Entropy

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Entropy

by Imperium42
Maybe it was All Might's betrayal that finally broke him. Maybe it was the torment from his friends, day in and day out, or the crushing weight of society's collective dismissal of his existence. The reason isn't important anymore- only the consequences. Two years after he and three other students vanished from U.A., Midoriya Izuku is the leader of the fastest-growing group of villains in Japan, and no one is left to stand in his way- no one aside from All Might's successor, the next Symbol of Peace.

All orderly systems descend into chaos. No one is immune to entropy, heroes least of all.
Two years ago, Midoriya Izuku, a quirkless first-year student in U.A. High School's general studies program, vanished without a trace.

Three of his classmates disappeared the same day.

Two more the next month.

Six separate U.A. and police investigations were unable to produce hard evidence of any of their whereabouts.

"Kurogiri! Portal! Now!"

It wasn't supposed to be this way, Shigaraki thought to himself as he ducked under a barrage of fire and bullets and dove through a pulsing purple warp gate, landing clumsily on his knees on another floor of the same decrepit warehouse. The ragged screams and roars of his Nomu echoed throughout the building- after almost a year of nonstop running and fighting, they were the last ones left, the strongest and the hardest, but even they stood little chance. All they could do was buy him time as he looked for a way out. This can't be how my story ends. I have to make it to the next level.

Wincing as blood began to drip from a shallow wound on his shoulder where one of Spinner's blades had grazed him, he forced himself to his feet and turned to Kurogiri, who stood panting at his side.

"They're right below us, and the Nomu can only buy so much time. Is this really the best you can do?"

Kurogiri straightened up, batting at patches of singed, still smoking fibers on his trademark blazer where Dabi's attacks had nearly engulfed him.

"I told you, there's some kind of dampening field surrounding the building- I can't generate portals anywhere outside this warehouse, but it would take a tremendous amount of power to restrict my quirk like this over an area so large. They either have someone new who can specifically counteract me, or they're using some sort of field generator."

"So we find the quirk user or we find the machine," Tomura gritted, his fist clenched. "Then we can get out of here, regroup…"

Regroup. He almost laughed aloud when the word left his mouth. What group? A year ago, the League of Villains had been swelling with talent under his undisputed command, with new recruits flowing in constantly, even when they were periodically forced to scatter and hide from police and hero investigations for months at a time. How quickly they'd abandoned him, all except a scant few. Twice and Dabi, Toga and Magne- no one had spared him the pain of betrayal, flocking to a rising new power within the world of villains like moths to a flame, eager to bow and scrape and bend the knee before the specter that had been hunting him relentlessly for over ten months now. Muscular and Moonfish, the last faithful holdouts from the height of his power, had both been killed escaping the last hideout, and now only Kurogiri and the Nomu were left. For how much longer, though? His enemies had found a way to defeat even the most powerful of the genetically engineered beasts, if their disastrous last encounter in Yokohama was any clue, and now it seemed that they could nullify
warp gate as well. Even the Doctor had cut off all contact with him, the last ray of hope that he’d clung to. Shigaraki could feel the *game over* screen looming.

"I'll go scout the perimeter and see if I can find what's creating the distortion," Kurogiri said suddenly, snapping Tomura back to reality. "Carefully, of course. I'll use the noise of the fighting as my guide to evade their forces."

"Good, yes. Return here at once if they spot you. If you find whatever's blocking your powers, bring me to you."

"Understood."

Kurogiri phased out of the room with a shimmer of black and purple light, and Tomura was left standing alone. He scratched his neck and slowly began to pace the room, taking in his surroundings with eyes made heavy from a lack of sleep. Barrels and crates of plastic and metal were stacked all around him, their contents long since emptied and or forgotten. The room smelled of rust and decay, and the walls were slick with moisture, their paint peeled almost bare. Midday sunlight filtered in through the broken windows far above, but the sight was no comfort to him. He’d chosen this place for its remote location in a nearly abandoned industrial park, so there was no chance of bystanders hearing the sounds of the clash, for better or for worse. *My best chance is to stay here and wait for Kurogiri,* he knew. To be forced to hide like a cornered rat enraged him to no end, but with these odds, direct engagement was suicide.

Staying as silent as he could above the sounds of the raging battle below, he clambered up onto a steel crate taller than he was, using a smaller plastic drum beneath it to help him up. From there, he continued to climb the abandoned stack of containers as far as he could, until he heard footsteps approaching, and froze in his tracks.

"Come out, come out, boss." A familiar voice drifted up to him, and his eyes narrowed in anger. *Magne. One of the first to leave me.* Shigaraki was high enough and well concealed enough that he was practically invisible from the ground, he knew. *Ignore her. Don't let her goad you into a fight. Stay put, and Kurogiri will return.*

"Hiding won't work," Magne called, as if she'd read Tomura's thoughts. "My heat tracker picked up a spike, so I know you're here."

Keeping his body as still as possible, Shigaraki tilted his head just enough so that he could see Kenji below him through a gap in the crates, walking toward the center of the room with her massive metal bar in one hand and a small, handheld electronic device with a display screen in the other. It was making some sort of dull beep at a regular interval as they held it up to each group of crates, moving from one row to the other. *So she knows that I'm in the room, but not exactly where.* Shifting one limb at a time, Tomura edged gently to the right, pressing his back against a steel canister so that it was between him and Kenji, just as his former ally reached his stack. Apparently, that was enough to conceal the exact location of his heat signature for now; Magne passed him and moved to the next row.

Shigaraki breathed a quiet sigh of relief, but apparently his pursuer was growing impatient. After a few more negative scans, Kenji holstered the tracker at her side and grinned widely.

"So you're better at hide-and-seek than I thought. I'm glad, though—just means I get to try this new enhancer out." Stepping back to the center of the rows of containers, she raised her arms and Tomura swore silently to himself as everything metal in the room began to creak and shudder. *Her quirk only makes other people magnetic. What is this?!*
He glanced out again, and saw that Kenji was holding up their bar, which was humming and gently glowing on either end- his stomach sank as he realized that there were a number of coil-like adornments mounted on the rod hadn't been there before. *So her gear has been modified too, it seems.*

"How do you like this?" Magne called out, as the shaking intensified, and all at once the steel crate he was perched on physically lifted several inches into the air, along with everything else metallic in the room. "A special design to allow me to channel my magnetic energy into inanimate metal objects within 10 meters of me, for a limited time. My new friends are so much more generous than you!"

A glowing orb of magnetic energy began to swell at the center of Kenji's bar, and something told Tomura that he didn't want to be in contact with anything made of metal anymore when it burst. Seizing the chance as Magne's gaze drifted in the other direction, Shigaraki leapt off the floating crate and towards his former ally, his hands outstretched; it was a ten foot drop, at least, but he could see no better option. Thankfully, Kenji was slow to turn around, and her body broke Tomura's fall as they both fell to the floor together in a tangle of limbs. Shigaraki clamped his hands onto the first exposed patch of flesh that he could find, and sank his nails in.

"AGH! Let go!"

That's no good, Tomura knew, dodging Kenji's clumsy attempts to dislodge him as the clothes and skin on his onetime follower's chest began to rapidly crumble and flake away, exposing the muscle beneath. *Someone probably heard that.*

Swinging her bar upward from where she was pinned to the floor, Magne landed a solid blow on her attacker's stomach and freed herself from his grasp before he had time to deliver a lethal dose of his quirk, but Shigaraki simply allowed his body to move with the momentum, landing on his feet and dodging Kenji's next swing. *I need to finish this quickly.* Closing the distance between them in one brief lunge forward, Tomura ducked as Magne swung the rod in a wild horizontal arc, sliding beneath it; his mind racing for openings, he latched onto the underside of the bar with one hand and onto one of Kenji's knees with the other; he could only hold on for a moment before Magne screamed in pain and swung her free foot into his chest, knocking the wind from him and probably breaking a rib, but a moment was all he needed to render his opponent's weapon unusable and dissolve a patch of skin on a vital joint. *I have the upper hand now,* he knew, smiling even as he winced in pain. *A perfect combo on this mini-boss. I just have to watch out for...* a balled fist landed on his cheek before he could complete his thought or react in time to dodge, and the raw power behind the blow drove him backward, tearing Father from his face. *...Her pure physical strength.*

Shigaraki tasted blood in his mouth, and felt some of it dripping down from his chin and onto the floor; luckily, the punch had been haphazard and poorly aimed, a reaction to pain rather than a precise attack- the damage could have been far worse otherwise. He backed several more paces away and began to circle his victim, who had fallen to one knee, wheezing in pain as she clutched the patches of exposed flesh and bone Tomura had left her. Her rod was discarded now, lying half-dissolved on the floor- she had no more tricks, just brute force. Shigaraki knew how to handle brute force. With a desperate cry of anger, Magne launched herself forward, her fists outstretched, just as Tomura knew that she would. Even with a broken rib, it was all too easy to sidestep the clumsy charge, drive a foot into the back of Kenji's injured knee, and wrap his hands around her throat as she tumbled to the ground. For a moment, he kept his middle fingers raised, savoring the sweet satisfaction that came with holding another's life in his grasp once again, of listening to their reaction in the instant they realized that the end was inevitable.

"B-boss, I-"
"Goodbye, Magne." Tomura let his fingers fall, tightening his grip when Kenji began to thrash and struggle in vain, even as her windpipe crumbled to dust. It was over within a few seconds, though, and Shigaraki rose, panting, to his feet.

On the floor below, the Nomu had gone quiet now, and Tomura became acutely aware of how loud his own pounding heart was amid the deafening silence. Clutching his fractured rib with one hand, he grabbed hold of Father with the other and fastened it carefully back onto his face, then stumbled away from Magne's corpse and the stacks of crates and into an open space on the other end of the room. Finally coming to a rest when he reached a dusty workbench fastened to the far wall, he clung to the decaying wood like it was a life raft, trembling.

"Itchy. I'm itchy again.

His hands shot up out of instinct, scratching at the already raw skin around his eyes and neck. Blood oozed steadily out in response, staining the tips of his fingernails a dull red.

"Kurogiri," he whispered, a plea. "Where are you? Don't leave me all alone. Not like everyone else. Not like…" He became aware of another presence in the room, and pivoted to face the new intruder, only to fall to his knees, his eyes wide. "…master?"

He blinked once, then again, but there was no mistaking it. All For One was here, standing just a few feet away, as tall and imposing as ever in his immaculate suit and jet black respirator mask.

"Master! You've come for me!" Tears of joy began to flow unbidden from Tomura's eyes, stinging as they washed down along his cracked and ruined skin, but he hardly noticed; a wide, jubilant smile of a like he hadn't worn in ages spread across his pale, bloodied face. "You've come to complete my training! To grant me your power, like you promised!"

"Yes, my boy. I'm here for you now, just as I always have been, and just as I always will be." Hearing his mentor's gravelly voice again was pure bliss for Shigaraki, who hung on his every word. "Didn't I tell you? You can fail as many times as you need to. That's what I'm here for." All For One held out his hand, beckoning Tomura; within moments he was kneeling at his master's feet again, feeling that comforting hand gently brush against his head, letting him know without so much as a word that everything would be alright. Suddenly he was Shimura Tenko once more, abandoned and alone and afraid at five years old, but All For One's presence was just as reassuring now as it had been then.

"It's been so long," Shigaraki finally managed, his voice barely above a whisper. "So long since they took you away… I've… I've lost almost everything. Even the Nomu are all used up. They've cornered me here.

"Everything that has been lost can be replaced." All For One moved his hand to Tomura's shoulder, and gently urged him to his feet. "I know I've been away, but I'm here now, and I can give you a new chance to start again."

"But… how did you escape Tartarus?" Shigaraki lifted his eyes to the indent on his master's mask where his own had once been, wiping the last of his tears away. "Won't they be chasing you? As soon as Kurogiri returns, we need to get away from here, find you a new place to hide…"

"That's not important," All For One cut in, shaking his head. "What's important is my gift to you."

Tomura's heart sped up again, and his eyes widened. Finally, after all this time, the power that he promised me. I can finally become the heir I was meant to be.

"Master, I'm ready to receive it. Make me your successor, so I can defeat my enemies and escape this place to be at your side again."
All For One chuckled beneath his mask, a deep, rasping sound.

"If you're truly ready, here it is."

Shhk.

Shigaraki felt the blade slide into his stomach, heard it pierce his flesh, noticed the warmth of the blood suddenly seeping out of him as it flowed across his clammy skin. But all the same, it took him several long moments to wrench his gaze away from his that expressionless mask and look down at the knife embedded up to the hilt just above his torso.

"I… what?" He stumbled backwards, his face contorted in confusion, staring at the knife like it wasn't really there. "M-master?"

But when he looked up again, his master wasn't there anymore. All For One's flesh melted and shifted and swirled around itself until only Himiko Toga was left standing before him, a girlish grin on her face as she tossed aside the mask, shrugged away the suit's black coat, and began to loosen her tie.

"Wow, you sure are bleeding a lot, boss!" She cried as he stood speechless and paralyzed, a shrill giggle bursting from her lips. "You're so much cooler when you bleed! Do you want me to stick you again?!"

She drew two more knives from inside her sleeves, and the sight of the blades startled him back into action. Roaring in anger, he swung his opened hand toward her, but she simply darted out of reach, twirling in circles, her peals of laughter echoing off the walls. With a grunt he reached down and dissolved the blade in his stomach, but the spurt of blood that spattered across the floor when the knife turned to dust quickly made him regret the decision. There was a lance of pain in the back of his thigh- in one brief moment she had slipped behind him, and he was forced to his knees as Toga drove the blade in deeper, wrapping her free hand around his side and pressing it into his open wound.

"So much blood," she purred, withdrawing just as quickly as she'd attacked, before he could react and grab either of her arms. She was back in front of him now, looking at the bright crimson dripping from her hand with wide-eyed amazement, rocking back and forth on her feet in glee.

"How dare you…" Tomura gritted, trembling with rage now rather than fear. "How dare you use his image… you are unworthy of it!" He struggled to his feet and lurched forward, but only made it a few steps before his wounds forced him back to his knees.

"Have some appreciation," another voice called; two other figures had entered the room, both young, both dressed all in black. The first wore a high-tech pair of goggles beneath his dull blue mane of hair, fitted with silver diodes that stretched back to rest on his forehead and temple. The instrument couldn't hide the purple bags beneath his tired eyes, though. "Do you know how many people I had to brainwash to get that blood for her? It took a while."

By now, Tomura knew better than to answer one of Shinso Hitoshi's questions, no matter how furious he grew. His allies had suffered the price for forgetting that simple rule too many times before. His gaze dropped to the floor, his hands clenched.

"And to fall for this façade too, so unquestioningly." Seeing that the man wasn't biting, Hitoshi was talking more to himself now than to Shigaraki; he walked over to where Toga had dropped the All For One mask and picked it up, marveling at it. "I suppose Yaoyorozu's craftsmanship is as good as ever. I'll have to drop by and thank her for the detail on this."
"Oh, look at you, so pathetic! Are you going to cry againi?" The second figure, more well-dressed than the first, with a sleek, flowing overcoat and a silver tie that stood out against the black of the rest of his outfit, bounded toward him, crouching down and peering at him with a wide, sneering grin. "But weren't you supposed to be special?! Weren't you supposed to be All for One's heir? What an aboslutely pitiful sight- I guess we really are better than both of you!"

Something snapped in Tomura at that, and he surged upwards, grabbing hold of the boy's arm with one hand and swinging for his smug face with the other. His opponent caught him by the wrist just inches shy, holding his arm in place while his other sleeve started to flake and crumble in Tomura's grasp. He met Shigaraki's red eyes with his grey ones, still grinning as a stray lock of his neatly combed blonde hair drifted down in front of them.

"What a wonderful quirk you have, Tomura. I think I like it."

A pain unlike anything Shigaraki had experienced before suddenly lanced through his wrist, and in horror he realized that his own skin was flaking and cracking where his opponent held it, cutting off the feeling to his hand. He struggled to pull away and tightened his grip on the boy's other arm, but Neito Monoma simply laughed at his effort. The copycat, he realized, panicking. How could I forget?! "Let go!" He cried, knowing full well the irony of his words, but in his injured condition he couldn't muster the stamina to overcome Monoma physically, and so they remained locked together in mutual agony for several brief moments that seemed to stretch into eternity.

"Begging for mercy, Shigaraki? That's so unbecoming of the great All For One's successor! You really are inferior, aren't you?!"

Finally, Neito's arm and Tomura's hand fell away from their respective bodies at the same moment; the older man fell back hard onto the ground, a wordless cry on his lips. Rather than recoil in shock or pain, though, Monoma merely glanced at the missing appendage, then suddenly collapsed into a pile of grey sludge, his damage threshold reached. A clone.

"Twice!" Shigaraki roared. "Come out where I can see you!"

"He doesn't take orders from you anymore."

The air in the room seemed to take on an unnatural chill as a third figure stepped through the door- or perhaps that was simply a side effect of all the blood loss. Either way, Tomura shivered as he looked up to the shadowy outline of the one who had taken everything from him.

"None of them take orders from you anymore."

He stepped forward, coming to halt at the edge of a patch of sunlight filtering in from the window above them, his body half within it and half without. The sleek black exoskeleton he wore as armor gleamed in the dappled light, and Tomura grimaced as he recalled what it could do. At first glance it looked like no more than a strangely textured, slightly angular bodysuit complimented by a matching mask, but Shigaraki knew well that its appearance was deceiving- it was made of jointed plates of high tensile carbon fiber, as light as cloth and as hard as diamond, with hidden servomotors and impact absorbers in the arms and legs to give his punches and kicks the force to break through walls and shatter bones. The armor retracted half a moment later, though, folding into its case on its owner's back, revealing a white shirt and dark blazer, and hands tipped by gloves of elegant black leather. He had gone by various aliases in his steady, two-year rise from nothing to the apex of the villain hierarchy: Ringleader, Rainmaker, Silencer. Shigaraki had known his true identity all along, though.
"Midoriya Izuku." Tomura gritted the name like it was poison. "Have you come to kill me after all this time at my heels? Will that finally satisfy you, to have trampled everything I worked for into the dirt once and for all?"

"No." A shadow of a grin playing about his lips, Midoriya took another step forward, now fully in the sunlight. Much like his armor, his face was disarming- at first it appeared to be a simple high school boy’s countenance, freckled and youthful, with a wild tangle of green and black hair. But there was something dark and unsettling in Izuku’s eyes- something broken. His gaze pierced straight through Shigaraki as he stood looming above him, his hands clasped behind his back. "No, it won't satisfy me. But it's a decent start. I'd like to say this is all nothing personal, but that would be a lie."

He advanced toward Tomura again, unclasping his hands and hanging them at his sides as they slowly balled into fists.

"You insulted me, Shigaraki, Do you remember? You called me weak, and I couldn't let that stand. I had to prove I was stronger than you, because I knew I was, even then." He broke into a wide smile. "And now I have! Survival of the fittest is the only universal law, Tomura, and I'm the survivor. Me. Turns out, from the beginning, you were the weak one. I didn't even need a quirk to beat you."

Shigaraki groaned softly as more blood leaked from his stomach, remembering how a quirkless boy had shown up on the League's doorstep two years ago, angry and determined and bitter at the world. How he'd laughed and thrown him out. You're of no use to us, he'd said, turning away and drawing the door shut behind him. Run along now, before I get angry. In the past few months had had replayed that moment in his mind times beyond count.

"And do you know why I didn't need one?" He spread out his arms and gestured to his followers, more of whom were filtering into the room with each passing moment. Twice and Spinner. Dabi and Mustard. A few more villains he didn't even recognize, their eyes watching him in his defeat. "Because I lead people, not command them. Because I give them a plan to follow and ideals to strive for. Because I would defend them to my last breath, just as they would defend me. Because they know that no matter the odds, I can find a way to win. Because I'm a survivor, Tomura- I don't need a quirk to prove that to them. And guess what? They respect me more than they ever respected you."

As Midoriya monologued, Shigaraki had been slowly mustering the strength to edge away from him, betting everything on one last burst of speed. The wall behind me is crumbling and weak. If I put all of my quirk into it, I can dissolve it enough to break through, and... that was as far as his plan extended, but it was the best he had right now. His muscles tensed, fighting through the pain of his wounds, and he began to slowly inch backwards, a bit at a time, until... BAM, BAM, BAM.

Suddenly there were three smoking bullet holes arranged on the floor around him in a triangle, and his heart sank as he became aware of a red laser dot roving over his body before finally settling on his forehead.

"Ah ah ah," Midoriya chided, wagging one gloved finger. "You don't get to run away. Not this time, not ever again." He turned to the upper window, where the bullets had entered from, and held a finger to a wireless receiver in his ear. "Good shooting- I think we made the impression we needed to, but keep your eyes on him just in case."

Izuku returned his gaze to his prey, and there was a vicious hunger in his eyes now that turned even Tomura's stomach.
"I'm going to have to punish you for trying that. Shinso, if you would?"

Hitoshi advanced to his master's side, and cracked his neck before crouching down and peering intently at Tomura, whose eyes were flitting about the room, still looking desperately for some way out, for any way out.

"What do you think of these?" He asked, gesturing to his goggles, his tone light and conversational.

*Does he think I'm some sort of idiot?* Shigaraki's brows furrowed, and he stared up at Shinso defiantly. *I know not to answer his...* Suddenly a dull light flashed at the back of his vision, and like a wave of lead had washed over his muscles, Tomura found himself unable to move or speak. *What?!* His eyes widened in horror. *But I didn't say anything!*

"I can see they're working," Hitoshi continued, a grin spreading slowly across his face. "They're a new design. By making sustained eye contact with someone for a period of three seconds or longer, I can use my quirk on them without ever exchanging a word. It also helps me compartmentalize my power, so I can control multiple people more easily." He paused, a slight grin playing about on his lips. "Would you like to meet one of the other people I'm controlling right now? You've been expecting him, I think." Shinso chuckled, a hollow sound, and raised his voice. "You can come in now."

Kurogiri entered the room slowly, reluctantly, his movements robotic, his blazing yellow eyes cast toward the floor. Tomura's heart sank with each coerced step.

"Watch," Hitoshi commanded, pointing at the man's defeated master. Kurogiri complied silently, but even without a proper face, the pain in his expression was clear. Then Shinso returned his attention to Shigaraki, his voice low. "Get on your knees. Place your arms behind your back. Don't resist."

Unable to stop himself, Tomura did exactly as he was asked. The world seemed to be muffled somehow, moving in slow motion, even as Midoriya ripped off Father and tossed it aside, then grabbed hold of a tuft of hair at the back of his neck and drove a clenched fist into his face. Just like that, the spell was lifted, and the world sped up again- there was blood dripping from his broken nose, and with his sleeve rolled up, Izuku's arm was much more muscular than he might have expected. He tried to swing his hand around to grab hold of his attacker, but Hitoshi was ready.

"Be still."

CRACK. Another punch, from the left this time. Shigaraki could feel one of his teeth loosening.

"Be still."

CRACK.

"Be still."

CRACK.

"Be still."

Tomura's face was a crimson ruin by now, one of his eyes quickly swelling shut. He braced himself for the next punch, but it didn't come; Midoriya turned around and stripped the bloodied gloves from his hands.

"I'm finished." His voice was tired, disinterested.
Toga squealed with glee and wrapped her arms around her lover, gazing up at Izuku with adoring eyes.

"Oh baby, that was amazing! The blood, there's so much of it everywhere, but you didn't have to stop! Can I keep cutting him for you? Can I, can I?"

"He's not worth your time, darling." Midoriya planted a single kiss on her forehead, never so much as glancing back to the man he had just beaten. "He's not worth any of our time anymore. All that remains is to leave him to rot. Shinso?"

"Bring her here," Hitoshi commanded, looking to Kurogiri. "The woman on the roof across the street."

With no choice in the matter, Kurogiri obeyed; a few feet away, a warp gate opened up, and Hatsume Mei stepped through with a smile on her face and a rifle in her hands.

"How do you like my new baby, Hitoshi? It works great, doesn't it? Oh, they've all been working so well today!" She was practically bouncing with glee, only pausing for a moment to glance over at Magne and the modifications on her half-dissolved rod. "Well, all except Number 2113 over there, but that was mainly due to user error. Still, over a 90% success rate!"

On her right arm guard, an electronic display gave the diagnostics for all of her creations in the area, a constant stream of data that only she could decipher. From his vantage point on the ground, Shigaraki scowled. Beside Midoriya himself, Hatsume had been the most consistent thorn in his side over the past year, developing countermeasure after countermeasure to each powerful quirk wielder left in his arsenal of followers, and at the same time constantly and dramatically improving the capabilities of her allies with every innovation. She was also deadly in her own right, though, given a sniper rifle- with a quirk that let her see clearly up to five kilometers away, Mei had no need for a scope, using only a laser spotter fixed to her rifle's barrel and a specially crafted eyepiece that compensated for wind speed and bullet drop. Ten months into this bloody struggle, Tomura had long since lost track of how many of his allies had fallen to her lethal accuracy and range, gunned down when they least expected it.

She had slung the weapon in question over her shoulder at the moment, and was currently peering at the armor case on Midoriya's back.

"The new folding mechanism I developed is working perfectly, I see! Amazing- this has always been one of my favorite babies!"

"We'll discuss your babies later." Izuku cut her off with a single wave of his hand, and she quickly lapsed into a respectful silence. He strode up to Kurogiri, a hand on his chin; Shigaraki could feel his heart tightening in his chest.

"No, let him go, please.

"You're strong, and your quirk is useful. I like it. You'll come with us."

Shinso snapped orders to that effect, and Tomura breathed a ragged sigh of relief. At least one of us will be getting out of this, old friend.

"Hitoshi, did you have Yaoyorozu make burners as I asked?" Izuku still refused to look in Shigaraki's direction as he paced about the room.

"Yes, sir."

"Good, give me one."
Shinso pulled a cheap, plastic flip phone from his coat and tossed it to Midoriya, who wasted no time opening it and dialing a number.

"H-hello? I-is this emergency services?" In an instant, Izuku's demeanor had changed completely, his voice wavering like a nervous schoolboy's, and if he hadn't known better he might have thought there were actual tears welling up in the boy's eyes; Tomura sucked in a quick breath in shock. He's that versatile, huh? "I think I saw some vigilantes fighting villains at the old steel warehouse in Nabu Ward! P-please come quick, I'm so scared!"

The moment he closed the phone, though, the darkness in his eyes returned.

"Dabi, Monoma, Hatsume. Comb the warehouse and destroy any evidence that we were here before the police arrive. Leave the bodies of the Nomu intact, though- let them believe that the organized presence that the League represented is finally extinguished. Spinner, Twice, gather everyone else on the first floor and wait for my command to depart- our new friend Kurogiri is going to be very useful for transportation. And Toga, Shinso…" There was a sudden coldness in Midoriya's voice. "Dispose of this trash, would you?"

Like clockwork, everyone snapped into their assigned tasks- Shigaraki's eyes widened in rage. All this time and effort to trap me here, to kill me, and he can't even be bothered to watch the end himself?

"Aw, boss, Hitoshi'll make it so quick though!" Hatsume cried in protest, tagging along at Izuku's heels. "I've got some new babies that could really make him suffer if you know how to use them."

"She's right," Monoma chimed in with a gleeful smirk. "Someone as pathetic as him isn't worthy of an easy death! And I do like his quirk. If we take him back I could have more opportunity to study it and find some… creative applications for it."

"He doesn't deserve any more of our time or our effort." Midoriya countered in a tone that brokered no argument. "We've wasted enough on him by now." Just as before, his subordinates nodded silently before returning to their objectives. Izuku started to step through the door, but after everything, Tomura couldn't let him leave that easily. Not like this…

"She'll defeat you." The words tasted like bile on his tongue, but he spat them out all the same. At the room's threshold, Midoriya paused. "You think you're invincible now that you've beaten me. That you've removed all opposition. But she's still there. She'll still be hunting you. Without my master's power, you'll never be able to defeat the new Symbol of Peace."

"Is that so?" Even with the boy's back to him, Shigaraki could feel him smile. "You still buy into that nonsense, don't you? That you were the chosen one to defeat the Symbol of Peace? I almost pity you, actually. The press can fawn over her all they like, but All Might's errand girl doesn't concern me. She's just a woman, and she'll die like one, when the time is right. A shame you'll never be able to see that moment come."

There was a flash of motion at the corner of his vision, and a sharp pain suddenly shot through one of his legs; Toga had slipped behind him and injected him with her blood collector while he was focused on Midoriya.

"Suck, suck, suck… I'm gonna drain you dry, Mr. Boss!" She wore a sadistic grin as she worked, and any attempt that he made to resist was swiftly counteracted by Shinso, who was standing above him. He glanced back to the door and opened his mouth to throw one final barb, but Izuku was already gone.
"One canister should be enough." Hitoshi cut her off just as Shigaraki began to feel lightheaded— with all the blood he had lost by now, he was surprised it had taken this long. "Go join the others. I'll handle this."

"Aww, you're no fun!" Himiko pouted, but she complied all the same, dashing off to find Midoriya and leaving Shinso alone with his victim. At first Tomura thought that the boy might finish him off himself, and braced himself for the inevitable blow, but it never came— when he opened his eyes, Hitoshi was standing near the entrance, a soft smile on his lips.

"Dark Shadow. Kill."

There was a rustling movement in the nearest corner of the room, and for the first time Shigaraki noticed that there was a shape hidden among the shadows there, the vague impression of a body surrounding by pulsing darkness. It emerged into the light one labored step at a time, but when it unfurled to its full height, letting out a roar from its beaked mouth, the shadow was well over ten feet tall. Tokoyami Fumikage, he knew, his memories stretching back to the broadcast of the U.A. Sports Festival, so far in the past now. One of the two first years who vanished a month after Midoriya and his group's initial disappearance. So they've had you and Yaoyorozu all along?

There was no more time to reflect on the past, though. Tokoyami's pace was steadily quickening as he and his shadow advanced on Tomura, one massive, clawed limb reaching toward him. Beneath the veil of sentient darkness that surrounded and enclosed the young man's body, he could see tears streaming down Fumikage's beak as he drew closer, and once he was near enough, Shigaraki realized that he was mouthing out the words 'I'm sorry'.

When he was within a few feet of Tomura, the yellow-eyed head drifting far above Tokoyami let out another roar, and the beast charged, talons of darkness outstretched.

Shimura's gaze drifted to his Father's hand one last time, lying discarded on the floor, to the others lining his arms. Mother. Grandpa. Grandma. Hana. His breath escaping in a soft sigh, he closed his eyes, and all at once the itching finally stopped.

"Game over," Tenko whispered, as the shadow rushed forward to meet him.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you guys enjoyed this darker take on the VillainDeku AU! The next few chapters will be a series of quick flashbacks to explain how everything got to this point, and from then on, it'll be alternating chapters from the heroes and villains.

Let me know what you think in the comments! Who do you think All Might's successor is?

Also, a note for anime watchers about Magne's pronouns- it hasn't been made very clear yet in the show, but the manga reveals that she identifies as a woman, if anyone's confused about that.
"A phone call… is here! A phone call… is here!"

Swearing softly under his breath, Yagi Toshinori fumbled in the pocket of his coat for his cellphone, setting down his chopsticks and flushing with color as Aizawa, Present Mic, and Midnight all glanced in his direction with expressions ranging somewhere between annoyance and sullen acceptance. It was the first day of class at U.A., and his first official day on the job as a teacher- he had been trying his best all throughout their planning meetings over the last month to make a good impression with his new coworkers, but his ringtone was one thing they hadn't been able to get over yet, apparently.

"Shit, shit… yes, hello?"

"All Might- it's me. Do you have a moment to talk?"

Toshinori sucked in a sharp breath in shock when he recognized the voice on the line, and a small shower of blood spurted from his mouth, to the dismay of Mic, who had been sitting closest to him.

"Yes, absolutely! One moment."

Abandoning his half-eaten gyudon, he muted the call, grabbed a napkin, and frantically wiped down where the stray droplets had sprayed across the table before turning to the others and clapping his hands together in apology.

"Please excuse me, everyone! I need to take this, I'll be back in a moment!"

Darting outside the door before they could respond, he grew into his hero form as he left the teachers' lounge behind and made way down the hall, unmuting the call and launching back into the conversation with his trademark bombast.

"Apologies for the delay, but I am here now! What can I do for my old sidekick?"

"You don't have to talk to me like that," Sir Nighteye replied, as curt as ever. "For what I want to discuss, I need to speak to the real you regardless, not the Symbol of Peace. I trust that you're adjusting well to U.A. so far?"

Deflated somewhat by his former partner's bluntness, Toshinori lowered his voice back to its normal tone when he answered.

"Well enough- I haven't gotten to see too much of the students yet, but the other teachers have all been incredibly helpful. I have to say, Nighteye… I didn't think you'd call, he almost said, but thought better of it. "…I wasn't expecting to hear from you." Shit, that's almost as bad!"

"If there haven't been any problems so far, I'll skip the rest of the pleasantries." Nighteye blew past Toshinori's last remark completely, and All Might could practically see the lanky man steelping his fingers at his desk as he spoke. "I want to talk about your successor. You still haven't chosen one, I take it?"

"Well, I…" He hesitated for a moment, then let out a defeated sigh. "No, I haven't. For a while after I
moved here I thought I might get a head start by hunting for candidates before the school year started, but no one truly caught my eye. The year just started, though, and finding the right one is the reason I'm here, after all." Feeling restless, he set out toward the rear of the school as he spoke, wanting to stretch his legs a bit in the training yard before classes resumed; it was lunch hour right now, so the halls were relatively deserted.

"Hm, I see. I just thought I'd check if you had any candidates in mind so far. By all means, keep watching the hero course students as you settle into your position- the U.A. upperclassmen have some real standout talents in their ranks right now. But if no one grabs your attention, there's a third-year working at my office who I'd like you to meet- I've already spoken to your principal about him, actually."

Throwing open the door and stepping out into the warm afternoon sunlight, Toshinori started to reply, but paused when he almost tripped over someone sitting on the steps. Yagi's mouth fell open in horror when he realized that he'd stepped on the boy's notebook and school folders, and his mind began racing for an excuse to politely end the call.

"That sounds great, but I'll have to get back to you about it later! Class is, uh… about to start! My apologies!"

"…It's 12:37. I looked up your schedule before I called, your next class doesn't start for another-"

Toshinori hung up before Nighteye could finish his sentence, crouching down to his knees to help pick up the scattered papers, but the boy had already snatched them up, and was clutching them to his chest, his eyes wide in… Fear? All Might was used to his presence provoking strong emotional reactions in people young and old, but aside from villains and criminals, fear was rarely one of them. His heart sank further when he realized that a wad of dirt-stained pink gum stuck to the bottom of his shoe had smeared itself across one of the notebook pages in the boy's arms; several of his drawings were wrinkled and torn.

"My apologies, young man, I didn't see you there!" He put on a winning smile, doing his best to cheer the startled boy up. "Don't worry, I'm sure I can find someone in the staff room whose quirk can help us make that notebook look good as new!"

To his shock, his words had the exact opposite effect than intended. Tears started to well up in the boy's wide green eyes, which he quickly dropped to the ground. When he answered, his voice was shaking.

"I-it's all right, sir, don't w-worry about it. I'll be ok."

Something's wrong. All Might's protective instincts kicked into full gear, and he gently placed one hand on the boy's shoulder- the child flinched away from his touch.

"Are you sure you're alright, young man? Why are you out here all alone, and not in the dining hall? Lunch Rush prepared a delicious menu for everyone's first day, why don't you and I go get some?"

The boy's gaze stayed fixed on the concrete stairs beneath him, and his reply was barely above a whisper.

"Y-you don't remember me?"

Oh, shit. Everything clicked at once in Toshinori's mind, and he realized with a start why the boy's untamed mop of green hair had seemed familiar. The one I who accidentally saw my true form, of course! You damn idiot, how could you possibly have forgotten?!
"Ah, that's right- from the day that sludge villain attacked! You were instrumental in helping me bring that vile criminal to justice, young Midoriyo!" *Please let that be right, please let that be right.* The minor incident had been ten months ago, but Yagi always made a conscious effort to remember his fans' faces and names whenever possible, and that encounter in particular should have been memorable. "It's thanks to you that I was able to secure him in that bottle so quickly, and keep him from attacking anyone else!"

"It's M-Midoriya, Midoriya Izuku." Shit. It took all the discipline Toshinori had to keep smiling unflinchingly as Izuku lifted his watery eyes up to meet his. "Do you remember what else you told me that day?"

Finally, Yagi's smile broke, the corners of his mouth drifting down to set in an uneven line.

"I… do, yes." *I cannot simply say 'you can become a hero without power'.* He winced slightly as he recalled the words."I'm sorry I couldn't say more to you that day, or give you a happier message. But look how well for yourself you've done- you're here at U.A., with the best of the best! That's fantastic!" Toshinori quickly regained his optimistic demeanor, and his smile returned.

"Yeah, I guess… in the general studies program, though." Midoriya sniffed and wiped away his tears with a sleeve. He forced a trembling smile, but Yagi couldn't help but think that there was something hollow in his eyes- a pang of guilt shot through his heart. "I trained and studied really hard to get here, and everyone seems amazing so far…” He trailed off, and the smile faded.

"You still haven't told me why you're out here all alone." All Might said quietly, dropping a bit of the bombast from his voice again. "Are you adjusting alright? Did something happen?"

"No, nothing bad happened, it's just…” he paused, and the tears started welling again. "The other kids at my table were all introducing themselves by talking about their quirks, and when they got to me, I… I just c-couldn't look at them anymore." He was trying desperately to wipe his eyes even as they were overflowing, shrinking away from All Might with every passing moment. "I'm so sorry you have to s-see me like this, I should go…”

He stood abruptly and rushed through the door with his head down; Toshinori rose and started after him, but they both froze in their tracks when a loud crash sounded from down the hall, and smoke started to filter out of the Development Studio. Breaking into a sprint, All Might was at the door in a flash, and nearly yanked it off its handles as he opened it.

"Is everything alright?! Is anyone hurt?!"

"No worries, All Might-sensei!" A girl with bright pink hair and a pair of goggles fastened on her head strode out confidently from the cloud of smoke, holding a sparking, half-charred rocket boot in her hands. "Baby number three is just having some growing pains- I must have crossed a wire or two wrong somewhere in there. The name is Hatsume Mei, by the way, first-year in the support course! It's such an honor to meet you!"

Before he knew it he was shaking her hand, though the exact details were still processing.

"I… well, it's good no one was injured, but you should be more careful, young Hatsume! Where's your teacher, though? And why aren't you in the dining hall?"

"Power Loader-sensei said after class this morning that I could use the studio during my free time if I wanted, so I just came here instead of eating! I've finished three babies already!"

*Already building support items on the first day? She really moves fast, huh? Toshinori opened his*
mouth to praise her for her initiative while admonishing her for being careless, but he was cut off by Midoriya, who had caught up to them and was staring at Hatsume's creation with wide-eyed amazement, his tears forgotten.

"Whoa, is that rocket boot modeled off the ones used by the Buster Hero, Air Jet?!!"

"It sure is!" She turned excitedly to her classmate, practically bouncing. "Are you a fan of his too? I'm Hatsume Mei, in case you didn't hear, first-year in support!"

"He's one of my favorites, yeah! I'm Midoriya Izuku, first-year in general studies, it's great to meet you! Have you seen the one move where he…"

The two were quickly engrossed in a discussion of famous hero support items, and for once in the past few decades, All Might was completely in the background- it was a refreshing feeling. Doing his best not to interrupt them, he politely shooed the two toward the cafeteria, then made his way back to the teacher's lounge, a broad smile on his face. It seems like things worked out after all!

"I'm sorry, but my answer is no."

Shota Aizawa did his best not to sound too harsh- an impressive effort, given how frustrating his students had been today- as he sat with fingers steeped across the table from Midoriya Izuku. The sports festival had been an exhausting affair, and with internships and midterms approaching soon, he already had more than enough on his plate without figuring out the logistics of how to allow a quirkless student to take the hero course transfer exam. On top of all that, his face still ached where he had removed the bandages from the USJ attack days ago; each movement of his eyes and mouth set off a dull twinge of pain.

"But… what?" Disbelief was plain on the boy's face, and he rose to his feet from the couch. "Sir, you've seen what I can do, you watched the videos Hitoshi and Mei took of me using the enhancers in the studio! Do you need a live demonstration? I can book the space for after school on the first available day to show you!" As he spoke, the boy gestured frantically to the support items he wore across his body: on his feet and back, rocket boosters for flight, on his fists, metal gauntlets connected to shock absorbing arm braces for strength, on his head, a pair of goggles with nightvision and rangefinding capabilities, currently hung around his neck.

"No, that's quite alright- I've seen enough. The videos were fairly impressive, actually." Aizawa cut his panicked motions short with a wave of his hand, then leaned forward across the table. "But they still do not make you suited for hero work. The fact remains that your performance would depend on these support items almost entirely."

Izuku seemed prepared for this argument, sitting straight up and reciting names from memory, his face set in determination.

"Air Jet, Ingenium, Backdraft, even Present Mic here at U.A.- plenty of amazing heroes rely on support items, and that doesn't-"

"Wrong." Eraser cut him off midsentence, shaking his head. I hate to be the one to burst his bubble, he mused, but someone has to make him face reality before he gets himself hurt. "They do not rely on their support items. I've heard a good bit about you from your teachers, Midoriya, including how knowledgeable you are about heroes. You of all your classmates should know best, then, that support items are meant to complement the wearer's quirk or address a specific weakness, never to be the primary source of their power and ability. Even if you take Present Mic's speaker away, for instance, his quirk is still more than powerful enough to shatter eardrums without
"he only uses it to control where his soundwaves flow. The same concept applies to the other heroes you mentioned. It is a poor hero who grows too reliant on technology as anything more than a stopgap. I'm sorry, but passion alone cannot change that fact."

"I can integrate them into my own unique fighting style, I promise I won't depend on them too much! If you want I’ll do it without them!" Stoic until now, Izuku’s eyes were wide as saucers, and beginning to well with tears. He was struggling to detach his enhancers as he spoke, tearing the braces haphazardly off his arms. Aizawa raised a questioning eyebrow.

"I'm afraid that's also out of the question. Going up against other students and the obstacles we put in your way without a quirk to hold your own… the risks to your personal safety are too great."

"A-All Might, please, help him understand! I just want to be like you! I want to save people with a smile!" Struggling to contain his tears, Midoriya turned to the other teacher in the office, taking a tentative step forward. Toshinori had been standing at the back of the room for the duration of the meeting, mostly keeping his gazed fixed out the window. He was reverted to his weakened form; as far as Aizawa knew, Midoriya was the only student at U.A. aware of the nature of his condition, a frustrating coincidence given Izuku's request. Yagi was silent for a long moment before he finally spoke.

"Young Midoriya... I'm sorry, but Aizawa is right." All Might was clearly struggling to find the right words, and his eyes remained averted from Izuku. "It's always been my belief that a hero must be able to stand on the merit of his own power- that's why I've never taken to using support items. Your situation is clearly a special case, and maybe with enough dedication, you could successfully shape these enhancements like others shape their quirks, but there are some things we as your teachers would not be able to ignore. What if you encounter a villain who warps metal? Disables electronics? What if young Hatsume's creations malfunction at a critical moment? If we could count on support items to be as foolproof in every encounter as quirks, then all heroes would wear rocket boots and fighting gauntlets and every other upgrade they could fit onto their costumes. But at the end of the day, we just can't, so we don't. You wouldn't be safe going on like this, Midoriya, and what kind of hero would I be if I let you put yourself needlessly in harm's way to try and follow in my footsteps?"

Surprisingly wise words, from him. Aizawa noted Toshinori's reluctance to give the boy an unambiguous rejection, and with a heavy sigh, turned to Midoriya to deliver the final blow.

"Safety is more paramount than ever here at U.A., especially after the USJ attack, and the revelation that villains are beginning to organize again. This is not the right time for a trial period on an educational experiment. All Might has spoken to me about his previous conversation with you on this topic, but while you cannot be a hero as you are, that doesn't mean you can't do something heroic. You are still capable of pursuing many career paths in line with your ideals- don't let this setback affect your goals. Have you considered applying for transfer to the support course instead? I'm sure that with your friend Hatsume's guidance, you could develop a talent for mechanics quickly. There are a wealth of possibilities within general studies too, of course, which would allow you fulfill your urge to help others- police or rescue work, for instance. You have many options, Midoriya, but your request for permission to sit the hero course transfer exam is denied."

Izuku had frozen up by the time Aizawa finished, his mouth contorted in a grimace somewhere between despair and defiance. His eyes were fixed on the floor, and his body was shaking with emotion.

"I... you... how could you..."

Before he could complete his thought, the door to the office swung open; All Might grew back into
his muscular form in the nick of time as Shinso Hitoshi and Hatsume Mei burst through.

"That's completely unfair, Aizawa-sensei!" Shinso cried, exasperated. "Can't you tell how much he wants it? He'll do anything just for the chance to sit the exam, it's no cost to you just to let him take it!"

"I've been working so hard on making the perfect combination of babies for him!" Hatsume added, picking up Izuku's discarded arm braces and fastening them back onto his body as Midoriya stood between the two, speechless. "He's my special project! I'll fine tune them as much as you want, make sure they run perfectly with as close to a 0% malfunction rate as I can get! And I appreciate your suggestion, but even I can tell that he wouldn't really be happy in Support!"

"And I know that he's not happy in General Studies," Hitoshi continued, "we've been talking about this since we met the first week of class. He and I both want to transfer to the hero course- but for me to get the chance and for him not to- you're all failing him if this is what your response is! If not even U.A. can be bothered to try and help him live his dream, what is he supposed to do?"

"Find another," Aizawa snapped, his patience finally at an end. "You two were eavesdropping, weren't you?" His eyes shot to Hatsume, who hesitantly produced a dish-shaped listening device connected to two earbuds from her pocket- no doubt one of her countless creations.

"We just wanted to make sure everything went ok for Izuku, we didn't mean any-"

"Detention, three days, both of you. Hastume, rest assured that I'll be speaking to Power Loader about cutting back your time in the Development Studio for the rest of the week. And Shinso, I frankly don't care how well you did at the Sports Festival- one more word out of you and I'll revoke your permission to take the transfer exam as well." The two sank into a shocked silence at that, their cheeks flushed red.

"Wha- don't punish them, this isn't their fault!" Midoriya suddenly remembered how to speak again, and was waving his hands back and forth vigorously. "I could have stopped them, I should have made sure they didn't come! Aizawa-sensei, you can't…" He realized his mistake too late, and screwed his eyes shut as he waited for the inevitable rebuke.

"Oh really, Midoriya? I can't?" Shota cocked an eyebrow, wincing at the pain the simple motion caused him. "Do you want to join them? Because you're about to."

Izuku glanced to his friends; when he looked back, all the fear and sadness in his eyes had been replaced by anger.

"I might as well. Seems like they're the only ones who care about me in this school anyway."

"Bullshit. This whole thing is just… such a load of bullshit."

Shinso kicked a stray rock along the street for effect as he spoke, his hands stuffed in his pockets. It was past nine on a Thursday night, and he, Midoriya, and Hatsume were walking home together from their third and last session of detention. Aside from the gentle chirping of crickets and the sound of their voices, most of the neighborhoods they passed through were silent and still.

"Seconded," Hatsume seemed drained of her usual energy, and was conspicuously lacking the usual smears of grease on her face and arms. "I haven't been allowed in the studio outside of class all week- I'm about to die from withdrawal." She took a turn at kicking Shinso's rock when they caught up to it, sending it sailing over a nearby home's fence. "I know we shouldn't have talked back to Aizawa-sensei, but aren't they always telling them to go plus ultra to help others in the hero course?
At the end of the day, isn't that what we were trying to do?"

"I… I just don't get it. First, they stack the entrance exam in favor of combat quirks, and now they pull this with the most enthusiastic applicant they could ever ask for? I don't know if I even want to go through the trouble of trying to transfer anymore."

Assigned to the same homeroom class, 1-C, Shinso and Midoriya had met during the first week, and quickly bonded over their mutual desire to switch to the hero course. Izuku had introduced him to Mei shortly after, and half a semester later, the group was practically inseparable, spending countless hours after school together in the Development Studio as Hatsume worked on her babies, in the gym as Midoriya and Hitoshi trained, or simply out exploring the city. Since grade school, Shinso's classmates had mocked him for his quirk, told him that it was only good for criminals, and in response he generally tended to shy away from attempting to befriend others. But there was something so intense about Izuku and Mei- their drive to achieve their goals was so strong- that he couldn't help but be drawn to them, like a moth to two shining flames. It wasn't that they were particularly popular, or funny, or strong- Midoriya was a quirkless nerd and Hatsume an obsessive gearhead- but he found himself opening up to them all the same; he couldn't remember the last people he had felt this comfortable around.

A few weeks into their friendship, Midoriya had opened up to them about just how serious he was about his desire to be a hero, about his childhood, his bullies, his parents, his fascination with All Might- everything. Hatsume leapt at the chance to build a new set of combat augmentation babies, and after a month of trial and error with different combinations of support items, on top of Izuku's already strenuous physical training regimen, they'd recorded a demonstration of his abilities. Spurred on by Hitoshi's fourth place finish at the sports festival, where he'd brainwashed three hero course students to make it to the semifinals before Tokoyami Fumikage caught on and refused to answer his question, they'd talked him into calling the meeting with Aizawa and All Might, reasoning that the hero course teachers might be more willing to consider transfer candidates in general after how well Shinso had performed. Now, in the aftermath, they still weren't sure how to pick up the pieces.

"Don't give up for my sake, Hitoshi."

Shinso and Mei both started, and traded a glance. Midoriya had been withdrawn and quiet all week, pushing away most of their attempts to console him. Aside from simple answers and requests in class and at lunch, it was the most he'd spoken the entire day.

"Just because they don't understand my dream doesn't mean that you should cut yours short. I know that you can be a great hero, Hitoshi. I just need to make them understand… if the video wasn't enough… but what more could they…"

He quickly devolved into one of his bouts of unintelligible muttering, and after exchanging another knowing look, they fell back behind him and let him ramble on, making their own small talk as they continued homeward. As each streetlamp they passed bathed Mei in its dull yellow glow, Hitoshi couldn't help but think that she looked different, somehow, without her usual aura of grease and sweat. Almost cute, in a strange, 'I'll never love you like I love my monkey wrench' sort of way. And while it showed less skin than her usual workshop attire, the school uniform had a funny way of accentuating her curves. *Huh. This is new.* He blinked, surprised at himself, but unable to look away. *Has her chest always been that… well-shaped?* But then her crosshair-pupiled eyes caught him staring, and he quickly snapped his head forward, stammering for a conversation topic.

"God, yeah, I can't believe they have someone like Aizawa teaching first year hero candidates. Talk about a stick up your ass. I swear, sometimes I'm tempted to just brainwash the whole administration. Too bad my quirk lets them know it's happening, it would solve a whole lot of problems."
"Sometimes I'm tempted to make a baby to fix that loophole for ya." She responded with a giggle, but then they both grew silent, thinking about what they'd said. She's joking, right? His gaze drifted up to the moonless sky above them. Would it even be... no, no, it's illegal, that's out of the question.

They came upon Midoriya's block before he could consider it any further- their houses were all in the same general direction, but he lived the closest to the school out of the three of them. Just as they were about to say their goodbyes, though, something flashy and colorful in the dumpster nearest to the curb caught Shinso's eye, and he took a step closer to examine it.

"Wait, Izuku, is that..." Another step, and Hitoshi's eyes widened. "Holy shit, is that your All Might poster?"

"No way!" Mei sprinted up to the garbage bin and peered in. "Izuku, this is your whole collection! All the action figures too, and the comics!"

They had been to Midoriya's apartment a number of times since the beginning of the school year, and never failed to make fun of him for his extreme taste in superhero décor.

"But you loved all that stuff, why would you..." Hitoshi trailed off- he and Hatsume both already knew the answer. Fuck, he's taking this even harder than I thought if he went that far. When Izuku finally replied, his eyes were lowered to the ground, and his voice was quiet. Shinso couldn't help but notice that one of his fists was clenched at his side, though.

"I, uh... got kind of angry the other night, after the meeting. And sad. I might have gotten a little carried away. But I just... I couldn't look at him anymore, not when he was all around me like that. It doesn't feel right anymore. Like I'm just not worthy. I... I don't even deserve his presence."

"Whoa, whoa, hold it right there."

"Yeah, wait just one second."

In an instant Hitoshi and Mei closed the distance to Izuku and wrapped into a group hug with the quirkless boy at the center.

"Don't you ever call yourself worthless, ok?" Shinso ruffled Midoriya's hair as he broke the embrace. "You'll find a way to prove yourself to them. I know you will."

Prove myself. I have to prove myself. How do I prove myself?

Over the next few days, Midoriya Izuku chased obsessively after that elusive, amorphous goal, discarding idea after idea in a manic fervor. At the time he'd been so sure that the video of his performance with Mei's babies would be enough, so confident that All Might would finally see his passion, recognize his capabilities. But he rejected me. He still rejected me. I'm still not good enough for him. They still don't understand.

For a days after the meeting, he'd fallen into a cycle of despair and denial and anger, eating little and talking less, even to his closest friends. His mother was worried sick, and nearly fainted with shock when he threw out his collection of All Might memorabilia, but he hadn't been able to muster up the courage to explain to her, to put his pain into words. Every night since the rejection, the face of the Symbol of Peace, a comforting presence for so many years as it stared down at him from his walls and shelves, had become nothing more than a reminder of his own inadequacy. He'd felt like vomiting every second he spent in his room until it was all safely in the dumpster.

But now, after a week of agonizing over his failure, he finally felt like he had the answer. They don't
understand, so I have to make them understand. I have to show them how committed I am. I have to, I have to, I have to…

Those were the words Izuku muttered again and again beneath his breath as he shoved Mei's gauntlets and googles into his backpack after class, covering them up with his gym clothes for good measure. As he darted out of the empty development studio and caught back up with his friends where they were waiting for him at the school entrance, making some innocuous excuse about the bathroom. As he dumped the support items out onto his desk that night, threw on an inconspicuous grey hoodie to hide the arm braces and gauntlets, and slipped out the door while Inko was busy doing the dishes. As he slipped on the goggles once he had walked a good twenty minutes away from his neighborhood, toward the rougher part of town, and pulled up his hood.

If I show them that I can rescue someone from a villain, then that'll prove it to them. Then they'll understand. They'll see how great of a hero I can be. I can save people with a smile too.

Trembling from anticipation, Izuku forced a shaky smile onto his face, and pulled his latest notebook from his jacket pocket- a flash of anger came and went when he saw the torn pages where All Might had stepped on it, just as he'd stepped on the rest of Midoriya's aspirations, over and over.

"I'll finally make myself worthy of you tonight," he whispered, flipping to his most recent notes, a catalogue of known villains and criminals operating in this area of the ward. No longer in neatly walled residential neighborhoods, he was passing bars and brothels and mahjong dens now; red lights glowed all around him, giving the throngs of drunken revelers bustling through the narrow streets and alleys a sinister aura. A month ago he might have felt terrified walking through a place like this, but now, the danger made him feel alive. His forced smile slowly grew into a real one as he thought of all the lowlifes he could find here, what tactics he'd use to fight them, how they'd fall on their knees before him and bow down to his skill and ability. It occurred to him that that last thought wasn't very herolike, and he paused, trying to shake it from his head.

Then a shrill scream pierced the din of the crowds, and just a dozen paces away, he saw his chance- a woman was frantically pointing after a man darting away with a red bundle in his arms. A purse snatcher. It wasn't quite the type of villain that Midoriya had been hoping for, but he sprinted after the thief all the same, away from the crowds and into a series of twisting backalleys. The man must not have expected any pursuers or heard Izuku's footsteps; he found the thief dumping out the purse's contents in the deserted space behind an old restaurant, rifling through a pile of makeup accessories, loose yen notes, and hygiene products. He let out a cry of triumph when he finally found her cellphone, and was in the process of pocketing it when Midoriya finally found the courage to speak up.

"All right, that's enough! Put your hands behind your head and get on your knees! You're coming with me!"

The man flinched and dropped the phone, but when he whipped around and saw Izuku, he started to laugh.

"What kind of hero are you supposed to be? Sweatshirt Boy?" He leered at Midoriya with sharp white fangs and vertically-slitted yellow eyes from beneath a mop of greasy black hair, and pulled a switchblade from inside his jacket. "Get out of here before you start to annoy me, ya fuckin' twerp."

"I'm not gonna do that." Izuku took a step forward and clenched his fist, feeling the smooth metal of Hatsume's gauntlets slide over his knuckles as he observed his enemy. Much of the man's appearance was vaguely feline- *His quirk. Night vision, maybe, or quick reflexes? *"I said, you're coming with me. Now you can come quietly or-"
Midoriya was still midsentence when the thief lunged forward with his knife, driving it directly toward his stomach. He barely had time to dodge before the man slashed across his right arm; the blade tore through the sleeve of Izuku's hoodie, and would have dug into his flesh, but caught on the metal of the braces instead, and bounced cleanly off. The thief stumbled back, confused- in the brief opening, Midoriya drive his fist into the man's chest with all the power he could manage. Magnifying the force of impact by a factor of five and adding a 300 volt electrical shock, Mei's baby sent the thief staggering backwards and onto the ground, the outline of a fist singed on the front of his shirt.

Midoriya marveled at the device with wide eyes; he'd seen what it could do to target dummies before, but this was his first time using it on a real person. *That was amazing… I wonder how much the impact force depends on momentum, though. Maybe if I get a running start next time…*

Rising shakily to his feet, the thief tried to bolt, drawing Izuku out of his thoughts and back to reality. Dashing forward, he caught the man by one leg and forced him back down; a glint of steel flashed at the edge of his vision, and he twisted out of the way of another desperate swipe of the thief's knife as the man fell hard on his back, grabbing hold of his target's arm as soon as he regained his balance.

"*Drop the weapon!*"

"Fuck you," the man gritted in response, pushing back against Midoriya's grip with all his strength.

His brows furrowing in determination, Izuku drove a fist into the man's jaw and at the same time began to gradually tighten his grip around his arm, remembering his combat training. *Disarm the target first.* Blood spattered across the pavement where the gauntlet impacted, though there were no electrical burns left behind this time; that component of the baby had a thirty second recharge period. All the same, the sight of the man's ruined jaw produced a swirl of feelings inside Midoriya that he had never expected. Satisfaction, elation, *release.* The thief still hadn't dropped the knife, so Izuku hit him again, then a third time, opening a gash on his cheek and cleanly breaking his nose. Endorphins surged through his body like fire with each blow, and all at once the man's arm broke with a loud snap; the knife clattered to the ground, and the thief let out a cry of pain muffled by the blood in his mouth.

Midoriya didn't hear either sound, though- his eyes were wide in glee, and his breath was a ragged pant. Red filled his vision. He hit the man two, three, four more times, pummeling his throat and chest and shoulders as well. All the pain and emotion that he had felt over the past week- no, not just since then, since he first realized he was quirkless- was flowing out through his fists, the pent-up rage which had slowly built up inside him over eleven years of being labeled as inferior, as not good enough, as hopeless, all erupting at once.

"*Am I good enough now?!*" He cried, starting to chuckle as he continued his onslaught. "*Am I, Kacchan?! What do you think, All Might?! Eraserhead?! Am I strong enough to be a hero now?!*"

When he glanced back down he imagined Aizawa's face beneath the messy black hair instead of the thief's, but instead of holding back, he hit even harder, relishing the thought of sending the teacher's teeth flying with a single punch. A few moments later the recharge period on his electrical attack ended, and the jerking shudder that the volts sent coursing through the man's body was the most beautiful thing he had seen in ages. After a few more blows, Izuku fell back and sat down by his target's side, his arms aching from exertion. The thief was still now, and silent. As his rage slowly receded, Midoriya gradually became aware of the warm wetness on his arms, and face, and chest. The realization dawned on him slowly at first, when he glanced down to his hand and saw that he was covered in crimson almost up to the elbow.

"O-oh."

His eyes slowly drifted over to the thief, and Izuku's heart seized in his chest when he saw the
mangled ruin that remained of the man's face- and everything else above his chest, for that matter.
For a moment he thought to check for a pulse, but deep down he knew there was no need. He's
dead. I killed him. The concept seemed so foreign, it was practically unreal. But he couldn't ignore
the pool of blood that was slowly seeping across the ground towards him, running into the gutter and
down the storm drain, couldn't pretend it wasn't there.

"Oh my god."

Without another word, Midoriya turned around and vomited into the nearest dumpster, his entire
body shaking like a leaf. I have to get away from here, he knew. Have to go home. Still on his
knees, he tore off his crimson-spattered hoodie and used the clean sections to mop off most of the
blood on his hands and face, then bunched it into a ball inside his arms so that only the pristine inner
fabric was facing outward. Can't leave any evidence. They can't find out. Staggering to his feet, he
stumbled like a drunkard toward the street, tears welling up beneath his goggles as the trembling
continued unabated. After a few tentative steps he broke into a run, charging through the red light
district's crowds and not stopping or slowing until he was a block away from his home, panting and
soaked in sweat. What he had done was beyond self-defense. He was a criminal. A murderer. He
could never be a hero, not anymore. But what terrified Izuku the most- what he had truly been
fleeing from- was how good it had felt to finally be strong.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you guys enjoyed the slow burn leading up to Villain!Deku taking his first life! I
realized that there was a lot more to tell in terms of flashbacks than I initially anticipated,
so this is Part 1 of 3 now. Next time we'll see how Shinso and Hatsume react to this,
why they leave U.A., and how Neito, Momo, and Tokoyami are involved.

Let me know your thoughts and comments in the reviews! Was this gradual descent to
murder realistic?
"Guys… I think I messed up. I think I really, really messed up."

Hatsume looked up from her bento, and exchanged a quick glance with Shinso. Quiet for most of the past week, Midoriya had gotten a bit livelier after their detention ended, but today, he'd been as silent as the grave. They'd both tried asking him what was wrong, to no response; now, as they all sat together at lunch, he was looking at them both with hollow eyes, his voice soft and distant.

"What do you mean?" Mei finally asked, setting down her chopsticks. "Did something happen in class?"

"Is this about your All Might collection?" Hitoshi managed once he'd finished gulping down a mouthful of noodles, his brows furrowed in concern. "I know that was all really important to you."

Izuku shook his head, his eyes drifting down to his practically untouched tray of food.

"No, it's not about that. I don't regret throwing it all away. Especially after…” He trailed off, cradled his head in both hands. "I… I can't talk about it. Not here. But I need to tell you. It's been eating me up."

Something about the way he said those last few words made Hatsume's heart drop in her chest. This sounds a lot worse than a failed test.

"I… think Power Loader-sensei will understand if I have to miss my extra time in the studio after school today," she offered after a moment's contemplation. "Why don't we all go over to your place once class lets out? Would this be easier to talk about there?"

"We can pick up some of those red bean mochi you like on the way," Shinso added with a grin, doing his best to cheer Izuku up.

"Yeah, sure." Midoriya nodded faintly, then lowered his head to the table. "Sounds good."

He told them on the walk back. Not all of the details, of course, but as much of the basics as he could manage without vomiting or bursting into tears- he'd practically run out of those last night, in the aftermath. He certainly didn't tell them how taking the man's life had made him feel- how the desire to make the thief suffer had overwhelmed him. But all the same, once he was finished, Izuku was flooded with relief- it was as if a massive weight had been lifted from his chest after deadening his movements for the past day.

Hitoshi and Mei were quiet at first, and the elation was swiftly replaced by fear of what they'd say. That they'd go straight to the police and turn him in, that they'd shrink away from him in horror. Shinso was the first to speak.

"That sounds… intense. But it was self-defense. He attacked you. You didn't do anything wrong."

"You really think the police are gonna see it that way?" Midoriya asked dejectedly.

"No, Hitoshi's right," Hatsume butted in, "he kept coming after you even after you tried to disarm
him. It's not your fault." She took a sullen bite of mochi and dropped her eyes to the ground. "If it's anyone's fault, it's mine. They were my babies. I bear as much legal responsibility as you do."

Guilt swelled up in Izuku's gut, but before he could reply, Shinso cut him off.

"Why didn't you just ask for our help if that's what you wanted to do, Midoriya? With my quirk, I could have forced him to drop the knife…"

"And I could have fine-tuned the gauntlets to regulate their power outlet," Mei continued quietly. "If's my fault they were lethal, I need to put safeties in place for future combat situations."

Izuku's stopped in his tracks in the middle of the sidewalk, staring at the others with wide eyes.

"W-what?! But... what I did, vigilantism, it's illegal! You're saying you would've... helped me?"

"If that's what you thought it would take to get them to consider you for the hero course, then absolutely," Hitoshi answered without hesitation. "The rules say it's wrong, but sometimes... maybe sometimes, the rules need to be bent a little bit."

"Plus, I've sunk way too much time into making your babies not to make sure you use them properly in action," Mei quipped, punching him lightly on the arm. "You're an investment now, Izu!"

For the first time all day, Midoriya smiled as he started walking again. 

I don't need All Might any more, he knew. They're all I need. He let me down, betrayed me, but they never will. But the warmth was only fleeting; the reality of the situation quickly set back in.

"You guys are amazing. But even if it was self-defense, what do I do now? It's been almost a day, and I fled the scene with evidence… if there's an investigation, I'll be-"

"One step at a time." Hitoshi interjected, patting him on the back as they rounded the corner onto Midoriya's street. "We're almost at you're place, right? Let's talk about this when we can sit down and have some time to think. I'm sure there are steps we can take."

Izuku nodded in agreement, and pressed ahead. When they reached his door, though, it was already slightly ajar. Weird. Could mom be bringing in groceries? Maybe she just forgot to close it.

He was about to push it open and step inside when Hatsume's hand latched onto his shoulder like a vice; confused, he followed her line of sight to the lock. The busted lock.

"What the…"

"Quiet. " Shinso hissed, grabbing onto Midoriya's other shoulder, his eyes narrowed in concentration. The feeling of uneasiness growing in the pit of Midoriya's stomach broke with the intensity of a wave when he angled an ear to the entrance, and the sound of unfamiliar male voices began to drift through.

Robbers. MOM.

Izuku's body moved without thinking. Within a second he had burst through the door and into his living room, and was staring down two- no, three- armed men, currently rummaging through whatever meager valuables the threadbare Midoriya residence had to offer. His mind jumped into an analysis of the threats, and time's flow seemed to lag as they turned around to face him. Closest to him, and leaning on the doorframe of his room, was a heavyset man with short brown hair, a nasty scar on his face, and a pistol in his hand. In the center of the room, the tallest of the group carried a crowbar, and had the head of a Doberman Pinscher. The third man was half-obscured behind the television, which he was process of unplugging- Izuku couldn't tell if he had a weapon or not.
"There you are," the tall man snarled, his fangs bared.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Shinso stepped up to Midoriya's side, his voice frantic. No, stay back, he wanted to shout, but his mouth refused to move.

"We're asking the questions here," the one with the pistol answered, then froze and fell suddenly silent. It took Izuku a moment to realize what had happened, but by then Hitoshi was already calling out orders.

"Point your gun at him." He gestured to the dog-headed man, trembling slightly as his eyes darted between the two. "If he attacks us, pull the trigger."

"Nice quirk," the tall man said with a whistle. "But we're not here for you. I suggest you leave before you get yourself hurt." He pointed his crowbar straight at Midoriya, a growl erupting from his jaws. "We're here for him."

"M-me?" Izuku squeaked. 'T-This must be a mistake, I've never-

"Yeah, that's a really nice quirk." The Doberman ignored Midoriya completely, looking his paralyzed colleague up and down before returning his gaze to his target. "You know what my quirk is called, kid? Bloodhound." He took a step forward, chuckling when the brainwashed man's hands began to shake on the grip of his pistol, and audibly sniffed the air. "I can pick up a single scent in a crowd of hundreds, and follow it fifty kilometers or more, as long as there's a trail. Now, when I found my buddy Kibato splattered across an alleyway last night, there was plenty of his scent to work with, and do you know what?" He took another step, sniffed again. A drop of sweat rolled lazily down Izuku's brow.

"I can smell him all over you."

Midoriya gulped, his mind racing for some way, any way, to convince the intruders to leave. I make up all the alibis I want, but his quirk is impossible to fool.

"Look, I-

"I hope you'll understand if we decided to take some liberties with your things while we waited for you," the man continued. "But it's all a fair trade in the end, I think. What I'm most curious about, though, is how mommy dearest is gonna react when she finds out that her baby boy is a murderer," he laughed aloud at that last part, and held up a family picture frame from a side table tauntingly. "Oh don't worry, you won't have to tell her yourself. We'll explain it all in perfect detail to her when she gets back. But when it comes to the whole killing part, I think there's someone more deserving than me to handle it."

The next few moments passed in a blur. The third man sprung out from behind the television, a snub-nose revolver in his hands- he had the same feline face as the dead purse snatcher. His brother?! Midoriya didn't have time to think anything else before Shinso grabbed him from behind and pulled hard, then shouted something to the brainwashed thug with the pistol. The heavyset man promptly switched targets and opened fire, just as the man with the revolver let off three rounds of his own. Despite Hitoshi's effort, one stray bullet still caught Izuku in the arm as he fell back, and blood sprayed across his field of vision; ten paces away, the Doberman charged forward with his crowbar raised. He was within an arm's length of Shinso and Midoriya when a small metal disc slammed into his chest, and a web of electricity snaked across his body from the point of impact.

Forced to his knees, he grit his teeth and tried to stand again, but Hatsume simply stepped closer and fired another from the concealed launcher on her wrist, aiming for his head this time. He fell to the
floor in convulsions shortly afterward, while on the other side of the room the feline man collapsed onto Izuku's couch, dead from half a dozen gunshots.

The room was silent for a long moment after the dust had settled. No one wanted to speak first, because addressing what had just happened would make it real—would make the bullet holes in the floor real, and the blood soaking into the couch real, and the dead body real. Mei finally broke the silence by murmuring something about getting bandages for Midoriya's arm, and as his adrenaline died down, the pain of the wound hit Izuku in full force. The bullet had only grazed him, thankfully, and lodged itself in the soil of a houseplant by the door. Putting pressure on the wound with one hand, he rushed over and fished the spent projectile out with the other, shoving it into his pocket and hurriedly replacing the dirt over the smoking hole so that the site of impact was erased entirely.

"Izuku, what are you doing?" Hitoshi asked, his eyes still trained on the brainwashed robber holding the pistol.

"Getting rid of the evidence that any of us were here," Midoriya replied shakily. "Once we bandage my arm we have to clean up all of my blood and then get the hell out of here. Self-defense or no, if they question us and find out that you used your quirk like this without a license, they'll expel you, maybe even arrest you. I can't let that happen, not when this is all my fault. If the police find the crime scene as it us without us here, we can play this off as a dispute between robbers gone wrong."

"I guess you and I are in this together now." Shinso sounded much calmer than Izuku could possibly expect him to be given the circumstances.

"Don't forget me," Hatsume added with a weak grin as she returned with gauze and tape and began to tend to Midoriya's arm. "I'm still an accessory to both incidents, technically." She glanced down to the unconscious Doberman, and nodded approvingly. "'Muggers beware, it's better than pepper spray!' Guess it turns out the slogan I used to pitch this baby to the companies was accurate after all."

Once Izuku's bleeding had been stemmed sufficiently, he and Mei both set about at scrubbing his blood off the floor with all the cleaning products available to them, balling up the washcloth and stuffing it in his backpack after they were done. Finally, they arrived at the elephant in the room—sensing the others' reluctance, Hitoshi shook his head and addressed the issue first.

"The only question left is what we do with these two." He motioned to the two surviving criminals; the brainwashed one was glaring at them all with raw hatred in his eyes as he stood rooted to the floor. "They know about Midoriya and what happened last night, not to mention about me today. They have no reason not to rat us out the moment the police start asking them questions."

"Is there any way you could use your quirk to erase their memories?" Hatsume offered. "Maybe brainwash them into forgetting the past day? Or into lying to the cops?"

"I wish," Shinso responded, "but my quirk doesn't work like that. I can only command one person at a time, and the part of the mind it interferes with is completely different from the one that stores memories. Plus, as soon as it wore off, they'd just tell them anyway."

"Then there's only one option left," Izuku said quietly. "We've already started down this path. None of us can be heroes anymore—there's no use clinging to their morals. "I don't see any other way that doesn't end in us being arrested."

Another moment of silence, longer than the last. Hatsume sat on the floor and ran her hands through her bright pink hair, conflict plain on her face. Hitoshi lifted his gaze to the ceiling, deep in thought.

"There's no turning back after this." The blue-haired boy finally said, rubbing the bags under his
eyes, which suddenly looked to be watery. "No more reliance on self-defense if we're caught. You both know that. We... we'll be giving up becoming heroes. Heroes don't do things like this."

Silence followed his remarks, long and uncomfortable.

"Guys, please... I don't know what to do." Shinso's voice had become more urgent now, and the tears welling in his eyes had begun to drip slowly down his cheeks. "I want everyone's agreement before we go through with this."

"They threatened my mother," Izuku gritted without hesitation. Something had hardened inside him— or maybe something soft and gentle had died. "And even if we let them go and they don't talk, they'll just end up hurting other people. That's who they are. Do it."

"I don't think they would've shown mercy to any of us," Said Mei, wiping a stray tear from one eye before walking over to the Doberman and retrieving both of her shock discs. "If you're gonna do it, do it quickly. I... I just don't see any other way out of this. I can't make babies in jail, or if I'm expelled, for that matter."

Shinso nodded, drew in a deep breath, and turned to the man with the pistol.

"Kill the man on the floor, then kill yourself."

For Midoriya Izuku, the days after the break-in were filled with police sirens and school counselor visits and his mother's tears. Hiding their involvement hadn't proven as difficult as Izuku had feared—the wound was on his upper arm, so he was able to hide it relatively easily, and thanks to the time of day, no one had witnessed them entering the apartment directly before the shooting. Aside from a few cursory questions about where they had been and whether they had seen anyone suspicious leaving or entering the area, the investigators didn't pay them much attention at all.

As much of a relief as that was to Midoriya, it didn't provide much comfort to his mother, who had been more or less an emotional wreck since the day she came home to the crime scene; Izuku regretted that she had to be the one to find the brutal display, but they couldn't risk being at the scene themselves when the police arrived. Many times since then, he'd wanted to comfort her, wanted to sit next to her and cry along with her. But the more he tried, the more he found he couldn't bring himself to. It wasn't that he was out of tears— it was as if the sight of them now inspired some primal revulsion seated deep inside him, triggered a newfound aversion to weakness in any form. He couldn't tell her it was alright because he knew it wasn't.

While the authorities finished their investigation and the floor and furnishings were cleaned and redone, Midoriya and his mother stayed in the guest room of one of Inko's few friends in the neighborhood, Bakugo Mitsuki. Living in an actual house was a dramatic shift, though it wasn't as if her son made the transition any easier. For the first time, though, he was able to respond to Katsuki's unending torment with something far better than tears and complacency— complete indifference. So a week into their stay at his home, when he signaled Shinso and Hatsume's arrival at the door with his trademark attitude, Midoriya was far from flustered.

"Deku! Come get your loser friends!"

"Don't call them that, Kacchan." Izuku said evenly as he descended the stairs. *Deku. Useless.* The name had always bothered him, as it was meant to, but now, every time Bakugo said it, he felt anger rather than shame, boiling quietly inside him.

"I have to deal with them coming over to my goddamn house, so I can call them whatever the fuck I
want." Katsuki replied with a sneer. "All because you dumbasses had to go and get yourselves robbed."

Midoriya paused a few feet from the door, his hand outstretched to open it. The rage surged up inside him for a moment; he thought about punching Bakugo, about watching the blood fly from his broken nose. But then the seething anger calmed again, and he opted for a simpler approach.

"Shut up, Kacchan."

Katsuki was silent for a moment. His eyes widened momentarily in shock, then his features twisted into an expression somewhere between disgust and disbelief.

"What the fuck did you just-"

"I said, _shut up. Stop talking._"

Izuku swung the door open before he could reply, and Bakugo's retort was drowned out by Hitoshi and Mei's cries of greeting. They quickly moved past Katsuki to the guest room- Inko was working a late shift today to help pay for Mitsuki's groceries while they stayed at her house, a completely unnecessary gesture that Midoroyia's mother insisted on despite her host's protests. Regardless, they had the room to themselves, and plenty to discuss. For a week, they tried to forget what had happened- to leave it behind and press on with their studies like nothing had changed. They all knew it wasn't working. Izuku was the first to put their collective sentiment into words.

"We can't stay here."

Shinso simply nodded, and Hatsume dropped her eyes to the floor, twiddling idly at her thumbs.

"I know. But… where would we go? Who would take us? And how can I leave my babies behind? They're everything to me. I… I don't know what I'm supposed to do if I can't make more."

"We go as far away from U.A. and from heroes as we can get," said Midoriya, "and we make our own path. Forget the law, forget the way society tells us we're supposed to live. I know that together, the three of us can do whatever we set our minds to. As far as how we'll find a place to call our own, and how you can keep making babies…"

"I think it's time for us to fix the loophole in my quirk," Hitoshi finished; a wry smirk crossed his face. "If you're up to the challenge, that is."

Mei grinned, and lowered her goggles over her eyes as she pulled out her concept notebook.

"Always."

"I have four candidates."

Hatsume slid her notebook across the lunch table, a satisfied smirk on her grease-stained face. Midoriya nodded for her to continue as he began to thumb through pages of her messy handwriting. It hadn't taken long for Izuku to realize the wisdom of Aizawa's words- as strong as Mei's support items were, their group was lacking a truly powerful combat quirk. They needed to bring at least one capable hero course student into the fold if they hoped to do more than merely survive, and as the one who interacted with them the most, Hatsume had been tasked with scouting potential recruits.

"Go on, I'm listening."
"Well, it was five as of a few days ago- my first choice was Todoroki Shoto, but after the Hosu Incident... well, obviously he's off the table now."

Shinso shook his head and let out a low whistle.

"I can't believe he's still alive after that. Talk about a mess."

Midoriya nodded, and glanced around the cafeteria- a pall still hung over the school, a palpable film of shock and despair that coated everyone and everything. Three days ago, Stain, the Hero Killer, had made an appearance in Hosu City in concurrence with a Nomu attack orchestrated by the League of Villains, where he murdered the Pro Hero Native and Class 1-A Vice President Iida Tenya. When the other heroes in the area attempted to confront him as he escaped, the Pro Hero Manual was killed and several others were grievously injured, foremost among them Todoroki Shoto, who was now in a medically induced coma at the verge of death.

Enraged by his son's injuries, Endeavor had ignored arrest protocol and reduced Stain to ash as the media watched, turning the villain into a martyr and significantly damaging both his own reputation and that of heroes as a whole. Several parents had pulled their students out of U.A. in the aftermath, and protestors outside the school were almost a daily occurrence. With Stain's ideology spreading like wildfire online in the wake of his death, and the hero world in chaos, there had never been a better time for them to make their escape- they had already set a date, and were simply counting down the days now, searching for a perfect ally in the meantime.

"Well, moving on to my number two, we can't ignore Bakugo Katsuki. He did win the Sports Festival, after all."

"He's off the table." Midoriya countered quietly. "You already know why."

Hatsume looked like she was going to protest for a moment, but thought better of it, and continued.

"Alright, well that leaves Tokoyami and Yaoyorozu from Class A, and Monoma from Class B. All of their quirks are incredibly useful and versatile- I've already been coming up with some amazing baby designs for them! But I recommend we go after Monoma first."

"Why's that?" Izuku raised an eyebrow, looking up from the notebook. For the first time, he realized that Mei's eyes were glowing with the same dark light as his.

"He thinks like we do."

Monoma Neito always seemed to be trying his hardest to make himself the center of attention wherever he went, so it wasn't particularly difficult for Midoriya to find him that afternoon, loudly berating his classmates as he sparred with them in the gym.

"Not good enough, Shiozaki!" He was saying with a maniacal chuckle, as he began to sprout vines from his own blonde hair to match his opponent's and leapt out of the way of one of her blows.

"You'll need to be faster to beat Bakugo or Tokoyami!"

Content to watch from a distance for now, Izuku took a seat alongside Shinso in the bleachers and began to jot down his observations in his own notebook, following Monoma closely as he faced classmate after classmate, frequently emerging victorious. *Copy. I remember it from the Sports Festival- what a wonderfully useful quirk. And he seems to have excellent control over it, too. He's studied the strengths and weaknesses of his classmates' quirks thoroughly.*

They waited to approach their target until 1-B finally finished their training half an hour later; luckily,
he was one of the last people to leave, and they were able to catch him as he towed a sheen of sweat off his forehead by the lockers.

"You're Monoma Neito, right?" Midoriya approached the blonde-haired boy first, an innocent smile on his face.

"That depends, who's asking?" Neito turned around with a smug grin, brushing a stray lock of sweat-soaked hair out of his eyes with all the brash, misplaced self-confidence of a pop idol. Izuku could barely contain his laughter at the sight. Oh, this is going to be fun.

"I'm Midoriya Izuku, in general studies! My friend Shinso and I are big fans of yours- you might remember him from the Sports Festival."

Monoma raised a skeptical eyebrow, but his eyes widened slightly in recognition when he saw Hitoshi a few paces behind.

"Ah yes, I remember you." He held a hand contemplatively to his chin, his voice growing more conceited by the syllable. "Not too bad- for a general studies student, that is. I have to say, my expectations for your program weren't too high to begin with. Yes, you're quite good, in fact."

"I didn't see you in the bracket for the final round," Shinso countered nonchalantly. "From what I remember, it was mostly 1-A students, right?"

Monoma's eyebrow twitched slightly, and his grin quickly became forced. Ah, so that's his weak spot. This is going to be even more enjoyable than I thought.

"1-A may have gotten lucky during the first few stages, but we still have them more than beat in terms of overall quirk quality. They rushed out of the gates at the first opportunity, but it's only a matter of time before 1-B catches up and leaves them in the dust!" By the time he finished he was practically trembling with passion, one fist clenched in the air.

"That's why you're all practicing so hard, huh?" Midoriya's smile widened. "At that rate, I'm sure you'll catch up to them in no time."

"That's a lot easier to say after Hosu City," Hitoshi said bluntly, and for a moment, Neito's bravado faltered.

"What happened to Iida and Todoroki was a tragedy," Monoma replied, his eyes lowered. "But in the end, the result is just more of the same. Class A has the monopoly on both sympathy and attention now." Bit by bit his passion began to return, and frustration swelled up in his voice. "Hell, the press is practically following them around! Did you see the interview those fools Bakugo and Asui gave last night? The web certainly won't stop talking about it! And this type of story isn't the one that goes away in a week or two- it's going to stick to them until they graduate! 1-B has to work twice as hard as we were just to be noticed from here on out, much less praised. And that's not even mentioning the fact that two of my classmates have already been pulled out by their parents just this week…" He closed his eyes and massaged the bridge of his nose with two fingers. "Heh, that turned into a rant, didn't it? It just doesn't feel fair. They're going to be flocked with offers from agencies the moment they graduate because of this. We can't just stay stuck in the background, not when we deserve the spotlight so much more than they do!"

Huh. More like a gaping hole than a weak spot.

But rather than driving him away, Neito's crippling insecurity only drew Midoriya in more intensely. With a character flaw this significant, he wasn't real hero material, but that only worked to their
benefit. It was a weakness, yes, but a weakness that could be exploited, manipulated, controlled.

"You're right," Izuku said simply, never letting the smile leave his face. "You deserve so much more than a background role, Monoma. What if we told you there's a better option than languishing away in obscurity here for the next two years?"

Monoma lifted his gaze to meet Midoriya's, and Izuku already knew from the spark of curiosity in Neito's eyes that the rest would come easy.

Chapter End Notes

Here's part two of three of the flashback chapters! The final part, featuring the escape from U.A., the beginning of the Toga x Midoriya relationship, and the Successor, will be uploaded within the next two days, as it's 90% finished already. I hope you all enjoy! Monoma is fun but surprisingly tricky to write for. And I hated having to kill off Iida like that, but I felt like without Midoriya there, it was the only realistic outcome.

As always, let me know what you think in the reviews!
They left at dusk on a Friday night, a week after they persuaded Neito to join them. As investigators would note in the coming months, by all eyewitness accounts, their day was entirely routine; they all attended classes as normal, ate lunch together as normal, attended extracurriculars as normal. Shinso, Midoriya, and Monoma were all spotted training together in the gym during their free period, but that was nothing out of the ordinary- neither was the fact that according to her classmates in the support program, Hatsume spent every available moment slaving away over a baby in the Development Studio, even staying two hours after school to complete the project while her friends waited for her. Power Loader would go on to comment in his testimony that despite the massive amount of time she logged in the studio in the weeks and days leading up to the disappearance, the number of support items that she submitted to him for grading and approval actually fell slightly below her average during the same period. This observation was ultimately overlooked, however.

By all accounts, they followed their normal route at least half of the way home; the last confirmed sighting of the group placed them on a seldom-frequented path just minutes away from Midoriya's apartment, newly refurbished after the triple homicide that had bewildered police a month prior. When all four students failed to make it home that night, gang activity related to that incident was the first possible lead on their disappearance investigated by the authorities, at a tearful Inko Midoriya's insistence. But the trail of evidence for this theory quickly went cold, and over the following weeks every probable cause from an underground human trafficking ring to an abduction by the League of Villains was considered and explored. Within a month, the search area had expanded to five wards, as U.A. officials and teams of detectives alike combed dozens of square kilometers of urban sprawl from top to bottom. The search was always destined to be fruitless, though, from the moment it began. They had planned specifically for it, after all, studied police tactics and practiced how to avoid them, how to make themselves invisible in a crowd. The hair dye, colored lenses, and falsified IDs provided by Hatsume didn't hurt either, of course.

Once they'd stopped in a deserted alley a few blocks from Izuku's place to don their disguises, the group separated into pairs and took two different routes to the nearest train station; they rendezvoused two hours and 260 kilometers away in Nagoya, where they were currently debriefing in the backroom of a run-down, otherwise deserted internet café on a remote side street, far from the bustle and crowds of downtown.

"Everything seems to be going off without a hitch so far," Mei was saying, her features illuminated in the dappled glow of neon signs from outside as rain pattered on the window. "My transaction spoofers worked perfectly for the train ticket purchases, and we have at least another day or two before the search actually begins, but I still doubt they'll think to look as far as Nagoya."

A train ride later, Shinso was still taken aback by how different she looked- her hair was dyed a deep blue and tied up in a ponytail, and purple lenses hid most of the crosshair markings in her eyes. Her trademark headgear was stowed in her bookbag, along with all of the mechanical equipment and components she could carry, collected surreptitiously and in small increments from the studio over the past month. It was a good look on her, but he still preferred the original. Hitoshi's own disguise was just as jarring every time he glanced at his reflection, though: His wild blue hair was dyed black and slicked back into a neat wave with gel, and his green contact lenses were already starting to itch. Mei had tried to obscure the bags under his eyes with makeup, but no matter how much foundation she applied, the dark purple crescents still shone through. Midoriya and Monoma were both brunette
and brown-eyed now, though by comparison their hairstyles were less dramatically altered. Their clothing was a hodgepodge of preppy and casual civilian wear, purposefully distant from any of their normal styles- Neito still looked genuinely uncomfortable in a nondescript graphic t-shirt and khaki shorts.

"Very good. If they do by some chance expand the search to here, we always have Kyoto and Osaka as our next fallbacks." His gloved hands clasped over the table, Izuku looked almost satisfied, a faint grin crossing his face. He was wearing a black blazer over a white shirt. "Most importantly, though, is your newest baby complete?"

"As ready as it'll ever be!" She beamed, reaching into her bag and pulling out a slender silver headband ringed with hidden circuitry and fitted with diodes that reached down to the wearer's forehead and temples. Holding it in her hands like a delicate treasure, she turned to Shinso. "This is my pride and joy. Time to finally close the loophole, right, Hitoshi-kun?"

"Remind me, what are the exact capabilities again?" He examined the device with one eyebrow raised. She'd spent most of the past month on this one baby, perfecting it down to the last detail, though even he wasn't entirely certain what it did- Hatsume wasn't very talkative when she was focused on her work, and had a tendency to go silent for hours at a time when she was 'in the zone'. A wide grin spreading across her face, her eyes lit up, and she launched into an enthusiastic explanation.

"As far as I could tell, your quirk works by interfering with people's brainwaves, sending a powerful signal that overrides how they normally function. Now, naturally, people's minds don't like being messed with like that- they panic and try and stop what's going on, and the brainwashee instantly becomes aware that you're controlling them. This baby adds an enhancement to your powers that I'm gonna call 'Suggestion'- it stops that process by adding a focused burst of theta waves on top of the signal that you send, which calms down the brain and tricks it into believing the override is normal. Think of it like knocking out the cashier before he hits the alarm button under the register during a robbery- you still get control, but now that the brain doesn't go into panic mode, the victim thinks that whatever you're commanding them to do was their idea in the first place."

"Good, that's very good," Neito purred, a hand perched on his chin. "It's so brilliantly despicable. But what about after the effect wears off? Do they realize they were commanded after the fact?"

"That's where it gets interesting," Hatsume continued, waving her hands enthusiastically. "So obviously, while the mind is malleable, you can only bend it so far. If you use Suggestion to brainwash someone into killing their best friend, for example, while they might believe in the moment that it was their idea, as soon as the effect of the quirk wears off, they'll realize that they had no motive to do so, and eventually that you were the one who forced them to. Essentially, once the quirk's effects ends, their mind is faced with a two way junction- if your Suggestion seems like something like something they'd hypothetically have reason to do, the brain accepts that the action was their idea, and the victim will go on believing that. If the Suggestion was something that fundamentally conflicts with their values, routine, or beliefs, the mind will reject responsibility for the action, and the alarm button gets triggered, albeit after the fact."

"So what's the use?" Monoma had suddenly soured, and was sipping plaintively at his coffee. "It's not like anything we could ever ask the police to do would align with their values, for instance."

"Oh, but you're missing so much of its potential." Hatsume's grin only widened. "Sure, you couldn't ask a cop to execute a civilian for no reason, but let's say you want to falsify an arrest record, or steal something specific from a case file. Managing records and files are part of a police officer's daily routine, so if you suggested to them that they should give you a specific file because their superior
already granted permission, nothing would seem out of the ordinary to their mind— it could easily construct a motive and precedent for the action. If you asked them to light the record cabinet on fire, maybe not so much. At least, that’s how it should work in theory. We still need you to perform the actual in-person test, Hitoshi."

Shinso nodded and slid the band over his head, throwing up his jacket's hood to conceal it. The diodes felt cool and strangely comforting resting on his bare skin.

"Well, the next phase of the plan depends on it. Time to find out, for better or for worse."

An hour later, they were standing in the cavernous marble lobby of an apartment complex Izuku had chosen as a testing ground for Shinso's newly enhanced ability, and Hitoshi was beginning to regret not testing Suggestion on the way over. He had thought about trying it on the owner of the internet café, or a street vendor, but they were trying their hardest to limit interactions with others except when absolutely necessary, and the desire to be cautious had won out. His quirk was easily recognizable after the Sports Festival, after all- even this one planned use on a civilian was a risk.

As the others milled about near the entrance, he strode up to the attendant's desk, and let out a silent sigh of relief that the man sitting there was alone.

"Good evening, sir! Can I help you?" Short and bespectacled, the attendant gave Hitoshi a friendly smile as he came to a stop and rested his hands on the lacquered wood.

"Yes, in fact; my friends and I are looking to rent a room. Do you have any available units?"

He already knew the answer- Midoriya had researched possible living arrangements in Nagoya for weeks, and as of this morning, this particular complex, along with an ideal location and access to amenities, had plenty of room to spare.

"Certainly! What type of lease are you looking for?"

"Long-term, six-month payment intervals. I believe that unit 516 is available."

"It is! Our standard security deposit for a room of that size will be-"

Shinso activated his quirk, and cut the man off midsentence. The headband and diodes began to thrum with a quiet energy as he spoke.

"You'll be letting us move in tonight. We've already made our security deposit, and the first six-month payment. You will make no further inquiries into our status- instruct the cleaning staff not to service our room. Use my name as the primary occupant." He handed the attendant his fake ID card, and waited calmly for his response.

The clerk blinked, confused, and was quiet for a moment. Hitoshi's heart seized in his chest, and their contingency flared in the back of his mind. Pretend it was a practical joke, get out of here as soon as possible. But then the man's smile returned, and he began to key a set of magnetic cards.

"Ah yes, I remember! You're all set on the first payment, the room should be ready at your convenience."

Past the first hurdle. Now to see if his mind accepts the Suggestion as natural.

As he reached out to take back his ID once the data was entered, Shinso let his hand bump into the attendant's, with just enough force to break his quirk's effect. The man blinked again, then quickly
apologized, and held out their room keys with his other hand, still smiling. Hitoshi allowed himself a
triumphant smirk, and was about to take them when he thought of a better option.

"Could I ask you to make a minor adjustment?"

"Of course, sir!"

"I misspoke when I said unit 516. Our reservation is actually for the penthouse."

"We could be a highly useful asset to you. We have an established base of operations in Nagoya, and
multiple sources of income, along with significant technical resources and black market
connections." Midoriya allowed himself a confident grin as he finished his pitch, and glanced around
the dimly lit bar at the various figures watching his every move. He'd thoroughly researched every
one of them before coming here, compiling at least a dozen pages worth of observations on their
strengths and weaknesses in the notebook in his jacket pocket. A few months ago, the thought of
joining the League of Villains would have been nothing short of repulsive, but now that he was
sitting here among them, he couldn't contain the excitement rising in his chest, the desire to be part of
something bigger than himself, in an organization where his skills would be rewarded and
appreciated.

Kurogiri stood behind the bar, idly polishing a sake glass with arms made of flickering black and
purple light. Dabi was lounging on a stool, rocking it back and forth in boredom as he played with a
ball of blue fire in one hand. Spinner loomed in the shadows at the corner of the room, flanked by
Twice and Toga Himiko, a blonde-haired girl his age, and the only one whose quirk he was still
unsure about- he was aware of her fondness for the blood of her victims, though. His eyes lingered
on her a moment when he realized she was staring back, her cheeks flushed red. That's... strange. Is
she...?

Shigaraki Tomura rose from the table before he could finish his thought, though, his voice a ragged
hiss.

"I already have all of that. What are you offering that I don't have?"

Izuku blinked, and narrowed his eyes. He's going to make this difficult, isn't he?

"As I said, we're constantly expanding our sphere of influence in the Nagoya area, and we have
multiple ventures that."

"You already told me all of that." Tomura interjected. "Remind me, what's your quirk?"

Despite his best effort to remain calm, Midoriya's cheeks flushed red, and his brows furrowed in
anger.

"I already told you, I don't have one. I also already explained that my colleagues are all endowed
with highly useful quirks which they've spent a good deal of time refining, and that my support items
more than compensate for-"

Shigaraki laughed, a harsh, rasping sound.

"I don't care how good their quirks are- if they willingly chose to follow a powerless runt like you,
then I've already lost interest in them."

"Aw, but boss, it couldn't hurt to have a few more recruits!" Toga spoke up from the back of the
room, taking a few steps forward and balling up her hands in two slender fists beneath her chin.
"Didn't the brainwashing kid place high in the Sports Festival? And it doesn't hurt that the quirkless one is... easy to look at." She made eye contact with Midoriya and grinned widely, running her tongue along her elongated canines. He couldn't help but flush even harder at that, confusion plain on his face.

"We have more than enough asking to join up after Endeavor torched Stain," Tomura replied, never taking his eyes off Izuku. "If we take in too many at once, it becomes harder for us to stay hidden."

"We can give you inside intel on U.A.," Midoriya offered, reaching for his notebook. He'd told the Tomura his group's real identities off the bat, hoping the gesture would serve as a show of good faith; it wasn't as if the League had any reason to turn them into the police.

"I already have that too." Izuku could practically feel the man's smirk from beneath the hand he wore as a mask. "You think you're the only ones from that school who sympathize with us?"

"I..." He didn't know what to say to that. A traitor explained the USJ attack, but how could someone have evaded detection for so long? "Who do you-"

"Wouldn't you like to know. Dabi, escort our guest out."

The black-haired flame wielder stood and stretched, then began to stride menacingly towards Midoriya, his expression deadpan. For a moment, Izuku's mind flashed to the plastic explosives woven into the fabric of his jacket, currently draped over his chair. Given to him by Hatsume, they were a last resort in case the League attacked him- he could dart out of the room and trigger the blast within the span of a few seconds. But something told him that burning this bridge so violently would risk throwing away potential future assets, and he reluctantly allowed himself to be led out into the hallway without resistance. He opened his mouth to fling a parting barb, but Shigaraki cut him off again as he closed the door.

"You're of no use to us, Midoriya Izuku. Run along now, before I get angry."

The night's objective was simple- capture Tokoyami Fumikage and Yaoyorozu Momo, alive and unharmed. From Shinso's brainwashing to the custom-made tranquilizer guns and capture nets that Hatsume had equipped Monoma and Midoriya with, they weren't lacking a wide variety of ways to achieve their goal. A quick exfiltration following their targets' capture was the riskiest component of the operation, but with Mei waiting at the edge of the forest in a Jeep that Hitoshi had acquired for them, they had little to worry about if they remained undetected.

So how did everything go so wrong? Midoriya wondered as he darted through the trees, toward the line of blue flames and expanding cloud of gas that were threatening to consume the forest. He'd planned the operation to coincide with the hero classes' summer training camp specifically to avoid the possibility of outside interference, but in hindsight, Shigaraki's mention of a traitor at U.A. should have tipped him off that the League might also know the camp's location. The school faculty had done an admirable job of keeping the exact coordinates a secret, to be fair, but Mei had placed hidden tracking devices in the costumes of every hero course student before their group left the school, using trace amounts of radioactive isotopes to mark Momo and Fumikage in particular for easy detection.

Izuku glanced down to his handheld tracker, whose screen displayed two pulsing dots less than a hundred meters ahead- even if their targets weren't wearing their costumes, the radioactivity would still be lingering on their skin. After observing carefully for the past day, they'd chosen tonight for their time to strike, with the test of courage serving as a perfect cover. Apparently Tomura had the same idea. Tokyoami's signature was closest, and thankfully they encountered no direct resistance.
on the route toward him, though the forest still echoed with the screams of students. Midoriya, Monoma, and Shinso were all wearing black jackets and hoods on top of their disguised hair and eyes to ensure that there was no chance of accidental recognition if they were spotted by any U.A. personnel, and night vision goggles helped them navigate through the darkness with ease.

They were able to hear Fumikage long before they finally drew within visual range of him, though, as the snapping of branches ahead of them coincided with a bestial roar. Dark Shadow, Izuku quickly realized. *It's being driven out of control by the fear and the lack of light.* His theory was confirmed when the three of them reached an open clearing, and the full size and ferocity of the boy's rampaging quirk became visible. Dark Shadow stretched easily twenty feat into the air, its normally yellow eyes an angry red as its shadowed talons tore indiscrimately through the foliage surrounding it. Tears streaming down his beak, Tokoyami was visible suspended in midair at the center of the shadowy mass, but before Midoriya could aim his air rifle, he caught sight of another figure down and to the left, partially hidden in the treeline. He recognized the student by their tentacle-like appendages as Shoji Mezo, and though the student almost certainly couldn't see them at this distance in the darkness, he seemed to have heard their footsteps approaching, and turned in their direction.

"Who's there?"

"We're here to help!" Shinso called, stepping forward. "Are you hurt?"

"Yes, but not badly. Tokoyami needs more help than me, though, he-" Shoji's voice faltered as Hitoshi's quirk activated.

"Run away and find somewhere safe to hide until your teachers find you. We have the situation under control."

*Good strategy,* Izuku mused. *He certainly has reason enough to do that.* Mezo quickly complied with Shinso's Suggestion and darted off into the trees, leaving them alone with their target. On Midoriya's other side, Neito had taken aim with his own rifle, watching carefully through his scope as Dark Shadow began to take note of the new intruders and move steadily toward them. It was rearing its beaked head to let out another roar when Monoma fired; his dart struck home, plunging into Fumikage's chest and delivering enough sedative to slow an elephant.

Dark Shadow growled in anger and charged forward, but by the time it reached them, it was already shrinking rapidly, receding back into its bearer. Even as Tokoyami faded into unconsciousness, though, it managed one final, desperate attack, slashing through the fabric of Izuku's jacket and sending him careening back into the underbrush before he had time to dodge. By the time it vanished completely a few moments later, Midoriya was already rising shakily back to his feet, shrugging off his subordinates' attempts to help him up.

That's the price for overconfidence, he knew, looking down at the three shallow cuts that Fumikage's talons had left him, steadily oozing blood. I should have known the tranquilizer would take longer than expected to subdue his quirk in that state. Shinso was prepared to call Mei to extract him, but Izuku shook his head.

"My injuries aren't serious- we continue with the mission. Monoma, get him back to Hatsume. We'll press on and find Yaoyorozu. She's not too much farther ahead."

"Understood," Neito called in reply, throwing his lanky, beaked classmate over one shoulder and starting off in the direction they came. "Contact us if you meet any resistance! And don't be afraid to rough up a few of those miserable Class A showoffs for me if you get the chance!"

"Only if necessary," Midoriya countered with a smirk, turning back to his tracker and plunging forward into the darkness with Shinso at his side. Momo's signature was around a hundred meters ahead, and moving rapidly- they broke into a run when they heard female voices somewhere ahead
of them, and quickly came upon another clearing. Rather than Yaoyorozu, though, Midoriya found himself looking at Toga Himiko, currently attempting to pin Uraraka Ochako to the ground as Asui Tsuyu struggled where she had been pinned to a tree by her hair. Blood was flowing from a syringe in Uraraka's leg to a collector on Toga's back as they grappled with each other- every time Ochako tried to pull the needle out, Himiko caught her hand and wrenched it away.

"She's from the League, right?" Shinso hissed beside him. "They haven't seen us yet, let's move on before we get caught up in whatever they're trying to do here."

"No, you go ahead and find Momo," Izuku countered after a moment's consideration. "I'll handle this."

"What?!" Exasperation was clear in Hitoshi's voice. "Why? Do you know her?"

"No, but I think she wants to know me. This could be our chance to gain a contact inside their ranks. Now go ahead, find the target- that's an order." He laced the last few words with enough venom to swiftly spur his colleague to action; once Shinso had continued back into the treeline, Midoriya stepped out into the clearing and took aim with his rifle, waiting until Uraraka was firmly in his sights before firing a dart into her back. He planted another round in Asui's side as Ochako slumped motionless to the ground, and within seconds both of them were unconscious. Crawling out from under Uraraka's limp body, Toga eyed him suspiciously at first, but before he could explain himself, she stood and dashed forward. Swearing internally, Midoriya activated his gauntlets and braced himself for an attack, but instead of lunging with one of her knives, the blonde-haired villain wrapped her arms around him and squealed with glee.

"Oh Izu, I knew you'd come back for me!"

"I… how did you know it was me?" He finally managed, pulling back his hood and goggles. Her golden eyes were glowing in the moonlight, and he could feel the warmth of her body pressing against him.

"I recognized your smell," she purred, her cheeks going pink. "You smell even better when you're bleeding, Izuku!" Without warning, she ran her hand along his open wound, shuddering with pleasure when she withdrew it soaking red. "I love how you bleed, baby. Can I call you baby?"

For a moment he was paralyzed, overwhelmed by the situation. He almost reverted to the nervous, stuttering fool too socially inept to even consider speaking to women who had occupied his body until a few months ago, almost mumbled out a stream of nonsense in reply to her advances. But then he remembered that he'd already killed that part of himself- it had died in his living room, along with everything else weak inside him. Instead of blushing, he grinned.

"You can call me whatever you like. Now I know I didn't get off on the right foot with the League, but I want to fix that. Maybe you and I can come to some sort of… private arrangement."

"Private arrangement…" She giggled, then pinned him against the nearest tree with one swift motion. "I think I like the sound of that. What sort of arrangement would that be?" She whispered the last few syllables in his ear, her breath hot on his neck.

Now it was his turn to shudder as she began to plant a trail of soft kisses across his neck and jaw. His bravado wavered slightly in the face of her intense affection, and he couldn't fully rid himself of the voice at the back of his mind screaming that he was about to kiss a girl for the first time. But he steeled himself all the same, and continued as steadily as he could manage.

"You could… ah… supply me and my group with information about the League's activities, plans,
recruitment… and in turn, I could… oh… I could give you…”

Taking his face in both hands, she kissed him full on the lips, sliding her tongue into his mouth and grinding her hips against his at the same time. It was all Izuku could do not to faint then and there.

“That's what you're going to give me, baby. Deal?”

“Deal,” He breathed, then winced as a river of white hot pain flowed along one of his arms. With a start he realized that she was dragging a knife slowly across his skin, watching the crimson leak out of the shallow cut with awestruck eyes.

"I'm so happy, baby!” she squealed, pulling out a vial and capturing some of the blood before he could react. "But I'll be even happier if you bleed some more for me."

He opened his mouth to reply, but closed it again when voices became audible in the distance. More U.A. students, by the sound of it. Toga heard them as well, and loosened her grip on him.

"Aw, I wanted more time to play!” She pouted, pocketing the vial and giving him one last peck on the lips. "One week from today, the Red Crane ramen bar at the edge of Kamino Ward, 8PM. It's a date, baby."

With that, she darted off into the undergrowth, leaving him only a few seconds to collect his thoughts and pull his hood and goggles back on before the approaching students drove him in the opposite direction. Starting off down the path Shinso had taken, Izuku tried his best to focus on the mission again, but he couldn't shake one persistent thought.

Do I have a girlfriend now?

"Who are you? What did you do to him?!"

Yaoyorozu looked up in horror from Yosetsu's tranquillized body as Shinso emerged from the brush, shouldering his air rifle.

"He'll be fine, it's a medical sedative. Are you injured?"

Her hand shot to a bloody gash just above her hairline, and he swore internally. Shit, must've been that Nomu. The chainsaw-limbed creature had already been retreating by the time Hitoshi arrived, plodding off into the trees- the League must have recalled it when they finished their mission, whatever it was.

"Yes, but that's not-"

Gotcha. Was worried you wouldn't say anything for a moment there.

"Leave him for the rescuers. Follow me, I know how to get out of here safely."

Reluctantly, Yaoyorozu stood and turned away from her unconscious classmate, limping toward Shinso as blood continued to drip from her wound. He quickly rushed forward to help her, throwing one of her arms around his shoulder and setting off in the direction of Hatsume and their escape vehicle. As concerned as she seemed to be about Yosetsu, there was a decent chance that her mind would reject the Suggestion, but he'd cross that bridge when he reached it. He gradually quickened their pace as much as Momo could bear; the screams and cries for help emanating from the other sections of the forest had largely died down, meaning that the situation had reached one of two resolutions- neither one was good for him.
Hitoshi's heart lifted when Midoriya emerged from the trees ahead of them, and the two exchanged a satisfied nod before Izuku radioed Mei.

"Second target acquired, Mr. Green and Mr. Blue are incoming- Mr. Blonde should be arriving soon as well. Keep the engine running hot- all mission objectives achieved."

"I can't believe this freaking twerp," Tetsutetsu groaned as they made their way back to camp, glancing back at the unconscious schoolboy dragging behind them, his cheek a dark purple now where Tetsutetsu's fist had shattered his gas mask. "He's not even out of junior high! How the hell did this kid even find them? What, is the League running around putting ads in Jump now?"

"He may be young," Kendo Itsuka countered, her gaze remaining fixed ahead, "but that doesn't mean he isn't dangerous. Who knows how many people that gas knocked out before we stopped him?"

"Too many," her metallic companion growled, shaking his head. He was about to say something else when a shrill scream cut through the air from ahead; they exchanged a glance and charged toward the source, leaving Mustard's motionless body behind. The scene that greeted them when they burst into a clearing froze Itsuka's heart mid-beat; Reiko and Yui were cowering on the forest floor as a massive, wiry man with a shock of short blond hair and one artificial eye towered over them, his entire body covered in a rippling layer of exposed red muscles.

"Shh, quiet now, or you'll make me angry." Muscular was saying, holding a finger up to his mouth. "Don't be impatient, you'll both get your turn! As soon as you watch me squeeze the life out of your friends." He gestured to a cluster of unconscious bodies, victims of the sleeping gas, and Kendo's blood ran cold in her veins.

*I have to stop him,* she knew, and before she could think anything else she was running forward, leaping into the air as her fist swelled up to the size of a boulder.

"*PICK ON SOMEONE YOUR OWN SIZE!*" She screamed as she landed a right hook cleanly on his jaw, sending him stumbling backward and into a tree. In the brief span the villain took to struggle back to his feet, she turned to Tetsutetsu, Yui, and Reiko and gestured to the gas victims. "*GET THEM OUT OF HERE, GO!*"

Then Muscular was charging toward her, his arms raised; she barely had time to dodge before he slammed them into the ground she had been standing on, sending clumps of grass and dirt flying with the force of impact. She swelled up her other fist and drove it into his side, but he braced himself for the blow this time, and it practically bounced off the hard shell of muscle fibers that he had encased himself in. Surprisingly fast and agile for a man of his size, he dodged or blocked the next few hits she attempted to land on him, then surged forward all at once, grabbed hold of her right fist, and twisted, a cruel sneer on his face. The twin cracks that echoed through the clearing as her wrist and lower arm broke almost simultaneously were enough to drive her to her knees in pain—when his next punch shattered the rest of the bones left in the limb and sent her flying into the bushes ten yards away, she wasn't quite sure how she managed to stay conscious amid the swirling torrent of agony. Her vision was fading in and out, but she forced herself to look down and assess the damage all the same; it seemed that her fist had shrunk back to its normal size out of reflex, but then she saw the jagged white tips of bone protruding from her skin just below the elbow, and before she knew it she was retching all over the bloodsoaked grass.

As Itsuka lifted her head again, she could make out the blurry shape of Muscular plodding slowly toward her, a sadistic smile on his face. He was calling out a crude taunt, but her ears were ringing too loudly for her to make out the words. When he was just a dozen paces away, though, shouts
became audible nearby, and suddenly his muscles retracted back inside his body. Then Eraserhead was charging into the clearing with Vlad King and Pixie-Bob at his side, and the sounds of battle filled the forest once again. Two strong arms wrapped around Kendo's waist, and Mandalay's smiling face was the last thing she remembered before she drifted into unconsciousness.

If a pall hung over U.A. after Hosu City, the atmosphere on the first day back after summer break and the training camp incident was practically funerary. A hero course student abducted and two others missing, just a month after four vanished without a trace- it was almost unreal. The more Kendo thought about it, the more she didn't want to believe it had really happened. But every time she almost forgot, she saw the missing posters on the bulletin boards in the hallways, walked past Monoma's empty desk. Why did you go away?! She wanted to ask him, wanted to yell the words in his pretentious face. Not a day went by that she didn't hope against hope that she'd walk in and he'd be there as usual, spouting off some nonsense about the tyrannical rule of Class A. She'd have to chop him on the back of the neck to shut him up like always, and everything would be right with the world again. Well, the whole chop thing might be a bit more difficult right now, she mused, glancing to her right arm, still in a sling where Muscular had crushed it to a pulp. Recovery Girl and a team of surgeons had done the best they could, but it would still be a few days before she could use it again, and weeks before she could fight with it.

The move into dorms was a welcome one, even if not all of her classmates could enjoy it with her. Five first-year hero course students had dropped out of U.A. after the latest security breach, three from 1-A and two from 1-B, and the hallways were filled with whispers of transfer applications to Shiketsu or Ketsubutsu. The press conference held by Nezu and Aizawa and the successful rescue of Bakugo and defeat of All For One by All Might and the hero rescue team in Kamino Ward had lifted people's spirits to a degree, but even the Symbol of Peace hadn't been able to bring U.A. its missing students back. As ashamed as she was to admit it, Itsuka wished that they'd all been openly abducted like Katsuki- at least then there would be actual evidence to go on, leads to follow. Anything would be better than this hellish uncertainty, than the constant gossip that they had all committed suicide together, or run away to become villains. That isn't the Neito I know. He would never.

Frustration rising up inside her, Kendo slammed her locker shut and was beginning to head to the gym to blow off some steam on the treadmill when someone cleared their throat behind her. "I'm busy," she muttered, barely casting a stray glance over her shoulder. Probably just Juzo or Tsuburaba asking for help with their homework again. It can wait 'til later.

"Not too busy for a brief chat, I hope, Young Kendo!"

Itsuka's eyes shot wide open, and she nearly dropped the P.E. uniform bundled up in her arms when she pivoted to find the Symbol of Peace standing before her, a wide smile on his face. "A-All Might-sensei, I'm so sorry, I didn't see you there! Of course I have time!"

She tried to bow in apology, but he caught her by the shoulder and let out a booming laugh. "There's no need, Young Kendo! Follow me- I have something I'd like to discuss with you."

She nodded furiously and quickly set off after him, struggling to keep pace with his massive strides as they made their way to his office. Maybe the rumors were right after all, she wondered, her eyes drifting to the floor. With two missing students and three dropouts, Class A had been reduced to just fifteen after the training camp, as compared to 1-B's seventeen; there was talk that the administration would be transferring one class B student to A to even out their numbers. I'd hate to leave all my friends behind at a time like this, but I'm sure it wouldn't be so bad. 1-A really needs support right
now, and I could do my best help with that. They'd need to choose a new 1-B class rep, but 1-A is missing theirs too after Yaoyorozu vanished, so…

"Young Kendo? My office is over here!"

"O-oh! Sorry!" Lost in thought, Itsuka had blown completely past All Might's open door; her face flushed with color as she turned again and darted inside.

"You seem distracted," All Might began, sitting down in a chair that looked entirely too small for his hulking figure as Kendo closed the door and took a seat across from him. "Are you holding up alright?"

His voice had taken on a softness and tone of genuine concern that surprised even her- she couldn't bring herself to lie to him.

"I… things have just been so hard lately. I miss Monoma. I miss my friends who transferred out. I understand why they did, but…" She paused, and shook her head. "You saved the day like always, you defeated All For One and rescued Bakugo, the League is on the run, but it just… doesn't feel like a complete victory."

"Because it isn't one." All Might replied. "You're entirely right, Young Kendo. It won't be a victory until all the rest of the League is hunted down and brought to justice, and until all the missing students are found and reunited with their families. The more I search and fail to find them, the more I'm reminded of my own limitations- of my own shortcomings."

In just a few moments the conversation had taken on an entirely different tone; Itsuka's brows furrowed in confusion.

"Shortcomings? Sensei, you've done more to help us get through this than anyone, no one has worked harder to defeat the League and keep U.A. safe with more success than you! No matter how dark the situation seems, you inspire all of us… including me."

A smile spread across her face as her thoughts drifted back to all the childhood hours she'd spent playing with All Might action figures instead of dolls, pretending she was there fighting alongside him.

"But I won't be able to inspire you forever," he said quietly. "I have something to show you- please don't be alarmed."

Before she could say anything else, steam began to emanate from All Might's body, almost enveloping him in a dull white cloud. Then, all at once, he shrank, his well-defined muscles and chiseled jaw receding into nothingness, leaving behind a gaunt skeleton of a man, his blue eyes sunken into dark, hollow sockets and his striped orange suit hanging in folds over his thin figure. Even his trademark spikes of blond hair drooped down past his chin now. Itsuka practically leapt out of her chair in shock, her eyes wide.

"All Might-sensei?! Is that… you?" For a split second she thought this might be some kind of practical joke, but the punchline never came.

"Yes," he said with a sigh, all the bravado gone from his voice. "This is me. And this is why I need a successor."

The next few minutes passed by like a dream. Itsuka listened the best she could as All Might explained his injury and the resulting limits on his abilities, how his quirk had been passed down generation by generation, a stockpile of power that increased with each bearer. But all the same, the
more she understood, the more she felt like this couldn't be happening - not to her.

"You can't actually want me," she finally managed once he went quiet. "T-there are so many more qualified candidates, older and more experienced than I am. The Big Three, or Kamui Woods, or Hawks - I don't even have a provisional license yet!"

"That's exactly why I think you're the right choice." He placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. Hawks, Kamui, even the upperclassmen here... they've had so much more time to practice with their quirks that they've already developed distinctive styles and techniques. Introducing One For All to that mix wouldn't just throw them off balance, it would be asking them to go back to the drawing board, revamp how they think about using their quirk from square one. But for someone in your year, now is the perfect moment for you to make it your own while developing and refining your own innate abilities at the same time."

"Well that explains why'd you'd prefer a first-year... but why me? I don't understand." She looked up at him with wide eyes. "What makes me special, out of everyone here?"

He sighed and sat back down, leaning forward over his desk.

"I've been watching your year closely since the day I arrived here. There are many of your classmates who embody the values a hero should aspire toward - strength, devotion to duty, leadership, selflessness. But you, Young Kendo, rise above all the rest. You go above and beyond what we ask of you here at U.A., to protect your classmates and inspire them to strive for greatness. Along with serving as 1-B's representative, since the beginning of the year you've acted as a bridge between the two classes, easing tensions and promoting camaraderie and cooperation - not because anyone asked you to, or because it was expected of you, but because you knew that it was the best way to strengthen the first year as a whole. You truly convinced me of your worthiness, though, Young Kendo, with your actions during the training camp attack. Not only did you correctly deduce the source of the sleeping gas and brave incredible odds to help stop its production, you risked your life to protect your classmates in the face of overwhelming force when it would have been far safer to retreat. Remind me, what were the words you used in your official incident report?"

"My... my body moved without thinking," She said, thinking back to the testimony she gave from her hospital bed in the days after her surgery.

"Yes, that was it." All Might's eyes shone with wistful nostalgia. "You have the spirit that this country needs, Kendo Itsuka. That's why I want you to be the next Symbol of Peace."

Chapter End Notes

And there you have it! Picking the successor was a hard choice - I was very close to going with Ochako. That's the end of the flashbacks chapters, so from now on the story will be picking up in the 'two years later' timeline after Shigaraki's death. I hope you enjoyed their escape - as always, leave a comment letting me know what you think!
Setting the Pieces

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Osaka, Kansai Region

Tennoji Ward

One Week after the Death of Shigaraki Tomura

"Asset sighted. Grey van, just parked on the second floor. Coming up the elevator now, two armed guards. Looks like he's got the money with him."

Hatsune's voice sounded loud and clear through Shinso's earpiece as he stood in the quiet darkness of the high rise's thirtieth floor, the wind whistling past him. The skyscraper was still under construction, with bare concrete floors and walls and nothing at the edges between them and the abyss below. He ventured a glance to the building across the street where Mei was concealed on the roof, directly beneath the bright orange disc of the setting sun. As usual, she and her rifle were ready for the first sign of trouble- once they were certain enough of Kurogiri's loyalties to deploy him in the field, her job would be even easier. Hitoshi's gaze shifted back to the figures beside him, half hidden in shadow- Twice and Mustard, his backup.

The red eyes of Mustard's gas mask glowed menacingly in the twilight; Hatsune had made significant upgrades to his gear since he came over from the League, increasing its structural integrity for close quarters combat and adding a high voltage shock that triggered when an attempt to remove it by force was made. She'd also used his quirk to fashion a set of highly potent gas grenades, currently stored on a bandolier slung across his chest beneath a dark trench coat. Twice was muttering to himself in a corner as usual, and finally raised his voice when Shinso glanced in his direction.

"You know, for once, I actually feel pretty good about this! He was always one of our most reliable partners! Oh, what am I kidding, it's all gonna go wrong!" Jin's back-and-forth rambling continued until he finally drew in a deep breath and tugged down at the edge of his mask, just as the half-enclosed steel cage of the service elevator dinged to a halt at the center of the floor.

The display on Hitoshi's goggles automatically zoomed in to better focus on the trio that emerged; wearing a lavender suit and gold-rimmed glasses, Giran stepped out first, puffing on a cigarette as his thumb ran idly along the handle of the nondescript leather briefcase in his right hand. A longtime ally of the League, he had jumped ship and become a valued broker for Mei's babies on the black market, along with pointing them in the direction of several potential recruits. If everything ended without a hitch tonight, this would be his largest purchase so far- a cornucopia of deadly support items ranging from maximum-voltage shock gauntlets to neurotoxin dart guns was waiting in a passcode-locked steel box at Hitoshi's feet. The sheer scale of the arms sale was enough to draw Midoriya's attention- along with the standard hidden trackers, there were kill switches embedded in all of the babies, failsafes in the event that the weapons were sold to a rival villain group and used in an attack on their own.

"What's with the muscle?" When Giran was within earshot, Shinso looked pointedly at the two hooded thugs on either side of the broker, his eyes roving warily over the submachine guns they carried. "You trying to hurt our feelings? And here I thought we could trust each other by now."
"Never hurts to have some insurance these days," Giran offered sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck. "Especially with Hawks and that red-headed twerp around. They've really busting my balls lately- lot of my partners on the market are getting cold feet again!"

"Not you, apparently," Hitoshi countered, taking a step forward- Twice and Mustard advanced with him. "This is a lot of hardware we're talking about, even for you- top grade, all of it. Are you supplying someone new? The Eight Precepts, maybe?"

Giran's eyes flitted to Mustard's expressionless mask, and he tugged at his fashionable lavender scarf with a sly grin.

"I wouldn't be a very good broker if I gave away all my clients, now would I?"

"Maybe not, but my employer would certainly prefer to know. Just so we can be sure you're not getting mixed up in anything… unsavory."

"Unsavory? I wouldn't dare, Hairo." Giran's gaze roved past Shinso and came to a halt on Twice as the two men shared a chuckle.

The secret of the group's true identities had died with Shigaraki, as Midoriya planned- the rest of their contacts outside their own ranks only knew them by aliases. They had kept up their disguised appearances for most major operations since they first fled to Nagoya- two years later, Hitoshi was used to his gelled black hair, though his green contacts still occasionally itched. Despite all his underworld connections though, Giran was still none the wiser, thankfully.

"The money, if you would?" Shinso's brows furrowed as he extended a hand.

"Of course, of course." Giran turned the briefcase in his hands and flicked open the latches to reveal rows of neatly bundled yen notes- a cursory inspection by Twice confirmed that it was the agreed amount. "Feel free to look as close as you'd like."

"Something's wrong," Mei's voice whispered into his earpiece, her tone urgent. With her quirk, Hatsume could see the details of the exchange as clearly as if she were standing at Shinso's side. "The money doesn't look counterfeit, but I ran a deep scan just in case, and my eyepiece is picking up a faint electronic signature somewhere in the pile. Should be about the center row, bottom stack."

Wasting no time asking, Hitoshi took a step forward, plunged his hand into the bills, and yanked out a wad from the middle, prompting a chuckle from Giran.

"Just like I expected, Hairo, you guys really are a cut above the rest. As efficient as always, and your group really is on the right track. I know you still haven't found everything you wanted, but trust me, you gotta keep looking."

Nodding quietly in response to the message hidden among the broker's words, Shinso began to piece together the situation bit by bit as he thumbed carefully through the stack of bills in his fist, searching for any irregularity. A much larger purchase than usual. Guards we've never seen before. A bug planted in the cash, one that he seems to want us to find.

"Keep going," Hatsume urged, "I'll let you know when I spot it."

Giran's guards were both growing tenser by the moment, their hands tight around the grips of their SMGs; their expressions were hidden by their hoods, but their demeanor was crystal clear. Out of the corner of his eye, Shinso could see Mustard's hand edging slowly into his coat, nearer and nearer to the grip of his holstered revolver. As he drew close the end of the stack, Hitoshi lifted his eyes to meet Giran's.
"So, how did it happen?"

"You know how these things go." He started forward as he spoke, puffing thoughtfully on his cigarette as he strode up to Hitoshi's side. "They bust down your door in the middle of the night, throw a bag over your head, and next thing you know you got your hands cuffed to an interrogation room table while some deadbeat police lieutenant yells at you about your responsibility to this country."

Right on cue, Shinso reached the final bill in the stack, and pulled it out to reveal a faint patch of green and gold micro-circuitry spread across the reverse side. Ushering Giran behind him, he stood and gazed toward the two guards with a bored look in his eyes, waving the bugged bill in front of his face.

"You guys did a pretty shit job at hiding this. And you call yourselves professionals?"

Mustard and the guards drew and aimed their guns at the same moment, but before a proper standoff could even begin, two white flashes cut through the air, and the enemies' weapons fell apart into cleanly divided halves. Twice retracted his razor-sharp measuring tape just as quickly as he'd deployed it, and wagged a taunting finger at the broker.

"So clumsy of you, getting captured like that, Giran! You better be glad we were here to save your sorry ass!"

"My apologies for the trouble." Giran took one last draw on his cigarette, then flicked it in the guards' direction. "I hated having to lead them straight to you, but they were pretty damn persistent, and I knew pulling something like this was my only chance. Spiders, meet the flies."

"We're always more than happy to help out a friend in need. Yumeko, could you deal with this trash?"

Chirp, chirp.

Giran's guards dived out of the way just as two shots from Hatsume's rifle punched holes into the floor they'd been standing on, and rushed for cover; Twice lashed out with his tape again at the taller one, missing his neck but striking a grazing blow that tore off his hood.

Some teen? Hitoshi frowned when he saw the guard's youthful face and mop of unruly black hair. He almost looks like Izuku- he can't be much older than we are. Then the guard slammed both of his palms into the ground, and the room began to vibrate; Shinso's eyes widened in recognition as a crack in the concrete arced toward Mustard, and a hole in the floor swallowed him up before he could fire his revolver or activate his gas.

Shindo Yo, better known Epicenter, the Earthquake Hero. Graduate and valedictorian of Ketsubutsu Academy, Sidekick to…

"Yoroimusha!" Mei cried into his ear, frantic. "He's coming up the elevator now! I'll try to take out the cables, but it's a tough shot with the scaffolding in the way, I can't make any promises!"

Time slowed down as more muffled shots rang out, and Hitoshi's heart began pound in his chest. A trap. How could I have fallen for a trap? The vibrations quickly dragged him back to reality, though, and he dived behind a wall for cover alongside Giran as the room began to descend into a chaotic battle. No use wondering how this happened. All I can do now is survive and escape, like Izuku would. A few paces ahead, Twice surged forward with his tape to cut down Shindo, but the second bodyguard leapt in to intervene, delivering a solid kick to Jin's side and a punch to his gut. He
whirled around and extended his other tape measure to cleave off the offending limbs, but as the blade descended on them, they suddenly vanished- or so he thought, until he realized that they'd simply retracted into the guard's body. Tatami Nakagame, he knew as the girl's hood fell back to reveal her blonde hair, blue eyes, and sharp teeth. Also known as Foldagirl. Another Ketsubutsu alum, and another of Yoroimusha's sidekicks. When her leg and arm burst out again and slammed into Twice's chest, the force of impact sent him tumbling into the next room; Foldagirl rushed after Jin while Epicenter made a dash for Hitoshi.

"Think you can hide from me? Save us both the trouble and come out!" The cocky grin the young hero wore on his face as he charged forward made Hitoshi's stomach roil. That's it, come closer- I'm going to enjoy brainwashing you.

"Masks on!" Suddenly Mustard's voice was ringing loud and clear in Shinso's earpiece; he barely had time to pull his sleek black respirator out of his coat and fit it onto his mouth before a thick stream of gas began to pour out of the hole Yo had made, twisting and turning to carpet the entire floor in a dense cloud.

"You better be glad I have an extra," Hitoshi snapped, reaching into his coat and tossing a second mask to Giran. "A heads-up on all this would've been nice- I'm sure you could've found a way. When I found the bug, I thought you had cops with you, not actual heroes!"

"They were watching me too closely!" The broker protested as he fit the respirator over his mouth. "Trust me, if I could have, I would've! I'll pay you back double for all this shit, I promise!"

It seemed that Yoroimusha's team was just as well-prepared, though- Epicenter ducked behind a crate and pulled on a mask of his own before continuing after his quarry, though he was stopped in his tracks just a few paces shy of Hitoshi's cover when a bullet tore through his side and forced him to his knees. Mei was his first thought, but then he glanced over to see Mustard clambering out of the rubble, smoke wafting from his revolver's barrel and mixing with the gas pouring from his body. The piece of concrete he was hanging onto shifted as he tried to pull himself up, though, and his second shot missed- reaching for the ground, Yo tried to activate his quirk again in the brief moment that luck had bought him, but Shinso was ready. Charging out of cover, he delivered a brutal kick to Shindo's injured side, then grabbed him by the collar and forearm and heaved him toward a wall- or so he intended, until Yo latched onto his leg with one hand, and everything below his torso began to vibrate.

It took less than a second for Hitoshi to lose balance completely, and before he knew it they were both rolling across the floor together, each struggling to gain the upper hand amid a tangle of limbs. He opened his mouth to ask a question- Giran didn't know his quirk, so neither should this brat- but a swift knee to the stomach left him gasping for breath and momentarily unable to speak. Epicenter gained the upper hand relatively quickly after that, pinning his opponent beneath him with a massive surge of strength. With his goggles, though, a few seconds' eye contact was all it took to activate his quirk- by the time Mustard had pulled himself onto solid ground, Yo was a blank-eyed puppet.

"Go help Twice," Hitoshi called to the other villain, glancing back to the elevator; its wheels and pulleys were still turning. "With any luck we can get out of here with the money before the cavalry arrives."

