hineni | הינני

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by noahfronsenburg

Summary

The problem was not that All Might was Yagi Toshinori.

The problem is that Yagi Toshinori is—was—had always been—All Might.

And always would be.

Notes

The title of this fic (הינני) is a Hebrew word (pronounced hinéni), and means “here I am.” It is used throughout Jewish scripture as an answer to a call, usually one both painful and essential. It is what Abraham says when G-d calls him to sacrifice Isaac; it is what Moses
replies when he sees the burning bush.

Hineni is a difficult word. It means a present choice; it means deciding, despite your own personal fears and the potential horrors yet to come, that you will do something. No matter how hard. Hineni, to be present, to stand before another, is to choose the most difficult path before all other easier ones, because those that are not difficult do not matter.

When you say hineni, you have no other option. There is no other way except forward. There is no turning back.

Hineni is also the name of one of the most important prayers of the High Holy Days, on Yom Kippur. When the leader of the service sings the Hi’neni, they are begging that their congregation not be judged by their sins. They are asking forgiveness, for their failures, for their shortcomings.

When All Might says “Never fear, for I am here!” what he is saying is hineni. He is saying I have made the choice, and I will stand, no matter what is yet to come.

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see end of work for specific trigger warnings
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

- genesis 22:11 | בתישרב

In the beginning, Yagi Toshinori was a too-tall boy with too-small hands and too-much heart. He had had nothing of his own—Quirkless, powerless, and probably fated to die young—and then Nana had given him a hand, and lifted him up, and he could fly. How quickly, how fast, that became his whole identity! Everything he was became One For All, until Yagi Toshinori was a little boy who had been someone else, until All Might was all he was.

The problem is, he realises too late, only when he wakes up in the hospital with half his body in a cast and an ache deep inside his chest where his left lung used to be, staring at his fingers, as slender and narrow as they were when he was fourteen, not that All Might was Yagi Toshinori. He has had five years now to come to terms with the fact that he was going to lose One For All, and longer that he’s known he’ll have to give it up. He’s going to become another person. The boy, with the blue eyes, and the blond hair, and the too-small hands and the too-long legs.

No, this is not the problem. This is a Fact; unassailable, unstoppable, fixed.

The problem was not that All Might was Yagi Toshinori.

The problem is that Yagi Toshinori is—was—had always been—All Might.

And always would be.

The first words he speaks to the world as The Man Who Isn’t All Might But Isn’t Yet Yagi Toshinori is to look a camera dead on, to show the face he loathes and loves in equal measure in all its horror and glory, are: “You’re next.”

He can imagine Midoriya in his mind’s eye, still so young. The same age he had lost Nana at, a lifetime before. Sometimes, he can hardly believe he was ever that young—but he can’t believe how old he is now, either.

All Might never thought fifty felt like this until he was fifty.

There’s no surgery, this time. All For One didn’t punch a hole through his guts or tear his lung halfway out of his own chest. No broken ribs, miraculously, and the fact that half of his now are titanium isn’t lost on him, since otherwise they certainly would be shattered. All things considered he is in remarkably good shape.

He considers saying no to a morphine drip, but he aches, down to his soul. Not just his body, but the empty hollow where he has held One For All for almost forty years. His very soul, the parts of him that were All Might.
Nana.

The Man Who Was Once All Might lays in a morphine haze all night, and does not sleep until early morning.

They take it off just after dawn, to wean him right back down. He won’t be in the hospital more than another night, since the only major injuries are his broken right arm and his concussion, and he wants to be as out of the spotlight as much as possible right now. As much as he can be.

He eats breakfast. It’s a nutrition shake, that tastes like chalk, as all nutrition shakes do, and toast with butter. He savors the toast, watching out his hospital window at the city below him, the distant hills and mountains, and longs for a feeling of home that doesn’t know where it’s supposed to lead him. He thanks the nurse that takes his clean plates, and reads the newspaper one-handed where it’s propped on his lap, fingers tracing the edges of the paper, fraying them.

He can’t use his cell easily while his hands are bandaged. Won’t get the pressure through right.

Around noon, the door opens, and Gran Torino comes hobbling in. All Might closes his paper, and waits as his sensei comes over to flop over onto the foot of his bed, his cane set over his lap. He has to turn awkwardly to look at All Might, the left half of his face swathed in bandages.

“You look like shit,” is the first thing Gran Torino tells him, and All Might smiles. “Better than last time.”

Last time All Might spent nine months in and out of the ICU as they removed his left lung, his pancreas, his stomach, and five ribs from his left ribcage, became addicted to morphine, went into cardiac arrest three times, had so many blood transfusions he now has permanent pinprick scars at the back of his hand and the fold of his elbow, and almost died so many times that at a certain point—

He’d stopped counting.

“I should hope so,” All Might replies, folding his hand in his lap. Gran Torino grunts agreement, and for a long time neither of them speak. Their thoughts, he has no doubt, are along the same lines, but he cannot bring himself to say it yet.

“So many years,” Gran Torino says softly, his head hung. “So many years. And it’s done.”

All Might bites his tongue. “Almost,” he agrees. Shigaraki Tomura is still out there. All For One is still alive. “Almost.”

Gran Torino sets his hand on All Might’s ankle, narrow and bony. He’s not wearing socks.

“Toshinori,” Gran Torino says, softly, “Nana would be proud.”

Toshinori presses his left hand over his face, draws his knees up to his chest as best he can paying deference to his broken arm and badly bruised chest, and wishes he could cry.

They let Tsukauchi in after lunch. He comes straight over to the bed and hugs All Might, tight, lets
him bury his face in the starched cotton of his best friend’s work shirt, fingers clutching at his back. Tsukauchi pets down his hair, and they stand there like that for longer than All Might wants to admit, breathing in time.

Tsukauchi knows him, he sometimes thinks, better than he knows himself. Tsukauchi doesn’t need to ask.

He knows it’s done.

It’s only once he’s composed that Gran Torino comes back in, and they sit there for a time in silence. All Might wonders how long he can avoid the truth, looks at his hand.

(After everything, it’s still him.)

“The last flames inside of me have gone out.” He says it, and hearing it in his own voice, spoken aloud and echoing inside his head, makes it Real. “The ‘Symbol of Peace’ is dead.”

He does not say it—but it’s up to Midoriya now.

“However,” he continues, sighing, “There are still some things I have to do.”

Neither of them need him to explain: it’s on both their minds. “Shimura’s grandson, huh...Shigaraki Tomura.” Gran Torino rubs his chin in thought; it’s not an easy burden, for any of them.

Tsukauchi steeps his hands. “That’s just what he claimed, right? There’s not much basis behind all that, is there?” All Might nods mutely. “Did neither of you interact at all with the previous generation of the family?” Tsukauchi continues, looking between them. All Might has told him some of what happened, how he lost Nana, but not all. He can still, all these years later, barely speak of it.

“Well, Shimura’s husband was killed...” Gran Torino runs a hand over his face. “To distance her son as much as possible from the world of heroes, she gave him up to a foster family. She told Toshinori and me that under no circumstances did she want us to come into contact with her child, even if the worst were to happen to her.”

“And, because you two kept your promise...” Tsukauchi pinches the bridge of his nose. Sighs. “How miserable.”

“In parting with her own blood, my master just wanted to do what she could to ensure him a life of peace!” All Might stares at his hand. It’s smaller than it used to be. It’s not just the loss of One For All; he is Sick. He has been Sick for a very long time. It’s just permanent, now. “I have to go find Shiraraki. If I do, then he—he’ll do something. He’ll do like Nezu said; he’ll bring the boy back from the precipice, even if it costs him his—

“No.”

Gran Torino’s voice is a bark.

All Might slumps.

“What would you do if you found him?” His voice softens, but it still galls and burns. “You’re not longer capable of seeing him as a villain. You would be at a complete loss. No matter what his lineage is, at the end of the day, he’s a criminal.” All Might has to remember this. Has to try to reconcile Aizawa’s face, covered in blood, half his bones shattered, his elbow torn open almost down to the bone. He has to remember Midoriya, shaking in the police station, with fingertip bruises around his throat. Has to remember Bakugou being stolen, torn away, from his family and friends.
A criminal. That is Shigaraki. That is what he is.

“From now on,” Gran Torino says, gaze pinning All Might down like a butterfly to a corkboard, “Tsukauchi and I will handle the search for Shigaraki. You,” and Gran Torino jabs him in the knee with his cane, “You will remain at U.A. and carry out all that it is you must still do. Even if you can no longer be the symbol of peace, All Might is still alive. It’s time you acted like it.”

All Might smiles, bows in apology. “Sorry, sensei,” he murmurs, laughing as Gran Torino thwacks him over the back of the skull with his cane. “Sorry. I know. One of these days, I promise, I will act like it.”

They discharge him that evening, although his paperwork still lists him officially as a patient, so he can keep some anonymity until he’s ready. He still has to come back for daily checkups, at least for the next week or two, but he isn’t bleeding internally and all his damage is (comparatively) superficial. He cannot spend another day there without going mad. He thanks his doctors, the same care team that has been with him for almost six years, and goes home.

Not to his house, but to his apartment, in Musutafu. It’s still mostly empty, and he gets winded climbing the two flights of stairs to his front door. He gets there and makes instant miso and then, slowly—

He cannot do this.

He sets down his bowl, puts his face in his hands. He cannot do this. He cannot go to school tomorrow, and act like he is okay with this. He cannot show this face before his students and not feel a coil of fear in his stomach pressing up against his gag reflex. He cannot smile for the cameras that will follow him around. He cannot go through his closet and throw away all the clothes he has hung on to for years, that he bought when he Wasn’t Sick.

He can’t just stop being All Might overnight. He doesn’t know how to be anything else.

The scent of miso, curling in his empty apartment, tickles his nose. He cannot abide the scent of it; it makes him ill. He takes it to the sink and pours it one-handed into the drain catch, not bothering to try and hold back the mushrooms and seaweed, just lets the drain catch do its job. He puts the empty bowl in the sink, fills it with water, and shakes the drain catch out into the compost bin, and replaces it.

He stares at the bandages on his left hand, where all the hairline fractures are already healed, where the skin is still sensitive, knitting. He looks at his left hand, where the bandages are now stained brown with miso.

All Might has two glasses of water, and stares sightlessly at the whitewashed wall of his living room. He rented the apartment empty, furnished it himself. When he had still been able to be Not Sick, he would break regular furniture, so the rooms are full of things that could take his weight. Now all of it is too large.

All Might knows he is in shock.

He has another nutrient shake, and texts Midoriya, and goes for a walk down to the beach, because that is where he goes, now, when he is in shock.
It’s not the first time All Might has been in shock. He was in shock five years ago, for several months, cycling between dissociative episodes as he came to terms with Being Sick. He has diagnosed C-PTSD, and was in therapy for years after his fight for All For One, but it never did much. There was so much he couldn’t talk about—Nana, All For One, One For All—that in the end it was kind of a waste of time.

He takes antidepressants now, and anti-anxiety medications for when he has panic attacks, which are thankfully rare. This is not a panic attack.

He remembers his first panic attack.

He was fifteen, and Gran Torino had taken him on a walk, to an ice cream parlor. Yagi Toshinori had grown up in poverty, born to two Quirkless parents who both lived with registered disabilities, and being treated was something he had looked forward to. Nana had always taken him out to do things like that—ice cream, all-you-could-eat sushi, let him pick random things off of convenience store shelves.

He had stood there, with his ice cream in his left hand, and Gran Torino had said: “Shimura is dead.”

He remembers the way the cone felt in his hand. It was a sugar cone, smooth, with paper wrapped around the base. He remembers how cold the ice cream seeping slowly through the wafer was, the single line that dripped down the outside lip to bump into the tips of his fingers, running one at a time over the rounded edges of his fingernails, leaving a sticky trail.

He remembers exactly how it tasted. Vanilla. It had always been his favorite—there was something about vanilla ice cream. It was simple, plain. The creamy yellow that his mother had always told him reminded him of his hair. The soft burst of the vanilla against his tongue, his soft palate.

He had been biting it, as he did then. There were teeth marks on top of the hard-serve. Shaped like his front teeth, the first of which he had lost only a year later. (He now only has twelve of his natural teeth left. The rest are implants.)

All Might has not had vanilla in thirty-five years.

It makes him throw up.

It tastes like blood and bile and screaming.

“How,” Yagi Toshinori had asked, as his world narrowed down, down, down. Pinprick. To the long slow drip of the ice cream under his fingernails. Sticky. “How?”

And Gran Torino had told him. And Yagi Toshinori had watched the ice cream drip. And drip.

He watched it melt, one drip at a time, onto the ground, into a small puddle on the tarmac. He watched the puddle grow, spread, sliding in long sticky trails between bumps in the asphalt. He felt the cone grow soggy, soften in his hand, until his grip, white-knuckled and so tight he had scars for years from where the round arcs of his nails had dug into the meat of his palm until it bled, finally crushed the cone and ice cream burst like pus from a wound, flowing between his fingers and over his knuckles and down the soft tendons on the inside of his wrist, under the sleeve of his uniform shirt, and joined the puddle on the ground.
Gran Torino had taken his hand. Uncurled his fingers, thrown it away.

“It’s okay,” Gran Torino had said. “It’s okay to cry.”

The ice cream, the long, yellow drips, like his hair when it got wet. Drying and melting on the hot asphalt into a slimy, sticky mess.

No tears.

Dry eyes.


All Might has ice cream in bowls now.

He hears Midoriya’s footsteps before he sees the boy. He has a distinctive way of running—all his weight thrown all over the place, his legs too fast for the rest of him. He’s like a kitten, unsure of where his limbs and feet are.

It’s not a One For All thing. It’s just a Midoriya thing.

All Might closes his eyes. Stops staring at the darkness over the ocean, leaving his Sick body one inch at a time, until he can’t feel anything at all. Turns to look at Midoriya, who stares up at him with big hopeful green eyes, his face flushed from running, his freckles standing out against his skin.

(Had Yagi Toshinori looked like that once?)

All Might smiles, because All Might smiles, and Yagi Toshinori watches the ocean. “Oh!” He says, because he has been waiting long enough the hair on the back of his neck is bristling and goose-pimpling, that his arm, hanging at his side, and his aching feet and chest, all hurt. It has probably been almost an hour and he’s not moved. “You’re finally here!”

Midoriya is crying, running straight towards him. “All Might!”

All Might thinks about Midoriya, charging out with his friends from behind the wall. He thinks of Midoriya, rushing by All For One, as precious a cargo himself as the quirk he carries. He thinks about what if Shigaraki Tomura had taken him, and not Bakugou. He thinks about—

He thinks about Midoriya Izuku, standing in a crater in Tokyo, holding his guts in behind his shattered, pulverized ribs, blood filling his mouth.

He thinks about Midoriya Izuku, watching ice cream drip onto the pavement.

“Took you long enough!” All Might says, running towards this boy who is (One For All Nine Midoriya Izuku His Protégé His Successor His Son) as Midoriya screams his name, and meets him in the middle and pulls back his good hand and says, almost joking, “Texas Smash!” and punches him so hard that Midoriya goes flying a meter back, spitting all over the sand.
The impact jars him, and All Might tastes blood in his mouth. “You...” the word slithers away in his mouth, as All Might looks down at the boy in the sand, staring up at him like he’s the most amazing, awful thing in the world, “You really have a hard time doing as you’re told.” His shoulders slump. “That was inches from the edge. Sheesh...who says you take after me.”

(Yagi Toshinori, he knows. Midoriya Izuku takes after Yagi Toshinori, who died holding an ice cream cone when he was fifteen, and is now only the buzzing silence that All Might hears when his tinnitus flares up and the whole world becomes a quiet scream. The scream Yagi Toshinori didn’t make when he died.)

All Might looks down at Midoriya, cradling his aching jaw and smarting cheek. At his curly green hair, his sad eyes. “Midoriya, my boy...” All Might’s words dry up in his mouth. They fail him. He doesn’t know what to say.

He looks at his left hand, at the bandages on his fingers stained brown.

“I,” he begins, and he tastes vanilla ice cream. “The truth is, I’m retiring.” He knows there’s no other choice. He remembers Gran Torino saying, devoid of emotion, Shimura is dead. He remembers that dead voice. He puts it into his own voice. He makes himself not care. He detaches, goes away, until his Sick isn’t his own. “My body is no longer in a state where I can fight any more.”

For a moment, he draws upon the little tendrils of One For All that still linger in his bone marrow and skin, that will ease out of him in the years to come, drip out of him one drop of coughed blood at a time. For a moment he is Not Sick—he is big again, his clothes fit flush to his skin, his bandages ripping and stretching, his cast on his broken arm barely containing the mass of his muscle.

All Might gets three punches before the wind goes out of him like sails on a dead sea, and he doubles over, coughing blood up from the heart of him as his recently-healed internal bleeding tells him this was a stupid fucking idea and you know it. He coughs until his lung is empty, spits a wad of blood to congeal in the sand. He clears his throat. “The last embers of One For All have gone out, and on top of that...I’m not able to maintain my muscle form any more.”

His therapist used to say if you put words to it, it becomes real. All Might has spent five years not saying it. Now, he has no option.

He is Sick. And now he has said it.

At least he has something to hang onto. If he had nothing at all, if he just had the miso in his apartment, he knows he would stare at the asphalt, and scream, and no sound would come out, and no tears would come out. But he is so angry at Midoriya, at this trusted boy, this child barely learning how to run, that he has, at least, that.

“That being said!” He rounds on Midoriya, who stares up at him, tears in his big green eyes, “No matter how many times you’re told, you come flying out of nowhere looking for trouble!” Just like All Might; Midoriya may as well just start walking into rooms and yelling I am here to make a scene, because he’s well on his way to filling the optimistic hole in the world that All Might just shrunk and left open. “No matter how many times you’re told, you continue to break your body!”

There is still blood dripping down All Might’s chin, between his teeth.

“And that’s why—”

Midoriya curls up into a ball.

All Might feels all the tension go out of him. “This time, for the first time...you were able to get
yourself out of harm’s way without getting hurt.” He escaped. He escaped, even when he probably wanted to fight. He knew better than to try. All Might kneels down in front of him on the beach, his knee sinking into the sand, sets his good hand on Midoriya’s narrow shoulder. His palm and fingers are so large that they swallow it up. He is smiling, his cheeks aching, tears in his eyes. “That makes me incredibly happy.”

He leans forward, and pulls Midoriya into his arms. He’s so small. How small, how precious, this cargo!

“All Might promises, pulling his son against him, fingers knotted into his thickly curling hair, “I am devoting myself to your development. Despite my condition, we’ll do our best, okay?” He understands now, why Nana could give up her son, knowing that doing so would hurt her more than anything else—because he was precious, precious beyond worth, and she would do anything to protect him.

All Might understands, because he would do anything, anything to protect his son.

It’s why he turned to face the film cameras, showed He Was Sick, and said, you’re next.

Midoriya curls up into him and begins to sob, ugly wracking cries, the cries that bottled up like bile in the back of Yagi Toshinori’s throat. All Might holds onto him, wishes he could pull the boy into his arms, make this all right. He closes his eyes, digs his chin and cheekbone into Midoriya’s muscled shoulder, softens his fingers in the boy’s hair to stroke it in some kind of a facsimile of soothing, and feels the first of his own cries press against his ribs, cave in his remaining lung, and rattle apart the repeat fractures in the bones of his spine.

“You really have a hard time doing as you’re told, don’t you?” All Might says, as his voice gets wet, as his tears come in earnest, burning hot down his cheekbones, as he feels his world fall apart for the first time since he was fifteen. “How many times have I told you to stop being a crybaby.”

He is grateful.

As Izuku sobs and screams, holding onto his shoulder, nails digging into his back, having the panic attack and breakdown that Yagi Toshinori didn’t have thirty-five years ago, nobody but Izuku can hear All Might crying, slumping as his knees give out, he collapses into the sand, and his whole world falls apart.

In the end, All Might produces two handkerchiefs. One is clean, and he passes it to Izuku, who noisily blows his nose and sobs into it as he leans into All Might’s good arm, head buried in his armpit. The other one he coughs into, stains with blood, and pockets for later.

They watch the surf together for some time.

“Are you okay?” Izuku asks. “With this?” He’s still so scared—All Might is still his hero, his father, after all. He’s still too scared to ask the painful questions. To push too hard, too far. “Of course,” All Might says. Ruffles his hair. “It’ll all be fine. I have you to trust in, after all.”

(All Might is very good at lying.)
Izuku smiles slightly, hiccoughs. All Might knows how much his faith means to the boy. The wind off of the ocean blows over them, dries the tears on his cheeks. “Have you eaten?” He asks, after a time. “If I have one more nutrient shake—“

“Oh no,” Izuku fumbles for his phone, pulling away, and when he severs their physical connection, All Might has to go back to being All Might. “My mom just finished cooking before I came out here.” It’s been over a half-hour. He scrolls through his texts. “I have to get home, I’m sorry—“ he looks up, green eyes bright. His mouth makes a little surprised o. “Do you want…uh. I mean. What I’m trying to say—I don’t want to be forward! You’re my sensei. I mean. If you. I think there’s. Extra. If you want to come over for dinner. And uh. My mom. Meet her, I mean. You don’t have to!” He quickly waves his hands, and his phone goes shooting out of his grip, and he barely catches it before it plants charge-port first into the sand. “Never mind, pretend I didn’t ask. Stupid! Sorry, I know, I’ll be—“

“Thank you for the offer.” All Might smiles. “I am honored. But no; you’re right. I cannot come eat with you and your mother.” In another life, he would say yes, but he knows he’s going to have to meet her sometime soon, differently. He knows, without even having spoken to Nezu, that life at U.A. is about to change drastically.

He needs to be the Symbol of Peace—or at least, the Symbol of Failed Peace—to parents soon. He can’t be just Izuku’s. Whatever he is.

Izuku helps him up, gives him a hand, and All Might brushes sand off of his cargo pants, ruffles the boy’s hair. “Run along home now, Midoriya my boy. Tell your mother I am sorry for keeping you out. Go eat and rest; you will need it.” Midoriya bows, yells a hasty “Oyasumi!” and races off like his feet are going the wrong way again.

All Might smiles after him.

He hasn’t been hungry in five years, since they took out his stomach, but he knows when he needs to eat.

He sighs, scrubs his good hand through his hair, scratching at the healing gash on his scalp from his concussion, and finally leaves the beach to go get something to eat, his feet carrying him to the train home without his even noticing, the swaying and rock of the totally empty car lulling him into complacence like the rock of a boat on the ocean.

- exodus 3:4 | תַּא רְאֵש

He ends up at a convenience store when he gets back to the neighborhood most of the U.A. staff live at, because convenience stores are the place you go when you don’t want to be noticed or to talk to anyone. The teenager who is running the register has half a dozen piercings and a quirk that has given him whiskers and hair like the mane of a lion, and doesn’t look up from his homework as All Might goes to the premade food in the cooler, and stares at it.

The boxes of plastic-wrapped onigiri look back at him. There are sandwiches, all of them soggy in the way that bread gets when you leave tomato slices on it for hours. Box sushi, which never agrees with him. Curry bowls. Bags of bread. Yoghurt. If he looks at the frozen section there are frozen
meals.

He knows he should go home and cook. All of this will settle ill. He’ll feel nauseous, he’ll probably dump. But he keeps staring at it all anyway, trying to pick between a rock and a hard place, his left hand hovering between a package of five onigiri and a curry rice bowl he will have to reheat. Neither sound appetizing. Maybe he should just get some instant noodles, as much as he knows it is bad for his cholesterol, since he can make it at home—

He’s so distracted by the food he doesn’t want to eat that he doesn’t realize there’s another person standing beside him. All Might opens his mouth to say I’m sorry, I can’t give you a signature, my arm is in a cast, and then he glances down and sees who it is.

Aizawa’s messy head of hair is parked next to him, black waves loose and hanging shaggy around his face, a curtain. He has, All Might realizes, been standing there for some time. He sags. “Aizawa?” Aizawa grunts, doesn’t look up. “Are you...”

“You look lost. Like a kid in a supermarket.” All Might laughs softly. “Trying to figure out what to eat?”

“Yes. Nothing appeals, I’m afraid.” He misses being hungry. When he was still able to get hungry, All Might would have cravings, things would fill the need for tastes inside. Now, he can taste, but he’s never hungry. He forgets to eat so much. Its why he weighs so little. Why he lost so much weight, even when big. “I guess more nutrient shakes.”

Aizawa snorts. “Come on.” He looks up at All Might, his dark eyes unreadable, hollows beneath them. He looks like he’s slept even less than usual. “Let me take you to dinner. My treat.”

