Argumentum Ad Absurdum

by atrees

Summary

AU. In a world where Izuku never inherits One For All, a chance encounter with All Might nonetheless spurs him to become a hero. [Quirkless!Deku]
Chapter One: The Entrance Exam

It was the worst possible outcome.

As Izuku stood on the battlefield gazing at the cityscape-turned-warzone, he marveled that his dreams of entering UA would be crushed at the literal starting gate.

All around him rang explosions and the triumphant shouts of his fellow examinees. They were perhaps more at home here than anywhere else, this playground designed for the sole purpose of allowing them to unleash their full destructive potential (Bakugou was no doubt having the time of his life – Izuku was sure of it, even though they were at different locations). The air was thick with fumes and something wild. Flames littered the ground, the heat rising every time the wind blew, and even as Izuku watched, another robot exploded in a maelstrom of fire and metal as the examinee who took it down gave a loud whoop.

Izuku shielded his eyes and mourned the inherent *unfairness* of it all.

"Listen to me," he called, approaching a boy with red hair who seemed to be covered in some sort of armor. "I have a plan – Wait!"

The boy was already off. The noise of combat was deafening. Izuku could barely hear himself – did it even matter? He approached two others but they also ignored him, frantically charging forward in search of more robots. The test was a race. Gather as many points as possible before the time limit ran out. Every man for himself. Who would team up under such circumstances?

A failure of a test, Izuku thought bitterly. All his training, all his preparations, built on the assumption UA would create a fair entrance exam for *all* heroes. Only combat types excelled here. What about the intelligence-gatherers, the anti-personnel, the rescue specialists? Much less a boy who didn't even have –

"Forty-five points!"

A robot flew past him, broken up even before it smashed into the building fifty paces away. Izuku had just enough time to wonder what the point of calling out your score was before the examinee himself ran by – the boy with glasses, Izuku remembered, who earlier had criticized him for making light of the exam.

"Wait!"

Izuku grabbed the boy's arm.

"What are you doing? You're not allowed to attack other examinees," the boy snapped. Recognition dawned on his face. "It's you. The mutterer. What do you want?"

"I have a plan. We can score points, both of us."

"No thanks." He shrugged off Izuku's hold. "We're enemies here. I don't have time to waste."
"It's about teamwork," Izuku said desperately. "In the field, heroes have to work together all the time. That's another purpose of this test. They're judging us on how well we can cooperate."

The boy paused mid-step, one foot already forward for blast off. It was, of course, mere speculation, and unlikely speculation at that. Sweat ran down Izuku's face. Heavy thuds sounded in the distance. The starting area was already bare of robots. Each second they wasted was a second the other examinees – hundreds of them, maybe thousands – spent getting ahead. Part of Izuku felt guilty for lying. He didn't have a plan, not yet, but he was confident he could come up with one so long as he could get someone to listen…

"I'm Iida," the boy said at last. "What's your plan?"

"The robots have an off-switch," Izuku said with relief. "I saw the invisible girl use them earlier. If we hit it, they'll shut down."

"I can destroy them faster than looking for some switch. Unless…what's your Quirk?"

"Time dilation. It allows me to slow down my perception of time."

"You can control time? Why do you need my help?"

"I can only slow down my perception of time," Izuku explained. "I can't control anything else. I can't even use it on my body – if something's too fast, my body won't react in time even if I see it coming. Basically, my Quirk allows me to take stock of the situation and think things over."

"So you have zero combat potential," Iida said with scorn, "and you want my help to carry you through the exam."

"No! Just listen – "

Iida was gone.

Izuku reached out a hand. Instinctively, he chased after him. He managed two steps before the figure disappeared from sight.

Only silence now.

It's over, Izuku thought, staring at the literal cloud of dust Iida had kicked up – the phrase made him laugh, made him drop to his knees and stare at the sky. The countless hours he spent studying and training his worthless body just for the chance at a prize that others could seize as easily as plucking it from the ground. The blue of the sky was cloudless and perfect. The same sunlight shone on them all. The same dust dirtied them. People were not born equal, Izuku reflected. The words were as profound now as they were eleven years ago in that doctor's room, and every day thereafter the words had rung inside his skull. He remembered it always. Everyone else certainly did. You can be a hero, All Might had told him – and for a moment Izuku had forgotten his disability and marveled at the strength of heroes.

What would All Might think, seeing him crumpled on the ground at the first obstacle? Getting into UA wouldn't be easy – hadn't everyone told him that? Hadn't he understood the impossibility of his dream? Slowly, he picked himself up, wiping away the tears until the world came into clarity once more. Four minutes had passed. Six minutes remained. He was alone.

The starting area was deserted save the corpses of broken robots, melted robots, electrified robots, burnt robots. The other candidates, too, were giving their all – even if they weren't quite Bakugou's level, they certainly were a step above the students at Aldera Junior High. The test was almost
halfway over and he had zero points. He would never pass using conventional methods, and he
couldn't rely on gathering allies as he had initially planned. Think. The solution lay somewhere
outside the box…

Izuku turned around.

The entrance stared back, a metal gate that looked as if it lead to another world. On the other side lay
the flat open grounds they drove on to get here. Each testing area was a large square maybe half a
mile across, enclosed by walls as tall as trees. There had been seven testing areas in all, he
remembered, branching off a central building like spokes on a wheel. Several mechanics had
lingered near the building. There were no other facilities in sight. That central building must've been
the nucleus for the testing areas – the cityscapes would need tremendous setup before every exam
and even more repairs after, especially the robots.

Izuku pushed against the gate. His arms strained and burned and threatened to tear, and a year ago
the gate would've stayed closed. It wasn't all a waste. The gate shifted open just enough for him to
slide through. He raced down the road. The strength of his legs buoyed him, put to use at last. It was
a last-ditch gamble, and whatever examiners who were watching were probably laughing to
themselves (The boy's too scared to fight!), if they hadn't already sent someone to stop him. But the
air was fresh and clear. The weather was warm. Rain had fallen earlier, and the smell of dew rose
from the grass. As Izuku ran away from the testing area, fourteen years of dreams ran with him, and
soon they would all crash down or come true.

Izuku finally burst through the door of the central building, the clang ringing through every corner of
the hangar, and he didn't notice his lungs burning, or the mechanics staring at him, or the clamor of
machinery that ground to a stop.

The hangar was filled with robots. Rows and rows lined up like dolls, one-pointers and two-pointers
and three-pointers and many more types unlisted. It was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

"Aren't you a student?"

The robots were dead – turned off. He flipped the switch on, and it came to life with a rumble of
gears, its single red eye scanning the room as it raised its canons. Several people screamed. He
flipped the switch off. It died once more.

"Three points!" he shouted at the wide-eyed mechanic. "Three points!"

He raced along the platforms, on and off, on and off. The rumble of gears rose and fell. It was only
later, when he was back in the comfort of his home, that he realized what a ridiculous scene he
must've made – a boy who came from nowhere, covered in sweat and dirt and desperation, laughing
wildly as he ran between the robots like a child in a toy shop. No doubt the mechanics thought him
insane as they chased after him, but they were slow and their Quirks were slow – what else did you
expect from civilians? – and Izuku felt as if he actually could slow down time. It was not until the
horn sounded in the distance and Present Mic's voice (resounding even here) announced the end of
the exam, that Izuku relaxed and let a pair of twisting metal beams wrap around him.

"What the hell are you doing!" the mechanic shouted. "Are you crazy?"

It's over, Izuku thought. He didn't know how many robots he managed to get, he didn't know if it
was enough to past the test, and he didn't know if what he did even mattered. It broke every rule the
other examinees followed. In a conventional school, he would no doubt have been disqualified the
moment he set foot past the gate. But UA, he thought, would place greater emphasis on results. After
all, Present Mic had given them surprisingly little instructions. Disable the faux villains and earn
points – that had been the entirety of the ruleset. And what better way to root out villains than at their own hideout?

As the mechanics carted him out of the building to await Present Mic's judgement, in full view of the returning students who stared and snickered at the strange boy bound by metal, Izuku Midoriya felt the lightest he'd ever felt.

A/N: The testing area really is set up as described, though it's my speculation whether such a central building exists. The "robots have off-buttons" theory is a widespread fan theory to explain how Hagakure passed the entrance exam.
Quirk Testing

Chapter Two: Quirk Testing

Izuku arched his arm back, mustered every ounce of strength he had, and threw.

"Forty-six meters," Aizawa said. "Congratulations, you're in last place."

"It can't be," Izuku said in a daze. "It can't be."

"Weakling!" Bakugou said, laughing. "I knew you only passed the entrance exam by a fluke. How the hell did a Quirkless loser break the record for most points ever scored?"

"I'm sure you're okay," Ochako said in a far-from-sure tone. "You won't seriously be expelled… right?"

"I was against you being here from the start," Aizawa said. "That trick you pulled at the entrance exam was ludicrous. It never would've flown in the real world. The only reason we accepted you was because there was no precedent for such a stunt. Everyone, head back to the classroom. Midoriya, meet me in the teacher's office."

Aizawa had been joking – Izuku had been sure of it. What kind of school allowed teachers carte-blanch to expel students? But UA was not like most schools, and Aizawa was not like most teachers. Hunchbacked, he led Midoriya back into the school building, his seaweed hair – which looked like it hadn't been washed in weeks – spilling over his eyes. A perpetual five o'clock shadow peeked out of the scarf he hid behind like a man afraid of sunlight. Some heroes looked more like villains; Aizawa looked more like a homeless man. At first, Midoriya didn't know what to make of their lazy, apathetic teacher who had arrived in a sleeping bag. After learning he was Eraserhead, Midoriya's doubts had further increased at the discrepancy between man and legend.

None of it mattered, he thought bitterly. He was about to be expelled.

Was it better to taste success once and forever afterwards mourn what you've lost, or to never taste it at all?

As they traipsed back to the classroom, the other students did their best not to look at him. Only Ochako, who did so with pity; and Bakugou, who had on the biggest sneer Izuku had ever seen on him (and that was saying something); and Iida, who looked away the moment Izuku met his eyes. Iida must've still been feeling guilty about what happened during the entrance exam. I should've listened to your plan. Your understood the test far better than I did. Iida's earnestness had surprised Izuku. A Quirkless boy did not often hear someone say they had misjudged him. But perhaps Iida had been closer the first time.

"Sit down," Aizawa said.

The teacher's office was cramped and messy. Aizawa's desk sat in the far corner half-hidden in shadow, and the aroma of coffee suffused the space around it. Except for them, the room was empty, for which Izuku was grateful.

Clearing away the mess of papers and books, Aizawa drew out a folder.

"Izuku Midoriya, fourteen years old. Previously Quirkless. Suddenly developed a new Quirk – dubbed time dilation – six months ago. Holds current record for the UA entrance exam at 124 points.
Quite a turnaround, isn't it?"

He seemed to take pleasure in the torture. Leaning forward, he steepled his fingers, staring at Izuku as if he were a bug under a microscope. Strangely enough, he had put on a visor, a gaudy, yellow strip of metal that wrapped around his eyes. The thing was as out-of-place as a party-popper at a funeral.

"Describe your Quirk to me, one more time."

"I can slow down my perception of time," Izuku stammered. "It gives me time to think – "

"Activate it."

He knew, Izuku thought with dread. He knew I don't have a Quirk – rather, he suspected it. Aizawa was activating his Quirk-cancelling ability – or maybe he wasn't. There lies the game. With that visor on, Izuku couldn't tell whether Aizawa's erasure was on. If Izuku claimed to be able to activate his own Quirk while erasure was active, he would be exposed. If he claimed to be unable to activate his own Quirk while erasure wasn't active, he would also be exposed. It was a fifty-fifty shot. Was Aizawa's Quirk active?

"I did," Izuku said, "though you can't see it, of course."

"Oh? Then you'll be the first person to do so in the presence of my Quirk."

"Quirks are constantly evolving even within a single generation. It's not impossible that there exist Quirks that can't be erased. You can't erase transformative Quirks either, right? Or Hagakure's? Mine's probably among the exceptions."

Aizawa sighed, leaning back into his chair. "Twenty percent of the world don't have a Quirk. This isn't the first time someone has tried to fake one. Though it is," he admitted, "the first time someone's made it all the way to UA."

"I really do have a Quirk. It's just I'm not used to it yet – "

"Don't lie to me," Aizawa snapped. "If there's one thing I can't stand, it's liars."

"Please, attending UA is all I ever wanted. All Might – "

"You think this is a game?" Aizawa tore off the visor, revealing red-rimmed eyes. "Even the strongest heroes die in the line of duty, and you expect to fight villains without a Quirk? You're making a mockery of our entire profession. Accepting you here would be murdering you."

"I passed the entrance exam. I deserve to be here."

"A mistake which I was against from the start."

"So what if I don't have a Quirk?" Izuku said, standing up. He was crying again – damn these free-flowing eyes – and he was shouting, but he was making up for all the lost years. "Am I also not allowed to have dreams? I passed your stupid test and beat everybody else in history who had ever taken it, everyone with their Quirks. I don't think it's a game – I've never thought it was a game. There are villains out there who can kill me with a snap of their fingers. Of course I know that – more than you do. I understand fear more than anyone else. All my life I've lived with weakness. I've been bullied, beaten, mocked, humiliated. I've been looked down on all my life. Is that a reason to stop me? Expel me if you want. I swear you'll one day regret that choice. You won't stop be from becoming a hero. Nobody can."
"Listen to the boy, Aizawa. Can't you feel his passion?"

The voice came from the door. Clad in blue and red, All Might strode in with a thunderous "I am here!" His footsteps quaked like the heartbeat of a giant. He was in his muscle form today, all seven feet of him, his smile wide enough to catch the gleam of sunlight at the corners. The sight of that face – plastered across billboards, buses, mugs, blankets, figures, the walls of Izuku's room – filled Izuku's heart with an indescribable emotion.

"My apologies for being late. Midoriya, my boy, your speech brought me to tears! How can you say no to that, Aizawa?"

"He's not staying. A Quirkless boy can't survive in the hero world."

"If only you knew... It's not the strength of your Quirk, Aizawa, but the strength of your heart. Midoriya showed me that strength a year ago, and he repeated it at the entrance exam. There's nobody I would trust more with the title of hero."

"You remember me?" Izuku said.

All Might clapped him on the back. "I never forget a fan, especially not one as courageous as you. I see you took my words to heart. You've grown in the last year, far more than I could've ever dreamed of."

The tears came again, though this time not out of sadness. Izuku laughed. He felt as if he were floating – if he jumped a little or if he was a little bit lighter, he would break free entirely. Once more he faced the real strength of heroes. It was not the ability to destroy or capture or even protect – it was the ability to turn despair into joy. Had there in the history of mankind ever been a more noble profession? Aizawa and All Might continued to argue, but for Izuku, the matter was over; he didn't know why he had ever worried. A minute ago his world had crashed down around him. If it continued to fall, well, he would still be standing by the end of it.

"Fine," Aizawa said at last. "But for the record, I'm marking it down that I was against it. If he dies, it'll be on your hands."

"I have greater faith in your abilities than that, Aizawa."

"What are you still doing here?" Aizawa said to Izuku. "Get back to class."

"Thank you, sir! And thank you, All Might! You won't tell anyone, Mr. Aizawa? That I'm Quirkless?"

Aizawa glared at him. With a glare like that, who needed a Quirk?

"Worry about yourself. You're going to have a hard time keeping it a secret. Now get back to class. We've wasted enough time."

But there was no need to tell Izuku that. Proudly, he walked down the hallways of UA.
Chapter Three: Support

The development studio was surprisingly cramped. A small room on the first floor, it was filled with tools, wires, costumes, computers, paint, springs, strange machines. Something was constantly beeping, constantly moving. A pile of discarded parts lay in the corner. From the ceiling hung a pair of what looked like butcher's hooks. A door emblazoned with "DO NOT ENTER UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES" lead further in. Worrying enough, the door was slightly open. The place, Izuku thought, was rather like a secret base.

It also happened to be on fire.

"What are you doing?" Power Loader – the head of the studio – shouted. "Get the fire extinguisher!"

Hurriedly, Izuku grabbed the extinguisher from its case. He directed it along the line of flames, wondering if he had accidentally stumbled into a disaster-control course. Thirty seconds ago, he had been in front of the studio doors, working up the courage to knock. Then someone had screamed (though high-pitched, he'd swear it had been Power Loader). An explosion had blasted the doors off its hinges, narrowly taking his head with it.

The fire died down. Smoke filled the room. Something whirred in the walls. The ventilation roared to life, sucking with great, greedy gulps. Within minutes, the smoke had also cleared, and except for the gaping blast-mark covering half the floor, you could hardly tell there had been an accident at all.

"Mei," Power Loader growled, "what have I said about quality control?"

"Failure is the mother of invention. Haven't you heard of Thomas Edison?"

Mei – the presumed instigator of the explosion – bent over the blackened pile of rubble. She was a pink-haired girl wearing a low-cut tank top. Her hair reminded Izuku of a sea anemone. She had tied her jacket around her waist, and the thing was filthy with smoke and dust and an assortment of colored chemicals. The smell of smoke still choked the room. Izuku thought that the explosion would've brought someone over, but nobody came, and neither Mei nor Power Loader (who had already returned to his computer) acted like anything was out of the ordinary.

Izuku coughed.

"I'm here about my costume."

"Kids these days, always so impatient," Power Loader said. "It won't be ready until next week."

"Actually, I have some specifications about my equipment, and I was wondering I could work closer with the support team about it."

"I don't have time. Talk to Mei."

"Don't want to," Mei said, still bent over the rubble. "I have my babies to take care of – wait, aren't you that guy from the entrance exam?"

She whirled around – she had cross-hair pupils, Izuku saw, and the sight of those eyes was so startling he almost reached out a hand. She marched towards him, chin resting in the palm of a grease-stained glove, an expression of intense focus on her face, and really, she was entirely too
Izuku's arms brushed something soft. He shrank back, trying not to stare. Mei was the worst type of girl for him to deal with.

"You're that Midoriya guy, right? The one who scored the highest points ever on the entrance exam?"

"I just got lucky – "

"I'm Mei Hatsume! You're a legend among Support! Did you really destroy a hundred robots with your bare hands? They said you were so fast it was like lightning! They said you could stop time!"

She pumped his hand vigorously. Her grin rivaled All Might's, and surprisingly, even after he explained what really happened at the entrance exam, her grin didn't go down. "That's using your brain!" she proclaimed.

"About my equipment," Izuku began, taking out his papers.

Mei snatched them from his hands. For several minutes she was silent. She was silent so long, in fact, that Izuku realized he had just talked to a girl. The shock of the explosion had knocked the anxiety out of him, but now that he was standing idly in front of her, they returned full force. The only other girl he had sustained a conversation with was Ochako. The two could not be further different. Should he compliment her on her hair? Surely that hair could not be natural. But some girls, he read, didn't want you to draw attention –

Mei looked up from the papers.

"You never should've joined the Hero course."

"I'm not – er, I understand I'm not that strong. I can't really control time, what I'm trying to say is that –

"You should've joined Support!" Mei dragged him to the tables. For her frame, she had a surprising amount of strength, as if the energy pent up inside her could rush out at the slightest provocation. He was holding hands with a girl – well, gloves. Splaying out the papers, she fiddled with a strip of metal. "Heroes don't usually bother with tech. It's beneath them, or so they think. Well, I'll show them that technology can beat Quirks any day."

"My Quirk's not suited for combat, so I wanted to make up for it with support items. There are several pro heroes who do the same. Eraserhead, for example, and Nighteye, and Fourth Kind can also qualify."

"It'll take me a few days, at least. Potassium perchlorate's not easy to make. There's a twenty-percent chance they'll blow you up."

"Twenty percent?"

"Alright, maybe thirty," Mei said with a guilty look. "But enough about that. If it's exploding, it's working! Now, about this fuse system of yours…"
terrified. Frequently, she referred to him as a test dummy.

"Are you ready?" Aizawa said. "It's time to begin battle training."
Battle Trial

Chapter Four: Battle Trial

Bakugou came at him like a rocket. His speed was unreal – Izuku had never seen him fight seriously before, and despite knowing how powerful he was, experiencing it was another matter. He barely dove to the side as Bakugou pulverized the space he had been. The sparks from his palms burned ashes along the wall.

"Go!" Izuku shouted to Ochako. "Forget about me! I'll deal with him here! Remember the plan!"

She hesitated, worry visible even behind the tinted glass of her helmet. But she ran up the stairs. Bakugou, as expected, didn't even look behind him. That perpetual smirk was on his face as he cracked his knuckles.

"You piss me off. How did a weakling like you manage to beat me in the entrance exam? And then I learn you've been hiding a Quirk all this time. Are you making fun of me?"

Izuku forced down the fear. Victory was not about strength – it was about strategy. He did not have to beat Bakugou here, just stall him long enough for Ochako to get into position – assuming, of course, Iida didn't overpower her immediately. The plan was the best he could come up with on short notice. The two of them made the worst possible pairing. The ideal pair would be a combat and a support, or, failing that, two combat types. Izuku and Ochako were both supports. Bakugou or Iida alone could likely take on them both at once. On top of that, the hero team was at a disadvantage.

The world was unfair. UA certainly shoved that philosophy down its students' throats.

"My Quirk manifested late. I was never making fun of you. I consider you my friend."

"You? My friend? You're not worthy to lick my shoes."