He turned back to Shindo, and was about to simply tell the hero to take a leap off the side of the building when a far better idea crossed his mind. Once he'd made the requisite commands and left Yo to his devices and called Giran back to his side, he rounded the corner to find Tatami still locked in combat with Bubaigawara amid the swirling purple torrent of gas- both had apparently equipped their masks on time. Foldagirl's abilities were clearly at their limit, though- her rapid retracting and
expanding to dodge Twice's attacks was becoming more and more sluggish as the fight dragged on, and she'd received several cuts from his tape and blows from his fists. Mustard watched the two down the barrel of his gun for a moment, but quickly determined that there was no way to get a clear shot, and dashed to the other end of the room to begin lobbing gas grenades down the elevator shaft.

"You know, I've never been a fan of hitting women," Jin was saying as he dodged one of her kicks, "but I'm not gonna lie, this whole turtle thing is really creeping me out!" He connected another blow when she was too slow to retract, this time to her shoulder, sending her staggering. "So if you don't stop it, I won't be responsible for what happens next!"

He swung his tape wildly at her midriff in a brutal arc that would have bisected anyone else; when Tatami drew her entire upper body into her waist as expected, leaving only her head poking out, Twice lunged forward, grabbed hold of her, and ripped off her mask in one short motion. She quickly expanded again and tried to grab it back, but a lightning-fast blow to her stomach forced her to suck in a breath, and within moments she had collapsed unconscious on the floor.

Hitoshi, Giran, and Jin all exchanged a glance, but before they could decide what to do with her, the elevator groaned to a halt a dozen yards away, sparks flying from half-shredded cables as it hung at a haphazard angle, the floor sloped downward.

She almost got it.

The steel-cage door swung open, and Yoroimusha stepped out defiantly onto solid ground, his hands gripped tight around his weapon, a blunted yari spear fitted with high-voltage shock emitters running along the blade- it was as close to lethal as the government would allow. Clad in a full suit of samurai armor with a black facemask above his whitening beard and a long horn extending from his ebony helm, the number nine hero was a fearsome sight to behold. Past seventy, he still had his sights set on breaking the records for longest hero career and most consecutive years spent in the JP Hero Billboard's top ten, and was very nearly there on both counts. Sleeping gas from the grenades choked the air around him, but his samurai mask had a respirator attached, and he started forward undaunted, even as a volley of shots from Mei's rifle bounced harmlessly off his armor. Jin made a rapid series of long-range slashes with his tape, but the razor edge didn't so much as scratch the hero, and Twice let out a whimper of defeat.

"I'll have you all pay for what you did to my apprentices," the man growled, his deep voice reverberating off the concrete walls. "Stand and face me in honorable battle!"

"Ok, time to go," Shinso breathed.

"You don't say," Giran added wryly.

He gave a short, sharp gesture, and on cue the group swiftly fell back to the farthest edge of the building and unholstered the grappling guns at their belts, a last resort contingency for escape provided by Hatsume. Twice created a series of clones as they ran, one for each of them, to stay behind and distract the hero while they fled. Dealing with two sidekicks barely out of high school was one thing, but a top ten hero was something different entirely: If Shinso used his quirk to kill Yoroimusha, the incident would bring a massive amount of public attention to their organization, the opposite of the low profile they’d strived for over the past two years; at this point, the best option was to flee and slow the pace of their operations in the city until the heroes tired of the chase.

Behind them, Yoroimusha was cutting through the doubles with ease; aiming his grapple with one hand, Mustard twisted around with his revolver with the other and fired three times at the hero, who let out a booming laugh when the rounds ricocheted off his breastplate.

"You think that least pea shooter is going to do anything to me, boy? They really don't teach you about the greats these days, do they? I've blocked bullets ten times that caliber without breaking a
Moments later, Yoroimusha cut through the last clone and started once more towards them, but when it became clear he wouldn't reach them in time, the aged hero hurled his spear forward like a javelin, aiming for Mustard's leg. All it took was a flick of Twice's wrist, though, to slice the weapon in half before it could hit its mark, and send the pieces clattering to the concrete.

"Too bad you're still too slow, old man!" Jin cried mockingly as his grapple found its target on an adjacent roof. "Come on, Giran, let's get the hell out of here!" Once the broker had grabbed tightly onto him with a look of slight embarrassment on his face, he leapt into the empty air, followed moments later by Mustard. Just half a dozen paces away from the charging samurai, Shinso had fired his own gun, and was bracing himself to jump when Mei's voice sounded in his ear again.

"Watch out beneath you! There's someone climbing the building!"

Two feet slammed into his chest from below before he could respond, and he stumbled backward. *What the hell?*! Hitoshi looked down to face his attacker, but a thick arm laid him flat on his back before he could regain his balance – at least, he thought it was an arm, until he saw that it had a tuft of blond hair at the end rather than a hand, and remembered all at once who the old man's newest intern was. Finishing a leaping vault over the edge from the floor directly beneath them, Ojiro Mashirao drew back his tail and raised his fists, his white martial arts costume rippling in the evening wind.

"You're not getting away that easy," said the U.A. third-year, his eyes full of fiery determination. "Surrender while you still can."

"I'm not planning on it."

Springing back to his feet, Hitoshi surged forward and aimed a sweeping right hook at Ojiro- now that the others had gotten away, all he had do was buy time, and he'd done more than his fair share of intensive combat training over the past two years. Brainwashing either or both of them at this point would be simple, but there was no need to risk giving his quirk's details away needlessly. Mashirao seemed surprised at his opponent's sudden ferocity, and for a brief time, the two were evenly matched, blow for blow. Even without his spear, Yoroimusha could easily end it by intervening, but he seemed confident enough in Ojiro to leave it to him, opting to retrieve Tatami's unconscious body instead. Sure enough, the intern's precise form and tail-based attacks quickly began to overwhelm Shinso's defenses, and within a minute he'd been backed into a corner, sporting several fresh bruises and a busted lip.

"Where's Epicenter?" Ojiro had barely broken a sweat, and cracked his knuckles menacingly. "What did you do with him?"

"Don't worry, you'll find out momentarily."

On cue, the ground had begun to steadily vibrate, followed by the walls, and the ceiling. Within seconds the entire building was shaking in one endless tremor.

"That's Epicenter!" Yoroimusha cried in confusion, Foldagirl slung over one shoulder. "Find him and get him to stop! I'll handle this scum!"

"Oh, it's too late for that," Shinso said with a grin, struggling to remain on his feet as a web of cracks spread across the floor beneath them. *Once my companions escape,* he'd commanded, *hide out of sight and use your quirk to destroy the building.* Even if the entire skyscraper did come down, Yoroimusha would almost certainly survive due to the sheer strength of his armor, though the same...
couldn't be said for anyone else- the secret of Hitoshi's quirk would die with Yo, and to the media, the entire incident would look like a disastrous blunder on the heroes' part, with a sidekick's reckless use of his quirk resulting in the total failure of a sensitive operation. With any luck, the case would be transferred to another, less competent hero as a result. Shindo didn't disappoint; soon Ojiro and his master were both struggling to find space to stand as chunks of the concrete floor collapsed left and right.

"You!" Yoroimusha surged forward and grabbed Shinso by the collar of his jacket, lifting him into the air like a ragdoll. "You're behind this, aren't you? What have you done?"

When Hitoshi said nothing in response, the Armored Hero slammed him into the wall, his eyes shining furiously through his mask.

"Answer me!"

"Careful now, old-timer, or you might break the merchandise."

Yoroimusha scoffed and tightened his grip before slamming Shinso again, hard enough for him to see stars at the edge of his vision, and a strange tingling sensation suddenly began in his extremities. Ah, so that's where the threshold is. His purpose fulfilled, Hitoshi couldn't help but laugh through the pain as the samurai prattled on in vain.

"Whatever treatment I give you is far better than you deserve, you miserable coward! You-"

The hero was still midsentence when Shinso began to lose his shape and cohesion, dissolving rapidly into a puddle of grey sludge. By the time he and Ojiro realized that they'd been fighting a clone, the ceiling was already caving in overhead, and rubble and darkness overtook them.

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Two Days Later

Kyoto, Yamashina Ward

"The publicity surrounding this engagement is… regrettable, but given the circumstances, I think that can be forgiven." There was a hint of satisfaction in Midoriya's voice as he addressed them, his gloved hands clasped together over the table. A converted study currently serving as Izuku's office at this particular base, the room was dimly lit, with only a sliver of morning sunlight filtering through the shuttered blinds. "You faced down a top ten hero and escaped with no casualties, not to mention your successful retrieval of the funds."

Mei nodded, setting the briefcase on the table with a hint of pride in her expression; it had very nearly been left behind, but thankfully Giran had grabbed it moments before his escape. Due to the volatile nature of the operation, they'd spent the next 48 hours in a safe house, completely cut off from the outside world, only arriving in Kyoto an hour prior.

"I ran a thorough scan on every note in here before we left Osaka, they're all clean and genuine, aside from the one the clone and I found and removed. The idiots didn't even install ink packets as a backup!"

"Hubris really is the hallmark of the top ten," Mustard remarked dryly, shaking his head as he paced the other side of the room. Without a mask, the fifteen year-old villain had a boyish face, a shock of sandy blond hair, and sharp, cold eyes that always seemed fixed on some obscure point in the distance. "They couldn't even conceive of the possibility that their plan would fail."

"Look at you with the big words," Giran crowed, clapping his hands together sarcastically. "Did
they teach you those before you dropped out of junior high?"

"Hey, play nice!" Twice countered, crossing his arms disapprovingly. "He's a good kid, mostly!"

"He's right, though," Midoriya cut in, and Twice quickly stopped chuckling. A twisted grin had spread across Izuku's face, and his eyes were shining with malice. "Even with All Might fading, they're still blinded by overconfidence. It's going to make our next major operation so much easier."

Hatsume raised a questioning eyebrow, but Midoriya simply sipped at his coffee before continuing. "I'll explain everything soon. But for now, you've all done exceptionally. Twice, Mustard, report back to Nagoya and await new orders- I believe Monoma has an assignment for you. Mei, you'll stay here in Kyoto for the time being. Giran, you're free to do as you wish, but I expect a full briefing on your time in police custody. I trust Hatsume's assessment that you haven't been bugged or psychologically compromised, but we do have to be thorough."

Once the broker and two former League members had taken their leave, Hatsume stood and stretched before returning her gaze to Midoriya, rubbing her tired eyes. It was always hard for her to sleep at safe houses, without her babies to work on- she'd fallen asleep at the workbench with tools in her hands so often that it was entirely natural now.

"Whew, what a week. Speaking of the top ten, though, isn't new the JP Hero Billboard chart broadcasting today?"

"It's about to start, actually." Shinso's voice drifted in from across the room, and Mei's heart leaped as she whirled around to find him standing in the doorway, smiling sheepishly. "I was about to come let you both know. The-"

Her arms were wrapped tightly around him before he could finish his sentence, her head nuzzled against his chest. Though they'd been together in some capacity or another for nearly two years now, they still didn't have a true label for whatever this was, but they'd made it this long, and neither of them seemed to mind. At first, he'd simply been her favorite project- the intricate nuances of his quirk were perfect for building and testing an entirely new style of babies, ones that enhanced mental abilities rather than physical ones. This abstract fascination quickly translated to something else entirely, though, over the long hours they spent together testing each new innovation. But the more she thought about it, the more she liked how it had turned out. Where she was frenetic and spontaneous, he was calm and calculated. Where he still harbored self-doubt, she was overflowing with confidence and energy to spare.

"You know, even when it's a clone, I still don't like seeing you get hurt." "I know," he said quietly, and stroked her hair. Although she still hadn't had time to remove her dye and contacts, Hitoshi's hair and eyes were back to their normal bluish purple, just as Midoriya's were green again. The hideouts were some of the few places they could afford to return to their original appearances, even if only for a short time between missions.

Hand-in-hand, they strode out into the living room, where Spinner was currently splayed out across one of the couches, fully immersed in Grand Theft Auto. This apartment was one of four main hubs for their criminal network that they'd acquired by careful use of Shinso's quirk over the past two years, spread out across central Japan- Nagoya, their first, Kyoto, Osaka, and Yokohama, on the outskirts of Tokyo proper. Due to the massive concentration of heroes and their former U.A. classmates inside the capital, Midoriya had ruled out the possibility of setting up a base in any of the 23 wards as too risky- for now, at least. Their members were always spread out relatively evenly among the four locations for maximum security- even having three of the founding members in the same city, as they did now, was a rare occurrence. As things stood, Osaka would be shuttered for a while longer to allow the hero and police presence in the city to die down.
The Kyoto headquarters weren't the most spacious of the four, but they were likely the most luxurious, with pleasantly accented wood tones and several elegant Japanese landscape paintings adorning the walls; the place had been owned a wealthy collector before Hitoshi brainwashed him into "selling" it. A Zen stone garden was visible on the terrace outside a set of French doors, and an entire suit of intact samurai armor was set into an alcove in one wall, next to a display of antique katana and no-dachi; after their encounter with Yoroimusha, the sight was especially ironic. Just as in the other three bases, one room had been stripped and converted into a workshop for Hatsume- she caught a glimpse of metal and welding tools through an open doorway as they made their way to the couch, and her heart fluttered in longing. *Soon, babies. Just a little bit longer before mommy's back.*

In the far corner of the apartment, Dark Shadow stood guard over the doorway; the pulsating, avian void's glowing yellow eyes were dutifully watching several rows of security monitors connected to cameras aimed at every possible entrance and exit to the base. Tokoyami Fumikage was a particularly interesting case- after they abducted him during the forest training camp, he'd proven stubbornly resistant to their attempts to indoctrinate him, clinging to his ideals of heroism just as Yaoyorozu did at first. Constant brainwashing during missions by Hitoshi was logistically difficult, and the quirk had proven impossible for Monoma to copy- they'd been nearly ready to give up when Hatsume came to an epiphany: While Tokoyami wasn't sympathetic to their cause and methods, Dark Shadow, on the other hand, craved violence instinctively when at his full strength.

After her extensive experimentation with brainwave-alterating technology for Shinso's babies, it had been relatively simple for Mei to craft a special collar and headpiece that inhibited Tokoyami's capacity for critical thought while ensuring that his quirk was always active and in complete control of his movement, with its aggression and bloodlust enhanced significantly. After nearly two years of trial and error with more and more powerful and effective designs, Fumikage himself had been rendered completely subservient to his own quirk, which shrouded his body at all times, and viewed Shinso as a more worthy master than the one it had been born with. Hitoshi still had to accompany Dark Shadow on most of its missions to ensure that it stayed in line, and due to the recognizable nature of the missing U.A. student's power, it was only suitable for assignments that allowed for stealth, but the sentient quirk had become a valuable and deadly asset to them all the same.

"Come on, Iguchi, turn it back to the billboard announcement." Passing by the brooding shadow, Shinso sat down next to Spinner and nudged him with one elbow.

"Hey, I'm practicing my driving skills!" Shuichi protested, taking a gulp of beer and scarfing a handful of popcorn before leaning back over the controller. Explosions and gunfire echoed throughout the room, and the sound of police sirens set them all on edge for a moment before they remembered it was just a game.

"Don't make me use my quirk. You know I will."

"Just lemme keep going until I die again, I'm at four stars already!"

"Listen to Shinso- you can play later, Spinner. Switch it back, I want to see this."

Midoriya had emerged from his study, and was standing at the back of the room with an amused look on his face. Iguchi complied in a heartbeat at the sound of his voice; in his eyes, Izuku's ideals were the closest to Stain's of anyone living. After Toga, he'd been the second League member to defect, and had remained unquestioningly loyal ever since.

When Iguchi flipped the channel back to normal television, two news anchors were still commenting on the pre-event festivities, their faces relatively somber.

"Heroes are still arriving here in Tokyo, just minutes before the top ten announcement begins. For
those just tuning in, a short time ago we saw number nine hero Yoroimusha deliver a statement to the press from a local hospital- while his injuries are minor, and he has been given clearance to attend by his doctors, the Armored Hero has told reporters that he plans to skip the ceremony and remain with his sidekicks until they all make full recoveries. Epicenter and Foldagirl, graduates of the same class at Ketsubutsu Academy, both received critical injuries when a black market sting gone wrong resulted in the partial collapse of an under-construction office building in Osaka's Tennoji Ward earlier this week. The specifics of the encounter are still unclear, but according to a hospital spokesman, Shindo has been placed in a medical coma due to the severity of his wounds, and Tatami is still unconscious as a side effect of exposure to the quirk of former League of Villains member Mustard, believed to have escaped and still at large."

"That's our boy!" Spinner cackled, pumping his scaled fist in triumph before glancing back to Mei. "So glad you guys fucked up those pompous little Ketsu-brats, I wish the kid was still here to see this."

"They'd both be dead if I could've gotten a clear shot," she cried in exasperation, squeezing Shinso's arm, "but stupid old me decided to try and take out the elevator first! I should've just gone straight for the kill."

"Don't be too hard on yourself." Midoriya took a seat in a leather chair to the left, his steaming coffee still in hand. "This is almost preferable. Young heroes become martyrs if they die in the line of duty; if you leave them alive but useless, then you've truly beaten them."

"A third year at U.A. High School and intern at Yoroimusha's agency, Ojiro Mashirao, was present at the sting as well, but escaped with relatively light wounds," the anchors continued. "Police reports indicate that both Ojiro and Tatami owe their survival in large part to the Armored Hero, who shielded the two with his body during the collapse. For more coverage on this tragic story, tune in after the program. For now, though, it looks like the official announcement is about to begin!"

The camera cut away from the anchors to the inside of the packed auditorium where the ceremony was held, filled to bursting with pro heroes. Beside them, Spinner scoffed and shook his head between sips of beer as the view panned slowly over different sections of the audience.

"Fakes, all of them. Not a single one there knows anything about the true meaning of heroism."

"I couldn't agree more," said Izuku. "That's why it's our duty to teach them that lesson."

The ceremony proper began before Shuichi could respond, and all the former U.A. students in the room cringed at the sound of the announcer's voice.

"Good moooorrrninggg, Tokyooo! Are you ready?!" There was a pause while the audience roared out their approval. "I'm your host, Present Mic, and you're listening to the JP Hero Billboard Top Ten! Let's not waste any more time- we all know what we're here for! So without further ado, bounding in at number ten is the boy wonder who's taken the nation by storm since his public debut last year! His partnership with Sir Nighteye and Miruko has resolved more incidents per commission than almost anyone else here! I give you LEMILLION!"

Iguchi made a gagging sound as Mirio Togata strode out onto the stage, waving enthusiastically to the crowd.

"God, I can't believe they actually gave Tintin a spot, the plucky little shit. No one really smiles that much! There's something off about him, I'm calling it now."

"He'd be such a pain to make babies for with that quirk of his," Mei groaned, sticking out her tongue
in disgust.

"Coming in at number nine," Mic continued, "with one of the most impressive ranking recoveries we've ever seen, is ENDEAVORRR!"

Spinner practically had a conniption at the sight of the man who killed his idol, leaping to his feet and pointing angrily at the screen.

"The fuck is this bullshit?! He was all the way down at 22 last time! Who the hell's even voting for him after Hosu? This asshole should be in jail, not getting a comeback tour!"

Ignoring the irony of that statement, Mei quickly motioned for Iguchi to sit back down so they could see.

"After a plunge from number two into the forties following his controversial handling of the Hosu City incident, Endeavor has made steady progress back toward the top ten at each ranking, gaining major traction after his trial ended with a not guilty verdict a few months back!"

*Okay, now he would be fun to make babies for,* Hatsume admitted to herself, watching the man's scowling countenance. *I'd get to play with lots of heat resistant materials and designs, tungsten would probably work best... Too bad Dabi's such an anti-support item purist.*

"Up one spot at number eight is the Armored Hero, *Yoroiimusha!* As you all know, he's currently in the hospital with his sidekicks after this week's incident, so let's wish them all a speedy recovery!"

"Damn right he is," Mei muttered, ruffling Hitoshi's hair. "That was good thinking, making the vibration kid bring the building down."

"Well, technically speaking, it wasn't *my* idea."

Frowning, Hatsume was about to launch into a philosophical tangent about how in a sense it was when Present Mic cut her short; the next few names passed by rather uneventfully.

"Continuing her steady rise up the ranks, at number seven we have the Dragon Hero, Ryukyu! Give her a hand!"

"For the second ranking in a row, the gifted rookie Kamui Woods stands at number six, although he has some competition for that title now from number ten!"

"Breaking the top five for the first time after a recent fall to rank twelve is everyone's favorite sea mammal- that's right, ladies and gentlemen, it's *GANGG ORCAA!*

Present Mic was growing even more boisterous and excited as he neared the top spots, if that was possible, and eventually Shinso had to turn the volume down to keep the whole room from reverberating with his every word.

"Holding down the number four spot for the fourth ranking in a row is the ever reliable Shinobi Hero, Edgeshot! If Mount Lady can break past her number eleven ranking next time, his hero team will set a record for most members in the top ten at once!"

The camera cut briefly to a shot of Mount Lady in the crowd, wiping tears from her eyes and wailing a string of apologies directed at Kamui and Edgeshot between exaggerated sobs.

"Oh, come on, have some goddamn dignity," Spinner called at the TV, shoving more popcorn in his mouth. "But I have to say, it'd be a lot easier to hate her if she weren't so damn cute. And speaking of
"Jumping to a new high is the young hero who's put bunny ears back in fashion- don't pick a fight with her in a dark alley! Reaching the highest ranking for a female hero since Shimura Nana, you guessed it, at number three it's MIRUKOOOO!"

Rather than simply walk across the stage like the rest of her colleagues, the Rabbit Hero literally bounced into place, landing in line next to Edgeshot with pinpoint precision to thunderous applause from the crowd. As she waved to her cheering fans, the camera cut to a shot of the audience, focusing in specifically on Kendo Itsuka, dressed in a flowing blue and silver costume complete with a cape and gloves. All Might was sitting next to her in his Golden Age costume, still imposing even in his weakened form. An even more massive cheer went up for the two Symbols of Peace, one in training and one retired, but the living room quickly fell silent. Out of the corner of her eye, Hatsume could see Izuku shaking his head in quiet frustration, and Shinso muttered something profane beneath his breath. Spinner remained mute.

"We're all hoping to see Miruko's famous new intern reach great heights on this billboard when she graduates U.A. this spring! Stay cool, Kendo, but don't let your snazzy new job cut too much into your study time for my class!"

Itsuka went as red as her hair in the brief moment before the camera cut back to the stage, but Mic moved on just as quickly, and suddenly the auditorium was saturated with quiet anticipation. Shinso was checking his phone, but a gentle hand to the face from Hatsume dragged his attention back to the screen. Ever since Endeavor's fall from grace and All Might's announcement of his retirement just over a year ago, the top spot had been evenly contested between Best Jeanist and Hawks; Jeanist had managed to hang onto it in the past two rankings, but after a string of widely publicized rescue operations and gang busts by Hawks over the past six months, nothing was certain anymore. For the first time in ages, who would take the title of number one hero was anyone's guess.

"The vote was closer than ever this year," Mic cried, "and the hero statistics were nearly tied too! So here's the moment you've all been waiting for! Coming in strong at number two, I give you BEST JEANIST!"

So the new beats out the old after all, Mei mused, watching as the audience reacted with shock and jubilance in equal measures. Jeanist took the stage as suavely and politely as ever, but the roaring of the crowd didn't die down even as Present Mic raised his volume to read the final result over them.

"And at the age of just twenty-four, an all-time record, your new number one hero, the unflappable, unbeatable, unparalleled, HAWKSSSS!"

His crimson wings spread out in all their glory, Hawks took a page from Miruko's book and soared twenty feet into the air from his place in the crowd, lighting in his spot at the head of the stage with the grace of a ballroom dancer. Even through the TV, Hatsume could hear women (and some men) in the crowd squealing as he flashed a roguish grin at the camera, though she nearly gagged at the sight. The individual comments from each of the ten heroes came next, though their group mostly tuned out and devolved into scattered conversation- except for Midoriya, of course, who wrote feverishly in one of his dozens of notebooks after every speech. When it came time for Hawks to talk, though, the room seemed to quiet instinctively.

Even before he spoke, the new top hero's tone was readily apparent from the self-satisfied smirk on his face and his relaxed, casual posture as he held the microphone up to his mouth.

"Wow. All I can say is, took you guys long enough. I mean, about damn time, right?" A peal of
laughter rose up to the rafters. "But no, really, though. I've been saying ever since I broke the top ten that popularity polls should be the only real metric that determines these rankings, and I still stand by that. As your heroes, we should be a reflection of how the people of this country feel, and that's what I finally see on this stage today. Now I know that this is a massive responsibility- I've been thinking about this moment for a long time. And right now, what I want you to know is that even if things seem rough and confusing right now, I have your back, and I always will. My goal has always been a world where heroes have more free time than they know what to do with, and that's exactly what I'm going to give you."

Shinso muted the TV to silence the applause that followed, and Spinner narrowed his eyes, one hand clenched into a fist.

"That arrogant piece of shit. He's everything that's wrong with this society, with the entire system. He doesn't understand the first thing about heroism, about sacrifice."

"I know," replied Midoriya. "That's why we're going to kill him."

Twelve Hours Later

Tokyo, Location Unknown

"You're fucking serious? You want to kill Hawks? The new number one hero? Forget the Kendo girl they keep trying to prop up, that guy is riding the biggest wave of popularity I've seen since All Might's debut. And you think you and your band of high school dropouts and ex-League goons can lay a finger on him? Even if I had a reason to, I wouldn't dare go for him, not at a moment like this."

Midoriya smiled, and shook his head in quiet exasperation. The office was much brighter than his own, but at ten meters underground and with no natural lighting to speak of, it felt twice as confined and claustrophobic. It was setting him on edge, making him angry, but he quickly pushed the feeling back down.

"And that's exactly why your organization has gone nowhere in the past twenty years. A willful lack of ambition- of imagination. You tell yourselves over and over there's no chance of bringing down someone who's ascended that high, that they've become untouchable, and after you repeat it enough times you start to actually believe it. I hate to be the one to break it to you, but you're wrong, Overhaul."

Chisaki Kai narrowed his eyes; on the table between them, Izuku nonchalantly moved another shogi piece. The match was still even.

"You don't know what we've been through," Chisaki growled. "You're too young to remember. It's a miracle that the Yakuza survived All Might in the first place- he's only just retired, and now that I've barely got this group back on its feet, you want us help you make a move so bold, it could easily get us both crushed for good. Is it just me, or does that sound insane to you too? Because insanity is a sickness, and I can't stand sickness." Kai's eyes were shining with barely restrained fury, and one of his hands started to fiddle almost instinctively with the edge of the thin white glove lining the other. Midoriya had done enough research on Chisaki's quirk to know that the gesture was a threat, but he remained calm, and motioned for Overhaul to make his move on the Shogi board.

"Back on your feet? That's being a bit too generous, don't you think? Correct me if I'm wrong, but the last I heard, your little quirk-erasing drug ring was busted by Nighteye before it even got off the ground, and you've been turning tail and running from his hero team at every chance you get ever since. I don't know what kind of clowns you were used to dealing with back when the League was
around, but I'm sure you know by now that my operation is of a much higher caliber, both financially and strategically."

Chisaki calmly moved a piece, placing it within striking distance of Izuku's king.

"You should be glad that I respected your organization enough to agree to a one-on-one meeting," he said, still fidgeting with his glove, as if he couldn't decide whether or not to remove it. "My men would have already killed you for speaking like that to me. I'm still not sure whether you're sick or not, but keep going while I make up my mind."

Midoriya reached down and maneuvered his king out of danger, watching with a smile as Chisaki tried to retaliate.

"So let's boil this down to the basics, shall we? You have a problem- the Eight Precepts are being hunted by Nighteye, Miruko, and Lemillion, and the noose is starting to tighten. I have a problem- I want Hawks dead. They may seem disconnected at first glance, but if my problem is solved, the solution to yours becomes much, much simpler. If Hawks dies, the hero world is thrown into chaos just weeks after crowning its new king, and in the confusion, you'll have the perfect chance to strike back at your pursuers. We've always kept a respectable distance from each other, Overhaul, but this is the moment we've both been waiting for- if we join forces now, nothing will be able to stand against us." Izuku paused and slid a piece forward; it was Kai's king in danger now. "After we ensure that the Yakuza escapes unscathed and stronger than ever, we can go our separate ways just as usual, and neatly divide the spoils of war. If we don't seize this moment, though, we'll both fail, and you know it just as well as I do."

Chisaki remained silent for a long moment, his expression imperceptible beneath his plague mask, eyes fixed on the shogi board.

"I don't think I have to kill you after all," he finally said, capturing Midoriya's piece to even out the match again. "I'll need to meet with your people, assess your capabilities. My informants tell me you're operating out of Nagoya, that right? How about next week? I'll come by then, and we can talk. Make sure you keep the place clean for me."

Izuku laughed out loud and shook his head, ignoring the Yakuza capo's look of indignation.

"A week? So inefficient! Why wait?!" He pressed down on his left cufflink until it clicked, and began to emit a soft, steady electronic beeping.

A swirling black-and-purple portal manifested at the center of the room moments later, and Chisaki was still rising from his chair when Toga, Dabi, Monoma, and Yaoyorozu strode through.

"Let's talk now, Overhaul."

Chapter End Notes

And here we go back into the present timeline! My apologies to any anime-only readers, but we're plunging full into manga territory from here on out- I can't tell you guys how satisfying it is to finally include Hawks, Lemillion, Overhaul, and everyone else! As always, let me know what you think- can Midoriya & co. plus the Eight Precepts really pull this plan off? Can Spinner ever make it to five stars in GTA? Tune in next time for a chapter from the heroes' perspective!
Chapter Notes

And we're back with the longest chapter yet, just in time to fill the void after the end of the third season! This one was definitely one of my favorites to write, and I hope you all see why by the end- everyone else who was disappointed we didn't get to see the female hero team's fight during the Internship Arc, this one goes out to you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Two Years Ago

Nagoya, Shinso's Penthouse

The first thing that Yaoyorozu Momo noticed as she drifted slowly back into consciousness was that the consistency of her mattress had changed. The training camp's sleeping bags had offered little protection against the cold, hard floor, but now she was lying in a bed so cushy and comfortable that she was tempted to just sink into it and stay there forever. I almost made a mattress pad and pillow for myself the first night, she remembered, but it wouldn't have been right to sleep in luxury while my classmates suffered! Aizawa-sensei must have finally taken mercy on us…

Keeping her eyes screwed shut in order to preserve her blissful, half-awake state, she pulled the blanket tighter around herself, and cracked a small grin. My alarm hasn't gone off yet, so I still have a while to sleep! I should really get up and get a head start on my quirk training, but I think we've all earned some rest after the… Momo's eyes shot open, and she sat up straight in bed, her grogginess gone in an instant. …test of courage.

Everything flooded back to her at once- the villain attack, the Nomu, Awase, that strange boy at the end. The rest of the night's events were a blur after he showed up, but there were vague flashes of memory she could make out: sitting in the back of a jeep as the forest passed by in a blur, the bright lights of a city, a luxurious apartment lobby. One thing was certain- she wasn't at the camp anymore. Resisting the urge to panic, she allowed her eyes to adjust to the darkness and slowly took in her surroundings, breathing deep breaths. She was wearing a fresh set of clothes, with her bloodied pajamas from the test of courage barely visible folded in a neat pile on her nightstand. Her right wrist was handcuffed to the bedframe, but her head was wrapped bandaged where she'd been injured by the Nomu, and an IV drip was embedded in her left arm, supplying her with what looked to be water or saline- apparently, whoever had taken her had no intention of harming or killing her- yet.

Whoever's taken me. She shuddered at the thought, her stomach sinking as her first encounter with the League at USJ came to mind. But she pushed the fear to the back of her mind, glancing around the room, searching for any useful information. Though the curtains were drawn on the main window, the complete lack of light suggested that it was nighttime- whether it was still the same night as the attack was another question entirely. Most of the room was too shrouded in shadow for her to make out anything, and what she could see was generic to the point of uselessness- it looked like a completely ordinary bedroom, for all intents and purposes. Giving up that route, she carefully pulled out the IV and turned back to the handcuffs, reaching to the nightstand for her dictionary out of instinct before remembering that it wasn't there. Ok, I have to brainstorm this one myself. Let's try a pair of wire cutters first.
Glancing to her bare forearm, she thought of the item in mind, but nothing emerged; instead, she felt a dull twinge of discomfort at the base of her skull, and her brows furrowed in confusion.

"So sleeping beauty's finally awake, huh?"

Momo started at the sound of a feminine voice from the other end of the room; there was a distinctive click, and a lamp turned on to reveal a pink-haired girl sitting in an armchair, a pair of steampunk-style goggles lowered over her eyes as she watched Yaoyorozu with a hint of amusement on her face. She was wearing a nondescript black-and-grey jumpsuit, but it was similar enough in style to the U.A. gym uniforms that it only took a few moments for Momo to gasp in realization, her eyes widening as one hand shot to her mouth.

"No, it can't be… I remember you from the Sports Festival. You're Hatsume, you're…"

"One of the students who vanished!" Mei finished, grinning widely. "Bingo! And now you are too-welcome to the club! We have free food!" Hatsume rose and strode over to Yaoyorozu's bedside, setting a container of Chinese takeout on her nightstand before slurping down a clump of lo mein noodles from her own dish. "We thought you'd be hungry- you've been out for over a day, after all. Hope ya like Mongolian beef, it's all we have left."

Mei had set the food on the side of the bed she wasn't handcuffed to along with a pair of chopsticks, but as starving as Momo was, she couldn't help but eye it warily, her mind racing to analyze the situation.

"No, it's not poisoned, dummy," Hatsume said suddenly, as if she were reading her captive's thoughts. "I swear, the other one thought the same thing. Just think for a minute with that big brain of yours, why would we go to all the trouble to bring you back here and patch you up if we just wanted to kill you?"

"Forget the food," Yaoyorozu snapped, "first I want to know what's going on! You're suppressing my quirk somehow, aren't you?" To demonstrate it she tried again to produce something from her forearm- a staff, a necklace, a pair of tweezers- but once again, nothing happened aside from the same muffled throb of distant pain. "Where am I, and why am I here?! You said you took someone else too?!"

"My goodness, what a reaction!" A second voice drifted in from across the room, and Momo whipped her head around to see Monoma Neito striding through the doorway, a crooked grin stretched across his face. "Who knew she had such a temper? Almost as bad as Tokoyami! I always knew that Class A was an irrational bunch, but this is just too amusing!"

Trailing just behind him was Midoriya Izuku; though she'd only seen him a few times in passing at school, but his face was easily recognizable from the missing person posters. *Three of the four missing students.* Her eyes flitted frantically between them, and her mouth refused to work. *What is this? Did they really turn to crime?! It can't be! U.A. students would never do such a thing!"

"You weren't kidnapped…" Her voice was faint, as if she could scarcely believe what she was saying. "You all ran away on your own… and now you've attacked us, you abducted me and Fumikage! You… you joined the League of Villains?!"

"No, that's not it." Midoriya stepped out from behind Monoma and began to advance towards her; he was smiling, but there was something so unnerving about his presence that she recoiled out of instinct as he moved forward, edging as far to the other side of the bed as her restraint would allow. "We're something beyond them entirely. Our paths may have intersected at the training camp, but that was simply an unfortunate coincidence. They act strong, but in truth they're lost, causeless,
searching for meaning where the world offers none. They have no true leader and no true ideals."

"And?" She countered. "What cause do you have, besides kidnapping innocent people? What are you trying to accomplish by running away like this?"

Izuku paused for a moment, one gloved hand perched contemplatively on his jaw.

"It may be difficult to understand for someone like you— for someone who was born with everything. A rich, comfortable life, a secure future, a quirk with potential beyond most people's wildest dreams. You started at the pinnacle of this society, with nowhere to go but further up. You never got a chance to see the sickness that runs beneath it, the decay that's slowly eating it from the bottom. All men are not born equal— I learned that lesson a long time ago. Everyone does, at some point. But we decided to do something about it." He gestured to the others around him, all of whom nodded silently in turn, and Yaoyorozu's stomach turned at the sight. It was true— she had led a privileged life. But how dare he assume that I don't understand how it feels to fail, to be frustrated, to want to be better?!

"We decided to make our own futures, rather than accept the pitiful lots that were offered to us. I'm sure you read the writings of Stain after they were released online, didn't you?"

"I… yes." She managed, after a moment's hesitation. Momo hated everything about the Hero Killer, the animal who had killed Iida and maimed Todoroki almost beyond recovery. But she hadn't been able to resist examining his ideology, if only for the sake of clinical, academic curiosity. "Are you some disciple of that sick bastard? Is that what this is?"

"No, not quite," Midoriya answered with a grin. "He was right about a good deal of things, though— this society is corrupted beyond redemption. This country is sick, but our difference in opinion lies in the cure. He believed that only paragons of virtue— true heroes— could save us." The grin vanished, and his countenance grew cold. "But I know that there's no such thing as true heroes. Only the strongest can save what's left of society. Tell me, are you familiar with the concept of entropy?"

"Of course," she replied, her eyes narrowed.

"All orderly systems descend into chaos eventually," He breathed, as if whispering a prayer. "Everything falls apart in the end. The slow heat death of the universe. I've been thinking a good deal about entropy, ever since we left. As things stand, our festering wound of a society isn't particularly orderly in the first place, and it will only get worse from here. Some people talk about a quirk singularity, that our genetic gifts will become so powerful that we won't be able to control them anymore. But I believe the opposite. Quirks will grow more powerful, but they won't be the cause of the collapse— people will. People will still be able to control them— they'll just choose not to, as it becomes easier and easier to break the rules for their own benefit. And in the end, when the heroes and villains tear each other apart and destroy this nation in the process, the strong will be left to rule over the ashes. We just have a head start on the rest."

"You're insane," She said quietly, her eyes drifting between the three of them. Hatsume and Monoma were watching Izuku with the quiet reverence of congregants at a sermon. "You're all insane."

"Insane?" Midoriya chuckled. "Such an easy word to use about someone you don't understand. So what if we are? Insanity is like gravity, Yaoyorozu. All it takes it a little push— and we have all the time in the world for that. You'll understand us soon enough. I promise."

Present Day
"Wake up, Ochako-chan. You slept through the study session."

A finger poked her cheek, and all at once Uraraka Ochako bolted awake from her nap, breathing hard. Her dreams had been strange and uneasy, but the details slipped away within moments as the world came into focus. Asui Tsuyu, her roommate, was standing in front of her in her pajamas, her expression somewhere between inquisitive and concerned. The sky was pitch dark outside the window, with moonlight filtering into their shared kitchen. With a groan, she realized that she'd fallen dead asleep on their couch without even changing out of her black and pink hero costume, a sheen of sweat still damp on her forehead.

"Not again," she murmured dejectedly, her eyes falling down to the floor, too ashamed to meet Tsuyu's gaze. "I really wanted to go this time too! How long was I out?"

"Well, we got back from work at 8, and it's almost 11 now, so about three hours."

"Three?!" Uraraka's lip quivered a bit, and her stomach sunk. "All that time I could've been working... I just couldn't help it after today with Ryukyu, I was so exhausted."

Tsuyu nodded in understanding. The two had been interns at the Dragon Hero's agency since the end of their first year, and by now, at the end of their third, they were treated as sidekicks in everything but name; Ryukyu had already extended job offers to both of them after graduation, with as much time to decide as they needed. The past few days had been particularly grueling work, though, as they attempted to nail down a series of violent incidents in Yokohama thought to be related to the same group of ex-League members who infamously came into contact with Yoroimusha and his sidekicks in Osaka.

The movements and activities of Dabi and Toga Himiko had their office's particular focus lately; today, they'd been launched headlong into a frantic rescue operation when an apartment complex in a poorer area of town suddenly caught fire. They'd been staking it out for weeks as a suspected meeting point between Dabi, Toga, and several local gangs of small-time villains and criminals, and despite the unmistakable blue flames that had marked the conflagration as Dabi's handiwork, there had been no trace of him left when they arrived. They managed to save almost everyone from the blaze after Ryukyu extinguished it her wings, but they weren't any closer to their targets, and it was hard not to be frustrated.

"Why didn't you just wake me up?" Uraraka asked, rubbing her neck as she sat upright and started to strip out of her costume- after nearly a year as roommates, any sense of modesty or embarrassment between the two about such things was long since gone.

"I tried," Tsuyu protested, taking a seat beside her, "but you just kept mumbling 'five more minutes' over and over." Asui leaned her head against her roommate's now-bare shoulder, as she struggled with her sweaty black jumpsuit. "Besides, you just look too cute when you're sleeping for me to disturb you, ribbit."

Ochako felt color flush across her face as Tsu wrapped a hand around her waist and planted a quick kiss on her cheek. They'd grown considerably closer in many ways since moving in together, but this aspect of their relationship was still something she was uncertain about. After several failed attempts to discuss the nature of their feelings for each other, largely due to Uraraka's nervousness, the matter had been left at a sort of standoff, but Asui gently broached the subject every now and then, when her roommate seemed comfortable with it.

"Don't say something that's so untrue," Ochako protested, shifting her body and letting her head fall
into Tsu's lap. I haven't been at the gym nearly enough lately, I'm gonna get pudgy if I'm not careful! I need to ask Gunhead if I can go practice martial arts at his studio again..."

"Because you've been working," said Asui, poking at Ochako's abs and biceps. "Field experience is the best workout, silly. Or did you forget all the times All Might-sensei said so?"

Uraraka's eyes widened, and she suddenly sat upright, to Tsu's silent distress.

"Speaking of All Might-sensei, didn't Kendo-san mention at joint practice today that people were gonna go out again tonight? I didn't sleep through that too, did I?"

On cue, her phone began to buzz on the coffee table, and Mina's contact image, a selfie with her tongue sticking out, popped up on the screen.

"Heyyyyy, girlies!" Ashido's voice burst out of the speaker the moment Ochako accepted the call, already slightly slurred. "Where are you guys?! We're already here at the bar, and I wanted to make sure you didn't get lost or forget! I just... I just miss you two so much!" Sniffling became audible on the other end of the line, and Uraraka's eyes widened for a moment, until Tsu tapped her on the shoulder and leaned in toward her ear.

"Don't worry, Mina's just an emotional drunk. Remember the party on New Year's Eve, when Toru showed her a video of a puppy and she wouldn't stop crying about it for half an hour?"

Ochako stifled a giggle at the memory, and tilted her head back towards the receiver.

"I miss you too, Mina! We'll be there soon, I just overslept after work!"

More sniffling followed, accompanied by several hiccups.

"Okay, do you promise?"

"Mhm."

"Do you pinky promise?" Ashido suddenly started sniggering. "Get it? Pinky promise? Because I'm Pinky?"

"Of course I get it," she replied with a chuckle. "Now I've gotta go get ready, ok?"

"Okaayyy, seeya soon cuties!" There was an audible thump as Mina tried to hit the end call button and failed, and for a few moments Uraraka could hear the sounds of muffled voices and clinking glasses. "Let's do another shot, everybody!" She shouted, and Bakugo yelled something in response, prompting an enthusiastic reply from Kirishima. Ochako listened in for another few seconds before hanging up, a soft smile on her face.

"It'll be so good to see everyone relaxed outside school like this. We've been so busy with finals and graduation coming up that we're barely had time to hang out...

"I was actually just planning on going to bed," Tsuyu croaked suddenly, derailing her train of thought.

Asui was already in her frog-themed pajamas and matching slippers, but some of Ashido's energy seemed to have rubbed off on Uraraka, who surged forward, grabbed hold Tsu's baggy shirt, and pulled it off in one swift motion, only blushing a little bit when she realized her roommate wasn't wearing a bra.

"Nope, no early sleepers allowed in this room, not on a Friday night- you're coming with me to get changed right now! Team Froppy-ravity is hitting the town tonight, and we're gonna conquer it!"
She pumped her fist in the air for effect, and poked Tsu in the belly with her other hand until she reluctantly mimicked the gesture.

"Only if I get to conquer bed afterwards," she ribbited weakly.

By the time they reached the bar half an hour later, nearly everyone else was there, and a chorus of shouted greetings bombarded them the moment they stepped through the door.

"You made it, you made it!" As usual, Mina was the most enthusiastic of the group- she stood up from her seat and tried to run over and greet them, but lost balance and tripped halfway, plummeting straight for the floor until Ochako bolted forward and caught her, inadvertently touching her with all five fingers and turning her weightless.

Ashido's yelp of distress quickly turned into a fit of laughter as she floated up into the air, and the table of U.A students erupted into oohs and aahs. She managed to gradually drift her way back over to their classmates, and Kaminari wasted no time pouring out a serving of sake and handing it up to her.

"Anti-gravity shot!" He cried as she downed it, to raucous applause and laughter, which lasted until Ochako finally released Mina at a safe spot over the floor.

"Do me next!" Kirishima cried, jumping out of his chair.

"No, no, me!" Toru insisted, the sleeves of her shirt waving frantically in the air. "I'll buy you a drink if you do!"

"So Uraraka's touching everybody, huh?" Mineta added smugly; they all roundly ignored him.

The requests built up to a frantic chorus that Uraraka could hardly speak over them- she shot a worried glance to Tsu, who had told you we should've stayed in written all over her face. Finally, though, a single voice cut through all the uproar.

"Come on, everyone, calm down. Uraraka and Asui just got here, they haven't even had a chance to sit down and have a drink yet."

The table grew silent in an instant, and all eyes snapped to Kendo Itsuka. Sitting at the far end, with Tetsutetsu to her left and Jiro to her right, the new Symbol of Peace was undisputedly the leader of both classes both socially and professionally, and undoubtedly the most famous student at U.A.- in all of Japan, for that matter. She tried her best to be humble, but being All Might's designated successor didn't exactly foster a low profile, and many of her classmates worshipped the ground she walked on despite her protests. Even the ones who didn't still respected her, though, and listened to her out of instinct- she had proven herself worthy of that much. Ochako and Tsu fell into the latter category.

"I'm sorry, Kendo-sama!" Kaminari cried, the first to speak up after the momentary silence. "Please forgive me!"

The apologies flooded in after that, and amid the clamor the two new arrivals took the chance to squeeze in next to Ashido and Bakugo. Katsuki was glaring at his drink, a glass of straight whisky, like it had personally insulted him, and barely glanced up when they sat down.

"Took you fuckers long enough. Ryukyu work you hard today?"

"You better believe it," Ochako replied, pouring herself a beer from one of the pitchers at the center
of the table- due to the size of their group, they tended to order in bulk. "It was fire rescue all afternoon, and recon work in the evening. How about your internship?"

"Things were pretty standard with Best Jeanist," he grunted, taking a sip of his drink. "Working on busting some narcotics smugglers. Helped save some kids from a sinking ferry the other day. Haven't gotten to blow much up lately, so that's fucked. But I still think the new ratings are a load of bullshit." He cast a pointed glance at the TV up in the corner of the room, which was currently playing a highlight reel of the new number one hero's latest interviews. "Jeanist deserved that number one spot. Fuck Hawks, he seems like a pretentious douche to me."

"And how are things with Camie?" Asui piped in, one finger perched inquisitively at her mouth.

"None of your fucking business, that's how," he shot back, his entire face scarlet.

It was common knowledge that Katsuki had been dating Camie Utsushimi of Shiketsu High for nearly a year now; he'd managed to keep the relationship a secret for months, until Mineta caught him sneaking her into the U.A. dorms, and promptly blabbed about it in the class groupchat. It had taken three teachers to keep Bakugo from reducing Minoru to ashes and dust the next morning, and three weeks of guidance counseling with Hound Dog for him to be able to speak to the shorter boy again.

"Are you guys talking about work?" Mina slurred, leaning over toward them with a wobbly grin. "Because mine was totally awesome today, right guys?"

"You better believe it!" Kaminari cried from across the table. For some time now, he, Ashido, Hagakure, and Shoji had all been interning for various members of Edgeshot's hero team- Denki and Mina mainly switched between Kamui Woods and Mount Lady depending on the assignment, while Toru and Mezo studied under Edgeshot himself. "Did you see Mount Lady stomp that friggin' car when the guy tried to get away?! I think I'm in love!"

"Why is she so pretty?!" Ashido wailed, starting to snuffle again. "Even when she's fighting she's gorgeous! I just look like a mess all the time!"

"A hot mess!" Toru corrected, patting her on the shoulder even as she started crying into her cocktail.

"That's right, like super flaming hot!" Kirishima added enthusiastically, a sharp-toothed grin on his face as he ruffled her hair.

"Kirishima," Tsu said suddenly, the same curious look on her face as before, "have you told Mina that you like her yet? We're graduating soon, you're going to run out of time."

Within a few moments Eijiro's face was the same color as his hair; thankfully for him, Ashido and Hagakure hadn't heard her question over all the noise. Thinking fast, he whipped his head around to the other end of the table, and waved at Todoroki, who was currently brooding over his cup of sake.

"Sooo, uhhh… Speaking of flaming hot, Todoroki, how've things been with you lately?"

"Things with Gang Orca have been going well," Shoto replied evenly, "My father wasn't thrilled that I chose him for my internship, but I think he eventually understood that I needed experience with someone else for a change."

"Yeah, that makes sense," Uraraka replied, doing her best to help Kirishima change the subject. "But Endeavor's been climbing back up the rankings, right? Did you guys celebrate him breaking the top ten again?"
"I'm not so sure that he deserves a comeback," said Todoroki, one hand drifting to the long scar that ran down his face, from his right brow to his mouth. It was one of several that Stain had left him, minutes before the Hero-Killer was murdered by Endeavor in retaliation; the medical coma he was placed in afterward lasted nearly three months, and he barely caught up with his work in time to move on to the second year with the rest of his class. It wasn't the only thing that had changed about his appearance since their first year- he'd let his hair grow out much longer, and currently kept it tied up in a bun at the back of his head. Like most of his classmates, he was physically larger and more mature in general as well, and had to shave to keep from getting two-colored stubble.

"But the jurors at his trial seemed to think so, I suppose. So what do I know?" He slung back the rest of his drink in one gulp, and laid his forehead down on the wood of the table. "Since you asked, he celebrated by taking us out to the most expensive steakhouse in Tokyo. I hated every second of it. But it's okay. A few more of these and I'll forget about it all for a while."

"Todoroki-kun…" Ochako was reaching her hand out to comfort Shoto when the door opened and Ojiro Mashirao walked in, greeting the group with a weak smile and wave. He still had a cast on one wrist, and a patchwork of bandages all over his face and tail. Before he could even open his mouth to speak, Hagakure was out of her seat and tackling him a tight embrace, though she quickly shifted to pounding at his chest with invisible fists a few moments later.

"You big dummy, you didn't tell me you got discharged! I was so worried about you, you haven't been responding to your texts all day!"

Mashirao and Toru were another couple that had come to fruition in the past year, much to the other 1-A girls' excitement, and everything seemed to be going well so far, to Uraraka's relief. Hagakure had been hysterical over the news coverage of the Osaka Incident involving Yoroimusha and his sidekicks, and took the train out with Mina the next day to go and visit him in the hospital.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly, returning her embrace. "I shouldn't have scared you like that, I was just hoping it could be a surprise."

"That's an awful surprise," she said, before starting to giggle through her tears. "But I think I can live with it. As long as you're okay."

Several *awws* went up at that, and when Ojiro finally made his way over to the table, Kaminari was the first of many to offer him a drink.

"No thanks, not tonight. I just came to see you guys. Drinking would be too much like celebrating, and I don't feel like celebrating. Not now, when Shindo and Tatami are still in the hospital."

Ochako's heart sank as she thought back to their joint practices with Ketsubutsu. She'd bonded with Nakagame in particular on one occasion, and Yo had always seemed nice, if a bit two-faced. *I can't even imagine how Ms. Joke feels right now.*

"Tell us about how it went down," said Bakugo, who had finally looked up from his whisky. "Yoroimusha's been pretty vague in all his interviews, aside from naming Mustard and Twice. But there were others, right, Tail?"

"It's not fair to ask him to relive that," Kendo countered from the far end. "Hasn't he been through enough already?"

"I wanna know who the other villains were, so I can remember to beat their faces in for him if I ever run into them. At least what they look like. Something wrong with that, Little Ms. Perfect?"
"Don't call her that," Jiro snapped, frowning, and suddenly the air was filled with knifelike tension. The only people who remained oblivious to the rapid development were class 3-B's Pony Tsunotori and Komori Kinoko, who were drunkenly rambling to each other in varyingly disjointed English at the far end, and Todoroki, who by now was either asleep, passed out, or too apathetic to even lift his head from the table. Uraraka personally considered the last option to be the most likely.

"Hey guys," Mina slurred confusedly, "whuzz' goin' on? We're all, hic, friends here."

Not even Ashido could break through the deadlock between Bakugo and Kendo, though. He was the only person who could still come close to challenging her authority, and they'd been rivals since the day she made her debut as All Might's successor, mostly at his insistence.

"It's okay," Ojiro finally said, glancing uneasily between the two. "I can talk about it. I think maybe I need to."

The stalemate resolved, Kendo nodded, and held out a hand and smiled.

"Whenever you're ready, then. Sorry for being presumptuous."

'Sorry for being presumptuous,' Katsuki mouthed mockingly- thankfully, only Uraraka and Kirishima saw it.

"Well, to begin with, forget what most of the press are saying. It wasn't a sting- or at least, it wasn't intended to be a sting, not yet. That part was supposed to come next- it was a simple surveillance and handover. The targets would take the money, we'd trace the bug we put in it to wherever they were operating from, and then we'd come in swinging with the police as backup. Tatami and Shindo were only there as a safeguard in case things went south- which they did, of course- while Yoroimusha and I watched from a disguised police van in the parking garage." He sighed and shook his head.

"Everything was going fine, but I think our guy got cold feet. He was gonna get a massive amnesty package if he pulled this off, along with a few other favors for the police force, but it turns out he was playing us the whole time. He just used us to get close to them again, the two unidentified ones, and he turned on us at the first opportunity. Twice and Mustard were there, but they were the muscle, these two were the ones running the show. The one doing the handoff… I think he was the leader. Giran called him Hairo, so even if that's not his real name, it's the best we've got right now. He was young. Couldn't be older than twenty. Black hair, green eyes, these crazy high-tech goggles. Something about him looked… familiar, almost, but I couldn't place it. His voice, too. I just got this eerily intense vibe from him. He was pretty good at hand-to-hand, he had me on the ropes for a minute. Yoroimusha and I still aren't sure what his quirk was, though. It was almost like he purposely didn't use it when he was fighting us, after I cut off his escape. We think Shindo knows, that it had something to do with why he brought the building down. We won't know for sure until he wakes up, though."

"The second one… we never got a clear look at her. She was on a rooftop across the street; even with all the advance recon we did of the site, we didn't pick up any trace of her. Either she only showed up immediately before the handoff itself, or she has some kind of stealth quirk or tech. Anyway, she was a pretty good shot- I think her quirk probably had something to do with that, come to think of it- but still not good enough to beat Yoroimusha's armor. That's about all I can give you that you hadn't already heard."

"It's enough," Bakugo grunted. "Hairo, the green-eyed son of a bitch. I'll remember that. I'll fuck his shit up if I ever come across him working for Jeanist. At least I know to look out for him now." He cast a pointed glance at Kendo, then returned sullenly to his drink.
Over the next minute or so, the table gradually returned to its normal level of conversation, and fairly soon Ochako was tipsy enough for Tsu to comment on how much redder than normal her cheeks had gotten. Within an hour they were walking home arm in arm at the head of the group of U.A. students, watching as Kirishima hoisted Mina up onto his shoulders to carry her the rest of the way back to dorms, a gesture mimicked by Ojiro and Toru and then by Pony and Kinoko, who were drunk enough to think that they were having another cavalry battle. Struck by a flash of inspiration amid her tipsiness, Uraraka activated her quirk on Asui and did the same, to the latter's contented ribbits.

"You know," She croaked when they were finally within sight of campus again, "this was nice and all, but I could've been falling asleep to a nature documentary this whole time, like I usually do on weekends."

"That BBC one about frogs?"

Even though Ochako couldn't see Tsuyu's face, she knew she was smiling.

"Yep, that's the one."

"You know, it's only half past one. We could still watch it together if you want."

"I was hoping you'd say that."

Seven Hours Later

Downtown Yokohama

'URGENT, PLEASE MEET AT HQ ASAP. CONFIRMED TARGET SIGHTING. '

Was the text Uraraka and Asui had received from Ryukyu's emergency number at 7:14 AM, setting off automatic alarms on both of their phones. Ochako glared at the message with bleary eyes as their train pulled into the station at 8:46 AM on the dot, an hour and fourteen minutes after they'd dashed to the nearest stop in a panic, and approximately four and a half hours after they'd finally fallen asleep the night before.

"Why did it have to be today of all days," She groaned, stretching as they stood up from their seats and hurried toward the exit through a parted crowd- heroes on duty had first priority when boarding and exiting public transportation, thankfully. "It's like the villains planned for this."

"I'm just lucky frogs don't need as much sleep," replied Tsu, who was, relatively speaking, much more bright-eyed and alert. "You're hungover, aren't you, Ochako?"

"Maybe a little bit," Uraraka admitted, wiping the sleep from her bloodshot eyes with one hand and rubbing her stomach with the other. It was true that in terms of nausea, she felt like she'd just been using her quirk on herself a few minutes past her limit, and her dull, throbbing headache was nothing to be envied. "That's what I get for not drinking enough water before bed."

"That's probably my fault for distracting you," Asui said sheepishly, blushing slightly. She was about to say something else when a familiar voice cut through the station's din.

"Hey, hey, you two! There you are, it's so good to see you!" Waving enthusiastically, Nejire Hado practically bounded over to greet them, her bright, spiral-adorned hero costume easily distinguishable in the crowd. "Look at you two sleepyheads! They say sleep is super important! You were out partying last night weren't you, Uravity? Did you go to that one space-themed bar? Or the traditional
one?"

"Well, we-"

"You don't look that bad, though, Froppy! Do you drink? Can frogs drink? Is it like chocolate for
dogs, where your body can't metabolize it?"

"I can, but-"

"I bet neither of you has had breakfast yet, have you? It's the most important meal of the day, we
can't have you fighting villains without it! Come on, let's pick some up on the way there."

"Thank you, Nejire-chan," Asui finally managed, "but why are you here? Shouldn't you already be
at the office with Ryukyu?"

Tsu was able to get a full sentence out faster than usual! Ochako thought to herself, impressed. They
were used to conversations with Hado going this way by now- she'd been with them at Ryukyu's
office since they started with the Dragon Hero two years ago, first as a fellow intern and, since her
graduation, as a full-fledged sidekick.

"Change of plans!" She cried happily. "We're meeting the boss on the scene, and I'm gonna drive
you guys there! Come on, last one to the car is a rotten egg!" At that she dashed out ahead of them,
and they exchanged a worried glance before running after her. They'd only ridden with Nejire once
before, but once was enough to know that she was perhaps the most terrifying driver in the greater
Tokyo area.

"Maybe she's gotten better," Asui offered weakly.

Time was quick to prove her wrong. The two interns held on for dear life as Hado weaved her way
in and out of traffic, going well past the speed limit all the while, and making a variety of turns and
maneuvers they were fairly sure weren't legal. Loud pop was playing over the radio, but she lowered
the volume when Tsu raised her hand with a question from the backseat.

"Nejire-chan, I'm sorry if this isn't my place to ask as an intern, but what exactly is going on? Who
was spotted, and where are we going?"

"Was it Dabi or Toga?" Ochako asked sleepily from shotgun. Even with Nejire's music playing, the
passenger seat was suddenly feeling far too comfortable for its own good.

"Food first!" Hado responded cheerfully. "Are you guys feeling pancakes? Ooh, ooh, or burgers? I
could have a burger. With ketchup and pickles and bacon and...

Ten minutes and one drive-thru later, after Nejire had thoroughly questioned the poor attendant about
nearly every item on the menu, Uraraka and Asui were struggling to scarf down Hawaiian burgers
and fries in spite of Hado's erratic driving as she briefed them on the situation.

"So essentially, we got a tip-off from a local rescue hero working clean-up in area where the fire
happened yesterday! One of the citizens he interviewed described seeing a high-school age girl who
vaguely matches Toga Himiko's description entering an abandoned park just a few blocks away from
the building that burned down on several occasions in the past week, but never leaving. We think it's
possible that the villains might have some type of base or outpost hidden there, so we're going in to
check it out, since he saw her go in early this morning. Backup's standing by if we find anything, but
we get to be the first on the scene!"

Another five minutes and they were pulling into the run-down parking lot of the same housing
complexes from the day before- the burned-out shell of the apartment destroyed by Dabi's fire was still visible across the road, but they took a turn in the opposite direction this time, walking ten minutes down a side street before entering a gated off park that hadn't seen use in over a decade, from the look of it- the equipment was rusted badly, and the grass was yellow and dead, pockmarked with weeds. The padlock had been cut off the gate, presumably by Ryukyu, who was visible standing at the park's other end, surveilling the area with hawkish eyes, but the fence was worn down and overgrown enough that the gate wasn't much of a barrier to entry in the first place. Asui waved to the Dragon Hero as they walked in, who returned her greeting enthusiastically, and began to walk toward them with a smile on her face. Uraraka was about to call out to her when Nejire held out an arm to stop them both in their tracks, and strode out to the park's center alone, her face deadly serious for the first time that morning.

"So glad you could all make it so soon!" Ryukyu was saying with a chuckle. "I've been doing some routine surveillance, but it doesn't look like there's-"

"Where were you on the 30th of November?" Hado interjected, her arms crossed. A dozen paces behind, Ochako and Tsuyu exchanged a confused glance.

"…Somewhere in Tokyo, I'm sure," she replied after a moment's hesitation. "Why do you ask?"

"Thought so," said Nejire; in a single fluid motion, she lifted up her hands and let out a massive blast of her quirk, sending the older woman flying across the park.

"What are you doing?" Uraraka cried, rushing forward.

"Oh, don't worry!" Hado said amicably. "That isn't actually her. The '30th of November' is a code phrase the boss and I came up with for any operations involving our current targets, to make sure we're still us. The correct answer is 'watching the frost fall at Aomori', but whoever that is just failed. Oh shoot, I was supposed to tell you two that on the way here. Well, you know now!"

Sure enough, when she glanced at the cloud of dust where the hero had landed, she was greeted by a familiar sight, as Ryukyu's claw-shaped headband and qipao melted into a flowing mass of beige goop along with the rest of her body, before it fell away to reveal Toga Himiko, entirely naked but bearing a knife in each of her hands and a demented smile on her face.

"You're strong," she called with a giggle. "Cute, too! And you brought some of my friends with you! Do you remember me, girls?! I had so much fun playing together at the training camp!"

"We told you before," Uraraka shouted, activating her quirk on herself after a sprinting leap, so that she sailed into the air in Toga's direction, "that we're not your friends!"

She released her quirk high in the air, so that she sailed downward toward the villain's position like a bullet, her shock-absorbing boots outstretched. Nicknamed 'Gravity Bomb', she'd worked on this technique tirelessly for the past two years, until by now she could calculate the exact parabola of her motion on the fly. She'd also made multiple adjustments to her costume to assist with the move, reinforcing key areas with durable carbon fiber armor and to make her into a veritable human projectile. Her boots now had air-jet thrusters for any necessary adjustments while in zero-g, in addition to the shock absorbers that allowed her to land from massive heights without shattering her legs. When she impacted the ground with a resonating thud, Toga wasn't there, though, vanished in the dust cloud Hado's waves had kicked up. A quick glance around the park confirmed that Uraraka and her allies, who were running forward to catch up with her, were alone. We were warned that she's trained to suppress her presence, she remembered, but I don't understand, we were all watching her!
"Uravity, behind you!"

Ochako whipped around to find one of Toga's knives mere inches from her face, quivering in place; Tsuyu's tongue, wrapped around the villain's arm, was the only thing holding the blade back. The girl's face was close enough to see her licking her sharpened canines.

"Ochako-chan, don't you want to play with me?! I remember how cute you look when you're bleeding! I wanna see you bleed for me again!"

"Get away from her!" Froppy cried as pulled back on her tongue and yanked Toga sideways, trying to throw her to the ground.

Himiko landed effortlessly on her restrained hand, then used her momentum to vault herself toward Asui; when she landed a few feet away from the young hero, she drove her other knife into the girl's tongue, pinning it to the ground. Letting out a distressed croak, Tsu released her grip on Toga out of instinct, and the villain lunged menacingly toward her, but another blast of shockwave energy from Nejire sent her flying back in the other direction.

Determined not to let her slip away again, Uraraka reached out and grabbed one of Himiko's legs with all five fingers as she sailed past, then slammed her weightless body into the ground. When she reached down to restrain her, though, Toga's flung her second knife up toward her attacker; it impacted Uravity's visor with a sharp crack, embedding itself partly into her cheek and sending her stumbling backwards, her vision completely obscured. By the time she managed to wrench the helmet off, ignoring the blood streaming down her face the best she could, Himiko had slipped away again.

"Where is she?!" Ochako cried frantically. She twisted around in every direction, searching for any sign of their opponent, but it was all in vain; the entire block was as silent and still as the grave.

"I have an idea," Nejire responded, once she'd helped Froppy pull the knife from her tongue. Using her quirk to propel herself into the air, Hado waited until she was high enough, then blanketed the entire park with heavy shockwaves, aside from the small area the two interns were standing on. Sure enough, Toga was sent flying from a patch of tall grass; once she'd spotted her, Nejire focused her attacks, pummeling the younger girl into the ground with brute force until Asui and Uraraka were able to surround her. She lighted back down, and the three breathed a collective sigh of relief.

"Froppy, are you alright?!" They both cried, practically in unison.

"I'll be ok," Tsu managed, though her words were slightly slurred form the wound. "It heals pretty fast. Let's focus on the capture for now, and on finding Ryukyu."

Ochako nodded, and pulled a pair of handcuffs off her belt. As she leaned down to place them around the dazed villain's wrists, though, they suddenly vanished into thin air, and clapping became audible in the distance.

"Wow. Three against one. Real fair, huh?"

They all pivoted at once, and Uraraka's blood ran cold in her veins. Dabi stood at the stop of one of the rusted playsets, flanked by two men in dark suits wearing plague masks- one of them was dangling the handcuffs she'd just been holding moments ago from his fingers, while the other clutched a bottle of sake in one hand. The Eight Precepts of Death, she realized, thinking back to the famous bust on one of their operations by Nighteye two years ago- their members had been on the most wanted list ever since. Setsuno Toya, quirk: Larceny. Sakaki Deidoro, quirk: Sloshed.
"The ex-League members are working with the Yakuza again," said Froppy, voicing Uraraka's next thought. "This is bad. We should retreat."

"Run away?" Dabi laughed out loud. "Why would you wanna do something like that? Stick around for a while, and we'll even out the stakes. A nice, even, three on three. Fair and balanced."

Suddenly, a steady tremor began to shake the entire park; Ochako thought it was Nejire for a moment, but when she threw a glance in the sidekick's direction, Hado shook her head. Even Dabi seemed confused, until a moment later, the ground beneath another of the playsets burst open, and the rusty metal swings and carousel were sent flying as Ryukyu's dragon form crawled out of a now-exposed bunker, letting out a deafening roar. Several gashes leaked blood along the length of her scaled body, but her eyes shone with defiant rage. Another masked Yakuza climbed from the bunker behind her, waving his arms as he ran toward Dabi and the others.

"I'm sorry, bosses! She broke out of the quirk restraints we put on her, I don't know how the fuck she-"

The man was swiftly silenced when one of Sakaki's throwing knives pierced his skull, and fell limp onto the grass.

"That's ok," Dabi said with a grin as he turned to face Ryukyu. "I like a challenge. I wonder, though, are you even a real dragon if you can't breathe fire?"

He launched a swirling torrent of blue flame in the dragon's direction just as she lunged for him, while the two Yakuza members leapt from the playset and charged toward the other three heroes. Nejire threw up her hands to counter them, and Ochako was reading herself to launch into another Gravity Bomb, but halfway across the open field, Deidoro paused to take a swig of sake, and suddenly the ground was shifting and spinning beneath her feet. An overwhelming sense of drunkenness washed over her senses, twice as bad as she'd felt last night, and she merely stumbled forward instead of properly sprinting; her hands missed each other when she tried to clap them together, and she fell hard to her knees.

"Uravity! To your right! Get up!"

Blinking rapidly to try and dispel some of the haze, Uravity forced herself back to her feet at the sound of Nejire's voice and swung her head upwards. Panic gripped her chest when she forced saw Setsuno running toward her with a katana in his hands and death in his eyes, raising the blade up for a slashing blow, and at the last possible moment, she cleared her head enough to turn herself weightless and activate her thruster boots. With a burst of pressurized air, she soared back just as Toya swung his sword in a brutal arc that would have cut her in half otherwise. Another moment of erratic, swerving backwards flight and she was out of range of Sakaki's quirk, her head suddenly clear again.

Ochako took a brief moment to get her bearings, roving her eyes over the chaotic battlefield. Ryukyu and Dabi were still locked in single combat on one side of the park- the effects of his flames were greatly dampened by her thick scales, but he was still agile and powerful enough to keep her from assisting her interns and sidekick, and the grass around them was entirely ablaze. Tsuyu was holding her own against Deidoro, pushing him back with a series of relentless attacks from her tongue and muscular legs, accurate enough to hit him despite the intense effects of Sloshed. To her left, Nejire had also flown out of range of the Yakuza's debilitating quirk, and was currently bombarding Setsuno from a distance with her shockwaves, though it was easy to see that her reserves of stamina were running low this late in the fight- the spirals were gradually growing more sluggish as her energy was depleted, and Toya was able to dodge enough of them to stay on his feet. I should help her, Uraraka knew, lining up her target and preparing for another Gravity Bomb.
"Stay back and recharge!" She cried in Hado's direction. "I've got this!"

"No, I have him!" Nejire called back. "Froppy and Ryukyu your help more than I do!"

For a moment, Ochako wanted to protest, but Hado's voice was deadly serious, and her eyes were full of fiery determination rather than her usual childish glee. With a brief nod of acknowledgement, she adjusted her trajectory and rocketed down toward Sakaki; thankfully, Tsuyu saw her Gravity Bomb in time to hop drunkenly out of the way before it struck its target full in the back, sending Deidoro flying face-first and unconscious into the ground, his sake bottle still clutched in one hand. Asui was bleeding from several cuts on her arms and legs delivered by the Yakuza's knives, but when she rushed forward to do an injury assessment on the other intern, Tsu shook her head fiercely.

"No, forget about me! Where's Toga?!"

No, no, not again! Pivoting, Uraraka searched the battlefield; on the far end, Ryukyu finally had Dabi on the ropes despite several severe burns across her chest and limbs, fanning out his flames with her wings as she tried desperately to pin the man beneath one of her massive, clawed hands. Nejire, meanwhile, had been similarly successful; she'd managed to force Setsuno to his knees and knock his katana from his grasp, and was lowering herself to the ground to finish him off. He tried to pull a hidden knife from inside his mask as she approached, but a blast of energy from her hand sent it flying before he could even raise it. Toga Himiko's unconscious body, however, was suddenly nowhere to be found, and Ochako slapped herself hard across the face for being so careless as to lose track of her in the chaos.

"We were four against three, one of us should have stayed with Toga. I can't believe I was so stupid."

Asui seemed to have read her mind, though, and patted Uraraka on the shoulder before hopping off toward the girl's previous hiding place in the long grass.

"Don't blame yourself, Uravity, I'll go look for her! Help Nejire-chan!"

Ochako shot her fellow intern a thumbs-up and took off running toward the older sidekick, who was panting in exhaustion as she prepared one final shockwave to knock the kneeling, defeated Yakuza unconscious. Moments before she could muster up the energy to fire it, Toya twisted his head around to face Uraraka, his eyes wide and wild; she stared at him in confusion for a brief instant before she realized he wasn't looking at her, and panic coursed through her body.

"Look out, he-"

She was still midsentence when Deidoro's bottle appeared in Setsuno's hand, too far away to stop him as he bashed it across Hado's face in a brutal sideswipe. Streams of blood and sake poured down the older girl's cheeks in rivulets from jagged shards of glass still embedded in her skin, and for a moment she stumbled backward in a daze. But when she opened her eyes, they were full of rage; using her shockwaves to help spin her, Nejire dodged Toya's next blow and twisted into a swirling roundhouse kick that slammed into the man's jaw and drove him into the dirt, his face broken and bloodied by her boot.

"I'm alright," she said, before Ochako could even ask.

"But your face, can you still fight like that?!"

"Worry about me later, Uravity." Despite her wounds, Hado forced a weak smile, and started off toward Ryukyu and Dabi. "Our backup will be here soon, we just need to hold them until then."

"I couldn't find any sign of Toga," Froppy croaked, leaping back toward them. "Could she have
escaped into that bunker?"

"Where were you on the 30th of November?" Uraraka stepped forward and grabbed Tsuyu's shoulder, turning her weightless until she responded.

"Watching the frost fall at Aomori."

Ochako and Nejire exchanged a satisfied nod, but before they could move to help Ryukyu, Asui's prediction was swiftly proven right. Fully clothed in her standard schoolgirl attire with her blood collector strapped to her back, Toga climbed out of the rift in the ground alongside a second villain around her age- he wore a dark suit and overcoat with a silver tie, his neatly combed hair a dark brown.

"You know how much I hate getting involved in these little spats," he was saying, casting a smug glance about the park. "But I suppose you were truly desperate for assistance."

There was something frustratingly familiar about the haughty tone of his voice, but before she could study his face further, he reached down, pulled Sakaki's throwing knife from the dead Yakuza henchman's skull, and touched the tip of the blade to his tongue; in an instant, he transformed into an exact facsimile of the thug, mask and all. Another blood-based metamorphosis quirk, like Toga's? Uraraka's eyes widened at the possibility, but Himiko didn't give them time to ponder it, rushing forward with a new pair of knives as the disguised one sprinted into the cloud of smoke that partially obscured Ryukyu's battle with Dabi. With her opponent finally backed into a corner, and she was too far away to hear a warning shout; Nejire launched herself into the air to intercept the villain, but before she could reach the park's other end, a second dragon rose up out of the smoke and flame, unmistakably masculine, as opposed to Ryukyu's drake form.

"Why won't you worthless heroes ever learn to stop meddling where you're not wanted?!" he roared, sinking his claws into the female hero's back and pulling her off of Dabi before she could deliver the final blow. Changing targets, the flame-wielder rolled out from under the clashing beasts and charged toward Uraraka and Asui, launching a wave of blue fire in their direction as he ran. In the blink of an eye, Ochako turned herself and Tsu weightless and thrust upward with her boots, but the fire was too fast- it was about to catch up to them, until one of Hado's shockwaves slammed into the raging inferno and dissipated the flames. Her chest heaving with exertion, Nejire landed directly opposite Dabi, her glass-scarred face a mask of fury.

"Not one more step toward them! You're fighting me now!"

"Oh, is that so?" He took a step forward and cracked his knuckles. "Doesn't seem fair, seeing as that Eight Precepts goon already did half the job for me. I guess they aren't totally worthless after all."

Another wall of flames erupted from his palms, even higher and more intense than the last, and Hado let out a cry of defiance as she matched it with her largest burst of shockwaves yet, tearing the ground between them to ribbons.

"KINETIC MAELSTROM, PLUS ULTRA!"

"Just burn already!" Dabi yelled in reply, clearly straining to contain the surge of power.

"She's past her limit!" Tsu croaked in distress at Ochako's side. "She needs our help!"

"She's been past her limit for a long time," Uraraka responded, resolve building in her chest. "But I haven't even gotten close to mine."
"Hey, no fair!" Himiko shouted from below, watching them with jealous eyes. "I can't play with you if you're all the way up there!" She hurled a knife up toward them, but Uraraka was able to maneuver out of the way in time to dodge it.

After a few quick adjustment thrusts to angle them properly and build momentum, she launched Tsuyu toward Toga like an amphibian missile, then positioned herself for a Gravity Bomb with Dabi as the target. *I don't have my helmet to protect against his fire,* she knew, *but it doesn't matter. Nejire wouldn't let that stop her, and neither will I.* As she reached the top of her arc, she could see the entire park laid out beneath her, and watched uneasily as the two massive dragons continued to grapple with each other, surrounded by smoke and flame. Ryukyu had the advantage in terms of strength, but her capture scars and battle wounds were slowing her movements, giving her opponent brief openings that he was all too quick to seize upon. *I'll help her next. There's someone who needs me first.*

*Why do you want to be a hero?*

Her classmates had asked, at the beginning of her first year. *Money,* she told them. *To help my parents live a better life.* She still wanted to give that to them, but when she looked down on Nejire, Uraraka felt something entirely different swelling up inside her.

*Why do you want to be a hero?*

Aizawa had asked her, the last time he saw her in the hallway at the end of her first year. *Money,* she told him. *To help my parents live a better life.* She'd never forgotten the look of quiet disappointment on his face. Maybe she'd been wrong then. Maybe she'd been wrong before. Maybe she'd always misunderstood her own heart.

*Why do you want to be a hero?*

Ochako asked herself. *So I can save the people I care about,* she answered. *So I can save the people I love. So I can save as many people as I can.*

"Plus ultra," She whispered as she released her quirk and began to hurtle down towards Dabi.

By the time he noticed her, she was already practically on top of him; he shot up a burst of fire in her direction at the last moment, but it was only enough to singe the more vulnerable areas of her costume before her boots slammed into his side and sent him tumbling ten yards across the dead grass. Unfortunately, due to the angle, it hadn't been as direct of a hit as Ochako wanted- that would have required her to approach from the front, risking the full brunt of his flames- so he wasn't knocked unconscious, and struggled back to his knees where he'd fallen to a rest beside the seesaws, pain clear on his face.

"I think you broke a few of my ribs," he gritted, as a trickle of blood began to drip steadily from his mouth. "And punctured a lung. Fuck, that hurts. I'm gonna have to pay you back for that one."

He raised one hand, and Uraraka was readying herself to dodge again when a towering barricade of ice sprouted up in a semicircle around the villain, blocking off his attack. A scythe of concentrated blue flame cut through it a moment later, but then it was met by a raging orange inferno, and Ochako's heart lifted as Todoroki Shoto strode through the park's gate with Gang Orca at his side. Both his halves were fully active as he walked out to face Dabi alone.

"You've done more than enough already, Uravity. Let me handle this."

"Well I'll be damned, if it isn't little Shoto," Dabi crooned, stepping through the steaming puddle that
remained of Todoroki's ice wall, an orb of fire in each of his hands. "This day just keeps getting
better and better."

Chapter End Notes

Hope you guys are enjoying this fight! Next time, the conclusion of the battle, from the
villains' perspective. This is definitely the biggest fight I've written yet, so hopefully I
did it justice- let me know if I need to improve anything. Also, hopefully that little bit of
U.A. student bonding broke up the tension some, I wanted to explore how the class
dynamic has changed in two years before going back into the heavier stuff. Are there
any other students' internships who you want to see explored? Before anyone asks,
Kirishima is still with Suneater and Fatgum. And let me know what you think of Momo!
We're going to be seeing a lot more of her soon. Until next time!

P.S. If anyone got the 30th of Frostfall reference, you rock.
With Friends Like These

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tokyo, 21st Ward

30 Minutes before Ryukyu's Team Encounters Toga

"Looks like rain."

Midoriya scarcely glanced up from his notebook at the sound of Shinso's voice. It was hardly a groundbreaking observation, after all; fat droplets of water has been bursting intermittently on the car's windshield for some time now, and a front of grey clouds was rapidly devouring what little clear sky remained outside the tinted windows. All the same, though, Hitoshi's confirmation of the inevitable prompted a frown on Izuku's face. Not because of anything related to the actual weather, of course, but because rain meant he had to take off his sunglasses and put in his vexingly itchy false color lenses- he much preferred to use the former when in public, when possible. It was already enough of a nuisance to keep his hair concealed, but at least the dye wasn't uncomfortable.

"Yeah, no shit," Spinner replied from the driver's seat as Midoriya reluctantly folded away his glasses and pulled a pair of dark brown contacts from a leather case. "That won't be a problem for your meeting though, right?"

"Unlikely," Izuku replied dryly, slipping the lenses in with a grimace. As soon as they settled into place, he wasted no time turning his gaze back to his notes on the respective strengths and weaknesses of Hawks' interns, Shiketsu's Yoarashi Inasa and U.A.'s Sero Hanta, and his newest sidekick, Ketsubutsu's Makabe Shikkui. "If anything, he'll love the dramatic element of it- might put him in a better mood for the negotiations."

"And if it doesn't, I'll be watching to make sure he doesn't get any rash ideas," Mr. Compress added from beside Iguchi; though his face was obscured, his grin was practically audible. "Am I still to take the girl if things go awry?"

His frown lightening somewhat, Izuku closed the notebook and threw a glance outside the window. A multi-colored sea of umbrellas was springing up along the sidewalk as they passed block after block in a blur, escaping the deadlock of the usual morning commute only due to the fact that it was a Saturday.

"Yes, of course. In the long run, she's much more valuable to our plans than he is, as useful as his quirk may be. But seeing how loyal she is to his cause, I'd prefer not to have to use force if possible."

"And I'd prefer not to be forced rely on brainwashing to keep one of the key components of our operation against Hawks in check," said Shinso. "Mei's enhancers have increased my abilities significantly, but my quirk still has its limits. It would be far better if they join voluntarily."

"Never hurts to have a little insurance," quipped Spinner, turning the car off the main street and onto a side road before putting it into park. "Ok, this is where you guys get out. The meeting spot should be half a kilo toward the old market. Feel free to call me if this old geezer can't handle them."

"I take offense to that," Compress replied in mock dismay as he climbed out onto the street and put up his own umbrella.
He was wearing one of his elaborately patterned masks, but quickly used his quirk to shrink it down into a blue marble, along with his trademark feathered cap; because he always disguised his appearance during combat, his real face, a rather plain, friendly countenance with greying black hair, was perfect for blending into a crowd. Atsuhiro's overcoat was a more restrained design than usual to complete the effect, though he'd refused to part from his elegant cane and gloves. Before he started off down the main road, he gave a respectful nod to Midoriya and Shinso, who had just emerged from the car behind him.

"Well, gentlemen, I'm off- I'll see you both soon, though you hopefully won't see me."

Izuku returned the gesture in kind as he and Hitoshi began to walk in a different direction. While they approached the meeting location- a tea house- via one route, Compress would take another, arriving there before them to monitor the situation and lie in wait as backup, disguised as a customer. He shared Shinso's hope, though, that Atsuhiro's presence wouldn't be necessary- he much preferred to make new allies in the criminal underworld than new enemies. *Though sometimes, the latter simply can't be helped,* he reflected as the rain began to pick up until it formed a steady drumbeat on his umbrella, obscuring the dimly lit signs of cafes and corner stores, just opening for the day.

Shigaraki and his loyalists had hardly been the only obstacle he crushed over the course of his organization's steady rise to prominence, simply the most stubborn and most recent. Taking over the black market for weapons and support items across most of Central Japan, which remained their most profitable venture, had been an involved and bloody affair, with many competitors somewhat reluctant to relent their share of the industry to a group of high-school dropouts.

Only a few, Giran foremost among them, had seen the way the wind was blowing- the rest had paid for their arrogance, one way or another. Often, Hatume's product was simply so markedly superior to anything else on offer that buyers flocked to her willingly, and once Yaoyorozu finally ended her futile resistance and gave them the full support of her quirk in the third month of her captivity, they could replicate any design that Mei drafted in perfect detail, as many times as an order demanded- all it took was time and food for Momo, a lucratively efficient system. *Speak of the devil,* he thought, looking down to his buzzing phone to find her number on the screen, requesting a facetime. Her image came steadily into focus the moment he pressed 'accept', a frown crossing her near-perfect features. She'd changed her look drastically since committing to their cause, in order to avoid detection; her ponytail long since abandoned, she wore her hair cut short now, slightly above shoulder length, and mainly swept to one side. Dark purple lenses and lavender-white hair dye completed the look during field missions, but both had their normal color now- the background indicated that she was at the Osaka Headquarters.

"To what do I owe the pleasure, Mitsuni?" As in all remote communications, he never addressed her by her real name.

"I've been monitoring cell communications in your area for any anomalies, as a precaution for your meeting. Nothing unusual from the targets, but I did pick up a strange call from a number that I was able to tie back to a small-time group of weapons traffickers whose leader we killed six months ago in Yokohama. They were speaking in some sort of code, but I believe they might be targeting you in an attempt to take revenge for their superior's death."

"Always the little guys who can't let go of a grudge," Hitoshi muttered, leaning in next to Midoriya to listen to the call. "You think they'd know better by now."

"Any indication of how many, or how close?" Asked Izuku, entirely unconcerned. "As much as I enjoy tying off old loose ends, I would hate to be late for the meeting."

"The call was placed twenty minutes ago, several blocks from your current location. Their group was
never more than ten strong, according to my intelligence, but I doubt they've been able to maintain
those numbers so long after we destroyed their infrastructure and eliminated their leadership. The
only real danger comes from one of their quirks, Nemesis, which can pinpoint the location and vitals
of any individual whom the user has a powerful hatred toward, within a radius of twenty kilometers.
It's likely that they'll find you soon. Shall I call in additional backup for you, to monitor the area?"

"That won't be necessary, though I appreciate the advance notice, as always. I have Spinner and
Compress if things get out of hand, but I doubt that we'll need them. How are things in Osaka?"

"Proceeding as expected. The police and a team of pro heroes are still monitoring the financial
district closely, but our hideout's location is well outside the zone of increased activity. We should be
able to resume operations as normal in the area within a week, two at most, provided that we put
additional safety measurements in place, and restrict our activities to the outskirts."

"Excellent. Is there anything else?"

"The team at the Eight Precepts bunker in Yokohama is awaiting Ryukyu's arrival- the trap I helped
them design won't give her a chance to resist. You'll be the first to know once she's safely captured.
Overhaul is making more demands about our personnel exchange, but I've managed to keep Dark
Shadow and Kurogiri off the table, as you asked."

"Understood- keep up the good work. Akira out." Izuku wore a soft smile on his face as he ended
the call. From the moment she abandoned her misguided aspirations of heroism and opened her eyes
to the merits of their philosophy, Momo had become the organization's second brain, planning most
major operations alongside Midoriya and brainstorming many of the security measures and tactics
they now employed regularly. The other three founding members had been slow to trust her at first,
insisting on constant vital monitors and area-locked restraints to prevent her from fleeing or betraying
them, but she'd shocked them all with the intensity of her dedication to their cause.

His expression quickly soured, though, when they turned a corner to cut through an alley, and came
face-to-face with three muscular thugs, dressed neatly in grey suits. The leader of the trio, a tall man
with a black topknot and goatee, stepped forward first, his features twisted in a scowl.

"You remember who we are, you little punk?" He drew a pistol from inside his jacket; the man on
his left followed suit by producing a shotgun, while the one on his right slid two tanto from sheaths at
his belt. "I bet you've forgotten by now, haven't you? What your little gang did to our boss? But I
think we can help jog your memory. Now you're gonna take me to whoever you work for, or I'm
gonna blow your brains all over that wall. Who runs your operation? And don't tell me it's you, I
don't believe that for a second."

Beside him, Shinso had already donned his goggles, and was about to take a menacing step forward
when Izuku held up his hand.

"No, I'll handle this. I've been dying to blow off some steam."

Anger flashing in his eyes at the nonchalant tone of Midoriya's remark, Topknot raised his gun and
fired; the rage quickly turned to shock and confusion, though, when his gaze drifted down to the thin
line of smoke rising from his target's right palm. Having caught the round with little effort on the hard
metal and carbon plating of his gauntlet, Izuku rolled the spent shell between his fingers as the rest of
his enhancers powered up with a low hum. He hadn't worn his full combat armor today, but what
little he could conceal beneath his clothes was more than enough to deal with these three.

"Starting a gunfight in the middle of the market district at eight in the morning? I'm beginning to
understand why we beat your little group so easily."
"No cops are gonna come save your asses, if that's what you mean," the one with the tanto called, gesturing with the tip of one blade to the alley’s entrance and exit, which, on closer inspection, were shrouded in a shimmering, translucent misty barrier. "My quirk's blocking all sound from leaving here. No one's gonna be able to hear you scream."

A grin spread rapidly back across Midoriya's face; he shrugged off his jacket and let it fall to the ground.

"That goes both ways, you know."

Topknot squeezed the trigger again, then a third and fourth and fifth time for good measure, but he was too late; Izuku had activated the bracers in his legs, and closed the distance between the two in a single bound, vaulting over the stream of bullets. His gauntlets fully were extended around his hands now, and his metal-sheathed fist slammed into Topknot's jaw with a sickening crack that echoed through the alley. Blood spurted bright and red from the man's ruined teeth as he sailed backward and slammed into a dumpster. The second man fired his shotgun, but his aim was clumsy, his eyes panicked; Izuku ducked under the blast easily, and aided by the metal and carbon coverings which had extended over his shoes and the thrusters in his soles, he broke one of the man's knees with a single, swift kick. His hand shaking, Topknot tried desperately to raise his pistol again from where he lay broken and bleeding at the other end of the alley, but with another short leap, Midoriya was towering over him, snapping his arm with a brutal, two-handed twist before slamming a knee into his ruined face; the gun clattered useless to the ground.

Behind them, Shotgun had struggled back to one knee, and was aiming straight for him. Expending all of the effort of picking up a doll, he grabbed Topknot by the back of his neck and held up his weakly stirring body as a human shield, just in time for the spray of lead pellets to tear the man’s chest to shreds. From the other side, Tanto was finally charging toward Midoriya- he had tried to rush Shinso in the fight's opening moments, and the blank look in his eyes told Izuku that his lieutenant had obeyed his wishes rather enthusiastically by brainwashing the man into changing targets. Hitoshi watched from the alley’s entrance with an amused look on his face as Midoriya hurled Topknot's body into Tanto from half a dozen paces away, sending them both tumbling to the ground. After dodging a third blast, he bounded forward, kicked the weapon from Shotgun’s hands, and stomped his skull into the pavement with three swift movements of his feet. Tanto had struggled back to his feet from beneath Topknot, and ran toward Izuku with a ragged cry, released from Shinso's quirk by the force of the impact. After weighing his options for a moment, Midoriya decided to entertain the main's antiquated fighting style by producing a short, curved blade of black steel in one hand from where it was kept hidden in the joints of his right arm brace, concealed beneath his sleeve.

More agile than he expected, Tanto met his first few slashes rather nimbly, and for a short while the duel was evenly matched- until Izuku began to grow bored after half a minute of dancing blades, though, and activated a fraction of the full strength of his right brace. His next swing clove through one of the man’s short swords like butter and bit deep into his arm, nearly severing his hand. As the thug recoiled in shock and pain, Midoriya, lunged forward and used his gauntlet-sheathed free hand to break the man's other wrist and pull the second weapon from his grasp. Once he held both blades, he sent Tanto stumbling into the nearest wall with a kick, then darted in close and opened up his stomach with a brutal, x-shaped slash before finally burying both weapons in the man's neck. Sweet, adrenaline-laced satisfaction coursing through his body, Izuku closed his eyes and tilted his head upward, letting the rain wash away the blood that coated his face and clothes.

"Well done," said Shinso quietly, before handing him back his umbrella. "You're in top form today."

"I think I'll keep this one," Midoriya replied, pocketing the tanto after he slid the hidden blade back
Grabbing his jacket, he paused just as they were about to continue down the alley, took out his phone, and snapped three pictures, one of each of the bloodied corpses.

"More souvenirs?" Hitoshi asked, one brow raised.

"No. Presents, for Himiko." Izuku grinned. "She'll love them, don't you think?"

When they finally walked through the tea house's front door ten minutes later- perfectly on time, despite their delay- Izuku was still soaked to the bone, but the ancient owner scarcely looked up from the counter as he tracked in a trail of water, all the way from the welcome mat to the table where Gentle and La Brava were seated. He'd been able to wash the blood and gore from his shoes in the alley, but they'd given up on his vest- formerly white, it was now entirely crimson, and they'd decided that perhaps it was best to pretend it had been that color all along.

"Ah, gentlemen! So good to finally make your acquaintance!" Danjuro Tobita greeted them both with warm, sincere handshakes, a broad smile on his face. He was a handsome man, with neatly combed white hair and elegant clothing in purple and silver.

"The pleasure is all mine, Gentle Criminal," Midoriya replied, making sure to lower his voice for the last part. The tea house was hardly crowded, and they were in a secluded back room sectioned off with curtains- he'd seen Compress seated near the door when they entered, buried in a newspaper- but it never hurt to be cautious.

"Call me Gentle, I insist. And I'm sure you're familiar with my charming assistant and partner, La Brava!" He gestured with a flourish to the petite woman still seated at the table, her long red hair drawn into two flowing pigtails, complemented by heart-shaped ruby earrings. She had been watching the two of them with mildly suspicious eyes, but brightened up immediately when Tobita looked her way, a wide grin spreading across her face to match his.

"Nice to finally put faces to the names!" She remarked amiably- though Danjuro was the more well-known of the duo, Aiba Manami had been the one they made contact with online in order to request this meeting, employing Momo and Hatsume's combined knowledge of the dark web to start an encrypted correspondence that had lasted over a week before La Brava finally deemed them worthy of meeting Gentle.

"Indeed it is!" Tobita stroked his well-trimmed moustache and beard with one gloved hand as he looked the pair over with genuine curiosity in his eyes, finally settling on Midoriya. "You're… Akira, yes?"

"The same. And this is my partner, Hairo. Mitsuni unfortunately couldn't make it today, but she sends her regards."

"Ah, a tragedy. But my goodness, Akira, you're soaking wet!" He gestured dramatically to Izuku's dripping hair for effect. "The weather in this city can be so fickle, I swear! I shall fetch you a towel at once- we can't have you catching your death before we even have the chance to converse! Kotsuko, my dear, a washcloth, if you would!" Despite Shinso's attempts to reassure him, Gentle stepped out of the room with a hurried promise to return at once, leaving them alone with La Brava.

"Take a seat, why don't ya?" Aiba nodded to two empty chairs at their table, and they hesitantly accepted before launching into polite small talk about the commute and the weather. Outwardly, she was still perfectly friendly, but the more Midoriya watched her, the more he could tell that the
suspicion had returned to her eyes. Finally, Manami noticed him staring and returned his gaze.

"I'm still not sure what you people want," she said after a moment of tense silence, "but just know this before we go any further: If you try to hurt Gentle in any way, I swear on my life that I'll make you regret it until the day you die, Midoriya Izuku."

One eyebrow on Midoriya's rain-streaked face slowly lifted, though his features remained a mask of calm. In hindsight, it wasn't at all surprising that Aiba had discovered his identity. After all, she was one of the best hackers in the region- that was why they wanted her talent in the first place, though it wasn't the pretext they used for the meeting. If anything, the fact that she had was proof of her worthiness for the role Yaoyorozu had envisioned for her. Accordingly, it was with a smile, not a frown, that he prefaced his next words.

"That sounded like a threat. Threatening potential business partners isn't the best model for expansion."

"Well, it wasn't." She crossed her arms defiantly. "It was just a warning. I've done enough research on your group to know that you're dangerous, so just know that I've got my eye on you. And don't think we didn't notice your henchman at the table by the door. Gentle and I know every customer who comes to this place, and there aren't many newcomers- what a coincidence that we'd have one the same morning as this meeting."

Shinso and Midoriya exchanged a glance. Even if she knew he was with them, she likely couldn't anticipate his quirk. All it would take was one click on his cufflink to summon Compress, and they could be out the door with La Brava in hand in a matter of moments. Suddenly, his smile died a bit. Or is that where Gentle is? Was the towel a ruse? Is he actually-

Tobita returned before he could complete his thought, a pile of fluffy linens in hand.

"Apologies for leaving you for so long, gentlemen- I had to ensure that it would be warm! I hope you understand, I would be a dreadful host otherwise." Instead of merely handing it to Izuku, though, he strode over to his chair and wrapped one around the seated boy's shoulders himself. Midoriya couldn't see his face from his position, but clearly heard the quick intake of breath that marked the moment the towel touched his soaked vest and began to rapidly turn crimson.

"My dear Akira..." Gentle's voice was slightly shaky now, tinged with anxiety. "I meant to ask you earlier, but I, ahem, I hoped my eyes were deceiving me. Is that... blood?"

"Yes," Izuku replied simply. When it became apparent that his explanation wasn't sufficient after a few moments of awkward silence, he added, "It's not mine."

"I... see." A nervous smile on his face, Tobita returned to his seat, his eyes flitting rapidly between the two. "Well then, shall we... shall we order some tea?"

On cue, the ancient woman from behind the counter shuffled into the room, hobbling on a weathered cane. Her face was so lined and wrinkled that it was hard to tell whether or not she was actually looking at any of them, but she seemed to either not notice the bloodied towel wrapped around Midoriya, or simply not care. Her wizened head slowly shifted in Tobita's direction, and Gentle gestured for his guests to order first.

"I'll have black tea," said Hitoshi without so much as a glance at the menu. "Whichever one has the most caffeine."

For a moment Izuku was about to say the same, but the thought of his conversation with Momo
reminded him of her favorite brand, an especially luxurious variety that she'd shared with all of her colleagues.

"Do you have Imperial Golden Tips, by any chance?"

Across the table, Gentle gasped in what seemed to be a combination of shock and delight as the woman nodded almost imperceptibly.

"My goodness, Akira, this is a delightful surprise! To think that you would be one of the select few who share my passion for Golden Tips!" Giddy excitement on his face, he seemed to forget about the blood all at once. "La Brava, I had no idea you'd be introducing me to such a cultured young man!"

Shinso and Midoriya exchanged another glance, confused rather than conspiratorial this time. Their host continued before either of them could reply, though.

"Now please, gentlemen, let's get down to business!" Suddenly, the old woman was back with a tray full of teapots in hand- Midoriya hadn't even noticed that she'd left, but it seemed she knew Tobita and Aiba's orders by heart. After thanking her graciously, Gentle kept speaking as he poured himself a cup and let it steep. "La Brava mentioned something about a potential partnership. We generally work alone, as I'm sure you know, in order to best cultivate my personal image. But I must admit, I'm eager to hear what you have to say."

"A partnership between us would only be the starting point," Izuku began. "You've built quite a large following of devoted viewers online over the past few years, and you've proven yourself quite capable of pulling off high-stakes stealth and combat operations- your infiltration of the U.A. Cultural Festival two years ago was particularly entertaining, I have to say. The thought of working with you has crossed my mind several times since I first watched it. But for all your talent and your listeners, you still struggle with resources, money, and infrastructure. We, on the other hand, lack none of those. We have facilities in four cities from Osaka to Yokohama, a lucrative stake in this country's black market for support items, and more money than we know what to do with. We could fund your video routine indefinitely, give you top of the line recording equipment- provided that in return, you both lend us your talent."

Never moving his eyes from Izuku's, Tobita sipped his tea thoughtfully.

"A most interesting proposal. But do be specific, dear Akira. How exactly would you make use of our talent? I am a showman by nature, I thrive on an audience. From what I gather, your organization is much more… subtle, by comparison."

"It's true, we've focused on keeping a low profile since our formation- but that's all going to change very soon. We're currently in the midst of preparations for a large-scale operation that will serve as our public debut, and I want you, La Brava, to record and broadcast it. Perhaps you can provide commentary if you wish, Gentle- inform the viewers what they're seeing. The important thing is, you already have an audience and an established means to reach them- to us, those two resources are invaluable at the moment."

Strictly speaking, Midoriya reflected, it isn't a lie. It was indeed important for them to have a proper means of capturing and distributing their debut and future operations to the public, and it was more efficient to use Gentle and La Brava for that purpose than to build up the necessary infrastructure from scratch. Simply recording a battle was barely the beginning of the role Manami would play, though, if all went as planned. His brows knit in contemplation, Tobita still seemed somewhat intrigued, but it was Aiba who spoke up next, a look of indignant shock on her face.
"You think I'd cheat on my Gentle by recording someone else's fight? We started doing this together to spread his message to the world, not yours."

"Trust us," interjected Shinso, "this partnership, alliance, whatever you want to call it, is the best way to spread your message. What we're going to be doing is leagues bigger than the small-time heists that make up most of your videos; it's going to make waves across the entire country. And if you two are known as playing an integral role in what happens, then your notoriety hitches a ride through the roof along with ours. You have an audience in the tens of thousands right now, maybe past a hundred? We're talking about something that's gonna reach millions."

"Now that you mention it, what exactly are we going to be doing?" Danjuro's expression was halfway between curiosity and confusion. "Assuming we accept your offer. I tend to cut away during the more... violent moments of my battles, but I get the distinct impression that..." His eyes drifted once more to Izuku's bloodstained vest. "...that you might prefer to keep it rolling, as it were."

"We can't give away everything quite yet," Midoriya responded quietly, his gloved hands clasped. "Not until we're sure we can trust you- you understand. I'm sure, how these things work. For the moment, all I can tell you that you'll be recording a battle between several members of my organization and an indeterminate number of pro heroes. You will be provided all the equipment you need, as well as a safe location to capture the action from. Whether you wish to participate in the fight or merely observe and commentate is solely your prerogative, but you need not personally involve yourself in any violence if you don't wish to do so. After the operation, we can evaluate how well we worked together, and decide if we want to continue the partnership. If you perform satisfactorily enough stay on with us afterward, then you'll be given a high degree of autonomy in choosing whether you want to continue to record solo videos or participate in our operations as a member of the team, as long as you continue to provide us with your skills when asked."

After asking for a moment to discuss things privately, the villain duo stepped out into the hall and conversed in hushed tones for several long minutes. It would have been easy to adjust his earpiece to eavesdrop on them, but Izuku already knew by the look in Tobita's eyes that they'd accept, just as he'd known with Monoma two years ago, so he was more than content to simply sip at his tea and wait for the inevitable. Just as the two stepped back inside, though, with Gentle wearing a contented look that all but confirmed his assumption, Midoriya's phone began to buzz in his pocket, and his eyes narrowed. My colleagues have my schedule, they know better than to interrupt me during a meeting. This could only be him. For the second time in a span of moments, his hunch was proven correct when he pulled out the phone and glared down at Overhaul's number.

Apologizing profusely to Gentle and La Brava, he shot Shinso a glance that said handle the rest of this and stepped out into the hall they'd just returned from, contemplating letting the call go to voicemail for a few moments before reluctantly accepting it.

"What do you want? You just interrupted an important meeting, Overhaul. I don't like being interrupted."

"I guarantee that this is more important than whatever you're doing," the Yakuza capo's voice crackled through the speaker, his tone clipped and impatient. "Turns out the dragon bitch brought some company. I got a call from one of my Expendables that a perimeter camera picked up three of her sidekicks or interns or whatever closing on the compound, and Gang Orca was sighted in the same ward a few minutes ago. These extras weren't part of the plan, Midoriya- we were supposed to capture Ryukyu and get out, but they're too close to the bunker's location for them to perform the extraction."
"Nothing about this call strikes me as particularly urgent," sighed Izuku. "Ryukyu's little helpers haven't actually found the bunker yet, have they? Or did your people conceal it so poorly that their discovering it is an inevitability?"

"No, they haven't, but they will be expecting to find her there waiting for them."

"You trusted me enough to enter this alliance, Overhaul, to agree to share our personnel and resources until Hawks and Nighteye are dealt with. Trust my people to deal with the situation- Toga and Dabi alone are more than capable of handling two interns and a sidekick barely out of high school."

The line was silent for a moment before Chisaki gritted out a reply.

"If things go south, both our asses are on the line, I hope you know that. I'll be in touch if I hear anything else."

A dull click announced that Kai had hung up before Midoriya could respond, and he pocketed the phone again with a scowl. As confident as he was in Neito’s abilities, though, he couldn’t entirely push away the unease that crept through his mind at the thought of Gang Orca finding them, of Toga, defeated and arrested. She certainly had enough murders under her belt for Tartarus, and once those doors shut she’d be beyond his reach, locked away in the same hole as All For One. *I'll never let that happen,* he told himself, shaking his head. *I'll never let them have her.*

When their relationship began with a kiss and a promise in that distant forest, Himiko had been little more than a tool for gathering information in his eyes, a convenient means to an end that came with the added benefit of shedding every trace of sexual innocence he had left within him. But over the next few months, as they ate together, slept together, laughed together, killed together, the situation had spiraled beyond his control entirely. By now, his love for her was one of the few emotions that he still allowed himself to possess; she was his only weakness. *But she's strong,* Izuku reassured himself, sucking in a deep breath as he prepared to plunge back into the negotiations. *She can look out for herself. She'll have to."

*Yokohama, Eight Precepts Bunker*

*Five Minutes before Ryukyu's Team Encounters Toga*

"You know, you'd make things so much easier for us if you'd just call them off," remarked Monoma Neito, a smirk on his face as he increased the voltage to the Ryukyu's restraints. On the wide flatscreen monitor behind him, a direct feed from one of their surveillance cameras, Uravity, Froppy, and Nejire-chan were still walking undaunted toward their location, blissfully unaware what was beneath their feet.

Her back arched in pain, the number seven hero let out a cry of agony that gradually descended into a low growl of defiance. When it seemed that she was finally going to say something, he lowered the electricity coursing through her body just enough for her to hang her head, panting as she struggled to catch her breath. She was suspended above him and the rest of the spectating crowd by spherical metal braces around both of her hands and feet, each of her limbs drawn out to their full length. The entire assembly was a product of cooperation between Yaoyorozu, Hatsume, and the Yakuza, a device that suppressed quirks and restrained movement alike.

"What was that?" Neito allowed his smirk to spread even further across his face, and angled his head up toward her with one hand cupped around his ear. "Did you have something to say to us? You'll have to speak a little louder, I'm afraid."
"I'll never… lie to them… for you," she finally managed between labored breaths, lifting her eyes to meet Monoma's. "They're going to find me. They're going to save me. And they're going to beat you."

"Really? Now you're just being delusional, lady." Dabi stepped up to Neito's side with a chuckle, shaking his head. "We already took you down, and you think your little pipsqueak apprentices can do the trick?"

"Day after day, year after year, it's always the same meaningless platitudes from these heroes." Monoma sighed, and pinched the bridge of his nose with two fingers. "It gets a bit tiring, don't you think? How readily they lie to themselves?" He took another step toward their captive, dangling her phone in front of her face.

"All I need you to do is tell them to go away- it's that simple. Once you do that, I can end the pain."

"Pain?" Ryuko Tatsuma chuckled as a stream of blood began to drip from her mouth. "What pain? This is like a massage."

"She's just gonna try and call for help, even if she tells you she'll do it," Setsuno spoke up from the back of the room. The Eight Precepts members all stood bunched together in one corner, the henchmen crowded in a circle around Toya, Sakaki Deidoro, and Tengai Hekiji, the three Expendables Overhaul had assigned to this operation. "The ones at the top don't break that easy."

"You're right, I suppose. They're far too obsessed with their fickle ideals to take the easy way out. But it was worth a try, all the same." Monoma pressed a button on the console beside him, and with a low mechanical hum, the rack holding Ryukyu lowered until she was at eye level. "This would be so much easier if Shinso were here. Toga, if you would?"

When Himiko failed to respond, he threw an annoyed glance in her direction; she was standing in the far corner of the room, her red-flushed face a mask of glee as she stared transfixed at the screen of her phone.

"Toga, are you listening to me?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm coming!" Hastily pocketing her phone, she bounded over to Neito's side, sticking her tongue out at Dabi when he shook his head in disapproval. "Izuku just killed some people, and he sent me the best photos of it." Once she'd regained her usual sadistic composure, she leaned in close to Ryukyu, a knife gripped tight in her palm.

"You're pretty. I bet you don't hear that nearly as often as you should. I love the way your face twists up when you're screaming." She planted a kiss on the restrained woman's cheek before dragging the blade in a swift slash down the length of her arm. Blood spilled from the cut, and Toga let out a shriek of delight. "And now you're even prettier!"

She pulled back the blade and ran the flat of it across her tongue in the same motion, giggling all the while as her body transformed into Ryukyu's, clothing and all. Tatsuma herself kept her face calm as she watched the metamorphosis, her eyes lowered to the floor as her muscles strained in their shackles. Anger filled her voice when she spoke again.

"If you think you can fool them that easily, you're wrong."

"We'll see about that." After waving a finger tauntingly in her face, Monoma turned back to Toga. "Get them to leave the area as quickly as possible, but don't say anything more than necessary. Avoid combat except as a last resort, they'd almost certainly call for backup. Keeping this facility
hidden and secure is our top priority."

"Blah blah blah, don't worry, I know what I'm doing! They'll be gone in no time." With a cheery wave, she headed down the corridor toward the ladder that led up to one of the bunker's trap doors, well-concealed beneath a tangle of bushes at the edge of the park.

Once she was gone, Neito gestured dismissively toward a trio of Eight Precepts henchmen as he returned Ryukyu's rack to its original height.

"You three, keep an eye on her- report to me immediately if she has a change of heart. The rest of you, with me."

With Dabi at his side and the Expendables trailing behind, Monoma strode out of the large, open prison chamber and into the bunker's control room, a much smaller and more claustrophobic space filled with screens and consoles, many of them displaying direct feeds from security cameras both at this location's perimeter and other Precept outposts in the region. Rows of sidearms, rifles, and body armor were visible behind the metal grating of a tall, deadbolted grey locker which occupied much of the far wall, along with knives, katana, and more than a few grenades and tear gas bombs. This was just a fraction of the stockpile the Eight Precepts had been collecting over the past two years, little by little, largely from foreign arms dealers. Though Overhaul and his lieutenants were quick to dismiss the horde of weapons as a last-resort security measure whenever they inquired about it, Neito knew better. They're preparing to go to war, whether they admit it or not. But how sad, he reflected, shaking his head in pity. The mere fact that they feel the need to rely on such barbaric methods only shows how weak they truly are.

Setting his concerns about the Yakuza's future plans aside for the moment, Monoma redirected his attention to a screen connected to a camera hidden in one of the park's rusted playsets; it gave them a wide angle view of the disguised Toga, who was currently greeting her sidekick and interns. There was no audio, and the camera was further away from them than he would have liked, but even from this distance he could tell that something was wrong when Nejire Hado stopped the two interns short of approaching Himiko and crossed her arms. There was a brief exchange of words, and before he could blink Toga was sailing through the air, sent clear across the park by a blast of Hado's shockwaves.

"Ah, fuck," Piped up Dabi, watching dispassionately as Himiko's disguise melted away and the three heroes started their attack in earnest. "That's not good, huh?"

"Eloquent as always," Neito responded, massaging his temples with one hand before the sheer idiocy leading up to this moment gave him a headache. Am I the only competent criminal left in this godforsaken city?

"So, uh, should we do something? Help her, maybe?" Dabi's words prompted Monoma to glance back up to the display. Toga was putting up a fight, as expected, and had Uraraka and Asui handled; only Nejire was giving her trouble, but in a three-on-one situation, that was forgivable.

"Why yes, I think you should- an excellent suggestion, seeing as they never would have found us if you hadn't gotten 'carried away' yesterday and tried to burn down an entire apartment building when our meeting went wrong. So please, do go clean up your mess. Setsuno, Sakaki, go with him, keep him in line. The objective now is to kill them as quickly as possible. Tengai, stay with me."

After a moment of hesitation from the Yakuza members, they all fell dutifully in line, following Dabi to the same ladder Toga had taken. Hekiji said nothing, watching Monoma calmly down the nose of his plague mask he waited for further orders.
"Start evacuating all the weapons and equipment to the annex room- use as many men as you need. I'm going to make a call."

Tengai nodded and released the deadbolt on the storage locker with a fingerprint and retina scan before setting about his task with the aid of two henchmen, while Neito ducked out of the room and into the hallway. The line for the Kyoto headquarters only rang for a few seconds before someone picked up, but the monotonous dial tone seemed to stretch into hours as he paced back and forth across the corridor, until Twice's voice finally crackled through at the other end, distorted by the mass of earth and metal overhead.

"Kyoto speaking, can I help you? Make it fast, we're very busy over here- just kidding, there's nothing to do!"

"Listen to me very carefully, Twice- I'm not in the mood for games right now. Is Kurogiri there? We need an emergency extraction from Yokohama, we've engaged multiple heroes."

For some time after his master's death, Shigaraki's right hand had simply refused to speak to his captors, content to meditate in silence within the confines of his quirk-suppressing cell, only performing menial tasks when forced to by Shinso. After his quirk was finally deemed impossible for Monoma to copy just days ago, Midoriya was torn between killing him and turning him in anonymously to collect the police ransom on his head when Kurogiri suddenly announced his intention to cooperate. *I'll never forgive what you did to Shigaraki Tomura,* he'd told them, all the emotion emptied from his voice, *but you have the best chance of anyone living to fulfill All For One's vision for the future of this society, even if you disrespect his name. It is my duty to aid you, distasteful as the task may be.*

At Yaoyorozu's insistence, they still kept him off the most dangerous missions for now except in case of emergencies, and the metallic container that served as his body was fitted with high-yield explosive charges that would detonate unless kept within 100 meters of Hatsume at all times. Mei had volunteered to serve as his guardian of sorts while he transitioned into the organization, keeping him in check while designing babies for his unique quirk at the same time. Accordingly, Neito was frustrated yet unsurprised by Jin's answer.

"He's on assignment with Hatsume over near Pontocho- some kind of stealth operation that Midoriya gave them, they're on radio silence right now. I can get through to them on Mei's emergency channel, but it'll take me a while to connect to the frequency."

"Just do it, and keep the splitting to a minimum. This could expose everything if we don't get out of here in time."

"No problem, boss- this is gonna be so hard!"

A dull click ended the call before Monoma could retort again, and he was left silently fuming as a procession of masked Precept thugs rushed past him with bundles of weapons and armor in hand- thankfully, one of them had a weak metal-bonding quirk that sped the process up significantly. He was about to copy it and join them when a scream echoed down the hall, followed by a deafening roar that merged with the sound of creaking steel and shifting earth. All at once, the bunker's ceiling cracked apart above them, and visible in the clear light of day was Ryukyu's dragon form, talons bared and wings outstretched as she clambered up and out of the ground.

*Those fools. Those absolute, worthless fools. How easy of a task did I give them? One of the Dragon Hero's guards had followed her out onto the surface, but the other two stumbled out of the ruins of her chamber in a panicked daze, both sporting bleeding wounds and broken bones. They seemed to be trying to make their way toward the control room, but stopped in their tracks when they saw him*
"I don't know how the hell she did it," one of them was saying, when Neito raised a pistol he'd taken from the locker and fired four rounds in quick succession, two for each of their chests. Tengai and the other Precept members said nothing as the pair collapsed dead to the floor, simply continuing their task with only the slightest hint that they'd even noticed the disturbance. *It seems Overhaul at least taught them to expect discipline for their failures. Good.*

Not a moment later, Toga slid nimbly down the pile of rubble Ryukyu's exit had left behind, landing in a somersault just short of Monoma's feet. Her bare body was streaked with dirt, grass, and blood from her fight with the hero team, but she was as lively as ever as she gave him a giddy wave and bounded off to her quarters, beckoning for him to follow.

"So this is pretty bad, huh?" She started to change into her standard outfit the moment they reached her room, still talking as she slipped on her skirt and sweater and filled her blood collector with canisters. "Sorry I couldn't get them to go away, they had some sort of stupid code phrase they were using. That's cheating if you ask me."

"It doesn't matter how it happened, they caught you, and now our main target is loose too. She was the most important part of all of this- a top ten hero to bait Hawks." He slammed a fist into the wall, his brows knit in anger and frustration. "Without a high-value hostage, the plan collapses entirely."

"So what are we gonna do?" Himiko asked, fully clothed now.

"Twice is contacting Kurogiri as we speak, and we have plenty of those Precept fools to use as fodder for the heroes in the meantime. Strictly speaking, we don't need to do anything besides wait here for our extraction."

"And what about Dabi? He can take those three girls out no problem, but I'm not so sure he can handle the dragon lady by himself."

"He knew what he was getting into when he went up there," Neito replied coldly, gesturing for her to follow him out the door and down the hallway, back toward the gaping hole in the ceiling. "He's been in worse scrapes than this before; if anyone can get out of this, it's him." Monoma stopped in the middle of the corridor, his plaster-coated fist clenched at his side.

"But?" Toga prompted, watching him curiously.

"But I can't risk losing both Dabi and Ryukyu. I won't. I refuse to fail Izuku like that, after all the trust he's placed in me." He had an idea of what to do next, but it was risky, so risky that it ran the chance of exposing his identity just days before their grand public debut. All the same, though was the only way forward he could see that didn't end in retreating with his tail tucked between his legs and nothing to show for his effort.

"Come with me." He extended a hand. "I'll need your quirk, to disguise my appearance. We're going to the surface to take her back. To take them both back."

"Hey, no fair! I can't play with you if you're all the way up there!"

When she was sure the knife she'd thrown at the two floating interns had missed, Toga continued to pace about beneath them impatiently, only occasionally diverting her attention to the main battle. To her surprise, the cute older girl was holding back one of Dabi's full-powered attacks with the energy spirals shooting from her hands, while Monoma had copied Ryukyu's quirk by now, and was gradually wearing down the older dragon's defenses with a series of brutal slashes and bites, most of
which she barely managed to block or counter. *He's strong, huh? I wish I could copy quirks as well as appearances, it would make things so much more fun!*

When she glanced back upward, though, Uraraka was gone, and Tsuyu was hurtling toward her, her legs and tongue outstretched. Himiko had less than a second to dive out of the way before the other girl slammed into the ground she'd been standing on, but midway through the jump, her adrenaline kicked in, and she pulled another hidden knife from its strap on the inside of her thigh as she landed in a crouch.

"You just can't stay away from me, can you, Tsu-chan? Don't be greedy, though, you can't have me all to yourself!"

Asui's tongue darted toward her, but it was slower than usual, still coated in blood near the middle where she'd stabbed it. Toga took the first blow it landed on her face, spitting out blood from a loosened tooth, but when it tried to wrap around her, it was all too easy for her to grab hold of it again, dig her heels into the ground, and yank hard. Tsuyu pulled back with equal strength, and for a moment they were locked in a standoff, each straining against the other. Suddenly, Himiko let go all at once, and was sent sailing towards her startled opponent, who failed to back away before Toga delivered a brutal headbutt to her forehead. Stars filled her vision, and she could feel blood trickling down from her hairline, but she fought through the pain and wrapped her arms around Asui, wresting the dazed girl to the ground before she could recover.

By the time the intern started to push back, she was already pinned, and Toga's blade was poised at the side of her mouth.

"Do you think you'd be prettier if I cut out your tongue, Tsu-chan? I'm so curious what you'd look like!"

She could feel the muscles in Tsu's legs tensing beneath her, but only tightened her grip on the girl's tongue in response, pressing the knife into it until it drew blood.

"Ah ah ah, don't try to fight back, or it's coming right out. I'll tell you what, Tsu-chan, I just had the best idea! I'll let you keep it if you beg for it."

For a moment Asui remained silent, but as Toga pressed the blade deeper and deeper, tears began to flow from her eyes, and she slurred out a distorted plea.

"Pleash, pleash, don't take it. I need it. Pleash."

Himiko's cheeks flushed with color, and she leaned in close to Froppy's face.

"Come on, Tsu-chan, I know you can do better than that. Tell me how much you-"

Her attention was drawn away when the familiar sound of cascading ice filled the air, and she glanced up to see Todoroki Shoto and Gang Orca entering the park through the far gate. Focusing on Dabi and Monoma, they hadn't seen her yet, but it would only be a matter of time before they did. *Looks like I have to wrap this up quickly."

"I changed my mind, Tsu-chan. You're not very good at begging." Her voice grew cold in the last few syllables, and Asui tried to throw her off in a panic, but she was a beat too slow. She pushed her knife the rest of the way through in an instant, silencing Tsuyu's scream of pain by bashing the hilt of the blade against the back of the girl's head.

Leaving the unconscious intern's body behind, she retreated back into the relative safety of a row of dying bushes.
attack—while he was too large to be paralyzed, the male dragon reared in pain, letting out a cry of distress, and as he turned to confront the sound's source, Ryukyu lunged at him from behind. But Neito's agony swiftly turned to anger, and in the span of a moment he delivered a brutal lash across her face with his tail and sent Gang Orca flying backward with the wind pressure created by a flap of his wings. Uravity, it seemed, had snuck up behind him, and turned him weightless by slapping one of his massive legs with both hands, but rather than hinder Monoma, this simply prompted him to spread his wings and propel himself upward, laughing all the while.

"Oh my, you're even more foolish than I thought! What a laughably ineffective tactic; they really don't teach you anything at that school, do they?"

Beneath him, Dabi and Todoroki were in a near draw, each locked in a continuous struggle to surpass the pace of the other's attacks. Ryukyu, meanwhile, was trying to muster the strength to follow Neito up, but his last attack had clearly left her stunned, and the wounds from her captivity and her fight with Dabi were finally exacting their toll; after one weak flap that barely lifted her a few inches, she collapsed unconscious to the grind with an earth-shaking thud, smoke and blood drifting and dripping from her scales in equal measure. Monoma laughed at the sight, but Toga frowned in spite of his victory. *He's almost at his time limit.* He seemed to notice it too, though, and had begun to fly back toward the bunker when the crack of rifles and wail of sirens suddenly filled the air.

Himiko whipped her head around to find two squads of police rushing into the park, one through each entrance, their guns trained on the dragon above them. Their bullets bounced harmlessly off his hide, but taking advantage of their distraction, Toga pulled a rack of blood vials from a slot on her collector, each carefully labeled with the name of the 'donor'. Several were quite old—she'd nearly used the last of the sample she took from Ochako two years ago capturing Ryukyu the first time—but she looked past those to the more recent ones. Shigaraki Tomura, All For One, Asui Tsuyu, just freshly capped, her weekly vial from Midoriya—this one had a series of colorful hearts drawn on it—and several other notables, ranging from Aizawa Shota to Nighteye to Amaki Tamajiki. Many of the samples were scarcely more than a few drops collected from her blades or from battlefields, but even that was more than enough.

Finally, she found the one she was looking for, a lieutenant in the police she'd killed a few weeks ago, and gulped it down without hesitation, grinning as the rush of Metamorphosis coursed through her. Once she had fully assumed the officer's appearance, she walked calmly and authoritatively from the bushes, first making a beeline for Nejire Hado's barely conscious body, currently eagle-splayed on the ground where she'd collapsed after Uraraka attacked Dabi.

"How serious are your injuries?" She always enjoyed toying with her targets at first, saving the reveal of who she really was until the very end.

"I'm… alright, I promise." Nejire managed, spitting out blood as it flowed from the shards of glass embedded in her skin into her mouth. "Don't worry about me, officer."

"No, I'm afraid we're going to have to get you a medevac, stat. Here, let me take a sample for the lab." Policeman Toga held a vial under one of Hado's wounds and let it fill. "After all, it would be a shame to let someone as cute as you die, Nejire-chan. Not before I see you bleed a lot more than this."

Hado's eyes widened, and Toga's chest soared with happiness at the sight. She was too weak to resist as Himiko leaned down and planted a single kiss on her neck, careful not to ingest any of the blood on her face.

"You're… no…"
"Night night, Nejire-chan." Toga slammed her knife's hilt into Hado's forehead, hard enough to open up a new wound in addition to the half dozen that already scarred her face, but she fell unconscious all the same, her eyes fluttering shut as Himiko stood and jogged over toward Todoroki and Dabi. The other policemen had scattered to deal with the various villains on the battlefield, and she nodded confidently to them as she passed; she stopped short, though, when one officer next to her fell to the ground with a bullet in his side, and her head jerked around to meet Setsuno Toya's gaze. His mask broken and his face bleeding, he'd somehow struggled to his feet and used his quirk to steal an officer's rifle, and was eagerly gunning down as many as he could. He was about to fire on her too, and panicking for a way to let him know who she was, she shot the Yakuza a peace sign with a nervous smile. Thankfully, he understood, and gave her a brief nod before dashing toward the bunker.

Safe again for the moment, she turned and ran toward Todoroki, who was currently using a flurry of ice to try and hold off a vicious attack from Dabi.

"Lay down suppressing fire on his left side!" Shoto cried, throwing a glance in her direction. He gasped in shock when she wrapped an arm around his neck and drove her knife into the small of his back.

Forget Ryukyu, she thought, her eyes wide with glee. Let's see Hawks try to stay away when we use the son of Endeavor as our hostage.

"Our people will fix you right up," she whispered into his ear, "so I can hurt you as much as I want before we take you!"

Her blade plunged two, three, four more times into his body as he struggled in her grip. Just when it seemed he was about to fall unconscious from the pain, flames began to sprout from his left side and ice from his right, and Himiko was forced to back away before her uniform was alternately burned and frozen. Before Shoto could properly counterattack, though, Dabi's first landed squarely on his temple, and he fell limp into the older man's arms.

"Officer! What the hell do you think you're doing?!"

Gang Orca, Uraraka, and the other policemen had finally noticed them, but a towering burst of flame from Dabi was all it took to hold them off as they carted Shoto off toward the bunker as fast as they could run, each holding half of his unconscious body. God, I'd kill to have Mr. Compress here right now. Dabi finally wrapped Todoroki around his shoulders as they dived into the exposed prison chamber together, the heroes in close pursuit, but just before one of Gang Orca's hypersonic blasts could reach them, a dome-shaped shield sprung into place over the hole. The number five hero's sound attack bounced harmlessly off the barrier, as did the officer's bullets, and Toga pivoted to find Setsuno, Hejiki Tengai, who was maintaining the forcefield, and Monoma, reverted back to human form, standing in a circle around her. Behind them, the remaining Yakuza henchmen were frantically carrying the bunker's weapons supply through a tall black and purple portal in the wall. She breathed a sigh of relief at the sight, and transformed back to her normal appearance.

"Excellent work," Neito purred, patting her on the shoulder and giving Dabi a congratulatory nod. "Simply excellent. He'll make a fine hostage, so I do hope you haven't damaged him too badly. Come on, bring him through, and we'll be done with this place for good."

He'd barely finished speaking when Nejire, who to Toga's shock had already awoken and mustered the strength to walk again, added her shockwaves to the bombardment, and Tengai began to sweat and struggle under the combined assault.

"All of you, get out, now!" He cried, never moving his eyes from the heroes above them. "My
barrier's weak against high-frequency attacks like whatever that orca's using, I can only buy you so much more time before they break through!"

On cue, one of the Precept thugs shot them a thumbs up to indicate that all the arms had been successfully evacuated; Setsuno and Monoma were the first to run through the portal, followed closely by Dabi, still carrying Shoto. Toga was about to follow them when Uraraka Ochako's voice became audible, slightly muffled by the forcefield.

"GRAVITY BOMB!"

All at once the barrier shattered at the force of Uravity's impact, and the intern landed deftly on her feet halfway between Toga and the warp gate. Tengai was swiftly immobilized by Gang Orca and Hado’s quirks, but Himiko was too close to Uraraka for them to target her.

"You're not going anywhere," the intern gritted, her fists raised. "Not after what you did to Tsu!"

"Don't you like how she looks now, Ochako-chan? I think she's so much prettier!" Toga lunged forward before Uraraka had time to respond, and a grin spread across her face when the brown-haired girl tried to counter her charge with the same martial arts tactic she used in the forest two years ago.

It had worked then, but this time, Himiko was ready for it. She dropped her knife, caught both of Ochako's arms by the wrist before she could touch her and activate her quirk, and slammed her knee into the girl's stomach. By the time Uravity regained her breath, Toga was already shoving forward with all the strength in her body, and they tumbled together through Kurogiri's warp gate, even as Gang Orca and Nejire's panicked cries echoed behind them.

The portal flickered shut the moment they landed on the cold floor of a dark warehouse, and in the silence, Himiko shuddered with delight as she watched the realization of what had happened dawn on Uraraka's face. Her expressions cycled through surprise, panic, and finally anger, but when she shoved Toga off of her chest and raised a fist to strike her, a hand caught her arm, and Momo Yaoyorozu stepped out into the light, flanked by Kurogiri and Dark Shadow.

Uravity whipped around, ready to attack her new opponent, but when she saw whose hand was holding her back, she sank back down to her knees, abject shock on her face.

"Momo… Tokoyami… is that… you?"

"Of course it's us, Ochako," Yaoyorozu gave the girl a friendly smile, and knelt down to pull her in close for a tight hug. "I've missed you so much." Unsure of whether to return the embrace, Uraraka's body remained stiff at first, but quickly fell limp when Momo plunged a syringe of tranquilizer into the back of her neck, still smiling all the while. "We have a lot to catch up on, after all."

Chapter End Notes

And so our first major battle is done, with two class 3-A members captured, along with Gentle and La Brava's introduction! I really enjoy these two villains and their arc in the manga, so hopefully even if you're anime-only, they work well within the world of this story! I tried to flesh out Midoriya's current combat capabilities (or at least, a hint of them), the nature of his relationship with Toga, and the details Yaoyorozu's role in the organization- let me know what you think! Next time, perspectives from Kendo and
Todoroki. How will Shoto react to being reunited with Momo like this? Find out soon!
Shipping District, Niigata, Chubu Province

Thirty Minutes after the Villains' Escape from Yokohama

"Room clear. Advance."