All Might immediately fumbles for his wallet. “No, no, let me pay. I have plenty of money.” More than enough money, actually. All Might is the most loved man in Japan, and one of the most loved heroes in the world. He can pay for his own dinner. Aizawa grabs his wrist, stops him from pulling out his wallet.

“I know,” Aizawa agrees. “And you can pay me back later. Spot me for lunch sometime, or something. Renew my cat café membership. I’m not treating you to dinner because you can’t pay for it, or because you feel bad.” He’s watching All Might’s face carefully. “I watched you, in Kamino, on the news broadcasts. Stuck out here, at the U.A. press conference, pretending everything was going to be fine, making myself a target for the rest of the world.” He’s still shaved. All Might has never seen him shaved. It makes him look maybe ten years younger, especially with his hair perfectly clean for once. He’s wearing glasses, thick-lensed plastic frames. He’s got on a black t-shirt and sweatpants, his neck and face hidden in his capture weapon, which he never seems to go anywhere without.

“I don’t know how you do it.” The way Aizawa says it, it isn’t a question. He doesn’t want to know. “I couldn’t. I couldn’t do what you do. Having to hold the ceiling up even for just a few days is killing me.”

“It’s all right,” All Might says. “That’s why I did it.” It is. He held it up so everyone else could work under him; he made himself the pillar on which society rested so nobody else had to.

“I know. So let me do something for you, when you’ve done everything for us. Even if that’s just taking you out for dinner.” Put like that, not as an obligation, not as pity, but as trying to give back something, however small—All Might can’t say no. He lets go of his wallet.

“That’s very kind of you,” he agrees, hanging his head. “What were you thinking?”
“Sukiyaki. I know it’s a little warm, but—“ It’s August; it’s not a little warm, but the thought of warmth inside him makes All Might feel a little less tired.

“No,” All Might immediately agrees. He longs for comfort food: the mashed potatoes his mother used to make with the skins still on the red potatoes and white gravy dripping into the crannies and valleys formed by the press of a spoon, with salt granules dusting the top. He misses, desperately, the sweet tea she would brew in summer in a glass pitcher, the sun making the tea bags steep, the sugar melting as the water grew hot. His father’s onigiri, when he would hide a pat of miso paste within the nori on the outsides, like butter over toast, so that when Yagi Toshinori bit into it he would taste the miso exploding against the roof of his mouth, coloring the salmon inside so that it was savory and sweet all at once, or the mochi his father would make and roll the outside in rice candy so that they were crunchy before they were soft, that each bite would make a satisfying rattle inside his skull when he chewed.

Sukiyaki will do.

“I would like that.” He finishes. He still doesn’t know many good places to eat near campus, since most of the goings on he has with his fellow staff tend toward alcohol, even if he can’t drink. “Do you know somewhere good?”

“Yeah. Come on, it’s not too long a walk.” They leave the store, walking side by side through the night, now properly fallen. It’s almost nine, and humid still, and the sound of cars driving by is normal. Being with Aizawa is normal. He lets All Might keep to himself, quiet as ever, and turns into side-streets before coming to a hole-in-the-wall kind of place with a sun-bleached awning and windows fogged from the heat inside. It’s three steps down from street level, and Aizawa has to duck under the low lintel of the door where cloth flags with the name of the restaurant hang, red and blue.

All Might has to stoop, his head and shoulders bent down toward his waist, to get in the door. He is, after all, thirty centimeters taller than the other man.

The inside of the restaurant is dark and warm, especially so given it’s August. Steam wreathes the ceilings, and the kitchen, open-fronted, clatters loudly, a crowd of people working shoulder-to-shoulder. Aizawa waves to the host, who waves back, and leads them to a table in the corner. It’s isolated from the rest of the restaurant, which is not nearly as empty as All Might would have expected given that it’s August, and Aizawa lets All Might take the chair on the outside, since he’s taller and battling with a cast.

Their places are set, but the host buzzes over, fills up cups of water, and hands All Might a fork. He stares at it, and begins to laugh under his breath. Turns it back and forth between his fingers, and reaches up to tug at his bangs.

“Is it the way I look…?” He asks, looking up at Aizawa, who is smiling a little bit. “They don’t think I’m American—“

“It’s the bandages, All Might. Chopsticks are slippery. Probably didn’t want you to hurt yourself.” He smiles, sets the fork down, picks up the chopsticks. “Do you need the fork?”

“No, I should be all right. It’s not my first time.” Aizawa nods, and glances at the menu.

“I remember you mentioning something about not liking spicy food.” He says, tucking a long dark lock of hair behind his ear as it hangs in front of his eyes, his glasses sliding down his nose. “I’ll just get something savory.” All Might sits there as the other man waves the waiter over, the chopsticks sliding down in his grip.
He loves spicy food. He loves the way it lights up the top of his mouth, makes his tongue tingle. Anything, from anywhere, he doesn’t care. It just—it makes him sick, now. It doesn’t settle right. Without a stomach, he’ll end up nauseous, in pain sometimes for days. He *loves* spicy food, but to eat it is to tempt the devil, even when he’s at his best. Normally, people he eats with ask him if he could or could not have something, excuse their orders.

It’s strange, how freeing it is to just have Aizawa ignore what or why, to take it part and parcel to who he is.

“Thank you,” All Might says. Aizawa looks up at him. “I...for remembering about the spicy food. I really like it, but eating it, without my stomach, tends to make me sick, and I can’t really afford to lose any weight or fluids right now, and—“

Aizawa shrugs. “I mostly like sweets, so I don’t care. You don’t have to apologize like you’re taking up space. It’s just sukiyaki.” All Might nods.

“I suppose it is.”

“Anyway, what are you doing out of the hospital?’” Aizawa continues, scrubbing his fingers through his hair. “‘Official records say you’re still in. Avoiding the press?’”

“For a little longer, yes.” All Might sighs, stretches out, slumps in his chair. “I know I can’t forever but...another night or two, anyway. I’ll have to hold a press conference.”

“Why?” Aizawa asks. “About what happened with that villain you were fighting?”

All Might stares up at the ceiling. He clicks the chopsticks together.

“Did Nezu not tell you?” He says, softly. He hasn’t seen Nezu himself, but he knows the Principal probably has already guessed. He waits, and feels Aizawa watch him.

“No,” Aizawa says at last. “He hasn’t. Should I wait?” All Might looks down at him, his eyes dark and unreadable. “Do you want me to hear it from him?”

“It doesn’t matter.” All Might shrugs minutely. His cast shifts in its sling. “Everyone will know, soon enough.” He holds up his fist. He knows the majority of his conversation with All For One wasn’t broadcast; they weren’t yelling for much of it. All For One has this way of talking where he keeps his voice just above a whisper. All Might’s carries, but even still.

All Might squeezes his fist. His nails dig into his palm. The bandages wrinkle.

“I can’t use my Quirk any more,” he says, voice a hush. “Not even for short amounts of time. I’ve tried to grow big again; I can’t for more than a few seconds, and any stress will make me lose it. Like this, I’m not well enough, and I’ve already put my body through so much damage...” he trails off, lowers his hand.

He does not look at Aizawa.

“All Might is done. I’m retiring.”

Aizawa, he notices, does not look at him.

They both sit there in silence, the tension sapping out of it with each passing second. Neither of them know what to say, but they aren’t ignoring one another. The sukiyaki comes. They don’t talk at all, and the silence finally begins to grow thin as they both bow their heads and murmur, “Let’s eat.”
They eat quietly, Aizawa helping All Might get his portion out as the chopsticks slide about in his heavily-bandaged hand, as he sweats through them.

Aizawa eats his first portion, takes a second, eats that too. In that time, All Might manages half of his. Aizawa sets his chopsticks aside.

“Are you okay with that?”

His voice is so sudden and unexpected All Might jumps, spraying broth all over his shirt. Looks up at the other man. Aizawa is chewing on a strip of tofu. “Are you okay with retiring?” He says again. “You don’t seem to be.”

All Might smiles and lies. “Of course I am. I’ve been a hero for a very long time, after all! It’s past time I let another generation get a crack at it.”

Aizawa sees through him, of course. They both know he is lying. The other man seems to consider if he’s going to say something, call All Might’s lie out, but in the end, he doesn’t. He just lets it go.

“So,” he says, changing the topic, as they continue to eat, “Broken arm, huh? I’m only barely out of my casts and now you’re back in them. At the rate this year is going, Hizashi is next.” All Might relaxes immediately, glad that Aizawa has so effortlessly ripped that rug out from under him and turned them to something easier, and the conversation becomes more natural, softer. His fears about the future recede.

It’s nice. It is, genuinely, nice. He can’t believe that he thought Aizawa was cruel once upon a time; goes to show to not tell a book by its cover. Even thought they didn’t get along.

True to his word, Aizawa treats, and they leave side by side when the clock is already ticking toward eleven. They live fairly close together, walking distance from the school, nearby most of the other staff.

All Might says: “You and Mic live together, don’t you?”

“He lives above me,” Aizawa clarifies, hands tucked into his sweatpants pockets. “We used to be roommates, but when we broke up a couple years back everyone agreed it was for the best we finally just get actual apartments.” All Might hadn’t been sure that the two men had used to date, but he’d guessed as much. “Why?”

“I can’t say I’m looking forward to going home and having to lay there alone,” he admits. “Maybe I should move somewhere nearer the rest of you, especially...now.” He’s going to need someone to help him out. Even just until the arm heals. Security. He can feel Aizawa studying him. “I’m probably just stressed. Ah, goodnight, Aizawa.”

“Stay at my place.”

All Might coughs blood violently into the back of his front teeth. “Sorry?” He asks, clearing his throat and spitting it onto the pavement and coughing again. “Can you, uh, repeat that—”

“Stay at my place. I have a guest futon. Look; I’m no stranger to not wanting to be alone. If it’ll let you sleep better at night, you’re welcome to stay with me. As long as you’re not allergic to cats.” All Might isn’t. “I wasn’t kidding, you know,” Aizawa adds. “You spent thirty-five years holding us up. All of us. If I can take a little burden off—if anybody can—we should. Even if it’s just letting you sleep on my floor.”

All Might considers saying no. Going home. Sitting in the dark, in his empty apartment. Trying,
failing, to prepare lesson plans.

“I,” he says instead, “Would really like that.”

Aizawa opens the door to his apartment, and immediately bends down to pick up a grey streak that races towards the door, using his other hand to pull his shoes off. All Might copies him, toeing his sneakers off and shutting the door, locking it by habit as Aizawa moves further into his apartment. It’s as bare a space as All Might’s own apartment, but whereas his own doesn’t feel lived in, this is very much a home. Just a spartan one.

Not surprising, given how important the logic of function is to Aizawa.

There is a couch. A television; a cheap, small model. A tall dining set with two chairs. There are almost no wall decorations, except for three different calendars, all of them of the free sort places give away. He turns on table lamps instead of the overhead, all of them lit with old incandescent bulbs rather than fluorescent or halogen, the light yellow. His kitchen is clean. His floors are wood.

It’s a nice apartment.

Aizawa turns around and holds up the grey streak wiggling in his arms. “This,” he says, “Is Meishiba.” Meishiba is the ugliest cat All Might has ever seen. She’s a bluepoint siamese, with one ear and one eye and one front paw missing, her face half-mashed in over her nose, she’s cross-eyed with her remaining one, and she stares at him. Madly. “You can just call her Yelly if you want.”

As if to prove her nickname, she shrieks at him. Aizawa puts her down and she immediately comes over and starts body-slamming All Might’s shins.

“You two have some history,” Aizawa says, leaving All Might to fend for himself, trying to circumnavigate Catland. He follows the other man toward the kitchen as Aizawa washes his hands, sets the kettle to boil. “I adopted her five years ago. She was one of the animals that survived your fight, the one with your injury. Needed a home where someone could care for her unique needs.” As if to prove her unique needs, Yelly goes racing between All Might’s legs, overbalances trying to jump onto the stool beside Aizawa’s counter, slides sideways and topples onto the floor of his kitchen with all her paws splayed.

“Is it...a balance issue?” All Might asks, tentatively. “I’ve never really spent much time around cats.”

“What, her doing that? No, she can do a three point jump a solid ten feet up and not miss.” Aizawa scoops his cat up gently with his foot under her chest, and she bends over the top of it as he deposits her upright. “This is just her personality. She might wake you up shrieking during the night, but Mic’s bird definitely will in the morning. Her nickname is Screamy. They’re an endless feedback loop.”

“Lovely,” All Might settles on.

He’s internally still trying to work through the revelation that one of the animals displaced by the buildings All For One leveled five years ago has been living this whole time in Aizawa’s apartment. That one of the victims of the fight he hates most has been here all along, happy.

And Aizawa never told him.
He knows Aizawa doesn’t really know what happened, five years ago. Very few people do, for good reason. He knows that Aizawa probably doesn’t realize how much All Might has struggled with it, with the damage he did to himself, others, the world. And all along, this cat. Here.

Aizawa shoves a mug of tea into his hands, stops his spiraling thoughts. “I can see you thinking,” the other man says, not unkindly. “Stop it. A worry spiral won’t help you, or anybody else.” All Might bows his head, hides his smile.

“Was I that obvious?”

“Not if I wasn’t looking. Come sit down.” Aizawa goes into his bedroom, comes back out a moment later with an extra futon bundled up in his arms. “Couch is fine, you can take the armchair if you prefer.”

His arms either in cast or bandaged, All Might can’t sit in an armchair. He takes the couch, and watches Aizawa set up the futon. There’s already a space cleared for it on the floor.

“You do this often?”

“Hizashi has pretty severe insomnia,” Aizawa replies, still bent over, his hair hanging down over his face. “He sleeps here a lot, since I don’t care. Says it helps him to be in a space where he’s supposed to behave himself. Also cats are good at soothing nightmares.” As he says it, Mehishiba is winding between his ankles like a demented slinky. He straightens. “Do you want to watch something? I actually do get cable. I jerry-rigged Hizashi’s box through the ceiling.”

“If you want to, that’s fine. I’m…I must confess, very tired.” He’s exhausted, actually. Now he’s somewhere his brain can connect to safety. All Might’s entire body is collapsing beneath its own weight. He’s had an awful, long day. This morning he was in the hospital still, barely recovered, still on morphine. Now he’s here, in Aizawa’s apartment, walked all around two suburbs. He can feel pain in his knees, worn down by years of abuse, in his arms and shoulders.

The tea in his hand, heating up the mug, is only making him more tired.

“Are you on patrol tonight?” All Might asks, looking up at Aizawa. He’s never been sure exactly what hours the other man keeps for his hero work; the underground is a very different world from the one All Might inhabits. Aizawa rubs the back of his neck, grimaces.

“Normally. Nezu asked me to refrain from going out until he knows more of what’s going on. Wants me alert, at my best.” Aizawa snorts. “Like I get any more sleep here than I would if I was out being useful. You don’t need to worry about being left here alone. I need to be presentably functional to parents and the media. I’ll probably be up most of the night, but if you need something all bandaged up like that, just call. I’ll hear.”

It is, All Might knows, a very great deal of trust Aizawa is giving him.

No; it’s more than that.

This is friendship.

All Might smiles.

“Thank you,” he says, and his voice is hoarse. He is genuinely touched. He bows his head and shoulders. “I owe you a debt.”

“You,” Aizawa tells him, “are the last person who needs to owe anything to anybody, except
possibly owing a sense of self-preservation to the world.”

The following morning All Might wakes up sprawled on the futon on the living room floor, his feet in their socks stuck out the end because he’s too tall to fit properly, to the sound of someone stamping on the ceiling. “Get *up*, Shō-chan! Get up! It’s that time! Time for work! Time for sun! Time for—”

Mehishiba, who has been asleep curled into the crook of his broken arm, picks that moment to stand up, shake herself out, pad over onto All Might’s throat, and start howling. Moments later, a bird begins to scream *FUCK!* Repeatedly with the sort of emphasis only birds can manage, simultaneously both over-dramatic and also strangely plasticine. All Might groans, presses his good hand to his forehead.

He doesn’t have a watch on, his phone charging by the wall, but his internal clock is guessing it’s around eight.

He fell asleep the night before at barely eleven.

He hasn’t slept this long, this deeply, without waking, in almost thirty years.

On the couch the figure of Aizawa stirs slightly, a sprawled heap of limbs and long wavy hair. “Ugh,” he says, barely moving. His hand stretches out from under his hair, grabs something from the coffee table, and he bounces a rubber ball that thwacks the ceiling. Mic, distantly, begins laughing, and Mehishiba takes off, chasing the ball.

“Sorry,” Aizawa mumbles, the word mashed into the couch cushion. “I break alarm clocks so I have three and they all scream.”

All Might smiles.

“No,” he disagrees, “It’s rather nice.”

It can’t last.

The media gets wind that he checked out of the hospital that afternoon, and All Might spends the following night in his apartment at the dining table, his head on his forearm as he tries to think through everything, to find words.

He puts on the one suit he owns that fits him when he’s Sick, and goes out the next morning to a press conference full of so many people he can’t even see all of their faces. He says words, reads them from a script as a speech, but he doesn’t remember any of them. They filter and trickle back out of his head like water through a sieve, and he knows he will hear them on the radio and on tv for months, and none of them will ever stick in his head.

They are performative grief for everyone else. Not for him.

All Might doesn’t get to perform his own grief.
He just has to, quietly, go on. He has no other option.

He’s almost glad the words won’t stick to him. He won’t have to pretend they’re true.

The next day, he goes in to a meeting that Nezu calls of the three Class 1 teachers. Blood King stops him outside of the Principal’s office, asks him if he’s all right, and All Might laughs, smiles, agrees he’s fine. He feels very far away. Barely tethered to himself.

When they enter Nezu’s office, the Principal comes over, and brings a stool. He sets it beside All Might, climbs the steps, and sets his paws on his shoulders. His face is difficult to read sometimes, but he’s watching All Might with genuine concern.

“I really am all right,” All Might promises. “My arm’s almost better, and the rest of me will follow in due time. I don’t know what you’re all so worried about!”

“If I was just worried about your body, I’d get Recovery Girl in here.” All Might wishes he could smile as Nezu goes back to his chair behind his desk, spinning it back to face them. “I wish you understood just how important you are to me. To everyone.” All Might hangs his head slightly.

He wishes he didn’t, actually.

He wishes he didn’t know.

He wishes he didn’t know that at all.

“You’ve done something extraordinary in the years I’ve known you, All Might.” The Principal sorts through some papers as he speaks, not looking up at them where they stand before his desk. “You’ve recreaded this world in your ideal image, even if you have suffered terribly for it. Through your sacrifices, an even greater number of lives have been saved. It’s all because of your efforts.”

All Might stares at his shoes and the floor. The laces of his indoor shoes aren’t properly tied. He couldn’t do it right with just one hand. There’s a smudge of dirt on the otherwise pristine linoleum.

“As a citizen,” Nezu says, “A fellow hero, and Principal, I cannot thank you enough.”

His ears are ringing. His tinnitus is screaming, because he can’t. All Might does what he learned to do in therapy, and takes in a long, slow breath into his remaining lung. Counts in a breath of ten. Exhales a breath of ten. Does it again two, three times. He isn’t blinking, he feels lightheaded. He should sit down.

“However,” Nezu continues, “In the eyes of society, if you continue as a teacher at U.A., there will be, at the very lest, dissenting opinions.” He changes his tone to imitate a concerned parent, and continues with, “From the very beginning, the problem was All Might transferring to U.A. Everything that transpired can be traced back to that. If he’s in a state of health where he can no longer fight, won’t that put the children in even more danger?”

All Might opens his mouth. He wants to say, I know, I know this. You don’t need to tell me this. All of you are in danger because of me.

Aizawa sets a hand on his elbow, and he breathes in. Ten. Out. Ten. It hurts, to put his smile back on, but it’s hurt like that plenty of times in his life. He manages, somehow. Its partly because he knows Nezu is just saying what has to be said. Not telling him to undo and become someone else.

“The situation is causing everyone great anxiety. And—that is exactly why, now more than ever, we must do everything we can to strengthen the threads you wove for us, All Might. It’s because of you
that we have such unwavering faith and confidence in heroes. If we squander that now, we’d be doing you a disservice.”

Blood King clenches his fists, straightens his shoulders. “In the wake of this incident, I have become all too aware of the great burden which we forced you to bear all by yourself...” He looks at All Might then, his smile softening. “I never realized before just how monstrously large it was.”

“And the threat has not yet been eliminated,” Nezu agrees. “From here on out, more firmly and more strongly than ever, we must protect, nurture, and raise all our students.” Nezu steeples his paws. “And so, based on discussions with the Board of Trustees—my apologies for not including you in the conversation, All Might, as you were still in the hospital at the time—we shall act accordingly. We’re putting into effect a plane of mine that I’ve been mulling over for some time. Now more than ever, it is needed. Blood and I will see to Class B, which suffered the most injuries at summer camp. All Might, Eraserhead, you will see to Class A.”

Of course; All Might already knows what he means. He has known for years.

“Home visits. I ask for your cooperation.”

Nezu didn’t ask his opinion as a Trustee because Nezu already knew—that is what he tells Aizawa afterward, as they sit in the teacher’s office, comparing addresses and notes. “I have for some time,” All Might admits. “He approached me with the idea probably two or three years ago, when I first started to consider teaching.” Aizawa, scratching at his half-grown stubble, nods. “I think it’s a good idea,” he says at last. “For more than just those students coming from far away or poorer homes.” They already live on campus.

Yagi Toshinori was one such student.

“It fosters camaraderie, a strong and safe environment to build relationships, and may help protect against students dropping out.”

Aizawa shrugs. “I don’t care one way or another. I can’t say I’m looking forward to moving onto campus, though. One of those little cretins will probably harass my cat.” All Might snorts into his tea, turning to the next page in the packet Nezu gave them. More information on the policy change. “If Bakugou so much as looks at her funny, I’m going to skin him and make him into a couch.” All Might laughs. Not a pained chuckle, this time. Properly, from his gut, his head thrown back.

It is the first time he has properly laughed since he stared down at All For One in the crater he’d punched the man into, crushed into blood, and felt thirty-five years of strength flow back out of him, a spilled cup dripping onto the floor.

“I’m sorry,” he apologizes, “I was just thinking about how flammable a couch he would be. It would probably be a safety hazard; against dorm code.” Aizawa cracks a smile, his eyes softening at the edges. “Probably not all that comfortable, either.”

“Guess not,” Aizawa agrees. “So I’ll just have to stick to traditional punishments. Make him hold pails of water and not spill a drop. There’s one.” It goes quiet between them, the both of them compiling addresses into their phones, All Might taking notes on the dorm system in case he gets any unexpected questions.

“I’m looking forward to it,” All Might says at last, setting down his pencil and shaking out his left
hand. He’s passably ambidextrous—most heroes are, since so many of them break their dominant arms at one point or another in their careers—but his tendons and muscles are still weak. He’s healed enough to be out of bandages on that arm, but it’s sore. It hurts to write. “Since the press conference, I’ve been followed by four teams of reporters, had no less than five neighbors knock on my door, and I’ve been accosted by more people than I can count. I can’t even take the train. I had to call Nezu to send someone to get me from my apartment to get here.”

Aizawa snorts angrily. “Ambulance chasers,” he growls. He curls his hands for a moment, his shoulders bunching up tight with anger under his button-up, muscles standing out against the cotton. He lets out a slow sigh, relaxing. “You need privacy now more than ever. Not be made into a spectacle. Will people never get that. You’re not a commodity; you’re a person.”

Two of the neighbors came up to thank him. One brought him a stir-fry, told him to keep the Tupperware. The other two came to ask if he needed a hand, offered to get his groceries for him. Of the people who he had run into in outside, only three had asked for his autograph. One had wrung his good hand until it ached, thanking him profusely. Numerous had thanked him. Someone had fainted. He’d gotten a few jeers, a few angry shouts about how awful he looked and what a bullshit way out it was to be too sick. The reporters were the worst—they asked him questions about his health. When he would be better. If he would be better. What had happened to his body, what that fight was about, his thoughts on the League of Villains, on the economy, on—

“Reporters aren’t allowed onto school grounds,” All Might agrees. “And I won’t have to go out to the store. And, to tell the truth, I could use a hand until I’m out of the cast. I’d like some privacy, even if it is tempered by our kids.”

“When they start getting on your nerves, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

In Midoriya Inko, he sees Nana’s ghost.

She’s too short; too fat. Too old for the Nana that Yagi Toshinori knew; too young for the Nana that she would be now. She is Midoriya’s mother, and he loves her immediately with a power that hurts, in the same way he once loved Nana. She wears her hair the same way Nana preferred to, and the lay of her eyes is the same—steel, deep steel, under velvet and arsenic—with the power to cut a man down.