He charged forward once again. Izuku ran. The hallway was choked and narrow with little room to maneuver, and stray explosions continually showered him with shrapnel. He turned the corner just as Bakugou collided with the wall, the impact obliterating it completely. Sunlight peeked through the hole. Bakugou paused. A small, round thing had rolled near his feet.

The explosion knocked him into the air. Anyone else would've been incapacitated immediately, but at the last minute, Bakugou had used his own explosion to cancel out the force of the grenade. Ungracefully, he landed on his back with a howl of pain. Snarling, he stood up.

"You've picked up some new tricks. It won't save you."

Nervously, Izuku fingered the grenades along his belt. Three left. The first-year allowance for support items was limited. Mei had made it clear he owed her several favors. Bakugou's greatest strength lay not in his Quirk but in his reflexes, his instinct, his cunning. That surprise attack had been Izuku's best chance to take him out. Now that he knew what was coming, it would be impossible to get him again. Not with this, at least.

Ochako's voice buzzed on the earpiece; Iida and the bomb were directly above them.

"Wait for my signal," he whispered.

The plan was coming together. Even if Bakugou beat him bloody, they would win.
Bakugou advanced slowly. He was limping, Izuku saw with satisfaction. But he was also on his guard. That alone was a victory. To have Bakugou scared! What a wild dream only a year ago.

"A Quirkless loser suddenly develops a Quirk. Awfully convenient, isn't it?"

Izuku's blood chilled.

Bakugou sneered. "You don't have a Quirk at all."

"It manifested late. It's not as uncommon as you think."

"And it just so happens to be a Quirk that nobody can verify, right? You tell us you can slow down time or some bullshit, but you're the only one who knows that. Do you think I'm stupid? You made the whole thing up. It's a wonder the other idiots haven't caught on yet. But after I crush you, I'm going to tell everyone in the class. You're going to wish Aizawa had expelled you."

"Deku?" Ochako's voice said. "Are you ready?"

"I'm going to need some time," he said quietly.

It was inevitable, Izuku reflected. From the moment he saw Bakugou in the same class, he knew this would occur. Where did it all go wrong? They had been friends. They had hunted for insects in the same forest, skipped stones across the same pond, watched the same shows and worshipped the same heroes. It would be easy to place all the blame on Bakugou, but the vassal who bowed under tyranny bore as much blame as the tyrant. Izuku had been weak, and not because he lacked a Quirk. When Bakugou made fun of him, he smiled. When Bakugou beat him up, he ran. When Bakugou ignored him, he had been relieved.

Izuku clutched his shamefully beating heart through his uniform. The mask his mother had lovingly crafted was torn in half. His uniform, too, was tattered. Burns snaked along his bare arms. It would be easy to run away. It was always easy to run away.

"Nitroglycerin," Izuku said. "It produces a well-contained explosion that can be used in all sorts of ways. The idea for my grenades was based on you. I've always admired you."

Bakugou's face contorted into a rictus of hate – why? Probably he was also scared of the answer. He exploded forward, scorching black the floor beneath his flight. Izuku tossed another grenade, but Bakugou easily blasted it away. The explosion rained dust and concrete. Izuku prepared himself for another right hook, but Bakugou jumped over him, changing direction in midair, using the momentum for a roundhouse kick at his exposed back. Izuku barely managed to block it, but even with metal-reinforced gauntlets, the impact pounded him into the wall. He gasped. Something in his back cracked. It took him two tries to pick himself up. Haltingly, he drew out another grenade.

"A copy will never stand up to the original," Bakugou said. "That thing's like a matchstick to my sun."

Izuku threw.

Bakugou cursed. His hand lashed out. Two explosions. The first was Bakugou's, knocking it aside. The second was soundless and heatless, a flash of light so bright that Izuku saw the afterimages even behind closed eyes.

"What the hell did you do?" Bakugou screamed, clawing at his eyes. "I'm going to kill you!"

Each opponent had two blind spots: the first when they didn't see the attack coming, and the second
when they're used to seeing the same attack coming. Izuku's ribs hurt with every breath, but he
managed to avoid Bakugou's wild explosions long enough to wind the capture tape around him. The
effects of the flashbang wore off quickly. Bakugou's eyes burned, raw and red, and, staring back,
Izuku marveled that they had ever been friends.

"You're dead," Bakugou said, struggling against the capture tape, and the cold restraint in his voice
was more terrifying than all his heat. The tape, given to both teams, was a poor imitation of
Aizawa's; already he was breaking free.

"Bakugou, you've been captured," Aizawa's voice called over the loudspeaker. "Any further actions
will automatically result in your forfeit."

He howled in frustration. For a second Izuku thought he would ignore what Aizawa said and
pummel him into the ground, consequences be damned. But although Bakugou was a bomb thrown
down a volcano on a star going supernova, the core of him had always been conscious of restraint.
He knew how best to tiptoe the line that allowed him to rage free without reparation from adults.

Izuku bent down and whispered into his ear:

"A Quirkless boy beat you. Explain that to everyone."

This time he did break free, snapping the tape in a whirlwind of fire. But it was too late. Izuku threw
his last grenade directly upwards, jumping back just in time as the ceiling crashed down around
them. Briefly, he glimpsed Iida falling, and somehow Iida's surprise was evident even under that
mechanical armor. The jets on his legs roared, but without solid ground beneath his feet, he went
nowhere. And then he, along with Bakugou, was buried beneath the rubble. The bomb – a paper-
mache rocket. Was that what they had endeavored so hard for? – also crashed through the ceiling,
but Ochako managed to touch it just before it hit the floor. They made a comical sight, rocket-and-
girl floating in mid-air.

"Bomb secured," Aizawa's voice called. "The hero team wins."
Rescue Training

Chapter Five: Rescue Training

Out of all Quirks, Thirteen's was maybe the most extraordinary. The ability to generate black holes – not merely a vacuum but a black hole, which perplexed both Quirkologists and theoretical physicists alike. Although the cause was unknown, several mechanisms of Quirks had already been elucidated: certain chemical secretions generated fire (like Bakugou's); early embryologic changes lead to transformative Quirks (like Kirishima's); extreme muscular hypertrophy was responsible for extreme speed and strength (like All Might's); and even stranger Quirks such as Ochako's had been hypothesized to result from macro-application of the Biefeld-Brown effect.

But scientists were at a loss as to how anything in the human body could produce a black hole – and control it.

It was a blessing, Izuku thought, that Thirteen was not a villain. A black hole fed into itself and could theoretically last eons. A single, uncontained black hole could destroy all of Japan before its citizens even understood they were dead. Thirteen could destroy the world. The government generally policed Quirks that were deemed too destructive, but it also understood some Quirks were too powerful not to use. Privately, Izuku thought that using his powers for rescue purposes was a tad mundane.

"Your powers are not meant to inflict harm," Thirteen said. "I hope you leave here today with the understanding you're meant to help people."

It started as a blackness in space. For a second, Izuku thought a fly had landed on his nose. He swatted the air uselessly. Aizawa continued to talk about their rescue simulation; they were to split into teams and rotate through each environment. But the blackness continued to expand until it was the size of a hole, and Izuku knew it couldn't be a trick of the light because the other students had also begun to notice. Someone asked if it was part of the simulation.

Then a hand reached through that spiraling black galaxy.

…followed by a cadre of villains.

"Fall back!" Aizawa shouted, diving forward, scarf fluttering behind him like wings. "Thirteen, begin evacuation and call the school!"

But the attack was too sudden, too premeditated; the fact the alarm hadn't been triggered meant something had gone horribly wrong. The mist-formed villain introduced them as the League of Villains. League implied a group. Allies. Power. They said something about killing All Might – impossible. They had known the class would be here. How? Eraserhead was poorly-suited for head-on battle. He – all of them – were badly outnumbered. All this ran through Izuku's mind before Aizawa landed the first blow. Then a voice whispered Begone, and blackness enveloped him.

Izuku was falling.

He landed unceremoniously in the water. He had just enough time to realize he was drowning with twenty pounds of metal on him, only to realized drowning would be preferable to getting eaten by this shark-headed villain in front of him. Then what looked like a frog carrying a bundle of grapes crashed into the villain, and Izuku found himself moving through the water at tremendous speed. Breaking through the surface, he landed on the deck of a ship.
He bent over, vomiting seawater. Next to him, Mineta did the same. Tsuyu climbed over the side, water clinging to her wetsuit.

"Thank you," Izuku gasped.

"We're still in trouble."

The smell of salt and fish made Izuku gag. Villains surrounded the ship. Like the shark, most of them were amphibious, and some wore diving gear. This could not be real. The development of events held the unreal pace of a nightmare. Izuku was hyperaware of his own heartbeat, his breath, the warm blood flowing through him and what it would look like mixing in the water. Hands shaking, he unclasped his belt. His grenades were water-logged. If it came to battle, he would be useless. In the distant mountains, several figures were already fighting; a great flower of ice bloomed in the fire zone; explosions sounded from the city zone as buildings collapsed like dominos; and by the entrance, Aizawa and the remaining students struggled against the bulk of the villains.

They were split up. In time, they would be overwhelmed.

"All we have to do is wait for All Might," Mineta said. "There's no way they could kill him. Once he gets here, they'll be sorry they messed with us."

"They must have figured out a way," Tsuyu said. "There's no way they would plan an attack this big otherwise. Plus, we may not last before he gets here. None of the alarms were tripped. They must be blocking the signal somehow. In the worst case, the pros won't come at all."

Mineta's face would've been comical if Izuku didn't share the feeling. The villains circled closer. "I'm going to kill you!" the shark roared (screeched? Called? Echolated?). But for all his bluster, they remained in place. Why were they waiting? They outnumbered them three to one. They didn't know our Quirks, Izuku realized. The fact they had thrown Tsuyu into the flood zone further reinforced it.

"Tsuyu, how many do you think you can take down?"

"Three, maybe? Four if I'm lucky."

"Mineta?"

"It's hopeless," he moaned. "We're doomed. Doomed!"

Mineta's ability to create sticky balls certainly would be useless in a direct combat situation like this. The ship shook. The villains were climbing the hull. The smell of fish grew stronger, more rotten. Tsuyu and Mineta looked at Izuku expectantly. Don't pin your hopes on me, he wanted to say. I'm a Quirkless liar. There's a limit to what I can do against impossible odds. How had the villains even known they would be here? The schedules of UA's classes were kept secret for this exact reason. And they had known All Might's schedule, too, though they hadn't foreseen it changing at the last minute. And there was that media rush the other day…

The first villains peeked over the deck.

"I have a plan," Izuku said, clenching his fist, "but I'm going to need you two out of commission."

The shark was the last to arrive. Despite his appearances, he was surprisingly cautious.

"Hope you saved some for me," he said, baring his teeth. "I haven't had a good meal in a long time. What are you standing around for? They dead already?"
The other villains looked at him sheepishly.

"Are you the leader?" Izuku said.

The shark approached slowly, incomprehension dawning on his face. Tsuyu and Mineta lay in a pile at Izuku's feet, unconscious. Izuku rubbed the tender skin over his knuckles.

"What," the shark said slowly, "is going on here?"

"Your task here is finished. Assist the other squads at once."

The shark became more and more confused. Izuku read somewhere that shark brains were only the size of a walnut. But at least he understood that something extraordinary had occurred, and, being a villain, jumped to the natural conclusion.

"You think that by offering your allies, we'll spare you? Some hero you are. Shigaraki's given us our orders. Leave nobody alive."

With as much coldness as he could muster, Izuku said, "I guess they wouldn't tell a goon like you. Lay a hand on me and you'll be gutted worse than what we'll do to All Might."

"You – you're on our side?"

"Who do you think caused the media break-in at the school? Who do you think leaked All Might's schedule? I'm the reason you're all here today, though I admit getting teleported wasn't part of the plan, and I hadn't expected All Might to pull a no-show. Still, I thought you low-lives would at least be told the one person you shouldn't kill."

The shark's gills flapped. "You're lying."

"You know what the League is capable of."

The shark hesitated; Izuku had been right in thinking that the higher-ups wouldn't give much information to their cronies. These villains seemed like regular street-criminals, not the kind of people who could pull off an attack of this caliber. Most likely, they had been hired for the job. Reputation was more powerful than money in the villain world. No group kept order without cruelty.

"I did hear something about a mole," someone muttered.

"He took out both of his allies for us…"

"Are we still getting paid?"

"Those two are still alive," the shark said, sniffing the air. "Hand 'em over, and maybe I'll listen to what you have to say."

"Are you stupid? How would it look if I was the only one who returned alive? The plan has gone completely off the rails, in case you haven't noticed. That means we'll need to try again. That means I'll need to continue operating at UA. That means I can't do anything that'll make them suspect me!"

The shark flinched. "It was only a suggestion."

"That Shigaraki doesn't know when to quit. We're not after a bunch of students. We need All Might. And unless you want Shigaraki to flay you alive, you'll leave at once."

"What are we supposed to do?"
"Half of you go to the city zone, the other half to fire zone. One of you head to Shigaraki and tell him what happened. Tell him Midoriya sent you. What are you waiting for? Get out of my sight!"

They scrambled. It wasn't until the last of them landed in the water that Izuku's fists stopped trembling. He sat down heavily. Relief washed over him as palpably as a wave. Bakugou and Todoroki would be more than capable of taking on a few extra goons. He wanted to laugh but he couldn't. If he started he might never stop. He looked at Mineta and Tsuyu, still out cold. What would he tell them? Perhaps the whole thing had been a dream. But it didn't matter. He would come up with something. He always did. For now, they were safe.
Chapter Six: Preparations

The media fed on the attack like sharks. The appearance of a villain organization whose members, objective, and reach were unknown created a national panic. For several days reporters swarmed the school gates, and the act of merely getting to class became a struggle. Luckily, Kirishima and Kaminari were more than eager to hog the spotlight. Between them, they had defeated a dozen villains. On the second retelling, they had defeated two dozen. By the fourth, they had defeated all the villains while the rest of the class watched helplessly. By tomorrow, Izuku had no doubt they would root out the League single-handedly.

In the moments before sleep, Izuku closed his eyes and witnessed the final battle. All Might's punches pounded like thunder inside his skull. The arrival of the other teachers had quickly quelled the attack, but even the teachers could do nothing against that strange, hulking black-skinned beast with the exposed brain. Even All Might had looked to be on the verge of defeat. But when was a hero strongest if not at his weakest? All Might's moves had been too fast for Izuku to follow (an inexplicable flaw from someone who claimed to be able to slow his perception of time), but the final punch rocketed the Nomu out of the stadium like a homerun. And they had cheered, and all was once again right with the world.

But this was no children's book, no morning cartoon. The hero did not come out broken and helpless after his victory, and the villains' story did not end with their defeat. The police questioned the students individually about what happened; Izuku was glad they bought his account about being saved in the nick of time by All Might. Aizawa was shrewder. After they returned from the hospital, he called Izuku into his office and demanded to know what really happened. When Izuku finished, he was silent.

"Under no circumstances are you to tell anyone how you survived," Aizawa said at last.

"So it's true. There really is a traitor at UA."

"It doesn't matter if it's true. The last thing we need right now is a witch hunt."

"I can ask around the students –"

"This is a matter for the teachers. You have enough to worry about, Quirkless boy. You can rest assured that we're doing our best to conduct an investigation. Secretly." Aizawa sighed, brushing the hair out of his eyes. "A student's biggest job is to learn. Let the teachers handle the rest. How else will you become the heroes of tomorrow? Get back to class. I'm sure you have to prepare for the sports festival."

As Izuku headed out the door, Aizawa called, "By the way, come to the gym after school. If you're going to be useless in combat, you should at least get some hand-to-hand experience. I've found an instructor for you."

The sky was the color of an apricot when Izuku arrived at the gym. Security at UA had been amped up considerably. Guards patrolled the perimeters at all times, and curfew had been imposed on students. Somehow, despite all, Class 1-A had returned to normal. Iida was once again berating people for minor infractions. Ochako had once again begun to smile. Mineta had – in shockingly quick fashion – returned to perving on girls. Their battle against the League had spread throughout the school and turned them into legends. Class 1-B almost seemed jealous. Not even a villain attack,
it seemed, could stand against the rigors of school. His mother, too, had stopped fussing over him every morning.

Aizawa's words had made it difficult to concentrate for the rest of the day. Hand-to-hand experience. It was a far cry from having a Quirk, but many heroes relied more on combat ability than their Quirks. Who could his instructor be? The teachers at UA had overwhelmingly powerful Quirks and rarely resorted to physical combat. Vlad King and All Might were the only two who did, but it was too much to expect the head of Class 1-B to teach someone from Class 1-A, and using All Might's limited time for this seemed a waste. A professional hero, perhaps? There was Ingenium, Mirko, Gunhead, Fourth Kind…

For an hour, Izuku waited, wondering if he got the time wrong. The gym doors groaned open.

"Mr. Aizawa," Izuku said eagerly. "Who's my teacher going to be?"

Aizawa loped across the gym. The door closed behind him. Nobody followed.

"At least try to look excited," he said with a yawn. "They don't pay me enough for this."

I should've expected it, Izuku thought with disappointment. Aizawa's Quirk had no combat potential in of itself. The best it could do was drag villains down to the same level as you. The reason Aizawa didn't come to mind when Izuku thought hand-to-hand was that he usually kept his distance with his binding cloth – a marvelously flexible tool. During the attack, Aizawa had been an acrobat dancing through the air, cloth flying at impossible angles to entrap one villain after the next. Izuku had asked Midnight why nobody else used it. She said nobody else could.

"Are you going to teach me how to use that capture weapon?"

"Let's get one thing straight. You're not going to be fighting. In fact, you should be running as far away from combat as you can. Your Quirk is meant for planning, not fighting. You wouldn't even pose a threat to a middle-schooler. Those grenades are a nice idea – ranged weapons, utility weapons. Remember that. What I'm going to teach you is the absolute last resort. If you're engaging in hand-to-hand, you've done something stupid. Let's start with the basics. How much do you know about martial arts?"

"Lots! I've read aikido, boxing, jujutsu, taekwondo…"

Aizawa laughed, a single dead note that echoed to the rafters.

"You can't learn combat from books. Show me what you got."

Recovery Girl was widely-regarded as one of UA's greatest assets and the biggest reason why UA ranked as the number one high school for heroics. Countless times she had saved students and teachers from crippling injury, if not outright death. Healing Quirks were rare, and her services were so valued that she frequently rounded hospitals to help patients.

But Recovery Girl's true nature was misconstrued. In truth, she was the greatest blight on UA. Without fear of death or injury, the teachers could push students as far as they could go, then give them a giant shove over it. What's some bruises, lacerations, broken bones, concussions, when they could be healed in minutes?

By the time he walked out of the clinic, Izuku could barely stay awake. The stamina required for
healing had left him in a state between consciousness and coma. His muscles ached all over – Recovery Girl, he found out, often left pain to "teach a lesson. I won't be around all the time." Aizawa had beaten him so badly she thought another villain attack had occurred. The training session seemed more like a way for Aizawa to vent than to teach. And there would be more.

He found Tsuyu waiting for him by the school gate.

He knew she had been waiting for him because she was alone and waved happily when he came into view. The two of them had spoken several times, but they were not particularly close – Tsuyu was friendly with everyone – and he couldn't think of why she would want to see him. She was an odd girl. Even among the oddities of Class 1-A, Tsuyu stood out, though not in the same way as Momo or Bakugou or Todoroki. She was methodical. She was observant. Her Quirk was strong, but not overwhelmingly powerful. She was nice to everyone. She never tried to draw attention or speak out. It was precisely (and rather disconcertingly) because 1-A had so many oddballs that a competent, reserved girl stood out so much.

"What are you doing here?" Izuku asked.

"Ochako told me she saw you heading to the recovery wing. Tough day?"

"I was getting some extra training."

"I didn't expect the honor student to need supplementary lessons."

"It's not – well, I'm quite weak, but they're not really supplementary – ah." Tsuyu's eyes curved upwards, her froggy mouth smiling wide. It took getting used to – people treating him as a friend. Distinguishing jokes from insults was tricky, and it had only been recently that he assumed people meant the former instead of the latter. Well, some people, at least. Bakugou's insults were never jokes. But Bakugou had been strangely subdued ever since the battle trial.

"You heading home? My house is in the same direction," Tsuyu said.

They walked past the baseball diamond and the confectionary shop and the bookstore that Izuku liked to waste time at. He pointed it out to Tsuyu, who nodded and said that she had always admired the display cases. She had a younger brother and sister, so she never had much time for reading. Izuku told her he was an only child. Was it lonely? He had never thought of it that way, but in retrospect, after arriving at UA, perhaps it had been. You never know what you didn't have until you had it.

She nodded thoughtfully, and the conversation drifted, as it inevitably did these days, towards the sports festival. He found Tsuyu surprisingly easy to talk to. She had an almost hypnotic ability to calm. The journey should've only taken ten minutes, but the afternoon was warm. The spring air was ripe with the scent of honeysuckle that lined the roads. A child waved to them from the doorstep of a house, and Tsuyu stuck out her tongue and made him laugh.

"I never said thank you, by the way," Tsuyu said. "For what happened at the rescue simulation."

"I didn't do anything. It was All Might who saved us."

"I've been wondering about that…"

"You think I could defeat all those villains alone? I wish."

"Is what you said really true? There's a traitor at UA."
Izuku stopped. Tsuyu stared at him with wide eyes that blinked through translucent eyelids.

"You were awake?"

