Shell Game

by Liangnui

Summary

The mission is simple: Infiltrate the most famous hero academy in all of Japan as undercover security, at least until All for One is brought down for good. There are a few steps missing in this plan, Kei knows, but that's not her concern. No, she has a different problem to juggle on top of cultural context, keeping under the radar, and a universe full of superpowers: the entire high school experience.

After all, "simple" and "easy" are not the same thing.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Chapter Summary

Kei gets her mission and takes a test.

She may not have studied for it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Infiltration was not a mission type Gekkō Keisuke was designed for.

Didn’t mean she didn’t have the skillset for it, no matter how she’d reached that point. Despite a Gordian knot of coincidences and at least one soul-based mishap, she was still left with a strong Nature Release specialty, immense endurance from being a jinchūriki, something of a multicultural education, and the ability to read, speak, and write English. Between the limited preparation time and the possible threat level faced by any shinobi who attempted this mission, there were only so many candidates even before dimensional travel was factored into the Hokage’s decision.

Which was why she was chosen for a very special mission to infiltrate a Japanese high school.

*Hey, Isobu.*

*Yes?*

*Riddle me this: How am I, a freaking special jōnin, supposed to answer this question?*

Kei, it had to be said, had not needed to compose an essay for anything in Japanese since her successful Chūnin Exam. Mission reports? Sure. Fūinjutsu write-ups? Part of the job. Proposals regarding usage of village resources for local and national problems? It cropped up on occasion, but not consistently.

Isobu’s mind peeked over her figurative shoulder.

American high schools only required students to register or be registered for coursework by their parents, as far as Kei recalled. Her actual high school years were a little vague by this point, having devolved into hallway-shaped blurs punctuated primarily by friends and trivia. Mostly friends. In Konoha, compulsory education for shinobi was less of a formal affair and more on-the-job training a thousand times over, leaving holes all over the board.

And unfortunately for Kei, Japanese, mathematics, science, social studies, and English were all required topics. Kei’s Japanese was better than some of her peers, given the emphasis her skillset placed on calligraphy and kanji, but social studies was a wash. Japanese was probably not much better, and it was followed down the drain by mathematics. Science was middling, given the problems imposed by slamming into an alternate universe with ubiquitous internet when the shinobi-rulled world barely understood radios.

But dammit, Kei at least knew some things. Even if her English was informal, she’d *done* her time in the appropriate school system. Time to get some use out of it.
It was just a matter of muddling along until she could get to the practical.

Why couldn’t a friggin’ hero academy of a high school just involve knocking muggers unconscious? Kei knew how to do that. Without killing anyone, even!

**You were supposed to change the exponent too,** said Isobu, who read the questions through Kei’s eyes.

*Dammit,* Kei thought, and erased her second equation. She cracked her knuckles and drew glares from the students around her, but ignored them. *At least it’s not differentials. Always sucked at those.*

...**You know, seeing you attempt calculus at this stage would be hilarious.**

*Thanks a bunch,* Kei told him, and got back to work.

The math test came and went. The social studies test followed suit, reminding Kei that her “peers” were working with a solid decade of education and cultural context she didn’t have. Even if she’d been truly Japanese, there was a real chance a child from her version of Japan would have failed the entire section on Quirk legislation. She probably didn’t fail science, between Isobu and Kei’s discussion method and what she could extrapolate from the briefings regarding Quirks. And English? There was something of an edge there, and Kei and her Tailed Beast buddy had ever been a pair fond of using everything at their disposal to win.

And then, the dreaded practical exam.

With Isobu acting as her live-in Jiminy Cricket, in the exact opposite way a conscience was generally supposed to work, Kei managed to tune out the DJ-like announcer for the practical examination on the big day. She had her paperwork in front of her, a mission prodding at the back of her head, and a whole room full of hero-hopefuls who were probably going to hate her in about fifteen minutes. She did listen to enough of the explanation to know how the robot targets were going to be scored, and could see some figures in the crowd start to slump for one reason or another, but ultimately the information felt extraneous.

Kei had no intention of allowing a written exam keep her from completing her mission. To that end, she would happily destroy every opponent in the examination stadium with only Water ninjutsu. It was a nice way of working off stress.

Kei filed out of the room alongside the other potential students when the intro spiel was over, taking in the crowd. She could see a wide variety of body types, features, and open fear among the examinees. Assuming any of them got in, she’d try memorizing names and faces then.

Her mission would take priority.

*“You need to have a paper trail.”* Sensei’s frown had been audible over the connection, probably because he had no experience with cell phones and a lot of experience with genjutsu. Not a Luddite, but really unfamiliar with tech.

*“That won’t be a problem. We’ll just have her take the entrance examination along with all the other heroes-to-be.”* The Mickey Mouse soundalike had given her chills, at least up until she’d realized that they actually were speaking to a talking mouse. Sensei probably would have called him a summon, but Nezu assured them that Quirks worked in mysterious ways. And he actually was a mouse. Probably.

Maybe?
“If it’s what the client wants…” Sensei’s chakra signature remained wary, but it hadn’t shown in his voice. “One academic year or until the threat is ended, whichever is shorter.”

Sort of like any warranty, really. Kind of funny, in hindsight.

“By your command, Hokage-sama.”

And here Kei was, dressed in gym clothes for a school she’d never attended and waiting for the hammer to drop. She tapped her shoes on the ground idly, getting used to wearing something other than sandals for the first time in nearly a lifetime, just to feel a bit more prepared. The exam robots were just there for racking up combat scores on opponents who didn’t bleed. Some of the kids around her would be able to go all out. It’d be fun.

But apparently not for the kid just to her left, who looked like someone told him life was cancelled. He had his arms crossed and eyed the entrance like it was a gallows, not a set of unusually large double doors. Another kid looked like she was going to throw up from sheer nerves. Two boys were stretching, while a girl near the front of the crowd was nearly bouncing in place.

Welp. Time to ruin their days. Probably.

“GO!” screamed the digitized voice of the cockatoo-headed announcer, and Kei went to work.

Chapter End Notes

And now: Art links for *Shell Game*. Because that's what everyone really wants. :D

- Kei in one of her Tokyo street outfits, Close-up version.
- Kei in a sort of school uniform.
- The Water Dragon Bullet Train.
- A version of the UA school uniform that has pants! Or leggings, at least.
- If UA tolerated the yankee look.
- Kei in a different Tokyo-compatible street outfit.
- Kakashi also wanders around Tokyo occasionally. Here's his non-ANBU outfit.
- Tried drawing Kei in another variant of the UA uniform. Still needed to learn that UA doesn't allow workout clothes as a part of the uniform.
- Obito shows up to help with the training montage.
- Obito discovers the magic of smartphones.
- Hitoshi and the cat cafe adventure.
- More Tokyo outfits for Kei.
- Team Minato in Tokyo outfits, but with more color!
- Kei and the turtle-themed hoodie. Harajuku is amazing.
- Hoodies are back in style. Kei thinks they never left.
- Two false ANBU masks and a real one, for Team Minato's use.
- Kei in the art style of the universe she's not native to.
- The post-tech upgrade ANBU combat uniform, as modeled by Kei.
- Workout clothes for Kei's Tokyo stay! Or at least sit-at-home-and-watch-TV clothes.
- The world's scariest sukajan jacket model (and design).
Chapter Summary

Kei decides to do some independent research and gets a special delivery.

_Huh. So I did land in General Studies._

There were twenty-seven drowned, maimed, and exploded robots in a scrapyard somewhere that attested rather to the opposite. Water Dragon Bullet might’ve been a mainstay, but she could make hand seals fast enough to drop the Great Waterfall Technique on robots, too. Or rather, “villains.” Then again, if a hero didn’t understand the laws they were supposed to be enforcing, it probably wouldn’t turn out well.

_Is that a bad thing?_

_Dunno. It’s not the hero course, but the idea of actually taking a spot from one of those kids… Well, it would be a waste. She wasn’t planning on being a hero. General Studies, from what she understood, didn’t tend to get fun things like provisional licenses or whatever, so that could be a bother if she was ever caught using her powers, but being a role model to children who weren’t her brother? Meh._

Kei shrugged to herself, setting the announcement hologram aside. The big blond guy who signed off reminded her a bit of Gai, but unfortunately the impact of his reputation had been nearly stonewalled by Kei’s dead-eyed stare. It seemed to put him off a bit.

_No use worrying about it now._

Isobu mulled that over. **It will be easier to escape scrutiny if people do not think we are important.**

_Step one complete, then._

Kei looked around the bland, cookie-cutter apartment she’d been assigned by the school’s administration. She’d done her best to customize it, slapping down furniture from storage seals and using a store-bought futon decorated with puppies and kittens. Her wall scroll hanging was the second beacon seal, acting primarily as a mailbox for anything she needed to get from home. She’d carry the original in her school bag.

As for the rest of the apartment, Kei wasn’t impressed. She paid rent for a two-bedroom apartment back in Konoha for her and Hayate—paid in advance until the end of next year, now. The three-rooms-total scheme felt off, much like everything else.

Normal people didn’t have their records faked. Normal people around here had school until April or near enough, high school exams or not. Ubiquitous school uniforms made it difficult to escape truancy officers day or night.

Too bad Kei was, through the use of some rather basic techniques, a shapeshifter. One Transformation technique later, and Kei’s fifteen-year-old appearance was neatly replaced by a fair
mockup of Shiranui Genma in more typical street clothes instead. Eighteen-year-olds got to do things without being stopped by cops.

_All right, then. Time for a fucking crash course in life in superhero-riddled Japan, then._ She locked the apartment and left, with her wallet and a GPS map in hand. She needed to get food, a train pass, and probably a guidebook to local culture to go with the mission stipend.

_No time like the present._

Kei wandered the streets for hours. Quite aside from having grown up in a shinobi village, which had neither cell towers (ever) or paved roads (half the time), the city was bigger than anything from her old life either. Advertisements blared in every corner, which was typical, and everything from corner stores to massive shopping malls carried hero merchandise, which made Kei feel like more of a tourist than she was. It seemed like, at some point, more typical sports teams had been partially displaced by superheroes. Sure, plenty of other points of interest _existed_, but Kei had always been a sucker for bright colors even if she refused to admit it.

So, she absolutely sought out hero merch. And by far the most popular topic was All Might.

Kei knew several things about the man: a) he was a teacher at UA High School this year, b) he was hugely popular to the point of probably starting religions, and c) he was basically the only pillar holding this wacky superhero-centric society together, through his role as the World Symbol of Peace.

_And this place may be at risk of total collapse._

Kei nodded to Genma’s borrowed reflection in the storefront, to make up for not being able to do so to Isobu’s face. _Gotta love the house of cards we’ve got here._

_It is at least visually interesting._ Isobu sent a brief flash of neon signage spiraling through Kei’s mind, and Kei glanced inside her grocery bags for the bright, grinning All Might onesie she’d bought for Naruto. Sasuke would get Endeavor the Flame Hero, whoever that was.

Sure, nobody would understand what the hell the reference was, but he’d find it interesting to chew on. The bunny ears even kind of resembled Sensei’s hair if he ever bothered to style it, and the Uchiha clan was hilariously fond of fire.

The rest of the week passed like that, with Kei slowly adapting to fast-paced urban life in disguise and as herself. It was, for the most part, mainly a matter of memorizing train schedules and not getting frustrated when she inevitably got things wrong. Landing herself out in a place called Hosu had been a bit weird, but she played with her GPS settings until she got the train route back figured out. From the windows during long train rides, she got to watch hero-villain brawls as life went on behind yellow traffic barriers, like criminals with Quirks held up the commute every day. Maybe they did.

Also, Wikipedia existed here. Kei binged articles harder than she had in her old life in its entirety, at least if she counted a) her somewhat spotty memory and b) the lack of a looming essay in her immediate future. Having so much information at her fingertips, compared to the nigh-impenetrable maze of “he said, she said” that made up shinobi intelligence networks, was both overwhelming and familiar enough to be comforting.

This place was so weird.

She got to know her neighbors, spinning a story about needing to leave her parents behind to attend
UA. Shikoku was too far, she said, and the elderly residents of the building nodded their heads knowingly. Kids these days always wanted to be heroes, but it was nice to see young people interested in public service no matter what form it took. Only a dedicated, independent girl would push herself so far, they said.

She wasn’t sure the folks who lived on her actual floor in the building bought it, but oh well. Most of them were businesspeople who worked in and around the most hero-dense part of the country, so she could skate any suspicion by waving UA’s name around like a flag. Not that anyone would fail to recognize the uniform, once she got it and threw every scrap of leftover childish enthusiasm into showing it off.

And she got care packages from drop-in friends.

“Special delivery!” Obito’s voice rang out during dinner one day, and a Kamui portal opened to drop both him and Hayate almost on top of her futon. Which, of course, she barely ever put away.

“OW!” was Hayate’s response, having been dropped half on his head and almost into a bowl of udon.

“Hayate! Missed you, goofball!” Kei promptly grabbed him with both arms around his ribs and squeezed him hard enough for him frantically tap the futon in surrender.

Kei didn’t buy it, but she did let go.

Hayate tackled her, barely missing the udon a second time.

Obito cackled, landing neatly on the other side of the futon with a wide grin. He propped his head up in both hands as the Gekkō siblings continued to try to get each other in submission holds. “So, how’s the last week been treating you?”

“It’s—ow!” Kei pinched Hayate’s side, making him yelp and skitter back, before adding, “Been fine, Obito. But boring and school doesn’t start here for like two months.”

“Two months?” Hayate gaped. “I have to keep staying with the Hokage for—”

“For technically not at all,” Obito said, cutting across him. “I mean, I’ve got room and the Yamanaka clan would totally—”

“Why can’t I stay here with you at least sometimes?” Hayate griped, interrupting Obito in turn. “You get to see this weird place, with ‘trains’ and ‘cell phones’ and all this other weird stuff we don’t have.”

“Because I’m the one who got the mission,” Kei told him, standing. “And, well, just look out here.”