Kendo Itsuka shot Jiro a thumbs up and obeyed wordlessly as the shorter girl pulled her jacks out of the ground and fell in step behind her. Together they edged carefully along the warehouse's cold metal wall toward Nighteye's position, their eyes flitting back and forth through the shadowy metal containers for any sign of movement that Kyoka might have missed. The downpour outside formed a steady drumbeat on the steel roof as they moved, interspersed by occasional booms of thunder that set the dull yellow lights above their heads flickering with every clap.

As they entered another, identical room and began to repeat the process all over again, Kendo couldn't help but reflect how much she hated stealth missions. They were perfect for Jiro's quirk, to be fair, and more experience was always good, but... but all this sneaking around just feels like a waste of One For All, she mused, as they turned a corner and started down a dimly lit corridor with bare concrete walls. I could be punching villains across cities right now, or flying from town to town helping with disaster relief after that quake in Kyushu last week. Her daydreaming tapered off when she thought of All Might, though, and one of the dozens of little impromptu lectures he continued to deliver each time they trained together. Making an impression is important, Young Kendo, but you must never forget that being a hero isn't about showing off. Some of the greatest acts of bravery and selflessness this country has seen in the past hundred years occurred outside the public eye, but those men and women never complained that they weren't recognized for their deeds. Being a hero isn't about being praised, it's about being worthy of praise in all that you do. Whether or not you receive it is irrelevant.

Itsuka chuckled softly to herself; it had been a windy day when he gave that speech, and she could still picture the way his drooping tassels of blond hair had whipped back and forth across his face as he talked. I wonder what he's up to today- I'll have to text him after I'm done here. Usually her mentor spent his weekends working even in his 'retirement', at the police office with Tsukauchi or brainstorming lesson plans with Aizawa and Midnight. One time she'd run into the three of them grading mid-terms in an honest-to-god maid café, and despite Toshinori's panicked insistence that they'd lost a bet to Nemuri, Kendo had never let him live that one down.

"Hey, Itsuka, hold up. I'm getting something up ahead in the next room." Jiro laid a hand on Kendo's shoulder to pull her to a halt, one jack plugged into the wall and the other into the floor. Her voice had dropped down to a whisper. "This stupid storm is creating enough background vibrations to throw me off, but I'm pretty certain it's one, maybe two people, just inside the threshold."

"Roger that." Itsuka whipped her head back to the doorway in question, eyeing it carefully. It was about five meters ahead, and when she looked closer, she could see the briefest hint of a shadow flitting along the opposite wall before it disappeared again. "Alright, let's take this slow and steady, one of us on each side. If you can get their exact location, I'll come in from the left and-"

Whack.
Before either of the girls could even begin to move on their potential target, a Yakuza thug's limp body fell through the door and into the passageway, though Sir Nighteye caught him by his dark outfit's nape before his masked face hit the floor, straightening his glasses as he stepped into the light and gave the two U.A. students a curt nod.

"Sir? What are you doing here?" Kyoka asked, her eyes wide. "I thought we were supposed to meet you further ahead!"

"I arrived at the rendezvous point early, so I decided to backtrack and make sure you two hadn't run into any trouble. Some help here, if you would?"

"Of course, Sir!" The older hero's current intern, Jiro rushed forward first as Nighteye stripped the plague mask from the man's head, revealing a rather plain countenance with short, tufted brown hair, though Kendo wasn't far behind.

"Earphone Jack, I need you to wake him up for me. Battle Fist, help me restrain him."

They each nodded and snapped to their respective task; once she'd firmly pinned the man's arms and legs, Itsuka watched as Jiro pressed her jacks to his skull, one at each temple, and sent a concentrated burst of soundwaves hurtling into his body. She'd seen the move in use before- capable of waking someone from anything short of a coma, it was incredibly useful for quickly reviving unconscious allies, and the sound it generated was mostly contained within the target, making it relatively quiet as well, perfect for their purposes today.

By the time the Yakuza jolted awake, Nighteye had already clamped one hand down on his mouth, muffling his cry of anger while he made eye contact and activated his quirk. The man tried to thrash and struggle, but Kendo's grip on his limbs remained tight- she didn't even need to use an ounce of her full strength to contain him.

"Alright, I've seen all I need to see." Nighteye stood from where he'd been crouched over the thug, brushed off his grey suit jacket, and delivered a single, swift kick across the man's jaw that quickly rendered him unconscious again. "I watched his patrol route. We're clear until the room at the end of this warehouse- that's where most of his colleagues seem to be concentrated. I counted ten to fifteen men, including the two priority targets, Rappa and Rikiya. There was one new face as well, a girl. It's unclear whether she's affiliated with the Eight Precepts or the Osaka Group, but regardless, she's to be treated as a threat. They're already suspicious about how long the shipment is taking- we should hurry, or they might try to leave. On my six." As he spoke, Nighteye's fingers ghosted along his newest support item, a small metal attachment affixed on the lenses of his glasses, which allowed him to reel back the tape he saw with Foresight and look up to one hour into his target's past as well as into their future; it enabled him to use his powers twice a day as well, up from his previous limit of once per twenty-four hour period.

He gestured back toward the same door he'd entered through, and the three of them walked through it together. They advanced through a maze of empty crates and up a flight of metal stairs to a catwalk halfway to the ceiling, from which they could look down through a set of wide, open windows into the next room. Sure enough, just as predicted, the Eight Precepts were there, milling about on the warehouse floor as they waited for a shipment of foreign weapons and ammunition that had already been intercepted off the coast. Her eyes darting between them, Istuka did her best to compile a mental list of their positions, noting that their primary targets, the Expendables Rikiya and Rappa, were furthest from their current vantage point. Steal Vitality and Strong Shoulder- draining stamina via touch and insanely fast and powerful punches. Two incredibly dangerous quirks- we have to take them out right off the bat. At the Yakuza's center, though, was the unidentified girl Nighteye had mentioned. Her back was to Kendo, but from this distance she looked relatively young, with blue
hair tied up in a ponytail and a pair of complex electronic goggles on top of her head. She had a rifle in her hands, and some sort of strange mechanical harness on her back. *Could she be the girl from the Osaka Incident?* She wondered, listening in to see if she could get any clues one way or another.

"I swear," one masked man was saying, "those fuckers better not have gotten cold feet. This was our biggest purchase from them in months, they're gonna be missing out on a hell of a payday if they don't show."

"Relax, man," another replied, "they're Russians, they're always late. The only real danger is that they all had too much vodka and passed out before they could leave port."

Peals of laughter lifted up the rafters at that, giving the three heroes the opening they needed to quietly discuss their next steps.

"Lemillion's already given me the all clear that he's in place, so once I get the same from Miruko, we'll attack." He glanced down to his comm unit, which had just begun blinking with a new alert, and swore calmly under his breath.

"Actually, change of plans. It seems that Miruko and Real Steel encountered a separate pocket of enemies en route, and they've engaged them. We'll move in now, before they can call this group for backup. Earphone Jack, like we discussed- you're the signal to engage."

"Yes, Sir, of course." Taking a deep breath, Kyoka stood up, plugged her jacks into her boot-mounted amplifiers, and shot Kendo a confident grin before she sent a massive wave of sound screeching down toward the cluster of Yakuza.

As they covered their ears in pain, Nighteye ducked out from his own cover and hurled two of his tax-stamp hypermass seals down towards the enemy, with deadly accuracy; they struck Katsukame Rikiya in the head and chest, knocking the hulking criminal out cold and sending him skidding ten yards backwards into the wall. Letting the power of One For All fill her body up to the brim, Kendo leapt through the open window frame and out into the center of the room, a wide smile on her face. Blue sparks of energy crackled around her first as it swelled up to the size of a boulder; once it was ready, she rocketed straight downward in an instant and slammed it into the ground, tearing the concrete floor all around her to ribbons and sending the incapacitated thugs flying.

"COLORADO SMASH!" She cried, then jumped back up and began to pick off the henchmen one-by-one while they were still midair, opting mostly for simple punches or swipes now that her hand was back down to just two or three times its normal size.

Flitting between them before they landed turned out to be even easier than she thought- she only needed to use about half of the speed she'd unlocked by now. Over the course of a few seconds, she tore through five, but when Kendo propelled herself over to the sixth amid a wave of blue lightning, someone's first was already smashing into his face; Lemillion gave her a friendly wink before phasing right through her, something she still hadn't gotten used to after two years of knowing him, and moving swiftly on to his next target.

By then, the dust had settled, and the thugs had all fallen back to solid ground, conscious or not. Working roughly in concert, Kendo and Mirio plowed through another three before they could aim their guns, but she was stopped short when something hard and heavy slammed into her side before she could block, and staggered backward. The cloud of dust kicked up by her initial move was so thick that she couldn't locate the attack's source, and cursing herself for the carelessness of the tactic, she swelled up her hands and waved them back and forth, beating the dust away just in time to reveal a fist hurtling toward her face, bound by leather straps and massive metal knuckles. Her mind racing, she barely leapt out of the way in time to dodge it, eliciting a chuckle from the man it was attached
"Kendo Itsuka. The famous girl with my name. Funny coincidence, huh? But that's what made me certain that I have to kill you." Kendo Rappa cracked his neck as he stepped forward to face her, and pounded his knuckles together with a reverberating clang. His face was entirely obscured by his beaklike mask, though a mane of long, greasy blond hair spilled out the back. "Now I don't wanna see any of that fancy flying-around crap. Just you and me, straight punches, to the death. I don't care if I lose, I just need to know for sure who's stronger."

Deciding to entertain his challenge, Itsuka bared both her enlarged fists, a hint of a grin on her face. *I'll finish him in one punch, then move on to help Mirio and the others.*

"Don't think I'll go easy on-" She was cut off midsentence by a lightning-fast hook across her jaw, and felt blood flying from a broken cheek and busted lip as she threw up her hands to block his next blow. *Okay, I deserved that one. Get it together, Itsuka.*

But instead of just one blow, Rappa followed up with a storm of dozens, each one impacting faster than she could even process. Even with all the extra strength and endurance provided by One For All, they were chewing through her guard like so many bullets, gradually pushing her backward as bruises and cuts opened up across her palms. She could finish him in one strike, but there was simply no time to counterattack, not even a hint of an opening. He began to laugh aloud as she struggled, and her expression darkened. *Alright, forget the challenge. Let's finish this.*

Digging her heels into the ground, she waved her hands to stagger him with the resultant blast of air pressure, then used a burst of speed to dart behind his field of vision, safely out of range of his punches; she was winding up a finishing blow when he pivoted and landed a vicious backhand across her chest. The impact still stung, but Kendo was prepared for Rappa's quick reflexes this time; she caught the blow, wrapped her oversized hands around his arm, and vaulted him brutally over her shoulder and into the ground, digging an even deeper crater than the one she'd already made. When he tried to lift his arms in a desperate attempt to keep attacking, she grabbed him by the collar of his torn shirt and flung him straight up into the air.

*Hey asshole, here's your punch!*

Itsuka leapt up to meet him, letting 100% of One For All's strength flow through her as she landed her first squarely on his chest. A dull grunt of defeat escaping his lips, Rappa was sent flying backward at twice the speed of one of his bullet-like blows, and impacted a stack of steel shipping containers with a resounding crash before finally falling still among the wreckage.

Once she was sure he was down, Kendo only allowed herself only a moment to catch her breath before she turned to charge back into the fray. At first glance, chaos still rained across the span of the cavernous room: Mirio was finishing off the last few Yakuza thugs as they attempted to flee, while Jiro was currently locked in combat with the blue haired girl. A set of metal earmuffs had slid down from the sides of the villain's goggles, rendering Kyoka's sound-based attacks ineffective, while a half-metal, half-holographic mask had descended over her face, perhaps for her quirk, or perhaps to conceal her identity. Each time Jiro tried to strike her directly with the jacks, a set of hydraulic-powered mechanical arms sprung out of the case on her back, lifting her out of the way just in time over the sound of her maniacal laughter. Even Heartbeat Monitor proved ineffective; when Kyoka plugged her gauntlets into the ground and tore apart the concrete floor beneath the girl, she activated a set of rocket jets on her boots and soared upward and out of range, bringing her rifle to bear once she came to a hover.

"Alright, that's enough messing around for one day. Say goodbye, hero!"
Activating all of her speed in a single bound, Kendo barely extended one massive hand in time to pull Jiro out of the way before a stream of high-caliber bullets reduced the ground she'd been standing on to a flurry of rubble and dust. The gust of wind from another swipe of her free hand sent the villain tumbling back through the air, but before she could set Kyoka down and continue the attack, a sizable hole burst open in the massive hangar door, and Tetstutetsu Tetsutetsu charged through, letting out a ragged cry of defiance as he tore Soramitsu Tabe's gnashing jaws off of his arm and body slammed the Expendable into the floor.

"Sorry we're late!" He bellowed, before he leaned down and broke the Yakuza's jaw and teeth with his next two blows, rendering his quirk, Food, useless. "Can't eat what you can't chew, you freak!" Bullets from the airborne villain's rifle bounced off his metallic skin the entire time, but he paid them no more heed than so many gnats.

Seconds later, Miruko bounded through the opening behind him, whipping the rain out of her hair before starting a running jump toward Rocket Boots. Swearing viciously, the villain tried to dodge, but one of Nighteye's hypermass seals slammed into her back while she was distracted and broke her mechanical harness in a flurry of sparks. It was only a glancing blow, but she was still thrown off balance long enough for Miruko's leaping kick to connect with her stomach, and the two descended to the floor together with an audible thud. A brutal stomp to the face knocked the girl out when she tried to reach for her fallen rifle, but instead of simply falling unconscious, she began to quickly melt into a pile of sludge, and Real Steel and Miruko swore almost simultaneously at the sight.

"Are you kidding me?!" Tetsutetsu cried, his voice full of exasperation. "I'm so friggin' tired of these clones!"

"You and me both, kid," Rumi muttered, patting her second intern on the shoulder as he fumed over Tabe's limp body. Kendo, the first, waved weakly to the two after a quick check to confirm that all their targets were down, and released her grip on Jiro.

"Glad you two could make it after all, I was starting to get worried."

"Oh, don't lie," scoffed Miruko, "you know better than to worry about us. Well, about me, at least. This reckless little twerp, on the other hand, just can't help finding trouble." She clamped a hand onto Tetsutetsu's head and mimicked ruffling his metallic hair.

"This whole stealth thing's just not my deal…” He said sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck with one hand.

"Hey, everybody! Great job today!"

Though Rumi remained stoic as usual, Battle Fist and Real Steel nearly jumped out of their respective skins when Lemillion popped out of the ground between them, shooting them all two thumbs up. The wide smile on his face quickly turned into a grin when he looked Itsuka's way, though.

"I counted six takedowns for me. How about you?"

"The same," she grunted, shaking her head. "Tied again, huh? That's the third time this month."

"It's not a competition, you two," Nighteye chided, setting the case of money the Yakuza had prepared for the Russians down in the middle of the congregation of heroes. He chuckled despite himself as he glanced between them, though. "I swear, though, sometimes working with you makes
me feel like I'm Toshinori's sidekick again."

"Aw, don't say that, Sir, we're partners now! I think we make a… great… team…" Confusion clear on his face, Mirio began to trail off midsentence, and fell to one knee with a grunt. Suddenly the same quickly began to happen to the rest of the group; Jiro was the first to notice what was wrong, pointing to the far end of the room with her jacks.

"It's Rikiya, he's conscious again!"

"But he has to make physical contact for his quirk to work…" Miruko gritted, struggling to stand. Kendo and Nighteye locked eyes, and in an instant she understood exactly what she had to do.

"He has Trigger!" She cried, swelling up both hands and using them to swipe the four others to the opposite corner of the room, as far from Katsukame as she could get them. "He doesn't need to touch you, stay away from him!" It was widely believed that the quirk-enhancing drug had been pulled once and for all from the black market after Nighteye's bust on the Eight Precepts' operation manufacturing it two years ago, but clearly they'd been mistaken.

Once they were at a safe distance, Itsuka bore the full brunt of the Expendable's quirk alone, and forced herself to turn around and face him despite the steady drain of energy from every muscle in her body. I have to finish this right now, she knew. The more power he drains, the more his size increases. Rikiya's deep, steady breaths were audible from ten meters away as he slowly rose and emerged from the shadows, his entire figure growing larger and larger with each passing second. If he gets all of One For All, the others won't even stand a chance.

The desperate need to prevent that outcome was pushed to the forefront of Kendo's mind as she knelt down and shot herself forward, one massive fist outstretched. Every part of her body felt like it was weighted down by lead, and after around ten seconds of exposure she could only muster around 50% of her second quirk's full strength. Her blow was still more than enough to stagger Katsukame, though not nearly as much as she was used to; it took three more to send him stumbling out into the rain through the hole left by Tetsutetsu's entrance, and she winced with each one; for every instant of physical contact, her stamina left her at a swifter pace. Far behind her, Kendo could hear the others' shouts as she followed Rikiya outside, and Jiro's too. But the rain quickly muffled them, soaking her hair and costume; her blue cape, already slightly tattered from her fight with Rappa, was waterlogged within seconds, and her wet bangs threatened to obscure her vision.

She pressed ahead regardless, though she couldn't help but shudder when Rikiya's rose up to his full height, the rain bouncing off his bulging muscles. Her trademark strategy of 'punching people really hard until they faint', as Tetsutetsu once so eloquently put it, doubly ingrained into her mind since she inherited One For All, was actively working against her, more and more so with each passing second. It was a bitter irony, but Kendo had no time to reflect on it- her vision was fading in and out, and her head was swimming, but forced herself to leap forward again, the lightning trailing behind her a bit less vigorous this time, down to 30% strength now. I have to finish this with my next attack, or I won't be able to put a scratch on him. There was still enough power behind the sweeping punch to put a hole through a building, but after all the stamina he'd stolen, Rikiya was practically a behemoth; caught her boulder-sized fist with both arms, skidding backward half a dozen yards, but not falling.

When it was clear that the attack was ineffective, she ripped her arm away immediately, but the damage was done- 10% and dropping. She wanted to back away, get out of range of his quirk and reevaluate the situation, but her legs wouldn't move properly anymore, and when she tried to jump backward, she only traveled a few meters before falling to the ground in a haze. Katsukame began to stride slowly toward her, each footfall shaking the ground, and for a moment, as the corners of her
vision grew dark, she saw Muscular in his place, remembered how eager to kill her he'd looked after he smashed her arm to pieces. It seemed so long ago, so distant, her first true act as a hero.

*Your origin. When you think you're at your limit, remember where you came from.* All Might's words drifted unbidden into her mind, but they lit a fire in her chest all the same, a blaze that forced her eyes open and pushed her back to her feet in spite of her overwhelming exhaustion.

*I remember, sensei. I remember where I came from, and I know where I'm going.*

A shaky grin spread slowly across her face as the gears of her mind began to turn again, formulating a strategy. *He thinks he has my strength, but as long as there's even the faintest dreg of One For All left inside me, I carry more power than he ever could.*

Kendo slammed her foot into the ground she'd just been lying on, and watched with satisfaction as the resultant shockwave cracked apart the concrete in a web spreading outward from where she stood, disrupting Rikiya's balance just long enough for her to leap upward and out of Vitality Drain's area of effect. Moving more quickly than she thought possible with this much energy gone, she flit around him in a rough circle from rooftop to container stack to rooftop, trying to get a sense of exactly how wide his drug-enhanced quirk's range was as a fraction of her strength began to return bit by bit. Haphazardly smashing aside everything in his path, Rikiya tried to pursue her, but she was moving too fast for him to keep up- his enlarged form was as cumbersome as it was strong.

Just as she was searching for an opening in his guard for the next phase of her plan, the perfect one presented itself, in the form of Mirio Togata bursting out of the torn-up concrete and delivering a lightning-fast strike to Katsukame's face before phasing right through him and retreating back into the ground on his other side. He proceeded to repeat the attack three, four, five more times, and soon the villain was spinning in circles, letting out a roar of rage as he tried and failed again and again to swat the untouchable hero out of the air. Togata's vitality wasn't being drained anymore, Itsuka noticed, because he was only deactivating his quirk in his hand, and only in the exact instants he struck; the rest of the time, there was simply nothing there to steal from. *He can't even see what he's aiming at,* she realized with a start, *he memorized his approaches in advance!* But Mirio's punches alone clearly weren't strong enough to take the Expendable down- this was a distraction, not a real attempt at victory, designed for her benefit. Kendo's suspicion was confirmed when a wave of sound from Jiro's boots and another of Nighteye's hypermass seals struck Rikiya from behind, and Tetsutetsu's voice became audible over the roar of the rain. All three of them had followed her outside, but thankfully they were smart enough to stay at a good distance.

"*Fuck him up, Battle Fist, you can do it!"*

"*You've got this!"* Kyoka added, her hands cupped around her mouth. Nighteye remained silent, but even from this far away she could feel his intense gaze urging her on, no, *challenging* her to win.

"*Keep him there!"*"* Isuka bellowed down to Mirio, before she remembered he couldn't see or hear her. *Shit, that makes things more difficult.*

"Better hurry up over there!" He shouted in the midst of his next attack, as if he'd read her mind. "I can only distract him for so long!"

She was about to shout something back about him taking his own sweet time to come help, but immediately recalled the futility of the gesture, and sufficed for a simple nod before she bolted back down to the ground. Rather than make straight for Rikiya, though, she leapt clear across the shipping yards in a single bound, landing at least three hundred meters away from where the Expendable was still struggling with Lemillion. There was a clear path straight to the villain through the maze of crates and buildings, though, and that was exactly what she'd been looking for. And so, after a brief
stretch of her legs and a slap across her face to clear the remaining fog from her head, she started to run, faster and faster, accelerating herself with One For All until she was nothing but a streak of blue-white energy, too fast for the eye to keep track of. At the last possible moment, as Katsukame's towering silhouette grew large above her, she held out her right fist, let it grow until it was twice the size of her body, and put her back into it.

"SAN FRANCISCO SMASH!"

When her blow connected with the Yakuza's chest, the sound it made was louder than any thunderclap the storm had mustered. Blood spilling out from inside his mask, Rikiya flew up and backwards like a ten-foot missile, blowing straight through Lemillion- who was thankfully still dephased- and out over the harbor. For all Kendo knew, he might have kept going like that for miles, but the hull of a docked cargo ship stopped him short. Easily four hundred meters long and fifty tall, the massive freighter rocked in its moorings at the impact, churning up the already rough water into a foaming frenzy. But when Katsukame fell motionless from the deep dent he had made in the thick steel plating onto the distant pier, Itsuka knew without a doubt that she had won, and sank to her knees, her chest heaving with exertion.

"You did it." Mirio laid a comforting hand on her shoulder. Above them, the clouds had finally broken, and a shaft of bright sunlight fell through as the rain began to falter.

"Yeah…" she choked out after a moment, smiling through the blood trickling down her face. "I did, huh?"

A set of rock-solid arms wrapped around her waist from behind and lifted Kendo up into the air before she could move another muscle, and Tetsutetsu's excited laughter became audible as her adrenaline levels gradually died down.

"Holy shit, dude, that was insane! The distance you got on that last punch?! So friggin' manly!"

"Put her down, Real Steel," Jiro chuckled, poking the 3-B boy with her jacks as he spun Itsuka around so she could see them both. "After that, I think she could use a little less energy."

"Not to mention some first aid," Nighteye chided, stepping up behind them with his hands clasped behind his back. "Remember to follow protocol, you two. Lemillion, contact Inspector Tsukauchi and tell the detainment squads that they can move in." With his suit drenched and his several strands of his waterlogged green-and-gold bangs hanging down over his forehead, the tall, lanky man looked even more like a scarecrow than usual as he ordered them about, and Kendo had to stifle a giggle at the sight. All the same, though, the expression he wore as he gazed down at her was kinder than she was used to seeing, and his mouth curled into the faintest hint of a grin before snapping back into its usual straight line. That was enough for her to know that he approved, even if he was too stubborn to put it into words.

"Of course, Sir!" Once Tetsutetsu set her gently back on the ground, Kyoka was quick to kneel down and start cleaning the wounds on her face, a soft smile on her lips and a hint of color on her cheeks as she applied a bandage to one of the wounds left by Rappa's fists. "He's right, though- it was pretty amazing. I don't know how you did it, Itsuka."

Kendo's breath was still escaping in ragged pants, but she managed to return her friend's smile all the same.

"I guess… I just needed… a running start."
Half an hour later, cleanup from the raid was well underway. The entire harbor was swarming with police, and the warehouse was bathed in flashing blue and red lights from the small fleet of squad cars on scene. Crime scene tape snaked in a haphazard line around the perimeter of the engagement, and off to one side, Earphone Jack, Real Steel, and Lemillion were already debriefing with Tsukachi and his assistants. They weren't taking any risks with transporting the captured Yakuza members; a full riot police squad, armed and armored to the teeth, watched with their weapons trained as Rikiya and the dozen-odd other Eight Precepts members they'd captured were led into the quirk-dampening Iron Maidens. Even Gran Torino, one of Naomasa's most frequent partners since Kendo forced him out of his self-imposed retirement at All Might's behest, had made an appearance, and was conversing in hushed tones with Nighteye at the edge of the water when Itsuka gave the two a friendly wave.

"Long time no see, you old grouch! Good to see Tsukachi's helping you socialize every once in a while."

Torino crossed his arms at her nonchalance, and made a grandfatherly harrumph.

"I see you haven't changed at all, kid. Still the same impertinent little pain in the ass." As usual, the shadow of a grin on his lips gave him away despite his best attempt to hide it, and within a few moments they were laughing and reminiscing about old times.

When the time came to look for an internship at the end of her first year, just a few short months after she inherited One For All, she'd nearly gone back to work with Uwabami a second time, but ended up seeking out the older hero instead on her master's advice. While Toshinori still remained terrified of his former teacher, she'd shocked All Might by rapidly befriending the man, perhaps because of her uncanny immunity to his normal intimidation tactics, or perhaps because she reminded him of Nana Shimura, something he'd only admitted when thoroughly drunk at Yagi's last birthday party. After a summer working together, Gran Torino recommended her in turn to Sir Nighteye; she spent over a year and a half as an intern at his agency before taking on her current position with Miruko, for the sake of diversity of experience. Luckily for Kendo, the transition between the two inspired both her past and present employers to form a hero team together with Lemillion, and she'd gained three mentors for the price of one.

"I'll tell you what, Kendo, I wish I'd been here to see you in action- it's been too long. Remember when we busted that arsonist gang down in Chiba? Was it anything like that?"

"Oh trust me, sensei, this one was even better! It reminded me more of that crazy cult down in Kyushu, when we cornered them in Nagasaki!"

"Ahem." Nighteye cleared his throat pointedly, tapping one foot on the ground even as he struggled to conceal a smile of his own at their antics. "If you two are finished?"

"Sorry, Sir!" Kendo snapped back to attention, and after a quick glance back toward the warehouses, realized with a start that her current boss was nowhere to be found. "Still no sign of him, then?"

Amid the chaos of the fight with Katsukame, it seemed that Rappa had somehow regained consciousness and snuck out of the building. While the others ventured outside to help Kendo, Miruko had done her best to follow the trail he left behind, but weakened by Rikiya's quirk, she wasn't as quick on her feet as usual, and hadn't been successful in her search so far. The police were actively assisting, and had already put out an APB for him for the entire city; Itsuka tried to help as well, of course, but she'd already overexerted herself in her fight against Katsukame, and in the end Jiro and Tetsutetsu persuaded her to let Rumi handle it out of concern for her health.

"Nope, none, and I'm pissed!" Miruko called from a dozen yards away, striding out from behind a
metal container- Kendo jumped at the sound of her voice, and reminded herself for the hundredth
time that Usagiyama's rabbit ears gave her an incredible sense of hearing, with top-notch accuracy
and massive range. "I swear to god, it's like that fucker vanished into thin air!" The tan, silver-haired
hero pounded one fist into her hand in frustration, and shook her head vigorously. Personality-wise,
she was almost the exact opposite of Sir: aggressive, loud, fiercely individualistic, and unabashedly
expressive of her thoughts and opinions, regardless of whether or not they'd been asked for. All the
same, though, their partnership seemed to be going rather smoothly thus far, to Itsuka's surprise.

"That's a possibility we can't discount entirely," said Nighteye, straightening his glasses. "However
rare they are, a warp-type quirk could have been involved."

"Yeah, and there's a chance that you could get struck by lightning at any minute, but that doesn't
mean I'd bet money on it, as entertaining as that would be to see." She couldn't help but smirk at that
last bit, her hands perched on her hips. "Warp quirks are one in a million. My much more credible
theory is that the Precepts have a compound somewhere in the area, and that bastard slipped into a
hidden entrance before I could catch him. We're gonna have to get the seismic team to do an analysis
on this whole district to check for irregularities."

"A few blocks should suffice. The entire district would be a bit excessive, don't you-" Sir was
interrupted by his phone's ringtone, and politely excused himself to one side when he saw whoever
was calling. Gran Torino spoke up once he'd stepped away, one hand stroking his scruffy grey beard
contemplatively.

"The last active villain with a warp-type quirk was Kurogiri, and he's been missing for months, ever
since that explosion in Kobe took out half of the League. I still regret not bringing him in myself. If
the Eight Precepts somehow got their hands on him…"

"Possible," Miruko conceded, "but still unlikely, as far as I'm concerned. I can't imagine that
whoever took out Shigaraki Tomura over in Nabu Ward would leave him alive. He's probably
buried in the same ditch as Muscular and Moonfish." She turned to Itsuka and wrapped an arm
around her intern's shoulder, a smile replacing her scowl. "But forget about that, I heard you put on a
good show while I was gone, kiddo! You keep makin' me proud like this, I might actually…" Rumi
trailed off midsentence, and her ears began to twitch. The color drained from her face, and following
her line of sight, Kendo realized she'd been listening in on her partner's phone call.

"Oh, fuck…"

"What is it?" Itsuka asked, glancing rapidly between the two. "Is something wrong?"

By now Nighteye had noticed his eavesdropper, and held the phone away from his face, one hand
over the speaker. His expression was unreadable, his features completely calm, but when he spoke,
there was enough of a hint of urgency in his voice to chill Kendo's blood.

"Gran Torino, go and get the others. They need to hear this." Then he drew the phone back to his ear
and continued the conversation quietly, though they were all listening this time. "Yes. I will. Thank
you. Stay safe, Shota."

_Shota? Was that Eraserhead?_ Nighteye fell as silent as the grave as he hung up and turned back to
face them, and remained so until Jiro, Tetsutetsu, and Mirio had joined the loose semicircle around
him. Even the usually talkative Miruko, who also seemed to know what was happening, remained
mute.

"What's up?" Real Steel asked good-naturedly, a wide smile on his face. Kyoka and Togata were
similarly upbeat as they strode up on either side of Kendo, but they all drew quiet in short order once
"I… was just on the phone with Aizawa." Sir began haltingly, as if he disliked the very words leaving his mouth, and wished to stop them from doing so if at all possible. "There was an incident about an hour ago in Yokohama. Ryukyu, Gang Orca, and several of their sidekicks and interns engaged a group of villains that included Dabi, Toga Himiko, Kurogiri, and at least three known Eight Precepts lieutenants. There were multiple casualties. Ryuko, Asui, and Nejire sustained serious injuries, and are already being treated at the nearest hospital." He took a deep breath, and dropped his gaze momentarily to the ground before lifting it back up to meet their eyes. "Todoroki Shoto and Uraraka Ochako have both been captured, and were transported away from the scene by Kurogiri. Their whereabouts are currently unknown. The situation is still unfolding as we speak, but Aizawa thought it was best that you hear this before the media pick up the story and run with it. Lemillion, I trust you handle the rest of the cleanup and debriefs here. Jiro, Tetsutetsu, Kendo- you'll be returning to Tokyo immediately with Miruko and myself."

He paused again, longer than before, and pulled off his glasses, though Itsuka barely noticed over the frantic beating of her own heart, and the panicked thoughts racing through her mind. Genuine anguish was plain on Sir's face when he finally spoke.

"I'm so sorry."

The train ride back to the capital passed in near silence. No one wanted to be the first to talk about what had happened, to make it any more real and visceral than it already felt. They would much rather it remain a distant, foggy nightmare, one they'd surely wake from at any moment. But as Kendo, Jiro, and Tetsutetsu stared blankly across the booth at each other, the Kanto countryside whipping by outside the window, no one seemed to be snapping out of it. At Nighteye and Miruko's insistence, they were seated in the dining car- their last meal had been at six in morning- but their plates of food remained cold and untouched. No one felt like eating. A TV in the corner of the car had been blaring news headlines about the two kidnapped young heroes when they boarded, but the staff had immediately turned it off out of respect when Sir asked. They were just thirty minutes away from Tokyo when someone finally spoke.

"It's like it's happening all over again," Jiro suddenly said, tears falling from her eyes and into her miso soup. "With Tokoyami and… and Momo." She tried to wipe them away with the back of her hand, but that only made them spill out harder, and her face flushed red. "Oh god, I'd gone so long without thinking about her, but… now…"

"Hey, hey, I'm right here." Seated next to the shorter girl, Kendo wrapped Kyoka up in her arms and let her cry into her shoulder, stroking her hair softly. Tetsutetsu laid a comforting hand on her arm from across the table. "We're both right here, Kyoka. We've got you. Let it out."

"I c-can't lose someone like that again," she finally choked out through the tears. "Not Ochako, not Shoto, not either of you! God, I'm sorry, I'm so fucking weak. I-I'm not strong like you, Itsuka, I try and I try but I never will be!"

"Bullshit," Kendo countered, grabbing hold of the other girl's face with both hands and using her thumbs to wipe away Jiro's tears herself. "That's not true, and you know it's not. We all do, right, Tetsu?"

"You're one of the strongest freaking people I know," Real Steel growled protectively, locking eyes with his distraught classmate. "You've done so much and come so far, and I've always been jealous of how cool you are, it's like you don't even have to try!"
"Cool? Are you kidding me?" She jabbed a finger toward the streaks of eyeliner running down her cheeks, and shook her head. "I'm a mess, Tetsu! Heroes don't cry!"

"That's a load of crap," he shot back, and the sudden change in his tone momentarily silenced her sobs. Once he was sure he had her attention, he leaned forward, wrapped his meaty fist around her dainty one, and gave her a gentle smile. "I mean, who made that a rule? I think crying when you need to is one of the manliest- I mean, uh, bravest things that anyone can do, hero or not."

As much as she tried, Jiro couldn't stifle a chuckle at that last part, and forced a shaky smile onto her face.

"You really think so?"

"I know so. Just like I know we're gonna find Ochako and Shoto. We're gonna get them both back, I promise."

Rather than continuing to cheer her up, though, his words had the exact opposite effect. Kyoka's smile withered just as quickly as it had blossomed, and tears welled up anew in her already puffy eyes.

"Whoa, whoa, what is it?" Exchanging a confused glance with Testsutetsu, Kendo pulled Jiro back into her arms, an embrace the other girl returned even more tightly this time.

"T-that's the same exact thing we said about Momo, and Fumikage, and Monoma!"

The last name sent a jolt of white-hot pain through Itsuka's heart, an ache from an old wound that had long since scarred over. Her eyes fell down to the table. She opened her mouth to try and say something, but the words wouldn't come out. Even Testsutetsu seemed at a loss for words.

"Kyoka… I…"

"Don't you remember, how we all said we'd never stop searching, how we wouldn't rest until we found them? The speech that All Might gave to the school? We were all so confident, but in the end, no one ever came out and owned up to the fact that it was over, we just accepted that they were gone! I've never been able to give up on Momo. I still see her sometimes. It's always just a flash of a black ponytail in a crowd, or a voice that sounds like hers on a busy street, but every time, I still stop and look. Am I crazy?! I just want to be able to forget! Sometimes I wish she was dead, that I'd seen her die. Then at least we could've had a funeral! I never even got to say goodbye!" Jiro paused to take in a ragged breath, and Kendo rubbed her hand back and forth across the girl's back, more cradling her than hugging her at this point. By now her jacket's shoulder was entirely soaked with Kyoka's tears, but she didn't mind.

"And now… god, what now? The last thing I said to Ochako at the bar last night was something stupid about her being a lightweight. I don't think I even talked to Shoto besides saying hi! Why does this keep happening?! I can't lose two more friends like this. Please promise me it'll be different this time, Itsuka. Please."

A light footfall followed sounded behind them, and when Kendo glanced back to its source, Nighteye was standing over them, his face full of surprise and concern. Judging by the slips of paper in his hand, he'd come up from the passenger car to give them their luggage tags before they pulled into the station, but at the sight of his intern in tears, they'd swiftly been forgotten. He and Itsuka made eye contact, and without a single word, her expression conveyed everything he needed to know. With her head still buried in Kendo's clothes, Jiro couldn't see him, and remained oblivious as he sat down next to Testsutetsu, watching the back of her head intently.
"I promise," Kendo continued after exchanging a nod with Sir. "I promise on my life that things will be different. We've learned from our mistakes, from our past. And I'm not the only one who can make that promise to you, Kyoka."

After a moment of sniffling which announced that her tears had halted again, Jiro lifted up her head hesitantly, but immediately recoiled in horror when she saw Nighteye and realized her mentor had witnessed her breakdown.

"S-Sir! I'm so sorry, I didn't know you were here! I was just feeling… after hearing about the kidnappings… I mean, it's not that I…"

"There's no need to be embarrassed." With a few quiet words, he cut off her nervous rambling, then stood and gestured for the other two students to leave. "Go and see Miruko, she needs to brief you on the conference we'll be attending when we get back. I'll stay here and speak with Jiro."

"She's not in trouble, is she?" Tetsutetsu asked warily as he and Kendo rose and stepped out into the center of the car.

Nighteye raised a questioning eyebrow as he sat back down, and shook his head calmly.

"No, of course not. I have a state license for post-traumatic stress counseling."

"O-oh, yeah. That makes sense."

Kendo nearly delivered a chop across his neck on account of the sheer stupidity of his question, but managed to restrain herself until they were safely out of the dining car and approaching their seats. When they did finally reach them, Miruko was fast asleep, drooling on her neck pillow. Knowing full well that waking her would end in their violent and untimely deaths, they sat down, joined hands, and leaned against each other in melancholy silence until they finally pulled into Tokyo Station.

When they arrived after twenty minutes of traffic, the hospital's waiting room was already full to bursting with press. A dozen mics were shoved into Kendo's face the moment she stepped inside, and the reporters' desperate pleas for a soundbite blurred into a series of barely discernible cries.

"Battle Fist, Miruko, do you have any comment on the disappearances?!"

"How close were you with Todoroki and Uraraka?! Did they have a history of being reckless in combat?!"

"Is a rescue operation going to be mounted?! Will Endeavor be involved?!"

"How will U.A. respond to this latest breach in security?! Do you still feel safe in your own internship?!!"

"Give her some space!" Tetsutetsu shouted, pushing one particularly aggressive paparazzo out of their path to the elevators. Moments later Jiro did the same on Itsuka's other side, and muttered something under her breath about deafening every last one of them.

As much as Kendo wanted to imitate the two, though, to swell up her hands and sweep the entire crowd of press back outside, she knew that she couldn't. I have a responsibility as the Symbol of Peace, one that I can never ignore. And so, when she spotted a reporter for her favorite evening news show, she walked straight towards the woman, graciously took the mic she was offering, and began to speak.
"Uravity and Coldflame are two of the smartest and most highly skilled heroes-in-training that I've had the honor to know during my time at U.A., and I can assure every one of you that their competence is not in question. They are both dear friends of mine, and my heartfelt condolences go out to their families." The room had fallen almost entirely silent, and Itsuka struggled not to blush under the gaze of thirty cameras. She wasn't nearly as much of a natural in interviews as her mentor, but she was learning. Just like All Might always says, pretend you're talking to a single person. Her eyes tried to drift out across the entirety of the crowd for a moment, but she forced them to focus on a single camera.

"I'm not aware of all the details of the incident right now, and I can't speak for the hero community, but I can promise you this. There will be a rescue operation, and we will get them back." She was about to turn away and end things there, but the woman persisted.

"How much responsibility does U.A. bear for this massive lapse in its students' safety?"

"Every one of us understands before we even apply for internships exactly what's at stake when we choose to participate in them. If we want to experience professional hero work firsthand, we have to experience all of it, and that includes the danger of injury, capture, or death. Coldflame and Uravity both knew that, and they still chose to risk everything regardless. I just don't understand why everyone's always so eager to try and pin blame on our own community after something like this happens, when the only ones who deserve that blame are the villains themselves." Even if her expression didn't show it, Itsuka was beginning to get angry now, and very nearly let a 'fucking' slip out midway through her last sentence. I'm not Bakugo, I need to stay civil. But then Miruko's reassuring hand was on her shoulder, and her boiling frustration subsided, transformed into pure passion and charisma.

"We have to remember first and foremost as a nation of heroes that we can't fight villains if we're also fighting each other! That's exactly what they want us to do. So to the criminals who kidnapped my friends, I have only one thing to say." She let her hand grow to three times its normal size, and pointed one massive finger straight at the camera. "If you think you can run, you're wrong. If you think you can keep my friends away from me, you're wrong. And if you think you've broken our spirit, you're wrong. You're going to regret the day you thought you could mess with U.A."

Surrounded on all four sides by Real Steel, Earphone Jack, Nighteye, and Miruko, who for a few brief moments felt more like her bodyguards than her mentors and peers, she handed back the mic, then pushed through the crowd's renewed chorus of shouts and flashing cameras and into the elevators, letting out a deep sigh of relief once the doors had closed.

"Does it get any easier?" She resignedly asked no one in particular.

"Ah, you get used to it!" Rumi gave her a friendly shoulder punch, and ruffled her auburn hair. "And if they get too bad, you can just do what I do, and kick the fuckin' cameras out of their grubby little hands. Well, it'd be punching for you, I guess."

"Please don't do that." Nighteye pleaded as the doors opened, and they stepped out into the tenth floor hallway, much less rowdy by comparison.

There was already a small gathering of figures outside Tsuyu's room when they reached it at the end of the corridor: Her parents and siblings were conversing quietly with a group of U.A. staff including Aizawa, Midnight, and Snipe, her second-year homeroom teacher. A familiar, skeletal figure was towering above them, dressed in one of his gaudy striped suits; his back was to her, his mane of messy blond hair bobbing up and down as he spoke, and Kendo had to restrain herself from calling out his name and breaking into a run. Thankfully, the group noticed the newcomers soon enough, and All Might was the first to start toward her.
"Young Kendo!"

She'd reached him in just a few swift strides by the time the words left his mouth, and the two shared a brief, tight hug that communicated more than words ever could before Itsuka turned to face the others.

"How is she?"

"Can we see her?" Jiro added frantically, her eyes wide.

Aizawa exchanged a solemn glance with Asui's parents, then stepped forward to speak on their behalf.

"She's already in surgery- they're operating on her now. There's a decent chance that they'll be able to reattach her tongue, but whether she'll ever be able to use it the same way is a different question. In a best case scenario, it'll take months of physical therapy."

"My poor baby girl," Tsu's mother whimpered, wiping tears from her eyes. Jiro, who knew the Asui family best, embraced the woman, whispering comfortingly in her ear, and the two held each other for some time as Tetsutetsu did his best to distract Samidare and Satsuki with jokes and silly faces, finding only middling success. Miruko and Midnight quickly struck up a conversation, as did Nighteye and Snipe; she picked up a few stray words from the latter two about an upcoming meeting to discuss rescue plans.

Kendo, meanwhile, turned back to All Might, whose gaunt face seemed even more gloomy than usual.

"I should've been there." Itsuka hated the sentence the moment she said it, because it wasn't necessarily true. She had her own responsibilities to fulfill, her own battles to fight. She wasn't her classmates' babysitter- she couldn't save everyone, everywhere, every time. She'd been a hundred miles away when it happened. But even though it wasn't true, she desperately wanted it to be.

"I know how you feel," Toshinori responded quietly, shaking his head. Usually, she reflected, when someone says, 'I know how you feel', it's a lie, just a weak attempt at mimicking real empathy. But when they came from All Might, she was satisfied with those few brief words, because he did know, intimately and truly.

"I hope the press didn't bother you too much." He offered next, smiling weakly. They began to walk down the hall together, around the corner and away from the others.

"Don't worry, nothing you didn't teach me how to handle. I tried to give them some good quotes to chew on."

"I look forward to hearing them. You're better in front of a camera than you give yourself credit for. Maybe not as much of a natural as me..." He chuckled to himself at that, and weathered a soft chop on the neck from Kendo as they continued down the next hall. "But that can be forgiven. Spending time in America does wonders for getting rid of your stage fright- you should try it too! I can show you all around Los Angeles and New York, maybe if you have time after graduation."

"I can't copy you too much," she replied with a smirk. "I loved San Francisco and Denver when I went as a kid to visit relatives, but that was only a week. Maybe I can try some more northern cities, or Canada for a change."

"Hmm, I wouldn't mind that." He mused, one hand on his chin. "I've always loved maple syrup. And I wonder if they let you pet the moose, like the deer at Nara."
"Torontooo smash!" She cried with an air of mock seriousness, miming a blow to Yagi's chest. Their laughter died a swift death, though, when a group of doctors in surgery scrubs rushed past them, carrying saline and bloodied scalpels, and the mood grew somber again.

For a moment she was ashamed that she'd dared to laugh and joke at a time like this, but as always, All Might knew exactly what to say; his face suddenly dead serious, he stood up as straight as a pole and held a finger to the bridge of his nose to push back a pair of imaginary glasses.

"The world always needs more smiles and laughter, Battle Fist." Fully committed to the impression, Toshinori even keyed his voice up to Sir's register, and perfectly imitated his pattern of speech. "But don't tell me that, I'm too busy brooding and pretending I don't care about anyone."

Kendo had to hold a hand to her mouth to keep herself from sniggering, and only partially succeeded. Before she could start clapping, though, someone else did, and they both nearly jumped out of their skin when they whipped around to find Nighteye standing behind them.

"Not half bad," he said, with the bare hint of a grin on his lips. Then he pointed a questioning finger to the door immediately to their right. "You two came down this way to visit Nejire, yes?"

"Of course," replied Kendo, not missing a beat. He wasn't wrong- she had actually been intending to find Hado's room next, until All Might's antics distracted her. She'd grown relatively close to the Big Three's only female member after losing to her during the Cultural Festival Beauty Pageant in her first year, and had kept in regular contact with her after she graduated. The three of them stepped inside together, and found the still-bedridden Nejire holding hands with Amajiki Tamaki as the two of them facetime Mirio on a laptop. Suneater had clearly come straight from one of his patrols with Fatgum and Red Riot- he was still in his hero costume, with a few minor scrapes of his own on his hood and cape. Hado's face was heavily bandaged to the point that only her eyes, nose, and mouth were fully visible, but that didn't stop her from turning and greeting them with a smile.

"Hey guys, look who's here! Itsuka, it's so good to see you, it's been too long!"

Something was off, though, and they all knew it; her words didn't have the same carefree, joyful tone as usual, her eyes didn't light up with the same childlike glee at every syllable. After she returned the greeting, Kendo briefly made eye contact with Amajiki, whose pained expression made the situation clear- they were trying their best to distract her. Hado's arms were bruised and bandaged as well, with burn gauze on the palms of her hands, so Tamaki turned the laptop to face the door for her, and Togata's excited voice burst through the speakers.

"Whoa, Sir, Kendo, is that you?! Long time no see, huh?! And All Might too! Don't worry, Sir, I'm not slacking off on the job- I already finished the incident reports and helped Tsukauchi file everything. Say hi to All Might, Naomasa!" Mirio turned his phone camera to face the detective, who waved awkwardly for a few moments before another voice became audible off-frame.

"Did you say Toshinori's there? Lemme see that damned thing." Suddenly the camera was jerked downward, and Gran Torino's grizzled face filled the frame. "You watch yourself now, Yagi. I don't like the way things are headed. Now that it's confirmed that Kurogiri is back in play, and that the Osaka Group is working with the Yakuza, things are about to get messy. So you kids best stop messing around and start taking this seriously. A lot more than just two lives could be at stake."

"Yes, of course." All Might replied sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck. "We'll be doing everything we can, master, I promise. There's going to be a meeting downtown this evening…"

"I know, I'm going to be there. Take care, Toshinori. And you too, kid." Torino handed the phone back to Mirio before Kendo could reply, but the previously jovial mood was beyond even
Lemillion's power to save.

"Well, uh… I've probably gotta go finish up some things at the police station here in Niigata before I head back to Tokyo. You guys take care now, ok? Stay strong. I'm here for all of you, and I'll be there in person soon." Once everyone had said goodbye, he gave then one last friendly smile before hanging up, and the atmosphere in the room seemed to immediately grow colder from his absence.

"Are you holding up alright, Nejire?" Kendo asked in an attempt to fill the void. There was no use trying to skirt around things anymore. "He's not the only one who's here for you, we all are."

"I'll be… ok." She said, though the words sounded forced. "Please, don't worry about me."

"But we are worried about you!" Amajiki protested, his voice cracking midsentence. "We know you're strong, Nejire, but you don't have to deal with this by yourself!"

"There are people who have it way worse off than me!" She countered fiercely. "Ryukyu's in surgery right now having her skin grafted back on where Dabi burned it off! Uraraka and Todoroki were abducted! Toga stabbed Shoto before she took him, did you know that?! Because I saw it! Put her knife in his back half a dozen times, I don't even know if he survived, and that was after she took my blood! And… and…" Angry tears welled in her eyes, and she forced them shut. "And it's all my fault, because I wasn't fucking strong enough!"

That silenced the room for a long moment. It was the first time Kendo had ever heard Hado even come close to swearing; judging from the shocked look on Tamaki's face, it was a first for him too.

"That's not true." All Might said quietly. "And you know it isn't. It's possible to make no mistakes and still fail, Young Nejire. That's not weakness, that's life. I read the police reports, reviewed every line of the witness testimony. You did everything you possibly could and more. You went so far beyond the limits of your quirk that the doctors are still struggling to explain exactly how your body handled that much energy in that little time without falling apart. By all previous measurements, you should be dead right now. But you're not, and do you know what that means?"

Hado opened her tear-filled eyes and shook her head almost imperceptibly.

"It means you have a second chance to save the people you couldn't. If they could talk to you right now, what think Ryukyu, Uravity, and Coldflame would want? For you to beat yourself up over something you couldn't change, or for you to be strong and push forward?"

The answer clear, she slowly nodded her head, trembling.

"Y-you're right, I'm sorry. I'm so stupid."

Before he could correct her, the door opened again, and Yuyu Haya burst in, red-faced and clearly exhausted, along with two other girls Itsuka recognized as Hado's former classmates.

"I came as soon as I heard," Yuyu panted, rushing immediately to the bedside. "I was in Nagano, I'm so sorry I couldn't be here sooner." Kendo had barely ever spoken to Haya, but she did know that the short-haired girl was Nejire's best friend, and All Might quickly recognized the fact as well.

"Let's give them some space," he whispered in her ear, and with a nod to Sir their trio retreated back outside and gently closed the door.

"Is… now not a good time?" A quiet voice piped up behind them; Itsuka turned around to find Gang Orca standing in the middle of the hallway, his red eyes lowered to the ground. Everything about his posture and tone conveyed abject shame and remorse. "I… I thought I should come see her. And all
of the rest of them, of course. To apologize."

All Might opened his mouth to speak, but Gang Orca cut him off with a wave of his webbed black hand.

"I've heard your speeches before, Toshinori. Don't tell me that I did everything I could do, that it's not my fault. The students are blameless, but me? I was responsible for him, for all of them! They were kidnapped on my watch! I could've done more, could've been there sooner, could've fought harder, could've stayed with Todoroki instead of letting him fight Dabi on his own. I could've jumped down into that godforsaken bunker instead of letting Uraraka do it for me like some kind of damn coward. It should've been me they took. I wish it had been."

"Kugo…" Using Gang Orca's first name, Yagi laid a hand on the man's shoulder, but he was interrupted by the distant sound of shouting around the corner.

"Sir, please, try not to make so much noise, there are patients sleeping!"

"Where is he?! I know he's here, my sidekicks saw him walk in!"

"Sir, if you can't calm down, I'm going to have to ask you to leave!"

They all recognized the voice in a heartbeat, and Nighteye cleared his throat pointedly.

"Gang Orca, perhaps it would be wisest to move you somewhere more-"

"SAKAMATA!"

The thought came too late, though. Endeavor had already rounded the corner, trailed by a helpless nurse and doctor doing their best to keep their distance as he continued forward, heedless of their pleas. His flames were smoldering with magnified size and intensity, and his face was a mask of pure rage.

"There you are, you piece of filth!"

All Might and Nighteye immediately stepped between the two men, but Kugo waved them aside and extended one hand toward the furious hero.

"Endeavor, I'm so sorry. I was going to come to you in person next, I-"

"Were you now?! I don't believe you!" Enji was still advancing with every word, his footfalls singing the floor as he walked.

"Endeavor!" Nighteye snapped, pushing back his glasses and putting himself in front of Gang Orca again. "Control yourself!"

"I trusted you, Sakamata, I trusted you with my son! Where is he?! WHERE IS SHOTO?!"

"Forgive me, please. It was my fault." Gang Orca fell to his knees and bowed his head low, but when Endeavor still didn't stop, and flames began to dance around his right fist, Kendo decided that she'd seen enough.

"You know what you need, Endeavor?" She stepped past All Might, swelled up one hand until it was larger than her, and picked up the flaming hero like a doll, holding him in the air. "A time-out, until you learn to behave."

After a moment of shock, the anger returned to his face, and he began to struggle in her grip.
"Let me down. Now."

"Not a chance. Unless you promise to play nice, that is."

"Play nice?! Is playing nice going to bring me my son back?!" The flames on his head roared with sudden intensity, and Itsuka winced as her palm began to rapidly heat up; it felt like she was gripping a hot stove. *Okay, that's not good. One For All does a lot of things, but it doesn't make me flame retardant.*

Just when Kendo was about to drop him instinctively out of pain, though, all the fire on Endeavor's body went out at once, and his eyes widened in disbelief.

"Enji." His bands of binding cloth writhing around his neck and his eyes glowing with his quirk's dull red light, Eraserhead's voice was full of disgust as he walked toward the group with Midnight at his side. "Would you care to explain what the hell you think you're doing?"

All Might motioned for Itsuka to let him go, and it took a good deal of willpower to set him down gently when she would much rather have tossed him across half the length of the corridor. He sank to one knee the moment he touched the ground, his hands balled into fists.

"I don't have to explain myself… to you…"

"Get up." Nighteye placed a hand on Enji's shoulder and stared into his rage-filled eyes. "Get up and walk away. Before we decide to press charges."

The next few moments passed so quickly that Kendo could hardly process them. By the time she realized that Sir had activated his quirk, Endeavor was already on his feet and swinging, making wild, vicious arcs with his fists that Nighteye dodged easily with Foresight, ducking and weaving his lanky body out of the path of each strike. Then All Might, blood spurting from his mouth as he forced himself back into his muscle form, landed a hard blow on Enji's back, and sent him sprawling to the ground. His body trembling with rage, he tried to push himself back to his feet, but Midnight rushed forward and tore one of her sleeves, and within moments he had fallen still and silent in the throes of sleep.

More footfalls echoed down the hallway, and a group of hospital orderlies and police officers burst around the corner.

"What's going on here?!!" One officer asked, confusion clear on his face. "We heard there was a disturbance!"

"Cuff him." Aizawa flashed his pro hero badge, and nodded toward Endeavor's unconscious body. "He's under arrest, on my authority."

Chapter End Notes

Hope you all enjoyed, and as always, I'd love to hear your thoughts in the comments! I meant to get to Todoroki's POV this chapter, but once I started writing Kendo, I realized that I had a lot more to tell for her than I anticipated. What did you think of everyone's reaction to Todoroki and Uraraka's abduction? I tried to focus on some of the realistic emotional fallout that would take place, and there's more to come next time on the practical, hero community side. Also, I hope the All Might/Kendo relationship is good
so far, this chapter was my first chance to write about them actually being master and student. And let me know what you thought of her fighting technique! Plus, Tetsutetsu! Mirio! Nighteye! (Aka three of my favorite characters, this chapter was a blast to write). Next time, one final setup chapter before the big Kill Hawks operation is a go. I think it'll be a mix between hero and villain POVs, and it should most likely be out by Christmas, New Year's Eve at the latest. See you soon!
"Not good enough. You'll have to be quicker than that."

Refusing to respond to Aizawa's taunt with anything more than a grunt of frustration, Midoriya wiped the sheen of sweat from his brow with one hand, wrapped the cloth bandages around his knuckles tighter, and charged in for another attack; first a feint to the left, then an uppercut from the bottom. The older man was still nimble enough to dodge, but only barely, and the effort clearly threw him off balance. When he tried to aim a kick at Midoriya's side, it was all too easy for Izuku to grab hold of his opponent's leg with both arms and flip him onto the hard wooden floor.

Even downed, though, Eraser didn't give up; when Izuku lunged downward to restrain him, he swung one foot in an arc that swept Midoriya off his feet as well; he only barely caught himself mid-fall, just in time to take a fist to the stomach that sent him stumbling back and gasping for breath.

"Bastard," Izuku wheezed as he dodged the pro hero's next swipe and launched into a new assault of his own, planting his feet solidly on the floor and winding into a haymaker.

"Oh-ho, so he finally speaks. And here I thought he was mute." Aizawa allowed himself a smirk as he sidestepped Midoriya's punch and caught him with a lightning-fast jab to the side; the smile died when Midoriya seized his left wrist before he could withdraw it, then pulled him into a half-nelson and hooked one ankle around his shin in the same fraction of a second.

Swearing viciously, Eraser pulled away with all his might and tried to strike the younger man's head with his right hand, but he was a beat too slow- in one fluid motion, Midoriya maneuvered behind him, forced him to his knees, twisted his restrained arm into a position where it could be dislocated with ease, and wrapped his other arm around the man's neck.

"I win again," he whispered in Aizawa's ear, a crooked smile on his face. "That makes the record 3-1 in my favor today."

"Are you sure?" Eraser's voice crooned, its tone drastically different now. "I think you're jumping to conclusions."

Confused, Midoriya glanced down, then sighed in acknowledgement of the switchblade his opponent had pressed against his torso with his free hand, positioned just precisely enough in a backhand grip that a single slash could open his entire stomach.

"Very impressive, as always, but we agreed on the no weapons rule, darling."

"Did we? I don't remember that at all." The excess flesh from her transformation melting away, Toga twisted her head around and grinned at him, her gold eyes shining through again from beneath the obscuring locks of Aizawa's ugly black mop. She was still wearing the same dull grey t-shirt and black exercise shorts that 'Eraser' had been, and her blonde hair was tied up in her usual style. "Fighting with just fists is so boring, babe, where's the fun in sparring if you can't add a little variety?"

"Besides minimizing accidental injuries, restricting myself this way during most of my training forces me to rely first and foremost on my own body, not artificial tools."
Content with at least a moral if not a strategic victory as well, Izuku released Himiko, though she didn't move the knife from his stomach even as she turned around to face him, and her newly freed hand began to snake slowly around his back.

"That last move really got my blood flowing, babe. The way you move is electrifying." She whispered the last word into his ear, dragging out the syllables so provocatively that color began to creep onto his normally pale face involuntarily. They exchanged a brief kiss that was quickly followed by a much longer and more drawn out one, and amid the ecstasy he barely noticed her pressing the knife into his skin until it was already drawing blood; she pulled away and shuddered in pleasure at the sight, maneuvering until she was sitting squarely on his lap, straddling his hips. He was forced to catch her hand and pull it gently away before she dragged the blade any farther.

"Easy now, darling. You've already used your cut for this week."

She pouted, but dropped the switchblade all the time, watching it forlornly as it clattered to the dojo's wooden floor. Over the course of their two-year relationship, her fascination with his blood had led them to adopt numerous unorthodox tactics to keep his chances of serious injury at a minimum. Izuku provided her with one vial of his blood a week with which to do whatever she wished. Whenever Toga was feeling particularly violent, she often made use of Twice's clones, but once a week, she was permitted to make a single cut on her lover's real body. Several of them became visible as Midoriya lifted up his now-bloodstained white undershirt to inspect the wound, thin, a series of thin, shallow scars on his waist and abs, barely visible from a distance.

"Have I been bad?" Himiko purred, running one hand across his muscles as she grabbed onto a tuft of green hair from behind with the other. Before he could respond, she had grabbed the hem of his shirt and pulled it the rest of the way up; as she pressed her body against his, he became acutely aware that she was wearing no bra beneath her own t-shirt, and breathed a sigh of surprise.

"Here? Now? We're both so sweaty, I'll shower first…"

"That won't be necessary." With a swift jerk and push, she had him pinned against the floor. "I like you like this. Rough."

Dredging back into the distant past, Izuku could still remember a time when her predatory eyes and twisted grin would have unnerved him, but by now, he was easily able to match, if not outdo her.

"Well then, if that's the way you'd like it, my dear." Suddenly reciprocating her embrace, he twisted his center of mass, knocked her knees from beneath her, and flipped her cleanly onto her own back, reversing the pin. "But be careful what you ask for."

"Oh shut up, babe, you know that you never have to be… careful… with me…" She trailed off as he began to plant a series of deep kisses on her neck, but just as he finally stripped her of her shirt, the door creaked open, and footsteps became audible at the other end of the dojo, rapidly advancing and then suddenly halting.

"Oh, whoops. That time of day again, huh?"

A glance over his shoulder confirmed that the voice belong to Hatsume; this was hardly her first time witnessing them like this, so she was entirely unfazed. Behind her, Yaoyorozu had one hand over her mouth and was blushing slightly, and Dabi simply looked bored. The only one who seemed to be genuinely alarmed was Gentle, who was doing his best to avert his eyes, along with issuing a strong of hasty apologies.

"Forgive me, young Midoriya, we had no idea that you were occupied with such… important
matters! I never meant to pry into your personal life, I can come back later!"

"Oh, it's no fault of yours." Izuku lifted his head up and made eye contact with Tobita, never once breaking it as he continued to disrobe Himiko in plain sight of the group. "I seem to have lost track of time. Is it noon already?"

"It is," replied Momo. "But I can take over for you in the scheduled strategy meeting if you're otherwise preoccupied, sir."

"Oh, he's sure as hell preoccupied," sniggered Mei. "Jeez, sir, at least Hitoshi and I can keep it in our pants until after hours."

As he tossed Toga's shorts aside, Midoriya considered taking Yaoyorozu up on her offer, but only for a moment. It was vital for him to be present at every meeting, now more than ever, with the start of the operation to kill Hawks just days away.

"No, there's no need for that, though I appreciate your willingness. We'll only be a few minutes. Wait in the conference room, if you'd all be so kind."

"Of course, sir." Momo gave him a curt bow before leading the group back out into the hallway, and Izuku was forced to gasp for breath as Himiko eagerly resumed where they'd left off before the door even closed.

Despite his best intentions, it was around twenty minutes before Midoriya finally emerged from the shower, swiftly dressed, and strode back out into the heart of the Osaka headquarters. They were a pleasing blend between modern and traditional; the spacious dojo had always been one of his favorite places to hone his combat skills, and the panoramic waterfront view of the harbor visible from the massive pane-glass windows in the penthouse's converted dining-conference room was admittedly impressive. Toga, of course, remained at his side- she and her quirk were a key component of the plan, after all. Gentle blushed furiously at the sight of her when they walked in, but the rest looked up from their small talk and gave him their attention without the faintest sign of embarrassment.

"Shall we begin, then, if you're all ready?"

"Of course, I'll start the conference call." Yaoyorozu pressed a few buttons on her cellphone, and the holographic display on the speaker at the center of the table lit up with two different numbers- one for Overhaul in his Tokyo stronghold, and the other for Shinso and Monoma in Nagoya.

"Hairo and Saiki here."

"Aren here. You better have a damn good reason for starting this shit late, kid, I've got appointments to keep."

"I had to take care of an urgent situation- that's all you need to know. Is our call secure, Yumeko?"

Hatsume shot him a thumbs up, though her eyes remained on the endless streams of data flashing across her glass visor and gauntlet panel.

"Yup, we're beyond secure, totally encrypted. The new program La Brava shared with us is working perfectly, we can go ahead and drop the codenames."

"I knew she wouldn't disappoint!" Gentle cried triumphantly, practically beaming with pride. "In all the years I've worked with her, she's never once let our online activity be traced by the authorities!"
"Excellent. First things first, then. Overhaul, how are things holding up with the Precepts after the raid in Niigata last week?"

"The weapons were a bust from the beginning. Russians got intercepted off Hokkaido, so that was never gonna work out, but we got enough a few days later down in Chiba to offset it. The loss of Rikiya and Tabe is a setback, but thanks to Kurogiri, we were able to get Rappa out unharmed- he was always the most stable asset of the three in the long term. We'll still be ready on schedule for our part in the plan, my men have been looking over the blueprints nonstop for the past 48 hours. When do we rendezvous with your people?"

"You'll meet with Dabi, Mustard, and Dark Shadow tomorrow evening at our Yokohama headquarters. Dabi, do you have any further questions about your role for now?"

"Nah, it's all pretty crystal, boss. La Pipsqueak gives me one of her cameras, I film the murder and explosions, I participate in the murder and explosions, I use her tech to livestream it all to the web. Kinda hard to fuck up."

Across the table, Gentle visibly bristled at Aiba being referred to as 'La Pipsqueak', but remained silent. It seems his manners are too perfect to allow him the luxury of interrupting a conversation, Izuku noted dryly. Good for you, Danjuro.

"Excellent. Mustard, you?"

"My task is clear, sir. They won't stand a chance." The young villain was currently at Nagoya with Hitoshi and Neito, and spoke up on their line when addressed.

"And I trust their exit will be well-secured, Hatsume?"

"You bet it will be. Kurogiri's over in the workshop right now with La Brava, they're finishing the last touches on my newest baby. It'll increase the range, accuracy, and speed of his portal generation drastically when location-paired with specially-tuned signal amplifiers that I'll be handing out to everyone in the operation. He'll be able to pull each team out of hell itself."

"Perfection. I do so dearly enjoy seeing you put your talents to use. Shinso, Monoma, is everything clear on your end?"

"We did have one or two questions," said Hitoshi. "First of all, what's the contingency if they manage to get hold of one or both of the hostages? Do we kill them rather than let the heroes make a recovery?"

"Don't worry, I've got ya covered, babe. They'll pay a little visit to studio later tonight- they're both gonna be fitted with all sorts of fun babies that I can activate remotely at any time if they do somehow get rescued. In fact, Midoriya and I have been discussing whether or not we should let them take one back, just to watch the chaos."

"Devilishly clever, as usual!" Monoma proclaimed. "I assure you, we'll both be looking forward to seeing your designs- I hope they're suitably creative. The only other thing were wondering is if there are any priority targets other than Hawks. As you know, we were developing an anti-Endeavor contingency as well, but thanks to his own hubris, his involvement seems unlikely. If Hawks' sidekicks and partners do arrive on scene, is there anyone else we should prioritize?"

"I do regret this mess with Endeavor; dealing with him and Hawks in the same stroke would have been wonderfully satisfying. You have my notes on Yoaarsi, but I sorely doubt that anyone besides him will be able to arrive in time. Of course, you know the new protocol for dealing with top ten
heroes, but Hawks is still priority one, naturally. His public punishment comes first."

"Of course. I must admit, I'm trembling with excitement to finally see this through, Midoriya. I can picture the look on his face now!" Neito's trademark lust for the humiliation of his rivals set a smile to Izuku's face as he turned his gaze back to Danjuro.

"Finally, Gentle, something I forgot to ask you yesterday- is the algorithm La Brava used two years ago to slip past the U.A. security system still valid now?"

"Hm, well…" Tobita stroked his moustache and frowned. "I'm not the best one to ask about this between the two of us- I'm sure she can clarify more for you later. But if I understand her parlance correctly, then the base structure and framework of her code will still be useful, but the specifics will need to be updated to handle their newest firewalls. She's been monitoring their system constantly since you first informed us of that aspect of the plan, though, so rest assured that you'll be well-equipped."

"I'd expect nothing less. Now, if everyone's ready, let's run through each phase again, step by step. You'll all be receiving an updated personnel and target list from Yaoyorozu in a matter of moments, send conformation once you have it."

Two hours later, as the meeting finally adjourned and the participants began to file out, Midoriya was about to retire to the kitchen with Toga for a much-needed meal when Hatsume tapped him on the shoulder.

"Yo, Izuku, you got a sec? Got something that might need your attention." The other founders were some of the few people he let call him by his first name, and even then, only in private. They knew that he preferred Midoriya for the sake of professionalism, but he'd always had too much of a soft spot for Hatsume, his first friend at U.A., to scold her for it.

"That depends, I suppose. What is it?"

"One of the prisoners, Uraraka. She's been asking to speak to you for the past day. I dismissed it as some weak attempt at bargaining at first, but she's been pretty insistent."

"Has she been, now? Interesting." After a moment's consideration, he squeezed Himiko's hand and gave her a conciliatory glance. "Darling, would you wait for me? This shouldn't take long."

"Hmm, alright. But if you take too long, I'm just gonna order some sushi or wings, I'm starving." She leaned in closer, gave him a peck on the cheek, and said the rest with a wide smile and a happy lilt to her voice.

"I can't pretend I like you talking to other girls, though, baby. If she does or says anything that I don't like, I'm gonna carve her into so many pieces that they won't even be able to tell what's what."

"You know I can't let you do that…" Izuku ran a hand gently through her hair and offered her a sympathetic frown. "She's an important part of the plan, unfortunately. But if she annoys me too much, I'll have Twice make a clone of her for you to play with. Deal?"

"Deal."

Since the early days when they placed their trust in simple handcuffs to hold Yaoyorozu and
Tokoyami, the group's methods for holding captives had advanced significantly, needless to say. In a brightly lit, almost entirely bare chamber of the Osaka headquarters, Uraraka Ochako was free to move around her cell, behind the confines of a tungsten reinforced, triple-plated door, which could also vacuum seal the room and vent it of air at any time. It could only be opened from the outside, and only then after retinal, fingerprint, and voice scans from one of the four founding members or a designated proxy given clearance by one of the founders. A guard stood outside at all times; this shift, it was Spinner.

"Yo, boss, thank god you're finally here, this chick's been driving me crazy asking for you every time I bring her food and water. You want me to go ahead and restrain her?"

"If you'd be so kind."

Iguchi nodded and leaned down to scan his retina and begin the lengthy process of unlocking the cell door; once that was finally done a minute later, he slipped in and closed it behind him. A nearby monitor allowed Midoriya to watch as he drew the blade at his hip and forced Ochako to step back to the far end of the room, where he attached the quirk-suppressing metal shackles on her ankles and wrists to four powerful magnets on the wall, until she was splayed in an x-position up against it.

When the young heroine was securely fettered, Spinner turned to the camera and gave him a wave, signaling Izuku to begin unlocking the door in turn. *It's a tiresome process,* he reflected as he placed his thumb on the scanner, *but peace of mind is worth a bit of tedium now and then.*

Half a minute later, Shuichi had taken his leave, and Midoriya was left standing face to face with Uraraka as, per protocol, Iguchi shut the door behind them. The room itself was nothing short of mind-numbingly monotonous, with all of the previous interior features covered with a layer of lead to prevent signals entering or leaving and a layer of hard, moisture-sealed wood on top of that. In one corner, the wood layer protruded from the wall to form a bed, with a simple mattress and pillow on top- there were no wire or metal components that could possibly be fashioned into a weapon. A lidless metal toilet was located in the opposite corner, and between the two, a woven rug covered the floor. After some consideration, Midoriya had even fitted both of Osaka's cells a bookshelf, stocked with various writers ranging from Nietzsche to Camus to Beckett. Nihilism and the absurd nature of life were the general themes; while he wanted his prisoners sane, he didn't want them hopeful, though he hadn't been able to resist including a printed and bound copy of Stain's writings as well. A copy of *The Stranger* was open on the bed, one page dog-eared to mark the spot Ochako had left off on when she was interrupted.

Only when the door sealed shut with a soft hiss of air did Uraraka lift her head to meet his gaze. The wound Toga had left on her cheek was mostly healed by now, and beneath her greasy, unwashed bangs, Uravity's demeanor remained defiant, her eyes fiery and her mouth set in a hard line. According to her guards' reports, she spent multiple hours a day exercising, with activities ranging from pushups and stretches to shadowboxing. They delivered an electrical shock to her bracelets and anklets whenever she tried the latter, but she still hadn't given up completely. Dried-out sweat stains were visible on her grey sweatpants and black tank top, the only clothes they'd provided her with, but even that reality hadn't discouraged her over the eight days that she'd been held captive. Before he could ask her why she'd summoned him, though, the fierce defiance in her expression melted away, and against his wildest expectations, she began to laugh.

After a moment's surprise, he crossed his arms and resolved to wait for her to quiet down again, but when she was still going ten seconds later, he decided to speak up instead.

"What's so funny?" There was no anger in his voice, merely earnest curiosity.

"I... I thought it was you, but I had to see your face in person to be sure." Tears streaming slowly
from her eyes, Ochako had finally recovered enough to speak, her breaths deep and heavy as a gleeful smile remained plastered on her face. "Oh my god, I can't believe I was right… to think that all this time, I hadn't remembered…"

"What are you going on about?" He asked, suspicion creeping into his tone. They'd made no efforts to conceal their identities from the two hostages- the next operation was serving as their debut, so the need for secrecy would soon be at an end regardless. _Could she mean she knows me from the missing person posters? Everyone saw those, that's nothing special._

"I remember you from the hero course entrance exam, Midoriya." Suddenly her voice had grown deadly quiet, and Izuku felt a shiver run up his spine.

"Sorry, what did you just say?" One of his eyebrows twitched, and he felt the fingers in his right hand curl into a fist involuntarily.

"There were so many people there, I'd completely forgotten, but now I'm sure it was you. I didn't talk to you, but I remember seeing you at the orientation, before Present Mic explained the rules. You were so skinny then, you looked like a stray breeze could knock you over. And you were so nervous too, I think you were trembling the entire time!" Another giggle burst from her lips.

"Stop talking. _Now._" Izuku took one menacing step towards her, sliding on one black leather glove as he withdrew the other from his blazer's pocket. His glare was boring a hole through her skull, but she paid him no heed.

"I saw you again after the exam ended. You were crying in a corner outside the arena because you hadn't scored a single point. I was going to go up and ask if you were okay, but your mom came to pick you up before I could. She looked like such a sweet lady- I doubt she knows about any of this. I wonder what she'd think if she saw you today?"

"Don't talk about my mother."

_Thud._ Ochako wheezed for air as he landed a solid punch to her stomach, but the smile only left her face momentarily before returning.

"I remember wondering what your quirk was, if it somehow hadn't been suited for combat. It wasn't until Bakugo mentioned you during the school year that I found out you tried to take it without one! Congrats on getting into general studies, though, the acceptance rate is only ten times higher!"

_Thud._ Another punch, to her arm this time. It was clear from the moment he withdrew his fist that it would leave an ugly bruise, and she winced in pain for a few brief seconds before continuing.

"Oh yeah, I bet you love me talking about him, don't you? Well he sure had a lot to say about you, Midoriya. Or should I be calling you Deku? Deku, as in useless."

"Shut up."

_Crack._ A third, to her face, harder than the last. Little by little, the control that Izuku had worked so hard to maintain over his anger was crumbling away. _I should leave, I should walk away now. She's trying to provoke me, that's all this is._

"He talked a lot about you after you disappeared." She paused to spit out blood, and more trickled down her chin from a busted lip." About how weak you were, about how you'd probably just killed yourself in some alley because you were just a pathetic, quirkless loser, always following him around. It turns out he was wrong- you were even more pathetic than he thought, Deku."
"Stop saying that name."

Midoriya barely diverted his fist into the wall in time before he delivered a blow to her temple that would've stood a decent chance of killing her. Control yourself. Focus. She has to live, for now. Breathing deeply, he withdrew his gloved hand from the dent in the wood that he'd made just inches from the side of her skull. He could feel warm blood seeping from his knuckles and filling the leather, but ignored it.

"I'm surprised at you, Uraraka. None of what you're doing right now is very herolike."

"I guess you're right." Ochako smiled wistfully. "I'm supposed to try and save you, right? To try and reach your heart and remind you that you're a good person deep down? Make you feel sympathy for me? That's what they told us to do in training, but after a week of sitting in this cell, I'm not really in the mood anymore. So if you don't mind, I think I'll keep on going where I left off."

"Do your worst, I'm trembling in my boots." Izuku's breathing had steadied again, and most of his murderous intent had been contained for now. Let her think she can keep rattling me. You'd only be validating everything she's said. Stay and prove her wrong.

"Bakugo really is the opposite of you, isn't he?" Uravity's grin widened when he visibly flinched. "He's a major asshole, yeah, I know. But he's also strong, brave, passionate, honest. He taught me a lot of what I know about hand-to-hand combat. I had a crush on him for most of our second year, not that he ever noticed. I wanted to be like him. The good parts of him, that is. I bet you did too, come to think of it."

He turned around and was a hair's breadth away from signaling Spinner to open the door again, but something inside him resisted. You're letting her win if you walk away now. You'd only be validating everything she's said. Stay and prove her wrong.

"So, Deku," she continued behind him, "tell me if I've pieced this together right. I'm sure you've got some long speech memorized about why you became a villain, about how you always knew something was 'wrong with society', or some bullshit like that. But deep down, I know you wanted to be a hero. And you didn't fail because you're quirkless, you failed because you're a weak, insecure, selfish little brat who couldn't stand it when his best friend surpassed him!"

Just as she fell silent, another hiss of air announced that the door was opening again, and Toga strode through with a knife in her hands and death in her eyes.

"Okay, that's it. I'm killing her, now."

"Himiko, no." He caught her with both arms as she made an aggressive stab in Uraraka's direction, stopping her blade just inches short of the hero's forehead. "You know you can't, we went over this. As much as I wish you could."

"I don't fucking care." She'd stopped struggling against his grip, but murderous intent was still clear on her face. "No one gets to talk to you like that, not as long as I'm here. No one, Izuku."

"Clone. Later. Like I said." A kiss to her forehead calmed her down significantly, and Midoriya turned back to face Ochako with one arm wrapped around Toga's shoulder. "Do you know why I love Himiko? Why I've remained in awe of her these past two years?"

"Because you're both psychopaths?"

"Because she's led a life without doubts and without regrets. She does what she wants, when she wants, to whom she wants. You're right, I did want to be a hero, a long time ago. I was misguided- it took a long time for me to get to where she's always been, to accept the truth. I bought into the
collective lie that this society spins, the one you're telling yourself right now. The lie that the strong must protect the weak, that the powerful should sacrifice themselves for the good of others. I was weak, but not anymore. I don't intend to waste my strength protecting anyone, and neither should you."

"Looks like I was right on the selfish part too." She spit out another gob of blood, at his feet this time, and dropped the smile completely. Anger dripped from her every syllable when she spoke again, "What the hell do you even want?! What are you trying to gain, what's the goal?! Money?! Recognition?! I saw you have Stain's writings, do you think you're some sort of fucking crusader?!"

"Almost, almost." Releasing Toga, he strode over to the bookshelf and pulled out a black-spined hardcover embossed with red lettering. *Hagakure*, read the title, *The Book of the Samurai*. "Tell me, Uraraka, have you gotten to this one yet?"

"No. Still working my way through the Camus and Kafka."

"It's written by a man living in a time of peace who longs for the age of the sword, for the return of the warrior to the forefront of society; I find his sentiments quite relatable. Once, this nation recognized the right of the strongest to the rule - the power of the shogun, the emperor, the daimyo. We've strayed from the path, and now we've regressed, moved in the opposite direction. We're ruled by the weakest among us - our nation and its people are more powerful and capable than they ever has been, but we still force ourselves to slow our pace keep the incapable, infirm, and unworthy from being 'left behind', out of some inane fear that the world will judge us if we do otherwise."

He closed the book, set it carefully back on the shelf, and looked back towards her, his voice dispassionate, his eyes bored.

"Make no mistake, this society is doomed by its very nature - *entropy always wins*. There is no 'saving' the weak - their death is necessary, natural. If Japan is to survive - if we as a people are to survive - then the strong must take back their place by force at the top of the hierarchy. We are the strong. Killing Hawks is just the beginning. To save Japan, we will undermine the public's trust in the current system until it collapses under its own weight, then replace it with a better one."

Stepping forward, he leaned in close, until he was practically whispering in her ear.

"The goal, Uravity, is me on the throne in Kyoto Imperial Palace, with Toga and my lieutenants at my side, as the head of state of this country, overseeing the beginning of a new era."

"Huh." For a moment after he withdrew, Ochako remained silent, one eyebrow raised. "Looks like I need to add 'delusional' to that list from before. So how many people are going have to die for your 'new era' to begin?"

"As many as necessary. Thousands, I suspect, in the decline and collapse that will serve as the catalyst for our takeover - the revelation that heroes can no longer protect them will produce unparalleled levels of unrest and violence among ordinary people. Even I'm not sure exactly what to expect. But that's the beautiful thing about chaos, isn't it?" Izuku couldn't hold back a wide smile, his eyes shining with anticipation. "Confronting the unknown. You'll be doing that yourself very soon now, Uraraka. Get some sleep, finish your book. You and Todoroki have an important role to play in setting things in motion."

"It won't work," called Uraraka as they turned and readied to leave, and the door began to open again. Though she lacked the same fury she'd spoken with before, her words were just as determined. "None of it will. People are stronger than you think. We're going to stop you."
Now it was Midoriya's turn to laugh, a wild gleam in his eyes as he tilted back his head and ran one gloved hand through his green hair.

"How many times do you think I've heard those exact words these past two years? Go ahead and try your best, I'll be waiting."

"Harder, Tetsu, don't hold back. Hit me like you mean it!"

Kendo couldn't wipe the scowl from her face as she countered another half-assed blow from her sparring partner, then sent him staggering halfway across the studio with a brutal open-palm strike.

"Use your quirk, come on, I told you it's fine!" Her voice was angrier than usual, because she was angrier than usual. For the past week, she'd been suspended from hero activities for her part in the incident with Endeavor at the hospital; he'd received a two week suspension for his role, though the details had largely been covered up by the police in order to prevent any further public hysteria than had already been sparked by Uraraka and Todoroki's abduction. As Nighteye and Aizawa had later revealed, they'd set the entire thing up, designed the scenario so that Endeavor would snap and give them an excuse to suspend his license for long enough to keep him out of any rescue operation for Shoto and Ochako. Apparently, rescue attempts involving a relative of the captive were on average 40% more likely to result in failure or casualties. More than anything else at this point, with only a few hours of her sentence left, she was just trying to distract herself, just as Enji surely was.

Tetsutetsu's countenance drooped as he paused to towel sweat from his forehead before lunging at her with another hook.

"Fuck, man, I don't wanna bruise you again, you know how this goes! If you don't use both your quirks…"

"If I did use both my quirks, you'd be a red streak against a building halfway across the city!"

Leaning down to her kit on the sidelines, Itsuka grabbed another set of elastic bandages to wrap her knuckles with and squirted a mouthful of water down her throat. "I'll risk it, Tetsu, just stop pulling your damn punches! Pretend I'm Kirishima!"

"Her hair's pretty much the right color for it!" Jiro called sarcastically from the other end of the 3-B gym, where she was currently stretching on the floor; loud rock music was playing from the speaker at her side. "All she needs to do is tape down her boobs and it'll be a perfect match."

Her comments eased the tense mood significantly; locking eyes with Real Steel, Kendo jerked a questioning thumb back toward her bandages with a smirk on her face and one eyebrow cocked.

"Nah," he chuckled, "it's the teeth that ruin it for me. I gotta see that shark grin of his, or it doesn't work."

"Stop talking about him or he's going to show up again," Kuroiro called morosely from the stationary bike. "He's got way too much energy. Last time he came, he talked me into deadlifting with him and I pulled a muscle in my back."

"Ah, that's all just part of the process!" Tetsutetsu replied excitedly, shooting Vantablack a thumbs up. "But if you want help deadlifting, you should ask Shishida, that dude's a-"

Whack.

While Real Steel was distracted, Kendo laid an oversized backhand across his face, meeting his shocked expression with a mischievous grin when he turned back in her direction.
"Vlad King's first rule of sparring, always keep your eyes on the target. Come on, man, we're not done yet. Show me that steel."

"Alright, but just remember, you were asking for it."

Thankfully, her last blow was the final push that Tetsutetsu needed to snap out of his fog; in a flash, his skin became gleaming metal, and he surged forward in a lunging hook. She swelled up both hands and deflected it to the side, wincing at the jolting pain of the impact, then followed up with an open-handed slap that he barely blocked in time. Her birth quirk was incredibly hard to defend or attack against in close quarters, but over the span of the next minute, he made a fairly promising attempt at doing both, so much so that their match built up a small audience, with Kuroiro, Setsuna, Jiro, and Kamakiri all watching at various points. Every time she oversized her hands to try to brute force him into tripping up, he went on the attack, pummeling her palms until they were bruised and bloodied, covered in a patchwork of cuts that made her traditional tactics significantly more painful to attempt. He took his fair share of damage too, though, suffering numerous dents that would later turn into bruises of his own when he reverted. Finally, after sidestepping a desperate charge, she managed to land a punch low enough on his legs to send him sprawling, and scattered applause and cheers filled the room as she knelt down to complete the pin.

"Nice moves," said Tokage, eyeing them both curiously as she detached one arm to grab her towel from the lockers on the other side of the room. "That was pretty hardcore."

"I'm just ready to get back out on the streets," Kendo responded, glancing over at the other girl while Jiro helped her apply more bandages to her wounds, and Kamakiri did the same with Tetsutetsu. "I get way too much pent up energy just sitting around campus doing nothing. I want to be out there helping with the search effort."

The mood in the room dimmed a bit at that, as everyone was forced to openly confront the unpleasant reality of the past week, to confront the frenzied press at U.A.'s gates, the solemn speeches by Nezu and the rest of the administration, the calls from parents for all student internships to be suspended indefinitely.

"Would some food make ya feel better?" Setsuna offered. "Juzo, Reiko and I were gonna make some yakisoba for dinner if you want in. Meet us in the kitchen after you're done down here."

Fifteen minutes and one brief shower later, Kendo was practically salivating at the thought of stir-fried noodles; she'd barely had anything to eat all day. In the 3-B kitchen, prep was already well underway- Reiko was using Poltergeist to chop the meat and vegetables while she chatted with Tokage, the knife moving of its own accord, while Juzo likewise used his own quirk to soften the noodles instead of boiling them, careful not to go too far and turn them into liquid. Itsuka greeted them and joined the conversation seamlessly, but when it was nearly time to move the ingredients to the pan a few minutes later, Setsuna swore viciously at the sight of an empty cabinet.

"Fuck, sesame oil! How are we out of sesame oil?"

"I can go check if 3-A has some," Kendo offered amicably, already up and on her way before they could stop her.

Thankfully, the third-year hero course dorms were connected by a skybridge, so coming and going between them wasn't a problem. She ran into Jiro along the way, just out of the shower, and the two struck up a discussion about her latest playlist choices as they crossed over into Class A's domain. It became immediately clear once they reached the kitchen, though, that something was off. Two bottles of plum wine and a handle of whisky were out in plain sight, each partially drained, and most
of the people sitting at the counter, namely Kaminari, Hagakure, Ojiro, and Aoyama, were visibly drunk- the only exception was Asui, and even she seemed slightly tipsy. *And not the happy type of drunk, from the looks of it,* Kendo noted. Toru and Yuga had clearly been crying, and the mood was utterly somber. Tsuyu, and Mashirao were arguing with a second group, standing and dressed to go out, which consisted of Kirishima, Ashido, Sero, Shoji, and of course, the loudest member, Bakugo.

"You're going to get arrested or worse," Asui was pleading, her words slightly slurred by her recent surgery. Her tongue had thankfully been reattached, but it would be some weeks yet before she could even come close to using it like she had before. "Think about what Best Jeanist would say, Bakugo! What Fatgum and Suneater would say, Kirishima!"

"Well I think Hawks would say to fucking go for it," Hanta countered, his arms crossed. "If there's even of a fraction of a chance that we could be the difference, that we could offer something that the pros can't."

He'd changed a great deal since he began his internship under the winged hero last year; his costume was sleeker and more streamlined, his hair was cut short in the back, and he wore black stone piercings on his right ear. More confident and assertive in general, his personality had begun to clearly display influence from both Hawks and Bakugo- whether that was a good thing, Itsuka could hardly say.

"Oh great, look who it is," Katsuki growled, having finally noticed the two intruders. "Right on cue, Little Ms. Perfect herself. And if it isn't Ears, her fucking sidekick. Get the hell out of here, this is a private discussion."

"I thought I told you not to call her-" Kyoka began angrily, but Kendo silenced her with a firm hand to the shoulder.

"What's going on?" She asked, pointedly addressing Mina instead. When the pink-skinned girl simply fidgeted nervously instead of answering, and a glance to Kirishima produced the same reaction, Ojiro spoke up from the counter, lifting up his reddened face.

"They're... hic... they're gonna go try and save 'em. Uraraka and uh, hic, Todoroki. I, for one, think it's a bad idea."

"They're going to what?!" Jiro cried. "Are you kidding me?! Not again! You saw how much of a difference you ended up making last time!"

Two years ago, when Bakugo was abducted by the League of Villains, Kirishima and Todoroki had gone out on their own to try and recover him after the latter broke into his father's work computer to find out where police and hero intel placed the League's hideouts (the password had been Shoto's name and birthday). They reached the scene at approximately the same time as the heroes, but ended up simply watching as the pros did the heavy lifting and All Might rescued Katsuki from the clutches of All For One, receiving nothing but a stern reprimand and multiple days' house arrest afterward in reward.

"Even if he didn't make a difference," Bakugo replied, "Half-and-Half actually tried to save me, and that's what fucking matters. I don't like being shown up, and I like being in debt to people even less. So we're gonna go, and we're gonna rescue them, and don't even think about trying to stop us."

"Ignoring all the rest of the terrible parts of this idea, how would you even know where to go?" Itsuka asked in exasperation. "The search area is all of Japan, no one has any idea if they're even still on Honshu!"
"That's what they want you to think," said Sero, casting a glance in Shoji's direction. The masked student stepped forward and produced a mouth on one of his dupli-arms.

"Today at the office, Hagakure and I were using our quirks to listen in on a conference call Edgeshot was having with several other pros. We clearly heard that they've narrowed the search area down to Osaka and the surrounding suburbs. It was just out of concern for our friends, we didn't mean to actually act on the knowledge. We agreed not to tell anyone, but…"

"But I told Mina," Hagakure confessed from the counter, downing another cup of plum wine. "It just, hic, came out, I didn't mean to."

"And I told everyone else," Ashido declared defiantly. "No way I'm leaving Ochako there to suffer, or Shoto. Not if we know where they are. I regretted not going last time, I'm not skipping out now."

"As the one responsible for acquiring the information," Mezo continued, "I was honor-bound to watch over them the moment they decided on this course of action. And no matter what my own personal objections to this plan may be, Todoroki has been a good friend to me."

"And, Kirishima?" Kendo asked quietly, her eyes on the floor, her face blank. "Again?"

"It's no different than two years ago," Eijiro responded. "I have a responsibility to each and every one of my classmates. I see one of them in danger, I help. That's all it is. I'm sorry if we're letting you down."

"Don't be fucking sorry!" Bakugo snapped. "She should be the one who's sorry for not coming! Now come on, you extras, we've got a train to catch in thirty minutes!"

"No, you don't." Kendo lifted her gaze up to meet Katsuki's eyes and pulled out her phone. "I'm not letting you go."

"Big talk." He waved a hand dismissively in her direction and turned toward the stairs. "That's all you are. You can't stop us, we've made our decision."

"Yes, I can." Itsuka opened her contacts, pulled up Eraserhead's number, and let her finger come to a rest a centimeter away from the dial button. "If you take so much as one step out that door, I'm going to call Aizawa and report you. How's that for talk?"

"You wouldn't," Sero protested, but every one of them including him knew that she would by the look on her face. Ashido and Shoji instantly began to shrink back towards the kitchen, and even Kirishima suddenly looked doubtful.

"You kidding? He's probably asleep by now." Bakugo objected. "He wouldn't get here in time, if he even answered." Katsuki was bluffing, trying to talk her out of it indirectly, and Kendo narrowed her eyes. Not gonna work, douchebag.

"Then I'd just stop you myself." Her words carried enough weight that now even Hanta and Eijiro gave it up, and plopped down on a couch with defeat on their faces. Only Bakugo was left, standing alone in front of the stairwell with both fists clenched.

"Turn around and walk back into the kitchen, Bakugo." There was no room for compromise left in Kendo's voice. "Now."

When Bakugo did start walking, it was directly towards her, his eyes full of fury. Kirishima stood up and tried to calm his friend down as he stalked past the couches, but he was pushed aside with ease, and the rest could only watch as Katsuki came to a halt directly in front of Itsuka, his face inches
from her own. He was only taller than her by a few centimeters, so she could more or less look him straight in the eye as he seethed wordlessly. Out of the corner of her vision, Kendo could see Jiro moving up behind Bakugo with her jacks ready, but she held up a hand and shook her head to stop her, not breaking her eye contact with him for a moment.

"You fucking bitch." He finally snarled. "You think you're better than me, than all of us, that you're special. I think it's about time that someone showed you otherwise."

As usual, he's completely wrong, Kendo knew. But after over a year of this back-and-forth rivalry, she also knew that explaining herself and trying to defuse the situation wouldn't work. The only way to win was to communicate in a language that he understood- to out-Bakugo him. Accordingly, she crossed her arms, raised one eyebrow, and took on an arrogant smirk.

Ugh, I hate doing this.

"You really think you can take me? Don't make me laugh. Sit down, before you get hurt."

Now it was her turn to bluff. At this ridiculously short range, there was only about a one in two chance that she could fully activate One For All in time to defend herself before he used a Howitzer Impact to blast her clean through the nearest wall, and very possibly knock her unconscious in the process. Kendo knew full well that as much as she couldn't stand him, Bakugo was the only one in their year- besides perhaps Todoroki- who could come even marginally close to challenging her in terms of pure combat ability, and in a scenario like this, he had the advantage. The advantage that I'm not trying to kill or maim him, she reflected dryly. He knew that he could win just as well as she did and their standoff dragged on for another twenty-odd seconds of tense silence before Shoji finally stepped in and physically tore them apart with six arms' worth of force.

After that, things returned to normal surprisingly quickly, largely thanks to Kaminari, who ran to his room and returned with a full handle of vodka to use as a peace offering. The remaining sober students in the room agreed silently and unanimously to join their peers in drinking the pain away, and the all of the alcohol was brought to the coffee table between the couches as everyone, regardless of their side in the dispute, sat down and began to distribute cups and glasses. It was angry, sad drinking, and there were few jokes and fewer smiles, but if nothing else, they were all united in their determination to forget everything about the past week. Wine, sake, whisky, vodka- it all ran into a blur, and soon Kendo's head was swimming, one arm wrapped haphazardly around Jiro's waist and the other hand ruffling Kirishima's spiked hair as Denki and Mina poured the remainder of a bottle of umeshu into her mouth, chanting drunkenly.

At some point, Setsuna's disembodied head drifted into the room to let Kendo know that they'd found the sesame oil after all, and ask if she still wanted to eat. Once Kaminari was done screaming at the sight of Tokage's quirk in action, Kendo excitedly agreed, although the time between when she got up to get food and when she stumbled back into the 3-A kitchen an hour later with Juzo, Setsuna and Tetsutetsu was fuzzy to say the least. Kyoka and Denki had both passed out in their seats while she was gone, apparently, and Asui's group had left along with Shoji, so the survivors had moved back to the counter. Ashido welcomed the newcomers enthusiastically, and quickly pressed the two groups into a 3-A vs. 3-B shot competition, with Bakugo, Kirishima, and Sero against Kendo, Tetsutetsu, and Juzo; she and Tokage would serve as the referees, and decided that in order to compensate for not having been drinking the whole time, Team B had to do two shots for every one that Team A did- except for Itsuka, of course.

"Annd start!" The two girls cried together, waving imaginary flags.

Luckily for her, the yakisoba was finally beginning to sober Kendo up, and she was able to launch headlong into the battle with a relatively clear head. The refs had also decided to make things interesting by alternating straight vodka, sake, and highball shooters, all lined up in rows, though
when it came to the first two, thanks to the color, the participants had no idea which was which. Grabbing the first shot glass, Kendo waited until the other five had done the same, and led her team in a cheer of ‘Kanpai!’ before everyone downed it together. Oof, that's definitely vodka, she thought, grimacing as the liquor shot down into her stomach, leaving a trail of fire in its wake.

"Making faces already, huh?" Katsuki taunted from across the counter. "Can Little Ms. Perfect handle her alcohol or not?"

"Plenty better than you," She shot back as her teammates slung back their second. Oh god, I think I know how this is going to end.

Ten minutes later, she was proven right; Juzo and Sero conceded defeat first at six (twelve for Honenuki), followed shortly by Kirishima and Tetsutetsu at ten (twenty for Real Steel), the latter of whom ran to the restroom to vomit moments later. In the end, just as Kendo had predicted, the match turned into a one on one duel between her and Bakugo- by the time they reached fifteen, they were both swaying back and forth where they stood, and Itsuka's movements felt like she was underwater. They were also down one and half referees; Setsuna was off playing cards with Juzo on the coffee table, though she was keeping one eye hovering over the match to make sure there were no rule violations, and Kendo was fairly sure that Mina and Eijiro were making out over in the far corner of the room. It was getting hard to devote enough attention to tell one way or another, even more so with Katsuki's constant trash talk.

"You can just… give up any time now… ya fucker." He slurred as they stared down shot number sixteen, a highball that was looking increasingly disgusting with each passing second.

"Y'know what?" Itsuka asked, rubbing her aching stomach. "Why don't we just call this a draw, dude?"

After a sluggish glance around to confirm that no one aside from Tokage's solitary eye was watching, Bakugo lowered his head into both hands and nodded almost imperceptibly.

"Whatever, yeah, sure."

Another blurry patch in her memory, and she was slumped outside the door of her room, alone in the dark hallway, with her keys in one hand and her phone in the other. She was still more than tipsy, but her head had cleared enough for her to form more or less coherent thoughts. 1:07AM, she read off the phone's screen, then shook her head. How late did the shots battle go? When did we even start? How long have I been here? Ugh, fucking Bakugo, this is all his fault. Grunting in discomfort, Kendo forced herself shakily to her feet, and was about to insert her key into the lock- something she had a feeling she'd tried and failed to do before- when his name brought another thought to mind. I bet he's still gonna try and go to Osaka. Shit, what if that whole damn shots battle was just to get me drunk enough to fall asleep?! Pocketing the keys again in her jeans, Itsuka wiped the remnants of a stream of drool from her chin and stumbled back down the hall towards Class A's side.

Just as she made her way onto the skybridge, though, she blinked in shock- Bakugo was standing on the other side, looking equally surprised to see her.

"The hell are you doing here?" He snapped, his face quickly reassuming its usual, annoyed expression. If the red on his cheeks was any indication, he was still drunk too.

"I'm coming to make sure you don't still try to leave on your stupid fucking rescue mission, that's what the hell I'm doing." she advanced towards him as she spoke, managing to remain mostly dignified despite the fact that she still swerved back and forth slightly as she walked. He responded in turn, and soon they were standing in the middle, staring each other down just as they had earlier in
the night. "So, you gonna tell me what you think you're doing?"

"I was gonna come tell you what an insufferable fucking asshole you are." Katsuki growled, daring her to blink with the intensity of his glare. "If you were still even alive, that is. I only quit that early on the shots so you wouldn't throw up in the damn kitchen."

"Everything's about winning with you, I swear to god!" At this point, any semblance of control she'd been working to maintain over the anger and frustration that had built up inside her over the past week was gone, and it felt good to finally yell it out. "What the fuck is wrong with you?! Are you incapable of doing anything that doesn't benefit you directly?! You even said so you yourself, you were only gonna save Todoroki so you didn't owe him anymore!"

"Watch your fucking mouth, before I blow you out the window." He kept his voice low but angry, and leaned in even closer. She raised an arm to slap him across the face with a double-sized hand, but he caught it, and she laid her other hand on his stomach to try and push him away. They stared at each other for another few moments, but something was different this time.

In retrospect, Itsuka wasn't sure which one of them started kissing the other first, just that it was rough, angry, and passionate. He still tasted like whisky, but so did she, probably. His arms wrapped around her waist, and she ran her fingers through his hair, which was surprisingly soft, despite its appearance.

"I hate you," She breathed the instant she broke apart, tensing her fingers so she had a handful of blond spikes at her mercy. "You're the most selfish person I know."

"You can do better than that." He muttered in reply before leaning down to kiss her neck.

"I despise you. I can't stand being around you. I feel like breaking the screen every time I see you on TV."

After that, one there was one final blur, longer than the rest. She remembered pinning him against a wall (or was he pinning her?) and tearing his shirt. The next thing Kendo Itsuka knew, sunlight was filtering through her window, her entire body felt like it was trying to kill her, and she was buck naked beneath her sheets. She barely had time to think I don't sleep nude before a muffled snore alerted her to the fact that she wasn't alone, and everything came rushing back at once.

No, no, no. There's no way. No goddamn way. I would never, I can't stand him. He has a girlfriend! And I have... well, I have two people who'd murder me if they found out about this. For a moment she tried to convince herself it had been a bad dream, but a glance to her right confirmed that Katsuki's gently rising and falling back was very real. Suddenly she felt faint and ill at the same time, but deciding to put off confronting that situation for as long as possible, she reached over, picked up her phone, and died a bit inside when she saw the screen.

10:48AM, Monday morning. Two canceled alarms. Two and a half classes and one quiz already missed. Three missed calls from All Might, four from Jiro, three from Tetsutetsu. Six unopened texts, three unopened voicemails. And as she looked back over at the other side of bed, one wide-awake Bakugo, wearing an expression of abject horror on his face.

"What the fuck?!!"

Downtown Tokyo

Dawn, the Next Morning

"Okay, looks like we're just about ready."
Aiba Manami had double and triple checked her code for any possible weaknesses or bugs, but she still had the same feeling of unease deep in the pit of her stomach that she always did before missions. She glanced back down to her laptop, a bulky military model with a built-in encrypted network modem and enough processing power to simulate practically anything she wanted, expanded over the course of dozens of custom modifications. The virus was one of her best creations yet, specifically tailored to crack two of the most secure systems in the country. 'Shieldbreaker', Midoriya had dubbed it—usually she didn't name her creations, but Izuku had a flair for the dramatic, if their codenames for this mission were any indication.

"Everything seems peachy on my end too!" Quipped Hatsume, watching streams of data on her babies through her goggles. There were five of them perched on the skyscraper's rooftop—La Brava, Gentle, Mei, Kurogiri, and Twice: the advance guard for Operation Brennus, laying the groundwork for the three strike teams.

"See that it is," Kurogiri intoned ominously, glancing at the ornate silver watch on his shadowy arm. "Two minutes until we commence."

A gust of cold wind whipped past them, and Aiba shivered before edging closer to Tobita and wrapping herself in his long cape. The other three were mostly standing toward the far corner of the roof, so she felt confident enough that they wouldn't hear to tug at his vest and speak up softly when he leaned down in her direction.

"Gentle… are we doing a bad thing?"

Danjuro's eyes flitted back toward the others before he responded, his reply halting and hesitant.

"Well… that depends on your definition. According to the one used by heroes, by most of society, we've always done bad things."

"What about by our definition? That's what matters to me."

"By our definition…” He seemed a bit more at a loss for words this time. "I don't know. We're in new territory right now, La Brava, placing our trust in new people. I'll always value you and your opinion above everything else, but I can't deny that I'm curious to find out what they have to offer."

"But we-“ She was interrupted before she could finish her thought by Twice clapping his hands in excitement.

"And, three, two, one! Ladies and gentlemen, start your engines, because here we go! Alright, kiddos, you ready?"

"As I'll ever be!" Cried Mei, pressing a few buttons on the tripod-mounted remote transmission spike that she'd set up at the roof's center; it hummed to life with an electronic whir, and Jin began to stride over in La Brava's direction.

"Alright, short stuff, get ready."

Emerging out from beneath Gentle's cape, Manami stood still as requested while Twice measured her with his tape, and even though she'd been expecting it, she still jumped in surprise when her clone sprang into existence in front of her. They exchanged an awkward nod, then, like clockwork, the original Aiba crouched back down and pressed a single key on her laptop.

Program [Shieldbreaker]: Start.

Transmitting…
Transmitting…
Remote transmission achieved.
Processing…
Processing…

Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department- Firewall Status: Breached.

U.A. High School- Firewall Status: Breached.

Beginning Mainframe Infiltration.
Processing…
Processing…

Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department- Mainframe Status: Infiltrated.


"Send the all clear to the strike teams," La Brava called, watching the results scroll across the screen with a mix of pride and anxiety. "The operation is a go."

Chapter End Notes

And here we go- now it's time for two of the biggest, most climactic chapters yet, with plenty of death, mayhem, and feels around the corner. Will Hawks survive? Will Bakugo and Kendo make it out of bed without murdering each other? Find out next time, and as always let me know what you thought! This one was a trip to write, and I hope you all enjoyed Midoriya going a bit more in detail about his goals, as well as his moment with Toga. See you again soon!
In the dream, Todoroki Shoto was still in Yokohama, on patrol with Gang Orca, moments before they received the orders to back up Ryukyu's team. It came nearly every night, like clockwork, often with slight variations- the intensity of the light outside, the time of day, the buildings on the street, even his own appearance. This time, when he glanced at his reflection in a dark storefront window, the face staring back at him was more youthful- a first-year, not a third-year. His hair was still in his former style, not the bun he wore now, his costume was back to its old, plain design, and his cheeks and chin were bare, devoid of any hint of stubble. But of course, it didn't occur to him that this was anything out of the ordinary as he turned back to face Sakatmata's hulking figure. Just like every time, Gang Orca was checking his phone, and just like every time, he'd just received the text from Nejire alerting them that something had gone wrong with their recon operation. Kugo said something in a distorted, muffled voice, but somehow he understood, and moments later they were running down the street at full speed, shadowy masses of pedestrians parting before them.

They turned onto a side street after a few minutes, and suddenly it was dark out- the sun had simply vanished while he wasn't looking. *How long have we been running?* Deep in his gut, Todoroki had a vague feeling that it was supposed to be daytime, but he shook it off as they neared their objective. As the park grew closer, he realized with a start that all the buildings around them were burnt to a crisp, reduced to blackened husks and illuminated only by patches of glowing embers, still leaking acrid smoke into the pitch black midnight sky. He was leaning down to investigate the skeletal remains of an apartment complex when he first saw the bodies. There were dozens of them, their corpses little more than charred impressions where people had been, a scene out of Pompeii or Herculaneum, of wrath nothing less than Vesuvian. *Dabi,* his mind cried in rage, and he felt his fists clench. When he started running again there were angry tears streaming from his eyes, but when the park finally loomed before him, orange flames, not blue, towered above him. *Maybe he has a new technique,* Shoto mused as the entrance drew nearer and nearer. *It doesn't matter, I have to stop him.*

Todoroki charged through the gate with determination on his face, but it swiftly turned to shock and horror. The park's perimeter was completely ablaze, with a ring of fire blocking off all the other exits, and Gang Orca was already dead on the ground in front of him, his cetacean body still smoking; standing with one flaming foot atop his mentor's body was none other than his father. Thunderstruck, Shoto fell to his knees, his eyes wide. "No. It can't be. Gradually, an inch at a time, he forced himself to lift his head again, only for his heart to drop even further in his chest. Visible behind Endeavor were the corpses of all the others- Ryukyu, Nejire, Uraraka, Asui, each one immolated. Enji's face was a mask of rage, but when he saw his son, it turned into a wide smile.

"Shoto, my boy!" He held his arms out wide, and took a step forward. "You've finally come back to me!"

Before Todoroki could respond, he heard something else in the distance, behind his father, past the bodies- the sound of a child crying. Bathed in the light of the inferno raging around them was a boy with spiky red hair, sitting on the ground with his hands covering his face. In each dream, the sight compelled him to stand up and start walking again, a desperate, primal urge to save the child that overrode any other emotion.

"Did he hurt you?!" Todoroki called, looking past his father as he advanced. "Do you need help?!"

"Who are you talking to, Shoto?" Enji placed his hands on his hips and frowned disapprovingly.
"Don't ignore me, we're the only ones here, I made sure of that."

Refusing to give Endeavor the satisfaction of a response, Coldflame brushed straight past him and continued toward the boy. No matter how much he quickened his pace each night, though, the child remained in the distance, just as his father remained right behind him, his flaming costume visible out of the corner of his eye.

"Can you walk?!" Todoroki cried. "Come to me, I can help you!"

"Listen to me when I'm talking to you!" Endeavor pleaded behind him. "Please, Shoto, I've done all this for you!"

"You think I wanted this?!" He gestured to the corpses, which seemed to be dissolving into smoke and ash with each passing moment, their features rapidly reduced to unrecognizable piles of cinders. "They'll arrest you for this, you'll never see the outside of a cell again for the rest of your miserable life!"

"Who's going to arrest me?" Enji asked, his voice tinged with genuine curiosity. "It's like I said, there's no one left but us."

Pausing briefly, Shoto glanced up at the skyline, only to realize that there no longer was one. All the buildings— the entire city— everything as ablaze. The wall of flames around them was growing higher by the second. When he glanced back down, the child was directly in front of him, still sniffling and wiping tears from his eyes.

"Hey there," Todoroki said, crouching down and doing his best to put on his friendly voice. "You okay, buddy? What's your name?"

The boy fell silent, and slowly lifted his head; he met Coldflame's gaze with two wide turquoise eyes.

"Touya."

Todoroki felt the breath leave his body all at once, his heart pounding in his chest. *That's impossible,* he knew, but the face, the eyes, the hair— it was all so familiar. Half-formed memories flitted back and forth in his mind, just beyond his ability to recall them. This child couldn't be Touya, the Touya who left when he was still a toddler, the Touya no one in his family had seen or spoken to in ten years, but somehow, Shoto couldn't shake the feeling that he was. He lifted his hand to reach out to the boy, but just before he could touch his face, Enji grabbed his other arm from behind, and began to pull him away. The child began to rapidly recede back into the distance, no matter how much he struggled.

"Let me go!"

"Shoto, if you'd just look at me…"

Ten years of fury welling up inside him, Coldflame dug his heels into the ground, pivoted, and drove a twenty foot spike of ice directly through his father's chest. The size and nature of his attack varied slightly each night, but the result was always the same- Endeavor's flames flickered out, and blood began to pour from his mouth.

"Shoto…" He coughed, tears welling up in his eyes. "Why?"

Todoroki never came up with a proper response for that— at least, not one that could be put into words. So each time, he remained silent as his father wrapped his burly arms around him and died
embracing his son. It took him some time to realize he was crying too- why, he didn't know. But the moment he began to move again, to turn back towards Touya, Endeavor's body began to transform, melting and shifting until suddenly he was eye to eye with Toga Himiko. She wore a sadistic grin on her face, and wrapped her arms tight around him, her cheeks flushed with color as her laughter rose in volume until it was the only sound he could hear. Panic rising in his chest, he tried to activate his quirk, to throw her off, but suddenly he'd grown hopelessly weak, his body paralyzed and limp.

"Our people will fix you right up," she whispered into his ear, "so I can hurt you as much as I want before we take you!" Then she drove her knife into his back, and Dabi's fist slammed into the side of his head, and everything went dark.

Dull, throbbing pain was the first thing that Shoto became aware of when he suddenly jolted awake in a cold sweat, right where her blade had been. It was a sensation that he'd become intimately familiar with over the past week, the five aching ghosts of the wounds left by Toga that morning in Yokohama- almost as familiar as his recurring dream, some details of which never failed to slip away each morning despite his best efforts to preserve the memories. He'd been unconscious for nearly two days after his initial capture, apparently so close to the complete failure of his damaged kidneys that they'd considered putting him on ice until they found a better healing quirk, if his guards' idle chatter was anything to be believed.

As things were, they had one Eight Precepts henchman with a weak cell regeneration quirk come in twice a day to try and repair his back, often with Monoma's help when Neito was around. The revelation of his captors' identities had been the worst shock of the third day, the discovery that he wasn't merely a prisoner of the League of Villains, as Bakugo had been two years before. Shinso, Hatsume, Monoma, and Midoriya had all visited his cell at some point or another over the past eight days- sometimes to check on the progression of his treatment, other times to talk. The conversations were mostly one-sided; many were little more than sermons espousing the group's insane perversion of meritocracy, seemingly in the hopes of 'converting' him. Even once he was over the initial shock that U.A. students could stoop to such a low, he didn't offer them much in the way of replies, mostly just asking simple questions about their beliefs and pretending to take them seriously. Let them believe they're slowly winning me over. The more time to gather intel, the better. At one point, he asked Neito whether they were the ones who'd taken Yaoyorozu and Tokoyami- Monoma had simply laughed in response as he left the room, and Shoto hadn't asked again since.

After the sixth day, he could finally stand and walk around his cell, though the pain still remained, and a saline drip remained embedded in his arm. On the seventh and eighth days, he tried to read, went through the selection on the bookshelf one by one, but Todoroki found that he couldn't make it past fifty pages in any of them before the emotions inside him, the rage at his captors, at himself for being so careless, the horror of thinking how his mother and siblings and friends must feel, became too distracting to focus on anything else. Finally, he fell back on meditation, a practice which had always served him well, but even the mere act of clearing his mind was a difficult task in these circumstances. On the morning of the ninth day- at least, what seemed to him to be morning, for there was no clock and no concept of the passage of time in this prison, which stayed brightly lit twenty four hours a day- he decided that we was well enough to make an escape attempt- clearly, if this much time had passed with no rescue, the odds were decent that their location was too well concealed for the investigators to find. I'm far from fully recovered, he knew, and I don't have my quirk, but braver heroes than him had faced worse odds.

Clever and attentive to detail in every part of the room, the villains had left him nothing that could be used as a weapon, aside from softcover books and a pillow. After a quick once-over to make sure that he hadn't missed anything, Todoroki settled on the only thing even remotely deadly available to him aside from his own fists: the butterfly needle in his arm. Though he couldn't see them, Shoto knew there were doubtless cameras watching, so he climbed into bed, turned to face the wall, and
after around ten minutes to convincingly fake falling asleep, he remained absolutely motionless as he
gently removed the needle millimeter by millimeter, careful not to prick the vein any further and lose
more blood than he already had. Once it was finally out after what felt like an eternity, he clamped
his clammy fingers shut around his two-inch, stainless steel prize, intending to attack his guard and
make a break for it the moment the moment they set the tray for his next meal down at his bedside.

And so, for what seemed by his best estimate to be over an hour, he waited silent and still, his body
feigning sleep but his mind racing through possible exit strategies. **Assuming that I can silently
eliminate the guard and that their nearest backup is one or two rooms away, I'll most likely have
somewhere between fifteen and thirty seconds to try and flee before backup can arrive, depending on
how quick their response time is and how attentive they are to their camera feeds.** From the brief
glimpses of sunlight he occasionally saw when the door opened and the muffled sounds of rain he'd
once heard on his ceiling, he knew that the compound was aboveground and had windows. *That's
the best way out, he knew, but in this state, only if we're at ground level. If I had my quirk, I could
make a path of ice down from any height, but like this...* Shoto glanced down to the magnetic, quirk-
dampening shackles around his wrists and ankles in frustration. *Ideally, they might deactivate or
disconnect from their power source once I leave the cell, but that's unlikely. I have to prepare for the
contingency that...*

A sharp hiss of air interrupted his thoughts and announced that the door was preparing to open, and
he felt his breath quicken involuntarily at the sound of footsteps on the wooden floor. Still facing
away from the entrance with his weapon clutched tight against his chest, he slid the needle out from
between two fingers so that he could wield it like a spike when he formed a fist. All the while, the
footsteps were drawing closer and closer; when he was certain they were looming directly over him,
he tensed his arm and core and readied himself to attack. Just as he was steeling himself to roll over
and strike, though, the blood drained from his face at the sound of the guard's voice.

"I hope you slept well, Todoroki. How are you feeling?"

The needle still in hand, he opened his eyes and slowly turned his head, even as his stomach slowly
filled with an all too familiar sense of dread.

"Yaoyorozu," he choked, his tongue suddenly dry, his voice hoarse. "What are... no..." He closed
his eyes and shook his head. "I'm still dreaming. You're not really here."

"Oh, Todoroki. You always did love to flatter me." She giggled as she spoke, and like a spell, the
sound compelled him to open his eyes again- she was still there. "I'm not a dream," she continued, a
soft smile on her lips, "I promise."

Pushing his ever growing doubt and fear aside for the moment, he sat up straight in his bed and
began to carefully study her features, her expressions and mannerisms. *This could be Toga's quirk
again, or a clone, or one of a dozen other tactics designed to rattle me.* As far as he could tell, her
picture-perfect face had hardly changed since he last saw her at the training camp two years ago,
aside from the expected signs of maturity. Her hair was cut short and side parted, though she wore
the shoulder-length style with the same grace as ever. Noticeably altered, her costume was now grey
and silver instead of red and yellow, with a much more sleek and streamlined design. There were still
large open patches over her stomach, back, and forearms to allow for her quirk's activation, but the
rest looked halfway between a bodysuit and body armor, close-fitting and lightweight but textured
like steel or carbon-fiber. Perhaps most different, though, were her eyes. The eyes Todoroki
remembered when he thought of Yaoyorozu Momo were many things- warm, happy, earnest, kind.
They were the eyes of a girl who cared as deeply about her classmates' success as she did about her
own, who would go to any length to help a friend in need, who had never once looked down on her
peers despite the privileges of her own upbringing.
The ones staring back at him now were none of those. There was a coldness in them that he'd never
seen before, a gleam of unmistakable superiority and overflowing confidence in the way she was
watching him. It's not her, Shoto told himself, a prayer more than a certain fact. It's not her. After a
few moments of meeting his inquisitive gaze, she seemed to understand his train of thought; he
couldn't help but flinch when she cupped his face with one gloved hand, and began to gently stroke
his cheek with her thumb.

"You still don't believe it's me, do you, Shoto?"

He couldn't control the chill that shot up his spine at the sound of his first name on her lips, and
suddenly his face flushed with color.

"You're… different." He managed after struggling for several long moments to even begin to find the
right words. "How can I be sure you're not…"

"Her?" Momo finished, giving him a sympathetic grin. "Well, could she do this?" She held her other
hand flat in front of Todoroki, and produced a red nesting doll from the bare patch of skin in her
glove over her palm; despite himself, he let slip a hint of a grin at the sight.

"We did well on that final exam, didn't we?"

"You did wonderfully," Yaoyorozu insisted, shaking her head as a glimmer of her old modesty shone
through. "My performance left much to be desired."

Before he replied, Shoto shifted again in bed to better position himself, and the motion tweaked one
of his wounds just right; a lance of pain shot through his body, and he winced visibly. Concern,
seemingly genuine, spread across Momo's face, and she gently moved her hand from his cheek to the
patchwork of bandages on his back.

"Toga hurt you badly, didn't she? I'll make sure she never does that again." Suddenly her arm was
wrapped around his waist, and their faces were inches apart. "You're too important to me."

"Momo…" Slowly and reluctantly, he placed a hand on her stomach and pushed her away. "Why
are you here? Are you a prisoner too? Or… I… I just need to know." Shoto had put the question off
for as long as he could, because he was terrified that he already knew the answer. Please, please,
prove me wrong.

"So inquisitive, like always." Only frowning slightly at his reaction to her advance, she withdrew her
hand from his side and held it out expectantly. "Give me the needle, and I'll tell you everything."

"So, not a prisoner, then."

For a brief moment, he tried to muster up the resolve to lash out with the makeshift weapon, with his
fists, with anything, but the door had already closed behind her the moment she entered. I could hold
her hostage, force them to negotiate. But aside from not being very herolike, Todoroki knew full
well that taking a hostage required the willingness to harm them, and the longer he looked at
Yaoyorozu, the more he realized that he wasn't capable of that, no matter how far she might have
fallen. Without even a hint of an effort to conceal the anguish on his face, he hesitantly dropped the
needle into her palm and continued to study her features as she began to speak.

"You've spoken with Midoriya and Monoma, so you know the basics of what our group believes,
the goals we strive towards- a complete restructuring of the society that we live in, the restoration of
strength and merit as the driving factors determining social standing."

"Yeah, I sat through them spewing their insane propaganda." His voice rising in frustration, he took
her hands in his own. "Might is right, restoring the monarchy, abandoning the defenseless? I don't believe for a second that someone as brilliant as you could even think about buying into that bullshit. So please, Momo, tell me what's really going on."

"What's going on," she countered, "is that I realized that they're right, Shoto. I know it's hard to hear-it took me weeks to even consider the possibility- but it's the truth." Breaking free from his grip, she stood, created a stack of detailed charts and graphs from her forearm, and tossed the booklet of papers down on his bed.

"When a month had passed from the time they captured me without any progress in their recruitment effort, they agreed to let me research their claims about the current system's inevitable collapse, about the singularity, about… entropy. I would request crime statistics, economic reports, demographic charts, and they would provide them for me. Even classified government records that no one without a security clearance can access- thanks to Shinso and Hatsume, nothing I needed was beyond my reach. And so, for the next eight weeks, I studied over two thousand pages worth of data, calculated projections for the next fifty years from scratch, triple and quadruple and quintuple checked every single line of math. Do you want to know what I found?"

"That they were editing the data they sent you?" He muttered, shaking his head. "How the hell could you trust anything that they provided!? You're smarter than that!"

"I had the same concern, obviously." Yaoyorozu crossed her arms and began to pace path and forth across the cell while Todoroki leafed through the notes she'd given him. "Despite how authentic and legitimate everything appeared to be, I couldn't shake that doubt. So once I earned their trust- once they released me, and I had free reign to do as I pleased, free access to the internet- I rechecked every last figure, each sentence of each report down to the punctuation. I even watched Hitoshi brainwash government clerks and officials to get the same classified documents a second time, direct from the source- it was all real. So if my projections are correct- and they are-if crime rates and quirk potency both continue to skyrocket at their current rates, and the national debt… oh, don't even get me started on the national debt." Chuckling, she strode back over to his bed, pulled out one sheet in particular, an annual costs report from the Ministry of Finance, and dangled it in front of his face.

"Do you know how expensive heroes are for this country? And I'm not just talking about their salaries, but the funding for supporting their rescue operations, the damages from their fights, the cost of repairing swaths of buildings and infrastructure devastated on a nearly annual basis, if not even more often than that in the case of cities like Tokyo and Yokohama."

"Pretty cheap, right?" Shoto deadpanned, leaning back on his pillow with one eyebrow raised.

"More expensive than anyone outside the cabinet knows," she countered, unfazed. "Your father included. Even before the Age of Heroes, this country's public debt was massive, over to 200% of our GDP by the 2010s. Now that hero salaries and continuous infrastructural repairs have been draining government funds for the past century, we're finally at the brink."

"You're reading old textbooks, that crisis was averted decades ago." Reaching back to his second year, Shoto dredged up his memories of Ectoplasm's economics class. "The deficit fell to practically zero before our parents were born."

"That's what I thought too, until Shinso, Midoriya and I started to compare public expenditure reports with classified revenue data Hitoshi extracted from a deputy minister's assistant. Guess what we found out?"

"That you should've taken up a career in investigative journalism?"
"I see that your sense of humor has developed quite well since I last saw you, hm? Very funny, Shoto, but wrong. The deficit growth may have halted, but the public debt to GDP ratio is still nearly 300%, with no sign of decreasing any time soon, and at the same time, an asset bubble is slowly growing around the hero industry, around investment in the agencies themselves- it looks good on paper, but it's unsustainable growth, not reflective of real value. This country is due for its biggest economic bust since the 1990s, and only a few dozen people realize it."

"So things aren't looking good- nothing new there. What's this doomsday prediction of yours that I'm supposed to be so terrified of?"

"Seven years." She said matter-of-factly, as if reading the number off a spreadsheet. "Less than a decade until the hero bubble economy bursts and the stock market tanks, timed perfectly to coincide with increased quirk potency making crime practically impossible to contain: the dreaded singularity. Complete economic and social collapse will follow. Chaos, poverty, war, mass emigration- an exodus. The end of this country as we know it. For the past two years, everything I've done has been to prevent that from happening. The current system can't be saved, it's too late; the changes needed are too immense in scope. The only way forward is to replace it while there's still time, and if violence is necessary to achieve that, then so be it. So yes, I've lied, stolen, murdered, betrayed my ideals and my friends, abandoned my home and family, but in the end, it's all for the greater good, and that's why I can still sleep easy at night. I was faced with an impossible choice, but I made the logical decision, and if I had the chance to do it all over again, I'd gladly do the same."

"Then I truly don't know you anymore," Todoroki responded quietly, setting aside her papers and closing his eyes to try and meditate. "Please, leave. I want to be alone."

"If only you had as much time as I did to come to terms with the facts," Yaoyorozu perched one hand on her chin and gazed briefly off into space, a wistful look in her eye, before snapping back into focus. "We'll see after today, I suppose. As much as I hate to interrupt your brooding time, Shoto, you have a very important appointment to keep this morning- I hope you're feeling as photogenic as usual, because you're about to be on camera for quite a large audience."

By the time he opened his eyes, she was already aiming the air pistol at his chest- a slight pinch was all that announced that the tranquilizer dart had pierced his skin, and the pain barely even registered before his limbs began to grow weak and his vision murky, his cell's bright ceiling lights swiftly overtaken by darkness.

15 km outside Matsuya, Ehime Prefecture, Shikoku

One Hour after La Brava's Activation of Shieldbreaker

"My goodness, Midoriya! I know you told me the location would be scenic, but I never imagined that it would be quite like this!"

His hands propped on his hips as his cape billowed behind him in the cool morning wind, Gentle smiled broadly as he took in the mountaintop view of the sun rising over the forests of northern Shikoku, the secondary location they'd warped to via Kurogiri after making preparations in Tokyo. A few dozen meters behind him, the others were still making preparations inside a towering Buddhist temple of wood and stone, one of eighty-eight making up an ancient pilgrimage route that circumnavigated the entire island. The priests had been persuaded by Shinso to take the day off, and Yaoyorozu had created large barriers and signs a kilometer down the trail in either direction directing pilgrims to turn back due to scheduled maintenance. Now, all that was left was to watch and wait until the time was right, an activity Danjuro had joined Izuku and Toga in at a steep cliffside opposite the temple.
"You never take me to any romantic spots like this!" La Brava cried in dismay, walking up behind them with a pout on her face and her laptop in hand. "When's the last time the two of us went on a vacation?"

Just minutes ago, Aiba had finished setting up half a dozen hidden cameras in the hills around them, all connected to her computer, able to be remotely activated and adjusted by a keystroke, all for the sake of capturing the most views and angles of the action possible. Quick to comfort her as always, he leaned down and hoisted the shorter woman onto his shoulders, ignoring her whoop of shock and subsequent peals of laughter.

"Perhaps we shall, my darling, if all goes well today! What do you say, my dear Midoriya? Surely it wouldn't be unthinkable for the two of us to take a weekend off sometime later this month, if we continue to put in good work for you in the meantime."

"If all goes well today, then you'll have much more than a weekend's worth of vacation time in reward." Izuku turned to face them with a smirk on his lips. "We all will. But depending on the circumstances, it might be a bit more stressful than your average trip."

"Why don't you ever carry me like that, baby?" Tugging impatiently at her lover's coat, Toga looked pointedly in Tobita's direction before turning her puppy-dog eyes back to Midoriya.

"Because I don't trust you when I can't see what you're doing with your hands, my dear," he replied jokingly, before scooping Himiko up and carrying her back towards the others bridal style. A grove of cherry trees stood between them and the temple proper, neatly divided in two by a paved stone path running through the middle and a tall red torii gate at the entrance. On a small wooden table he'd erected toward the far end of the stand of trees, Gentle had set a pot of water to boil in an electric kettle; a glance at his watch confirmed that it should be nearly ready by now.

"Come, La Brava!" He cried dramatically, steadying her position on his shoulders with one hand before striding confidently down the path behind Izuku. "Our morning tea awaits, and we mustn't keep it waiting!"

A gust of wind set a storm of cherry blossom petals swirling around them as he walked, and Aiba oohed and aahed in childlike wonder at the sight- it was late March, after all, the peak season for the famous pink flowers. By the time they reached the table, Yaoyorozu and Mr. Compress were already seated and waiting for them; the four villains had quickly bonded over their love for tea, and Danjuro and Manami were delighted for the newfound company in their pre-mission ritual.

"I hope you all had a good night's rest," Tobita said amicably as he set La Brava back on the ground and began to pour the water into their cups. "That's the next most important thing for good performance, beside tea, of course!"

"This old man slept like a baby," quipped Compress with a grin, laying his mask down on the table and glancing through the box of different teas that Gentle had set out. "How about you, Yaoyorozu?"

"Oh, well enough. My mind is usually too preoccupied running through possible outcomes for me to get anything resembling a proper rest before this type of operation, but I manage just fine- it's the sleep the night afterward that's truly restful." She plucked out a bag of green tea for herself, then held a hand to her mouth in surprise at Aiba and Tobita's choice. "My goodness, no Imperial Golden Tips for you two today? I'm aghast, Gentle!"