He cannot stay in the same room as her. It makes something deep inside him ache like a bruise punched into his bones. He declines her offer of staying for lunch. He can’t be in a room with her. He can’t look at her and see Nana’s ghost. He can’t look at the posters of his old body on the walls, grinning, and not feel like he’s inhabiting a corpse. They are both a reminder of the life he used to live, and he’s not sure enough in his new life now to be able to do anything except regret, palpably, his heart aching between his ribs.

He is so glad that Izuku has a home, a mother, like this. He is so glad his son is safe, wherever he goes, with a mother like that watching over him. He says as much as they stand outside the apartment block, the half-cloudy sky glaring sun down to warm his blond hair. “You’ve got a pretty wonderful mom, don’t you?” He says, and Izuku smiles, looks down at his hands.

“Yeah.”

Izuku has never spoken to All Might of his father. He desperately wants to take the boy in his arms
and admit the things that hide behind his teeth and tangle in his throat with the blood that he always tastes, hot against the roof of his mouth. But he knows this is not his role to play. Not spoken, anyway.

All Might thinks of Midoriya Inko holding a ladle like a sword, her love for her son her shield. She had told him to go on living, no matter what. Live, for Izuku, who looks up at him with such hope in his eyes.

Living is becoming harder and harder for him. It was already hard enough when he still was himself, when he still could close his eyes and feel normal, for just a moment. Now it’s even more difficult.

He wonders, sometimes, what Nighteye meant five years ago about his future. About what, exactly, defines awful, painful. Is it not more awful, not more painful, to waste away in-between his breaths as his body fails him, his own bones and muscles giving in, his heart and lung and organs collapsing even as his mind is still alert, as the person he was, the person he still is, deep inside, is forced to remain. Caged. Trapped. Is that not more awful than a quick death, however painful in the short-term?

*Please,* Midoriya Inko had said. *Go on living.*

There is nothing else he can do, of course. He will live, until his time is up. And then he won’t any more.

It has been a source of comfort to him now for many years.

But when he looks at Izuku, he feels warm inside. Midoriya Inko raised a natural-born hero; her son is already twice the man Yagi Toshinori was at his age. Perhaps, more than the man he is now. He cannot remember the last time someone talked to him like she did: open, truthful, and unafraid. A little like Aizawa.

“My master,” he says at last, thinking of Nana, the last time he saw her. She was dropping him off at home after a night out patrolling with her, and the grey-yellow light of the streetlamp had made her skin appear washed out and palid. *Like a corpse.* She had grinned at him. Told him she’d see him tomorrow.

She had died, tomorrow. Tomorrow she had died.

He never saw her body.

(It is the small things.)

“Somehow or other,” All Might continues, when he has breath in his lung again, “She reminds me of her.”

Izuku looks at him, expressive face cloudy and confused. “Huh?! My mom does?” All Might smiles at him; Izuku is still young. He still thinks of heroism as something that you do on the big stage, where everyone can see you. He still thinks of heroism as accolades and confetti.

He doesn’t realize that his mother is a thousand times the hero All Might ever was. Ever would be.

“Yeah, her hairstyle, or something.”

“Her hair?” Izuku is gaping at him, and All Migh laughs, flexes his good arm.

“Because she’s a strong person,” he clarifies. He wants to tell Izuku how lucky he is to have his
mother, how he should respect her, love her, every moment of every day he is with her. Because she won’t always be here. (Because he won’t always be here.)

The moment is robbed, though, when someone yelps down the street, and he looks over, startled, as they yell and call him a skeleton face guy, and he wants to curl up inside his own skin and die. He can feel his tether, hanging him into his good arm and his rickety legs and his one lung, breaking.

There’s blood all over the white cuff of his shirt, dripping down his chin, between his teeth. He feels sick, nausea boiling at the back of his throat. His grin is plastic, a temporary tattoo like the ones Yagi Toshinori would put on his legs as a child, and it will melt off the moment it gets struck with water.

He hides, rushing back to the taxi. He cannot look at Izuku.

Izuku knows him well enough to know when his smile is false and broken. “How can I still call myself All Might looking like this?” He tries to laugh. It burns. Molten inside him. “I suppose I’m just not adjusted yet.” He never will be. He will die unadjusted. All Might is still what he is inside his head. Yagi Toshinori is a boy with a broken ice cream cone dying, dying, on the sidewalk, who doesn’t know how to scream and doesn’t remember how to breathe. “All right!” He waves at Izuku. “I’ll see you at school, then!”

He tells the taxi driver to head off before Izuku can respond.

All Might is a coward.

They move into the dorms two days before the students do. The dorm All Might has is bigger than the apartment he had rented in town, and is next door to Aizawa. Mic—Hizashi—is on Aizawa’s other side, Blood King on All Might’s other side. Ectoplasm is across the hall, and Midnight is next door to him, with Thirteen and Cementoss taking the other two rooms on that side.

All said, it’s not bad. He’s surrounded by people he likes, genuinely cares for. Being next door to Aizawa is more than nice, actually. Cementoss and Ectoplasm help him move in, since he’s still in a cast, and after all his stuff is set up in his small suite of rooms, he sits on his oversized couch and stares at his feet up on his coffee table.

There’s a knock on his door. He opens it, and sees Aizawa there, Hizashi draped over his back. “Hi!” Mic waves, getting Aizawa’s elbow to his chest. “How’s your arm?”

“All broken,” All Might replies. “You both moved in?” As if to confirm, there’s an angry squawk from the vicinity of Hizashi’s room.

“Just wanted to let you know you’re still welcome,” Aizawa tells him. “I got another futon when I moved. This one is extra-long, so if I have to put up with both my blonds snoring in my living room, there are now enough beds.”

All Might is learning that in Aizawa-speak, that is pretty close to saying, I really care about you, so he grins. He did not miss my blonds.

“I’ll take you up on it, I’m sure. Thank you, Aizawa.” Aizawa doesn’t smile, but he does nod slightly. “Have you two made dinner plans yet?”

“Not yet.”
“I heard,” Hizashi says, his arms thrown over Aizawa’s shoulders, “Thirteen’s making udon. For everyone. If we pitch in.”

“Time to go substantiate a rumor, then.” Aizawa waves briefly, and All Might bows as they leave, smiling after them. It is good, he thinks, to be with friends.

It’s why he answers his door three days later, right during dinner. Aizawa is standing there, in uniform again, his hair combed out of his face, a clipboard shoved under his arm. “Hey. Want to come make sure no kids snuck in contraband?” As their homeroom teacher, he’s also in charge of their dorm as their R.A., so All Might isn’t surprised Aizawa is checking it out.

“Ah—don’t you want Blood King?” He cranes out his door. “Since you’re both homeroom teachers?”

“You look bored,” Aizawa replies, like that explains everything. All Might is bored, actually. He’s still too worn out from Recovery Girl accelerating his healing to be able to do much of anything except prep lesson plans, and he’s doing that as fast as he can. He can’t do hero work because his agency is still keeping him intentionally out of the loop, as per his request. He can’t handle being All Might the Not-Sick right now; he can barely handle being All Might.

Most of the time, when he’s left alone, he just slowly leaves, letting his body drift away until he’s not anybody at all.

“If I let you get too idle you’ll probably wilt and die or something. Like a plant. Gotta water you and give you light, or whatever. So, do you want to come look at the kids rooms and make fun of what kind of wacky stuff they snuck in?”

“Absolutely,” All Might agrees immediately. Not just because he knows teenagers, all rambunctious terrifying monstrosities, are definitely up to something no good. But also because he’s found himself craving the company of other people—especially Aizawa—lately. They walk side by side over to the student dorms, and Aizawa cards them both in.

They do it systematically starting at the second floor, which means that they get one room into it before they both just have to stop for a minute. “Holy shit,” All Might says as he stares at Tokoyami’s room, squinting as he pulls his cell phone out of his pocket and getting the flashlight on, shining it up at the overhead. “He took the lightbulbs out of the overhead.”

“Yeah, I made sure he was in the room nearest the most fire extinguishers.” All Might grins, and it lasts the whole way through Aoyama’s room (blinding, after Tokoyami’s pitch blackness) until they open the door to Midoriya’s room, when he feels all the breath go out of his body and he deflates so much he has to squat for a minute, his head almost between his knees.

They sit there, in the doorway, Aizawa leaning against the doorjamb and the wall, All Might on the
floor wheezing, for what seems like a very long time but cannot be more than a few seconds. He’s blushing, he realizes. “It’s cute,” Aizawa settles on, laughing under his breath. “You could just breathe in his general direction and Midoriya would probably spontaneously combust. He also, from the looks of it, didn’t even sneak anything in.”

“He has gacha coin dolls of me,” All Might says, not able to look up, or he’s going to have to sit down again. Aizawa pushes past him further into the room, moving around, checking drawers, and then goes to the closet, humming as he pulls open a drawer in there.

“He has underwear of you.”

All Might very much wants to be swallowed up into the floor, and possibly then die.

It is more than sweet. He loves Izuku, terribly. Like a son. A very easily overexcited otaku son, yes, but still a son. However, the sheer amount of hero-worship the boy has toward him leaves him overwhelmed. That he should be so lucky to have a child so brilliant and beautiful care about him like this is astonishing—but seeing his own Not-Sick face peering back at him everywhere he looks—

“All Might,” Aizawa says. All Might looks up, and sees Aizawa has paused beside the boy’s desk. “Come here.”

Albeit reluctantly, he stands and goes to join the other man. There is a scrapbook on Izuku’s desk, and Aizawa is leafing through the pages. They’re all stuffed full of articles, pictures, of All Might through the years—everything from manga panels with his face in them to newspaper clippings, the holiday postcard his agency sends out every year (one for every year since Izuku was two), stub tickets from his movies, the page out of his notebook All Might signed and then—

Every photo they’ve taken together. Not just the ones of him when he is/was well, but all of them. Selfies from the beach, when they were training. A montage they did in a photo booth. Pictures All Might has sent Izuku to congratulate him. A photo from when they were both stuck in the infirmary together, with blood all over All Might’s face because he started coughing halfway through. With each page he turns, he feels his body like it’s his own again more and more, until he comes to the most recently filled page, the last. There’s still room for more in the scrapbook.

It is the front page of the Yomiuri Shimbun from the day after All Might defeated All For One in Kamino. It’s the photo he’s seen plastered everywhere since. Not the photo he expected, of him with his fist raised in triumph, barely holding onto his muscled form, the body that had been Before He Was Sick, covered in blood.

The other photo.

It’s a candid, taken while he was watching them load All For One into the iron maiden. He’s staring off into the distance, his eyes pained and unreadable, even to himself. He’s covered in blood, burns, his right arm hanging limp from his dislocated shoulder and elbow, broken in two places. His hair is a rat’s nest and plastered flat with blood, his uniform is hanging off his body like a circus tent. He’s watching the city lights, the moon pale just behind his head, like a halo, framing his profile and hair in a perfect circle of light as the floodlights cast gold and dust and shadow onto his cheekbones.

White silver, against the vanilla-gold of his hair. The few stars visible in the night sky through the light pollution are glitter and glitz. The rubble that surrounds him is ruins and corpses, but he looks like some kind of a saint, surrounded by anguish and bloodshed and chaos.

He’s smiling. All Might doesn’t remember smiling that night, but in the photo he’s seen all over the
world, he’s smiling. It’s not All Might’s smile—in the face of danger and horror, forcing happiness. It’s Yagi Toshinori’s smile; little, triumphant, blood soaking between his teeth over his thin lips. It’s a smile that isn’t one of winning. It’s a smile of loss, and sadness, and rest. It’s—

All Might remembers exactly what he was thinking at that moment when he smiled.

He was thinking, *Nana would be proud.*

The headline beneath the photo reads *ALL MIGHT: SELF-SACRIFICE AND THE PRICE OF PEACE.*

It’s a good headline. He smiles. “The photo’s a little much,” he murmurs. “I’m not a saint or a Buddha.”

“You’re close enough to one,” Aizawa replies, finishing checking off the list. “You’ve done more yourself to further the cause of peace in modern Japan than pretty much anybody else, living or dead. I know humility is a good and admirable personality trait, but you should be proud of what you’ve accomplished.” He holds out the pen he’s been checking off with; it’s a permanent one. “Do you want to sign anything while we’re in here?”

“Cast,” All Might points out. Aizawa waggles the pen at him.

“Sign something.”

All Might takes the sharpie, and turns the pages back to the very first page of the scrapbook. That’s the page that has the first newspaper headline he was ever in—Izuku wasn’t even born yet, so he’s baffled as to how the boy got a hold of it. Maybe his mother had a copy. It’s not just printed off the internet, either. It’s on actual newsprint.

He signs it, small, in the corner. His signature is barely legible, written in his off-hand—

No.

No, it’s legible.

All Might holds the sharpie, and wonders why, for the first time in his entire hero career, in almost the whole of his adult life, he has signed his autograph as *Yagi Toshinori.*


• *isaiah 58:9 | וַיְאַמֵּד הַיָּדָּו*  

All Might recovers. He wears polos and cargo pants and loafers because they’re easy to put on one-handed, he eats meals that are mostly rice and nutrient drinks because he knows better than to push too hard, and Recovery Girl is shredding his stamina to help him get well sooner. He goes to doctors appointments in the morning, and comes back after lunch to U.A., driven by Tsukauchi, who chatters at him about inane things in order to keep him from getting antsy. Since it’s still summer vacation the campus is almost silent for the most part, the students who have already moved in all either goofing off with their remaining vacation time or presently at work on improving their Quirks and making super moves.
He knows it’s 1-A’s day, so All Might wanders over to TDL to take a look. He knows they don’t need him, but he’s been reading more about teaching theory, trying to become a better mentor for Izuku (and the rest of the students) and he also is just—

He worries. He is worried. About these students, who came so close to disaster trying to help him. He wants to be sure they’re all doing all right. He’s never been like Aizawa—he doesn’t really have a good grasp on how to care for others in trauma situations, he saves people, gets the situation under control, and gets out—but he’s rarely been as close to a group of anybody as he is to these students.

He watches them for a little while, probably five minutes, just leaning in the doorway and staring at all the kids. He can see all of them, the changes, the ways they’ve each improved. Individually and as a whole. Aizawa is nearest to him, arms crossed, focused on the kids. “Happy to see everyone going at it!” All Might says to get his attention, the other man jumping. Aizawa turns toward him.

“All Might?” He’s got his mouth halfway open to ask him, no doubt, what he’s doing there, when All Might comes over.

“Never fear!” He laughs, momentarily growing larger—a reflex, one he’s going to have to stop using sometime soon. “For, although I wasn’t asked to come, I didn’t have anything else to do!” He’s got the rough idea of most of his lesson plans done, and he’s not on bedrest or anything. In fact, his care team told him he needs to stop wallowing and get out and do things. It won’t make him any better, but they’re worried about his C-PTSD. He’s been having more dissociative episodes than ever, flashbacks that are so real he can taste the vanilla and blood on his tongue. He’s struggling with his identity. It’s all the things that shouldn’t happen, given all the years of care he’s been through.

But they happen anyway. All Might is very lonely. He knows being alone will just make it worse, and he will just self-isolate more.

“I’m here!” He finishes a moment later, just as he becomes Sick again. The transformation isn’t taking as much out of him as it was; he’s not coughing blood, just coughing. Aizawa sighs as he walks over, arms crossed, shakes his head.

“That’s okay, but please, go recover.” Aizawa huffs. “You need to prepare for the next semester anyway.” All Might waves his good hand at the other man.

“I’m halfway there, and we still have two weeks!” He knows, of course, that he won’t be done at the end of those two weeks, but he’s going to, for the sake of this argument, pretend. “Why the cold shoulder? This is the lesson on super moves, isn’t it?” All Might grins, for real for once, his whole face lighting up as he looks at their students, his chest lighter. He hangs on desperately tight to the feeling that his body belongs to him, that each of his limbs is his own, that he is Present. “Of course I’d want to come see it!” Midnight is shaking her head at him, her hands on her hips.

They’re like his own personal protection squad.

“I am a teacher too, you know,” he mumbles to Midnight and Aizawa, trying to reassure them, or trying to reassure himself, he’s not sure which. He can see that Izuku is watching him—as Izuku always does, when All Might is near enough to watch—but he consciously looks away from his son, at all the others around him. His attention is drawn, as always, by Bakugou.

All Might does not have to try to imagine how helpless the boy felt when he was rescued, or how powerless he was when trapped by the League of Villains. It is a feeling that All Might knows all too well, the awful weakening of everything that makes you yourself. Even with six years to come to terms with it, he’s only barely starting to understand it himself.
“He’s something else,” he says to Aizawa, standing next to him. He has noticed how closely Aizawa has been sticking to him these past few days; it’s not worth questioning. If Nezu told Aizawa to guard All Might, he will do it until he either is told not to or until he dies. If he is just doing it because it’s Aizawa and he is fiercely loyal to those precious few he lets in past his defenses, then he’ll protect All Might to and through the grave.

“Yeah.” Aizawa agrees. “There’s no question he’ll get stronger.” All Might worries about that. There’s a plateau for everyone. He hit his when he was in his early twenties, just on the other side of becoming the Number One hero, and he struggled with it for several years. Could he really become the Symbol of Peace, when he couldn’t get any stronger?

The only thing that helped him get over that crisis was realizing that his baseline was already so much further ahead of everyone else that to go any further would make catching up to him impossible.

“I hope so,” All Might agrees. “He’s going to need it, soon.” They all will. All their students will. The wall that All Might had made himself is crumbling now in-between heartbeats. Soon it will fall.

Aizawa squeezes his shoulder, and goes off off to talk to Yaoyorozu, leaving All Might watching over the kids et al, when his attention is drawn by Izuku, who is staring at his hands. All Might has been told of the worst of the damage by Izuku, his mother, his care team in the hospital after the summer camp—he’s worked himself almost to permanent harm.

All Might can’t have that.

“Hey,” he says, coming over. Izuku glances up at him, eyes wide and hopeful. Ectoplasm’s clone tilts its head slightly on the side.

“Ah—” Izuku startles as he realizes All Might has actually joined him where he’s working. “All Might!” He’s so excited, always so excited. He starts to flush up to his roots (he probably saw the signature) and All Might takes a breath to stop him before he gets into a full-on Izuku meltdown. “Some advice;” and Izuku immediately is paying twice as much attention as before, his eyes huge. “You’re still trying to imitate me, kid.”

Izuku gapes at him. All Might snorts under his breath. It’s a good thing that Izuku’s head is so sturdy—he’d have cracked it by now without it—but also. It takes a long, long time for anything to sink in.

As Izuku starts asking him what he means, All Might pivots, leaving the boy to Ectoplasm, and heads over toward Kirishima, waving to get his attention. He can’t just give Izuku all the answers and call it an education. Izuku has to think—he’d have cracked it by now without it—but also. It takes a long, long time for anything to sink in.

All Might won’t always be there.

He spends his days alternating between checkups with Recovery Girl or his care team, hearing updates from Tsukuauchi over the phone, working on his lesson plans, trying (failing) to eat extra meals, and eventually just going to keep an eye on the first-year students. He bothers 1-B as much as he does 1-A, those students in as much need of his guidance as Aizawa’s class. Moreso, in a few cases—they were heavily injured in the summer camp attack, after all. He wants to see them succeed
He wants all of them to succeed. These children are the hope of the future; they are the vessels into which All Might and his peers will pour all of themselves and hope that they will succeed the way they need to. He becomes such a constant, wandering around in TDL and assisting everyone a little bit at a time, sharing his expertise of years of hero-work for each special move, ways it might or might not work as intended. It’s to the point that when he wanders in midafternoon, tired of designing hero simulations, Aizawa just looks over at him.

“How’s their progress, Aizawa my man?” All Might comes over to him, and Aizawa shrugs, his face buried in his capture weapon as is his wont. He looks tired; he was out on patrol last night.

“Back again?” Aizawa asks. Sighs. “It’s slow but steady. Everyone has been making good progress.” All Might nods, standing beside him. “I think the hardest part has been convincing people that it doesn’t necessarily need to be offensive. You,” he adds, his eyes crinkling, “Have been a big help with that. Sekijiro and I were talking about it last night. Even if all your moves are offensive.”

“Ah, only on the surface!” All Might laughs. “It’s really the air vacuum that makes them special.”

“Anyway, thanks to your help, while there are those who are just starting to realize styles of their own, we also have those who have already acquired multiple moves.” Aizawa turns slightly, looking up at Bakugou, and All Might follows his gaze. The boy has picked his place atop the TDL on a spire of cement where he’s safely away from most of his peers, since his blasts are nigh-on uncontrollable and will just go off no matter whether he wants them to or not. It’s smart.

It would be so much easier for everyone involved if Bakugou was as stupid as he pretends to be, but he isn’t. As if to prove that hypothesis, he’s setting off narrowed blasts, giving up spread for precision and power. It’s the kind of attack that, deployed correctly, could save lives.

All Might realizes as he watches that that’s exactly what it is. It is just a blast version of his own shockwaves, the vacuum his punches create. Bakugou and Izuku are so much more alike than either of them want to think they are.

All Might smiles, turns back to look at Aizawa. “Bakugou’s battle sense is sticking out prominently as ever, I see.”

He hears the cement crumble. He could hear that anywhere. He hears it in his nightmares. He’s not fast enough, strong enough, and rebar breaks, cement falls. There are civilians. There are children. Innocents, who will be hurt or killed by his own failures in acting. A true hero saves everyone. He’s turning, even as he hears Bakugou shout, sees Aizawa moving, hair standing on end and capture weapon rippling to life as he activates his quirk, as—

(Vanilla.)

There’s a rush of wind, and All Might knows exactly who and what it is. Izuku appears, still for a moment in midair as he turns, momentum catching up with his body, legs spinning, and the sound of his foot pulverizing the cement is sharp and loud, dust flying everywhere, shards rattling to the ground like hail. Bakugou is frozen halfway toward jumping down to break the cement, Aizawa is stumbling to a halt, still meters away from All Might.

All Might is grinning in triumph. He can see One For All working in Midoriya, his hair slicking into spikes, his whole body alive with it, muscles lumping. All Might grins more, his good hand clenched into a fist of triumph. His cheeks ache with his smile, his heart is in his throat, and he feels like the sun has just risen inside him and blown light throughout his scar-tissue chest.
Izuku looks up at him, eyes big. “Are you okay, All Might?” He’s landed, One For All’s power receding, and he stands up, rebalancing as he jogs over to All Might.

“Yes!” All Might is still grinning at him. More than okay.

Some of the other students come over then, attracted to the sounds of Bakugou and Midoriya and likely coming to get a look at the carnage. Kaminari and Kirishima leave their Ecto-clone, staring at their friend.

“Midoriya, that you? Holy crap!” Kaminari throws his hands up in the air. “That was some destructive power!”

Kirishima’s eyes are sparkling. “Yeah!” He agrees. “I thought you were a puncher!”

Izuku glances back at them as he loses his balance, still getting used to his new hero uniform, toppling back down on his ass. “Oh hey, Kaminari, Kirishima.” All Might puts his good hand on his hip and leans over to look at what Izuku has to show him, lifting up his foot. “The destructive power is thanks to these soles Hatsume came up with, and I changed my style by observing how Iida moves his body.” He looks chagrined for a moment. “All I’ve really done is determined what direction I’ll be going in now, and this skill’s still hot off the forge, so I don’t think it’s anything I could really call a super move just yet.”

He isn’t wrong. Just kicking things isn’t a super move; there has to be more follow through than that. Bakugou gets it, that armor-piercing blast is a good example. It’s what All Might means when he says he doesn’t just punch things. He makes vacuums.

Made. He made. He made.

If he tried it now, he’d just throw a punch. He doesn’t have One For All now.

He ignores the chill that settles in the hole in his chest where his ribs were reconstructed, in the hole his lung left when they took it out. “That’s all right!” He tells Izuku, who stares up at him like a puppy. “Because that skill is probably more than just hot off the forge—for the provisional license exam, that is.” Izuku looks confused, and All Might wants to explain branding, how to get attention, the feat of gravity-defying, but at that moment Aizawa finally joins them, clearly rattled as he grabs All Might’s elbow.

“It’s dangerous in here, All Might. Don’t get too close.” He’s like a mother hen sometimes.

“Thanks, but I’m heading out anyway.” Aizawa only reluctantly lets go of his elbow, subsides. All might looks up above, at where Bakugou is frozen on the cliff-edge, and shades his eyes from the light of the overhead to squint more at the boy. “Sorry about that, Bakugou my boy!” He calls it out loud enough for Bakugou to be able to hear. He has to raise his voice, now, to get that kind of volume.

He’s softer now. Normal volume now. To be loud requires he open his mouth, inhale until his remaining lung is all the way inflated, and speak from his diaphragm. He has to clear his throat, yell. All Might doesn’t boom. All Might—no.

All Might’s voice booms enough to knock down walls.