Hayate got up and followed Kei to the window, with Obito trailing and peeking over both of the Gekkō kids’ shoulders.

Though the view wasn’t great, Kei’s apartment was on the fifteenth floor. The two boys pressed their faces to the window until she unlocked the sliding door and let them out onto the balcony, though Obito needn’t have waited. All three of them piled out onto it, dodging a potted aloe plant and staring out into the city skyline.

There was a lot of skyline.

“Whoa,” Hayate breathed. “Sis, the lights—it’s so bright even this late?”
“Holy shit,” said Obito, leaning as far out onto the railing as Kei would let him. “People live in places this big?”

“All packed in like sardines, yeah,” Kei told them, settling her weight onto her back foot. “And I’m the only one of us who won’t gape like a fish all the time.”

“I think we could probably—” Obito began.

“Obito, no,” Kei said flatly. “You two can stay over sometimes, if you want, but this is a mission.” Kei glanced back into the apartment and the still-lit nightstand lamp. She’d put it on the floor for lack of better options. “Only on the weekends. I have to attend school soon.”

“I heard about that,” Obito admitted, then clapped her on the shoulder. “Better you than me!”

“Same,” said Hayate, pushing away from the balcony railing.

Kei groaned. “Shut up.”

“You sure you don’t want to head home for a bit?” Obito asked, as though that was within the bounds of his role as people-mover. Technically, Hayate wasn’t supposed to be here either.

“The only reason I’m staying the entire two-month gap is because I’m required to get a feel for the place,” Kei said, shaking her head. “It’s been a week. I’m learning. Maybe once I have neighbors invested enough to ask where I’m going on weekends…” Kei frowned. “I’m supposed to establish something like a life. The other students and uninformed hero-teachers can’t know why I’m here.”

Neither boy hid how much hearing that disappointed them. Sure, they tried, but Kei could read chakra and right now theirs and hers was the only available data.

“I got you stuff,” Kei said into the silence.

“So did we!” Obito and Hayate reported, before elbowing each other for speaking in unison.

Gifts were exchanged (Hayate made a face at the identical onesies, then smiled at the local sweets, while Kei and Obito compared kunai with posable action figures), the boys were ushered away, and Kei continued acclimating to Tokyo with a promise of being in the apartment at the same time next week.

That was different.

No, that was familiar. A good kind.

True enough.
Japanese high schools apparently had a thing for non-academic days.

Kei’s first day in the UA school uniform involved waking up on a Sunday on the day before term started, walking to the train station after burning breakfast, and jogging to the campus in time to meet the homeroom teacher for class 1-C. There wasn’t enough time to get through class introductions, and Kei couldn’t recall any familiar faces because she definitely hadn’t actually been paying attention during the entrance exams two months back.

So, whoops. Double whoops for failing to realize ahead of time that Kayama-sensei (the R-18 Hero Midnight) definitely wore her hero outfit to work and being caught with a “what the fuck” expression on her face.

Isobu spent the trip through the crowded halls asking questions Kei would prefer not to answer. Is that what you call a dominatrix?

Pretty sure, yeah. Kei could see the spikes of blue-black hair as Kayama-sensei led her homeroom through the halls, after the principal’s Mickey Mouse voice informed everyone that it was time to assemble.

The entire first-year class assembled in the auditorium, with one notable exception.

“Eraser’s doing his thing, I see,” said Kayama-sensei to cockatoo-head from the entrance exams. “Mic, did you already place your bet?”

“Yes. Someone has to be the optimist around here. Maybe he won’t expel half his homeroom class on day one.”

“Banking on day two?”

“…Maybe.”

Oh, so that was Present Mic. Weird how some teachers seemed to prefer going by their hero names. Maybe locals just knew them better that way? Kei tried to imagine calling Sensei “Yellow Flash” just to get through the day, and immediately failed.

And that intrusive thought stuck with her for the next hour, because the principal proceeded to talk like he was being paid per word. It really looked like the principal had an invisibility Quirk, because someone seemed to have forgotten that he needed a few phonebooks to so much as see over it. Kei had no idea what the other students were making of the apparent disembodied voice.

While Kei played mental Tic-Tac-Toe with Isobu (which eventually became a matter of “best out of
fifty”), she scanned the incoming class for any standouts. Sure, she was in the General Studies section, but there were a mess of characters from Heroics. She could see a kid who looked like Bigfoot wearing a uniform, a student with a speech bubble for a head (seriously), Vine Girl, a yellow golem, someone whose skin was literally entirely black, somebody with a praying mantis head, and a girl with giant horns and quadruped-style legs. That was pretty impressively weird, even by Kei’s standards. Even if, per Midnight-sensei’s commentary, there seemed to be twenty students and an extra homeroom teacher missing.

Hrm.

From her mission briefing and a fair amount of informal research, Kei knew the absent class was 1-A, run by pro hero Eraserhead. There wasn’t nearly as much information on him as the rest of the staff, because apparently underground heroes were also a thing. Kind of a letdown in some ways.

Ah, well. Kayama-sensei at least seemed nice.

**What exactly do we think the General Studies department does?** Isobu wondered aloud, tails curling curiously. **Unless I miss my mark, no one in this assigned area will become a hero. We are only using this as a cover.**

*I kind of assumed it’s like normal high school, but taught by heroes.* Kei shrugged, because there wasn’t much else to do while the principal rambled on. *It’ll...be interesting.*

**That is what you say when you are being diplomatic.**

*I try, okay?*

Eventually the lot of them were freed from the tyrannical monologue and allowed to head back to their homerooms.

“Not you,” said a voice by Kei’s knee, and she looked down to find Principal Nezu’s snout pointed squarely in her direction. “If you could come to the staff room instead, Gekkō-kun, it would be appreciated.”

**As long as I get a pass to class,** Kei thought, before wordlessly following Nezu through the school.

And the staff room, perhaps owing to Nezu’s rodent physique, didn’t bother with ladders or anything. He clambered gamely up onto a shelf and started making tea, ordering Kei to sit on the lone chair opposite the couch.

“Are you wondering why I asked you to come here?” Nezu asked, and Kei hadn’t quite finished nodding before he went on, “Of course you are. Gekkō-kun, how have you been adapting to this city? To the school?”

**Hard to tell, given that I’m missing homeroom.** “There are still gaps in my education, but I know UA will fill them.”

“Ah, spoken like a student. Well done for getting into your role.” Nezu placed tea in front of her, then hopped up onto the couch without spilling a drop of his own. “Your teacher has told me that I should expect to see a young man with a warp not-Quirk around you with some frequency. Uchiha Obito, I believe.”

“He’s my contact.” Obito didn’t make much of a “handler,” seeing as he had a documented tendency to launch himself right into any situation that could conceivably require his assistance. Cats in trees
Nezu took a long sip of tea. “Only those he cares about?”

Well, there’s me and there’s the other guy with half his original eyeballs. Obito actually had a better targeting scheme when it came to locations than people, but he could manage. “Sometimes. It’s not something we could test.”

“I see. Well, Gekkō-kun, do you feel it would be useful if Uchiha-kun was on call for you?” Nezu’s whiskers twitched. “Especially after meeting the Heroics students.”

Oh. So Nezu wanted her to focus her efforts on the classes most likely to get into fights with villains and survive? Interesting tactic, but Kei didn’t have enough information to know who would be the most at risk in those classes.

“He’s already on-call for me. I’ll ask if he wants to meet them outside of class, since he can’t pass for a student here.” Not that Obito would want to, given his thoughts on his last brush with an educational system. The problem was mainly that, at this point in the year, there was no way to squeak his paperwork past all the prying eyes focused on the top hero school in the country.

Besides that, while he was already sixteen, Obito also had an ANBU-derived disguise and a codename and wasn’t going to be shy about using them to get around in Japan if he had to. Better a vigilante than a random schoolkid, in his opinion.

And Kei had, through transformation techniques and various outfits provided by Sensei or the shinobi corps, also acquired a “work” disguise. The only thing she didn’t have was a vocoder that would fit inside an ANBU mask, but to hell with it. She just had to layer Isobu’s resonance over her own, if it came down to it.

The lower tones, I hope.

Of course.

“That works!” The principal smiled, thankfully without showing his teeth. One of his ears twitched, and a second later Kei heard very faint footsteps coming down the hallway. Someone was very careful to step only on where nailheads would be, it seemed. Principal Nezu continued cheerily, “Now, Gekkō-kun, regarding behavior expectations at this school—”

The staff room door slid open, admitting a scruffy-looking man in a black jumpsuit. He looked like he hadn’t slept in about a year and had a scowl to match. If Kei squinted and turned her brain about ninety degrees, she could recognize…

“You wanted to see me?” the guy said, without preamble or honorifics beyond the bare minimum.

Yep. Definitely the missing homeroom teacher.

“You can go now, Gekkō-kun,” the principal said. As though anyone would believe that someone with a super intelligence Quirk would forget the daily schedule. Kei didn’t know if the principal planned on informing his staff, but that was his decision. She’d be informed later.

Freaking outside contracts.

Kei stopped long enough to get a hall pass, then skittered back to 1-C. She arrived, after knocking, just in time for introductions.
Hooray.

Hush, you.

Well, the tail end thereof. The purple-haired kid with eyebags almost as bad as hers had left his name on the board (it read, *Shinsō Hitoshi*) and was in the process of actually sitting back down, so that was easy enough to figure out. Once Kayama-sensei got the hall pass and promptly turned the whole class’s attention to her, well…

Kei sighed inwardly and wrote *Gekkō Keisuke* on the board. Probably the easiest cover name to remember in the history of infiltration missions.

Isobu rolled his eye. Inventive.

*I don’t exactly have a reputation to protect here. Not like anyone will call me “Keisuke” here without notarized permission.* That was another thing Konoha didn’t quite have: people addressing each other by family names by default. Amazing what a few centuries of continuous clan warfare would do to a society.

“Please take care of me.” Kei bowed, and any whispers from the class were cut off as Kayama-sensei snapped her flogging whip down on the desk. Kei flinched mostly for effect.

“Do you want to share your Quirk?” Kayama-sensei asked, once the excitement was over.

“Oh!” Kei made a show of thinking about it. “My Quirk is called Tsunami. I can create and control huge amounts of water.”

Which anybody who’d been in her exam arena would know all too well, unfortunately for them. All Might’s condolence video had made a point of mentioning that she was one of a select few students to beat the practical and enroll entirely on “villain points” from destroyed robots. It certainly hadn’t been Kei’s written scores that did the trick.

“Very good. Now, get to your seat.” Kayama-sensei pointed out a desk by a window—Convenient, Kei thought—before returning to the demo desk at the front of the room to hand out curriculum packets and class schedules.

It seemed that homeroom took the place of what Kei knew better as “study hall” or whatever the hell it was called in schools in America. There was one teacher who met the same group of twenty students every day, class competitions and assembly spaces were organized by homeroom, and teachers themselves rotated in and out of the various classrooms. While Midnight would be back to teach Modern Hero Art History (which Kei was going to fail), teachers like Present Mic and Cementoss taught English (which Kei planned to pass) and Modern Literature (also a total wash).

Kei rested her head on her upraised fist.

*Here we go, then.*

**Tomorrow.**

Chapter End Notes

Say hello to class 1-C.
Kei has her first day of classes, which goes as expected until it doesn’t.

True to form, Kei sat through four classes with a completely blank expression before lunch. Modern Hero Art History was going to be a complete nightmare, while Mathematics and English were…at least translatable, kind of. She knew how English worked, and she at least knew numbers didn’t tend to shift much between cultures. But it’d been a very long time since she’d done literary analysis on anything more complicated than ROOT reports pulled from the depths of Shimura clan holdings.

It was pretty miserable.

Also, it turned out that being the only kid in General Studies who’d gotten in on the power of smashing giant robots made Kei something of a standout. Kayama-sensei had told her, while probably trying not to laugh, that Kei’s education up to this point had clearly been about as well-rounded as a cactus. This, of course, meant that Kei had an appointment with the guidance/career counselor next week.

While Kei resented the drain on her time, Kayama-sensei wasn’t exactly wrong. The academic problems she faced were quite real, but training to be a shinobi from the age of five meant Kei laughed off physical challenges.

Case in point: PE.

See, physical education consisted of pretty modest exercises by Kei’s standards. More or less. Push-ups, pull-ups, and “consecutive side-hops” made appearances, as did the fifty-meter dash and long jump, grip strength, and so on. And even in cases where people had variously-useful Quirks to assist them, ranging from Extendable Nails (not terribly impressive) to Tooth Shedding (what the fuck) to Prehensile Hair (better), Kei neatly outperformed them in at least three categories. Her scores were within the top four of every single test, at minimum.

It hadn’t exactly made her any friends. Especially since, due to her brief absence on the day of the opening ceremony, some of the students were convinced she was new record holder for “shortest time between enrollment and disciplinary issues” in the school’s history. Kei had done nothing to dispel this idea, because zoning out during study periods to chat with Isobu was more likely to keep her awake than listening. Even if it did mean Kayama-sensei waved her whip threateningly.

It probably wasn’t a great strategy to avoid her fellow 1-C students, but the principal’s orders had been clear regarding the Heroics kids. Kei mostly observed from the far end of the cafeteria, noting Explosion Kid and Engine-Legs as well as others with physical Quirks and less inclination to randomly explode something. Getting Obito to meet these kids could be a pain in the ass unless she could grab them after school.

That’d probably be kidnapping. Not the best plan, especially if the Heroics kids were gonna do battle trials all afternoon.

She’d have to talk to Obito and see who she could run into.
And then it was back to class.

**Three in a row. I win.**

Kei mentally crossed out the board. *How about Connect Four?*

**Verticality will not make it any easier for you to beat me.**

The argument in Kei’s head went on for a while, blotting out Modern Literature, before a student stuck their head in the classroom door. “Um, is Gekkō Keisuke in this class?”

Kei felt the every student’s eyes on her when she raised her hand.

“Again?” Cementoss’s brick-flat face turned to her, then said, “Go ahead, Gekkō-san.”