Tsuyu rubbed her jaw. "You sure can throw a punch. But frogs are flexible. You can't knock me out that easily." She smiled, but Izuku wasn't sure if she was joking or serious.

"I wasn't sure what your plan was," Tsuyu continued. "I'm still amazed you managed to come up with it while Mineta and I had already given up. I had also suspected there could be a traitor at UA. That was the only way the villains got so much inside information. But why'd you lie about what really happened?"

"It's not something you can talk about. Especially if it's true." He told her about what Aizawa said.

"I don't like it," Tsuyu said, shaking her head. "The teachers should be more open with the students. But I guess if it did turn out to be one of us, we shouldn't let the traitor catch on." Contemplatively, she tapped a finger against her chin. "Who do you think it is?"

"For all I know, it could be you, Tsuyu."

"Please, call me Tsu."

Izuku spluttered, looking away. "I mean, at this stage, it's too early to say."

"For all I know, it could be you, Izuku."

This time she was joking, and Izuku laughed. So this was why she had embarked on this journey with him. She wasn't the kind of person who did things without reason. Perhaps it had been too much to expect a girl to want to enjoy his company. But he enjoyed it all the same: exhausted, sore, barely awake, listening to Tsu talk about her siblings again, beaming as she bounced along the sidewalk.
It's amazing how quickly you could go from feeling on top of the world to having the world turned against you.

The first part of the sports festival had gone as well as Izuku dared to hope. An obstacle course race was far from his strong suit, but at least it tested more than just pure combat ability. His physical training had kept him solidly in the middle of the pack. Those with Quirks well-suited to the race had quickly outpaced the rest, but they had begun fighting each other before the finish line even came into view. For once, Bakugou's hair-trigger temper had worked to Izuku's advantage. Smart use of a robot's shield and the minefield had, against all odds, allowed Izuku to take first place just ahead of Todoroki.

"Ten million points! That's right, Izuku Midoriya's headband is worth ten million points!"

The eyes of the other contestants turned on him as if he were a trophy mounted on a wall. Even his friends from 1-A – he hadn't known Iida could look so greedy, or Kaminari so contemplative, or Tsu so terrifying. Bakugou was practically salivating. This hadn't been part of the plan. Last year's first-place winner had only been worth slightly more than second. Nobody would team up with him. Seizing another's headband would be easier than maintaining your own, and nobody wanted a million-dollar jackpot on their head. In the end, only Ochako and Tokoyami accepted his offer. Ochako no doubt took pity on him (bless her, he thought amidst tears), but Tokoyami surprised him.

"We're kindred spirits," was the bird-man's reply.

Tokoyami, too, seemed to have trouble finding a teammate. Even in class he was usually alone. Mutants usually faced some discrimination, and Tokoyami's black-feathered head and sharp beak, coupled with his quiet manner and general aura of reserve, made him hard to approach. Izuku got the impression everyone was a little afraid of him.

"I won't let you down," Izuku said, clasping his hand. Tokoyami started at the gesture. "Now all we need is a third teammate."

"Team up with me, Mr. First-Place!"

Mei wore what looked like a backpack and robotic arms and a toolkit brimming with so many gadgets that it was a wonder she was able to walk. "You sure do stand out, Izuku," she proclaimed, slinging an arm around his shoulder, completely oblivious to the stares she herself received. "You'll make the perfect spotlight for my cute babies. And you owe me, so don't you dare refuse!"

"You two know each other?" Ochako said.

"We've spent many lonely afternoons together. Say, you sure you don't want to join Support? We can go at it all night…"

"Izuku!"

"Mei's helped me design my equipment," Izuku explained.

Ochako still looked suspicious. The horn sounded the end of the planning phase. They lined up in front of Midnight, who counted up their point totals and handed them their headband: ten million,
three hundred and twenty-five points. Tokoyami had come in seventh, Ochako in sixteenth, and Mei had just barely squeezed in second-to-last – the only person from a non-Hero course who made it this far.

"You're dead," Bakugou growled as they passed each other. He had teamed up with Kirishima, Mina, and Sero – a formidable combination. A head-on encounter would be disastrous.

They took their places. The battlefield was a rectangle draw in the dirt. A low, excited hum filled the stadium. The day was hot and dry. Giant screens mounted along the walls displayed close-ups of each team – tense, nervous, determined. The thwip thwip thwip of newscopters beat overhead, broadcasting the event to the rest of Japan. Izuku swallowed. He was acutely aware of the eyes of the other thirty-eight contestants, the thirty thousand spectators, the millions watching at home.

Reaching behind his head, he untied his headband.

"What are you doing?" Ochako said. "Hurry up and put it back on!"

The wind caught the headband, sending it spiraling towards the center of the battlefield.

Midnight began counting down.

"Three…"

"What's the meaning of this?" Tokoyami said.

"Two…"

"You're more boring than I thought," Mei said.

"One…."

"Run," Izuku said.

"Start!"

The teams converged on the headband like a starving mob. The mess of bodies and Quirks collided in a deafening blast of noise and color: Bakugou's explosions rang, and Todoroki's ice blossomed, and Aoyama's laser lit up the sky, and a tower of vines sprung from nothing, and someone had turned the ground into quicksand. His team had leapt away just before the rush. It was a meat grinder, Izuku thought – simply going in meant you would never come out whole. The screams of the crowd shook the stadium. They drowned out the contestants' shouts, exultations, shrieks of pain. As he watched, Sato writhed on the ground, clutching his chest which seemed to be melting. A flash of electricity lit up the battlefield, and half the contestants fell over, still smoking. The other half wore on. At length, Bakugou emerged from the chaos, flying through the air with one hand grasping the headband, a dozen others chasing after him.

"I hope you have a plan," Tokoyami said icily, "and that it wasn't mere cowardice."

"Over there!" Izuku said. "See those two? Go!"

His team hesitated.

"They only have seventy points," Ochako began.

"Go!"
They went. Their opponents – a green-skinned boy with a pair of insect mandibles riding atop a fitfully equine girl – looked at them with surprise. No doubt they had thought themselves safe from attack. Who would go after the team with the least amount of points? As Izuku's team bore down on them, they froze, unsure whether to fight or run, then turned to run. But that moment of vacillation had been enough. With Ochako reducing their gravity and the speed of Tokoyami's Dark Shadow, Izuku's team easily overtook them, and he grabbed the boy's headband while narrowly dodging a blow that would've sliced his neck off his shoulders. The pair chased after them, but only briefly before turning their attention to another group. After all, the scales were reversed now. Juicier prey roamed. Even if they got their headband back, they would still only have 70 points.

"This is so lame," Mei complained. "We're never going to get any attention picking on weaklings."

"I must agree," Tokoyami said. "It is ignoble. Furthermore, no matter how many we take down, if they're not worth a lot of points, we'll never take the lead."

"That's not the purpose of this battle. Don't you see? Every year they – there! Those guys! Go!"

They charged forward once again. One by one, Izuku directed his team towards the weakest teams, systematically hunting down those who never had a chance to begin with. A chorus of boos followed them. Luckily, the battlefield was so busy his teammates never noticed, but the disapproval stung Izuku. This was not how All Might would've done things. All Might would've charged headfirst into the fray and overpowered everyone with sheer strength. Izuku was not All Might. He would never be All Might, no matter how much he wanted to. The weak had to do things their own way – more than anything else, he learned this from UA and from life. Tokoyami was a titan: Dark Shadow was mobility, offense, and defense all rolled into one. The other teams quickly realized that the effort of going up against Tokoyami wasn't worth the reward. Even after taking down three teams, Izuku's team only had a paltry 420 points – a distant fourth trailing behind the top three with point totals in the thousands.

As the game entered its final minutes, frenzy took hold. Bakugou, Todoroki, and Tetsutetsu fought among themselves to take the top spot while everyone else threw themselves into the crossfire. Staying as far from the epicenter as possible, Izuku focused on defense and retreat. Even they were getting attention now as the teams below them grew increasingly desperate for any points possible.

"Watch out," Tokoyami said. "Monoma's coming."

Monoma's team rocketed across the battlefield on the trail of explosions blasting from his palms. That Bakugou, inconsiderate as always – Monoma in this state would be a tough opponent and impossible to outrun. Throughout the festival, he had been intent on toppling Class 1-A, mocking them at every opportunity, but his usual swagger had vanished. His team was in fifth place. Izuku glanced at the scoreboard. 420 to 165.

As the crowd counted down the last ten seconds, Izuku took off his headband and once again dropped it.

Monoma's mouth dropped open. "Get away!" Izuku shouted. Tokoyami bristled, but did as he was told. Monoma's eyes flickered to Izuku's team, flickered back to the headband. He sprung forward, grasping for the headband.

"Time's up!" Midnight yelled. "Everyone, stop where you are!"

Izuku collapsed. He took off the sweat-stained headbands. Only two, 350 points combined. Ochako gave him a worried look. Around them, fights had broken out between team members (It was your fault. My fault? It was your fault!). Bakugou, Todoroki, and Tetsutetsu had stopped fighting but still
eyed each other as if itching to start again. The battlefield was strewn with scorch marks, blast marks, ice, metal, sticky balls, discarded items, and, at the center, an immense crater whose dusty, sulfurous smoke drifted downwind and made Izuku cough. Something buzzed in his ear. It took him several moments to realize it was the roar of the crowd.

"This certainly was one of the most one-sided cavalry battles in history, folks! In first place, team Todoroki! In second place, team Bakugou! In third place, team Shinso! In fourth place, team Midoriya! These four teams will proceed to the final event! Everyone else, there's always next year!"

"Oh! So that's what you were after," Ochako said. "How'd you know?"

Izuku sat down in the dirt. He closed his eyes, sweat running down the back of his neck.

"The structure of the Sports Festival has been the same for the past five years. The first round is a free-for-all to weed out everyone but the top students. The second round continues the selection process. The third round is always a one-on-one tournament. The exact format varies, but it's always the top sixteen. We only needed to come in fourth place to secure our spot. There's no benefit for coming in first. This round wasn't about getting as many points as you can. It's about eliminating the other contestants. Your point total doesn't matter so long as you make it into the top four. In fact, it's better for us if the top three grab all the points for themselves. That's why I threw away my million-point headband. Let everyone else fight over it while we conserve our strength and go after what really matters. It's why I threw my 70-point headband to Monoma. Even if he got it, he still wouldn't have enough points to overtake us."

"I apologize," Tokoyami said. "I thought you were a coward. I see now it was I who had been foolish. I still have much to learn."

"I'm a liability when it comes to combat, but my Quirk gives me some good ideas. We gotta play to our strengths, right? You did great, by the way. Dark Shadow's so strong! My plan never would've worked if not for you."

Tokoyami bowed, and Izuku didn't think a bird of his complexion could blush.

"So lame," Mei said. "I didn't get to do anything. How am I supposed to market my babies?"

"I don't think you need to worry about that. The final event's coming up."

A/N: I skipped the first round because it goes the same way as the manga/anime, where Izuku wins without using One For All.
Chapter Eight: Round One

Given the nature of Hitoshi Shinso’s Quirk, many students considered it strange that he wanted to be a hero. A brainwashing Quirk was practically tailor-made for crimes (Mineta especially salivated at its uses). But the same argument could be applied to many heroes: Wasn't Endeavor's all-consuming destructiveness also villainous? Or Mina's flesh-eating acid? Or the sinister nature of Tokoyami's Dark Shadow?

"Midoriya, the honors student. Of course I've heard of you. Everyone's heard of you."

The real reason students viewed Shinso as a villain was, disappointingly enough, because of his appearance. For someone who professed to be a hero, he made no effort to look like one. His hair, slicked back into messy spikes, made him look unkempt, and his sunken cheeks turned his face into a skull. His arrogance, coupled with his indifferent attitude, cultivated an image that any villain would've killed for. More than anything else, it was Shinso's eyes that gave him away: deep-set and half-lidded, perpetually shadowed by heavy bags, staring down at the world as if he scorned everyone living in it.

"It must be nice, having a powerful Quirk. You can control time, right? Congrats on winning the genetic lottery! Thanks to my Quirk, I couldn't do a damn thing against those robots. But those naturally blessed with power couldn't understand what I've had to go through."

You've got it reversed. It's you who don't understand. Those with Quirks can never understand the Quirkless. It's like being born with a missing limb. It's like being born missing a lung. It's like being born blind.

"You people, born with your awesome Quirks, getting to follow all your dreams! The world must be easy, handed to you on a silver platter! What do you know of hardship? You don't deserve any of it!"

Shinso was panicking now. His provocations weren't working. Slowly, he backed away.

"With a Quirk like yours, this is the best you can do? Pathetic! If I had your Quirk, I could become the number one hero in Japan. If you were in my shoes, you wouldn't last a day!"

Izuku grabbed his arm. Desperately, Shinso tried to shake him off, but though he was taller he was weaker, and clearly inexperienced with close-quarters combat. Obedience did not equal loyalty, did not equal respect. Shinso had lost the moment Ojiro told Izuku about his Quirk. Pivoting on the ball of his foot, Izuku used the momentum to lift Shinso over his shoulder – he was surprisingly light – and threw him out of the ring.

"Midoriya wins!"

A/N: I like Shinso but he had no chance. Chapter Nine is also up since this was so short.
"Don't want to,"

"Please," Izuku said. "It's my only chance."

"I have my own stuff to do," Mei said, inspecting her attachment bars. "Like how I'm going to remain upright without this thing snapping my spine in two. Hand me the torque adapter, will you? I'm in the tournament, too, in case you forgot. I don't have time to design a weapon for your petty problems."

"Petty? The head bolt's loose, by the way."

"It's a just a tournament, Izuku," Mei said with an exasperated sigh. Grunting, she tightened up the bolt. "Who cares if you win some dumb tournament? The companies – now those are guys you need to impress. If I get their attention, I'll secure enough funding for the rest of my life, and my babies will spread throughout the world!"

"If I beat Todoroki, that'll be great advertisement."

"If you beat Todoroki, and that's not very likely even with my excellent engineering capabilities. How does it look?"

"Looks fine," Izuku said as Mei protracted and retracted the steel bars. "You're my only chance, Mei. Without you, Todoroki will destroy me."

"Aren't you getting ahead of yourself? You still need to beat Shinso."

"I don't think that'll be much trouble."

Mei inspected the blueprint, which he had hastily scribbled in his notebook. "This thing looks pretty complicated. We don't have much time."

"Most of it's already built," Izuku said excitedly. "It's just a matter of assembling the parts. For the generator, we can use that fusion core left over from that robot you built (and destroyed). The coils we can get from that heating system you designed (and destroyed). The gloves are all we have to build by hand, and we just need to modify those power gauntlets you made (and destroyed). If we work together, we can finish just in time."

"Well, I won't say no to a good challenge," Mei said, cracking her knuckles. "And when you beat Todoroki, you better damn tell everyone you did it with my products."

Beating Todoroki! How easy it seemed when he spoke with Mei, how easy it seemed when he drew up his plans. Beating Todoroki! It was only after you faced him on the battlefield, after you saw him display the full might of his power – a sheet of ice that exploded out of the stadium like a river flash-frozen in flight – that you realized how impossible it was.

"This next match is a battle of geniuses! Izuku Midoriya, the student who broke the record at the UA entrance exam, against the best of the best, the strongest of the strong, the son of Endeavor – Shoto Todoroki! And what's this? Izuku seems to be wearing something! What does he have in store?"
The announcer was playing him up – nobody seriously expected him to beat Todoroki. Nobody expected anyone to beat Todoroki. Carefully, Izuku adjusted his gloves, stretching out the coils that connected to the generator on his back. The thing had worked in the few trials he had managed to fit in with Mei, but the fuel consumption had been far higher than expected. It also weighed thirty pounds. Being out-of-breath before the fight even began was never a good sign.

"Don't disappoint me," Todoroki said.

"Start!"

The ice blossomed from nothing. The battlefield sat hushed in expectation, and then the battlefield vanished beneath a sky of white. Izuku barely had time to hold up his gloves before the ice overtook him, spreading out behind him like a tidal wave breaking against the rocks. The air was cold. He shivered. And yet the air in front of him shimmered from heat. A gaping hole in the ice lead back to Todoroki, who looked straight back with shock – the first emotion Izuku had ever seen on his face.

The gloves worked, at least, though the heat was almost unbearable. His hands felt like they were inside an oven.

He raced forward. The gloves only emitted heat to a few feet. His ranged options were limited. If Todoroki kept his distance, it would be impossible to win. He wished he could use the binding cloth, but the gloves made fine manipulation difficult. Todoroki fired off several more blasts that Izuku easily melted. Izuku swung his fist. The extra weight unbalanced him, and his punch went wide. Dancing behind him, Todoroki delivered a sharp jab to his flank that sent him sprawling. Instantly, a sheet of ice hardened over the bruise. Todoroki arched his arm back for another ice blast, leapt back just in time as the grenade at his feet exploded. The smell of smoke and char. Picking himself up, Izuku faced Todoroki once more.

"You're prepared," Todoroki said.

"Your ice is powerful. Trying to break it physically would be like trying to break concrete. But melting it? That's a whole another story."

No trace of Todoroki's surprise remained. Like Bakugou, Todoroki's Quirk was not the most dangerous part of him. He lacked Bakugou's brute cunning, but he more than made up for it with composure and judgement. Already he was keeping his distance. Izuku raced forward once more, tossing out two grenades – one regular, one flashbang. Todoroki froze both instantly. Izuku tossed out more grenades, not even bothering to prime them, each one dropping out of the air like diamonds. But they had slowed down Todoroki enough. Izuku swung, and this time adjusted for the extra weight. The punch connected with Todoroki enough. Izuku swung, and this time adjusted for the extra weight. The punch connected with Todoroki's shoulder. He gave a cry of pain as the metal scorched his flesh, a black ring of char sprouting around the wound. Reflexively, his other hand shot out another ice wave, but this was easily melted. Izuku's second punch sank into his stomach. Gasping, Todoroki sank to the floor. He gave off the smell of cooked meat.

He raised his head, and the hatred in those eyes froze Izuku more surely than any ice. No, not hatred. Fear. Panic. Something wasn't right, Izuku realized.

And then he saw the scar.

He had seen the scar many times, of course. The other students, too, were doubtlessly curious, but asking about Todoroki's scar was like asking a rabid dog about its teeth. The scar covered the upper left part of his face, a red, shriveled patch that swallowed his entire eye before merging with his scalp at the hairline. Its appearance left no room for what it was.
Todoroki had been burned.

"Stay away!"

The hailstorm came haphazardly. It swallowed the battlefield, cloaking the air in a shroud of chill mist – a pointless, extravagant waste of power. Why destroy a battlefield when your opponent was right in front of you? A thin layer of frost coated Todoroki's skin. The wounds at his shoulder and abdomen wetly glistened. He had also begun to shiver. Izuku advanced. Todoroki backed away, his eyes as wide as a pig's on slaughtering-day, and Izuku could smell the dirty, animal panic that came off him in waves. Todoroki barely seemed awake, throwing wild, fumbling ice blasts at imaginary enemies.

Save Todoroki's cries, the stadium was silent. The crowd rippled uneasily. Even the announcer trailed off into nothing.

The fight was over. Defeating Todoroki now would be as simple as grounding an ant beneath his heel.

"So this is all you are," Izuku said. "A fraud who'll live in his father's shadow his entire life."

Was this how a hero wins? Dredging up past trauma? Picking on someone weaker than he was, who knew pain as he had known it, weakness as he had known it? Even the strongest, it seemed, bore their own terrors.

"You were born with every advantage," Izuku continued. "I don't know what happened in your childhood, and I won't trivialize whatever happened. There is one thing we both understand. I am winning. You are losing."

Todoroki stared at him in a daze.

"You probably think it's pride that holds you back from using your left side. You made a vow to yourself – you'll rise to the top without using your flames. You think it's noble that you're angering your father, refusing to do what he wants. All I see are chains. Not even the lowliest hero will be satisfied at achieving only half his potential. There are kids in the world without Quirks, and you think you can ignore yours? Are you proud right now? Do you feel noble? You're losing to a nobody. And you'll continue to lose – to me, to others, to villains. And one day you'll lose for the final time, and as you lay dying you'll realize why. What you are now is not strong. You are not a hero upholding some sacred promise. You're a weak, worthless joke of a hero shivering in a cage of his own creation.

"To win, you must break free."

The heat of the spring sun melted away the frost and fog. The water clung to Izuku's clothes. Silence filled the stadium.

"Thank you," Todoroki said. "And sorry."

The blast of fire caught Izuku in the chest. He had seen it coming, but the speed of it was impossible. It was like getting hit with a little piece of an eruption. Pain coursed through him, so intense it whited out all other sensations. He found himself lying on the dirt. He took a breath, and it was like someone had set fire to his lungs all over again. The generator on his back gave a hiss of steam; it had overheated. There wasn't much fuel left anyway.

Todoroki stood over him, wreathed in a halo of flame.
With the last of his strength, Izuku tapped the dirt.

"I surrender."

The world turned black.
Aftermath

Chapter Ten: Aftermath

Izuku stared at the list with disappointment. Perhaps it had been too much to expect multiple pro drafts, but he had hoped to get at least one. After all, he had made it to the second round of the tournament. He had hoped things would change once he got into UA. But it seemed that no matter how much effort you put in, no matter what results you got, in the end it was still all about your Quirk. Izuku tried to sweep the bitterness from his tongue but it returned like a sour candy. Todoroki, Bakugou, Tokoyami – the trend among those who received the most drafts was overwhelmingly in favor of those with flashy Quirks. Even Ochako managed to get twenty offers. Even Sero managed fourteen.