"I thought we might mix things up a bit, for luck." Danjuro held out the bag he'd chosen for her inspection before dropping it in to let it steep; Manami waited on him to do the same, as she always
did. "I give you the Cleopatra blend! A decadent combination of rose petal, almond, milk, and honey!"

"That sounds delightful! Any chance that you could save me some for next time?"

"Of course, my dear, you absolutely must try it! I first encountered this particular blend at a wonderful little night café in Poland when I was on holiday there, and let me tell you, Yaoyorozu, it's truly something special. It has hints of…" Midsentence, he caught sight of La Brava's jealous eyes glaring a hole straight through Momo's skull, and remembered only too late how envious his partner was like to become when he when he discussed tea so enthusiastically with the younger female villain, as had occurred on a regular basis since the successful negotiation of their partnership with Midoriya's organization.

"…hints of cardamom and clove too, I think. La Brava, what do you think of it, compared to our usual?" Gentle wrapped a reassuring arm around Aiba's shoulders, but before he could gauge her reaction either way, Monoma strode over with Shinso and Hatsume trailing close behind, and captured the table's attention.

"At last, one of the little tea parties I keep hearing about, how delightful!" Neito clapped his hands together in glee and wafted some of the aromas with an audible sigh of delight. "A simply marvelous selection too! I'm quite impressed. Would you mind terribly if I joined?"

"The more, the merrier." Yaoyorozu wasted no time producing a fifth foldable chair from her back, and soon enough Monoma was sipping at a Darjeeling blend and reminiscing with Mr. Compress about the good old days of a year before.

"Are you sure you don't want to join in?" Momo held out a beckoning hand to the other two founders, but Shinso was quick to decline as he sipped from a thermos.

"The offer is appreciated, but I prefer coffee whenever possible."

"Coke and energy drinks." Mei shrugged, rubbing at her nose.

Suddenly Hitoshi's phone buzzed, and he glared down at the notification with tired eyes; if anything, his purple bags seemed even more intense than usual. *Someone didn't sleep very well*, Tobita chided mentally, shaking his head as he finished his first cup. *Though I wonder if he ever has. Hopefully it won't hurt the boy's performance.* Hatsume, by contrast, was wide-eyed, jumpy, and alert, her eyepiece flickering with data and her face streaked with grease from last-minute adjustments to her babies.

"Alright you guys need to start wrapping it up here," Hitoshi called, his gaze still fixed on the screen. Overhaul's strike team is in position, they're just waiting for the rest of us to start. T-minus five minutes 'til we go live, you got that, La Brava?"

"Yessir!" Aiba gulped down the rest of her tea and one go, grabbed, her laptop, and bounded back off toward the temple, followed closely by Yaoyorozu and Mei.

"The young have so much energy these days," Gentle sighed, taking up a more leisurely pace through the cherry blossoms alongside Mr. Compress.

"Oh, you can't fool me," Atsuhiro chuckled, fastening his mask back on and straightening his elegant top hat. "You're still young too, don't pretend otherwise." After another moment of walking together in peaceful silence, Compress laid a gloved hand on Tobita's shoulder and gestured off to the side of the path. "Gentle Criminal, would you allow me to speak with you in private for a moment?"
"Why, of course!"

When the two reached a more secluded spot and came to a halt, Sako drew in a deep breath and tapped the ground expectantly with his walking stick, as if summoning up the proper words was a strenuous act.

"I've been watching you with great interest ever since you joined us, Gentle. Partly because I've been asked to keep an eye on you, admittedly, but also partly because you remind me of myself when I was young. We're both showmen at heart, we thrive on the stage, on an audience. So while some parts of villainy come naturally to people like us- the theatrics, the scheming and deception, the grand drama of it all, I know that others… are more difficult."

"Whatever do you mean?" Gentle was hardly shocked to hear that he was still being monitored- the alternative would've been more concerning. "Ah, are you referring to the need to share the spotlight with others? I've been preparing myself for that adjustment, and I think that-"

"No, not that." Compress waved a hand to cut him off. "Even that comes easily enough. I know you've talked to Midoriya and Shinso about your role here today, that they've told you that you don't need to participate in the fighting if you don't want to. I'm here to tell you that if you truly want to work with us, to graduate from a B-rate internet celebrity- no offense, I enjoy your videos- to someone who can actually come within reach of achieving a broader set of goals, then there is no choice but to fight, and hold nothing back."

He paused again, and removed his mask and balaclava. Atsuhiro's face was kind, warm, even fatherly- Danjuro would never have guessed that it might belong to an infamous criminal of his stature.

"You've… never killed anyone before, have you, Gentle?"

"…No." Tobita managed after a moment, his eyes flitting down to the ground. "I haven't. Neither has the girl. I've… I've tried to shield her from that."

"I thought so. It's the hardest step for people like you and me to take, but you have to take it sooner or later, you and La Brava both, and the sooner the better. Now I know what you're thinking, that you're above things like that, that you can always get out of a scrap without stooping to that level. But a time will come when you can't. Maybe today, maybe tomorrow, maybe a year from now." Compress concealed his face again and started back off toward the temple. "I just want you to be ready, whenever it does."

"C'mon, c'mon, hurry it up, people, we haven't got all damn day here." Shinso sipped aggressively at what little coffee remained in his thermos as he checked his phone for what felt like the twentieth time in as many seconds, watching for any new messages from Overhaul or notifications from the hacked CCTV cameras monitoring Hawks' current location. "Two minutes until we're live. La Brava, check the camera feed. Twice, go ahead and clone Kurogiri while we have time. Spinner, get off your phone and check on the fucking prisoners before I have to use my quirk on you."

As one of the three team leaders, he bore responsibility for the first and arguably most important component of Operation Brennus, bringing down Hawks; it was by far the most complex and high-stakes mission Midoriya had ever entrusted him with, and he had no intentions of letting him down. He and Hatsume had hardly slept in the past two days, practically barricading themselves in one of her design studios to plan tactics and perfect support items, respectively, with occasional visits from Monoma, Yaoyorozu and Midoriya to ensure that they were both still alive. Together the five of them had come up with what, as far as he was concerned, was as flawlessly simple of a strategy for
this component of the mission as could be conceived. The two hostage students, Uravity and Coldflame, would serve as a lure for Hawks, and when he arrived, the full complement of villains at Shinso's command- Monoma, Twice, Spinner, Kurogiri, Mr. Compress, Yaoyorozu, and Nemoto Shin of the Eight Precepts- would ambush him at once from their hiding places in and around the temple, carefully chosen to best position them for optimal use of their quirks. Gentle and La Brava would film the action, while Hatsune would remain concealed on a hillside three kilometers away to snipe any other heroes or emergency responders who attempted to interfere. *We'll overwhelm the number one hero with sheer numbers, and by the time he or anyone else realizes what the others are after, it'll be far too late.*

In the courtyard before the tall wooden temple doors, Uraraka and Todoroki had were bound and gagged in metal pillories, tungsten-forged and practically indestructible, their hands restrained parallel to their heads as they kneeled on the ground with their ankles chained to the frame of the building. Their sedatives had gradually worn off over the course of the morning, and by now Ochako's chains were taut as she struggled desperately against them, her breath heavy and her muscles straining. Shoto, by comparison, was facing the situation much more calmly, fully immersed in some sort of meditation. Twice and Spinner had made a few increasingly irritating attempts to snap him out of it, but he seemed to be fairly committed to remaining silent and motionless. *It doesn't make a difference in the end,* Hitoshi reflected as he strode past the two. *We don't need him to talk on camera, just showing that he's alive and unharmed is enough.* Shinso paused when he reached Uraraka, though, and watched her thrash and struggle for a moment with a bemused expression.

"I'd brainwash you into being quiet, like a good little hero," he remarked, grinning, "but I just can't seem to make out a word you're saying. It has to be more or less intelligible for my quirk to work, after all."

"I don't know why she insists on this pointless little display." Monoma sighed, polishing one of his pocket watches as he passed by the two of them. "What do you think you're going to achieve, darling? Are you hoping to frighten us?" He held one hand to his mouth in mock terror before succumbing to a fit of laughter. "What do you think, Hitoshi? Were U.A. students always this pathetic, or did they simply drop in quality after we left?"

"The latter, as far as I can tell." Shinso glanced one more time at the time on his phone, then lowered his goggles, grabbed Ochako's face, and stared into her rage-filled eyes. Two holographic reticules on his heads up display locked onto her pupils, and a timer counted down the seconds until her face went blank and her struggling stopped all at once.

"Sit down and don't speak. Make no attempt to escape or leave this area unless I command you otherwise."

Once Uravity had complied wordlessly, he glanced back to Coldflame. *It would be ideal if he just stayed like this, but on second thought, best not to take any chances.*

"Hey, golden boy." Hitoshi crouched down and waved a hand in front of Shoto's face while Neito watched with his arms crossed, tapping one shoe impatiently. "Would you mind opening your eyes for me before I have Momo make pins to pry them open? The less we have to damage you the better, in my opinion."

Apparently, the mention of Yaoyorozu pushed him over the edge that Iguchi and Jin had failed to reach, and a few seconds later, Shinso had issued the same command to their second captive as well.

"Are you gentlemen finished over there?" Midoriya called, waving them over to the center of the yard, where all the villains present had assembled in a neat row, as if posing for a group photo; La Brava was setting up the camera a few yards away with Gentle's assistance.
"Okay, places everyone!" Aiba cried excitedly; Shinso picked up the pace and fell in line between Monoma and Hatsume, who continued to fidget uncontrollably in anticipation until he took her hand. The four founders naturally occupied center stage, with Yaoyorozu next in line, and the already well-known ex-League members on either flank, with the sole exception of Toga, who stood next to Midoriya with her arms wrapped around him. Once everyone was ready, Danjuro leapt out in front of the camera and straightened his bowtie while Manami held up her fingers for the countdown.

"And three, two, one, we're live!"

A red light above the lens flicked on, and as Tobita launched into the introduction, a thought crossed Shinso's mind that he'd done his best to suppress over the past two years: what his parents might think when they found out. The smile on his face slowly faded, and suddenly his heart felt like it was made of lead. *I'm sorry, mom. I'm sorry, dad. I hope the cops and press aren't too hard on you. I'll make sure they aren't.* Squeezing her hand between his fingers, Hitoshi leaned down and kissed Hatsume full on the lips in an effort to distract himself, smirking when her eyes widened in shock—Mei was almost always the one who initiated intimate moments between them, even if he was more than happy to reciprocate.

"Going public already, huh, babe?" She gasped when they broke apart.

"Ah, don't worry, the camera's still on Gentle."

"For luck, then?" Hatsume grabbed a handful of his hair and pulled him in again, something that was finally possible again on missions now that they'd all abandoned their respective dyes, gels, and false lenses.

"For luck." He mumbled past her tongue, unwilling to end the kiss even for a moment.

A sharp kick to the ankle from Neito finally brought Hitoshi back to reality; Danjuro's opening monologue was almost over, and they were up next.

*Time to show the world who we are.*

---

*Hiroshima, Chugoku Region*

*Downtown, Hondori Shopping District*

"What do you want on yours, kid? The octopus here is pretty solid from what I remember."

"Yeah, sure, octopus sounds good! And some udon noodles on top." Sero Hanta glanced up from his menu to make sure the waiter had heard his order, then shot Hawks a thumbs up to thank him for the recommendation.

After a graveyard shift working reconnaissance in pursuit of a gang of human traffickers in the port city, Cellophane and Gale Force had been dragged by their mentor to a 24-hour okonomiyaki restaurant he knew in the area, serving Hiroshima's famous local variation on the savory layered pancakes; after nearly ten straight hours of work with hardly any breaks to speak of, Sero was more than ready to devour the first thing someone set in front of him.

"Hmm, let's see, for the layers on mine…" Hawks set down the menu and began to count off ingredients on his fingers, his face locked in deep contemplation. "Squid, double cheese, mayo, yakisoba, and four fried eggs, please."

"I'll have whatever he's having!" Yoarashi practically bellowed at the poor man the moment he
turned in his direction, slamming his palms down on the table in excitement.

"Like we talked about, buddy, inside voice." Hawks chided, using one of his manipulable red feathers to catch the waiter's pen when he dropped it in surprise at the outburst.

"I am so incredibly sorry!" Inasa whispered, slamming his forehead into the table as gently as possible in a bow of apology.

Ever since taking on Gale Force as an intern last year, the number one hero been making an active effort to regulate some of the more eccentric aspects of the Shiketsu student's personality in order to help his media image and public appeal, occasionally with Hanta's assistance- so far, they'd met with more success than they'd initially expected.

"Wait, did you actually just order all that, though?" Sero asked incredulously, glancing across the table with a dumbfounded expression on his face. "For the same dish?"

"Gotta load up the calories while I can," Hawks replied with a shrug, picking his teeth with one of the already cleaned yakitori skewers he'd ordered as an appetizer. "You'll be doing the same thing when you go pro, trust me. I've got a full shift today after you two head back to school, I might not eat again 'til past midnight."

Due to his current status as the country's number one celebrity, arguably ahead of even All Might and Battle Fist, Hawks was able to exercise a good deal of leverage in securing his interns free passes out of classes when he needed them for assignments that conflicted them with school hours, though Nezu and Shiketsu's principal generally only allowed them to miss a total of one day total per week. It helped, of course, that Hiroshima, the location of their current operation, was a decent halfway point between the interns' two schools.

"Eh, I wish we didn't have to." Hanta frowned and sipped at his coffee. "Things have just been so depressing at U.A. this past week. How's Shiketsu been handling all the shit that's been going on lately?"

"I haven't noticed too much of a change." Inasa replied, one massive gloved hand on his chin- his bulky hero costume looked hilariously out of place shoved into a tiny booth in the middle of a restaurant. "I suppose some of the teachers seem pretty rattled, though. And my old senpai Shishikura has been texting me about the Osaka Group, he seems pretty interested in them. Come to think of it, Camie was freaking out and yelling about something after classes yesterday, but I'm pretty sure that was just girl drama."

"I hope things are going ok with her and Bakugo," Cellophane replied, a puzzled look on his face. "He was acting pretty weird yesterday too, he didn't show up to his first three classes."

"I don't understand relationships at all," Yoarashi sighed. "I mean, I get passion, but the whole romance thing doesn't make sense to me. What do you think, Hawks-sensei?"

"How many times do I have to tell you?" The winged hero chuckled. "It's just Hawks, please- drop the sensei. And don't you dare apologize!" He quickly added when Inasa began to prepare his body for another violent bow. "Now, on the topic of romance…"

Pausing briefly, Hawks turned to the window, where even at 8:00 AM, a small gaggle of women was chatting excitedly and pointing at him; a few of them were taking pictures and videos, some more subtly than others. When he flashed them a grin and a friendly wave, there was a good deal of blushing and giddy squealing.
"… It may not seem like it," he continued, turning back to them, "but I'm not exactly an expert either."

"With all due respect, boss, that's such a load of bullshit." Sero countered. "You've clearly got mad game, you could date any girl you wanted to. Don't tell me you've never at least thought about making a pass at Miruko."

"I don't have a death wish, so nope on that one. You remember what happened to that paparazzo when he tried to ask her out, right?"

"I wish I didn't," Hanta replied, wincing. "Poor dude. But you totally dodged the rest of that."

"Well put yourself in my shoes," Hawks continued, his tone suddenly a bit more serious. "I went pro the same year I finished high school, just a few months after graduation. From then on, I've had to work nonstop to get where I am now. No one in the existing hero elite wanted to take some punk teenager seriously, even if I did have a flashy quirk, so I had to put in twice the effort as anyone else just to get off the ground, resolve twice the number of cases, kiss twice the babies and give twice the interviews- none of it came easy. As dynamic as it is, the hero world is still dominated by tradition and the status quo- just look at guys like Yoroimusha and All Might, before he retired- at the top of the game for decades at a time, with little to no challengers for the highest spots. That's the problem I saw. That's what I wanted to change. That whole mission has defined everything I've done for the past six years, and I guess I sort of lost track of the little things along the way, like the birds and the bees. So, have I seen people? Yeah, occasionally. It's not like I'm a shut-in. But have I pursued a romance? Nope, never had time for it."

"You're… so wise, Hawks!" Inasa shouted as quietly as possible, a wide grin plastered across his face. "I'll take that to heart! Heroism always comes first!"

"Well, that's mostly true, but there are some situations where'd I'd say… oh shit, here comes the food!"

Sero could feel his mouth watering as the waiter set down their steaming okonomiyaki on the table, but before they could all dig in, his phone buzzed, and he checked it out of instinct- it was a text from Kaminari.

KD: dude. Are you seeing this shit

SH: what are you talking about?

KD: turn on the news

KD: are you with hawks now?

SH: ok ok jesus man, gimme a sec, I was about to eat

SH: yeah I am, why?

Shaking his head and resigning himself to the fact that it was probably a scandal involving some attractive female celebrity claiming she was Hawks' secret lover (it wouldn't be the first time), Hanta opened his news app; the top story on the front page, marked with a 'BREAKING' banner, linked straight to a live video. He clicked on the play button out of instinct without even reading the caption, and was presented with a stern-faced news anchor, midsentence in an explanation of whatever was happening.

"… exactly what their motives may be. For those viewers just tuning in, we'll play the video that we
and all of our affiliate stations received simultaneously twelve minutes ago, immediately after it was livestreamed on the web."

The camera cut to an image of a silver-haired man in a cape and elegant purple clothing, and Cellophane's eyes widened slightly in recognition. Gentle? What the hell did he do this time? Tobita Danjuro was a name most U.A. students were well-acquainted with, after he snuck into their cultural festival during Hanta's first year and put on a routine that ended in a chaotic fight with the faculty and staff; the area around the school was put on lockdown to hunt for him and La Brava for days afterward. He seemed harmless enough in his videos, but Sero had witnessed firsthand how dangerous he was when backed into a corner; he'd seen Tobita take down three teachers during his escape, including Eraserhead and Vlad King, who both ended up in the hospital with concussions and fractured limbs. Aizawa still swore up and down that he'd erased Gentle's quirk during their fight, but the ridiculous power Danjuro had wielded indicated otherwise.

"You gonna eat anytime soon, kid?" Hawks mumbled through a mouthful of food, one mayo and cheese-coated tentacle hanging out of his mouth.

"Yeah, just gimme a sec, my roommate said I need to watch this."

After a moment to buffer, the video started, and Tobita launched straight into one of his typical monologues.

"Welcome back, loyal viewers! This time, I have something a bit different from usual in store for you today. Lately, I've been thinking hard about what direction my journey with you all might take this year, and I'm excited to announce a new partnership between the Gentle Criminal and a group whose faces I think you'll all know very soon, if you don't already. In contrast to me, they've been keeping a low profile for the past two years, but that changes today, because today, ladies and gentlemen, my new friends and I are going to make history together. I'll let them speak for themselves, though."

The camera panned over to a group of villains standing in a row, and Hanta instantly recognized several- Twice, Toga, Spinner, Mr. Compress, most of the surviving members of the League. Hanta's stomach plummeted when he saw the five people standing in the middle, though.

"No fucking way…"

"The hell are you watching anyway?" Hawks swallowed the bite he'd been working on and leaned in to peek over his intern's shoulder. "Wait a second… is that…?"

"Momo?!" Jiro choked, tears streaming down her face. "No, no, it can't be her. Tell me it's not her, Mina!"

"I… don't know…" Ashido stuttered, her black-and-gold eyes wide and her hand shaking as she struggled to hold her phone up sideways in front of the gaggle of 3-A students that had gathered around her to watch the video. First period was about to start, but no one's mind was anywhere remotely close to school right now. For once, even Bakugo was stunned speechless, and Asui looked sickened at the sight of Yaoyorozu alongside Toga Himiko, clutching desperately at her reattached tongue.

"What's going on over there?" Midnight called, yawning as she walked into the room, at the last minute before the bell as always. "Sit down, everyone." Then Nemuri noticed Kyoka's tears and the horrified faces of everyone in the crowd, and confusion spread across her face. "Is something wrong? What happened?"
Still trembling, Mina turned the phone around so that their teacher could see, her other arm still wrapped around Kyoka's shoulders. As Midnight watched the former U.A. students recount the story of their turn to villainy with an expression that shifted from perplexed to shocked to somber, the rest of the class's reactions were varied. Jiro and Hagakure sobbed, the former plugging her ears and refusing to even look at the screen when Momo started speaking about how she'd researched the devastating cost of heroes to the economy. Tsuyu excused herself and ran to the restroom to vomit the moment the camera zoomed in on Toga and Midoriya, hunched in the throes of a panic attack over the toilet for minutes afterward as her mind forced her to relive the end of the fight in Yokohama. Kirishima punched a hole through the nearest wall when the shot panned to show Uraraka and Todoroki bound and gagged, Shoji laid his head down on his desk in silent distress when he saw no sign of Tokoyami, and Bakugo simply stood, wide-eyed and rooted to the spot where he'd first seen Izuku on the screen.

"He did it." He murmured to himself after a while, his voice tinged with disbelief. "Deku actually fucking did it. I never actually thought... he was always... Jesus fucking Christ." The right words refused to form in his mouth, which had suddenly gone dry.

This is your fault, the voice at the back of Katsuki's head shouted, snippets of their childhood together flashing through his mind. You did this to him, you worthless piece of shit, because you were afraid of him, afraid of how much better a person he was than you. As usual, he ignored it, curled one hand into a fist, and slammed it into the whiteboard.

"I'll kill that bastard myself."

When Kendo first saw Monoma on the screen of Present Mic's laptop, she quite literally refused to believe her eyes, even as her 3-B classmates reacted with shock and horror all around her. It must be a trick, she told herself, the sound of her heart pounding in her chest drowning out the tears and shouts of dismay, her face flushed crimson. Some sick practical joke. It's a lookalike, or a clone, or that freak Toga. It can't be him. But Himiko was plainly visible farther to the left, and when the neatly dressed, blond-haired boy that couldn't possibly be Monoma began to speak, all the air slipped out her lungs at once, as if she'd suddenly been rammed in the gut by the force of a dozen blows. No, please. Tears began to well in her eyes, no matter how much she tried to hold them back.

"...I was always struck during my time at U.A. by how profoundly weak my alleged 'peers' were," he was saying. "In terms combat prowess, some of them were certainly sufficient, but their ideals, methods, goals? None of them were even close to worthy of holding the title of hero they worshipped so readily. It was pathetic, really. I wondered to myself more than once- are they really the future of this country? Because you deserve the best- certainly better than what that school is producing."

"Turn it off." Itsuka snapped, rubbing furiously at her eyes. "I don't want to watch any more of this shit." The cadence, the choice of words, the haughty tone- everything about the villain's speech screamed that it was really Monoma, and she knew it. Is it my fault? Was I not a good enough friend to you?

To her surprise, Hizashi actually complied, closing his computer and shaking his head resignedly. 3-B's first period teacher been browsing the web before class when the video started to blow up online, and when his students began to chatter about it as well, he'd turned the laptop around and played it for them, equally as curious as they were about its contents.

"I, uh... wow. You kids stay here." Mic stood up from his chair and started toward the door. He was doing his best to seem as casual and carefree as normal, but it clearly wasn't working; he couldn't
hide the haunted look on his face. "Don't worry, okay guys? Everything's gonna be alright, the pros have this situation handled. I need to go have a quick talk with some of the other staff members about this."

"Take me with you," said Kendo, standing abruptly once she'd shrugged off Tetsutetsu's attempts to comfort her. "I need to talk to him too."

Yamada paused halfway to the door, and gave her a sympathetic glance. They both knew who she was talking about. No ordinary U.A. student could speak to a teacher that way, but she wasn't exactly an ordinary student, as much as she tried to be.

"Okay, come on. I better not get yelled at for this."

"This is bad." Aizawa grabbed the remote and pressed the pause button. He'd scarfed down a generous helping of toast and eggs before he walked in on All Might watching the video on the staff lounge TV, but by now, he felt like it was all going to come back up soon enough at this rate.

"I… failed that boy… We… failed that boy, Shota." Tears were streaming down all All Might's sunken cheeks when he lifted his head out of his hands. "We put him on this path, and Hatsume and Shinso with him. This… this is my fault."

"No, it's not." Eraserhead grabbed Toshinori's shoulders and forced the taller man to look him in the eye. "We are not responsible for his choices and actions, Yagi. We gave him the only answer we could. Maybe… maybe I was too harsh." He sighed heavily and shook his head. "But if he had this darkness inside him all along, is there anything we could have done for Midoriya?"

"We could have saved him!" All Might protested, his agonized voice breaking midsentence. "It was my responsibility to save him, and I failed to even realize how severe the real problem was! I'm pathetic!"

The door swung open before Aizawa could reply, and Present Mic burst through with Battle Fist at his side.

"What is she-" Shota started to ask, but suddenly All Might was on his feet and at the entrance, wiping his eyes clean as he greeted his apprentice.

"Young Kendo… about your classmate Monoma, I…"

"Let me go after them, please." Her words were heavy with despair, and her eyes were puffy from crying, but the next Symbol of Peace kept a straight face as she made her request. "I know you'll be going after them soon. You or any number of other pros. It doesn't matter who, they'll listen to you, but I have to be there. I… I need to save Neito."

"And what if he's already beyond saving?" Aizawa crossed his arms. "What if that's exactly what he wants you to do? If they're all trying to lure you and their other former friends to your deaths?"

"Then I'll defeat him, and I'll bring him back to face the consequences." Kendo clenched her fists and forced her trembling mouth into a hard line. Her eyes were watery, but she managed to hold in the tears this time. "He was my friend. Neito is my responsibility, no matter what."

Midway through the villains' speech, the restaurant staff had turned the wall-mounted TV to the news channel; by now, Sero, Hawks, and Yoarashi were at the front of a small crowd of people standing beneath it, watching transfixed as Midoriya and the others laid out the beliefs and tenets of
their organization, some ridiculous, doomsday-mongering corruption of meritocracy that argued that the country would collapse if the strong didn't take power. Hanta was still dumbfounded that Momo could possibly associate with a cause like this, but her argument about heroism's detrimental effect on the debt-ridden economy had been more thought-provoking than he cared to admit.

"Now we know that simply pointing out the need for change doesn't suffice," Midoriya was saying, his tone calm and methodical. "As urgent as the problems facing our society are, those at the top of the hierarchy would never willingly hand the reigns over to people like us, relinquish their power and influence, even as they continue to knowingly drive this country into the ground and ignore the consequences on the horizon. Change is hard to accept, after all, and radical change harder still. Sometimes a step in the right direction requires a bit of a push, and the old guard must be made to move aside by force. So no matter what happens today, no matter how it affects you and your personal lives, remember that everything we do is for the greater good. My name is Midoriya Izuku, but you can call me Seraph, if you'd like. They've spoken to you already, but I think my companions still need to formally introduce themselves as well."

Over the next few seconds, the camera cut to a close-up each one of the former U.A. students in turn.

"I'm Monoma Neito, but these days I prefer Chaudron."

"Hatsume Mei here! I go by Longshot now!"

"Shinso Hitoshi, but call me Synapse."

"My name is Yaoyorozu Momo. I'd settled on Creati before, but I think Pandora suits me better."

"And I'm Toga Himiko!" The ex-League schoolgirl cried giddily, blushing as she waved at the camera. "I guess a lot of you already know me, huh? It's nice to be appreciated! I'm going by Carmilla now, though, so be sure to remember that!"

In one final cut, the camera shifted back to Izuku, smiling broadly and holding his arms wide open as if to embrace the audience.

"We are the Syndicate, and we're here to save you. The only ones who need be afraid are those who are still harming our nation. I'd like to make an example of one such person for you all this morning—our new number one hero, Hawks."

On cue, the view switched to one of Todoroki and Uraraka in chains, their expressions blank and eyes glassed over as they knelt on the ground. Out of the corner of his eye, Sero could see Inasa's jaw clench and his gloved hands curl into hefty fists.

"Todoroki… I still can't believe they got you." Gale Force shook his head in frustration. "You better hang in there, or I'll never forgive you."
For his part, Hanta simply looked on in silent terror, his feet stuck to the floor and his mouth immobile; it didn't help ease his mind about the situation that he'd had a crush of sorts on Uraraka for most of the past year, ever since she wiped the floor with him in one of their midterm close-combat drills. It wasn't anything more than what Kaminari would refer to as 'mild infatuation' on his patented ten-point spectrum of attraction, but knowing she was suffering and alone somewhere had still been agonizing him over the past week- it was why he'd been so quick to join Bakugo when he decided to go after the two. Midoriya's voice jerked Sero back to the present, though.

"So, Hawks, here are the terms. If you can't reach me within the time limit I set, I'm going to execute both of them. Now before anyone else watching gets any bright ideas- if anyone other than Hawks shows up before time expires- police, other heroes, their families- both of them will die immediately, so be sure to play by the rules, everyone! Now I know that you're in Hiroshima right now, in Hondori, to be precise. The distance between you and me is approximately 115 kilometers. With your top recorded speed of 225 kilometers per hour, you should be able to reach us in around thirty-one minutes. I'm going to give you thirty from the moment I start my watch, so try your best to push your limits. What was that old phrase these two liked so much? Oh, yes." Seraph's lips curled into a satisfied grin. "Go beyond, Plus Ultra."

The camera panned up to a view of an ornate Buddhist temple and the surrounding mountains, before it zoomed back in on Izuku.

"As for where we are, I think that's the only hint you need. While you may not be watching this live, we're watching you, so your time will start the moment you reach this point in the video! See you soon!" After one last friendly wave from Midoriya, the video cut to a live countdown, which had just started from 30:00.

By the time Sero noticed that the restaurant's door was ajar, Hawks was already airborne, his wings a distant red streak against the blue morning sky.

"He just saw it!" La Brava called, watching the CCTV feeds displayed on her laptop with hawkish eyes. "Starting the countdown now… and he's already out the door. He may actually make it in time!"

"I'll be so very disappointed if he didn't," Seraph purred. "Give Strike Team Vandal the go-ahead to move on police headquarters. I'm curious to see how Overhaul handles the little challenge I've given him. It's tragic that I won't be able to see either operation for myself, though." He laid a black-gloved hand on Shinso's shoulder before changing his mind and pulling Synapse into a tight hug. "Do your best, Hitoshi. I have complete faith in you."

"Thank you, sir," Shinso replied, then pulled Hatsume's sleek black voice-disguiser over his mouth, muffling his speech immediately. "He won't stand a chance."

Once he'd wished luck to Chaudron and Pandora as well, and Midoriya took Toga's hand in his own and turned to Mr. Compress.

"Are you ready, then, sir?" Atsuhiro asked.

"Yes. Do it."

"Very well. Stand still, this won't hurt a bit."

With a flourish of his hands, Sako compressed Izuku into a translucent blue marble, which Himiko promptly inserted beneath her tongue.
"Careful now, Carmilla, you mustn't swallow him! I assure you, getting him back wouldn't be pleasant."

"You think I'd be so careless?" Toga looked genuinely offended. "I could never hurt my baby like that!"

"Very well, just an old man being cautious. I'm sure you'll perform spectacularly today."

Himiko gulped down a vial of blood as she listened to him talk, and winced in discomfort as her body grew in height by over a foot, a beige suit replacing her sweater. When she responded, Nighteye's voice still sounded unfamiliar on her lips. *Oh well, it'll just take a few minutes to get used to. I can see so far from up here!*

"You better believe I will. Kurogiri, portal?"

"Of course, Carmilla."

The yellow-eyed villain summoned a pulsing black-and-purple warp gate with a wave of his hand, and Toga had to remind herself to wipe the excited grin off her face as she strode through. La Brava's clone was already waiting on the other side, crouched down in a stand of bushes that did hilariously little to conceal her bright red costume.

"Oh hey, was wondering when you'd show up!" Aiba smirked and pressed a few keys on her laptop. "The security system is basically my puppet at this point thanks to Shieldbreaker, I can make the cameras see whatever I want to. What a shame that they didn't upgrade it more thoroughly since the last time I was here. But wow that disguise is definitely legit enough to get you through, even without me!"

"I'd rather not take any chances." Himiko gazed up through the trees to the top of the hill they stood at the base of, where the school's walls towered over the landscape. "Let's proceed as planned, on my mark. I'll go through the west entrance." She managed to keep her face straight, but still couldn't stop the blush that crept onto her cheeks as she started up the rise. "I'm so excited to see U.A. for the first time."

Chapter End Notes

After meaning to get to them for a while, I finally managed to address Todoroki's perspective and Momo's motivations, tell me what you thought of her analysis! Also, villain names for everyone! Some explanations for a few of them: Yves Chaudron was one of the most notorious art forgers in history, notable for making essentially perfect copies of the Mona Lisa after he helped steal it. Carmilla is the most famous female vampire in literature, and is Dracula's bride in a few stories. Seraphim are the highest-ranking angels in Christian tradition- Midoriya will explain more about why he chose this name later. As always, let me know how you felt about everything in the reviews! Can Hawks win in these circumstances? What are Toga and Midoriya doing at U.A.? This chapter is part one of two, the next one should be out by the end of the month, and will be almost entirely action.

P.S. A spinoff of just villain tea parties would be very fun to write. Gentle and Compress are too pure. Also, the cafe in Poland Gentle mentions is a real place, it's called Bunkier Cafe and it's in Krakow! They actually have the Cleopatra tea blend he's
drinking, it's really good.
"Before anything else, the students' safety is our top priority- and I mean anything. If you have a choice between saving one of them and stopping one of the villains from escaping, always prioritize the rescue. Our first goal upon entry should be to prevent this from turning into a hostage situation, but if it does, follow my lead, and comply with their demands if I do- it's better to have to withdraw than to get the hostages killed. Don't get trigger-happy, no matter what you do- if bullets start flying, this'll turn into a bloodbath, and our chances of a safe recovery drop to almost zero. And remember, we're dealing with Toga Himiko here; I know it goes against your instincts, but be sure to verify the students' identities before letting your guard down or freeing them their restraints. Remember the personal questions we rehearsed for both of them- asking for names of pets or relatives outside the immediate family is your best bet. Everyone got all that?"

Once Mandalay had telepathically communicated his whispered instructions to Death Arms and the squad of armored police waiting in the elevator, and the Punching Hero shot him a thumbs-up to confirm that they'd been received, Edgeshot motioned silently and continued toward the ominous black wooden door waiting for them in the middle of the hallway, using his quirk to flatten himself against the wall so that he made practically no sound. Soft morning sunlight filtered in through wide windows on either end of the corridor, but recon by the other team had confirmed that all the ones in the penthouse were shuttered. When Kamihara came to a stop just a few feet from the entrance, Mandalay moved up behind him, keeping her footsteps as silent as possible; one-by-one, Death Arms and the six officers followed their lead, taking up strategic positions around the doorway to cover it from all possible angles.

Narrowing the search down from the city of Osaka to this specific apartment building had been a monumental task, to say the least. The group of villains they were dealing with, a peculiar blend of former League members and several yet-unidentified newcomers, had been taking great pains to conceal their movements since they first came onto the professionals' radar around two years ago, and they'd proved almost impossible to track for multiple other heroes. Edgeshot had been on their trail for around six months now, and he'd closely monitored their conflict with Shigaraki Tomura's loyalists whenever and wherever they left any visible signs of their handiwork. He'd nearly caught up with them in Kobe, then again in a Nabu Ward warehouse several weeks ago- Shigaraki's body had still been warm when Shinya arrived on the scene. After that, their trail had disappeared again for a while, until they slipped up three times within a few days, once here in Osaka, once at their now-infamous encounter with Ryukyu and Gang Orca's teams in Yokohama, and once at the shipyards in Niigata.

Using witness reports from the participants of all three battles and a few intercepted fragments of phone calls and texts, he'd been able to put together workable sketches of several of the group's unknown members: Hairo, medium-length gelled black hair and green eyes with notable bags, an unknown quirk. Saiki, short, straight brown hair and brown eyes, an elegant style of dress, a metamorphosis-type quirk. Yumeko, blue hair kept in a ponytail, purple eyes, proficient with a rifle and support items, possibly either a stealth-type or accuracy-enhancing quirk. Cross-referencing sightings of people matching those profiles on top of the existing ones for the group's ex-League
members, Kamihara been able to piece together a rough picture of their recent movement that roughly centered on Osaka. After a week of nonstop coordination with local heroes and civilians to monitor for unusual activity and narrow down the search area, he had finally located what he believed their headquarters on the top floor of a luxury apartment complex. The owner of the building insisted that the penthouse's occupants were pleasant, quiet tenants when he was questioned, but upon further investigation of their accounts, Edgeshot had discovered that despite what the owner believed, not a single yen had been paid toward rent or utilities in their eighteen months of residence there. When the tenant names and social security numbers in the system came back as falsified, he finally had all the evidence that he needed, and the government granted him the authority to assemble the rescue team that was currently ready and waiting to strike. In planning the operation, Kamihara had based many of the details and tactics off the raid on the League of Villains hideout two years ago.

"Alright," he whispered to Mandalay, who once again communicated everything via her quirk to the others. "On my mark. Three, two, one, mark." He nodded to the police officer on the other side of the door, who reached out his hand and knocked.

"Hello, Osaka City Maintenance! We're here to fix your pipes!"

Once two seconds of silence had followed, Shinya pressed a single button on his phone to give the all-clear to the team on the roof, and the sound of breaking glass filled the air as Tiger and the other police squad rappelled in through the windows. Moments later, Edgeshot flattened himself again and slid through the gap between the door and the wall, though doing so was more difficult than he'd expected; this entryway was better-sealed than most. The room he found himself in was dimly lit and seemingly vacant, little more than a lobby, with a short hallway leading down to the main living area and other rooms; Tiger's shouted commands were audible on the other side of the penthouse, but it didn't seem that they'd encountered anyone yet either. After a quick glance around to confirm that no one was in the immediate vicinity, he turn back to open the door for the others, and his eyes widened slightly as he suddenly understood why he'd had to exert himself to get past it. Before him was one of the most thoroughly secured entryways he'd ever seen, with multiple analog and electronic locks and several layers of metal reinforcement. *This thing belongs in a bank vault, not a penthouse.*

"Force entry!" He called, hoping that they could actually hear them on the other side. Thankfully, Kamihara's doubts were assuaged when one of Death Arms' fists sent the door flying off its hinges and careening down the hall in one swift blow, and the Tokyo-based hero charged through with Mandalay and the police at his heels. After checking his corners, Edgeshot slowly and cautiously made his way down the corridor, gesturing for the policemen to check and clear the other side rooms they passed along the way. They found no sign of the villains anywhere, though, and when Shinya's group reached Tiger and his squad in the main foyer, it appeared that they'd met similar results so far.

"No luck on your end either?" Chatora asked, his mouth drawn in a frown as he helped his officers check the couches, fireplace, and TV stand.

"None yet," Kamihara replied, glancing around at the walls and ceiling, searching for any clue that the occupants had left behind. The lights were off, and nearly everything but the furniture had been stripped bare, by the looks of it. "Mandalay, are you picking up anyone at all here?"

"Not a single soul aside from our team," Sosaki called disappointedly from the other side of the room, her eyes closed and one paw-gloved hand on her temple. By applying Telepath to broadcast brief, frequent messages with no specific recipients in mind, she could generally detect how many people were inside her quirk's radius, as well as their rough locations. "If they were here, I'd have picked them up by now."
"What about those two lead-lined rooms the satellites picked up?" Shinya offered. "If they're holed up inside there, there could be interference with your quirk."

"I already checked both myself," said Tiger, his wiry arms folded. "Seems like they were cells after all, but there was nothing left, even the bedding and books were gone."

"Damn it." Edgeshot shook his head in frustration. "The heat scans picked up at least a dozen people here just twelve hours ago. How did they know we were coming? We took every precaution…"

Stay calm, Shinya, he reminded himself, closing his eyes and clearing his head of distractions. Don't let this case get under your skin. They can't be far- we have them on the run now.

"Alright, listen up, everyone. I'll use my quirk to perform a full search of every last inch of this place before we move on, behind the walls and above the ceiling and wherever else they might have something hidden, a valuables stash or a black box if we're lucky. I also saw some security monitors and hardware in a station down the hall- they probably wiped the hard drives, but we can have the techs poke around and see if they can piece anything together. For now, keep looking, and report back to me if you find anything out of the ordinary, no matter how small. Is that understood?"

"Yes sir!" The room responded in unison, before they set off to carry out his commands in short order. Tiger took his men to search the villains' living quarters, while Death Arms, Mandalay, and three of his six officers followed Edgeshot into the kitchen.

"You just can't catch a break with these guys, huh?" Shino asked as they began to methodically pick apart the room, a sympathetic smile on her face.

"Yeah, for real." Death Arms echoed. "I can't believe you've been on them for six months and still haven't even seen one of them in person. I dunno if I could stand that, I think I'd go crazy from anticipation."

"Patience is often the most difficult aspect of the art of heroism," Kamihara quipped, perusing the cabinets for anything that could possibly be of use to the investigation. "It took me many years of careful practice and meditation to be able to…"

He trailed off as he neared the pantry, and a faint beeping sound became audible, muffled behind the wood. An ordinary person would likely have missed it completely, but Shinya's senses were sharper than most.

But the explosive scans came up negative, he thought to himself as he opened the door and came face-to-face with a massive bomb, its timer ticking away the seconds until detonation. Taped on top of it was a short handwritten note, smudged with patches of grease all around the messy penmanship of a simple message: 'Bye-bye, Edgeshot!'

:06

True to his creed, Shinya didn't panic; rather the opposite, judging that taking vital time to inform the others would only slow him down and damage the entire team's chances of survival, he calmly folded himself down into a paper-thin scarlet ribbon and dove straight between two metal panels to find the detonator and sever its connection. Playing around with the insides of a bomb is no different than doing the same with the insides of a human- mess with the right parts in the right way, and everything shuts down. If this one was like most of the improvised explosives that he'd dealt with over the course of his long career, defusing it would be a breeze.

:05
As it happened, Kamihara discovered almost instantly that this bomb was not, in fact, like most of the ones he'd dealt with. Every inch of the internal circuitry and wiring had been welded by the hands of a master electrical engineer, with none of the usual gaping flaws or weaknesses of the typical jury-rigged work of an amateur villain. To make matters worse, the explosive core was connected to a sophisticated, automatic version of a dead man's trigger, so that no matter which wire he attempted to cut or which component he attempted to separate, any disruption of the power supply would instantly cause a detonation. *Think, think,* he cried internally, rooting around the wires for any defect that the craftsman had overlooked. *There has to be some way!*

*04*

After a rapid inspection of every last cranny and corner of the device proved futile, Edgeshot burst back out of the bomb and unfolded into his normal form, this time checking the exterior. *Could Death Arms pick it up and throw it out the window?* He wondered, glancing back at the Punching Hero, who was still obliviously checking drawers at the other end of the room; thanks to the way the kitchen was set up, none of the others could see inside the pantry from their positions. Shinya was about to call out to him when he noticed that the bomb's wiring extended into the floor and walls as well - there was no way to remove it without triggering it.

*03*

Conceding that stopping the detonation in this timeframe was impossible, Kamihara turned around and swiftly assessed the situation, his eyes flitting back and forth. There were a hundred different ways that he could escape these circumstances: fold into a twisting ribbon again and skate down the side of the building at a speed of twenty meters per second, or a paper airplane to let the swift winds carry him away, or a needle the width of a hairpin to shoot down through the floor until he was all the way back in the lobby. But what about the others? He could shout, yes, warn them, but with three seconds left, what would that accomplish besides confusion and panic? There was no way that any of them could make it out in time, and even if he drew himself out to paper thinness and wrapped his own body around the bomb in self-sacrifice, it wouldn't absorb enough of the blast to save them, judging by the sheer quantity of explosives he'd seen inside. *Am I really that useless of a hero, of a leader? There are fifteen other people in this apartment with me, they placed their trust in me, and I'm about to get them all killed because of my carelessness.* Edgeshot felt like screaming, crying, raging at the world, but he wouldn't allow himself those luxuries.

*02*

*If I can just save one person,* he told himself, his calm gaze growing frantic now, his heart pounding in his chest, *one single person, that would be enough.* *That's what a hero does. But who?* Death Arms was too heavy for him to carry, the police officers too far away to reach. Shinya's eyes quickly settled on Mandalay, the closest to him, and with no time to waste he launched himself toward her. Thankfully several of Tiger's men had entered through the floor-to-ceiling kitchen windows, and the cords they used to rappel down were still twisting aimlessly in the wind, just outside the shattered glass.

*01*

"What are you-" she started to ask, but then the breath was knocked out of her chest as Kamihara wrapped his arms around her waist and leapt through one of the jagged openings, out into the empty morning air. With one arm supporting Sosaki, he only had a single chance to grab the cord; thankfully, his fingers found purchase, and their momentum swung them out and away from the windows.
Edgeshot felt the shockwave of the blast before he heard the sound, a deafening roar that seemed to split open the sky. Bright orange light filled the corners of his vision before he reminded himself to close his eyes and hold Shino’s face tight against his chest so that neither of them would be blinded by light or shrapnel. Then the heat hit him all at once, and he gasped in pain at half his hero costume was incinerated in an instant, and a lashing tongue of fire covered his back in agonizing burns.

Adjusting midair, he tried to position himself to take the brunt of the blow, but Mandalay's leg and side were scorched as well, and she cried out in confusion and pain as several sections of her bright orange Pussy-Cat costume were reduced to cinders. The force of the explosion propelled them out even further in their arc, and despite the ringing in his ears, he seized the first opportunity to assess her condition, ignoring his own for now.

"Mandalay, can you hear me? Are you alright?"

She didn't respond except for an anguished grunt, but he was forced to accept that for the time being, and twisted his head to look back at the apartment. As he feared the entire top floor was a hollowed-out shell; what remained of the interior was filled with raging flames.

"Alright," he called over the sound of the air screaming past them, "I have a plan, but you need to listen carefully, we'll only have one shot. I'm going to get onto your back and fold myself out into a sort of improvised hang glider for you, but you'll need to hold on tight and do exactly as I instruct you. Have you ever been hang gliding before, Mandalay?"

No response, aside from another grunt- Kamihara's brows furrowed in concern, and he tore his gaze away from the approaching ground to look back at her.

"Sosaki? Can you…"

Then he noticed the long shards of glass embedded in Shino's neck and side, and the stream of warm crimson blood dripping from her collar onto his chest, and the piece of iron rebar protruding from his stomach.

"Oh."

As the full pain of his injuries suddenly broke like a wave, Shinya's vision suddenly began to fade in and out, and a ragged cough filled his mask with blood. He tried desperately to fold himself, to save Sosaki at any cost to his own body, but he could no longer summon the strength, and the last thing Edgeshot saw before he slipped out of consciousness was Mandalay's wide, frightened brown eyes.

"Okay, before we go in, I'll ask again. For the last fucking time, does everyone understand what the hell they're doing? Because if I catch any one of you stepping a single toe out of your assigned roles- and this goes for my boys and our new partners both- I will execute you on the spot, no questions asked. Got it?"

His arms crossed impatiently, Chisaki Kai looked out over the members of his strike team, currently spread out across the main armory of one of his remaining bunkers, daring them to reply. He'd been able to assemble a rather formidable force, thanks to Midoriya's help, as much as tolerating the little creep grated on his nerves. His own men were mostly at the back of the room: Kurono Hari was cleaning his pistol, while Setsuno Toya polished his katana and Rappa Kendo strapped on his
massive metal knuckles. To think they're all that's left of my lieutenants, Overhaul mused, frowning beneath his plague mask. Aside from Nemoto Shin, who was with Strike Team Visigoth in Shikoku, the rest of his underbosses and Eight Expendables had all been captured, either in Nighteye's raid on his Trigger production facility two years ago, the same day he lost Eri, or in the twin battles in Yokohama and Niigata last weekend. I'll take them back. All of them, and the girl—once this is done, no one will be able to stop me.

Ten of his best foot soldiers, all holding assault rifles or light machine guns equipped with high-capacity drum magazines, evened out the Precepts' contribution to the elite force; for today's mission, all their plague masks, including Kai's own, had been equipped with gas filters to protect them from Mustard's quirk. The school-aged boy in question had already donned his own mask, and was carefully loading his black steel Python revolver alongside the other two transfers from the Syndicate. As Chisaki predicted, Dabi was the first to raise his hand in reply, his turquoise eyes gleaming with amusement.

"So how about half a toe? Like, what if I see some guy over in your section whose face I just really can't stand, and I need to burn it off real quick so it doesn't keep bugging me?"

Dark Shadow issued a rasping cackle from its beaked mouth at that, and Overhaul's golden eyes narrowed in frustration.

"What's so funny?"

"Everything about today is funny," the sentient quirk retorted, its harsh, growling voice booming through the metal-walled chamber. "You're funny because you think you're scarier than Master Shinso, your little gang is funny because you're all dressed to look like a bunch of birds when I'm the only real one here, and Dabi's funny because his dumb little joke reminded me of the time last week when I tore a some guy's face off and then threw him out the window of a skyscraper. Now that was hilarious!" The shadow laughed again to emphasize his point, and Kai raised one eyebrow.

"You think this is all some kind of joke? We're going up against the Tokyo fucking PD, not the two-bit wannabes you guys love to beat on so much. They're gonna put up a fight."

"Exactly!" Dark Shadow crowed gleefully. "That's why I'm so excited, it's about to be a real bloodbath! I wanna try some new techniques, there are some pretty brutal finishers I've been working on. I'll tell you what, Master Overhaul. I don't usually listen to anyone aside from Master Shinso, but if you kill enough cops today, maybe I'll consider starting to listen to you."

"Ah, but that means I'll have to start listening to him too," Dabi protested, looking up from where he was setting up the video camera La Brava had given him.

"I apologize on both of their behalves," Mustard spoke up, though his tone was hardly sympathetic.

This is who Midoriya sends me? This is the best the Syndicate has to offer? Overhaul clenched one fist, breathed deeply, and resisted the urge to pull a glove off and reduce the both of them to puddles of blood and gore with two swipes of his hand. They're too valuable to kill. You and they both know that.

Even aside from the backtalk, Dark Shadow already unnerved Chisaki enough by virtue of its existence; the concept of a quirk gaining self-awareness and proceeding to enslave and puppet its owner's body for years on end didn't do much to remedy his distaste for quirks in general, no matter how powerful and useful his own was.

"If you're done making asses of yourselves," he started, nodding to the clone of Kurogiri, who'd
arrived several minutes ago, "we should be about ready. How much longer, Kurono?"

"The video's already over," Chronostasis replied, glancing at the wall-mounted monitor livestreaming the performance from Shikoku on his end of the room. "He's just waiting for Hawks to respond now. Shouldn't be long."

"Speak of the devil," Kai muttered as his phone began to buzz- it was the text from Shinso that he'd been waiting for, one simple word: 'Begin.'

"Alright!" Overhaul cried, cracking his knuckles, "We officially have a go, let's do this!"

All previous distractions forgotten, everyone in the room stood and readied themselves in an instant. Magazines slid into their weapons with a resonating click, safeties were released, and the red recording light on Dabi's camera flicked on as he aimed it at himself.

"Hey there, internet. Hope you guys are feeling excited after that, because man, do we have a show for you now. I'd personally say it's a lot more fun than the last one, there's a lot less talking."

On the monitor, the image of the countdown for Hawks was replaced by Dabi's scarred and stitched face- everyone who had been watching the video from the temple before was now seeing him.

"Because you see," Dabi continued, putting all the charisma of a used car salesman into his role, "Gentle isn't the only other big name the Syndicate's teaming up with. You guys probably recognize this ugly mug from the wanted posters. You wanna say hi, Overhaul?"

He flipped the camera around so it was facing Chisaki, who simply shook his head in disgust as he led the strike team through the waiting portal Kurogiri had prepared for them. A flash of purple light, and the entire group of seventeen was standing across the street from the headquarters of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department. Originally, Kai reflected, the plan hadn't been nearly so daring and grandiose. When he first started strategizing with Midoriya, they'd decided that his team would take out Nighteye's agency, nothing more. But as the operation grew in size and scope over the next week, they'd both agreed to set their sights on larger prey, to deal with the root cause of the Yakuza's woes instead of a mere symptom: the oldest and most persistent bane of all villains in Japan. Thanks to La Brava's Shieldbreaker virus, over two dozen false reports of various crimes had been called in all over the city in the past few minutes, drawing as many officers away from the scene of the attack as possible.

"I want you all to watch closely," Overhaul declared, turning to face the camera, "what happens to those who would stand in the way of the Eight Precepts and the Syndicate, who try to uphold the old way of doing things."

He nodded to Mustard, whose mask's red eyes seemed to glow with pleasure as he holstered his revolver and took aim with a grenade launcher, each of the shells filled with concentrated doses of his gas. Bystanders on the street around them had barely even started to take note of the strangely dressed group, and only a handful were beginning to regard them with suspicion when Mustard fired all six grenades in rapid succession, landing each one of them through a different window of the police HQ. Shouts of shock and dismay filled the morning air over the sound of shattering glass, and the civilians up and down the block quickly scattered. Tires screeched as cars turned away from them, and Overhaul chuckled through his mask as one fleeing vehicle was T-boned by a semi-truck at the nearest intersection. Once tendrils of thick lavender gas began to drift through the broken windows, and the two other Syndicate members had donned gas masks of their own, Chisaki raised one hand and gave the signal to advance.

With Dabi filming, he led Kurono and his ten Yakuza across the street and up to the glass doors of
the entrance. Just inside, over a dozen police officers and employees were visible, many of them clearly confused by the noise and commotion. Most of them were relatively unfazed, though, due to the fact that the building’s alarm system hadn't sounded gone off- Shieldbreaker had disabled it, of course. Several of them noticed the approaching criminals, but none of them made it outside in time before all eleven Precepts raised their guns at once, opened fire, and slowly emptied their magazines on the station's occupants. The roar of the machine guns was deafening, their barrage merciless. Concrete, wood, metal, flesh and bone; nothing in the room was spared the fate of being torn to shreds under a hail of 7.62 millimeter fury. The floor of the lobby was soon covered in pooling blood and shards of glass, and as the Yakuza continued their advance through the pitiful remnants of the doors, each one left a smoldering golden trail of spent shells behind them. Overhaul, for his part, pulled off his right glove, reached down, and laid his bare hand flat on the street; four spikes of black asphalt shot out of the ground and crashed through the walls, skewering or maiming the scant few officers who had managed to take cover from the storm of bullets, as well as several arriving from down the adjacent hallways to reinforce their comrades.

Then, on a dime, the firing stopped all at once, and Rappa, Dark Shadow, Dabi, and Setsuno rushed in to finish off the stragglers. With elegant, precise strokes of his katana, Toya decapitated or gutted anyone who still looked to be alive on the left side of the lobby, while Rappa bashed in the heads of those still stirring on the right. Dark Shadow took up the middle and slashed two policemen cowering behind the sturdy receptionist's desk in half with its claws, while Dabi laughed wildly and filmed it all, shooting blasts of blue fire down the hallways to immolate anyone who'd fled the initial attack. A pleasant ding suddenly announced the arrival of three armed officers in one of the elevators; the moment the doors opened, Setsuno stole their weapons, then used the pistol that had landed in his hand to join Kurono and one of the henchmen in gunning them all down.

"There's our ride!" Dabi cried excitedly, hopping inside and holding his arm out to stop the doors and let several of the Yakuza on behind him. "As you can see, ladies and gentlemen, the security at this establishment is sorely lacking. Pretty pathetic, if you ask me. Whatever happened to Tokyo's finest?"

Back outside the lobby doors, Mustard was already building up a swirling torrent of gas large enough to surround the entire building in a toxic whirlwind. Judging from the sirens, several squad cars had already pulled up, but their vision was obscured by the cloud, while Mustard's sense of direction within the bounds of his quirk was beyond perfect. Chuckling quietly to himself, he raised his revolver and fired four shots in two different directions; the screams of pain that followed indicated that his aim was true. Dark Shadow took up position beside him- now that the sunlight was obscured, its size had grown threefold, and he towered all the way up to the second floor, letting out a roar that shook the rafters. As if to demonstrate its anger, the towering shadow reached out into the murky depths of the gas typhoon and delivered a brutal swipe in the direction of one of dimly flashing sirens. The distant explosion that followed as the car slammed into a nearby building more than convinced Chisaki that the two would make do just fine; together, they served as the rearguard, preventing any heroes or police from entering the building while the rest of the team cleared it out floor-by-floor.

As Overhaul stepped onto the elevator alongside Chronostasis and the doors slowly drew shut across the pool of blood dripping down into the shaft, the tightly packed metal box reverberated with the clinks and clicks of a dozen weapons reloading, and Dabi's voice bounced gratingly off the walls as he continued his commentary.

"It's a bit of a tight squeeze, but that's okay, 'cause we're all friends in here. Ain't that right, Overhaul?" The flame wielder reached out an arm to wrap it around Chisaki's shoulder, but one glance of pure malice from Kai managed to dissuade him. If the Syndicate's more unruly members had learned to respect single boundary about working with the Eight Precepts, it was
this: Never touch the capo. It seems you can teach even a rabid dog some tricks, Chisaki reflected, grinning beneath his mask. When they arrived at the first floor with another ding and Kurono led the group forward and out of the elevator, the situation played out largely as Overhaul had expected. Although a thin veil of gas covered most of the room they stepped into, and a majority of the policemen and employees present were slumped unconscious on the floor as a result, some officers had found gas masks in time, and at least ten of them had formed a rough semicircle with their guns trained on the elevator entrance—too many for Setsuno to use his quirk on at once.

"Freeze!" The lead one bellowed, his pistol shaking in his grip. "You're surrounded! Drop your weapons and get on your knees, all of you, or we will open fire!"

Happily playing the role of the vanquished villain, Chisaki held up his hands innocently and stepped in front of Kurono.

"Forgive us, officer, we know we've done a very bad thing. We're sick people, and we want to get better. But I don't think I heard you the first time—what did you want us to do again?"

"Drop your weapons and get on your—"

Overhaul made a swift backward movement with his hand, and the entire strike team dropped to the floor in an instant as Chronostasis' clock hand strands of hair tore through his white hood and swung around the room in a wide, precise arc, nicking each one of the officers in rapid succession. One or two men at the far end managed to fire a few shots in the brief moment before the minute hand reached them, but from his prone position, Kai slammed down his palm and turned a section of the floor into a makeshift shield of wood and carpet and linoleum in time to catch the bullets. It was all over in the span of a second; all ten officers were frozen in place with no hope of escape, and not a single member of the team was even injured.

"Look what we have here!" Dabi crowed, skipping up to the paralyzed policemen and waving the camera in their faces. "I knew Tokyo cops were slow on the draw, but this is just sad. How do you fine ladies and gents think we should deal with these slackers? I wish we had a feature where you could all vote on this. What do you say, Overhaul? Should I roast the lot of them?"

"Deal with them however the hell you want," Chisaki growled, stalking forward and reducing the top half of the closest one to a puddle of blood with a single swipe of his open hand. "Just make it quick, we have a timetable to keep."

Most of the remaining policemen were swiftly gunned down by Kurono and the henchmen or cut to pieces by Setsuno after that, and Rappa and Dabi fell in line behind Kai as he made his way toward the rows of desks and computers that occupied most of the space in the office-like floor plan they'd researched so thoroughly.

"You know what to do."

Without a moment's hesitation, the two quickly set to work at destroying every piece of technology in sight, with Rappa punching and smashing indiscriminately and Dabi cackling as a wave of his fire set two dozen monitors melting and sparking. Aside from the symbolic message that raiding the headquarters would provide, this was the operation's real goal: destroying the police's resources and infrastructure for tracking criminals. Ordinary desktop computers were just the first step, of course—to make any real impact, they would have to hit the servers on the third floor, annihilate the physical backups, and manually insert a second virus coded by La Brava into the mainframe to erase the secondary digital backups. Dubbed Cloudpiercer, it was stored on a small thumb drive in Chisaki's pocket, which he periodically checked to make sure it hadn't by chance been clipped by any stray bullets or shrapnel. They had two more floors to clear, and according to Seraph and Pandora's
estimates, only around ten more minutes to do so before the hero and police reinforcements would grow too numerous to hold out against.

"Double time it, assholes!" Kai shouted as the armed henchmen began to turn their rifles and machine guns on the remaining computers. The sound of approaching boots from another wave of officers grew louder and louder the closer Overhaul came to the entrance to the building's main stairwell, but when he leaned down, reached a hand through the door, and rearranged the entire chamber into a maze of jagged concrete spikes, the sound was rapidly replaced by screams of pain and a steady drip of blood. *No one'll be sneaking up on us from there anytime soon,* he mused contently. On the other side of the floor, Dabi followed his lead by submerging the second stairwell in a blue inferno so intense that the steps literally began to melt, along with anyone unlucky enough to be inside it at the moment. *Now the elevators are the only way up and down, and thanks to Shieldbreaker, they can't turn them off.*

Once all resistance had been cleared and all the electronics had been dealt with, the strike team rendezvoused back at the elevators, both of which La Brava was remotely keeping at their floor. *The only drawback is that they know exactly where and when we're coming.* To counter that disadvantage, they had agreed to send one elevator up first as a decoy, empty except for one Precepts soldier who would draw the enemy's fire. More than eager to demonstrate their loyalty to the Yakuza, nearly every one of the ten henchmen on the team had attempted to volunteer for the role, and Chisaki was forced to choose by lot in the end. The unlucky (or perhaps very lucky, in his opinion) sacrifice stepped enthusiastically into their already blood and bullet-ridden coffin, and Overhaul gave them one final nod of acknowledgement before the rest of the team shuffled through the other set of doors.

"I hope you guys are enjoying yourselves so far," Dabi was saying, "because god knows this is the most I've fun in a while. Well, on second thought, *I did* fight a dragon last week, so maybe it's a tie, actually. Tell you what, I'll get back to you after we're done here."

He was interrupted by a burst of gunfire above them which signaled that the decoy had done his part, and just moments later their own doors opened onto a waiting squad of officers, their smoking barrels still trained on the wrong elevator. Kurono, Dabi, and the henchmen wasted no time tearing the group to pieces with a barrage of fire and bullets; many of the policemen were entrenched behind desks and overturned tables, but their cover was quickly chewed to pieces by a combination of blue-hot flames and military-grade rounds. Soon, enough of the enemy had been taken down or forced to retreat that Overhaul could finally charge out into the fray with Rappa and Setsuno. Aiding them was the fact that the gas was growing thicker by the minute as Mustard continued to produce it, obscuring their foes' vision more and more with each passing second. Once he was in cover, Chisaki reached into his coat and donned a pair of heat vision goggles that Mei had provided, then motioned for Dabi and Setsuno to do the same; Rappa, Kurono, and the others with full-face plague masks already had them built-in.

The chaotic battle was now overlaid with shades of red and blue to denote areas of warmth and cold, and after a glance above the desk he was crouched behind, it was child's play for Overhaul to sneak up behind the nearest duo of officers, his footsteps concealed by the crack of gunfire, and obliterate the men with two taps of his finger. A few rows over, Rappa had already bum-rushed and beaten to death at least three disoriented foes, and Toya was having a field day darting around the maze of desks with his quirk and his katana. As he searched for his next victim, Chisaki suddenly let out a cry of surprise as a bullet took him in the thigh, and he stumbled down to his knees, desperately lunging for safety behind what looked to be a breakroom table as a hail of bullets rained down on where he'd just been standing. A brief, panicked peek out from cover confirmed that a new group of enemies had appeared, having apparently rappelled in from a higher floor now that the stairs and elevators were gone. Dressed from head to toe in riot gear, the squad had heat goggles of their own below
their black metal helmets; their rifles' red laser sights cut menaciously through the fog of gas as they slowly advanced on his position.

"Kurono!" He called, but Chronostasis was on the other end of the floor, too far away to hear him, as was Dabi. Rappa was closer, but even with all his brute strength, he'd be a poor match for their firepower.

Catching sight of his capo's predicament, Setsuno drew his katana out of a policeman's side and rushed forward, his free hand outstretched to steal the newcomers' weapons, but for once he was a beat too slow- a rifle round slammed into Toya's stomach before he could activate his quirk, and he tumbled to the ground a few feet away from Overhaul's cover. Kai barely managed to pull him behind the table in time before they finished him, but the officers' bullets quickly began to tear apart the metal and plastic bit by bit. *This won't last long*, Overhaul knew, gritting his teeth, but he couldn't make very effective spikes out of this style of carpeted flooring, and even if he tried, the floor was thin enough that he wouldn't have enough material to work with regardless. To buy them both precious time, he slapped the ground and sprang up a bump large enough to tip over a nearby vending machine. One arm wrapped around Setsuno's shoulders to support the wounded Expendable, Chisaki scooted carefully behind the new source of shelter and helped his lieutenant do the same, wincing as bullets continued to whizz overhead.

"Boss," Toya muttered, his blond locks slick with sweat, "how's it look?"

"Pretty shit right now," Kai replied, one hand on the open wound, "but give it a few seconds." Now that he had time to concentrate, using his quirk to repair the injury was a simple matter- thankfully, the bullet had pierced through, or things would be considerably more difficult. There was a brief delay while he probed the extent of the damage, then the hole simply closed itself at his touch, as the blood flowed back into the Expendable's veins and his stomach sewed its walls together again internally.

"Y'know, I gotta say, boss, it still kinda spooks me when you do that." Setsuno's voice was already healthier, the color slowly returning to his face.

"Yeah, me too."

In the meantime, several of the armed Yakuza had been trying to advance toward Overhaul and extricate their leader from the assault, but the riot police were proving more than a match for them so far- two Precepts had already fallen, and Chisaki was forced to call the rest off for now.

"*Hold your positions and dig in, wait for Dabi and Chronostasis! Someone go get them, dammit!*"

*Think, damn you, think!* Kai cursed himself, shaking his head. *We're going to fall behind schedule at this rate!* But every way he looked at it, they were utterly pinned down until backup arrived; the barrage of fire was too intense for Setsuno to risk leaning out of cover for even a moment, and the enemy was drawing nearer with every second. *Come on, come on, use your quirk! Be creative! What if you- Midway through his thought, his eyes drifted down to his belt, and the solution suddenly became clear. Not wasting another moment in contemplation, he reached down, pulled a small metal disc out of one of his equipment pouches, clicked a button in the center, and tossed it over his shoulder toward the enemy.

After a few seconds, a guttural, screeching roar echoed through the building, and a set of shadowy purple-black talons the size of longswords crashed through the nearest window and quite literally tore the squad of elites into pieces with one brutal swipe, destroying a sizable chunk of the exterior wall and dozens of desks and computers in the process. Dark Shadow's beaked head drifted into view in the resulting opening, and one of its glowing eyes, now bright red, focused in on Overhaul.
After a moment's hesitation, Chisaki gave the beast a nod of thanks for responding to Longshot's target indicator, and seemingly satisfied, the sentient quirk turned back to its main quarry, who were arriving in increasing numbers if the sounds of battle below them were any indication.

"Mustard, report." Kai called into his earpiece radio, peering out over the crumbling edge. The orange glow of a wall of crackling flames was visible along the street they'd entered from, along with the brief, bright flashes of quirks and bullets being fired off from the adjacent corners. "What's your status?"

"We're holding up well enough," the younger villain replied, though his breathing was noticeably heavy. "The police aren't too much of a problem, but someone's agency must be distributing gas masks to the local heroes, I didn't expect so many to show up equipped to handle my quirk so soon. We hold on a second." There was a brief pause, and several barks of Mustard's heavy-caliber revolver were audible in the distance, along with a scream of pain. "We must've killed half a dozen by now, and they keep coming. I'm worried a heavy hitter is going to show up soon, so you guys better hurry your asses up, with all due respect."

"You know the drill if things get too dicey, Kurogiri and his clone are both on standby if you need an emergency extraction. Don't sacrifice yourself needlessly, and the same goes for Dark Shadow, you hear me?"

"Copy. Good luck up there."

"You too, kid." Chisaki murmured begrudgingly before he hung up.

"Alright, listen up!" Overhaul turned back to face the strike team, the rest of whom had reached his position by now; the floor appeared to be clear of enemies after Dark Shadow's timely intervention. Once they had all given him their attention, he gestured to the seven remaining Precept gunmen.

"Two of you, go reinforce the rearguard in the lobby. Everyone else, on me. Only one more floor to go, then we hit the data backups and wipe the record of every criminal in this city- clean slates for all of us. Are you with me?!"

"To the death!" Kurono cried, a short but effective reply that was quickly picked up by the rest of the group, except of course for Dabi, who made do with a delayed 'Hell yeah!'

"Damn right! Now all of you, fall in behind me- let's do this."

"Any sign of activity out there yet?" Shinso's voice came through loud and clear in Hatsume's earpiece, and she shifted her stance on the leafy ground of the hilltop, focusing her quirk-enhanced vision and peering out over the horizon.

From this position, she had a panoramic view of the entire landscape, with the temple squarely at the center vision, and the hills leading toward Matsuya, the nearest city, to the right of it- both Hawks and any other interference from heroes and the police would likely come from that direction. Up to five kilometers out, she still saw nothing but trees and rocks in every direction, along with a few animals and the occasional disappointed pilgrim in sandals and a Buddhist robe turning back when they saw Yaoyorozu's signs.

"Ooh!"

"What is it?! Is he here?!"

"Nah, but there's a really pretty deer out on one of the hills about four kilos away."
Hitoshi sighed heavily over the radio, and Mei grinned in response. She could see the tall sika buck like she was standing next to it, count the notches on its antlers and the white spots on its side. Flesh-and-blood animals had always been more strange and mysterious to her than the dozens of steel-and-circuitry babies that she surrounded herself with. More than once over the past two years, she'd tried to get along with her boyfriend's cats, but they always seemed to shy away from Hatsume no matter how much Shinso tried to encourage them to take a liking to her; the behavior of machines with clear-cut programming was much easier to predict. All the same, though, the deer maintained an odd sort of beauty as it drank calmly from a small stream. Struck by a design idea for a new baby as she watched it, Longshot reached back to grab the notebook she kept in one of her pockets, but then the deer pricked its head up and bolted, and she paused halfway through the motion. In the treeline above the deer, a flock of birds had just taken flight.

"Hey, 'Toshi, hold up a second."

"I swear, Mei, if it's another animal…"

"No, no, I promise, babe. I think there might be something out there."

Inching forward through the dewy morning grass, Hatsume carefully adjusted the light-refracting optic camouflage blanket draped over her back- baby number 1079- and strained her vision to its limits, searching the distant shadows for any sign of movement. As it turned out, she didn't have to try too hard; a few seconds later, a group of military policemen dressed in ghillie suits and bearing silenced sniper rifles crept out from the underbrush and into view, led by the pro hero Gunhead. Geez, sure took them long enough. She glanced again at the timer displaying Hawks' countdown on her eyepiece's HUD; there were only six minutes left, but she'd expected more than just one rescue team to try and sneak into their perimeter by now. After all, when she ran the simulations using the data currently available to the police, it usually only took Hatsume between five to ten minutes to determine the hostages' exact location based on clues in the video. Well, maybe I was just overestimating them. Wouldn't be the first time.

"Alright, the first guests are here. We've got a covert ops team led by Gunhead about 4.2 kilos to the northeast of the temple. They must have airdropped in outside my quirk's visual range, they're on foot."

"Interesting." Synapse chuckled, and she could practically see his smirk through the radio. "I trust you can deal with them?"

"Can I?" Longshot let an excited grin spread slowly across her face. "It would be my absolute pleasure."

"By all means, go ahead. But remember what we discussed- make it quick and make it clean. Don't leave any survivors to call for backup or transmit your position to their allies."

"I wouldn't dream of it, darling. I'll call you back when it's done- well, you'll probably see the fireworks."

While Hatsume had drafted, scrapped, and manufactured hundreds upon hundreds of support item designs in the past two years ranging from brainwave-dampening headgear to practically unbreakable suits of mechanized armor, the true passion she'd discovered away from the rules and regulations of Power Loader's workshop was making weapons, and sniper rifles above all else. The model currently cradled in her arms was practically brand new, designed specifically for this operation just a week ago: the L-7 Javelin. At first glance it more resembled an artillery piece than an infantry weapon- as long as she was tall when they were laid beside each other, it needed a sturdy bipod to be fired without breaking the user's arms, and its barrel was filled with electromagnetic coils
that turned the firing chamber into a miniaturized railgun capable of launching projectiles at a speed of 2.4 kilometers per second. The custom-forged rounds it used were the size of anti-aircraft flak shells, and came in a wide variety, including armor-piercing, flechette, and incendiary. For this specific target, she drew an eight-centimeter explosive cluster round out of the black leather bandolier fastened about her chest and slid it carefully into the three-bullet magazine, followed by two flechettes.

"Alright, now stand still for just a second, pretty please."

Staring down the barrel at her quarry, Longshot set aside her eyepiece- the Javelin's rounds traveled so quickly that wind speed and bullet drop were irrelevant- and watched the squad slowly and cautiously cross the shallow stream the deer had been drinking from. When they were back on solid ground, Gunhead paused for a moment to peer through a pair of binoculars at the temple, and she had her opening.

"Bye-bye!"

Once she pulled the trigger, Mei honestly wasn't sure which she heard first- the thundering sonic boom that the shell generated or the resonating explosion that echoed through the valley when the cluster munitions annihilated an area of five square meters in the blink of an eye. Of the rescue team's five members, the four military snipers died immediately in the blast, as far as she could tell when the smoke cleared. Only the Battle Hero seemed to be alive, draped across a rock a dozen yards away, blood dripping from beneath his mask, his twitching legs covered in coal-black burns. Slowly and painstakingly, he eased himself to the ground and began to drag himself toward the safety of a nearby stand of trees. For a brief moment, Hatsume almost pitied the hero, and she found herself rooting for him to make it to the underbrush as she ejected the round's spent casing and readied the rifle to fire again. *Come on, buddy, you can do it. You're almost there!*

But when Gunhead was only a few feet away from a stand of bushes that would have obscured him from her view, he reached up to his head with one shaking hand to activate his earpiece, and Mei clucked her tongue disapprovingly.

"Bad hero! We can't have you doing that."

And so, without hesitation, Longshot centered the barrel on his back and fired again. The flechette round kicked up a fountain of dirt and blood and gore several meters high on impact, and after the debris had settled, the pro hero's corpse sported a four-inch hole in the middle of his torso.

"Not bad for your first time," she said with a wide smile, patting the weapon's still-warm barrel affectionately. "Alright, 'Toshi, they're dealt with."

"I saw from here, it was quite a show. You'd best change to Position 2, though, in case whoever they were reporting to saw it too."

"Copy that." Hatsume clicked a button on the location tracker clasped to her belt, and a pulsing warp gate opened beneath her almost instantaneously, dropping her on a roughly identical hillside two kilometers to the other side of the temple. In the pre-mission strategy sessions, she'd coordinated with Kurogiri to choose three separate sniping vantage points that allowed her to cover the operation's central hub from all sides, and he was prepared to teleport her and her gear between them at a moment's notice whenever she gave the signal. They'd discussed cloning her with Twice so they could have all angles watched simultaneously, but ultimately La Brava and Kurogiri took priority for Jin's two duplicates.

"Ah, there it is, their chopper! It was too far away from the other vantage point."
"Good, you know what to do."

"Boy, do I!"

From this view, the stealth helicopter that the team had taken in was visible at the far edge of her quirk's range, relatively well concealed in a small clearing near a bend further downstream. Several other military and police personnel were visible near and inside it, many of them chattering frantically on their radios, presumably trying to contact Gunhead and his squad.

"I think I'll need one of you to crack this nut," she murmured bemusedly, pulling out the magazine and loading an armor-piercing round into the chamber. Lining up her iron sights squarely on the engine block, she waited patiently as the team lead determined his men's fate and ordered everyone back inside, presumably to withdraw until further reinforcements could be called in.

The rotors started spinning a moment later, and she followed the chopper with her barrel as it lifted off the ground. Not a moment after it crested the forest's canopy, Mei drew in her breath and took the shot. *Come on, baby, don't let your momma down now.*

As usual, her child didn't disappoint: After a thundering sonic boom that seemed to her to be even louder than the first two, a burst of flame and shrapnel announced the complete destruction of the helicopter's engine, punctuated by the gaping hole just under the rotor. Within seconds the blades had sputtered to a near halt, and the chopper left a trail of fire and smoke in its wake as it spiraled down to the earth before crashing into a nearby outcropping of rocks with a satisfying explosion. After checking the wreckage to ensure that there were no survivors, Longshot was about to report her success to Synapse when a beeping alert on her eyepiece announced that one of the perimeter sensors had been tripped, and she hurriedly turned her gaze in the indicated direction. At first Hatsume couldn't make out anything but trees and sky, but then she saw it: a bright red streak, dreadfully distinct against the green and brown of the mountains. *Hawks.* A closer look, and she was certain- his crimson wings were unmistakable.

"Oh shit, he's here!"

"Already?! There are still almost four minutes left!"

"Better forget about that countdown, 'Toshi, because he's gonna be there in about five seconds whether you're ready or not."

"Oh trust me, I'm ready."

Everything that Yaoyorozu, Shinso and the others had prepared was neatly in place and ready for the Winged Hero's arrival, but Momo still couldn't shake the gnawing anxiety from the back of her mind as she gazed up at the horizon, standing directly in front of their two unconscious hostages- after the initial video was finished, they'd been sedated as a precaution. The others were concealed in various spots around the building, courtyard, and adjacent cherry grove- Pandora was the only one out in the open, a bored expression on her face as she glanced back to Uravity and Coldflame to check on their restraints for the hundredth time. It didn't exactly ease her mind either that Kurogiri and his clone were both unavailable for the moment as they monitored the other two strike teams for their emergency extractions; it took enough of his concentration already just to focus on Longshot enough to remotely warp her between her three set vantage points, nevermind the rapid adjustments that an active battle would require. Their group had the most personnel, so they'd been entrusted with the unenviable task of taking their target down the old-fashioned way.

"Get ready!" Synapse hissed into the strike team radio channel; he was hidden behind a corner of the
temple just a few meters away, so she could practically hear his voice unaided. Yaoyorozu nodded almost imperceptibly, her countenance unchanged. *Time to do or die. It all comes down to this.*

Momo heard Hawks before he saw him, the shrill whistle of wind against his wings. A flash of crimson later, what seemed seconds ago to be little more than a distant smudge against the sky had landed in front of her with a ground-shaking *thud,* and she was forced to create a pair of safety goggles over her eyes as a flurry of dust kicked up by the new arrival whipped past her. When the cloud settled, she was left standing face to face with the country's number one hero; his chest was heaving from exertion, and his brow and bangs were slick with sweat, but Hawks clutched one of his swordlike flight feathers defiantly in his hand as he spoke to her, his expression cold and unforgiving.

"Where… *hah*… where is he?"

"You mean Seraph?" She allowed herself a hint of a smirk. "Oh, he's long gone." When Hawks couldn't hide the reaction of shock and anger on his face, she let out a chuckle. "Midoriya never promised that he was going to stay in the same place. He only told you where he was at the start of the countdown- he didn't say anything about where he'd be at the end."

"So I went and beat my personal best for nothing, huh? Figures. At least weren't lying about the kids, I see." He gestured with one wing to the hostages, and she nodded silently.

"Of course- we wouldn't dare. Speaking of timing, you seem to be here a bit on the early side- much earlier than even we could have hoped. If you wouldn't mind me asking, what's your secret?"

This time it was Hawks' turn to laugh, though the sound was harsher on his lips than usual.

"Please. You think the top speed they have on file more me is anything close to accurate? Like I'd ever let them put my real record down."

"You raise an interesting point; I don't doubt that many of the hero statistics available to the public record are deliberately altered to prevent villains from gaining sensitive intel. I'll have to keep that in mind going forward."

"Okay, yeah, enough small talk." He raised his arms to stretch, and suddenly two of his feathers were hovering inches from her throat- there was something peculiar about them, a strange gleam to their texture, but Pandora didn't have the luxury of examining them too closely before she had to lift her gaze back to Hawks.

"Aggressive negotiation tactics, I see. Bold, when you're dealing with someone who could kill your precious hostages at any moment." She pulled a small remote control out of one of the pouches on her belt and held it up for him to see, her thumb to the button. "I press this, and both of their jugulars are going to be injected with… what was the number again? Ah yes- 1000 times the lethal dose of the most potent neurotoxin I could create without accidentally killing myself."

"Blah blah blah, I'm a scary villain, I'm going to cruelly murder the hostages if you anger me!" He chuckled again, a bit more genuinely this time, and began to glance around the courtyard. "So are you gonna signal your lackeys to attack me yet, or do I need to go find them myself?"

"Now what reason would I have to ask them to do something as dangerous as that?"

His head still twisted around to inspect the cherry trees, Hawks came within half a heartbeat of responding before he caught himself, and Momo's face contorted in frustration when he turned back toward her with a wide grin on his face and a middle finger raised up on both hands. Even though it
was her voice, she wasn't the one who had just spoken.

*Good try, Shinso. Looks like we'll have to resort to Plan B. It's too bad we need him alive, or Hatsume could blow his head off any second now.*

Yaoyorozu tapped a button on her belt with her free hand, and without a moment's delay, Mr. Compress swung open the temple doors and snapped his fingers. A series of marbles carefully concealed throughout the complex burst apart as his quirk selectively released the hidden villains, and all at once the forces of the Syndicate launched their attack.

The next two seconds passed by in a blur of frenzied activity, and looking back on the fight, Momo had to think very carefully to piece together what exactly happened in what order. Gentle leapt down from the temple's third-story balcony with the aid of his quirk, where La Brava had been perched with her camera filming the entire time. Twice and Chaudron rushed in from the tree grove, the former brandishing his measuring tape and the latter a dagger and silver-embossed pistol; Neito had copied Jin's quirk, so there were already two of him. Nemoto Shin trained his own gun on the number hero from as he leaned around the temple's other corner, while Spinner sprung out from behind a small shrine on the opposite end of the courtyard with his massive bundle of blades in hand—the closest to Hawks, he led the charge, yelling out a ragged battle cry.

"EAT SHIT, FALSE HERO!"

At the center of it all, Hawks sighed in disappointment, cracked his neck, and curled his wings around himself before beating them quickly back outward again.

"Iron Wings."

Compress was the first to take a hit, as far as Pandora could tell, when a two-foot scarlet feather drove straight through his stomach like a spike and threw him to the ground like a ragdoll, sending blood spurting from beneath his mask as a shocked gasp escaped his lips. At the same time, the massive flight feather Hawks had been holding shot out of his hands, sliced straight through Spinner's colossal blade, and landed a long, gaping cut across Iguchi's chest, while a second one broke apart the leading strand of Twice's razor-sharp measuring tape like it was tissue paper; Bubaigawara barely leapt out of the way in time before his arm was slashed off too, and scrambled behind a tree for cover. A barrage of smaller feathers targeted the others simultaneously, whistling through the air like a storm of daggers. Thinking quickly, Yaoyorozu produced a tungsten shield in time to catch the ones targeting her; Monoma ducked behind his clone just in time to let the duplicate's body become a pincusion instead of his own, and when Gentle rebounded the projectiles back to the ground with a circle of elastic air, the stone cracked and split where they impacted. Shinso tried to duck behind the corner of the temple, but one crimson missile plunged straight through the aging wood and delivered a brutal gash to his forehead, sending the team's leader stumbling unconscious to the floor.

*What kind of technique is this?!* Seizing the chance as soon as he looked away from her, Pandora knelt down behind her shield and began to create a tranquilizer gun from her arm. *His feathers shouldn't be anywhere near this strong!*

"Synapse, Compress, and Spinner are down!" Momo shouted into her radio. "I'm in command now! Regroup, Lunging Spear Formation B, open fire!"

A fraction of a second later, Nemoto and the two Monomas each loosed a stream of bullets at the hero, but Hawks simply held up one wing in either direction and smiled as they bounced off harmlessly, like they were hitting solid metal. Aiming for his head and neck, Yaoyorozu leaned out from her cover and fired two sedative darts the moment her creation was ready, but the hero's
reflexes were too fast; he deflected them effortlessly with one of the feathers that had been at her throat earlier. Not one to give up easily, she'd already created and fired a capture net launcher by the time the dart's fragments had fallen to the ground, and cried aloud in triumph when the carbon-reinforced cords wrapped around Hawks' body and began to deliver an electrical shock through his skin, forcing him to his knees.

"Charge him, now!"

While Gentle and Twice eagerly followed her command, Nemoto dashed out to secure the hostages, and Chaudron seized the opportunity to try and make a break for Pandora's position amid the chaos. Pushing herself back to a feet and breaking into a run, she met him halfway, and the two exchanged a swift high five for Copy to take effect.

"Triple quirk combo!" He cried gleefully, creating a chain of clones until there were five of him standing around her, each one imbued with Momo's quirk as well. "Pandora Forgeries!"

While they each rolled their sleeves up and ripped their jackets open to produce a variety of weapons, shields, and capture items from their skin, Danjuro and Jin were barely holding their own against Hawks, who'd already sliced through the net with his feathers, an act that should've been impossible. It was all Twice could do to dodge the hero's feathers and try to slice at his weak points when at the seldom points when there were openings in his guard. Gentle, on the other hand, was holding his own fairly well with Elasticity, rebounding each attack back at Hawks, but even Tobita was slowly losing stamina if the sweat dripping down his brow and his disheveled bangs were any indication.

"I studied every technique he has, watched every damn fight!" She glanced over to the original Monoma with a mix of exasperation and fury on her face. "I've never seen anything like this!"

"How troublesome," Neito replied with a grimace. "He's proving to be much more problematic than even I had expected."

"Thanks for the compliment!" Hawks called, smiling as he launched himself up into the air to evade attacks from Twice and the charging Chaudron duplicates. "It's always good to know that I keep you assholes on your toes."

Two of Monoma's clones had produced net guns of the same kind that had briefly restrained him before, and one other had a tranquilizer pistol, so the Winged Hero was forced to fly a wide arc around the temple to evade their barrage. What little energy he had left had been depleted even further, so he wasn't quite as swift as before, but he more than compensated for the lack of speed with the hail of steel-like feathers he rained down on his opponents on his return pass. More prepared for the attack the second time, the Syndicate blocked or dodged most of them, but dealing with the projectiles still tied them down long enough for Hawks to drop down low and charge straight through their ranks in the blink of an eye with one of his largest feathers in hand, to devastating effect.

"Flight Sword Rush!"

When he skidded to stop in a cloud of dust amid the cherry blossoms, three of Monoma's clones were grey goop, Gentle and Nemoto were both on the ground with slashes on their waste and side, and Twice had fallen to his knees, blood dripping down his face, half of his mask torn apart.

"F-fuck, guys, I-I'm gonna split! I can't hold it in!"

"You all handle Hawks!" One of the remaining Monoma duplicates cried, "I'll use Create to put his
"I'll cover you!" Tobita shouted, his teeth grit against his wound as he pushed himself back to his feet and took off running in Jin's direction, his torn cape billowing behind him. "Gently Shield!" Sliding to the ground like a baseball pitcher, Danjuro barely elasticized a circle of air in time to block the two from another bombardment of feathers.

"Be careful, please!" La Brava squealed from above, and Momo shook her head in frustration. *I'd almost forgotten we're livestreaming this. Not quite the easy victory we were hoping to show the world, but it'll do, as long as we still win.*

Chaudron, in the meantime, was keeping Hawks occupied near the cliffside with a fresh batch of clones- each time one fell, another sprung up in its place, and though their stream of ranged and melee attacks were mostly blocked or parried, they were wearing the number one hero down nonetheless.

"What I think happened here," he was saying as he flexed his wings to break apart another net, then flapped them once to dodge backward through a row of trees, "is that you fuckers forgot about one of my sidekicks. The name Makabe Shikkui ring any bells for you? Diamondhead, the Hardening Hero, out of Ketsubutsu? Face looks kinda like a weird blue turtle. Nice kid." Kicking a storm of cherry blossoms up into to the clones' faces with another flap, he used the momentary distraction to grab hold of one of his mid-length feathers and draw it like a dagger across one's throat, then kicked another straight off the cliff before resuming his defensive stance. "He's back at my agency right now, but these past few weeks, we've been working on a new technique, using his quirk on my wings."

"That's impossible!" One Monoma retorted bitterly. "His quirk doesn't work on living things!"

Taking no precautions about a potential copy of Shinso's quirk, Hawks broke through the duplicate's guard and cut him in two before he continued.

"That's what we thought too, until he had an idea, and we tested it out. You see, feathers are all dead tissue, just like hair, so turns out he can put these babies way past the top end of the Mohs scale after all." Another leaping dodge and he was back in his original position, bobbing out of the way of a blast from a sonic cannon one Chaudron had produced. "Of course, there's a downside. The reason it took me so much longer than usual to get here is that I weigh almost 50% more than I normally do!"

*He's just mocking us now,* Momo thought furiously to herself, though she was taking careful mental notes on everything he said at the same time. *If they can just keep Hawks in one spot for a little longer...* Darting forward to the cover of one of the tree trunks, she created one of Hatsume's favorite babies from her stomach, a gas canister launcher loaded with aerosolized chloroform rounds. *Just one whiff of this, and he'll be down for as long as we need him to be. So what if I knock out a few clones in the process?*

Dropping down to one knee, she took careful aim at the melee occurring a few yards away, but even as he ducked and weaved between the attacks of half a dozen Chaudrons, Hawks still managed to catch sight of her somehow amid the fray, and beat his wings in a vaulting leap that propelled him all the way back into the courtyard, just as she pulled the trigger and sent nearly all of the duplicates sprawling to the ground with a burst of white gas. He swung his right boot downward in a brutal kick in the same motion, knocking the original Neito to the ground unconscious, and loosed two feathers that snapped the hostages' chains with a resounding clang.

"Do you assholes think I climbed up to number one with nothing looks and charisma?!" Hawks yelled back at them, the anger rising in his voice with every word. "I had to fight every day for six years to get here, so if I need to wipe the floor with you punks to prove that I earned my place, I can
keep this up all day!"

Nemoto was still down, as were Compress, Shinso, and Spinner- there was no one left in the immediate vicinity to stop him besides a single Monoma clone who was cut down into sludge before he had time to react.

"Now if you don't mind, I'll be taking these two back!"

"No you don't!" Gentle cried, springing off of a patch of elasticized ground towards the hero.

Plunging toward the two imprisoned interns without so much as a glance back, Hawks waved his hand and sent another massive feather toward Danjuro, but when Tobita rebounded the missile this time, the trajectory lined up just right; it streaked straight back towards its distracted owner and cut a gaping wound in his thigh before burying itself in the ground.

Letting out a small grunt of shock, Hawks fell to his knees before he could reach Uraraka and Todoroki to try and wake them, and only barely turned around in time to defend himself, limping noticeably as he clashed with the Gentle Criminal once again. His mask newly repaired, Twice rejoined the melee as well with his remaining tape dispenser once he was back on his feet, lashing out at the Winged Hero's defenses while Tobita used Elasticity to provide cover for them both in the intervals between Jin's attacks.

*Spear and shield,* Pandora realized, watching the two proudly as she created a rag soaked in smelling salts to wake the real Chaudron and help him back to his feet. *I guess they did learn something from that tactics session with Overhaul after all.*

"The clones aren't any use against his fighting style," Monoma muttered weakly; a steady stream of blood was dripping down his scalp, and Yaoyorozu had to wrap an arm around his back while he draped one over her shoulder to help him walk. "He's too fast, so they've just been getting in the way. I need to get Compress' quirk if we're going to beat him, he was going to be the most important part of all of this. I'm an utter fool for not copying it beforehand."

"That's a good plan," Momo replied, but they both knew it was easier said than done- Atsuhiro's weakly twitching body was by the doors of the temple, on the opposite side of the hectic two-on-one duel currently unfolding. *He's too weak to reach Sako on his own like this, and even if he did get the quirk...* She shook her head and pressed forward undaunted, tightening her grip around his side. "I'll get you to him, Neito."

But before they could reach the group, Hawks sent Bubaigawara sprawling with a sweeping kick to the ankles, and slammed his flight feather sword down into Danjuro's elastic barrier with all his strength, trying to cut through the circle of air and into its wielder- Tobita's eyes widened in shock when the attack didn't immediately bounce back, and began to furiously circle his hands to reinforce the shield with additional layers while Twice recovered behind him and Hawks continued to press down viciously with his blade. Several muffled shots rang out as Neito and Momo fired a pistol and a semi-automatic tranquilizer rifle at the hero, but with his back turned to them, Hawks' wings were for all intents and purposes completely impenetrable, a shifting maze of diamond-hard feathers that covered his every possible weakness; the bullets and darts ricocheted off uselessly in a shower of sparks. Then, a familiar female voice cut through the chaos, and Momo's heart seized in her chest.

"W-Where am I? Hawks, is that you?! Please, help me, I can't get these restraints off!"

*No, that's impossible. Uraraka couldn't be awake yet, and she's gagged!*

"Just hold on, Uravity, everything's gonna be okay! I'll be there as soon as I-" Hawks froze
midsentence, and Pandora's eyes widened as Synapse stepped shakily around the corner of the temple. Blood was still dripping from the corner of his brow, but his grin was visible even beneath his voice disguiser.

"Got you, you son of a bitch."

But as Hawks' muscles relaxed under the influence of Hitoshi's quirk, his grip on his flight feather slackened, and not half a second later the sword bounced backward off of Gentle's barriers and slammed right into his face. The Winged Hero stumbled backward in a daze, blood spilling from a deep gash down his forehead and one cheek, but his mind was free again, just moments after it had been chained. Twice, Pandora, and Gentle all tried to lash out and down him before he could regain his bearings, but he took off too quickly for their attacks, flying a high loop around the temple grounds as he recovered his senses and surveilled the battlefield.

"No!" Shinso bellowed. "God dammit, Gentle, I had him!"

"Forgive me, please, I had no intent of-" Hitoshi landed a hard slap across Danjuro's face before he could finish his sentence, and above them La Brava let out a shriek of anger.

"How dare you touch my Gentle like that?! You're lucky I've got the camera on Hawks and my mic on mute, you asshole!"

"No, Aiba, please, it's alright." Tobita held up a hand to calm her and lifted his eyes back up to the sky to look for their target. "He's right- that was my fault, I should have been quicker to release my quirk. But we can't change what happened- let's focus on the mission, shall we?"

"Agreed," Momo replied, as Synapse led the remaining villains into a rough circle around the hostages.

Nemoto and Monoma were both barely conscious, all of the clones were gone, and it wouldn't be long before Spinner and Compress needed emergency medical evacuations from Kurogiri to prevent their wounds from becoming life threatening. Synapse seemed to have fully recovered, but now that he'd used up two chances with the voice disguiser, it would be almost impossible to get Hawks to fall for it again, and three seconds' worth of eye contact against a man so swift was out of the question. Realistically speaking, she, Twice, and Gentle were the only ones still in the fight; Neito had copied Compress' quirk at the first opportunity as they planned, but he was so unsteady on his feet that it would be unlikely that he could use it effectively.

"Longshot, what's your status?" Shinso held a hand to his earpiece. "Can you provide suppressing fire, force him to land again?" Jin was keeping an eye on the Winged Hero, but for now, he seemed to be simply circling far above them- whether it was to recover his stamina, formulate a new attack strategy, or both, Momo didn't know.

"God, it's good to hear your voice again, I was so worried! I wish I could, babe, but I'm kinda busy over here myself, if you guys haven't noticed!"

Yaoyorozu created a pair of binoculars and gazed through them to the far end of the valley- they'd all been so focused on Hawks that they hadn't been paying attention to the steady stream of sonic booms produced by Mei's rifle as she fended off a steady stream of police choppers and airborne local heroes; it seemed that since the time limit expired, the government had fully committed to its attempts to intervene, but if the trail of flaming helicopter wrecks that littered the course of the stream was any result, they hadn't met with much success so far. As she watched, the Buster Hero Air Jet and a SWAT chopper both opened fire on one of her hilltops, reducing it to a flaming heap of smoke and ash with their cannons and missiles, but then another boom sounded in the distance, and before Air
Jet could dodge, a cluster round fired from Position 3 engulfed both him and the helicopter in a web of bright orange explosions.

"Huh." Synapse chuckled softly. "She always loved that guy as a kid. I think I had one of his action figures."

"Well, he's ashes and dust now," Neito managed, spitting out a gob of blood. He had to lean against the wall of the temple for support, and his breathing was still ragged and heavy. *We're going to have to check him for a concussion and internal bleeding after this,* Momo knew. Shaking her head, she was about to put the binoculars away when Gentle extended one finger to the distant horizon, squinting to make something out.

"Pandora, what the devil is that?"

When she lifted up the binoculars again, she couldn't see what he was talking about at first, but then Tobita guided her hands a bit to the right, and a peculiar vortex of air came into view, rapidly growing in size as it drew nearer. With a flip of her index finger she increased the zoom by two, and her mouth set in a hard line as the smudge in the middle came into focus, two instantly recognizable figures.

"Longshot, at your eleven! It's Gale Force and Cellophane, bring them down!" The Shiketsu third-year's scowl was visible even from this distance as his cape whipped and twisted behind him; he had Sero wrapped in his burly arms like a parcel.

"Roger that, I see them! They're moving fast, but I think I can make the shot!"

Another sonic boom rang out, and Yaoyorozu's jaw slackened in shock as the whirlwind Inasa was using to fly bent the trajectory of the projectile downward in the instant before it hit them, sending it streaking past them and down into the trees. That round was traveling at over two kilometers per second! *How strong could his wind be?!!*

"What the fuck?!" Hatsume cried, echoing her sentiments perfectly. There was no time for her to fire a second shot; Yoarashi was already on top of them, and Hawks broke his circle to fall perfectly in formation with his interns.

"Defensive Formation Delta, we have incoming!" Pandora shouted, her mind racing- there were only moments left before they arrived. *I guess it's time to try that technique after all."

As the remaining fighters took position and the their three opponents shook the earth with their landings, Yaoyorozu dropped the gun she was holding and stretched out her arms, smiling as every bare patch of skin on her body started to glow with Creation's light. On her stomach, thighs, and arms, silver-and-grey tungsten-carbide armor to complete the half-set she was already wearing, lightweight, durable, and ornately designed. On her back, a sleek, maneuverable jetpack, complemented by additional thrusters on her calves. On her wrists, rotating metal gauntlets that sported a variety of weapons ranging from neurotoxin dart launchers to flame throwers to cryo grenades. In her right hand, an elegant, curved sword, the cutting edge of its blade coated in a chemical concoction she'd designed that caused instant paralysis on contact with the bloodstream. In her left a black metal shield emblazoned with a stylized silver 'P' and bossed with a large electrical diode that delivered a 5,000 volt shock to anyone unlucky enough to make contact with it while it was activated. And on her face, a silver-and-black checkered harlequin mask, fitted internally with all the target trackers, vital scanners, and heat sensors she could ask for, its mouth half-frowning and half-smiling. There was a crest of raven feathers on top, but that touch was just for show.

"Fullmetal Chaos Regalia."
"Am I supposed to be scared of that?" Hawks called with a smirk, as his interns sized up the remaining villains. "You assholes couldn't beat me with your whole team, now you expect to take us four-on-three? Best go ahead and surrender before your buddies bleed out. Am I right, guys?"

"There's no shame in quitting while you're behind, Momo," said Hanta. His expression was indecipherable through his mask, but she could hear the pain in his voice. "Just give it up and come home."

"And miss the fight of my lifetime? I don't think so." She twirled her sword in her hand, and took one step forward. "But as thrilling is this is, I have to say, I didn't think we'd get the chance to take on all three of you. I'm impressed that you managed to make it all the way from Hiroshima just a few minutes behind your master."

"Are you kidding me?" Inasa let out a booming laugh, and the air around him began to stir and twist. "We could've gotten here at practically the same time as him if we hadn't decided to hang back until he signaled us. After all, Hawks hired us because we're the only ones fast enough to keep up with him!"

"Is that so?" Hitoshi cracked his knuckles and stepped up to Momo's side. "In that case, I can't wait for round two. Let's wrap this up this nice and quick, gentlemen."

"What's the progress downtown so far?"

"Not good. Slugger and a few other local pros are confirmed dead, along with at least thirty police, but that's expected to rise significantly. Plenty more missing in action, both heroes and cops. They're running out of gas masks to give the teams on site, and by all reports it seems Tokoyami's quirk is on a complete rampage."

"That poor boy… I don't even want to think about what he and Yaoyorozu could have endured. Is it possible that Shinso is influencing their actions?"

"I suppose we can't discount that."

"And the rescue team in Osaka?"

"All KIA, aside from Edgeshot and Mandalay, who are still missing. Their reports before the explosion indicate that the penthouse was entirely abandoned."

"Of course it was. Can… can we turn this trash off? Please?"

The longer Toshinori Yagi watched the live feed of Dabi and the other villains slaughtering policemen, the more he felt like he was going to vomit out of what was left of his respiratory system, along with his meager breakfast.

"No, we can't," Aizawa replied quietly, turning up the TV's volume, his eyes never leaving the screen. "I'm sorry, Yagi, but this is all vital information. We can't afford to be in the dark about what's going on down there, and as far as we can tell, this is the only signal that's getting out of the building."

"…Of course." All Might murmured after a moment, his heart sinking in his chest as he looked down to his phone. He'd tried to call Tsukauchi and Gran Torino a dozen times each, but every attempt had gone straight to voicemail.

"So let me go shut it down myself." Kendo pleaded from the back of the room, where she'd been
watching with her arms crossed. "I can't sit here any longer, I've seen enough!"

"For the last time, it's a warzone down there. There's an active government counteroffensive happening right now, Kendo!" Aizawa closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose with one hand. "As much as I want to let you go, you are a student and I am a teacher, and this school has a responsibility to keep you safe whenever that's possible, provisional license or not!"

"A counteroffensive that's getting cut to pieces! I'm a student, sure, but I'm a hero first, Aizawa, so I don't care if you have to expel me, I'm going. The fight in Shikoku is too far away for me to intervene, but this? I could be there in five minutes, maybe fewer if I push myself. This is something that's within my reach, Eraser! You can't ask me to ignore that!"

Eraserhead and All Might's phones suddenly buzzed at the same time, and Shota glanced down at the notification with one eyebrow raised before exchanging a brief nod with his fellow teacher.

"You're in luck, Battle Fist. Nezu is about to dismiss all students and teachers early, so as of two minutes from now, you'll no longer be bound by U.A. regulations. Miruko sent out a post on the Hero Network that she's already putting a team together now at Lemillion's office, I'll call now and ask if we can join them."

"We?" Ituska asked, as Aizawa hit the dial button and opened the office door.

"You kidding?" Stepping out into the hall, he barely glanced back at her. "I'm going with you, obviously. I'm probably gonna pull Mic, Snipe, and Ectoplasm in on this too. Be ready to leave in ninety seconds, we'll be waiting in the lobby."

"No time to go get the costume then in that case," she muttered, shaking her head before looking to All Might. As soon as they were alone, she pulled him into a deep hug, and a new set of tears threatened to spill from Toshinori's eyes.

"Young Kendo, please. I'm sorry that you have to wait to save Monoma until another day, but, Naomasa, and Sorahiko…"

"I'll find both of them, I swear." She ruffled his hair and gave him a weak smile. "I doubt they'll even need saving. The old man'll probably just yell at me for taking so long to get there. I'm sure he's gonna beat the absolute crap out of Overhaul, if he hasn't already." She glanced again to the TV, but there was still no sign of either Tsukauchi or Gran Torino; both of them had been at police HQ when it was attacked, working on locating the same Eight Precepts members who were currently besieging the building.

"I… I hope you're right." He tried to return her smile, but mostly failed.

A soft knock came on the door, and All Might called for whoever it was to come in. From the look of it, Kendo was about to protest to Aizawa that it hadn't been ninety seconds yet, but both of their eyes widened in surprise when Nighteye stepped through.

"Sir, what are you doing here?" Itsuka asked. "Shouldn't you be down at Mirio's agency? Eraser and I are about to head down there now."

"I was," he replied, pushing back his glasses, "until I realized something rather disturbing connecting today's events, something that demanded immediate action. All Might, if I could speak to you in confidence?"

"Certainly. Just… give me a moment with Kendo before she goes."
"Of course." Nighteye stepped out into the hall to allow the two some privacy, and Yagi turned back to his successor.

"Please, be careful out there, young Kendo. I… I know I haven't always been the best teacher, and somehow you've still managed to learn from me in spite of that. You've strong, maybe even stronger than I was at this point in my training but…" He sighed deeply and shook his head. "But something feels different about today. I always worry when you're out on missions, but right now… this group, the Syndicate… there's something about them that makes me even more anxious than usual." As always, he fumbled through explaining his feelings, but the look in her eyes told him she understood.

"I feel the same way. Maybe it's because of who I'll be fighting, that it's friends and former classmates instead of just faceless, irredeemable thugs. But please, don't worry, okay? I know what I'm up against, I promise I'll be careful. I'll avenge everyone the Syndicate and the Precepts have killed today, and I'll make you proud, sensei."

They hugged again, tighter this time, and when they broke apart, he was crying again despite his best efforts. For a moment, he saw an old memory in her expression, somehow soft and kind yet fierce and unyielding all at once.

"You know, you really do remind me of my master sometimes."

"You and the old man both, huh?" She chuckled and punched him lightly on the shoulder, then swore when she glanced down at her watch. "Shit, Aizawa's gonna kill me, I'm already late! See you soon, All Might!" Itsuka darted out the door and was about to bolt down the hall, but paused to give Nighteye a brief hug too before he could protest.

"Just watch me, Sir, I'm gonna have Chisaki in cuffs before you know it! You better not be too late getting back downtown, or I'll make sure Usagiyama kicks your ass!" Then she was gone in a burst of speed, and Toshinori was left watching his old sidekick with a bemused expression as Nighteye shook his head disapprovingly.

"That was highly unprofessional- I thought I taught her better. Miruko's been influencing her far too much lately."

"Don't be too hard on her, old friend. She's still young and rebellious. As long as she fights hard and stays composed in front of the cameras, I don't see the harm in it."

"You're quite a biased source of opinion, though," Sir countered with a hint of a grin.

"You may have me there. Now, what did you want to speak about?"

Nighteye clasped his hands behind his back and began to walk down the hall, beckoning for All Might to follow. The early dismissal bell had just rung, and all around them students were pouring out of their classrooms, looks of worry, shock, and dismay on their faces. These poor children… Yagi tried to greet the ones looking his way with an encouraging smile, but even that had no effect. The fallout from today is going to be a nightmare. I might need to visit the hero course students' families again to discuss the situation. Not to mention Midoriya's mother… He forced the thought out of his mind for now and fell in step beside Sir, leaning in to hear his voice over the clamor.

"I believe it's safe to say that the police department's security system was breached in advance of this morning’s attack, and by an expert, no less- it had one of the best firewalls in the country. We don't know how long they've had that access, or how they attained it; this could be a mole or a sophisticated remote hack, it's anyone's guess. The point is, if they could breach Tokyo PD's server,
almost nowhere is safe. Do you understand what I'm saying? Agencies, schools, government ministries- nothing is guaranteed as secure anymore."

"You think U.A. has been breached as well?" All Might's eyes widened. Present Mic and many others had believed for years that they could have a traitor in their midst, but a hack was equally frightening, if not moreso.

"I'm almost certain- all the evidence is on here." He pulled a thumb drive out of his jacket before pocketing it again. "Chances are, they're watching us this very moment. Follow me, there's a blindspot in the security cameras on the roof- we need to get away from any prying eyes."

Nighteye stepped through a door leading to one of the stairwells and started upward, the opposite direction of all the students, and Toshinori squeezed in past the crowds behind him.

"All Might!" a voice cried as they continued upward- it was Kirishima, flanked by Bakugo and Ashido. "What's gonna happen?! What should we do?!"

"We're going to beat them, that's what's going to happen." Yagi responded, halting his upward climb for a moment to lay a hand on Eijiro's shoulder. "All of you, make sure your families know you're safe, then contact the heroes supervising your internships and ask if they need any assistance. Don't endanger yourselves needlessly, but try to help any way you can!"

"Of course! Thank you so much, sensei!"

"I'm really glad you're here," Mina managed, smiling through her tears. "I'll call Mount Lady as soon as I'm downstairs!"

"I'm gonna destroy every last one of those fuckers whether Jeanist says I can or not!" Katsuki cried.

"Make sure you do, Ground Zero." All Might responded with a grin, patting the hot-tempered third-year's back encouragingly before continuing after Nighteye. After fighting through a few more flights' worth of crowds, they finally emerged out onto U.A.'s roof, and All Might sighed with relief when the morning sun washed over his face.

"Well that was certainly an ordeal. I know things seem dire, but I hope they're not too rattled by today- I think I'll ask Nezu to let me give a speech when all the dust has settled and the Syndicate are safely locked in Tartartus."

"Yes, I'm sure that would help their recovery a good deal." Nighteye said calmly, gazing out over the edge at the sea of students leaving through the main gate.

"So what was this evidence you wanted to- oh, one moment, excuse me." A soft buzz announced that he'd received another text, and he glanced down to check the message- it was from Kendo, and the first three words were visible in the preview:

KI: IT'S NOT NIGHTEYE.

"Huh?" He murmured aloud. Then his eyes widened in realization, and he lifted his gaze back up to look at the man he'd been following, but suddenly there was no one there.

Toshinori didn't see the knife until it was too late.

Chapter End Notes
So once again, I gravely underestimated how much I was going to write- this chapter is the longest one yet, and I still didn't have space to fit in everything! Coming up soon are the dramatic climaxes and conclusions of all three operations. The Hawks and Overhaul battles were by far some of the most complex action scenes I've ever written, so please let me know what you thought of them in the comments, I hope they flowed well and were easy to follow! You didn't think the number one hero would go down easy, did you? Tune in again in 1-2 weeks for what will narratively serve as this story's Season 1 finale, as Overhaul faces off against Gran Torino, Yoarashi and Sero go up against Yaoyorozu and Shinso, and All Might comes face to face with Toga and Midoriya. Thank you to everyone who's helped me get this far, I'm so glad I can tell this story!
"Well this is starting to get really fucking annoying."

"No shit," Overhaul spat in disgust, shooting Dabi a withering glare before turning his attention back to the series of bleeding bullet wounds in Kurono's shoulder and arm. "So why don't you go deal with the problem, smartass?"

"Because if you haven't noticed by now," Dabi shouted indignantly over the sound of howling gunfire and splintering wood and metal, crouching lower behind the overturned desk serving as their cover, "their shields are flame-resistant!" By now he'd given up on most of his recording and narrating duties, but with the room submerged in a writhing sea of lavender fog illuminated only by fire and gunshots, Kai could hardly blame him.

"Of course they are." Chisaki swore resignedly and laid his palm flat on his patient's chest. "Hang in there, Chrono, this might feel a bit… weird."

"You should have just… left me behind, Kai." Kurono muttered, shaking his plague-masked head. "There's not enough time for this."

"There's time if I say there is," Overhaul growled, though he knew full well that his lieutenant was right. Only three minutes remained on their ticking countdown- three minutes to push through to the databanks before their chances of escape dropped to near-zero.

Just moments after Kurono's injuries neatly closed, another Yakuza foot soldier fell dead to the ground a few feet to the left of them, his mask shattered by bullets, and Setsuno shot the trio a worried glance from where he, Rappa, and the others were dug in behind an overturned breakroom fridge. After making good initial progress on the third floor, their advance had been stalled halfway to the databanks by another squad of armored cops, even more organized and ferocious than the last, this time equipped with massive riot shields that made targeting them almost impossible. I could turn the things to piles of dust if I could just get close enough, Chisaki knew, but stepping out of cover is a fucking death sentence as things stand. He'd tried to summon Dark Shadow again with another target indicator, but the rearguard team was too busy dealing with the influx of reinforcements to render any further assistance. Entrenched behind various pieces of cover, the remaining Precepts soldiers were holding the police off from advancing on their position to the best of their abilities, but their numbers were quickly beginning to dwindle, and there were no openings for Toya or Rappa to attack or use their quirks.

Looks like we might have to use this after all, he mused, drawing a vial and syringe out of jacket pocket. It was one of the last doses of Trigger that his organization had left; Nighteye had seized almost all of their stores and destroyed their production facilities in his raid, and only around ten doses' worth of the drug had been saved in the end. It had been reserved solely for the Expendables and even then only for emergency circumstances over the past two years, but today certainly seemed to qualify as one by any measure. Edging towards the other group, Overhaul slapped the ground to raise up a temporary wooden shield in front of the team, then leaned out and tossed the syringe to Setsuno, who caught it deftly with one hand and plunged the needle into his arm like clockwork as Kai began to speak into his earpiece.

"Alright, listen up, boys, new plan. Dabi, you hit them with a blast big enough to suppress them for a
few seconds. Setsuno, as soon as he does his part, steal as many of their guns as possible. Once that's
done, Rappa, the rest of you- you know what to do. Move in and eliminate them, a straight charge
from the front. I'll take Chronostasis and cut off their retreat. There's no time for questions, just do
what you're fucking told, now go!"

Not a moment later, the sea of purple turned bright blue as Dabi dashed out of cover and began to
bombard the cops with an inferno so hellish and sudden that their front rank backed up several steps
in surprise, their constant barrage of bullets falling silent for a few moments as they locked their
shields together in defense. Just as Chisaki had intended, everything else fell in place like clockwork
as soon as they lost their offensive momentum. His breath ragged and his eyes wide and wild
beneath his transparent glass goggles, Setsuno leapt on top of one of the surviving desks and
extended a trembling hand out toward the enemy. Whereas his quirk was usually only able to steal
things being directly held by his targets, and limited him to taking around three items at once, Trigger
expanded his capabilities dramatically- his upper limit was past ten items now, and the handheld
restriction no longer applied.

"That's right, shitheels, give me everything you've got!" He cried with a gleeful cackle, as one assault
rifle fell into his arms and a dozen others clattered to the ground behind him. Another wave of his
free hand and half the group's gas masks were stolen as well, along an assortment of helmets,
goggles, ammunition, and shields; all of it accumulated in a growing pile on the floor behind him as
he opened fire on the enemy with a series of bursts from the hip.

Several men tried to draw sidearms or stun batons from their belts, but by then it was too late- Rappa
was already in their midst by then, bashing aside any remaining riot shields before beginning to
slowly demolish the squad one-by-one with brutal, lightning fast blows, chained together from man
to man in such rapid succession that none of them could effectively counter him. A handful of
reinforcements burst through from the data vault's entrance at the far end of the room, but Dabi and
the three remaining foot soldiers rushed forward and quickly pinned them down.

"Not strong enough!" Rappa bellowed in protest as he bashed in the lead riot officer's chest in with a
sickening crack, practically ignoring his armored vest, then grabbed the man's body by the legs and
swung him into one of his charging allies like a ragdoll. "These guys are weak, Overhaul, I want
more of a challenge!"

"Don't worry," Overhaul called, stepping out of cover and starting towards a trio of disarmed riot
police who had barricaded themselves in one of the floor's corner offices; he let Kurono take point in
case they had any tricks left up their sleeves. "I'll make sure that you get one soon en-"

Wham.

It happened within the span of an instant, while Kai's head was still craned toward the sound of
Rappa's voice; the door to one of the smaller, shuttered offices they were passing by burst open
directly between Chronostasis and Overhaul. The corner slammed hard into the back of Kurono's
head and sent him toppling to the floor, and a gas-masked Tsukauchi Naomasa darted out into the
open, training a gun on Overhaul's chest.

"Freeze, Chisaki!"

"Is that a fucking joke?!!" Kai retorted, lunging forward with his right hand outstretched. All he
needed was to lay one finger on the detective, and it would be over. I'm not going to let a worm like
this slow me down.

But Tsukauchi dodged to one side with a catlike level of grace and deftness just before he could
reach him, and Chisaki could only watch in shock and horror as his hand exploded before his eyes in
a shower of blood and gore. Three of his fingers were either missing or stumps, and the top of his palm was spit in two, bone and tendon openly visible.

"You son of a bitch!" He roared in agony, clutching at the bloody ruin as he stumbled backwards. Stars filled the corners of his vision, and every glance at what remained of his prized appendage pushed Kai closer and closer to retching on the office floor. My other hand is still gloved, I can't fight back!

Before he could come up with an escape strategy, the detective's pistol barked again- more pain, more stars, and suddenly he was on the floor, his vision fading in and out, Naomasa's boot on his chest. Tsukauchi had shot him in the shoulder this time, if the stream of warm, wet blood running slowly down his forearm and chest was any indication.

"I could kill you right now," The detective gritted, his features contorted in barely restrained anger. "But you don't get to die that easily. I'm going to make sure you pay for every life you took today."

"BOSS!"

Suddenly the pistol disappeared from Naomasa's hands, and Overhaul whipped his head around to find Setsuno standing just a few feet away, the stolen gun trained on its former owner.

"Shoot him!" Chisaki cried, an order the Expendable complied eagerly with. Toya fired five rounds in rapid succession, and laughed in triumph when Tsukauchi grunted in pain and sunk down to one knee, his head hung low in defeat. He was about to offer his capo a hand getting off the ground when Kai noticed that there was no blood dripping from the detective's tan trench coat, and his eyes widened.

"Setsuno, shoot him in the goddamn head, I think he's wearing-"

Shhk.

...Kevlar. By the time Overhaul finished his thought, Naomasa had already shot back up to his feet, pulled a military knife from a holster on his calf, and hurled it at his adversary, all in the same fluid motion. It had buried itself cleanly between Setsuno's eyes, and now the most capable of Kai's remaining Expendables was lying dead on the floor beside him.

By now, though, the commotion of the encounter had drawn the attention of the rest of the strike team; Rappa's heavy footsteps were audibly drawing nearer, and Tsukauchi was forced to dive for cover behind a desk as bullets fired by the foot soldiers whizzed by. Taking advantage of his captor's distraction, Chisaki took a deep breath of fresh air, tore his mask off, then used his teeth to pull off his other glove. Repairing his shattered hand took only moments once that was done, and by the time Naomasa noticed what had happened, he was already back on his feet and halfway towards him. Deprived of his gun this time, the fury in the detective's eyes was replaced by panic; he reached for the stun baton at this belt, but he was a beat too slow. A swipe of Kai's hand disintegrated Tsukauchi's arm in a burst of crimson, and he cried out in pain, stumbling backward in shock just as Chisaki had. He slumped against the same door he'd flung open in ambush, only to be skewered against it when Kurono's hour hand plunged straight through the wood and his throat at once; he had finally stirred again after falling momentarily unconscious from the blow he received.

Then Rappa was towering above them all, his voice full of disappointment as he gestured to the detective with massive metal knuckles slick with blood and gore.

"This is the guy who was giving you trouble, boss? He's puny!"
"Yeah, still a pain in the ass, though." Overhaul muttered, pulling the knife from Setsuno's forehead and laying both palms over the Expendable's wound to heal it and revive him— it was a rushed job due to the timeframe, but he could correct any lingering brain damage later as long as Toya could still walk and fight for now. "Why don't you go ahead and finish him? I'd do it myself, but we're short on time, and I feel like I might get carried away after what he did to Setsuno."

Kurono retracted his clock hand and strode around the door to watch Rappa as he cracked his neck and wound up the finishing punch; Tsukauchi tried to say something in the final moments before the blow, but only a dribble of blood and a labored grunt left his lips when he opened them. He sufficed instead by holding up a defiant middle finger, one that Overhaul returned in kind once he had helped Toya back to his feet and pulled his mask on again. Finally, Rappa caved in his chest with a single, swift jab, and Naomasa's body slid lifeless to the floor.

As Chisaki led the three men back across the room towards Dabi and the foot soldiers, who had nearly pushed the remaining cops all the way back through into the data vault, the thick coat of gas around them began to visibly dissipate, and Kai swore under his breath as Mustard's voice came in over the radio.

"I'm sorry, Overhaul, but we had to retreat. They were starting to use flashbangs and searchlights against Dark Shadow— he was going to be captured or worse, and I was almost out of ammo. We're at the rendezvous point now, but the gas won't last long without me there to keep producing it. You need to hurry."

"Alright, as of now, we are officially running on overtime!" Chisaki bellowed. "We no longer have the rearguard watching out for us— that means that any number of heroes are in this building at this very fucking moment, trying to find a way to get up to us! So double time it, because every second we're not finishing our mission is another second closer to Tartarus!"

"Well, viewers, looks like we're gonna have to wrap up this broadcast pretty soon." With a wave of his free hand, Dabi used a rolling wave of flame to incinerate the cops' remaining cover, leaving them to be picked off by Kurono and the soldiers, then turned the camera back towards his face as he leapt over a desk and took point in the advance towards the now unguarded door waiting for them. "I hope you've all been enjoying the show, but it looks like it might be a pretty good finale."

Just seconds after Mustard's message, the air was already clear again, and Overhaul joined Dabi and Setsuno in removing his goggles as they led what remained of the strike team into the data room, a tall chamber filled with rows upon rows of server banks, stacked all the way up to the ceiling. But not a moment after Chisaki had walked through, the automatic metal door slammed shut, splitting the team in two.

"The hell?" Shouldering his katana, Setsuno turned around and mashed the 'open' button with his thumb, only to receive a shower of sparks in reply. Then a flash of yellow whipped through Chisaki's line of sight, and a sudden gust of wind tore through his hair. Before he knew it, Toya was face-down and unconscious on the floor; Overhaul barely had time to hold his hands up to defend his head before something slammed into his gut like a charging bull and propelled him back into the wall with a dull crack. Pain lanced through his skull, and the world went dark; Chisaki wasn't sure how much time passed before a hard slap suddenly dragged him back to consciousness. At first he only saw patches of colored light— the first thing that resolved itself into a real image was Dabi's scarred face, just inches from his own, The younger man wore a bitter scowl, and was about to slap him again until Kai sat up of his own accord.

"Wakey wakey, eggs and bakey, Overhaul! Jesus, you scared the shit out of me, man. I thought I was gonna have to fight this asshole on my own."
As the rest of the room shifted slowly into focus, Chisaki realized that Dabi was actively maintaining a tall wall of intense blue fire in a semicircle around their group with his other hand. Visible on the far side of the inferno was a short man with a grizzled grey-white beard and a black domino mask over his eyes, hovering on the jets of air shooting from his bulky yellow boots.

"Gran Torino," Overhaul growled, his teeth grit against the throbbing pain as he reached to the back of his head and withdrew his hand covered in warm red blood. "I had a feeling he might be here."

"Yup, well turns out you were dead on the money with that one. I think he's the one who busted the door, to get at you easier. He almost took all three of us out at once, but he knocked me out that way before, back in Kamino Ward- I wasn't about to fall for the same tactic again. You hear me, old man?!" He craned his head around and gave Torino a middle finger; the old-timer simply laughed in response.

"Oh, I hear it. I bet you think you're pretty badass, don't you, punk?"

"Nah, not particularly. I just think you need to burn." Turning back to face Sorahiko, Dabi held out both his hands and turned his wall of flame into a massive, expanding burst that spread out in every direction, forcing Torino to soar back and out of its path.

In the same moment, Chisaki slammed one hand into the cold metal floor and the other into the sealed door behind him. A hole immediately opened up to allow the others through, while the ground transformed into a field of spikes rising up to counter the aged hero's every move.

"You need to close the door again!" Kuruno shouted over the din of the battle, loading a clip into his pistol and then turning to fire a burst of rounds into the room he'd just entered from. "The building's crawling with heroes! I froze a few with my quirk, and Rappa and the gunmen are holding them off the best they can, but it won't last for long!"

Ducking momentarily behind Dabi for cover as Gran Torino continued to dodge and weave between the flames and spikes, Overhaul craned his head to glance back through the hole and assess the situation. Sure enough, to say that things had descended into chaos was an understatement: Now that the gas had cleared, multiple teams of heroes had flooded through every possible entrance, and the strike team's forces were being completely overwhelmed. His mask already tattered and his face bloodied, Rappa was going blow-for-blow with Miruko as her kicks proved more than a match for his punches, while a group of Ectoplasm clones had surrounded the remaining Yakuza soldiers, who were rapidly running out of ammunition dealing with the endless destructible facsimiles. As he watched, one of the windows on the near wall burst open, and Snipe leapt through, smoke wafting from his gun's barrel. Kai's eyes met the expressionless gaze of the teacher's gas mask, and the hero wasted no time taking aim and cocking back the hammer; Kai only barely slapped the wall and fused the door shut again in time before a barrage of bullets slammed into the metal, tracing a perfect outline of each of his limbs. God, we really do need to get a move-on.

Behind him, Chronostasis had already joined the main battle, lashing out with his clock hands at the aging hero, who was very nearly cut by them in the first attack. When Overhaul added his spikes back to the fray, Gran Torino had almost nowhere left to dodge, though Chisaki was forced to reprimand Dabi for the intensity of his attacks after a tongue of blue flame set one of the rows of server banks sparking and melting.

"Careful with the damn fire, we can't complete our mission if we destroy everything first!"

"Well we can't complete it until we kill him either, can we?" Dabi shot back, letting his inferno die down for a moment as he turned his head to face.
Gran Torino wasted no time taking advantage of the perceived opening, and blasted down toward them at full speed, his yellow-gloved fist outstretched. From there, everything went exactly as they'd planned; Chisaki had suspected that the old-timer would be present, after all, so naturally they'd devised a strategy to counter him during their tactics sessions. Still looking at Kai in order to preserve the genuine nature of their 'argument', Dabi shifted one hand back in Torino's direction at the last possible second before impact and let out a massive blast of flame. His reflexes as sharp as ever, Torino dodged in the only direction available to him, given all the momentum he'd just built upward Overhaul. The opening was brief- it took less than half a second for Sorahiko correct his course and jet back in the other direction- but Chisaki was ready. Swinging both his hands in a wide, converging arc to cover the full range of Torino's possible movement, Kai lunged toward the hero, whose beady eyes widened in shock as he realized his error. The old man was fast- nearly fast enough to escape in time- but not quite. The very tip of Overhaul's left middle finger grazed ever so slightly across the side of Torino's boot as he rocketed away, but that was all it took to disintegrate the hero's right leg up to the knee, splattering all three men with blood.

"Ah, god damn!" Spiralng out of control on his single remaining jet, Sorahiko slammed into one of the servers and tumbled to the floor, his cape covered in streaks of crimson.

Still not done yet, the hero tried to take back off with his left leg, but Chronostasis darted in and swung his minute hand in a clean arc across the hero's back and side before he had the chance. Frozen in place, Gran Torino could only watch with an expression somewhere between fury and regret as Overhaul strode forward, reached down, and destroyed his other leg in the same fashion. Chisaki considered just leaving him to bleed out like that, but after a moment's consideration, he decided that he was in the mood for tragic irony today.

"Here," he called, and tossed the thumb drive containing Cloudpiercer to Kurono. "Go ahead and upload it while I deal with grandpa over here. Dabi, grab Setsuno and contact Kurogiri, we're gonna need that extraction in about thirty seconds."

On cue, one of Miruko's kicks drove a deep, rabbit paw-shaped dent into the door, and Kai chuckled nervously as he grabbed Sorahiko by his collar and carried the paralyzed hero over to the outer wall. The room had no windows, but it only took a second for him to make a wide hole in the metal and concrete and insulation, facing out to the street and city blocks below. Wailing sirens filled the air, but most of the heroes and cops were concentrated on the other side of the building, by the front entrance. Accordingly, there was no one below to catch Gran Torino when Overhaul hurled him over the edge, a soft grin on his lips.

"Your whole life you've been able to fly like it's your second nature," he called down as Sorahiko fell, "so tell me, how does it feel to finally experience gravity like the rest of us?"

He never heard the old man's answer, of course, just the sound of flesh and bone hitting distant pavement. Satisfied, Overhaul turned around just in time to watch Lemillion phase through the sealed door and land nimbly on the vault's floor with a wide smile on his face. A moment after it had soared up to new heights, Kai's heart plummeted like a stone in his chest, his eyes wide.

"No, not again. He wasn't supposed to be here. He was supposed to be out of the city today…"

"Well well well, what do we have here?" Mirio put his hands defiantly on his hips and shook his head in disappointment. "Looks to me like a few cornered thugs with nowhere to run. Wanna give it up and come quietly, Chisaki, or do you need me to rough you up again first?"

Over at the access port, Chronostasis and Dabi seemed at a loss for what to do; the latter had an orb of fire at the ready in his ready in the hand that wasn't busy keeping Setsuno slung over his shoulder, but his expression made it clear that he knew full well he wouldn't be able to singe a single hair on...
"You don't touch Kai!" Kurono finally bellowed after a few agonizing seconds of silence, stepping forward with his own pistol held against his head. Even from ten yards away, Overhaul could see that he was trembling in his white overcoat. "You heroes have to save everyone you can, right?! If you take another step forward, I'll fucking do it!"

"Kurono?!", Chisaki cried in confusion, edging towards Dabi as steadily and cautiously as possible. "What the hell are you doing?!",

Even Lemillion momentarily seemed at a loss for words, but a moment was all they needed. In the span of the next second, Kurogiri's portal opened amid one of the rows of servers, midway between the other two villains, Miruko and the heroes finally knocked down the door and burst through, and everyone started to move at once. Dabi and Overhaul both broke out in a sprint for the warp gate, the latter slapping the floor as he went and erecting a shifting wall of grey metal to catch Snipe's bullets and hold back Ectoplasm's clones. Chisaki lost sight of Lemillion and Kurono behind the shield, but a gunshot rang out across the room, just as Miruko leapt over his wall in a single bound. With one last flourish of his hand, he was able to create a bed of spikes large enough to throw off her landing, sending her sprawling face first into one of the servers while Dabi dove through the portal with Setsuno. There was no time to check whether the virus had been successfully uploaded- Kai had to leave that up to faith as he charged through behind Dabi, his breath a ragged pant, sweat soaking his brow and bangs.