The principal would have to make sure Kei got some kind of official excuse for this shit. Even if she ended up with a disciplinary record that looked like a villain in the making, there had to be something to justify all the absences. Though, on their own, the repeated absences could at least justify Kei’s terrible grades.

It turned out that the principal wasn’t alone in the staff room this time.

“Gekkō-kun, this is Aizawa-sensei from the Heroics course,” was what the principal said.

Kei saw a yellow sleeping bag on the couch, piled high with empty juice pouches. It twitched occasionally, and Nezu was sitting on it.

Isobu considered the situation, then said, **Of course we are expected to work with a walking eccentricity. Sleeping bags, really.**

*I suddenly feel so well put-together,* Kei sighed inwardly. Despite wearing her shirt untucked and tie just badly. It wouldn’t have been outside the scope of some high schools to write her up for that alone.

Kei still trooped across the room and sat in the lonely little folding chair, hands on her lap and back straight. Pretending not to notice the situation, she said, “Nice to meet you, Aizawa-sensei.”

“The feeling is not mutual.” The figure in the yellow sleeping bag sat up, revealing exactly the same scruffy man from the day before. Or at least his face, because apparently he couldn’t be assed to actually employ the zipper. “You’re the General Studies problem child.”

Kei nodded, though it hardly seemed to matter.

“Gekkō-kun is legitimately a student,” Nezu said, “but I thought it would be best if she explained her purpose here. If you would, Gekkō-kun?”

“I was ordered to enroll in UA as a part of an undercover operation,” Kei rattled off without letting her expression change. “While attending classes in General Studies, I am required to act as a security operative for the safety of the students currently attending UA, at least until the end of the academic year.”

Aizawa-sensei clearly had several thoughts on that front, though Kei could only tell by watching his face for the most minute tics. He, like some ANBU she’d known, had a poker face to end all poker faces. Or maybe he was just so sleep-deprived he didn’t give a shit.
Probably both.

“It’s a good thing you’re in General Studies,” Aizawa-sensei said, eying her every bit as warily as Kei was him. “Or else I would have already expelled you.”

Nezu laughed. “You have to admit you have no aptitude for hero work, Gekkō-kun.”

Kei shrugged. “I didn’t apply to Heroics. I know my limitations.”

“So, is your Quirk also a fabrication?” Like your life, Aizawa-sensei didn’t say. Kei could still hear it loud and clear.

“My registered Quirk comprises about…one-sixth of my actual abilities.” Kei had no real intention of getting into the details of that, and as a shinobi was legally obligated to keep ninjutsu a secret where possible. As a student in a high school, full disclosure was more acceptable.

Kei didn’t care.

And neither do I.

Still, there was something she could do here. Reaching into her uniform pocket, she withdrew a slip of paper and set it carefully on the table. Written on it was, among other things, Obito’s name in kanji he barely ever used, “Kamui,” and a mess of other directive information before Kei’s handwriting devolved into nothing but especially dangerous fūinjutsu scribbling.

“If you carry one of these and tear it in half, it acts as a beacon for an agent with a warp Quirk.” Kei sat back as Nezu retrieved the seal for Aizawa-sensei. “He knows where I am, and he can come get me if trouble happens.”

“It would be best if your friend came here first,” Principal Nezu said as the paper disappeared into the folds of sleeping bag. “Then we can make the necessary excuses to have you careening across campus into danger.”

Kei didn’t let her face shift. “I’ll explain it to him tonight. Hopefully nothing will happen before the system is in place.”

And, in hindsight, saying that might’ve jinxed them.
Evacuation Drills

Chapter Summary

Emergency exit Iida comes and goes, and UA needs to run more fire drills.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Oh, sure,” was Obito’s response to the entire idea. It did mean he’d need to stay at Kei’s apartment overnight before following her to school like a wall-permeating goofball. If there was one great weakness of the beacon system Kei and Sensei had put together with Kushina and Obito’s help, it was that Obito needed to be awake for them to be effective. There was only one space-time manipulator they were keyed to, and he was mortal.

Not for the first time, I wish there was some way to give you your teacher’s power.

I think the last person who tried that got turned into shredded cabbage.

Sensei had tried to teach Kei and Kakashi a version of the Flying Thunder God jutsu, but they only really had the Formation edition. Which required three people. Something about the original technique seemed to draw on a quirk (hah) of Sensei’s physiology. Trying the full technique, safeties or not, had been the death of a few people in Iwa who thought they could reverse-engineer the most dangerous technique known.

Anyway, the second real day of term had started all right. It didn’t say that way, but mornings were sneaky that way.

Obito stayed over, trying to force his body clock to understand what time zones were. Kei made breakfast for both of them, then left Obito snoozing on the spare futon with the expectation he’d stumble out of bed for real later on. She’d even taped a note to his forehead, over his remaining eye, and made sure his medicated eyedrops were within easy reach.

Taking the train to school, Kei paused in front of the building. Which was, unfortunately, swarming with reporters. To the point that they were stopping students, sometimes backing down if they recognized the bands and shoulder patches of departments that weren’t Heroics. It seemed that, for whatever reason, they smelled blood in the water.

“What’s it like learning from All Might??”

“Tell us about All Might, the teacher!”

Oh.

I feel as though this was somewhat predictable.

You know what they say. “Don’t ask questions you don’t want the answer to.”

It is a little disappointing, Isobu admitted. Come to think of it, we have not seen the man since the confirmation videos, have we?
Kei sighed, not for the first time, and glanced around for familiar faces. The Heroics kids were easy to spot, because she’d actually put in the time to memorize them, but she couldn’t make out any of her 1-C classmates. Or any of the other General Studies kids, either.

But she did see a guy with white-blue hair picking at his face way at the back of the crowd. As in, so far back he could see the entire crowd and every kid who was trying to muscle past it, because dammit, the bell was going to ring soon. He didn’t smile, but his chapped face and red eyes were pointed pretty determinedly at the gates for somebody without a press armband or video equipment.

*Isobu? Note to self: that dude’s a creep.* And Kei had strong opinions about what ought to be done to creeps.

Tsunade’s wrath was the world’s most terrifying deterrent, but very effective as an object lesson. Different type of creep, but Kei would settle for breaking different ribs if the opportunity came up. There were no points for originality.

**It would be the first genuinely interesting thing to happen here,** Isobu muttered.

He might as well have said, “Nothing interesting ever happens here. In a school for heroes. Speaking of, what’s the life insurance policy here?”

Kei wasn’t any better, but still. She snapped a photo of Creeper anyway, just to be safe.

With one eye on Creeper, Kei ducked through the mob of reporters. She “accidentally” stomped on insteps and threw elbows, issuing rapid-fire apologies that didn’t have time to land before she was already causing the next offense. This was what she got for taking the second train instead of the first: the irreplaceable experience of having to deal with someone else having a celebrity teacher. It was quite a turnaround.

“Sorry, I’m gonna be late!” Kei shouted over her shoulder, before darting to safety inside the school’s gates. She almost got clocked by a reporter’s foam-padded microphone, but whether through hero training (ha!) or just being all too used to weird things flying at her face, she escaped unscathed.

Class, as it turned out, was exactly as it had been yesterday. She got a message from the principal’s office saying Obito had safely arrived (and was napping with Nezu using him as a backrest, apparently), but things were starting to settle into a slump by the time lunch rolled around. As they had on the first day of term.

Kei was tempted to poke at the table with the Ingenium family scion, but wasn’t quite able to work up the motivation before the fire alarm went off.

Well, intruder alarm. But still.

Kei, who had been about to just make Isobu flip a coin and make her decision for her, found that with every single first-year student in the damned building forming a panicked crush towards who-knew-where, there wasn’t much of a choice at all. Instead, she whipped out her phone and started checking her messages, even with the alarms blaring.

“Hey, should you really be doing that right now?!” squeaked some kid from Business.

Kei shrugged. “If you think I’m gonna fight that crowd, you’re wrong.”
Obito’s text was quite slow to arrive due to a lack of practice.

**Cyclops:** principle said intruder youo ok?

Kei fought to keep a smile off her face. Aw, he was learning how to use tech. Faster than Sensei, too. She texted back:

**TMNT-TNT:** I’m fine. Where’s the breach?

**Cyclops:** front. lots of cameras and mics.

**Cyclops:** mayb newspapeer poeple.

**TMNT-TNT:** Is the gate intact?

**Cyclops:** no? Tehy put 2 heroes theree…Cockatoo and Gloomyface.

Shit. Aizawa-sensei and Present Mic out of the picture, then. To Obito, Kei texted:

**TMNT-TNT:** Patrol. Teh loud place isn’t where we need ot look.

**Cyclops:** Ok.

**Cyclops:** meet you in 15.

And for better or for worse, Obito stopped responding after that. She hoped he had the sense to pretend to be a student or something, even if few high school students would type poorly that particular way without either a meme, running joke, or pranks getting in their way.

Nonetheless, when Kei was about to get up and dump the remainder of her lunch tray—just because it seemed like the doing thing to run around in a theatrical panic when crammed into the hallways like some kind of humanoid sardines—the students started filtering back in. Kei had missed whatever quelled the impending riot, and probably the riot itself. That said, the Heroics kids even got to make it back to their tables.

*Couldn’t have been that important.*

“That was pointless,” commented Eyebags, whose name Kei had already forgotten. It was hard to miss that kind of poofy purple hair on someone taller than her, though.

“What happened?” Kei asked.

“One of the Hero students pinwheeled across the hallway and decided to be an exit sign,” was the only answer she got. Eyebags might’ve been in her class, but they weren’t friends, and he was already walking away.

_Hm._ Kei decided that it was probably time to stop tiptoeing around, and cleared her throat just behind the green-haired kid’s shoulder.

Poor guy whipped around on the spot like she’d dropped a plate, already half-poised to act. Then his brain caught up with his reflexes. “Oh, uh, hi! Do I know you?”

“I don’t think you would.” Kei nodded down at her uniform sleeves, which had different stripe arrangements than his. “Gekkō Keisuke, from General Studies. I, uh, overheard you guys were responsible for nobody getting hurt a second ago?”
“That is a vast overstatement of our importance in averting disaster,” said the kid with glasses who…

Yep, that was Enginelegs. “It was a matter of teamwork, not individual acclaim.”

“I only did a bit, Iida-kun!” said the girl with brown hair in a bob.

“And I didn’t do anything!” said the green-haired boy.

“Sounds like all of you are too modest.” Kei bowed her head slightly. “I’m sorry, I didn’t get your names besides Iida-kun…?”

“Uraraka Ochako!”

“And Midoriya Izuku,” added the last kid. “And really, it was nothing!”

There is no way you are going to remember these names unless I step in, Isobu complained.

“Keep that modesty in check,” Kei told Midoriya, only half-seriously. “What’ll you do if you really accomplish something super-cool? Gonna downplay it or own it? Heroes need to have confidence!”

“Oh…” Midoriya paused, just for a second. “I’ll—”

“We’ll make sure he thinks about it, Gekkō-san!” said Uraraka, and Kei took that as an opportunity to leave.

A little later, lunch period ended. While everyone trooped back to their classrooms, Kei’s phone buzzed. Unfortunately, Obito’s message would have to wait just a little longer, because a boy from who-the-fuck-knew got in her way as she was about to leave the room.

“They’ll leave you behind, you know. So stay in your lane, Gen Studies,” he said.

Oh, so this was that tall poppy crab bucket bullshit. To think she’d assumed she’d left the daily grind at home.

“Mind your own business. You’re making me late for class,” Kei told him in a flat tone.

“Gekkō!”

“Dammit, in trouble again.” Kei ducked past the blond kid without a further word.

While he watched, trying to drill holes in her back from his glare, Kei trudged after the latest teacher to get in her way and hid a smile, because it didn’t take a sensor to identify Obito under a Transformation jutsu. Aizawa-sensei and Present Mic were out of the building to deal with the trespassing public, so there were that many fewer teachers to catch Kei skipping.

Obito dragged Kei to the principal’s office, then poofed back to normal once the door was shut.

“The front gate got disintegrated,” Obito reported, once they were settled. “And so did like ten internal doors when I poked around.”

“That’s a very specific term to use,” commented the principal.

“It’s a really specific thing.” Obito nudged Kei with one gloved hand. “And Kei, didn’t you say you wanted to show me somebody’s picture?”

“Yeah.” Kei whipped out her phone and scrolled through the camera roll, which was mostly filled with touristy shots and “reminder” notes she was never going to read on such a tiny screen. When
she found Creeper’s profile shot, she flipped the screen around and set the phone down on Principal Nezu’s desk.

“And I almost ran into this blond guy,” Obito went on, while Nezu peered down at the somewhat grainy photo. Kei hadn’t wanted to get caught snooping; she’d wanted to break Creeper’s bones. “I guess there’s someone else here who can walk through walls?”

“This is the most prestigious heroics high school in the country,” Nezu said instead of answering the actual question. “Until we can find out what the infiltrators took, predicting their movements becomes more difficult.” He looked up. “But I have no doubt they did take something. Information, most likely. And if this young man is involved…”

Obito and Kei looked at each other, then shrugged. Kei said, “We’ll be on call.”

“You should.” Nezu paused. “Gekkō-kun, Uchiha-kun, our students are the most important part of this institution. If events transpire… Do everything you can to protect them, alongside our faculty.”

There wasn’t any arguing with that.

Obito left the school to report back to Sensei, at least for a little, and Kei returned to class with yet another note apologizing to Cementoss about the principal monopolizing her time. At this rate she’d qualify for remedial classes before the first month was over.

At some point, her reputation as a trouble student was going to be impenetrable.

It couldn’t come fast enough.

Chapter End Notes

Kei and Obito have cell phones. Fear them.
Field Trip

Chapter Summary

Kei lays down the law, and the law is promptly picked up again and used as a bludgeon.

In what was clearly becoming a pattern, the third day of term was the worst yet.