"It's 'cuz you relied too much on support items," Mineta said.

"If only you could take mine!" Iida said. "You're far more worthy of them than I am. You fared much better against Todoroki than I did. Indeed, you would've won had he not used his fire side."

Izuku's eyes darted over to Todoroki, but he gave no indication he heard them. Head resting in his palms, he stared out the window, the same pose he had for the last ten minutes. As the class lauded him for receiving nearly four thousand offers, he remained silent, only occasionally handing out noncommittal responses. Ever since their battle, he had been quieter, as if something in him had cooled down. The two of them had not spoken since. Frequently, questions startled him out of his thoughts – an inconceivable trait from someone who used to be so alert. And it was probably Izuku's imagination, but was he smiling more?

In the final round of the festival, Todoroki had lost to Bakugou with indifference; Bakugou had won with so much fury that he shocked the spectators. After his "victory," he fumed more than ever, temper igniting at the slightest remark, to the point that even Kirishima avoided him. Izuku knew by experience that his foul mood could last weeks. Even now the oily odor of nitroglycerin clung to him.

"Who're you going for?" Izuku asked.

Iida chose a shockingly normal hero. Mineta wanted Mt. Lady, to nobody's surprise. To everybody's surprise, Ochako wanted to go with Gunhead. "Getting stronger opens up all sorts of possibilities!" she proclaimed. Izuku had often wondered why more heroes didn't train in martial arts like Aizawa did; for those without combat Quirks, martial arts was a valuable way to hold your own, and for those with combat Quirks, martial arts was even more valuable. Someone like Kirishima or Iida would've benefitted immensely. Probably it was – again – pride. Heroes lived and died by their Quirks. To rely on lesser skills like hand-to-hand combat or support items would've lessened their value in the eyes of the public. Villains also seemed to abide by the same principle.

After class, Izuku found All Might waiting for him.

"It's great to see you, Midoriya! Your performance at the sports festival was exemplary!"

"All Might! What are you doing here?" Izuku still hadn't gotten used to his sudden, peculiar appearances: All Might stood half-bowed at the classroom entrance, and, judging by the stares of the other students, he had been there for quite a while. Class 1-A saw little of All Might. When he wasn't busy with the third-years, he spent his limited time heroing, but he appeared less and less in the news. Izuku suspected his power was weakening; even now, his face looked strained. The wound must be
progressing further. Perhaps one day, there would be no All Might at all.

He led Midoriya up the stairs to where the third-years took their classes.

"Someone's drafted you! Well, I recommended you to him. But it was just a little nudge! He's very interested in you. You and him are similar in a lot of ways, actually. We used to work together in the past, and he's, ah, how do I put it, rather frightening at times…"

In all the time Midoriya had known him, in all of All Might's public appearances, news clips, advertisements, TV shows, Izuku had never seen him scared. But he was shivering now, eyebrows drawn tight. Was this a hero or a villain?

"Who is it?"

All Might stopped, staring into space as if contemplating the question for the first time.

"He's someone who knows how to kill me."

"So, despite all your talk, you lost," Mei said.

"Ah, well, I guess you could call it that."

"If I didn't already receive half a dozen offers on my babies, I'd be so mad at you right now. One of them includes those gloves, by the way. They think it might help rescue people stuck in avalanches."

The sudden rain had forced the two of them to take shelter at a secluded bus stop. The sky was dark and downcast, lit by rare flashes of lightning. His mother would be worrying about him again, despite the fact he already called her. He had stayed late in the studio with Mei – not by his choice.

The grenades, the flashbangs, the suit augmentations, the gloves – Mei had ticked off each item on her finger like a banker marking defaulted loans. According to her calculations, he owed her six hundred and twenty-four hours of service.

"You better come in early tomorrow," Mei said. "We need to finish up that jetsuit."

"I'll be starting field training. You're going to have to get someone else to help you."

"With who?"

"I don't know yet. Someone's supposed to introduce me."

Mei turned her head away. "We'll shelf the jetsuit until you get back."

It was easy to see her scowl in the reflection on the glass. There was a reason she practically locked herself in the design studio – she would sleep there if she could – working only with a student from the hero course. He had never seen her with anyone from her class. Several times Izuku saw her eating alone in the cafeteria, reading some dense textbook or fiddling with something while she ate, or otherwise eating as fast as possible to return to the lab. No doubt it was her zeal that drove away the other support students. It's not like she did it on purpose. Many must've been drawn by her lively exterior only to be turned away by her core – her solid, unbreakable, unchangeable core. She devoured mechanics, drank automation, breathed theorems. She cared for nothing else, and it wasn't even the fault of the other students that they found her exhausting. Those without passion always feared it in others. And so it was with talent. Being near her was like standing next to a live conducting rod.
A car roared by, scattering a puddle of rain. His role in the lab, Izuku reflected, consisted mostly of bringing Mei's wild, disorganized ideas into focus. It was all he could do to keep up. In a fair world, the support teams would receive as much fame as the heroes. What was the power of an individual compared to the power of an idea? Heroes didn't discover electricity, cars, microbes, the internet. Civilization only progressed on the back of researchers and engineers. "The world is unfair," he thought aloud. Mei looked at him solemnly and nodded.

It would not remain so. In a hundred years or a thousand, technology will overtake Quirks. It was as inevitable as the first human creating fire to warm himself. Already you could bottle Bakugou's explosions, manufacture Sero's tape, synthesize Mina's acid. With the right equipment, even a Quirkless boy could (almost) beat Todoroki. Quirks had ruled the world for eight generations. Its shell was beginning to crack. Izuku hoped he lived long enough to see the dominion of blood break entirely.

But for now they lived in the imperfect, rainy present. In her tank top, Mei shivered. Izuku covered her with his jacket – a shameless act of chivalry. How could history continue if one of its premier geniuses died of a cold? He expected her to throw it back with indignation. She drew it close and muttered thanks.

They sat close and watched the rain. The storm was projected to stop by eight; already it was letting up. They only had a few minutes more.
A/N: I use the terms "internship" and "field training" interchangeably here.

Chapter 11: Internship I

"The most I can do for you is an introduction. The one to decide whether to take you on will be him."

"Is he, er, as terrifying as he sounds?" Izuku said.

"Well, he's quite strict, and he's tough on both himself and others, and he's turned away many applicants at the door…"

"Is there any hope for me?"

"All Might recommended you. Step forward proudly!"

Grinning, Mirio Togata shoved Izuku through the door.

Behind a wide mahogany desk, Nighteye's gaze flickered upward.

"Nice to meet you, Sir Nighteye! I'm Izuku Midoriya, reporting for field training."

The scratching of pen across paper. Izuku clutched his form in front of him like a shield. Nighteye didn't look up from his work. Covered in All Might memorabilia, the office commanded a beautiful view of Hosu all the way to the bay. Stacks of All Might books filled two extensive bookshelves. All Might figures posed proudly atop desks. Posters of All Might plastered the walls, including the extremely rare, not-for-sale tenth anniversary tapestry. The smell of antiseptic emanated from every surface. At the corner sat a strange contraption: an upright table on wheels outfitted with handcuffs. It would've seemed like a tool to capture villains had not the words "Tickle Hell" been printed across the top.

At last Nighteye put away his papers. Leaning forward, he steepled his fingers and fixed Izuku with a stare that made him wonder if jumping out the window wasn't a good idea.

"Izuku Midoriya. You wish to follow me in day-to-day activities, correct?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Let me see the form."

As Izuku leaned over to hand it to him, his arm brushed against a figure, sending it crashing to the floor. All Might's head rolled across the room.

"That figure," Nighteye said coldly, "was worth two hundred thousand yen."

"I'm sorry, sir! I promise I'll pay you back. Er, I don't have any money, but I can work for you –"

"Sit down," Nighteye snapped. Izuku sat.

"Why do you want to work here?"

"You're an excellent hero, sir –"
"Don't be a sycophant."

"I mean, you and I are similar in many ways, so I thought – "

"Don't compare me to you."

"All Might recommended – "

"I already know what he did."

"Ah, well…"

Nighteye leaned back. Izuku trailed off, squirming. Even in the news Nighteye had a reputation for being unapproachable, but you really had to see him in person to appreciate his frigid, shriveling manner. He was an extremely tall, extremely lean man. He wore a grey-white suit and a polka-dot tie, both of which looked as if it had just been delivered from the dry-cleaner. Two yellow streaks ran through his dark green hair, perfectly-combed. His face was as austere as the rest of him: high cheekbones ending in a sharp, jutting chin and a thin mouth that, despite Mirio's assurances of his superior's humor, looked as if it had never smiled.

"I'm aware of the merits you reap by working here. The question is: How will I benefit by employing you? This office functions perfectly with two sidekicks and a student intern. Adding another would be like adding a broken gear to an already-perfect machine. What can you contribute to society? How can you be of benefit to others? If you want my acknowledgement, you must demonstrate your worth."

"I'm a quick learner, sir! My Quirk allows me to absorb information and formulate plans. I believe I'll be of use to your office. I have a good set of support items. I've been personally trained by Eraserhead in hand-to-hand combat and the use of binding cloth. I can also design tools, and I've memorized the information of almost every professional hero in service."

Nighteye tapped his finger on the desk.

"I'm also pretty good at sketching, and, uhm, I can clean…and I can cook ramen?"

In a sudden motion, Nighteye stood up. With surprising strength, he dragged Izuku up by the hand. A look of intense shock passed over Nighteye's face, so briefly and so inanely that Izuku was sure he had imagined it. Nighteye's skin was as cold as a corpse. In his other hand he dangled a stamp in front of Izuku's eyes as if it were a brilliant diamond.

"Three minutes. I challenge you to either take this stamp from me or to otherwise render me incapable."

"Huh?"

"For someone who professes to be intelligent, you're quite dense. I'm giving you a chance to join my office despite the fact you'll bring nothing to the table. Aren't I generous? Your time's already started, by the way."

"What?"

"The stamp. Your goal is to – "

Izuku's arm shot out. Nighteye turned his body slightly, and the fist flew past him. Izuku's other hand reached for the stamp, fell just short as Nighteye raised it half an inch. Izuku's leg sweep, too, was
dodged by taking a single step back, the margin so thin that Izuku's foot grazed Nighteye's pant leg. Instinctively, Izuku jumped away, preparing for the counterblow. Nighteye looked at him languidly.

"I won't lay a hand on you. Two minutes remain."

Izuku threw a flashbang. Nighteye closed his eyes as it exploded in white light. In that moment, Izuku rushed forward. Without fear of retaliation, he focused entirely on offense, recklessly throwing punch after punch that was as easily dodged as if he were moving in a frame-by-frame reel. Izuku flung the binding cloth, delicately manipulating it with his fingers so it wrapped around Nighteye like a Christmas present. Izuku drew it tight, but it ensnared nothing but air. Casually, picking up the coffee cup from his desk, Nighteye took a sip. Izuku led with a right jab, feinted, delivered a left hook, also a feint, finished with a high crescent kick. Nighteye bent forward. The leg sailed over him. He straightened, sipping his coffee. His eyes were still closed.

Breathing heavily, Izuku backed away.

"One minute."

Foresight. Nighteye's Quirk was as powerful as Izuku heard. *Can predict the future* – that was all that was written in the hero registry. The exact details were a secret and the subject of many rumors. Some people deemed Foresight the strongest Quirk in existence, but Nighteye himself was far from the strongest hero. It had to have a weakness. No Quirk was perfect. Perfect foresight equaled perfect omniscience, and nothing was omniscient. Yet Nighteye had proved he could predict at least the immediate future around him with complete accuracy. How did you beat someone who knew your every move?

There had to be conditions. The more powerful the Quirk, the bigger its drawback.

"Touch," Izuku realized. "It's activated by touch."

"Are you going to stand there all day? Thirty seconds."

Figuring out the activation condition might help him fight Nighteye in the future, but it did nothing for Izuku now. The condition had already been met. Was he destined, then, to forever dance in Nighteye's palm? Nighteye stood with his arms crossed, stamp dangling from his hand only a few feet away. It might as well be on the other side of the planet. There had to be more conditions than just touch – otherwise, Nighteye could simply touch as many people as he could to construct a near-pansophical view of the future. His power could likely only be limited to a few people at once, and even then there were further limitations. If he could completely predict someone's future for the rest of their lives, then he could simply touch someone like All Might – as he once did – and figure out the movement of every villain All Might would ever encounter. All Might would never struggle again, never be injured, and he would never have missed the League attack at the rescue simulation. Foresight of that caliber would bring down villain society in a year. No, Nighteye's Quirk had to be limited. Izuku could think of three possible limitations.

Closing his eyes, Izuku flung another grenade. Nighteye kicked it through the window. It exploded in a hail of glass shards.

"Do try to keep the damage to a minimum. Thirty seconds."

Izuku walked to the end of the room. Taking a deep breath, he unhitched his grenade belt.

"Stop," Nighteye said.

For a long time he was silent. Then he said, "You pass."
"Yes!" Izuku pumped the air.

Nighteye took a seat behind his desk. He picked up the stamp, held it over the form, then put it away.

"Explain. For the record."

"In order to beat you, I had to figure out your Quirk. I knew you could predict the future, but not how or to what extent. The first thing to figure out were the conditions. When I threw the first punch, you already knew it was coming. When did you activate your Quirk? Was it active all the time? But your Quirk wasn't active when I stepped into the room or when I gave you the form. If it was, you never would've allowed me to break your All Might figure. Your Quirk was activated some time between when I broke the figure and when the fight started. Only one thing stood out to me: You grabbed me by the hand. You did a good job disguising it. I didn't think it meant anything at the time. Foresight's activated by touch.

"But I only figured that out after the fight started, so it wasn't much help. I had to figure out the further limitations of your Quirk after the activation requirement was met. I knew there had to be further limitations because it was too powerful otherwise. The very fact you had to physically touch someone suggested that your power was limited to that one person. But there had to be more; perfect foresight, even if limited to one person, is enough to predict the movements of almost every villain in Japan. The first thing I thought of was time – maybe you could only see a certain distance into someone's future. Your time limit suggested it was only three minutes. But I remembered that All Might told me you knew how to kill him. You had foreseen his death. That must've been at least five years ago, and potentially several more years would pass before the actual event itself. Your power was not limited by time. The second limitation I thought of was perception – maybe you could only see the future from the point of view of the person you touched. I tested this hypothesis by throwing that second grenade. I picked it and threw it with my eyes closed. Not even I knew what type it was or where it was headed. But you did. Your power was not limited by perception. You could see things even the subject didn't know.

"The last limitation was distance. Your power could only see the immediate surroundings around the subject. That explained how you were so easily able to dodge my attacks, even when I didn't know them. A powerful Quirk, but severely constrained in its scope. The problem was I didn't know how large that distance was. It was at least the range of my grenades, but for all I knew, it could've extended to the next city block. I had no choice. I had to make a move with what I had. So I headed to the end of the room, the furthest away from you as possible, and prepared to throw every grenade I had to reduce the possibility of you dodging them. I would say the range of your Foresight is about thirty feet."

Softly, Nighteye brought his hands together, a sound like cat's paw running over tatami.

He was clapping.

"Well done," he said, and the normal glacialness of his expression made his smile all the more genuine. "You're right on all accounts, except one. The range of my Quirk extends fifty feet. It's more than sufficient to cover the length of this room. If it came down to it, I could've easily dodged your grenades. The reason I stopped you was because I didn't fancy my office blowing up in smithereens. You also didn't go far enough, though based on what you knew, you couldn't have. My Foresight, in addition to what you figured out, is imprecise. The further away the event is, the blurrier it becomes and the less I can fix the date. Foresight's further limited by a cool down period. I can only use it once every twenty-four hours. All this, by the way, is a strict secret. Leaking a pro's Quirk is punishable by twenty years in prison."

"Can the future be changed?"
"No doubt you're referring to All Might's death." Nighteye sighed, closing his eyes. His words took on a rote tone, as if he had said this many times before. "My power is absolute. All Might will die as I have foreseen it. However, like I told him, I can't give an exact date when that will be. It could be fifty years from now. It could be tomorrow."

"The future is not set in stone," Izuku said fiercely. "If anyone can change the future, it's him."

Nighteye laughed, a shockingly carefree sound from so austere a face. Maybe Mirio had been right.

"We'll see."
Izuku tugged at his sleeves, feeling slightly ridiculous. Despite how often he dreamed of this moment, he found himself unprepared for the ordeal of actually walking the streets in costume. Thousands of pairs of eyes stared at them, and most of them, he felt, were chuckling. In the morning, Mirio and Izuku patrolled the third and fourth districts of the city before returning to the second district. Several people waved to them; Mirio, it seemed, was a regular sight. Children called out excitedly, and one bright-eyed boy followed them for two blocks before his parents picked him up. An elderly man who ran a food stall gave them free takoyaki. The warmth of the sweet bean jelly invigorated Izuku, and the smell of baked bread followed him the rest of the day. Besides that, the patrol had been unexciting. In fact, nothing had happened.

"That's a good thing," Mirio said.

He wore blue leggings and a white plated shirt embossed with gold shoulder pads. "1000000" was emblazoned across the chest. To save one million people. An impossible dream. But that was the prerogative of dreams, wasn't it? To be impossible? Yet the most striking part of Mirio's costume wasn't the number but the cape, a tattered strip of red cloth that, at the slightest wind, streamed out heroically behind him.

(Izuku reminded himself to get one later).

"It's amazing you passed Sir Nighteye's test," Mirio said. "All I had to do was make him laugh."

"I didn't really pass. He would've beaten me."

"Be proud of yourself!" Mirio clapped Izuku on the back, nearly sending him into the path of an incoming car. "Sir Nighteye's Quirk is unbeatable in one-on-one. For someone without a combat Quirk, it's amazing what you came up with."

*For someone without a combat Quirk.* With that modifier, Mirio's compliment fell flat. People were not born equal. Around Mirio, Izuku felt the truth of those words more acutely than ever. Izuku had prayed for a Quirk; Mirio had been gifted with two. Dual-Quirks were not unheard of but incredibly rare (Todoroki could be considered one, though his was more of a hybrid than true duality), especially when either Quirk would be overpowering alone. Permeation and super strength. On top of derivative powers like super speed and teleportation. Many pros were already clamoring to take on Mirio once he graduated. There were even rumors he would strike out alone immediately. And some students whispered that All Might was grooming Mirio to become his successor.

But if there was one person who could promote an unjust system, Izuku reflected, staring at the blond striding proudly forward, it was him. Mirio was no Endeavor, physically strong but unable to capture the public's adoration. Mirio was a hero to his bones. He smiled and made others smile. His confidence instilled others with confidence. His optimism did not seem like a hope but a promise. Even more than Quirks, he held that supreme power of heroes – the ability to turn despair into joy. What separated him most from the other top-tier students like Todoroki and Bakugou, however, was that he had not been born into greatness. He had been one of the weakest students at UA, and it took him years to get Permeation under control (and even then he occasionally lost his clothes). His strength Quirk did not manifest until last year. He often joked that he had been on the verge of failing out. From anyone else those words would've seemed like an attempt to fish for compliments – the premier student of UA, failing out! – but Mirio really was laughing at himself. It was precisely
because he hadn't been born into talent that he understood the plight of those without it.

He embodied the ideals Izuku aimed for. He lived the life Izuku dreamed of.

(Izuku hated him, just a little.)

They returned to the building at twelve for the meeting. The rest of Nighteye's office had already gathered. Nighteye sat at the head of the table, hands clasped in front of him, irritation drawn (as it always was, but more starkly today) on his face. Bubble Girl and Centipeder occupied the seats on either side. Two more dissimilar sidekicks couldn't exist. Bubble Girl was energetic and excitable and wore an outfit that Izuku was amazed had passed decency laws. Dressed in a full black tuxedo, Centipeder was as reticent as his boss. Izuku wondered why Nighteye chose them as sidekicks, or did they come to him? Did they have to pass the same test he did? Or did they, like Mirio, make him laugh? Bubble Girl he could imagine, but not Centipeder.

Ingenium, too, was seated at the table. At their entrance, he grinned and waved. From the praises Iida had sang about his brother, Izuku had expected a demigod. Like Iida, he was tall and strongly-built, with a mop of dark blue hair falling over his forehead. But he had none of Iida's severity. On either side of his head stuck out a rather large pair of ears, giving him a disarmingly comical appearance. Except for the helmet hanging off the armrest, Ingenium was dressed in full costume (Izuku certainly saw where Iida got his inspiration from), lounging against his chair with his feet propped up on the table. One hand flipped through his phone while the other held a sandwich.

"How're the little interns doing today?" he said. "Capture any villains? Save any damsels?"

"Nothing happened," Izuku said.

"Not what you expected, huh? I was the same way. I thought I'd be battling it out with villains all the time, making a name for myself. But it's mostly patrols and paperwork. No glory! It's probably for the best. Our job is to keep peace, not make war. You hear anything from Iida?"

"He's doing well with field training."

"He won't tell me a thing," Ingenium complained. "He wants to be independent of his big bro. He considers you his rival, Izuku. Don't show him up too badly."

The door burst open. In walked a dark-skinned man wearing a necklace of five golden keys.

"Takagi," Nighteye said. "You're late."

"Baby was crying. I promised the wife I'd put him to sleep." Yawning, Takagi stretched out. The keys at his waist jingled. "I'm telling you, they don't give us enough days off. Let's wrap this up as fast as we can."