Yagi Toshinori has to yell to be heard.
Bakugou doesn’t care, though. The boy seems to care about very little, and he practically blows up with anger, the explosion that he sets off covering his entire body as he yells back “Watch your damn self, All Might!” His voice tangles with the explosion and the rain of cement shards, and All Might feels the weight of the world press down on his shoulders again. Cementoss is running to his side, already asking if he’s all right, and Aizawa hasn’t moved away, still caging him in.

He had thought he understood what this new life would be like. After all, he’s been getting ready for five years. He went out like this, lived life like this. Had friends like this.

But even then, he was still All Might. All Might and One For All still filled his body. Now he is neither one of those things. He had protected himself, protected everyone, even in his half-crushed body.

Now, he lives under the protection of his peers.

He goes to his meeting with Nezu, and while he wasn’t shaken after almost getting his head bashed in with concrete (he has had the same happen to him numerous times) he is shaken by the time he reaches the principal’s office for their meeting. It’s a meeting to discuss numerous things—the coming provisional license exams, his lesson plans for the fall semester, his upcoming meeting with All For One in Tartarus, his health. Other things, too.

They do the formalities first, All Might offering his lesson plans for Nezu to look over, the Principal rubbing his chin behind his desk as he marks them up and passes them back, as they discuss them. They go over the questions he’s supposed to ask All For One (like All For One will answer any of them, which he won’t) and then it lapses into silence in the Principal’s office.

All Might stares at the wood of his desk, and the tops of his knees, the khaki of his cargo pants greyed out in the fluorescent light of the overheads. He sees, in the corner of his eyes, Nezu steeple his fingers. Still neither of them talk; neither of them move or speak. Nezu sighs. “You have something on your mind, All Might.” It is not a question.

“Yes,” he agrees, at last. His long fingers shift over his knee. “I do.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

All Might laughs under his breath, and it’s hot and ugly. No, he does not want to talk about it. He does not want to talk about any of the things he has been feeling these last few days. He does not want to talk about them at all. He knows he has to—sharing the trauma and the feelings of helplessness are a way to keep him from becoming alienated from his peer group. He knows it’s important that he force his brain to retain the fact that these people he works with are his friends, are trustworthy, are equal to him. But the words he’s supposed to share bottle up behind his teeth, get chewed into mash that feels the same to the touch as a shattered ice cream cone. It feels the same through his chest that rebar felt like five years ago, when All For One—

“I think I should step down.”

“No.” All Might closes his eyes; he knew Nezu was going to say that. Of course. ‘I’ve already thought about this. It’s not effective as a deterrent for anybody. Not for the parents—they still see you as a source of stability and protection. Not for the students—they look up to you, and your experience is vital to their growth. I can’t ask Endeavor to come teach and you know it. You are the
only person who can do the job that they need. If anything, you can do it better now. They can see what being a hero can do, will do, to some of them. For the press, you leaving as a teacher is just more proof that the entire world is coming apart at the seams. All Might giving up on something is unheard of. If you’re scared, the press will argue, how scared should the rest of us be? If the League of Villains makes U.A. unsafe, if you need to leave here to be safe, then we should just all leave Japan while the getting is good and let Shigaraki take it.

“You’ll lose friendships you’ve built here, a network you need. You’ll be left alone, Yagi, and the last thing you need now is for that to happen.” All Might knows it. Alone, he’ll lose track of days. Without a schedule and people counting on him, in a communal space, his journalling will drop. He’ll eat less. When he dissociates, he has no idea where he might end up.

He’ll be a target. An unprotected one. One who will rely on public funds and attention to protect.

“No,” All Might agrees tiredly. He can feel his body slipping away the longer his eyes are shut and he sighs, the air going out of his remaining lung, melting into Nezu’s extra guest chair. He lets all the tension and fight go out of him until he’s just a puddle of melted ice cream, sizzling on the asphalt. “I know you’re right. But...” he trails off.

“I’m not worried about being a magnet for danger, or the students copying my risk-taking behaviors. Already the two I worry about most are consciously acting out against the way I do.” Bakugou, designing special moves in places that he won’t hurt anyone else. Midoriya, learning new skills rather than relying on old ones, to keep himself from getting hurt. It’s so unlike the both of them. “I’m worried about myself, Nezu. I’m worried that as long as I am around these kids, trying to be something to them, a role model, a teacher, a warning, a...whatever. I’m worried that as long as I try to be that to them, I’ll be a liability.

“I went to go help out at TDL again today, and almost got killed by falling concrete. How can I be a good teacher when I can’t even do the things that are ostensibly my job?” He lifts his good hand, lets it fall. “You should ask someone else to do Foundational Hero Studies, make me a Homeroom teacher or something. Something where I’ll be out of the way. I can trade with Mic; I’m fluent in English too.”

“If you still feel that way in the spring, we can discuss it for next year, I’m fine with that.” There’s a huff of breath as Nezu hops off of his chair, comes over, his shoes tapping on the floor.

He takes All Might’s large hand in both his paws. “Yagi,” Nezu says softly. All Might opens his eyes, looks down at the Principal. “I won’t lecture you, because you hear plenty from me as it is. I’ve known you a long time, and I like to think that I know you pretty well.”

All Might fakes a smile. “I should hope so. You’ve known me since I was—what—fifteen?”

Nezu huffs a laugh, squeezes All Might’s hand.

“That’s my point, Yagi. In all these years, you’ve changed, but one part never has. You have always been more than willing to put yourself into harm’s way, even if it’s just taking detention for another student—‘a thing he did all the time when he was at U.A., to the point that it became a known way to get out of trouble, to push Yagi to take your punishment— ‘Or giving up your life, your personality, your interests, your future, your past, to be the Symbol of Peace. As long as you think that your only job as a teacher is to make sure that you do all those things your students can’t, you will never succeed at what it is that you want to do. It’s high time you learned that you can’t be everything to everyone.”

All Might looks away from his face. He can’t keep eye contact. That’s a problem with a friend being
so damn smart—Nezu can think him in circles any day of the week. He doesn’t even have to try.

“Yagi—Toshinori. You aren’t going to be a liability to your students unless you insist on making yourself a target. You’re retired now. All Might isn’t a hero any more. Now he’s a teacher. Now he’s you. Stop trying to turn your life into a martyrdom. I don’t want to make you play this so close to the chest, but you know it isn’t what Shimura would want for you.”

All Might pulls his hand away.

Nezu lets him.

His uniform doesn’t fit.

His uniform doesn’t fit, and when he puts it on, All Might has to stop, give up, let his shaking knees bend. He sits on the couch in his room in the dorms. His right arm is out of its cast and sling, so he can get dressed on his own without too much difficulty, but he still holds his gloves.

They don’t fit.

His belt, even clinched the tightest it goes, sags off of his waist. His boots flap around his shins.

None of this is new. It’s been like this for several years. His time has been growing more and more limited, so he gets dressed in his uniform under his oversized clothes, and all of it hangs off of his frame. He has it down almost to a science—he can whip a full suit off and on in heartbeats. But this time, when he leaves his room, it won’t magically start to fit. He won’t grow tall and have it all stay on him correctly, the way it’s meant to.

There’s a knock on the door. “Yagi?” Tsukauchi. He feels more of his strength go out of him. “Are you ready to go?”

“Door’s open,” All Might replies, and it opens to reveal his best friend. Tsukauchi is still dressed in uniform, having come straight from the station, and he bends down to untie his shoes, hangs up his hat on the hatstand by All Might’s door, and then walks over to stand by his side at the couch. All Might can’t look up at him. All his attention is on his gloves.

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“Your arm is out of the cast!” Tsukauchi says, genuinely happy. “How is it?”

“A little nerve damage, but nothing terrible.” All Might is staring at his hands. He can’t lift his right arm as high as he could two weeks ago. There’s a little line of darkness that runs over the top of his shoulder and down his bicep partway, where he can’t feel anything. “I should be out of bandages soon.” Tsukauchi squeezes his good shoulder, a reassuring sign that he’s there. He has been there, for a year and a half now, and All Might—

All Might doesn’t know what he would do without him.

He hangs his head. “I don’t,” he begins, and his throat closes shut. “I don’t know if I can do this.”

Go into Tartarus, and sit there in front of All For One, and pretend he’s doing fine. He is—physically, he’s actually healthier than he has been since their first confrontation. The stress One For All was exerting on his system as an imperfect vessel was killing him as sure as a hand around the throat. Without it, he’s lighter. His body was never meant for it.
He wonders if he would have always looked like this, without One For All. Would Yagi Toshinori have just grown up gaunt-faced?

“You should ask someone else.”

Tsukauchi’s hand on his shoulder tightens, and his best friend sits down beside him, their knees dug into one another. Tsukauchi throws an arm over his shoulder, and if it was pity, All Might would shove him off. Tell him where to take his pity. But it’s not pity. The hardest part is, it isn’t pity.

“There is nobody else,” Tsukauchi says. All Might closes his eyes. Hangs his head. “He keeps asking after you. We need answers. If you want to wait, that’s fine, we can call this off—“ All Might shakes his head. Tsukauchi’s arm around his back tightens. “Do you want to talk about it?” He offers.

“No.” All Might wants to forget it. He wants to forget being All Might. Going in front of All For One and pretending he’s still the same person, when he’s managed the charade in front of people who aren’t inside his personal bubble, has been hard enough. Keeping it up in private has been harder. In front of All For One—“Let’s just get this over with,” he sighs. “Sooner the better.” He turns his gloves over, and tugs them on, and stands up.

He feels stupid. He’s sure he looks like an idiot. A child playing dress-up in his parents clothes.

Tsukauchi smiles up at him. “Never fear,” he says, “Because here you are.”

All Might tries to fake a smile, and follows him to the squad car.

Tartarus is cold. The air conditioning cuts straight through him, skin and bones as he is. Even the carbon-spandex weave of his uniform isn’t enough to dampen it, and he is glad for the heavy cloth of his cape over his back. The guards he meets all manage to shutter the looks in their eyes as soon as they glance up to meet his gaze, the looks that are fear and pity and terror and dashed hope. They treat him with deference, as becomes All Might, and deliver him to speak with All For One.

It is not lost on All Might that it took eight users of One For All to defeat him, and that when All Might did manage it, it nearly cost him his life. That for all eight of them, all their powers inside All Might, all they managed to do was disfigure All For One. He lives. He’ll live years longer. Decades. (He’ll almost certainly outlive All Might.) And, for all that effort, all that blood shed and all the lives lost, All For One gave as good as he got.

They’re both dying. Just All Might is dying a lot faster.

And here they are. Two old, broken men sitting on either side of bulletproof glass. They’re not even looking at one another, because All For One doesn’t have most of a face any more. There was a reason All Might genuinely thought he was dead for five years. The body he’d left in the crater five years before had been completely still, shards of bone sticking out of the front of the head, brain matter all over the floor. He’d snapped the neck, blood had poured from chest wounds. All For One should have been dead.

But he wasn’t. He isn’t.

All For One grins at him through the bulletproof glass, and All Might clenches his hands over his knees. “It’s about time for the second semester to start, right? Or...has it already started?” All For
One is nonchalant, normal, relaxed. “Here I thought you’d be completely absorbed in educating young minds, but...” here they are. Facing down. One last time. (Until next time, and then next time, and then—) “What,” All For One says, “Do you seek from me?”

All Might takes in a deep breath. Feels his right lung swell to capacity, pressing against his ribs, misaligned. Feels the dark line down his right shoulder from the nerve damage. Lets the breath out.

Shuts away the tinnitus, and the scream that bottles behind his teeth, and leans forward.

And speaks.

(It is a waste of time.
He knew it would be.

But for Tsukauchi, All Might will do almost anything. So he did this

At least he tried.)

He stands up at some point. He doesn’t remember doing it. His knees unbend under him, his hands are fists at his sides, and he feels as helpless as he did that day when he was fifteen and ice cream dripped down the sides of his hands. All For One laughs at him, his voice mocking. He could be dying at All Might’s feet, and he would still be winning, and they both know it. “All you can do is sit and look on at these villains that you were responsible for creating,” he says, and each word is a thorn that finds a chink in All Might’s armor, cracks it apart a little tiny bit at a time. “I believe,” he says, almost musing, “That you will spend the rest of your life stricken by your powerlessness and inability to do anything.” That he will have won. That All For One, even imprisoned forever, will have won.

They both know he’s won.

“But,” he says, “Really, I want to hear from you—how does it feel?”

All Might is so angry. He can feel his pulse pounding in his temples. The backs of his eyes burn. His teeth are so tight-grit that his jaw, clenched, is grinding. His nails are digging into his palms, over thirty-five year old scars. The guards are telling him to back away.

A hero doesn’t kill people. It’s one of the tenants of being a hero. You capture, disable, knock out if you need to. You arrest, tie up, handcuff. You prevent them from getting up.

Five years ago, he had the opportunity to kill All For One. But he didn’t. He thought to himself, let nature take it’s course. It had already almost done the same with him, at the time.

Every day All Might wakes up in the morning and he wishes he had taken ten minutes longer in the crater to break All For One’s ribs, to peel his chest open, and rip his still-beating heart from within his body. To shred veins and arteries, to crush the aortas and the ventricles until All For One’s heart was bloody pulp. Every day All Might wishes he had broken his one tenant, the one thing keeping
him from All For One, and made sure he was dead. Smashed his face into the pavement one more
time, to snap his spine into enough dust that tearing his head off would have been easy. Caved his
skull in until there was more bone outside his head than there was in it. Every night as he’s falling
asleep, All Might knows that in another life, he did. He tore the throat out of All For One’s corpse,
crushed his heart into nothing but paste and blood between his fingers.

He wonders, in that life, if that All Might is any happier than he is, or if by breaking that one vow, he
gave up something of himself for good.

All Might wonders if that other him needed that part, whatever it was. If he himself still needs it.

All For One laughs in his face, head thrown back against his wheelchair, the mechanical ventilator
making the laughter sound robotic and hateful, acidic and disgusting, crawling over All Might’s skin.
“People often get upset when their feelings are guessed correctly!” He grins. “What a shame you
can’t hit me here.”

If he could, All Might would already have his hands around All For One’s neck. He would squeeze,
with the pitiful strength he has left, until his heart stopped. He would squeeze, until this was done.
For good.

All Might takes a deep breath. Lets it out. The anger saps out of his body, quick as it came. It’s too
late for what-ifs now; it’s too late to have any of those hopes. He can’t do anything now but keep
moving forward. Nobody can change the past. Not even All For One, his vaunted Quirk-godhood,
can undo that which has been done. He shakes his head. “You, of all people...don’t you go and
presume you know everything.”

He knows why All For One has done this. Because Shigaraki hurts him, as much as All For One
puncturing his lung had hurt. Because All For One takes a special sort of sick amusement in seeing
All Might debased in front of him, brought down to his level. But All Might knows—what has
happened to Shigaraki, it isn’t his fault. Oh, maybe the system that failed him is his fault. But he’s
heard enough lectures and taught enough students through the years that he maybe better than
anyone else knows that he can’t save everyone. He wishes, he wishes he could. But he can’t.

It galls to burning that one of his few failures is the very weapon which All For One has turned
against him and pressed bare-blade against his throat, but he knows it isn’t his fault. “I understand
your thinking very well,” he tells All For one. His fingers dig into his palms. “Shigaraki, the blood
relative of my master, I—“

No.

“No,” All Might says. “Both I and the boy are to be killed by him. That’s the gist of it, isn’t it?”

For an evil criminal mastermind, the greatest villain with a Quirk to ever live on Earth, there is
something refreshing about All For One. He’s not some horrifying unstoppable systemic evil, he
doesn’t prey upon society’s weak and helpless. He’s not racist, homophobie, transphobic, classist,
ableist. He’s not genocidal. All For One is a man. A simple man, who hates. Hates. He fixates on
what he hates, and he destroys it. For no other reason than because he can.

There’s something about that kind of evil, the kind of simple everyday evil, that can be fought, killed,
beaten, that makes him less frightening.

“And?” All For One goads him, as if to say, what next? What will All Might do?

All these years, All For One has won. He destroyed his brother on a whim, because he could. He
tore down the world because he wanted to win. He has ruined All Might’s life one breath at a time, because it was easy.

Not this time.

All Might stares at All For One, this old, ugly, broken man in a wheelchair, as shattered in body as All Might is in spirit, and digs his heels in with a stubbornness that he had long before Nana looked down at him, retching on the pavement, and made the decision he made only a year ago.

“I will not die,” Yagi Toshinori says, the words lava on his lips, fury making his heart pound in his ears. He doesn’t care what Nighteye said; he doesn’t care what his body has to say. “I won’t allow Shigaraki to kill me.” Even if it means he will look Shigaraki in the eye as his heart beats its last, he will throw himself over the edge of a building and to his untimely death rather than give All For One that last satisfaction. He will not die. “I will not be killed! The future you envision will never happen, you bastard!” He will live, because it’s hard, because it will make All For One furious, because it will be his one little rebellion against all the common sense that has guided him so far.

He has lived this long. He has survived every other thing he expected to kill him.

Yagi Toshinori has not come through hell and high water to be beset here by a snarling manchild and fail this one last test.

This won’t fucking take him either.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Tsukauchi asks, after making sure he gets back to his dorm room. All Might grins, plastic.

“More than. Thank you, Tsukauchi. Are we still on for Sunday?” Their usual watch-a-baseball-game and complain about it date.

“If I have anything come up, I’ll let you know!”

They clasp hands, and Tsukauchi leaves, and All Might shuts his door. He takes off his uniform.

He sits on the edge of his Western-style bed, that is up off the ground because its easier on his knees that have had all their cartilage beaten out of them, and leans his elbows on his thighs. He sits there in his underwear, his left hand pressed over the starburst scarring on his chest, thumb brushing the edges where the punctures of feeding and drainage tubes have never faded, and stares at the wall for a long time

He doesn’t think of anything. He just stares.

Eventually, he gets up and makes dinner—a salad, the way his mother used to make them. It has apples cut into it, and he pares the knife through them without really watching, bleu cheese sprinkled on top, and drenched in ranch dressing. It makes him feel ill to eat the whole thing, but when he sits and eats it in his empty living room it reminds him of his childhood and the back patio of his grandparents house in Hokkaido where he and his parents lived, and watching the sea billow in choppy drifts while his mother threw more shredded cheese on top of his salad, diced hardboiled eggs and ham and dumped them in.

When he’s done, he goes to finish his lesson plans for the third years, because if there’s one thing hes
learned, it’s that life goes on. Nobody bothers him as night falls, as it gets dark, and it’s past eleven when he stands up, rubbing out a crick in his neck, as he goes to get his tea for his nighttime medications.

He hears the buzzer for the intercom system in Aizawa’s room go off, and pauses, crosses back out of his kitchenette over to the part of the wall that they share. All Might doesn’t even need to hear the whole thing—he hears two of your students and ground Beta and he’s already forgetting his meds, bending over to pull on his sneakers and stumbling out of his room and into the hallway that they share.

Everyone else on their floor has their doors closed—either sleeping or working—and a moment later, as All Might stands between Aizawa and the building exit, trying to think of words, his door opens.

They stare at each other. Aizawa lets his hand fall back to his side. “You heard.” It’s not a question. All Might nods. “What, do you want to take Midoriya? I know he’s your favorite, but—“

“No,” All Might replies. They’re still staring at one another. He sighs, lets his hands fall to his side. He’s listened to Midoriya talk about Bakugou before, their tempestuous, tumultuous relationship that’s been building and tilting on the same axial dynamic for a decade. “No. You should be the one to discipline them, if they need it.”

“They’re fighting, All Might. It’s past curfew, without supervision, in a part of the grounds they’re not supposed to be on. Yeah, I’m gonna go punish them. They’re going to be lucky if I just knock their stupid stone-hard skulls together.” He pinches the bridge of his nose, fist on his hip. “Why’s it always Bakugou. I’d give him to Sekijiro if 1-B wouldn’t eat him alive to make a point.”

“Let me go talk to them,” All Might says.

“Why?”

That’s a good question. He says as much. “That’s a good question. But...it’s gotta be about. Ah. Something...” That, of course, being Midoriya letting slip One For All, and Bakugou’s kidnapping. And All Might, of course, With those two, it’s always about him. “I knew both of them from before they enrolled here. I have a hunch about what’s going on.” He bows slightly, hands folded. “Please, Aizawa. Can you let me handle this? I’ll bring them to you shortly.”

Aizawa glares at him, and finally his shoulders slump. “Fine,” he grumbles. “Whatever. Midoriya’s way more likely to cut the shit with you than he is with me, anyway. Go break it up, bring them back here whenever you’re done. Or whatever’s left of them.”

“Ah, Aizawa. Always such a pessimist!”

He’s been jogging every day, and it’s certainly not the same speed he could get jumping around with One For All, but it’s still better than walking, so All Might takes off running as fast as he can to reach ground Beta. Even still, by the time he arrives, he can hear the explosions of their fight and his feet slow, stop.

He’s about to vault over the barrier to the street they’re fighting on when Bakugou’s words reach him, the boy’s voice cracking. “Why did I,” Bakugou yells, “Have to be the reason for All Might’s end?”

And all at once the pieces slot together, a puzzle he didn’t want solved.

“If I was stronger, if I hadn’t been kidnapped by the villains, then none of that would have ever happened!”
The pain and anguish in Bakugou’s voice cuts him to the quick. All Might presses his left hand to his chest, to the puncture wound and scar of his ribs. This boy, who could have suffered so much more, so many worse horrors, thinking not of himself—but of All Might—

All Might leans against the nearest wall, and closes his eyes. He’s far enough away that he’s well out of the disaster radius that their combat won’t be reaching him. They don’t care about anything but each other right now, after all. He just listens, instead, to the sounds of punches and kicks, to Bakugou screaming his fury and anguish, to Izuku fighting back. For once, finally, finally, fighting back. And curls into himself, and feels something slough away.

These children—they’re still all but babes in arms. Their world is still one that, at the end of the day, is simplified down to homework and practice and teenage hormones and angst. They certainly don’t live idyllic lives, but it’s still so much smaller. So much more self-centered than the world of adulthood.

And yet, they’ve both made the decision to fight for him. When everyone else in the world has taken All Might for granted for thirty-five years, a pillar, a part of society as normal and regular as taxes or the sun rising in the morning, these boys have taken their childhood worship of his footsteps and turned it around. They are his peers. They are a part of the small cluster of heroes who are now protecting him, rather than the other way around. They, like Aizawa, knew that it was only a matter of time before he fell, and society began to crumble.

And here they are, eschewing the angst of childhood, so they can battle for the title of his successor.

All Might, his head in his hands, begins to laugh. Lord, what fools all mortals be! What stupid, hopeful naïveté defines their lives, what thoughtless self-destruction, that two fifteen year olds are willing to kill one another to prove that they are the most to blame for his failures. They are still so young. They don’t yet understand. This is their ice cream on the asphalt.

All Might failed not because of them. Not because he had to rescue Bakugou, or because he gifted One For All to Izuku. All Might failed because he is human. He, to all of the best of his ability, is still painfully, hopelessly human, and to be human is to err and fail and fall and sometimes take others with you. He did his best not to.

In the end it should be some kind of consolation that he only took two down with him.

Ground Beta is quiet, and All Might steps out from behind his wall. Their words, all of them, weigh heavy inside him, stones thrown into the pond of his soul. Bakugou has Izuku pinned to the ground, the both of them gasping, covered in scrapes and blood. They have found their standstill, their stop, and All Might squares his shoulders and strides forward

“That’s enough, you two.”

They both freeze.

“I’m sorry,” he continues, coming over to their little square of blood and crushed pavement. “But I took the liberty of eavesdropping on you.” They stare at him, whisper his name, and he shakes his head at them—did they really not expect someone would come to see what they were doing? Bakugou makes a spectacle that can be seen from miles away when he gets going. They disentangle themselves, wiping blood off of their faces and onto their forearms, and turn to look at him as he stops, still some feet away. “I’m sorry,” he says again, this time as an apology. “For not realizing you felt this way.”

Even two people failed is two too many in his playbook.
“Now you…?” Bakugou asks, his shoulders hunched up towards his ears, a furious porcupine of a boy. He looks at All Might, but can’t meet his eyes, turns away, his head hung low on his shoulders. “Why Deku?” He asks, Izuku’s nickname dripping with loathing from his lips. “Ever since that time with the sludge villain, why Deku?” Bakugou kicks a shattered bit of cement as he says it, and All Might is almost certain he’s imagining it’s Izuku’s head.

All Might looks to Izuku, blood on his shirt collar, and thinks again how lucky he’s been, to have lived long enough to meet this boy. He tastes his lips, speaks— “Despite being powerless, he was more of a hero than anybody else.” Even All Might. Especially All Might. Izuku was another Yagi Toshinori, with a heart ten sizes too large for his chest and a death-wish just as big to match. He had done what Yagi Toshinori would have done, in his place.