It started fine. Everything started fine. Days always looked like they were going to shape up perfectly normal and mean Kei would just have to make it through an endurance test masquerading as a high school education. Sure, Obito was in the building with his security pass practically nailed to his eyepatch, waiting for trouble, but it honestly seemed like the day was going to be normal for like a minute or two.

Kayama-sensei was in the middle of taking homeroom attendance when the note arrived, demanding Kei’s presence.

“Four for four,” commented some kid diagonally to Kei’s left.

“That’s our Gen Studies problem child,” grumbled someone else.

Kei debated flipping them off, but that would be pointless. She left her school bag—but not her cell phone—in the room as she trotted wordlessly out of 1-C. Maybe she should save everyone’s time and just start messing with the school uniform so people would write her off as a delinquent. The longer skirt would be a pain, though…

But when Kei arrived, Obito was alone in the principal’s office in full ANBU uniform, complete with the Crane mask. Without his bright smile, the shadows in the room emphasized his height and the faint red glow of his single Sharingan.

Well, shit.

“That guy triggered the beacon seal.” Obito threw a parcel of clothes, topped with a mask, at Kei. “I let the principal know, but the teachers can’t teleport. Come on.”

Kei took Obito’s right hand and found herself in the thin air of the Kamui pocket dimension, and immediately changed into the ANBU uniform. Her mask, marked up more in line with Isobu’s features, slotted into place last, and she folded up her school uniform to store it out of the way.

“I didn’t go look yet,” Obito said, as he joined her in the land of cubes and pillars. “But uh, if you wanna just V2 and launch that way…”

I vote for that option.

…Y’know, so do I.

With that, Kei reached down into her chakra coils and put a figurative hand against Isobu’s much larger one. Isobu’s face might not have been able to smile, but Kei could feel his power thrumming eagerly at her fingertips. The past few days of petty insults and forced inactivity grated on his nerves, too. Kei didn’t even need to put her request into words before Isobu was raring to go.
Kei vanished under the crimson chakra cloak. Her stance changed entirely, becoming hunched as though the sudden spectral shell across her back was weighing her down. Two blood-red spiked tails trailed from the base, and her head was replaced by a blank-eyed face with a glowing mouth full of conical spike-teeth, half-hidden by blunt horns arranged in a crown. Between the armor plates half-manifested on her arms and the bulk of Isobu’s shell, there was no way she’d be pegged as a disheveled high school student.

Obito raised a hand to his mask, framing the round eyehole he actually used. With his other fist, he gave her a cheery thumbs-up. “Okay. I’ve got a lock, but you’re going through first. Don’t get hurt before I get there!”

Kei, though it was distorted heavily by echoey overlay from Isobu, definitely laughed. The shockwave from the transformation could still be contained by Kamui, at least. Nothing else about her would be.

Obito laughed, too. As a rip in space-time formed in midair, he shouted, “Fire in the hole!”

Kei dove through, and was immediately surrounded by a whole mob of villains.

This is what we call a target-rich environment.

Yep!

This situation was, it had to be said, because Obito only knew where Aizawa-sensei had been when the Bat-Signal went up. He’d told her he didn’t know what the inside of this wannabe Sapporo Dome would be like, and Kei knew introducing a pissed off jinchūriki had a way of making all the nearby problems rethink their priorities.

To emphasize that, the fanged jaw dropped open and let loose a battle cry that sent several of the still-standing villains scurrying.

Chickenface McMuscles snarled back, sounding like someone had stomped on his throat. Pinned and apparently unconscious underneath him was Aizawa-sensei, one arm thoroughly mangled in a hand the size of a human torso. There was blood all over the floor, too, and Kei was willing to bet that most of it was his.

Not good.

Later, Kei would find some humor in the situation once she learned how the villains had made their dastardly entrance. Teleporting seventy-odd villains and a giant chicken-faced monster into a building filled with civilian children (no matter their Quirks) to bait out and kill the Symbol of Peace was quite an evil plan. Aizawa-sensei and Thirteen wouldn't have been enough to hold the line alone, because if nothing else Chickenface McMuscles was a heavy hitter.

And all of that was being countered by teleporting another inhuman monster into the building.

Kei lowered her head like a bull, keeping both the big monster and his beanpole accomplice in line of sight. In the moment, she had her priorities. Civilians, allies, and neutral parties needed to be saved. And the fastest way to do that was to take the rest of Brainiac’s head off his bulging shoulders.

“Go, Nōmu,” said the guy in the back field, and the creature attacked as dutifully as a Pokémon.

Kei dropped onto all fours just in time to take Nōmu’s offhand punch square on her chakra shell. The concrete beneath her hands and feet buckled, whether she transferred the impact fully or not, but then
Kei’s two available tails looped around Nōmu’s wrists before traveling up his arms. Ten-centimeter spikes dug into the jet-black skin, seeking muscle and bone.

Kei punched it in the face with Isobu’s chakra behind the blow. And a second, and a third, being sure to aim at eyes, jaw, and exposed brain.

Nōmu snarled back as though she hadn’t just unloaded strikes strong enough to toss a pickup truck like a tin can, broken teeth bared.

Rasengan?

On it.

Two glowing blue spheres bloomed in and outside of Nōmu’s arms, and they both exploded. Bone crumbled. Blood flew. With a pair of wet thuds, chunks of Nōmu slammed into the concrete and Kei tossed the remnants contemptuously aside.

The creature staggered backward, unbalanced even before Kei formed a third Rasengan on the tip of one of the tails and slammed it into the beak like a bastardized uppercut. Blood spurted from each shattered upper arm, but erratically. It probably had some kind of physical enhancement beyond the norm to survive those, but Kei was already springing forward to cut the big guy off from Aizawa-sensei—

Nōmu promptly sprouted two new lower arms from the stumps. Flesh and bone creaked as the creature snapped back to normal as though they’d been shoved through a Play-Doh mold. The enthusiastic spaghetti kind.

What the fuck, Kei thought, even as she roared a new challenge at the now-recovered enemy.

That does not seem like it follows conservation of mass.

Not the time, Isobu!

Nōmu charged, and Kei slammed her twinned tails into the ground as an anchor so she could meet it.

“Don’t you know using cheats is against the rules?” hissed the beanpole behind the bulky black mountain. He was scratching frantically at his throat, visible red eye wild behind his…mask. “Especially against bosses!”

Kei snapped her fingers inside her head. While Isobu amused himself by making their fake jaws drool spontaneously-created water, Kei said, It's Creeper! Only, damn, maybe I should’ve named him Facepalm.

It is as deliberate as ours. Isobu sent the manifested tails curling over Kei’s back, like a scorpion’s. You drive.

A punch glanced off her shell, only to be met by a neat judo flip to smash his exposed brainpan into concrete. Out of reach of Aizawa or anyone else, because Kei did have some situational awareness.

Hopefully he wouldn’t get his other arm removed by Facepalm-kun before Obito came back.

“Nōmu, kill it!”

Nōmu was fast, Kei would give it that. But Gekkō Keisuke, jinchūriki to Isobu the Three-Tailed Beast, had been trained for combat by the fucking Yellow Flash. She sparred with Maito Gai as a
hobby. She got schooled by Uzumaki Kushina and Kurama once a week, had been raised alongside the strongest Uchiha of the current generation, fought with the scion of the Hatake clan, and was nobody’s mere stepping stone.

If Facepalm-kun and Nōmu thought they were going to kill anyone here, they were about to learn the most painful lesson Kei could dole out: total defeat.

Kei and Nōmu didn’t trade punches. Kei had already seen how that worked out, and whatever bullshit he could do with kinetic energy wasn’t her problem when she had so many other options. So while Nōmu bounced blow after blow off the Isobu-derived shell, sending shockwaves rippling through the air after each hit, Kei dug in with every scrap of control she possessed.

A water bubble gathered on the tip of the left tail of the chakra cloak, slamming forward into Nōmu’s face. Instead of exploding or grinding his skull into meat paste, the water engulfed Nōmu’s beaked head whole. The tail-tip had to stay embedded, even in such a small water prison, but Kei slammed her hand up and into the globe to get to work.

Even if chakra scalpels weren’t Kei’s forte, V2 meant she could choke Nōmu into submission by jamming coral down his throat.

“So annoying,” muttered Facepalm-kun, finally audible without Nōmu’s croaking cries polluting the air.

**Three o’clock.**

*I see him.* Kei grinned under the V2 cloak.

But just as Isobu redirected the other tail to pulverizing Facepalm-kun’s ribs like she’d promised, the villain snapped a hand out like a snake and wrapped his fingers around it before it could strike him.

This was—out of all available tactical decisions—probably not the worst idea in context. It just wasn’t good.

Facepalm-kun hissing in pain and backed off almost as soon as five fingers settled onto the whirling energy waveform. Sure, he’d disintegrated the outermost coating of the V2 cloak fairly well, which accomplished jack and shit. As Isobu laughed in Kei’s head, she saw the chakra flake away only to a) reveal absolutely nothing underneath it and b) instantly reform, because the V2 cloak was only a shape. There was no candy in the middle of this piñata.

The V2 cloak had as nasty of a tendency of dissolving human flesh as Facepalm-kun’s hands did. And it seemed like Facepalm had just withered all the skin off his hand. So much for fingerprinting.

*Whoops for him.*

And then Isobu whipped out the third tail and punched Facepalm-kun in the ribs with a manifested fist. He fell back with a shocked wheeze, doubling over before Isobu could bat his head off his shoulders.

Nōmu punched Kei in the head at this point, which at least kept her from dying of laughter in the meantime. Black knuckles split on one of Kei’s energy horns, but the blow was weaker than before. Apparently, breathing through calcified sea life wasn’t a Quirk here.

A quiet ping on her chakra sense meant Obito was back, though it seemed to have taken him a while. He was way up on the entrance platform, though.
Then a guy made of black mist was hurled like a sack of potatoes into the central area, because that was just what Kei needed today. More villains.

And at that point, Facepalm-kun lurched back upright. Despite his busted ribs and the fact that his pet science experiment was clearly being suffocated, Kei heard him say, “Dammit. No All Might, Nōmu’s losing to some cheating freak, and no dead kids…yet.” He eyed the Darkest Fog Cloud. “Kurogiri… What happened?”

“I…one of them got away.”

“If you weren’t so important, I’d kill you.”

No honor among child-killers, apparently.

Did you notice?

*Did I notice what?* Kei grumped, as Nōmu’s struggling started to slow.

Isobu sent her a snapshot of the nearby pool and the craters around it, including three fifteen-year-olds trying to sneak Aizawa-sensei away from the fight Kei had well in hand. One frog girl, one purple kid about half anybody’s height, and…dammit, that was Midoriya. Well, this would make any conversation tomorrow awkward, at least on Kei’s part.

*Oh wait shit—*

Several things happened at once:

Facepalm-kun lunged for the frog girl, at a speed she clearly hadn’t been trained to react to. Even if she had, she was carrying Aizawa-sensei.

Isobu sent the spare tail spiraling after Facepalm-kun’s leg with full intent of ripping it off at the knee—

Midoriya crackled with red lines of energy, backed by green, and threw a punch directly for Facepalm-kun in sheer terror—

Nōmu’s eyes bulged comically and he *ripped* himself out of Kei’s grip, leaving most of his throat and half of his upper chest behind—

Isobu roared through Kei’s mouth, briefly thwarted—

Aizawa-sensei snapped awake with his eyes glowing red and hair flying around his head, the exact second Facepalm-kun’s hand touched the frog girl’s face—

Nōmu practically teleported into place directly between Facepalm-kun and the punch that might’ve decapitated a person and grabbed Midoriya’s arm—

—And in the half-a-heartbeat of heartstopping terror, Facepalm-kun had just enough time to chuckle ruefully, saying, “You’re pretty cool, Eraserhe—”

And then a lot of other things happened at once:

Obito warped in and jammed a kunai into the hand acting as Facepalm-kun’s mask, fourteen meters of wood springing out of his arm entirely on reflex and forcing the villain away from the kids before he got horribly impaled even more—
Kei whipped all three tails around and shaved huge chunks out of the backs of Nōmu’s legs and spine before digging into his exposed brain with her projected form’s teeth—

Midoriya yanked Aizawa-sensei and frog girl and short kid away, still sparking wildly until he collapsed on broken legs almost twenty meters off—

—And, finally, the doors to the building flew off their hinges in a single mighty blow and landed in the open area where all this brawling had been going on.

"HAVE NO FEAR, STUDENTS."

_Uh-oh._

"FOR I AM HERE!"

Obito’s head jerked up, Sharingan aglow, and he made a very clear hand signal for Retreat amid all the branches he’d just made. And if nothing else, Kamui would keep him in the clear to explain shit to the teachers where Kei’s chakra-cloaked mouth would have some trouble.

“Finally…” hissed Facepalm-kun. “All Might—”

Kei would have probably been happy to follow Obito’s lead, even if Nōmu was annoying. Things were going fine. It was probably time to fall back.

She didn’t really get a choice, because two hundred kilos of bunny-haired superhero proceeded to _punch her through the roof_. Had Kei been hit on Isobu’s projected shell, like Nōmu had been doing with all the persistence of someone who didn’t know any better, she could have nullified the hit.

Not so much when she was nearly uppercutted.

“WHAT THE _FUCK_, ALL MIGHT?!” Obito’s voice screeched, just to add a cherry on top of this gigantic screwup.

_Somehow,_ Kei thought while careening through the air, _I don’t think the principal filled in all the faculty about us. Or even me._

**What was your first hint?**

The brand new cracked ribs, now that she thought about it. Kei set her head back in the dirt as the V2 cloak faded a bit. _All in a day’s work._
Chapter Summary

Look, at least she still has her lunch money.

Everyone did make it out alive, somehow. With Nōmu knocked down to half effectiveness due to missing half his brain and therefore not being able to use both hands, punching him out of the dome in the other direction apparently worked out great even with his kinetic energy shenanigans. Obito ditched almost immediately after both Kei and Nōmu were forcibly removed from the building, saying after the fact that he cared more about her than the mission if the World Symbol of Peace was gonna act like that. Also, there was a decent chance he was next on the to-punch list.