Testily, Nighteye said, "Now that we've all gathered, we can finally proceed with the meeting. Though unfortunately for our Lock hero, I doubt Stain will consent to his wishes of being 'wrapped up' quickly."

The screen behind him lit up. The figure that appeared was the same figure that dominated the news for the past five months: a broad-shouldered man dressed in plated armor that left his shoulders bare. Across his waist, on his back, down his sides, even holstered over his left collar, he sported multiple swords. The photo was grainy, but even at this resolution his face stood out: noseless, eyes wrapped in bandages, with a mouth that stretched wide and cruel. It was a face mothers told bedtime stories about. At his feet lay a corpse.
"Stain has claimed forty victims. His methods are –"

"I got a question," Takagi said. "What's this got to do with us? Stain operates up by Sendai."

"Native was found dead last night bearing stab wounds identical to those of Stain's victims. The commissioner immediately requested a team to deal with the possibility he's moved to Hosu. On such short notice, you were the best I could get."

"Watch it," Takagi said. He crossed his arms. "A few cuts and everyone's worried about Stain? Seems like a stretch. Who brought the kids? I didn't know you were running a daycare."

"These kids are my interns. Part of our job, I remind you, is nurturing the next generation of heroes. What you see behind me is the greatest threat to hero society in decades. Any villain who kills for profit can be eradicated without consequence. Stain kills for conviction, and he's good enough at it that he's already built a following among the lesser villains. What he's after is nothing less than the total collapse of hero society as we know it. With each kill, his fame grows. He uses murder as a platform the same way a politician uses a pulpit. We must capture him before this virus spreads. His motives are clear. His killings are random. His methods are unknown, as is his Quirk. In order to find him, we must look at his victims…"

What followed was two hours of blood. Nighteye went through each victim, their time and location of death. Although Izuku had known beforehand what the meeting was about, his stomach turned at the corpses, and several times he stepped out, sinking against the wall until the nausea passed. You will be a hero, he told himself. Sights like this will be nothing – these are what you're fighting against. He appreciated Nighteye treating them like adults. Mirio watched the whole thing with his fists clenched at his sides. Even Takagi interjected little. The presentation ended with Native found dead at a back-end alley on the east side of Hosu ward. Like all of Stain's victims, he bore a gaping slash wound across the throat.

"Get your teams on this, as well as any other heroes you can recruit. This is your top priority. Work with the police in each of your districts to keep an eye out for Stain. It's highly likely he's disguised himself in civilian clothing. We meet again in two days."

"Pain in the ass," Takagi grumbled as he headed out. Ingenium bid them a grim farewell.

"How are you doing, Izuku?" Centipeder said. "I admire your courage in staying for the whole presentation. Sir Nighteye was adamant you see this."

"There will be no coddling in my office," Nighteye said.

"I'm doing alright. I missed a couple, but I noticed there was something weird about some of the victims."

"What?"

"Just some of them," Izuku said, taken back by Nighteye's eagerness. "The fifth and eighth, I think, and the twelve, and thirteenth? I think it was thirteen. Those I'm sure on, and half of the others I think might also fit the pattern. I've been interested in heroes since I was a kid. Not just the ones at the top of the billboard – " hurriedly, as Nighteye growled impatiently, Izuku continued " – what I'm trying to say is that I recognize some of the victims, and they had one thing in common…"
Ken Takagi got into the hero business for fame, money, and girls. After he got married, it became fame and money. Talent always sought the best avenue to express itself, and he was moderately talented. He never topped the Billboard charts, but he owned a nice apartment on the rich side of Hosu, and people recognized him on the street. In interviews, he was fond of saying that most heroes got into the business for less-than-altruistic reasons. They were just too scared to say it. The myth of heredom had perpetuated so far into the minds of the public that any selfish thought sent your ratings into freefall. But what's a hero if not also human? And so the business side of the hero business was conducted in whispers.

He stalked the alleys of Hosu's slum districts, guided only by the sulfurous light of the moon. The night was bitterly cold. Two hours ago, he had put his son to sleep – and his wife, who had dozed off with the baby still burbling on her lap. After his marriage and especially after the birth of his son, he was finally beginning to understand why some heroes did the things they did. Sometimes, creating a better place for yourself paled in comparison to creating a better world for those you loved.

(But he would rather suffer a thousand of Stain's cuts than admit that).

From the shadows, a figure shifted.

"Late hour for law-abiding citizens," Takagi said.

"Those who serve profit have no right to call themselves heroes."

On the rooftop above them, Izuku whispered into his earpiece, "Target sighted. Second alley behind sixth street."

They seemed to be talking. Izuku was too far up to hear, but there was no mistaking Stain's armory of swords and daggers strung across every inch of him. Strange weapons for a strange villain. His flat, angular face caught flashes of moonlight when he moved. He had Takagi backed into a dead-end alley that reeked of sewer garbage. In the apartment over, a couple was arguing. Takagi remained casual, as if he had no idea who stood in front of him. Then he dropped to his feet as Stain sprang forward.

For a while, they seemed even. Takagi's Quirk was not especially suited for close-quarters combat, but he was athletic and had formidable experience. Most importantly, he was not fighting to win. Stain's Quirk was similarly not powerful – they knew this because his victims' murder scenes bore little environmental damage, and his victims either bore signs of no resistance (when he caught them by surprise) or prolonged struggle (when he didn't). Stain didn't even seem to be using his Quirk at all. Izuku followed their shadows dancing across the walls. It was hard to see how Stain could've killed so many heroes.

Takagi fell forward. He lay motionless as if dead. Izuku stifled a cry. Casually, Stain walked up to the corpse. Drawing a knife, he bent over the body.

He's not dead, Izuku realized. Stain had no reason to stay if he was dead.

The flashbang lit up the night like a firework. With an animalistic howl, Stain stumbled back. Blindly, his swords snaked out. Izuku jumped down the fire escape. Takagi was as stiff as his own Quirk, but he was alive, eyes rolling frantically like a hunted rabbit's in his stiff, mask-like face.
Izuku could see no injuries except a shallow cut down his chest. Roughly, he hoisted Takagi over his shoulder, stopped. Stain was separating them from the alley exit. The flashbang was already wearing off. Carrying Takagi, Izuku would never make it out. Gently, he laid Takagi's body against the wall.

"It's…blood," Takagi gasped as if forcing each word through a straw.

"Who the hell are you?" Stain said.

Izuku threw. One hand covering his eyes, Stain batted the grenade against the building, where it left a crater in the brickwork. In a smooth practiced motion, he drew a throwing knife from his boot. In the time it took Izuku to dodge the knife, Stain had covered the distance between them. His sword came from the right. Izuku blocked it with a metal-reinforced fist, narrowly avoiding the second strike that came from his left. Stain kicked upwards, moonlight glinting off the blade hidden in his shoe, and, as Izuku jumped back, Stain threw another knife that scratched Izuku along the arm.

Izuku wanted to run but he couldn't leave Takagi. Instinct had made him throw that first flashbang, had made him jump down. It was a stupid, arrogant move – how the hell could a student, one without a Quirk at that, take down a villain who'd killed forty heroes? His body had moved before he could think. Further and further he backed into the alley, doing all he could just to stay alive, somehow managing to take only superficial wounds. The gulf in experience between them stretched as endlessly as the night sky. An hour a week with Aizawa couldn't compare to someone who lived it every single second of his life. Each movement Stain made disguised another; fighting him was like trying to solve a puzzle that constantly changed its rules. It was not a duel but a game. The sight of blood seemed to awaken him. Laughing wildly, Stain rushed forward, tongue leaking out of his mouth like an engorged parasite. Izuku flung the binding cloth. Stain jumped over it, but Izuku had expected that. The grenade should've caught Stain in the chest. Instead he sliced through it. The two halves fell uselessly to the ground. His right sword drove towards Izuku's neck. Izuku ducked beneath it and even predicted the second blade aimed at his abdomen. What he did not predict was Stain himself, arching his head forward impossibly, tongue darting out to lick the wound along Izuku's arm.

Izuku slumped to his knees.

"Two for one. Not bad for one night." Stain tilted Izuku's chin upwards. His face was covered in scars, and where his nose should be was a gaping hole. "Who are you? A student? Jumping in to save this worthless excuse for a hero was commendable. For one so young, you put up a surprising amount of resistance."

"It was a trap, you dumbass," Takagi called. "Multiple pros are on their way here as we speak. You're done for. Get out while you still can."

"Don't mistake others' power for your own. I beat you. A thousand defeats by another's hand would never change that. You are weak. Your entire kind – people who become heroes purely for self-gain – is weak."

Desperately, Izuku tried to reach his grenade belt with frozen fingers. Stupid, stupid. It's blood. He had initially thought it was Stain's blood that contained a poison, perhaps coated on his swords. He had never thought Takagi meant ingesting it. That was why Stain had aimed for shallow cuts instead of killing blows. At least it was short-lasting – already Takagi could speak better. But Izuku had a sinking feeling the paralysis would last long enough for Stain to finish them both.

"A hero cannot become a hero without struggle," Stain breathed into Izuku's face. He stank like the leftover grease from a burned-out engine. "Self-sacrifice is the only way. Those who do not cast away the world have no right to call themselves heroes. You know sacrifice well, boy. I see it in
your eyes. You are worth keeping alive." Throwing Izuku aside, he stalked towards Takagi. "This one, however…"

The crack of a sonic boom. For a second Izuku thought it was thunder. Ingenium crashed against Stain, sending him flying against the wall.

"Are you alright?"

"My apologies for being late," Nighteye said. A bristle of stamps fanned from his fingers. Behind him, a row of police cars surrounded the alleyway.

"Don't…he…lick blood," Izuku managed.

"You did well," Ingenium said grimly. "We'll finish it from here."

"More shams," Stain growled. His tone was vicious but he tottered on his feet, still reeling from the impact. He braced his swords defensively in front of him. "I'll slit all your throats."

Watching Ingenium fight was like watching living lightning. He moved so fast he seemed to teleport, the force of his engines leaving miniature craters in the concrete. Smoke from his exhaust pipes filled the alleyway. Nighteye was more reserved. He stayed back, tossing out stamps at every break in Ingenium's movements. The stamps – eleven pounds each – collided against Stain with sickening cracks. To Stain's credit, he never ran. He howled against the moon, swinging his swords in frenzy, and the sight of that cornered madman would stay with Izuku always. The fight did not last long. Nighteye's stamp struck Stain on the shoulder. He lurched back. Ingenium's first kick broke two swords and caught him in the solar plexus. He doubled over. Ingenium's second kick came directly down on Stain's head, driving it into the ground. He did not get back up.

As Nighteye helped Izuku stand, Izuku marveled that Stain, armed with no equipment beyond some swords, had managed to take down so many heroes. Investigators had thought it was a particularly well-suited anti-personnel Quirk, but it wasn't. In that respect, Izuku understood Stain well. To want to do something so desperately even though an unfair world did all it could to stop you. Conviction – that was what Nighteye had called it. Stain had called it self-sacrifice.

"What the hell were you doing?" Nighteye said.

"Takagi was in trouble. Stain was going to kill him."

"Your job was to follow Takagi and relay his location should Stain appear. You were under strict orders not to engage." Nighteye rubbed his temples. "UA's going to give me hell for letting a student fight. With Stain of all villains."

"It wasn't his fault," Takagi said. "He did what any hero should've done, and what a great many wouldn't have. He saved my life."

"We'll talk more about this later. For now, we'll get you both to the hospital – "

Laughter coursed through the air. Izuku whirled around. Stain was standing. One hand held a knife. The other hand gripped Ingenium by the chin, exposing the pale hollow of his throat. Ingenium made grunting noises but otherwise was limp. At his feet lay the handcuffs he had tried to bind Stain with.

Along Ingenium's left hand, through a tiny crack in his armor, ran a fine line of blood.

The police drew their guns. "Stop!" Nighteye commanded them. Stain held his sword against Ingenium's throat.
"Put him down," Nighteye said. "We can work this out."

"The world has too many heroes. Those born with power are the least deserving to wield it. Left to its own devices, society will perpetuate its own cycle of hedonism. The targets of my purge number greater than the stars. How can you kill greed? Selfishness? Pride? I was like you once, content to wallow in filth because I knew I could not change it. But that made me no better than the rest. Society will not change unless you force it. You cannot create a better world unless you also throw yourself into the fire."

"You kill him, you're never going to see sunlight again. Put him down – No!"

The knife ran red. Ingenium collapsed.

"Just try me, you fakes! None shall kill me except a true hero!"

Stain stepped forward – and stopped. His scarf caught the wind. Motionless, mouth open, he stared straight ahead, fingers still grasping the knife dripping blood into the ground as sirens blared against the silence of the night.
Chapter Fourteen: Internship's End

"It was my fault," Izuku said. "It was my plan that got Ingenium killed."

"First of all, it was not your plan," Nighteye said. "You were the one who realized that Stain went after heroes who were, let's say, self-motivated. But it was my plan that captured him. It was my plan that got Ingenium killed. You couldn't have known that out of the eight potential targets we had followed, Stain chose Takagi." He pushed his chair back, sagging into it. Lifting his glasses, he rubbed his eyes. "Perfect knowledge? What a joke. One wrong target after the other. We should've waited until I got it correct, until there was zero possibility for error. But we were all desperate to capture Stain. Each day we delayed could've meant another hero dead. Ingenium knew what he signed up for. All heroes know. If nothing else, I hope you learn this."

"It was my fault."

Sighing, Nighteye waved him out of the office.

"There are some things you can't do, especially as a student. If you need a recommendation, let me know."

The end of internships brought Class 1-A back under the same roof for the first time in a week. Everyone greeted each other as if they had parted for years. The cheeriness of the atmosphere rattled Izuku, as if he were watching it on a screen. Eagerly, Ochako told Izuku about her experiences training with Gunhead. Mineta's field training with Mt. Lady seemed to have left him traumatized. Mina complained that all she did was evacuation and logistic support. With his hair slicked back, Bakugou looked the most changed, though not even Best Jeanist, it seemed, had been able to make any dent in his personality.

"So? How'd you capture Stain?" Kirishima said.

Conversation ceased. The class turned to him. Izuku had known the question was coming, but he hadn't expected this restless, almost primal zeal. Despite his best efforts to downplay his role, the newspapers had gotten wind that a UA student had been involved. Rumors must've floated around for days. Bakugou visibly glowered, no doubt upset at having been "upstaged." Kaminari and Kirishima planted themselves at his desk, eagerly leaning forward. Ochako and Tsu fixed him with worried glances. Iida had not shown up to class.

"I didn't do anything. It was all Nighteye and Ingenium."

"Come on, we knew you were there," Kaminari said. "Lockpick said that you rescued him!"

"Lockhead. I was the one who needed rescuing."

"I don't think this is the best time to talk about it," Tsu said.

Izu could've hugged her. An awkward silence fell. The media had portrayed Stain's capture as an act of virtue. Ingenium's sacrifice especially had been highlighted as the pinnacle of heroism. "He gave his life to avenge forty victims," the newspapers said. Ingenium's supporters held a full night of vigil. His death was the greatest death a hero could ask for – a blaze of glory that ensured his name would live on for decades.
Did anyone understand what went through Ingenium's head as he felt his body freeze, as he felt Stain's knife prick his throat? As he knew he was about to die? Even his expression had been obscured behind his helmet. And Stain, body so worn out he could barely stand, in his last act as a free man, had committed a nonsensical murder that guaranteed nothing but a harsher prison sentence. Afterwards, against two heroes and a hero-in-training and a dozen police, he had been prepared to stand against them all. What drove him?

Izuku understood, and that was the most horrifying thing of all.

Iida came to school two days later.

"Your perfect attendance record's gone," Izuku called, closing the rooftop door behind him. In class, with everyone watching, it had been difficult to speak with him. Iida's entrance had run a current through the class, and nobody knew quite what to say. A vague sense of guilt hung over them. Iida, usually enthusiastic class president, hadn't said a word. Several times when someone called his name he had stared back, dazed, as if he had forgotten what that was. Izuku got the feeling Iida had woken up as routine, brushed his teeth as routine, put on his shoes, packed his books, arrived to school as routine, finally become the robot his suit imitated.

Lunchtime provided more privacy. The rooftop was not entirely deserted, but the day was cold, and only a few other students ate their lunch on the far side. Iida leaned against the railing, staring at the city below.

It was my fault, Izuku wanted to say, but it would be the height of arrogance to draw attention to himself now. The shame would be his alone. It was the nature of heroes to blame themselves, he reflected. Nighteye blamed himself for not foreseeing the possibility. Mirio blamed himself for not arriving quicker. Takagi blamed himself for needing help at all.

"Doing your class president duties's going to be hard if you don't say anything."

The rustle of wind.

"See anything cool on your internship? You told me you rescued some people from a fire."

The murmur of students below.

"Media's really playing up the Stain capture, isn't it? Your brother was a true hero."

Silence.

"I saw Stain slit his throat and it wasn't nearly as heroic as the media would lead you to believe."

"What the hell do you know?" Iida snarled. His voice cracked and his uniform, normally immaculate, showed signs of having been slept in. Bizarrely, Izuku found himself wondering if villains had friends, family, lovers, people who mourned their deaths as easily as Iida mourned his brother.

"What did they tell you?" Izuku said.

"They told me he died heroically. They told me he sacrificed himself to capture Stain."

"He died because of a stupid mistake. Stain was already defeated. I don't know if Stain planned it or if the opportunity fell into his lap. Stain got him as he was getting handcuffed."
Iida laughed, a wild, free laughter that mixed with the wind and started again just when it seemed to stop. The sound of it sent shivers through Izuku. Breathless, Iida rested his hands on his legs.

"All my life I looked up to him. He was the hero I always wanted to be. And you tell me – he died for no reason? He died because of a stupid mistake?"

The lie or the truth? To die heroically or senselessly? For the public, the former was preferable. Society was built on the foundations of heroism. Nothing could be allowed to mar the image of heroes. Perhaps Izuku had made a mistake in telling Iida what really happened. No doubt the authorities were trying to be kind when they told him. But some, Izuku thought, deserved the truth.

If this were a movie, this would be the point where Izuku found the perfect thing to say to drag Iida out of his despair. But real life was not so convenient. He had known Ingenium for a week. Iida had known him for fifteen years. The most Izuku had ever lost was a pet goldfish in fourth grade. Tearfully, with the aid of his mother, he had buried it in his backyard. He didn't even remember the goldfish's name. Izuku wanted to turn around and go back down the stairs and rejoin the rest of Class 1-A excitedly discussing their upcoming final exams. Why had he even come here? He was as much help as Bakugou at a meditation seminar. But when the lunch bell rang he had followed Iida to the rooftop as if it had been the most natural thing in the world, and the rest of the class, watching solemnly, had nodded.

"He's dead," Izuku said, and really, it hadn't sounded so idiotically obvious in his head.

Iida seemed to understand what he was trying to say. For a long time he stared at Izuku, or more likely a point far beyond, his eyes glassy and unfocused, before turning his gaze back to the school grounds. Did it matter how he died? Did it matter how anyone died? After all, the dead didn't care. They had no more worries, no more fears. Those selfish jerks, leaving the rest of the world to cope.

A cold wind blew. Izuku shivered, drawing his uniform closer. For the rest of lunch they waited in silence on that rooftop, and when the lunch bell rang again Izuku followed Iida back down.
Pairing Izuku with Momo didn't make sense. The teams had been chosen based on grades, relationships, and combat ability, or so the teachers claimed, but Izuku couldn't fathom why he had been paired up with her. They were not particularly close. Their abilities didn't complement each other – they both leaned towards utility over combat. And there was the choice of foe: Aizawa. Why him? Erasure was the perfect skill to force students to rely on something other than their Quirk. Kaminari or Kirishima would've benefitted immensely from using something other than brute force for once. Instead Eraserhead would be cancelling the Quirk of a girl known for her intelligence and a boy who didn't have a Quirk at all.

"Izuku? What do you want me to do?"

He couldn't remember if he had ever held a private conversation with Momo. They had spoken a handful of times, but it was always among other classmates and usually about exams. Most of the time Izuku scored highest. One benefit of not having a Quirk was that he had much more time to study. It would've been suspicious if the kid whose Quirk gave him infinite time to prepare did poorly. Kaminari claimed that using his Quirk like that was cheating, though that never stopped him from asking Izuku for help.

Izuku never actively avoided Momo, nor did he ever seek her out. Instinctively, from the moment they had met, he realized they inhabited different worlds.

Why had they been chosen?

"Reconnaissance," Izuku said. "Forget the handcuffs. We're never going to beat Aizawa in a straight fight. Our goal is to get to the exit – nothing else. He's either going to be hunting us or staking out the exit. Keep making small objects. It doesn't matter what, just don't tire yourself out. When you can't make any more, we'll know Aizawa's watching us."

The buzzer sounded. They walked into the arena – a suburban housing development. Rows of identical houses stretched to the horizon, immaculate lawns shining before immaculate brickwork. Each house had the same windows and the same doors and the same fake car parked in the driveway. A perfectly blue and cloudless sky stretched above. The air was ripe with the smell of freshly-cut grass. Without people, without the noise of children, the suburb felt eerily dead.

"Follow me," Izuku said.

