones that we had tried so hard to impart. So I say now – we will stand with you. We will make ourselves worthy of you.”

The thundering ghosts. The pulsing step. The gleam of the poison and the gash it would carve. The gash of the train and the thunder of its passing. The child’s quickening pulse and the hateful world about to be gashed. The sleeping signal, the signal’s poison, the poisoned rage, the rage that would
poison the world to come.

“I am All Might, the Symbol of Peace. And while I can no longer fight alongside you, I haven’t left you behind. We will face this approaching evil and whatever evils succeed it, and every last one of them will fall beneath our righteousness! In you, we have glimpsed a brighter future. The possibility of a better world than this one. For that world, we will support you with everything we have!”


“For the world to come…for the people we treasure…for the sake of our Hero Academia, we shall make our stand here!”

Chapter End Notes

End of Part Two.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!