And then the rest of the teachers arrived and Smokey the Bartender and Facepalm-kun made a rather abrupt exit, ditching everyone on their end too. Or so Kei heard.

Obito was good at gathering information when he wanted to be. He even knew that Aizawa-sensei and Thirteen had been packed up into an ambulance. Past that, though, he’d lost track of details (like All Might) due to not giving a shit.

“Can’t believe he fucking punched you,” Obito groused once they were both safe in the Kamui pocket. He’d had to dig Kei out of a trench fifteen meters long and resented this fact quite a bit.

“It still happened,” Kei said, wincing as Obito checked the massive bruise blooming along her entire left side. She’d changed back into her UA uniform and wasn’t looking forward to having to trudge back to 1-C to collect her stuff while dealing with this kind of injury. More annoyingly, she wasn’t quite sure if Isobu’s passive healing would deal with this before tomorrow. “Ow.”

“I don’t see anyone on site who can deal with this?” Obito asked. “Like a nurse or something.”

Kei ran through the list of staff and faculty in her head, then said, “Yeah. Drop me back at the school.”

“You sure?”

“Technically, the day’s over, but the nurse should still be there.” Kei bit back a sigh, because it hurt to breathe too deeply. “The principal’s office would make a nice waypoint.”

Obito did as she asked, frowning the entire time. Kei carefully kept a Transformation jutsu going in the somewhat-empty halls until she reached the nurse’s office, appearing for all intents and purposes to be a school janitor. It wasn’t until she was just about to enter the room that she resumed her normal form. Ish.

The school’s nurse was a tiny, nice lady who went by Recovery Girl. Kei didn’t bother to ask her real name, since no one else ever seemed to care. She was learning more every day, really.

“Dare I ask how you got hurt?” Recovery Girl asked, but more in a perfunctory way than because she genuinely wanted to know.

“You should see the other guy,” Kei said, and was careful not to move as the nurse literally kissed
her injuries better. Fascinating, and likely to make Rin want to take notes. She always wanted to know about new healing techniques, even if she couldn’t personally make use of them.

“I’m sure I don’t want to.” Recovery Girl huffed, then said. “Please take a seat. You’re going to feel the exhaustion set in shortly.”

Kei obeyed, because fighting with medics was an excellent way to end up with a sedative in the ass. She noted distantly that the nearest bed had its curtains drawn, for whatever good that would do. Presumably the occupant was asleep.

The second, however?

“Gekkō-san!” said Midoriya, looking astonished. And remarkably intact for a kid who’d broken at least a few bones today. Horribly.

“Hello, Midoriya-san.” Kei gave up on meditating. She could make an itemized mental list of everything that had gone wrong today sometime later. “Are you all right?”

“Oh, yeah!” He flexed his toes. “Recovery Girl fixed me right up. It only took like a minute.” He paused, fidgeting in place a little. After spending a few seconds working up courage, he managed to say, “Um. What happened to you?”

“I got punched by someone with a strength-enhancing Quirk,” Kei said blandly. Statements like that had the benefit of being true while also wonderfully misleading if she tacked some mild observations on the end. When Midoriya’s jaw dropped, Kei added dutifully, “He didn’t get my wallet, though. Small victories.”

All Might hadn’t been looking for her wallet. It’d been in the classroom the entire time, too. So, ha.


“Didn’t have time,” Kei told him, and sighed deeply. Which didn’t hurt. Hooray.

“Don’t do that with broken ribs, please,” Recovery Girl fussed, and Kei froze in place. “They’re not set yet, even with my Quirk.”

“Sorry,” Kei muttered.

“Y-you had broken ribs?!” Midoriya squeaked.

“Oh, come on,” Kei deflected. “Cracked at most.”

Recovery Girl frowned. “They were broken, Gekkō-kun.”

“W-wow, uh, I guess General Studies students have it rough, too?” Poor kid. Still trying to make small talk. “I wonder if it’s related to the attack today? Villains have been getting a lot more bold lately, and they were talking about a League of Villains. Maybe if they’re organizing, there’ll be a way for pros to get on top of them? But if it was that easy, they would have already done it!” Or not. Um…

He sounds like you, but less snide.

“Midoriya-san?” Kei prompted gently. “Did something happen today?”
“Oh, uh…” There was a wet cough from the other bed with suspicious timing, and Midoriya immediately changed whatever he’d been about to say to, “Um, you’ll probably see it on the news.”

Great. “All right. I didn’t mean to pry.”

“I-It’s fine! It’s only fair to be curious. I would be.” Midoriya glanced down. “You know, Gekkō-san? You’re actually pretty nice.”

Kei did her best not to make any kind of dismissive noise. “Kind of you to think so, Midoriya-san.”

“And I don’t believe the rumors about you at all!” Midoriya continued, hitting his stride. “Um, just keep your head up. I don’t know if you want to be a hero, or really anything, but you can’t let other people tell you what you can and can’t do! Don’t let anyone bother you!”

Great. Now I have to pay attention to a high school rumor mill.

Since when have we ever?

Point.

Kei made a neutral noise, then said, “I think ‘not letting anyone bother me’ is how I got landed here.”

“That’s not what I meant!”

At that point, their conversation was interrupted by a phone call on the nurse’s office landline. Immediately, Kei and Midoriya snapped their mouths shut as Recovery Girl took the call.

“Mm-hm. All right. I understand. I’ll send her right to you.” And then the phone was back in the cradle. “Gekkō-kun, the principal wants to see you in his office.”

Kei dropped her head into her hands with as much drama as possible. “Here we go again…”

“You’ll be okay!” Midoriya tried to assure her.

“Thanks, Midoriya-san, but that’s a little too optimistic.” She waved over her shoulder as she left, though. “Later.”

It wasn’t until Kei arrived to speak to Principal Nezu, carefully ensconced behind his massive desk, that her frustration finally peaked.

So, in the most tactful way possible (and with one arm pointing squarely in the direction of the USJ), she snapped, “That is never happening again.”

“Agreed,” said the principal.
There was, thankfully, no school the next day.

Obito went back to Konoha for a bit, both to restock his eyedrops and probably take a break. Kei sat in the apartment for an annoying amount of time, staring blankly into her closet while she tried to decide if it was worth going out or not. Schools in Japan also ran a half-day of classes on Saturdays, so this was still squarely in the middle of the week.

It was a nice day out.

Fuck it.

Kei changed into street clothes and decided that today, like many of the days before term, was a day to wander town like a stray cat. She did have a list of things to buy (such as a hairbrush), but those were afterthoughts compared to the raw need to just not be in the dinky apartment anymore. To this end, she hopped on a train to some other town, to see if the stores were any different.

Two incidents in two days involving villains, Isobu commented as Kei waited for a crosswalk to change indicators. The word “villain” sat strangely on his tongue. And four incidents in four days in which you have been pulled from class to speak with administration, teachers, and the school’s healer.

Sounds right. Kei crossed the street with the crowd, headed for a shopping district.

I do not think I have ever heard of another human, even across every one of your memories, who has managed to attract so much extracurricular interference in their first week of school. Congratulations.

It’d be fucking amazing if anybody ever had. Kei checked her phone as she waited for the next crosswalk. No messages, other than the news update talking about the attack on the USJ. Nobody was dead, but Facepalm-kun and Kurogiri had gotten away. Kei couldn’t help but think that if she’d been allowed to use lethal force, she’d probably have killed Nōmu. She’d never seen anybody parade around with a weak point in full view like that.

You are assuming that Nōmu needed his brain. With that kind of regeneration speed, I do not know if he was even kept down by the injuries you dealt him.

Kei shrugged. Maybe. Maybe not. But it was a tried and true zombie disposal method, if nothing else.

Kei eventually found her way to a combini, glancing through the shelves for anything she needed back at the apartment. A cell phone card would be nice, just in case she needed to pester Obito sometime this month without invoking every emergency service known to humanity. Thus far, she only had his number and the school’s, but there was a nonzero chance that could change later.
Also, snacks. So many snacks.

Sure, most of the snacks wouldn’t survive Hayate’s next visit, but few ever did.

She was still pondering onigiri vs. dorayaki when a somewhat familiar voice said, “You again?”

Kei looked up from her vital decision and spotted a classmate looking a little surprised to see her. It was Purple Kid, but not the one from the USJ. The tall one from her class, who always looked a little less sleep-deprived than Aizawa-sensei. He was carrying a multipack of pencils and pens, along with two notebooks and a box of bandages.

“Yo,” Kei said, though he didn’t exactly look happy to see her. “I, uh, forgot your name. Sorry.”

“Shinsō,” was his dry reply. “Gekkō-san, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right.” Kei paused. “Nice to see you outside of school, I guess? I didn’t realize we lived anywhere near each other.”

“We probably don’t,” Shinsō said, already turning away to go and search the rest of the store for whatever.

*What a riveting conversationalist,* Kei thought, and promptly went back to her snack debate. She ended up not deciding and bought one of everything, so she could see her brother’s face when he tried some of the really weird ones. Ramune bottles would give him a hilarious headache. Obito too, since he couldn’t just teleport the marble out.

“You’re going to eat all of those yourself?” Shinsō again, of course. Right as she was walking out of the store with heavy “grocery” bags slung over her arm.

Kei considered being sarcastic, then decided she did enough of that in her head. “Nope. My brother and my best friend visit a lot, so I’m gonna stay up late and watch weird American movies with them.”

If she had a TV, anyway. That was another thing she probably ought to look into.

“…I can’t tell if you’re being serious or not.”

“Sometimes I can’t either.” Kei glanced at her phone, noting two messages about more USJ articles. Obito still wasn’t back yet, or else he would have already texted her about being bored. “Did you have something to ask me?”

Shinsō took a few seconds to put his thoughts in order. “A couple of things.”

“I’m listening,” Kei said, as the two of them fell into step.

“What’s your Quirk again?” he asked, rather than just getting right to the point.

“Tsunami,” Kei said, because it was easier to remember than the other names she’d tried out. “Why?”

Shinsō didn’t answer immediately. Then, “That’s…a really powerful Quirk for General Studies. Almost enough for the Hero department.”

“I guess. I killed a bunch of the villain ‘bots in the test.” Kei shrugged.

“Then why aren’t you with 1-A or 1-B?” Shinsō pressed, which made Kei think they were starting
to get to the root of the problem.

“My test scores sucked.” Kei readjusted her grip on her store bags. “I know it’s really early in the year and things could change later, but I think I failed every topic besides science, math, and English.” Actually, she’d probably failed math, too.

“So you basically got in on the strength of your Quirk alone.” Shinsō’s expression was a little pinched.

“I guess. What about your entrance exam thing?”

Shinsō scowled. “You can’t brainwash robots. They don’t have organic brains and they don’t exactly talk back.”

Kei stared at him. “Your Quirk is brainwashing? Or mind control, maybe?”

“Yeah, it… Wait, you didn’t know?” Shinsō’s normally half-lidded eyes were wide.

“I got back to class at the end of introductions,” Kei reminded him. “And basically nobody in that class talks to me because they’re afraid of me. Or maybe they’re afraid whatever keeps getting me in trouble will rub off on them.”

“They think you’re dangerous,” Shinsō told her bluntly. At Kei’s blank look, he added, “Like me.”

“Okay, I can understand me, since I’m the ‘Gen Studies trouble child’ and everyone knows it,” Kei said, air-quoting Aizawa-sensei’s blunt assessment. She lowered her arms. “But I don’t remember you ever using your Quirk on anyone.”

“The part they care about is that I could. I just need someone to respond to me,” Shinsō told her. “Most people just stop talking to me once they realize that’s how it works.”

“So, basically, you could’ve done it fifteen times since the start of this conversation.” When Shinsō nodded, Kei shrugged again. “Okay. You clearly haven’t. Case closed.”

Shinsō stared at her. “…That’s it? No big deal?”

“I have weirder friends.” Kei smiled a little crookedly.

The list starts with me and goes around the planet, twice.

Thanks, Isobu.

It also starts with you.

...Thanks, buddy.

Shinsō didn’t appear to know what to say to this. He looked away, and then his phone buzzed. After checking the messages, he said, “I… I’ll see you tomorrow, Gekkō-san. I’ve got to go home.”

“Bye, Shinsō-san,” Kei said amiably, and waved as he left. Then she checked her own phone.

Cyclops: im back

Cyclops: and bored

Cyclops: also
Cyclops: how do u change names on this

Kei smiled and set out for the apartment again, the day’s good deed completed.

That meant the day’s somewhat less-good deed (laughing at Obito’s attempt to get the marble-blocked soda open) was neatly balanced out.
The next day, school resumed.

After announcements and roll call, Kayama-sensei took the front of the room by storm. She cracked her multi-pronged whip against the desk, grinning wildly, and explained the next big event on the docket.

“In two weeks, the UA Sports Festival will arrive!” Kayama-sensei was nearly bouncing in place. “It’s one of the biggest events in the entire world, where we as a school can show off how great our students have always been! This is your chance to show what you’re really made of.” Her grin widened. “And for those of us with heroic ambitions, students from General Studies have been known to transfer to Heroics if they make a big enough splash.”

Kei figured that last comment was probably a dig at her, whether it meant her monstrously powerful “Quirk” or her total lack of ambition, but it was awful hard to summon enthusiasm for a career choice she was simply not suited for. Quite aside from having been Team Rocketed by All Might two days ago, she wasn’t going to be in the school past the first year. And that was at the outside.

That said, I do appreciate the idea that it is a free-for-all for using these “Quirks.” It is an opportunity to stretch without being punched by a superhero.

Oh, no question. And though Kei didn’t let any sign of vicious satisfaction show on her face, she could see her classmates starting to eye her.

There was one exception, however. Shinsō stared straight ahead, shadowed eyes locked on Kayama-sensei as she explained the further benefits of going all out in the biggest televised event of the year. His hands curled into fists on top of his desk, and though Kei could only see his face in profile from her seat, she didn’t doubt Shinsō was absolutely determined to make something out of this opportunity.