What All Might should have done.

“I judged it was my responsibility to help him stand in the arena,” All Might continues, still watching Bakugou, “And not you, who had already been standing in it.” Bakugou cannot deny that he is lucky in some ways. His Quirk is one that guarantees him his goals. Even if he didn’t know how to use it, the power would be enough to take him to the top of whatever tree he wants to climb.

Bakugou turns away from him, and All Might realizes, suddenly, that the shaking shoulders he had mistaken momentarily for rage is because the boy is crying. “But I’m weak!” Bakugou shouts, his voice cracking again. He looks at his hands, and All Might can see even from here where the skin is scarred and burnt from years of practicing and perfecting his Quirk. “Even though all I wanted to do was become strong like you! But because I’m weak—” he chokes, presses his hands over his face. Breathes.

The sob he makes is so tiny that if All Might wasn’t listening for it he wouldn’t hear it.

“Because I’m weak, now you’re like this!”

All Might sighs, runs a hand back through his hair, his bangs caught on his thumb and tucking back behind one ear. “This,” he replies, coming over to Bakugou, who is crying angry, silent tears, “Is not your fault.” This is the body he is stuck with now, the body he traded willingly in order to do the one thing he was meant to do. Nana entrusted Yagi Toshinori with One For All for one purpose: to destroy All For One. He did that. Twice. He expected, of course, to pay for it with his life.

He paid for it with his body instead, and it’s a punishment that is both a greater burden and a lesser strike all at once, and hurts thrice as much for it.

“All roads come to an end, Bakugou. It was going to turn out like this no matter what.” He had known that six years before, when he’d made the split-second calculation to strike All For One with the blade of his hand and rebound his face off of a wall, the cement denting his head and crushing in the right side of his skull, making him scream as his occipital bones had shattered into dust and his eye had pulverized. It had been a trade—half his head and one of his eyes in return for him thrusting a spiderweb of rebar through All Might’s chest, shattering bone and organs alike and only not taking his heart with them by sheer dumb fucking luck. “You are strong.” He tells Bakugou, and the boy still won’t look at him.

All Might has stood in the boy’s shoes before.

He never felt strong any of those times, either.

“But, you know,” his voice softens as he takes Bakugou’s shoulders in his hands, and realizes, for the first time, they’re just as small as Izuku’s, “I concentrated so much on that strength that I let you
bear too much.” Bakugou is still a child. He will still be a child for a long time. He deserves, as much as his peers do, to remain so. “I’m sorry.” All Might whispers, pulling Bakugou into his arms, letting him, even if it’s just for a heartbeat, hang onto some normalcy of adolescence, his forehead pressed into All Might’s sternum as he cries. “You’re a young man too.”

It ends up taking almost an hour to explain everything. All Might has never been one for long-winded inspirational speeches; he can raise spirits quickly, but he’s no orator. Still, he lays everything out to Bakugou as he did to Izuku not so long ago, and the young man paces as he listens, hands shoved into the pockets of his sweatpants. He doesn’t ask any questions, just stands there and listens as his expression gets darker and darker.

All Might doesn’t blame him his taciturn manner. He felt much the same, when he first learned of it from Nana. He had hoped, when he’d passed One For All to Izuku, that the boy would be able to use it in a world where it wouldn’t have to be put to its intended purpose. He had hoped that All For One was dead and his ideals had died with him, and Izuku as the Ninth was going to be a different kind of beacon, for a different kind of age.

Maybe he still will be; All Might knows it’s still too soon to tell.

But Bakugou gets it, and that’s as much as he can ask.

He takes them back to the teacher’s building afterward, lecturing them in his own way about curfew and safe sparring practices and getting a first aid kit to patch them up. Nobody needs stitches (fortunately) but they’re both going to be smarting for a while. He does his best to shield them from Aizawa’s wrath, but also knows that they brought this upon themselves—they have to pay their dues. That is what makes a functioning society.

After Aizawa sends the kids away, back to their own dorm to sleep, he and All Might clean up the first aid kit, and then end up sprawled on the sofa together, Aizawa’s arms crossed and his shoulders hiked up to his ears, his jaw grit in fury. All Might watches him, and across the hall, the clock ticks on until it hits one, and chimes. “We should go to bed,” All Might says at last, into the quiet. “Early morning tomorrow.” Aizawa grunts, but doesn’t move.

“What’s Midoriya to you,” Aizawa says, suddenly and abruptly. “Is he your illegitimate child, or something?” All Might chokes and rubs the back of his neck.

“Why is that always the thing that people end up settling on…”?

“Similar Quirks,” Aizawa counts off, “Curly hair, he’s going to be tall when he finishes growing up, he has your personality, your mannerisms, your attitude. He’s a spitting image of you but dyed green and dumber.”

All Might throws back his head and laughs, leans more into the couch. “If you think he’s dumber than me, you should ask Nezu what I was like at his age! If he was my illegitimate son, if anything, he’s giving a better name to the family at U.A. than I ever did! I think I served some form of punishment every single day of my three years here.”

“Yeah,” Aizawa shoots back, “And how many of those were your own punishments, not ones you’d taken on for other people?”
“You have a point, but it was still a solid half my own bullshit.” Aizawa snorts derisively, but lets it go. “But, no. He’s not my son.” All Might doesn’t say it, but I wish he was is sticking uncomfortably to the tip of his tongue. “It’s more complex than that, and as much as I wish it, I cannot tell you—I’m sorry, Aizawa.” He holds up his hand to stall the younger man’s scolding before it even gets started. “I have Nezu’s permission.” Aizawa grunts.

“It’ll come out sooner or later,” he agrees amicably at last. “Neither you nor Midoriya knows how to keep your mouths shut.” All Might grunts. He hopes it stays secret. “So was their fight all about whatever it is you can’t tell me? Or…?”

“Both,” All Might admits, staring at his hands. The bandages on the right are starting to loosen; he hasn’t fixed them since that morning. “One and the other are the same issue, and that’s I think a good deal of the conflict between those boys. What I told you, though, is true. Bakugou really does think that if he hadn’t been kidnapped, I would still be fine.”

“That,” Aizawa agrees with his unspoken sentiment, “Is bullshit.”

“If anything,” All Might’s voice softens, and he curls his hands into fists, closes his eyes, “If anything, he has it the wrong way around.” He runs his fingers through his hair again to rub at the back of his neck. “I’m their teacher, not to mention the top Pro Hero. If anybody is to blame for what happened to Bakugou, it’s me. Not him. I’m not going to lie to you and tell you it doesn’t really scare me that he genuinely thinks that way.”

“You weren’t even there,” Aizawa retorts, grabbing his wrist. “If anybody’s at fault for Bakugou’s kidnapping, it’s me and Sekijiro. Not you. Even if you had been there, I don’t know if it would have made much difference. If Hizashi is right and there is a traitor, they would have ratted on you, too. They would have just come prepared for you on top of everything else.”

“I don’t mean,” All Might starts, and then stops. He rubs his chin—he needs to shave. “I don’t so much mean summer camp,” he clarifies after a moment. “Because you’re right. If I had been there, I probably could have delayed it, but they would have either succeeded or killed me trying. I mean more this whole situation.”

Aizawa’s grip on his wrist tightens. “Shigaraki Tomura doesn’t exist because of you,” he says softly. “A systemic problem is a systemic evil. He didn’t slip through the cracks because you weren’t there to personally pick him up when he fell.” All Might laughs, and it comes out hysterical. “All Might, we both know I’ve never liked the idea of one man alone bearing the weight of the world, and it’s precisely for reasons like this I didn’t like it. I know why you did it, but—”

“Shigaraki Tomura is the grandson of my master,” All Might’s voice is very soft in the back of his throat. “Shimura Nana. She died—well before your time. When I was in school here, actually. My first year.” He can practically hear Aizawa doing the calculations backwards to see how many years ago that was, and he feels, abruptly, old. It’s not a feeling he’s used to having with Aizawa, who seems decades older than thirty.

“So that’s why Gran Torino came to teach here for a year,” Aizawa murmurs, pieces slotting together. “Because of her death.”

All Might nods, gently pulls his hand back from Aizawa’s grip, rubs his bandaged fingers over the nape of his neck. His hair is getting long. He needs it cut. “All For One killed Nana, soon after we…” Soon after she gave him One For All. Only a margin of months. “Met.” He finishes. “At the time, she’d recently given her son up to the foster system. Her husband died shortly before she met me, and she didn’t want her son getting caught up in. In the events which eventually led to her death.” In One For All. In the messy web of lies and regrets that has shrouded All For One/One For All for
nine generations. “Gran Torino and I both swore to leave him be. We’ve spoken of it since, and we both seriously considered finding her son, after her death. In the end, though, we upheld our promise. As some kind of penance to the dead, I suppose. Since we couldn’t save her.”

“You were fifteen,” Aizawa murmurs. “It wasn’t your fault she died. What could you have done? You’d have just gotten killed with her.”

“I know that,” All Might agrees. It’s something he’s had a very long time to come to terms with, after all. “I know that, but I still wish I had been able to do—something. All I did was fail her, and her son, and now her grandson as well. Because of me, because she died protecting me, All For One has turned Shigaraki Tomura into a weapon against me. To prove a point.” That’s the danger of those little, straightforward evils.

They hurt the most.

“You did.” There’s something of fury in Aizawa’s voice, banked and glistening like coals. All Might looks up at him, and realizes that the other man is so angry his Quirk is active, his eyes glittering red. He takes a deep breath, his hair flattens, he runs his fingers back through it to straighten his ponytail. “You did do something. Am I right in guessing that Shimura is the reason you became All Might?”

All Might nods, mutely. “Saving the world, smiling all the way? Becoming the pillar of peace? Isn’t that what you’re trying to train Midoriya to do—to become the thing humanity needs most, even when it’s hard?”

“Yes,” All Might says, his voice hoarse and quiet as a whisper in his throat.

“Then you did do something. Isn’t that what all this is about?” Aizawa gestures around them, to the entirety of U.A. “You gave up thirty years of your life to make the world into one she would have loved to live in. You’re All Might,” he adds. “I’ve said some awful things about you, to your face and behind your back, but that’s what you do. You take the needs of the many over the needs of the few, and never even think of the needs of the self. That’s who you are. It’s what you do. Wouldn’t turning the whole thing upside down to save Shigaraki Tomura be counterproductive?”

“I suppose,” All Might begins, but Aizawa is still going.

“It’s not your fault Shimura died. It’s not your fault that Shigaraki is evil. It’s not your fault Bakugou got kidnapped, either. Hell, it’s hardly even my fault!” Aizawa lets out a shaky, angry breath. He looks up at All Might, with his big dark eyes. “It says a lot about you that you’ve done more than any single other person to make the world a better place, and you still don’t feel like you’ve done enough. Would you give up everything you’ve done if it would save Shigaraki?”

All Might looks down at his hands and bites his tongue. He wants to say, in his heart of hearts, yes. He wants to say he would give up peace without a second thought if Shigaraki was saved. But he doesn’t.

Aizawa clasps his shoulder. “You’re a hero, and I don’t just mean the professional kind. You saved the world, you’ve made a new one. A better one, a more difficult one, but I wouldn’t trade it for anything.” All Might doesn’t feel like he has. “I wish you’d treat yourself like it. We’re supposed to protect our kids, but it’s not any more your fault Bakugou got kidnapped than it is his fault you lost your Quirk.” Aizawa lets him go, grunts. “Anyway, the ceremony is early tomorrow. I’m going to bed. You should too.”

He leaves quietly, but All Might stays where he’s sat, staring at his hands.

He feels, for the first time in a long time, very, very young.
Saying he and Nighteye broke up is a lot less far from the truth than people always think it is. Because they did—break up, that is. All Might dumped him, as softly as he feasibly could. They also stopped working together, but he's stopped working with a lot of people over the years. That isn’t the reason that seeing Nighteye is awkward.

They’ve spoken thrice since the day Nighteye broke his trust and read his future to see if he would die. The first time was the day that All Might, broken in his hospital bed, muscle and fat wasting away as he lived on fluids for months, told him that they couldn’t stay together. His future had always been his unknown. He would succeed, or he wouldn’t—he wanted it a mystery. Nighteye breaking his trust, even (especially) out of concern for him broke a sacred line he had considered inviolable.

Nighteye hadn’t cried. “I knew it was coming,” he had said, not looking All Might in the eye. “I suppose I’ve had some time to get used to it.”

The second was when Nighteye moved out of All Might’s house in Tokyo. Most of his stuff had been at their office, which he had cleared out while All Might had been in the United States for some further surgery, the gastrectomy that put the final nail in his coffin of ever again having a normal life. He had been recuperating at home, staying out of the international spotlight by claiming an injury (torn rotator cuff) when he had heard the knock on the door.

Nighteye had brought boxes. “I’ll make it quick.” Nighteye had said.

All Might had stood in his kitchen, counting his pills, and listened to his ex-boyfriend/sidekick pack up his things. The sounds of his dresser and closet opening and shutting. Knick-knacks taken off of shelves. Posters peeled down. They had mutually pretended the other wasn’t there. He had taken a cup of water to Nighteye, who was allergic to dust, to clear his throat after packing all his clothes.

“Did you see this too?” All Might had asked, looking at the top of the other man’s head, his bangs hanging down over his eyes. “When you looked into my future?”

Nighteye’s nod had been so slight he could have missed it. “I didn’t need to,” he clarified, staring at the cup. “I knew when I made the decision to look that it would be the end of it. I don’t have to be able to read the future to know that it would hurt you.” He had looked down at his hands. “I don’t know why I did it,” he had murmured, his voice barely above a whisper. “I love you, but that’s not an excuse.”

“It isn’t,” All Might had agreed.

Almost five years had passed since those conversations, and the part of his heart that had grown to encompass another person, someone who he loved, had shut again, because it had to. He had bought new clothes, for a man still 220cm tall but half his former weight. He’d stacked the other side of his mattress with books he never read and half-finished projects he forgot about two months in. He had transferred Nighteye’s number whenever he got a new phone, kept him listed as an emergency contact and the executor of his Will, because there wasn’t anybody else.

And then he’d met Midoriya, and picked up his phone, and called Nighteye.
To say he is surprised by Izuku wanting an internship is a lie. Of course Izuku wants one—he’s focused on improving to the point that his entire life revolves on that one axis. Gran Torino is completely out of the question, his hands full with all the work he’s doing with Tsukauchi to track down and ideally stop the League of Villains. Nobody else took notice of Izuku during the sports festival, and the list of people that All Might knows and trusts with students is short, mostly because he’s lived the last five years not getting close to anyone at all.

He knows, of course, that there is only one option for Izuku to ask about. But he still pretends it won’t happen, lies repeatedly to himself. Tries, tries, to convince himself it will all work out.

It doesn’t. Izuku comes into the faculty office, tongue-tied and overhopeful, and hands All Might his permission slip, signed by his mother. He wonders what Izuku did to get her approval. All Might reads it, even though he knows what it will say, and looks at the boy, who stares back so hopefully that All Might feels awful even contemplating what he’s about to do.

“I refuse.” he says, and watches Izuku deflate. He knows his reasons for his decision to refuse to support the internship are sound—even if Mic making fun of him for being uncomfortable dealing with his complex feelings about Nighteye is legit. He still doesn’t like the idea.

Izuku might still be young enough that he’s more worried about grades and crushes, but All Might is worried about letting him off the leash again. He’s survived only one fight unharmed in the last six months, and if that’s his baseline for starting hero work, All Might is frightened of what the future has in store. Yes, because he is a precious vessel, and One For All reaching the next generation relies on his survival. But, less pragmatic but no more important, because Izuku is his son.

All Might knows he will fail the boy, someday. Probably someday soon. But he doesn’t want to let him run headlong into danger like this.

It is, after all, sometimes all right to walk.

He’s rushing into his role as the successor. But, even so...oh, he is a soft touch.

All Might goes to Togata. He has met the boy numerous times in the last few months as his teacher, and he has more than seen the potential in the boy, that both Nezu and Nighteye correctly noted. If he had not met Izuku with his hopeful eyes and the fact he has never, not once in his life, stood down from anything, he would have given One For All to Togata without a second thought. He would have carried it well, done good with it.

But he wouldn’t have been Izuku.

And then Nighteye dies, and All Might sits at his bedside and thinks about metaphors like the shoe on the other foot, and not looking a gift horse in the mouth, and atoning before it’s too late, and undergoes a grief so awful he hardly feels like he’s alive any more. He cries in his dorm bathroom, can’t keep down any solid food for a day and a half, and goes himself to deliver the news to Nighteye’s parents, his first time seeing them in six years, and holds his mother as she cries in his arms.
(All Might looks at his will, at Nighteye’s civilian name atop it, his executor. He quietly scratches it out, and writes in Nezu’s name. 

He does the same for his next of kin, but here, he adds Aizawa.)

Togata Mirio becomes Quirkless, and All Might, unspoken, breathes a sigh of relief that the child he gave One For All to was Izuku. The students of 1-A who fought quickly become celebrities within their own class. Lots of people go and come from the hospital. Nighteye’s funeral is sombre and attended by a tight, broken cluster of friends and family, and All Might helps sort his bones out of his ashes, his hands shaking so hard he almost drops them.

Nighteye joins the little altar at his house in Tokyo, another portrait beside all those of his family.

Life goes on.

It is November. All Might has not been All Might for three months.

He is, remarkably, okay with this.

He’s coming back from a meeting with Inko to discuss what had happened with the Precepts over tea, jogging back from the train station when he hears a woman crying, and thirty years of reflexes don’t just stop existing when you can’t jump the height of buildings, so he whips around.

“Yes,” the woman says. She’s standing at the base of a tree, her hands pressed to the trunk. “Come down.” There’s a cat, halfway up the tree, clinging to one of the branches.

All Might hems over it for a moment, and then approaches. “Is that your cat up there?” He asks, and she turns around to face him. He can see the time it takes for her to match his face, and then her eyes get very wide and she gasps. He tries not to be too awkward, rubs the back of his neck. “Here, let me give you a hand.” He’s been jogging a lot, and has even worked up to actually using some of the U.A. gym equipment. He can’t jump up there, but he is nearly as tall as a tree himself, so he grabs onto the lowest branch and hoists himself up.

It’s not hard—he doesn’t actually weigh all that much for his height, and the cat isn’t all that high, either. He gets to the third major branch and leans up onto his toes, grabbing the cat, his weight precariously balanced as he leans into the tree trunk. “Come on, pretty baby,” he murmurs, picking the cat up. It meows at him balefully, cling desperately to the branch. “I know you don’t want to be peeled off, but come on.” It clings a moment longer and then finally lets go, and he almost overbalances as he cups the cat to his chest. “There we go,” he murmurs, crouching down.

The woman has come rushing over. “I’m so sorry,” she says, as All Might slides to the next branch down so she’s able to stretch out her hair to pull her cat from his arms. “You’re retired, and—”

“I don’t need a hero license to help get a cat out of a tree,” All Might laughs. “They all right?” The cat has clawed up her back and burrowed under her hair, and all he can see is the ears and tail. She’s smiling.

“Just fine now, I think. Thank you, All Might.”

“Anytime, because I’m here!”

It is at this point he looks down at the ground, which is a lot further down than he thought it was. Probably something to the tune of three meters. He purses his lips, locks his knees around the branch he’s sitting on, and fishes out his cell phone. “Are you stuck?” She says, as he one-handedly texts the teacher group chat, and he sighs.
“I,” he admits, “may have miscalculated how long my legs are.” And how much weight his nerve-damaged right shoulder will take. There’s a real difference between doing a pull-up and dropping all his weight onto his shredded rotator cuffs.

“I’ll stay with you,” she promises. “You did me a real favor, getting Thomas down. Only fair I stay and make sure someone can get you down now.”

Aizawa shows up, half an hour later. He looks exhausted and bleary, yawning into the back of his hand. He clearly just rolled out of bed—he’s wearing his hideous pink sweatpants and his pajama shirt, his dark hair everywhere. He comes over to the base of the tree, looks at the woman and her cat, and looks up at All Might. He doesn’t say anything for a long moment, and then he groans, pinches the bridge of his nose.

“Why didn’t you just call the fire department or something,” he says to All Might, and starts to climb the tree. Getting All Might down is a tad faster than the cat, because he trusts Aizawa and his capture weapon to lower him safely to the ground so that he doesn’t jar anything, including his still-weak knees. Aizawa hops down after him, and bows to the woman.

“Sorry about this,” Aizawa tells her.

All Might laughs. “Thank you,” he tells her, honestly. “It’s nice to still get to do stuff like that.” She’s still a little awestruck, even though they spent a half an hour discussing the relative drawbacks of her Quirk. He fishes in his pockets, and produces a sharpie. He carries one, by habit, wherever he goes. “Would you like an autograph?”

“I’d love one, if you don’t mind!” She produces a planner from her purse, an old, weather-beaten orange thing, and hands it over. He signs it, and then glances at her cat, purses his lips, and does his best artistic approximation of it. It’s not very good, but it’s the thought that counts. He hands her planner back. “I owe you both a great deal.”

“No you don’t,” Aizawa mumbles. “It’s our jobs. Have a good evening, ma’am.” She bows and leaves, and he is left standing next to All Might as he caps the sharpie and puts it away. “I got up for this, you know.”


“Never took ‘em,” Aizawa mumbles. He’s still pretty banged up from the Precepts fight, but it could be worse, all things considered. Not even any broken bones. Just mostly bruised pride. “Sure. Beer sounds good. You’re not doing anything?”

“Just grading. I’m trying to keep busy,” All Might admits then, softly. “Nighteye.”

“You sure you can’t have the beer?”

“Unfortunately, certain. I’ve been given marching orders and under no uncertain terms to consume alcohol. They’re worried about my liver and kidneys.”

Aizawa snorts, and starts walking. “More for me.” As they walk, a comfortable silence falls, and All Might is glad for it. He’s had a lot on his mind lately, and something about Aizawa is just...relaxing. He always feels a little more settled around the other man than he does on his own.
“How are you?” All Might asks, glancing at Aizawa. He’s roughed up, both his eyes bloodshot from being stuck using his quirk for the better part of an hour. He’s still got bandaids stuck to his face, and he’s wearing his glasses, tinted to take some of the strain off of his eyes. “Feeling, I mean?”

“Like I got beat to shit,” Aizawa replies, huffing as he walks. He pulls one hand out of his pocket, rolls that shoulder. “Stiff. Bruised. But it’s my pride, mostly. Getting rescued by my students so often is starting to make me feel like I’m not a very good teacher.” He sighs, his shoulders hunched towards his ears. “Getting rescued by you at USJ, that I expect. It’s your job, after all. Was,” he corrects after a moment. “It was your job. But these kids...damn, I hate that I’m not doing better for them.”

“I think you’re doing a great job. If you hadn’t stopped Midoriya and Eri, Midoriya would almost certainly have died,” Aizawa grunts. “I mean, if anything, you should take it as a good sign for the future.” The other man cocks an eyebrow at him, silently questioning. “I mean,” All Might quickly explains, “If they’re helping rescue you, one of the best heroes alive, when they’re still students, think of what they’ll be like in ten or fifteen years! These students are partly as incredible as they are because of you, Aizawa. You should be proud of them.”

“And it doesn’t gall you, that they’ve done so much because of your weakness?” Aizawa is harsh, brutal, sometimes, with his words. But All Might appreciates that about him. Everyone else sugarcoats, tries to soften the blow. Instead, Aizawa tells the truth. Even when it hurts.

All Might smiles and looks away from his eyes and lets his silence answer the question.

Aizawa snorts. “Talk the talk but can’t walk the walk. I see how it is.”

“Indeed,” All Might agrees. “You’ve got it in one.” It’s quiet again as they walk, and All Might thinks about how grateful he is, to have gotten this man’s friendship. “Thank you,” he says. “For coming to get me, even when you aren’t feeling very well. I owe you a debt. This and that dinner after Kamino—”

“What I told you then is still true,” Aizawa says. “You’ve saved everyone so many times. If I can do a little bit, even if it seems stupid, to help you, I want to.” All Might chances a look over, and sees that Aizawa is watching him with his deep, dark eyes. “We all owe you, All Might. Everyone. Just...next time, call the fire department.”

All Might throws his head back and laughs. “All right! Next time, I’ll just call you to come get the cat.”

Aizawa rolls his eyes. “Since when am I the fire department,” he grumbles, and All Might is still laughing as he slings his arm around Aizawa’s shoulders, tugs him over beside him as they walk. He expects Aizawa to elbow him, or pull away, but the other man just stays, comfortable beside him as they walk. “I mean, I’ll do it. But for the cat. Not you.”