Hiding behind the houses, they made their way through the area. The streets were so identical that simply walking through them disoriented Izuku. Behind him sounded pops as Momo continually made Russian nesting dolls. A strange choice. The arena was huge, surrounded on all sides by a wall covered in barbed wire, and it took them ten minutes of careful travel before they saw the gate. In front of it, standing on a lamp post (how had he even gotten up there?) with his back to the sun, was Aizawa.

"What now?" Momo said.

As expected, Aizawa had followed the most rational plan. Finding someone hiding in the vast arena would be difficult, and if the pair split up, it would be easy for one person to delay him while the other headed to the exit. Aizawa had chosen a location that gave him a complete bird's-eye view of
the most important area. Momo had stopped making her dolls. So he saw them already. He gave no indication. After all, why go to your prey when your prey will come to you?

Their goal was the gate. All they had to do was get past its defender.

An arena surrounded on four sides…

If it worked once, why not again?

"Momo, how quickly can you climb the wall?"

"It'll be easy to make a ladder, and I can cut the barbed wires. But why climb them when the gate's right there? Plus, I'm definitely going to be caught."

"He won't see you. I'll make sure of that. This is what we'll do…"

Grenades in hand, Izuku approached.

"About time," Aizawa said.

He made no movement. Even when Izuku threw a grenade, forcing him off the street lamp, he never ventured forward, remaining within a fifty-foot perimeter of the gate. Izuku had never expected a baiting tactic to work anyway.

Throwing a flashbang, Izuku raced for the exit. The grenade didn't even slow down Aizawa, who shielded his eyes while launching his binding cloth forward. Hours of punishment had made Izuku familiar with its flight. He wove around it, deftly avoiding its snake-like movements. Blocking was the mistake people often made. The moment the cloth touched you, it would never let go. He threw out his own binding cloth, not expecting it to get Aizawa, and it didn't. But it had distracted him long enough for Izuku to throw another grenade, catching Aizawa just at the end of its blast range. He stumbled. Izuku's fist flew out.

He found himself upside-down in the air, dangling by his feet.

"You're twenty years too early to be taking me on alone."

Digging into his belt, Izuku threw a battery of grenades. Aizawa jumped back, simultaneously swinging Izuku through the air and slamming him into the wall. Pain exploded in the back of his head. Before Izuku could even stand, more binding cloth had wrapped around him, encasing him like a cocoon. The gate was just a few feet away. Like a caterpillar, he crawled towards it.

Aizawa looked at him languidly.

"Now for Momo."

*There's no way he knows.* It was impossible, it would require prediction beyond comprehension, it would require genius on an unheard-of level. Izuku watched with dread. Casually, using the binding cloth as leverage, Aizawa jumped onto the wall, landing with his feet between the barbed wire. He peered at the other side. A yelp. The cloth reached down and came up with a writhing Momo.

"Not bad," Aizawa said as he dumped her next to Izuku. She looked at him helplessly. "Distracting me while Momo makes her way to the exit from the other side of the wall. Once she reaches the gate, all she'd have to do is hop in and out. Certainly nobody would think to look behind the wall. Come on now, you already pulled that trick at the entrance exam. You'll make sure that I won't see
He threw them, the binding cloth unravelling as they flew through the air and landed in some bushes.

Izuku helped Momo up.

"It was my fault," Momo said. "I couldn't make it in time. I'm sorry."

Gingerly, Izuku brushed the leaves from his costume. Aizawa had returned to his perch, facing them like a gargoyle. They were back to square one. Worse, they only had ten minutes left.

"How did he know?" Izuku thought aloud. Aizawa's attention had been fixed on Izuku the entire battle. The fact Momo had been able to use her Quirk to climb the wall was proof that he hadn't seen her do it. And once she made it over, she was entirely out of his line of sight. He never even looked behind him. Yet Aizawa acted as if he had known about her, about the plan, all along…

You'll make sure I won't see her?

They were being watched.

That line had almost been an exact quote of what Izuku told Momo. The only way Aizawa would've known Izuku's words was if he had been monitoring them. Wildly, Izuku looked around – the flowers, the trees, the houses. Cameras must be everywhere. Being watched was nothing new. Their exercises were always recorded for grading purposes and so the students could review them later. Many times Izuku had rewatched his battle with Bakugou during the battle trials, figuring out his own mistakes, ways to improve. But this was the first time someone had used that recording to their advantage during a test. Aizawa was watching them directly, or maybe just listening in via mic; in any case, he was probably smirking at their confusion. He knew their every move.

It had been an excellent plan and well-executed. But Aizawa clearly hadn't cared. He seemed set on failing them. It would be entirely in-character. Yet he had also given them a second chance – another contradiction. In the time they had, it would be almost impossible to improve on their first attempt. Plus, since Aizawa knew everything they did, making a plan itself was futile. Beating Aizawa legitimately was already hard enough. How were they supposed to beat him when he knew how they planned to do it? Perhaps this was a test of their combat ability – were they supposed to charge him head-on and hope for the best? They stood no chance, and to the marrow of his bones Izuku believed that no school would ever encourage a hero to charge recklessly without a plan. But what was the purpose, then, behind this smoke-and-mirrors trick? What was the point of giving an impossible test?

"Izuku? What should we do now?"

Momo glanced at him, worried.

They weren't testing him, he realized. They were testing her.

He gripped her shoulders. "Come up with something. Quick. We don't have much time."

"Me?" Momo said, taken back. "What can I do?"

For someone who arrived at UA on a special recommendation, especially compared to Todoroki, Momo's performance had been less than expected. Nobody talked openly about it. They didn't need to. Momo was hard enough on herself. Since the semester started, she had become progressively quieter. Especially after her quick loss to Tokoyami in the sports festival, she became withdrawn, rarely looking others in the eye, second-guessing herself on questions. Her internship, too, had been nothing more than a glamorized photo shoot. Shockingly, her practical scores had fallen into the
bottom half of the class. She tried to hide it, but her smiles were always tinged with strain. Everyone's kindness probably made it even more difficult. Often she stayed late in the training gyms, and several times Izuku saw her asleep on a pile of books in the library. Given her status and her lack of progress, it was unsurprising Aizawa would go to such lengths to test her.

And who cared about a Quirkless boy? Just throw him in with her. It doesn't matter what he does. In fact, the less he interfered with the princess, the better.

"It has to be you," Izuku said, unable to keep the bitterness out of the voice. Momo flinched. Izuku softened his tone. She was the one suffering, not him. "I mean, my plan failed. It's up to you."

"If you couldn't do it, there's no way I could."

"Let's hear it, at least."

"There's no point."

The irony of it almost made him laugh, made him cry. Momo! Looking up to him! A girl with one of the most versatile Quirks in history comparing herself to a boy without a Quirk! The insanity of it made him dizzy, made him scared. She was further along than he had thought, trapped so long in the well she would eventually forget the world beyond existed. He pressed her further but she shook her head. She was terrified. He marveled that the weight of expectations could be so crushing. Nobody had ever expected anything of him. In a way, that made it easier to succeed. If he failed, he failed in isolation. What happened when Momo failed? Her friends, her teachers, her parents, her family – it was a vicious cycle. Failure prophesized failure.

Izuku sat down, resting his palms in the dirt.

"I was bullied in middle school, you know. My Quirk didn't develop until after graduation. They say eighty percent of the world is Quirkless, but that's almost entirely made up of the older generation. In our generation, that percentage is less than one. Do you know what it's like, to not have something everyone else does? I wanted to be a hero. Everyone laughed at me."

Momo was surprise at his sudden confession. "Bakugou said that a lot, but we thought he was just mad you kept beating him."

"It's true. Nobody ever expected anything of me, not even my mom. But one person did." He closed his eyes and traveled back to that time on the busy road. "My friend had been captured by a villain. I tried to save him. No plan in mind, just ran forward like an idiot, as if I could do anything against a villain even pros had trouble with. Predictably, I almost died. All Might saved me. The police berated me for rushing into danger like that. But All Might – he commended me. He said that the best heroes were the ones who gave it their all. It's not what you get out of it – it's what you put in. His words were what finally convinced me to try for UA, everybody else be damned. He said that courage, more than anything else, more than even a Quirk, was the defining trait of heroes."

He clasped Momo's hands. Her skin was soft and supple, and the sunlight turned gold the fan-like spikes of her ponytail.

"Let's hear your plan."

Perhaps one day he could tell the whole story. The warmth of the memory grew with every reminiscence. He couldn't tell her about All Might's wound, about how his Quirk never existed, about how it had been Bakugou he had tried to save, because, at one point, they had been friends. Momo turned red. Quickly, he let go of her hands.
Softly, she said, "It's not much, but I was just thinking…"

It was a fine plan. A tad overcomplicated, but workable with only a few minor adjustments. With two minutes remaining, they headed once more towards the exit.

They wore black cloaks. Erasure required line of sight. Unfortunately, the hoods also hindered their own field of vision, but that didn't matter. They had barely stepped out of their hiding place before Aizawa was upon them. His binding cloth flew out, squeezing around the cloaks that they immediately tore off to reveal the mannequin on the top half. Shielding his eyes, Izuku threw a grenade. Aizawa turned his head away from the flashbang, but it had been an explosive all along. The impact knocked him down. He was up again immediately – right into the line of fire of Momo's catapult. The ball of binding cloth launched forward, its free end gripped in Izuku's hand. He pulled. The ball came undone, floating in the air around Aizawa like a loose tangle of yarn, then snapped inward, binding him tight. Izuku pulled it a bit tighter, just to be safe. After being on the receiving end of so many similar positions, it was justice to see Aizawa entrapped in his own silk.

"Not bad at all," he said as Momo clamped the handcuffs around him. "With your Quirk canceled, I underestimated you. I suppose Erasure has no effect on items you've already created. Using the binding cloth was a nice touch."

"Your plan was perfect," Izuku said.

"No, I almost missed the shot," Momo said, "and you ended up doing most of the work anyway."

But for all her protests, she seemed on the verge of tears. "It's all thanks to you," she repeated. Izuku shook his head.

It had been a fine performance – from Aizawa. To tiptoe the line between just losing and purposely losing required immense adroitness. Of course, a certain level of handicap was expected from a teacher vs. student exam, but you could only give so much. The worst outcome was for the student to pick up on the fact you were losing on purpose.

Aizawa looked suitably chagrined. This entire underhanded test reeked of his style. He was, in his own way, looking out for his students. Student.

As Momo headed back to the field station, Izuku helped Aizawa out of the binding cloth.

"She just needs more confidence," Aizawa said. "Hopefully, this'll lead her back onto the right track."

"I guess I'm the perfect partner for her. I don't matter at all."

Aizawa burst into laughter.

"Is that what you were worried about? Izuku, I didn't pair you up with her because I thought you didn't matter. I paired you up with her because we didn't need to test you. You're the only student in the class we don't need to worry about passing. Honestly, you're such a perfect student it gives me a headache. I was always a delinquent, you know. Grades and schoolwork don't matter in the real world. Anyway, you made the perfect partner for Momo because we could focus on her without worrying about her partner falling behind. She was the one who needed help. You didn't."

"Do you – do you mean that?"

"Don't get too full of yourself," Aizawa said, smacking him on the head. "You're too confident in your own plans. You needed to be taken down a notch, which is why I monitored your conversation,
though you probably already figured that out. Being a leader isn't about taking all the responsibility onto yourself. It's about trusting others. Nobody is a hero alone."

Light-headed, Izuku followed him. As the field tent came into view and Momo waved at them, as Iida and Ochako called out congratulations, as Bakugou scowled (with a hint of relief), as Tsu smiled widely, as Tokoyami gave a barely-perceptible nod, Izuku thought: how could I have underestimated them? One day he would place his life in their hands. He had never even given Momo a chance. Their eyes met, and she turned away shyly. Laughing, Izuku waved back.

A/N: Momo is my favorite character. I had to write her in somehow. Final arc up next.
Forest Training

Chapter Sixteen: Forest Training

As the sun sank below the mountains, Class 1-A finally trudged out of the forest.

Dirty, exhausted, they stepped into the camp. The journey had taken almost eight hours, hounded every minute by Pixie-bob's endless army of earth beasts. At Izuku's suggestion, they had taken a wedge-shaped formation with their strongest at the front – Todoroki, Tokoyami, and Iida – rotating as needed to conserve stamina. The rest of the class defended against attacks from the side and back, while those without Quirks suited for forest battles remained shielded in the center. (This was met with mixed reactions. Jiro complained she had nothing to do. Kaminari assured everyone he was super strong against everything not earth-based. Mineta was only too glad to let others do the work.) Bakugou had ignored the plan altogether and raced forward ahead of the group, dragging Kirishima with him, but Izuku had taken this into account. A trailblazer made their journey easier.

Unexpectedly, Aoyama had proved to be a dominant force. Without fear of property damage or civilian injury, his laser destroyed entire swathes of the forest at once. Even more unexpectedly, Koda also proved useful. An army of earth beasts, Izuku learned, was no match for an army of bears.

"Wow, you guys got here quick!" Pixie-bob said. "Of course, you missed lunch, but you made it just in time for dinner."

"Three hours, my ass," Sero groaned.

"That's how quickly we would've done it. That formation was a good idea – Midoriya, was it? – and Todoroki, you took down the most. Aoyama and Bakugou did excellently as well, though you could've – well, we'll save that for tomorrow. Now, it's time to eat!"

Cheering, his classmates headed to the mess hall. A day of hard work magnified the deliciousness of Lunch Rush's food (by far the most underappreciated staff at UA), but frustration prevented Izuku from fully enjoying it. As his classmates congratulated each other, Jiro and Kaminari and Hagakure ate quietly. Not all your Quirks will be suited for every environment, he had told them in the forest. But their feelings of uselessness persisted. He himself was used to it. Your Quirks do not define you, he wanted to say, but to a generation raised on the principle that their Quirks did define them, his words would've made as little sense as insisting their eyes were grapes. Hopefully, the rest of the training camp would provide a more diverse test of their skills.

After dinner, they lounged in the open-air bath, which passed uneventfully save Mineta's failed attempt to peek on the girls. It was only nine when they came out, and several people had commented earlier that they wanted to get a campfire going, but everybody, exhausted, headed to the cabins. And it was only the first day. Aizawa and the Pussycats would run them even more ragged in the coming week. Their education was being accelerated due to the rise of villains, the teachers had told them. The world needed heroes more than ever.

With a strange feeling of foreboding, Izuku fell into troubled sleep.

"Ragdoll's Quirk allows her to know everything about someone from a single glance, including Quirks and weaknesses," Aizawa said. "She's perfect to help the class train."

"She's going to know about me?" Izuku panicked. "I can't go."
"Not an option. You can't run away your entire life, Izuku. If you ever make it as a pro hero, you'll eventually come face-to-face with Ragdoll. Better she learn about it now, under our terms, than later. Don't worry, she'll understand your situation. There's no chance of your Quirk leaking. Plus, she's not the only one who can see through you. There's one or two other pros that I can think of, and who knows how many non-pros. This path you started on is a dangerous road. A single glance is all it would take to destroy your career. Still want to be a hero?"

The ball drilled into Izuku's abdomen, leaving a grapefruit-sized swelling. With a moan, he rubbed the tender wound.

*You're getting faster,* Mandalay said over telepathy. *Again!*

For the eighth time, Izuku faced his nemesis: a pitching machine hopped up on a fifty-current wire and a laser-guided targeting system. Insofar as Quirk training for a boy without a Quirk, Aizawa had come up with an ingenious method. The pitching machine lobbed hypersonic balls at him, forcing him to continuously activate his time dilation to avoid it. With repeated use, he could slow down time more and for longer periods. That was the explanation, anyway. In truth, he was just training his reflexes. "All the technique in the world won't matter if your body can't catch up," Aizawa had said. Of course, Izuku would've preferred combat training, but it would've looked suspicious if he was the only one who didn't work on his Quirk. Reflex training was a workable compromise. But couldn't they use lighter balls?

*No pain, no gain, Izuku!*

The machine beeped. He ducked just in time, but not quite low enough. The ball clipped his forehead.

*Almost there! Keep going!*

Shakily, he stood back up. At least he wasn't suffering alone. Around him was a scene from hell. Todoroki sat in a burning tub. Mineta's head bled as he continuously tugged off balls. Kaminari was hooked up to an electric generator. Ojiro socked Kirishima repeatedly across the head. Training, or cruel and unusual punishment? The machine beeped. Grimly, Izuku faced it once more.

Quirk training lasted late into the afternoon. They stopped at four to, of all things, cook. The class gave a collective groan. "The pampering ended yesterday. If you wanna eat, you need to cook for yourselves," Pixie-bob proclaimed. Iida hit upon the reason: In times of disaster, providing food was part of rescue operations. It was also, Izuku thought, a team-building exercise. As the most experienced chefs, Ochako and Sato took the lead. Making enough curry for twenty-six people, including heavy eaters such as Momo, took them late into the evening.

Amidst the glow of the campfire and the aroma of spices, they ate under the stars. And it was delicious.

Afterwards, they gathered for the test of courage.

"Class B is on the offensive first," Pixie-bob said. "Class A will head into the forest in pairs. At the halfway point, you'll find your name cards. Grab it and come back! Direct contact or injury by the scarers is strictly prohibited! Besides that, anything goes. Use your imaginations, everyone!"

"Don't piss your pants too badly," Monoma smirked.

Aizawa dragged away the remedicators for extra lessons, and the remaining members of Class 1-A drew lots to decide pairs. Izuku was paired with Ochako.
"I don't do very well with scary stuff," Ochako said.

"Neither do I," Izuku admitted. "But that's part of the fun, right?"

She smiled. As the fifth team, they went in at the fifteen-minute mark. The forest was dark and alive. Something constantly rustled, croaked, chirped, squeaked, howled. The trees took on menacing shapes, so dense the starless sky barely peeked between the leaves, and Izuku remembered how just yesterday they had fought here against earth beasts. It was easy to imagine beasts lurking in the shadows as the path snaked between the trees. You would die before you even saw what killed you. The night was warm but Ochako shivered, sticking so close to Izuku her arm rubbed against his.

"Remember, they can't hurt you," he said. "This is the earliest point where you're out of sight of the cabins. Class B should be making their first move any minute now."

But the minutes passed without incident. Even when they almost made it to the halfway point, Class B didn't show themselves. Ochako clung to Izuku's arm like it was a lifeline, jumping at every stray noise. His own nerves were in tatters. It was a brilliant scare tactic, he thought. The horrors of imagination dwarfed the horrors of reality. Nothing you came up with could ever surpass what the victim came up with. Doing nothing, letting the victims stew in their own fear, was an ingenious method. He wondered who came up with it. It was a tad subtle for Monoma. The longer it went on, the more terrified the victim became, until Class 1-B would finally make their move, at the last minute, when your defenses were at its weakest, right before the end when you thought maybe, just maybe, nothing would happen.

A strong wind blew, bringing the smell of smoke and something sharp, something foul. A fog rolled in.

Things had gone horribly, horribly wrong.

Within seconds the smoke became overpowering. Izuku doubled over, coughing. Heat fanned from the north. A distant glowing beacon, the far side of the forest had caught fire. His lungs burned, but it was not the smoke that scared him. The fog was unnatural. Such dense fog, so dense you couldn't see anything within, did not spring up out of nowhere in a climate with little rain. It hugged the ground in tendrils that creeped forward like grasping fingers. He could taste it like peppermints in the back of his throat. Each breath made him dizzy, made him want to sleep.

"We need to get back to camp!" he shouted to Ochako. "Hold your shirt over your nose! Don't breathe in!"

Supporting each other, they staggered back the way they came.

They met a girl in the moonlight.

She was petite, with gold-brown eyes that curved catlike in the dark. On her back she wore a strange contraption: a chrome monstrosity of tanks and tubes connected to a syringe she held in her left hand. The bottom half of her face was covered by a ventilator. Around her neck hung a scarf with fangs. Most bizarrely, underneath everything, she wore what looked to be a normal school uniform. If they weren't surrounded by smoke and fog, Izuku would've thought she was a girl playing at villain dress-up.

"It's you!" she said with surprise, her grin stretching past the edges of her mask. "Izuku Midoriya! I didn't expect to meet you here. This must be fate!"

"Please tell me you know her," Ochako said.
"Who are you?"

"I'm a big fan of yours," the girl continued. "It's about the blood, you know? From the minute I laid eyes on you I could tell you were covered in it. You smell wonderful, like an abattoir. Oh, I'm Himiko Toga! Call me Himiko. Beautiful night for a murder, isn't it?"

"Are you from the League?"

"Oh, I shouldn't. They told me not to. But I can't help myself!"

She came at them, syringe held like a knife. Izuku shoved Ochako away. Himiko thrust her syringe forward, shockingly slow and clumsy, as if she didn't know how to fight. He dodged it easily. Or he should have, at any rate. The fog had dulled him. The syringe sank deep into his arm, and the machine on her back pumped with greedy sucking noises. Himiko's face lit up with delight. The pain woke him. Izuku wrenched his arm away, shoving her hard. She screamed – in pleasure? – and danced back, cackling.

"Oooh, that hurts. You sure know how to treat a girl!"

Ripping his sleeve with his teeth, Izuku bandaged the wound.

"We'll be able to see each other more in the future," Himiko said, holding up the syringe reverently. "It's a pity you're not my target."

She darted towards Ochako. "No!" Izuku shouted, springing forward. To his amazement, Ochako spun on the ball of her foot, moving behind Himiko as the girl sailed by. Grabbing Himiko's arm, Ochako drove her flat into the ground, the weight of her knee planted in the gap between Himiko's shoulder blades.

"Who are you? What do you want with us?"