They hadn’t exactly talked since their random encounter yesterday, but perhaps Shinsō would be willing to share later.

The first four periods came and went, with Kei taking spotty notes for the first time this school year. Teachers in the school favored the lecture method, apparently, so she had to pick and choose what to record for later interpretation. Note-taking was a bit of an adventure that way. If the result ended up with a border made of turtle sketches, she was sure no one would care.

But before she could catch up to Shinsō and pester him during lunch, or even check her phone for any messages from Obito, she was promptly redirected to a meeting with Aizawa-sensei. Because of course she was.

Kei sighed inwardly and dragged her phone and her lunch to the staff room.
Aizawa-sensei was not in his sleeping bag this time. No, instead he was…kind of a mummy, with both arms bandaged to hell and back and his appearance more bedraggled than usual, because it was awful hard to use a hairbrush without being able to move his arms above his shoulders. There was also about two meters of gauze bandages wrapped around his head, too, which about matched the initial assessment Kei had made.

It was kind of weird to face off with him without Principal Nezu as a buffer, though.

“Were you at the USJ?” Aizawa-sensei asked, though his tone remained flat.

“Yes. Though I kinda…looked a little different,” Kei responded. She set her bento on the low table between them and held up her hands, pantomiming Isobu’s thick spikes above her head. When Aizawa-sensei nodded, she settled her hands in her lap again.

“What you did was reckless.” Not like Kei didn’t know that. “You may have combat clearance from the principal, but now your disguised form is listed among the villains to escape during the incident.” His eyes flashed red for a second. “I shouldn’t have to remind you not to use it during the Sports Festival.”

*What do you take me for? I don’t have anything to prove to a bunch of goddamn teenagers. “I wouldn’t,”* Kei told him, which was the more polite option. “No matter what.”

Aizawa-sensei settled back, his eyes no longer glowing. “Kayama-sensei already knows about your situation. And the principal told All Might what happened on your end of things during that fiasco. You can expect more scrutiny, but also an apology.”

Kei blinked. “Um…?”

“Even if All Might didn’t know at the time, he still punched a student through school property.” Aizawa-sensei’s voice was as mercilessly dry as ever. “That’s an accomplishment for someone who’s only been teaching for five days now.”

Ouch.

**I get the impression this man and All Might do not get along.**

*You don’t say.*

“I see…” Kei stared down at the tops of her folded hands. Then, apropos of nothing, she asked, “Aizawa-sensei, you and Thirteen really are going to be okay, right?”

“Don’t worry about us,” he said flatly. “Now go have lunch.”

With that dismissal, Kei skedaddled. Whispers followed her through the hallways, as they always did.

**The absurd web of lies forming around you is only becoming more complicated.**

*You can say that again.* Kei heard a whisper involving her stabbing someone, and had to wonder what kind of middle school they thought she’d attended.

Shinsō wasn’t around when Kei scanned the cafeteria, meaning he probably ate lunch outside or something. It was hard to miss the purple hair at any distance now that she knew who it belonged to, and Kei looked a little longer before giving up. Instead, she spent her lunch period shoveling rice into her mouth and checking her phone with one hand.
Obito was back in Konoha again, having taken all the strange modern foods their friends wouldn’t have seen before back to prank them. Therefore, the only messages on Kei’s phone were news updates regarding USJ and speculation regarding a shadowy figure called Stain. The Creeper dude was officially on everyone’s most-wanted list, assisted by Kei’s somewhat-blurry photo and USJ footage, though hell if she knew where they’d gotten that.

**There was something about sensors.**

*Probably electronic.* Not that there was much point in worrying about it now.

Kei was just about to head back to 1-C to wait out the last of the lunch period when she noticed the 1-A kids from the other day. They were, however, missing one green mop from the middle of the table.

“Uraraka-san, Iida…san?” Kei had probably been a little presumptuous to use “-kun” for Iida the other day.

“Iida-kun is fine,” he said. “Hello, Gekkō-san. I apologize if you felt unable to join our table today, but Midoriya-kun was pulled away by All Might.”

“It’s fine,” Kei said, waving off Iida’s concerns. That said, she did want to know why All Might had called on Midoriya of all people. It would be hilarious and sad if someone else was getting the constant pull-out treatment. “I was just so busy thinking of the Sports Festival that I probably wouldn’t have been good company.”

“I didn’t realize General Studies was so invested in the Sports Festival,” said Uraraka. “I mean, the Hero course depends on it for internship applications, but…”

“We’re all UA students,” Kei said with a shrug. “It’d be weird if it wasn’t getting pushed as hard as possible. Else there’d only be forty students participating.”

“That would be disappointing,” Iida admitted. “Gekkō-san, how do you feel about the Sports Festival? Competing against students from our class?”

Before Kei could give an answer other than, “Um,” because she was trying to figure out how to phrase “I’m biding my time until I can legally throw down” politely, the bell rang. Kei left the 1-A kids behind in friendly confusion, then hurried back to class.

And, of course, the day didn’t end there.

See, there’d been tension building in the various classrooms after the homeroom announcement. The Sports Festival was such a big deal that, at some point, it had eclipsed the Olympics. Kei wondered if that had something to do with the evolution of Quirks, because hell if she could see someone like All Might being anything less than a terrifying addition to any organized sport. Sure, she was the same, but at least All Might was from around here. And also a big deal.

Perhaps the USJ incident had sparked something besides just news soundbites. It had, among every single first-year class except for the hapless 1-A, basically started the buildup to a war.

In a high school competitive spirit kind of way.

Thus, when school cleanup was done and Kayama-sensei cleared out before the final bell, the halls were once again packed to the brim with students crowding closer to 1-A. And no one had needed to slam the intruder alarm this time.
Kei crossed her arms and tilted her head back a little, trying to see past some of the taller students. Though it was hard to tell from her position at the back of the crowd, the door seemed open. If she could climb onto someone’s shoulders, there was a chance she’d see someone she knew trying to fend off a school of piranhas worse than reporters could legally be.

Damned if she could hear anything, though. There were at least eighty voices, most of them chattering and demanding to be let closer to the star hero class of the year.

“OUT OF THE WAY, EXTRAS!” Blondie McSplode from 1-A proceeded to bull his way through the crowd, scowling fit to put a thundercloud to shame.

The students mostly got out or got stepped on, which did give Kei a clear view to the front of the classroom. She could see a grumpy semicircle slowly forming in front of the door while the other students of the least-lucky kids in the school started to filter out, eying everyone else with suspicion.

It took her a bit, but Kei eventually spotted Shinsō and finger-waved. Somewhat in line with what Kei had learned of his character so far, he gave her a funny look before disappearing in the other direction.

Oh good. Another Kakashi.

Only purple. Besides, Kakashi got over being teased a while ago. Don’t think Shinsō has yet.

Still, there was no violence. It appeared today was a massive improvement over Wednesday.
Chapter Summary

Kei’s week ends on a couple of high notes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Saturday’s four class periods were entirely mundane after the ridiculous first week, because Kei didn’t get pulled out and wasn’t being shouted at by anyone but Isobu, who knew multiplication better than she did. He was also picking up Modern Literature coursework faster, which Kei figured said more about her than him. Even a week into the term, she was not the best student. Senioritus set in early and didn’t let go.

Honestly, if not for the utter havoc of the first three days, Kei probably would have said it was a nice way to end the week. As things stood now, though, she was a little antsy and rather eager to get out of UA. Everything going wrong seemed tied to the school. Lying to Midoriya and saying she’d had a run-in with a mugger didn’t make it less true.

It seemed like it was going well until she was about to walk out the front door of UA, at which point a voice more accustomed to booming tried to whisper, “Young Gekkō, if I could have a word?”

Kei turned on her heel and stared down the…emaciated dude in an oversized yellow pinstripe suit. Kei blinked twice, surprised. While she’d seen the guy around, in the same vague way as she knew the school had other class years and people who weren’t involved in almost dying a lot, she couldn’t put a name to the face. If she had to make a comparison, especially with the way his baritone didn’t seem to suit his body, she’d call him Skinny Steve.

“Fine,” Kei said, and followed back into the thrice-damned school building. “I’m assuming you’re a teacher here?”

“You’d be right,” he said. “Heroics only, however.”

Huh. “Makes sense. I don’t recognize you.”

This could be a trap.

At this point in the week, I’m about ready to push somebody out a window for that kind of crap. Let me have this.

Once again, Kei made her way to the all-too-familiar staff room. Ambling along after the unidentified teacher, she spotted Mummy-Aizawa snoozing under a desk. Or maybe his yellow sleeping bag had just developed sapience and its owner’s personality. It was hard to tell.

Nonetheless, the pair of them settled on the couch (skinny dude) and the opposite chair (Kei). There was tea already there, but it’d long gone cold.

“Did you need to speak to me about something…?” Kei trailed off, unsure what to call him. She didn’t have the civilian names of most of the teachers memorized anyway, and it was at least
plausible that this guy had been a hero in the past.

“I wanted to apologize,” the guy said, drawing a blank look from Kei.

“Oh, okay…?” Kei paused. This was already awkward enough. “Look, what do I call you?”

There was a pause on his end, too. Then, much akin to Tsunade’s youthful facade stitching together after she used her regeneration a little too much, the bony guy filled out right in front of Kei’s eyes. It went fast enough that the air actually popped, and the guy’s hair shot upright like gel was some universal law unto All Might.

...Is All Might secretly a muscly balloon animal? Kei mentally whacked Isobu’s shell. Did you see that?!

I am using your eyes to see. I certainly saw that.

“Uh,” said Kei, once Isobu whacked her in retaliation. “That’s a… neat trick?”

The conservation of mass is a lie.

It may just be on vacation.

As though Kei hadn’t said anything or made a deer-in-headlights face at him, All Might bowed about as far as he could while sitting. “Young Gekkō, I most humbly apologize for the strike I dealt you during the USJ incident! Had I taken thorough stock of the situation, I would not have made such a heinous miscalculation! My apologies!”

The sapient sleeping bag grumbled a general affirmative. Sounded like Aizawa-sensei had probably said more when he had more energy. That was about as close to approval Kei had ever gotten from him.

“I mean,” Kei said after a second, “if I hadn’t known I wasn’t going to hurt anyone besides the villains, I would’ve probably punched me too.”

“You should never make excuses for the poor actions of pro heroes, Young Gekkō!” All Might insisted, while Kei tried to subtly reel back from the volume he was using. “As a symbol of my trust, I have revealed my true form. It is a poor apology for my actions at the USJ, but I hope it is one step toward forgiveness, Young Gekkō!”

“Well, then I can do this?” Kei waved a hand in front of her face just as All Might looked up. Between her hand cutting off his view and no longer doing so, she’d let Isobu’s chakra leak into her coils. Her eyes itched a little, as they always did when they took on Isobu’s traits. “The, uh, the thing I do? This is the most basic stage. Can’t do the other one indoors without breaking things.”

The two of them regarded each other—a man with pitch-black where white ought to be in his eyes, and a girl with utterly inhuman eyes from another being entirely.

“Just accept the apology already,” Aizawa-sensei griped from the corner. “I’m trying to sleep.”

But he had a point. “I accept your apology, All Might-sensei. Please don’t do it again.”

Just as Kei dropped the usage of Isobu’s chakra, All Might poofed back into his skinny shape. Once the smoke cleared, he scratched at the back of his now-limp head of hair. “You’re pretty easygoing...”
“Did you expect something different?” Kei asked, gently challenging.

“I did, but now I see I was wrong.” All Might settled back onto the couch, but he did bow one last time. Just a bit. “Go on, Young Gekkō. Enjoy your weekend.”

“Thanks, All Might-sensei.”

“When I look like this, please call me Yagi-sensei.”

Kei waited just long enough to make sure she wasn’t going to be scolded for using the title even for his incognito form, but nothing was forthcoming after Kei bowed to show her agreement. On her way out of the room, she leapt neatly over Aizawa-sensei and ducked out into the hall.

It was time to leave the freaking campus behind for the week.

She checked her phone once she was on the train, ignoring news updates for the moment.

GreenThumb: u get hayate for sat-sun

GreenThumb: hes been buggin me for 2 days

GreenThumb: and u need more marble things

TMNT-TNT: Hand the phone to him

GreenThumb: r u on ur way back?

TMNT-TNT: Yeah but he doesn’t have a phone

TMNT-TNT: Have him call me

Not four seconds later, Kei’s phone started ringing. “Yeah?”

“I get to stay over the weekend!” Hayate’s grin was audible. “And you have to let me see the city this time. I got the Hokage to sign off for a ‘cultural project.’”

Kei didn’t want to know how much wheedling it would’ve taken Sensei to cave to Hayate’s demands, because there was a chance it’d be used against her. “Okay, but the first thing we need to do is get you clothes to blend in better.”

“Seriously?” But before Kei could argue her point, Hayate gave in. “Fine, fine. I’ve been looking out the window and nobody dresses like Obito.”

There was a muffled “Hey!” in the background.

“These phone things are pretty cool,” Hayate managed to say, while apparently fighting Obito off one-handed. There was a thud and the sound of struggling stopped.

“They are,” Kei agreed.

“Come back soon, okay?” Hayate paused, thinking over what he’d just said and finding it a bit too heartfelt, then added in a brighter tone, “Or else we’ll both starve to death.”

Teenagers. “Got it.”

Well, it was like All Might said. Kei fully expected to enjoy her first weekend of the school year.
By the time she got back to the apartment, Obito looked like he was perfectly ready to leave for a week. Instead, though, he jokingly saluted Kei and only said he had one more delivery to go, at which point he disappeared into thin air with a message scroll.

Kei, who could recognize Sensei’s calligraphy on the outside wrapping at a glance, let him get on with it. She had a kid brother to look after instead.

“Please don’t make me wear one of those,” Hayate said, indicating Kei’s school uniform. To Hayate’s shinobi-trained sensibilities, it probably looked pretty ridiculous. Kei didn’t disagree.

“I won’t,” Kei promised, and once she had a chance to change, they were off.