Just as he ran through the gate, though, something grabbed hold of one of his legs- one moment he was looking at the dim interior of the warehouse that they were scheduled to warp to, the next he was on his back, staring up at Mirio's face as Lemillion tightened his grip on Chisaki's shin. "You're not getting away again! Not this time!"

The young hero's body was half-in and half-out of the portal, but his sheer strength was incredible; Overhaul was sliding rapidly back through the gate until the familiar metallic click of a revolver being cocked filled the air, and two fingers on Togata's right hand exploded. His eyes wide with shock, Lemillion loosened his grip out of instinct, and let out a yelp of surprise and pain. Seizing the brief opening, Kai drove his foot hard into the hero's face before he could dephase, sending him stumbling back through to the other side- the instant he was gone, Kurogiri drew the portal shut, leaving the remaining members of Strike Team Vandal alone and exhausted in the darkness, yet nonetheless victorious.

"Thanks for the assist, kid." Chisaki gave Mustard a nod of acknowledgement, gesturing to the boy's Python. "I thought for sure he had me there."

"I would have closed the gate and cut your feet off before I let you be captured," Kurogiri intoned solemnly- Kai couldn't tell whether it was genuine concern or hidden malice in his voice. "Am I to assume that this is everyone who made it, then?"

"Seems like it," Overhaul replied, pushing himself to his feet and doing a quick head count: Mustard, Dabi, Dark Shadow, himself, one Precepts foot soldier, and one unconscious Setsuno. "Six out of seventeen. Losing Rappa and Chronostasis is a kick in the balls, but could've been worse, I guess. We'll get them back soon enough, if they're still alive. That reminds me. Dabi- did Kurono install the virus in time? And where's the video camera?"

"Well, good news and bad news, I guess." The patch-faced Syndicate member eased Setsuno down to the floor, then shoved his hands back in his pockets and shrugged. "Bad news, the old geezer busted the camera to pieces while you were out for a few seconds, so we didn't get to film our great
escape. Good news, I'm pretty sure clock hair uploaded the special computer thingy, so don't worry about it."

"Pretty sure?" Chisaki felt one eyebrow raise out of instinct. "You're pretty sure that we accomplished the main goal of our mission? You want to amend that statement?"

"Okay, I'm ninety percent sure he did, that make you happy? I saw him put the flash drive in the computer, things were happening kind of fast, so forgive me if I didn't have time to watch the whole process while the dude was holding a gun to his head and half a dozen heroes were charging at me."

"No, it doesn't, but it'll have to be good enough for now." Overhaul signed heavily. "We'll find out whether or not he did it soon enough, I guess. That's a wrap on today, good work, everyone. Now all of you, split up and head to your safehouses, like we discussed. I don't want to see any of your faces on the street until this has all blown over." He glanced down at his bloodstained jacket, and shuddered at the sight. "I feel filthy. I gotta go take a shower. I need to be clean again."

"So, am I to assume we're sticking to the plan, then?" Gentle asked, stepping up to Pandora's side as they continued to stare down the three heroes opposite them. The slash on his torso still ached, but the bleeding had stopped for the most part, and the adrenaline coursing through his veins had numbed most of the pain for the moment. "I can still fight. There's a chance for us to win this yet, and for me to prove my worth."

"I think we're a bit past plans at this point," Synapse replied dryly. "Win. That's the only plan we need to worry about."

"Unfortunately, I'm going to have to object to that strategy," Hawks called, flexing his wings. "Any chance I could persuade you to plan on surrendering instead? It's just that I've already thrashed you all so much, any more would start to feel excessive."

"Just know when you're bested and give it up already!" Gale Force cried, his arms crossed in disapproval. "You have no chance of winning this anymore!"

"I'll admit," said Yaoyorozu, leveling the tip of her sword with Hawks' head, "It's been a rather exhilarating warm-up. You made a fatal error, though."

"Oh?" Hawks took a step forward and grinned, his feathers slowly gathering in a rotating cloud around him. "And what's that?"

"You gave us time to regroup." Momo said with a matching smile of her own, then aimed one of her gauntlets at the ground and fired the smoke bomb that served as the signal for a full counterattack.

Opposite them, Inasa wasted no time whipping up a funnel of wind to blow the thick white cloud away, but by the time it dissipated, Shinso was gone, Yaoyorozu was airborne and making a beeline for Hawks with her jetpack and thrusters, and Tobita as striding calmly towards Sero and Yoarashi, tapping the ground with his elegant walking stick as he went.

"Well well, gentlemen- how shall we go about this? The easy way, or the hard one?"

"I've seen your videos!" Gale Force shot back, lifting steadily off the ground and sending a burst of pressurized wind in Gentle's direction; Danjuro drew his hands around in a wide circle just in time to reflect it back toward its sender. "You've got a lot of passion- not as much as Hawks, but still, I like that! So I don't wanna hurt you too badly, if I can help it!"

"My dear boy, if you want to beat us, you're going to have to hurt me."
Inasa's eyes darkened beneath his Shiketsu cap, and he raised his gloved hand to summon another funnel of air, but Hanta held out an arm to stop him first.

"This one's trouble, Gale Force, I've seen him in action. Let me handle Gentle, you go for the hostages!"

"Are you sure, Cellophane?"

"Yeah, I'm-" Sero froze, his arms suddenly falling limp at his sides, and by the time Yoarashi realized his fellow intern had been brainwashed, Gentle was already springing off the ground towards Hanta, his eyes narrowed in determination.

With a frantic wave of his arms, Inasa used a massive gust to propel Sero up into the air just moments before Danjuro landed where the young hero had been standing- the wind pressure was enough to break the effect of Shinso's quirk, but if the worried glance the two interns exchanged was any indication, they wouldn't be coordinating any further verbally. Predictably, they launched into the same plan they'd just been discussing: Gale Force flew toward the temple doors, where Twice, Monoma, and Nemoto were standing their ground in front of the two hostages, while Cellophane latched onto the roof with a long strand of tape and began to build up momentum in a wide, swinging arc that sent him in a 180 degree loop around the back side of the building. Above the chaos, Pandora was holding her own in an aerial duel with Hawks, whose movements were growing more and more fatigued as exhaustion set in and his feathers were steadily depleted. Hanta tried to surprise her from behind with a strand of tape from his free arm as he swung past them, but she angled down her left gauntlet and incinerated his attack in a stream of fire without so much as a backward glance in his direction.

"La Brava," Tobita called, his eyes locked on Sero as the intern began to swing back in his direction, "now, darling!"

As he watched and waited, Danjuro allowed himself to steal one brief glance up at her perch on the third floor, and smiled softly to himself when she leaned out over the edge of the balcony and cupped her hands around her mouth.

"Gentle, I love you!"

No matter how much they used 'Lover Mode', the feeling of Aiba's quirk flooding through him never failed to impress Tobita as it took effect. All at once, his speed and reflexes were heightened to superhuman levels, his muscles surged with overwhelming power, and excess energy began to emanate from his body in the form of golden fire, from his hair and moustache and flowing cape. A strange tingling sensation shot through his veins until it filled his every limb and extremity, and suddenly his mind was absolutely at peace, brimming with feelings of warmth and affection. These emotions quickly turned to cold resentment, though, when he turned his gaze back to Sero, who by now was flying towards him at full speed, his legs outstretched for a kick.

"Are you quite certain you've seen me fight, young man? You don't seem to be the least bit aware of my tactics." Laying a field of elastic air circles in Hanta's path as he went, Gentle slapped the ground and bounced back and away into the cherry grove, ready to launch a fresh attack on the boy the instant he rebounded into the ground.

Rather than simply fall for the trap, though, Cellophane tugged on his main thread of tape and adjusted his course midair to shoot perfectly between the patches of elasticity, then severed the strand, bared both of his elbows, and fired a swift series of tape bursts down at Gentle as he skidded in for the landing. Tobita was practically mummified from the neck down in the span of a heartbeat, his arms pinned to his side, and with a cry of triumph, Sero pulled hard to the left to swing Danjuro
into one of the trees.

"Got you now, asshole! This is for Aizawa!"

_Oho, what's this?_ Tobita cocked an eyebrow in amusement, then cracked his neck and planted his feet firmly in the ground, digging a small pit for each one with the force of impact. _Not a bad tactic, but sadly futile._ Hanta kept pulling, but Gentle didn't budge a single inch, and couldn't help but let out a chuckle when the intern began to visibly struggle and strain.

"Sorry, young man, did you say you wanted to avenge your teacher? You'll need to try a bit harder than this."

A grin spreading across his face, Tobita flexed his arms a single time and instantly tore the tape bindings to shreds.

"Ah, that's better. It was getting a bit stifling under all that- I'm sure you understand."

Then he launched himself directly toward Cellophane, who raised his elbows and fired another barrage of tape in a panic- it was exactly what Gentle was hoping that he'd do. Grabbing hold of the tips of the threads and wrapping them around his hands, Danjuro dropped back to the ground, dug his heels in, and yanked with all his enhanced strength, sending Hanta flying towards him. He quickly severed the strands midair, but by then momentum was already working against him; there was no chance for Sero to slow down or stop himself before Gentle slammed his waiting fist into the intern's tape-dispenser mask and sent him tumbling bloodied and unconscious to the ground, his jaw shattered.

"Such a bother, violence." Tobita shook his head solemnly, then wiped the blood from his glove with an embroidered handkerchief and turned back to the rest of the battle to assess the situation.

Momo and Hawks were still darting about and slashing at each other overhead like a pair of mad hornets, while at the temple doors, Neito had copied Todoroki's quirk, and was holding back Gale Force with alternating blasts of fire and ice while Twice lashed out at the young hero's defenses. _I still have nearly a minute of Aiba's quirk left_, he knew, his eyes flitting between the two engagements. _But whom to assist?_

"Chaudron needs your held more than Pandora does. He's barely conscious at this point, he could pass out any moment, and then the hostages are practically unguarded." Danjuro jumped at the sound of Synapse's voice in his ear- Hitoshi had practically read his mind- but swiftly complied nonetheless, breaking into a sprint and then a quirk-assisted leap towards Yoarashi.

Inasa noticed his new opponent just in time to dodge his outstretched fist, but he wasn't quite agile enough to evade the circle of elasticized air Tobita was wielding like a bludgeon with his other hand, and blood spurted from his broken nose as he sailed a dozen meters toward the ground before finally catching himself. Gentle, meanwhile, landed atop the roof of the temple, his flaming cape billowing in the wind, and the two stared each other down for a few tense moments.

"You say you've seen my work," Danjuro called, stroking his moustache. "Well I've seen your interviews, Gale Force, and I must say, I'm impressed. You have a clear dream that you're not afraid to chase with all your heart no matter what the world may think of you. In another lifetime, perhaps we could be comrades. What a pity that we meet today as foes."

With a heavy sigh, Tobita reached down, touched the tiles of the roof, and shot off the newly elastic surface towards Yoarashi, who raised his arms and fired off two funnels of air to intercept the villain. The wind was strong and fast, and Gentle was very nearly thrown back, but in his current state, he
was stronger and faster still, and fought through the gale to land a brutal, double-fisted blow on Inasa's chest. Much of the impact was absorbed by the intern's bulky hero costume, but the Shiketsu third-year's wind died down as he gasped for breath, and it was all too easy for Danjuro to slip behind him with his enhanced speed and deliver a brutal chop to the back of his neck, sending Yoarashi plummeting into the ground.

"The only problem," Gentle continued, bouncing down towards his foe of a series of air circles, "is that I have a dream too, young man, and that dream is not just my own to protect! Who's to say that yours is more important than ours?!"

Touching down gently on the stones of the courtyard, Tobita regarded Gale Force with a look of pity; the hero had struggled back to his knees, though blood was still dripping down his face, and his breath was wheezing and ragged.

"Finish him, Gentle!" La Brava shouted, and Danjuro was raising his fist to do just that when a blast of wind sent him staggering backward, and suddenly Yoarashi was back on his feet, his eyes wide with anger as his massive glove surged straight toward Tobita's face- tendrils of wind were whipping around it to increase the blow's speed and power.

"Take this! Hurricane Punch!"

"How trivial," Gentle replied in a bored tone, catching the attack easily with one hand. As little as he generally enjoyed these parts of his fights, he couldn't help but find himself grinning as Inasa's eyes widened in shock. With a flourish of his free hand, he laid an open palm strike on the intern's chest that sent him skidding back a dozen yards- Yoarashi nearly fell off the mountaintop, and only caught himself thanks to his wind. When he lifted his head and raised his arms again, though, his face was a mask of furious determination.

"Let's see how you handle a taste of Divine Typhoon!"

This time, the deluge of wind was on a completely different level in terms of power, and even when he dug in his feet again, Gentle found himself sliding backward uncontrollably. He tried to create a series of air circles to reflect the gale, but each time he sealed off one side it started to come from another, until it began to lift up from beneath him, and he was in danger of being carried away. The whirling torrent built up in a massive, storm-like pattern around Tobita, until the walls of the miniature tornado were practically all he could see; just outside his visual range, he could hear the cracking and twisting of wood as the trees were torn from their roots, and the shattering of ceramics as the tiles from the temple roof smashed into the ground. **Well, now, this might be a problem. I suppose if things get too dire, I could-**

"Hey, kid, easy with the wind there, you could injure the hostages!" The sound of Hawks' muffled voice interrupted his thoughts, and with eyes wide in anticipation, Tobita whipped his head back around to watch Inasa's response.

"Forgive me, Hawks-sensei! I didn't mean to-"

Yoarashi fell instantly for the brainwashing, and the moment he froze in place, Gentle lunged forward and delivered a brutal kick to the boy's stomach that sent him soaring through the air like a bullet. Against all odds, Inasa managed to hold on to consciousness and steady himself above the cherry grove, but by then Danjuro was already directly above him, holding half a dozen layers of elastic air over his head.

"No one gets to stand in the way of our dream, not even you! Farewell, young Gale Force- Gently Sandwich!"
Before Yoarashi could dodge, Tobita slammed the compressed circles down into the intern's body and sent him sailing into the ground like a missile, then rocketed down after him and bashed Inasa once more into the crater he'd created to ensure that he wouldn't be getting up again this time.

But once the adrenaline surging through his veins had died down, and Lover Mode's aura faded, Gentle's eyes widened in horror as he gazed down at the young hero's bruised and battered body. **Dear lord, is he… dead? Did I kill him?!**

Then Danjuro saw Yoarashi's armored chest move up and down ever so slightly, as his mouth parted almost imperceptibly to allow a hint of a breath to escape from his bloodied lips. He sighed in silent relief, but then Mr. Compress' words drifted once more into his mind. **It's a bridge you're going to have to cross, sooner or later.**

Pushing Atsuhiro's warning to the back of his mind for the time being, Gentle turned toward the others and sprang back into the air. **I can wait to cross it for a little while longer, I think.**

Back by the temple, though, the battle wasn't going nearly as smoothly, as Shinso was forced to admit to himself. In spite of all the advanced combat gear she'd created, Yaoyorozu was still losing ground against Hawks in their duel- she'd managed to singe or freeze a few feathers and patches of his jacket, and had even broke his nose with her shield, but she hadn't managed to lay a single solid cut on his exposed skin with her paralyzing sword, and although the two interns had both proven gullible, Hitoshi hadn't been able to get the Winged Hero to fall for his brainwashing trick again, no matter which voices he tried.

As Synapse stood and watched on the balcony beside La Brava, cursing himself for his uselessness, one of Hawks' flight feathers whizzed behind Pandora before she could counter it and slashed straight through her jetpack's fuel cell in a burst of sparks and flame. A quick follow-up attack forced her to land before she could create a new one, and Shinso's stomach sank when he drove her head into the stone with a swift kick.

"Hold on, Pandora!" Gentle's voice drifted over from the far side of the battlefield, where he'd just finished off Gale Force, and Tobita began to leap from air cushion to air cushion back over toward the rest of them. A glint in Hawks' eye indicated that he remembered how Twice and Gentle had given him trouble before by working in concert, and the Winged Hero charged straight for Jin and the hostages, aiming to take Bubaigawara down before Danjuro arrived. Monoma had already fallen unconscious and ben carried inside by Nemoto, so Twice was the only one still guarding the hostages, and Shinso watched with genuine curiosity as Hawks dismantled Jin's defenses, shattered his tape dispensers, and slammed his body into the temple wall, all in the span of a second.

So it seems like he'll be rescuing one of them after all, Synapse mused, as the hero used one of his flight feathers to pry apart Uravity's restraints, touched Ochako's fingertips to her face to turn her weightless, and let one of his smaller feathers carry her out and away from the mountainside at a breakneck speed, towards where government helicopters and hero teams were still clashing with Longshot. **Perfectly acceptable. Hatsume's going to have a field day with this.**

Just as Hawks was turning to Coldflame to free the second hostage, though, Gentle skidded to a halt just behind the Winged Hero, who barely turned around in time to deflect Tobita's elastic attack. The two traded blows for a few brief moments, but just when a feather plunged through Danjuro's knee like a dagger, and it seemed that the villain was on the verge of defeat, a hissing sound filled the air, and suddenly one of Hawks' legs was frozen to the ground, rendering him immobile; Momo had finally struggled back to one knee and torn her broken mask off, panting as she aimed her gauntlet at the hero with trembling hands.
"Jesus Christ, that's cold!" Hawks yelped in protest. Within half a heartbeat, he had grabbed hold of one of his longer feathers to break apart the cocoon of ice, but just as he leaned down to free himself, there was a flash of blue light, and suddenly one of his wings had disappeared, all the way down to a bloodied stump, and the hero let out an agonized cry of pain.

"You seem to be unfamiliar with the most basic rule of showmanship," Called Mr. Compress, wiping away the stream of blood dripping from underneath his mask as he limped slowly and gingerly towards the hero, a turquoise marble grasped between two gloved fingers. "Never overstay your welcome."

Atsuhiro swiped downward with his other hand, and now both of Hawks' wings had been compressed, leaving the number one hero practically powerless- this had been the plan from the beginning, until he took them by surprise with the ferocity of his new tactics. It seems we're finally up, Shinso realized. Wasting no time, he gestured for La Brava to follow him downstairs and out through the doors into the courtyard, then crossed his arms and waited while Gentle and Pandora each restrained one of the defeated hero's arms and forced him to his knees. Hawks gave them practically no resistance- the look of shock and hopelessness in his eyes was so raw and complete that Hitoshi almost found him pitiable- almost, but not quite.

"Strike Team Vandal has completed their mission at the police station and been successfully evacuated," said Synapse, glancing to Compress, who still had a two-foot feather embedded in his stomach. "I'm signaling Kurogiri's clone to return for a medical extraction. Make sure he takes Chaudron, Spinner, and Twice too. Pandora, come to think of it, do you need one as well? You took a pretty hard hit back there."

"I'm fine," Yaoyorozu insisted, despite the blood dripping down from her scalp. "I need to see this through to the end. If I need medical attention, I can create the supplies myself."

"If you say so," Hitoshi muttered, as he pressed a button on his phone and a pulsing warp gate appeared by the temple entrance. Once he was sure that Kurogiri had the extraction well in hand, he beckoned for the plague-masked Nemoto Shin to join them, and crouched down to look Hawks in the eyes- once three seconds had passed, he began to issue commands.

"Do not attempt to escape or resist anything that we do. Do not speak unless you are asked to. When you do speak, do not provide any information other than precisely what you are asked for."

Then he nodded for La Brava to begin filming, and launched into the opening monologue- the whole piece had been written for Monoma to deliver, but that wasn't currently possible given the circumstances.

"The number one hero," Shinso began, clasping his hands behind his back and turning to face the blinking red light. "That was what you named him the other week, yes? We at the Syndicate were so excited to test out that claim for ourselves after the challenge our leader gave him, but after one little fight, he doesn't seem to be capable of much heroism at all anymore. Isn't that right, Hawks?"

The camera zoomed in on the meager remains of the hero's wings, and out of the corner of his eye Hitoshi could see La Brava screwing up her face in disgust at the sight of the exposed blood and bone. Hawks merely looked up at Synapse with lifeless eyes, and said nothing in response- whether he was trying to avoid the chance of brainwashing or he'd simply run out of witty barbs altogether, Shinso wasn't sure.

"As such," Hitoshi continued, "it seems to me that the only merciful thing for us to do now is to kill him, and put him out of his misery. Before we do, though, there's something that we think you all deserve to know about your soon-to-be former number one hero. La Brava?"
Aiba pressed a button on the side of the camera, and suddenly everyone tuned into their livestream was watching the same video clip, retrieved from the League's old files- Manami turned the screen around so that they could all see it. The footage was grainy, and there was hardly any color, but clearly visible at the center of the screen were Hawks and Dabi, standing in the semi-darkness of an old warehouse.

"That was different from what we'd discussed," said Hawks, holding a three-foot scarlet feather out in front of him like a short sword.

"Is that so?"

"I was hoping we'd get along better than this, Dabi."

Synapse felt a smile growing across his face as he continued to watch the exchange- it was the only footage of use they'd found among the League's archives in Kobe, and for some time after watching it, Midoriya had been delighted by the revelation that Hawks was a double agent whom they could target for recruitment. It took further investigation by Momo to reveal that he'd been working for the police the whole time, but after Overhaul's team raided and pillaged Tokyo PD headquarters, it was unlikely that the files proving Hawks' innocence still survived. Even if they try to reveal the truth of the operation after the fact, Shinso reflected, it'll just seem like they're trying to cover for him. People always latch onto the worst possible scenario out of instinct.

"Well hey," Hawks was saying, "it did some serious damage to the number one. You should be happy. I haven't broken my promise. You're the only one who's gone back on his word."

"But it's even more unreasonable for you to think I'd trust the number two hero right off the bat. So this was also a test to see if you were trustworthy," Dabi shifted on his feet, and tilted his head slightly to the left as the feather began to hover closer and closer to his neck. "Why exactly did today's little event get resolved with zero deceased? It's hard to believe someone who sympathized with our cause and requested to cooperate would act in such a way."

"I've got to keep up appearances on my end," Hawks shot back. "I can't afford to lose the faith that's been placed in me as a hero. The more confidence everyone has in me, the more valuable information I'll receive. You should really be looking at the big picture here." Grabbing the feather back out of the air, the Winged Hero turned and began to walk away. "Everything I do, I do for the League, Dabi."

"Well, I still won't let you meet the boss for the time being, but... I'll contact you again, Hawks."

Then the clip ended, and the camera cut back to the hero's defeated face. On cue, Nemoto stepped forward into the shot, and Shinso, positioned between the two, smiled at the camera.

"Allow me to introduce Nemoto Shin of the Eight Precepts, a name I'm sure you're familiar with from the most wanted lists. His quirk is called Confession, and it forces anyone he poses a question to answer truthfully. I believe you had something to ask Hawks, didn't you, Nemoto?"

"Indeed," The Expendable replied, then took another step forward. "Hawks, was that you in the clip we all just saw?"

"...Yes."

"So you can confirm that you met with Dabi on multiple occasions, with the goal of gaining the trust of the League of Villains?"

"Yes."
"Why did you stop meeting them? Did you have a change of heart?"

"No. They got too suspicious, I guess. They stopped responding to my messages."

"That's all the questions I had," said Shin with a nod to Hitoshi.

"What a heartbreaking turn of events," Synapse said with feigned solemnity. "I must admit, even with our disdain for the current system, we were shocked when we learned of Hawks' betrayal; we knew that the people deserved to know the real truth about their so-called 'heroes'. But we won't let this traitor wound you anymore. Pandora, if you would?"

"With pleasure."

A soft smirk on her lips, Yaoyorozu grabbed hold of a tuft of Hawks' blond hair, then leaned down and dragged the blade of her sword across his throat. Bright crimson blood the color of the hero's stolen feathers spurted out across the cracked grey stones, and after swaying back and forth for a moment, he fell to the ground face-first and died in silence.

"Now he can't hurt anyone else with his disloyalty," remarked Shinso, his tone warm and comforting. "I'm afraid we have to go for now, but don't think that today's festivities are over quite yet. Make sure you keep watching for the grand finale."

"Alright, Snipe and Ectoplasm are on their way here now. Battle Fist, are you ready to go?"

"As I'll ever be," Itsuka replied, in the midst of a series of arm and leg stretches. "You're just lucky I'm patient, or I'd already be there."

"You know you don't have to come, right?" asked Present Mic, rubbing the back of his head. "You've been dealing with a lot lately, no one's gonna blame you if you let us pros handle it."

Kendo shot him a withering glare that said more than enough about her stance on coming to silence Hizashi, then stood and straightened her skirt; she was still wearing her school uniform, but it'd have to make do for now. Most of the students had made their way back to the dorms by now, but there were still a significant number visible milling about outside the glass doors of the lobby, many calling their parents or watching the villains' livestream on their phones. The hallways around them had grown eerily silent, though- for all intents and purposes, U.A. had become a ghost town in the span of a few minutes. When approaching footsteps announced the other two teachers' arrival a few moments later, Kendo turned to face the group of pros and cracked her knuckles.

"Alright, are we doing this the fast way or the slow way? With all due respect, keep in mind, there's a right answer and a wrong one to that question."

"I… was going to say we could use my car," Snipe offered meekly. "Traffic parts for heroes on duties after all, so it's not like it'd take…" He trailed off and exchanged a glance with Aizawa, who simply dug his hands into his pockets and shrugged.

"Sorry, she still doesn't really know how to take 'no' for an answer. But to be fair, it'll be a lot more efficient."

"And only slightly more humiliating," Ectoplasm quipped. "There's no sense in more discussion- the mission comes before our pride. Battle Fist, we're ready."

"Glad to hear it."
Once the group had stepped outside, Kendo grew both of her hands to a massive size, then gently picked up two teachers in each one, careful not to squeeze too hard. The moment they were all secure, she crouched down, let One For All fill her body, and took off towards downtown with a soaring leap, kicking up a cloud of dust in her wake.

In the end, it only took three minutes and forty-two seconds for them to reach Lemillion's agency, a swanky, modern office with floor-to-ceiling glass windows and colorful decor overlooking a busy market street. Togata had done well for himself since graduating from U.A.; an instant media darling, he already had a few sidekicks of his own, and had taken on several students from his alma mater as interns, including a few of Kendo's classmates during his most recent recruiting drive. Juzo and Setsuna were both visible on a video call with Mirio when they strode into his conference room- their faces occupied one wall-mounted flatscreen monitor, while the Syndicate livestream took up the other.

"I know traffic's going to be bad," Togata was saying, "and you should definitely check with your parents first, but if you really want to come down, you're more than welcome. I gotta warn you, though, we might be rolling out in the next few minutes- I'll keep you posted, okay?"

"Kendo!" Tokage cried as soon as she caught sight of Itsuka. "How are you already… wait, nevermind, of course you are."

"Look who it is, early as usual!" Lemillion turned around and flashed the group of newcomers a beaming grin, his hands on his hips. "Glad you guys could make it too, Eraser. Miruko and the sidekicks are in my office if you wanna say hi before we leave, first door on the right."

"Will do," Aizawa replied, gesturing for the other teachers to follow him. Battle Fist lingered, however, to speak with her fellow 3-B students for a short while longer.

"I'm sorry I didn't realize you guys wanted to come too! I could've carried you both like I did with the others, do you want me to come back and get you now? It'd probably be quicker in the long run."

"Nah, don't worry about it." Honenuki shot her a thumbs up, and a sudden lighting change indicated that they'd entered the dorm- the chatter of a dozen other of Itsuka's friends was audible in the background. "That'd do nothing but slow you down, and we know time's an important factor. Just save some of the bad guys for us, okay?"

"Yeah, at least a couple!" Setsuna butted in. "I really feel like kicking some villain ass after watching those dumb Syndicate motherfuckers on video for half an hour."

"Language!" Togata protested in shock. After a few hurried apologies from the new interns, they ended the call, and Mirio turned to face Kendo.

"I'm really glad you're here, Battle Fist. You ready for this? We're gonna be walking into a rough situation, I'll be handing out gasmasks and flashbangs for everyone to counter Mustard and Dark Shadow."

"As ready as I'll ever be," Itsuka sighed, thinking back to the training camp. "I've dealt with the sleeping gas prick before, he's smart- fights dirty."

"So I've heard. Sorry, just one second." A cheerful ding announced that Lemillion had received a text, and his face lit up when he read it. "Alright, Sir's finally here!"

"…Huh?" Kendo raised an eyebrow questioningly. "No, he's over at U.A., talking with All Might."

Togata gave her a puzzled glance, but before he could say anything, the door to the lobby opened,
and Itsuka's eyes widened in disbelief as Nighteye stepped through, dusting off his grey suit—
a different color than the one she'd seen him in just five minutes ago, a quarter of the way across the
city. Suddenly her heart felt like it was made of lead, and her mouth refused to work properly.

"I… you… what? How are you…"

"Took ya long enough, slowpoke!" Miruko's loud voice interrupted her stammering as the Rabbit
Hero strode over from the office, a cheeky grin on her face. "What, did you get lost at the
haberdashery?"

"As you're well aware, I was stuck in traffic," he replied curtly, straightening his tie and glasses.
"That joke isn't any funnier now than it was the first two times you texted it to me."

"Eh, third time's the charm, and you're a hopeless audience anyway. I… Kendo, what's wrong?"
Usagiyama had noticed her intern's obvious distress, and Itsuka finally forced herself to form words
again.

"Sir, you… you weren't just at U.A., were you?"
Please say you were. Please let me be wrong.

"No. As we've established, I was-"

"I need to go." Itsuka turned and began to walk towards the exit, but quickly changed her
mind. *Fuck it, the elevator takes too long. I think Mirio'll forgive me if I repay him for the window."

"Go?" Lemillion looked even more confounded now. "But you just got here! Do you mean to the
police station? We're all going to leave together soon, I can't let you go by yourself!"

"No!" Kendo pulled out her phone and typed out a brief warning text with shaking fingers as she
spoke, trying her best to keep the panic building up inside her chest out of her voice. *I need to get
back to U.A., because I think I just left All Might alone with Toga Himiko!*

"Holy shit." A loud crack and splash announced that Aizawa had dropped his mug of coffee on the
other end of the room, where he was standing paralyzed with shock, his eyes locked on Nighteye.
When he turned his head to face Kendo, his expression was full of an emotion she'd never seen in
him before—fear. "Go, now, I'll explain it to them!"

You don't have to tell me twice.

Only a slight tinge of guilt for defacing Togata's new agency flitted through Itsuka's brain as she
leapt through the window in a shower of shattered glass, bounced off the nearest rooftop, and began
to soar back in the direction she'd come from. The rest of her mind was deep in the grip of cold,
numbing terror, the unmistakable feeling that something horrible was about to happen to someone
she loved.

"I'll save you," she whispered to herself as she drew nearer and nearer to the school. "I promise, I'll
save you. Please, just hang in there."

When Atsuhiro's quirk was finally lifted, and Midoriya burst back into form and consciousness from
his compressed state, the scene playing out before him was already enough to put a wide smile on his
face. Toga cried out in glee the moment he appeared, and wrapped her arms tightly around him, her
cheeks flushed with color. Just beyond her, All Might was slumped against the tall metal fame of one
of the roof's heating units, gazing up at them with wide eyes. One of his hands was wrapped weakly
around the hilt of the knife embedded just above his collarbone, and his breath was halting and ragged.

"Aren't you proud of me, baby?" Himiko cooed, planting a brief kiss on his lips. "I was really tempted to just finish him off, it would've been so easy, but I left him for you, just like I promised!"

"I'm so proud of you, darling. I know that must've been difficult for you." He wrapped one hand around her waist and straightened his tie with the other, taking one step toward the fallen hero.

"Long time no see, All Might." The affection was gone from his voice, replaced by cold, calm apathy. "Do you remember our last conversation? What you told me?"

"How could I… ever forget?" Blood dribbled out of Toshinori's mouth when he spoke, and his body was wracked by violent coughs the moment he drew silent. "Young Midoriya… I'm so-"

"Sorry?" Izuku laughed aloud. "Were you about to tell me that you're sorry? It's a bit late for that." He let go of Toga and crouched down until his face was only a few inches from Yagi's. "Two years too late, old man."

There was an audible click, and suddenly Toshinori's arm was fitted with a quirk-suppressing shackle of the same type that had held Uraraka and Todoroki.

"Just for insurance's sake." Seraph explained matter-of-factly. "Your quirk is so curious, after all. I found it fascinating, personally, how it simply vanished about a year ago, except for the few rare occasions you've been seen to use it again- and even then, only for a brief moment. Tell me, Carmilla, have you ever heard of another quirk behaving like that?"

"Nope, never!"

"I hadn't either, until I began to do a bit of research, about your past, and the concept of quirk transfer. What I found was absolutely enthralling, Toshinori." He paused, and shook his head with a sigh. "But I'm not here to talk about One For All. I'll have plenty of time to discuss it with the current holder once you're gone, after all. What do you think, All Might? Would Kendo be agreeable to a little chat?"

"Leave her… out of this." All Might gritted, his eyes narrowing in anger. "I'm the one you want, not her."

"How right you are… for now, at least. My apologies for the digression- where were we? Ah yes. I believe you were apologizing."

"I'm not sorry for what I said to you." Yagi coughed again, more violently this time, as a new stream of blood leaked from his wound and soaked into his suit. "At the time, with the information I had, I thought it was the best way to keep you from hurting yourself."

"Oh?" Izuku raised one eyebrow, and he felt the fingers on one hand curling involuntarily into a fist.

"I'm sorry that I didn't see how much pain you were in, young Midoriya." Suddenly tears began to well up in All Might's eyes, and Seraph flinched when the retired hero laid one trembling, bloody hand on his shoulder. "You were suffering right in front of me," Toshinori continued softly, "but I… I didn't realize how badly you needed me to save you. When you disappeared, I remember how terrified I was, how ashamed. I was so afraid that you had… that you had ended it out of despair. I'm glad that you're alive, Midoriya, but I can't help but despise how badly I failed you."
"I didn't need to be saved." Izuku slapped away Yagi's hand, grabbed hold of his throat, and lifted the gaunt skeleton of the man into the air like a ragdoll, grinning as he gasped for breath. "Don't you get it? I didn't need your 'help' then, and I don't need it now."

The exo-armor concealed beneath his blazer and dress shirt hummed with electricity as it activated, but All Might was so light that Midoriya hardly needed the augmentations. His heartbeat was growing weaker and weaker each second Seraph tightened his group around the man's neck, so Izuku forced himself to toss Toshinori to the ground, and let him gasp for breath again. We can't have him dying before I'm finished.

"Everything I've done these past two years has been to prove myself to you, to prove that I'm worthy, that I don't need your pity. I had to show you that I can stand on my own, that I don't need a quirk to show my worth. So what do you think of what I've built, Symbol of Peace?"

Midoriya held out his arms and smiled warmly. "All the blood and death and violence, it's all for you! I suppose I really have to thank you, in a roundabout way. None of this would've been possible if I didn't have you to keep driving me forward! There were so many times in the first few months that I was close to giving it all up, frightened that I was going to get myself and the people I cared about killed. But each time I despaired, I thought of you, All Might, of how greatly you'd hurt me, and just like that, I had the will to move forward again!"

Midoriya chuckled softly to himself, crouched down again over Toshinori's bloodsoaked chest, and grabbed onto the hilt of Toga's knife, twisting it back and forth in the wound. Yagi gasped in pain, and behind him, Himiko groaned with pleasure at the sight, running her fingers through Izuku's hair.

"You know, in a way, All Might, you're just as responsible for every person who died today as I am! How does that make you feel?"

"That's... not true." Toshinori muttered defiantly, though his voice had dropped to a ragged hiss.

"Perhaps it isn't, but what will the public believe if I tell them that it is? That's the wonderful thing about power, All Might- when you have enough, the truth is whatever you want it to be." Bored of making the retired hero writhe in agony, Izuku let go of the knife's hilt, stood, and began to pace back and forth across the roof, his hands clasped behind his back.

"And once you and Hawks are gone, and entropy takes its toll, I'll have more than enough power to have the good people of this country- the people that you care for so dearly- eating out of the palm of my hand. A quirkless boy who was told he'd never amount to anything will be their new symbol, and rest assured, they'll come to love me more than they ever loved you. It's rather poetic, don't you think?"

"I was never big... on poetry." Turning his head away from Midoriya, All Might reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out his cellphone, and began to type a message with shaky hands.

"Trying to call for help? How futile. You really are more pathetic than I thought." Seraph leaned down, snatched the phone away, and peered at the bloody screen. It was a half typed text message, addressed to Battle Fist.

(Draft): goodbye, young Kendo. I will always

"Ah, so you're more of the sentimental type than I realized! How touching." Izuku smirked and dangled the phone in front of Toshinori's increasingly pallid face. "What a shame it would be if she never received her master's final words." Then Izuku activated his metal gauntlet and squeezed until he was holding nothing but a mangled wreck of shattered glass and cracked circuitry.
"Oops. How clumsy of me."

Another tear ran down Yagi's gaunt cheek as Midoriya dropped the remains of the phone to the ground and began to advance toward him again, and when Seraph grabbed him by the collar of his suit and lifted him into the air, the wounded hero stared back in silent defiance.

"It's a vice of mine, to tell you the truth." Izuku shook his head and took a step toward the roof's edge. "I have the worst habit of breaking things when I grow bored of them. And do you know what All Might? I've looked forward to seeing you again for two years, but now that you're finally here in front of me, and I've said what I wanted to say, you're starting to bore me."

Another step, and they were at the precipice; the tips of Toshinori's toes were still on solid ground, but only barely- the rest of his body was being held in place by Midoriya's hand. One light push, one stray gust of wind, and he'd go tumbling into the abyss.

"So do what you came here to do." The sympathy gone from his voice, All Might spit a gob of blood directly onto Izuku's face, and Seraph couldn't help but smirk as he drew his handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped it away.

"Ah, there's the spirit I once admired so dearly. You know, I'm going to miss you, in my own way."

Then Midoriya drew his free hand back, let the electrified metal plates slide around his fist, and drove it into All Might's chest with every last ounce of his strength, a single word escaping his lips as he released his grip on Toshnori's neck.

"Smash."

For a fraction of a moment, All Might seemed to hang in midair, his eyes half-shut if he were in a dreamlike trance. But then gravity caught up with him, and he plummeted to the distant ground like a stone, smashing through a series of tree branches before landing crookedly amid the bushes with a dull thud.

"Yayyy! We did it, baby, we did it!" Toga's giddy voice was the first thing that Midoriya heard over the sound of his own pounding heart once it was done, and he allowed himself a soft grin as she wrapped her arm around his shoulders and kissed his neck from behind. "Can I send the signal now, baby? Can I, can I?"

"Go ahead, dear. I'll summon Kurogiri once you're done."

Cackling gleefully all the while, Carmilla drew a flare gun out of her kit and fired into the air; it burst into a bright, glowing red 'X' far above them, burned into the sky like a brand, where it would linger for the better part of an hour, thanks to Hatsume's proclivity for pyrotechnics.

But as Seraph's gaze drifted from the flare back down to his phone to call for their extraction, something caught his eye on the horizon, a small smudge rapidly increasing in size. By the time he realized what is was, she was nearly on top of them.

Kendo Itsuka saw it in slow motion, like a nightmare. She was still over a kilometer away from the school when it happened, but she saw the distant blonde dot that was All Might fall from U.A.'s roof, his shadow reflected on the bright glass windows as he dropped. Somehow, she instantly knew that it was him, and she pushed herself past her breaking point, strained her every muscle in a desperate attempt to wring One For All for any extra speed that it had, but deep down Kendo knew she was too far away to catch him. She was passing the thousand meter mark when she saw him hit the ground.
On the return journey, it took Kendo just two minutes and seven seconds to travel from Lemillion’s agency back to the school. By her own estimates, calculated some days afterward, she was just nine seconds too late to save him. Nine seconds- she would never forget that number.

Itsuka also saw the one who had pushed him. As she soared closer and closer, she could see that he was a boy around her age, with messy green hair, neat clothes, and Toga Himiko's arms wrapped around his chest. Midoriya Izuku. Suddenly, she felt her horror turning into pure rage, and all at once she decided she was going to kill him, a decision unanimously reached by every fiber of her being.

She was very close now, just moments away from landing- near enough to see the expressions of shock on the two villains' faces. So you weren't expecting me back so soon, huh? Good. Then a black and purple portal opened just a few yards behind them, and her hands swelled and curled into fists as they broke into a run for it, pure adrenaline and fury coursing through her veins.

"YOU'RE NOT GETTING AWAY!"

But Toga had already jumped through, and Midoriya was close on her heels, just a heartbeat away from a clean escape. She landed on the school roof with a ground-shaking thud just as Izuku began to disappear through the gate, one hand reaching for his back. No. It can't end like this. I won't let him get away. I have to catch him.

What happened next, she didn't understand. Suddenly her outstretched arm pulsed with an unfamiliar energy, and all at once a long black tendril burst out from beneath her sleeve, streaking toward's Midoriya's receding form. When he vanished completely into the portal, it followed him through, and out of an instinct that felt both entirely new and deep-seated within her, Kendo yanked back, hard. Like a fish on a line, Izuku popped back through, struggling to remain on his feet; the black mass was coiled around his lower arm, and Itsuka could feel it tighten at her command when she flexed her bicep. They locked eyes with each other, and Kendo could feel a grin spreading across her face when see recognized genuine fear in Midoriya's expression.

"You're dead meat."

Before she could drag him any closer, though, Izuku produced a short, curved black blade from inside his other sleeve and brought it down in a swift slashing motion. His restrained arm was instantly amputated at the elbow in a fountain of blood- he never broke eye contact with her all the while. Then he fell through the warp gate and it flickered shut behind him, leaving only his severed limb behind. At the same time, the black tendril receded back into her body just as quickly as it had appeared, and Kendo fell to her knees, alone and broken. Battle Fist was vaguely aware of an intense, numbing pain in her arm, like pins and needles multiplied by a hundred, but she honestly couldn't bring herself to care. After spending a few moments in shocked silence, Itsuka came to her senses all at once, shot up to her feet, and leapt down to where she'd seen All Might fall, her eyes wide and frantic.

He was still alive when she touched down on the ground, but only barely, his body eagle-splayed among the bushes beneath a classroom window. His back and most of his limbs were broken, by the look of it, and along with the knife buried above his collar, his stomach been run through by a jagged stump; shards of bloodsoaked wood were scattered across the nearby leaves. His eyes were closed, but his chest was still rising and falling ever so slightly, and he began to slowly stir when she crouched down over him, tears welling up in her eyes.

"No, no, god please, no… All Might, can you hear me?!

"Young Kendo." Suddenly his sunken eyes opened, two bright points of blue gazing proudly up at her. "You came back."
"Of course I did! You're gonna be okay, we're gonna fix you right up. Just hold on." For a moment she considered lifting him up and carrying him to the nurse's office, but then her eyes drifted back to the hunk of wood protruding from his stomach. *He's already lost too much blood, his heart won't be able to take it if I move him.* Footsteps became audible in the near distance, and when she looked up a there was a small gaggle of students she didn't recognize a few yards away, watching from the main path with horrified expressions.

"Get Recovery Girl!" Kendo shouted; the tears were streaming openly down her face now, but she didn't care if they saw her cry. "*Does one of you have a healing quirk?!*" One of the students darted back towards the school's entrance, but the rest of them remained rooted to where they stood, and more and more gradually began to arrive, drawn by her yelling, until there was an entire crowd watching.

"Kendo… listen to me." All Might laid a hand on her face and cupped her cheek, drawing her attention back to him for the moment.

"Don't talk, please. You need to save your strength!" Laying her hand across his own, she glanced briefly back up at the spectators. "*Where the hell is Recovery Girl?!*

"You really do… remind me of her." All Might's voice was barely a whisper now, and she leaned in closer to hear what he was saying as he wiped away her tears with his thumb. His gaze had grown wistful now, like he wasn't really looking at her anymore, but far past her. "I can finally see her again, Kendo. I've missed her so much."

*Nana,* she realized, a leaden lump growing in her throat.

"But you still have so much to teach me." Shifting her position on the ground, she lifted his head and shoulders into her arms, forcing a shaky smile onto her lips. "Right? And don't forget that we're still going to Canada together. I looked it up, though, you're not supposed pet the moose."

All Might let out a rasping chuckle at that, though her grip on him tightened out of instinct when more blood spurted out of his mouth.

"Thank you, Itsuka." He smiled weakly, then leaned up and held his forehead gently against hers. "Thank you for making the last few years of my life… happy ones."

Then he drew silent and still in her arms, and Kendo knew that it was over. She stopped crying, perhaps out of sheer shock, and the crowd grew mute around her- only the sound of chirping birds filled the cool morning air. Her eyes screwed shut and stayed that way, and she was only vaguely aware of most of what happened next. It took Midnight and Hound Dog a full minute to pry her off of Toshinori's body, and then she was wrapped in Jiro and Tetsutetsu's arms, sobbing into Kyoka's chest as Real Steel stroked her hair tenderly. They were talking to her in comforting voices, but she couldn't hear a single word. Right now, she and her grief might as well have been the entire world, and Kendo had never felt so alone.

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Chapter End Notes

And so it's done. The death of All Might was one of the hardest scenes I've ever written, so I hope I did it justice, not to mention the demise of Hawks and Gran Torino. As I mentioned last time, this is the story's Season 1 finale from a narrative perspective, so let me know what you've thought of events up to this point! Every comment is a major
help, no matter how brief. It might be a bit longer until the next update as I take a short
break, but next time we'll delve into the complex aftermath of the operation, the
response of society and the hero community, and what the Syndicate is planning next.
Where do you think they'll go from here? By the way, for anyone who's confused about
the black stuff that shot out of Itsuka's arm, all I'll say is that you need to catch up on the
manga.

Also, props to anyone who gets where the title of this chapter comes from.
"Even more of them out there today, huh?"

Kendo didn't respond to Uraraka's question with words, just a simple grunt of acknowledgement. The skies were thick with clouds and the air was unseasonably cold for the beginning of April, but the mourners and protestors had still come out en masse to the plaza in front of the National Diet Building, where All Might and Hawks' bodies had been lying in state for the past five days. They had an excellent view of the entire scene from the office building roof they were perched on, and of the clear division between the two crowds of people below. There were somewhere between five to ten thousand in total by Itsuka's rough estimate, and this was one of the slower days that they'd seen in the past week. Their assignment was simple- monitor the situation and be prepared to respond to the first sign of rioting, villain activity, or a violent disturbance of any other kind. Aside from breaking up a few fistfights earlier in the week, they'd mostly just been watching and waiting for hours on end, but that gave Kendo plenty of time to make observations.

The mourners were mostly concentrated on the western end of the square, easily recognizable due to the fact that at least half of them were wearing All Might-brand merchandise and clothing, ranging from shirts and full outfits based on his Silver and Golden Age costumes to hats and headbands in the shape of his trademark spikes of golden hair. Hawks costumes were visible as well, albeit in lesser numbers- his wings were a bit trickier to replicate, though his leather flight jacket had seen a dramatic uptick in sales lately.

Then, there were the protestors. They had the monopoly when it came to numbers- and volume, for that matter. Their distant chants were clearly audible even half a kilometer away, and Kendo could just barely make out some of the slogans on their signs and banners. 'Hawks is a traitor to the nation', the largest one read. 'Protect our students, not yourselves', demanded another. 'We want answers about the economy', a third declared. And then there was Kendo's least favorite, one that had been there nearly every day so far: 'Shut down U.A., school for villains!'

Half of her was of a mind to fly down to the plaza and correct the shouting throng's misconceptions in person, but the more reasonable half knew that she couldn't do that, as much as she wanted to. It had been hard, watching reporters and word of mouth twist and distort the truth over the past two weeks. Once the nation had recovered from its collective shock over the death and despair that had descended so swiftly on the hero community, rumors and false reports began to spread like wildfire, and despite the government's attempts to censor the video from the internet, the Syndicate's livestream had been transcribed into a manuscript that rapidly gained a cult following even larger than Stain's. Most difficult to quell was their allegation and corresponding evidence that Hawks had actively sympathized with the League of Villains, and even attempted to join them.

Tokyo's police commissioner had perished from prolonged exposure to Mustard's gas during the attack, but his acting successor made it clear at multiple press conferences in the following days that Hawks had been acting on direct orders from the government. It didn't exactly help his case, of course, that all of the files related to the operation had been destroyed during the attack. Even the
cloud-based digital backups had been erased by a virus, as was the case with over two thirds of the police department's total records - only the timely intervention of Lemillion and the other heroes who responded to the assault on the station had saved the remainder. Public opinion polls conducted a week after the attack found that only 37% of the nation believed the new commissioner regarding Hawks' innocence; 52% considered him guilty, with the remainder undecided. The same polling agency found that 61% of Tokyo residents held the current U.A. administration responsible for the injuries suffered by the school's students over the course of the day, the breach of the security system by La Brava and Toga Himiko, and the subsequent death of faculty member and retired hero Toshinori Yagi. A further 43% of respondents believed that the school was directly at fault for the actions of former students Midoriya Izuku, Monoma Neito, Hatsume Mei, Shinso Hitoshi, Yaoyorozu Momo, and Tokoyami Fumikage, with regard to their defection to villainy.

Principal Nezu stepped down in accordance with the results the same day they were released, and Vlad King had been appointed his acting successor until a formal selection process could be undertaken. Along with those at the National Diet, protests at the gates of the school itself were a near constant now as well, and the application rate for next year's class of incoming freshman had dropped so sharply that teachers were considering only fielding one first year hero class instead of two. The school was also facing a series of pending lawsuits from the Yaoyorozu family, who had already hired three of Japan's most prominent attorneys to prosecute their case. All of their charges involved Momo, of course; they were also actively financing a series of commercials pleading for her to give up and come home, with a massive cash reward offered to anyone with knowledge regarding her current whereabouts. The line had been flooded with false reports, of course, and many of the advertisements had been taken off the air in the past few days, ever since an anonymous package arrived on the doorstep of a major Tokyo news agency, containing extensive evidence cataloguing a relationship between the Yaoyorozu clan and various Yakuza groups, stretching back at least fifty years.

"I think that one's new," Ochako said after a few moments of silence had passed between the two, one finger extended out towards the far end of the plaza. Blinking out of the fog of memories that had enveloped her mind, Itsuka hopped down from the AC unit she'd been perched on and took a few steps across the gravel toward the other intern's position. The banner in question was made of bright red cloth, painted over with white characters.

'They can't save us anymore,' it read. Kendo didn't need to think very hard to understand who 'they' were.

"Huh. Yeah, guess it is."

Out of the corner of her eye, she could Uraraka's lips sink into a pout- she'd been trying out a wide variety of conversation starters all afternoon, but Battle Fist hadn't been particularly receptive to any of them. It was nothing personal, of course; after everything that had happened over the past fourteen days, Itsuka was so exhausted that saving up what little energy she had left to be cheery and upbeat with the inevitable flood of reporters who would corner her when she left was all she could do to stay sane. Come on, Kendo prodded at herself. You can do better than that. She's a classmate and a friend. Don't make excuses.

"It's, uhh..." Itsuka trailed off, trying desperately to think of something relatable or insightful to say. Ochako visibly perked up when she started to speak again, but the pressure only worsened the problem. "...it's a stupid slogan. But... um. Nice penmanship, I guess. They did a good job with the kanji, at least."

"Well, shit. That already sounded lame in my head, but it was so much worse out loud."

"I... didn't know you were into calligraphy." Uraraka responded hesitantly; the awkward silence that followed was deafening.
"I'm really not. Always hated it in grade school." Kendo sighed and lowered herself to the ground, sitting down in the gravel with her legs dangling over the roof's edge. Not a moment later, the dull, familiar sting of a persistent headache that had been troubling her lately returned with a sudden vengeance, and one hand shot to her forehead out of reflex, her eyes squeezed shut against the throbbing pain. Double shit. Left my damn painkillers at the office again, didn't I?

"Here. Drink this."

Itsuma's eyes fluttered open again, and suddenly Ochako was pressing a warm thermos into her hands, a sympathetic smile on her face.

"Huh? What is it?"

"Coffee, silly. That looks like a stress headache- my dad gets them all the time, and he always says caffeine helps best. And you're in luck, I always keep a heat press in my kit in case I sprain a muscle or something. Can you tell me where it hurts?"

Before she could say anything in reply, Uraraka was kneeling down beside her and undoing her ponytail, running her fingers along Kendo's scalp and temples beneath her thick red hair, careful to keep her thumbs in the air so she wouldn't activate her quirk. Her touch was gentle and cautious, yet still firm; once she was over the initial shock of the rapid development, Itsuka gestured to the area in question, just above her hairline, and mumbled out a reply.

"Right around there, I guess. You don't need to bother, though, really." She sipped plaintively at the coffee, and a frown crossed her face. "Besides we're supposed to be on duty. We can't afford to get distracted- what if something happens?"

"It would be impossible for you to respond to the best of your abilities in a crisis with a headache like this." Ochako chided. "I'm just getting you back in fighting shape. Besides, you're still keeping an eye on things, right?"

"Of course." Gazing out over the crowds, Kendo winced slightly as Uraraka laid the heat pack across the top of her forehead and pressed it down. "All's still quiet on the protestor front. Well, not exactly quiet, but you know what I mean."

"Yeah," Uravity replied softly, taking a seat beside her. "I do." Another moment of silence, more comfortable than the last, then Ochako spoke up again. "I know you've been going through a lot lately, Itsuka. It can't be easy, working this shift. I'm here if you want to talk about any of it. It doesn't have to be now, but… well, you know where I live."

"You're telling me I've had it rough?" Kendo turned to meet the other girl in the eye, and shook her head fiercely. "Trust me, anything I've had to deal with is a walk in the park compared to what you went through, and don't try to tell me any different. Ochako, you were just cleared for duty again two days ago, and even then, no one's forcing you to be here! You should be spending time with your family or studying for finals, not out on reconnaissance! After everything that happened…"

"After everything that happened, I know more than ever exactly where I need to be." Her voice had grown quiet, but the words carried more weight than before. "I'm only free again because a better hero than I can ever hope to be gave his life to rescue me. You're right, I don't have to be here.-Ryukyu offered me as much time off as I wanted to recover, with full stipend. So yeah, I could be studying, or sleeping, or talking things over with my counselor, but I'm here because doing anything other than going straight back to work would feel like an insult to his memory. You understand what I'm saying, don't you?"
Kendo nodded wordlessly, and both their gazes drifted back out over the plaza below, to the tall, ornate white building where her hero was lying at rest alongside Ochako's. *Yeah, I get it. I really do.*

"I only ever met Hawks once," Uravity continued. "It was about six months ago, at the afterparty for the previous ten hero billboard announcement. I was there to support Ryukyu- she came in eighth, Hawks took second. We were all mingling afterward in this fancy hotel, all the heroes and sidekicks and a handful of us interns who had been lucky enough to be brought along for the ride, and everywhere I looked I was just so star-struck, it was overwhelming. I kept thinking to myself, 'I shouldn't be here, I haven't earned the right to talk to these people like we're equals'. I ended up panicking a little bit, so I ducked out to the balcony for some air. And he was there too, just standing there, looking out over the city." Pausing for a moment, she smiled wistfully, and brushed a stray lock of brown hair out of her eyes.

"He turned around and said hi, and after choking on my tongue for a few seconds, I said hi back. We only talked for about a minute or two before another group came out and pulled him back inside, and I was so horrifically awkward the whole time- I doubt he even remembered me the next day. But there he was, the number two hero, and what surprised me most was how… normal he was. Not stuck-up, or aloof, all high and mighty and distant like a lot of them. Just an earnest, funny guy who, for ninety seconds, was genuinely interested in what a lowly high school intern had to say, in how my classes were going, and how things were with Ryukyu, and what my goals were after graduation. It felt like he cared about who I was and where I was going, and not in that fake, 'pretending to enjoy this conversation until I can escape' sort of way that you always run into at parties. Over the rest of the night, I started to think that maybe this massive, gaping canyon I always thought existed between people like him and people like me wasn't really that wide at all. I think that's what he wanted all of us to realize. And that's why people loved him so much."

Suddenly one of her hands curled into a fist, and her smile set in a hard line on her face.

"It's also why having to watch this bullshit day after day pisses me off so much. I don't understand it, Itsuka. Hawks was a hero, he saved my life, and hundreds- no, thousands of others over the years. He gave everything for the sake of his work. How could they be so quick to turn on him like this? This is exactly what Midoriya and the rest of them wanted when they released that video, to feed us a lie and then watch while a bunch of gullible morons crucify an innocent man. It just makes me so… angry. I want to…" She trailed off, and shook her head.

Beside her, Kendo raised an eyebrow- it was the first time she'd heard her mention Midoriya, or any of the Syndicate, for that matter, since she'd been back. The details of what had happened during her captivity were still largely confidential, kept between Uraraka, the police, and her state-provided post-traumatic stress counselor, but Itsuka knew that she'd spoken with Izuku at least once. After a moment's consideration, she decided to probe as gently as possible into the matter, and laid one hand over Uravity's.

"What do you want to do, Ochako?"

"I want to…" Her voice dropped down to a whisper tinged with shame, and when tears began to well up in her eyes, she quickly wiped them away with one hand. "I want to punch them. Kick them. Teach them a lesson. The people who are lying about him. I know it's not right, I hate myself for even thinking about it, but I've just been so… mad. Itsuka, mad about everything that's been happening. I don't know how to keep it bottled up anymore. When… when I was in that cell, I did my best to stay calm at first, to be optimistic. That's what they teach you, after all- don't panic, keep a level head, never stop looking for a way out. But after a few days went by, I started thinking about my parents, how I was never going to see them again, never going to be able to help them like I
wanted. About how they must be feeling, about how they'd keep feeling over the weeks and months
and years if I really was gone forever. About all the things I'd never get to do with them now. They
were terrifying thoughts, but instead of scaring me, they made me angry. I wanted to lash out at
someone, to make the villains hurt like they were hurting me. I picked Midoriya. I used what I knew
about his past against him, provoked him, prodded at him over and over." Falling silent for a
moment, she drew up her knees and wrapped her arms around them, then dropped her eyes to the
ground.

"I think part of me wanted him to kill me. That's why I went so far. Wanted to push him over the
edge, so he'd just go ahead and end it, instead of letting me waste away in that cell for god knows
how long with nothing but my regrets for company. It was selfish, I know. My counselor told me all
of this was nothing to be ashamed of, that these reactions and emotions are normal given my
circumstances, but how can I not be ashamed?!" The tears started to flow again, and she made no
effort to stop them this time. "How can I not wish that I was still sitting in that cell, that Hawks hadn't
tried to rescue me? It should have been me who died, Itsuka, not him. I wasn't worth his life, and I
never will be."

Shaking her head in protest, Kendo tried to lean over and embrace the other girl, but Uraraka stood
up before she could, grabbed a tissue from one of her pouches, wiped her eyes, and blew her nose.

"I'm sorry. That was unprofessional. I didn't mean to… unload on you like that. Not when you're
hurting too. I missed my last counseling session because of work, I just… let's move on."

"It's okay." Itsuka rose back to her feet. "I know what you mean, about getting angry. I've been
dealing with the same thing. Tell you what, before we get back to the monitoring, just promise me
you'll come by my room sometime soon." She gave Ochako a hint of a smile, and laid a comforting
hand on her arm. "I think there's a lot we could talk about, when we have more time."

Before the other intern could reply, though, the door to the stairwell slammed open, and one of
Kendo's eyebrows twitched involuntarily as a familiar voice became audible over the sound of
distant shouting.

"So I told the little fucker, if you actually have the balls to ask for my help studying for the final after
the shit you pulled, then your head is even farther up your ass than I… oh." Bakugo trailed off and
stopped in his tracks the moment he caught sight of the two girls, his eyes narrowed and his mouth
hanging slightly agape. A moment later, Kaminari ran directly into his back; once Denki had glanced
up from his phone and appraised the situation, he stepped out in front of Katsuki and gave them a
sheepish grin and wave.

"Hey, guys. Your shift's done, the bosses sent us up to take over."

"Oh yeah, crap." Kendo glanced down at the clock on her phone- they could've left five minutes
ago, but she'd been busy listening to Uraraka. "Sorry, lost track of time there."

When she looked back up, Ground Zero had snapped out of whatever fog he'd been in, and was
stalking over towards them behind Chargebolt with his gaze fixed on the skyline, deliberately
avoiding eye contact with her.

Uraraki was the first to gather up her things and start towards the stairs once she'd briefly exchanged
greetings with the other two 3-A students- a grunt of acknowledgement was all she got from
Bakugo- but Kendo lingered by the roof's edge, and grabbed hold of Katsuki's arm as he passed her.

"You go ahead, Ochako, I need a minute." Once Uraraka had nodded hesitantly and continued
down the stairwell, Itsuka turned back to Bakugo, who was still looking directly ahead, his brows
furrowed in annoyance.

"Let. Go."

They were practically the first words he'd said to her since the morning they'd both been trying to forget for the past fifteen days, but she only tightened her grip in reply.

"We need to talk."

A fat drop of rain burst atop her silver gauntlet as another few moments of silence passed between them, followed by a second, then a third. By the time Katsuki finally turned around to face her, it was a full shower, and his face was streaked with water.

"Why?"

His expression was still a mask of anger, but the question wasn't delivered with the trademark venom she'd come to expect from him, just exasperation and impatience.

"You know why. A few reasons." She let her eyes drift over to the crowd of mourners, and after a few seconds of glaring wordlessly at the side of her head, he glanced to Kaminari, the spark of bitter contempt returning to his voice.

"You think you can hold down the fort for five minutes without me needing to wipe your ass, Sparky?"

"You got it, chief."

Not a word or a stray glance passed between the two as they walked to the other end of the roof together, with Kendo in the lead and Bakugo trailing behind, his posture a moody slouch and his hands shoved in his pockets. They ended up leaning against the cool cinderblock wall of the stairwell; it had a slight awning which provided a minimal amount of cover against the rain. For what felt like a long while, they simply stood there in mutual silence—neither of them wanted to be the first to speak, and they both knew it. He'd just received this assignment today, apparently; the last time Kendo had seen him before now was six days ago, at All Might's state funeral, the second of two services held for her mentor.

The first had been for Toshinori Yagi, a small, private affair attended by only a dozen of his closest friends and associates. He was memorialized according to Shinto ritual alongside Gran Torino and Tsukauchi on a sunny hillside, next to the graves of Shimura Nana and her family. Even David and Melissa Shield had flown out to attend—it was the first chance she'd had to see them since the I-Island debacle during the summer of her second year. It was also the first and to date the only time that she'd ever witnessed Aizawa and Nighteye crying, though she had tears enough for both of them.

The second funeral was for the Symbol of Peace. It had been a grand ceremony, practically worthy of an emperor, held in the main hall and grounds of the famous Senso-Ji temple; the entire city had thronged the surrounding streets in a mix of All Might regalia and traditional white mourning robes, with thousands more pouring in from the countryside for a chance to say goodbye to the nation's greatest hero. There had been a laundry list of speakers on the day of the main event, ranging from the prime minister to the crown prince to Best Jeanist, Yoroimusha, Nighteye, and even Endeavor. Kendo went last, and she still considered it a minor miracle that she hadn't broken down in tears at any point during her eulogy; she'd gone through a full box of tissues writing it, after all. It was full of platitudes about unity and moving forward and what All Might would have wanted to tell them, along with a handful of anecdotes to break the tension—she'd gotten a few laughs from those, at the very least, before she ended with an emotional plea not to give in to fear and hatred when
confronting evil, taken straight from one of his lectures to her.

She still remembered in perfect detail how she'd been mobbed by a swarm of reporters after the main service ended, and ended up ducking down a side hallway to avoid them. How she'd found Bakugo, who'd remained steely-faced throughout the entire affair, sobbing into his shirtsleeve in an empty prayer alcove, his eyes red and puffy and his knuckles white as he gripped at his hair. The look of utter shock and horror on his face when she reached out and tried to comfort him was still burned into her mind, as was the sting of his hand slapping away her own before he stalked off and retreated into the men's restroom.

"So, what do you want?" He finally sneered, glaring over at the side of her head. "You gonna try and fuck me again?"

So we're dealing with this first, then. Lovely.

"No, Bakugo, I'm not. I think we both know that neither of us wants that."

"Then why did it happen?" He snapped, making sure to keep his voice low enough that Kaminari couldn't hear. "Tell me, huh? Why did I have to call my girlfriend and tell her that I cheated on her? Fucking why, man?!"

"I… didn't know you did that." Kendo managed after a moment, one brow raised. "That was… honest of you. You, uh… didn't mention my name, right?"

"…No."

"Thank you. I'm sorry that…" That I put you and Camie in that situation, she almost said, but that made it sound like it was all her fault, which is exactly what Katsuki wanted to hear. "…Look. I think it's pretty obvious that we made a mistake that night. Emotions were running high, a lot of alcohol was involved, and both of us can agree that it's never going to happen again. So why don't just we act like adults and move past it already?"

"What's obvious is that you got me drunk so you could fucking seduce me," he spat, his every syllable dripping with renewed vitriol. "Because just looking down on me wasn't good enough, I guess. Becoming my idol's goddamn successor wasn't good enough either. No, you wanted to fuck up my life so bad that you had get between me and my girlfriend to do it, you fucking…" He trailed off, the first syllable of the next word on the tip of his tongue, and bit down on his bottom lip so hard that he drew blood, his fists trembling at his sides.

"You fucking what? Say it." Kendo crossed her arms and stared him down. "Slut? Is that what you were gonna call me? Certainly can't be bitch, you're not shy about throwing that one around. And here I thought your mom hadn't taught you any manners at all."

Livid couldn't even begin to describe Bakugo's expression; for a moment, it looked like he was going to turn and walk away, but she grabbed hold of the back of his collar before he could, forcing him to halt with half of his body under the awning and half out in the rain. No. You don't get to put this conversation off any longer, you asshole. Neither of us does.

"Look, I know you'd rather bite your own tongue off than admit it, but you know deep down that at the time, what happened was just as much your decision as it was mine. So let's cut to the bottom line, alright? I have never looked down on you or wanted to ruin your life, nor have I had any reason to. You know, it's funny- I actually used to think you were pretty cool back in the day, besides all the yelling and rage. I mean, we've both got CQC quirks, and yours is a lot more versatile than mine, if I'm being honest. After you won at the Sports Festival during first year, I still remember thinking to
myself how amazing your technique was, how I needed to ask you to help me train. So tell me, what happened? I mean, I know the answer, but I just want to see if you can say it yourself."

Katsuki's back was half-turned to her, so she could only see one corner of his face when he finally spoke up again, but that was more than enough to tell that the fury had faded from his eyes- his jaw wasn't clenched like he was trying to crack a walnut, and the trembling in his arms and fists had mostly subsided.

"Why did he choose you?" The rage in his voice had been replaced by an emotion Kendo might have mistaken for anguish, if she hadn't been dealing with Bakugo Katsuki. And there it is. Took you long enough. She could see it all so clearly now as she watched him struggle to verbalize his feelings- his insecurity, his raging inferiority complex, his resulting obsession with perfection. Itsuka raised one eyebrow and listened silently as he continued to speak.

"You just admitted it. You were weaker than me back then, when he picked you. I know I could still beat you, even now, if I played my cards right. All I've ever wanted is to be just like him, to always win. That's how I learned what makes you worth something in this world." He tilted his head up and stepped out from under the awning- Kendo slackened her grip and let him go. He won't run away, not now. She couldn't tell if the water running down his cheeks was rain or tears as he stared up at the sky, his expression indecipherable.

"So what the hell's up with him losing like that to Deku, huh?" Bakugo leaned back against the wall with one hand and cradled his forehead with the other, his eyes screwed shut as his voice gradually rose in volume. "Why didn't you save him?! I could've saved him! I could've won!"

"Deku?" Kendo narrowed her eyes. "What the hell's a Deku?"

"The asshole who killed All Might, that's who!" Katsuki was shouting at this point, but he didn't seem to care anymore whether or not Denki was listening. "How the hell did the weakest small fry I ever knew beat the person I admire most?! I swear, you and him both, always looking down on me, always acting like you're better, always fucking with my life!" He slammed one gauntleted fist into the cinderblock, activating just enough of his quirk to blow a hole clean through.

"And here I thought we were about to make some progress," Kendo mused, scowling. "Calm. The fuck. Down." Swelling up one of her hands to triple size, Itsuka held it out in front of her in preparation for a swift chop. "You wanna fight? Will that finally satisfy your insane delusions about me? Sure, be my guest- not here, though, and not now. We're at work, in case you forgot. Unless you think this is something worth getting fired over." She took a step closer, keeping her voice perfectly calm. "But Bakugo? If you compare me to Midoriya Izuku one more time, I will not be responsible for what happens next."

"I can't believe I never realized it until now." Ground Zero chuckled as he withdrew his fist from the rubble and shook off the dust, a grin spreading across his face. "Why you piss me off so much… It all makes sense. Sure, you're more social, and more confident, and less whiny. But deep down, you both think you're better than everyone around you, that you're god's fucking gift to the world. Deep down, you're just like him."

They both started moving at the same time. Miniature explosions crackling in his palms, Katsuki raised his arms in an X-shape to block her chop, so he was completely unprepared when she abandoned it midway through, grabbed him by the shoulders, and drove her right knee directly into his groin. A wheezing gasp of pain escaped from his lips, and Bakugo's body fell more or less limp in Kendo's arms as she wrapped her oversized hands around his head and back and dragged him down to the ground along with her, until they were both sitting side-by-side under the awning, her
massive fingers drumming along his scalp.

"Looks like I win this round," she sighed in satisfaction, shooting him a wry grin. "I mean, you and I both know I could crush your skull like an egg right now if I wanted, so please, don't try and start any more shit, okay? Not today. Today, I was planning on watching TV and napping after work, and look at what I'm doing instead. If you really want a rematch, we can schedule one for later, after your balls recover."

"Next week," he muttered, his teeth grit and his eyes closed in agony. "After graduation. And you're not allowed to do that again."

"Ah, so that's where Bakugo Katsuki draws the line. Targeting enemies' reproductive organs is off-limits. Interesting, I'll have to write that one down later so I remember."

"Nah, not everyone else's. Just mine." Ground Zero made another wheezing noise that almost sounded like a laugh this time, and Kendo could've sworn that she saw a smirk flit briefly across his face as he draped a hand over his eyes and forehead. "That was dirty. First time someone's ever used that move on me, villains included. You really have been taking after Miruko, huh, Ms. Perfect?"

"I guess you could say, that, Asshole."

"Nah, that's not a good nickname. It has to be unique, otherwise people would be too hard to keep track of. You can take your hand off my fucking head, by the way. I'm not a goddamn dog."

"You've got a talent for coming up with them, I guess." She sighed as she withdrew her arm, wondering whether what she was about ask would make things better or worse. "So… where did Deku's nickname come from?"

He looked over at her with wide eyes, his expression halfway between annoyance and pain. His lips parted, but when a few seconds had passed without any sound leaving them, she spoke up for him.

"You two were close when you were young, weren't you? And you both idolized All Might. Deku…" Writing out the characters mentally, the meaning suddenly struck her- it was just a rearrangement of the name Izuku. "Useless? You named him Useless?"

"He's quirkless." Bakugo mumbled, his gaze dropping back to the ground.

"Yeah, I know that. I talked with Aizawa about him, how he tried to transfer to the hero course with only support items. Being quirkless was a pretty massive insecurity of his back when he was in General Studies, apparently. You had something to do with that, didn't you?"

"I… you don't understand. When we were kids, he… he was always…" His voice on the verge of breaking, Bakugo trailed off again, but Kendo continued to press deeper. She was close to a breakthrough, she could feel it.

"Tell me about him. Tell me how you treated him."

Katsuki cradled his head in his hands, and for a fraction of a second, it looked like he was about to start talking. But then he was pushing himself to his feet and starting back towards Kaminari, rubbing aggressively at his eyes with one hand.

"No. I'm not gonna talk about him. Not today. I'm at work, not at the fucking therapist. So do us both a favor and get the hell out of here already, okay? I've already slacked off enough."

Part of her wanted to grab him again and berate him until he fessed up, but his tone of voice told her
that would be futile; he'd made up his mind.

"Alright. But we're not done here. This conversation isn't over. Next week?"

He waved one hand dismissively in her direction and muttered a few choice profanities under his breath, but when it came to Bakugo, that was a resounding yes. Satisfied and exhausted in equal measure, Kendo looked over at the stairs for a few moments, then shuddered at the thought of the reporters below and decided to take off back towards U.A. from the roof instead. In the moment she leapt into the air, surrounded by a concussive cone of wind pressure, Itsuka glanced back just in time to catch a glimpse of Katsuki watching her leave with envious eyes.

By the time she got back to her room, Kendo's limbs felt like they were tied down with leaden weights. Against her better judgement, she'd stayed up until past four last night with Jiro and a group of other 3-B students, studying for finals; the written exams were tomorrow, and the practical ones the day afterward. The graduation ceremony itself was only five days away, and as one of the students selected to address the class, she still had to finish preparing her speech.

"Tough time at work?"

Itsuka perked up as she fumbled for the key to her bedroom, and glanced over at the kitchen table. She hadn't even noticed her roommate, Kodai Yui, when she walked in; the quiet, black-haired girl was calmly sipping from a mug of tea, with a set of calculus textbooks and problem sets splayed out in front of her. As usual, her penmanship was perfect to the point that it more resembled a font than actual handwriting, and the graphs and shapes she'd drawn were so precise that they looked computer-printed.

"Yeah, you could say that. It felt more like a therapy session, though- Uraraka needed to work through some stuff, and guess who else showed up at the end?"

"Hmm." Kodai was a girl of few words and fewer displays of emotion, which is perhaps what Kendo valued most about her after days like this. She took a long sip of tea while she thought about her answer, then finally replied in a neutral tone. "Oh, was it Bakugo?"

"Yup, none other."

To date, Kendo had only told two people about the events that had led to her and Katsuki waking up in the same bed. As it turned out, she didn't even need to worry about whether or not to confess to her roommate: When Itsuka asked as casually as possible whether she'd heard anything strange the night before, Yui told her quite frankly that she'd been at the fridge getting a glass of water when they stumbled through the door with their clothes half torn off. Luckily- or perhaps unluckily- Kendo and Bakugo had been too distracted and inebriated to notice her as they made their way to the former's bedroom. To make matters worse, though, they'd apparently been loud enough to make sleep 'difficult' for Kodai, who ended up having to wear her noise-canceling headphones. That evening, Kendo had gone out and bought a box of pastries from Yui's favorite French bakery to apologize for the experience and buy her silence, although she was quiet enough already that there wasn't too much to worry about on the latter front.

The second person was Miruko, whom Kendo had reluctantly approached for advice about the issue after work a few days ago, reasoning that Usagiyama was much more experienced with this sort of thing than she was. When Itsuka finally told her, her boss had taken around five minutes just to stop laughing, and nearly gave her a heart attack when she pretended to call Best Jeanist to gossip about the affair. In the end, though, Rumi had been relatively helpful, reassuring Kendo that this sort of thing happened between rival heroes all the time, and that it was nothing to get worked up about as
long as they communicated about the issue and agreed to move past it like two mature adults. \textit{Well, I feel like we're about halfway there after today. Better than nothing.} More than once over the past two weeks, she'd tried to muster up the resolve to come clean to Jiro and Tetsutetsu, but every time, she started to worry too much about their reactions to go through with it, and put it off until the next chance. As much as she hated being dishonest, keeping the secret was gradually starting to wear on her, though. \textit{After finals, I just need to make it through finals, and then I'll tell them. It wouldn't be right for me to distract them with something so trivial at such an important time.}

"So how did it go?"

"Well I ended up kneeing him in the balls, but somehow I feel like we hate each other a little bit less now, weirdly enough. I'll tell you more about it tonight, we still on for a movie once you're done studying?"

"Sure thing, I just need to finish reviewing the unit on related rates and optimization."

"Ugh, gross. I'm gonna go take a quick nap, wake me up if I'm still asleep at seven."

"Will do. Sleep well."

Her bed was messy and unmade, but Kendo wasted no time changing into a t-shirt and sweatpants, and passed out practically the moment she hit it. After a series of increasingly surreal dreams that were quickly forgotten, she woke up sometime later in a sweaty haze, tangled beneath the covers; it was dark outside now, and the air was quiet and still. 7:19 PM, Itsuka read off her phone, staring at the screen with bleary eyes. \textit{Huh, weird. Isn't like Yui to forget.}

After taking a solid minute or two to convince herself to emerge from beneath her blanket, and another thirty seconds in front of the mirror to make a rough attempt at fixing her horrific bedhead, Kendo slid on a pair of slippers and peeked out into the common room. At the kitchen table, Kodai was fast asleep, using one of her textbooks as a pillow- Itsuka couldn't help but crack a smile at the sight. \textit{Damn, I wish I could look half that cute when I'm sleeping.}

Before she could go wake her, though, Kendo's stomach growled fiercely, and she realized with a start that it was her turn to cook dinner tonight. \textit{Damn, hope we have enough ingredients in the communal kitchen. I'll probably end up making pancakes and omelets again if there isn't any meat in the fridge.} Deciding to surprise Yui with the meal once it was finished, Itsuka started towards the door, but just as she was about to turn the handle, a grey envelope on the floor caught her eye, and she stopped in her tracks. It had been slid through the gap under the frame, but at a glance, it didn't seem to one of the club flyers or internship bulletins that U.A. students usually went around the dorms passing out. She crouched down and picked it up, and a quick inspection revealed no return address or identifying information of any kind on the nondescript exterior, besides a single word: 'Kendo'. The envelope weighed more than a usual letter, though, and when she shook it, something rattled around inside.

In retrospect, Itsuka knew that she probably should've called a teacher and reported the package as a potential security hazard and there, but her mind was still half-asleep, so she hardly thought anything of it as she sat down on their couch and tore the envelope open with a yawn. A metal disc slid out and onto the coffee table, and the moment it came to a rest, a light came on in the center, and a holographic image sprung into the air. Suddenly, Kendo was just inches away from All Might's gaunt, smiling face, and any remaining trace of grogginess left her body in an instant.

"Hello, Young Kendo. If you're watching this, then I'm afraid that I'm no longer by your side."

"O-oh." Was all she managed to stammer out in response. Over the past two weeks, she'd come a
long way toward making peace with her mentor's death, but now everything was rushing back up to the surface at once.

"However it happened," Toshinori continued, "I'm sure you understand that given my deteriorating condition, I recognized the need to make advance preparations for my death a long time ago. There are things I still need to tell you, about your quirk, about its past, and about All For One. Things that I couldn't before, out of concern for your own safety. I don't know where you're watching this, but make sure you get to somewhere where there aren't any prying eyes or ears before I continue. What I have to say is for you and you alone, from one inheritor of this borrowed power to another."

After a brief glance back to the other side of the room to make sure that Kodai was still asleep, Kendo grabbed the disc and practically sprinted into her room, drawing the door shut behind her and pressing a blinking button on the side of the device once she'd set it down on her desk. It must be about the other successors, she told herself, thinking back to the dream she'd had the night after All Might died, how she'd talked with the wielder of Blackwhip about the new powers she would soon gain. He must have known about the other quirks after all. But then All Might's face vanished, and her blood ran cold in her veins.

"I really had you fooled there- didn't I, Battle Fist?"

Midoriya Izuku gave her a wide smile, and even through the projection, the hollow gleam in his cold green eyes was as clear and vivid as it had been as she watched him cut his own arm off.

"Hopefully I have your undivided attention by now."

"I… no…" Itsuka opened her mouth and tried to speak, but the words wouldn't come. Her heart was pounding in her chest like a drum, louder and louder every second.

"Cat got your tongue?" He chuckled mirthfully. "What a shame. And here I was so looking forward to talking with you again. We never did get a proper chance to introduce ourselves."

"No need," she gritted, struggling to contain the rage that was threatening to boil over inside her, the same wrongful fury that she'd nearly succumbed to when she first activated Blackwhip with the intent of murdering Seraph. "I already know exactly who you are."

Calm down. Don't let it control you. You're a hero, not a vigilante.

"Do you now? That's rather presumptuous of you, don't you think?" The hologram perched one gloved hand on his chin, then glanced down at it and grinned in sudden recollection. "Oh, and I nearly forgot. I also haven't had the chance to thank you for this."

His movements calm and methodical, Midoriya pulled off the glove and rolled up his white sleeve, revealing a gleaming new metal arm and hand to replace the one that he'd cut off to escape her.

"What do you think of the design? It's one of Hatsume's best pieces in terms of pure craftsmanship, as far as I'm concerned. Overhaul offered to replace the limb, but this one is much stronger than flesh and blood, of course, faster and more durable too- part of me is glad you forced my hand like that. But the real reason I chose this option is that it serves as a reminder, Kendo- a reminder of how I almost lost everything to you, and a warning never to be so careless again. I'll wear it proudly for the rest of my life, so from the bottom of my heart, I truly am grateful."

"Oh, it was no problem at all." Itsuka forced herself to remain calm and expressionless, though the task was becoming increasingly difficult. "In fact, I'm pretty sure we still have the original here on ice in an evidence locker if you wanna come pick it up. I'll show you myself."
"My my, so fierce, I'm simply terrified. But while we're on the topic of gratitude, why don't you go ahead and congratulate my dear associate on her marvelous performance? I had to find a way to get you to lower your guard- it would've been much more difficult without her help."

Kendo knew what was coming after a lead-in like that, but her stomach still turned when Toga Himiko leaned into the frame, wrapped one arm around Izuku's waist, and waved blithely at the camera.

"Hey cutie, how's it going?! Hope you're enjoying having your blood inside your body, because the next time we meet, I'm gonna make you pay so, so bad for hurting my baby." She delivered the threat in a lilting, giddy voice, but the twisted grin on her face and the demented look in her eyes were enough to send a shiver up Kendo's spine.

Rather than respond any further, Itsuka stood, pulled her phone out of her pocket, and started to dial the first staff member's number she could think of- her thumb was a hair's breadth away from calling Vlad King when Midoriya spoke up again.

"Ah ah ah, no you don't. The moment you try to call for backup, or leave, or trace my signal, this device will self-destruct, and you'll lose any insight or intelligence you might stand to gain from this conversation. So why don't you put that phone away and sit back down, like a good little hero."

It took all the restraint Kendo had left in her not to turn around and smash the disc into a dozen sparking pieces, but as much as she hated to admit it, he was right, and he knew it- she had a responsibility to keep him talking for as long as possible, to learn everything she could. The police hadn't been able to find a single trace of the Syndicate or any of its members since the day of the attacks; this was too good of an opportunity to pass up.

"I can try and record the audio, at least. But I've only got a few seconds to put the phone down before he starts to get suspicious. Have to be subtle."

Keeping her eyes locked on Midoriya's, she began to slowly set the phone down on the desk, moving her thumb across the screen ever so slightly as she used her peripheral vision and muscle memory to navigate to the camera app.

"Don't even think about trying it." Seraph wagged one mechanical finger in front of his still-smiling face. "You're a persistent one- but then again, that's much more interesting than the alternative. I think we're going to be good friends, you and I, once you start cooperating with me."

Left with no other choice than to concede a momentary defeat, Kendo closed out of the app, laid down the phone, and took a seat in her chair, the mask of tranquility on her face just barely concealing the swirling torrent of emotions hidden just beneath the surface.

"Good," Izuku crooned in a patronizing tone, "that's very good. I knew that you could be obedient if you put your mind to it. Now that both of our cards are on the table, let's have a nice, relaxing chat, Kendo Itsuka. We have a lot to talk about."

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**Okinawa, Kyushu Region**

**Yomitan Township, Ten Kilometers outside Kadena US Air Base**

**One Day Earlier**

"I'll take another martini, on the rocks, two olives. Your top-shelf vermouth, if you please. And you, darling?"
"Lemme do a Bloody Mary!" Toga cried excitedly, lifting up her sunglasses as she leaned over and kissed Midoriya playfully on the neck.

"Very good, sir. I'll have those out right away" Nodding politely, the bartender continued on his route along the rows of lounge chairs to where the others were reclining in the warm afternoon sun.

"A margarita over here for the lady, if you'd be so kind, good sir!" Gentle replied when it was his turn to order, gesturing to La Brava, "and another gin and tonic for myself!"

"I'll take a highball. The oldest barrel-aged Suntory whisky you have." Yaoyorozu scarcely even glanced up from the book she was reading as she floated lazily around the pool on a chair-shaped inflatable, though she did lift a foot to push off the side when she nearly drifted into the hot tub section that Monoma and Shinso were seated in.

"Two more vodka sodas over here," Neito called, then turned to Hitoshi with a conspiratorial grin. "Or were we switching to tequila sunrises?"

"No more tequila, not after last night. We'll have…" Synapse started to crane his head around to face the bartender, then gave up halfway through and sank lower into the hot tub. "You know what, just surprise us."

The heavyset, bald-headed man strode back to the bar to begin preparing the group's orders, and Midoriya couldn't help but let out a gentle sigh of ecstasy as he wrapped his artificial hand around Toga's real one and gazed out at the ocean. After the death of All Might and the successful conclusion of all three components of Operation Brennus, things had gone exactly Seraph planned, once he staunched his bleeding wound with Carmilla and Overhaul's help. When they were sure that they hadn't been followed or tracked, the strike teams rendezvoused at a safehouse to debrief and lick their wounds; as soon as everyone was ready to move again, the assembled villain forces split up and went into hiding from the inevitable manhunt for their heads that swiftly followed. For maximum security, they'd traveled in opposite directions, with the goal of getting as far away from each other and from Tokyo as possible: Midoriya's group went south to Okinawa, while Overhaul's went north to Hokkaido.

Thanks to Hatsume's enhancements to Kurogiri's range, though, even the massive distance between the two locations wasn't a true barrier, and they could transfer personnel and supplies between them as needed. They'd tried to use that option as sparingly as possible over the past two weeks, though, out of concern that the heroes might eventually find a way to track Warp Gate based on its unique energy signature if they employed it too liberally. True to his words, though, Midoriya had rewarded his followers and allies with a genuine vacation of sorts after all their hard work- in Okinawa, his group had been lying low at a luxurious beachfront villa inside a walled private resort, while Dabi, Mustard, Dark Shadow, and Overhaul's men were at a large, fully-furnished mountain cabin in the woods outside Sapporo, along with their remaining captive, Todoroki. Shinso had taken the usual steps of brainwashing the owners with Suggestion, of course, but on a less pleasant note, their current status as the most wanted men and women in the country had forced them to take a variety of precautionary measures in the meantime, including a return to disguising the more notable of their appearances.

Since they'd been spotted on multiple occasions in the past, most of the main group had opted for a change from their previous styles: Izuku's hair was dyed black and slicked back behind his ears as Hitoshi's had been before, Mei's pink locks were now a reddish amber color, and Shinso's was dark brown and tied up in a ponytail, when he wasn't lounging in the pool. Monoma had been growing his hair out for a while now, so Midoriya had spared him from the pain of scissors and allowed him to get away with silver-grey dye, while Momo simply returned to her previous lavender color, since
she'd never been seen by heroes in her disguise- not by any who were still alive, at least. Toga's growing notoriety was an easy enough problem to solve given her quirk, but Midoriya couldn't help the fact that he preferred her original appearance over any other by far. They'd monitored the private beach enough to be sure that there were no prying eyes aside from their generously-tipped bartender, so for now, a few simple measures were enough to suffice: she'd let her hair down around her shoulders from its usual buns, and false lenses had turned her recognizable golden eyes a deep bluish green.

"Hey baby," The sound of Himiko's whispered voice in his ear woke Izuku from his reverie, and she grinned mischievously as she took a swig of her crimson-colored cocktail. "Wanna go down to the water? Maybe it's warmed up from this morning by now."

"Hmm?" Seraph took a thoughtful sip from his martini and glanced up in the direction she was pointing. Past the pool, the paved stone ground turned to fine white sand, and the ocean was only fifty yards away at most; the air was filled with the soothing sound of softly crashing waves. "And here I thought you hated swimming."

"I do, but I'm sure we could come up with plenty of other fun things to do underwater." She planted a kiss on his lips that he returned eagerly; her tongue tasted like tomatoes and vodka, but Midoriya decided to ignore his hatred of Bloody Marys for today, if only for Toga's sake. But he had to break away soon enough, and stroked her cheek in conciliation.

"Oh, I'm sure we could. But you know just as well as I do that today is a very important day. I have to get back to work before too long."

His response prompted a girlish pout from Carmilla, and for a moment, the sight of her body stretched out along the lounge chair in a bikini was almost enough to make him relent. A soft chuckle cut through the air before he could decide one way or another, though, and Midoriya's eyes flitted over to the bar, where Mr. Compress was leaning against one of the wooden columns at the corners with a warm smile on his lined face. Without his mask, overcoat, and top hat, Atsuhiro was practically unrecognizable; with a faded Hawaiian shirt, khaki shorts, and worn leather sandals, he wouldn't have looked out of place at a luau-themed barbecue attended entirely by married men over forty. Then again, Midoriya could hardly blame him- he was dressed in an almost identical fashion.

"Did you need something, Compress?"

"Oh heavens no, Seraph- far be it from me to interrupt two young lovers. When you have a moment, though, Longshot would like to speak with you over at the villa. Something or other about tailwinds, she's a bit delirious at the moment. Do try and see that she gets some sleep tonight- my attempts to persuade her usually fall flat, but she listens to you."

"Ah, I see. I'd best go and speak to her now, before I risk falling asleep myself out here." After another, longer sip from his drink, Midoriya started to stand, until Toga's palm pressed him back down into his chair, and her fingers deftly undid the last two buttons on his shirt before sliding beneath it.

"Don't worry, baby, I'll make extra sure that you don't fall asleep. You know how loud I can get."

Wrapping her up in his arms and stroking her newly lengthened hair with his remaining flesh-and-blood hand, Izuku kissed Himiko again, longer and deeper than before, passionately enough that she was practically numb and mute from pleasure by the time he released her half a minute later.

"I'll be back soon, darling. Go and test the water if I take too long."
"Mmm-hmm," she mumbled in response, her entire face the color of her drink.

At that, Seraph rose and started down the neat stone path back to their towering villa, slipping his sandals off at the entrance before entering their code on the keypad, a complex sequence that changed every twelve hours. This location had a good deal less security infrastructure than their strongholds back on Honshu, but La Brava more than compensated for that with the dozens of cameras she'd either set up or hacked into around the premises. The door's lock released with a satisfying click, Izuku was about to open it until he caught a whiff of cigarette smoke over the smell of salt and sand. When he peered around the corner of the house, his suspicion regarding the source was confirmed; Twice was sitting beneath the shade of a palm tree at the edge of the villa's lawn, puffing on a pack of his signature Natural American Spirit. He was staring out at the ocean, and stirred a bit when Midoriya approached, glancing up at him with bleary eyes as if he'd just awoken from a trance.

"What are you doing over here, Twice?"

"Nothing much, boss- something special." Jin grimaced and slapped himself hard across the face when his second voice spoke up, running his hands through his tufted blond hair. "No, no, just stop. Please. I... I'm sorry, boss. I've been trying to see how long I can keep from splitting without wearing the mask. I want... I want to do my best for you. For the mission."

A few of Bubaigawara's words were slightly slurred, and when he shifted his position under the tree slightly, Izuku noticed that he was clutching a near-empty bottle of rum in one hand. Thank god we don't need him until tomorrow, Seraph mused, leaning down and grabbing hold of it. Twice didn't resist or protest when Midoriya pulled the bottle away from him, or when he upended the rest of the contents onto the grass.

"This isn't your best, Twice. We both know that. And I don't think you're going to achieve your best like this. Why don't you go over with the others? There's no reason to be out here by yourself."

"They don't want to be around me."

"And who told you that, hm?" Midoriya crouched down and watched Bubaigawara until he lifted his head to meet Izuku's eyes, then gave the man a soft, sympathetic smile and laid hand on his shoulder. "It was him, wasn't it? That voice inside your mind?"

"Yes." Twice whimpered, clutching at his temples.

"It tells you how weak you are, doesn't it? How foolish and inferior. How everyone despises you."

"Yes, it does. I can usually keep it contained but..." Jin cradled his forehead in both hands. "But today's been bad. Worse than usual."

"Did you know that I used to have a voice like that too?"

Twice flinched visibly, and his gaze shot back up off the ground.

"W-what?"

"I did. It wasn't as aggressive as yours, but it told me the same things. After I was diagnosed as quirkless, it told me for eleven years how I would never amount to anything in this society. That my dreams were nothing but a fantasy, that I would never know friendship, or recognition, or love, because something was wrong with my DNA. It told me that no matter how much as I tried, I
would never be able to prove my worth to the people I cared for and respected, that I was destined to be forgotten. So do you know what I did, Twice?"

Jin watched Izuku with wide, expectant eyes, and Seraph almost shuddered with satisfaction at the sight. Everything he was saying was true, but he still couldn't deny how good it felt to hold someone's emotions in the palm of his hands, to persuade them into laying bare their soul with a just few words of gentle coaxing.

"I proved the voice wrong. I made something of myself. I found comrades, love, a purpose. When those I held most dear in my heart spurned me, I left them behind, and moved on to something new, something better. I forced the world to remember me. I turned everything it had told me on its head, and like that, it held no power over me anymore. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes," Twice whispered, then slowly rose to his feet; Midoriya did the same. "Yes, I do, boss. I… I think I'm gonna go over to the pool for a while. I'm… sorry." He started off down the path to the pool and bar, and Izuku watched him go with a soft smile on his face.

"Don't be."

Then Seraph opened the door and stepped inside, and the first sight he was treated to was Spinner, passed out and snoring on the couch with the TV remote in one hand and a half-empty beer in the other. For a few seconds, Midoriya considered waking him up, and he'd even leaned down with one hand reaching towards Iguchi's face. But after a moment's contemplation, he grabbed the beer bottle instead, finished it, and continued up the stairs towards Longshot. One intervention is more than enough for today. I suppose I shouldn't exactly have expected complete mental and social stability when I decided to recruit League members.

Two weeks into their stay, Hatsume's room in the villa was one part workshop, one part high-tech office, and entirely a mess. A workbench cluttered with spare parts, clipped strands of wiring, and bullet cartridges occupied one entire wall, and the pile of support gear that she'd either brought with her or manufactured here in Okinawa was actively spilling out of the closet beside it. On top of the bed, the pillow and blanket were scarcely visible beneath an expansive pile of wrinkled clothes, and the nightstand was decorated with dirty dishes and crumpled yen notes. Mei herself was currently seated at the computer station that occupied most of the remainder of the space; she was surrounded by three massive monitors and two auxiliary holographic displays, all of which were displaying various streams of data or live feeds from Aiba's cameras. The desk housing the array of tech was strewn with empty energy drink cans and opened bags of chips and popcorn; the thumping bass of electronic music was faintly audible from beneath her headphones, and her fingers were flying at lightning speed across the various keyboards laid out in front of her as she sipped from the straw of a cocktail that had been made in a hollowed-out pineapple. Midoriya stopped for a moment in the threshold to admire the force of nature that was Hatsume at work, but after a short while she seemed to notice him regardless, and swiveled around in her chair.

"There you are! Took ya long enough, slacker. Look, I could tell you all about it, but long story short, we've got a little bit of a problem." Just as Atsuhiro had warned him, she seemed a bit more strung-out than usual, and her eyes were slightly bloodshot beneath them, she was starting to develop traces of dark circles to match her boyfriend's. He took a step towards her with a skeptical look on his face, and she wasted no time pulling up a live air traffic control map of the island and surrounding area on one screen, along with a weather map of southern Japan on a second. "So turns out that the targets' flight out of Toyko caught some seriously good tailwinds on the way down here, on top of an early departure. As of right now, it's looking like they're gonna be getting in a full hour early, maybe even more. We're gonna need to adjust the timetable accordingly, or we'll miss the window for scouting out their security detail. You think you can have Aiba and the boys ready to go
in ten minutes? I'd rather get there ahead of time than risk running late."

"What a pain. Of course, I'll go and get them right away. But Mei... how much have you been sleeping?"

"Eh, like that matters. Is 'enough' a valid answer?" Hatsume wrapped her arms around the back of her head and stretched, sighing with relief when her neck popped audibly. "Compress told you to ask me that, right? Come on, you know how I operate, Izuku. I'll sleep when we're done with the mission, that's how it always goes."

"The most urgent part of the operation is still over sixteen hours from now." Midoriya crossed his arms and did his best to sound venomous, but that was easier said than done when it was just the two of them, without anyone else watching - the same rang true with Shinso. "Don't make me sedate you again after we get back from reconnaissance, I don't want another incident like Nagano."

"Ah, now you're just nitpicking - those were exceptional circumstances and you know it. We can argue all we want once we're at Kadena. Besides, I've got plenty more of these lovely little babies that Momo whipped up."

Standing from her chair, Longshot reached into one of the pouches on her belt and pulled out one of the boosters that Momo had designed for long night shifts. Little larger than a stamp, the patch was covered on one side with a forest of thin, five-millimeter needles that administered a time release of chemical compounds into the bloodstream, designed to enhance the user's awareness and energy levels for a limited time, as well as sharpen their reaction time. Seraph had found them useful on more than one occasion, as had most members of the team, but Hatsume had taken a particular affinity to them; she sighed in visible relief when she pressed the booster into her forearm, then promptly stepped over toward the bed and began to strip out of her grease-coated work pants and sweat-stained tank top. Far from embarrassed by the sight at this point, Midoriya simply rubbed one temple in exaggeration before slipping back through the door, her voice drifting down the hallway behind him.

"Ten minutes, you hear me? You guys better be on time! We're not gonna miss these fuckers, not after me and Aiba spent ten days tracking their asses!"

"Trust me, Mei- we won't."

As he made his way back to the pool, Seraph pulled out his cell phone and gazed down at the classified flight itinerary that Longshot had sent him earlier - a 12:50 PM flight out of Yokota Air Base in western Tokyo, originally scheduled to arrive at Okinawa's Kadena Air Base at 3:26 PM. The plane in question was United States military, an incredibly difficult and dangerous asset to track, even for technical savants like La Brava and Hatsume. The potential payoff of the operation was well worth the risk as far as Midoriya was concerned though, both practically and personally. The smooth, satisfying sound of metal sliding across metal filled the air as Izuku's artificial hand wrapped slowly into a fist, and he couldn't help but feel a rush of anticipation when he thought about the future.

"I'm going to enjoy seeing that man writhe and beg at my feet. But one step at a time, as in all things.

"Ah, Midoriya, there you are." Wearing his trademark haughty grin, Monoma was the first to greet him on his return. He was still dripping water from his hair and hastily tied towel, and if the slight sway in Neito's step and flush on his cheeks were any indication, he'd gone through another drink or two since Izuku left. "If you'd be so kind, would you join Gentle as the judge for a footrace along the beach? It's Twice, Pandora, Synapse, and myself - hardly a fair competition, if you ask me. Yaoyorozu has a bit of that dreadful 1-A class arrogance left inside her, I suppose. She still needs to
be taught her place from time to time."

"No. No more games, the party's over for now." Seraph said the words loud enough for the whole group to hear, and in an instant everyone had grown silent and attentive, looking up from their various conversations. "The schedule has changed, the reconnaissance team is leaving in five minutes. La Brava, go coordinate with Hatsume on the flight data and the exact coordinates of the lookout point we'll be using. You three, on me."

In the span of a heartbeat, the Syndicate members lounging on the poolside and beachfront snapped straight from leisure back to business, all thoughts of foot races and sunbathing and alcohol forgotten. Gentle, Shinso, and Mr. Compress gathered around Midoriya under the awning of the bar, listening closely as he explained the situation in brief terms.

"Did you gentlemen want to order something else?" The bartender asked confusedly, glancing up at the small gathering from the glass he was cleaning behind the counter.

'No', Izuku was about to snap, but Synapse spoke up first, and gestured to himself, Gentle, and Seraph.

"The three of us probably need something to sober up, if we're being honest. Doesn't sound like we're gonna have time for lunch like we thought we thought we would."

"If only it was cool enough for a good kettle of tea," Tobita sighed dramatically, shaking his head. He'd shaved his beard and died his silver-white hair and moustache a bright gold as part of their effort to conceal their identities, though persuading him to temporarily abandon his extravagant wardrobe had been quite the task at first. After three days of sweltering in the Okinawa heat in his usual vests and debonair jackets, he'd finally relented and joined the growing majority of Hawaiian shirts, though his by far had the most elegant patterning.

"There's an easy solution to that," Compress replied, then turned to the bartender. "Four iced teas."

"Right away," the man replied, promptly pouring them four tall glasses all set out in a row.

"If we could finish these inside the next ten seconds, that would be ideal," remarked Midoriya, glancing down at his phone- it had only been five minutes, but Hatsume was already blowing up his notifications with texts telling him to hurry up.

Without so much as a moment's hesitation, the four men picked up the glasses in unison and drained them together in one long gulp, their expressions deadly serious. Not a heartbeat after they slammed them back down on the bar, they were striding down the path toward the villa; in the driveway, Mei was already revving up the jeep, one hand on the ignition and the other on the keyboard of a laptop that she had resting on one knee. La Brava was seated in shotgun beside her, in a white summer dress instead of her usual attire, her long red hair down around her waist instead of in the more recognizable pigtails. She had a laptop of her own as well, and pointed frantically at the screen as Midoriya and the others approached, lifting up her red-tinted sunglasses.

"We've only got thirty minutes until their plane lands at this rate, let's go! I can't monitor the base's perimeter cams for blind spots unless I have time to set up first!"

"Shouldn't we change into something more… suitable?" Gentle asked in a pleading tone, lingering on the path as Hitoshi, Izuku, and Compress piled into the back of the jeep. "I bought a new summer outfit just for this mission, much looser fitting and less bulky, with all beige and white and tan notes instead of black and purple. I think it goes excellently with my new hair color, it would only take a minute for me to go grab it…"
"A minute that we don't have," Midoriya replied coldly, staring Tobita down until he caved and jumped in with them, his face crestfallen. Aiba reached over from the front seat and rubbed his shoulder sympathetically as they backed out of the driveway and started off down the private access road; after a moment of drifting back and forth between lanes, Shinso had to reach up and snatch away Hatsune's laptop to get her to use both hands on the wheel.

"C'mon, babe, you know I can multitask!"

"You say that, but somehow it feels a lot less convincing when you have all of our lives in your hands."

In the end it only took fifteen minutes for them to reach the grassy hilltop they'd chosen as a vantage point, and La Brava had plenty of time to ensure that they were well-hidden, on top of the multiple optic camouflage blankets that Mei had already provided. From here they had a panoramic view of the largest American military base in the south Pacific, with dozens of fighter and cargo planes taking off and landing as they watched. From this distance away—around two or three kilometers from the main gates—Hatsume saw everything that was happening inside with perfect clarity, and could practically count the freckles on the pilots' faces beneath the glass of their cockpits as they took off. Pandora had provided binoculars for the rest of them, but after a few cursory glances, Seraph largely left the observing up to Longshot.

"Anything interesting so far?" Compress asked after a while, shifting slightly in his prone position. He, Gentle, and Shinso were there as backup in case anything went awry—he was prepared to reduce the entire group to marbles in the event that they needed to evade the enemy or make a quick exit.

"Nah, nothing much. But I did just memorize their patrol routes around the base perimeter, so that'll probably help tomorrow. The gates don't look too heavily guarded, but I guarantee you there's a whole squad on standby in the barracks a few yards away. No matter what happens, we can't get caught going in or coming out—we're gonna have to keep this 100% stealth, or we'll have a shitshow on our hands like you guys wouldn't believe."

"Picking a fight with the world's largest military isn't really on my agenda," said Shinso, "so yeah, you've got my support on that front. What's the ETA on our targets?"

"About a minute, if their plane's transponder beacon has anything to say about it," Aiba responded, her gaze still fixed on the screen of her laptop. "You guy will know it when you see it, it's a pretty big transport. Two escort fighters."

"No expenses spared, hm?" Midoriya smirked and lifted his binoculars up to the distant white clouds over the ocean. "Of course not. He's a valuable asset for them."

Sure enough, three planes burst through after a few more seconds, descending rapidly towards the base. The faint scream of their engines became gradually more audible as they approached the ground; finally, the two fighters peeled off in opposite directions and looped back out over the water, while the larger grey transport hit the runway with a jolt and slowed steadily to a halt. Izuku could feel his fingers curling around the sleek black metal in excitement as the ramp lowered, and a group of officers from the base stepped forward to greet the new arrivals. First came a contingent of ordinary soldiers, followed by two Air Force colonels, a Navy rear admiral, and a relatively famous Army general, if Midoriya was reading their rank insignias correctly. None of them interested him, though, and for a moment he was gripped by fear that Longshot and La Brava had tracked the wrong plane.

Just when he was about to ask them something to that effect, though, two people who were clearly not military strode down the ramp: The taller of them, a man in his late forties, had short tufted brown
hair and a goatee, and was wearing a grey suit jacket over his dark blue button-down. Following close behind him was a young woman just slightly older than the Syndicate founders, with long blonde hair and bright blue eyes beneath her glasses. A wide, twisted grin spread across Seraph's face as he watched them chat with a few of the officers, then start off toward one of the main buildings.

"I've been so looking forward to meeting you, David and Melissa Shield. I think that the three of us are going to be the best of friends."

Chapter End Notes

And here we are with the Arc 2 premiere! I was planning on waiting until midterms were done to work on this chapter, but I just couldn't wait, especially not after I finally saw the movie a few weeks ago- I definitely knew that I had to tie the Shields in somehow. Let me know in the comments what you think of their inclusion! I also knew that I had to clear up things with Bakugo and Uraraka, so hopefully you guys have a clearer picture of where they and Kendo are coming from. And I feel like the villains had definitely earned a little R&R time at this point, so it was nice to give them that, albeit briefly. How do you think Midoriya and Kendo's first real conversation is going to go? Next time, a (digital) confrontation between our two main characters, the continuation of the Syndicate's plan regarding the Shields, and possibly the beginning of U.A.'s final exams, if I don't run out of room with the other stuff first.

If you can't tell with that reference toward the end, I've been binging JoJo's in my free time lately when I'm not writing this, after I finally caved to the memes and started it a while back. Also, any other current manga readers hyped about that new group of villains Horikoshi just introduced? They're almost certainly going to show up in this story's future, once we know more about them.
Welcome to the Jungle

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the slightly longer hiatus this time, but we're back in action! School and work have been busy lately, and I've also been working on a second MHA fic, Rhapsody in Green, if you wanna check that one out as well (shameless plug, I know).

On another note, I've been making heavy usage of Spotify on my commute to work lately, and as someone who enjoys listening to music while they write, I thought that some of you guys might enjoy having specific soundtracks while you read. With that in mind, I've been noting a few songs that fit especially well for this story and its characters. So without further ado:

The theme of the story as a whole: The Perfect World, by Marty Friedman
Midoriya's theme: Melancholy Man, by the Moody Blues
Bakugo's theme: What's Up Danger, from the Into the Spiderverse Soundtrack
Kendo's theme: Still trying to decide this one, but maybe Fighting Gold, from JoJo's Part 5?
Overhaul, Dabi, and Mustard's theme: Oh Mama by Run the Jewels

Hopefully you enjoy these choices! I might add more in the future as I find good songs, so let me know if you have any recommendations. Now, on to the story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Old Glory Bar, Yomitan Township, Okinawa

Eight Hours Later

"It's busier tonight than I expected."

"All the better for us, though."

Midoriya grinned and clinked his glass with Shinso's; it was difficult to hear Hitoshi's voice over the pulsing beat of the music, but they were seated close enough together on a couch at the back of the room to manage, their eyes roving over the crowded dancefloor. This bar in particular was a popular haunt for American soldiers stationed at Kadena, and there were dozens of them out tonight, easily distinguishable from the locals as they danced and drank and flirted with the Okinawans. Their loud, boisterous voices were beginning to grate on Midoriya's nerves, but if everything went as he'd designed, he wouldn't have to listen to them for much longer.

"To a plan coming together?" Hitoshi asked, watching Midoriya with expectant eyes as he held his prosecco glass to his lips.

"That would be speaking too soon, now wouldn't it?" Izuku swirled around his wine, his gaze still fixed on the distant patch of bright pink that was Toga's hair, barely visible amid the sweaty, drunken throng as it bobbed in and out of view on the dancefloor. She seemed to be inching closer to the target, but it was difficult to tell from this distance. Thankfully, Yaoyorozu strode up and sat down a
few moments later, and launched into a report on the situation after a long, exhausted sigh.

"Apologies, I just needed a short break from all of that. I had no idea it would be so… tiresome." Pandora shook her head, plucked Seraph's glass from his hand, and drained half of his wine in one gulp. "I kept getting pulled farther and farther away from the target, Carmilla was making much better progress navigating that mob of brutes than me."

"Understandable. She's quite a natural talent, after all." Izuku reached out a hand to take the glass back, but Momo preempted him by holding it to his lips and tilting it back until he was forced to either drink or spill it on himself; he chose the former.

"I'm gonna go take a piss," Synapse grunted, rising to his feet before plodding off towards the other side of the room, his hands shoved in his pockets. He was serving as backup tonight, a failsafe in the event that Toga and Yaoyorozu both failed in their mission, and brainwashing was necessary to bring the target back to the villa. Like Midoriya, Shinso had dressed smartly for the occasion, but his neat button down and khakis couldn't quite hold a candle to the skirt Momo was wearing, with its mesmerizingly low-cut neck, short hem, and elegant patterning.

"So it should be just a few minutes longer, then?" Izuku asked, mulling over whether or not he should be annoyed by what she'd just done.

"Oh yes, certainly- she's very efficient. But I wouldn't mind staying a while longer, to be honest." Pandora leaned up against him and let out another sigh. "It isn't too often that we get out like this as a group, after all. The atmosphere isn't too bad, I suppose, even if most of the patrons are an absolute bore."

"So I take it that none of them were to your liking?"

"Hardly. Not a single one was even close to my type. I don't think they have a single brain cell between the lot of them." Suddenly her hand was resting casually on Midoriya's thigh, and he felt one eyebrow raise out of instinct. "You know I tend to go after the intelligent ones, after all."

"You're drunk." He picked up her hand and lifted it off of him, only for her to snake it around his shoulders with a coy grin on her face.

"How insulting, Izuku. You know I wouldn't dare, not on a mission."

On more than one occasion over the past year and a half, Yaoyorozu had made no secret- to him, at least- of the fact that she found him "incredibly stimulating, both mentally and physically," to paraphrase her confession. His relationship with Toga notwithstanding, Pandora was far too valuable of an asset for him to even consider punishing or threatening her for a relatively minor offense such as this. And aside from that, it wasn't exactly as if Midoriya particularly minded the added reassurance of her absolute loyalty- that was how he typically justified it to himself, at least.

"All the same, you're usually not this bold when she's around." He shifted his position slightly, casting a sidelong glance in her direction as she began to lower her hand until it was wrapped around his side. "You're aware that I won't be able to do anything to stop her if she sees you."

The gleam of pure confidence in Momo's eyes told him that she understood the risks of her behavior with perfect clarity, however. She was admittedly quite stunning tonight, her shoulder-length hair and perfectly structured face awash in the flashing, multicolored glow of the lights overhead.

"What's life without a little danger?" She asked in an innocent tone of voice, cupping his face with her free hand stroking his cheek with her thumb. "What Himiko doesn't know won't hurt her, Izuku."
"And if she did know, she'd be the one hurting you." Their faces were only inches apart now, and it took a considerable amount of discipline for Seraph to forcibly suppress the temptation that swelled up momentarily deep in his gut as he inhaled her fragrant, intoxicating perfume. "And having to deal with that would be unpleasant. I'm going to check in with Compress and Chaudron at the bar. You should also know full well that we can't afford distractions." Midoriya began to hesitantly extricate himself from her grasp, and only flinched momentarily when she planted a soft kiss on his cheek as he stood.

"My knight in black armor," she called after him as he walked away, and he could hear her triumphant smirk in every word. "It's quite romantic of you to be so concerned for me."

More the opposite, in fact, he mused as he pulled a cocktail napkin from his pocket and hurriedly rubbed away any trace of lipstick. You're simply too useful to let her carve you to pieces. If I have to play this little game of yours to keep you intact, then so be it.

Over at the bar, Atsuhiro and Monoma were sipping at their drinks a few seats apart, glancing over at the dance floor every so often to keep track of Toga. They were both dressed in similar semi-formal attire to Shinso's, and Neito in particular cut a rather clean figure with his new silver hair and matching tie; he'd already had to fend off several women's attempts to flirt with him toward the beginning of the night.

"Anything to report?" Izuku asked casually, taking a seat between them and gesturing to the bartender for a rail drink.

"Nothing too interesting," Monoma downed what was left of his vodka tonic with a grimace and a sigh. "He seems to be taking the bait, as far as we can tell. What a blithe idiot, I swear. Anything to add, Compress?"

"Nothing aside from the obvious," Sako replied, glancing up from his old fashioned. "Although I must say, tonight has been an excellent opportunity for me to practice my English. I've shown three groups of Yanks the same old simple card trick, and they just eat it up every time, it's delightful. You wouldn't believe how many drinks have been bought on my behalf."

"If only you could just make them all disappear for your next trick," Midoriya muttered. "And the DJ too, for that matter. This playlist is god awful."

Suddenly two other patrons sidled up to the bar, filling in the two stools between Izuku and Atsuhiro, one chattering loudly and the other relatively quiet by comparison. Seraph felt his brows furrow in aggravation at the interruption, which was only exacerbated when the louder of the two's elbow knocked over an abandoned mug of stale beer and sent the half-finished drink spilling onto Midoriya's lap. Lovely, that's just lovely. Does the resort even have a dry-cleaner on premises?

"Aw shit, I'm so sorry, dude! That was my bad, lemme buy you a shot!"

In the span of an instant, Seraph's scowl turned to an expression of utter shock, which he quickly disguised as surprise at Kirishima Eijiro's generosity. Izuku blinked in the vain hope that he was seeing things, but when he opened his eyes, the muscular U.A. third year was still sitting in front of him with an oblivious smile on his face.

You're kidding me.

"C'mon, Eijiro, we just got here. How did you even manage to spill something that fast?"

That tired voice was instantly recognizable: Seated just beyond Red Riot was Amajiki Tamaki, better
known as Suneater, his expression as morose as usual as he glanced over at the incident.

*Oh, you've got to be kidding me.*

"My bad, I guess I was just a little too excited to finally be off duty!" Kirishima rubbed the back of his spiky mane of hair sheepishly, then turned again to Midoriya with a shark-toothed grin.

"So what do ya want, buddy? Don't be shy, anything on the menu's fine."

"Oh, it's alright. I'm just about done for the night." Midoriya gave him a cursory nod, then quickly started to stand up and walk away; Monoma was already long gone, halfway over to Yaoyorozu on the couches by now. As he expected, though, Eijiro wasn't satisfied with that, and caught him by the shoulder with one hand.

"Nah, man, it's okay! I feel really bad, let me do something for ya." He turned to the bartender with a confident smile and threw one wiry arm around Izuku's shoulder, holding up two fingers. "Two shots of the best rum you have for me and my new pal here."

"I… well…" Try as he might to slink away, Seraph was utterly trapped in Red Riot's grip- not playing along with someone this friendly and charismatic would look suspicious in its own right.

"Didn't you hear him? He said he's done for the night." Amajiki shook his head in exasperation.

"How can you still have this much energy after a full day of patrol, plus that dinner? I just want to go to sleep…"

"Ah, there's always room for one more drink!" The bartender cried jovially as he set out two shot glasses and started to pour. "No worries, I saw what happened- this round's on me!"

Now I really can't refuse, Midoriya realized, forcing a congenial smile onto his face. *But I have to end this interaction as soon as possible. The longer they look at me, the greater the chance they see through the false lenses and hair dye. Nevermind why the hell they're even here, I'll figure that out later.* If it were even possible to add any more dramatic irony to the situation, the TV overhead was currently playing a deep-dive special on the events of 'The Black Day', as news outlets and the masses had dubbed it- he and Toga's pictures were currently plastered across the bottom half of the screen, but thankfully the images changed to Shinso and Hatsume before Tamaki glanced up at the broadcast out of boredom.

"Alright, man, let's do this! You ready?" Kirishima's expression was vivacious and eager to please as he waited for Izuku's response, his eyes wide and innocent. *Just like a puppy. A sad, dumb, puppy.*

"As I'll ever be!" Seraph replied, his voice full of faux enthusiasm. He lifted the glass up to his mouth, prepared to gulp it down and get away immediately afterward, but Eijiro caught him by the hand before he could do either.

"Whoa, hold up there- I almost forgot something. What are we drinking to?"

"To a brief reprise from the misery that defines every waking moment of our lives?" Suneater suggested, laying his forehead down on the bar before immediately recoiling in horror when it landed in the sticky remnants of a spilled drink.

*To killing the both of you,* Midoriya thought with a glance to Compress, who was still holding his position on the other side of the hero duo. With his new artificial arm, one swift motion was all it would take to snap Kirishima's neck, or plunge his fist through his back; Atushiro could deal with Tamaki in a similarly short timespan at this close distance. *You could both be dead before you even realize what's happening, Red Riot. You're so very lucky that I'm trying to keep a low profile for the
"To making new friends!" Eijiro finally proclaimed- his wide, toothy grin remained plastered across his face even after they'd both slammed the drink back. "Whoo! What a rush man, am I right? Say, what's your name, by the way? I'm Kirishima!"

"Hazamada," Seraph replied without missing a beat, though he was doing his best to inch away with every passing moment. "It was great to meet you, but if you don't mind, I really need to be getting back to my friends…"

"Ah, just bring 'em over here, I'd love to meet them! Are you guys here on vacation? I'm visiting with my buddy from Tokyo, we're here on hero business! We spent all day-"

"Do I really need to remind you not to talk to civilians about our work?" Suneater gave his intern a half-serious smack across the back of his head. "Stop bothering the poor kid."

"Ah, come on, he looks like a trustworthy guy! And I wasn't gonna say anything classified, jeez. So Hazamada, sounds like a Tokyo accent you've got there. I'm right, aren't I! What ward are you from?"

"How would you gentlemen like to see a magic trick?!"

Just in the nick of time, a life raft arrived in the form of Mr. Compress, his deck of cards in hand. Clearly Sako had been standing by in the hope that Izuku would extricate himself on his own, but that was growing less and less likely by the second.

"Oh damn, I love magic tricks!" His eyes glowing with excitement, Kirishima took the bait just as easily as expected, and within a few moments Midoriya had managed to slip away amid the distraction. He made an immediate beeline for Monoma, Shinso, and Yaoyorozu; the latter two had already been briefed on the new development, if the grim looks on their faces were any indication. Wasting no time with pleasantries, Seraph extended a finger toward Neito.

"Find Carmilla, copy her quirk, monitor those two. I want to know why they're here. Help Compress get out of there if you can. You have a few of her blood vials on you, yes?"

"Of course."

"Good. Any woman will do- perhaps a man would be even better, given Red Riot's temperament. I trust you to use your best judgement. And be sure to take a lock of her hair, to boost your time limit."

"Yes, sir." He rose and strode off to fulfill his new mission without a moment's delay, leaving Izuku with Momo and Hitoshi.

"It would be best for all non-essential personnel to leave immediately," Pandora declared, gathering up her purse. "Especially the three of us. Toga can see through the mission from here, it's almost complete regardless."

"I'm staying," Midoriya responded, in a tone that brokered no argument. "I have to make sure that she makes it out safely. The two of you can go if you'd like, but I think that Compress has the situation handled, I doubt he's persistent enough to wander all the way over here to find me."

"What if it's a trap?" Asked Shinso, his arms crossed. "They could be toying with us. What if they knew exactly who you were, and this whole place is surrounded by squad cars?"

"Impossible. They know we have Kurogiri, they would never tip their hand so obviously before an
"Fair enough." He shrugged, then glanced up to Momo. "I don't know about you, but I'm staying if he is."

"I don't think that any of us will need to stay too much longer," said Yaoyorozu, her eyes fixed on the dancefloor; when they followed her line of sight, it quickly became clear why: Toga was already moving toward the door, arm-in-arm with the target, an American lieutenant colonel who just happened to be in charge of the Shields' security detail. As they paused to wait for the crowd to clear, Monoma whisked briefly by her, his movements so casual and subtle that Midoriya doubted anyone aside from Himiko herself noticed when he had tapped her bare shoulder and plucked out several of her hairs. Thankfully, despite the fact that she was disguised as a tall, busty pink-haired woman at the moment, any trace of her DNA would still allow Chaudron to copy Metamorphosis unhindered.

"The first stage seems to be a glowing success." Midoriya sat down on the couch between his two lieutenants with a satisfied smirk. "We'll wait five minutes and then follow them back, just as we discussed. Start the timer once they walk out the door, Pandora, if you'd be so kind."

Most of the dirty work had been done by the time they caught up with Toga at the villa. The target was still alive, but only barely- she was just toying with him now. Blood was splattered all across the sheets and walls in messy streaks, and when Midoriya stepped through the door of the master bedroom, the lieutenant colonel was prone on the floor, dragging himself toward the door as he left a streak of crimson behind him. She'd slashed the tendons in his ankles and knees first to immobilize him, by the look of it, then moved on to the shallow veins in his elbows and wrists and neck, until his clothes were almost entirely dyed with blood, and all he could do was flail weakly on the ground like a worm writhing on hot pavement. There were dozens of shallow cuts across his face and chest and back too, of course- frankly, it was a miracle that he was still even conscious, as far was Seraph was concerned.

When he saw Izuku standing in the doorway, the man's face bloodstained face lit up with a glimmer of hope, and he extended one trembling hand toward him, calling out in English, his voice made faint and hoarse by the slash across his throat.

"Please… you've gotta help me… she's crazy."

"That's such a mean word to use." Himiko pouted, then rose from where she was perched on the bed- she was back to her original appearance now- and hurled her knife at his back. It impacted with a satisfying thunk, and a few drops of the resulting spurt of blood landed on Midoriya's cheek. "And here I thought I taught you to be polite!"

"Please…" the man repeated, his voice growing weaker by the second. "Please, help…"

"And what makes you so sure I'm not crazy too?" Seraph asked in perfect English, crouching down in front of the officer with a widening grin. "You know what they say about making assumptions, don't you?"

The look of terror and realization that slowly spread across the man's face sent Midoriya's heart soaring with glee in his chest. They'd originally intended on leaving him gagged and bound as a hostage, but it seemed that Himiko's instincts had gotten the better of her.

"You know you were supposed to leave him alive, darling." Izuku clucked his tongue disapprovingly as he slowly wrapped the metal fingers of his left fist around the man's throat and began to rise back up, lifting him into the air. "This makes things a bit messier."
"But he is still alive!" A gleeful grin on her face, she leapt to her feet and twisted the knife in his back to prompt a guttural groan of pain, muffled by Seraph's grip on his neck. "See, baby, see?!"

"And what about the fact that he's seen your real face?"

"Well… I was just having so much fun…" At the drop of a pin, she became the picture of guilt and remorse, wrapping her arms around his waist and gazing up at him with innocent eyes. "And I forgot to take my blood again before the time limit. Am I in trouble, baby?"

"It's no trouble at all, Himiko." With a quick twist of his artificial hand, Midoriya broke the man's neck with a resounding crack, then dropped his lifeless body to the ground and leaned in to plant a gentle kiss on Toga's forehead. "Go ahead and take all the blood you need. Let me know when you're finished- I'll have Compress and Yaoyorozu dispose of the body." The phone in his pocket began to buzz, and he gave her one last brief kiss on the lips before stepping out into the hall to glance at the screen- Monoma.

"Speak."

"I listened to them for half an hour, ended up talking with them eventually. I was disguised as a woman- Kirishima actually tried to set me up with Tamaki, it was quite amusing. Is it just me, or is that gym rat actually losing brain cells each year? He was even denser than-"

"The point, if you would care to reach it sometime tonight?" It seems listening wasn't the only thing he was doing, Izuku noted, all too familiar with the vocal tics that gave Neito away when he was drunk. Red Riot likely bought him more than one round, knowing his generosity.

"Very well, very well. You're no fun on missions, I swear. It took me a while to get them intoxicated enough to spill a few details, which I was able to piece together with what I got from eavesdropping. I don't think we have to worry about them being after us, first of all- it seems this was all just a coincidence. They're here tracking a group of smugglers that fled south from Kyushu, and while they were on the island, they got an invite to dinner from a Japanese Air Force colonel who's good family friends with Fatgum. That's what they'd just come from when they got to the bar. Now get this- they're sticking around Kadena for the time being because the colonel is here to attend the same joint forces meeting tomorrow that David Shield is going to presenting at. He's paid for their lodgings and everything."

"And do we know where this colonel is at the moment?" Midoriya could see an opportunity opening up in front of his eyes- a chance to gain inside access to both the hero and military communities along with the Shields, if they could strike swiftly enough.

"Not precisely, but he can't be far. The night is still young; I'm sure that with La Brava's help, we could track him down before he makes it back to his quarters on the base."

"Consider me interested. I'll go and speak with her about it now, hold your position in case we need you to intercept." He held one hand over the speaker, and turned back around to face Toga's bedroom. "Darling, wash yourself off and put some fresh clothes on. I've got another job for you, if you can promise to show some restraint this time."

"So what do you expect me to do? Act like we're old buddies?"

Kendo crossed her arms and leaned back in the chair, still unsure exactly what the proper course of action was in a situation like this as she stared down Midoriya's hologram.

"Why, listen, of course- that's all I ask. That's what heroes do, isn't it? Listen, so they can help those
"in need?" The leering grin on his face spread even further. "And I fall into that category, don't I? I'm just one more poor, misguided soul for you to save, to bring back into the light. Isn't that right, Kendo? It's what your master seemed to think, at least, before I threw him off the side of a building."

"Save you?!" Her mouth fell open in shock, and it all the resolve she could muster not to be much more profane about her disbelief- it was hard enough already to keep her voice low enough not to wake Kodai. "Save someone who brags about killing the man I loved like a father?! Are you kidding me?!"

"Be precise now, Kendo." He waved a taunting finger, and his eyes seemed to take on an unnatural gleam even through the imperfect technology of the projection. "I didn't kill the man you loved like a father, I murdered him. And why wouldn't I brag about that? I'm so very proud of it, after all."

Itsuka felt her hands curl into fists, and bit hard on her lip for several long seconds before finally speaking again.

"Some people... people like you... aren't..."

"...Aren't worth saving?" Izuku completed, an expression of mock horror crossing his face. "Is that what you were going to say, Kendo Itsuka? That's not very heroic of you! But I suppose I shouldn't be surprised, really. You weren't acting very heroic the other week. 'You're dead meat', were the only words you spoke to me, I believe. Refresh my memory, has the government changed its position on heroes using lethal force? Because I don't doubt that you would've followed through on that threat if I'd given you the chance. What would your poor dead mentor say if he knew his beloved apprentice was guilty of attempted homicide? What about your real parents? What about the press?"

"I... no, that's not it... I wouldn't have..." Kendo trailed off and drew silent, a heavy weight tugging at her heart. As desperately as she wanted to tell herself that he was wrong, that she wouldn't really have gone through with it, she still remembered how she'd felt as she landed on the roof and latched onto Midoriya with Blackwhip, what she'd wanted to do to him for hurting All Might. The memory of that rage-driven bloodlust had haunted her ever since- she never wanted to feel that way again, but now she was on the brink of reliving it.

"You can't even deny it. Pathetic." He perched his hands on his hips and let out a heavy sigh, the smile fading from his expression. "What a depressingly unworthy successor All Might chose. It's only a matter of time before you show your true colors to the world, and then they'll wash their hands of you- no one wants a cheap imitation with the social grace of Endeavor occupying the vaunted throne of the Symbol of Peace. And what a shame, too- I hate to see a quirk like One For All wasted on the likes of you."

"What did you just say?" Suddenly all the air left Itsuka's lungs at once, and her voice dropped to scarcely above a whisper. "H-how do you know about... about that?" The anger inside her was rapidly replaced by fear, and she felt a solitary drop of sweat roll its way down her brow. It occurred to her moments later that she should've just played dumb, but it was too late now.

"No denial there either! I'm really on a roll tonight. It's really quite simple, Itsuka- may I call you Itsuka?"

"No, you may not."

"Well, Itsuka, as I was saying, it's simple. I just did some rudimentary research- the information is all out there, after all, if you know what to look for. I first became suspicious when All Might retired and lost his power overnight- I was devastated, you know! I'd just spent the better part of the past..."
year planning how I was going to kill him, after all. I knew about his condition and his weakened form, but I didn't expect that the degradation would set in so suddenly and severely. I had a grand scheme in the works to expose his frail body to the world before I executed him, but then he went ahead and did it for me! That was just a few short weeks before you made your public debut, and explained your newfound strength and speed to reporters as a latent aspect of your quirk that had somehow been activated during your training. Honestly, it's laughable that a single member of the public believed that lie for a moment."