"Ochako, you're cute, too," the girl sang. "Love is in the air tonight! Look at you, turning all red! You have the same scent I do. One maiden to another – what's your type?"

The girl was crazy, Izuku realized.

"You don't seem to understand your situation." Ochako drove her knee deeper. "Who are you?"

"You're so boring. It's not fair if I have all the fun."

Ochako cried out. Himiko stuck the syringe into her thigh. Reflexively, Ochako jumped back. The needle snapped, still stuck in her leg, jagged end oozing blood.

"You broke my toy," Himiko complained.

"Are you okay? Get behind me," Izuku said. He took a low stance, knees bent, fists tight towards his core. Blood leaking between her fingers, Ochako tried to compress the wound. This was not a good fight. He was not in costume. No gauntlets, no grenades, no binding cloth. The biggest problem, however, was that they didn't know Himiko's Quirk. So far, she had done nothing with their blood. In the worst-case scenario, if she used blood like Stain did, they had already lost.

Himiko sighed. "I have what I came for. I wish we could have more time together, but we'll see plenty more of each other later. Say, you know where that Bakugou boy is? It'd be a great help."

"What do you want with him?"
"So you don't know? Well, it was worth a shot. I had fun, Izuku. We'll go on another date some time!"

With a wink, she vanished into the darkness.

_Bakugou._ Why were the villains after Bakugou? Why would they plan an attack of this caliber for a student? It had to be the League – nobody else could leak UA's schedule. When Himiko had first said something about a target, Izuku had thought she meant one of the teachers. An isolated training camp would be the perfect opportunity to take down Eraserhead. Yet the cabins, where Aizawa was giving lessons to the remedial students, was silent. The fog and fire came from ahead of them.

"Ochako, can you walk?"

She nodded, wincing.

"You need to go back to camp. I'll look for Bakugou – "

"I'm coming with you."

"No, you need medical attention as soon as possible. Tell the teachers that the villains are after Bakugou. We need to keep him out of their hands at all costs. Stay away from the path. Got it? Away from the path."

She looked like she wanted to argue, but at last she nodded. This may be the last time we see each other, Izuku thought. This may be the last time we see anyone.

He cut through the trees towards the brightness of the fire. The test of courage was shaped like a loop. Bakugou and Todoroki had been the second pair to enter. They would be well ahead of him. His arm stung, but at least the fog had cleared, replaced with the smoke of burning pines. The wood crackled and popped. Himiko had known their names, and, judging by the way she charged forward recklessly, she had also known the relative strength of their Quirks and how useless Izuku was out of costume. The enemy had the advantage of information. Fortunately, they likely lacked numbers. The first villain attack during the rescue simulation had been an overwhelming show of force in broad daylight. This cloak-and-dagger scheme in the middle of the night, coupled with the initial use of fog to thin their numbers, suggested the villains were a small group on a more focused mission.

"I'll kill you, you bastard!"

For once, Izuku was glad to hear Bakugou's obnoxiously loud shouting. He followed the voice to a small clearing a short distance away from the path. The first thing that came into view was Todoroki's ice, a massive sheet that rose high over the trees. The second thing Izuku saw, bizarrely, was a man who seemed to be floating in the sky, silhouetted against the moon.

"Are you alright?"

Bakugou clutched a gash along his arm. Blood caked his leg. Todoroki was in better shape, but a swollen cut throbbed along his forehead. Both breathed heavily, clothes matted with sweat and dirt. They took cover behind Todoroki's ice wall, which trembled from the force of whatever was attacking from the other side, crunching as great chunks sloughed off. All around the grass had been dug into, as if enormous claws had raked through the dirt. Several trees had been splintered in half. Laughter echoed in the air.

"What the hell are you doing here, twerp?"

"They're after you," Izuku said. "You're the target of this attack."
Todoroki stared back with disbelief. Bakugou narrowed his eyes.

"This better not be a joke."

"I heard it from another villain. We need to get you to safety."

"What the hell do they want with me?"

"So you were attacked, too," Todoroki said. "I feared the worst. That fog got most of Class 1-B – we stumbled over the bodies. They're alive, so it doesn't seem the villains' main goal is to kill us. The fog almost got us, too, but we're trapped. This guy's blocking the way back to camp – "

He cried out as what looked to be a box-cutter penetrated the ice, piercing his blade retracted, and immediately Todoroki froze the hole just as another assault came. Gritting his teeth, he chilled the wound.

"I can't hold out much longer."

Cautiously, Izuku peered over the edge. The villain was not floating – blades erupted from his mouth, drilling into the ice with so much force that they held him suspended in the air. He wore a black straightjacket that covered every part of him except his mouth: eyeless, drooling, held open with straps to reveal the gums. To beat back Todoroki and Bakugou, he had to be no ordinary villain. A strange, lilting song filled the air, and it took Izuku several moments to realize it was the villain's voice, high-pitched like a reed, alternating between sobs and laughter.

"Show me your flesh. Give me your innards!"

"He's smarter than he looks," Todoroki said. "He has us beat in range and firepower, and he's excellent at using the terrain to his advantage."

"We gotta go for it," Bakugou said. "I'm not hiding any longer."

"That's suicide. We already tried that."

"Got any better ideas, idiot?"

Cracks ran along the ice, showering them in tiny shards. The wall had dwindled noticeably, and Todoroki's breathing was ragged. Back and forth, elongation and retraction, the blades hammered rhythmically, relentlessly. The villain was taking advantage of his superior range to pin them down. For all his insanity, he displayed enormous patience. They would not survive a battle of attrition.

"Bakugou's right. We need to attack," Izuku said.

"Shut up and stay here, you nerd," Bakugou snapped, standing up. "Without your equipment, you're useless."

Grabbing Bakugou's arm, Izuku forced him back down. For an instant, Bakugou was so surprised he forgot to be mad. He opened his mouth. Izuku cut him off.

"Follow my lead."

Izuku came out from behind the wall. Immediately, in mid-air, the blades changed direction, homing in on him. He dove to the side, but they changed direction again, impaling him through both legs. He cried out. "Blood! Blood!" the villain shrieked. The blades retracted. Through a haze of pain, Izuku reached out, both hands gripping the blade still buried in his leg. The metal cut deep into his palms.
As the blades continued to retract, Izuku hung on with all his strength, flying through the air with astonishing speed. Too late the villain realized what was going on. The blade stopped, but the momentum catapulted Izuku forward. His fist smashed into the villain's head.

The villain stumbled back. Izuku tried to form another fist but his hand, slick with blood, wouldn't close. He collapsed to his knees. Two gaping holes penetrated his thighs. The villain screeched, an incoherent jumble of bloodfleshinnardschildren. The blades came at Izuku again, and behind that masked face he glimpsed eyes that had never known sanity. Bakugou flew in from the right, unleashing a short-ranged blast that the villain just barely dodged by propelling himself backwards. An enormous pillar of ice sprung below him, encasing him completely. His blades, caught mid-launch, gleamed like fish below a frozen pond. Motionless, his face stared out into forever.

"Izuku! Are you alright?"

Todoroki bandaged his wounds, but Izuku was losing blood rapidly. He needed a hospital. Taking either shoulder, Todoroki and Bakugou supported him.

"We're close to the cabins," Todoroki said.

"You goddamn twerp," Bakugou seethed. "You goddamn, stupid little freak."

"You said they're after Bakugou?"

"It's what Himiko – the villain Ochako and I fought – said."

"Why would those dumbasses be after me?"

"Your conduct at the sports festival turned a lot of heads," Todoroki said.

"It was your fault!"

"I suspect they want to turn you to their side," Todoroki continued. "Having a student of UA become a villain would deal a crippling blow to hero society."

"I am so goddamn sick," Bakugou said, "of people calling me a villain."

The world swam. Izuku felt very, very cold. His feet dragged along the ground as Todoroki and Bakugou struggled. Please let the cabins be safe, he prayed. The sky was bright with flame. A deer darted across their path. The trees shuddered with the chittering of birds taking flight. He prayed that Ochako had made it back safely. He prayed that Tsu and Tokoyami and the rest had made it back safely, that Class 1-B had woken up with no repercussions, that Aizawa and Vlad and the Pussycats were busy guarding the cabins, surveying the treeline for the return of the final three boys.

"Excuse me, do you know where the bathroom is?"

Two taps on Izuku's shoulder. The question came from a strange man wearing an orange raincoat. He was tall and slender, face hidden by a black-and-white mask. Cane in hand, he gave a sweeping bow.

"Who the hell are you?" Todoroki's voice echoed. "Bakugou? Izuku? Where'd you go?"

As the world twisted as if sucked into a vortex, Izuku came to the final, horrifying conclusion.

They weren't only after Bakugou.

They were also after him.
Drums inside his head. Worms squirming over his tongue. Slowly, Izuku opened his eyes. The first sensation to come back was pain – dull, throbbing pain lancing from his arms and legs. Fumbling, he tried to move, couldn't. The second sensation to come back was touch. Wood rubbed against his arms. Something heavy pressed into his leg. He was strapped to a chair. The world hung on the balance of a lightbulb swinging overhead. An array of shadows solidified into people, brick walls, a television. A bar of some sort? The third thing to come back was memory.

"Bakugou! What did you do to him?"

"Welcome to our hideout, little hero," said a white-haired man. He was pale and slim. Two disembodied hands clasped over his head like a bear trap, obscuring his face save for dry, cracked lips. A dozen more hands clasped his arms and shoulders. His speech was slow and strained, as if he were unused to talking.

"Good morning, Izuku." The optimistic sing-song of that voice made Izuku's skin crawl. Himiko kneeled at his side, staring at him with her chin resting in her palms the same way a girl might look at fish in an aquarium. The room was small and dimly lit. Opposite him sat a television, turned off. To the right ran a counter, behind which were arrayed shelves of liquor bottles. A man made of smoke casually polished shot-glasses – the villain from the first attack, Izuku finally remembered as his brain gave a painful throb from the effort. The only other person he recognized was the magician, who leaned against the far wall with his arms crossed. Four others stood before Izuku like witnesses at an execution: a black-haired teen with patchwork skin, a lizard mutant, a stocky man wearing sunglasses, and a man clothed head to toe in a skintight black bodysuit.

"Bakugou unfortunately managed to escape our grasp," said the white-haired man. "Well, he was only a side dish anyway. You're the main course, Izuku."

"What do you want?"

"Heroes sure have it rough these days. You watch the news lately? It's all save us, save us! Bunch of filthy ingrates. Himiko, untie him. I'm sure our friend is intelligent enough to understand his situation."

Cautiously, Izuku rubbed his wrists. The movement ran a sharp, electric current of pain down his spine. His hands were heavily bandaged, and the bandages were caked in blood. His legs were lead weights. He made the mistake of looking down. His pants had been torn below the waist, revealing tourniquets wrapped tightly around both thighs, below which sat a mass of bandages yellow with necrosis. Engorged purple veins spiderwebbed to his ankles. He smelled foul rot, antiseptic.

"We had enough drugs to stabilize you – for now. Your continued care will depend on your cooperation. Try not to move, though I doubt you could anyway. I heard you took down Moonfish."

"What do you want with me? Are you from the League of Villains?"

Beneath the ashen hand, the man smiled.

"I am Shigaraki. Welcome to our humble headquarters. I believe you've already met Himiko. I'll get right to the point: We want you to join us."
Despite all, despite the blood and the pain and the knowledge he could die at any moment, Izuku laughed.

"You think it's ridiculous. You have more in common with us than you think. Our leader chose you because he saw your potential. Your Quirk developed late, right? Don't look so surprised. We've done our research on you. The reason you were chosen was because you understand the plight of the weak." He spread his arms. "We are the dredges of society. The forgotten. The has-beens. The never-beens. We are the ones trampled by heroes so they can take the spotlight. If a mother and her child are in a burning building, which one will you save? We are the ignored choice."

So this was the man who lead the first attack, the Shigaraki whom Izuku had impersonated. He was not the mastermind he had envisioned. The room reeked of the sour smell of alcohol. How long had he been out? It could've been days since he was captured. Windowless, the room gave no indication of time or location. The survival rate for captured heroes was less than two percent. At least Bakugou had escaped. That they had kept Izuku alive and even tended his wounds provided little hope. Torture was a favorite past-time of villains.

With bravery he didn't feel, Izuku said, "If you want me to pity you, you failed the moment you attacked my friends."

"I don't want your pity," Shigaraki snarled, slamming his fist against the counter. The wood fizzled and rotted. "I merely wanted you to understand our situation. Heroes are the ones to blame. They think they can save everyone when they can't even see half of society. They squabble among themselves, take money from sponsors, spend millions crafting their persona – for what? So they can pretend they're doing good when they pick up one person from the millions teeming in the refuse heap. They can't save a damn thing. Look around you. Poverty. Sickness. Corruption. Exploitation. Instead of focusing on the true problems, heroes go after the man who robs a grocery store to feed his family. They ignore the forest for the trees! And they're applauded for it. The public is as guilty as heroes. You, student of UA – is that who you want to become?"

"Of course the world isn't perfect. Heroes, like everyone else, are doing their best. What's your goal? To destroy heroes entirely like Stain?"

"You're not worthy to speak his name!" the lizard-man roared. "You'll pay for what you did. I have no idea why the boss wants your lame-ass Quirk. Keep making fun of us. Do it long enough and they'll hand you over to me."

"Or me," Himiko said.

"You misunderstand us, Izuku," Shigaraki said. "We're not after the destruction of hero society. We want to create a society for ourselves – a society of villains. We will make our own laws. We will create our own schools. We will take from the undeserving and give it to the deserving. The decision shall fall to the individual: to become a hero or a villain? We're providing a choice to those who never had it. Is that really so evil?"

"You're killing heroes."

"Waste of time," said the stocky man with sunglasses. For his build, his voice was surprisingly high. "I don't see why the boss wants this kid either. He's a hero through and through. We ain't never going to convince him."

"The heroes are the ones killing us," Shigaraki said. "Every time a child dies from neglect, a hero killed him as surely as if he had slit his throat. Heroes created this sorry world. We're fixing their mistakes. I ask you one more time: Join us."
Perhaps someone else would've regret going to UA, Izuku thought, staring at their iridescent reflections glinting off glass bottles. Someone else might've followed the advice of the adults and sought an easier road, becoming a policeman, for example, or seeking out a job in another field entirely. He had always been fond of art. He would never have gone to UA, never made friends, never gotten captured, never followed his dreams. He was going to die. The only question was how painfully. Izuku held no illusions about the consequences of his next words.

"Plus ultra."

Gently, rain beat against the roof. Shigaraki shook his head.

One by one, the villains left the room.

"See you soon, Izuku," Himiko said.

The lizard ran his thumb across his throat.

"Make your choice wisely," Shigaraki said, and shut the door.

Their departure caught Izuku off-guard. For a second he thought he had gotten lucky. Then he realized they were leaving him here to rot. He tried to get up but his legs couldn't support him. A slow, rotting death as the bacteria from his wounds ate through him. Or perhaps they were waiting for him to break, waiting for him to become so desperate for food and water he'd turn his back on everything he stood for. He almost would've preferred torture.

Dimly, amidst the drone of rain, he was aware of a scratching noise. It came from the television, which was not turned off as he had initially assumed, but displayed a room of some sort, so covered in shadow it seemed black. Something shifted, and with a start Izuku realized it was a man.

"It's good to finally meet you, Izuku Midoriya."

The man's voice was heavy and clearly mechanical. He breathed heavily, catching his breath between words. Against the shadows, Izuku could just make out the silver outline of a ventilation tube attached to the man's face.

The sight of that shadow terrified him more than Shigaraki and his cronies combined. A visceral fear gripped Izuku, so primal he couldn't figure out why, it was senseless, to be so terrified of this man on the other side of the screen who couldn't hurt him in any way. Yet sitting in front of him was like being in front of a corpse, in front of a black hole.

"I've wanted to meet you for a long time. Ever since the sports festival, I've had my eye on you. Your capture of Stain displayed true courage. Bravo, child! It's a miracle what a Quirkless boy can do in this world of ours."

Izuku's blood ran cold.

"I had hoped Shigaraki would be able to convince you to join us, but the task, it seems, falls to me."

I have a Quirk. The protest died in Izuku's throat. The man's manner left no room for negotiation. He knows – not just this, more, maybe everything. Izuku didn't know how the man discovered his greatest secret, but he had a feeling it had required no effort at all. Izuku was a child before an authority figure, an ant under a scientist's scope. The gap between them was so wide that he felt, spasmodically, that they could not have belonged to the same species. His protests would mean nothing, especially since they both knew the truth.
"You must forgive Shigaraki. He's young and still learning, but earnest. Everything he told you is genuine. We are trying to create a haven for villains, our own utopia. I must say, I'm surprised you're so attached to hero society. These are the same people who cast you out for not having a Quirk. You, at least, I thought would see through their hypocrisy. Do you think you can hide it forever? Your classmates suspect. You must know they suspect. Such a convenient time for a Quirk to develop, and in such a convenient way. How long do you think you can keep it up? For the next three years? After graduation? The world of pros is one of constant scrutiny. A single slip-up, and the public will descend on you like starving dogs. You should thank me for taking Ragdoll out of the picture – "

"What did you do to Ragdoll?"

"She's fine, and you never need to worry about her Quirk again. I've had my eye on her for a long time, actually. Your career will inevitably end in a plummet. The longer you keep it up, the greater the fall. Your friends will abandon you. Your teachers will abandon you. The people you've saved will abandon you. In our world that revolves around Quirks, do you seriously believe that someone without a Quirk can stand equal with those that do? It's absurd."

Tremulously, Izuku said, "If I don't join you, you're going to reveal my secret to everyone? I'd rather be a nobody than a villain."

Even as he said it, secretly, so secretly he feared to even touch it, he knew that everything the man said would come to pass. A mouse cannot become a lion. In the middle of the night he woke up to dreams of everyone laughing at him as they once used to laugh at him. When the veil of childhood lifted, he had realized the worthlessness of You can be anything you set your mind to! The real world was not as kind as children's programming. He was acting out a play – a fun, fulfilling play, but one day the curtains must fall. No matter how much he yearned for acceptance, only his charade will be accepted, never his true self.

"You insult me, Izuku. I would never stoop to blackmail. I've learned the inadequacies of force. I'm only telling you because I want you to know I understand – your fear, your helplessness, your struggle. The world can change! Shigaraki's intent is noble, but he struggles to see the ultimate goal. A society of villains is only the first step. Our true goal is to shift society away from Quirks entirely – a true society of equality. Haven't you ever thought to yourself that the world was unfair? To have our entire lives controlled by one trait of our birth is too tragic. Imagine a world where someone with a weak Quirk, or no Quirk at all, is given the chance to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the strongest! Where they can strive towards the same goal not by the grace of their birth, but by the amount of their effort. A world where a person isn't defined by their Quirk."

"It's too good to be true."

"It's too good not to be true. The path our current world is heading towards is a bleak one. For eight generations, Quirks have dominated society, and instead of lessening, their grasp has only tightened. With each generation, Quirks grow stronger, more varied. The stratification of blood grows stricter. Some have already begun using genetic manipulation – sham marriages – to produce offspring with desirable Quirks. Drugs are made that can magnify the power of your Quirk tenfold. The end result is inevitable. Left to their own devices, the people will destroy themselves over their obsession."

"Technology – "

"An optimist's dream," the man said impatiently. "Quirks grow linearly. Technology grows exponentially. Left to their own devices, technology will eventually overtake Quirks. But it's been centuries. Why hasn't it occurred? Because those in power don't want it to. Funding is cut, research is stymied, children are shepherded away from study into heredom. There exist Quirks that can produce endless energy, eliminate world hunger, revolutionize industry. And what do they do? They
use them to catch jewelry robbers. The only research that's progressed is support items and Quirk research, to those deplorable ends I just told you about. It's a shame, but that girl you care for, Mei was it? Our friend at UA keeps a good eye on you. She has no future. She will slave away her life making support items for third-rate heroes with not a tenth of her capabilities. If she dares strike out, she'll find that her creations will only be good for making mundane tasks slightly easier, like a new brand of toaster or a slightly faster car. Same for every other student in engineering. They have no future. The world does not want them to have futures. Heroes realize that if technology surpass Quirks, they'll be out of a job."

"Heroes aren't as selfish as you believe. If it wasn't for you villains, there wouldn't be a need for heroes in the first place."

"You have it backwards. We are the byproduct of a failed society, not the cause. I chose you because you understand the unfairness of the world. Those fools at UA don't see your potential. They're so focused on Quirks they don't even realize the value of the weapon that's fallen into their hands. Despite the introduction of Quirks, what made someone successful has never changed. Willpower. Foresight. Intelligence. Any idiot can beat up another idiot. It takes an entirely new breed to command someone to do it. For heroes, that person is All Might. For villains, we have nobody. That is our biggest flaw. You're probably asking yourself, why not me? My time is nearly over. You see me in this sorry state. Too late did I realize my mistake. I can inspire fear, but not loyalty. I can make someone obey, but not willingly. Villains will never rally around me as heroes rally around All Might. That's why I've groomed Shigaraki to be my successor. No doubt you think it excessive to stage an attack just to capture a student, but personnel is the most valuable resource you can have… I've realized that now. You are the last piece of the puzzle, Izuku. You deserve a stage where your talents can truly shine. Together with Shigaraki, you will lead the League to new heights. You will become the rallying point for the revolution. You will guide the world away from its path of destruction towards a new era of equality, and at the end the world will look up and say, Thank you."