“Of course,” All Might agrees.

He likes the changing seasons, the leaves falling from the trees. He likes the first chilly breath of winter in the air, even if it is still fairly warm. He likes having Aizawa here.

“Hizashi called you my boyfriend.”

All Might almost trips over his own feet and starts coughing, covering his hand with his mouth as he hacks up blood, spitting it onto the ground as he clears his throat and pulling his arm back to get out a handkerchief, wiping the blood off of his hand and his face. Aizawa is laughing, the other man
chuckling as he mops up the mess, and he looks over at Aizawa. “What, that crazy of an idea?”

“No,” All Might blurts before he can stop himself, “A little too close to home.”

Aizawa stops laughing and goes very still.

“They stand, watching one another carefully. All Might still has blood dripping off of his chin, and he self-consciously wipes at it, spits some more between his teeth, tries to tuck his bangs back behind one ear. Aizawa’s eyes, previously so distant and hazy, are sharp. Neither of them move. “Sorry?” He finally manages, his deep voice barely a whisper.

“I,” All Might starts to say. He doesn’t want to say this. “I like you,” he settles on. “As. A friend. Maybe more.” He tries not to think about it, how comfortable he is around Aizawa. How much he’s begun to care for the other man. How he relies on his opinion. “You don’t...you treat me like a person. I like that.”

“A lot of people treat you like a person.”

“But you’re the first one who did before I—before I stopped being All Might.”

“You never stopped being All Might.”

That isn’t true, but he appreciates the kindness of Aizawa’s words. It is nice of him to say that. “Aizawa, I...meant that,” he settles on, which comes closest, perhaps, to all the things he has jumbled up in his mind. “When I’m around you—everything is so much clearer. You help me focus. Nobody else has ever done that. Not the same way. I know it was a joke, perhaps, but I—“ he’s babbling, and he knows it.

All Might looks up, and meet’s Aizawa’s eyes. They’re very dark. Still bloodshot. He needs to shave. He needs a haircut. All Might wants to kiss him, but he’s wanted to kiss him for months now, and just pretended he hasn’t.

“If you were. If you actually wanted to—do. Would you like to actually go out with me? I know I’m a little old to be asking questions like that, but I’m not sure of the protocol because I haven’t—“

“You want to date me?” Aizawa interrupts, cutting through the chaff to the wheat, and All Might sighs internally in relief. He is so glad he can rely on the other man to think clearly, even when he himself cannot. “Actually date.”

“Yes,” All Might’s voice is soft. “As in, pursuing a romantic entanglement, yes.” Aizawa hasn’t looked away from him; he’s not even entirely sure the other man has blinked. “With you. And me. You...mean a very great deal to me, Aizawa. I know we haven’t always seen eye to eye. But, if you would like to give it a shot, I would be.” He swallows. His mouth is dry, still tastes of blood. “I would really like that.”

Aizawa, hands in his pockets, watches him, the setting sun casting ruby and gold into his dark hair, his dark eyes, his high cheekbones shadows. He tilts his head on the side, and raises his eyebrows,
and opens his mouth, and says:

Chapter End Notes

tws: graphic descriptions of violence and violent intrusive thoughts, disordered eating (self-starvation), graphic descriptions of medical trauma, dissociation and dissociative episodes, suicidal ideation, identity trauma and implied death of the self, panic attacks, chronic illness and disability, and self-esteem issues.

completed in nov 2017, posted in july 2018. originally intended to be five chapters, this stood alone perfectly well so im posting it.

for those interested i compiled my working playlist for this fic and you can find it here

tumblr/twitter @jonphaedrus
author's notes, drafts, and scraps

Chapter Summary

a collection of various auxiliary works to hineni—think of it as appendices. included in this are:

• links to the fic ost (both on spotify and on youtube) with annotations on individual songs for explanation
• the outline (for those of you who are interested in my outlining process)
• some of the original drafts for this fic—it was originally intended to be from shoutas pov, and changed along the way.
• the excerpted scene i removed from the first chapter
• the total remaining existing text of the second chapter

Chapter Notes

several people had asked me about the scrapped second chapter i had partway written, so i made a gdoc with it and then i realized more people might want it as well, so i went ahead and compiled together a couple of things that i had.

for a lot of reasons, im never gonna be finishing this project. part of it is the headspace i was in when i wrote it—last november i had a hypomanic and hyperfocus episode simultaneously during finals, which i normally do, blacked out for three days, and wrote EVERYTHING THAT IS IN BOTH THESE CHAPTERS—and the voice for it is not going to be the same if i come back to it. i had a vacation soon after, and kind of "reset" my brain, to a much healthier space. i dont want to go back to the project and not represent the same perspective and voice that it had. it'd feel just primarily wrong, to present something written by a very different person. the way that all might is written in hineni is very representative of where i was sitting at the time it was written, and couldn't be really.

it would feel wrong.

anyway, i hope people who want this stuff enjoy! i dont normally share these with people outside my beta readers & close friends so its weird to be posting my shitty unbetad outline crap with people but HERE IT IS

i should also note: this is all 100% unbetad. i didn't even do typo checks. this is completely wholesale copypasted from the original files. drafts of original author's notes, summary, and intended educational links are also included where applicable—ive gone ahead and filled in the links where they're needed so if you're interested you can follow up and research on your own, too.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ANNOTATED OST (SPOTIFY and YOUTUBE)
Jacob’s Vision ([Lyrics](#))

Preemptively, for those who have never experienced Sacred Harp: all Sacred Harp songs begin with the “tuning”, which is every member of the round singing the notes (fa, so, la, and mi) to the tune of the song as they find the tempo and space to sing. So, yeah, the recording sounds like they’re speaking gibberish at the start, because they are.

If you’ve looked at any of my titles for fics over the years (or any of my other OSTs…) you’ll probably find that I really, really like Sacred Harp. I usually have one or two Sacred Harp songs on every OST I ever make. Sacred Harp was developed for the illiterate to be able to sing from, and was intended for hymnal singing. Jacob’s Vision is specifically referring to the story of [Jacob’s Ladder](#), which matches thematically to the narrative idea of generational exchange, the path to salvation, and the idea of martyrdom on the part of the pillar of all.

All is Well ([Lyrics](#))

This one is pretty self explanatory: What’s this that steals upon my frame?/Is it death, is it death?/That soon will quench this mortal flame,/Is it death, is it death?/If this be death, I soon shall be/From ev’ry pain and sorrow free./I shall the King of glory see,/All is well, all is well.

Kol Nidrei ([Text of the prayer](#), [Wiki](#))

The holiest day in the Jewish calendar is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. There’s a lot of misunderstanding of Yom Kippur outside of the Jewish Community, and it’s often conflated with Tisha B’Av—in reality, Yom Kippur is not a day of suffering or grief. Yom Kippur is a day to atone: Jews, the entire world around, go to services and publicly atone for our failures throughout the past year. Both to G-d, as well as to one another; Yom Kippur is the day to apologize and accept your own failures. Kol Nidrei opens Yom Kippur services, and is considered by many to be the holiest prayer in Jewry.

Hineni (the Mordechai ben David variant) ([Lyrics](#))

This is also what it says on the box. Hineni as a concept is pretty vital to the entirety of Jewish life and thought, and there’s been more than just prayers that have hit on it.

Hineni (the Jordan Critz variant)

This is totally an instrumental, but it lands on the feeling I wanted the fic to have—sort of hazy, dissociated, and pained, but beautiful and rising despite it. I wanted the fic to simultaneously be a mesh of agony and brilliance, and this song felt texturally very like that to me, with a hint of sour to it. Sorry I have mild synesthesia so. These may be weird.

Hineni (The prayer) ([Prayer explanation](#))

The author’s note for the fic itself really covers all the reasons that this is on the playlist, but the Hineni is really beautiful and I wanted a rendition of it on here.

The Exodus Song
See: the whole chapter on the book of Exodus. In addition, this is musically accurate to the texture I wanted the fic to have, and gets across the kind of bombastic personality AM has, as well as the agony that defines and undercurrents his entire life, as well as the arc he has in this fic.

When You Believe (Lyrics, Shirat HaYam)

Also known as “The Song of the Sea” or “Mi Chamocha”, “When You Believe” is the sort of popified variation of one of the oldest (possibly the oldest) Jewish prayers, which was sung when the Israelites crossed the Reed Sea out of Egypt. Mi Chamocha directly translates to Who among the gods/is like you, Lord?/Who is like you—/majestic in holiness./awesome in glory./working wonders? And is a song of awe and jubilation. We sing it all the time, at every Shabbat prayer, and it’s a feeling of joy, sorrow, release, leaving home and coming home. I happen to like the tune in “When You Believe” better than most Conservative and Orthodox tunes, so that’s the variation that’s on the list here. In addition, Prince of Egypt is a really fucking baller good movie so like, fuck yeah thats on here. This is also for the Exodus chapter, in that here is leaving out of a land of suffering and slavery, toiling for the causes and needs of others, toward a new and better future, albeit one that will require forty years of suffering before the success of stepping out of the desert and into a new life.

Hashkiveinu x2 (Hebrew, English, Wiki)

Lay us down, LORD G-d, in peace,/And raise us up again, our King, to new life. Those are the words that open the Hashkiveinu prayer, which is simultaneously something of a lullaby as well as a prayer for release unto death. As part of the evening service, it closes out the day and ushers in the night, the time of sleep and peace, and also is a way of soothing the aches and pains of the agony of daily life. Hashkiveinu is one of my favorite prayers, and a lot of AM’s arc in this fic is about struggling with the balance between life, death, and the desire for release, but knowing that another day will always dawn that may well be worse than the last one. AM needs a lullaby, a quiet rest, and it’s very hard to get it.

The Viddui (English, Wiki, MyJewishLearning)

Also commonly known by its first word (Ashamnu), the Short Confession is read silently throughout the year but aloud on Yom Kippur. Traditionally, Jews confess both silently throughout the year, and then on Yom Kippur, we do so publicly, so we can, as a nation and a people, hold one another accountable for our failings, both to G-d and to one another. The Ashamnu is the most public, brilliant version of it. Written as an alphabetical acrostic, each letter of the Hebrew aleph-bet has an associated sin (some translations do the same with English as well) and for each one, the congregant beats themselves once over the chest. We take that sin into our hearts, and hold it.

A lot of gentiles misunderstand and think that Yom Kippur is a day for being punished, for failing to be good people, or being bad Jews, or whatever. Yom Kippur is really a day to accept, acknowledge, and recognize our own faults. Nobody—certainly not even G-d—is perfect, and we can only see our failures and learn from them, and do better next year. The Ashamnu is a chance to see each and every one of those sins before us, place ourselves into the shoes of them, find the ways we have failed, and promise, always, to improve. I considered making the fic break down into a smaller version for each sin listed, but then decided not to, because it was too much work.
The Boxer (Lyrics)

This song is also on the playlist for Bones which probably doesn’t surprise anyone who has read both. One of my favorite songs, the image of a man standing simultaneously defeated and undefeated, struck down by every opponent and standing up again and again even when he cannot hold himself upright any longer, really fits for this story. AM has given up everything in his fight and still has not won, and still will never win.

Song for the Divine Mother of the Universe (Lyrics)

This is about both Inko and Nana. AM’s loss of Nana, so young and so raw, is an enormous part of his character development and paved the way to what he became—his life is defined by sacrifice, and that was one of his earliest and most formative experiences. So how surprising is it that his adulthood is all about his sacrifices, however painful, and the way he has made them for others? And then, in contrast, Inko raised Midoriya in a context of love, support, and care, even in the face of cruelty and loss—a single mother who has always supported him no matter what, never punished him for his failures, has created a very different hero. You cannot have a Symbol of Peace without the willingness to die; but Midoriya is not that. He’s something else. Potentially something better.

Holy Manna (Lyrics)

After the Israelites were taken out of Egypt, they wandered the wilderness in the Sinai desert for forty years because, for various reasons, the generation from Egypt could not enter the promised land, and they needed to learn and become a new, stronger community. During this time, they were fed manna—a food that fell from the sky every day but Shabbat. Part of Hineni is the parallels between AM and Moses (both gave up everything for a chosen calling for their people, and in the end, it was not enough and they will never live to see the fruits of their labors bloom and cannot enter the promised future despite all their hope and blood and tears) and Exodus is definitely the book of the Torah I pulled from most. Probably because I know it best; my parsha for my b’nei mitzvah is from Exodus.

In addition, I’ll just go ahead and take directly from the author’s notes for my fic actually named after this particular hymnal: it was given to the hebrew people as proof of god’s covenant, that they would not be abandoned as they suffered in the desert, and in modern parlance “manna” can be something that refers to an unexpected benefit, a spiritually nourishing gift, or a relief from the suffering of daily life and a grant toward the boons of heaven, release, and rest.

THE OUTLINE

For those interested in my writing process, I rarely outline like this unless its for thematics—I write keynote scene to keynote scene, and then fill in the sections between them. For the first chapter, those were, in order of appearance:

- the ice cream flashback scene
- the afo confrontation
- the cat in the tree scene
So when I outline it tends to be the thematics or the main sequence ideas that I have to make sure I hit and then I build the story around each of those bullets so that I create a total story by the end. If you look at the end of the future chapters scene breakdowns, there's a little more there, albeit not much, since those are more keystone.

**total overall length: aim for 115k**

115k is not an arbitrary number—in Hebrew, letters are numerals, and the reading of them that way is called gematria. The best known example is the shoshesh (root word) יִנֵּנִיה (pronounced "chai") that means life. You hear it in things like the toast "L'chaim" which means "to life". יִנֵּנִיה in gematria is the number 18—so people give money in multiples of 18, or bid for aliyyot (reading from the Torah) with multiples of 18 (which is always hilarious because you bid while drunk as a skunk at most congregations). The gematria value of the word יִנֵּנִיה is 115—thus why I intended to hit about 115k for the fic as a whole. Then, I was going to try and do 18 "sections" (separated in the final version with ch:verse numbers, rather than what I was going to do originally, which was Hebrew numerals) so that it was 18 sections, chai, broken out of 115000 words, hineni.

In addition, as you read through the outline that follows, you'll notice the definition of thematics. Each chapter was originally going to parallel one of the five books of Moses (the Torah) and the thematics of each book as a parallel to the meanings of the chapter. You can see that a little in the remaining opening lines—each chapter was going to open with the English first words of the books of the Torah ("In the beginning..." etc) and then work through the themes as their forms of growth for All Might. So the second chapter was going to be him learning to think of himself as Yagi Toshinori, etc. Then his own space was also going to parallel Moses, because hey, go hard or go home.

The final section breaks are actually the original intended chapter titles, each for a chapter and verse in either the Torah or the books of the prophets where a speaker uses hineni in the context of call and response.

The other thing is that hineni was originally intended to be a direct rebuttal of one of my least favorite themes in the BNHA fandom—namely either that a) someone falling in love with All Might means he'll get better and won't die or b) he dies and it's so sad for everyone around him :( . This is really reductive and also incredibly hurtful to disabled people, many of whom are facing a time limit, and for whom there isn't something as easy as falling in love = healing or dying = disabled inspiration porn. The hardest part of chronic illness like All Might's, especially given that he's outlived his time limit from Nighteye, is that there isn't an easy way out aside from voluntary euthanasia. We just have to make the decision to keep going, trying, suffering, living, even when there's very little left for us to hang onto.

**CHAPTER OUTLINE:**

chapter 1 – genesis 22:11

יִנֵּנִיה יֵשֶׁךָ אָלַעֲל אֶלְוַי אָשֶׁר יָשַׁמְךָ אֶלֶּה יָמָּֽךְ אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִي
And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said: 'Abraham, Abraham.' And he said: 'Here am I.'

opening line: “in the beginning” (“In the beginning, yagi toshinori was a too-tall boy with too-small hands and too-much heart. Now, that’s all he’ll ever be.”)

thematics: creation, beginnings, new relationships, a new chapter in life, a new role in the world

moses parallels: the roles we have passed on by our forefathers.

keystones: toshinori and shouta start officially dating, and toshinori is the one who makes the motion toward it, rather than shouta. The scene where shouta rescues toshinori from the tree and admonishes him for trying to save everyone, even a cat, and they walk home together. Shouta saying that he had been called to go get toshinori bc hizasi said his “boyfriend” and ts asks if they want to be actual boyfriends.

author's notes:

Genesis is the first book of the Jewish Torah, called the New Testament by gentiles. In Hebrew, the title is “B’reishit/s” and translated means “In the beginning”, the first words of the first line of text. Gensis is the story of the Jewish people until their arrival in Mitzreim, Egypt.

Gensis 22 is the chapter where Abraham is called by G-d to take his son, Isaac, born when he and his wife were both over a hundred years old, to the mountain, and sacrifice him to G-d to prove his covenant as G-d’s chosen. At the last moment, as he raises the knife, G-d sends an angel with a ram for the slaughter, proving Abraham’s faith has been rewarded. By believing in G-d and trusting in him utterly, even with the life of his child, Abraham has ensured his future as the father of the Jewish people, and he and Isaac live, becoming, respectively, the first and second Jewish patriarchs.

Further reading:

Hineni in the Wiktionary.

Wikipedia page on the Torah.

Wikipedia page on Gensis.

Wikipedia page on the sacrifice of Isaac.

Genesis chapter 22 in NKJV and in Mechon-Mamre.

chapter 2 – exodus 3:4

And when the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said: 'Moses, Moses.' And he said: 'Here am I.'
opening line: “these are the names” (“these are the names of the eight other men and women who have held one for all, at least, the ones he knows. These are the seven that come before him, and the one that comes after.”)

thematics: choosing and constructing a new identity and name, accepting that the world has changed, leaving the known for the unknown

moses parallels: leadership, the call and the answer, community pillar, the ten commandments

keystones: ts asking everyone to call him yagi, including students. Press conference where he officially gives up am title.

chapter 3 – isaiah 58:9

Then shalt thou call, and the LORD will answer; thou shalt cry, and He will say: 'Here I am.'

opening line: “he called”

thematics: ritual, legal, moral goodness, giving in to perceived sins and failures, atoning for sin and guilt, god (all might) living in the midst of and alongside humans, atonement, holiness

moses parallels: construction of the tabernacle, being the voice for god, the torch must be passed and the role must carry on and You Are Not Enough

keystones: endeavor confrontation.

chapter 4 – first samuel 3:16

Then Eli called Samuel, and said: 'Samuel, my son.' And he said: 'Here am I.'

opening line: “in the desert of”

thematics: descendants and generations, covenants and promises, fulfilment of roles, the role of previous unfulfilled generations as unable to complete promises due to their own weakness, death in the wilderness

moses parallels: leading the people to the promised land but being refused peace of your own, to help others gain their birthright

keystones: rewrite of the sequences in the manga where toshinori tells midoriya about the history of ofa/afo and his failure to defeat afo and midoriyas project being the one to defeat him. About toshinori and midoriyas relationship and midoriyas role as both son and successor and future pillar of
Therefore My people shall know My name; therefore they shall know in that day that I, even He that spoke, behold, here I am.

opening line: “spoken words”

thematics: covenant, duty, chosen and unforced, the uniqueness of life, the care of the poor and disadvantaged, being called and accepting!

moses parallels: to do all that can be done for his people, that they will always have someone like him if they stay true to what he taught them, that even should they fail there will always be other chances and more generations, being called to death and accepting!

keystones: toshinori making the final decisions to set up the easiest end of his life. the scene on the levee discussing if toshinori will stay alive, and him saying he wants to stay, even if its hard. Not for others for himself. Bittersweet ending, sakura blossoms.

DRAFTS

First Draft: 9/24/2017

This draft was scrapped because it was from Shouta's pov, and it didn't work. Some elements of it were recycled into later drafts. It also was kind of a comedy, which didn't work? It's not in character at all, either, because this was written really early on before I really knew the characters at all. This is not a good draft. I don't know why I'm letting you people see it. Consider this a gift.

The problem, Shōta has concluded, is not that All Might is Yagi Toshinori.

The problem is that Yagi Toshinori was always All Might, and now he does not know how not to be.

His phone ringing wakes him up early enough that the light hasn’t actually reached the point the sun has cleared the edge of his bedroom window. He doesn’t bother opening his eyes; the longer they’re closed the less they hurt. He doesn’t bother answering it, either. It’s not an official Hero call, or UA—it’s Hizashi, from his personal cell. He knows this because he set Hizashi’s ringtone to be him screaming. It’s so he can know to ignore it.

Shōta slaps his phone until it stops ringing, and curls more into the cocoon of his blanket nest, trying to escape the morning.
His phone rings again.

*MY NAME IS HIZASHI YAMADA AND I AM FINE!*

*MY NAME IS HIZASHI YAMADA AND I AM FINE!*

*MY NAME IS HIZASHI YAMADA AND I AM FINE!*

*MY NAME IS HIZASHI YAMADA AND I—*

He picks it up.

“It’s not even fucking seven in the morning,” Shōta says, still not opening his eyes. “I hope you stick your finger in a wall socket and explode.”

“Shōta!” Hizashi says. “I need—“

Shōta hangs up, because Hizashi only calls him Shōta when a) he wants something and b) it is something so monumentally stupid that he would refuse to do it if Hizashi wasn’t playing the *I have known you since we were fifteen and know every single one of your deep dark secrets, and if I don’t know them, then Kayama does, and I’ll make her tell me because she likes seeing you squirm.* He gets maybe halfway back to sleep when his phone rings again.

It’s still Hizashi.

“What?” Shōta snaps as he picks it up before he can finish hearing Hizashi’s tinny, speaker-shattering voice say *I AM FINE.* “What is so important you need me to wake up before seven in the morning on a Sunday?”

“Your boyfriend is stuck in a tree!”

Shōta hangs up on him again. This time, with great relish.

He knows Hizashi is going to call him back, he just wanted to do it anyway. He picks up as soon as the vibration starts, rather than get his ears blasted by the ringtone. “All Might is stuck in a tree!” Hizashi says this time. “Someone needs to get him down!”

“Why can’t you? You’re a Hero.”

“I’m busy!” At seven in the morning on a Sunday, that can literally only mean that Hizashi has discovered some new stupid (adorable) trick that his cockatiel can do, and therefore will be both unavailable and stupid for the rest of the day. “Besides he’s your boyfriend! You go get him.”

“Call the fire department. Or one of the kids. Good practice.” Shōta does not say, *he is not my boyfriend,* because it is too early in the morning for him to have that argument for the nth time. “How to get the elderly out of compromising situations. Search and rescue.”

“Shōta!” He’s whining. It’s painful. Shōta sticks a leg out of bed and drags himself the rest of the way to the floor, still not opening his eyes.

“One of these days I’m replacing your styling gel with molasses and I’ll feed your head to Tsuyu.” He hangs up, because there is only so much a man can handle of Hizashi Yamada before seven in the morning (read: absolutely none) and he worm-crawls the rest of the way to the bathroom to get up, put his eyedrops in, and stumble out of the apartment like he’s a functional human adult with a job and hobbies. Which he isn’t. But his boyfriend is stuck in a tree. So he has to go help.
“What the fuck, All Might.” He does, at least, have the decency to look chagrined. Which is pretty impressive, considering he’s twenty feet up a tree. Shōta crosses his arms and glares up at the other man, currently clinging to a solid enough branch. He winces.

“I’m so sorry!” Says the middle aged woman wringing her hands next to him, the most fluffy and baffled cat that Shōta has ever seen clasped in her arms. The cat attempts to meow at him, but it just comes out as a wheezy squawk. He reaches over to let it sniff, and then it begins to purr wildly, scrubbing its face all over his hand. The woman has not let up on her panic. “My poor Thomas had gotten stuck in a tree, and I just didn’t know what to do, and he was walking by, and—"

Shōta glares at Yagi. Yagi smiles.

“You got yourself stuck in a tree because of a kitten?”

“Well,” Yagi says, like it’s a kind of penance, “I knew if I didn’t help the cat, and you found out, you would kill me.”

Shōta really, really wants to deny this. Like, on a scale of one to ten, he wants to deny this a nine, with ten being “I am dating Yagi Toshinori also known as the former No.1 Pro Hero and Symbol of Peace All Might,” but he can’t. Just like he can’t, technically, deny the ten, either. “I really thought I could get back down.” Yagi leans forward, his brow furrowed, mouth a moue of worry. “Guess not.”

“Screw Mic,” Shōta growls, “You’re the real fucking nuisance who needs to get electrocuted around here.” He brought his scarves, because when does he not, so getting Yagi back down isn’t actually all that difficult, since he really does not weigh that much, and he scrambles down the last meter of the tree trunk by himself, like a particularly bony stick insect, and ignores Shōta and goes straight for the distraught woman, takes her hands.