"But when I began to look into your background, and how close you reportedly were to All Might? That's when I truly started to develop an interest in this power, a quirk that had seemingly been transferred from one person to another. I began to look for reports of a quirk with characteristics similar to the one you now possess, starting with people in Toshinori Yagi's past. And from there, voila! The pattern was as plain as day, so clumsily hidden that it was almost sad. A trail of tragically ill-fated top heroes with an almost identical set of powers, stretching back generations, each one more powerful than the last. It rapidly became clear to me that some sort of stockpiling quirk was involved, one that can be passed on somehow- tell me, am I in the right ballpark?"

"I...I have no idea what the hell you're going on about."

Kendo's mind was racing at a mile a minute, trying desperately to figure out how best to respond to his damningly accurate speculations without giving away any more secrets about One For All. All Might entrusted me with this power. I have a responsibility to protect it, to keep its purpose secret like he did. I can't let people like Seraph find out, or all the work the past eight wielders put in could be for nothing. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and reached deep inside her mind, trying her best to summon one of the Vestiges for advice and counsel, any of them, but she was only met with silence and darkness, and eventually forced herself to reply.

"Sounds to me like you were just trying to make the data fit your own theory."

"Well, I suppose that's one point for you in the hero category- you're not very good at lying." He began to tap one foot impatiently, and raised one hand to stroke his chin in contemplation. "I'm going to take that as a yes. You know, it's funny- at first I was confused what broader goal all this stockpiling could possibly serve, until Shigaraki started yammering on about how he was the chosen successor of All For One, destined to destroy the Symbol of Peace. It explained everything- that's why all the successors before All Might died such sudden and unexplained deaths, why you've all been trying your best to keep the nature of this power hidden! Tomura was a stubborn bastard, I'll give him that. It took me a year to finally stamp him and his loyalists out, much longer than I initially expected. But he's dead now, and All For One is in Tartarus. So tell me, Itsuka, what purpose do you even serve anymore? All that inherited power, and for what? Your fated rival bled out on the floor of an abandoned warehouse, and his master will never see the light of day again, if I can help it- I don't need another rival interfering with my plans, and certainly not one as potent as him. So how does it feel to have your raison d'etre stolen from you? To be completely and utterly useless?"

"I'm not useless. Nothing that my predecessors did will ever be useless, so long as people like you exist." She felt the icy grip of fear fading from her chest as she gazed into Izuku's eyes; an overwhelming sense of serenity and calm had suddenly descended on her. Whether it was a gift from the other wielders or a product of her own mind, she wasn't sure, but she seized onto it all the same. "I'll try to save you, because that's what heroes do, no exceptions. But if I can't do that, then I will stop you, no matter how much it costs me. Not because of what you've done, but because of who I am, and who I'm meant to be."

"Bravo! Truly, bravo- a rousing speech." Midoriya clapped his hands together with a look of faux admiration on his face that gradually faded back to cold ambivalence. "So it seems you still intend on
playing the part of the hero after all. Allow me to warn you, in that case. I'll only say this once,Itsuka, and only because we're such close friends. If you choose this path- if you stand in my way- it will cost you everything."

Something about the way he said that last word send a chill racing up Kendo's spine, and she had to use every ounce of mental discipline she had left to keep a straight face as Izuku continued to speak.

"I will take the things you love and break them one by one, just like I broke All Might, until there's nothing left of the person you once were but an empty husk of skin and bones and regret. Maybe then you'll finally see the light, as I have- when you have nothing left to cling to in the face of the rising tide. I'll be waiting for you on that day with open arms." He reached over to disconnect the line, and Kendo leapt to her feet and held out a hand at the sight.

"Wait! Don't I get a turn to talk? I have questions too, Midoriya. Questions about your past. About Bakugo Katsuki." For a moment, she thought she saw a glimmer of anger cross his face at the mention of Ground Zero's name, but it was gone just as quickly.

"Questions you can ask another time. I'm a busy man, Itsuka- I have things to do and places to be. I did enjoy this chat, though, so I'll be reaching out again soon. Have a lovely evening."

"Dammit, hold up a minute. How did you-"

The hologram flickered off before she could even blurt out a question, and a few moments later, the projector disc erupted in a flurry of blue-white sparks before rapidly turning to a pile of ash and dust.

After taking a solid half minute to process everything that had just happened, Kendo grabbed her phone and finished dialing Vlad King. Within five minutes the room was swarming with U.A. staff, and the police were well on their way.

"What's going on?" Yui asked sleepily, rubbing her eyes as she plodded over from their kitchen.

"Did something happen?"

"Nothing you need to worry about," Itsuka replied reassuringly, steering Kodai back toward her bedroom with one hand on the girl's shoulder and the other on her side. "I just need to talk to Vlad-sensei real quick about some work stuff, and then I'm gonna order us both takeout for dinner. That sound good?"

"You're just too lazy to cook," Yui countered with the barest hint of a grin on her lips, then closed her door without any further objections.

The metallic dust from the destroyed communicator was quickly sealed into a bag as evidence, and soon enough Battle Fist found herself seated on one of their couches, across from Eraserhead and Vlad King. Their expressions were both grim; Kendo's former homeroom teacher in particular looked especially taxed by his new role as U.A.'s acting principal. Given the school's suffering reputation and the tangled web of lawsuits it was embroiled in following the Black Day, she had a good idea why. He was dressed in a neat suit instead of his usual hero costume, and his eyes were sunken and slightly bloodshot from sleep deprivation, ringed by prominent dark circles. She told them as much as she could without revealing the details of One For All- thankfully, they seemed largely satisfied by that.

"I will take the things you love…' Well, it goes without saying that your parents will be placed under government protection immediately." Aizawa began, his voice as deadpan as usual. His hair was up in a ponytail, but for once he looked to be the less exhausted of the two. "They're both abroad, is that correct?"
"Yes. My father runs a traveling judo school that's currently touring Europe, and my mother is doing lab work for a firm in Korea."

"Good, that'll make it harder for them to reach them and attempt to make good on this threat." Vlad frowned, and his gaze turned sympathetic. "I'm sorry, but they might not be able to return to Japan until this is all over. The Ministry of Defense has plenty of safe houses across the world where he won't be able to reach them, but…"

"I understand. It's for the greater good."

Kendo's heart ached in her chest as she forced herself to nod in assent; it had already been months since either of her parents had been in Japan, and almost a year since they'd both been home at the same time. For years she'd done almost everything for her two younger siblings as their absences grew longer and longer, and it had driven her halfway to exhaustion at many points during her first semester at U.A., before they implemented the dorm system; All Might had used his money and connections to pay for a top-tier daycare for them when he found out, though that didn't cover the time she spent on her internship outside typical working hours. Thankfully, her thirteen year old sister, the older of the two, had already learned to cook and clean and put her brother to bed when Itsuka didn't have time to visit, and their aunt and uncle lived nearby enough to take care of them most nights. Regardless, though, she still felt guilty- it was a big sister's job to be there for them.

"And what about-"

"Your siblings will be taken care of as well, of course." Aizawa stroked at his stubble for a moment. "I understand that you have family members in Hokkaido?"

"Yeah, my dad's parents. Wait, are you saying…"

"They'll likely be sent to live with them, yes." Vlad's face remained somber as he spoke. "Under police surveillance. I'm sorry, but these next steps are all about mitigating risk, and keeping your immediate family as far away from this mess as possible."

"…I understand," she replied, but that one came harder than the last. Kendo thought back to her conversation with Midoriya, to the speech he'd given about his group's ideals on the Black Day. He seems like the type to pretend he has principles. Would he really stoop that low to get at me? Murdering children?

"We'll also be briefing Nighteye and Miruko on the situation," Aizawa continued before she could arrive at an answer, "along with any close friends of yours here at the school. I know that you spend a good deal of time with Jiro and Tetsutetsu- is there anyone else we should be aware of?"

"Kodai," Itsuka said quietly, nodding at her roommate's bedroom door. "Juzo and Tokage too, for that matter. Maybe Uraraka… and…" She trailed off and frowned, unsure whether she should say the name that had just popped into her head. "…and Bakugo."

"Bakugo?" Aizawa raised one eyebrow skeptically, and exchanged a glance with Vlad. "I'm sorry, did I hear you right just now? Correct me if I'm wrong, I was under the impression that you two-"

"We're not friends," she interjected, "at least not in the traditional sense. But I feel like there's a strong chance that he could be a target, given his past with Seraph. The same goes for Ochako."

"Understood." Shota rose to his feet and stretched with a grunt. "Well, I think that's about all I have for you, for the moment. I'm sure the police will have a few other questions. Vlad?"

"And how about you, Kendo?" The new principal asked, his hand on his chin- he had the
beginnings of grey-white stubble to match Aizawa's coming on. "I know what you're going to say, but it might be in everyone's best interest for you to have…"

"Protection?" Itsuka smiled weakly. "Thank you, but it I think I'll be fine. U.A.'s going to be secure enough as it is after the reforms you're pushing through, and having bodyguards might sort of undermine the image of the Symbol of Peace. Miruko and Sir will look out for me when I'm working."

"About that…" Eraser glanced down at his watch and shook his head. "Well, you'll be briefed soon enough. I was supposed to inform you later regardless- your presence is requested tomorrow night at an emergency meeting downtown, at Best Jeanist's agency. I can't tell you anything else, just to be there at eight sharp. Everything else will be explained when you get there."

"Oh, uh… okay, sure. I'll be there." Best Jeanist, huh? Lovely, another chance for Bakugo to yell at me.

A curt knock on the door announced the arrival of the police and detective team, and a pang of pain shot through Itsuka's chest when she remembered that Tsukauchi wouldn't be among them.

"I'll go ahead and speak to Kodai now," Vlad offered, starting toward Yui's door as Eraser let in the officers. The debrief with them was much more formal and businesslike, and half an hour later, she was starving, exhausted, and tired of answering questions. The principal had left to go back to his office by then, and Aizawa was seated at the kitchen table, hunched over his laptop; Kodai was hovering nearby, her expression uneasy. When he noticed that they were both done with the police, Shota beckoned the two roommates over.

"Battle Fist, Rule, come take a look at this. I've been reviewing the security footage for the hallway outside your dorm."

"I meant to ask you about that, yeah." Kendo frowned as she leaned over his shoulder to peer down at the screen, which was currently paused on a static image of the empty corridor. "Someone had to have dropped that off, someone who could get into the dorms."

"But don't they have a warp quirk user with them?" Yui asked. "Couldn't they have just teleported in and out?"

"Not without tipping us off. We've encountered Kurogiri enough times by now to nail down his precise energy signature- if he tries to open a portal anywhere on the campus, we would know immediately, and the whole school would go into lockdown. And they seem to be aware of that, to some extent- when they… when we were infiltrated two weeks ago, they only used him for the extraction. So Kendo is correct- whoever left the package somehow had access to the dorms."

He pointed at the screen, and a scowl spread across his face. "Now unfortunately for all of us, this room is at a bit of a blind spot between two security cameras. We can't see what's happening in the space directly in front of your door thanks to the way the wall and corner are arranged, but the rest of the hallway is visible in either direction."

Without any further delay, he pressed the play button, and they were treated to sped-up footage of the hall directly before and directly after their own door from earlier that evening. The timestamp started at 5:30, approximately when Battle Fist got back from work, and ended at 7:20, around when she woke up from her nap. Over the course of the one hour and fifty minute timespan, Aizawa slowed the video down whenever a group of students passed by, so that they could note their faces. By the time it ended, Kendo counted eleven in total, including plenty from Class B and Class A alike. Kuroiro, Kamakiri, and Setsuna, Pony and Ochako, Kaminari and Awase, Asui, Shishida, Ashido, and Shiozaki. The frown on her lips grew even deeper as she exchanged a glance with
Kodai. The students who walked past their room had all been in groups of at least two people, and as far as Itsuka was concerned, none of them were capable of something like this, unless out of sheer ignorance of the envelope's contents. Even then, it was hard to think that a third-year hero course student could possibly be so careless.

"They're all suspects," Eraser declared firmly, preempting her comment to the contrary. "I don't know if I'm going to go so far as to interrogate them- that might be a bit too heavy-handed at this point- but I will be monitoring each and every one of them to a greater extent than usual."

"What if it's not any of them, though, just someone who looks like them?" Yui took a seat in the chair next to Aizawa's and narrowed her eyes as she peered at the screen. "Couldn't it be Toga again? Like how they got inside last time?"

"That's also impossible." Shota sighed and massaged his temples with both hands. "The official announcement won't be made until tomorrow, but since you two are directly involved in this now, I suppose it won't hurt to tell you. We've been working on a major overhaul of our security systems ever since the breach, including sensors placed in the entrances of every campus building designed to scan for the DNA of any known Syndicate members. They've already been installed in all of the dorms as well as around the exterior wall, and no alerts for Carmilla's signature have been triggered today. Even when she's using her quirk, her own DNA remains present, intertwined with her victim's, so the sensors are theoretically foolproof in that regard."

"I'm glad to hear that," Kendo replied, her gaze dropping down to the floor. "I think I can live with that woman never setting foot on this campus again."

"That makes two of us. You said that Seraph mentioned contacting you again, yes? We're going to be setting up an additional camera to cover the blind spot- if he reaches out in the same manner, contact me immediately before opening the package, and we will get to the bottom of this."

"Understood. Thank you, sir."

"I'll leave you two to it, then. Don't hesitate to contact me at any time if you need to talk about this situation or anything else, or if you have additional questions. We'll be watching out for both of you, I can promise that. And Battle Fist, remember- 8:00 PM tomorrow. Don't be late."

Aizawa and the police filtered out at roughly the same time, leaving Kendo and Kodai alone in a room that didn't feel nearly as safe and secure as it had a few short hours ago.

"Peace of mind is always the first casualty of war," Yui said quietly, her gaze fixed on the dark wood of the kitchen table.

"Who said that?" Kendo murmured, prompting a confused glance from her roommate.

"...Me. Right now. Are you feeling okay, Itsuka?"

"That's not what I..." Battle Fist was interrupted midsentence by a fierce growl from her stomach, and trailed off with a grimace. "Well, I'll feel a lot better once I have some dinner, I can tell you that much. So, takeout still good?"

"Fine by me."

Moments after Kendo had finished ordering from their favorite delivery curry spot, another knock came at the door. I swear to god, if I have to debrief with one more cop... Her annoyance quickly vanished, though, when she swung opened it to find Tetsutetsu and Jiro waiting in the threshold, the latter of whom nearly knocked her over with a tight hug.
"We all saw the cops," Real Steel explained, waving hi to Kodai as they stepped inside. "Did something happen? Everyone's really worried."

"You weren't answering your phone," Kyoka murmured into the neck of Itsuka's t-shirt. "I was afraid you were hurt or something." Kendo winced with the sudden recollection that she'd left it in her bedroom this entire time, certain that she had at least half a dozen new texts and missed calls by now.

"I'm fine," she chuckled, rubbing Jiro's hair affectionately before turning to Tetsutetsu and exchanging a 'hardcore high-five', as he called them, a gesture that involved slapping each other's palms as hard as possible before gripping each other's hands as tightly as possible until someone was the first to let go. Usually she won, but today he had the victory, and he pumped his fist in the air in triumph. "There, is that proof enough?"

"Well you still haven't told us exactly what happened," Kyoka pointed out as she strode over to the coffee table and chose one of her playlists to put on the speaker.

"Because I can't tell you." Itsuka sighed and shook her head. "Not yet, at least. Aizawa's probably going to brief you both on the situation tomorrow, or maybe even later tonight. But until then, let's just try and forget about that. You guys free right now? We were gonna do a movie night if you wanna join in."

"Hell yeah, sounds great!" Tetsutetsu wasted no time plopping down on the couch, his expression eager. "Have you guys picked the movie yet? I'm kind of in the mood for one of the old action classics!"

"You mean like one of the American superhero flicks?" Jiro asked curiously.

"Nah, I was thinking more along the lines of Point Break or Predator. Keanu and Arnold? Now those were two seriously manly dudes."

The sun was low in the evening sky when Kendo donned her blue and silver hero costume and strode outside the next day, the distant clouds aglow with the last fleeting embers of daylight. Crickets were already chirping noisily in the treeline just beyond the dorms, and she shuddered as a cold breeze whipped past. One of Hound Dog and Ectoplasm's perimeter patrols was visible in the middle distance- they'd become more and more frequent these past few weeks, just one of the more outwardly visible of the changes that the campus had been undergoing recently. Acting Principal Vlad King had announced the new security system expansion earlier today just as Aizawa told them; along with the DNA scanners in the entrances of all buildings, all student quarters and belongings would now be subject to random and periodic searches, and no off-campus visitors would be permitted to enter U.A. grounds without prior authorization by a member of a the faculty and a thorough security screening.

So far, the planned measures had done little to stave off the media, though; the tide of public opinion was still against them, and it was unlikely that U.A.'s reputation would ever fully recover from the string of deaths, defections, and grievous injuries that had marked the Black Day. Sero Hanta, for instance, had only been recently released from the hospital after repeated reconstructive surgeries to his jaw, and Todoroki Shoto's abduction only seemed to gain more and more traction in the press the longer he remained in the Syndicate's hands. Endeavor was reportedly singlehandedly funding his own independent search and rescue effort with the backing of his agency despite the government's direct orders to the contrary, but media sympathy was on Enji's side this time, and the stalemate was still unresolved. His fanbase had eagerly rallied around him when he issued a call for support, and frequently clashed in the streets with the anti-hero, anti-Hawks protestors who had become more and
Kendo knew that many of her fellow students were on his side, too- the same type who would have ignored the rules and followed Bakugo to Osaka, who prioritized personal interests over the good of the many, even if they disguised it as valor. Day after day, she could hear the first and second-years talking in hushed tones in the lunchrooms and hallways, only to fall silent whenever she passed. Whenever she did happen to overhear some of the whispers, the subject never failed to be grim: They claimed that this would be U.A.’s last year in operation, that the principal would announce the school's imminent closure at the graduation ceremony. That Todoroki was already dead, and the government was just covering it up to keep Endeavor from turning on them, just like they were covering up Hawks' treason. That the Syndicate were right about the economy. That the new Symbol of Peace had let All Might die, and had no idea what she was doing. That last one had given Itsuka pause when the first-year saying it failed to notice her behind him in the lunch line, and she’d thought about it for a long time afterwards, late into the night, long after Kodai had fallen asleep on the couch beside her.

Do I have any idea what I'm doing?

Days later, Kendo still couldn't come up with a solid answer to that question as she set out on the path towards the main gate; the staff didn't like her taking off from inside the campus except in emergencies, mainly due to how badly her air pressure blasts tended to trip the perimeter sensors, something she'd found out the hard way her second year. She'd made sure to be on the early side, just in case- not knowing what this was about had been bugging her all day, especially seeing as Miruko and Nighteye hadn't been responding to her texts. Scrolling to one of the playlists Jiro had shared with her recently, she was about to put in her earbuds when a finger suddenly tapped her on the shoulder, and she turned around to find a disembodied lower arm floating in front of her face. Setsuna?

Sure enough, when Kendo glanced up, Tokage was waving sheepishly from the dorm's front porch with her remaining hand, with Juzo just a few paces behind- both of them were dressed in their hero costumes as well.

"Aw, dangit!" Setsuna perched her hand on her hip and smirked. "I miss when I could scare you like that."

"It's been a long time since then," Kendo chuckled. "Plus, Tetsu always gave way better reactions than me, for the record. But damn, does Lemillion really have you guys heading out on patrol this late?"

"Nah, this is something, uh… different." Replied Honenuki with a frown. "I dunno if we're supposed to talk about it."

"That's funny… it's the same for me."

Unsure of what to say next, the three students glanced awkwardly between each other for a few moments, until Tetsutetsu burst out the door and greeted them all hurriedly, dressed in his costume as well.

"Hey guys, 'sup Itsuka! Sorry but I gotta run right now, I'm gonna be late to some super-secret meeting thing I got invited to!"

"Lemme guess, at Best Jeanist's agency?" Kendo asked as he rushed past her, prompting Real Steel to skid to a rapid halt.
"Whoa, you too?!

"I'm pretty sure at this point that all of us are going to the same meeting." Said Battle Fist, a smile slowly growing on her lips. "And don't worry, I can guarantee that none of you are going to be late, as long as you don't mind a little turbulence. Trust me, though, the view is worth it."

To Kendo's pleasant surprise, neither Juzo nor Tokage vomited on the ten-odd minute flight to their destination, as tended to happen to first-timers. After half a year of working in the same internship, Tetsustetsu was well-accustomed to the experience, of course, and buckled over with laughter when Honenuki and Setsuna practically collapsed to the ground the moment she set them down on the sidewalk, visibly queasy. The crowd of pedestrians passing through the beating heart of Tokyo's neon-lit Shinjuku ward parted out of pity for the two young interns as they struggled slowly back to their feet, and staggered into the building's entrance, teased by Real Steel all the while.

"Oh man, look at you rookies! Don't worry, it's all part of the process! You guys should've seen Jiro the first time Kendo did it with her, she friggin' hurled everywhere, it was-"

"Ahem."

Even though she'd seen it coming, Itsuka couldn't help but chuckle to herself when Tetsutetsu whirled around to find a red-faced Kyoka a few paces behind him, tapping one boot impatiently on the ground- from the look of it, she'd just gotten here off the train.

"Wanna rephrase that story?"

"Well, I, uh…"

"Secret meeting?" Kendo interjected, one eyebrow cocked.

"Yeah, secret meeting."

"Perfect."

*Looks like Sir, Miruko, and Lemillion are up to something big,* she reflected as they all walked together to the elevators. *Something involving Best Jeanist, huh? Are we getting a fourth team member?* The others had clearly come to the same conclusion, and they all had a gleam of anticipation on their faces as the doors closed behind them and Battle Fist pressed the button for the penthouse.

"If this is what I think it is, then it's gonna be pretty fucking awesome," remarked Setsuna. "Well, I mean, aside from having to work with Bakugo. Bleh."

"You're just still salty about how badly he beat your team in the inter-class training scrimmages," Tetsutetsu shot back with a grin. "Don't worry, I'll put him in his place if I need to."

"You and me both, Tetsu." Kendo let out a heavy sigh and patted his shoulder in solidarity. "Trust me, I'm already working on it."

"He was acting even more like a brat than usual after the written finals today." Jiro nonchalantly twirled one jack around her finger as she spoke, her expression annoyed. "Bragging about how he was gonna have the top score in the class for the third year in a row. I mean, he probably will, but still, come on."

"How did you guys do on yours, by the way?" Honenuki piped up from the back. "I was totally stressing out studying these past few days, but it really wasn't so bad in the end, except for that one
"Yeah, I basically just gave up when I saw that one," Kyoka replied. "By the way, have any of you guys heard from Kirishima today? He was supposed to catch a red-eye flight back from his assignment in Okinawa in time to take his final this morning, but he didn't show up for the exam."

"Oh yeah, he texted our powerlifting groupchat last night at like 1:00 AM or something." Tetsutetsu pulled out his phone and scrolled to the message in question. "He said something urgent came up with work, and that he'd be getting back tonight, hopefully. Apparently Suneater and Fatgum are gonna coordinate with Vlad so he can take the written final over the weekend, before graduation."

"Huh. They were tracking smugglers or something down there, right?" Setsuna frowned and narrowed her eyes in contemplation. "I remember Lemillion saying something about it the other day. Hope he's okay, I haven't seen anything on the news."

"Me neither," Kendo added, "but I guess we wouldn't really be seeing local news from down there unless it was a major incident. Whatever they ran into, I'm sure they're fine, Tamaki's majorly strong. Have you guys ever seen him in action? One time, he-" The elevator doors opened while she was still midsentence, and she promptly choked on her tongue when she stepped out and nearly ran into Endeavor. His face fixed in its permanent scowl, he seemed to be glancing over his shoulder at them, and made an amused grunt when his gaze fell on Kendo, turning to face the group of interns with his hands on his hips.

"So they invited the children after all, I see. So be it. How's your palm, girl?"

"How's your pride?" She wanted desperately to ask him that question, but then Midoriya's words echoed in her head: A cheap imitation with the social grace of Endeavor. That's not who I am. Is it? After a moment of hesitation, she managed to force herself to take on a different tone, abandoning her matching scowl for a more non-confrontational expression. "I... I'm sorry that your son is still missing. Is this meeting about Coldflame?"

Enji's face softened a bit at her inquiry; his furrowed brows unknit themselves, and the flames forming his beard and moustache seemed to die down ever so slightly. His eyes widened in pain for a fraction of a second, then quickly returned to normal.

"No, it's not. They didn't tell you, eh? You'll find out soon enough. Follow me if you're all done gawking- the meeting room is to the right, if I recall correctly."

"Wrong, it's on the left! Jesus, how hard is it to remember a goddamn floorplan?"

Itsuka winced at the sound of the new voice, and exchanged a brief glance of exasperation with Jiro before looking down the hall towards the source. Ground Zero was fully dressed in his hero costume as well, his grenade-gauntleted arms crossed in impatience as he nodded towards an open door.

"In here, come on! Jeanist sent me to make sure you deadbeats didn't get lost. Guess it really was necessary."

"What did you just call me, boy?" Endeavor growled, stalking towards Bakugo with booming footfalls as Kendo and the others trailed a good distance behind. "I see that your time with Hakamata has somehow failed to instill you with some basic manners."

"I called you a deadbeat," Katsuki snapped back with equal ferocity, "but if you're not satisfied with that one, I can come up with something worse. You want me to show you my table manners so goddamn badly, bow and scrape and kiss your fucking boots? I'll be polite to you when..."
you've *earned* it, not before."

The standoff between the two men dragged on for several seconds of tense silence, before Enji suddenly broke out in laughter and walked past Bakugo into the conference room, clapping a hand on the intern's shoulder as he went.

"I have to say, I think I like this one, Tsunagu! Reminds me of myself at his age. What a strong spirit, my god!"

The sound of distant chatter drowned out Jeanist's response, and Kendo was left with the unenviable task of leading the others past their 'guide'. She was hoping to suffice with a simple nod of acknowledgement, but as usual, he wasn't content to let an encounter go by without some manner of confrontation.

"You guys are late. Typical."

"Wha- we're fifteen minutes early!" Itsuka cried in protest, holding up her lock screen as proof.

"Yeah, big deal. I've been here since four in the goddamn afternoon."

"Uh, maybe because you *work* here?!" Jiro replied incredulously.

"And your point is?"

She could tell that he was just messing with them at this point, but before Kendo could brush past Ground Zero and into the meeting room, Tetsutetsu spoke up from behind her.

"You hear from Eijiro at all today, Bakugo?"

"Not since last night, why?" Katsuki's entire demeanor changed in a split second, his expression momentarily shifting to one that almost resembled genuine concern. "Fuck, is he still not back? I asked him what the hell's going on down there but he couldn't say, just that it was important enough to skip a final."

"So that's not the topic of the meeting either, huh?" Sighed Juzo.

"We'll get to the main agenda in due time. If you could all do us the favor of stepping inside, then we'll be able to begin promptly." Sir Nighteye's measured tone was unmistakable, and Battle Fist wasted no time answering his summons- the others quickly followed her lead.

Most of the room was occupied by a long conference table, and similar to Lemillion's office, there were wall-mounted flatscreen TVs on either side, in this case displaying some sort of data or statistics. Best Jeanist and Nighteye occupied the table's head, and seated around it were Miruko, Lemillion, Mount Lady, Kamui Woods, Endeavor, and a wheelchair and respirator-bound Edgeshot, along with Kaminari, Ashido, Hagakure, and Shoji; Toru and Mina waved excitedly at the other interns as they stepped inside, and Denki shot the three new female arrivals a playful wink. They swiftly took their seats, and Itsuka received a friendly smile in greeting when she ended up next to Mount Lady.

"Now that everyone is present," declared Best Jeanist in an authoritative tone, "this meeting can officially commence. As we all know, the villain group known as the Syndicate wreaked havoc on this country two weeks ago, with a coordinated series of attacks designed to tear down the most fundamental pillars of modern hero society. To all of our shame, they succeeded in practically every objective. Our retaliation on that day was too slow- we did not truly understand the scope and capabilities of the threat we were facing until it was far too late. As the de facto number one hero,
ever since that day, I have been engaged in conversation with both the government and you, my fellow heroes, on how best to move forward, and tonight, I am eager to finally present you with a solution. As of this moment, all of you are officially members of Strike Team Fenrir, a government-mandated task force with the sole objective of eliminating the Syndicate by any means necessary. Tonight, we begin planning our counterattack."

Chapter End Notes

And the structure of the major conflict begins to emerge! You'll see the rest of the meeting and learn more about the details next chapter, but for the most part, Strike Team Fenrir will be the Syndicate's main opponents (for a while, at least) after this point. As far as the name goes, it's canon that Jeanist loves wolves, so I thought it fit. Also stay tuned for an explanation of how Edgeshot survived!

On another note, Anyone else who's caught up with the manga knows that there are some major additions being made to the world of villains in MHA after the latest chapters about Gigantomachia and the Doctor, so rest assured that I'm already drafting plans on how to bring them organically into the story. We'll jump back in time a day one more time next chapter to see the conclusion of the plan to abduct the Shields, as well as what incident Kirishima and Suneater are involved in. Any guesses on what might happen? For now, though, please let me know what you thought of the full conversation between Midoriya and Kendo, and anything else that struck your interest! I thought it was about time to finally give Kendo some backstory and a family, even if both of her parents are pretty absent. And IzuMomo is too good of a ship to resist playing with a villain spin on it, so I hope you enjoyed that as well. As always, all comments are appreciated!
"Coming up on the perimeter gate now- 300 meters out. Security doesn't look any tighter than usual, from this distance, at least. Proceeding as planned, pending any emergencies."

Neither Seraph nor any of the others were present to respond to his status report in their current state, but all the same, talking aloud as if they were gave Chaudron some small degree of comfort as their jeep approached the imposing perimeter fence of Kadena Air Base. It was still bright and early; the sun had barely lifted its full width above the horizon, and hardly a single cloud dotted the dull purple sky as the last traces of morning mist faded into nothing. As a sudden twinge of pain in his skull reminded him all too readily, Monoma was still feeling the lingering effects of his intoxication the night before, but instead of distracting Neito, the dull, throbbing headache gave him clarity- it made him angry, and when he was angry, he was focused. That was how it had always been, as long as he could remember; lucky for him, the world gave him plenty of things to get angry about.

"It's creepy when you talk to yourself like that," Toga declared from the passenger's seat, her arms crossed and her tongue stuck out in his direction- it was a much stranger sight than usual, given that she currently had the appearance of the thirty-five year old lieutenant colonel she and Midoriya had murdered the night before, a strong-jawed, blond-haired man with a standard military buzz cut. Neito, on the other hand, had taken down a target of his own later the same night, after he ditched Red Riot and Suneater: a fresh-faced young brunette captain who was currently tied up and unconscious in the villa's closet. It had taken a while for him to perfect the woman's tight-tucked ponytail when he was readying himself this morning, but he'd eventually gotten the hairstyle close enough to what it resembled on her military ID badge. Just as when he was surveilling the two heroes last night, he had a lock of Toga's hair in his pocket to make sure that his Copy of Metamorphosis didn't run out of time. Hair and skin samples allowed him to extend his quirk's time limit as long as he made sure to maintain physical contact at least once every five minutes, but only for up to three hours; after that, the samples 'expired', and had to be replaced with fresh ones. This mission was projected to last around three hours exactly, so the margin for error was slim.

"You know that's not what I'm doing," Monoma shot back, glancing down at the pistol holstered at his side for good measure as he eased his foot down onto the brake and slowly brought them to a halt. "I'm making sure they're aware everything's going smoothly."

Emptied of bullets, the gun's magazine currently contained Seraph, Synapse, Mr. Compress, Twice, Gentle, and La Brava, all shrunk down into Atsuhiro's blue marbles. Once they were safely past security and inside the base, they would have Compress release the quirk on himself, Shinso, and Jin- Pandora had prepared Japanese army uniforms and false ID badges for the three of them, and would be monitoring the situation from afar alongside Longshot and Kurogiri. Midoriya and Tobita were present mainly as close combat support in case of an emergency, and ideally they would both remained compressed until the conclusion of the operation. Seraph had made it expressly clear in his briefing an hour before that combat was their absolute last resort, due to the heavily fortified nature of the facility: fighting their way out of a military installation would be a nightmare scenario, so stealth was an absolute necessity. That aside, making an enemy of the world's largest military was hardly on Izuku's list of objectives, but if all went well, the Syndicate would leave Okinawa with more than enough leverage to prevent that from ever coming to pass.

"Eyy, Yeager, look at you! Never thought I'd see you rolling back in with the LC! Rough night,
Frustratingly enough, the guard on duty at the gate seemed to recognize the captain Monoma was disguised as when he held out his ID, and he was forced to put on his best congenial grin while he improvised a response.

"Tell me about it, man, I think I died and came back to life. Got separated from my squad, so I had to hitch a ride back with his loser." Luckily, Metamorphosis copied vocal chords perfectly, so Neito didn't have a trace of a Japanese accent when he spoke.

"Ah, what a bummer." To Monoma's intense aggravation, the guard proceeded to step up to the window, lean in, and nod at Toga, who was forced to return the gesture with a false smile of her own. "Don't let her bully you too much, LC," he continued, before turning back to Chaudron and holding up his fist. It took Monoma a moment to realize that he was supposed to bump it with his own, but the man didn't seem too phased by the delay.

"You sure you're sober enough to drive, cap? Seems like one hell of a hangover." He fell into a minor fit of laughter after that, and let them through with a wave of his hand, a gesture that finally eased Chaudron's pounding heart. *Well, that's one more stage done and over with. Now, on to the main attraction.*

Twenty minutes later, he and Toga had found their respective quarters, changed into their uniforms, and rendezvoused back at the main mess hall easily enough. They sat far enough to the side that none of the morning crowd were likely to spot them, a binder full of inventory catalogues set on the table between them to create the illusion that they were busy with work and dissuade anyone from interrupting them.

"Thirty-eight minutes until the joint forces meeting begins," Monoma was saying, glancing down at his watch. It was grating to force himself to speak in English, lest he arouse suspicion by suddenly becoming fluent in Japanese, but the nature of the transformation made the adjustment much easier. "Since you're a good, dutiful soldier, you should arrive at least twenty minutes early to mingle with the other attendees, especially the good Doctor Shield, who'll be speaking at two separate events throughout the morning. Unfortunately, I'm not high-ranking enough to have received an invite like you, but that just makes it easier for me to ferry the others to their designated objectives. Do you understand everything I'm telling you, Lieutenant Colonel Ackerman?"

"Loud and clear, Captain Yeager." She replied, pronouncing every syllable with deliberate sarcasm.

"Don't go around speaking with that tone," Neito hissed, his voice dropped down to a near-whisper. "I swear, are you even taking this seriously?"

"Ah, no one's listening to us, stop being so uptight," she replied with a wide grin. "I've got way more experience with this than you- I can tell. And of course I am, dummy, my baby's safety is at stake! Just trust me, I've got this down."

"If you say so." Monoma felt the corners of his lips turn down into a grimace, but he managed to suppress it quickly enough. "In that case, I think I'm off, I need to scout out the best place to release my backup."

"Roger that," Himiko replied, her demeanor changing in an instant as a group of officers walked past their table. "Best of luck, captain. You know how to reach me if things go south."

"If things go south, we're all dead," Neito muttered as he rose to his feet and set off for the bathrooms. After waiting a few minutes for the stalls to empty out, he stepped into the largest one, at
the very end, carefully drew the magazine out from his gun, and set the blue marbles that contained Synapse, Compress, and Twice out on the floor. Once he was absolutely sure the coast was clear, Monoma cleared his throat and gave Atsuhiro the verbal signal to release.

"Phase two, go."

In a burst of blue light, the three men sprang into being, already garbed from heel to toe in the clean white officer dress uniforms of the Japanese Air Force, complete with crimson and gold furnishings. Hitoshi's decidedly non-regulation haircut was tied up in a topknot beneath his cap, and a prosthetic created by Pandora hid the distinctive scar running down the middle of Bubaigawara's forehead. According to their rank insignias, Compress and Twice were both majors, while Synapse was a lieutenant. Due to the ongoing US-Japan joint forces conference, there were plenty of JSDF soldiers on the grounds of the base, so the presence of three extra officers wasn't likely to arouse any suspicion.

"God, that took long enough," Shinso grunted, lifting his arms into a stretch. "It was starting to get cramped in there."

"You get used to it," Compress offered conciliatorily as Chaudron opened the stall door and led them out to the sinks, his eyes locked on the bathroom entrance, watching for any sign of intrusion. "After so many years, I actually find the sensation quite comforting."

"You can chit-chat about it later," Neito snapped. "You should both know that there's no time to waste. Stick close to me, stick to your scripts, let me do the talking unless someone needs a dose of Suggestion. Twice, if you would?"

"Sure thing, boss."

With a wave of his hands, Jin created a perfect clone of Monoma, disguised appearance and all- the double quickly retreated into one of the stalls to wait until the others had left. While Toga's Lieutenant Colonel Ackerman was expected as participant at the meeting, Neito's Captain Yeager and her squad were assigned to patrol the perimeter starting in under an hour, as they'd discovered in the duty roster stored on her phone; with two of him, he could still fulfill his role in the plan without arousing suspicion from her superiors for dereliction of duty.

"Try your best not to split," Chaudron murmured under his breath as they strode outside and swiftly merged back into the crowd of soldiers.

"I won't," Bubaigawara replied, his tone earnest. "I have it under control. I promise."

"See that you do. Come now, the clock is ticking."

"So, how long do you think this one's gonna last?"

"Well it's scheduled for an hour and a half, so hopefully not any longer than two, given how late most of the other meetings have been running. Have you been finding enough to do in the meantime? Sorry again that I couldn't quite swing you a high enough security clearance for today…" David Shield rubbed the back of his head sheepishly and adjusted his glasses as he gazed down at his daughter, who simply smirked in reply.

"Well seeing as I'm still a college sophomore who doesn't have two decades of experience as a hero and military contractor, I wasn't exactly expecting to sit in the same room as the generals. Being on the base is cool enough, don't worry. I need to finish downloading some shows on my laptop for the flight back to California anyway."
"Strange to think we'll be on the way home just a few hours from now," David replied, half to Melissa and half to himself. "It's been… a memorable two weeks."

It had been five in the afternoon in San Francisco when the headlines of All Might's death broke in the US. The memory was still as clear as day, burned into his mind like a brand: he'd been in the process of wrapping up a speech at a statewide conference for hero costume designers on a stage in Berkeley when the murmurs started to ripple through the crowd, quietly at first, then louder, more insistent, panicked. Everyone in the audience had known about David's close personal and professional relationship with Toshinori; when someone in one of the front row finally mustered the courage to stand, look him in the eyes, and declare that All Might had been killed, he took it for a poorly executed joke at first, and tried to press forward with his remarks regardless. Then the event's organizer came out on stage a few moments later to deliver the same news, and a glance down at his phone revealed a series of missed calls and distraught texts from Melissa. 'Please tell me it's not true about Uncle Might', the first one had read. 'Please tell me he's okay, dad.'

The next few days had passed by in a blur of emotion. He'd wasted no time buying two plane tickets to fly out to Japan for the funeral, one-way rather than round-trip- he had a feeling even then that dealing with the fallout of All Might's demise might prove to be a lengthy affair. Luckily, the dates had lined up with Melissa's spring break from Cal Tech, so she didn't have to miss too much class- not that she would have let the alternative stop her from coming. The small, private ceremony organized by Nighteye had been a mess of tears and grief for both of them, but a few days later David made it through his eulogy at the state memorial ceremony without choking up, and seeing Toshinori's successor again had been a welcome experience for him and Melissa alike- she and Kendo got along exceptionally well. The spirit that Yagi had embodied was still burning bright inside her, as far as he was concerned, and though it was clear that she still had a lot to learn, talking with her had gone a long way towards mending the hole in David's heart that All Might had left behind.

After that, it had been eight days of business rather than pleasure, with a schedule full of speaking gigs and private meetings at support item companies, costume design labs, universities, political organizations, hero agencies, and more. In the turmoil that enveloped the country following the death of its beloved icon, it seemed that everyone was eager to hear from the man who'd helped shape him into the Symbol of Peace, and about his opinion on what the future held. David had offered to fly Melissa back to the US early, but she declined and soldiered on at his side through the whirlwind of events. After a while, it became difficult to even keep all the names straight: in one rather embarrassing incident, he'd accidentally referred to a Tokyo tech firm by the name of its largest rival in a roundtable with the executive directors, and the next day he forgot the CEO of Detnerat's name mid-conversation with him. After a meeting with an executive from Shueisha to discuss a possible book deal in the near future about his relationship with All Might, they were finally at their last destination, Kadena's annual US-Japan Joint Pacific Forces Strategic Coordination Conference. He was here to answer questions on the role heroes should play in national defense and intergovernmental cooperation, how the security of the region might be affected by the loss of the Symbol of Peace, and to what extent his support item and costume design skills could be applied to military technology.

So is it high time to sell myself out to the military-industrial complex once and for all? He'd wondered that more than once in the past two weeks, but deep down part of him knew that his best work would always belong to heroes first and foremost, even if he tried to change course now. He'd done a few stints as a defense contractor over the course of his career, often enough that he still held a top-secret clearance, but every time he felt himself pulled back to the allure of heroics before long. Even now, he'd spent much of the latter half of this trip sketching up a design for a new costume for Battle Fist, a homage to one of All Might's- he was waiting until it was finished and manufactured to surprise her with it. He threw a sidelong glance down at his shoulder bag as they strode out of the
building that contained their quarters and into the bright morning sunlight; his sketchbook was nestled inside, along with a few of the books and manga volumes the Shueisha exec had given them as souvenirs. 'Special Abilities Liberation Front,' he read off of one of the spines, 'The Untold Story.' Huh. I guess all that Destro stuff has been in vogue lately. Might be worth a read at some point.

"If you need something to do in the meantime," he offered, holding out the autobiography, "why don't you go ahead and check this out for me, see if it's any good?"

"Eh, I've read about Yotsubashi online, he seems a bit too fanatical for my tastes." Melissa took the book in hand regardless, though, before fishing into the bag of her own accord and pulling out his sketchbook and a manga volume. "We'll see if I get around to it. I'd love to review the design you've been working on, though if that's okay! It's for Itsuka, right?"

"There you two are!" A familiar voice cut in before David could answer, and both of their heads whipped around to find Lieutenant Colonel Royce Ackerman, the head of their security detail, giving them a friendly wave, trailed by two of his subordinates. "I'm not much of a head of security if I let you run off on me, am I?"

"You were AWOL when I woke up this morning," David replied jokingly, "so I thought I'd let Captain Diaz take over." He gestured behind them- one of Ackerman's men was trailing them at a reasonable distance as they made their way to the base's main building, and at the sight of his CO he quickly snapped into a salute.

"Sir! Escorting the civilians as ordered!"

"At ease, son. I'll take it from here." The hint of a grin lingering on his war-weary face, the lieutenant colonel fell in step beside David, his hands clasped behind his back.

"Apologies about this morning, Doctor Shield. I had a bit of a rough night, to be completely frank with you. You know how it goes- went out intending to have a beer or two and come straight back, but that's never how it goes. I had to play babysitter, give a fellow officer a ride back this morning. I hope you can forgive the lapse in judgement on my part."

"No harm done." David gave the man a reassuring smile. He certainly seems to be a bit less stiff and formal than yesterday. I suppose it's good that he feels more comfortable around us, though. So I take it you'll be escorting us out once the meeting is over?"

"Yes sir, that's correct. There are no outbound flights to the States scheduled from this airbase in the specified window, and all of our available aircraft are booked for either training or maintenance, so I'll be taking point on driving you down to Air Station Futenma, where the Marines will oversee your trip back to San Francisco. Don't worry, you'll be well taken care of."

"Excellent, that's good to hear."

Once they'd entered the main complex and gone through the standard security check, they quickly merged into a crowd of officers and conference guests both Japanese and American alike mingling in the lobby, though many of them quickly diverted their attention to David when he entered the room, much to his embarrassment. After a few of the standard handshakes and exchanges of pleasantries with his fellow Americans, one JSDF officer in particular sought their group out and introduced himself as Colonel Ishimata Keicho.

"I was a huge fan of All Might," the man was saying, shaking his head with a deep frown mirrored by David's own- that was a phrase he had heard times beyond counting the last two weeks, and it never failed to re-open the still-fresh wound of Toshinori's death for a few brief moments. "Well, to
"Trust me, I know exactly what you mean." David shot Melissa a knowing glance and smile, mulling over the difficult question of how much he wanted to embarrass his daughter today- she had a collection of over two dozen All Might figures back at the family home, not to mention her posters, apparel, and childhood bedsheets. She instantly realized what he was about to do and wasted no time delivering a swift kick to his ankle, her face flushed. Heedless of the consequences, though, he couldn't resist throwing an arm around her shoulder and turning back to Ishimata with a wide grin. "I'd go so far as to say that my daughter is probably his number one fan, as far as I know, at least. Although I suppose I could claim seniority on that accolade if I wanted- I like to say that I was an All Might fanboy before it was cool."

They all shared a chuckle at that, even Ackerman, and David breathed a sigh of relief that his Japanese was still holding up alright after a brief switch to English for the past day. Then David blinked, and turned back to Royce with a smile.

"Lieutenant Colonel, what a pleasant surprise- I didn't know you spoke Japanese. How long have you been studying it?"

"Oh, well… I, uh…" Ackerman chuckled and gave them a sheepish grin, his hands shoved in his pockets- he replied in English. "I just did a few basic lessons online, nothing fancy. It was mainly to impress a local girl I met a little while back. I can pick up on a few phrases here and there, but I'm told my pronunciation is atrocious."

The colonel laughed and patted Royce's shoulder, then switched to English as well; he seemed to be practically fluent, with little trace of an accent.

"A worthy cause, my friend. I hope you'll continue with the efforts!"

"I'll try my best. So how are you liking Okinawa, Colonel Ishimata? If I remember the personnel rosters correctly, you're visiting from a base on Honshu."

"Indeed I am! I've had a lovely experience so far, although I must admit, last night is a bit of a blur, if you know what I mean. I can't quite recall how I made it home from the pub!"

"You made it back," offered David, "and that's what matters, as far as I'm concerned."

"So you're a friend of Fatgum? That's so cool!" Melissa quickly brought the conversation back into Japanese, her eyes wide with excitement- she was always eager for opportunities to practice the language. "Have you ever met Red Riot, his sidekick?"

"On several occasions! I just had dinner with him last night, in fact! He and Suneater are still here in Okinawa, chasing some hero case."

"Whoa, really?! I met him last year, on I-Island! Do you know how long he'll be here?"

"Oh, it's hard to say, you know how these hero missions go, always unpredictable…"

"Ah, excuse me," David interjected with an apologetic glance to Royce, "but could we keep things in English for our friend here, Melissa? If you don't mind, colonel."

"Why of course not. But as I was saying, it's difficult to discern the details of their assignment, but I
can tell you that they were quite curious about how I-

A widening ripple of murmurs drew all of their attention before Ishimata could finish his sentence, and all at once the entire room's attention focused back on the door, as a squad of military police began to clear a path through the crowd.

"Step back, everyone," an officer boomed, "VIPs entering the building. No sudden movements."

That's right, David recalled, straightening his glasses and peering over Ackerman's shoulder towards the door, I remember them mentioning the possibility of some important guest speakers. It hadn't occurred to him how important they might be until the Chairwoman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee strode through the doors, instantly recognizable by her neatly trimmed bob of greying brown hair. Close on her heels was a man whose face he only recognized in the vaguest of senses, perhaps from a TV ad or roadside billboard in Tokyo. He was Japanese, and quite young compared to his American counterpart, lean and handsome, with neatly combed black hair, tinted glasses, and a shadow of a moustache on his upper lip.

"That's Hanabata Kouku," Keicho whispered in David's ear, having noticed his confused expression. "A member of the National Diet, and leader of the Shinkyu Party. He's been very popular recently, a young firebrand. Some say he's on track to be the next prime minister. I think it'll take him a little longer than that- at least another few years- but he'll get there eventually. He's a likeable man."

"Hm, I see. Hanabata…" He stroked his goatee thoughtfully, and gave Ishimata a gracious nod. "Thank you. I'll have to remember that name."

"I can write it down, if that'll help."

David practically jumped in the air at the sound of a new voice beside him, and pivoted back around to find Kouku standing just a few feet away; while the American politician was still making nice with the base's commanding officers, the Shinkyu leader had made a beeline for him, it seemed.

"M-Mr. Hanabata, it's such an honor to meet you! I didn't know that we'd have a guest as distinguished as yourself joining us!"

"Don't be so humble, Doctor Shield. I should be the one who's honored to meet you." He gave David a friendly grin as they shook hands, and clapped his other on Shield's arm. "You've done so much for this country, after all, through your work with All Might. And this is your daughter, yes?"

Kouku turned to face Melissa and bowed his head in acknowledgement, a smile still playing about his lips. "My cousin has a son at Cal Tech. I hear you're a real star on campus! You're looking to work at the JPL after you graduate, yes?"

Her face flushed bright red in embarrassment, Melissa stammered out her response with considerable hesitation.

"Um, well, maybe, maybe not. I'm still having some trouble deciding exactly what I want to do. Working in support item and costume design like my dad sounds amazing too."

"We're all unsure about our roles in life at one point or another." He gave her a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. "I'm sure you'll find something that fills your heart with conviction soon enough." Just when Hanabata was about to move on, though, his eyes drifted down to the cover of the Destro autobiography she was holding, and briefly widened- he froze in his tracks.

"Quite an interesting book you've got there, Melissa- it's one of my personal favorites, actually. Have you gotten around to reading it yet?"
"Hm, this?" She held it up and smiled apologetically. "Not quite yet, no. But I'll start on it soon, hopefully!"

"That's excellent to hear. I do hope you enjoy it!"

At that the young politician turned and made his way back towards the military bigwigs waiting to greet him, and the officer who had announced the VIP's arrival cut through the chatter before David could remark on Kouku's impressive charisma.

"The meeting will begin in five minutes- all cleared participants, please make your way to the front of the room."

After a good forty minutes of maneuvering around the base via the least frequented and least conspicuous route that Momo and Izuku could map, all the while praying that no one from Yeager's company would happen by and recognize her, Chaudron, Synapse, Compress, and Twice of them were finally nearing the building that contained the base's extensive server banks, and Monoma couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief when he saw the structure in the distance. The air base felt a good deal bigger on foot than it had seemed on the satellite map they'd reviewed the night before, a veritable maze of hangars, patrols, and barracks that had kept his heart rate much higher than was healthy for far too long. Due to the tight security, their options were much more limited than usual if they were detected: just like at U.A., the use of Kurogiri's quirk or anything like it within the perimeter would trigger an instant alarm, largely thanks to an infamous warp-type villain who had terrorized several major American cities a few decades back. Their DNA wasn't being watched for like at U.A. with its new security upgrades, but radio contact with anyone on the outside to coordinate their movements was impossible as well.

If their presence did come known before they had the chance to activate their radios and signal their position for an extraction, there would be no easy escape: over the past hundred years, the militaries of the world had adapted to fight villains just as effectively as each other. For all their skill and quirks and tactics, they would be surrounded by thousands of trained soldiers, with better weapons, better technology, and better coordination- each and every one of them would face almost certain death or capture. To make matters worse, even if they did manage to flee with Kurogiri's aid, making an enemy of the American military could only bode ill for the Syndicate's future- they'd already killed one officer, and that was enough of a risk in and of itself. Their only saving grace in the aftermath of this operation would be the classified military data that La Brava was here to extract from the base's servers, which could be as useful as blackmail and leverage as it could be as intelligence.

This is today's real objective, Monoma told himself as their objective loomed closer and closer in the distance, his teeth grit in determination as he reached into his pocket to wrap his sweaty fingers around the lock of Toga's hair that was allowing him to retain the effects of Copy. Midoriya trusted me with overseeing the future of our organization. I can't let him down. Using samples was admittedly an imperfect solution, but after fourteen years of adapting to his quirk's time limit, the mental alarm that went off every five minutes when he was using Copy was so strongly burned into his mind that it was practically impossible for him to forget.

"Looks like two guards out front," murmured Compress, leaning down towards Neito's ear, "just like Hatsume and Yaoyorozu predicted. How would you like to approach this, Chaudron?"

"Well, it's not like Captain Yeager has prior authorization to enter that area," Monoma replied with a grimace; the woman's voice still sounded strange when he spoke- he'd generally only used Metamorphosis to transform into men before, so femininity was largely a new experience for him. "Synapse, I do believe you're up. How's your English?"
"Passable enough. I've been studying up, just like Seraph asked."

"Good, that's very good." Neito rubbed his hands together, his heart pounding in anticipation as they approached the building's entrance, and the two airmen standing watch outside. He would have happily volunteered to shoulder the burden of luring away the guards- the Suggestion would seem more natural coming from a fellow American, after all- but the rules of his quirk still applied: Monoma could only use one at a time, and switching to Brainwashing from Metamorphosis would mean reverting back to his original appearance.

"Yeager, how's it going?" Predictably, one of the two guards seemed to know her, and Neito swiftly transitioned back into his friendly grin. "What are you doing all the way over here? Thought you had duty today."

"I did, but new orders came down the pipeline. I've been assigned to show some of our Japanese guests the databanks, part of an information exchange or something like that."

"Huh, is that so?" The other guard spoke up, with a decidedly less friendly tone. "Well lemme see some orders and your identification, and you guys can go ahead in."

"I believe Admiral Heishimoto already sent the requisite forms to your commanding officers," said Shinso, with barely a trace of a Japanese accent on his voice. "Haven't you heard?"

"Nah, I didn't see anything. How about you, Hansen?"

"Nope, nothing here. I can ring our CO if you wanna confirm, though, he-"

In the blink of an eye both men fell silent as Hitoshi activated his quirk, a soft smile playing about his lips.

"We've already received authorization to enter. You heard so from your commanding officer earlier this morning. You don't need to see our identification. We're clear to go about our business."

"You've… already received authorization." Replied Hansen, slowly yet confidently. "We don't need to see your identification. You're clear to go about your business."

"Move along."

"Move along," the second guard echoed, nodding eagerly. "Move along."

They passed through without issue after that, and it clearly took a good deal of effort for Twice to restrain his laughter until they were down the hallway and out of earshot.

"Hah, did you see that?! I forgot how hilarious your quirk is in action! Those suckers! They… they…" He shuddered and visibly suppressed an urge to split, pulling his white cap down tight over his tufted blond hair with a pained look in his eyes. "I'm whole. I'm whole. Don't worry."

"Shut it," Neito hissed, his eyes flitting back and forth, searching for any sign of more guards. Just moments later, two more walked past their little group, but hardly paid them any heed; as Monoma suspected, once they made it inside, it was generally assumed that they were supposed to be there. Striding confidently ahead, Captain Tessa Yeager led her three Japanese charges deeper and deeper into the heart of the building, until finally they were faced with another set of guards and a locked door between them and their objective, complete with a passcode and voice recognition detectors. Wasting no time with pleasantries on this one, Shinso stepped forward straight away and gave the two men a friendly wave.
"Good morning! We're here as part of the information exchange, have you heard about the new schedule?"

"No, don't think so."

"Me neither. You have any ID, sir? You can't be here without-" he fell silent just as usual, his eyes glazed over.

"Your presence has been requested by General Burke. Both of you, report to base headquarters at once."

"Yes, of course."

The two left without a fuss, and once he was sure the hallway was clear, Chaudron pulled a thumb drive-sized device out of a pouch on his belt, slid off the case, and held down on a button on the bottom. A stream of UV light sprang out of the front end, illuminating the keypad and revealing a well-worn pattern of fingerprints on the four numbers that made up the combination. *Thank god for Hatsume,* Neito mused as he punched in the code and pocketed her baby- this design in particular had come in handy more than once over the years. Next was the voice recognition: Yeager wasn't cleared to be here, but thankfully Lieutenant Colonel Ackerman was of a high enough rank that a simple recording of Toga saying his name sufficed to unlock the door, and Monoma led the others inside with a giddy grin.

The server room was filled with the cold, metallic hum of advanced machinery, so pervasive that Neito shuddered involuntarily when he stepped inside. The room was smaller than he'd expected, barely the size of a master bedroom, with three quarters of its available space taken up by towering server banks. After a quick check to make sure that they were alone, Chaudron glanced up to the nearest security camera, pulled out his phone, and pressed a single button.

"Alright, their surveillance feeds are on a loop now; it should be at least an hour before they notice, but judging by the size of the base, we only have thirty-five minutes until the guards return. Shall we move on to the next phase, if you're all feeling ready?"

"No problems here," replied Compress with a shrug- the other two nodded in turn.

"Excellent. If you would, then?"

His motions calm and methodical, Neito drew his pistol, pulled out the magazine, and placed the marble containing La Brava gently on the floor. Hardly a moment later, Aiba Manami sprang into being, and offered them all a brief greeting before darting over to the servers and beginning her work.

"I don't see why you had to leave Gentle compressed for all this," she grumbled, her face fixed in a scowl as she pulled out her laptop, plugged a cord into the nearest port, and began to tap away furiously at her keyboard. "He's plenty handsome enough to pass as military."

"He's too recognizable," Shinso shot back. "Same goes for Midoriya after he killed All Might, his face has been plastered on half the TV screens in the country for the past two weeks, not to mention abroad. Even the Americans might notice if they look close enough, and we definitely couldn't risk any JSDF personnel seeing either of them. Lucky for us, the international press has hardly been giving the rest of our little group any coverage- guess we're not important enough for them."

"What could you possibly be saying, my dear Hitoshi? That my gorgeous face isn't instantly recognizable the world over?" Neito let out a gleeful cackle before a stern glance from Shinso
reminded him to reign in his personality for the time being - behind the screen of her laptop, La Brava scoffed in amusement.

"Keep dreaming."

She fell silent for a while after that, and the others positioned themselves to keep an eye on the entrance while remaining invisible from the outside. As Manami had reminded them multiple times during the planning phase of this operation, Kadena's firewall would be a much more formidable target than either U.A. or the Tokyo Police Department by far, reinforced with military-grade software that required her to be present in order to counter it effectively. Despite his best efforts to the contrary, though, Chaudron largely found himself detached and disinterested as Aiba went about her standard hacking procedure; his thoughts were still replaying their conversation on loop, twisting and writhing around a question that had been steadily gnawing at his mind like a parasite for fourteen years.

_Not important enough for them._

Keep dreaming.

For as long as Monoma Neito could remember, he had always been the side character.

It started in grade school, when the other children teased and mocked him for his quirk, for how he had no innate power of his own. "You can't be a hero with a quirk like that," they told him, and deep down, part of him had believed them. "You can't do anything by yourself," they said, and he knew they were right. In all the games he played, all the books he read, all the movies and shows he watched, the protagonist always had some unique power, something about them that was singularly special - they were the answer to an ancient prophecy, or the long-lost heir to a throne, or possessed a skill that no one else did. And regardless of how many companions journeyed with them, there always came a moment at the climax of the story where they stood alone against the enemy, with no one but themselves to rely on, and emerged victorious - that was the test of a true hero. He understood even then that he could never be like any of them. That would never change. He was the companion, not the hero - perhaps the one who tragically perished right before the final fight, the one whose death spurred on the protagonist. No matter how keenly his heart ached for something different, he had come to accept this reality at an early age.

That didn't stop him from resenting it, though. He'd learned to bottle up his spite and anger and despair - those weren't traits that protagonists showed, after all. Protagonists were bold and confident - they smiled and laughed at danger. And so Neito had taught himself to smile and laugh as well, to throw modesty to the wind and present the image of a dashingy self-assured rogue - of someone who was worthy of attention and renown, someone whose very appearance and demeanor screamed in no uncertain terms that they were the main character. A few of the old bullies still made fun of him, but less and less often, until by the end of middle school he was the one who decided who was popular or not, who got to sit with him at lunch and who he'd walk home with. A dozen people vied constantly for his attention, boys and girls alike, and Monoma relished in the feeling of finally being wanted.

Then came U.A., and the swift and ignominious end of his brief reign as king. In the blink of an eye, everything he'd worked tirelessly to build up for himself crumbled away, and he was the companion again, doomed to the sidelines from the day of the USJ encounter, destined to watch as Class B played second fiddle to the media darlings of 1-A without their peers' experience fighting villains. Now he was surrounded by people who shaped the world around them like he'd only dreamed of doing, who were powerful enough to bring villains to their knees by their own merit - they were stronger than him, and there was no denying that. Suddenly it felt like all his childhood aspirations
had become heavy burdens, dragging back down into the depths of despair, like some kind of curse. Once again, Neito had resisted, done everything he could make himself stand out as unique, as special even in comparison to the chosen few rising to the top in front of his eyes, people like Bakugo and Todoroki and Asui. He'd always known that in order to become the hero he wanted to be, he would have to resort to unheroic behavior, subterfuge and guile and stealth- that was the nature of his quirk, which required him to touch his target to stand a chance if he were to fight alone. In a society that worshipped self-sacrifice and defending the weak, his distinct style of heroism was often unwelcome, as he'd discovered during the hero course entrance exam, when a group of participants cornered and confronted him after the end of the test, accusing him of fighting unfairly with his strategy of watching them in action, then Copying their quirks to steal robot kills out from under them at the last moment. They'd all ended up failing while he passed, but regardless, the incident had hardly done anything but embitter him further.

His resentment started to leak out more and more as the school year started and time went on- there were cracks in his façade, moments of bubbling rancor that expressed themselves as ceaseless mockery of his rivals. He'd earned quite a few bruises on the back of his neck for his lack of self-discipline in that regard, as Kendo Itsuka made sure of- she'd been a pain at first, just as figurative as literal, the so-called 'big sister' of Class 1-B. Battle Fist was a textbook protagonist, as far as he was concerned, a frustratingly earnest student who didn't seem to understand the concept of what was and wasn't her business, with a quirk and looks ideal for the media. He'd tried ignoring her at first, then avoiding her, but no matter which tactics he employed, Kendo stuck to him like glue from practically the first week of school. She stubbornly refused to let him vent his anger on his peers in peace, following him around like reforming his flawed personality was some sort of personal crusade. It had taken him some time to come to appreciate her sheer resolve, but even she couldn't come close to changing his fate.

When Midoriya and Shinso approached Monoma at the gym one sunny afternoon shortly before summer break and told him that they knew a way for his talent to be recognized and rewarded, as insane as their proposal sounded, he hadn't been able to resist hearing them out. Unsure of his loyalties, and rightfully so, they'd only revealed the true extent of their plans gradually, bit by bit over the course of the next few days. Instead of frightening him, though, every step they took together deeper into the darkness excited Neito, made him feel alive in a way he never had before. Suddenly the answer that had been eluding him his entire life was right in front of him- instead of languishing away within the confines of the current system, doomed to obscurity, why not tear it all down and build a new one? Of course, he'd had stray, fleeting thoughts of that like all his life, but in Hitoshi, he found a kindred spirit, someone afflicted by the same curse as him, and in Izuku and Mei, he found those with the tenacity and resolve to shape that pipe dream into a reality, no matter how long it took. And so, here he was, two years later. They'd made good progress towards their goal, to be sure, but every so often, Chaudron couldn't quite shake the feeling that despite everything he'd done to break free from the role he'd been given, he was still playing the companion to Seraph's hero. Midoriya was the undisputed boss of the Syndicate, and rightfully so. He'd earned his place, proven himself to be a leader worthy of respect a dozen times over, someone to be feared as much as he was to be admired. In a dozen different ways, Izuku's story ran parallel to Neito's own- he was quirkless, derided and passed over by those he looked up to, told that he could never be a true hero either, not without power. So what makes the two of us different? A quiet voice at the back of Monoma's mind refused to be silenced, the same one that had plagued him since his childhood. If we're both cursed, what makes him so special? Why does he get to be the one who leads us into the new world? Why not you? His brows drawn together in silent frustration, Neito grit his teeth and clenched one fist. No. Why can't you stop being so selfish, you miserable brat? He deserves to be our leader, learn to let someone else have the spotlight for once in your pathetic life. Keep proving yourself indispensable to him, and once the Syndicate achieves our goals, there'll be all the time in the world to write our own...
"Mono… Captain Yeager. Are you alright? You kinda spaced out for a bit there." Shinso's hand on his shoulder brought Chaudron crashing back to reality, and he gave Synapse a swift nod.

"Yeah, no worries. Just… thinking about our exit strategy."

"Uh-huh." Hitoshi raised one eyebrow, then lifted up his arm and tapped one finger on his wrist. "I'm sure you don't need me to remind you, but you've got about ten seconds left on Copy."

"Of course I know that," Monoma replied with a huff, not missing a beat as he casually reached into his pocket. "It's too bad the woman doesn't usually wear a watch, though, I must say."

"If you feel like getting a new one after this mission is done, then I'd be happy to make some recommendations for you," chimed in Compress, holding out his forearm to display an elegantly crafted gold and silver-embossed masterwork with a crystal face, one of the many luxury items that was now within their reach given the Syndicate's massive wealth. "I've found this brand to be particularly pleasing thus far, their products all."

"Shut up, let me concentrate. Something's… weird with this server."

All eyes in the room fell on La Brava when she raised her voice to interject, and Neito felt his stomach begin to twist and turn in unease as he watched her expression rapidly shift from vexation to genuine worry.

"W-what does that mean?!!" Twice hissed, throwing a sidelong glance at the door—there was still no one there, and they had plenty of time left before the guards returned. "Are you saying they caught us?!" It was clearly still taking considerable effort for Jin to stay composed and keep from splitting—his body trembled as he spoke, the tips of his fingers ghosting along the length of the hidden scar on his forehead.

"No, it's not that." Aiba shook her head and glanced up from the screen of her laptop. "Trust me, if they had, we would definitely know, and things would be a lot louder. I've been extracting the data like we planned, and everything's going fine with that—no trace of detection, I'm covering my tracks as I go. But… getting into some of these files has been too easy. Not like they let me get in as part of a malware trap or something, but like… like they've already been broken into, and the backdoor pathways are already there, just waiting to be used. I ran a trace on the server traffic, just to check— I didn't find anything unusual a first, but when I checked for other Japanese IPs encrypting their signatures, a hotspot popped up in Aichi Prefecture."

"And… what does that mean?" Asked Hitoshi, after they'd all attempted to decipher her technical jargon on their own for a few seconds. Still crouched on the floor beneath them, Manami drew in a deep breath, trying her best to keep the panic inside her off of her face.

"It means that there's someone else poking around this server who's not supposed to be here. Someone from this country."

"Aichi Prefecture…" Compress frowned, and stroked his chin. "That's where Nagoya is, our first base. Are we sure it's not just… an echo from our own computers, perhaps?"

"Do I look like an idiot?" La Brava snapped. "I know our tech when I see it— even if Pandora or Longshot decided to follow along with the hack remotely without telling me, I would recognize their signature immediately, and neither of them is at the Nagoya HQ— it's abandoned right now, and I shut off all the servers when we left. Besides, I don't think the signal is coming from Nagoya itself in the
first place…” A few more taps on the keyboard, and they all gathered behind her to see the result, even if they couldn't come close to understanding the maze of code overlaid on top of a map of the region. "They're doing their best to scramble their IP, but it looks our mystery hotspot originates from Deika City." Suddenly a red icon began to blink on one corner of the screen, and all at once Aiba's face went pale. "…And it's in use right now."

An icy hand wrapped itself around Monoma's heart, and he exchanged a glance with Shinso before meeting La Brava's eyes. When he opened his mouth to speak, his tone was calm and measured, yet urgent all the same.

"Can they see you?"

"I… don't know."

"How much of the data have you downloaded?" Synapse crossed his arms, his mouth set in a hard line.

"Well over half, around 70% by now. I can-"

"Disconnect immediately." Neito declared, leaving no room for argument in his voice. "We could already be compromised for all we know. I won't risk it. We leave with what we have, it'll have to be enough."

"Understood." As she reached up to unplug her cord from the server, though, a soft ping emanated from the laptop's speakers, and they all glanced down to find the text of a message superimposed across the screen from the browser's default communications app, followed by a second, then a third.

**Anonymous: I see we're not alone in here.**

**Anonymous: Why don't we make some introductions?**

**Anonymous: Let's get to know each other.**

"*Get out of there, now.*" In a single swift motion, Shinso leaned over and yanked out the cord himself, and La Brava followed his lead by holding down the power button on her computer until the screen went black, then quickly stuffing it back in its case.

"Alright, we're moving up the timeframe." Chaudron held his pistol up to his mouth so Gentle and Seraph could hear him. "We were detected by… someone. Not the Americans. Their motives and allegiance are unknown. The hack has been terminated, we're moving to the extraction point now to wait for the others. We need to get off this base as soon as possible, whatever that takes."

In hindsight, Toga was glad that the buzzing alert on her phone came when it did, because fifty minutes into the first panel conversation on the future of military-hero security partnerships in the Pacific, she was already midway through the process of nodding off despite her desperate attempts to keep her eyes open via pinching, tongue-biting, and a variety of other methods. The mobile was Lieutenant Colonel Ackerman's, of course- breaking the military-grade access code had only taken Longshot and La Brava around ninety seconds, and now Himiko had the contact information and GPS location of dozens of key personnel and assets at her fingertips, a pleasant bonus on top of the data that Chaudron's team was already extracting now. After taking a moment to subtly glance around and make sure that none of the other audience members were watching her, she looked down to find Monoma's- or rather, Captain Yeager's- name at the top of the notification, followed by a message: 'Potential threat detected. Get the principals off-site ASAP. Means up to your discretion,
A frown crossing her face, Carmilla glanced back up at the panel. Doctor Shield was answering a question from the moderator at the moment, while beside him the American congresswoman and Shinkyu leader were nodding in agreement- Toga hadn't bothered even attempting to remember either of their names, much less those of the two other panelists seated beyond them, a Japanese admiral and an American general. The conversation seemed to be gradually wrapping up, though, and a quick check of the schedule of events confirmed that this particular segment of the conference would be over in ten minutes. *He's also supposed to speak at some roundtable thingy next,* she noted, poring over the list of participants as she attempted to recall the details of Midoriya and Yaoyorozu's strategy meeting earlier that morning; she'd largely been falling asleep during that one too, with only Izuku's presence to keep her awake. *Well, looks like he'll just have to miss it. I'm sure I can make this sound urgent enough to get him out of here.*

'Can it wait ten minutes?' She typed out in response. 'He's speaking now, it would raise questions if I interrupted. Event will be over soon.'

'Not one second longer than ten minutes,' came the reply. 'We need time to get to the exfil point regardless, but don't push it. There's too much we don't know about the situation. Keep the contingency plan on standby.'

'Understood.' Toga pocketed the phone again with more questions than answers, but in the grand scheme of things, the only thing that mattered was that she successfully retrieved David Shield- even Melissa was secondary. While an inconspicuous abduction with no alarms raised was the goal, if the case of an emergency, she was prepared to walk straight up the target, tranquilize him, and signal Kurogiri for an immediate escape portal, stealth be damned. *Seems like things haven't gotten quite that bad yet, though. What a shame, I'd prefer to just get this over with the easy way.*

With typical military efficiency, the panel came to an end with a round of applause a neat nine minutes and forty-four seconds later, according to Ackerman's watch, and the moment the speakers and audience stood to begin mingling before the next event, Carmilla shot to her feet and made a beeline for the stage, rehearsing her story in her mind as she went. By the time she arrived moments later, David was conversing amicably with the Japanese politician and several of the other panelists and audience members, and a closer look at the former's placard finally reminded her of his name - *Hanabata Kouku, that's right! I remember seeing him on TV a lot these past few months. He's been pretty important lately, huh?* Himiko raised one eyebrow in contemplation as she reached out to tap David's shoulder. *Eh, he's not awful to look at, I guess. I can see why people would vote for him. I'd need to see him a lot bloodier to be sure, though.*

"Doctor, can I speak to you for a moment? It's an urgent matter."

"Of course, Lieutenant Colonel Ackerman. If you'll excuse me, Mr. Hanabata, gentlemen, it seems I've been summoned."

"Don't be too long, now," Kouku replied in Japanese, meeting Ackerman's eyes with a friendly smile. "I'd hate to see you run late for your next appearance, Doctor Shield."

A chill shot up Toga's spine, and after putting on brief expression of feigned confusion at the fact that the politician hadn't used English, she led David out of the room and back into the lobby; Melissa was waiting on a bench on the far side, her head buried in a volume of manga. Carmilla let out a sharp whistle to get the girl's attention, then gestured for her to join them.

"Everything okay?" She called as she walked over, glancing down at the time on her lock screen. "I thought I was gonna be waiting out here for at least another hour or two."
"It doesn't seem like that's going to be the case," Himiko replied, her tone serious. "Doctor, a few minutes ago, intelligence picked up a possible threat to your safety. Now, I can't divulge too many details, but as the head of your security detail, I had to make the call- we're going to be getting you out of here and over to Futenma ahead of schedule, so we can assess the situation and take the proper steps from there."

"Wait, wait, you're saying we're leaving now?" David's face took on an expression somewhere between confused and crestfallen. "But I still have another event to speak at, I can't just…"

"I'm afraid you're going to have to." Giving him her best sympathetic grimace, Toga clapped a hand on David's shoulder. "Trust me, last-minute cancellations happen all the time when it comes to politicians and the military. I'm sure they'll understand. What matters right now is keeping you and your daughter safe."

"Yes, that's… that's right." Shield nodded, a bit more confident now. "Alright. Show us the way."

Like taking candy from a baby, Carmilla mused, doing her best to keep a giddy grin from forming on her face as she led the two out into the sunlight and towards the motorpool where two black military SUVs were waiting to transport the Shields and their detail to Futenma. Standing in the shadows off to the side of the two vehicles, Monoma emerged into the sunlight when he caught sight of them approaching, still in disguise; if their group was following the plan, Atsuhiro had already recompressed himself, La Brava, Twice, and Synapse, so as not to arouse suspicion during the ID check they'd encounter when leaving.

"This is Captain Tessa Yeager," Toga explained. "She's a good friend of mine, and she'll be joining us for the trip to the Marine base."

"What about Diaz and Springer and the others?" Melissa asked, glancing around in confusion when the other members of Ackerman's squad failed to reappear.

"Don't worry, I'll explain more en route."

Himiko gestured for the others to join her in the lead car as she moved toward the driver's seat- David took shotgun while Melissa sat in the back, just as they'd hoped she would. By this point, it was all Carmilla could do to keep from visibly trembling with anticipation; they were nearing her favorite part of every transformation, the moment she could reveal to the target that they'd been deceived, and see the despair in their eyes as they realized that there was no chance of escape. Once she was sure that Monoma had taken up the wheel in the second car, she eased her foot onto the gas, and began to give her explanation as she drove towards the gate. She always enjoyed the intricate webs of lies that her stolen identities allowed her to spin, the little personal touches and embellishments she was able to add to her fictions.

"Apologies for the secrecy, guys. Essentially, we have reason to believe that someone in my squad might have been compromised by a criminal organization, one with a reason to want to see you harmed, doctor."

A shocked silence reigned for a moment after that, one that lasted through their ID check at the base's perimeter, which both cars passed without incident.

"Is it the Syndicate?" David finally asked, his eyes fixed on the horizon and his voice tinged with cold anger. When he finally turned his head to look at Toga, his face was twisted in pain. "Please… I need to know. After what they did to Sorahiko and Yagi… to Gran Torino and All Might… I wondered if they might come after me next."
"We have solid evidence that it might be," Toga intoned solemnly, prompting looks of horror from David and Melissa alike. Ackerman's phone buzzed in her pocket, and when Himiko slid it out just enough to catch a glimpse at the notification, her heart soared in delight. The message from Neito was only two words long: 'ALL CLEAR'.

"But Doctor Shield, I promise you," Carmilla purred, switching back to Japanese as she released her quirk and the excess flesh began to melt away from her body, "you don't need to worry one bit, because I swear on my honor that I won't let those nasty villains anywhere near you or your precious baby girl."

"You… no… I-It can't be..." David stammered, his eyes widening in horror as he recoiled away from Toga and reached for the door, only halting when she drew a knife from the strap on her thigh and held it nonchalantly up to his throat.

"Save your breath, Mr. Doctor. You're gonna need it soon, for all the screaming." She flashed him a wide grin, and in response he whipped his head around toward the back seat; he'd been so distracted by Toga that he hadn't noticed the brief flash of blue light in that direction moments before.

"Melissa, you have to… oh, god…"

"Shhhh." Midoriya held one finger up to his lips, then greeted David with a friendly smile. "You don't want to startle me, now do you? Who knows what might happen." He nodded to the curved black blade he was currently holding against Melissa's throat, and chuckled as the girl squirmed in his grip. "She's a lively one, I'll give you that." Then he turned to meet the girl's panicked eyes, tilting his head curiously when that prompted her to strain against him all the more vigorously. "Now what do you think that's going to accomplish? You know, Melissa, you remind me of myself in more ways than one. We both have the same fighting spirit, and we were both born quirkless, cursed and scorned. With so much in common, I think we're going to be fast friends."

"You killed my uncle!" She gritted, her knuckles white as she attempted to pry off Izuku's arm.

"Your 'uncle' was a weakling and a hypocrite who deserved far worse than the death I gave him." Seraph declared, grinning as he watched David's furious reaction. "But we'll have all the time in the world to discuss him later. Darling, if you would?"

"Of course, baby." Her cheeks flushed red and her expression nothing short of mirthfully sadistic, Toga delivered a short slash across David's arm with her blade— it was coated with a potent tranquilizer produced for them by Pandora, and within moments the doctor had slumped over unconscious in his seat.

Just as she was reaching back to do the same to Melissa, though, both Midoriya and Toga's phones buzzed at once, and he gestured for her to pause for a moment as he pulled it out to check the screen.

Anonymous: Pretty goddamn rude of you to ignore your new friends.

Anonymous: I gave you a chance. Don't blame me for what happens next.

"What the fuck is this?!" Izuku growled, pressing a single key to speed-dial Chaudron, who picked up in a heartbeat. "Neito, explain. Is this the same 'unknown' who contacted you earlier?!"

"I think so, boss, but I swear, we terminated the connection, I don't know how they—"

Monoma trailed off as Kadena's sirens began to echo in the distance behind them, a low, wailing sound that spelled a death knell to their dreams of escaping undetected. The base was rapidly
receding into the distance behind them past the rolling hills and crashing waves of Okinawa's shoreline, but Seraph knew better than to assume it would be so easy to get away now that their cover had been blown. Another press of a button and he was dialing Kurogiri and Hatsume back at the villa, but as the phone rang, the rhythmic thrum of propellers became audible in the distance, growing louder with every passing moment. Then all at once a V-25 Osprey burst into view over the sand dune ahead of them, whipping the long grass on its slope into a frenzy with its dual propellers. The side of the craft was emblazoned with the emblem of the United States Marine Corps, and as its chin-mounted rotary cannon began to spin up, Izuku could feel the breath leaving his chest in shock. "STOP YOUR VEHICLES IMMEDIATELY," bellowed the bullhorn, as the Osprey adjusted its course and velocity to match their speed perfectly. "I REPEAT, HALT, OR YOU WILL BE FIRED UPON. YOU HAVE TEN SECONDS TO COMPLY."

As Midoriya's mind reeled in shock, Melissa seized the opportunity to elbow him in the stomach, and use the split second of freedom that the attack afforded her to dive to the other side of the seat, out of the range of Carmilla and her sedative-laced knife. Himiko shrieked in protest when she saw Izuku in pain, but she was forced to divert her attention back to the road or risk running off it when they came up on a turn. "Not so fast." Flipping his blade around to a stabbing position, Seraph caught Melissa's foot with his mechanical hand when she tried to drive it into his face, dropping his phone out of instinct, and was about to drag her back within range of Toga when something flashed past his field of vision outside the window—someone with wings?! Blinking to ensure his eyes weren't deceiving him, he followed the blur's trajectory over to the windshield as it pulled in front of them, convinced for half a moment that Hawks had somehow risen from the dead to exact vengeance on them. The truth, however, was just as horrifying: His arms transformed into the oversized grey and brown wings of a duck, Amajiki Tamaki was soaring ahead of them alongside the American Osprey, his legs and feet manifesting those of a chicken. Clutched in Suneater's claws was none other than Red Riot, and not a moment after Kurogiri's solemn voice finally echoed through the phone's speaker, Tamaki released his cargo. "What do you need, Seraph? Is an extraction necessary?"

Midoriya's mouth fell open to respond, but before he could say a single word, Melissa's other foot whipped past his knife and slammed into his cheek, drawing a spurt of blood from his lips as several of his teeth were loosened. Anger flaring up inside him, he promptly plunged the blade into her calf in response, eliciting a cry of pain in the same moment that the entire car shook with the impact of Suneater's intern landing just above them. Kirishima Eijiro wasted no time tearing off the retracting metal panel covering the sunroof and smashing through the glass with his hardened fist. Before he could fully process what was happening, Izuku was being yanked by the arm out into the bright afternoon sunlight, and swiftly came face to face with Red Riot, whose toothy grin was somehow much less friendly than it had been the night before. "Hey buddy, how ya been? Sorry to say it, but I think I'm gonna have to ask you to pay for that shot after all."

Chapter End Notes

So it turns out that the 'Capture the Shields' operation might take a little bit longer than I
expected! Next time we'll see the climactic confrontation between Suneater, Red Riot, the American military, and Team Syndicate, with Melissa as a potential wild card in the midst of everything, then skip back to the present for an update on Kendo and the heroes' situation. As those of you who are caught up on the manga can see, I'm doing my best to naturally integrate Re-Destro and the Liberation Front into the story as a rival organization, so hopefully you enjoyed that aspect of the story! Who do you think the anonymous contact is? Also, Monoma characterization! Along with some original elements, I tried to base a lot of his internal conflict and monologue off of the brief focus Horikoshi gave his backstory during one of the Joint Training Arc chapters- let me know if you want to see more vignettes like this for the other villains!

As always, please leave a comment telling me what you think and where you want to see the story go next! Just a warning, though- unfortunately, due to finals coming up, I'm estimating that it's going to be about a month or so before the next update, but I promise it'll be a big one when it does come. Until next time!
Once More unto the Breach

Chapter Notes

First of all, some apologies are in order- that was definitely more than a month, to say the least. Unfortunately, life and school got hellishly busy for a while on top of the other two stories I'm working on currently, but as of now things have slowed down again, and this story should be able to ease back into its semi-regular update schedule for the foreseeable future. But what's important is that we're back now, with a big chapter to update you on both the villains and heroes!

One note concerning the manga, for those who are up to date- I try my best to keep this story compliant with canon aside from the obvious divergences, and it's come to my attention over the course of this latest arc that I sort of messed up Giran's character and relationship with Twice during his brief appearance in Ch. 5, as we've now gotten more info about his personality and motivations. As such, I might be going back and editing a bit of that chapter in the near future, so that's something to look out for. Without further ado, on to the chapter!

"It seems you were more perceptive than I gave you credit for, Kirishima. My dearest apologies for that." Seraph gave Red Riot the most disarming smile he could manage, given the situation- he was currently dangling in front of the hero by the collar of his shirt as the military SUV continued to hurtle down the road beneath them, staring down an expression that held nothing but righteous fury and contempt. "Do tell me, what gave us away? Your impression of a blithering, oblivious fool was so very convincing."

"Just do yourself a favor and stop talking," Eijiro growled, as he snapped back his arm and sent a lightning-fast, hardened first hurtling toward Midoriya's face. Izuku's sleek black metal exoskeleton only barely emerged in time for him to block the blow, and even then it packed more force than he expected, sending him skidding back to the edge of the roof and down onto one knee. "It'll make this easier for both of us."

His mouth twisted into a scowl now, Midoriya had to sink his armored fingers into the metal to keep from flying off the back of the car, and allowed himself a brief glance around the battlefield as he righted himself. If the continued sounds of struggle from within the vehicle were any indication, Toga and Melissa were still grappling with each other just beneath him, but the outcome of that clash was already assured; as always, he had complete confidence in Himiko's abilities, and the Shield girl had little to no combat training to speak of. The second car's situation, however, was another matter entirely: Suneater had already landed atop its roof, and was invading through every window and cranny with massive, spiked octopus tentacles emerging from hands; as Izuku watched, the car screeched to a violent halt and receded out of view behind a bend, with one of the two American Ospreys falling behind in turn. The other remained firmly on their six, however, and Seraph could feel the laser sight of its rotary cannon and guided missiles on his back as he launched himself towards Kirishima with one fist bared and a hidden blade clutched in the other, hoping to land a hit before his foe could harden his entire body.

They're only holding off on firing because they don't want to risk hitting the good doctor and his
poor innocent daughter, Izuku knew, frowning as he sidestepped Eijiro's next blow, ducked nimbly under the followup, then brought his blade streaking into the young hero's eye, only for it to shatter in his grasp the moment it made contact. Damn. Too late on that front, it seems. He's hardened completely. I do despise resorting to brute force, but it seems I've no other choice. Diverting power to the exosuit's arms with a satisfying hum of electrical energy, Midoriya let the sleek ebony mask and holographic visor slide over his face, covering everything from his chin to his forehead as his hair continued to whip wildly in the wind, back to its natural green-and-black color now. Designed by Hatsume, the display that flashed into existence before his eyes quickly began to highlight Kirishima's weak points and forecast his potential next moves, based on a variety of subconscious cues including eye movements and shifts in body weight distribution. His own armor integrity and heart rate were visible as well, along with an estimate for his physical endurance and the battery capacity of the suit; everything was currently at peak performance, and Midoriya could feel the grin returning to his face as Kirishima charged him with a loud, fierce cry.

"This is for All Might, you son of a bitch!" Red Riot's strength was respectable, but his blows were still telegraphed and simple to avoid- rather than continuing to dodge, however, Seraph opted to meet the next one head on with his own armored fist at full power, producing a resounding clang and subsequent crack that sent both fighters reeling back in pain. Though the skin of his hand had the appearance of craggy rock, a slow trickle of blood still seeped out from between Eijiro's knuckles as he clutched it and grit his spiked teeth. Izuku was hardly better off: The carbon-fiber alloy over his own knuckles was slightly dinted, and his fingers were throbbing with dull pain despite the shock absorbers. So it's a battle of attrition, then. All that remains is to see whose defenses give out first. Unlike you, however, my armor can adapt. Stalling for time while he upped the power to his shock absorbers and fine-tuned the power output and defense matrix of his knuckles, Midoriya kept up his smile, and even managed a laugh.

"I do certainly hope you put up a better fight than that tragically frail excuse for a hero. Do you have any idea how easy it was to kill him, Kirishima?" His voice took on an eerie quality now that it was echoing through the mask's speakers, almost disembodied, as if it was coming from all around them at once.

"I said, shut it!" If the pain or the taunting phased Red Riot, he certainly didn't show it, leaning into a brutal kick that Seraph parried with one of his own before going on the offensive with a full barrage of enhancement-assisted punches to Eijiro's chest, face, and side. Forced to hold up his arms to try and block the blows, Kirishima broke his guard more than once to try and strike back, but with Mei's technology assisting him, Midoriya's reflexes were far too swift to allow for an opening. Red Riot, on the other hand, paid dearly for every lapse in his defense, taking brutal strikes to the face, stomach, and shoulder that clearly produced damage in spite of his quirk. If I can throw him off the car, Izuku mused, he won't be able to catch up without Tamaki here to carry him. His opponent had clearly realized the same, though, and as Seraph watched for his next opportunity, Kirishima lowered and centered his stance in order to increase his balance and stability, his mouth twisted in a grimace of discomfort.

"Just try it, asshole."

"I think I will! I do appreciate the invitation." His eyes gleaming with bloodlust, Midoriya prepared to charge forward again, only to nearly be thrown off himself when the car swerved wildly beneath him, hanging onto the frame by only a single hand as the rest of his body swung down and nearly crashed through one of the windows.

"Keep it steady!" He cried as he activated the thrusters in his boots and used them to swing himself back up to the roof, sparing a brief glance through the tinted glass in the moment before he landed back above. Though it would have been impossible to make anything out with his naked eye, he
could toggle overlapping infrared and motion-detecting displays on the visor, and was able to make out the scene inside in perfect quality. Toga was still in the driver's seat, with one hand on the steering wheel and the other wrapped around Melissa Shield's neck in a chokehold, keeping the older girl pinned down on the divider between the two front seats with her body weight as she kicked and thrashed desperately in a series of increasingly vain and feeble attempts to free herself.

"I'm multitasking here babe, I'm trying my best!" The sound of her voice over his radio was heartening to say the least, though Midoriya forced himself to keep his focus on the enemy at hand as Melissa let out another muffled cry of defiance in the background, to which Toga merely responded by laughing and tightening her grip.

"Try your best not to kill her, darling- things will be easier if she's alive. Now if you'll excuse me, I do need to be wrapping this up."

"Make him bleed for me, Izu!" Then the channel closed, not a moment before Kirishima launched another attack, a feint followed by a savage uppercut. Eijiro's sudden burst of speed took even Izuku by surprise, and for a moment he was forced on the defensive, struggling to block one wild strike after another. It only took Seraph few seconds for him to right himself once more, though. The first moment a chance presented itself, grabbed hold of both of Red Riot's fists at once, diverted power to his hands, and twisted them outwards with enough force to crush a steel pipe like tinfoil. *No matter how hard your skin is, joints are still joints.* In the end, only one of Kirishima's wrists snapped, with a loud, satisfying sound not unlike a rock being split in two with a pickaxe.

Though he'd hoped to break both, his opponent's howl of pain was still more than opportunity enough for Seraph to swing both his fists into either side of the hero's face with all his strength, followed by a rocket-boosted knee to his stomach that doubled the U.A. third-year over and nearly sent him toppling into the open sunroof. A spurt of crimson blood dribbled out from between Red Riot's teeth, two of which had already been shattered by Seraph's fists, and Izuku could feel victory in his grasp as another swerve of the car nearly sent him flying off. Cracked and bloodsoaked, the young hero's hands were wrapped around the car's frame for dear life as Midoriya loomed above him, diverting power as needed to a set of electromagnets in his boots to prevent another near-fall.

"For an evil motherfucker, you've got some pretty solid moves." Kirishima gritted with a hint of a laugh, "Guess I should've known Katsuki was lying when he said you couldn't fight for shit." Wincing in pain and exhaustion, Eijiro slumped down in defeat, his limbs slackening as his forehead dropped to the black metal of the roof. Still a safe distance away, Izuku nearly took a step forward with the intent of finishing the job, then paused, and raised one eyebrow skeptically. *Seems like he might just be pretending to succumb to his wounds. His quirk hasn't deactivated, and his heart rate is still high.* Wasting no time, Midoriya held out his gauntleted right fist and equipped one of Hatsume's high-voltage shock discs, with the current set just beneath lethal amperage. His eyes still fixed on Kirishima's still body, Seraph crouched down in the direction of the open sunroof and called out to Carmilla.

"Has the problem been dealt with, darling?"

"You betcha! Don't worry, though, she's probably still alive!"

Out of the corner of his peripheral vision, assisted by the cameras on the visor, Midoriya could see the outline of Melissa's body, slumped face-down next to Himiko- though noticeably fainter, the infrared image still showed a heartbeat. *Good- one less variable to deal with. Now to finish things.*

"Did you hear that, Eijiro? We've gotten rather intimately acquainted these past few minutes, not to mention how quickly we bonded last night, so I certainly hope you don't mind me calling you Eijiro. But as I was saying, surely rescuing the girl was one of your missions as well. You knew her, didn't
you? From last summer? Maybe you even considered her a friend- that must make this failure of yours even more painful! I could order Toga to paint the dashboard red with her blood right this moment, and there's nothing you could do to stop me. No amount of muscle or testosterone or masculine courage could get you to her before Carmilla's knife. Tell me, how does that feel? I have to admit, I'm curious."

Only silence met Seraph's inquiry, prompting his smile to grow even wider. Red Riot's heart rate had increased drastically with his threat, a clear sign that he was conscious and listening.

"Come now, Eijiro, you're disappointing me. I've heard so very much about you by reputation-playing dead is hardly your style, not to mention that you're not much of an actor."

With his mask's HUD, Midoriya saw the attack coming nearly a full two seconds before Kirishima launched himself forward with a fierce bellow, his arms outstretched on either side of him. He had already fired the shock disc squarely at Eijiro's chest before the hero even opened his mouth, but the third-year fought through the blue-white electricity crackling across his body and continued his charge, his pace slowed but the resolve on his face unwavering. The texture of his entire body had changed, growing sharper and more angular, almost demonic- his opened mouth and spiked teeth looked for all the world like the maw of a ravenous beast, and his eyes were two bright scarlet rubies, shining with anger.

"There's a difference between playing dead and buying time!" He roared, tearing the disc off his chest with bloodied fingers that more resembled claws now than human digits. "Time to become UNBREAKABLE!"

"I've been waiting so eagerly for this," Midoriya replied, unable to hide the tremor of excitement in his voice as he brought his armored fists together and cracked the bruised and aching knuckles on his one remaining flesh-and-blood hand- he even retracted his mask for a brief moment so Kirishima could see his genuine anticipation. "Such a bold application of your quirk- taking your body to the absolute limit. I've been dreaming of this moment for years, ever since I first watched one of your battles on the news- I could hardly think of a more perfect test of my enhancements' abilities." He spread apart his arms, and let out a loud, mirthful chuckle. "Now we can truly begin to fight, with nothing held back! Please, Eijiro, be so kind as to indulge me this favor!"

"…Huh?" His face rapidly shifting from rage to confusion, Red Riot barely had time to let out a single word before Seraph activated the thrusters in his boots at full power and sent himself hurtling forward like a missile, his mask deployed once more and his fists outstretched. The sheer force and momentum of his attack's impact sent them both down onto the windshield, but thankfully the bulletproof glass held fast, and Izuku swiftly pinned his opponent to the hood with both legs. His first blow, a strike to Kirishima's stomach, had produced no visible damage to Red Riot's Unbreakable form aside from simply knocking him back- seems like I'll need to up the power even more, he mused, briefly allowing his mask's display to identity the weakest points in Eijiro's armor before activating the thrusters embedded in his elbows. The barrage of punches that followed were practically high-caliber bullets in terms of force delivered, streaking down in a blur of motion to strike the young hero's side, face, shoulders, neck, and anywhere else that showed even a hint of vulnerability.

Though Kirishima predictably raised his arms in self-defense, Midoriya's strikes were so rapid and precise that they bypassed his guard completely, and any efforts to extricate himself from the pin were rendered futile by the portions of exo-armor covering Izuku's ankles and knees, which were locked in place by the same electromagnets keeping Seraph anchored to the car in the first place. The simultaneous usage of so many abilities was draining his power reserves rapidly, but more than enough remained to see the fight through to the end. Good, that's very good. Still at 58%- no need to
rush! I'll have enough time to savor the experience properly. I could still throw him off the car any moment, it's true, but that wouldn't be anywhere nearly as satisfying as this.

"Oh god, keep going, babe!" Toga cried through their personal radio channel, the ecstasy in her voice practically audible- he could hear her muffled shouting through the windshield behind him, and made sure to adjust himself further to the right so she could see the road ahead as he continued to deliver once devastating blow after another. "Please, please make sure there's more blood! Enough for me to drink lots and lots!"

"Of course, darling, as long as you promise to keep an eye on the road. I know this is exhilarating for both of us, but we have to keep moving if we're going to make it out of this."

"Don't worry about me, Spinner taught me how to drive years ago!"

"Spinner learned how to drive from a video game!"

"Easier said than done, Midoriya reflected, searching between blows for any signs of cracking. So far, it seemed that Kirishima's ability was still living up to its name, and though the young hero's armor was gradually weakening, so were Seraph's own shock absorbers- the carbon-fiber alloy of his exo-suit was durable, but it could only take so much punishment in a short span of time, especially concentrated in such a small area. The adjustments in power distribution that he'd made after his first blow had largely prevented further damage and denting, but despite Longshot's genius engineering, the suit's current technology could only compensate so much when he was practically punching solid diamond at full power. Regardless, the shockwaves from each blow have to be dealing some degree of internal damage. He shouldn't be able to hold out for much longer without running the risk of hemorrhaging or organ failure."

"I'd say you've got another five or six punches before you start breaking fingers, Izuku- even on the prosthetic hand. Make 'em count, but don't push yourself too hard, alright? We've got bigger fish to fry than this meathead." The sound of Hatsume's voice in his ear was welcome, and he sighed in relief that she was monitoring the situation- he'd been too preoccupied with Kirishima to contact any backup.

"Good to know that you've been watching," he replied as he punished an attempt by Red Riot to free himself with a lightning-fast strike to the hero's broken wrist, eliciting a cry of pain and anger that set a smile to his face. "If you couldn't tell, it seems that our operation was compromised."

"You don't say," Mei shot back wryly. "I already have some theories about who's behind that, but we can get to that later. For now, you should know that I have Kurogiri here on standby to get you out of there at any moment. Just give me the signal and you'll be gone."

"You know our protocol," Midoriya replied grimly, glancing back down to the battered U.A. third-year pinned beneath him as he drew back for another blow. "We don't take unnecessary risks. If he opened a portal big enough for the car, it's possible that he or the Americans would make it through as well, and I don't particularly feel like dealing with another prisoner- wait until I finish him off first. How are the others faring?"

"They're handling the situation well enough. Don't get distracted, though, keep your focus on Red Riot. Longshot out."

"I have an idea," Seraph declared to his bloodied foe the moment the channel closed, drawing back
his fists for the moment—only one or two punches left, according to Hatsume. Best not to risk it. "I've had plenty of time to test my offense against you, but I've been dreadfully greedy, and haven't give you the same chance against me. So please, Eijiro, I want you to hit me as hard as you can. Do you think you can do that for me?"

Given Kirishima's battered state, the answer came sooner than Midoriya had expected; the young hero roared to life beneath him almost instantly, and launched a savage right hook into Seraph's jaw that strained his armor and shock absorbers to their limits, and even went so far as to loosen one of his teeth, filling his mouth with the dull copper taste of blood. He followed up in practically the same moment with a jab to Izuku's side that knocked the wind from him and would've doubtless broken multiple ribs if not for the exo-suit, then wrapped both of his legs around one of Seraph's in a vise-like grip and began to squeeze, Painful though the trio of attacks were, Izuku couldn't help but widen his grin, content in the knowledge that he'd found someone resembling a worthy adversary so quickly among the newest generation of heroes. *He's no Kendo Itsuka, but that challenge will come in due to time. No need to be impatient."

"Timing, Izuku!" Another voice barked into his ear, Momo's this time. "This backroad is about to merge on the main street of a town just a few clicks ahead, they're already scrambling the local police to set up roadblocks! Suneater is down, the other team is already back! You need to finish this!"

"Stop playing with your food, is what Pandora wants to say," Longshot butted in, her mischievous tone tinged with a hint of unmistakable urgency. "Besides, he's actually pretty damn strong. Your armor integrity is at 40% and dropping, if you haven't noticed, and I don't think any of us wants to see what those claws of his will do to your skin if the plating fails."

"I'm afraid our time together has come to an end," Izuku declared to the hero beneath him, the smile vanishing his face as he raised his fists to block Eijiro's next two blows with the last of the power in his hands' shock absorbers. Grabbing hold of Red Riot's forearms, Seraph wasted no time firing another shock disc into his skin. As Kirishima writhed in pain and his muscles momentarily slackened amid the webs of electricity, Midoriya wrenched himself free from the hero's leg vise and shot to his feet in one fluid motion, then delivered a devastating, thruster-boosted kick to the hero's already battered face. Already worn and cracked, Eijiro's black face and jaw-guard shattered at the impact. Too dazed to properly resist, Red Riot could only cry out in defiance and anger as Seraph grabbed hold of his ankle, diverted maximum power to the thrusters in his heels, and rocketed into the air with his opponent in tow.

"Let the fuck go!" He bellowed up as they ascended past the Osprey, which ignored them and continued to trail the SUV carrying the hostage Shields, just as Izuku had hoped it would. They passed through a low-hanging cloud and came to a halt on the other side, though his infrared and motion displays meant that Izuku still had a perfect view of everything happening beneath them.

"I will, I just a moment!" Midoriya called down in reply, as he alternated the direction of his thrust and began to spin in midair, using Kirishima's body weight to build up momentum. "I have to say, though, it's been a pleasure, Eijiro! I don't know what your odds of surviving this are, but if do you happen to live, would you do something for me? I hate to be needy, but I have one more favor to ask."

"Burn in hell," Red Riot growled back; they were picking up speed rapidly now, and if the calculations flashing across his holographic display were any indication, to say the force of impact would be devastating was a grave understatement.

"Tell Kacchan I said hello."

At that, Seraph lined up his shot and slung Red Riot downwards like a boulder from a catapult; he
watched with satisfaction on his face as the falling hero punched a hole straight through the cloud, then slammed headlong into the Osprey before it had even a shadow of a chance to dodge. At the time it happened too quickly to tell, but later, upon reviewing the footage from his mask's forward cameras, Midoriya came to realize that Kirishima flew into one of the rotors first- once it had chewed itself to pieces on his hardened skin and nearly cleaved him in two in the process, all within the span of half a heartbeat, he continued headlong into the fuselage and engine, which erupted in a bright orange burst of fire and shrapnel before plummeting to the ground, already a flaming wreck.

There was no time to try and ascertain the fallen hero's status- by the time Seraph lighted back down on the car's battle-scarred roof, the flashing sirens of police cars were visible ahead, and the grassy dunes and beachfront were beginning to give way to condos and houses. What delightful timing. Dropping down through the sunroof, he retracted his mask and intertwined the black, bloodstained fingers of one armored hand with Toga's own. The police barricade was scarcely a hundred yards distant when he snapped his fingers, and a towering black-and-purple portal swallowed them whole in the blink of an eye.

"Unsurprisingly, that's the last we've seen of either of them. Hero teams, local police, and military units from both the American bases and the JSDF have been combing the island from top-to-bottom nonstop ever since, but I personally doubt they'll find anything of value."

"Indeed. Given what we know about them, it seems it's not the Syndicate's style to leave so much as a trace of evidence behind when they move locations, and I doubt this was an exception."

A grim silence settled over the conference room as Nighteye and Best Jeanist concluded their presentation, and the last few seconds of grainy footage from a police car's dashcam began to play on loop on the screen behind them, depicting Kirishima's fall, the Osprey crash, and the villains' all-too-timely escape through Kurogiri's warp gate. Immediately following Jeanist's introduction of Strike Team Fenrir's purpose, the two leaders of the task force had launched into a detailed report on the clash that had taken place on Okinawa that morning, complete with accompanying footage from Kadena base security cameras, the Ospreys' black boxes, and a variety of other sources.

At the express order of both the Japanese and American militaries, everything they'd seen and heard was strictly confidential, on a need-to-know basis only; given their task of eradicating the Syndicate, the government had thankfully decided that they qualified for that category. The infiltration of the a military installation under joint Japanese-US administration by the criminals who continued to evade the law after murdering the Symbol of Peace just two weeks prior would be a public relations nightmare for both nations if it reached the media, and naturally a cover-up operation was already in full swing. The more she thought about everything she'd just heard and seen, the more Kendo Itsuka began to grow sick to her stomach, drops of cold sweat running lazily down her brow. If anything, Bakugo looked even worse off, his eyes wide with terror and his mouth hanging ajar. Even from across the table, she could see that he was shaking. Next to him, Mina looked to be holding back tears, while Jiro quietly comforted her. Hagakure had her head in her hands, Kaminari, Juzo and Setsuna were still staring at the screen in shock, and even the usually silent Shoji seemed unnerved. Two seats to her left, Tetsutetsu's eyes had grown dark and his expression inscrutable, his gaze fixed on the wood of the table as the knuckles of his balled fists grew white with exertion. The question that came next was on everyone's minds, but none of the students were brave enough to ask first. It fell to the professionals to speak, beginning with Endeavor, who cleared his throat before turning in his seat to face Jeanist and Nighteye.

"And… what of the heroes' current condition?"

"Suneater is stable, but it's likely the arm and leg are gone permanently- they're too damaged for
reattachment. Red Riot's condition is critical- he's still in surgery as we speak, but the prognosis is uncertain. His chances of survival have been fluctuating throughout the day."

"I see."

Enji's tone was measured, and his voice even. His face- like that of every other pro in the room, from Miruko to Mount Lady to Lemillion- didn't betray so much as a hint of emotion, the picture of stoicism. I know it's supposed to be the same for me, for all of us. I know we aren't supposed to let personal attachments play a role in our work, that to do so is dangerous and irresponsible. She tried her best to steady her breathing as she listened, to slow the pounding of her heart and quiet her panicked mind, But I'm just not ready yet. I can't keep calm and pretend it isn't personal. That's the type of hero I need to become, but it's still not who I am. Itsuka closed her eyes in an effort to help calm herself, but instead of blackness she could only see All Might's broken body before her, and they shot back open, wide and worried.

"What are…" Before she knew what was happening Battle Fist finally found herself speaking, though at first her voice was raspy, and she had to pause and clear her throat before she continued. "What are our next steps?"

"Is there any actionable intel that the Americans can offer us?" Added Kamui Woods, leaning forward at the other end of the table. "It was their base that was infiltrated, surely they have more footage than this."

"No, there isn't."Miruko declared, watching Nighteye and Jeanist's expressions- or lack thereof- carefully as she spoke. "At least, not that we know of. If these two had anything big for us, they would've already shared it. We're on our own now, aren't we? Zero leads?"

"That's correct," responded Nighteye, adjusting his glasses. "As far as we can tell, the trail is cold- which is why we sought guidance from someone who's been on the Syndicate's heels far longer than we have."

With a curt gesture, Sir stepped aside from his place before the screen and beckoned Edgeshot forward. Though the Shinobi Hero had been a constant, undisputed presence in the Top Five for as long as Kendo could remember, both Kamihara Shinya's brutal, crippling injuries and the near-complete destruction of the hero and police team he assembled to rescue the captive heroes from Osaka had hardly been mentioned by the media amid the chaos that followed the Black Day. Most news channels and dailies stuck with flashier headlines, providing constant coverage of All Might and the circumstances of his death, Hawks and his now dubious postmortem allegiances, and the devastation dealt the Tokyo Police Department. Even Battle Fist herself received more coverage than Edgeshot's team, as dozens of talking heads on television and opinion columnists in the newspapers speculated about how exactly she would take up her predecessor's mantle amid such a bleak backdrop. The tabloids had their field day as well, of course, eagerly publishing reports on a variety of scandalous topics ranging from her alleged pregnancy- Tetsutetsu and Mirio were put forward as the potential candidates for the father- to critiques of her fashion choices and speculation that she was secretly an Endeavor fangirl. More than once over the past two-odd weeks she'd feverishly leafed through convenience-store magazines to make sure that none of them made mention of her drunken tryst with Bakugo, but thankfully it seemed that Katsuki, Miruko, and Yui had all managed to keep quiet.

Amid the media frenzy and her own despondency, it had taken Kendo several days to even hear about the fate of the Osaka team, once the school reopened after a three-day period of mourning and she worked up the courage to start reading the news again. Lured to a Syndicate base that had already been abandoned ahead of time in the hopes of saving Todoroki and Uraraka from captivity,
they'd been taken unawares by a bomb that somehow fooled the initial satellite explosives sweep. Tiger, Death Arms, and a dozen police officers had been killed instantly; only Edgeshot and Mandalay had escaped by leaping out a window, though the shrapnel had still severely injured them. Rendered unconscious by their wounds and the shockwave, they fell nearly one hundred stories, and had only been saved from certain death by a bystander with an air repulsion quirk. Though his actions slowed them down significantly, the civilian still hadn't been able to stop the two heroes from hitting the pavement; along with numerous second and third-degree burns along his back, Shinya suffered a broken spine, one shattered leg, a punctured lung, and a pulverized ribcage, in addition to the piece of rebar that had mangled his stomach and liver. He would likely never walk again without the assistance of bionic implants, and had placed an indefinite leave of absence on his hero career.

With most of her body shielded by Kamihara, Mandalay didn't suffer nearly as many broken bones or ruptured organs as the Shinobi Hero, but despite Edgeshot's efforts, Shino Sasaki had sustained a severe concussion when her head jostled out of Shinya's arms and slammed into the pavement at the last moment. Though she'd woken up several days later from a medically induced coma once surgeons had controlled the swelling of her brain, she began to suffer from severe episodes of amnesia, anxiety, and difficulty concentrating shortly afterward. Due to its heavy dependence on her cognitive state, she quickly lost the ability to control her quirk, Telepath, and as far as Itsuka was aware, she was still in the hospital, her hero license placed on standby until further notice.

Though he still wore his mask and much of his costume, even when bound in a wheelchair, Edgeshot had given up on the elaborate, angular styling of his silver-grey hair, and kept it tied up in a simple ponytail. As he wheeled himself to the front of the room, Kendo searched his face, and felt her heart sink even further- though what little of his expression was visible above his shinobi mask certainly looked calm, she could see a glimmer of guilt and regret flash across his eyes in the instant before he turned and began to speak. After giving the assembled heroes and interns a brief overview of the six months he spent trailing the group of villains that would later reveal itself to be the Syndicate, along with their modus operandi and usual tactics, he returned to the situation in Okinawa, his eyes growing grim as he glanced back to the screen behind him and used a remote to scroll back to the footage from one of the base's internal security cameras, pausing at the moment when Carmilla and Chaudron- both using Metamorphosis- emerged from a bathroom alongside Synapse, Twice, and Mr. Compress, all disguised in Japanese military uniforms.

"Though their objective was bolder this time than in the past," Kamihara explained, "their methodology was practically the same as usual, with the exception, of course, of the Black Day. An operation focused on stealth and intelligence gathering, making plentiful use of Toga and Twice's quirks for deception and maximum mobility. If Suneater hadn't realized late last night that Colonel Ishimata's brief 'blackout' and mysterious puncture wound were consistent with accounts from many of Carmilla's prior victims, and acted on his hunch by informing local authorities, then it's entirely likely that the Syndicate would have escaped with Doctor Shield and his daughter without anyone the wiser. We might not have realized for hours."

"But they did still escape with them," snapped Bakugo, "and we don't even have any leads to show for it! Not only that, but two heroes, including my best friend, were almost killed!" His voice was steadily rising, full of anger and pain. All at once he stood from his seat, and slammed his palms down on the table- Ashido and Kaminari both made motions to try and calm him down, but he didn't so much as spare a glance in their direction. "Hell, he might still die! So don't say we're better off for having caught them in the act, because I sure as fuck wish we hadn't! Jeanist, you want us to think about a course of action? Well here's one for you: We go down to Okinawa and visit the scene, tear the whole island apart and see if there's anything the others missed- I'm sure that moron Deku left something behind. We visit the wounded and interview them for potential info. We get ahead of this before it gets out to the press, and-"
"That's enough, Ground Zero." Best Jeanist declared, in a tone that silenced even Bakugo in a heartbeat. "I appreciate your concern for Red Riot, but there are other factors we have to take into account before deciding the first thing about what our next move is. I'd also ask you to take a look around the table- you might notice that you're not the only one who in this room who has suffered personally at the hands of the Syndicate. Do you see them interrupting our meeting with emotional outbursts, as you have?"

Kendo was keenly aware that most of the eyes in the room were evenly split between herself, Tetsutetsu, and Endeavor, who thus far remained focused and rational despite his son's imprisonment. The more she thought about it, though, the more Enji's inclusion on the strike team seemed like a backdoors compromise between his agency and the government- a seat at the table in exchange for an end to his personally funded search-and-rescue efforts, which were bordering dangerously close to pure vigilantism. After a moment of silence from his intern, Tsungu nodded, his point proven.

"Exactly. I certainly hope that you've been continuing your regimen of empathy and self-discipline exercises, as we discussed- I would hate to be forced to remove you from this team before our first assignment. Tell me, Ground Zero, do you believe that you have been emotionally compromised by the core premise of our mission? Are you incapable of handling assignments involving the Syndicate from an objective and unbiased perspective?"

"…No," Katsuki managed, his cheeks flushed bright red in embarrassment, an emotion Itsuka wasn't sure she'd ever seen him display before. "No, I'm not emotionally compromised."

"Hell, I didn't think he was even capable of feeling shame. Well… aside from that one time. Point still stands."

"I'm glad to hear that. So, why are you still standing?"

Bakugo practically leapt back into his seat after that, his cheeks still scarlet as Endeavor let out a low chuckle and Tetsutetsu gave him a glance that was torn between sympathy and resentment. The two had never gotten along, largely due to Real Steel's close relationship with Kendo, but their mutual friendship with Kirishima was the one thing that they stood a chance to bond over.

"My most sincere apologies for my intern's conduct." Hakamata offered, with a low bow to the rest of the room. A moment later, a spark of realization flashed across Katsuki's face, and he quickly bolted to his feet and offered hasty apologies of his own, bobbing up and down like a trained parrot as he gritted out the words in monotone. The sight was so comical that Kendo couldn't stifle a brief snort of her own, earning herself a withering death glare from across the table when Bakugo sat back down- she responded with a simple shrug and one raised eyebrow. "2.5/10. "Bow wasn't low enough, apology needs more gusto." Nighteye began to speak the moment she pressed 'send', and her phone was back in its pocket just as quickly, her full attention on Sir. The only sign that her text had been received and read came some moments later, when Katsuki's eyes darted briefly beneath the lip of the table before his brows furrowed together in silent fury. Her phone buzzed faintly with a reply, but she let it be for now, unwilling to risk a ribbing of her own.

"Consider your apology accepted," Nighteye was saying, "conditionally. I understand, that you, like many of those present, are still a student. Certain exceptions and allowances must surely be made in order to ensure that the next generation of heroes is prepared when their moment arrives. By the time of our next meeting, however, you will no longer have the shield of U.A. to hide behind when it comes to your own inexperience. You will be fledgling professionals, on the verge of attaining your full licenses, with complete autonomy as to how you operate. If, after such a transition, anyone in this
room continues to make clear with their behavior their unsuitability for the task we've been given, removal from the strike team will likely be the response. You are all adults, and the enemies we face are murderers and terrorists. Dozens have died at their hands already, and should capture fail to be an option, we have government approval to employ lethal force in specific circumstances. There is no room anywhere on this team for childish emotion or thoughts of petty revenge. So all of you, not just Ground Zero- consider this your first and only warning."

"Yes, sir!" The interns at the table cried in unison- Denki and Mina in particular looked scared shitless, but after over a year interning with Nighteye, Itsuka had long since grown accustomed to the intimidating rhetoric he used to scare newcomers straight. From there, Edgeshot took back over.

"To address your concerns, Ground Zero, while I am not a full member of this task force, in my advisory capacity I believe that I am within my bounds to say that we are far better off for the sacrifices Suneater and Red Riot made in their attempt to apprehend the members spotted on Okinawa. After disrupting their typical M.O. with the targeted, high-profile attacks made on the Black Day, it seems clear that they sought to evade a drawn-out struggle against the full might of the country's heroes by going to ground, and returning to their old, stealth-based tactics, in order to continue building up their resources and infrastructure in the wake of their successes. Who knows whether they carried out any other operations in the meantime before Suneater and Red Riot flushed them out? Despite the fact that they succeeded in their main objective, it's clear that we delivered a major, disruptive blow to their plans. They were forced to flee Okinawa ahead of their schedule, and we were given a further taste of their combat and support capabilities. If we continue pushing them to their limits whenever we can, I assure you that we will find their breaking point sooner or later. Aside from that, any data we can gather on Midoriya Izuku and the extent of his support items' abilities will continue to prove valuable; as their leader, if we could eliminate him, it's possible their chain of command could crumble, but we can't do that if we don't know how to fight him.

Most importantly, however, by waiting to make their move until the Syndicate had infiltrated Kadena, Suneater and Red Riot forced them to kill six American soldiers in order to escape. While the wheels of bureaucracy move slowly, this isn't something that their generals or politicians can ignore- it ensures that our government is not alone in the fight against them, and could open the door for potential coordination with American heroes in the future, should the negotiations be handled properly. That door remains closed for the time being, though, and we obviously can't afford to rest on our laurels. I strongly recommend taking action before the Syndicate has time to recover from this blow, and have been discussing several potential operations with Nighteye and Best Jeanist."

Best Jeanist handled the transition seamlessly, and transferred the image on the screen to a personnel roster of Strike Force Fenrir with a wave of his hand. "Given the size of this task force and our need to keep our activities low-profile for the time being in order to escape. While the wheels of bureaucracy move slowly, this isn't something that their generals or politicians can ignore- it ensures that our government is not alone in the fight against them, and could open the door for potential coordination with American heroes in the future, should the negotiations be handled properly. That door remains closed for the time being, though, and we obviously can't afford to rest on our laurels. I strongly recommend taking action before the Syndicate has time to recover from this blow, and have been discussing several potential operations with Nighteye and Best Jeanist."

Oh god, please, no. Kendo immediately felt a pit of despair open up in her stomach at the last comment, and her eyes flashed to Nighteye Sir, you wouldn't do that to me, would you? When he finally met her panicked gaze, he seemed confused for half a moment, then cracked the briefest, wryest, most shit-eating grin she'd ever seen anyone manage, his eyes gleaming mischievously
behind his glasses before glazing over once more with their usual inscrutable lack of expression. And although he hid it one hand as if it were a cough, Itsuka would later swear up and down to Kyoka that he genuinely laughed in that fleeting moment, a subtle chuckle that only she seemed to notice, along with the grin, of course. Oh god, you really would, she realized all at once, struggling to come to terms with her inevitable fate as Jeanist began to read out the rosters.

"Assigned to Unit Alpha, led by myself: Lemillion, Mount Lady, Earphone Jack, and Alien Queen. Assigned to Unit Beta, led by Sir Nighteye: Endeavor, Mudslide, Chargebolt, Reptilia, and Lightwave. And assigned to Unit Gamma, led by Miruko…"

God fucking dammit.

"Kamui Woods, Real Steel, Tentacole, Battle Fist, and Ground Zero."

Just as she'd predicted, Bakugo looked ready to blow a hole straight through the table at the announcement of the third unit, but with his previous humiliation in mind, he sufficed for a few choice words muttered under his breath as they moved on, and Nighteye began to speak.

"One of the greatest strengths of splitting our numbers on the field is that we can now cover thrice as much ground in the same amount time- as such, each unit will have its own objective and mission parameters for our first major set of operations, which will take place next week, beginning the day following U.A.'s graduation ceremonies. When we analyze the available data about our enemy's capabilities in comparison to previous organized villain groups, one of the first attributes that stands out is their sheer wealth. Where by all accounts it seems that the League was barely scraping by in its final months, the Syndicate has access to state-of-the-art technology and weaponry, with no visible gaps or weaknesses in their infrastructure."

Here several pictures grabbed from the dash and helmet cams of police officers over the course of their encounters with the Syndicate flashed across the screen, highlighting in particular the group's high-tech armaments. Kendo grimaced at a zoomed-in shot of the Hatsume clone Miruko had dispatched at Niigata, gliding around with her rocket boots and holographic mask as she unloaded her rifle in Jiro's direction.

"It's not unsurprising given Pandora's quirk that they would be able to accumulate massive amounts of money, but it is our suspicion that aside from Yaoyorozu, one of the Syndicate's primary sources of funding is likely the sale of Longshot's weapons and support items on the black market, given the gradual rise of high quality items from mystery suppliers seized by police over the past two years. As such, Unit Alpha is tasked with investigation and sting operation on a suspected hub of black market dealings in Chiba. Even if we can't directly trace Hatsume's items back to a seller or point of origin, if we put ourselves in contact with some of the other dealers she's put out of business, they might be willing to point us in the right direction in exchange for government pardons."

Lemillion and Mount Lady nodded in approval, and to Itsuka's left, Mina and Kyoka high-fived each other enthusiastically at the prospect of working together, grinning widely- Jiro's expression turned to one of sympathy when she looked over at Kendo, however, and the two shared a brief laugh together before Sir picked up where he had left off.

"While Best Jeanist's team uses what we know of Longshot and her skills to our advantage, my own Unit Beta will be dealing with another known entity, one I'm quite familiar with- Overhaul and the Eight Precepts. As Lemillion and the others in this room who took part know well, after a successful raid on Chisaki Kai's Trigger-manufacturing compound two years ago, my team was able to cripple his group's infrastructure, capture multiple high-ranking lieutenants, and rescue the girl known as Eri, the source for the quirk-erasing bullets at the center of his future plans. I've managed to keep him on the run ever since, but due to my reluctance to confront his forces without first securing a decisive
tactical advantage, it seems that I may have inadvertently driven him into Serah's arms.

Unit B will redress that mistake, by seeking out, surveilling, and if necessary apprehending individuals and groups with suspected ties to the Yakuza or other organized criminal networks, current or former. The Eight Precepts are a well-equipped group, but they're not quite as methodical or as cautious as their new allies; the trail leading to Overhaul is out there waiting for us to uncover it, and if we find Chisaki, we find Midoriya. We have authorization to offer full pardons or reduced sentences to any criminals who will cooperate in pointing us towards the Precepts' current whereabouts. Seventy percent of criminal records in and around Tokyo are still in the process of being recovered from scratch after the Syndicate's virus wiped out the drives and backups on the Black Day, but the servers in the Tri-City region are largely intact; we'll be operating primarily in Kobe, Kyoto, and Osaka."

At the table's other end, Endeavor made a grunt that sounded something like approval, while beside him Juzo stared wide-eyed at his new partner. Slicking back his bright gold-yellow bangs with one hand, Kaminari leaned over in Tokage's direction and held out the other in greeting, an all-too confident grin on his face.

"Hey there, I don't think we've talked too much before. You free to grab lunch and discuss combat tactics anytime soon? I could probably show you some tricks of mine."

"Uhh… well…" Setsuna glanced in Itsuka's direction with 'Help me' written across her face, and was rescued a few moments later when Toru landed wrapped an invisible hand around Denki's hair and pulled his head back towards the front of the room, where Sir was waiting to continue with his arms crossed and one eyebrow raised.

Alright, time to find out what I'm gonna be up to. Hopefully it's something that involves lots of silence, the less I have to interact with Bakugo the saner I'll be at the end of all this.

"Unit Gamma's assignment is relatively unique in comparison to the other two. One of the most problematic aspects of dealing with a villain group comprised largely of former students is the networks of connections they leave behind to law-abiding citizens, especially with regard to their families. Yaoyorozu, Hatsume, Shinso, Midoriya, Monoma, Tokyoami- they all have parents, and several of them siblings as well. Following the Black Day, these families were the targets of suspicion and vitriol, their names smeared by tabloids and their reputations tarnished as a consequence of their blood ties to the villains who robbed the nation of its Symbol of Peace and new top hero. Many of the parents have either seen their employment terminated for vague pretenses or decided to quit on their own to avoid being ostracized at the workplace, and the Yaoyorozu clan in particular are already beginning proceedings to sue a number of media outlets for libel against their name. And while it is true that recent developments have given authorities reason to suspect that particular family of past, unrelated criminal activity, thorough police investigations have produced no evidence that any Syndicate member's parents or siblings were aware of their turn to villainy or of their whereabouts over the past two years. Government and hero investigators alike are confident in their innocence."

Battle Fist felt her eyes dropping to the table and her heart growing heavy as she thought back to the sensationalist headlines and widespread disdain that Nighteye spoke of. Syndicate family members had seen their houses egged and covered in graffiti in the short while before they were placed under police protection in the aftermath of the Black Day, and more than one of them had been assaulted on the street during that same period, with Hitoshi Shinso's father in particular suffering a number of injuries at the hands of a mob of Hawks-supporters. Even after police and hero patrols were set up around the families' homes, protestors continued to gather on the streets outside, especially in the case of the Yaoyorozu clan, who were doubly under fire after their leaked connections to organized
crime. On a nearly daily basis, the tabloids accused someone new among the families of having been aware of their child's descent to villainy along- one day it was Tokoyami's parents, the next Monoma's, the next Hatsume's. Neito's younger sister had been forced to drop out of her elementary school after a spike in bullying incidents, as had Hatsume's younger brother.

By far the most heartbreaking, though, was the case of Midoriya Inko, who had received the largest and cruelest share of anger given her son's position as the Syndicate's leader and his leading role in All Might's death. Harassed by the press and laid off from her job after a conveniently timed period of 'downsizing', she had been rescued by the officers guarding her apartment following a suicide attempt a week after the Black Day. The pictures of her bloodstained bathtub that had made the rounds on the internet despite the government's attempt to take them down still made Kendo sick to her stomach whenever they drifted to the front of her mind; after a second attempt involving sleeping pills, she had been moved to a hospital and placed under tight surveillance. More than once it had crossed Itsuka's mind to visit her, to try and comfort her and learn something about Izuku in the process, but the more she thought about it the more everything about the prospect terrified her. What the hell would I say? What the hell could I say? Sir's voice pulled her back to reality before she could produce an answer.

"Given the fact that the Syndicate seem to have infiltrated the security systems of both U.A. and the Tokyo Police Department with little difficulty, it stands to reason that they are likely aware of their families' situations and the specifics of their security details. Jeanist, Edgeshot and I have therefore deemed it necessary to take the safety of the so-called 'Syndicate families' into our own hands. Unit Gamma will escort these families to a series of three safehouses throughout the region, and take steps to ensure that their locations won't be discovered or leaked. We aren't so naïve as to think that the villains won't notice the sudden disappearance of their parents and siblings, though; at the same time, we'll be using a variety of channels at both U.A. and the police department to leak false information regarding the families' destinations. Once you relocate them, you'll be on standby at these fake safehouses to watch for any Syndicate member presence, and to intercept and engage them if need be. Are everyone's assignments understood?"

"Yes, sir." They responded as one, even Bakugo, and Kendo understood at once why they'd been placed on the same unit. We're the likeliest unit to directly engage Syndicate members- that's why the two strongest interns are together, along with Miruko, the strongest of the three team leaders as far as hand-to-hand combat goes.

"We're going to break into three separate rooms in order for each unit to discuss their respective missions in greater detail," declared Jeanist, but before that, there are several sensitive items I need to address while all the interns are still present. Namely, the fact that beginning tomorrow the position of 'hero intern' will likely cease to exist.

The students in the room exchanged a confused glance as Tsunagu continued, his tone grim.

"After the severe injuries sustained by Hawks' interns Gale Force and Cellophane on the Black Day, it didn't take long for politicians to start raising the idea of banning internships altogether behind closed doors, in the name of ensuring student safety. Many heroes with connections in the government, myself included, pushed back on this initiative, lobbying for the benefits that such experiences provide, and arguing that all heroes, students included, understand the risk that their profession entails- I personally consider it disrespectful and dangerous to deny willing young heroes the same right to risk their lives for the greater good that we expect of them immediately after graduation. Today's incident on Okinawa, however, was the last straw.

Tomorrow morning, the Ministry of Education will announce an indefinite ban on all internship-based hero activity for students still enrolled in secondary education. Luckily, all of you here are days
away from graduation, and our plans won't require adjustments, but I thought it prudent that you be informed of the development regardless. This is far from the only wide-reaching measure being discussed right now here in the capital- to speak frankly, the Syndicate and what they've accomplished have many politicians terrified, calling for heightened surveillance and national security measures. The situation is still fluid, and we'll keep you appraised as often as we're able, but the longer the Syndicate remains at large, the greater the chance that more restrictions will be enacted out of fear."

If the mood in the room had been somber before, it slid even further now towards melancholy and dismay, as expressions of shock rippled around the group of interns.

"That can't be right!" Protested Mina, who by now looked and sounded calmer than Itsuka might have expected, given how close her relationship with Eijiro had been growing over the past few weeks. "I mean, I understand if they want to put some restrictions in place after what happened to Ei-to Red Riot, but wouldn't a blanket ban do more harm than good? What about all the interns at U.A. who aren't about to graduate? It's just over for them, like that?"

"Yeah," piped in Denki, "with all due respect, it seems to me that this approach is a bit short-sighted on the government's part. It's a knee-jerk reaction that further erodes public faith in the hero system, and reduces the already low level of confidence people have in hero schools to keep their students safe. I'd personally say this stands to have a much stronger detrimental effect in the long term than a few high-profile injuries in the line of duty. It's like we're throwing in a towel and admitting they have us beat."

Silence reigned for a long moment after that, as the interns' shock at Jeanist's news rapidly turned to shock that Kaminari had contributed something thoughtful and intelligent to the discussion. Beside Kendo, Mount Lady let out a chuckle, and cast a proud glance in her pupil's direction.

"Don't you kids go acting all surprised, he has his moments- occasionally, that is."

"I think hell just froze over," Jiro muttered under her breath, prompting a rare nod of agreement from Bakugo.

"It happens," quipped Hagakure. "I mean, we still haven't found a way to stop him from quoting random books while we're on missions. Lately he's been going through another Hemingway phase."

"Sometimes it just fits with the moment!" Chargebolt protested, though once again he was cut off and cowed by a fierce glare from Nighteye.

"Your enthusiasm is appreciated, and I happen to agree with most of your arguments, but this isn't a debate or a discussion. The fact of the matter is that the ban will go into effect regardless of what we think, or which approach is wisest. Nothing can change that now- all that remains is to decide where to go from here."

"Still," growled Endeavor, "the boy has a point. The government's course of action has proven consistently disappointing, since the day Shoto was taken from me. The formation of this task force is a step in the right direction, but whether they'll follow through in giving us the free reign we need is another question."