It was so glorious that Izuku instinctively revolted against it for fear he would be drawn. To finally be accepted! For all his faith, Izuku knew that heroes were not the paragons they claimed to be. New scandals popped up daily. Heroes were not immune to greed, to anger, to jealousy.

"The world is unfair," he murmured. "I know it more than anyone else. But the world, for all its imperfections, continues to exist. Buses run on time. You can go for a walk without worry, celebrate birthdays with the neighborhood. Even if it is imperfect, even if there is corruption, if there is evil, that's no reason to uproot all the good that exists. People can change. I've seen it myself. You give them too little credit."

"I give them exactly the credit they deserve. The people will not change unless you force them."

"Who's going to rule over this new world? You? Shigaraki?"

"It is not about power, though I see you still don't trust us. Distrust is a vast sea to bridge," the man said with a sigh like a dead radio. "It's to be expected. Once we know each other, you will see that my intent is real. Change is hard to accept, I understand. The future is vague and uncertain." His tone shifted. "How about something a little more concrete? Join us, and I can give you what you've always desired."

"What's that?"

"A Quirk."

The steady *scritch scritch scritch* of mechanical breathing overlapped the sound of rain. Izuku struggled to understand. The implications were so vast they were impossible to even glimpse. The
word repeated in his mind until it had lost all meaning. Quirk. Quirk. Quirk. Quirk. Quirk...

"Of course you're surprised. I won't explain the whole story. Suffice to say, my Quirk is the ability to grant Quirks. If you doubt me, you can ask All Might later. Oh, you didn't know? I'm sure he'll tell you in his own time. But the proof is easy enough. All you have to do, Izuku, is accept, and a Quirk can be yours, just like that."

"Do it."

The man on the television smiled.

"I have too much respect for you to think you'd agree that easily. I have no doubt if I gave you a Quirk now, you'd use it to break out of this room. No, you must be with us, heart and soul." He tilted his head, a slight movement, and he was no longer speaking to Izuku but to something far-off in the distance. "Of course I never expected it to be this easy. Tearing down a lifetime's worth of prejudice is no simple task. He'll come around. The best ones always do."

Sirens sounded in the distance. They reached Izuku as if underwater. For as long as he could remember, he had fantasized about his Quirk. Telepathy like his mother, or firebreathing like his father, or possibly a mutation might give rise to something else altogether, something extraordinary. As the years passed and his chances grew dimmer, he gave up on fantasies because they hurt too much. Now, that same hunger returned, and years of dormancy, he found out, had merely whet its appetite. His own greed shocked him. No longer would he need to hide the fact he didn't have a Quirk. No longer would he be useless when caught off-guard like on the night of the attack. What he could do with Bakugou's explosions, or Mina's acid, or Momo's creations! Most of all, he would finally be able to stand equal with everyone else – without a mask.

And yet...

"Once, I would've done anything for a Quirk," Izuku said softly.

"Your reluctance already speaks to your growth. We shall have many more opportunities to talk in the future. You'll know where to find me."

The screen blinked out.

The suddenness of the dismissal stirred Izuku. The building was shaking. Bits of plaster fell from the ceiling. A commotion was going on outside. The stocky man with sunglasses burst in and slung Izuku over his shoulder.

"What are you doing? What's going on?"

"We're getting out of here – "

An enormous palm slammed into the man. He flew against the wall. Izuku cried out in pain. The bandages on his thigh came undone, revealing red, granulated flesh. The giant hand closed around him, then lurched back as the lizard-man appeared through the doorway and buried an armory of swords into its flesh. A deep groan, oddly reminiscent of a woman's voice, shook the rafters. The lizard-man raised his sword for another blow. A blast of fire caught him in the chest. The wall exploded. The street came full into view: dark, raining, chaotic, a poor, run-down area of a city Izuku didn't recognize. Police sirens blared, illuminating the scene in alternating red and blue. Armed policemen formed a perimeter. On the periphery, Tiger battled the magician, who was surrounded by dead policemen missing entire halves of their bodies as if they had been scooped out. Endeavor fought what looked like two copies of the youth with patchwork skin. Shigaraki, whose clothes
seemed to have wrapped around him like ropes, crawled along the ground, desperately trying to reach the villain made of smoke who lay slumped against a lamp-post.

And there, at the forefront, fighting a horde of Nomu whose skin blended perfectly into the night, was All Might.

Unbidden, Izuku cheered. The sight of that towering frame, tossing aside Nomu like they were toy soldiers, filled him with hope. How could he have ever doubted heroes? He was here. Yet, for each Nomu All Might defeated, more appeared in bursts of black liquid. A grunt came from Izuku's right. Charred, skin peeling, a dagger in hand, the lizard stumbled towards him.

"For Stain – "

A shadow passed over the moon. Izuku couldn't believe it. He almost cried. Todoroki. Bakugou. Tsu. Momo. Mei. They came not from the battlefield but emerged from a destroyed section of the wall as if they had been hiding there all along. A block of ice pinned the lizard against the floor. Bakugou's fist collided against his face in a shower of green blood. Mei offered Izuku a hand. He had never touched a warmer hand in his life.

"We got him! Go!" Momo shouted.

With Todoroki and Bakugou as the vanguard and Momo covering their retreat, they made their way towards the line of police. Izuku limped along, supported by Tsu and Mei. Each step sent shockwaves of pain through him. He tried to laugh but it came out in dry hacks. Mei looked at him worriedly. Screeching, a Nomu charged at them and was promptly blasted away by a massive pillar of flame. Endeavor's face looked murderous. Catching on, All Might and the other heroes also cleared a path. Quirks and Nomu stormed around them, a whirlwind of fire and blackness, and Izuku wondered if he was still not back in that barroom under a drug-induced dream. But All Might's bloodstained face was too real to be a dream. Even in the heat of battle, he flashed Izuku a grin.

With relief, Tsu and Mei lowered him into a stretcher.

"You came for me," Izuku croaked.

"Technically, we're not supposed to be here," Mei said. Her face turned nauseous. "We need to get you to Recovery Girl right away."

"I can't believe your weak ass is alive," Bakugou said as Tsu fixed his bandages. Someone held a bottle of water to his lips. He drank. When he finished he gave a contented sigh. He was safe.

Around him, the battle was wounding down. The League was clearly unprepared for an assault. He had never seen so many pros in one spot. Already All Might was cleaning up the last of the Nomu. Endeavor gathered up the remaining villains. Shigaraki, the smoke man, the youth with patchwork skin, and all the rest lay in various states of incapacitation. The nightmare was over.

Beyond the dim skyline, a figure rose from the ruins.

As if strung by fishhooks, their heads turned. The figure floated in the air, steadily growing larger as it approached. Night traveled with him. The lights withered. The stars flickered out. All sound ceased, even the sound of breathing. He was eyeless, noseless, bald, only corrugated skin where the upper half of his face should've been. Even at this distance, even in the darkness, Izuku recognized him by the fear throttling his chest. It was the man on the television.

The man held out a hand. In swirls of black mist, the villains vanished.
The smoke-man's teleportation Quirk, Izuku thought off-handedly. Now how did he manage to do that?

The man turned to him, and beneath that ventilator covering his mouth, Izuku could've sworn he smiled.

All Might strode forward.

They seemed to be talking. None dared approach. Then, too fast to follow, All Might's fist flew out, and, equally fast, the man held up his hand. The two collided in a thunderous boom that sent ripples downwind. Buildings collapsed, the pavement splintered, great dust clouds engulfed the district, and it was stupid to stay, this was beyond them all, they need to get back, care for the wounded. But nobody moved. Spellbound, they watched the man's arm morph, cycling through too many Quirks to count, and the resulting blast engulfed All Might as he took the brunt of it to defend a civilian trapped under the rubble. When the blast cleared, he was no longer a hero but human. Thin, frail, shriveled, he teetered at the mouth of the fissure as the merciless cameras broadcast his secret to the world.

When was a hero strongest if not at his weakest? When did hope shine brightest if not when all was dark?

As the city shook from the battle of the two titans, as the fate of the world progressed, for good or for ill, as All Might stood weak and crippled before the greatest threat to heroes that ever lived – once more, for the last time, All Might did the impossible:

He won.

The final punch, perhaps the last punch All Might would ever throw, tore through the man's shields and smashed him into the earth. The crack of breaking bone was audible at a hundred meters. A crater formed. All Might held up a fist to the sky. Seconds passed, initially in silence, then the noise that began as a lone clap grew louder and louder until it seemed the entire city roared. Izuku laughed and cried, and he found himself cheering, found his friends cheering, the other heroes also cheering, even Endeavor, that sourpuss, the earth trembling from the combined force of their exultations.

The police scoured the district for wounded. The heroes bound and escorted the man into an iron maiden. A paramedic ushered Izuku into the ambulance. His friends tried to follow but were denied. He gave them a fleeting smile. In a few hours would dawn the first morning of a new era. As the doors closed and the ambulance rumbled to life, the last thing Izuku saw was All Might's back, broad and powerful still, one finger pointed to the horizon as he spoke in a voice ringing clear through the alarms of the night, *Now it's your turn.*

When Izuku woke up the next day, he found out that it was not, in fact, the next day, but a full three days later. He had lost thirty percent of his blood volume in addition to two broken femurs and penetrating wounds along all four limbs. Recovery Girl had forced his slow recovery because an immediate recovery would've expended so much energy it would've killed him. Even still, when he woke in the hospital blinking through eyes that had not seen light for three days, he did not feel recovered at all.

"You're lucky to be alive," Mei said, jabbing a finger at him. "You were too reckless! You didn't have any equipment, in case you forgot."

His rescue, he had learned, came in part from Momo's quick-thinking in attaching a tracking device to one of the villains ("Imagine if I had her Quirk," Mei said with an envious sigh). Upon learning of Izuku's kidnapping, Mei had headed straight for the hospital where Class 1-A was being treated,
hoping to learn the details of the kidnapping but instead arriving in the middle of the student's rescue operation. Initially, only Momo, Todoroki, Bakugou, and Tsu had planned to go, but Mei had forced her way in. Izuku could imagine her planting herself at the door, refusing to let anyone past until she was accepted. Bakugou must've blown a gasket. "You were too reckless," he told her. She smirked. He had the decency to blush. Her courage – all of them – touched him more than he could say. The repercussions from UA had not been kind.

"I got banned from the lab for a week," Mei complained. "A week! The hero course students just got off with a warning."

*She has no future.*

Mei had arrived late in the afternoon. She had actually come the moment she learned Izuku had awoken, but the police had their turn first. They had been surprised to learn his wounds came not from torture but from the attack at the training camp. They were under the impression Izuku had been kidnapped for information about UA. Without guilt, Izuku told them he had no clue why he was kidnapped. The matter with the League was between him and they. Luckily, he bypassed most of the police’s questions by saying he didn't remember, which was true enough. That night came to him in flashes of color, noise, an irrational fear at the sound of mechanical breathing. Although the plain-looking detective in charge of the investigation had seemed satisfied, he still posted a policeman outside Izuku's door.

"They think you might be mind-controlled somehow," Mei said. "Some sort of Quirk. They think you're a ticking time bomb, ready to go off at any moment."

"I don't think so," Izuku said. They had done something far worse.

For all the chaos of that night, he remembered clearly the words of Shigaraki and the man on the television. *We are the dredges of society. The forgotten. The has-beens. The never-beens.* He pitied them because he understood them. A year ago, he had stood in their shoes, and one day, Quirklessness exposed, he would return there again. Trapped in the hospital bed, barely able to move his body held up by slings, he had plenty of time to ponder their words. *To have our entire lives controlled by one trait of our birth is too tragic. Left to their own devices, the people will destroy themselves over their obsession. Heroes realize that if technology surpass Quirks, they'll be out of a job...*

Each statement, taken alone, made perfect sense. It was only when you looked at them as a whole that the monstrosity of it stared back at you. Countless deaths, straight-out war, the complete destruction of society – was any of these worth the goal, no matter the end? Yet if the world continued on its current pace, he realized everything the man on the television said could possibly come true. Inequality will grow. Quirks will define you more and more, perhaps once again leading to the wars of yester-generation. Which was the lesser evil? Surely changing the system from within was less bloody than changing it from without. But they had clearly thought that method ineffective. *The people will not change unless you force them.* He remembered the conviction in the voice of Shigaraki and the man on the television. Their words were not complex webs designed to entice him. They believed it as much as anyone could believe anything.

*I can give you what you've always desired.*

"It doesn't matter," Izuku thought out loud. "He's gone now."

Stoically, Mei nodded. "All Might's gone."

All Might! Izuku had watched his retirement speech, and on the stage he looked so frail and
vulnerable, and if Izuku had not seen it with his own eyes, heard it with his own ears, tasted the dust of it on his own tongue, he would not have believed that was the same man who had defeated the greatest threat that ever faced heroes. The elation of victory had worn off. A hollowness filled the world. Endeavor moved up to the number one spot. Best Jeanist had been hurt badly in the assault. Ragdoll, who had also been abducted, inexplicably lost her Quirk. That night would go down in history as the Kamino Nightmare. And now for the weather, Mr. Kihara.

Mei squeezed his shoulder reassuringly, making him wince. Hastily, she pulled her arm back.

"Anyway, the important thing is that it worked out, sort of, in the end. It sucks that the League got away, but at least we captured their boss. They're holding him in Tartarus. If anyone deserves that place, it's him. Don't think that your injury is an excuse to skip out on working in the lab, you hear me? We have so much lost time to make up for! I've been thinking, those hover soles are due for an upgrade…"

As she rambled on, Izuku no longer heard her. He felt sick. They're holding him in Tartarus. That great impenetrable prison whose very existence helped people sleep better at night. There was no safer place in the world.

Except Izuku just remembered something the man on the television had said before the screen turned off. He had thought little of it at the time. Even now, it was a commonplace-enough statement that it might've been spoken by anyone. The full force of those few words hit him like one of Bakugou's explosions, uprooting the globe on its axis: safety was danger, reassurance was peril, victory was defeat. Mei trailed off, giving him a concerned look. How could he tell her? How could he tell anyone? Tartarus! It had not been a farewell, but a promise!

We shall have many more opportunities to talk in the future.

You'll know where to find me.

A/N: We don't know anything about All for One, so I had to come up with my own motivations. Final chapter up next.
Renewal

Chapter 18: Renewal

The start of the fall semester brought with it new dormitories and old faces. Auburn leaves blanketed UA’s grounds, the air crisp with the smell of apples, and Izuku hadn’t realized how much he missed those two towering glass skyscrapers. To think he had almost been denied the opportunity forever! His mother (a broken mess greeted him at the hospital, aged ten years with a face so red and puffy she looked as if she had been stung by a scorpion) had been against him returning, and it had taken nothing less than penitence from All Might himself to change her mind. What was fall? A shedding of the old, preparation for the new.

And the world, without All Might, spun on. He had refused all public appearances since he announced his retirement. Neither had there been news from the man in Tartarus. The League, what remained of it, was also silent. The Kamino Nightmare filled the news for a week before being upstaged by a political scandal. Now, the most trending topic was some celebrity's marriage. All that effort and sacrifice, forgotten. A more optimistic man might've called it resilience, a sign of Japan's ability to recover from any catastrophe. A less sanguine but still confident person might've called it an attempt to cover up a wound, a willful turning away of the eyes onto other things. Izuku only felt a hollowness. He remembered the raspy voice of the man with disembodied hands: *Bunch of filthy ingrates.*

"Izuku? You there? We're heading back to the dorms."

Iida stood over his desk, Ochako next to him. The sunset glowed outside the window. The classroom was nearly empty. The bell must've rung a while ago.

"I'm heading down to the development studio."

"Don't overexert yourself," Iida said, but he couldn't disguise the relief, like a sigh, in his voice. Ochako, too, gave a smile that was too quick to be polite.

It was the subtle things, Izuku thought, that told you the world had changed. Patched-up windows of a shop you used to walk by. Parents telling their children to come home earlier. For the first time in decades, crime was on the upswing.

His classmates said nothing openly, and he appreciated their kindness in trying to hide it, but small signs had revealed the wall that now separated them. He felt like he was back in middle school. But it hurt more to be shunned by those he had once been friends with than bullies. Conversations paused when he stepped into the classroom each morning. Over-politeness whenever someone spoke to him. Being left out of certain insignificant activities like eating together in the cafeteria or swimming in the pool. Even when they showed off their dorm rooms, his room, covered in All Might collectables, had drawn looks of guilt and nervous laughter, and the class had hurriedly moved on to the next one.

His capture had isolated him. Barely a day went by that he didn’t catch the tail-end of some student whispering rumors. *I heard they tortured him. I heard they tried to steal his Quirk. Nah, they wiped his memory and now he's like a vegetable.* Despite the efforts of those who were present that night – even Bakugou, screaming irately at a group of General Education students, *I never got captured, you idiots!* – the rumors grew. His friends in 1-A were not immune. They were as curious as the rest, like zookeepers enclosing an exotic animal. Some dropped subtle hints and some not so subtle that they wanted to know what really happened that night. None of them understood why he remained silent. His refusal hurt them, but telling them would hurt them more.
It was not their fault. Had Izuku returned with the same fervor he always displayed, the same faith, he had no doubt the class would've welcomed him with open arms, rumors be damned. But he had changed. He spoke less. He no longer offered to help others with their homework. In the evening he stayed in his room or headed down to the training grounds, turning down offers to hang out, and that no doubt was part of the reason why few people offered any more. What was solid was now fluid. What was once unbreakable was brittle. If he could wipe his memory of that night, would he? If he could return to the same person he always was? Before, he would've said yes.

He heard the development studio before he saw it. Mei had been especially energetic the last few days, dead-set on finally getting that jetsuit working, and the booms, cranks, thuds, formed a melody as he opened the door and was immediately assaulted by the smell of oil and smoke.

"You're late! Get to work on those turbines. I changed the blueprints again."

He set down his bags by the door. Power Loader wasn't here today. He had been waiting for such an opportunity – rather, he had been putting it off with that excuse.

"Is something wrong?"

Mei! The oil smudge on her chin, the concerned look in her cross-eyes, those strange goggles hiding even stranger hair. Her enthusiasm bordered on insanity. Izuku secretly suspected the reason why so many machines exploded in her presence was because she carried so much electricity. Was there a more intelligent, enthusiastic, purer, single-minded girl in the world? His heart swelled with gratitude. If one person deserved happiness, deserved success, deserved her name to become a household word, it was her.

"I have something to tell you."

Mei put aside her tools and sat down, her expression sober.

I could be ruining myself, Izuku thought. A suicide as fatal as any bullet. He was entrusting his heart to her, and she could do with it as she pleased. Embrace it, ignore it, throw it to the dogs – did she realize the power she would have over him? Did she even want it? No doubt he was being unfair. He had been planning it for a long time, he reflected, recently accelerated by his meeting with the man on the television. The world would not wait for him to be ready. The man's prophecies would come to pass. Izuku's only salvation lay in facing that future on his own terms.

"I don't have a Quirk," Izuku said. The words came out so easily. "I've never had a Quirk. I lied about having one in order to get into UA. I don't have the ability to slow down time or plan ahead or anything like that. I'm just a Quirkless boy with a few support items."

Mei cocked her head.

"You're trying to get out of work again, aren't you?"

"What? No – "

"Well, it won't work on me!" Mei's eyes sparkled devilishly. "Just because you don't have a Quirk doesn't mean I'm going to give you a pass on those hours you owe me! All six hundred and forty-two of them. Six hundred and ninety-eight now, actually, after my heroic rescue. And don't think I won't work you just as hard as before. You don't need a Quirk to tighten a few screws."

"I'm serious – "

"So am I," Mei said, stamping her foot. "So what if you don't have a Quirk? Does that change you somehow? Are you no longer the Izuku I know? If you ask me, not having a Quirk just makes
everything you did more impressive. You're not secretly bragging, are you? Scoring the highest score on the entrance exam, the sports festival, capturing Stain – look at me! I did it without a Quirk! Well, let me tell you, my Quirk hasn't done much for me either, you know? Anybody can do what I can do with a pair of binoculars! Who cares if you don't have a Quirk? Support items are much better anyway."

Mei! He wanted to cry and he did. After several seconds, Mei awkwardly put a hand on his shoulder, leaving a trail of engine grease. She looked miserable, probably cursing whatever stupid thing she had said to make him cry. She had never been good with people. If Izuku were a machine she could fix him right away. But there was nothing wrong with him.

"Thanks," he said, wiping away his tears. "Let's get to work."

Relief washed over her face. She punched him on the arm. "Look at you, making a girl worry." He laughed, the tears threatening to come out again, and she smiled, and he realized how silly he had been, how stupid, he of all people, not giving Mei enough credit! Because among the many expressions that had paraded across her face – solemnity, anger, frustration, fear, relief – there was one emotion missing.

She wasn't surprised.

"Let's get to work," Izuku repeated. "Let's get to work."

He could do it forever.

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A/N: This marks the end of Argumentum Ad Absurdum. 35k words! It took eighteen weeks, and I'm pleasantly surprised I managed to uphold my schedule of releasing weekly. I purposely left the story open-ended, which I understand can disappoint some people, but I felt this was a natural place to stop. In canon, the plot slows to a crawl after this point (I haven't even caught up on the latest chapters), and I don't feel comfortable building on something that hasn't been expanded in canon. I hope you all enjoyed reading, and special thanks to everyone who left reviews!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!