“I’m so sorry, All Might!” She bends over where he’s grabbed her hands to try and comfort her and bows from the waist. Her cat wheezes like a deflating bellows. “You offered me so much kindness, and—"

Yagi laughs.

“It’s really all right!” It’s not. “Nobody was hurt. How is Thomas?” His mouth has no trouble forming the word, which sits strangely on Shōta’s own. Then again, it wasn’t so long ago he was running around yelling things like DETROIT SMASH and TEXAS TAKE-DOWN or whatever. “No worse for the wear?” She looks back up at him, her eyes shining. She’s crying glitter. Shōta, with the ease of long practice, does not make a face, but frankly, he would rather die than have his Quirk be that he cries glitter. That would probably hurt his eyes even more than his does already. She is grinning, and holds Thomas up.

Thomas says something that sounds a lot like wheerrrrrhuuuuowooooooommmmmmmmmmmmmmm and All Might pats the cat’s head with the greatest of respect, bows to the woman. Shōta glowers.

“Thank you so much, All Might! You saved my poor boy, all stuck up the tree like that!” She’s crying harder now. The glitter is getting bigger. Now it’s chunky glitter. “I don’t know what I would have done—without you here to save him! All Might, saving my cat!” The glitter is now about the size of Shōta’s thumbnail. “I’ve never been more honoured!”
“Next time,” Shōta tells her tiredly, linking his arm with Yagi’s to drag him away before he starts trying to walk her home, “Call the Fire Department, please. They have ladders, and stretching Quirks, that are meant to get cats out of trees.” She nods at him, but he knows she isn’t listening to or hearing him. She’s staring at Yagi like the sun shines out his asshole, and he just turns around and hauls Yagi after him. He follows after a moment, the spindly pain in the ass, and they fall into step down the side of the road.

Shōta has almost fallen asleep on his feet when Yagi clears his throat. “Sorry, Aizawa.” He sighs, his head hung. He closes his eyes. “It’s because of me that you got dragged out of bed.”

Shōta makes a noise that is neither assent nor disagreement, but roughly communicates just how fucking much he does not want to be up and out of his warm bed at seven in the morning because the man he is definitely not dating got stuck in a tree. “I just...” he’s wringing his hands. “I was on my morning jog, and I ran past and heard her crying, and saw Thomas in that tree and I knew I had a duty to get him down, no matter what! She was so distraught, and I knew if it was you with Pencil in a tree—“ Shōta, not for the first time, makes a mental note to personally and himself kill Hizashi Yamada for deciding that Pencil was a good name for his cat— “I thought I could just reach up and grab him, he was on the lowest branch, after all! And I’m already so tall, that—“

“Shut up, Yagi,” Shōta says, without any heat, and with a great deal of affection. “I know.” Yagi’s narrow, rickety shoulders slump. He hangs his head, a few strands of hair falling loose over his face, escaping his jogging headband. “You’re a good man, offering help like that.”

“I think the way I smelled upset Thomas,” Yagi admits. He usually smells like blood, and worryingly like a sick person. Which he is. “He skittered right up the tree.”

“And you followed.” Shōta sighs, shakes his head, leans his head against the taller man’s shoulder. His feet are following Yagi on autopilot, and he should really be more worried than he is that he’s willing to trust Yagi to lead him like this. “One of these days, you’re going to get yourself killed.”

Yagi laughs, but it’s not a happy laugh.

Shōta feels much the same.

The problem is this: All Might was always Yagi Toshinori. When he stopped being All Might (which was almost never), he became Yagi Toshinori, who was just a heartbeat away from being All Might at any given moment. Even after his injury six years before, he had still, essentially, been All Might all the time. When he did have to stop being All Might, it was only ever a temporary reprieve before he went back to being All Might again. Yagi Toshinori was an identity entirely of flux and necessity, one that stopped mattering the moment he was All Might again. All Might was Yagi Toshinori in the same way that a square was a kind of rectangle; technically, the two shared the same space.

On the other hand, Yagi Toshinori had been picked as the eighth wielder of One For All. He had been given the Quirk young, he had learned and grown with it for the vast majority of his adult life. Even six years with limited, dwindling use had still left him as a part of One For All. All Might only existed because Yagi Toshinori, regardless of how much calmer and more succinct he was when he was inside his own, deflated skin, was All Might. All the things that made Yagi a good person, a good teacher, a good friend, were what made him All Might. He could never have become
I don't think I could pinpoint a reason I scrapped this draft aside from "it's fucking bad, dude".

All Might has been dying for a very long time.

Or, well, five years. It’s not the longest time. But it’s not exactly a few days, either. It wasn’t like Sir had needed to tell him, in broken words and cracking voice, that he was not going to live out to the same age his mother had died at (eighty-four), or even as far as his grandmother had made it (sixty-six, when she fell to liver cancer and no available transplant donors for a Japanese woman in rural West Texas). All Might had known exactly what he was doing to himself the day that Gran Torino had shut the door to the teacher’s lounge and said, “Nana’s dead,” in that abrupt and forceful way he had. He had known, then, he wouldn’t live to see his hair go grey, or see a future where All For One was gone. He had known, then and there, that he was going to die in the pursuit of this.

Seven dead sons and daughters, sacrificed upon the altar. What was one more? Soon it would be eight. (What was one more? Soon it would be nine.)

So he had lived to see his successor, same as Shimura-sensei. He knows, for a fact, he won’t see Izuku grow old.

All Might expected to die when he saw All For One again, and was struck down.

And All Might bled, and All Might rose.

And All For One struck him down.

And All might bled, and All Might rose.

All Might didn’t die.

All Might became Yagi Toshinori instead, after being All Might for almost forty years.

The problem is, he realises, too late, not that All Might was Yagi Toshinori. He had always known that when the chips were down, he would have to let it go, and become—someone else again. The boy, with the blue eyes and the blond hair, and the too-small hands, and the too-long legs. The problem was not that All Might was Yagi Toshinori.

The problem is that Yagi Toshinori is—was—had—always been All Might.

And that is where this begins.

“Well,” his doctor says, showing him the most recent MRI and CAT-scan images of his torso, “Here’s the good news: your lung is fine. Your pancreas is fine. Your liver, to my genuine astonishment, is fine. Your blood tests are spotless. Your iron is great. You’re up on all your vitamins. You’re getting not quite enough sleep, but I’ve known you for thirty years, and that’s not happened before so it’s certainly not going to now, either. You’re underweight still, and I want you to get back on your nutrient shakes, even though they taste terrible. I think it’s all that Recovery Girl
has been doing.”

“That all?” All Might laughs, hands folded over his knees. He’s lost weight again, he knows. He can feel them even through the coarse weave of his khakis. “Sounds like there’s nothing wrong I didn’t already know about.”

“Yagi,” his doctor says, “You’re dying.”

All Might smiles. “I knew about that, too.”

When his mother was fifteen, his grandfather was bitten by a rattlesnake. He died.

When Yagi was fifteen, Shimura N

he teacher’s lounge is a bustle as it always was. Today, between periods, it is less crowded than it gets either at lunch or before or after school, but there are still four other teachers. Ectoplasm waves greeting to All Might, Cementoss is napping, head hung toward his chest. Nezu is having a fight with the printer, his entire torso shoved up into the bowels of the eldritch beast, and Sniper is busily grading.

The chair caddy-corner to All Might’s own is empty. He isn’t surprised; Aizawa had grunted acknowledgement that he would be covering All Might’s own morning classes so that he could go to his doctor’s appointment without worry. Still, he feels a little lost as he slings his messenger bag down beside his desk and sits in his chair, sighing, the tension leaving his body in a slow leeching wave as he slumps.

Ectoplasm comes over. He’s wearing his battle prosthetics today—he doesn’t usually to work, unless he’s teaching combat. “Quirk baseline day?” All Might asks, nodding his thanks for the paper cup of green tea the other man offers him.

Ectoplasm grins. “3-B didn’t have a single score under their 90th percentile,” he says, genuinely delighted. “They’re on-edge from the ongoing investigation, I think. They’ve noticed the Big Three are out too often. But,” and here he shrugs a shoulder, “If it brings up their test scores, I won’t complain too much.” All Might laughs, blowing on his tea. If he lives out the year, he’d kind of like to try being a homeroom teacher. All the others are painfully devoted to their students.

Aizawa, who has basically adopted his, is still a bit of an outlier.

“How was your appointment?” Ectoplasm asks, arms crossed, one eyebrow cocked, his glasses glinting knowingly. “You seem pretty relieved.”

“All things considered, I’m in perfect health.”

All Might has gotten very, very good at lying.
And this one, at least, is true. He is in perfect health, all things considered.

Ectoplasm’s smile softens. “Glad to hear it,” the other man says, claps him on the shoulder, then pivots on the toe of one of his battle prosthetics. He doesn’t even wobble, despite the fact that the office floor was recently waxed. His balance is incredible. All Might almost envies him. “Want to come with me after school for groceries?”

“Certainly!” Maybe it’ll get him to eat more. He always feels more comfortable, being broken around Ectoplasm, who thinks there’s nothing wrong with being less himself. Maybe he’ll buy more nutrition shake powder. “I would appreciate the company.”

Aizawa’s empty desk haunts him until lunch, when Aizawa slides in, exhausted, grouchy, and cold. “One of the 1-B brats said that if I was subbing for you, I was supposed to be happy,” he grouches to All Might. “How are you always so chipper. I tried it for half an hour and felt like my skin was going to melt off of my face.”

“Natural optimism!” All Might grins.

Aizawa shakes his head. “You could rot teeth smiling like that,” he grumbles, and sits at his desk, and for the first time all day, All Might feels Right.

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**CHAPTER 1 DELETED SCENE**

I ended up removing this scene from the final version for a couple reasons. One—it’s just too long, and too quote-heavy direct from the manga. Two—inessential. Three—it just felt wrong to me. It didn't serve a purpose, it didn't read right. I tried editing it and working it back in a couple times, but it never really...fit. So it ended up being removed wholesale. This fic is really heavily canon compliant but it can go way too far, which this bit did.

He knows, of course, that Izuku meeting Nighteye is going to lead to questions he does not want to answer. There are things he has not discussed with the boy (many) but one of the biggest is that—

Its.

All Might wants to shield him. He won’t always be able to. Sooner rather than later Izuku will be out on his own, and the horrors that All Might has and still does shoulder will be his alone to bear. But he has wanted to keep the boy still a child. Let him live what he can while he can. So he knows that Izuku will learn of Togata being the preferred successor. He knows that Izuku will feel betrayed.

But still, even when he thinks he’s ready, he isn’t.

He isn’t ready for this, this hanging silence stretching between them that is made up of shattered childhood hopes and dreams. He isn’t ready for Izuku running in his footsteps, slower and slower, neither of them speaking as the axe hangs above their heads. He isn’t.

“Did you know everything all along?” Izuku asks, and his feet come to a halt. He stares down at his sneakers, at the bottom of his sweatpants. The tracksuit is the same as his hero uniform logo; what can be constituted as a gag gift if anything, from Tsukauchi. When he got the last of the bandages and the cast on his right arm off. Each step he takes forward is almost painful, his feet staying anchored to the pavement, and he listens to Izuku.
He wonders, vaguely, if Nighteye saw Izuku when he looked into All Might’s future. If he did. If he ignored it. Or if he didn’t see the boy at all.

“The fact that Nighteye knew about One For All, and that Togata-senpai was a candidate for your succession. You know all of that, didn’t you?” All Might cannot chide the boy for the accusatory tone of his voice, because he agrees. He did know. He did, intentionally, lie to and leave Izuku out of the conversation. “Why didn’t you tell me anything?” Izuku’s voice is betrayed, hurt, curled up high in the back of his throat. It wrings something deep inside All Might, and he feels guilt.

“It seems,” he says, staring sightlessly at the treeline as he runs, breathing heavy between his teeth. He doesn’t cough blood as much any more, even when jogging. He didn’t notice the toll that One For All was taking on him until his Quirk was gone—now, without it, his internal injuries that kept festering are beginning to, at last, come to balance. “There was a need to tell you after all.”

The longer secrets are kept the more they hurt when they come to light.

The more blood they soak in.

All Might closes his eyes when Izuku screams against his back, “Of course there was!”

A small voice inside of him idly wonders if this will be the moment that Izuku remembers in thirty years. If he will always remember the scent of fresh-mown lawns, the earliest must of dying leaves beginning to flake and fall to the earth. He wonders if Izuku will always remember the shape of All Might’s back cast into shadow by the setting sun, the sound of his own heartbeat loud in his ears as they jog. He wonders what moments he has carved in this boy’s life that are shaped like the soles of his shoes and the breadth of his shoulders and the curve of his spine, the shades of the shapes that fill up All Might’s own back.

One For All punches holes in narratives. It recreates people. It rewrites lives. It shatters hopes and dreams, and builds them anew. The nine men and women who are tied together by it, their lives roped into knotty fraying tapestries, drenched and sealed in blood, none of them have come through unscathed.

All Might clenches his hands into fists, his jaw until it aches, and weathers Izuku’s words, the pain, the anguish. He lets them strike him, because he deserves it. Because he has committed the cardinal sin: he, as a parent, thought he knew best.

“I have no clue what your hidden intentions are, and because of that, the inside of my head’s all murky!” Izuku’s voice cracks. “Why wouldn’t you tell me something so important?”

Because, that same little voice in All Might’s head says, I gave it to you against my own better judgment. Because in you I saw myself, before All Might, and after.

He does not say this.

“I’m saying this as your successor!” Izuku says, his voice cracking and shattering, cleft down the middle. “I want to know everything!”

All Might keeps jogging. The motions soothe him. The left-right pound of his feet, the pump of his blood, his remaining lung straining with every step.

Everything is heavy.

Everything is too much.
“I figured telling you the story wouldn’t benefit you at all, but...do you really still want to hear it?”

“It’ll benefit me a lot more than keeping it a secret will!” If All Might looks back at him, he will lose his nerve. He will lie, because he is good at lying. He will make something up. He will protect Izuku, because in the last year protecting the world has rapidly turned into protecting Izuku.

All Might breathes. “You better not regret it.”

“I won’t.” Izuku sounds so sure that for a moment, All Might almost believes him. And then he remembers the taste of the secret he is carrying, the edges of it, all blade-sharp and bloodstained. He remembers that at the end of this road for him there is only one ending: a gave, an incense stick, and a will that only has two recipients.

The story that All Might tells spins out from his tongue, the words landing with each pound of his feet. If he pauses to think about it too long, it will become too hard to speak. It’s hard enough as it is, thinking about those horrible first weeks in the hospital, when he oscillated between fine and flatline sometimes so fast that they just kept the crash cart in his room, and the person he relied on most, the man whom he had come to, against his own expectations, love, had done the one thing he had begged him not to do.

He will always remember the look on Nighteye’s face, cradling All Might’s body in his shaking, nervous arms, when he had said, you can’t possibly smile like this.

He had thought, before that day, that Nighteye knew him as well as he himself did.

The story that comes out, though, in the end, is very short. “In the first months after my injury, when nobody was sure I would even live, Sir Nighteye looked into my future with his Foresight, to see what would happen. He wanted to protect me. He told me that if I kept going, I would clash with a villain, and die a death so gruesome and terrible that he could not even put it into words.”

Lift his left foot.

Lift his right foot.

“He confronted me about my future,” All Might says. “We had a fight, and went our separate ways.” So much baggage, in so few words. Years of a relationship, dissolved. A gaping wound in the fabric of his heart. “Principal Nezu recommended me to young Togata, and Nighteye agreed. But...I ended up meeting you before I was able to meet with him.” And All Might, like Nana before him, had seen something of utmost worth in this pathetic, bloody-nosed child with nothing but his wits and the force of his will. Like Nana before him, he had made the decision he could only hope was right.

“I really didn’t want to say all this,” All Might adds, his voice so soft he hopes it doesn’t carry back to Izuku, although he knows it does. “Since you were my fan, after all. I’m so sorry.”

The silence sounds a lot like it did that afternoon when All Might was Izuku’s age, when the ice cream had dripped between his fingers and his world had, one brick at a time, begun to fall apart. He keeps running. It’s all he can do. As long as he can run, he can move forward; stop from falling back.

“All Might, you’re...” Izuku’s voice is hardly a whisper. “You’re going to die. You’re going to...” All Might’s feet slow. Each step becomes harder, the resistance greater. He cannot leave this boy, who is just now, right here, between them, losing his childhood. Maybe the memory will be tinged pink and orange from sunset. Maybe it will feel like the adrenalin of running. Maybe he will always remember the look of All Might’s shoulderblades beneath the cloth of his sweatshirt. “Die,” he
finishes finally. His voice is broken, almost so soft it’s inaudible.

All Might stares at the ground, and the cracks in the asphalt, and remembers the taste of vanilla.

He wonders if this was just as hard for Gran Torino.

He wonders why he’s never asked.

“When I met you and made up my mind to transfer my power to you, I let Nighteye know.” It had seemed important at the time; Nighteye had some skin in the game, after all. It was not a great sacrifice, to hear his voice, once-beloved. “But he was opposed to it, and that only drove us farther apart.” All Might had smiled when Nighteye had yelled to him that a Quirkless middle school student was hardly befitting the power, because All Might had been a Quirkless middle school student when Nana had given him a single hair and toppled the course of his life.

He could not think of anyone more deserving for his legacy. One For All was meant to be a shield and a sword both for those poor few who had been failed by society, to give them a chance to fight back against systemic ills, good or evil, that were against them from birth. To give it to a young man who had already carved his niche, who would surely use it well but had his own platform upon which to stand—it did not feel right.

But that has always been what Nighteye is like. He can see so much, perhaps too much.

“Insisting that I was making a fool of myself, he took it upon himself to begin cultivating young Togata, who he believed to be the truly appropriate successor.” All Might wonders if Gran Torino thought the same about someone else; he’s never said. But then again, Nana was a far more forceful person than All Might is. When she had made her mind up about something nothing short of death would change it.

Even death hadn’t changed it, and now Shigaraki Tomura would one day wrap his hands around All Might’s narrow throat and squeeze until he crumbled to dust, so where had any of that gotten them in the end?

Sighing, he begins to walk again, unable to sit still with so much hanging over him.

“Wait a minute,” Izuku starts, chasing after the shadow of his back again, “I said wait, All Might! When Nighteye used his Foresight, when did he say it would happen? Can’t the Foresight be changed any more?” That is his Izuku. Trying, trying to think a way out of his conundrum, the box he has been locked into.

“He said it would happen in six to seven years. There’s a margin of error in his estimation of far-off events.” All Might is still alive, after all. That seven years is ticking down fast now. He has just about six more months before that estimation is up, and he moves on into the unknown—a feeling he’s not sure he’s ready for. “But there’s no changing what he sees in his Foresight.”

That was why he had not wanted Nighteye to look. He had wanted to let death come when it did, without being ready, without fearing.

“Six to seven...” He can practically hear Izuku desperately doing the math. “Wait!” Ah; there it is. “That means either this year or the next, doesn’t it?” His breakdown is, mercifully, swift and painful. As if that can be called merciful. It is, at the very least, not silent. All Might does not know if he could handle watching, feeling Izuku stand upon a crumbling planet.

At least, All Might is able to rationalize, he will be ready when it happens. Izuku will know it is coming.
“No, All Might. You have to live. Don’t you remember the promise I made at the sports festival? I haven’t been able to fulfill that promise. You have to live until I can fulfill it!” His voice cracks, and All Might knows he’s probably crying, cannot bear to look— “You have to live to see that moment, when I can tell the world ‘I’m here!’”

All Might’s feet still. He feels old and tired and sore and slow. He feels twice his fifty years. If only it was that easy! If only he could make a promise to last that long, even when his whole world is crumbling around his head, and keep it! He wants to laugh or cry or both, but can do neither, as all he can taste is vanilla and all he can think about is the fact that if he had the ability to he would, without hesitation, do as Izuku is asking. He would turn the world inside-out and twist himself backwards and stay.

“Midoriya, my boy.” What he wants to say is Izuku, I’m sorry your father has failed you as a coward. “When I heard from Nighteye what he saw, I accepted it relatively easily.” All things considered, he has known he’d die young for a long time. The fact that he survived his first clash with All For One was genuinely astonishing—that he’s lived a second time is nothing short of a miracle. Nana was thirty-eight. The fact that she somehow knew her time was coming to an end has always struck him as odd. She was so young. So young to give up One For All and her own Quirk. So young to die.

(Yagi Toshinori lived fifteen years. All Might has lived thirty-five. All said, he’s had twelve more years than Shimura Nana ever had. How is that fair?)

“Because the goal was in sight, I ran at full speed towards it.” All Might is more of an idea than a person. If something was going to kill him, it was going to be something of such strength that he had no chance to fight back. He assumed it would be some clash with a villain, and better him than someone else. Dying is a thing All Might came to terms with when Yagi Toshinori perished without a single noise coming free of his throat; he didn’t even question it was going to happen again.

The needs of the many. With great power comes great responsibility. It’s All Might’s job to protect others, it’s All Might’s job to save others. A life for a life, he’d gladly give it. Now he can’t even do that.

“When I fought All For One at Kamino, I thought to myself, ‘here is the goal.’” And he cannot any longer ignore the boy standing behind him, wrought with anxiety and fear. He can’t continue to pretend that he doesn’t love Izuku, fear for what will happen if the boy emulates him like he emulated Nana. What; another twelve years? Sixty-two?

Izuku deserves better than that.

Izuku stares back at him with grass-green eyes, wet with tears. He looks like his whole world has come crumbling apart. He is relying on All Might—no. Not All Might. Midoriya Izuku is not relying on All Might.

He’s relying on Yagi Toshinori.

“But there you were,” he says, staring at Izuku. “You, a timid, Quirkless boy, who day after day rose to meet my expectations.” The same as All Might had, once upon a time. “And day after day, I whispered to myself to keep on living.” He has so little left. His body isn’t his. His mind isn’t his. His Quirk isn’t his. His life, even, isn’t his. His death isn’t his either any more.

He has willingly given all that. The one thing he had left to guard as selfish jealousy, the one
remaining object he could cling to as his own, was dying.

And now he has given that to Izuku too.

“And then your mom even told me, ‘Live on and protect and nurture him!’” They have demanded of him the one thing he can still offer—he can’t save anybody now, only himself—and Izuku and his mother and Aizawa and the children he teaches and Nezu and Gran Torino and yes even Nighteye—have said to him that he cannot keep this one thing he jealously guarded as his own. It belongs to them. It all belongs to them. Everything, all of it—his life, his death. He cannot fall when they still need him. “And so I am hanging on!”

There is a difference between acceptance and desire. All Might desired death, a release from his failing, aching body and the ever-harsher pain of his mind. He desired the chance to complete his work. He chased it, burned One For All to embers, because he had nothing else to do with it. Because he is going to die. He is going to die, so what was the point? What did he care? It would come for him whether he wanted it to or not.

Nighteye is never wrong.

But Izuku—Izuku happened. And because of Izuku, so much else happened, too. And now he still has more he can do.

Joy fills him, into every inch of his narrow, rickety frame, and All Might grows into himself once more, muscle filling in his loose skin, his neck snapping the zipper on his collar. “With this hand of mine, I will twist fate into whatever shape I like!” This is the difference between him and All For One. He will not give up; he will not accept the hand he has been played. He never has before—why should he now?

Dying is easy. He can die whenever he wants to. A bit of rope, a gun, a puddle of water. There’s no shortage of villains who would happily do the job. He’s sure he will have plenty of opportunities in the coming months and years to find his way off the mortal coil with ease. Dying is easy, dying is a joke. Dying is simply a matter of looking down the barrel of a gun and accepting that the bullet will come and you will fall.

All Might has never fallen without standing in his life, and he is not damn well going to start now.

Before the strain can get worse he lets his body go, and coughs, spitting blood between his teeth into the leaves. It’s less now than it used to be; he’s healing. “But, that said, no matter what happens, I’ve arrived at the same conclusion. Everything is still turning out exactly as Nighteye said it would. And now, I’m ashamed to look him in the face.” He sighs.

He ran full-tilt for so long. It’s kind of hard to slam on the brakes with that much momentum going. “I don’t want to hold you back, especially when you’re doing everything you can to become stronger.” Including apprenticing to Nighteye, over All Might’s vocal disapproval. Children have to grow up eventually, he supposes. Some sooner than others. “At this point, it’s possible that it’s too late to twist fate any more.” He took too long coming to the conclusion he wanted to live, probably. He doesn’t want to get his Izuku’s hopes up—or, for that matter, his own.

SECOND CHAPTER DRAFT (INCOMPLETE)

Cutting this from the final posted version felt so deeply wrong to me, I was so upset I
had to do it. The bathroom sequence in this bit is my favorite part I wrote for the entirety of the extant fic. This chapter was off to a great start but I won't lie that Nighteye's death really tanked my interest in working on it more pffft, it really ruined the arc I had in mind for canon compliance. Canon compliance: not even once.