Kei, who had quite the discretionary budget and little to spend it on besides food and train fare, found that her little brother’s presence had a way of punching a hole in her established bottom line. It wasn’t because he was hard to provide for, but rather that he had a list and was checking it twice. Hayate wouldn’t have minded going to tourist hotspots or trying junk food that didn’t exist in Konoha, but people back home had tacked on things like university-level medical textbooks (Rin), ludicrously specific novelty kitchen gadgets (Kushina), and omamori from every shrine they could find (Genma). As such, Kei spent most of Saturday afternoon running errands with her kid brother in tow.

Shinobi weren’t above making a conveniently traveling friend buy souvenirs.

Hayate, for his part, had plenty of fun flitting from place to place like a kid at a theme park once Kei got him a replacement for his haori-style coat. There was no way to fully hide his starstruck behavior, but Kei found that his constant rubbernecking and the barrage of questions actually revealed how much she’d been learning about Tokyo. And, underneath her constant griping, her appreciation for the city and all it offered. Even with the occasional superpowered fight.

“This kind of stuff is so unnecessary,” Hayate muttered while they waited for a train. The second ride of the day, in fact.

“Mass transportation?” Kei asked, still half-listening to the station announcements. Between the various circuits they’d made and Kei’s lingering unfamiliarity with the system, it’d be easy to get lost. Again.

“Yeah. I mean, can’t we just…run?” Hayate kept his voice down, at least. “I mean, so many of us can go so fast…”

“Turning to technology means that more people can benefit, though,” Kei explained distractedly. “I mean, it’s not just about people with powers, you know?”

Though the shinobi world sure pretended it was. Half the roads even in Konoha weren’t paved. Kei probably ought to tell Sensei to rethink that policy, but it was difficult to explain without vehicles to reference.

Hayate frowned. “I guess?”

And though Kei hadn’t been a student at UA for long, or managed to be particularly good at it, she could say, “There’s also the fact that even heroes with really wild powers tend to use support items. Endeavor can’t exactly go around wearing normal clothes with his face on fire.”

Though she did kind of question why All Might couldn’t find clothes that fit both of his forms.

“So…” Hayate leaned back a little, hands loaded down by shopping bags. “Is it like fūinjutsu?”
“A bit,” Kei agreed. “But instead of spending years mastering the art alone—”

“You can have a lot of people benefit because anybody can use it,” Hayate concluded, which was a bit of a forty-five degree turn. But it was okay. Not a great analogy, but not the worst ever made.

Kei shrugged. “Sure.”

They made it through a few more stops before Hayate really started to flag. It had little to do with actual endurance, and a lot more to do with mental fatigue. Any person could only process so much in a day, and shoving Hayate into an urban environment even with a tour guide was a bit over the top.

“I’ve never seen so many buildings or people in my entire life,” Hayate said, once they were on the last train of the day. His shopping bags had ballooned a bit, making it difficult for others to find places to sit. “How can you stand it?”

“I got used to it,” Kei replied, rearranging the bags to give other people a few more spaces to sit. This was absolutely silly. “You holding up okay?”

“Mostly?” Hayate managed to keep a straight face for a while, then couldn’t hide a jaw-cracking yawn though he ducked his head. “Sorry, it’s a lot.” He scrubbed at his eyes with the heel of his free hand, like he’d been trying not to do all day. The city air didn’t agree with him. They’d already had to pick up cough medicine just in case.

“Good thing we’re headed back, then,” Kei was feeling the day drag on, too. “I’ll cook. You take a nap and we’ll have a slower day tomorrow.”

Hayate, after managing a tired, “Sounds good,” ended up dozing on a still-wrapped All Might hoodie. He wasn’t much more awake on the walk back.

While Hayate napped on the spare futon and Kei reheated stewed pumpkin, Isobu decided to check in.

What are the chances your Hokage only sent an itemized expense report for damages? Isobu didn’t sound like he cared about the answer.

It’s more likely that Sensei just bit Nezu’s head off in writing. Kei leaned against the counter and sighed. I was really more focused on how All Might, of all people, has an actual secret identity. Everyone else has their names listed and works with an agency.

Does the mutual unmasking have to mean anything? I am content to stew in resentment.

Then I won’t stop you. But the mission on our end doesn’t change much. Kei scratched the lowest corner of her scar. Today’s been all right. I don’t want to ruin it now.

Fine, Isobu huffed.

It was just a quiet night in, but it meant a lot even in this strange place.

Chapter End Notes

That link is a near-direct quote of one of my favorite lines from Yesterday Upon the
Stair, which is an excellent BNHA fic by PitViperOfDoom and you need to go read it.
“What’re we gonna do today?” Hayate asked on Sunday morning. After omurice and tea, the day was theirs. And perhaps feeling generous after the sleepover, he even did the dishes.

“I thought about visiting the beach,” Kei said, holding up her shinobi sandals. “What do you think?”

“Sure!”

Dagobah Beach Municipal Park had apparently been completely trashed before Kei moved into town. Whether due to ocean currents or people being jerks, the accumulated wreckage and waste electrical appliances of an entire civilization ended up on one poor stretch of beach. But over the course of ten months, somebody or something had stealthily removed all the trash and cleared the beach from one end to the other.

It was also within walking distance, since Hayate had gotten fairly burned out on trains the day before.

...Wait a fucking second.

Hm?

* Dagobah. Uh, that’s…a planet. *In Star Wars.*

*I do not understand the reference.*

*It goes…um… “Go to the Dagobah system.” Something, something, Yoda. It could be a star system, I guess?*

Isobu sighed deeply, which was impressive for someone without lungs. **Kei.**

Yeah?

**Please go to the beach. I need to see a real one again.**

Kei and Hayate made it to the park pretty damned fast after Kei explained that.

In mid-spring, the ocean was still cold as all get out. Isobu wanted to head in and have Kei lie down in the surf, but she sharply vetoed that plan upon putting a toe in to test the temperature.

Meanwhile, Hayate darted down the beach with no difficulty, kicking up plumes of sand as he went. Though it probably wasn’t obvious to onlookers, Kei could feel the little pulses of chakra being emitted as her brother prevented himself from sinking too far. He wanted to goof off, not work out.

“Hey, if you want shaved ice, only one of us has money!” Kei called after him, but that was really an afterthought. Kei was still barefoot and walking in the surf, instead of living up to Isobu’s wish of
swimming in the ocean at nine in the morning.

Besides, Hayate was already happily running loose at the water’s edge, arcs of spray following him as he went. The sand, apparently, wasn’t his first love after that whole Chūnin Exam incident in Suna.

It took a little longer before, belatedly, Kei realized Hayate had never seen the ocean before. With Konoha as deeply inland as it was, only shinobi tended to get out often enough or range widely enough to see all kinds of cool climates and piss off the indigenous wildlife. Hayate was still a typical curious kid in some significant ways. Kei had been to plenty of strange places, both on missions and when she counted her previous lifetime, though this gravel-free sand was still novel.

How spoiled she’d become. Not just by her opportunities here, but by what knowledge she carried in her soul.

Isobu gave a deep sigh of contentment, though Kei hadn’t rushed into the sea. He seemed to be okay with the results of today’s morning adventure.

“You can see forever like this!” Hayate declared to the sea and the encroaching gulls.

Kei called back, “Try skipping rocks! My record’s five skips!”

Hayate flashed her a breathless smile, then promptly ignored her idea to try and snatch the miniature fish lurking in the surf. To be fair, this world had more interesting things going for it than Kei.

Hayate did eventually get bored, but it took a few minutes. He also managed to feed the seagulls his tiny haul of fish fry, which made him a troop leader in their eyes for the next few minutes. Perhaps it was youth, hidden viciousness, or just pure silliness that kept him interacting with the seagulls long past the “Mine!” stage.

But once they discovered he did not, in fact, have any more food, they all abandoned him in favor of a man eating takoyaki.

“I feel like I’ve accomplished something,” Hayate said, while the poor guy was being chased to the other end of the beach.

Kei didn’t have it in her to criticize much. Instead, she said, “So, after all that training with your team, how’s your taijutsu?”

Most bladed implements bigger than kitchen knives were highly regulated in Japan, so Kei hadn’t actually been able to spar with her full complement of melee skills. On the other hand, Hayate hadn’t specifically stated that he was training with, say, Gai on weekdays. Iruka and Yūgao were perfectly nice kids, but neither was a melee powerhouse just yet. Hell, Kei had been teaching Yūgao how to use her katana before this mission cropped up, so it was hard to tell if Hayate was getting rusty.

**Rust. For a kenjutsu specialist.** Isobu snorted. **Hah.**

* A pun for all occasions.

Hayate blanched. “Um…”

A not-so-nice smile stretched across Kei’s face before she managed to hide it. “Lucky for you, I think public fighting is illegal. But you’re gonna catch hell later.”

Hayate seemed to consider this, but Kei felt the spark in his chakra in the split second before he
threw a punch.

Kei instantly caught his wrist and judo-flipped him into the surf for being a brat.

Now, Musutafu—how the hell had she missed that little chestnut for two months—was in the same city as UA. It was also the same city as Kei’s apartment, primarily by design, but the point was that running into classmates was not the statistical impossibility it might’ve been if she lived, say, in Hosu. Sure, the greater Tokyo area was a big place, and she didn’t really know if anybody preferred hanging around their super-special high school.

“Is that how you’re training for the Sports Festival?”

Then again, Shinsō had already randomly come across her once. For a kid who didn’t look like he slept much, he was up early on a weekend.

“Hey, Shinsō-san.” Kei waved up at him, because it appeared her purple-haired classmate was actually a cyclist on his days off. Nobody with sense would take even a folding bike into the sand, though she could see Gai making a training exercise out of it. Thus, Shinsō had propped his bike up on a railing and was leaning next to it.

Put him a bit out of splashing range, though. That wouldn’t be a problem for long, because Hayate had caught onto Kei’s lack of attention.

In fact, both of the Gekkō siblings promptly trooped up to Shinsō, though Kei used the access stairs and Hayate hurled himself up and over the railing in a single leap like some kind of saltwater-encrusted kangaroo. Either because of watching Kei during PE or just being too used to a world full of Quirks, Shinsō didn’t react.

“Since when are there two of you, Gekkō-san?” Shinsō pointed past Kei to Hayate, who was sizing up the newcomer.

“Since I was three. This is my kid brother, Hayate.” Kei stepped neatly to the side, allowing Hayate to sidle forward.

Hayate, who was about tall enough to reach Shinsō’s collarbone, sized him up like he expected to have to get into a fistfight. While Shinsō probably outweighed Hayate by a fair amount, Kei’s adorable baby brother was also the next in line to mastery of their mother’s kenjutsu style and had been participating in their family training since he could walk. Now a fully-fledged mid-tier shinobi, he could probably take on most of the local toughs before Quirks got involved.

Then everyone blinked and the trance was broken.

Hayate dropped a fist into his open palm, as though something had just occurred to him. “Oh, wait, is this the guy with the mind control power? You didn’t say what he looked like.”

“I didn’t?” Kei tried to think back, but they’d discussed so many things over the previous (extremely tiring) day that she couldn’t remember. “Well, this is Shinsō-san. He’s in my class and… You’re at the top of the class, right?”

“You can’t remember the name of our class rep and you can remember that?” Shinsō shook his head. “You’re hopeless.”

“If he’s at the top of the class,” Hayate said after a second, looking between the other two, “where are you?”
“Well…” Kei began, belatedly realizing that this was probably a poor conversational topic.

“Dead last,” Shinsō said, throwing her under the bus as though on reflex. It was a well-developed instinct for people who hung around Kei for any length of time.

“Shut up,” Kei grumbled.

Hayate very pointedly reached up and pinched his own ear. “Okay, not dreaming.” He took a deep breath, then jabbed a finger into Kei’s chest. “But seriously, what the hell? You were at the top of your class back when you were like eight, and Obito keeps saying you slept through everything and you transferred in late. Again, what the hell?”

Called on the carpet by her very own little brother. And with a witness! Kei jerked her head away, feeling her ears heat up under her hair. “It’s different, okay?”

“I really don’t think it is!”

“She makes up for it,” Shinsō volunteered, after Hayate had started to build up steam.

He demanded crossly, “How?”

“Scaring our classmates to death.” Kei’s glare was redirected to Shinsō instead of her brother. Smirking, Shinsō went on, “It started with the scar, then they saw her Quirk, and then she’s been ignoring them all ever since.”

Hayate smacked his hand directly to his forehead. “You are my favorite sister—”

“Only sister,” Kei muttered.

“—but you’re supposed to be nice to people at least a bit, and I know you’re smart enough to do well in school anywhere. Just put your back into it!” Hayate finished. Then, perhaps realizing that he was still half-soaked, he started scrubbing his hands through his rapidly-tangling brown hair as though it would remove any of the salt or sand.

Kei and Shinsō both leaned back a little from the sudden spray.

“Anyway,” Hayate said before Kei or Shinsō could think of anything to say. “Mind control. How does it work?”

“…Why?” Shinsō asked, notably more hesitant now.

Kei hid her initial reaction, which was the urge to quell Hayate immediately. Though she often pretended not to know what people were feeling or disregarded it, and being unable to read any chakra from the locals made that problem slightly more genuine, she did have compassion. Shinsō didn’t need an interrogation from Hayate.

But her brother was already on a roll.

“Inoichi-sensei can do something like that,” Hayate said. “He just went like this—” here, Hayate made the hand seal for the Mind-Body Disturbance technique, “—and this guy punched himself in the face. It was really cool!”

Shinsō looked at Kei over Hayate’s shoulder as though to confirm that Hayate wasn’t bullshitting him, and Kei said with a shrug, “His sensei’s whole family can do something similar.”

“And that’s…cool.” Shinsō raised an eyebrow. “Not creepy, or villainous, or dangerous.”
“Of course it’s dangerous.” Hayate shook his head. Counting off with his fingers, he went on, “So is setting fires, being a walking thunderstorm, or almost drowning people. Any type of power is dangerous if you’re an asshole about it. And Inoichi-sensei even gave us this huge talk about that like…last month? There was a lot about ethics.”