"Since the day Shoto and Ochako were taken from us," countered Lemillion, his tone even and measured, "it seems to me that our superiors have been doing everything in their power to bring the Syndicate and the Eight Precepts to justice. It's not like condoning vigilantism was ever on the table- they have to set the standard for order for every hero in the country. I don't agree with the internship ban either-" here he gave Honenuki and Setsuna a sympathetic glance- "but if they think that's what's
best to calm the situation down, it's our duty to trust them and follow through. Complaining won't help anyone. It's likely that they'll retract the ban in due time, once we do our job and take down the Syndicate."

"What the boy wonder is trying to say," interjected Miruko, "is quit bitching and start contributing to the team. That's the bottom line. You want to get your son back, I get that. We all do. The faster we stop pointing fingers and start hunting these assholes down, the faster that happens. So work with us, okay?"

"I believe we're all in agreement here," Jeanist declared authoritatively, before Enji could muster a retort. "We all understand each other. Belaboring that point yields no benefit. Now if there are no further comments, we'll begin the unit briefings. Report to the following rooms, based on your assignments."

As they all stood and began to split into three separate directions, Tokage shot Kendo a panicked look, and her phone buzzed with another message.

TS: wait, how late is this supposed to go?! It's past ten already, we have finals tomorrow morning!"

Battle Fist could only return Reptilia's glance and shrug in response, though her expression quickly turned to a frown as she finally began to read through the rather charming string of insults Katsuki had sent her earlier.

This is going to be a long assignment, isn't it?

It was well past midnight by the time Kendo slid stealthily back into her room, doing her best to remain absolutely silent as she eased the key from the lock and nudged the door shut behind her. A brief inspection of the kitchen and lounge confirmed that Kodai was passed out on the couch, snoring gently with the remote still grasped in one hand. A polite 'Are you still there?' message was displayed across the TV screen as a baking competition show played behind it, but aside from the faint noise of shouting competitors, the room was quiet and still. No mysterious grey envelope awaited her on the floor or kitchen table, but despite that fact, she couldn't shake the vague sense of anxiety knowing at the back of her mind as she took a seat next to Yui with a sigh.

Why am I almost disappointed that there's nothing here? She found herself wondering, as she glanced back over at her roommate. By the look of it, Kodai had been training at the gym all evening- a towel draped beneath her, she was still dressed in a baggy white t-shirt and exercise shorts, her hair done-up in a ponytail and her clothing damp with sweat. As usual, the look on her face was utterly serene, devoid of any emotion either positive or negative.

It can't have been you, right?

The one possibility that Aizawa had discounted in naming his eleven suspects for the placement of the letter was the one other person who had unrestricted access to Kendo's room; whether he'd excluded her out of respect for her friendship with Itsuka or because he genuinely didn't view her as a threat was unclear. To be fair, the possibility hadn't even occurred to her until the next morning, and she still had a hard time even considering it as a potential solution. After all, if there truly was a traitor, surely a motive was essential. And what motive could Yui possibly have? She has a stable, wealthy, family, good grades, a strong quirk. She's one of my best friends. The entire situation only grew more complex and confusing when she attempted to apply the same principle to the others. Ibara? Absolutely impossible, she'd drown herself in holy water before even thinking about committing an evil deed. Kuroiro? He pretends to be a nihilist, but I know deep down he cares about all of us, and he was a massive Hawks fan to boot. Pony? Shishida? Ochako? Her head began to swim with all the possibilities, and she screwed her eyes shut in frustration, cradling her head in both
'The Big Sister of the Hero Course,' they called her, and for three years she'd embraced that role with pride. Now, the possibility than one of the people who felt for all the world like her little siblings was actively working for the Syndicate made Kendo sick to her stomach. *If we begin to suspect each other it's all over,* she knew, *but what other choice do I have?* Itsuka was all too aware that of the ten interns who had recruited to Strike Team Fenrir, at least three were already suspects- Kaminari and Tokage by the fact that they'd passed by her room, and Hagakure by virtue of her quirk. Nightmare scenarios of infiltration from within flashed briefly through her head, of Nighteye and Jeanist and Miruko lying dead on the ground because she'd stood by and watched while a traitor played the task force like a fiddle.

"You're back late. Is everything okay?"

Doubtless woken by the aura of worry and dismay Kendo was projecting like a furnace, Kodai had propped herself up on a pillow, watching her roommate with curious eyes.

"Yeah," Kendo forced herself to chuckle, glancing down at the clock on her phone as she gently took hold of the remote and turned off the TV. "Less than eight hours til the practical finals start. Looks like someone hit the gym hard- forget to shower afterward?"

"The hot water was off for repairs for a few hours," Yui protested, matter-of-factly. "And you know how freezing the cold water here gets."

"Yeah. Yeah, I do." A wistful smile spread across Itsuka's face as she glanced around the quiet room. "Last night ever before an exam, huh? That's a trip."

"And you didn't even study," Kodai teased, stretching as she rose to her feet and threw her towel around her shoulders. "Too busy with your secret meeting, huh? What was that all about?"

"Well, long story short, let's just say there's-" Battle Fist caught herself midsentence, and fell silent halfway back to her bedroom. Two days ago, her roommate's casual inquiry would have just that, an innocent question. Now, Kendo couldn't help but scrutinize it in a new light, regardless of what the intent may or may not have been. "I… don't think I'm allowed to say. Sorry."

"No worries, I get it." Shrugging off her t-shirt and unfastening her sports bra as she made for the shower, Yui, lingered at the bathroom door, and gave her one last vague hint of a smile. "Well, I'm sure I'll probably hear about it sooner or later. Sleep well, Itsuka."

Sleep didn't come easy to Kendo that night. After tossing and turning for hours amid a sticky mess of sweaty sheets, she was awoken by the loud blaring of her alarm what felt like mere moments after she finally faded into blissful unconsciousness. *This has to be wrong,* she thought in a daze, as she blinked through bleary eyes to stare down the numbers on the clock: the time was 4:07 AM, not 7:15 like her alarm was set for. It took her another few moments of groggy confusion to realize that the sound was coming from her phone, not the clock- she twisted around in bed and snatched it off the charger, swearing under her breath. *I swear, if I accidentally set some stupid alarm for four in the goddamn morning…*

The notification on the screen quickly disavowed her of that notion, though; the text was from Vlad King, the principal, and seemed to be addressed to all of class 3-B.

'URGENT: REPORT TO GROUND BETA IMMEDIATELY FOR YOUR FINAL EXAM. ANY STUDENTS NOT PRESENT BY 4:30 AM WILL BE FAILED AUTOMATICALLY.'
"Oh, shit."

Five minutes later, the hero dorm common areas were a scene of absolute chaos, as students darted back and forth with their costumes half-on and looks of panic in their eyes. Bedhead was rampant, the fridge and pantry were being ransacked for anything resembling a quick snack, and 'what the fuck' was by far the most commonly repeated phrase Kendo heard as she and her classmates attempted to process the sudden development. A quick glance across the skybridge proved that Class A was going through the same experience, with Bakugo's loud shouts of anger and Ashido's wails of protest faintly audible even over the sounds of Class B panicking.

It was true that U.A.'s third-year final hero exams had always been a source of mystery; while the practical finals in preceding years had all been relatively straightforward solo or partner-based exercises against the teachers, the format of the third-year final was rumored to be slightly more creative- or at least, that was how Nejire had described it. On top of that, the details changed every year, with alumni honor-bound to secrecy about their own experiences. The one constant seemed to be a sharp uptick in difficulty compared with previous semesters, and given recent developments, Kendo hardly had reason to hope that this year would be an exception.

"I still feel like I must be dreaming," Juzo muttered, rubbing the sleep from his eyes with one hand before he poured the rest of a bowl of cereal into his mouth with the other. "This is some hell of a graduation present, huh? And after just three hours of sleep, too…"

"They told me it'd be creative," Kendo sighed in between gulps of electrolyte water as she watched the toaster, "but I feel like this is more on the sadistic side. I can see the usefulness of being ready to go at any hour, but…"

"But they had to know we were out late last night," Protested Setsuna, her voice somewhat slurred by the protein bar she was chewing on. Her waves of dark green hair were a mess of tangles, and even behind her scaly green domino mask, the edges of bright purple circles were still visible beneath her tired eyes. "I swear, it's like they were targeting us specifically! I always say the early bird gets the worm, but this is overkill…"

Itsuka nodded solemnly in agreement as she snatched out her toast the moment it was ready, popped half the slice into her mouth, then cracked a raw egg with a gentle quirk-enhanced tap of her index finger and poured the contents in on top of the bread, chewing and swallowing the mix in the span of a second. If there was one thing All Might and Gran Torino had both taught her over the course of her time with them, it was how to maintain a high-protein, high-carb diet with maximum efficiency.

"Yeah, I wouldn't be surprised if the four of us were…" Then she narrowed her eyes, and glanced around the kitchen and common room. "Wait, where's Tetsu?"

"He wasn't in his room this morning," called Yosetsu, Real Steel's roommate. "The door was open, but his bed was empty."

"Alright, everyone line up, roll call!" Kendo called, glancing over at the oven clock- 4:16 AM. Fourteen minutes left. We all need to leave within two to make sure we have enough time to get to Ground Beta. Everyone in the class followed her command without question, though, even as most of them finished eating or fastening the straps of their costumes- it took her only a moment's glance to tell who wasn't present.

"Okay, we're missing Tetsutetsu, Kuroiro, and… Kodai." She finished on a hesitant note, trying her best not to outwardly display her confusion and dismay. It was true that she hadn't seen or heard Yui in the room as she was getting ready, but Itsuka had simply assumed that she'd left before her. What the hell is going on? Is this all part of the final?
"Shihai wasn't in his room either!" Volunteered Kamakiri, Vantablack's roommate.

"Well, we have to go assumption that there's a reason the three of them aren't here." Declared Battle Fist after a moment's contemplation, marching forward and snatching a banana out of the communal fruit bowl. "Come on, grab whatever food you can carry- we need to get moving. No way in hell are we gonna let Class A get there first."

As it turned out, there wouldn't be an inter-class race after all; though they both emerged from their respective dorms into the pre-morning darkness almost simultaneously, Class A took a sharp turn to the right while their counterparts veered to the left. Unsurprisingly, Bakugo lingered behind long enough to fling a few choice insults in Kendo's direction when he caught sight of her, but there was no time to discuss the situation with them. Itsuka's anxiety only grew, though, when she briefly searched for Kyoka among their number and failed to spot her.

"Lady Kendo, we must hurry!" The sound of Shishida's voice behind her dragged her back to reality- most of Class B had already begun to steadily break into a jog toward the training grounds. "We mustn't risk tardiness!"

"You got that right!" She called back in reply, stretching briefly before joining the others.

*Focus on the task at hand,* Battle Fist told herself, shooting her classmates a confident smile as she quickly caught up and took the lead. *Trust your friends, and trust the school. That's all you can do. I'm sure this is all according to some insane plan.*

They'd worked up a healthy sweat by the time they arrived at the training grounds four minutes later, at precisely 4:22 AM.

"You could've done better," Aizawa declared dryly, snapping shut his stopwatch as he gazed at them with an expression full of his trademark impatience.

"Wha… we were eight minutes early!" Setsuna held her phone up as proof, her face painted with confusion.

"Do you always measure yourself from the bare minimum standard, Reptilia? Getting here before 4:30 was the cutoff for failing, not the benchmark for success. I gave you twenty-three minutes, and you got here in fifteen. A pro could've made it in five. So as far as I'm concerned, you're all ten minutes late, not eight minutes early. In fact, I only wanted to give you ten total, so count yourselves lucky that Vlad King is more merciful than me."

"Understood!" Kendo shouted in reply, snapping to attention in a gesture that the others quickly mimicked. "Forgive us for our tardiness, sir!"

"That's better." Eraserhead yawned, cracked his neck, then raised his finger in their general direction. "Alright, first two teams: Jack Mantis, Battle Fist and Dragon Shroud against Mudslide, Airshifter, and Poltergeist."

"Whoa!" Yosetsu cried, his eyes wide. "So is this a straight-up versus match, like we did in the scrimmages a while back?"

"Does it have anything to do with the students who aren't with us?" Asked Shiozaki, her face the picture of worry.

"You'll find out when it's your turn," Aizawa shot back, a frown crossing his stubble-ridden features. "If you haven't figured it out already, this final is a test of your abilities to improvise and think on your feet, outside your comfort zone. You won't be told the rules until you're about to begin,
and we won't be broadcasting the matches for you to watch, so I'd better not hear any more questions. Teams One and Two, on me."

Kendo nodded amicably to Kamakiri and Rin as they stepped forward together and followed Eraserhead through the entrance, Juzo's team trailing slightly behind them. Though she was well aware of their skill, to be honest, Togaru and Hiryu were two of the Class B students Itsuka interacted with the least. Jack Mantis, with his versatile melee quirk Razor Sharp, had an aggressive and competitive personality, though still somewhat tame in comparison to Ground Zero's. A former intern at Gunhead's hero agency alongside Shishikura Seiji, an alumnus of Shiketsu, he'd been robbed of his mentor by Longshot on the Black Day, and though Kendo had tried to speak to him about it some time afterward, he'd rebuffed her attempt, declaring that he preferred to 'deal with this sort of thing alone'. At U.A., he typically hung around Kuroiro and Reiko; on occasion they allowed Tokage into their circle, a group that Setsuna had long since dubbed the 'Triumvirate of Edge'. Often as not, though, he seemed to prefer solitude.

Dragon Shroud, one of Class B’s two foreign students, was a bit more social by comparison, well-studied but generally quiet. He had his own group in the form of Kaibara, Shishida, Tsuburaba, and Yosetsu, with Shiozaki drifting in and out based on her prayer schedule; Tetsutetsu occasionally tagged along as well when they hit the gym together. He and Kendo had bonded once over their mutual interest in Chinese culture- he'd been raised there until he moved to Japan as a child- so she felt a bit more confident in the state of her relations with Rin, and glanced briefly over his costume as they continued down the hallway. Scale is a pretty well-rounded quirk, it has both offense and defense at range and up close. Assuming we're up against Honenuki's team, we might be able to-

"Team One to the right, Team Two to the left." The sound of Aizawa's voice pulled Itsuka out of her thoughts, and she glanced up to find him slipping through a side door as he gestured to either side of a fork in the hallway. They nodded and pressed ahead in their respective directions, and soon Kendo's trio had emerged into the arena, a maze of empty urban cityscape rendered eerie and unfamiliar by the near pitch-darkness. Juzo's group was completely out of sight, likely on the opposite side of the cityscape by now.

"I guess I should go ahead and explain the rules," Eraserhead sighed in exasperation through the speakers that lined the arena walls, "before you all have panic attacks. At its core, this final is an objective-based exercise. A hostage is being held in one of these buildings, by two teachers playing the role of villains- you'll have to find out for yourself exactly who you're up against. Both teams have the objective of successfully retrieving the hostage and returning them to their respective entrance. And while this is not a pass or fail test- you will all be graded numerically on your overall performance- the first team to successfully do so will receive a large share of bonus points. Solely targeting the other team will be penalized, however- while sabotage of your rivals is permitted, the hostage is your number one priority, and your actions should reflect that.

In addition, each team will be divided into a designated 'Pro Hero' leader and their two sidekicks- your actions should also reflect the chain of command that professionals deal with on a daily basis in their own missions, and we will be observing you closely to monitor how well you adapt to this scenario. Team leaders will be rewarded for taking charge of the situation, and sidekicks will be rewarded for effectively following their orders. Refusal to adhere to this chain of command will be penalized. The challenge of this exercise is to complete your objective while simultaneously fighting off the villains, playing your roles, and maximizing your team's total points. Actions which either directly or indirectly bring harm to the hostage will result in automatic failure, and your completion time is being monitored as well- you'll have a limit of twenty minutes. Team One's leader is Jack Mantis, and Team Two's is Poltergeist."

A giant screen flickered to life on the wall behind them, and before Kendo could even open her
mouth to begin discussing their strategy, the countdown began.

"Your final exam begins now. I have high expectations."

Chapter End Notes

And there we have it! Midoriya takes down Kirishima, Strike Team Fenrir's mission and structure becomes more clear, and the third years' last round of final exams begins. Let me know if you enjoyed the Seraph vs. Red Riot fight, it's the first time we've really seen Midoriya go all out and I hope I did both characters justice! Who would you like to see Izuku take on next? I wanted to fit in the Suneater fight as well, but this chapter is already long as is, and I ran out of room- we might see some of it next time via flashback, as there are some important character moments I have planned for it.

Also, the task force unit reveals! I realized a while back that Fenrir is way too big to have fight as one group, so splitting them like this made sense to me. I did give a lot of thought to how the three units broke down- Kendo's overpowered OfA aside, which one do you think is strongest and/or most well-balanced? Any predictions for how their missions might go? Also, pour one out for poor, poor Inko. I'm sorry I had to do her like that, but I really do think that these revelations about Midoriya would break her. Rest assured, though, she will be appearing in the story, and Kendo will talk with her in due time.

Finally, any thoughts on the final exam are welcome! I feel like U.A. would really go all out for their third year second semester hero finals, so I came up with something that combines several different ideas I had into one. Which team do you think has the advantage going forward? Also, in case you noticed, I love Horikoshi, but some of the hero names he's chosen are kind of bland, so I made some adjustments- let's just say that the hero course students had a chance to change their names again before finals:

Setsuna: Lizardy -> Reptilia

Mina: Pinky -> Alien Queen (Like she originally wanted!)

Juzo: Mudman -> Mudslide

Hagakure: Invisible Girl -> Lightwave

Reiko: Emily -> Poltergeist

Tsuburara: ??? -> Airshifter (Really wanted to make this Airbender, but I resisted the urge)

As always, let me know what you think, and what you want to see next! Glad to be back!
"I trust you'll all come quietly?"

Suneater's voice was a low growl, still distinct against the sound of his birdlike talons tearing apart the car's roof above them and his barbed tentacles slithering around every side of the vehicle, smashing through the windows with ease in a scene pulled straight from a monster film. His eyes wide and his heart racing, Gentle drew up a hasty semi-spherical barrier of elastic air around himself and La Brava beside him, just in time to prevent two tentacles from wrapping around the both of them in a death grip. In the passenger seat, Twice wasn't so lucky, and screamed in pain as the barbs dug into his skin and tore at his pristine white military uniform- they hadn't even had time to change back into their usual outfits yet, and Jin still didn't even have his tape dispensers equipped. Tobita would have shielded him as well, and everyone else, for that matter, but everything was happening so quickly, all in the span of a few short seconds- there was hardly time to react, and no time at all to think. On La Brava's other side, Atsuhiro had managed to re-compress Shinso before the tentacles reached them, and made short work of the appendages descending on him, using his quirk to reduce the tips to so many marbles in a spray of blue blood.

In the driver's seat, Monoma reached across and slapped the restrained Bubaigawara on the shoulder, then swiftly produced a clone on the other side of the shattered windshield, in an attempt to draw Tamaki's attention; the hero didn't take the bait, and sent the copy flying through the air and down onto the side of the road with a single swipe of a tentacle. Moments later, the entire car suddenly jerked to a halt with a metallic screech, and Danjuro realized that Suneater must have triggered the breaks manually on the undercarriage. Aiba looked up at him with terrified eyes as chaos continued to unfold around their protective bubble, her voice faded to a pitiful whimper.

"Are… are we gonna get caught?"

"No," Tobita replied, his eyes fixed on Monoma. "Not today."

Just as he predicted, the moment Amajiki's tentacles touched Neito, a demented smile spread across Chaudron's face, and spiked, reddish-grey armor sprung out from his skin, all across his arms and chest and back- they'd had crab for breakfast.

Suneater realized his mistake too late; by the time he began to retract his tentacles, one of Chaudron's arms was already a massive red claw, and he twisted around in his seat before giving Compress a swift nod; Sako raised up one gloved hand and compressed a wide, circular portion of the roof, stealing away Tamaki's perch. His tentacles receding as his arms turned back to wings, Amajiki tried to fly away before he fell through the resulting gap, kicking viciously at the villains with his birdlike feet. He was fast, his reaction time almost perfect, but Neito was faster still, and seized one of the hero's legs in his claw, then squeezed with all his strength. A sickening crack echoed through the air, coupled by the young hero's scream of agony, and even Tobita winced in discomfort when he glimpsed the mangled red ruin that remained of the hero's left knee. Still beating one wing furiously in an attempt to escape, Tamaki reverted his other arm back to normal and reached for one of the numerous pouches dotted across his hero costume, each of which contained a different type of preserved meat for his quirk. Not good, Danjuro knew, his eyes growing wide. Who knows what he has in there? We have to stop him before he gets to it. But he's too far away from Mr. Compress, and Monoma hasn't the mobility or speed to catch him…
Gentle started moving before he could even begin plan out an attack, elasticizing the seat and springing himself upward through the hole in the roof like a missile. His arm outstretched, he built up several layers of air around his fist, and proceeded to land a devastating blow across Suneater's face before the hero could defend himself, springing him straight into the ground. Tamaki tumbled several meters through the dust before falling still face-down on the side of the road, his cape and hood tattered and stained with dirt- his limbs all returned to normal in the process. With luck, he's out cold, Gentle mused, and that'll be that. His hopes swiftly proved to be ill-founded, however, when the hero began to stir again after mere moments; a scowl on his face, Tobita adjusted himself midair, bounced off a platform of air for momentum, and streaked down towards his opponent, ready to deliver an even more powerful attack this time. In the end, he was half a beat too slow. Just before he could reach the injured hero, Amajiki's hand darted suddenly toward his mouth, and Gentle felt his jaw slackening in shock as a mass of spiny brown quills erupted from Suneater's back, long and sharp and thick. Porcupine?! Did that boy truly just eat porcupine?!

Faced with the possibility of being gored on the hero's spines, Danjuro only barely caught himself in time, bouncing up and over Tamaki on a series of small air platforms before landing semi-gracefully on the ground a few meters beyond him.

"Well played, young man. That wasn't a half-bad trick- but surely, you must realize when you're beaten. Your leg is broken, and you're surrounded: there are six of us, and only…" He trailed off midsentence, his eyes drifting upward and his eyes widening in horror as he finally realized the gravity of the error he had made when he knocked Suneater away from the car.

"Miscounted, huh?" Pushing himself back to one knee as a stream of blood tricked steadily down his face, Amajiki chuckled morbidly, his hands gradually shifting back to a writhing mass of tentacles. "Now I understand why you flunked out of school."

Above them, a dull roar split the humid morning air as the American Osprey opened fire on the car with its primary machine gun, no longer concerned with the possibility of friendly fire now that Tamaki was safely away. A stream of Monoma clones erupted from within the vehicle at the same moment, and the sheer mass of their bodies managed to form enough of a momentary shield against the bullets for Compress to execute a dash-and-roll out of the door with La Brava under his arm and Monoma following close behind- Atsuhiro had already compressed Twice, by the looks of it, and as the hail of lead finally penetrated the barricade of clones and grey goop, the car erupted in a fiery explosion behind them.

Why didn't he compress her too?!! He wondered frantically, even as he raised his defenses against another onslaught of tentacles from the front. It only took Tobita a moment to understand Sako's thinking. Her quirk, yes, of course. We might need Lover Mode to make it out of this yet…

While Danjuro contended with Suneater and Neito sent a pack of clones charging in to reinforce him, Mr. Compress hurled a marble up towards the Osprey before it could change its target, with thoroughly impressive speed and accuracy. When it was just a few short meters from the aircraft, Atsuhiro snapped his fingers, and the marble reverted to a hefty-sized chunk of rock, slamming full-on into the side of the cockpit and part of the fuselage. Damaged and knocked-off center but not quite downed, the Osprey began to wobble unsteadily in the air, smoke trailing from the point of impact.

"One more shot should finish it." Compress declared, just in time for Suneater to switch targets, abandoning Gentle and his nigh-impervious elastic shield for easier prey. While he held Neito and his duplicates at bay with one hand, he lashed out at Sako with the other; Atsuhiro severed the pair of tentacles that swept him off his feet with a flash of blue light before he even hit the ground, but the damage was done- a miss. There's not enough time for him to try again, Gentle knew, eyeing the
aircraft cautiously— it was close to righting itself again already, and once it did, they'd all be mincemeat. I'll need to take it down with Lover Mode— one jump and a good punch should do it at full power. Undoing his shield, he bounced off the ground, away from Tamaki and towards Aiba, who was still cowering on the ground where she'd fallen after the explosion of the car, her hands over her head and her eyes screwed shut in fear.

"La Brava!" He called, as he skidded to a landing a half dozen paces away from her. "Darling, I need you to say it!"

"Gentle!" Manami perked up the moment she heard his voice, pushing herself to her feet and starting off at a run towards him with her wide eyes full of relief. "I love-"

A steam of bullets raked across the ground and straight through La Brava before she could finish her declaration, and Tobita screamed in horror.

Two crimson blossoms slowly began to sprout on the pristine white fabric of Aiba's summer dress, just above her stomach. Her face contorted in pain and confusion, she glanced down at the wounds, then back up to where Danjuro was frozen in shock, his outstretched hand trembling uncontrollably.

"…you," she said, then fell to the ground, her eyes fluttering shut.

There was no pleasure or satisfaction when her quirk's power filled him this time, no sensation of ease or oneness with the world. There was only rage and anguish, and what he chose to do with them. When he screamed again, it was a bellow of rage, not a cry of terror. The golden flames dancing around his hair and arms suddenly flared high and bright, and the ground split and cracked in a circle around him. After cutting down La Brava, the Osprey had moved on to attack Atsuhiro, who had compressed himself to evade its attack; now its gun swung back in Tobita's direction, its red laser sight zeroed in on his chest. The stream of bullets it fired next would never reach him, though. After sinking into five layers of elastic air, they bounced off uselessly, scattering back into the sky. The gunner opted for a missile next, sending a guided rocket streaking down in Danjuro's direction. It would be the last mistake he ever made.

With full awareness of the consequences of his actions, Gentle sprang his layers outward and rebounded the missile with the precise aim of a soccer player redirecting an oncoming ball towards a looming goal. Spinning wildly through the air, it nearly missed as the Osprey attempted to swerve to the side at the last moment, but one of the rotors just barely grazed the rocket's tip, and it was all over in a ball of flaming shrapnel. Not a moment later, Tobita knelt down and cast a bubble shield over himself and La Brava, cradling her in his arms as fire and metal rained down around them. A quick glance down to her chest and a hand over her mouth confirmed that she was still breathing, but it was faint and halting. As long as Love remains active, I'll know she's alive, but she doesn't have long left. She needs to be taken to Overhaul, now.

"We need a medical evacuation." He turned to Compress the moment Sako sprang back into being, his voice harsh and unyielding. Aiba was cradled in his arms, and he could feel the blood leaking out of her wounds and onto his white military sleeves with every weak beat of her heart.

"I already contacted Kurogiri, he's on standby. But you know protocol," Atsuhiro straightened his officer's cap and pointed in Suneater's direction, then produced one of his numerous masks from a marble and affixed it to his face. "We have to finish off the enemies first."

A few dozen yards away, Chaudron and his clones were still keeping the hero tied down for the moment, but Tamaki was a clever opponent, and Neito had nearly reached the five minute limit on Twice's quirk. He likely still has some of the team's hair and skin samples from this morning, Gentle mused, but they've expired by now- it's been more than three hours. He's almost at the limit of his
"Just leave it to me," Gentle declared coolly, reminding himself to save the rage and pain threatening to boil over inside him for his foes. "I need a distraction to catch him off guard. You know what to do."

"Of course. And allow me to be the first to congratulate you, Danjuro, on crossing the bridge at last." He nodded towards the flaming wreck of the aircraft, then promptly compressed himself once more.

Stroking her cheek with one thumb, Tobita set Aiba down on a patch of grass as gently as he could manage, then snatched up the marble and flung it towards Suneater without hesitation. His aim and throwing speed were enhanced exponentially and the spherical blue projectile streaked through the air like a bullet towards the distant clash. Just as it sailed past Amajiki's shoulder, Compress released himself and stretched out his hand towards the young hero. His reflexes commendably quick, Tamaki managed to duck in time to avoid being compressed himself, but his attention was drawn away, and that was all Tobita had needed. He sprang off the ground at twice his normal speed, his appearance reduced to little more than a bright golden streak as he closed in on Tamaki's back with an elastic bludgeon in his hands and death in his eyes. No doubt aware that he had exposed himself to an attack, Suneater once more sprouted massive porcupine quills on his back, but the sight of a hundred hardened spines was no longer enough to deter Gentle.

Putting all of his strength into his arm, he swung the compacted air layers in a brutal hook, striking Amajiki from enough of an angle to avoid hitting all of his defenses head on. With the additional power from Lover Mode, the blow landed with enough force to utterly shatter half of the hero's quills, and sent him flying with a sickening symphony of crack that mingled with his cry of pain, blood trailing behind him from the wounds on his mangled back. A few stray spines had managed to slip around the edges of the attack and embed themselves in Danjuro's arm and chest, but he could hardly be bothered to notice them as he bounded after his prey, intent on finishing the job. Ahead of him, Suneater had changed his arms back to wings midair and managed to right himself, but with one leg broken, there was only so much he could do to defend himself while airborne- he made for the ground, but Gentle was faster, and slammed into the hero's side with a flying kick. His feet met hard scales rather than yielding flesh- it seemed Tamaki's diet included some type of fish or lizard as well. Against one of his standard attacks, such a defense might have sufficed, but no longer. The scales shattered just as easily as the quills when both men slammed into the ground with an earth-shaking thud, and when the dust cleared, Tobita was standing atop the hero's chest in the center of the shallow crater their impact had carved.

Amajiki's face was contorted in pain, and a fresh stream of blood was trickling from his open mouth, but his eyes still shone with defiant fury, and before Danjuro could even move to strike once more, tentacles were springing from both of his hands, larger than before, darting towards Tobita with raw malice and ferocity.

"Gentle Armor," he intoned, encasing his entire body in a super-dense layer of elastic air in the moment before impact. Once Suneater's initial attacks had bounced off the invisible barrier, he added two more layers around his arms before swinging them outward in an x-shaped chop. He watched with satisfaction as he clove easily through the writhing mass, rebounding away the blood and remnants as he cut. "Gentle Swords."

These two were his newest techniques, developed within the past few weeks; they were only effective when Lover Mode was active, and relied on the extra strength it provided. Gentle Swords, for instance, pushed his elastic energy to the limit by combining it with intense kinetic energy applied over a small surface area, to devastating effect. This was the first opportunity he'd had to field-test either of them, and thus far, the results were quite encouraging. A new batch of tentacles tried to...
target his footing, but he dodged nimbly before they could wrap around his legs, leaping upward and out of range before bouncing back down from a different angle.

"These are growing tiresome," he growled, bashing away the writhing appendages with a bludgeon of air while he raised one foot and brought it down on Tamaki's left arm. It snapped with ease, and half of the mass receded instantly out of pain, as he'd suspected it might. In the instant before he could move on the second, the rest of the tentacles vanished of their own accord, before being replaced by a three meter blue spike that punched a narrow hole his armor and skewered him through his side and back. Just as had been the case with the quills, though, Gentle hardly felt the pain, and let out a booming laugh when he peered down and realized that Amajiki had turned his hand into the head of a swordfish. Desperation was etched plain on the young man's face where moments before there had been only anger, and Tobita could see the gears turning in his head as he raced for a solution.

"Ah, whatever seems to be the matter, dear Suneater?" His voice had taken on a mocking tone, and he made sure to place one foot over the boy's heart as a threat in case he tried anything else. "Have you exhausted your menu of options? How tragic. Nonetheless, a commendable attempt." He snapped the spike off with one hand, then knelt down and brought the other down in a chop with every last ounce of power he could muster, releasing his quirk and relying purely on strength. As he expected, he was able to sever the arm in one stroke with ease- he couldn't help but marvel how sweet it felt to release the rage that had built up inside him as the blood spurted high. Just when Danjuro thought he was finished, though, his mind's eye turned once more to La Brava's limp body, to the way she'd looked at him in confusion before he fell to the ground. The image was seared into his memory, like a brand.

It's his fault. It's all his fault.

His body operating off pure instinct, Tobita stood and stamped down hard on the severed limb, taking care to ensure that Tamaki watched as he crushed it. Then his gaze turned to the hero's already mangled leg, and he slammed his other foot into Tamaki's broken and bloody knee, cutting off his lower leg entirely and sending it sailing through the air in a fountain of crimson. Next he wrapped both hands together for a double-fisted finishing blow, raising them high above his head like an executioner. When he gazed down to ask Suneater for any last words, though, his eyes widened, and he paused- Amajiki was crying, tears streaming down his cheeks and mixing with the blood.

"P-please," he stammered out, his voice full of fear. "Please, stop. I d-don't want to die."

A trick? Gentle's eyes narrowed in suspicion. Some ruse?

No.

All heroic pretenses had been utterly abandoned. There was no deceit or hidden malice left in Tamaki's eyes, only the primal terror of a young man who was at the mercy of his opponent, and didn't want to die. Blinking, Gentle gazed once more at his handiwork, at the two limbs he'd taken from Amajiki and the fist he'd made in order to smash the boy's skull. At his own JSDF uniform, soaked up to the elbows and knees in blood.

Then he stumbled off to the side and retched, his every sense suddenly assaulted by an overwhelming sense of horror and nausea. Suneater didn't stir or follow when he stumbled back in the direction of the others, then broke into a run when he realized Lover Mode had faded away, primal fear welling up inside him. The others were gathered in a solemn semicircle around La Brava's fallen form- Kurogiri and Seraph were there as well, and when Gentle reached them, Midoriya looked up to meet his gaze.
"I'm sorry," Seraph declared coolly. "We were too late."

Tobita opened his mouth to cry out once more, but suddenly he found he had no voice—no sound came out when he tried to scream. He took a shaky step forward towards Aiba, but suddenly she and the others were receding into the distance, growing farther and farther away as the flames from the wreckage danced tall around him. Tears burned in his eyes as he drew them shut, sinking to the ground in despair.

"Manami."

When Tobita woke in a cold sweat and bolted upright, her name was the first word on his lips. His heart was pounding like a drum in his chest, and a probing touch to his cheeks proved that the tears were real as well. But she's alive, he reassured himself, glancing over to the hospital bed where La Brava was still fast asleep beside him, hooked up to an IV as an EKG beeped steadily in the background. It was a lie.

Most of the dream had been true to life, up to the end. After effectively putting her into stasis by compressing her, Atsuhiro had broken protocol and summoned Kurogiro for an emergency extraction while Gentle dealt with Suneater, only opening the warp gate long enough to pass the marble through so she could be brought to Overhaul without delay. Chisaki had held up his end of the bargain, repairing her damaged arteries and organs, though the lost blood was harder to replace. Midoriya hadn't been there, too busy with his own battle, nor had Kurogiri come in person—instead, Tobita had charged eagerly through the warp gate alongside Chaudron and Mr. Compress when he heard that La Brava was already on the other side.

As for the soldiers he'd murdered, and the young hero he'd maimed and crippled, Danjuro still wasn't sure how to feel. Atsuhiro had commended him afterward for making it past his aversion to killing, and coming to peace with the nature of his role and duties in the Syndicate. He knew this was a step forward, that he was now more useful to Midoriya and to the organization. Half a day later, Tobita's heart was still filled with guilt and regret more often than not when he thought of Suneater's tear-stained face, but in the moments when he glanced over to watch La Brava's chest rise and fall and thought of what had almost come to pass, he felt differently.

If this is the price I must pay to keep her safe, then so be it.

Syndicate Cabin, 30 kilometers outside Sapporo, Hokkaido Prefecture

The night before U.A.'s final exams

Standing from the makeshift bed he'd prepared beside her own, Gentle stretched and made his way out of the improvised clinic and into the common room, where Chisaki Kai was sipping tea beside the roaring fireplace, his mask set aside for the moment.

"I trust her condition is still stable?" He asked evenly, glancing up at Gentle with golden eyes devoid of emotion.

"Yes, quite so. May I?" He gestured tentatively to the steaming teapot.

"Only if you promise to buy more later. We're almost out."

"Ah, that won't be a problem. I have my own personal stash, I'm more than happy to share."

"Well isn't that just fine and dandy of you," Dabi remarked dryly, leaning in from the door to the cabin's kitchen with a butcher's knife in hand. "A true goddamn gentleman. You eating dinner or not,
Gentle? I'm about to cook something up."

"Of course. What... goodness, what time is it?" A glance out the window proved it was already dusk outside, with only the faint orange and purple afterglow of the setting sun still visible beyond the slopes of the mountains and distant lights of Sapporo.

"Almost nine," Responded Mustard from the dining room- as far as Danjuro was concerned, his voice and appearance were still somewhat jarring without the mask. "You've been out since four in the afternoon."

"We thought it best not to wake you." Commented Monoma, emerging from the kitchen alongside Midoriya as Dabi retreated back inside. "Overhaul, did I hear an offer of tea? I hope you don't mind if I help myself as well."

Chisaki merely grunted in assent, and Tobita was left facing Seraph as Chaudron made his way toward the fireplace with a grin.

"How are you feeling?" Izuku inquired calmly, sipping at a cup of coffee as he waited for Danjuro's reply.

"Good. Much better than before, to say the least. Her condition is still stable, which means the greatest danger has likely passed. She-"

"I'm not talking about La Brava," Midoriya replied. "I'm talking about you. Compress told me about what happened. I share his sentiments of pride for your newfound dedication, but I just wanted to make sure that you're still handling it well."

Though it had the appearance a polite gesture of concern on the surface, Tobita could tell easily enough that there was another intent behind the question.

"I do admit that at first, I was... intimidated by my destructive potential." Danjuro chose his words carefully, referring to the nausea and panic that had ensued after his bloodlust toward Suneater faded-no doubt, Monoma and Atsuhiro would have informed Midoriya of that detail as well. "But I have someone to protect, and I will gladly dirty my hands as much as you ask me if she's better off for it in the end. You... understand, don't you, Seraph?"

"Naturally, Gentle." Izuku nodded toward the ceiling, a hint of a grin on his lips. "She's still asleep now, upstairs. You and La Brava weren't the only ones who were tired after this morning's mission."

"Come now Gentle, the tea's getting cold!" Monoma's summons pulled Tobita back towards the fireplace, and Midorya trailed behind as poured himself a cup and sank into one of the armchairs with a sigh.

"Speaking of Compress, where's he off to?" Gentle glanced around the room and to the stairwell. "And dear Pandora, for that matter? They'd hate to miss an opportunity for tea."

"On Honshu, with Kurogiri, Longshot, and Synapse." Midoriya leaned up against the brick of the fireplace and took another sip from his coffee. "I sent them back to the mainland to scout our old facilities and investigate potential locations for a new one, after the loss of Osaka. The time for laying low has almost come to an end- our next major operation is imminent."

"What I wanna know before we even start thinking about that," said Overhaul, "is what the hell happened down in Okinawa. "Now if you remember, I was one of the ones who argued against moving on the military in the first place, and look what happened. The little girl almost gets killed,
Twice and Gentle get torn to pieces, you break three friggin' fingers and scratch up your armor, all while we twiddle our thumbs up here in the snow, and for what? Two deadbeat American hostages?"

"Two strategically valuable assets," Midoriya corrected evenly, "including one of the most brilliant quirk scientists and support item designers in the world."

"Who needs that when we've got Longshot already?" Kai shrugged. "Whatever, I won't pretend to understand your motives. You've delivered before. But you can't defend the execution. You got busted the night before the operation, and now on top of that I hear we've got some sort of psycho hacker freak on our asses? What the hell's up with that?"

"Hatsume and Yaoyorozu already have a theory about the identity of that particular variable. Tell me, how familiar are you with the support company Detnerat?"

"Like... from the commercial?" Overhaul narrowed his eyes.

"I hate that goddamned commercial," growled a deep, guttural voice from the corner, and Gentle jumped in his seat before he glanced over and realized it was only Dark Shadow, lurking out of sight just as usual. "It's always on at three in the morning, sometimes twice in a row. That annoying CEO prick, and his annoying nose... What does Detnerat have to do with all this about a hacker?"

"Quite a bit, as it turns out. I'll spare you the technical jargon, but Pandora's been doing some research, and there are some interesting connections between the company and Deika City, the area our mysterious friend's signal seems to have originated from. It was founded there, and it's the only major entity in the area with anywhere near the technical capability to remotely hack into the same secure military server we were fishing for data in. Their subsidiary, Feel Good Inc., also happened to have a satellite in position precisely above Okinawa during the time of the operation, and the politician Hanabata Kouku, also born in Deika, was present as a speaker at the conference- Toga can confirm that he seemed personally interested in Doctor Shield, and even regarded her with unusual suspicion. Taken separately, these could all very well be coincidences, but together, they point to an interesting relationship between a network of powerful entities. We may have stumbled onto a highly sophisticated organized crime network, or even a group to rival our own... the potential ramifications are concerning, to say the least. They don't seem to be either friendly or overtly hostile, but if our new 'friend' is to be believed, they had a part in alerting the heroes and military to our presence and location. Chaudron, what are your impressions from your interaction with the entity in question?"

"Initially, they seemed to be interested in making contact." Monoma frowned and sipped contemplatively at his tea before continuing. "To what end, I'm unsure. It was only after we cut off communications and failed to respond that they turned 'hostile'. While that action was certainly malicious, I wouldn't say that the window for negotiations has closed completely. If all the people and organizations you named are truly involved, then we should tread with caution, because their resources likely far outweigh our own. But if we do choose to contact them..."

"We can't show any weakness." Overhaul finished, strapping his mask back on. "That part's easy enough. We're the ones who killed All Might and Hawks, who took Tokyo PD by storm. Everyone in the country knows who we are. Who the hell are they? A bunch of B-class politicians and corporate big-wigs? What the hell have they done?"

"It's not about what they've done," countered Gentle, his tone steady and cautious- this was his first time arguing with a Yakuza capo, after all, and he found himself looking to Midoriya for support before he continued. "It's about what they could do, if they chose to. We've voluntarily exposed ourselves, but if they truly are the adversary we seek, then they've managed to fully integrate into..."
society, and to keep their purpose secret for years or decades. Shinkyu is a major political party- Hanabata stands a decent chance of becoming prime minister after the next elections. Detnerat is a universally recognized brand name, their products are in a third of the homes in Japan. Feel Good Inc. has access to a quarter of the country's phones and computers. I'd go so far as to say that if they chose to enter the limelight and cast the dice as we did, then they'd cause just as much damage if not more."

"Potential and execution are two different things," argued Monoma with a frown. "It doesn't matter how much they have in terms of resources and finances if they don't know how to use them properly. At the end of the day, it's all a question of leadership."

"That's exactly right," Midoriya replied with a grin. "As expected of Monoma- you've cut to the heart of the matter. We can't judge the caliber or capacity of their leaders until we speak with them, so if you judge that to be a prudent course of action, then contact them we shall, after taking all necessary precautions. We'll begin once Hatsume and Yaoyorozu return tomorrow evening."

"Ah, don't tell me we're about to go making even more friends," Dabi stepped in from the kitchen with a scowl on his face. "It's enough of a pain in the ass dealing with you shitheels already, god forbid we get another troupe of lunatics to join up. Food's ready, by the way."

After a surprisingly delicious dinner of beef curry udon- though the meat was slightly charred on the edges, as expected when Dabi used his quirk to cook it- Gentle found himself burdened with the unenviable task of heading into town to retrieve a handful of necessary supplies and ingredients.

"The car's parked at the bottom of the hill," Dabi was saying in between bites of food, his mouth half-full as he gestured with his chopsticks. "Just go straight down the road and you'll hit the nearest suburb in a few minutes, the supermarket's on the left. Pretty quiet little place, you don't need to take too many precautions about identity or whatever. I doubt your little show has many viewers up here anyway."

"It's true that we never truly broke into the Hokkaido market," Tobita mused, stroking the ghost of his tragically shaved beard as he threw on his overcoat and started toward the door. "A pity, but I'm sure it can be remedied in due time. Well then, gentlemen, if you've nothing else to add, I'm off!"

"Could you throw in some more beef?" called Mustard, yawning as he stood from his place at the table. "Or even pork. I'm tired of eating charred meat, I think I'll do some cooking on my own tomorrow."

"I'd love to see you try, smartass," Dabi growled, kicking his feet up on the table. "You're like fifteen, you're not supposed to have standards for food yet. Just go eat some cup ramen like a normal goddamn high schooler. Get him some of that instead, Gentle."

"And grab some more soap while you're at it," added Chisaki; he was washing his hands vigorously at the sink, as was his tradition after every meal. "Antibacterial, maximum strength."

"Of course, consider it done."

Once he'd slipped his gloves on and wrapped a scarf around his neck, Tobita gave one last respectful nod to Seraph, who glanced up from his conversation with Chaudron with a grin on his face.

"Do be careful, Gentle."

Danjuro smiled appreciably in reply, but he couldn't help the chill that shot up his spine as he turned and started out the door and into the cold northern night. A layer of snow several centimeters thick
still lay draped across the yard and the forest beyond; even by Hokkaido standards, the past week had been unseasonably cold for early April, dubbed a second winter by local weather forecasters. Not a moment after he took his first step out onto the path, another shiver rattled through his body, he felt a presence at his side- blinking in the dim light, he took him a moment to recognize that Dark Shadow had slipped out the door behind him. Growing tall and large under the glow of the moon and stars, the sentient quirk regarded him bemusedly with blinking yellow eyes, and when it spoke its deep voice echoed in the quiet, frigid air.

"I hear you finally proved your worth today, Master Gentle. They say your bloodlust on the battlefield was a sight to behold- if Master Monoma speaks true, then it was a thing of beauty. To assert your power so boldly and ferociously… I didn't know you had it in you. I only wish I'd been there."

"I… thank you." He finally managed- he hadn't the heart to boast about his victory, or even properly accept Dark Shadow's praise. "It was… quite the experience."

"The first kill always is," purred the avian beast, its beak twisted in a smile of sorts. "I hope you'll have many more to come. It's my shift on watch, so sadly I can't chat for long. Stay safe, Master Gentle."

"Y-you as well."

At that, the quirk turned and slid gracefully into the pitch darkness of the forest, melting into the shadows of the trees with all twenty-odd feet of its towering nocturnal size.

His heartbeat slowly falling back to normal, Tobita continued down the path toward the road, though he stopped in his tracks when he heard the soft crunch of footsteps behind him. When he glanced back, Spinner was faintly visible in the distant glow of lights from the house, shivering in a hoodie and sweatpants and faded sneakers.

"Hey, you mind if I tag along? Heard you were heading out, I need to grab a few more beers from the store."

"Oh that's quite alright, I can get them for you! No need to trouble yourself. Besides, it's dreadfully cold out."

"I'll be fine, don't worry." Iguchi shoved his hands in his hoodie's pockets and gave Danjuro a grin. "Besides, I needed to get out of the house anyway, stretch my legs and all. Being around Overhaul and his gang kinda creeps me out, to be honest."

"I understand you quite well," Gentle chuckled, and soon the two men were making their way to the car in step, braced together against the biting wind. They ran into more shadowy figures at the ridge just before the stairs to the driveway, a vantage point with a view of the entire valley, including the suburb in question and distant Sapporo. It was the rest of the perimeter patrol: Nemoto Shin, three black-masked Precepts henchmen, and Twice, his mask pulled halfway up so that he could puff on his Natural American Spirit as he gazed out over the quiet forest and faint city lights.

"Mind if I bum a light?" Spinner pulled a cigarette from his pocket as they approached the group, and Jin silently obliged as Gentle waited at the top of the steps, all too aware of the watchful eyes of the Yakuza men boring a hole into the side of his head. They still don't fully trust me, it seems. I can hardly blame them, given the stark contrast in our backgrounds. From the kings of the underworld to partnering with an internet personality… I must truly seem a joke to them.

"I trust you've made a speedy recovery from your injuries?" He forced himself to speak, lest his
thoughts grow too distracting.

"Quick enough," Twice replied, cracking his neck as he pulled his mask back on and stamped out his own cigarette in the snow. "I was pretty torn up by those freaky barbs, but I took it like a champ- it hurt so bad! But Overhaul patched me right up when we got back. Guess I have you and Compress to thank that it wasn't worse, though." He trailed off and glanced down at his phone. "My shift's finally over, right? Guess I'll go grab some food- I'm not hungry! Good luck with the supply run."

"Don't be too long," Nemoto called as they started down the stairs. "We'll be watching for your return."

"You see what I mean?" Shuiichi murmured, piling into the car with a grin on his face. "Let's get this over with quick, I don't wanna piss that weirdo off."

"My my, aren't you such a handsome young man!"

Gentle gave his most charming smile as the elderly woman behind the register leaned forward and pinched his cheek, throwing Spinner a brief, apologetic glance as he waited by the supermarket's doors.

"My most sincere thanks, madam- in all my days, seldom have I had the pleasure of meeting such a charming woman as you. But if you excuse me, I'll be needing to..." He reached for his bags, but she wouldn't be dissuaded- there was no one else in line, so it wasn't as if he could use that excuse to break free.

"And a perfect gentleman, too! If only I had a grandson just like you!"

"Would that it were so," Gentle chuckled- he always enjoyed attention, but this was growing dangerous- even with the shaved beard and gold hair dye, an old woman might recognize his face from the evening news if she looked long and hard enough. "My friend is waiting, though, and I mustn't keep him..."

"Oh don't worry about that, a nice man like you shouldn't bother himself with a mutant like him."

Tobita froze, and the smile on his face quickly died. His eyes darkening, he carefully took hold of the woman's arm, and eased it away from his face.

"I should go," he declared pointedly, gathering up his bags and plunging out into the dark parking lot alongside Spinner, who'd already stepped through the doors.

"Don't worry about it." Iguchi cut him off before he could even open his mouth to apologize, then lit another cigarette and cracked open a beer as they cautiously made their way back to their parking spot; half the lot was covered in slick black ice, so they'd been forced into a space at the far end. "We're only thirty kilos outside the city, but trust me, this is already hick country. I grew up in a town a lot like this. I'm used to it."

"But... but you shouldn't have to be!" Gentle protested. "Isn't that why you joined the League, after all? So you wouldn't have to tolerate this kind of treatment?"

"Well, that's part of it. What do you want me to do, though? Kick her ass? Kill her? Real brave of me, beating on a seventy year old woman, even if she does happen to be a racist piece of shit. Stand
up for myself? Argue with her? I'm not gonna pretend like I'm gonna change her mind. Sometimes, it's just best to take it and move on. She'll be dead soon enough anyway."

He took a deep swig of his beer, and Danjuro fell silent, at a loss for what to say next. *Perhaps saying nothing is better for the moment*, he decided. As they pressed on together through the all-but empty lot, though, Tobita's hairs began to stand slowly on end, one-by-one, and an unmistakable sensation began to creep into his very veins- the feeling that he was being watched.

Above them, the nearest streetlamp began to flicker, and when he glanced to his left, Gentle noticed that Spinner was shivering even more intensely than usual; the air had grown unmistakably colder than before, despite the fact that only twenty minutes had passed at most.

"Spinner." Danjuro laid a gloved hand on Iguchi's shoulder, his eyes narrowed. "Is it just me, or do you get the feeling that..."

He trailed off when the next streetlamp flickered back to life, and his gaze drifted back in the direction of their parking spot. Just twenty-odd meters away, directly in front of the car, a dark figure stood beneath the dim yellow light, scarcely more than a black silhouette in the shape of a man. He was watching them with two glowing eyes.

Gentle and Spinner saw him almost simultaneously, and stumbled back in unison with muted cries on their lips. Bags and beer and cigarettes fell unceremoniously to the ground as Iguchi drew two daggers from inside his hoodie, and Tobita cast a protective circle of air in front of them. The figure seemed to find that amusing, and made a rasping sound that resembled a laugh. *Dark Shadow?* He wondered, but the size, shape, and voice were all wrong.

"W-who the hell do you think you are?!" Shouted Spinner, doing his best not to let the fear seep into his voice. "This better not be more of that stupid clown shit! Get lost, man, we're not fucking around!"

Gentle, on the other hand, couldn't think of anything clever to say, but squinted closer at the figure as his eyes adjusted to the lack of light. All at once, he realized that the intruder wasn't an amorphous mass of humanoid shadow, as he'd initially feared- they were around his height, and wearing a heavy black parka, with the hood drawn tight around their face. The man took a step forward, his hands clasped behind his back, and finally spoke.

"You two, huh? Figures. I was hoping for more of a challenge, but you'll do."

"What was that?!" Shuiichi tightened his grip on his daggers, and pointed one in the man's direction. "We'll see if you're still talking shit after we beat your ass into the dirt! Come on, Gentle, let's take this punk!"

"Spinner, wait!" Gentle held up his hand, his eyes wide- for the past few moments, the faint sound of cracking and shifting ice had been steadily growing louder and louder in the darkness around them. "His quirk, I think it's-"

Iguchi had already hurled one dagger in the intruder's direction; before it had traveled even five meters, though, a sharp whoosh cut through the air, and in the stretch of darkness that separated them from the hooded man, something smashed into the blade, breaking it to pieces midair.

"What the-" Spinner scarcely had time to express his confusion before a second whoosh sounded, much closer, and a spherical chunk of ice no larger than a grapefruit hurtled out of the darkness and smashed into the back of his head. He toppled to the ground almost instantly, unconscious- his remaining blade slid from his grip as he fell and clattered across the asphalt.
"Dammit!" Tobita barely threw up the rest of his bubble-like elastic shield in time to rebound another ice projectile aimed at his own head. It was swiftly followed up by a barrage of identical missiles, but as Gentle focused his attention on reinforcing the barrier with more layers, he failed to notice the weblike strands of black ice creeping towards him across the pavement. By the time he glanced down and caught sight of them, it was already too late; in an instant, he was being encased in ice from the feet up.

Panicking, he reached down to elasticize his expanding prison, but before he could touch it, the ice around his legs shifted and changed its shape, dragging him off balance and throwing him to the ground. By then it had raced up his back all the way to his shoulders; when he tried to reach out a hand and touch the pavement, he found his own arm being wrenched in the other direction, so roughly he was almost sure it was dislocated. Before Danjuro could even cry out in pain, his head slammed hard into the asphalt, and his vision swiftly turned to black.

"I'm proud of you, Apocrypha. We only needed one, but you went above and beyond, and secured us two valuable hostages."

"It was nothing, sir. They were easy targets."

"So you say, but I've seen how dangerous this one can be when he has his little helper. Ah, he's waking up! Rise and shine, sleeping beauty."

When Tobita faded back into consciousness, the first sensation he was aware of was pain- throbbing and persistent, at the back of his head. His were a thoughts a foggy blur, and voices were fading in and out; he tried to lift his hand and feel the spot in question, but found that he couldn't move his arms. His eyes blinked open, and he winced in the harsh glare of an overhead light, letting out a soft noise of pain. The world came into focus slowly, but when it did, the first thing he saw was a man's face, narrow and angular, with a receding hairline and a long, prominent nose. Vaguely familiar by appearance, he smiled when Danjuro looked up to meet his gaze.

"There he is. How are you feeling, Gentle Criminal? Or do you mostly go by Gentle these days?"

"I... what? Where am I?" Tobita winced once more at the harshness of the light above him, and turned his head briefly to either side. He was in a small chamber that resembled a hospital room, restrained by his wrists and ankles on some sort of operating table- Spinner was in the same situation to his right, still out cold, while the mysterious figure from before loomed near the room's entrance, his face and body still concealed by a massive black parka. "Who... who are you?"

"I'm Yotsubashi Rikiya," the hook-nose man proclaimed proudly, "but if you'd prefer, you can call me Re-Destro. Now, I know it may not seem like it at the moment, but believe me- I'm your new best friend."

"We seem to have lost contact with Gentle and Spinner. They left the premises approximately ninety minutes ago, and have failed to respond to all attempts to reach them by radio and cellphone. Their GPS signals have vanished. I recommend immediate investigation."

Nemoto Shin's report on the situation was so dry and clinical, so devoid of emotion, that Midoriya couldn't help but laugh quietly to himself, drawing a skeptical glance from Overhaul and an amused one from Monoma.

"Something funny about that?" Kai rasped, his brows knitted together in annoyance. "I mean, they're your guys, not mine, but unless you know something I don't, I'd say this merits the bare minimum
amount of concern."

"No, no, not about the disappearances. I was just thinking of that old saying: 'speak of the devil and he shall appear'. It seems likely to me that we're being courted by Detnerat once more, even earlier than I'd expected. Their method is laughably clumsy, though. What do you make of it, Neito?"

"They're certainly taking considerable precautions for a first meeting," Chaudron commented, a smug grin spreading slowly across his face. "Taking two hostages in advance of our first meeting means one of two things: Either they lack sufficient confidence in their own capabilities, or they fear us enough to make such underhanded tactics necessary."

"Why not both?" Quipped Toga; laid across the couch next to Midoriya, she had her head in his lap, and had been twirling one of her knives while they spoke. "Maybe they're weak and afraid. Didn't think about that, did ya, Neito?"

"Ah, an excellent theory, Himiko. Corporate executives, politicians… they've been living the comfortable life for decades. They know they lack our survival instinct, our drive and willingness to act, and thus they feel they must compensate by presenting an ultimatum. How adorably quaint of them."

"Sorry to interrupt the little circle-jerk, but how do we even know this was Detnerat in the first place?" Overhaul closed his eyes and rubbed one temple in exasperation. "We're not even certain that they were the people who contacted us. And it's not like this hypothetical group of hypothetical secret criminal masterminds are the only ones who have it out for us. We made a lot of people's shitlists on the Black Day, if you'd somehow forgotten. Who's to say it wasn't some heroes or vigilantes, or even just the damn cops?"

"Oh, that's just a hunch of mine." Izuku smiled bashfully. "Do please forgive me for making assumptions. By all means, let's investigate the matter." Seraph reached for his phone and connected it to the wall-mounted study room television, then began to scroll through the numerous 'custom additions' that Hatsume and Aiba had made to their arsenal of software. Finally, he settled on an icon that opened to a map of the surrounding area, including the suburb where Gentle and Spinner had made their supply run. "Ah, here we are. Now that supermarket is just down the main road, correct?"

Scrolling with his finger, he rapidly zoomed in on the exact location in question, then tapped on the grey outline of the building. After a brief delay punctuated by a loading bar, the view onscreen changed to a grainy black-and-white video of the store's parking lot, which Midoriya rapidly adjusted to the proper timestamp.

"And just like that, we have access to their exterior security feeds. Neito, remind me to thank La Brava for this little program of hers when she wakes up."

"Can't do that if she doesn't wake up," Himiko mumbled, fumbling with her knife a bit more ominously now- after shooting her an appropriately stern glance, Izuku continued.

"Now, if they left ninety minutes ago, and the drive there takes around fifteen minutes…"

It only took Seraph a few moments to reach the section of footage they were looking for, with two figures vaguely recognizable as Tobita and Iguchi emerging from the store and making their way towards the car. They all watched intently as the two confronted a shadowy figure at the edge of the lot, as all the ice and snow in the area twisted and shifted and began to attack them. Monoma let out a soft noise of disappointment when they were both soundly defeated in a matter of seconds, but leaned closer all the same as a second car pulled up moments later, black with tinted windows. The sea of shifting ice coalesced all at once, and proceeded to carry the two unconscious bodies into the waiting open door like a conveyor belt while the hooded figure climbed into the passenger seat. The
car sped off and rapidly receded from view, and Midoriya paused the video with a satisfied expression, then reached for his notebook to jot down a few observations about the enemy's quirk. *Ice control and production, perhaps? No, he wasn't making more, he was only using what was already present- it must be cryokinesis."

"Well then, I think that rules out the police, as well as most heroes and vigilantes- unless it's now common practice for them to spirit away captured criminals in mysterious, unmarked vehicles. Is that the case?"

"Not typically," Chisaki muttered, his arms crossed. "Okay, fine, so they probably were kidnapped, judging from this. What are you going to do about it?"

"We'll track the car, of course. The license plate was too grainy to make out with this camera's resolution, but La Brava's software is more than capable of following a given vehicle remotely by piggybacking on GPS satellites, given the proper information about its starting position and time. It's unlikely they're based in Hokkaido, so the car is almost certainly headed to an airport- I'll call Momo and have her follow up once they make it to the mainland. But as for us, right now? We don't need to do a single thing, as far as I'm concerned. Gentle and Spinner's safety is practically guaranteed. Whatever their identities may be, our new enemies won't be mysterious for much longer- they're doing us a favor, to be honest, leading us right to their door. And I can't deny, I'm so very curious to finally meet them."

A knock came at the door just moments later, and Overhaul nodded for Nemoto to open it. It was Twice who stepped through, his mask removed.

"Hey boss, Chaudron, just letting you know, there's a new message for you waiting downstairs from one of the, uh… *recruits*. Also, Todoroki apparently wants to talk, passing the message on from Mustard."

"Does he, now?" His curiosity piqued, Midoriya raised one eyebrow. As far as Overhaul's reports divulged, their prisoner had scarcely said a word for two weeks, even under interrogation. "How interesting. Did he say what about?"

"Nope, I'm not sure. By the way, where are Spinner and Gentle? They should've been back by now, right?"

Izuku exchanged a brief glance with Chisaki before speaking.

"They might be away for a while longer than planned. I'll explain the situation to everyone first thing tomorrow, but for now, let's deal with this recruit of ours first. Coldflame has been patient this long, he can wait a while longer." Pausing, he looked back to Neito and Himiko. "Shall we?"

"After you."

"Lead the way, baby!"

For the past year, Monoma and Toga had been charged with spearheading the initiative cryptically referred to as 'recruitment' in all Syndicate records. Rather than contacting other villains, however, which remained Midoriya's purview, Chaudron's task was to identify candidates among the hero community who might be receptive to their message and mission. Once a potential recruit was identified, the first step was a long-term surveillance operation to monitor their behavior and identify any unusual tendencies or habits that might affect the operation one way or another. First contact only came after at least a month's worth of preparation, and even then, it was always carried out via Toga and her quirk.
After a year of efforts, the Syndicate had identified a total of nine potential candidates. Seven cases had progressed to a first meeting, with two deemed unsuitable shortly after contact. Of the remaining five, though, every single one had demonstrated potential. Two cases were still in progress, meeting periodically with a disguised Himiko as she gradually eased them into the proper state of mind to readily accept their new life and purpose when the time came to reveal her identity. The other three recruits had already pledged loyalty to the Syndicate.

Presented with the first of these new assets half a year ago, Midoriya had made the decision to keep them embedded in hero society as sleeper agents, until the perfect moment presented itself to play the aces up his sleeve. He’d been tempted to show his hand on the day of Operation Brennus, adding a fourth strike to the three he already had planned, but in retrospect he was glad for his patience. The Black Day had been but a brief prelude compared to what was to come, and the longer he remained patient, the longer the Syndicate would continue to receive the invaluable inside intelligence that made many of their operations possible in the first place.

These three faithful recruits weren't the only weapons at their disposal among the ranks of the enemy, however. In the midst of their struggle to dethrone Shigaraki and break apart the League of Villains, they had stumbled across something infinitely more valuable than anything Tomura's steadily collapsing group of loyalists had to offer. Since the day of his first meeting with the League two years ago, Midoriya had known of the existence of a traitor somewhere at U.A., but he'd nearly given up hope of ever contacting them. That had remained the case until six months ago, when they found a working cellphone amid the ruins of the League's hideout in Kobe after their battle there. It rang just minutes later, and when Izuku answered, it had been a U.A. student's voice on the other end, asking about the time and location for his next meeting. After brief negotiations, an amicable arrangement was reached between them, and Shigaraki's secret weapon became the first of the Syndicate's sleepers.

By the time they made their way to the heavily modified laptop they used for most remote communications- phones were too easy to trace back to a source, after all- two red icons were flashing on the screen, indicating that a second recruit had contacted them in addition to the message Twice had reported, a rare occurrence in such a short timeframe. *Something must have happened*, Izuku surmised as Neito sat down and logged in, *something important*. It wasn't long before his suspicions were confirmed. The first message was from Shigaraki's original traitor, codenamed 'Emperor', and had been sent two hours ago.

'Something's up. Pieces are on the move in a major way. Colleagues and I have been summoned to a classified meeting at Best Jeanist's office, multiple top heroes en route, including #9 #10, #6, and #3. Several other student interns as well. Will be in touch again after the meeting ends.'

The second message was more recent, received just two minutes ago; it was from the recruit codenamed 'Temperance'.

'Big developments. Best Jeanist and Sir Nighteye have put together a huge task force of top heroes and interns, with the mission of ending the Syndicate. Apparently they have government permission to use lethal force if necessary. Battle Fist and Ground Zero are involved as well, they've been placed together in a unit that's going to take protective custody of all of your families the day after graduation. I'll write more soon, I've been in the bathroom too long, don't want to seem suspicious.'

"Took them long enough," Izuku cracked his knuckles methodically, then gave Neito a smile. "It seems we'll soon have a worthy challenge after all. Relay this information to Pandora and Synapse when you have the chance, their team needs to be aware."

"Of course." Monoma refreshed the inbox, frowning when nothing new appeared. "No word as of
now from Tower or Hierophant. It seems they're likely not involved in this little team-up."

"We already have two aces in their ranks- let's not push our luck." Satisfied, Midoriya stood and wrapped one arm around Toga's side- she smiled giddily, bunching her hands up under her chin.

"I'm so excited to see my little baby recruits again! Can they finally join us soon, for real for real? This is such a good chance!"

"All in good time, darling. First, we'll need to decide what to do with this little team of theirs first. Thankfully, a group of heroes that large and powerful is just begging to be torn apart from within." He glanced at his watch, then laid his other hand on Neito's shoulder. "They've finally made their first real move against us- we'll begin planning our response in earnest tomorrow. For now, get some rest. I need to speak with our resident prisoner."

"Are you sure you don't need either of us to accompany you, Izuku?"

"I can give him another scar or two if he starts acting up!" Himiko added, drawing her knife once more in a flash as color began to creep onto her cheeks.

"That's quite alright, you two needn't bother yourselves. I've been looking forward to having some more alone time with Shoto."

"They tell me you'd like to speak."

Todoroki barely lifted his head in acknowledgement when Midoriya spoke, and didn't move it all from where he was laying on his bed, a book of old poetry in his hand. Let down from its bun, his bicolored hair flowed down to his shoulders now, and he had more red and white stubble than the last time Izuku had seen him. His dinner lay half-eaten on a tray at his side- flimsy paper, of course, to ensure it couldn't be used as a weapon. The shackles aren't even necessary this time. Ten of Mustard's gas canisters are connected to a vent in the ceiling- if he makes one aggressive move towards me, the whole room will be flooded in an instant.

"Yeah, that's right."

Glancing back behind his shoulder, Seraph gave Mustard a curt nod; his mask donned, the younger villain returned the gesture before closing the lead-lined door behind them with a hiss of air.

"That's good to hear. Poor Overhaul nearly thought you'd gone mute these past few weeks- you've been a horrid guest by all accounts, my dear Shoto. And how the time flies! It's been four weeks since we took you, did you know that? It's almost our one month anniv-"

"I want to join."

Midoriya trailed off, the joke dying on his lips. He raised one eyebrow, then took a step forward, his expression full of curiosity as he held one gloved hand to his ear.

"I'm sorry, could you say that again? You mumbled, and I just want to make sure that I heard you right."

"I want to join," Todoroki repeated, louder this time, looking up from his book and making eye contact. There was a ferocity in his eyes, but it quickly died away, replaced by pain. "I... I've been thinking a lot lately. About what Yaoyorozu said. About heroes, about the economy, about my father- about pretty much everything. Maybe I have been lying to myself- maybe we all are, back at U.A. and the other hero schools. If the old way isn't working... if the old system could ignore what
happened to my family because of who my father was... then maybe your way is worth a try."

"Hmm." Midoriya began to pace about the room when Coldflame drew silent, his mechanical hand perched on his chin in contemplation. Finally, he stopped, and pointed one prosthetic finger in the prisoner's direction. "That's a very convincing speech. You even got the little pauses right, too. How long have you been rehearsing that?"

"What are you... no, it's not an act." Shoto scowled, pushing himself upright in bed. "I'm being serious, Midoriya."

"Ooh, that bit wasn't as good. You lost some of that realistic emotion."

Coldflame sighed, and cradled his head in both hands.

"Of course, it's natural that you wouldn't trust me. Just tell, me please- what can I do to convince you?"

"Oh, it's not me you need to convince. It's her." For a moment Todoroki's brows knit together in confusion- Midoriya watched bemusedly as the realization slowly spread across his face before continuing. "Yaoyorozu isn't here at the moment, but she'll be back soon. As the one here who knows you best, she'll be the one to test you. And believe me, I'm quite looking forward to the results."

He turned and waved to the camera; Shoto said nothing more as he took his leave. When Izuku emerged, Dabi was waiting outside the door alongside Mustard, watching the cell's security feed with tired eyes.

"I take it you still haven't spoken to him?"

"Nah, course not. What the hell's the point in that? I found out everything I need to know when we fought."

"It might go a long way in clearing some things up. I think you'd both benefit from it."

"I don't know about that." Dabi shoved his hands in the pockets of his coat, turned, and started off down the hall. "I think it'd probably just fuck up things even more. I can't stand being around him for too long."

"And why is that the case?" Seraph inquired calmly, keeping step with the taller villain.

Dabi was silent for a long moment before he replied.

"Bad memories."

For one reason or another, sleep didn't come easily to Midoriya that night. Toga slept like a doll at his side, but after a few hours' worth of tossing and turning without success, he rose as quietly as he could manage and made his way downstairs, straight to the kitchen for another cup of coffee. If you can't sleep, you might as well be productive, he told himself, borrowing an old quote from Hatsume. She's probably awake as well at this hour, he realized as he settled down on an armchair with his laptop. Perhaps I'll give her a call. A quick check of her status revealed that she was 'away', though, and Izuku chuckled softly to himself. Probably with Shinso- I should've known. Wasting no time, he swiftly pulled open a new file and began a first draft of the Syndicate's response plan to the hero task force. How much time passed after that, he wasn't sure- the minutes and hours ticked by in a blur.
when Midoriya was working, and before he knew it, he had ten pages of possible courses of action and contingencies. Just when his eyelids were finally beginning to grow heavy, though, a faint beeping sounded across the room, and he stood and squinted in the direction of the source. It was the laptop Monoma used to contact the recruits, and judging from the blinking red notification at the corner of the screen, they had a new message.

What peculiar timing. What could possibly be so pressing at four in the morning? He wondered, glancing down at his watch. A quick check indicated that it was from the recruit codenamed 'Tower', sent five minutes ago.

'Looks like U.A.'s pulling some sort of surprise early morning final exam, a team-based hostage situation. I know this interferes with the plan, but the spike I planted in the Ground Beta cameras is still active if you want to monitor the situation.'

"Don't mind if I do," Izuku murmured, pressing a few keys to pull up a wide-angle view of the ongoing exam, direct from the same cameras U.A. teachers used to monitor the testing. Another keystroke and the footage was playing on the living room television, a tracking shot of Battle Fist as she leapt from building to building under a hail of bullets and projectiles, Jack Mantis in hand.

"Ah, we're getting right to the main event, it seems." He checked his watch once more, then glanced to the ticking timer counting down at the top of the screen- only twenty-odd minutes left. Not quite enough time to pull together the team necessary to execute our little surprise as planned, but no matter. Our next conversation will have to wait a while longer, it seems, dear Itsuka.

Two more blinking notifications had appeared at the top of the screen, from Emperor and Temperance, and Midoriya smiled broadly as he glanced over the contents before closing the laptop and turning back to the television.

"In the meantime, though, do please try your best. After all, I am your biggest fan."

Chapter End Notes

And here we are again, another chapter just in time for the one year (!) anniversary of this story! When I started it last summer I had no idea it would go this far, and I'm so happy that I took the chance on the idea I had. I look forward to another amazing year of twists and turns ahead for Midoriya, Kendo, the Syndicate, and everyone else.

As far as this chapter goes, though, the MLA is finally here in force! I couldn't wait to get to them, and I welcome any and all thoughts or predictions for how Re-Destro and his gang might play into the story going forward. Gentle's really been through a rollercoaster this time around, and he and Spinner are in a bit of a jam at the moment. And did someone say traitors? Because there are plenty of those to go around- this was another reveal I was really looking forward to, and trust me when I say that the Recruits are going to be vitally important to the story going forward.

What do you think about Todoroki's request? What would you like to see next time? Let me know any and all of your thoughts down in the comments, as always! Next chapter will be out by the end of the month.
"Keep pushing forward, we can't let them pin us down like this!"

"Easier said than done!" Kendo replied, sweat dripping down her brow as she flattened herself against the rooftop AC unit serving as their cover. She could hardly even hear her own voice above the constant cacophony of bullets tearing into the metal at any given moment; by now, it was more than clear that one of their opponents was Snipe, and his aim was as precise and deadly at ever. Firing from the top floor of Ground Beta's tallest building, a fifteen-story office complex near the center of the training arena, he had a perfect vantage point to rain down steel on anyone who tried to make an approach. The only respite came in the brief spans when he shifted his fire to Reiko's team, but given the superior mobility One For All provided, they'd spent the majority of the exam thus far in his crosshairs. That fact had done little to daunt their designated team leader, however- five minutes in, Kamakiri's version of a plan seemed to primarily consist of a straight charge at the enemy.

"Like I said," she continued, "he has a solid bead on us! We won't be able to get all the way to him without rethinking our strategy!"

"We just need to wait for the right moment," Jack Mantis insisted, his teeth grit in frustration as he pushed a few loose strands of his bright green mohawk out of his eyes. "The next time he shifts his fire, we go on the offensive, shred their defenses with a combination of you guys' quirks and then charge. Do you think those air blasts of yours are strong enough to deflect bullets?"

"I can definitely try, but no guarantees. We still don't know who the second teacher is, though…"

"It's gotta be someone with a close-range quirk," Togaru retorted, peeking out of cover for a moment before two more gunshots slammed into the metal just inches from his face and forced him to withdraw again. "Otherwise, they'd be on our asses too by now."

"Well that may be so, but-"

"Guys, the other team!" Beside them, Hiryu Rin shot to his feet and pointed across Ground Beta's main street, where their opponents were charging across the gap in between two apartment buildings, their silhouettes faintly illuminated by the streetlamps and the scant amount of sunlight filtering in above the horizon. The sky was slowly turning purple and orange in the far distance, but the early morning air was still bitterly cold, and Itsuka felt a shiver race up her spine as she squinted her eyes to take a closer look. At first glance, it looked like Poltergeist, Mudslide, and Airshifter were running on nothing, but a faint shimmer of reflected light confirmed that it was one of Tsuburara's hardened air constructions, this time in the shape of a simple bridge between rooves.

"Ah, shit!" Behind her, Kamakiri swore viciously. "Those motherfuckers! Battle Fist, do you think you can hit them with a blast from here, knock them off?"

"Maybe, but… we're not supposed to engage the other team! And besides, they're at least five stories up, a fall from this height could seriously injure them, or worse!"

"It's not engaging them, just long-range suppression! And they'll be fine, they've got Poltergeist to catch them!"

In the relative silence that followed, they all realized simultaneously that Snipe had switched targets,
"Dragon Shroud, help Snipe out-lay down some more suppressing fire on them! Battle Fist, get ready to jump us all the way to that building!"

While Rin fired hardened scales in the opposing team's direction, Kendo swelled up her hands, her eyes fixed on the distant window Snipe was shooting from, in case he decided to start prioritizing them again. After a moment, she was ready to carry them, and with a nod from Jack Mantis, Itsuka gently wrapped her teammates in her left hand, then launched into the air with her cape whipping behind her. Craning her head to the left as they arced high above the buildings below, she caught sight of Reiko's team, huddling behind cover on a roof just as they had been. Moments later, though, a bullet whizzed past her- she lifted her oversized right hand up just in time to catch a second and third on her palm, and winced in pain. Snipe obviously couldn't use live rounds against students, but his nonlethal stun bullets still packed plenty of punch. Taking one directly to the head or chest could knock someone cold-even her, if the angle was right.

"We're taking fire!" She called, adjusting their course to come in for a landing one or two buildings short of their objective. "I'm taking us back down, we're not gonna make it there without getting shot to pieces!"

"Just try the air blast!" Kamakiri shouted back over the wind. "We can't let ourselves get trapped again!"

"Roger that!"

Before Kendo could even adjust her stance to attempt a flick, however, she suddenly felt a sizable portion of her momentum leave her all at once, and her eyes widened in surprise. When she snapped her fingers together to try and produce the attack, nothing happened, and she realized with a sinking feeling who the second teacher was.

"Guys, it's Aizawa! One of my quirks just got erased, we're coming in for a rough landing! Brace yourselves!"

"Oh, shit!" Jack Mantis cried as the ground began to rush up rapidly beneath them, squirming frantically in her grasp. "Is he trying to fucking kill us?!"

"No, he just knows I can do this."

As they plummeted down past another office building, Kendo extended her massive right hand and plunged it through the wall, tearing through glass and concrete as she slowed them down to a halt over the course of five floors, then swung them all through one of the windows to evade Snipe's barrage. Luckily, it seemed after experimentation that he could only erase one of her quirks at a time, and One For All seemed to almost always be the ability that was targeted.

"God damn…" Kamakiri growled, coughing as Battle Fist set them on the floor and used her hands to beat away the cloud of dust that had gathered. "This is one hell of a test."

"Yeah, they really seem set on the 'plus ultra' part of it all," Itsuka flexed her bruised and battered fingers, doing her best not to show the pain on her face- she would probably need to see Recovery Girl after the exam at this rate. "Is everyone okay? I know that got kinda dicey."

"All fine here," Hiryu replied, dusting off his Chinese-inspired costume. "I had my Scale Armor for protection."

"And I'm just fucking dandy. Let's get back to the mission." Togaru stood and made his way toward
the windows on the far side of the room, which faced their objective—Itsuka and Rin followed close behind. "Alright, looks like Snipe's still targeting the other team. You think we're close enough to make it the rest of the way there in one more jump?"

"Theoretically, yes, but not if I get targeted by Eraser again— I don't wanna risk another fall like that, plus we're vulnerable targets for Snipe when we're all midair. Maybe it would be wiser to get down to street level until we're right beneath them. If I could find something to use as a shield, then we'd be safe from both of them. And come to think of it, Aizawa really emphasized the whole 'play the objective' thing, didn't he? What if this whole idea of one-upping the other team is just a distraction? We're dealing with two teachers—cooperating with Reiko's group could be our best shot at passing."

"Last time I checked, I'm still in charge," Jack Mantis snapped, his insectoid mouth drawn in a frown. "You're not the only one who can come up with a plan, Kendo. And I'm not gonna hand over my points to the opponent just 'cause you want everyone to get along and sing Kumbaya, as usual. Just for once in your life, try thinking of yourself first, okay?" Then he turned to Rin, his ragged black coat shining softly in the pale, flickering glow of the overhead lights. "So how hard can that Scale Armor of yours get? Is it good at taking big impacts?"

"I've trained with the durability pretty extensively— it can take a lot of punishment."

"Alright, excellent. Now listen up, here's how we're gonna get past those two. First, we wait for the other team to make a break for the main building, so both teachers have their eyes on them. Then, Battle First, I want you to take Dragon Shroud and throw him right at that top floor window, just like you're chucking a baseball. Put enough elbow into it, and he'll get there too fast for either one of them to react in time. Once he crash lands, he serves as the distraction, and draws their attention you carry me and charge in just a few seconds later. Once all three of us are in there, they won't be able to stop us."

"That's… Reckless, overconfident, and needlessly dangerous, Kendo wanted to say, but Hiryu laid a hand on her shoulder, and she forced herself to bite her tongue. I'm not in charge today, and we get more points for following his orders, however risky they are. "Dragon Shroud, are you okay with this plan?"

"Yeah, don't worry, okay? I can handle it. Let's get moving, though, I'm sure the other team isn't just sitting around."

"Not even close!" Kamakiri called, his face still pressed up against the glass. "Shit, they made another bridge, all the way to the main building! We gotta hurry!"

As she rushed forward and lifted up Rin in her undamaged hand, Itsuka spared a glance across the street; Reiko was using her quirk to hold up a sheet of metal as a shield as she charged across the invisible bridge alongside Juzo and Tsuburara, a. There was no time to waste complaining, though; once Togaru had destroyed the window with a blade produced from his wrist and Hiryu had turned his skin to scaly brown armor, she held her left arm up to eye level to gauge the distance and angle, then leaned back and hurled Dragon Shroud up and away like a pitcher with a fastball. Oh god, please be okay, please be okay.

Thankfully, her aim held true, and there was a distant crash of glass as Rin plunged through the window. Moments later, the steady crack of gunfire from Snipe came to a halt, and Kendo exchanged a nod with Kamakiri before picking him up and leaping out on a roughly identical trajectory. Just as planned, it seemed that Aizawa was too distracted dealing with their teammate to defend against their new advance, and there was no sudden sensation of losing speed like last time.

"Blast them before they get there!" Jack Mantis suddenly cried, pointing downward at the other
group, who were moving even faster not that they were unhindered by bullets. "Don't argue, just do it! That's an order!"

A frown spread across Kendo's face as she turned midair and flicked her oversized fingers in their opponents' direction, producing a concussive blast of pressure that streaked down with pinpoint precision and shattered Airshifter's bridge to pieces. Sorry, guys. I don't like it either. Thanks to Poltergeist, though, the trio only fell for a brief moment before Yanagi maneuvered their shield around to catch them all, and Itsuka sighed in silent relief as she and Togaru soared through the broken window and skidded to a halt inside. Just a few yards in front of them, Dragon Shroud had already defeated and forced to his knees by the two teachers, much of his body wrapped in Eraserhead's binding cloth. Aizawa still had two strands in hand as he tired the student up, and glanced up with only mild surprise at the two newcomers, his pupils glowing red and his hair lifting up in his signature tell; Kendo didn't have to snap to know that One For All was already gone, but she managed to dive in front of Kamakiri and raise her massive hands in front of her before Eraser turned his gaze to her teammate.

"Stay behind me!" She called back, her eyes still locked on Shota's. "I'm gonna start moving forward, don't let him see you!

"No, you're not going to do any of that." Came another voice, muffled by a gas mask. A few yards beyond Aizawa and Rin, Snipe stood with his gun trained on the back of the hostage's head; Battle Fist's eyes widened in shock when she realized that it was Tetsutetsu. Real Steel was tied to a chair, and when he caught sight of his would-be rescuers, he quickly launched into a desperate plea.

"Oh my god, I'm finally saved! You've gotta help me, these villains are crazy! I think they're gonna kill me!" Tetsutetsu had never been the best actor, so it was immediately clear that his antics were staged- not that the poorly hidden grin tugging at the corner of his mouth did anything to help the illusion. Kamakiri came to the same realization behind her, and started to move forward, but she leaned back and swiftly shook her head.

"Real or fake, if he 'dies' we fail automatically," she whispered. "We've gotta go along with what they say for now, but the moment Eraser blinks, we-

She was interrupted by the sound of shattering glass from across the room, as Mudslide, Poltergeist, and Airshifter charged through, with Reiko's metal shield levitated in front of them so that Aizawa couldn't erase their quirks. Within a matter of moments, chaos unfolded: easing the shield just a bit to the right so that Snipe was inside her field of view, Yanagi tore the gun from his hand and sent it flying out the far window. The teacher reached for the knife at his hip, but just a beat later, something slammed into Snipe's chest and sent him stumbling backward with an audible crack. With Eraserhead's attention sufficiently diverted, Battle Fist and Kamakiri charged forward together, and Togaru slashed Rin's bonds with a blade from his forearm before he received a brutal kick to the chest from Aizawa for his effort. Thankful for the distraction Jack Mantis had provided, Kendo made straight for Tetsutetsu.

I have a head start on Poltergeist's team, even without One For All I can make it there first!

She was swiftly relieved of that assumption when something hard slammed into the side of her head, and sent her stumbling to her knees just a dozen paces shy of the hostage. It produced the same distinctive crack that she'd heard with Snipe, and when another invisible projectile streaked towards her, glimmering faintly in the dull morning light, Itsuka quickly realized the nature of the attack. Tsuburara's making balls of hardened air, which Reiko throws at enemies with her telekinesis. Impressive- it's a perfect combo of stealth and offense.

Kendo held up her hands in time to bat away the next sphere before it impacted and send it sailing
out the window, but she'd already been delayed too long. Reiko's team was continuing their steady advance forward, and past Tetsutetsu, Snipe was already back on his feet, drawing a bowie knife from a sheath his hip. Still deprived of her second quirk, Battle Fist tried to resume her dash towards the objective, only to find that her feet wouldn't move; when she glanced down, they were sinking into the floor, like it was made of mud. *Oh, shit…*

A brief glance confirmed that everyone in the room was similarly trapped by Juzo's quirk—everyone except for Real Steel, who was being levitated chair and all by Reiko, slowly floating towards the shield that was protecting her team from Eraser's gaze. *Crap, we're gonna lose at this rate!* She realized, as the softening intensified and she rapidly sank all the way up to her waist. Her feet were dangling into the room below by now, and Snipe and Dragon Shroud had already vanished beneath the surface. Behind her, Aizawa had latched onto a pipe on the ceiling with his binding cloth, and Kamakiri had dug one of his arm blades into a support column, but they were both too far away to reach Tetsutetsu in time. *I'm the only one close enough to grab him.* Suddenly her mind flashed back to that day on U.A.'s roof, with Midoriya vanishing into the warp gate ahead of her, and Kendo understood immediately what she had to do: Eraserhead had finally blinked, and she could feel that One For All had returned. *There's no use hiding this power forever. If I'm going to be a hero worthy of my predecessors, then I have to embrace it.*

"*Catch him,/*" she whispered, extending one hand out towards Tetsutetsu. A surge of energy rocked through her body in response, and on cue, Blackwhip burst from her hand and wrapped itself around Real Steel's chest, prompting a very genuine yelp of surprise. Now it was a tug-of-war between Battle Fist and Poltergeist, but with her quirk's power divided between holding up the shield and lifting the hostage, Yanagi's strength quickly failed, and Tetsutetsu snapped back towards Kendo like a rubber band, right into her waiting hands just as she fell through and down to the next floor. Honenuki undid his softening in a panic, but Itsuka was already out of reach, and suddenly Aizawa and Kamakiri's strategy of staying off of the floor had backfired. Both Hiryu and Snipe had fallen through as well, and once he had clambered to his feet, Rin swiftly engaged the teacher with a barrage of scales, nodding in Itsuka's direction.

"*Go, get out of here with the hostage! I'll hold him off!/*"

"*Stay calm, citizen, you'll be out of here safely soon enough!*" Kendo declared, a grin spreading across her face in contrast to the look of shock and terror on Real Steel's.

"*Yo dude, seriously, what the hell was that? I mean, I know your quirk situation is weird, but…*

"*Escape now, explain later.*"

Just a few yards away, Juzo burst through a softened patch of ceiling like an Olympic diver and rolled to a stop on the floor, his black-toned armor more menacing than usual in the dim light. Though he was too far away to try and engage her directly, he sufficed by slamming a palm into the floor just as Kendo prepared to jump, allowing her to sink up to her ankles before hardening it again. With both her quirks, the thin layer of flooring around her feet was barely even an obstacle— all it took was one swift chop of her hand and flex of her legs to break it apart and free herself- but it was just enough of a delay for Aizawa to swing down through the window, erase her quirk once again, andplant his boot firmly on her face, just as Honenuki closed in from the other side.

Blood spurted from Battle Fist's nose as she stumbled backward and nearly fell, and she grit her teeth in frustration. *God damn, they're really going all out, huh? No training weights this time.* Deciding to respond in turn, Kendo pressed Tetsutetsu tight against her chest with one arm, then lashed out at Aizawa with the other. Thanks to the sheer size of her hand, he had no room to dodge- she connected a solid punch, sending him flying backward and out of the window, just before her feet
sank back into the floor and Juzo seized her from behind in a full nelson.

Thankfully, though, her attack seemed to have forced Eraser to blink again; she could feel the rush of One For All returning, and a single, swift elbow to Mudslide's stomach was all it took to crack his armor and send him flying halfway across the room. Then came a sharp slicing sound from somewhere above, and it took Kendo a moment to realize that Kamakiri had cut Aizawa's binding cloth again- by then, he was plummeting like a stone, and making no effort to catch himself.

_Holy shit, did I actually knock him out?_

There was no time to watch and find out. All objectives and grades forgotten, Itsuka dropped Tetsutetsu and launched herself downwards out the same window, reaching desperately for the teacher as he drew nearer and nearer to the ground. Blackwhip emerged from her hand before she could even think to summon it, and once she had grabbed hold of Eraser and pulled him close, she reached out and wrapped the dark tendril around a streetlamp. They'd built up too much momentum for it to stop them completely, but it slowed their fall enough to significantly lessen the pain for Kendo, who positioned herself back-down in order to absorb the lion's share of the impact.

They still managed to carve out a small crater in the asphalt, and Battle Fist could tell immediately that her lower back would be sore for the next few days, but when she checked his pulse and heartbeat, Aizawa's condition was normal, and she let out a heavy sigh of relief. A slow stream of blood was trickling from his nose where she'd hit him, and when his eyes finally opened after a few seconds, he winced in pain before glancing around at his surroundings.

"Damn, that was a good punch. Nice catch, too, but I'll still have to deduct points for removing your focus from the objective."

"Wha… but I…"

"More importantly, though, I think you and I need to have a talk about your quirk."

"Well, I, um…"

"Holy shit, are you guys okay?"

"Language," Eraser grunted, lifting his goggles and glancing up as Reiko, Juzo, and Kamakiri descended toward them on a sheet of metal levitated by Poltergeist. "We're both fine, Mudslide. I appreciate the concern, but I'd rather you all keep focused on the hostage."

"The others agreed to put things on a momentary pause while we checked on you two." Yanagi released her quirk as the metal platform set down on solid asphalt, then yawned and pushed her silvery bangs out of her eyes, both of which had notable purple bags. "Even Snipe said it was okay. He stopped the clock, we still have around ten minutes left."

"Of course he did." Aizawa sat up with a grimace of discomfort. "You're all lucky he's in a good mood- I might not have done the same."

"Sir, please forgive my conduct. I didn't know you were unconscious." Hopping nimbly off the metal platform, Kamakiri fell to one knee and bowed his head low. "That attack could've killed you if Battle Fist hadn't gotten there in time."

"It's fine, Jack Mantis- you had no way of knowing my condition. Your decision was tactically sound, given the limited information you had at the time. I would likely have done the same in your situation."
Eraserhead gingerly pushed himself to his feet, while Togaru stepped forward and extended a leather-gloved hand toward Itsuka. He had a bare hint of a smile in between his razor-pronged mandibles, with one eyebrow raised skeptically as he looked down at her.

"Come on, sidekick. You gonna get back on your feet, or just fall asleep down there?"

"It's more comfortable than you might think, boss." Kendo retorted as he helped her up out of the dust and rubble, then clapped a hand on his arm, her torn cape swaying in the morning breeze. "Don't beat yourself up too much about it, alright? You didn't do anything wrong. Now let's get back up there and finish this."

"Interesting, that's very interesting. Not your best performance, but not bad either."

A soft grin on his lips as Battle Fist's team left the arena victorious some five-odd minutes later, Midoriya held up the remote and pressed rewind, reeling back the camera feed to a shot of the mysterious black substance emerging from Kendo's hand and wrapping itself around Aizawa's falling body. Vivid memories flashed through his head of those same dark tendrils grabbing hold of his arm, pulling him back through the portal and away from Toga- of the sting of his blade as he drove it through his own limb to free himself. Izuku's gaze shifted to his mechanical replacement, and he flexed the metallic fingers before leaning over and using them to stroke Himiko's hair. She'd come down to join him some time ago, after she woke up and realized he wasn't in bed. Tokoyami had dropped by as well, but left soon after, complaining that the final exam wasn't nearly violent enough to be interesting.

"Ugh, I hate that stuff," Carmilla declared, screwing up her face and sticking out her tongue in disgust. "It was like a big gross tentacle, trying to steal you away from me. What's up with that, anyway? How can she even do that?"

"That's an excellent question. Excellent questions get rewards." Taking her cheek in one hand, Midoriya leaned in and kissed her deeply. "I've been wondering the same thing ever since the operation, and I still didn't have an answer, until tonight."

One arm still wrapped around Toga, Seraph pressed zoom, blowing up the center of the image until Kendo and the dark tendril took up nearly the entire screen.

"That day, everything happened so fast that I honestly wasn't sure what she used on me. Half of me was convinced that it was some type of capture-focused support item, but the other half had a wild theory, one she just confirmed. This is no support item, Himiko." Opening his phone, Seraph pulled up a second image and cast it to the TV screen alongside Kendo: it was a bald, burly man with a scruffy chinstrap beard, a leather jacket, and goggles over his eyes, swinging around a city block with an identical set of tendrils.

"Whoa…" Toga let out a whistle. "Looks the same to me. So who's that?"

"This is someone I came across during my research into One For All- one of the previous users, a famous hero who died nearly a century ago. His quirk was called Blackwhip, and now that I have an image to compare, I can say with certainty that Battle Fist has displayed the exact same power."

"Ooh!" Toga's grin widened, and she shifted in place, leaning back and laying her legs across Midoriya's lap. "So does that mean she's this guy's secret great-granddaughter or something?"

"Not quite- there's no familial relation, but they do share the bond of One For All. Until now I only thought it was strength that was passed on- raw power. But now it seems I may have been mistaken.
Through some mechanism or another, a full quirk has been passed from one user to another. Now, I need to find out how, why, and whether or not this could happen again with another predecessor's power. This might be a random fluke, or our dear Itsuka might be even more unique than I thought."

Toga pouted and rose to her feet, her arms crossed in indignation as she strode over to the television and stared Kendo down.

"You two got on a first name basis real quick. You sure are real interested in her, huh?"

"In the same way a biologist is interested in the animals he dissects. It's clinical, darling, I can promise you that. In order to break her, or to fight her if need be, I first need to understand her- her powers, her limitations, her motives and background. To know one's enemy is the greatest gift."

"Well I still can't forgive what she did to you, baby. But now that I take a closer look at her…” Toga leaned in close to the screen, and ran her fingers softly along the pixelated outline of Kendo's cheek; there was blood streaming down Battle Fist's face where Eraserhead had kicked her, and Izuku watched as Himiko shuddered at the sight, her cheeks slowly flushing red. "I guess she is pretty cute. I know you said we can't kill her, but… can I still taste her blood?"

Seraph smiled a wide smile, then rose to his feet and wrapped his arms around Carmilla from behind, planting a gentle kiss on her neck. The morning sun was filtering in through the window behind them, made even brighter by the reflection from the snow, and Midoriya couldn't help but think that Toga looked breathtakingly beautiful right now, her blonde hair and pale skin bathed in dappled light. In that moment, he would have done anything she asked, no matter how difficult.

"I think that can be arranged."

Monoma Neito rose early, as was his habit, gazed with bleary eyes at the watch on his nightstand, and slipped silently from his bed. 7:38AM. That's later than usual, he mused with a frown, glancing about the room. Though I doubt that sleeping with them has done my internal schedule any good. Since their return from Okinawa, he'd been sharing quarters with Gentle, Mustard, and Setsuno of the Eight Precepts- a byproduct of a shortage of living space in the cabin, which was meant to occupy only ten. With Tobita gone for the time being and his other two roommates still fast asleep, the room was blissfully quiet aside from the faint sound of chirping birds and an occasional snore from Toya, and Neito took a brief moment to breathe deeply and soak in the peace and calm in before stepping into the closet and shrugging off his black silken nightgown.

Setsuno's wrinkled clothes were strewn about the wardrobe when he opened it, a dramatic contrast his own neatly folded and ironed stacks. An involuntary shudder wracked his body at the sight, and a grimace spread across his face when he realized one of the Expendable's pairs of dirty jeans was brushing up against his pile of undershirts; . If there was one trait that Chaudron would happily admit he shared with Overhaul, it was a love for cleanliness and order in all things. How tragic that he failed to impart that particular lesson on all of his subordinates. Suddenly he found his eyes flitting unbidden to the lacquered ashwood box tucked on the shelf beside his slacks; he flicked the lid open, and ran two fingers over the smooth steel blade of his dagger, and the gleaming pearl grip of his pistol. I could teach him that lesson myself. But Midoriya wouldn't like that. He closed the box, and set about getting dressed, his movements steady and deliberate as he slipped on one piece of his elegant costume at a time. We can't anger our allies, can't sow any mistrust or discontent without reason. That would be going against his plan, after all. Then came the bathroom, where the process of smoothing out his bedhead with a comb and gel took another few minutes; though he was much less likely to admit it, Monoma cared a great deal about his appearance, and gave any changes to his signature look a great deal of thought.
After all, if I am to be the hero, surely I must look the part. Neito reassured himself, as he unbuttoned his collar to spritz his neck with cologne. It took a great deal of self-discipline to ignore the various unfamiliar toiletries placed haphazardly about the sink and cabinet, but Chaudron took a small amount of comfort in the fact that Gentle's things were organized as neatly as his own before he departed and made his way downstairs. In the kitchen, Seraph and Carmilla were already up and moving, eating breakfast at the counter alongside Overhaul and Nemoto, whose plague masks were removed in a rare sight.

"You're later than usual." Chisaki sipped at his coffee, his tone dry and his golden eyes disinterested. "What happened to Monoma the Machine? Always up at 7:00 AM like clockwork, sitting in the kitchen drinking tea all alone. I thought you were a man of routine."

"Some routines are harder to keep than others," Neito countered calmly, "especially when one is forced to sleep alongside a feral rat of a man who doesn't seem to understand the concept of basic hygiene, not to mention allowing others to rest in peace and quiet."

"You got some kinda issue with Setsuno?" A hint of a grin playing about his lips, Kai leaned back in his barstool and raised one eyebrow. "Come sit down and tell me all about it, buddy- let's have a nice little chat. Maybe let me know about your girl problems too, or how tough your finals are. Must be so damn hard, being a high school brat whose balls haven't even dropped."

"That's enough," Midoriya declared quietly, and Monoma's retort died on his tongue. Izuku didn't so much as look up from his eggs and rice when he spoke, but the room fell silent all the same, at the drop of a pin. "We all have work to do. Get some food, Neito, then join me in the living room. I expect that to be the last outburst I hear from you today. Please excuse his behavior, Overhaul."

"I'll consider it," Chisaki chuckled and turned back to his plate; Monoma could feel Nemoto's eyes boring a hole in the back of his head as he poured his morning tea and grabbed a bowlful of rice from the cooker. Agitated enough that he nearly spilled his egg on the counter when he cracked it and moved to pour it on top, he followed Izuku and Himiko through the doorway the moment his meal was ready, struggling to hold his tongue as his cheeks flushed red from the effort.

From the moment he could string together complete sentences, insults had come as naturally as breathing to Monoma, and asking him to refrain from them was generally a fruitless effort, a lesson his parents and teachers had learned a long time ago. In his life, he had only encountered two people whom he respected enough to stay his habit on their behalf, and Midoriya was without a doubt one of them.

"Imbeciles," he muttered under his breath the moment he was out of earshot from the kitchen; if Seraph heard him, he didn't acknowledge it, gesturing instead to the television as Chaudron took a seat at the coffee table and sipped at his tea.

"I have some footage for you, courtesy of Tower and the camera spike you gave him at your last meeting: Class 3-B's final exams. Many of them have made significant progress on their moves and techniques, Battle Fist in particular- I've been taking notes all morning, and it seems that my theory about her was correct. I'd like you to review the matches as well, give me any insight you can offer, and adjust your counter-strategies for each high-threat target accordingly. Contact me when you're done, and we'll discuss our next operation."

"And where will you be?" Monoma raised an eyebrow as Toga tossed him the remote control and blew a kiss in his direction, then skipped back to Midoriya's side. Seraph had a small silver cylinder in hand, with a blinking light at one end- the beacon to summon a portal from Kurogiri.

"Niigata, with Synapse, Longshot, and the others. They've found a suitable location for a new
headquarters, and I'd like to discuss this matter of Gentle and Spinner's disappearance with them in person. Brief Twice, Dabi and the rest on the situation for me, would you? La Brava too, if she wakes up today. We'll be back by evening for Coldflame." His brows furrowed briefly in contemplation, and he nodded towards the laptop sitting on the nearby side table, used for communication with the Recruits. "Ah, and I nearly forgot. You'll need to reprimand Tower for his behavior this morning. He was unduly clumsy during his exam- a mediocre performance."

"Understood, he'll hear from me once I've gone over the footage. Are you sure I shouldn't join you, though? If you're going to be discussing this new group with the other Founders, not to mention the issue of the new task force, it might be best for me to be there."

"I'll be sure to call, Neito- don't worry." Izuku gave him a sympathetic smile, one Monoma hesitantly returned. "I need you here, keeping this place in check in case our new friends come calling again. I'll be back before long."

"Indeed. Give Pandora and the rest my regards, will you?"

"Can do!" Carmilla cried enthusiastically. A portal opened up behind them on cue, then vanished a moment after they both stepped through, leaving Chaudron alone once more in a silent room.

Niigata, Chuo Ward

Two Hours Later

"I have to say, I'm glad you decided to come join us here. I know every use of warp gate is a risk, but discussing an issue this complex would have been difficult over the phone."

Yaoyorozu glanced up from Midoriya's report on the Gentle-Spinner situation, currently pulled up on her laptop, and gave Izuku a soft grin. His face remained stoic as usual as he responded, though Momo had to remind herself not to stare too intently at him- Toga was just a few feet away, after all, with eyes like a hawk and a killer instinct for sniffing out rivals. Pandora had already made it a year without arousing her suspicions, though; it was practically a game for her at this point, and the thrill of pushing the boundaries was growing all too enticing. The time for that would come later, though- for now, Syndicate business held first priority.

"Not to mention the fact that we're going to have to rethink how we secure phone calls from here on out," Hatsume added, a frown on her face as she paced over to the office's floor-to-ceiling window and tapped a button on the wall to shut the automatic blinds. It was a grey, foggy morning in Niigata, and the penthouse suite they were occupying was forty-odd stories off the ground, but if there was anything their group had learned over the past two years, it was that no amount of precaution was ever too much. "It's a stroke of absolute luck that Gentle was the only Syndicate member who actually used Feel Good Inc. for his carrier, but that doesn't mean the rest of us are safe, not by a long shot." She took a moment to snigger at her own pun before a stern glance from Synapse set her straight.

"What Mei is trying to say," Hitoshi continued, "is that despite the fact that none of us aside from Tobita use the company for our internet or mobile, their satellites could still be eavesdropping on our conversations, if they have a good idea of where we're located."

"And based on how they knew exactly where to wait for Tobita and Iguchi, it's safe to say that they weren't far off from the rest of us."

Momo turned her gaze back to the wall-mounted monitor, and used her touchpad to scroll through a log of FGI's active cell towers and satellites in the region; practically nowhere was outside their coverage. "Even with all our technological prowess, their
resources make our own look almost primitive by comparison. If we engage with them directly, their cyber capabilities alone could practically annihilate us, especially with La Brava still out of commission."

"All of which only further reinforces the soundness of our current course of action," Midoriya replied calmly, scarcely even sparing a glance to the screen as he continued to write feverishly in one of his notebooks. "We make no rash or sudden moves, and wait for them to come to us. With two hostages and a likely fix on at least one of our current locations, they believe that they hold all the cards. But we have a few aces up our sleeves as well. Don't we, Mei?"

"You got that right! Aiba's tracking program really came through. By bouncing from camera to camera, we were able to follow the car that took them all the way to the Sapporo airport, where our mysterious hooded friend- who's actually a lady, it turns out- took a private jet right back to Deika City. From there, it was pretty easy to figure out where their HQ is." Hatsume made a few keystrokes on her wrist gauntlet, and the image on the screen changed to one of Deika, where a massive corporate tower dominated the skyline.

"What a wonderfully evil-looking building!" At the back of the room, Mr. Compress clapped his gloved hands together in approval. "It gives quite the dramatic atmosphere, don't you think? It would be a fitting place for grand rescue operation, and a climactic confrontation!"

"With any luck, there won't be a confrontation of any sort," Seraph replied. "And I don't intend for us to set a single foot in their home territory, if we can help it. When we do meet to negotiate, it will be on neutral ground. Depending on their disposition, it might be a while yet until we reach that stage, though- it's only been twelve hours since Gentle and Spinner were taken. Yaoyorozu how long do you estimate until they reach out to us?"

"Going by our own system of managing prisoners, if they're even awake by now, which may or may not be the case, they're almost certainly still in the interrogation phase. Their questioning will likely continue for the rest of the day- the leaders of this organization doubtless want to obtain all the information about us they can. What comes next depends on how much or how little Gentle and Spinner reveal during this process."

"I've been giving that specific question thought." Shinso leaned forward in his chair and glanced up at Midoriya with tired eyes. "Not that I don't trust them, but Gentle only joined us a month ago, and Spinner… is Spinner. How can we be sure they're not talking right now? All creative torture methods aside, the people we're talking about have way more money than even we do. Those two could be staring down the payoff of their lives."

"They won't talk. I can assure you of that, Hitoshi."

Izuku's voice carried a tone of absolute certainty, and Momo raised one brow in response. I personally wouldn't be so sure, but if he trusts them, I'll accept that there must be a reason.

"Well, assuming you're correct, then, and they don't learn anything new about our locations or membership, I predict that they'll wait a few days for us to respond to our members' disappearance ourselves, to watch our movements and see if we either strike at them or open communications. No fewer than three, no more than a week- they want us to come to them, not the other way around, but their patience won't be limitless. If we maintain our silence and lay low as you advise, then only after that period will they reach out to us again themselves."

"At least three days… That gives us just enough time to carry out the surprise we have planned for the U.A. graduation ceremony." Rubbing his hands together in delight, Midoriya turned to Toga. "Himiko, darling, I trust you gave the disk to Temperance as planned?"
"Yep! It'll be in place on the big day."

"Perfect. Then it's time to start handing the fireworks over to the Recruits at tomorrow's round of meetings- Pandora, I trust you can handle the manufacture later today?"

"Of course- I can practically make cyclonite in my sleep by this point. We'll be using around half a ton, correct? That won't take too long, but I'll need a large meal."

"I'm sure we can manage that. Compress, order some sushi for lunch after an hour or so, would you? Make sure that Yaoyorozu gets a triple portion."

"With pleasure, sir."

"And now on to the star of our upcoming performance. Mei, pull up the data feed from Uraraka's implant."

A few more taps, and the image onscreen changed to a first-person view of Asui Tsuyu, sipping at a cup of tea across the 3-A common room kitchen table. More students were visible in the background and periphery: Kaminari, yawning as he poured himself coffee, Bakugo brushing his teeth with a scowl on his face, Shoji and Hagakure chatting in the corner. It was, by all means, a typical morning scene in the U.A. dorms- one of dozens that had been recorded in full and transmitted to them wirelessly from the baby Longshot had implanted deep inside Uravity's skull during the final days of her captivity. No larger than a coin, it had taken Mei and Overhaul nearly twelve hours of open-brain surgery to successfully install the chip, with Chisaki using his quirk to reset things every time Hatsume accidentally killed Ochako or damaged her nervous system irreparably- most of the process had been sheer trial and error, given that none of them had any real medical training.

Their efforts had finally been met with success, though: nicknamed 'Baku' after the mythical Shinto devourer of dreams, the implant was practically untraceable, and after nearly three weeks, there was still no indication that any of the tests Uraraka had undergone after her recovery by the heroes had detected it. Even if they had, any attempt to remove it would trigger a release of neurotoxins that would instantly kill Uravity, with a backup electrical overload for good measure. Its internal battery used the natural electricity from her own body to recharge, and with each passing day, its programming adapted and evolved to gain more and more access to her brain's internal functions. By now, they could assume full remote control of her body any time they wished; since there was still no way to tamper with her memories, they'd run their trials late at night, and luckily it seemed that Ochako had written off the few instances she did recall as sleepwalking.

"I think I could have done better," Tsuyu was saying, her expression downtrodden. "We got Jiro back in the end, but only barely- Ojiro and Shoji ended up doing most of the heavy lifting. I just hope it's enough to pass…"

"I'm sure you did great," Ochako replied, her voice echoing through the receiver. The Baku tapped directly into her optical and auditory nerves, and converted the raw data into images and sound with only a few-second delay. "Combat aside, I bet you contributed a ton to your team strategy and coordination! Don't worry too much about the little things, okay? The teachers all know you still can't use your tongue, they won't be expecting you to perform at the same level as when you could!"

"I'm still sad they put it in again," Toga interjected from the side, a pout on her face. "That's no fun, I cut it out fair and square!" Then she giggled, and her cheeks flushed red. "But Tsu still looks so cute even with it- right, Izu?"

"Of course she does, darling."
"Ooh, and Toru's looking fashionable too!" Himiko clapped her hands together in glee as Hagakure sat down at Asui's side, and the three began to chat about their plans for the weekend. "I think that's a new top! Do you recognize it, Momo? So risqué, showing her shoulders like that!"

"No, I don't believe so." Pandora exchanged a brief, amused glance with Seraph, and couldn't help but crack a grin. She latches onto the strangest things about her little crushes, doesn't she? All the same, though, Yaoyorozu couldn't fully suppress the brief pang of bittersweet pain that rose up in her chest as she watched the students of Class 3-A go about their morning, as much as she tried. When Uraraka turned her head to the side and Jiro walked into the frame alongside Kendo, Momo felt her eyes drop to the wood of the table out of instinct, as her heart sank in her chest.

_I was hoping they wouldn't be there._

A month ago, Pandora had been overjoyed at the chance to reunite with Todoroki and Uraraka, in spite of the circumstances- they were both dear friends, and once upon a time she'd even been hopelessly smitten with Shoto. Her relationships with Kyoka and Itsuka had been something different entirely, though, and in many ways far closer. Her best friend and her perfect rival- between weekends and evenings with Earphone Jack and her internship at Uwabami's agency with Battle Fist, she'd likely spent more time with the two of than anyone else over the course of her aborted first year. Leaving them behind for Midoriya and the Syndicate had been nearly as difficult as abandoning her home and family.

_But it was all for the greater good. My personal ties don't matter- not compared to the fate of the country. And besides, we'll still have still a chance to teach them the error of their ways. I can help Izuku show them the light._ Yaoyorozu took comfort in that thought, and the pounding in her chest slowed as she lifted her gaze back to the screen- she only slightly flushed when she realized that Midoriya was watching her intently, his expression inscrutable.

"Feeling nostalgic, Pandora? I could hardly blame you."

"No sir, not quite. Just looking forward to the day when the rest of our generation finally comes to understand the worthiness of our cause. That footage of her new ability you shared with us was quite interesting." Momo nodded toward Itsuka, who was currently braiding Tsuyu's long green-black hair while Kyoka kicked her boots up on the coffee table and strummed at her guitar. "It seems your theory regarding her quirk was correct after all. If you'd like, I could help you look into potential countermeasures for this quirk and the others she'll likely receive in the future."

"I would certainly appreciate that, but for now, there's another pressing matter that requires your attention. Another old friend of yours, in fact. Last night, Todoroki reversed his previous stance, and expressed a willingness to join the Syndicate. What do you make of that?"

"I… is that so?" Yaoyorozu's eyes widened in surprise, but only momentarily- she managed to regain her even tone before continuing. "That's wonderful to hear. But how can we be sure he's being truthful about his intentions? I see no intervening factor that could have influenced him to undergo such a radical change of heart in the past few weeks, given how staunchly he was opposed to the idea the last time I spoke to him."

"Seconded," declared Shinso. "Coldflame is entirely too straight-laced to turn on the heroes like this- if he was going to break, he would've broken a long time ago. As far as I'm concerned, all this means is that he's getting desperate. Take that quirk suppressor off him for even a fraction of a second, and he'll burn the whole cabin to ashes in a heartbeat."

"From what I've seen of the boy, he's hardly an actor," added Compress, stroking the bottom half his mask in contemplation. "But if we want to get to the heart of the matter, it seems to me that all we
need to do is ask our friend Nemoto to interview him. He has a quirk tailor-made for the job, wouldn't you say?"

"I appreciate the suggestion," Seraph replied, "but it's hardly necessary. I'm already certain that he's lying. I could read it on his face, as plain as day; you're correct, Compress, he is a horrible actor. What I want you to do, though, Yaoyorozu, is string him along- let him believe that he's tricked us, and that we're planning to let him join. Give him an 'interview', grant him little privileges bit by bit, even pretend to fall for him again if you deem it necessary- just make sure that he trusts you. He's still suspicious of the rest of us, me especially, and for good reason. You're the only one who can win him over. Do you understand your task?"

"Of course, sir. To clarify, though, what is the ultimate objective of this operation?"

"Another puppet for the theater, of course." A smile on his face, Izuku glanced up to the camera feed from Uraraka. "The Recruits are invaluable, but we'll need another set of eyes and ears in the hero community after we dispose of this one. After you gain his implicit trust, and fully convince him of our willingness to accept him, you'll feed him false information on our future plans, before 'slipping up' and giving him the perfect chance to escape on his first field operation. He'll run back to his father and the task force none the wiser, blissfully unaware that the 'valuable intelligence' he has in store for them is actually part of a trap designed to kill as many members of this new hero team as possible."

Across the table, Shinso nodded approvingly, and Hatsume clapped her hands together in anticipation.

"So I guess I'm gonna be sticking a Baku Mk. II on his brainstem before we let him loose, huh? I promise I'll only kill him a few times before I get it right, now that I have some practice!"

"Feel free to try as many times as you need- I'm sure Chisaki will be more than happy to assist. As for this meeting, though, unless there are further questions, consider yourselves dismissed. We'll be warping back to Sapporo at 1800 hours. In the meantime, Compress, continue monitoring the footage from Uraraka for any new intelligence. Carmilla, check in with Chaudron, and see if there are any new updates from the Recruits- if not, make sure you're ready for your meetings with them tomorrow. Pandora, start prepping for your conversation with Coldflame- you'll need to be prepared for any questions he throws at you. You can start producing the cyclonite after lunch. Synapse, Longshot- on me."

Tapping a few keys on his laptop, he pulled up two live video feeds, displayed side-by-side on the screen: one each for David and Melissa Shield, currently confined in the Yokohama headquarters' holding cells. A squad of armed and masked Yakuza gunmen hand-picked by Overhaul patrolled the corridors and checked on the two prisoners regularly, but that fact hadn't stopped Melissa from making several escape attempts already, all of which had failed pathetically- the only things she had to show for her efforts were bruises and a busted lip from the butts of her captors' rifles. Her father, on the other hand, seemed to have accepted his fate more readily, and spent most of his waking hours huddled in defeat on his bed. Momo watched as Izuku's eyes shone with glee at the sight of his new prizes, and couldn't help but linger a moment in the doorway to listen while Toga and Compress filed out ahead of her.

"Ah, there they are. I do hope they haven't been feeling too neglected; I think it's about time we paid our new guests a visit."

Chapter End Notes
First of all, apologies again for the slightly longer than average delay on this one- as tends to happen, I ended up underestimating how long the next chapter would be, so I had to find a good stopping point and split my planned outline in two.

As far as this one is concerned, though, I tried not to take up too much time with the final exam, but it was fun to write, and I wanted to set up Kendo getting more experience with Blackwhip in a way that would force her to be more honest about her quirk(s) to the U.A./hero community- that conversation will come next time. Midoriya is pretty interested in it as well, though, not to mention new revelations about Uraraka, Todoroki, and the Syndicate's next operation- what do you think they have planned for the graduation ceremony? Any more guesses on the identities of the Recruits? What's up with Monoma's angst? Let me know what you think in the comments.

Chapter 19 should be out within two to three weeks- for anyone who follows my other main story, Rhapsody in Green, I'll be taking a brief break from that one to focus on this next Entropy chapter. Until then!
So in typical fashion, I both underestimated how busy my schedule would be and how much I still wanted to write! Apologies for that, but I hope you enjoy! I know the chapter title isn't the one I promised, but there's a further explanation about some structure changes down in the endnote once you've finished.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Later that Afternoon

Syndicate Base, Yokohama, Naka Ward

"So Izuku, I almost forgot to ask, how are we gonna do 'good cop, bad cop' with three people? Ooh, wait, wait, how about this: You're good cop, Hitoshi's the bad cop, and I'm the moody wild card cop! I come in screaming and yelling at first, maybe do some light torture with my babies, but then later I simmer down and get all remorseful, start 'sympathizing' with him and stuff. There's a whole character arc I can go through!"

It was even more difficult than usual for Hatsume to contain her energy as she trailed Midoriya and Shinso down the hallway towards the Yokohama headquarters' holding cells, practically bouncing around them as she gesticulated wildly with her hands. She'd taken two Boosters earlier in the morning in order to stay awake while she put the finishing touches on a new anti-vehicle weapon design, and it was safe to say that the effects of Pandora's stimulants still hadn't worn off in the slightest. Momo must have added more of those delayed-release compounds, huh? I hope this interrogation doesn't run too long, if I'm lucky I can get in some more workshop time before I crash!

"Now now, Mei, you know I don't like sticking to a script or formula for these types of things," Izuku chided, and Longshot couldn't help but grin. Here with just the three of them, their leader had shed most of his cold, calculating persona, and she could see a faint glimmer of genuine amusement rising up to the surface in his expression. Shinso noticed it too, and they shared a brief glance; in moments such as this one, with no one else watching, they could talk to their best friend, not the leader of the Syndicate, even if only for a short while. "It would take all the fun out of the process, after all! Half the joy in breaking someone is coming across all the little idiosyncrasies and weaknesses you never could have anticipated."

"So we're improvising again, huh?" Synapse smoothed back his messy bluish hair and cracked his knuckles, chuckling softly. "Yeah, guess that figures. Say, you think you can let me do the punching this time if it comes to it? I've been meaning to work on my form ever since that fight with Ojiro a while back."

"Ah yes, do please remind us of the time you were beaten by the fearsome Tailman."

"First of all, that was a clone, not me, and second, you know I've always had a bad matchup against melee types." Shinso shook his head and glanced wistfully up at the ceiling while Hatsume struggled to stifle her laughter beside him. "Besides, that was still back when we were hiding our quirks and identities. Strange that it was just a month ago… feels almost like another lifetime."
"Offer's still on the table for some combat enhancement babies, if you've changed your mind." Mei slipped up behind Hitoshi, and squeezed on his biceps before shifting her hands to his chest and sides. "Hmm, yes, you've been filling your musculature out nicely these past few months. I can fit a full suit for you anytime you like, maybe you and Izu could even match! I know you've mainly been support class up until now, but with some minor adjustments, I could easily make you an all-rounder."

"I still don't know how I feel about putting my body inside a high-powered metal death cage," Hitoshi remarked dryly. "No offense to you, Izuku, I know the suit is safe. It's an irrational fear, to be honest."

"So you trust me to make neural tech that could scramble your brain like eggs if I wire a circuit wrong, but a power suit is a bridge too far? Interesting."

"Wait, is it actually that dangerous?!!" Shinso stopped in his tracks, his eyes wide with genuine fear, prompting Hatsume to dart back in front of him and stick out her tongue.

"Well now I'm definitely not gonna tell you. How about I just let you think about that one for a while?" She leaned in close and tapped playfully at Synapse's sleek metal goggles, currently lifted to his forehead, then turned back on a dime and continued forward with a self-satisfied smirk on her lips.

"That's not funny," Hitoshi muttered quietly, crossing his arms as Izuku patted him sympathetically on the shoulder.

"You both know we've never been able to fully comprehend her sense of humor."

"Fair point."

They reached the next corridor just moments later, and in an instant Izuku's expression changed back to that of Seraph, his smile dying and his green eyes growing cold and distant. The four Precepts henchmen on duty nodded to him respectfully, and Setsuno Toya, their squad leader, bowed his head.

"We're honored by the visit, sir. Whose cage do you want me to rattle first?"

"We'll start with the doctor, if you don't mind."

"Fine by me. You want me to restrain him?"

"I hardly think it'll be necessary, to be honest." Midoriya glanced over to the security feed of the cell's interior, where David could be seen hunched against the wall in the far corner of the room. "I don't believe he's a threat to any of us in his present state."

"And just in case he is, I've got security covered."

A gleeful smile on her face, Mei drew Baby 2784 from her hip, a gas-cooled plasma pistol that she'd nicknamed the Agonizer. Still in the experimental phase, it was connected by a thin blue tube to a small canister and battery unit strapped around her thigh, Even aside from it, of course, she had plenty of weapons concealed everywhere around her body: a retractable electrical whip in her gauntlet, cryogenic grenades on her belt, sonic pulse cannons in her boots. Half of her more of her goods were destined for sale on the black market in order to fund their organization, and many of the remainder went to equipping Overhaul's foot soldiers, but she couldn't resist keeping a few prototype models all to herself. With the help of Momo and her practically unlimited resources, the past year and a half had been a renaissance for baby production, though ironically, the more infamous the
Syndicate grew, the more missions Longshot was assigned to, and the less time she had for her workshops. Thankfully, Twice's quirk could compensate for that— even when Hatsume herself was busy, she could have at least one clone working at all times whenever Jin was free.

A few seconds and one complicated entry sequence later, they stepped inside as the door hissed shut behind them, and David Shield was the first to speak, hardly even looking up from where he was huddled on the ground.

"You again? Please, just… kill me already and get it over with, if that's what you're after. Murder me like you murdered Toshinori and Sorahiko. I have nothing to give you, no secrets you don't already know."

David's voice was quiet and hoarse from disuse— his clothes hadn't been changed since the abduction, and his food and water were untouched by his bedside. As pathetic as he was, Hatsume might have even felt a hint of pity for the man if her mind hadn't been preoccupied by a sudden desire to test out her sonic cannons on his eardrums.

"Well, you heard him," Midoriya replied promptly, clapping his gloved hands together. "If our honored guest wants to die, it would be a shame for us to deny him that. Mei, one plasma round to the head should do the trick, correct?"

"If melting his skull and brain down to a flaming carbon smoothie counts as 'doing the trick', then yep, I think one shot should suffice just fine."

Though Hatsume had no idea what kind of bluff Izuku was playing at, she happily armed and loaded her Agonizer all the same, giggling as the smooth rubber and steel of the grip began to hum pleasantly in her hands, and a sequence of lights on the side of the barrel began to switch from red to green.

"Ooh, here it goes! The firing sequence is just about finished— where on his head do you want me to hit? One of the temples, maybe, or right between the eyes? I'm so excited, this is my first time testing it on a live human! Twice's clones all turn to goop before I can get any valuable data!"

"W-what?!" His eyes widening in shock and fear, David scrambled back even further into the corner. "Aren't you going to-"

"Hold off just a moment," Seraph interrupted, holding up his hand. Half a heartbeat shy of painting the cell walls red, Longshot took her finger off the trigger and held the pistol up towards the ceiling. "On second thought, you can't die just yet."

"Oh, I think I know where this is going. On Midoriya's other side, Shinso had come to the same conclusion, and shared a silent nod with Izuku before stepping forward of his own accord.

"That's right— we couldn't have you biting the dust without saying one last goodbye to your precious Melissa. Mei?"

"One step ahead of you." Hatsume tapped a key on her wrist gauntlet, and a panel opened in the wooden wall, revealing a window to their other captive's cell. Melissa was visible just inside, and jumped to her feet in surprise when the corresponding section of her own wall slid away.

"My baby girl…" slowly pushing himself to his feet, David started towards the window, then stopped in his tracks, his terrified gaze shifting back to the pistol in Mei's hands. "Please, can I just…"

"By all means, take a good look." Seraph gave the man a friendly smile, and waved him towards the
"I… no, that's…" One hand pressed up against the glass, David turned his head back in their
direction, pain clear in his expression as he stumbled over his words. Just a foot away, Melissa was
inspecting her own side of the mirror, her mouth moving wordlessly and her eyes growing dark with
resentment.

"Ah, it seems like she has something to say to us." Synapse smirked. "Perhaps you'd like to hear her
voice one last time as well?"

Another tap of Mei's gauntlet, and the audio from the other cell was connected to the speakers on the
ceiling; his daughter's voice came through loud and clear and full of anger.

"You sick freaks are watching me through this, aren't you? I bet you think this is real funny,
Midoriya Izuku! What, was killing All Might not good enough for you? First you murder my uncle,
now you lock me in a cage like a rat? And what have you done with my father? Where is he? Come
in here and talk to me yourselves, you-

"I think that's plenty." Seraph gave Longshot a curt gesture, and she cut the audio just as quickly as
she'd enabled it. "Well, now that you have a bit of closure, I suppose we'll be dispatching you, as
requested. Unless, of course, you've had a change of heart!"

"I have," David swiftly declared, falling back down to his knees in front of them. "Please, I-I'm
sorry. Don't kill me."

"I'm so glad to hear it! It would have been quite selfish of you, after all, abandoning your child like
that. But let's not dwell on such a melancholy topic- I just want to clarify something, while we have
the chance. A few minutes ago, you said you have 'nothing to give me'. I want to give you a chance
to reconsider that statement."

"I… n-no, I…"

"No? Did I hear you say 'no'? That's unfortunate, then, because it leaves us at a bit of an impasse.
You say you want to live, but if you have nothing to contribute, then I see no reason to leave you
alive, even after all the trouble we went to in acquiring you. What a pity… Mei, aim right for his
forehead."

"You gotcha!"

"And while you're at it, why don't you go ahead and make the panel transparent both ways?" Shinso
added, one hand perched on his chin in contemplation. "Melissa should see her father's final
moments, don't you think?"

"Wait, no please!" Already down on his knees, David placed his palms flat on the floor, and bowed
his head low. "Please… anything but that. I'm begging you."

Holding his gloved hand up once more to signal Hatsume to hold off on firing, Izuku took a step
forward, then eased his foot down onto the older man's head, pressing his face into the floor.

"You should bow lower if you want to beg, doctor. You expected us to threaten your daughter,
didn't you? You've been watching All Might defeat villains for half your life, so I suppose you
thought you knew how this might go. Pardon my arrogance, but we operate a bit differently from the
rest." Seraph crouched down low, lifted his foot, and grabbed hold of a tuft of David's hair with his
mechanical hand, lifting it until they were eye-to-eye. "I other plans for Melissa; we're not going to kill her if you don't cooperate, we're going to kill you. Your life holds no inherent value, not so long as Twice can clone you. And rest assured: If that does come to pass, it won't happen quickly. Do you think I'd give you the luxury of a swift execution? Your death will last for days, and I think it goes without saying that Melissa will bear witness to every last excruciating detail. It would break my heart to do that to her, but the truth is I'd have no other choice.

In the event of your untimely demise, I'd also feel compelled to release all the information we have about you to the public, to ensure that your obituary is faithful to the truth. I have to say, I came across some truly interesting details while I was researching you; how fortunate, for instance, how our governments decided to overlook your involvement in orchestrating a terrorist attack and hostage crisis on I-Island last year. I wonder, what did you give them in exchange for commuting your sentence, and keeping the story out of the press? All Might's best friend giving aid to an agent of All For One… It must have been valuable. I'm sure the media would be salivating at the thought of publishing that scandal."

Shield remained silent in response, his eyes lowered to the floor in shame. After a few moments had passed, Midoriya shifted his grip to the collar of the doctor's shirt and rose to his feet, lifting him into the air.

"So, David, assuming that you don't want any of that to happen, I'll ask you one last time. Do you have something to offer me?"

"Yes! Yes, I do! Please, I… I'll do anything you want!"

"That's much better." Seraph released Shield promptly, letting him sink back down to his knees on the floor beneath him. "Now, as far as your task is concerned… Mei, can you take it from here?"

"Sure thing!" She chimed back, a grin on her face as she stepped forward and gazed down at their broken captive. "Nice to meet ya, Doc! Now get back on your feet, and follow me- we're gonna make a great team!"

One Day Later

"Guys, they're up!"

"Seriously?! Already?!

"Oh my god, I can't look! Someone go check for me!"

Tetsutetsu's shouted announcement that their final grades had been posted produced an instant panic in the 3-B common room, as half the class scrambled to look and the other half held back out of anxiety. Kendo, for her part, was one of the first to make it to the skybridge, with Real Steel, Yosetsu, and Kamakiri trailing close behind. Class 3-B's results had been taped to the window alongside 3-A's, and a good third of the other hero class was already present as well, searching desperately for their names. It only took Battle Fist a moment to find her own, and she could feel a drop of sweat rolling lazily down her brow as she read out her results, her heart pounding like a drum in her chest.

**Kendo Itsuka: Hero Name, Battle Fist**

**Written Exam Score: 95/100**
Practical Exam Score: 96/100

Final Academic Rank: 2nd

Final Quirk Proficiency Rank: 2nd

Itsuka breathed a sigh of relief that she'd passed, though she couldn't completely stifle the mild pang of disappointment in her chest that she hadn't made first for either of the rankings, as much as she wished she felt nothing but pride for her classmates. After three years, I thought I finally had at least one of them in the bag this time... I wanted be the best, to make All Might proud. Doing her best to keep a smile on her face as the crowd of students in the narrow hallway grew around her, she found herself searching for whoever had taken the top spots, and nodded in understanding when she came upon the first one in question. Well, at least I can't say I'm surprised.

Kodai Yui: Hero Name, Magnify

Written Exam Score: 100/100

Practical Exam Score: 89/100

Final Academic Rank: 1st

Final Quirk Proficiency Rank: 7th

"Congrats on keeping up the perfect streak until the end. I was really hoping to edge you out, but I guess I took one too many naps instead of studying, huh?" Kendo nudged Kodai playfully, and the black-haired girl gave a hint of a smile in reply. She'd sidled up next to Itsuka in complete silence, but Battle Fist had become an expert at sensing Magnify's presence over the past year.