Chapter 2: Exodus 3:4

And when the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said: 'Moses, Moses.' And he said: 'Here am I.'

Summary (chapter):

These are the names of the eight other men and women who have held One For All. These are the seven who came before him, and the one that comes after.

Author’s note (end):

Exodus is the second book of the Jewish Torah, called the New Testament by gentiles. In Hebrew, the title is “Sh’mos/t” and translated means “[these are] the names”, the first words of the first line of text. Exodus is the story of the Jewish people and their liberation from their time as slaves in Mitzreim, Egypt.

Exodus 4 is the chapter where Moshe Rabbeinu (Moses) is called by G-d through the Burning Bush to liberate his fellow Jews from Egypt, as they are the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and G-d is bound by contract to give them their promised lands. Moses, notably, had a lisp and was raised as an Egyptian prince, could hardly speak, and was painfully shy—so his choice was not an ideal one, at least in his mind. But he did as G-d asked and went back to Egypt, which is probably most familiar to many of you as the Charleton Heston film The 10 Commandments or Dreamworks’ Prince of Egypt.

(Prince of Egypt is better.)

Further reading:

Wikipedia page on Moses.

Wikipedia page on Exodus.

Wikipedia page on the burning bush.

Exodus chapter 3 in NKJV and in Mechon-Mamre.

These are the names of the eight other men and women who have held One For All. These are the
seven who came before him, and the one that comes after. A——— O———. T——— S

If there are more, he won’t know. By then, he’ll be long gone.

There is solace in this.

He had met with Nezu in March of the year before he started teaching to discuss the possibility of the
job working out. It hadn’t been too hard to bring All Might around; he was losing more and more
time every day, down to a little over three good hours, and he needed to find a successor.

“It’s more than that,” Nezu had said, bundling back up Togata’s folder after they had spoken. “You
need something else to do with your time. Have you even thought about what it is that you’re going
to do after you can’t work as a hero any more?”

All Might had smiled, coughed blood between his teeth, and wiped up the mess. “Retire. Maybe I’ll
get a cabin somewhere! Finally go backpacking across America; I’ve always wanted to. Just go to
see the Yakushima cedars, whenever I want.”

Nezu’s shoulders had slumped.

He had always known when All Might was lying.

“I think teaching would be good for you. It’s just as important as being out on the streets is. At least
consider doing it permanently if the first year works out? I would hate to see you die of boredom.” It
had been phrased as a joke, but it had hit closer to home than All Might really wanted to admit.

(Dying is easy. Living is hard.)

“I’ll consider it,” he had said, because years of living in the public spotlight meant that he had learned
to say what people wanted/needed to hear, and Nezu was no exception. “We’ll see how it goes, and
then we can discuss it afterward!” Nezu narrowed his eyes, but had let it slide.

He didn’t meet the rest of his fellow staff until that following winter. He had lived in Musutafu for
months, and run into most of them at one time or another, but he hadn’t officially been introduced.
He had spent most of his time training Izuku or doing hero work or seeing Tsukauchi or doing
nothing at all, which tended to be what he did if there was nothing to do. He knew it was the exact
opposite of what someone with his mental health was supposed to be doing, but—

Fake it until you make it, right?

He had gone to U.A. to meet his fellow teachers at a meeting midway through February, some small
little Valentine’s day get-together that Nezu had just turned into a faculty fête. He’d been to U.A.
plenty before that since he graduated, since he was on the Board of Trustees, but it was his first time
in years not just coming to show up at a meeting, boisterously agree quickly to votes, and then rush
back out—either because he was near to out of time or because he had other things he had to be
doing.

He’d arrived at the party, his body his own, and laughing, had been introduced by Nezu as new
faculty starting in April. He had stuck out like a sore thumb at that party, in his yellow pinstripe suit
and with his booming voice, given the rest of the staff were mostly either in-uniform because they
had just come from/were about to go to patrol or work, or were dressed as civilians. He’d gone
around, introducing himself, partaking of the food, and generally probably making a nuisance of
himself.

And then Nezu had gotten Eraserhead’s attention and had the man place him up on top of the
podium at the center of the room, where he had rung a bell to get everyone’s attention. “I’m glad this
has been such a success,” the Principal laughed, his paws pressed together. “I suppose this proves
we’ll be repeating the exercise for White Day?”

Eraserhead, who had gotten no less than five boxes of chocolate from his co-workers, including one
from Present Mic, had groaned. “Please,” he grunted, “Do not make me show up with more
chocolate than anybody wants to eat.” Mic, standing nearby, had elbowed him in the side.

“Come on, Eraser. It’d be rude to not return the favor.”

“I’ll return your favor,” Eraserhead had growled, and turned toward Mic, only for Nezu to ring the
bell again.

“He’s just trying to rile you up, Aizawa.” Nezu folded his paws together again. “As much as I’d like
to watch you both tussle, there is one small item that remains before we can let you all loose. As you
now know, U.A. has been lucky enough to have All Might agree to join our teaching staff to teach
Foundational Heroics. He’ll be officially a member of our faculty starting in April with the new
school year, although he’s going to be helping us with the Entrance Exam decisions as well. But, that
said, he has something he has to tell you all.” Nezu had pointed to the ground beside his podium.

“All Might, if you would!”

(Of course!” He had proclaimed, with far more enthusiasm than he felt, and approached the podium
to stand next to Nezu. “You see,” he had said, the words feeling cardboard and tasteless in his mouth
even after he had rehearsed them to the mirror for two hours earlier that afternoon). He paused. It
felt wrong to do this. He was Sick, but nobody knew. It was better like this, wasn’t it? He opened his
mouth, and no sound came out.

“Get it over with!” Recovery Girl had heckled him. “Pull it off like a bandaid!”

“Very well!” All Might struck a pose, his fists on his hips, and took a deep breath. “As I said earlier,
it is very nice to meet you all! I am All Might!” And then he let out a slow breath, closed his eyes so
he didn’t have to see the looks on their faces, and let it go. Steam hissed out of him, he deflated,
coughing blood in a spray onto the floor in front of him, and then he felt his clothes fall into loose
swathes around him, his hair fluffing out without One For All keeping it on-end, and bowed deeply
from the waist as he wiped blood off of his chin. “And I am Yagi Toshinori. It’s very nice to meet
you all.”

“Jesus Christ,” Present Mic had said, very softly. You could have heard a pin drop, the room was so
quiet. Someone gasped.

A cup shattered. He had never found out whose.

All Might straightened, opened his eyes, looked around at the group. The faculty was staring, and he
pulled out a handkerchief to wipe up his face as he finished clearing his throat. Nezu, kindly, handed
him a small bottle of water from the podium, and he gargled before he swallowed to clear the rest of
the blood out of his throat. “I am sorry,” he said to his fellow teachers. “Now you know what I
suppose may be the closest guarded secret in Japan.”
“What happened,” Ectoplasm said, easing to sit down in a chair before he lost balance. Ectoplasm had known All Might since he was young—he’d interned at the Might Agency when he’d graduated from U.A., early on in All Might’s career—and knew he had always been that big. That he was just actually huge and built, only encouraged by One For All.

All Might wrung his hands, ducked his head. “Ah, do you all remember five years ago, when I took an extended leave of absence?”

“News reports said you’d torn your rotator cuff and you were doing some consulting in America while it healed,” Eraserhead had been staring at him, unblinking. “You didn’t, actually, tear your rotator cuff.” In what All Might would learn was his usual way, it was not a question.

All Might had shaken his head.

“No,” his voice got softer. “I was seriously injured during a fight with a villain, and I had to spend almost a year recovering from the surgeries afterward. As a result, I’ve become limited using my Quirk, and my health is...unstable,” he settled on. He heard Recovery Girl snort. “Recovery Girl and Nezu have both known about this for the past five years, and were there while I was in the hospital. You all now know as well, because—“

Had there been any easy way to put this? For them? For him? For anybody?

“I can only use my Quirk three hours a day, give or take a little on either side. If I push it, I can hit about four and a half hours, but the damage it does to my body is. Serious enough that I pretty much can’t do that! So, I will be using most of my time to teach and do hero work and publicity appearances, which means I will have to be like this the rest of the time.” He gestured to himself. “I apologize for the position this puts you all in, since none of you will be able to speak of this. To anyone.”

Eraserhead had been staring at him that day, as a few people started to ask questions, as the shock had worn on into horror and then terror. He hadn’t been blinking.

(It was only later that All Might learned that Aizawa had been staring at him, because he’d kept trying to deactivate his Quirk, to see if it was true. It was true.

Even then, One For All had no longer been his.)

Yagi Toshinori had been born Quirkless. Just like his parents, and like their parents before them. He had been strangely proud of it as a very small child, who kept to his parents and his Japanese grandparents. His mother had been born in America, and talked about her home in Texas with longing, but it was too hard for them to travel. They hadn’t had much money, since it was difficult, even then, to get a well-paying job without a Quirk. His father had been a lawyer, his mother a seamstress and homemaker.

They had homeschooled him, until he went to middle school. Partly because he had been painfully shy, deeply attached to his parents. He didn’t like going out in public, became overwhelmed with other children. When he played on the playground, they all treated him differently, because he was Quirkless.

Everyone did.
He had to have doctors appointments, see specialists. He had to meet with government caseworkers who worked with Quirkless families. He had to explain to other children that he didn’t have a Quirk of his own.

It was very, very lonely.

So he had stayed home and watched videos of heroes on the news and wanted, desperately, to be like them, and helped his mother cook and sew and learned his lessons and been fluent in Japanese and English and practiced running and jumping and flying and punching. He’d been enrolled in kendo, and mma, and that had been enough socialization, because they had always encouraged him. How good he was, for a Quirkless kid. If only he’d had a Quirk; Quirkless students weren’t allowed to compete in competitions.

They had to have handicaps, after all.

And then he’d had to go to Middle School, and suddenly, he had been the strange isolated homeschooled child with no friends, with no Quirk, who didn’t have to take English because he was already fluent because his mother was American, who was already a head and shoulders taller than all his peers, whose knees and feet were always going all over the place, who tripped around and faceplanted into the turf, who came in dead-last at every contest, even when students weren’t allowed to use their Quirks.

But they hadn’t bullied him. To the contrary, people had been fascinated by him. They came to him with their problems, had oohed and aahed over his fusion-food lunchboxes with chunks of peanut butter and jelly and onigiri and rabbit apples and mashed potatoes instead of rice. He’d been picked first for every team because he’d been able to think out strategies that always won, he had been top of every class, been class rep three years running, and done everything he could to improve the lives of his classmates.

And then, one day, when he had been fourteen—

His best friend had died. (For the first time. It, after all, happened again when he was fifty.)

“Settle down,” Nezu says as he climbs onto his chair at the head of the table, raising it up so he’s sitting up over the edge, tapping his pen against the tabletop. “What’s on the to-do list, Nemuri?” Midnight is the unofficial secretary of most faculty meetings, since she’s the person with her shit most together. She sighs to Nezu’s question, flips through her papers.

“Well, there’s the term end testing for the students to discuss, the Togata Question, we need to go over winter break plans, the holiday party—“ every single person groans “And then finals dates.”

“Ah,” All Might says. It’s barely a noise, but everyone looks up at him as soon as he speaks. “I. If I may, before we get started?” Midnight’s eyebrows lift up over the rims of her glasses, and she sticks her pen cap between her teeth. “I have something I would like to request.”

“You!” Nezu grins, spreads his arms. “What’s on your mind?”

All Might flattens his hand over the top of his papers. They’re mostly grade reports, organized by class, along with some possible rough ideas for the practical finals. He takes a deep breath. Aizawa, who is sprawled in his chair with his feet up on the desk and wearing two extra sweatshirts and his head half-sunken into his collar, huffs a sigh.
“The faster you do it, the less time you’re going to have to regret it,” he points out, and All Might hangs his head, hides behind his bangs, smiles. As per usual, Aizawa is the direct course to his own meandering path. “Just get it over with.”

“Yes, of course. Aizawa is right.” He straightens, squares his shoulders, bows slightly. “At this point, as I am officially retired and I have almost no ties outside of U.A., continuing to use All Might as my name seems...counterproductive, I think. As I am sure Aizawa and Nezu would both agree, it’s past time that we all stopped expecting All Might to be a pillar. It’s time I stopped thinking that about myself.

“I would greatly appreciate it if you would all call me Yagi. I am—not used to it, but I should be. I don’t expect it to be easy, as you’ve all known me as All Might both in person and over the media for thirty years, but it’s time I stopped chasing the past.”

“You sure about this?” Present Mic pulls down his sunglasses, cocks both his eyebrows. “It’s kind of a big step forward, you know?”

All Might puts on his plastic smile. “Of course,” he tells the other man. “It sits ill with me, holding a title of a person I’m not any more, especially now that I’m working so hard to move forwards.” He looks to Midnight. “That’s all. I’m sorry for delaying the to-do list.”

She waves a hand at him. “Don’t go apologizing. You’re not bothering anybody, Yagi.”

Yagi. When she says the name, it hits him like a slap from concrete to the face. Yagi. It punches all the air back out of his lung, makes his eyes water, his teeth hurt from how hard he’s gritting them in his smile. The hole in the left side of his chest suddenly aches like it’s brand-new, and he presses a hand to it without thinking, fingers digging into his skin through his shirt as his heart hammers.

Yagi tastes like vanilla. Yagi sounds like Nana’s laugh. Yagi looks like wide brown eyes and the feel of slick blood and motor oil under his hands. Yagi is a pale hand limp on a hospital bedsheets. Yagi is a grave Yagi is All For One laughing in his face as he can’t stop punching Yagi is—

His tinnitus is going again. A quiet, constant shriek.

Aizawa sets a hand on his right shoulder, fingers fitted in along the dark line of nothing where the nerves are dead. “You did the right thing,” Aizawa says very softly. “Well done.”

All Might nods. All Might stares at his papers as his heart rate climbs until it’s racing like he’s just sprinted a mile and it’s so loud it’s drowning out the tinnitus scream, until he feels nauseous, bile pressing up the back of his esophagus. He’s sweating along his hairline. He needs to throw up. He needs to sit down. He’s already sitting down.


He doesn’t remember excusing himself afterward, the world blurring and time unravelling, only that he later finds he’s crouched in the faculty bathroom, legs bent on the cold tile floor with water soaking into the knees of his suit pants, his long fingers white-knuckled around the edge of the Western toilet, his hot temple pressed against the cold metal of the stall wall, blood all over the edge of the toilet bowl, his hands, his chin, his chest. He’s breathing like he’s run a marathon. He feels faint. His throat hurts from coughing, his ribs are sore. He’s been crying.

Aizawa is crouched just outside the stall, saying nothing. All Might can see Aizawa’s shoes. He didn’t try to break in past the door, and he is grateful. Aizawa has been waiting for him to come back from wherever it is he goes, when he goes away, when he just stops Being and the world goes quiet
and grey and time runs away and everything is tinnitus-scream and ice-cream sticky and heartbeat-soft.

Yagi closes his eyes. And. Breathes.

“Good morning!” Izuku calls as he comes jogging over to join All Might. It’s not even yet seven, a fresh Monday, and his protégé is up and energetic as always. “How are you?” He asks, his cheeks flushed and bright and happy. All Might doesn’t even bother to pretend he isn’t grinning at the boy.

Life is limited. He’s learned that again recently. Each day could be his last.

So now Izuku goes jogging with him, both as training and also just to spend time together. “I’m doing well,” All Might tells him, as they begin their loop of the main U.A. grounds. They’ll end up at the teacher’s lounge and take breakfast together. They set an easy pace—it’s best for All Might not to push it so he gets more out of his limited time and energy. It’s also good for Izuku, because he’s running at All Might’s speed with One For All active. He’s still getting the hang of using it all the time, without turning it into too much speed and power.

Izuku rambles as they run. His hair is getting longer; it needs a trim, but rather than getting it cut he’s just put on a headband. It’s got frogs on it, so it’s almost certainly borrowed from Tsuyu. He’s grown some in the last month, to the point that his old sweats from the spring don’t quite fit him. He talks about all sorts of topics—ideas for new moves, stuff from class, updates to his favorite comic books, what has been going on in the dorms.

It’s nice. Left on his own when he jogs, All Might’s mind goes in circles, and he ends up thinking about things that hurt him, that leave him anxious and sore and worried. With Izuku here, he can just listen to the boy talk. Izuku can talk for hours about the things that interest him without breaking—case in point, he’s just started rambling about identity theory, and he’s quoting theorists that All Might’s never even heard of.

They stop for a breather halfway into their jog, and All Might gives into his body, squats down and leans on the edge of a planter, his head hung and his bangs in his face. “Do you need a longer break?” Izuku asks—he’s picked up on Aizawa’s constant mothering attitude. It should aggravate All Might more than it does.

“No,” he tells the boy. Breathes deeper, his good lung catching against his ribs. “No, just a moment. The cold air is harder on me than the warm air is.” He coughs a little, but it’s an easy one—no blood, no rattle in his chest, just clearing his throat. He looks up to see Izuku draining his water bottle, rubbing his arms. He’s grown so much just since August.

“Midoriya, my boy,” All Might says. Izuku looks over, coughs into his water, splutters, and leans over to hack until he’s emptied his throat. “Breathe the air, my boy, not the water!” All Might laughs as Izuku gasps to get his air back. He pats the spot on the planter beside him, and Izuku comes over, eases down next to him. “Sit with me for a moment. I have something I want to talk with you about.”

Izuku looks worried. “Not—this isn’t more bad news, is it?”

All Might shakes his head. “No, no. Not at all.” He laces his fingers over his knees. “It’s neither bad nor good. I’ve been thinking a lot lately about what I will be doing going forward, aside from just teaching. There will be winter and summer vacations, after all, and I still have other work to do for
the government and such.” He’s just started picking up his committee work again, actually. His health is balanced enough that he’s not worried he’s going to overtax himself. “And who All Might is.”

“Well...you’re All Might,” Izuku says. Like it’s obvious.

“I was All Might,” All Might corrects. “It is still my job title. But I’m no longer doing hero work, and the identity I had as All Might is not...entirely accurate to who I am now, either.” His brow furrows. “It has sat oddly with me recently. The era of All Might is over, and yet here I am. Still pretending it is as it was.” He is glad he’s alive, he refuses to die—but it’s complicated, how he feels about it.

All Might claps his hands on top of his knees. “So!” He says, his voice booming. “My request for you, young Midoriya! I will be asking the rest of 1-A and the other U.A. classes sometime before the end of the semester, but I’m not used to it enough to respond.” Izuku is blinking at him. All Might clarifies: “I want you to all start addressing me with my name.”

Izuku blushes all the way to his hairline. “I couldn’t—I mean, I can’t—it’s so. That’s so much trust! What about your family, and. Oh, no, I. I can’t—“

“I have no surviving family,” All Might says, gently. “This is for the rest of Japan as much as it is for me. People,” himself included, “tend to forget that I was Yagi Toshinori before I was All Might. In this new world, without All Might, it has been easy enough for me to think it will all work out when I arrive. I can only imagine how difficult it is for everyone else. So, the solution seems clear. If you would call me Yagi, I would be indebted to you, my boy.”

Izuku is still blushing. “Are you sure?” He asks, quietly. “I mean. Not just me. Everyone!”

All Might gives Izuku his very best plastic smile. He has been wearing it more and more often of late, since Nighteye’s death. It is the one that his publicity manager used to hate seeing him wear for photographs, because it was too uncanny. It looked like he was imitating himself when he grinned like that. Now, when he does it, it just feels strange on his face.

But he’s not been so good at real smiles lately, and if nothing else, in the many years of practice he has had at pretending to be Not Sick, All Might has learned to fake a smile so nobody can read it’s not true.

“I am. Give it a try, my boy!” Izuku is still blushing. He laughs, and this, at least, is still real. “I promise, I won’t bite!”

“Y—Yagi-sensei,” Izuku finally manages, stuttering, and All Might throws an arm around his shoulders, the physical touch grounding him. The sensei on the end cuts all the pain just the name of the dead part of him brings, makes it more palatable. It’s easier to hear Yagi-sensei, because that’s not someone he has been before, someone who has died. That’s what he’s trying to become.

“Perfect! Let us finish our run, then! There’s still plenty of time before we sit down to breakfast, so up and at them, my boy!”

It’s the next week that All Might goes over to the Midoriya’s for dinner. Izuku comes with him, since its safer that way, and when they arrive his mother pulls him into a tight hug and bows to All Might, who returns it more formally than he necessarily has to. He takes his shoes off in the front hall and follows them both into the apartment proper.
“I tried to do my best to follow what Izuku told me of your diet,” Izuku’s mother says as she wrings her hands, going into the kitchen. “Hopefully I didn’t get it **too** wrong.”

“I’m sure it’s fine,” he says, trying to reassure her. “The thing I have to avoid most is alcohol and sugar, so I think it should not be that much of an issue.”

She laughs. “We should be fine then! Izuku, get All Might a glass of water—or juice? Tea?”

He brightens at this last option. “Tea, please. Matcha?”

Izuku starts to bustle about the kitchen, and he stands there for a moment as the boy puts on the kettle. “Ah.” Izuku looks up, his eyebrows perked up into his hairline. His mother stops serving the rice. They both watch him silently.

“All Might?” Izuku prompts at last. The water begins to boil in the kettle. “Is something wrong?” Lately, the boy has become even more attuned to his moods than he was before Nighteye’s death; he’s worried about All Might. It’s sweet, if a little misplaced.

“Not so much wrong,” All Might clarifies. “Midoriya, my boy, I’ve been thinking. I know I’m not quite...myself, any more.” He’s seen the boy’s bedroom. It’s a shrine to his face. “So I have come to the conclusion that it would be best that, at least in private, it’s past time I stopped using my hero name, as I am now retired. I’m going to be asking the rest of the U.A. students the same soon, once I’m a little more used to it, but, young Midoriya, as you are somewhat of a protégé to me, and I trust your mother deeply—“ he rubs the back of his neck. They are staring at him with identi

At their idiots +1 date that weekend, they practice. “Yagi,” Midnight says, “Can you pass me the sochu?” He passes her the sochu, and it only takes about a minute for the request to get from his ears to his brain to his arm to his hand to his fingers to pick it up and turn it around across the table.

“Thank you.”

Next to him, Aizawa pours him another glass of tomato juice, or what his friends have taken to calling a “**virgin Bloody Mary**” to make him feel a little bit better about it, and he gratefully drinks. Clears his throat, and the relative density of the tomato juice helps him get his head back on straight.

“I don’t know who introduced that kid to the concept of a thesaurus,” Mic is saying, his sharp chin pillowed on his hand, “But I’d like them to be taken out and shot.”

“It was Midoriya,” Aizawa says. “Almost definitely.”

“He doesn’t speak English, though,” Midnight disagrees. “Not fluently, anyway. Do any of them speak English?”

“Wait,” Yagi is decoding the conversation by keyword as his dissociative episode clears. “Do you mean lida?”

“You should see the essay he turned in to me,” Mic pinches the bridge of his nose around his glasses. “I don’t even know the word *adumbrate* existed. But it does. So does *emic*.”

“That,” Yagi admits, chagrined, hiding his face in his tomato juice, “May have been me. He just—he overheard you and I talking the other day and said he was frustrated by how poorly he expressed himself in English and wanted to know more precise words. So I directed him to an online thesaurus.
He’s seemed very happy.”

“Oh, my god,” Mic groans, sliding down in the booth. He’s not drunk, he’s just disappointed. “You!” He points at Yagi. “You are the cause of all my suffering! You are the architect of my agony! The purveyor of my pain! You are the monster who has come into my home and ruined my life! You are the destructor of my sanity! All these years, we thought you were a big damn hero and it turns out you were a wolf in sheep’s clothing who knew the web address for thesaurus dot com!”

Yagi smiles. “He’s very happy, though,” he points out. “He keeps asking me to repeat instructions in English so he can practice. I think 1-A is ready to kill him.”

“I’m ready to kill him!” Mic throws his hands up in the air, Midnight narrowly leaning away from the motion. “See if I ever do you a favor again, why don’t you.”

“Yagi,” Midnight says, tiredly, “Your arms are longer. Take his beer. If he’s being stupid, it means it’s mine.”

His ears stay quiet. His vision stays clear. His heart only stutter-stops once, and his mouth still tastes of tomato juice and not blood.

He passes her the beer.

“To be fair,” he tells Mic, “Iida would have figured it out eventually on his own.”

Mic groans.

Chapter End Notes

i know a lot of this is very weirdly textual and requires a pretty solid amount of understanding of jewry to understand, so if anybody has any questions or wants to talk to me about this, feel free to hit me up! id be happy to talk or answer any questions anyone has.

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