"You were tired for a good reason. You spend you so much time out fighting villains and saving people that a score like this doesn't even really matter- you're already a hero, Itsuka. It's me who's lagging behind, not you."

"Don't even try and be modest, okay? You deserve this." Blushing involuntarily at Yui's compliment, Kendo wrapped her roommate in a hug, only to be interrupted when a set of wiry arms which could only be Tetsutetsu's wrapped around her shoulders from behind.

"Bro, I'm so happy! I didn't fail the written after all! There is a god!"

"That's awesome!" Kendo replied with a chuckle, extricating herself as gently as possible from the double-embrace she'd been enveloped in. "You two had your final last night with Kuroiro, right? I was meaning to ask how it went!"

"Yep, bright and early at four in the morning just like you guys did! It was us against the three hostages from Class A's matches- Jiro, Sero, and Mineta. They put up a good fight, but we came out on top in the end! You should've seen Vantablack in action, he was in beast-mode the whole time!"

"I wouldn't say that…" Sidling up behind them, Shihai gave a dispassionate shrug, his hands shoved in the pockets. "I just got lucky that there were so many dark places in the arena, it was a perfect matchup for my quirk. I still have a lot to work on."

"Oh, not you too. It's okay to be proud of a win!" Grinning, Kendo reached up and ruffled his messy white hair with one hand, then leaned in close and whispered in his ear. "You know, Kinoko was talking about you earlier this morning, wondering if you passed. I'm sure she'd love to hear all about
how you went 'beast-mode'."

"R-really?" Kuroiro's standoffish persona vanished in an instant, and his speech began to come out in a nervous stammer. "Are… are you sure? I-I wouldn't want to bother her, y'know?"

"Hey, Kinoko! Did you hear about how well Shihai did this morning?" Instead of wasting more time trying to boost Vantablack's confidence, Kendo decided to go for the simpler option, and waved Komori over as she passed by. "He's been meaning to tell you!"

"Oh, really?" The shorter girl peeked out from beneath her heavy brown bangs, and Kendo nodded eagerly before steering Shihai in her direction and leaving the two to work things out on their own. That boy's had three years to confess to her… I'll be damned if he doesn't suck it up and bite the bullet by graduation.

"Ah, the blossoms of young love. Truly inspiring, isn't it?"

Itsuka chuckled at the sound of another familiar voice just behind her, and wrapped an arm around Kyoka's shoulder.

"What, are you gonna write a song about it?"

"We'll see if inspiration strikes me. I've never considered writing a mushroom-themed romance ballad, but now I might just have to give it a go."

"Oh, if it isn't the sore loser!" A sharp-toothed grin on his face, Tetsutetsu was quick to jump back into the conversation. "You should've seen her a few hours ago, in Recovery Girl's office after the exam. She tried to take us out while we were rescuing the hostage, but me and Kodai hit her with the old one-two combo before she even knew what was happening! Pretty sure she took a giant washer or two to the face before I knocked her lights out. Can't go easy in these things, even on friends."

"I hope it wasn't too painful," Yui added, leaning into their circle with an expression that almost resembled concern. "I may have gotten caught up in the moment."

"No hard feelings, it was all happening pretty fast. By the way, how'd you guys end up ranking? My written was so-so, I'm just happy to have made top five for quirk proficiency."

"Same here!" Real Steel cried excitedly, then leaned into an enthusiastic high-five that nearly knocked Jiro off her feet. It fell to Kendo to explain her and Kodai's performances due to the latter's impeccable humility, and Earphone Jack nodded in approval.

"As expected of you two. But if Yui got first in academic, who beat you in quirk proficiency? It's not even a question that you're the most powerful student at the school by far." Power isn't the only metric- more than that, it's how well you can control it, and I've still got a ways to go on that front. If I had to guess, it would be…" Trailing off, Itsuka shifted her gaze back to the scores, and quickly found who she was looking for.

**Shiozaki Ibara: Hero Name, Shepherdess**

**Written Exam Score: 86/100**

**Practical Exam Score: 100/100**

**Final Academic Rank: 9th**
"Yeah, that makes sense, come to think of it…" Tetsutetsu replied, scratching the back of his neck. "She's gotten crazy strong, hasn't she? I mean, forget beast-mode, I heard from Setsuna that she absolutely annihilated Midnight in single combat, powered through her quirk and everything, and nearly took down Present Mic too! Man, I hope they release the footage from the exams for us to review…"

"I could give you a more accurate account myself, if you'd like. Tokage does have a penchant for exaggeration."

All of them aside from Kodai jumped in unison when Shiozaki appeared suddenly amongst them, a soft smile on her face. Itsuka had always gotten along well with Ibara, but there were still occasional moments when the girl's unyieldingly tranquil and pious personality sent an involuntary chill down her spine.

"Uh, sure, if you want! Congratulations, by the way, your quirk control has always been amazing! If you don't mind me asking, though, how did you manage a perfect score? Their grading standards on the practicals are always strict, and escaping without any mistakes felt pretty impossible with the other team to deal with…"

"Deal with the other team… how do you mean? I thought the solution was fairly obvious. Our team cooperated with Shishida's, and carried the hostage through the exit gate together. Gevaudan and I agreed that the potential point gains for a quick and flawless execution of the main objective by all parties involved far outweighed the point and time deductions we would no doubt inflict on each other if we competed."

"Well I'll be damned…" Not a moment later, Kendo caught a brief glimpse of Kamakiri walking past with Setsuna- she proceeded to grab Togaru by the arm and pull him over, gesturing towards Shiozaki with a grin on her face. "See, I told you! She worked with the other team and got a perfect score, it really was the trick!"

"Wait, seriously? Aw, goddamn, that's a load of bullshit. How were we supposed to guess that when they set it up like a standard versus match?"

Itsuka had to stifle a laugh at Ibara's shocked expression, and bit down hard on her lip as the inevitable chastisement arrived in force.

"Kamakiri, I'm disappointed in you! Your score may have been beneath the average, but there's no need to resort to such vulgar language! With our professional lives just ahead of us, we should be looking inward now more than ever, to ensure that we leave this school with pure spirits untainted by the violence that surrounds us. If you'd like, I'd be happy to offer you some moral guidance in-"

"No worries, I'll make sure he learns his lesson," Setsuna interrupted, holding Togaru back before he said something even worse in reply. "He's a stubborn one, but I'm sure we'll wash that soul of his clean eventually."

"I'm glad to hear it! Ah, I've been meaning to ask you, Tokage- have you been enjoying the Bible I gave you? I made sure to mark my favorite verses for your spiritual benefit!"

"I… have, yes! I've just been feeling… so holy lately!" Stammering out her reply, Setsuna threw a glance that screamed 'help me' in Kendo's direction, and Itsuka quickly improvised an interjection.

"By the way, Ibara, do you know what you're doing after graduation? We should definitely team up
sometime, I bet I could learn a lot from working with you in the field!"

"That sounds lovely- I'll be sure to contact you, once my agency is in operation!"

"Your agency?" Kendo's eyes widened. "You mean… you're going out on your own? Already?"

"Indeed I am- the paperwork is almost finished." Ibara clasped her hands together in a gesture of prayer, and her eyes fluttered shut. "I searched long and hard for a professional hero as dedicated to the teachings of Christ as I, but my mission was fruitless all along. I realized some time ago that it is my duty to establish a new refuge for children of the church, a place where heroes who share my passion and faith can gather!"

Half the hallway was looking at Shiozaki by the time she finished her impromptu sermon, and Kendo nodded, impressed.

"That sounds pretty amazing… I wish I had that kind of drive, but I'm planning to stick with Miruko for at least another year before I go solo, so I can learn as much as possible."

"Yeah, I'm sure you wanna hide under the number three's wings for as long as possible. Typical."

Itsuka let out a heavy sigh as Bakugo stalked towards her across the skybridge, an all-too-familiar scene that did nothing but bring back memories of a night full of mistakes. Before she could even begin to compose a response, he brushed past her, his gaze fixed on 3-B's exam and ranking results. A smug grin spread across his face the moment he found hers, and he jerked his thumb back in the direction of Class A's scores.

"Read it and weep, Ms. Perfect."

Her arms crossed, Kendo rolled her eyes before reluctantly glancing over at the other side of the hallway. Itsuka already knew full well what likely awaited her, but all the same, seeing it still sent a lance of defeat stabbing through her chest.

**Bakugo Katsuki: Hero Name, Ground Zero**

*Written Exam Score: 97/100*

*Practical Exam Score: 98/100*

*Final Academic Rank: 1st*

*Final Quirk Proficiency Rank: 1st*

"You know we're in different classes, right? The scales aren't the same, you can't make a direct comparison. By your logic, Kodai and Shiozaki both beat you out."

"I'm not talking about them," Bakugo snapped back at her. "They don't matter. I'm talking about you and me."

Itsuka raised an eyebrow skeptically, and at Ground Zero's side, Kaminari snorted with laughter.

"Dude, that sounded way more romantic than you intended. Are you trying to ask her out?"

"Shut up, Sparky!" His teeth grit together, Bakugo held up a middle finger in Denki's direction, keeping his eyes fixed on Kendo. "She knows what I meant! The point is, my scores were higher. Guess I should start calling you Second Place now, huh?"
As much as she wanted to slap him out the window, Battle Fist restrained herself, and even put on as genuine of a smile as she could manage. *Here I was hoping he wouldn't pull this after the talk we had last week. Guess old habits die hard, huh? There would be no point in yelling back, but I think this might get under his skin even more. I'm done taking the low road for his sake.*

"Congratulations!" Kendo replied in the happiest tone possible, extending her hand to shake his. She could practically hear Jiro and Tetsutetsu's shocked expressions behind her- the hallway had gone dead silent around them.

"Huh?! I don't need your damn congratulations!"

"Well, that's all I've got to say about it, really. Looks like you got me fair and square. You should be proud!"

"The fuck… no, you…"

"What, did do you want me to yell at you? Scream that I'm better, and you can go to hell? God knows that's what you would be doing in my place. I'm not really in the mood, for it, though. So why don't you take it easy, for once? I'll see you at graduation- I need to go home and work on my speech."

Then she turned and walk back toward the 3-B common room, without so much as a spare glance behind her. She wouldn't actually be leaving for a while longer, but it felt like the right note to end the confrontation on all the same, and Kendo couldn't help but smile to herself. *Yeah, you may have gotten me this time, but I'm still kicking your ass after commencement.*

To her surprise, though, the shift in tactics actually seemed to garner results; instead of following her and prolonging the standoff, Bakugo turned and stormed back in the opposite direction, muttering a variety of creative profanities under his breath. Kaminari and a few others from 3-A followed him, but the majority of the students on the skybridge slowly gravitated into Class B's common room, and within a few minutes everyone was socializing amicably, basking in the glow of their last morning in the U.A. dorms. In just over an hour, pro heroes from the faculty and staff would arrive to escort them home for the weekend, a rare privilege usually only reserved for summer vacation and major holidays; the family visitation policies had grown increasingly restrictive over the past two years, for the sake of student safety. Then on Monday came graduation itself, and move-out the day after.

"It's crazy how fast this is all happening!" Uraraka was saying, trying her hardest to wipe away tears with her sweater sleeves as they welled up in her eyes. "It feels like just yesterday that we were moving in for the first time, and now it's almost over… I'm just gonna miss everyone so much."

"It's not like we're never gonna see each other again!" Kendo leaned across the coffee table and laid a hand across Ochako's. "I'm sure a lot of us are going to end up working somewhere around Tokyo, at least for the near future!"

"That's right!" Tetsutetsu cried enthusiastically. "I've already started planning some group patrols with Awase and Kaibara. If anything, we might be spending even more time together than before!"

"I know, yeah." Uravity sniffed, and eagerly blew her nose when Itsuka handed her a tissue. "I'm a bit sad, but mostly, I'm just so happy that I can finally help my parents. I talked to Ryukyu yesterday, and I'm going to be a full-time sidekick at her agency starting next week, with a salary and everything! My first paycheck is going to be the most money I've ever handled in my life, and I just…" Fanning at her eyes with her hands, Ochako broke into a wide smile, and Itsuka only barely managed to suppress the urge to cup the girl's round, innocent face in her hands. "I've had this dream for so long, and for it to finally come true… it doesn't feel real."
"Well you better believe it's real!" Hagakure declared, sneaking up on Uraraka from behind and wrapping her in a tight embrace. "I'm so excited to finally work with you as a pro, you've got no idea! And you too, Battle Fist! Defeating villains by day, ladies' nights after five!"

"That reminds me," Real Steel interrupted, "do you and Shoji know what you're doing for work, with Edgeshot out of commission? You were mainly working for him, right?"

"I think we're gonna be able to stay busy for the foreseeable future. Mount Lady and Kamui are still busy, so there's plenty of work left for us to do." Though Kendo couldn't see Toru's face, she could easily tell by Lightwave's tone that the girl was winking in her direction, and shot her a brief glance that said something along the lines of 'keep quiet about that' before turning her attention back to Uraraka.

"That's awesome that you're starting full-time so soon, though! Is Ryukyu recovering alright after Yokohama? I know that must've been hard on her, mentally and physically."

"All of her operations have gone well, and she's ready to get back in action! I just hope that I can live up to her expectations, after I failed last time…"

"That's not true, and you know it, Ochako." To Itsuka's surprise, Kodai was the next one to speak up- until now, she'd been sitting silent by Kendo's side, content as usual to watch the conversation without participating. "You didn't fail anyone. No one was ready for the Syndicate."

"Yui, you don't have to make excuses for me… I have to take responsibility for my own weaknesses. I fought Toga, and I lost."

"Then beat her next time," Kodai replied earnestly, as if it was the most obvious solution in the world. A bit of Uraraka's smile returned as she nodded in response, and Kendo leaned forward, her curiosity piqued.

"No offense, but I had no idea you guys were close- not that it's a bad thing, that's great!"

"We weren't, until last week! It's funny, I live just a few hundred feet away, but Yui and I never talked much until I ran into her at a café on the way back from one my counseling sessions. Did you know we activate our quirks the same way? I even gave us matching manicures the other night!"

Ochako held her hands up to reveal a glossy black sheen on her nails, a gesture that Kodai hesitantly mimicked after a few moments, and Kendo nodded approvingly. The past two days had been so hectic that she hadn't even noticed the change, despite the fact that her roommate was generally quite barebones in her use of cosmetics.

"Whoa, sweet color!" Tetsutetsu scooted closer across the couch and peered curiously at the girls' hands, his eyes wide. "Itsuka, we should get in on this! Well maybe blue for you, but I think black would go well with my costume."

"I can't tell if you're kidding or not right now, Tetsu, and that's honestly the scariest part of that comment."

Before Uraraka could respond to Real Steel's proposal, though, Sero Hanta approached their group with a wave and a quiet greeting, taking a seat next to Hagakure. While the physical wounds from Uravity's capture and captivity had all healed relatively quickly, Cellophane still bore the scars of his ill-fated encounter with the Syndicate for all to see. A chinstrap-like metal brace extended halfway around his jaw to hold the bones in place while they healed, and when he opened his mouth to speak, parts of it were filled with metal wires and braces. He'd lost a good portion of his teeth to
Gentle's fist, and was in the process of having them artificially replaced; not even Recovery Girl could grow bones back from scratch. Hanta's outgoing personality had grown a great deal more subdued after his mentor's death, especially in the first week following his release from the hospital, and though he was gradually regaining some of his liveliness, it still hurt Kendo to see a classmate so broken in spirit.

"Hey, I just wanted to apologize for Bakugo earlier," Sero began, clapping his hands together in a gesture of apology. "Pulling that kinda shit on one of our last days together isn't right. Me and the guys, we've been trying to talk to him these past few weeks about making things right with you before graduation, but you know how it is- mostly it's like dealing with a brick wall. Things were improving for a little while, but's been a lot harder since… since Kirishima got injured."

A collective ripple of silent despair spread throughout the circle at the mention of Red Riot's name, and Tetsutetsu in particular slumped back in his seat, his eyes dropping to the ground.

"Yeah," Kendo replied quietly, "that makes sense."

"And he was in an especially shitty mood today, given recent circumstances."

"Recent circumstances?" Suddenly Real Steel perked up again, turning to Sero with a mix of confusion and worry on his face. "Did something happen? Was there an update on his condition?"

"Yes, but you guys have to keep this between us, okay? We're trying not to spread this around, or make a big deal out of it, since we're technically not supposed to know." Once everyone present had given their agreement, Hanta continued haltingly. "Bakugo's pretty tight with Eijiro's old man, and he got a call from him earlier this morning, about Kiri's outlook. Apparently, the doctors said that most dangerous part of the recovery has passed- he's going to live. But whether he'll ever wake up again… that's another question. They're giving him a 40% chance at best of recovering from his coma, and even if he does, he's most likely going to be paralyzed for life from the waist down. His spinal cord was just too damaged for them to fix."

"Jesus…" Kendo felt her hands curling into fists, but managed to stomach the anger for the time being, and wrapped an arm around Tetsutetsu as she looked up to meet Sero's gaze. "I'm so sorry. I really hope things turn out for the best."

"You and me both. He probably still won't be awake, but me, Denki, and Mina are gonna go visit him and Suneater at the hospital tomorrow. You want in, Tetsu?"

"Absolutely, man." Real Steel rose to his feet, grabbed hold of Cellophane's arm, and pulled him in close for a hug, clapping his back with one hand. "Wouldn't miss it for anything. And I swear to you, I'm gonna take down the fuckers who did this to him, who did this to you. We're gonna get all of them, real goddamn soon."

"Alright, everyone ready? You all know the drill, split into groups based on where you live! Everyone from Kyushu, over here with me!"

"Yokohama area, this way!"

"Saitama, Saitama with me!"

Forty-odd minutes later, the U.A. staff and faculty showed up outside the dorms like clockwork, and as the students filtered out into the sunlight, a cacophony of shouts rose up in the cool morning air. Bunching together in groups based on their hometowns or native prefectures, the members of 3-A and 3-B drifted slowly to their designated teachers, and Kendo exchanged a brief hug with Jiro
before Kyoka joined Bakugo to head back to Shizuoka together.

"Stay safe, alright, Itsuka? And let me know if you want me to come by, okay? I can take the train anytime, it's not a problem. I know you might be… you're dealing with a lot right now."

*I know you might be lonely*, Kendo finished in her head, giving the other girl a soft smile as they broke apart. *I won't be mad at you for pointing it out.* While her peers all had their families to go back to, she would be returning to an empty house; both of Itsuka's parents had been planning to return for her graduation, but now those plans had been put on indefinite hold thanks to the Syndicate, and now her siblings were under police protection alongside her grandparents in far-off Hakodate. Battle Fist, the new Symbol of Peace, would be walking across the stage at graduation without a single member of her family in attendance, at a ceremony with military-grade security. *What a lovely end to my high school glory days. But it'll be alright, as long as I'm surrounded by friends.*

"Don't worry, I'll text you. You stay safe too, alright? Don't let Bakugo wear your ear off bragging about his 'victory' the whole way there."

"Ah, don't worry, I'm way ahead of you. These aren't gonna be coming out until I walk in my front door." Flashing Kendo one final grin, Jiro popped in a pair of skull-adorned purple earbuds and cranked up the volume on her phone before sidling reluctantly towards Ground Zero and Cementoss, their pro hero escort.

Leaving Earphone Jack behind, Kendo made the rounds and said her goodbyes to Juzo, Reiko, Kodai, and a few others before finally spotting Midnight, her designated chaperone, already waiting off to the side with Mina. Normally, Kirishima would fill out the group heading back to Chiba, and his absence was impossible to overlook; Itsuka's wave of greeting died before it began when she was the somber expression on Ashido's normally jubilant face. *She heard about the new update his condition too, right? I should say something… would it be overstepping my bounds to offer to come to the hospital with him? I mean, Eijiro and I were friends, but I was never as close to him as she was…*

Before Kendo could decide either way, she felt a hand on her shoulder, and turned around to find Tetsutetsu standing beside her, a nervous smile on his face.

"H-hey…"

"Hey dude, what's up? You lost? The rest of the Saitama gang is over there." Itsuka nodded to the right, where Aizawa was doing his best to ignore Kaminari's repeated and unsuccessful attempts to flirt with Tokage as they waited for Real Steel.

"Nah, I was actually thinking that… well, that you might…"

"Tetsutetsu, finish up saying your goodbyes and get over with your group!" Midnight called, glancing at her watch. "There'll be plenty of time to see each other again on Monday."

"Ma'am! With all due respect, I would like to request to change my destination for today!" Suddenly Real Steel snapped to attention under Nemuri's gaze, and though all the stammer left his voice, his cheeks only grew redder the more he spoke. "Kendo has no family in Chiba right now, so if it's alright with you, I'd like to help escort her back, and make sure she adjusts to home life again properly! *As a friend, of course!* I could also help ensure that her residence is safe and secure, in light of the recent Syndicate threats on her life!"

"Tetsu…" Her eyes widening as her heart began to pound in her chest, Itsuka fumbled for words and
"Oh my goodness, how wonderfully, perfectly youthful!" Her cheeks flushed scarlet, Kayama regarded Tetsutetsu and Kendo with a gleeful expression, and glanced to the side to make sure that Aizawa wasn't watching before sidling closer to the duo. "Aren't you two just adorable? Such lovely concern and affection among classmates! Well, as much as I'd love to say yes, it's crystal clear in the rules that I have to chaperone you back to your family residence."

"Wait… Midnight-sensei, I think there's been a-"

"However… they never said we couldn't make any pitstops. I live in Saitama, so I'll be returning there at the end of the day regardless. If I were to take you back just a bit later in the afternoon, I don't believe that either of us would be breaking any regulations. What do you say, Ashido? Any objections?"

"Not as far as I'm concerned," Mina replied, her tone suddenly taking a turn for the suggestive. When she turned towards Kendo and gave her a wink, it was all Itsuka could do not to die of shame then and there. "I mean, as far as the rules are concerned, I didn't hear any of this conversation."

"Are we… is this seriously okay?" Glancing hopelessly between the two, Kendo tried her best to piece together exactly what was going on, without any hint of success. Tetsutetsu gave her an enthusiastic thumbs up when she shifted her gaze back in his direction, and Itsuka quickly found herself turning the same color as her hair. "I'd figured this would happen at some point this weekend, but already? My place is probably still a mess!"

"It is if I say so," Nemuri replied, then turned in Aizawa's direction. "Oi, Eraser! I'm taking charge of Real Steel, don't worry about him!"

"Suit yourself," Shota grunted indifferently, pulling his scarves tighter around himself as he glanced over toward Reptilia and Chargebolt. "Dealing with these two is more than enough for me anyway. Alright, that should be everyone. Let's get moving, people!"

"You really are impatient, huh?" A grin on her face, Itsuka elbowed Tetsutetsu playfully in the side. " Couldn't just wait until tomorrow? I'm already making plans to hang with Kyoka."

An hour later, Ashido had already been dropped off, and Midnight was walking ten paces behind, doing her best to pretend she wasn't watching as Battle Fist and Real Steel made their way up a quiet suburban street toward the Kendo family home. The two had remained quiet out of embarrassment for most of the trip to Chiba, and Kendo could still hardly believe that Nemuri had actually agreed to Tetsutetsu's request, but in the end, it wasn't as if she had any particular objections either.

"It's not that," Real Steel replied quietly, glancing anxiously back at their chaperone as Kendo waved amicably to a pair of her neighbors out walking their dogs. He kicked a pebble aimlessly along the pavement, his eyes lowered to the ground and his hands shoved in the pockets of his grey U.A. uniform. His voice was lower too, though his tone was as earnest as ever. "This may look one way, but… after everything that's happened, after everybody we've lost, I just didn't want you to have to go home by yourself. There's a lot on your mind right now, I bet, but if there's anything I can do to help shoulder some of that burden… you know you can talk to me about anything, right?"

"Of course I do." She reached down and squeezed his hand, ignoring the giddy squeal Midnight produced from behind them. Moments later they were standing at the coded entrance to her yard, and Kayama gave them a brief wave before continuing past them down the street.
"Well, looks like I've done my duty and dropped Kendo off! I'm just going to be off grabbing some coffee by the corner, but the lines are awful this time of day. It might be an hour or so before I'm ready to leave for Saitama…"

"We get the message," Itsuka replied, managing to keep a straight face as she waved back and punched in the entry code.

They stepped through the gate in unison, and Kendo nearly forgot to check their mailbox, which was full to bursting now that her siblings were gone and her aunt and uncle hadn't been by. Stuffing a bundle of letters under one arm while Tetsutetsu grabbed the half dozen magazines they still needed to unsubscribe from, she fished the key out of her pocket with her free hand and sheepishly led her guest inside. Her shoes were flung off unceremoniously the moment she stepped through the door, and once she'd set a pot of water to boil for tea, Itsuka slumped down on the couch and began to rifle through the stack of mail, all while Real Steel eagerly read her little brother's latest copy of Shonen Jump on the armchair.

It was a comfortable scene, but the house was eerily quiet and dark around them, with hardly any sun filtering through the windows, and a thin layer of dust already accumulated on the coffee table. Despite the fact that it had been occupied just a few days ago, it felt like the home had been empty for far longer. Even the family dog was gone, spirited away to Hokkaido by her siblings, and her sister's fish were at a classmate's house until further notice.

"God, it feels weird not coming home to a mountain of chores," Kendo murmured, smiling softly as she tossed aside another piece of junk mail. "Wash the dishes, walk the dog, feed the dog, reach the shelves that are too high for them, do the laundry. Itsumi's been getting a lot better about helping out lately, but even so, I think I like it better when she leans a little more on me, on the rare occasions I do come home. It makes me feel needed, y'know?"

"Hm? Uh… yeah." After a moment's silence, Tetsutetsu glanced up from the magazine with a guilty, sharp-toothed grin. "Sorry, could you say that again? I was kind of spaced out reading. My favorite manga has a new chapter out, some crazy shit is going down."

"I'm sure it's super crazy," she chuckled, looking back down at the mail. There goes that one-track mind of his again. Occasionally frustrating, but generally endearing. Let's see what we've got here. More bills, bank statements, advertisements… ah, here we go. Down towards the bottom of the pile, Itsuka finally came across a bundle of fan letters, each one stamped with a government seal of approval. The fanmail process with regard to pro heroes had been strictly regulated over the past few decades for the sake of safety, after a fungal-type villain once used 'fan letters' to poison multiple heroes with anthrax and other deadly spores, killing one pro and hospitalizing half a dozen other heroes and staff members. Letterbombs weren't unheard of either in the historical record, so each piece of fan correspondence to professionals and heroes-in-training alike now went through a rigorous biochemical screening process.

Regulations aside, reading the letters was still one of Kendo's favorite parts of being a hero- a year after her debut, she still ended up crying nearly every time she read them, even as the volume steadily increased from month to month. Most went to her mailbox at U.A., but a few always managed to slip through and land at her house instead; she had plenty of fond memories of her brother and sister surprising her with them at New Year's and Golden Week. This time it seemed there were only a handful waiting for her, but she still managed to tear up midway through reading the first, a note from a middle schooler she and Miruko rescued from a derailing train a month back in Yokohama. Wiping furiously at her eyes and nose with a tissue as the girl ended by declaring that she wanted to work at Kendo's agency as a sidekick when she was old enough, Itsuka took a deep breath and set it aside before pulling a piece of paper and pen out of her bag as a reminder to compose a reply later.
The next letter provoked a different reaction.

"You scummy bitch, I hope you die in a fire. You claim that you're All Might's successor, but you let him die. You let all of Japan down. You don't deserve to be called a hero, you ugly-"

Tetsutetsu plucked the piece of paper out of her hands before she could read any further, likely having noticed the look of distress and unease on her face. After taking a brief moment to skim over the contents, he scowled and crumpled the letter into a ball before tossing it angrily into the unlit fireplace.

"There, now you have some more kindling for the winter. That's all that crap is useful for, trust me. Don't let some loser like that get a rise out of you, that's exactly what they want. Whoever it is, they don't matter one goddamn bit."

"You're right, they don't." She gave him a weak smile, and rested a hand gently on his arm. "Don't you get worked up about it either, okay? It's not my first time getting one like that, and it won't be the last. Hate mail isn't anything new for big heroes. Just ask Miruko- she and her sidekicks read her hate letters once a month with a bottle of sake, laugh at them, then set them all on fire. You're new enough that she hasn't invited you yet, but I'll make sure she does next time."

"Damn, do all the pros really get this kind of stuff?" Real Steel's eyes widened. "What about Nighteye?"

"He puts his through a shredder every Friday, then donates it to a recycling plant to be turned into compost."

"Whoa, sustainable."

"Yep. More than hate mail, though, I'm curious to see if…" Kendo trailed off as she continued to glance through the last few letters, searching for the nondescript grey style of envelope that she'd found under her door at U.A. just days ago.

"To see if what?"

"It's nothing," she sighed once she'd reached the bottom and found, simultaneously relieved and frustrated at the lack of mysterious packages with her name on them. "I was wondering if the Syndicate had left another message for me, but it doesn't look like it."

"Thank god," Tetsutetsu replied, leaning back in his chair. "Can you imagine what a pain it would be to call the cops over here on your first day back?"

"Fair point."

Moments later, a screeching whistle from the other room announced that the water was ready, and Real Steel followed close behind when Itsuka rose and strode over to the stovetop. They brushed together ever so slightly as she turned to set the kettle down on the counter, then locked eyes, staring wordlessly at each other in the calm quiet of the kitchen as if some kind of internal alarm had been triggered. They began to kiss within moments, the tea forgotten entirely as Kendo pinned Tetsutetsu against her fridge, biting at his neck as he grunted softly and stroked her hair, untying her ponytail. Several magnets and a handful of her little brother's drawings clattered down to the floor as Itsuka shifted back to his mouth and pressed harder against him, and they both laughed breathlessly before continuing. She yelped out in surprise when he slipped an arm under her legs and picked her up bridal style, but her expression quickly shifted back to a grin as they made their way to her bedroom.

"We're gonna have to make this one quick." She glanced down at her watch; it had already been
It had been a dramatic few weeks to say the least, with All Might retiring and Real Steel confessing within days of each other, not to mention the I-Island crisis and a handful of especially perilous missions with Nighteye. And while she shared her classmate's feelings, the looming responsibility of taking up the mantle of the Symbol of Peace made it clear that it had hardly been the right time to start a relationship. After a few days of contemplation, she had reluctantly declined him, explaining that she didn't want to expose Tetsutetsu and their time together to scrutiny from the press, not to mention the added risk of being targeted by villains.

All the same, though, they were each aware of the other's feelings, and they'd kept up an on-and-off, informal relationship ever since, all with Jiro's knowledge, blessing, and occasional participation. Miruko, Kodai, and a handful of others knew as well, but they'd all kept the secret faithfully so far. Just like they've kept the secret about you and Bakugo, a voice at the back of Itsuka's head reminded her, and a shiver of guilt and revulsion raced up her spine- she nuzzled closer to Tetsutetsu, tracing her fingers lazily along his bare stomach and chest, still glistening with a thin sheen of perspiration. After graduation. I'll get it off my chest after graduation. We're not officially dating, so it wasn't cheating… right?

"Everything okay?" Tetsu's voice startled her out of her thoughts, and she nodded before leaning over to plant a kiss on his forehead.

"Yep, all good. I was just thinking how miserably this plan of yours would've failed if our escort had been literally anyone other than Midnight."

"You make it sound like this was my objective!" Real Steel protested, his tone shocked and appalled. "Present Mic might've gone for it too, for the record."

"Uh-huh, and are you so very sure that it wasn't?"

"…Well, not my main objective…"

"Ah, there it is. What a shameless pervert."

She kissed him before he could protest, and when they finally broke apart, he continued down her body, planting a trail all the way from her neck down and back up, his callused hands dancing gingerly along the faded outlines of her numerous scars as he worshipped every last inch of her skin. The room fell silent aside from Itsuka's soft moans; Tetsu was somewhere around her torso when he spoke again.

"I think I love you."

Her heart skipped a beat, and she reached forward and wrapped one of his hands in her own, intertwining their fingers.

"I know."
Loud and obnoxious, the vibration ringtone on Kendo's phone went off before she could say anything else, and she bolted upright, her eyes narrowed in confusion as she reached over to the bedside table. *I turned the alarm off after we finished, and it hasn't been an hour yet...*

"Is it Midnight already?!" Real Steel asked frantically, leaning over her shoulder.

"No, worse." Kendo's eyes widened in horror the moment she saw the screen. "It's my sister, she's facetingime me! Throw me a t-shirt, my closet's right there!"

"Shit... can't you just answer it on voice?!" Sliding nimbly off the bed, he scrambled to his feet and proceeded to nearly trip over her laundry hamper, shouting back at her as he threw open the closet doors. "Say your hair looks bad or you're eating or something!"

"I can't, that'll look suspicious! We always do video chat! Ah shit, I've got sex hair, don't I?"

"Maybe a little," Tetsu answered sheepishly as he tossed her a fresh white t-shirt. She slid it over her head in record time, then grabbed a tie from a jar on her nightstand and quickly set to work on shaping her battered hair back to its normal style. The phone continued to ring all the while, and a drop of sweat rolled down Itsuka's brow as she worked.

"How about hickeys, did you give me any obvious ones? And turn on the lights, she'll think it's weird if I'm sitting in the dark."

"Not above your collar. Dude, just tell her you're on the train!"

"I told her what time I'd be getting home, plus our security system logs when someone unlocks the front door!"

"Your little sister has access to your home security system?!"

"Our parents are both abroad, she's a really responsible kid!"

Finally somewhat satisfied with her appearance, Kendo pressed the answer button on the second-to-last ring, positioning the shot with her back to the bedframe so that only she was visible. Both her sister, 13-year-old Itsumi, and her brother, 7-year-old Itsuno, were in the shot, and she couldn't help but smile at the sight of them. They both shared her red-orange hair and bluish eyes, though Itsumi wore hers in a standard ponytail behind her head as opposed to her sister's tufted bangs and fluffy sidetail. Itsuno had just lost a few baby teeth in the past few days, and eagerly showed off his gaps right out of the gate with a wide, gleeful smile.

"Nee-chan! Look, look, I lost three teeth in a row!"

"Wow, look at you growing up on us!" She giggled at the sight, nonchalantly easing up the collar of her shirt with one hand to make sure nothing suspicious was visible. "I sure hope the Tooth Fairy was generous! And how about you, Itsumi? Anything new?"

"Nothing much," the younger girl replied calmly, a polite smile on her face. "Grandma and grandpa are trying to decide which middle school is best to enroll me in for next year, so hopefully I'll finally have the chance to make some friends up here soon."

"Well if everything goes well with my job, that won't be necessary- I want you guys to be able to move back here as soon as possible, not to mention for mom and dad to come home. If your big sis does well these next few weeks, you'll be back in Chiba before you know it."
"All the same," Itsumi quipped, "it's best to plan for every contingency, wouldn't you agree? I've already been looking at high schools in the area, just in case—there are a few with fairly high-ranked hero programs in the Sapporo area… though business is still my first choice, of course." She flushed slightly towards the end, her cool and collected persona on the verge of breaking for a brief instant before she regained it, and Itsuka's smile widened even further.

Her younger sister's quirk, Grip Strength, allowed her to crush practically anything that she could hold or grab onto—the maximum force measured so far by the doctors was in excess of 500 tons per square centimeter, far outstripping even Battle Fist's strength, though the area of effect was obviously much smaller—she could enlarge her hands as well, but only to around two times their normal size. It was a popular joke among the Kendo family that they could strike it rich any time they wanted if Itsumi got her hands on some coal and squeezed down hard enough. Despite the suitability of her quirk for hero work, though, Itsuka's sister had always been more practically minded and precocious, preferring to indicate a future in finance whenever her family asked about her dream job.

Try as she might to hide it, though, Kendo knew that deep down her sister wanted to be a hero too—she could see it in her eyes the way Itsumi looked at All Might, who had been an occasional visitor to the household while he was alive. More than almost anything else, Itsuka wanted for her sister to look at her the way she'd looked at Toshinori. His death had been hard on both of them, but particularly on Itsuno, who idolized heroes, and spent hours on end running around with All Might and Fatgum and Miruko action figures. His quirk, the creatively named Big Limb, allowed him to enlarge an entire arm or leg with the same strength enhancement as Itsuka, but only one at a time; he already had dozens of crayon drawings of his future hero costume, several of which she and Tetsu had accidentally knocked down from the fridge earlier.

"Mhmm, I'm sure it is. How about you, Itsuno, are you excited to make new friends if you end up starting your next year of elementary school up there?"

"Yeah! I miss my old friends, but I already met some guys when grandma took us to the playground, and I think we're going to the movies together on Sunday!"

"Aww, that's awesome!"

Suddenly a crash sounded from the other side of the room, and Kendo glanced up to find that Tetsutetsu had somehow managed to trip over the same hamper he'd avoided earlier, knocking a lamp off the cabinet in an attempt to catch himself. He'd caught it before it broke, but the noise was still enough for her siblings to notice over the call; Itsumi in particular narrowed her eyes in suspicion.

"Nee-chan, is there someone else there with you? Your hair is messier than usual. Don't tell me you went to school looking like that."

"No, of course not! I was just taking a nap, that's all!"

"Oh, I see. So that noise was just the wind, then?"

"Uh…"

"Nee-chan, what's that black spot on your neck?" Itsuno asked, his innocent eyes wide with curiosity. A quick glance at her reflection on the screen proved there was one small hickey Tetsu had missed just above her collarbone, and she felt her face turn red all at once—the urge to shoot Real Steel a death glare was incredibly difficult to resist.

"That's… I think nee-chan might have accidentally scratched a mosquito bite…"
"So you wouldn't mind if I checked the feed from the front door entrance cam, then?"

*Oh, shit. I forgot I gave her access to that function too.* Letting out a deep sigh of defeat, Kendo looked up and nodded to Tetsu, who had thrown his shirt and pants back on in the meantime.

"L-look who just dropped in!" She cried in fake surprise, standing and turning around to catch a vividly blushing Tetsutetsu in the shot.

"Big Bro Tetsu!" Itsuno shouted in excitement- Real Steel and Earphone Jack had met her family on plenty of occasions, so her siblings were already familiar with both of them. Tetsutetsu waved back awkwardly, but shortly afterward, Itsumi turned to him and gestured toward the door.

"Hey, why don't you go ask grandma when lunch is going to be ready? Nee-chan and I need to have some girl talk for a minute."

"Ew, gross!" His face screwed up in disgust, Itsuno stuck his tongue out at the camera, then darted off to the other room.

"Don't get the wrong impression," Itsumi declared coolly, as soon as he was gone. "I approve of you two, I always have. I was just worried it was someone else, to be honest."

"Always have… wait, how long have you known?"

"The whole time, obviously. Did you really think you were being subtle? By the way, nee-chan, your t-shirt is on backwards."

"Ah, crap, it is, huh?"

"And yours is on inside-out, Tetsutetsu. Besides that, you should really take care of those hickeys on your neck before you go home to your family. My sister should have plenty of concealer for you to use on them."

"Will do," Real Steel responded weakly, hiding his bruised neck with one hand as he shot Itsumi a halfhearted thumbs-up with the other. "Sorry you had to see this, by the way…"

"Oh, it's fine. If anything, it's valuable research material for when I get a boyfriend of my own. On that note, I have some questions for you two, actually…"

*Midnight, could you please get back a little early?* Kendo begged, looking down at her phone with pleading eyes.

Their escort did not answer her prayer with mercy. It took another ten-odd minutes of uncomfortable conversation with Itsuka's sister before Nemuri finally called Tetsutetsu to indicate that she was ready to go, but thankfully Itsuno returned to save her from more 'girl talk' soon after Real Steel left. By the time the call was over, she was exhausted, and very nearly fell asleep of her own accord before she remembered that she was starving too, and got dressed to head up to the convenience store, seeing as there were hardly any ingredients to cook with besides cup ramen and old cereal. Half an hour later she was feasting on a cutlet sandwich, her feet kicked up on the coffee table as she flipped through the channels on the TV.

"Nothing but commercials," she muttered in frustration, watching the latest Detnerat ad for a few brief seconds before continuing on her search for something interesting. "What's up with that guy's nose anyway?"

Finally she landed on a news channel, right in the middle of a special report on the Syndicate, no
less. Her expression soured even further, but she set the remote down and kept watching, out of a mixture of boredom and morbid curiosity.

"…And according to eyewitness accounts, sightings of these symbols have been growing more and more common in metropolitan areas across the country," one of the anchors was saying, as the picture on the screen displayed graffiti in an alleyway: two white angel wings, outlined in dark forest green, with a golden halo above them. "Depictions of the symbol appear to be most highly concentrated in in Tokyo and Osaka, where the municipal authorities' diligent efforts to wash the graffiti away have only been met by further vandalism. But what does this seemingly innocent artwork have to do with the group of villains terrorizing the nation? Here to explain the connection is Kamihara Shinya, better known as former pro hero Edgeshot, who spent six months as lead investigator in charge of monitoring the group's activities."

Her interest piqued, Kendo leaned forward and set her sandwich aside. Oh god, what the hell are those assholes doing now? Kamihara looked slightly less haggard than he had at the strike team meeting, and seemed to be able to breathe without an oxygen tank, though his silver hair was still down in a ponytail as opposed to his usual style, and parts of his burn scars were visible on the back of his neck when he turned to the side to address the anchors.

"Thank you for having me. Though this graffiti may seem innocuous at first glance, closer inspection reveals multiple concerning connections to Midoriya Izuku, the self-proclaimed leader of the Syndicate. The wings and halo seem to be an allusion to his villain persona, 'Seraph', a name borrowed from Christian Biblical tradition, while the green coloring is nothing more than a reference to his name and appearance. By depicting himself as an angel, the Syndicate is waging a war of symbols with the hero community– they're hoping desperately that with time, the public will come to accept Midoriya as the savior he claims to be, regardless of the brutal and horrific nature of his actions."

"But how could such a small organization possibly cover such a wide area?" The second anchor produced a folder from under the desk, and opened it to the first page. "According to this declassified government report on your investigation, your estimate of the Syndicate's membership is no more than forty individuals, even including the Eight Precepts and their manpower."

"While we can't underestimate this group's mobility, given the villain Kurogiri's involvement, the only reasonable conclusion to draw regarding the sudden appearance of these symbols in so many locations around the country is that the number of civilian sympathizers is still rising," Edgeshot replied grimly. "In the past weeks we've seen dozens of websites and forums crop up across the internet dedicated to spreading and even expanding on so-called 'Syndicate Doctrine', and the government's attempts to shut down or quarantine such groups has been largely unsuccessful. This latest development makes it all too clear that some of these devotees have begun to act in coordination with each other off the web. The implications are… concerning, to say the least."

Then Shinya turned directly to the camera, and Kendo shivered involuntarily under his intense gaze. "So as the former Number Four Hero, I have something to ask of all of you today. If you see one of these symbols in your community, please contact your local hero agencies and police departments so proper measures can be taken to remove it and monitor the area."

"Well, I'll certainly be keeping an eye out in my neighborhood. But Edgeshot, could you explain to our viewers what about Midoriya these sympathizers find so compelling? What do we know about his background and upbringing that could have led him on this path?"

"I would rather not discuss what makes Seraph 'compelling'," Kamihara shot back, his tone suddenly much colder, and Itsuka nodded silently in agreement. Questions like that are dangerous. They make
it seem like he's some sort of celebrity, not a psychopathic murderer. "But as far as his past is concerned, he seems to have had a largely run-of-the-mill childhood, by all accounts. Testimony from his father, who remains abroad for work, and his mother, taken prior to her hospitalization, indicates nothing abnormal about his early life in Shizuoka, aside from his distress at being diagnosed as quirkless at age five."

Pictures of Hisashi and Inko Midoriya flashed across the screen, and Kendo felt her stomach grow heavy at the sight of Izuku's mother. Her appetite vanished the moment she recalled the image of that bloody bathtub, and she turned the TV off with a heavy sigh, then leaned back onto the pillows with her convenience store coffee- as usual, it was too sweet for her tastes, but she drank it all the same, her mind wandering. I'm gonna be meeting her myself in a few days, huh? And all the rest of them too. Here I am worrying about my family, while these psychopaths were more than happy to leave theirs behind to suffer. Try as she might, though, Itsuka couldn't get the news anchor's question out of her head. What do we really know about his past? More and more, it felt like she was staring at a puzzle with half the pieces missing- there had to have been something that drove him this low, after all. People aren't just born evil, something had to have pushed him over the edge. Bakugo knows, even if he won't say it. But besides him... If I could just talk to her in private, before the operation starts... Maybe there's something the police and pros missed in their questioning.

An idea flashed through Kendo's head, and within moments she'd pulled up Miruko's number on her phone- as expected, Rumi responded almost immediately.

KI: Hey, so quick question. What hospital are they keeping Midoriya Inko at?

UR: oh lord

UR: you're gonna something stupid, aren't you? Because I feel like this is the start of a request to do something stupid.

KI: I don't think it's stupid. If I'm right, I could get some incredibly valuable intel regarding Seraph. I think there are some questions I could ask her that the investigators might have missed.

UR: you know how damaged this woman is, right? I can give you approval to visit her, but only if you swear to me that you know what you're doing. Do not overstep your bounds with her.

KI: I swear that I do. And I won't.

UR: promise to keep a low profile while you're at it. I don't want this shit popping up on the evening news.

KI: I promise.

UR: you're lucky that I trust you.


KI: Thank you so much, I owe you one.

UR: you bet your ass you do.

Saint Luke's, huh? Pretty sure that's in Chuo Ward. Kendo switched over to her maps app, and clicked the first route that popped up. Hmm, traffic's not too bad right now, only a forty minute drive. I could always just fly, but taking the old-fashioned way actually sounds nice for a change. Plus, Miruko did say to keep a low profile. A grin of anticipation on her face, Kendo changed into a jacket
and jeans, grabbed her keys from the rack, and slipped out into the garage, where the present her
father had given her for her seventeenth birthday was waiting for her: a silver-grey Yamaha
motorcycle, sleek and modern, in pristine condition. Two more belonging to her old man were
visible in the shadows toward the back of the garage, behind the family car- her father was an avid
rider, a passion he'd passed on to her. Itsuka had made time over school holidays to get her
motorcycle license at sixteen, though she rarely had occasion to ride thanks to U.A.'s dorm system.

*Man, have I been looking forward to this. And there's really no better way to stay incognito,* she
mused, sliding the silver and black helmet over her head as the garage door opened behind her.
Another minute of safety checks later and she was out on the road, adrenaline pumping through her
veins as the wind whipped past and the Yamaha hummed with life beneath her. In a way it felt
almost better than flying- while the sensations were roughly comparable, though, there was a
nostalgic value to the motorcycle that she couldn't deny, a reminder of a time when she couldn't fly
across cities and break concrete with the air pressure from her fingers. For a moment memories of
riding with her father flashed through her head, of the way she'd clung to his back, her fingers
digging into the worn leather of his jacket for support as he weaved his way through the city traffic.
An overwhelming sense of security suddenly swashed over her, and Kendo continued the rest of the
way to her destination with a soft smile beneath her helmet.

*I'll make sure you can come home soon, okay, dad?*

---

*Syndicate Cabin, Hokkaido*

*Later that Evening*

"I see your latest conversation with Shoto just as productive as the first- excellent work, Pandora."

"I'm glad you found it satisfactory, sir. As always, I aim to please."

Midoriya did his best to ignore the suggestive smirk that accompanied the second half of
Yaoyorozu's reply, diverting his gaze to the video footage from Coldflame's cell that was currently
playing on his laptop. Two steps into his 'interview process' with Momo, Todoroki seemed to be
falling for the bait hook, line, and sinker; by all appearances, he was fully convinced that he was a
prospective Syndicate member, with a field test of his loyalty on the horizon. As far as he was aware,
Pandora- who was still desperately in love with him, naturally- was working diligently day after day
to convince Seraph and the other founders of his devotion to the group's cause. There were a few
more days of 'internal deliberation' planned out before the next step- they couldn't move too quickly,
after all, or even someone as dense as Shoto might clue in. Taking a pen in hand, Izuku began to jot
down a few additional notes about potential adjustments to the timetable, and raised one eyebrow
when Yaoyorozu took a step towards his desk instead of turning to leave.

"So can I assume that we're off the clock now, then?"

Though he didn't look up from his notebook, Midoriya knew from her tone exactly the type of coy
smile Momo was wearing on her face, and exhaled slightly in exasperation. *I suppose I should've
known that a standard progress report and nothing else was too much to expect from her.*

"I suppose one could say that, yes. That was the last assignment I had for you for the time being,
assuming that all the necessary preparations have been made for Monday's operation."

"Of course- I finished producing the cyclonite earlier this morning, and the chemical triggers as well.
What a shame that there's nothing else to do. I suppose I'd enjoy a chat with Himiko, but she's still
off at her meetings, isn't she?"
"...It would seem that she is."

Another step forward, and Pandora was at his desk now, leaning casually against the side. When he finally looked up to meet her gaze, there was an unmistakable predatory gleam in her eyes, somewhere just beyond the cool confidence and barely restrained desire. A shudder wracked Midoriya's body involuntarily, and though his face remained calm, internally, alarms began to sound; he wasn't accustomed to being looked at as prey by anyone except Toga, and the sensation produced a variety of unanticipated responses. Ignoring them all to the extent that he could manage, Seraph looked back to his computer, and was preparing to tell Pandora to leave him when the back of her hand brushed against his forehead.

"My my, did you catch a chill just now? I can hardly blame you, with it being so dreadfully cold in here." Rather than remove her hand once she'd felt his temperature, though, Momo left it in place, ghosting her fingers back and forth along his skin and twirling strands of his green-black hair in between them.

"We've already had more than one conversation about unsuitable physical contact," Izuku responded quietly. It was taking every ounce of effort he had to remain calm and collected, and to make matters worse, he was fairly sure that she could tell he was close to cracking.

"Are you telling me to stop?" With her other hand, Yaoyorozu reached over and gently closed his laptop; then she took hold of his chin and tilted his head up towards hers until their eyes met once more. All the while she continued to run her fingers through his hair, more and more confident with each passing second.

"It wouldn't appear that I am," Midoriya answered after a long pause, struggling to maintain eye contact as every sensible neuron in his brain cried out in protest. His chest was full of the same combination of excitement and fear that he felt whenever Himiko held a knife to his neck in bed, but it seemed that Yaoyorozu didn't need a lethal weapon to produce it. This course of action is illogical, he knew, his teeth grit in frustration I should leave, right this moment, get up and walk out the door before this insanity goes any further. But he didn't, and the carnivorous gleam in Pandora's eyes grew even stronger as a grin of delight spread across her face.

"I've been waiting so very long to hear you say that, darling."

"Darling?" He frowned, and came close to pushing her away. "I don't recall telling you that you could call me darling."

"And I don't recall you saying that I couldn't." Sliding her other hand behind his neck, she drew Izuku's head towards her, and leaned down until their faces were only inches apart. "Lie to me all you want, there are other parts of you that are honest." She rubbed her hand in a circle across the center of his chest, deftly undoing two of his shirt buttons in the process. "Your heartbeat, for example, seems to be quite elevated, and you're perspiring more than normal as well. If I didn't know any better, I might say that you're excited right now."

"Hardly." Despite Midoriya's best efforts, his cheeks were slowly filling with color under Momo's prolonged touch, but he still mustered the resolve to wrap a hand around her wrist and ease her teasing fingers away from his pounding chest. "You're making too many assumptions, Pandora." He shook his head disapprovingly, and gave her a soft grin. "I'm still in control here."

Then Yaoyorozu leaned forward, her lips brushing up against his ear as she whispered into it.
"No you're not."

For the first time in as long as he could remember, Izuku's concentration broke. His eyes widened in genuine surprise, and a range of emotions flashed briefly across his face before he regained his composure moments later, and responded in an even tone of voice.

"I would kill most people for saying that to me."

"Well it's a good thing that I'm not most people." Leaning forward again with a gleefully self-assured expression, Momo kissed him on the cheek. When Midoriya made no move to turn away, she wrapped an arm around his shoulder and pressed her lips against his own; Izuku only barely managed to resist the urge to kiss her back, and once she broke away, a bemused look spread across her face. "It's admirable, what a good fight you're putting up. It's alright to let go, you know. There's no one here but us."

"She could be back at any moment," Seraph breathed, tearing his eyes away from Pandora's lips and nodding towards the door, which was still ever so slightly ajar. They were on the second floor of the cabin, to be fair, away from the more crowded kitchen and living room, but there was still a chance that someone might pass by. "If that happens, you'll be dead before your body hits the floor. You're aware of that, yes?"

"All too aware," Yaoyorozu's smirk only intensified. "That's the most exciting part of this, don't you think? The risk of it all."

A sigh escaping from his mouth, Izuku placed his hands on her shoulders and gently eased Momo a few inches away. Somehow he'd managed to regain his senses for just long enough to stop things before they ventured any further into dangerous territory.

"You know, after a year, this... 'pursuit' of yours still confuses me, Momo. I tolerate it because you're like me- you're brilliant, capable, decisive, rational. I've never been able to understand exactly why you insist on carrying on like this when you should know full well that you're only endangering yourself."

Pandora's grin slowly faded; he could see in her face that she understood that this was as far as things would go, and she reluctantly released her grip on Seraph.

"Sometimes one's emotions demand a temporary cessation of logic. I explained it in perfect detail when I confessed to you- I'm attracted to intelligence, and simply put, you're the smartest man I've ever met. Confident, too, and so disciplined- you're everything I wanted to be, back when I was still pretending to be a hero. I can't stop myself from wanting this, even if I know I might come to harm in the process. But you should understand this kind of behavior better than anyone; wouldn't the more 'rational' option be to keep yourself free of emotional commitments in the first place, given your role? Your relationship with Himiko raises the same questions."

"Ah, there's the Momo I'm used to, always capable of making a strong argument. Instead of resorting to physical tactics, why don't you try and convince me why I should even begin to consider leaving Carmilla on your behalf?"

"That sounds like a challenge, Izuku. You know how much I love challenges."

"I wouldn't go getting my hopes up if I were you. It's not one you can win."

Suddenly Monoma's voice drifted through the crack, and they both started.

"Sir, I have my latest report on the Recruits ready for you, whenever you have the time."
"Ah yes, excellent. One moment, I'll be right with you. Is Carmilla back as well?"

"No, but she should be returning shortly. She's finishing up her final meeting."

"I see. Come in, please."

By the time Chaudron entered the dimly lit study, everything was back to normal; Seraph was sitting with his hands steeped atop his desk, with Pandora standing attentively off to the side, as if she'd just been listening carefully to Midoriya's instructions. If Monoma noticed something, the only indication he gave was a slight raise of one eyebrow as he stepped forward and opened a manila folder containing the records of all four active Recruits, plus the three prospective candidates still in the meeting phase, Hanged Man, Chariot, and Justice. As of now they were still unaware they were meeting with Toga Himiko, but bit by bit, their 'new friend' was nudging each of them closer and closer towards accepting the Syndicate's ideals, employing a variety of different methods personalized for each candidate. While Toga worked in the field as the actual point of contact between the Syndicate and the anyone labeled as a potential recruit, Neito served as her handler, monitoring the conversations through an earpiece and lens camera, and offering specific guidance if necessary by drawing on his extensive background research into the targets' interests, flaws, and vulnerabilities- anything that could be exploited to help drive them away from heroism was considered an asset.

"Remind me, Neito, who did she meet with today?"

"Tower, Temperance, Hierophant, and Hanged Man. Justice, Chariot, and Emperor had conflicts, and were rescheduled for tomorrow."

"I see. Well, any substantial updates that I should be aware of before I review the footage?"

"Nothing too out of the ordinary- Tower and Temperance both understand their roles for Monday, and the date and time for the explosives handover has been set. Additionally, going by Hierophant and Temperance's recommendations, I've marked two new prospective recruits to be moved from the monitoring phase to active meetings." Monoma drew a pair of files from inside the folder and set them down on the desktop; above the candidates; pictures were the codenames 'Empress' and 'Hermit'. Neito does love his tarot cards, doesn't he?

"Ah, these two are both excellent." Midoriya mused aloud, a smile spreading across his face. "Quite the diverse portfolio you're building- I'm impressed. You have my clearance to move forward with both of them."

"Very good, sir. I believe that Longshot and La Brava have a report for you as well, if you're ready to see them."

"Tell them I'll be with them momentarily."

"I'll go ahead and check in on them." Pandora nodded to Seraph and started towards the door- just as she passed him, Chaudron reached into his jacket pocket, drew out a silken handkerchief, and held it towards her.

"Your lipstick. It's smudged."

"…Thank you."

Once she was gone, Neito gave a heavy sigh, pulled up a chair, and took a seat opposite Izuku, his face laden with disapproval.
"You don't need to say anything." Midoriya had already switched back to jotting down notes, his eyes fixed on the two new files Monoma had given him. "I have things under control."

"Do you even know what you're playing at?" Chaudron replied quietly, his arms crossed. "This isn't a game."

"I know, it isn't. Just... trust me to deal with this, Neito."

"W-we still haven't been able to get any new intel on Gentle... I've been trying all day to break into the main tower's internal security cams, but the firewall is just too strong. It's the best adaptive security software that I've ever seen, and I haven't been able to make a dent... I just feel so useless, my Gentle is suffering and I can't do anything to help him!"

To her credit, La Brava only broke into tears a handful of times during her report on the situation in Deika City, which marked a substantial improvement from the night before; she had sobbed for hours on end when informed of Tobita and Iguchi's abduction, to the point that Shinso had been forced to brainwash her to get her to stop. Aiba had also attempted to convince them all to mount an immediate rescue operation, but settled for working with Hatsume on cracking their new rivals' systems after being overruled. Thus far, it seemed to be proving quite the challenging task; even Manami and Mei's best efforts had failed to produce any notable results beyond what they already knew.

"As La Brava was saying," Longshot continued, swiveling around in her chair to face Seraph, "this place is locked up way tighter than we expected, and not just the tower itself- anything past the outskirts is basically a dead zone for Aiba's program."

"But... how could that be possible?" A frown crossing her picture-perfect features, Momo stepped up towards the tech-savvy duo's extensive computer station, her eyes roving from monitor to monitor- half of the screens were displaying 'Error, No Signal' messages, and the others had only generic views from Deika's outskirts. "Aiba, your program works by hijacking street cameras, correct? Even in a small city like this one, there must be plenty around to work with."

"It's possible because all the cameras inside the city limits are encrypted with the same security program as the Detnerat headquarters building." Wiping away the remnants of her tears, Manami pulled up a street grid view of Deika, dotted by hundreds of nodes all spreading concentrically out from one central point. "The whole city is essentially one giant network, controlled centrally from that one tower- I've never seen anything like this at a municipal level. Detnerat and Feel Good Inc. have almost total control over all the information coming in and out, and without a team there on the ground, we can't get inside."

"That's not happening," Midoriya shared a brief glance with Overhaul, who was lounging in an armchair on the other side of the room. He was well aware that after the casualties Chisaki's forces had suffered in recent weeks, the Yakuza capo shared his reluctance to launch into a full-scale conflict with uncertain odds. "The plan still holds- take no offensive action until they reach out to us. If we can't break into their network, we focus on keeping them out of ours. Cease all efforts to penetrate their firewall, and focus on strengthening our own. We still have the resources to make this an even game, but not if they know our every move before we make it- ensuring secure connections and communication are your new top priorities. Understood?"

"You betcha!" Hatsume saluted enthusiastically while Aiba nodded politely in acknowledgement, and Izuku was close to turning and leaving when he recalled something else he'd been meaning to ask Mei.
"And how is your new assistant taking to his assignment?"

"Oh, the Doc? Man, what a natural talent! Deep down I think he loves getting ordered around, just take a look." A few taps on her keyboard and they were watching a live camera feed of David Shield working diligently in the Yokohama base's workshop, an explosives-laced anklet fastened around one leg in case he attempted to escape. Another Hatsume was welding two armor pieces together on the workbench beside him, and the one in front of Midoriya grinned at the sight. "My clone's working him hard, but I personally think they're getting along well so far." Suddenly her expression turned puzzled, and she stroked her chin with a grease-stained hand. "Or wait, is she the original, and I'm the clone? I've slept so little lately that I honestly can't remember! Could you help me check? Just chop off one of my fingers real quick, or even the whole arm if you want- Overhaul can put it back on."

"I've told you before, I'm not your personal medic," Kai snapped, looking up from his conversation with Yaoyorozu.

"I would rather not watch you be mutilated, clone or otherwise." Shinso's languid voice drifted over from the far end of the room, and Midoriya turned to find him leaning halfway through the doorway, his expression even more dispassionate than usual. "You're the real one, by the way, just for the record. Izuku, could you come downstairs for a sec? There's something I think you need to see."

When Seraph followed Synapse into the cabin's living room, Chaudron and Carmilla were both watching the former's laptop intently; Toga brightened up and planted a long kiss on his lips the moment she saw him, then nodded towards the computer.

"Check it out, baby! We just got this message a few minutes ago."

"It seems the camera Temperance planted in your mother's hospital room finally caught someone interesting," Monoma explained, turning the screen towards Midoriya. "Look who paid her a visit."

Izuku's eyes widened when an image of Kendo Itsuka came into focus, sitting by his mother's bedside, her hand wrapped around Inko's. A flood of conflicting emotions swelled up inside him all at once- rage, indignance, guilt, regret, and a dozen others in between. His mechanical hand clenched into a fist, then slowly relaxed.

"Well then," Seraph breathed, stepping forward and taking a seat at Chaudron's side. "Turn up the volume- let's hear what she has to say."

Chapter End Notes

The first encounter between Kendo and Inko finally arrives! Plus, a few developments in some key relationships on both sides of the conflict. Given how much this story is going to change over the next few update, I made the decision to delay the graduation ceremony and the climax of this arc by one chapter, in order to focus more on character interactions and dynamics that are going to be important going forward, and to introduce new elements like Kendo's siblings and the concept of civilian sympathizers. (Plus a few new potential traitors to think about, to boot). As always, keep the guesses coming! The Kendo-Inko conversation was also originally planned for later in the story, but I thought now felt like a good time to start off that dynamic. This chapter has a bit of a slower pace than I intended, but it essentially represents the final calm before a lot of storms start raging at once.
Will there be consequences for Momo's continued advances? What might Inko reveal? I hope you all enjoyed, and as always leave a comment letting me know what you think! I think I've learned my lesson about making promises about chapter release dates, so I'll just say this- Rhapsody in Green is probably going to get a long awaited Chapter 6 first, then it should be back to the alternating schedule. As far as future plans go, once Rhapsody finishes (it's currently planned for a total of 10-12 chapters maximum), I've been thinking for a while about starting an Attack on Titan story. Would any fans of that anime/manga be interested? Regardless, it's still in the planning phase. Until next time!
Hi, everyone! I hope you're all enjoying Season 4 of the anime as much as I am- it's definitely been a major motivating factor for me to get this chapter done, despite all the insane things life has thrown at me this past month. Long story short, I started a full-time job at the beginning of October in addition to taking classes, so it's gotten considerably more difficult to find the time to write, unfortunately.

With that in mind, though, I'm going to make some adjustments to how I structure chapters, so that updates will hopefully get back to more than once a month- instead of 10,000+ worders, I'm going to shoot for shorter and more frequent chapter drops, between 4,000-7,000 words. This applies to both Entropy and Rhapsody in Green, which is still not dead (!), just suffering from a bit of writer's block on my part.

Anyway, enough from me- enjoy the chapter!

"I'm here to see a patient of yours- room 914."

Kendo slid her provisional license across the counter and gave the receptionist a sheepish grin from beneath the raised visor of her motorcycle helmet, her eyes flitting back and forth across the crowded lobby to make sure no one had recognized her. As expected of her chronically terrible luck, the hospital entrance was currently packed to the brim; today of all days, over a month after his near-fatal confrontation with Synapse and his squad, Epicenter was being released from St. Luke's coma ward with a clean bill of health, and it seemed half the local press corps had turned up for the occasion. Now more than ever, any story involving the Syndicate was in high demand from both the media and the public- the saga of the group's heinous acts had turned into a drama on a national scale, so naturally the first hero to have fallen to the nation's new foes was guaranteed to draw a crowd of reporters. Yoroimusha and Shindo's girlfriend Tatami were present as well; it had been difficult to resist the urge to greet the Ketsubutsu graduate, who she'd run into on more than one occasion during her various internships. She'd had the foresight to hide her recognizable sidetail in her jacket, but in retrospect, wearing a full-face helmet inside a hospital couldn't exactly be called incognito- her look had already prompted a few confused looks, but luckily the Armored Hero was drawing most of the attention on the other side of the lobby, giving an impassioned speech about the bravery of his 'apprentices' in the face of evil.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but only authorized personnel are permitted to see… oh." The woman behind the counter hardly even glanced up from the screen of her computer at first, her expression deadpan and her voice monotone. All of that changed in an instant when she looked down at Battle Fist's license- her mouth fell open in disbelief, and as her wide-eyed gaze met Itsuka's own, Kendo held one gloved finger up in front of her mouth, then nodded in the direction of the crowd.

"Help me keep this visit quiet, okay? I don't want to steal the spotlight on someone else's big day."

"S-sure thing, ma'am. Got it."

Blushing profusely in embarrassment, the receptionist hurriedly handed over the necessary visitation
and clearance forms, and a few minutes later, Itsuka was safely in the elevator- she shrugged off her helmet practically the moment the doors closed, to the shock and excitement of the doctor and nurses who'd gotten on with her. By the time the doors opened on the ninth floor, she'd signed autographs for all three of them, a wide, beaming smile on her face as she did her best to channel All Might's contagious energy. It quickly faded, though, when she stepped out and watched a group of surgeons rush past, pushing a bloodied hero on a stretcher. An oxygen mask was hooked up to the man's mouth, and his costume was torn in several places; she recognized him from his dented, beaklike mask as one of Hawks' sidekicks. Surprise and confusion spread across her face, and after a moment's contemplation she fell in step with the group of policemen trailing behind the doctors. It didn't take long to single out one she recognized- Kagari Soichiro, an older, mustached officer who had been one of Tsukauchi's direct superiors. Itsuka had seen him around crime scenes often enough that she felt comfortable approaching him, even if the situation didn't concern her directly.

"What's the situation, major? What happened to him?"

"Ma'am, I can't just… oh, Battle Fist- good to see you here." Unlike the receptionist, Kagari hardly missed a beat once he recognized Kendo; he nodded respectfully and adjusted his glasses before continuing. "Well, I won't sugarcoat it- he was jumped on patrol by a group of anti-Hawks 'activists'. They were all known participants in the protests that have been going on lately, but no prior criminal records exist for any of them. Somehow or other they got the slip on him, beat him pretty bad. Left this at the scene of the crime."

Soichiro pulled out his phone and opened a picture: above the crime tape that marked where the victim's body had been found, the word 'traitor' was scrawled across the wall of an alleyway in black spraypaint, and below it, the same angel wings and halo that she'd seen earlier during Edgeshot's report.

"God… that's awful." Kendo shook her head in frustration and disbelief. "I don't understand why so many people still believe he was a criminal, even after all the evidence we've given them to the contrary. It just doesn't make any sense."

"People believe what they want to. It doesn't matter how convincing our arguments are if they've already decided we're liars." They rounded a corner, and stopped short of the next set of double doors as the doctors hurried their patient into the operating room.

"But for ordinary civilians resort to violence like that, all based on the words of a coward and a terrorist..." Itsuka frowned, and shook her head. "The Syndicate's rhetoric, it's like a poison we can't flush out. And there's another thing I don't understand. Hawks' sidekicks are the best of the best, they always have been. How could ordinary people have managed something like this?"

"Numbers and quirks, that's how- they didn't even need to use any weapons. I'll tell it to you straight, Battle Fist- sometimes you heroes tend to forget how few of you there really are out there, compared to the rest of society. A full 80% of the population have quirks, and only one in a thousand go pro, if that. That leaves behind a whole lot of 'ordinary people' walking around with deadly weapons that we just have to trust them not to use every time they get angry or scared."

Kendo hardly knew how to even begin to respond to that, and lapsed into an uncomfortable silence before finally speaking up again a few moments later.

"Well… I hope you caught the ones who did it, at least."

"They tried to make a run for it, nearly got away too. But lucky for us, Endeavor was in the area- he delivered them to the station personally. He's been regaining more and more popular support, ever since that mess with the Stain trial finally ended. At this rate, I think he's going to make another run
for the top spot in the next polls."

"Is that so?" Itsuka murmured, half to Kagari and half to herself. The next billboard rankings will the first ones I compete in as a professional. I'm have to make a strong first impression, just as strong as All Might, if I want to try and heal this country. And eventually, I'll have to outcompete both Best Jeanist and Endeavor, if I want to live up to his memory.

"...Do you really think he has what it takes?" She asked, once she'd drifted back to reality.

"In comparison to you and Jeanist? Who knows. All I know is that no matter which one of you ends up at the top, the number one's priority has to be taking down the Syndicate bastards who're behind all this." The major scowled, his tone noticeably harsher. A mentor to Tsukauchi and well-acquainted with Gran Torino, Kagari had been one of the dozens of officers drawn away from Tokyo Police Headquarters by false reports shortly before the events of the Black Day. Like the rest of the force, Soichiro bore an intense and bitter grudge towards the Syndicate in the aftermath. "Stoking suspicions and lying to the public, it's despicable. If I had my way, every one of them would be rounded up and-"

"Major Kagari."

A gruff voice sounded behind them, and Kendo pivoted to find the beagle-headed Tsuragamae Kenji waiting patiently for his subordinate's attention. Formerly Hosu Ward's Chief of Police, he'd recently been promoted to Deputy Commissioner for the Tokyo MPD following his predecessor's untimely death during the events of the Black Day, charged with the protection of the entire southern half of the capital, a full thirteen wards.

"Deputy Commissioner, my apologies. I didn't know you'd be joining us in person."

"Given the serious implications of this case, I thought it best to see things firsthand. I trust you have a report for me?"

"Of course, sir. If you'll excuse us, Battle Fist?"

Kendo bowed her head respectfully to the Deputy Commissioner before continuing back the way she'd come; the hospital's corridors were practically a maze, and even retracing her steps was a challenge. Five minutes later, she was finally going in what seemed to be the right direction based on the room numbers, and glanced down to check her phone. News of the attack on Hawks' sidekick didn't seem to have spread yet, but something in her gut told her it was only a matter of time before every news station and tabloid with an ear to the ground picked up on the scandalous headlines. I guess I know what I'm getting drilled about the next time a gaggle of reporters corners me. Her mind wandering, she was in the process of scrolling absently through her newsfeed when she rounded the next corner, and promptly ran into another young woman, equally absorbed in her own cellphone.

"Oh my god, fam, I'm, like, so sorry! I totes didn't see you there!"

"You're totally fine, that was my bad! I wasn't..." Pocketing her phone, Kendo trailed off midsentence when she looked up and realized who she was talking to, and suddenly her stomach began to tie itself in a knot.

Oh god, why have you abandoned me?

"Don't call the new Symbol of Peace 'fam', Glamourous. It's disrespectful." His arms crossed in annoyance, Shishikura Seiji, better known as the Sculpting Hero, Rodin, stepped up beside his...
former Shiketsu classmate, and tossed a half-sympathetic, half-skeptical glance in Itsuka's direction. "I apologize for my colleague's behavior, Battle Fist. Clearly, she still has much to learn about the discipline involved in professional heroics."

"Oh my god, Seiji, like, don't even worry about it! Kendo and I go way back, we met at work forever ago and totally bonded! Isn't that right, babe?" Camie Utsushimi flashed her a wide, beaming smile, complete with a peace sign, and it took all the energy Itsuka could muster not to black out from sheer shame alone when the older girl hopped forward and wrapped her in a tight hug. It was true that they'd gotten along well after teaming up on an assignment, and Kendo had even recommended Glamourous for her latest internship with Uwabami afterward-- that fact only made the reality of the current situation even more uncomfortable. "It's like, so good to see you here! What are you up to?"

"That's her business," Shishikura muttered, massaging the bridge of his nose in exasperation. "Do I need to remind you that we're back on the clock? Fraternizing on duty is beneath the caliber of Shiketsu graduates."

"It's alright, I won't tell on you," Kendo chuckled nervously as Camie took hold of her hands and began to inspect her nails, struggling to keep a straight face. "I'm just here to visit a friend. How about you guys? Tokyo is pretty far outside your neck of the woods."

"We were just visiting Gale Force, actually. He was transferred from a hospital back in Hiroshima to this one last week, to undergo a specific form of physical therapy they specialize in here." Seiji nodded towards the the opposite side of the hall, where Yoarashi's name was visible on the sign outside one of the doors. "I'd offer to take you by to see him, but he's with a doctor at the moment."

"Ah, that's nice of you! How's his recovery going?"

"As best as could be expected, given the nature of his injuries." Shishikura crossed his hands behind his back, and his tone grew curt and cold. He cut an intimidating figure in his black and red hero costume, and still wore a variant of the Shiketsu cap despite the fact that he'd graduated a year prior. "To be honest, I'm still surprised a group of villains were able to inflict such a defeat on him, given the sheer potency of his quirk. I personally hold Hawks accountable-- despite his raw talent, it's clear that the man lacked any semblance of dignity, or other qualities necessary in a mentor, for that matter. It's preposterous that someone like him was ever able to rise so high as a professional in the first place."

"Ohmygoddd, can you quit being a buzzkill for, like, literally two seconds?" Utsushimi turned and pouted in her former classmate's direction, wrapping her hands even more tightly around Istuka's. "I'm trying to vibe with the love of my life here, and you're seriously harshing it."

"That's... a pretty severe outlook," Kendo replied quietly, as some of her embarrassment was quickly supplanted by shock and indignation. "Wow, I'd almost forgotten what a total ass this guy is."

"Oh just ignore what he says, babe, Senpai's always rambling about something. Blah blah blah, dignity this, professionalism that."

"It's not funny," Shishikura snapped, narrowing his eyes. Half his face was hidden behind tufts of lavender hair, the back parts of which reached almost down to his shoulders by now, but the half Kendo could see was practically fuming. "We live in a society that has lost all respect for--"

"So anyway, like he was saying, we mainly came to visit Inasa," Camie proceeded to ignore Seiji entirely, a tactic that somehow succeeded in shutting him up after a few moments. "But he's looking to potentially start a hero agency in the area, and I take every chance I can get to come up here
anyway, to see Katsuki."

The older girl smiled giddily, and the guilt and regret Kendo had momentarily forgotten surged back to the surface; she felt her cheeks go red at the mention of Bakugo's name, and played it off as a sudden fit of coughing.

"Aww, you okay, fam?" A sympathetic smile on her face, Utsushimi leaned over and began to rub gentle circles on Kendo's back, all while Itsuka struggled not to vomit in self-disgust. "Something go down the wrong way? That's, like, the worst!"

Oh god, I feel like I have to tell her. But is it even my place to? Bakugo might go ballistic if I do, and there's no telling what would happen if she leaked it to the press...

"It's, ah, nothing- don't worry, I'm good." Kendo straightened up again and forced herself to smile in Camie's direction, hoping against hope that she wasn't still scarlet from ear to ear. "Speaking of Bakugo, how, uh… how are things between you two?"

"Well I'm seeing him tonight, but just between us girls, let's just say that boo fucked up pretty bad last month- I didn't text him for like, a whole week afterward. Not to sound like a gold digger, but I'm expecting a lit makeup present when we meet later."

"I'm still standing right here!" Rodin protested weakly, but by now he'd mostly given up at trying to steer the conversation away from personal matters, and fell silent when he was ignored once again.

"But what about you?" Glamourous asked, before Battle Fist could even fit in a response. "You're, like, hella popular right now, I see you on TV all the time! I bet you have a whole harem of hotties worshipping at your feet."

"Ah, well you know how busy things have been lately…” She grinned nervously and rubbed the back of her neck. "I've had basically zero time for that type of thing, so no harem yet, unfortunately."

"Hmm… gotta be honest, I think you're lying, fam." Camie's suddenly skeptical tone set Itsuka's heart pounding in her chest, and she felt her mouth go dry.

"W-what? What do you mean?"

"You did a pretty good job at hiding it, but I'm a pro at spotting these. The older girl reached forward and tapped a knowing finger on Kendo's lower neck, where Tetsutetsu's hickey was peeking out from above her jacket's collar ever so slightly. "Wow, looks recent, too! You gotta tell me, babe, who's the lucky guy?"

"Well, I, uh…"

"Alright, that's enough. We have a patrol to make in thirty minutes, we're going to be late if we delay here any longer." His patience seemingly at an end, Seiji stepped forward and laid a hand on Camie's shoulder; Itsuka found herself thanking him internally as she reluctantly assented.

"You are literally the lamest… Guess I'll seeya, soon, babe! We'll have to pick this up again next time." Glamourous started down the hallway after Rodin, but turned around to listen when Kendo stammered out a reply, walking backwards with casual grace.

"Y-yeah, for sure! I might be busy, but just let me know if you want to grab lunch!"

"Busy with your new squeeze, huh? Have fun with your man, babe, just make sure not to steal mine." Utsushimi winked suggestively, then pivoted and passed out of sight, leaving Kendo to
contemplate her final few words.

*That was just a joke… right? He said he didn’t tell her, so she couldn’t know. There’s no way she would’ve been so friendly… unless she was playing with me?!*

Itsuka forced herself to stop worrying before she gave herself a headache in the process, and strode decisively back down the corridor, in the direction of room 914. *That’s enough detours. Whether she knows or doesn’t, it makes no difference in the end- I came here to do something a lot more important than worry about my love life.* Before she knew it Kendo was standing outside the room in question, and staring down two burly police officers. Fumbling in her pocket for her license, Battle Fist hurriedly presented it to the guards, and was ushered inside within moments once they’d checked to make sure she was on the list of approved visitors.

Then they closed the door behind her, and Kendo was left standing alone in a room with Midoriya Inko.

The first thing that struck her was how deafeningly quiet it was. The halls had all been filled with chatter and the echoes of distant voices, but inside Inko's room, there was nothing but the faint, muffled beeping of a machine, and the beating of Itsuka's own heart. Even her breathing seemed noisy by comparison- she made a conscious effort to stifle it as she stepped forward, towards the bed.

Seraph's mother had been staring out the window when she entered, and didn't look away even as Kendo inched closer across the sanitized white linoleum floor. Like most of the room, her body was bathed in bright afternoon sunlight; on the other side of the glass, Tokyo harbor was glimmering white and gold in the far distance, past the vibrant spring colors of the Imperial Gardens.

"This room has a nice view," Itsuka said, taking a seat in a chair by Inko's bedside. *I can't come out of the gate questioning her about Izuku. This has to be a natural conversation.* "Have you visited the gardens before?"

"Just once." The older woman replied, after a moment's silence. Her voice was faint and distant, like she was talking to herself rather than to anyone else. "I went with Hisashi, just a few months before our wedding. It was such a long time ago, the memory is fuzzy now… But I remember that it was beautiful." She finally tuned her gaze away from the window, and gave Kendo a weak smile. "I know you, from the news. Are you here to ask me about my son, Symbol of Peace?"

Battle Fist swallowed, and took a moment of silence to search for the right words. She'd spent most of the ride over thinking of what to say, but now that she was actually here, all her planned phrases and questions had utterly abandoned her. Though she was trying her best to put on a happy face, everything nearly about Inko's appearance set off red flags in Itsuka's mind. Even with all the hospital's equipment and medication, her skin was pale and clammy, and she had the noticeably haggard look of someone who had lost far too much weight in far too short a time. Her eyes sported prominent dark circles from a lack of sleep, and her greenish black hair looked greasy and unkempt, let down past her shoulders from her usual style.

"I… well, I…" Kendo's tongue refused to work properly, and after a few moments Inko glanced back toward the window, and the far-off gardens.

"They want me to divorce him, you know?"

"…Pardon me?"

"Hisashi's parents. They sent me a letter, last week- they say Izuku's conduct demonstrates that I'm a failure as a mother, and unfit to be a wife. They're trying to convince him to cut off contact between
us." She chuckled softly, and wiped at her eyes with a hand that was bandaged from palm to elbow. "It's funny, because we barely talk regardless these days. I haven't seen him in almost two years- half the time, I'm not even sure where in the world he is. I think it's Singapore now, or maybe Jakarta. Then again, the Ministry of Defense may have already moved him to a safehouse, so who knows, at the end of the day?"

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Midoriya. I know this may sound presumptuous… But I think I know how you feel- at least, to a certain extent. My parents both work abroad. My mom's in Seoul right now, and my dad's… somewhere in Germany, I think. Or maybe Prague- it's tough to keep track of him, honestly. Years pass between the moments when they're home at the same time- it's been hard, going to school and looking after my siblings at the same time. Without my aunt and uncle's help, I honestly don't know what I would do."

"They've mentioned that, in the hero profiles they do on you." Inko met Itsuka's gaze again, and she felt a shiver run down her spine. The woman's eyes reminded her of Midoriya's, in a way: they were hollow and empty, like all the light and life had been drained out of them. "I've watched them all, ever since your debut last year, recorded every single one- just in case he came back someday, and wanted to see them. Even though he stopped looking up to All Might, I was sure that someday he would love to hear about his successor. In a way, I… I feel like I've known you for a while now. And to think that you two went to the same school… I think you would've good friends, if you'd had the chance. There's so much you could've talked about. So much you could've taught him."

"I'd… like to think so too," Kendo replied, a soft smile on her lips. "From what I've heard, he was a model student, enthusiastic in all of his classes, and social too, within a certain small group. He had perfect scores on the General Studies entrance exam, perfect grades for every course, even perfect attendance. The only infraction on his record is the detention that he received alongside Hatsume and Shinso- but I've only heard Eraserhead's side of that story. It must have been hard for him afterward, at home, dealing with that rejection. You said he stopped looking up to All Might… was that when it happened?"

She nodded almost imperceptibly, the smile fading from her face, and began to wring her hands together in a manner that seemed almost reflexive.

"Yes, it was. I'll never forget the sight of him carrying all his posters out to the trash, his bedsheets and comics and action figures too- I nearly fainted on the spot. I had to convince him to let me fetch most the most valuable pieces out of the dumpster so I could take them to secondhand stores to resell; his collection was worth tens of thousands of yen in total, he'd worked for years so save enough allowance for it all, but then one day he just wanted to throw it all away. Over and over again I asked him why, and all he would say is that he… didn't feel worthy of it anymore. I never understood what that meant. When I try and place the day I lost him, that's one of the first that comes to mind. He was never quite the same afterward, but looking back, I'm not so sure it was that sudden. I think it been happening bit by bit for a long time- I was just too oblivious to notice until it was too late."

Tears began to well up in Inko's eyes for a second time, and Itsuka reached out and took hold of her hand. Her palm was cold and clammy, but Midoriya didn't shy away from her grip, wrapping her fingers gently around Kendo's.

"No one could have known what he was thinking," Kendo replied, her tone firm. "But I can't help but wonder… what other days come to mind when you think back on that time? Were there any other moments like that, even ones that might have seemed insignificant? Changes in his behavior, or personal relationships?"

Inko's eyes dropped to the blanket draped across her lap, and Kendo felt her frail grip tighten ever so
"There was… there was also the day he took the hero course entrance exam. If you know about his detention, I'm sure you know about that too. He was inconsolable when I picked him up- he wouldn't come out of his room for days."

Itsuka nodded silently. Uraraka had told her everything about that particular incident: how he hadn't scored a single point, and how she'd seen him in tears afterward. To Kendo, it seemed like an important moment in Seraph's personal history, but surely he'd known what the likely result would be, going up against dozens of other applicants with powerful quirks.

"He knew he'd be at a disadvantage," Inko continued, practically reading Itsuka's thoughts, "but he was just so determined to go through with it, I couldn't possibly say anything to discourage him. He'd been training for months, working himself to the bone day in and day out- most days he'd go out on runs or to the gym the moment he got home, and fall asleep right after dinner. I was happy he wanted to be stronger, but… it didn't seem healthy. He was trying to progress too much too quickly- something about it was almost… desperate. I remembering worrying he was going to hurt himself, and then one day I got a call from the local hospital- his arms had given out while he was lifting weights. He dropped two hundred pounds right across his chest, broke his sternum and collarbone. He spent weeks recovering from that… it might've been even worse if Katsuki hadn't been there."

"Katsuki?" Kendo's eyes narrowed. "You mean Bakugo? They trained together?"

Inko's smile returned, and her expression grew almost wistful.

"When Izuku asked me to help him pay for a membership to the new gym in our neighborhood, he told me he chose it because it was the same one that Katsuki went to. He admired him so much… he even studied his workout routines, wrote them down in those notebooks of his. I don't think know if they were necessarily training together, but Bakugo was the one who pulled the weight off of Izuku when he dropped it on himself- from what the gym manager told me, he ran over the moment he saw, and threw it halfway across the room. They weren't as close as they used to be… but Katsuki still cared about my son. I know he did. Even more than All Might, he was the one Izuku was chasing after all those months."

Itsuka's brows furrowed in contemplation, as her conversations with Ground Zero played on loop in her mind. Nothing about this matches up with the way he talks about Midoriya.

"…And what happened afterward?"

"Afterward, I was still scared. He wanted to go back to weight-lifting right away, against the doctors' advice, so I threatened to take away his gym membership. I've never seen him so devastated, or so angry- he cried, screamed, yelled at me, even punched a hole in the door to his room. He told me he had to keep getting stronger, or he'd never be able to live with himself. It scared me even more, so I went to Mitsuki for help- I asked her to have Katsuki talk to my son. If he wouldn't listen to his mother, maybe hearing it from Kacchan would make the difference. I… don't know what exactly they said to each other, but he didn't protest anymore after that. He waited a month to start training his chest and arms again, just like our physician advised him. He was… quiet, those few weeks."

Now I have another question for our next conversation, Kendo mused. It felt like she slowly starting to put the puzzle together, but half the pieces were still with Bakugo.

"You say they weren't as close as they used to be. How close was that, exactly?"

"Inseparable," Inko answered, without a moment's hesitation. "For years, they were practically
joined at the hip. They did everything together- he spent so much time at Katsuki's house that
Mitsuki joked about adopting him at one point. It wasn't until around the end of elementary school
that I started seeing Bakugo less and less, but even then, Izuku would still talk about him all the
time."

"I see…” A glimmer of surprise must have shown on Kendo's face despite her best attempts to keep
her expression neutral; Inko's fingers tensed almost immediately.

"Is that so hard to believe? You know Katsuki, don't you? I'm sure he still talks about Izuku. I'm sure
he hasn't forgotten him."

Silence followed. Kendo sighed deeply before replying.

"…He does, yes."

"I knew it. I knew he still cared. He can still save Izuku. You can both still save him! Please, Itsuka,
I'm begging you- you have to save him." The woman grabbed onto Kendo's wrist with both hands-
hers voice was growing more desperate by the moment, her eyes wide and frantic as tears began to
spill down her cheeks. "I... I know he's done bad things. Things he can't take back. I know I failed
him as a mother… I didn't listen well enough, I didn't see the signs. I wasn't there for him, not like he
needed me to be. But please, don't let them kill my baby. I can't do it, I can't let him die."

Sobs wracked Inko's body as Kendo leaned forward and wrapped her in a gentle embrace, stroking
her hair and back.

"Don't worry. It's okay now. I'm here. I'm here."

"I don't c-care what he's done…” Her breath ragged as she struggled to speak between her tears,
Inko clung to the collar of Itsuka's jacket, her face inches from Kendo's own. "I j-just want to see my
baby again, so I can tell him I'm sorry. I'm so sorry for everything…"

"It's not your fault. None of it is. None of it ever was."

Itsuka eased the older woman's hands off of her as gently as she could manage, then took a step back
away from the bed, fell down to her knees, and placed her hands palm-down on the floor, her
forehead pressed against the cool white tiles.

"Midoriya Inko, I swear to you, on my honor as the next Symbol of Peace- you will see your son
again- alive and well."

"Please, no… G-get up, I… I don't deserve this kind of…"

"But you have to promise me something in return," Kendo declared, rising back to her feet. "You
have to promise me that you'll still be here when that day comes." She sat back down on the bed and
took Inko's hands again, nodding to the bandages on both her wrists. "You're not alone. I'll be here
for you, whenever you need me to be. If you want someone to talk to, or just someone to be
around… all you have to do is ask for me, and I'll come."

"I couldn't possibly trouble you like that…"

"Just think on it." Grabbing a pen from her pocket and a notepad from a table on the far side of the
room, Kendo jotted down her phone number and set it on the bed. "That's all I'll ask of you."

After a moment of hesitation, Inko nodded confidently, and the smile returned to Itsuka's face.
"I promise I'll still be here."

"Good- I'll hold you to that. And don't worry, you won't have to stay in this cramped room much longer. Just between you and me, we'll be moving you and the rest of the Syndicate parents to a safer location next week, after U.A.’s graduation."

When Inko smiled again in reply, it felt genuine rather than forced. "I'll be looking forward to it."

Deika City, Demerat Tower

Later that Evening

"I'm just about tired of asking, shitheels. Now one more time, from the top- where is the Syndicate's base of operations?!"

"I swear to god, there isn't one!" Gentle cried, tears streaming down his cheeks. "Like I said, they don't have a main base, they just move from place to place when it suits them! They could be anywhere in the country for all I know!"

"He's telling the fucking truth!" Spinner added, through grit teeth. "Jesus Christ, haven't we been over this enough?!"

"We won't be done with it until you stop lying to me," Skeptic growled, his bloodshot eyes shining with rage beneath his heavy black bangs. "My satellites can see everything. I already know you're in Hokkaido and Yokohama, and that you abandoned your bases in Okinawa and Osaka. But there have to be more- I know there are more. So fucking tell me, why don't you?"

Tobita hung his head and took a moment to breathe, his breath escaping in ragged pants. For the past four hours, he'd been tied to a chair, back-to-back with Spinner, while a rotating cast of Liberation Army acolytes took turns interrogating them, Skeptic was the most brutal and impatient by far- no answer was good enough for him, no lie sufficiently convincing. From the moment he realized his situation, Danjuro had resolved to stay true to his new allies- he had just begun to earn his place among the Syndicate, and he had no intent of betraying them now- not when La Brava's safety was on the line. Spinner's motivations were less clear, but thus far he had been just as stubborn- though he couldn't see his fellow captive, Tobita's head was resting against Iguchi's; he could feel every time the other man shifted or tensed, and vice versa. Together the two had developed an unspoken bond over the past day, but there was a sinister tension too, hidden beneath every word they spoke: Who would break first? What would happen to the one who remained loyal? Neither had yet dared to find out. For as terrifying as their captors were, in the end, they both feared Seraph more.

"Why don't you tell me," Spinner retorted, his tone dripping with sarcasm, "who's your stylist, you punk rock looking fuckboy? I've just gotta go to them for my next cut."

"Alright, another finger from this one."

With a cursory wave, Skeptic summoned one of his apelike puppets, who swiftly brought a pair of pruning shears to bear on Iguchi's hand. After a sickening snap, Spinner's scream echoed through the brightly lit, windowless room they'd been confined to; Gentle felt the other man writhing against him in pain as his blood dripped audibly to the floor, and drew in a deep breath. He'd already lost two fingers, the index and middle from his right hand- Spinner was at three now. For hours now he'd been reassuring himself that Overhaul could restore them when they were rescued, but at this point that felt more like a pipe dream than a certain fact.
"You seem like smart people," Tobita declared, trying his best to mask the fear in his voice. "You should know better than anyone that torture has been proven to be ineffective. The victim says only what their captor wants to hear, and the truth is quickly lost in the-"

Crack.

Pain lanced across Gentle's face as Skeptic drove his fist into his cheek—no puppets this time. Blood spilled from his lips, warm and coppery on his tongue, and he spat out half a tooth, forcing himself to continue in spite of the agony.

"My point is, *if they're going to talk, they talk after the first finger!* Why keep up this pointless charade?!"

"Because he gets off on it," said Iguchi, his voice hoarse. "His mommy and daddy never loved him, and he's got no friends, so he needs to take his anger out on someone."

Skeptic ignored Spinner this time, and grabbed hold of Gentle's face, digging into his bloodied, tear-stained cheeks with the tips of his fingers.

"I bet you think you're real fucking smart, you third-rate, narcissistic dropout. See, that little theory of yours presupposes that there are two types of people—ones who break and ones who don't. I happen to disagree—as far as I'm concerned, *everyone* has a breaking point." Skeptic's grimace twisted into a smile, and his grip grew even tighter, prompting a gasp of pain from Tobita. "Torture is just about pushing them closer and closer to the edge. It may take longer for some than others, but as long as you can parse the truth out from the slew of self-serving lies, it's worth it in the end. It's *always* worth it in the end."

"Any progress in here?"

The door swung open at the far end of the room, and Re-Destro strode through, flanked by Trumpet and Curious. Skeptic straightened up in an instant, releasing Gentle's face and bringing his thumb up to his forehead to perform the Liberation Army salute.

"We're getting there, slowly but surely. These two still think they're brave, but I'll reduce them to sniveling cowards soon enough."

"My my, do we have some would-be heroes on our hands?" A gleeful smirk on her face, Curious crouched down and sized up Gentle's battered face, using her fingers as a picture frame. "I can see it now—'From Dropout to Terrorist: The Story of the Gentle Criminal'. What a scoop! After the way your videos have taken off lately, the public's just going to eat this up."

"Hey, don't give him all the screentime," Spinner chuckled, straining at his bonds. "Trust me, I've got a face made for TV."

"*Prisoners don't get to make demands.*" His expression livid, Skeptic turned back to face his captives and swiped one hand sideways in a vicious arc. Tobita felt the puppet's blow land on Iguchi, heard the pop of his ribs breaking as both their chairs vibrated as one and Spinner grunted in pain. "What a shame you're still too stupid to figure that out. Now let's pick up where we left off, before you black out from the internal bleeding—the locations of the other Syndicate bases."

"Actually, that line of questioning won't be necessary any longer."

A soft smile on his face, Re-Destro took a step forward and lowered his gaze towards Tobita.

"I just had the most productive call with Midoriya Izuku—Seraph, if you'd prefer to call him that."
Gentle's eyes widened, and behind him he felt Spinner stiffen up. *Have they finally begun negotiations? I never know what that boy is thinking, but I'm sure he has a plan for this- he has a plan for everything.*

"And do you know how that conversation ended?" Re-Destro continued, as his smile slowly grew into a leering grin. "Our two groups have officially come to an accord- a non-aggression pact, you might call it. We'll keep a healthy distance from each other from here on out, with a few added provisions about information-sharing and asset recruitment. All-in-all, a fantastic deal for everyone involved. To be honest, though, I wouldn't have been willing to make such a generous arrangement if he hadn't been ready to give me something of value. Do you know what that something was?"

"What, did he have Pandora cook you up a hair loss cream for that balding dome?" Spinner wheezed with laughter for a few brief moments, before Skeptic stalked over and broke his jaw with a single, swift jab. When he staggered back into Danjuro's field of view, his knuckles were torn and bloody, and his eyes were shining with rage.

"There, that should teach you to shut your fucking mouth."

"Try not to damage them too badly, Skeptic." Yotsubashi laid a comforting hand on his subordinate's shoulder, then turned back to Tobita. "They'll be part of the family soon enough. What Seraph gave us was you, Gentle Criminal- the both of you. In the end, he was willing to accept this… transfer of talent, for the greater good of the Syndicate and the Liberation Army alike."

"No," Gentle grit in reply, his eyes lowered to the floor. "You're lying. He would never."

"Are you so sure about that, Tobita? I understand that poor La Brava truly put up a valiant fight when it came to leaving you behind, but you know how… persuasive Synapse can be."

A pit opened up in Gentle's chest, and suddenly he found himself short of breath as he stammered out a reply. *He wouldn't. He wouldn't. God, please tell me he wouldn't.*

"Y-you're wrong. Seraph isn't like that. He may not show it, but he cares about us."

"What a pleasant delusion." Yotsubashi crooned, pity flashing across his face. It was gone just as quickly, though, replaced by gleaming confidence, as he turned and ushered Trumpet forward. Hanabata was holding a bottle of champagne and two elegant crystal flutes- Re-Destro let him fill both glasses, then took one for himself and held out the other in Tobita's direction.

"Shall we toast to the occasion? It's not every day that our cause gains two members of such extraordinary talent."

He nodded to Skeptic, who in turn motioned for his puppet to cute one of the binds on one of Gentle's hands.

"I'd offer one to you as well," Yotsubashi called, casting a glance in Spinner's direction, "but I'm afraid that Skeptic's overzealousness might have made that impossible. Trumpet, do see that our friend receives proper medical treatment, won't you?"

"Of course, sir. I'll make the arrangements right away."

Hanabata bowed respectfully before striding from the room, and Re-Destro pressed the champagne glass into Gentle's free hand while Spinner grunted angrily in the background.

"Now, let's put all this ugliness behind us, shall we? I wasn't lying when I told you I was your new best friend, Tobita. You're part of a family now, one much bigger than the Syndicate, and much
more powerful." He raised his own glass high in the air, and gave Danjuro a beaming smile. "A toast, to new beginnings."

Gentle's eyes dropped to the floor, and silence reigned between them. For a fleeting moment, he felt the pull of temptation- of ending the pain now, and living out his days in comfort, without the fear of Midoriya and Overhaul, without having to kill again. But then he thought of La Brava, and what came next was easy.

"You paint a pretty picture." Tobita swirled the champagne around in his glass, a soft grin on his lips. "Too bad it's not my style." In one swift fluid motion, he jerked his arm forward and splashed the wine vindictively across Re-Destro's suit.

Silence reigned for a long moment afterward, though the smile never left Yotsubashi's face. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, he downed his own champagne, patted Tobita on the shoulder, then turned on his heel and started towards the door.

"It truly breaks my heart to hear that, Gentle Criminal. But all families have their fights- try to make sure that he understands how we feel, won't you?"

"Oh, we'll do our best," Curious replied, her black-and-green eyes shining with delight. Once Re-Destro had left the room, she began to pace along the outer wall, one deliberate step at a time. "That temper of yours really can flare up at the right moments, can't it, Tobita? That's a fascinating new angle for my profile of you to cover- I'm sure it'll just drive the readers crazy, given how cool and collected you act online. But as grateful as I am for your outburst, I still can't let it go unpunished, can I?"

The lavender-haired woman was behind him by now, out of sight on the opposite end of the room- he couldn't see her, but he heard the snap of her fingers, just before the empty flute in his hand exploded in a flash of heat and bright orange light. Gentle cried out and screwed his eyes shut out of instinct as a hundred pricks of white-hot pain spread across his upper body, from his torso to his forehead. The shards of glass embedded themselves almost everywhere, but it was worst on his unprotected face and hands; the fragments had only barely missed his eyes, but a dozen tiny daggers were spread across his cheeks and nose and lips. Warm red blood began to seep slowly from every wound in unison, and Danjuro groaned in pain as Curious and Skeptic both made their way to the door.

"Since you're both so broken up about parting ways with the terrorist scum who abandoned you, I thought I'd be kind enough to let you say goodbye to some old friends." Skeptic motioned forward with one hand, and two new puppets strode into the room. His vision obscured by blood and tears, Tobita couldn't make out any of their features at first, but as they drew closer, he saw, and his heart plummeted in fear.

One of the puppets was a spitting image of the Hero Killer Stain, his mask removed to reveal his terrifying, demonic visage. The other was modeled after La Brava, its every detail true to life, down to her heart-shaped earrings and bright red ponytails. The only difference was their eyes; their gaze was cold and dead and empty, and though he knew they weren't real, the sight still sent shivers racing up Gentle's spine. One for each of us, then.

"If you'll excuse us, it's about time we had some dinner," Curious called back to them with a friendly wave. "We'll be back by midnight- I'm sure you four will get to know each other quite well in the meantime."

"N-no, please, wait!" Danjuro cried, but to no avail. After one last vicious glare, Skeptic made sure to draw the door shut behind him, leaving them alone with the soulless facsimiles. At the drop of a
pin, they both began to move forward, one to each prisoner. Gentle wanted to scream, to shout out in distress, but his voice had gone hoarse, and his tongue refused to work. All he could do as La Brava advanced toward him was look on in mute horror, shivering wordlessly in his own sweat and blood.

"Well, do you think they bought it?"

"Possibly. Though that's not really the important part, is it?" Yotsubashi sipped again at his champagne, his eyes roving out over Deika's skyline as a smirk played at his lips. "We'll let them stew on it for half a day or so, build up their doubt and their fear, all while they enjoy the company of those specially designed puppets of yours, Skeptic. Excellent work on them, by the way- we should look into using the Stain-models in combat for the sheer intimidation factor alone."

"Thank you, sir. As long as they help break the two of them psychologically, they'll have done their job well, as far as I'm concerned."

"Skeptic, if I may," Trumpet interjected hesitantly, "we should get that suit to the cleaners as soon as we can, or it may be soiled permanently."

"Oh, this old thing?" Re-Destro patted at the splotch of spilled wine on his dress shirt, and shrugged nonchalantly. At the back of his mind, he felt his Stress levels rising ever so slightly, but on the surface, Yotsubashi's smile never faded. Over the years, Rikiya had mastered the art of concealing his true feelings, a necessary skill for the double lives he was forced to live on a daily basis. Not much longer now, he reassured himself, as his gaze drifted up to the far horizon. Only one obstacle left until the curtain rises, and the charade can end."

"Still no news on our good friends in the Syndicate?" He asked, evenly, turning back to face his lieutenants. "They're truly breaking my heart, ignoring us like this. Here I hoped we'd all be dining on caviar together by now."

"I haven't had any luck at monitoring their cellular communications since we took those two," Skeptic replied, his words tinged with bitter frustration. "It seems that they took the proper measures quickly, and by now they've isolated themselves from Feel Good Inc.'s networks almost entirely. Pulling something like that off… that level of technical expertise could only come from La Brava. It seems she must have survived her wounds."

"We should've tipped the Americans off about them sooner, that day at Kadena." Hanabata frowned, and removed his glasses to polish them. "Just a few minutes earlier and they'd all be dead, or at the very least, out of our way."

"That was my decision," Skeptic snapped, a vein bulging visibly on his temple. "Do you have a problem with it?"

Chikazoku Tomoyasu had never been a welcoming man when it came to criticism, even from his own colleagues, and his decision regarding their first contact with the Syndicate was no exception. Yotsubashi had been tied up with vital corporate meetings that morning, and thus it had fallen to his subordinates to make the final judgement call on how to handle the appearance of their rivals in the midst of a sensitive intelligence-gathering operation. He looked on quietly as Tomoyasu defended himself, and sipped once more at his champagne.

"I followed protocol, reached out and tried to establish two-way communications with them. When they ignored me, I tipped off the Americans, but not to eliminate them- if I'd wanted to do that, there were a hundred opportunities over the course of the day. It was about testing their capabilities, and giving them a warning about ours."
"A wise and measured decision," Re-Destro responded, his glass raised in Skeptic's direction. "You were correct in assessing that they were valuable pieces- far too valuable to discard out of hand like a child tossing aside a toy. Exposing them with enough time left for the heroes to give chase put necessary pressure on them, even after they proved themselves capable enough to escape. They're backed into a corner now, and the trail that had gone cold after their little publicity stunts on the 'Black Day' is fresh again- the heroes have more leads to follow than before, and if we keep feeding them breadcrumbs, it'll only be a matter of time before the Syndicate is driven into our waiting arms."

He chuckled, beaming with pride at the plan he and the others had crafted. "Just keep at the satellite monitoring, Skeptic- I know Kurogiri's meta-ability makes your job more difficult, but I have faith that you'll track down their remaining bases soon enough. Trumpet, Curious- any updates for me?"

"My apologies for questioning Skeptic's actions, sir." Hanabata bowed his head before continuing. "Everything is going as planned in the National Diet. Our messaging has been strengthened significantly by the Syndicate's actions and the governing party's perceived weakness- we've been quite successful at casting them as incompetent, lax on security, and too tightly wed to the hero industry. Pandora's warning about the economy couldn't have been better timed either- we've been attacking their policies for years, and now that she's given her doomsday prophecy about another bubble, people are finally starting to listen. I've been pushing for a general election this summer with every backchannel I have, and after Okinawa, we have the support we need. The government will call for one by June, July at the latest- they can't afford not to."

"And I, for one, can't wait to publish a tell-all biography about your career once you become the youngest prime minister in Japanese history," Curious added eagerly. "My readers are just going to eat it up, I know it! I should go ahead and start taking statements from you now, at this rate."

"Let's not count our chicks before they hatch, Kizuki. It's true that I've been whipping up support for this moment for years, but it's not over until the ballots are in."

"That part's easy enough with electronic voting machines," Skeptic interjected. "If Shinkyu falls short of an outright majority, I can always tweak the results, now that the government is finally contracting FGI for the equipment."

"As long as the numbers still look natural," Yotsubashi chided, wagging his finger in Tomoyasu's direction. "I won't have any reports coming out alleging foul play. If we go that route, we do it with the appropriate subtlety; I'd rather not have to arrange a series of convenient, fatal accidents among our nation's investigative journalists, if I can help it. But to return to our more immediate challenges- Curious, what is Devout's current status?"

"She's been making steady progress in her meetings with Toga Himiko," Chitoze replied, pulling out a notepad and flipping to the relevant page. "As far as we can tell, no one in the Syndicate is aware of her true allegiance, and they've continued to actively court her for recruitment. Carmilla still hasn't formally revealed her identity yet, nor has she introduced Devout to any other Syndicate personnel, but that's not a problem- we're trying to take things slowly but surely, in order to avoid arousing any suspicions by seeming too eager. At this rate, I predict she'll move ahead to the next phase by the end of the month, or possibly sooner if today's meeting goes well- I'm still waiting for her report."

"Very good. Continue to push forward on that front while we wait for Seraph to make his reply. I have full confidence in Devout's abilities; she's served us well as a soldier of Liberation for quite some time. If she's skilled enough to fool U.A., I'm sure the Syndicate will prove none the wiser."

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 graduating Day

Tokyo, Roppongi Hills
"I don't get why we couldn't be doing this up on a scenic rooftop like last time," Twice complained, his arms crossed in impatience as Longshot continued to work methodically on Seraph's augmentations. "We got to do these epic, brooding poses during the sunrise, it was the best! This place is just depressing- so cozy!"

Jin's two voices reverberated grating off the room's unfinished concrete walls, and Midoriya closed his eyes and breathed deeply, trying his best to remain calm and even-toned in his reply as his artificial fist curled in annoyance.

"As I explained during our last briefing, we have to avoid moving outdoors in this city whenever possible, thanks to our new friends from Deika- there are too many of Feel Good Inc.'s street cameras scattered around for us to get by without the risk of detection, ever since the municipal government signed that contract with them. The same goes for our base in Yokohama- it's clearly been compromised, seeing as there's been an FGI satellite pointed directly at it for the past few days. We're only keeping a skeleton crew of Overhaul's men there to keep up the impression that we haven't caught onto their tracking methods. It's tiresome, I know, but all these precautions will be well worth it in the end."

In all fairness, Seraph understood Twice's concerns, even if he took issue with the way they'd been raised. It was frustrating to be forced back into the shadows so soon after they'd emerged into the light; their advance squad was currently setting up shop on an empty floor of a half-completed high rise located in one of Tokyo's richest and hippest neighborhoods, with a perfect view of U.A. High School in the far distance.

"Why are we even going through with this plan when we're being watched by a bunch of scary, rich new bad guys?" La Brava muttered, her eyes fixed on the screen of her laptop as she nuzzled her head against Gentle's knee. Twice had made a clone of him to comfort her shortly after she awoke, and though the act had eased Aiba's mind enough for her to return to work, her thoughts were clearly still with the real Tobita. If only I'd thought of it sooner, Midoriya mused, watching as the duplicate patted her head and knelt down to give her a few words of encouragement. Perhaps it would have been best to lie to her about his kidnapping all along.

"What if they get angry that we've been ignoring them for so long?" Manami continued sullenly, finally casting her gaze in Izuku's direction. "What if they get impatient after seeing the news reports from today, and hurt my Gentle?"

"I'm quite certain that won't come to pass, darling," the double reassured her, a winning grin on his face. "I know myself rather well, and if I had to guess how the other me is faring, I'd say he's already well on his way to charming them over to our side, perhaps even sharing a pot of tea with that gangly CEO! And speaking of tea, would you care for another cup? Yours has gone cold, I see- a tragedy!"

He held out a thermos in her direction, but Aiba kept her eyes locked on Midoriya.

"Our rivals are careful and calculating," he answered, "masters of patience and measured, intelligent deception. I may not have met them in person, but I can assure you that they aren't so rash and shortsighted as to kill a valuable hostage in a sudden temper tantrum. You ask why we haven't canceled or postponed the operation, given the Deika Group's sudden appearance? As far as I'm concerned, that would be nothing less than a capitulation, an admission that they have us cornered. They need to understand that they won't shape my actions, now or in the future- rather, it's the other way around. We'll force them to react to our moves, just as we've done with the heroes these past few weeks."

"Another day, another inspiring speech." Hatsume chuckled as she fastened on one of the last servos of the custom exosuit Seraph would be wearing today, and wiped the sweat and grease from her brow with the back of her glove. "I swear, there's no way you just come up with all of this on the fly.
Is Momo writing them for you? I bet she is."

The sound of approaching footsteps drew Izuku's attention before he could reply, and he glanced up to find Mustard in the doorway, his mask's red eyes glowing menacingly in the shadows. "The perimeter is secure, sir. Dark Shadow is stationed by the elevators as you ordered, but we have all points of ingress fully locked down and monitored."

"What the kid said, basically," Dabi drawled, stepping up beside the younger villain with a bored expression. "Setsuno and his boys are still combing the upper floors. I don't know why you're so worried, no one's gonna be looking for us here."

"You know how I hate the thought of interruptions," Midoriya chided. "Especially when a task requires so much of my concentration. Is it all ready, Mei?"

"As it'll ever be! I ran a test drive last night and it worked like a charm! Isn't just the cutest baby?"

"As long as it's functional, the aesthetics are hardly relevant." Seraph flexed his arms back and forth, testing the strength of the motors. Fitted over his clothes, the metal exoskeleton was noticeably thinner than his usual bracers, with sensors at every joint as well as at his temples; rather than combat, it had been specifically designed to transmit his neural signals directly to the Baku implant in Uraraka's brain. With the two support items working in concert, he could be present on U.A.'s campus without ever setting a foot there, a convenient workaround of the school's heightened DNA security system.

Once he was sure it was working properly, he made his way to the center of the room, and stepped onto a circular treadmill platform around two meters in diameter that would allow him to move freely inside the limited space they had on hand.

"Alright, what's our timeframe?"

"Precisely thirty-one minutes until mission start!" Monoma proclaimed, one of his numerous stopwatches in hand as he strode confidently through one of Kurogiri's portals. "Everything is moving exactly to schedule! Carmilla and Mr. Compress have seamlessly infiltrated the crowd of reporters outside the gates, and the secondary vantage point is ready for you whenever you're done here, Longshot." Stepping forward as the warp gate closed behind him, Chaudron set his laptop on a nearby workbench, flipped it open, and began to scroll through his messages with a twisted grin. "And it seems our Recruits are all in place too! They've been keeping up with me so diligently all morning- the fireworks have all been set. All that's left for us to do is wait for the show to begin."

"So, as I was saying… my running theory is that this latest, um… 'transformation' is another aspect of the evolution my quirk underwent two years ago. So in the same way that my body evolved a second ability to help give me another outlet for the power in my hands, I think these tendrils are something along the same lines. Probably."

Kendo Itsuka had never been very good at lying, a fact which made explaining away her acquisition of One For All a near insurmountable task back when she'd first inherited it. It wasn't exactly a skill that had improved with time either, as her latest attempt to explain Blackwhip to a skeptical Aizawa clearly indicated.

"…I see," Eraserhead replied coolly, his arms crossed. His face, as usual, was an emotionless mask, but it seemed even he was hard-pressed to keep the disbelief out of his voice. "So let me get this straight, Kendo- you're telling me that you now possess a third quirk, on top of the miracle super-strength evolution you acquired during your first year?"
"...Are you going to be mad if my answer is 'maybe'?

Silence, long and uncomfortable. Itsuka shifted in her chair, and popped her uniform's collar—though the sky was grey and cloudy, it was a humid, muggy afternoon, warm for early April. All day the weather had teetered at the brink of rain, but when Battle Fist glanced out the open window of Eraserhead's office, the sun was struggling to shine through overhead, and it looked as if the clouds might clear. After postponing their conversation about her new power since the day of the final exam, Aizawa had finally summoned her the day of commencement. As they spoke, she couldn't help but notice that Shota looked even more ragged and weary than usual; his dark circles were especially pronounced, and his unkempt stubble was darker and thicker. Has he been working more night shifts lately?

"Well I'm not much of a quirk scientist myself," Kendo continued haltingly once she'd collected her thoughts, "but to me this seems like a case of-

"Answer me honestly," Eraser interrupted, locking eyes with her, "is this connected with All Might's death?"

"I... What do you mean?" Itsuka tried to keep the shock from her voice, but she knew full well that once Aizawa seized upon the trail, fooling him would be next to impossible. After all, she'd only managed to keep the charade up these past two years thanks to All Might's careful intervention on her behalf whenever the question was raised.

"Please, no more games. I don't have the patience for those anymore." Eraser closed his eyes and rubbed at the bridge of his nose in exasperation. "I'm not one to sing my own praises, Kendo, but at the very least I can say that I have a talent for observation— I can tell when someone's keeping a secret. You, All Might, and Principal Nezu— for the past two years I've been watching the way you three interact, and it didn't take long for me to realize that you all knew something the rest of us didn't— something about your power. It doesn't take a genius to put together the dots from there— your quirk miracle happened right when Toshinori started to take an interest in you, and now this third ability has shown up just weeks after his death. You can't expect me to believe that this is just a string of coincidences." Shota sighed deeply, rubbed at his bloodshot eyes, and took a long sip from his mug of coffee.

"Ordinarily, I wouldn't be asking you this directly, not at such a critical time. I reached out to Nezu first; even more than Yagi, he was the one who stepped in whenever a reporter got too nosy about your special circumstances. But he's practically gone off the grid since his resignation, and I can hardly blame him. With the principal unavailable and All Might gone, you're the only one left I can talk to. So please, Battle Fist, I'll ask you one more time— for your own safety and everyone else's, tell me what's going on."

Another stretch of silence followed, longer than the first. At first Kendo's mind was racing to find a possible escape from the corner she'd been backed into, but the longer she reflected on Aizawa's words, the more a different solution began to present itself. 'You're the only one left'- he's not wrong. All that time I was following All Might's guidance, but I'm the sole master of this power now, and the circumstances have changed faster than anyone could have anticipated. There were only a few people my master considered worthy of knowing the secret, but now it's my turn to decide. I can make the choice.

Itsuka lifted her gaze back up from the ground to meet Eraser's, her thoughts drifting back to all that he'd taught her, all the times he'd fought for her, all the times he'd saved her skin. If I can't trust him, then who can I? At last she cleared her throat, and began to speak.

"The name of the quirk I inherited two years ago is 'One For All'."
It took a good twenty minutes of explanation to satisfy Aizawa, but in the end, he took the revelations as well as Kendo could have hoped, with patient understanding and a solemn vow to keep the information confidential.

"I'll need more time to process all the details," he was saying, glancing down at his watch, "but we're on a tight timeframe for today's events- you need to join your classmates and get into your cap and gown if you don't want to be late. We'll have more time to discuss this after the ceremonies."

"Aren't you coming down too?" She asked, when Shota didn't follow her to the door. Pretty sure they want all you teachers assembled soon too."

"I won't be on the stage," Aizawa answered curtly, turning back to the screen of his computer. "I've been assigned to security for today, along with Ectoplasm and Hound Dog. They'll be making perimeter patrols as usual, but I'll be working all the cameras and electronic systems from the security suite in this building, making sure they don't miss any hidden threats. After the Black Day, and all the negative press this school's accumulated over the past few weeks, we need this graduation to go well. It's the least we can do for the students and families who have stuck with us through all the hardships."

Kendo nodded quietly, her thoughts drifting to the opinion polls in the paper, and the growing majority who held U.A. responsible for the rise of the Syndicate, even for the death of All Might. A student was still missing, taken by the enemy, with two more severely injured and one scarred by her hostage experience.

"Aizawa-sensei…" Itsuka found herself lingering in the threshold, her grip tight on the doorframe. "What's going to happen to U.A., after this year is over? What's the next semester going to look like for the underclassmen?"

"I can't…" Eraserhead trailed off midsentence, and sighed again in defeat. "Well, I suppose I did just demand the truth from you. I'll return the favor, just this once, under the same condition- keep this between us, no matter what. What I'm about to tell you is from one hero to another, not from teacher to student."

"Understood, sir."

Aizawa shook his head almost imperceptibly, and for a moment she swore she saw genuine sadness flash briefly across his expression.

"It was a done deal the moment six former students introduced themselves as villains- we're just lucky that all our alumni in the government and Hero Commission were kind enough to give us through the end of the academic year. There won't be a next semester. Effective at midnight tonight, U.A. will close permanently."

"Oh man, these gowns are amazing- they're even more gorgeous than I imagined!"

Uraraka Ochako couldn't contain her excitement as she twirled back and forth in front of the bathroom mirror, letting the smooth, silky blue material of her graduation gown flow along behind her. Her heart had been pounding all morning, as reality finally began to set in: she was graduating from the school of her dreams, and in less than a week, she'd be starting as a sidekick in the office of a top ten hero. After all the pain and suffering she'd gone through in the past few weeks, all the hurt and betrayal, there was a light at the end of the tunnel after all. They tried to break me, but the joke's on them. In the end, I still get to be a hero.
She felt a hand on her shoulder, and knew instinctively that it was Tsuyu even before she glanced back up to the mirror.

"You look pretty," Asui croaked, a smile on her face. Motioning for Ochako to sit down on their couch, she began to brush her roommate's hair as she spoke. "We've gotta hurry up, though, we're supposed to be assembling in the gym in less than ten minutes. Are your parents going to be here today?"

"Yep, and my grandparents too!" Uraraka beamed. "They saved up for half a year to make sure the whole family could come, and after the ceremony we're going out for yakiniku! I'm so excited, I've only ever had it once before in my whole life!"

"I wish you'd told me before that you like it- I would've treated you on your birthday or something, there are plenty of good places around here."

"No no no, there's no way I could've let you do that!" Ochako protested, her eyes wide. In her three years at U.A., she'd always taken special care to make sure her friends never felt obligated to pay for her on account of her family's financial situation. This had rung especially true since her rescue from Syndicate captivity; just days afterward, a group of Ryukyu's fans had tried to start a fundraiser for her, but she'd donated all the money to charities in the end.

"Will you still keep saying that even after you start making a real salary next week?" Asui countered inquisitively as she settled Uraraka's graduation cap on her head. "Or are you just going to save all that money like your internship stipends?"

"Well obviously I can't save all of it." Ochako smiled, and reached around behind her to wrap a hand around Tsuyu's. "I've gotta pay my half of the rent for our apartment."

They'd come to the final decision about their housing around two months ago, and were set to move in just four days. It was a modestly sized studio in a modestly priced area, but centrally located enough that their work commute wouldn't be a nightmare. Asui's smile widened in the mirror, and one she finished adjusting her cap, Uraraka stood and wrapped her in a deep hug.

"Promise me you'll let me treat you to dinner at least once?"

"I'll think about it," Ochako answered with a grin, as Tsu rested her head in the crook of her shoulder. "I mean, I gotta see that paycheck for myself first, before I make any commitments!" Then she glanced over at the clock on their microwave, and hastily broke off the embrace.

"Crap, you were right, we really are about to be late! Let's go, before we get yelled at!"

"Sure thing, I'm right behind you!"

They burst out into the hallway within moments; thankfully, they still weren't the last ones leaving, and quickly joined Kaminari, Ashido, Ojiro, and Hagakure's group to head down.

"Yo, guys, hold up a second," Denki hissed once the six of them were alone in the stairwell, a wide grin on his face. "Check this out." He reached into the folds of his gown and produced a water bottle- at least, that was what it appeared to be until Mina grabbed it with a conspiratorial smirk, took a sip, and let out an enthusiastic whoop.

"Oh man, you're a lifesaver- no way I could make it through today sober. What did you put in this?"

"Gin and tonic, nice and simple- looks just like water too. You guys want some?"
"Whoa, are you for real?" Ojiro's eyes widened. "Drinking right before graduation? That's pretty risky, man…"

"Think of it as celebrating" Chargebolt replied, then took a sip for himself before extending the bottle towards Lightwave. "We're about to do something pretty amazing today, so I feel like we've earned this. Plus, I'm sure a lot of us will be with our families tonight, so we may not have a chance to go out together afterward."

"You make a convincing argument," Toru giggled, taking the bottle and gulping down a sizable amount before her boyfriend could object. "Here, you have some too, babe!"

"If you're sure it's okay," Mashirao replied, blushing intensely as she pressed it into his hands. He began to drink reluctantly at first, but quickened his pace with Hagakure and Kaminari's encouragement, and the bottle was half empty when he passed it along towards Asui.

"This is a pretty risky move, even for you," Tsu said evenly, staring down the liquid with an inscrutable expression. "I know it's our last day, but Aizawa won't hesitate to expel us if he catches us drunk at the ceremony."

"Well lucky for us, he's not gonna be there!" Piped in Mina, her expression and tone giddy- as usual, she was a lightweight. "Denki overheard the teachers talking about how he's working security today, so he won't even be around to bust us! It's gonna be Present Mic and Midnight escorting us to the stage, and we both know neither of them cares."

"That doesn't make it okay… but I guess a little sip won't hurt." Froppy reluctantly took a drink, then held the bottle out in Uravity's direction. "Do you want some, Ochako? Don't feel pressured."

"No worries, I can handle it."

If even Tsu and Ojiro are drinking, what's the harm? She thought, lifting it to her lips and bracing herself for the taste. The drink was noticeably strong, but still smooth and sweet, and Uraraka found herself taking a longer draw than she intended before finally handing it back to Denki, nearly empty.

"Sorry, I meant to save more! You brought it, after all, and there's barely and left for you…"

"Ah, don't worry, I'm well prepared." Kaminari produced two more identical bottles, then concealed them back in his gown. "Don't worry, I've got more than enough for the rest of the class, if they want some. One is vodka soda, and the other is straight sake- I honestly forgot which is which, but I guess I'll just figure it out on the fly. It wouldn't be fair if only a few of us got the graduation booze, right?"

"That's awesome, you thought of everything!" Hagakure bounced up and down with glee, then let out a yelp when she checked the time on her phone. "Oh crap, we've gotta get moving, guys, we're already late!"

A few minutes of clumsy running-in-gowns later, they were nearing the main building's central gymnasium, but slowed their pace when they caught sight of the other students still mingling and socializing through the open double doors.

"Okay, maybe we're not screwed after all," Mina panted, straightening her lopsided cap before plunging inside and greeting Jiro and Kendo with a surprise hug. The others followed close behind her, and Ochako was about to join them when a shiver raced up her spine without warning, and her hairs began to stand on end. In an instant the sensation of being submerged overwhelmed her, like she'd just been plunged into a tub of water; despite how strange it felt, Uraraka couldn't shake a sense of uncanny familiarity, like she'd been through this before- in a dream, or a nightmare. Her breath
quickened, and she tried to reach out, call to Tsuyu and the others, but suddenly her arms wouldn't move the way she wanted them to, no matter how much she strained. In fact, no part of her body was responding to her efforts- even her eyes were still fixed staring blankly forward, and her voice had vanished. Then a sudden jolt of electricity rushed through her, and all at once Ochako's body began to move again- her eyes blinked, her arms flexed back and forth, and her voice emerged in a quiet sigh. For a brief, fleeting moment, she felt a rush of relief- until she realized with creeping dread that the movements were not her own.

W-what? What is this? I don't understand! Her mind cried out in confusion, but to no avail- her body ignored her commands, and Uraraka could only watch, horrified as she jogged up to Asui and tapped her on the shoulder.

"Hey, I'm just gonna run to the bathroom before things start- my stomach's feeling kinda weird. Save a spot for me, okay?"

The voice was hers- the words, those of a stranger.

"Will do." Tsu replied, then turned around and continued towards the center of the gym, where the rest of their friends were waiting. Ochako wanted desperately to yell at her to stay, to get help, but nothing she tried worked- she was trapped in her own head, reduced to a spectator as her body turned and left the room. It has to be someone's quirk. I don't know of any underclassmen or staff members with an ability like this, so a villain is the most like explanation. Could it be Synapse?! I talked with the others the whole way over here- if he's hidden somewhere with his voice disguiser, maybe I accidentally responded to him at some point! The more she thought about it, the more Shinso's Brainwashing seemed like the likeliest culprit, but this level of control seemed far too precise; all the reports on his quirk clearly stated that he couldn't carry out commands as sophisticated as making his victims speak. Even if he'd conquered that hurdle, video footage captured from numerous incidents showed that Brainwashing always left telltale signs on the victims, such as a blank stare and sluggish movements. There's no way someone as perceptive as Tsu wouldn't have noticed! Could his quirk have undergone some sort of evolution since the Black Day?

The slam of a door dragged her back to reality- she was in a bathroom, but not the closest one to the gym, judging by the position of the window. This is the restroom on the third floor- why bring me here? Uraraka felt curiosity mixing in with her fear, and resolved to stay as alert as possible, so that she could include every last detail in her report once she escaped. All it'll take is a solid bump, and I'll be free. Even someone patting me on the back would probably be enough! I just need to be patient, until he slips up. Meanwhile, her body had moved to the farthest stall, and was crouched down, reaching for something behind the toilet.

"I'm sure you have a variety of incorrect theories about what's happening to you right now," her voice said aloud, as her lips twisted into a smirk. "Perhaps you believe a quirk is behind this- Hitoshi's would be the logical candidate, yes? Allow me to disabuse you of that notion."

Behind the toilet, her hand wrapped around something cold and metallic, and yanked it from its tape wrapping with a swift tug. It was a knife, long and sharp, gleaming in the dull light. Ochako felt her heart rate quicken at the sight, though in hindsight she wasn't certain whether it her own doing or the villain's. Rising to her feet, Uravity watched in shock as she dragged the blade along her own arm, opening a cut that spilled a steady stream of blood to the floor.

"Ah, there we are. Hopefully you're beginning to grasp your situation now, Ochako. This is not a quirk, something that can be undone by exploiting a convenient weakness. Hatsume and Chisaki spent a long time making sure this chip was foolproof- there is no escape."

Something about the deliberate cadence and mocking tone of the words set off an alarm in Uraraka's
mind; she realized almost immediately who was controlling her body, and felt an immediate surge of revulsion at the thought. *Oh, god. It can't be, not him…*

But when she strode up to the mirror, there was no mistaking the twisted grin on her lips, or the dark glint in her eyes. Though the features were still Ochako's, it was Midoriya's face staring back at her, not her own.

"I know you're in there, watching, caged like an animal in your own mind. I must admit, I wish I could speak with you directly, just to listen to you realize how hopeless your situation truly is, bit by bit! But as tempting as it would be to give you back your vocal chords for a few moments, we couldn't have you calling for help, now could we?" He paused for a beat, as if waiting for her to reply, then chuckled and shook her head. "Old habits die hard, I suppose. But let me assure you- I'm thrilled that we can spend this quality time together. I never properly repaid you for your kind words of encouragement, after all!"

Izuku tore off a sheet of paper towels from the holder and wiped the blood from the wound on Ochako's arm- it had already stained her gown, but he paid that little heed.

"Now, let's not delay any longer- it's almost time." He twirled the knife elegantly in hand, then tucked it into her gown and strode confidently into the hallway. "We're going to have a wonderful time together, you and I. It's so lovely to be on campus again- what a rush of nostalgia! Who shall we visit first?"

Chapter End Notes

And thus the second major Syndicate operation begins. This will likely be a 2-3 parter, just like the chapters covering the Black Day, although narratively, it isn't actually the Season 2 finale- that's going to come together in due time. Regardless, I tried to include a good variety of perspectives and events this chapter, featuring a Kendo-Inko heart-to-heart, a long-needed conversation with Aizawa about One For All, and an update from our two suffering MLA hostages! The Gentle and Re-Destro parts were by far my favorite to write (besides Camie's dialogue, of course), so among everything else, please let me know if you'd like to see more from the MLA! It's lit, fam.

Also, the Baku finally comes into play, and damn, I'd be lying if I told you that writing that scene from Uraraka's POV wasn't difficult- hopefully it was clear what was going on, even if the wording gets a bit tricky! What's on Midoriya's agenda now that he has full control of a U.A. student? All will be revealed in good time, but I always appreciate your guesses and feedback!

As I mentioned above, I'm going to be trying to transition to shorter chapters from here on out, to try and make sure I get content out on a more regular basis. I've learned my lesson on making promises on release dates, but my goal is to drop at least 2-3 total chapters in November, divided between Entropy and Rhapsody in Green. On a final note, if you were early in catching Chapter 19 last month, you may want to check out some edits I made a while back, particularly to Izuku and Momo's conversation, which I was feeling unsatisfied with after the fact.

Otherwise, happy Season 4, and as always, let me know what you think about the story in the comments!
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!