Ironic, since shinobi education tended to go light on those. Then again, Hayate’s batch of genin were growing up in a more peaceful era. Maybe that meant something.

“If you’re trying to get Hayate to admit he thinks you might randomly go evil,” Kei said in a mild tone, “even jokingly, it’s not gonna work. Mind control Quirks are really common where we come from. You can do a lot of good with good intentions and strong morals.”

Madara notwithstanding, the Uchiha were a respected noble clan. And, while not as rich or as popularly known, the Yamanaka clan sat proudly among the Konoha elite when they felt like putting on airs.

“Besides, I don’t know you,” Hayate said, “but you don’t feel like a bad person.”

Kei dropped a hand onto her brother’s shoulder and asked in a complete conversational left turn, ”Are you hungry?”

“Uh, sort of?” Hayate kept his eyes on Shinsō, however. “Do you think they have taiyaki?”

“Maybe.” Kei had not exactly made a habit of scouting beaches for snack stands.

“I’ll look!” Hayate said, and ran off.

Kei and Shinsō watched him go. Sooner or later, Hayate would remember that he didn’t have any local money.

“So,” Kei said after a few seconds. “Sorry if that was a lot to dump on you all at once.”

“It’s…It’s different, I guess.” Shinsō grabbed the handlebars of his bike and looked around for a second. “I’m going to park this, but I could…stick around. See what you’re doing for training.”

“All we’re doing right now is getting a mid-morning snack,” Kei said, and the pair of them followed vaguely in Hayate’s wake.

It turned out that, much like parking spaces for cars that had timers and pay meters, Japan also had such spaces for bikes. Kei poked at the strange devices while Shinsō locked his bike in one of the empty slots, paying the fee with a few coins.

“Are you looking forward to the Sports Festival, Shinsō-san?” Kei asked, while she idly pinged for Hayate’s chakra signature. Though she’d seen his reaction to the announcement, and perhaps the aftermath of everyone declaring war on 1-A for whatever reason, she still wanted to hear his answer.

As her brother’s lightning signature lit up further down the street, Kei heard Shinsō respond, “Isn’t it obvious?” When she glanced at him, he went on, “If I win, it’s a chance for me to get into the Hero course. I can’t afford not to win.”

Kei blinked slowly. That was a bit more intense than she’d been expecting.

“What?” Shinsō seemed almost offended that she didn’t have an immediate response.

“Good luck?” Kei tried. “Some of the kids you’re gonna be up against are pretty tough, aren’t they?”
Kei was fairly certain Blondie McSplode would be totally okay with blowing up anybody near him, Shinsō included. Hell, his own classmates *most definitely* included.

“Doesn’t matter,” Shinsō said dismissively. “I know you don’t care about this kind of thing, but people have been telling me my whole life that I can’t become a hero with a villainous Quirk.” Yes, Kei had rather figured that. But she kept silent so Shinsō could continue with, “But that’s my dream. I’m going to prove them all wrong.”

What, exactly, was she supposed to say to that? “Okay. I mean, you’ve probably got a strategy and I’m sure it works for your Quirk, but do you have a backup plan?”

Shinsō clearly didn’t want to listen to suggestions, but managed to grumble, “I’m all ears.”

Kei was game enough for it. “Learn to fight?”

“The Sports Festival is in two weeks,” Shinsō said flatly.

“It takes just a few hours to learn basic self-defense.” She crossed her arms, “If your Quirk doesn’t cut it, that’s all you’ll have left. Do you even know how to throw a punch?”

“Of course I do.”

They continued half-seriously arguing this way for a while, following Hayate’s constant window-shopping more than anything. Apparently, in the months since the beach had been cleaned up, more businesses had cropped up to take advantage of the view than Kei had thought. Most of them didn’t have customers this early, but it was actually better that way. It meant no one really had to hear Kei and Shinsō’s ongoing debate regarding his fighting skills.

Hayate interrupted a round of Kei gesturing empty-handed while trying to explain the principles of punching someone in the face or the throat with, “Hey, what’s the law on Quirks again?”

“I know I’m not supposed to use mine in public,” Kei said, which Hayate accepted without elaboration.

She’d given him a very bare-bones explanation of Quirks and Quirk legislation, but it boiled down to about the same reason non-shinobi weren’t supposed to use chakra-based techniques outside of clan holdings. Hayate understood that, and then spent two hours over one summer weekend cheerfully tossing ideas back and forth with Obito and Kei about what his Quirk could be.

Hayate’s decision, in the end, was based on his chakra sensor ability. Besides being the only person in Konoha who could use their mother’s samurai-trained technique, Hayate didn’t expect to be able to carry a sword here or even to fight. The ability to sense other people’s emotions and intent was good enough for wandering the streets, and it covered neatly for shinobi hyperawareness.

“You can use them for self-defense,” Shinsō put in, when Kei was going to let the subject drop. “Technically, you can defend yourself or others, but just enough to run away.”

“Given the number of heroes running around, that can’t be that bad.” Hayate folded his arms behind his head, content to join them while they walked. “And everyone has cell phones, so contacting somebody would be easy.”

“You’d think,” Shinsō said. “There was a kid…last spring.” Shinsō rubbed the back of his neck, though the expression that crossed his face wasn’t particularly kind. “He got captured by a villain and nobody could get him loose until All Might showed up. Three heroes, and between the kid’s explosion Quirk and the villain possessing him, none of them could do anything besides try to keep
people away and put out fires.”

Kei couldn’t help but notice that Hayate’s presence seemed to calm both of them down. Or rather, Kei stopped dominating the conversation and Shinsō had a chance to educate a twelve-year-old. Maybe he liked non-judgmental kids?

“Was that kid the blond jerk from 1-A?” Kei asked, unable to think of anyone else who could create explosions on demand.

“The very same,” Shinsō confirmed. Okay, that was definitely a bitter sort of smirk. “Guess that fancy Quirk didn’t do anything for him.”

Lots of bitterness.

“We might both have to face him in the Sports Festival,” Kei said, while they turned toward a shopping district instead of the beach. “Your strategy’s set, right?”

Shinsō nodded. “Shouldn’t be too hard to piss him off.”

“I don’t think I’m gonna be able to see that while it happens,” Hayate grumbled. To Kei, he said, “You haven’t done an exhibition match since you were eleven. How bad do you really think it’s gonna get?”

Good of Hayate not to mention the Chūnin Exams by name. The death toll was rather higher than would be accepted in a peacetime society. Sure, nobody tended to die in the finals, but the Second Exam was the obstacle course round and fairly unrestrained. Certainly people tried to kill each other, with varying levels of success.

“I’ll be fine,” Kei said.

“I know that,” Hayate griped, as Kei affectionately ruffled his hair. “But are you aiming for the top? Do you have a strategy?”

“Dazzle everyone with my skill,” Kei suggested sarcastically. When Shinsō and Hayate both gave her skeptical looks—disturbingly alike, actually—Kei huffed and said, “Depending on what the events are, I might be able to just use my athletic ability to get past them. But up against people like the explosion kid…yeah, that’d be about when I should bust out my Quirk.”

Kei needed to figure out what mechanism allowed Blondie McSplode to act like a walking minefield. If his Quirk was anything like the half-magic fūinjutsu explosions she favored, countering him would be harder. If he relied on a chemical balance, though…

Shinsō shook his head slowly as they passed a bank. “Are you sure you should be talking about this with me? We’re going to be rivals in the Sports Festival.”

“Whatever.” Kei flapped a hand dismissively. “If we both get that far, then I’ll worry about it.”

“She said the same thing before her last exhibition match,” Hayate said to Shinsō, in a stage whisper. “And then she and one of her friends beat the crap out of each other.”

“It was Gai,” Kei defended herself. “If I wasn’t prepared to use everything I had, I’d lose.”

“Shots below the belt are illegal everywhere else,” Hayate muttered, while Shinsō paled.

“Hey, we both knew there weren’t any rules,” Kei argued.
“What the hell kind of dojo did you two join?” Shinsō demanded incredulously. When both of the Gekkō siblings looked askance at him, he clarified, “Who was your teacher?”

Kei and Hayate exchanged looks. Then, in unison, “Mom.”

Shinsō’s purple gaze flicked rapidly back and forth between them, and then he pinched the bridge of his nose with a sigh. “That explains so much.”

At least Shinsō knew now that Kei came by her weirdness honestly. Couldn’t be anything else if Hayate was also affected.

It was at this point that the bank next to them started to rumble.

Hayate’s first instinct was to pause and look at the potential problem, his eyes narrowed and entire body tensed for a fight. So was Shinsō’s, but he was a bit closer to the street in comparison and didn’t have any combat training to fall back on.

Kei grabbed both boys by the backs of their jackets and flung them clear before the front doors shattered.
Chapter Summary

Hitoshi has a Bad Day.

Chapter Notes

Tons of credit to Abalisk, who took the wreck of a chapter I'd flailed over for two days and helped me make it coherent between art sprees!

Shinsō Hitoshi, if asked one full week ago what he thought of Gekkō Keisuke, would have asked, “Who?” and then not gotten an answer, because his Quirk’s reputation was starting to permeate General Studies. He wouldn’t have mustered the curiosity at all until later on Sunday when everyone showed up to class for real and Quirks were shared. Then, upon realizing just how much potential the delinquent in his class was wasting by constantly getting in trouble, he might’ve answered with a dismissive, resentful scoff.

If someone like that was languishing in General Studies, Hitoshi just needed to work that much harder to prove himself once and for all. He’d win the Sports Festival. He’d even beat her, even if she knew his Quirk.

And then meeting her outside of school turned that impression on its head. Gekkō was friendlier away from class, more aware, and infinitely more understanding than he’d ever dared hope.

“Oh, I can understand me, since I’m the ‘Gen Studies trouble child’ and everyone knows it. But I don’t remember you ever using your Quirk on anyone.”

“The part they care about is that I could. I just need someone to respond to me. Most people just stop talking to me once they realize that’s how it works.”

“So, basically, you could’ve done it fifteen times since the start of this conversation. Okay. You clearly haven’t. Case closed.”

“…That’s it? No big deal?”

“I have weirder friends.”

That might’ve been enough to ease the constant leaden weight of resentment in Hitoshi’s chest, just a bit. Meeting someone new who didn’t scoff at his dreams, no matter how obliquely, was a triumph he hadn’t managed once in three years of junior high. Maybe UA was different. Maybe his days of being sidelined and shut down were over. It didn’t make everything right again, but it helped.

And then Gekkō had to pop that comfortable bubble by being nice. Understanding. It was the kind of easy conversation that made Hitoshi feel wrong-footed somehow, like the world had tilted slightly and no one told him. People didn’t like his Quirk. They barely tolerated it. And no one he’d ever met
brushed it off as *no big deal*.

Hitoshi dealt with sudden confusion by avoiding her for half a week. It was safer that way until he could get his thoughts in order.

Then this morning rolled around, and Hitoshi biked his way out to Musutafu with no expectations and thunderous what-ifs about the Sports Festival clamoring in his head. When fresh air didn’t seem to banish them, he’d been about to give up and just call it a wasted day.

And then he’d seen a familiar-looking seaweed-head flip a smaller version of herself into the water.

The Gekkō siblings were both impossible people. Where Hayate—who, to Hitoshi’s surprise, managed to look *less* like Eraserhead than his sister—cheerfully dished out one burn after another and seemed half to be conspiring with Hitoshi already to mess with her, while Gekkō only remained fondly exasperated. Hitoshi had never seen her manage the combination before, because what he’d seen of her in school kept any conversations short. Hell, she was much nicer to the Hero course kids than she was to their classmates in 1-C and that was saying something considering she treated most everyone with equal levels of apathy.

And apparently Gekkō’s tolerance—even approval—of his Quirk wasn’t a total fluke. Her younger brother went to a middle school that employed a mind-controller too, and he’d apparently even seen his teacher in action.

For Hitoshi, who’d only ever heard of other people with similar Quirks in *prison*, tried not to ask the kid where he’d gone to school. It kept back the urge to wonder why he hadn’t been able to find a school like that.

And then that morning gave way to *now*.

"*Oh for fu*—"

Hitoshi landed hard on his back, barely avoiding cracking his head against the pavement. Before he could scramble back to his feet and demand to know what the hell that was about, he saw a semi-translucent *thing* wrap around Gekkō’s waist and yank her into the bank.

A cold feeling settled across his shoulders, and Hitoshi choked against the sudden weight in his chest.

Hayate, on the other hand, clearly wasn’t restrained by such simple notions as *fear for one’s life* and shot to his feet before Hitoshi could even string two words together. “Kei, wait—” he called numbly, still reeling.

Hitoshi thought, later—after the adrenaline drained from his system, that that was a bad way to start any kind of question about what the hell he’d just seen. Still, he scrambled after the middle schooler who was definitely heading face-first into hell and tried to stop him on reflex.

The instant his fingers clamped down on Hayate’s hood, Hitoshi was dragged along for the ride.

*Shitshitshit*—

Hayate skidded to a halt among broken glass and bent metal that used to be a door, one arm hitting Hitoshi in the stomach like a locked turnstile as he followed, knocking the wind out of him as a result.

“You wanna be next, you little shits?!” snarled a man standing in the middle of the bank, just as
Hitoshi looked up. There was shattered glass and destroyed cubicles and upended chairs and water absolutely everywhere, not to mention shadows cast by sparking, destroyed lights. And right behind the guy, floating in a massive column of surging water, was Gekkō.

*Water tank on the back, chainmail, shark’s teeth,* a part of Hitoshi’s brain rattled off, calmer than the rest of him. *Water villain. Has to be.*

The rest of him was trying very hard to freeze in place, his muscles locking despite his brain’s obvious protests to get the hell out of there. He’d seen villains on TV—who hadn’t?—but that was a whole different world from being face-to-face with one.

“Let my sister go.” Every inch of Hayate bristled like an angry cat, his fingers reaching as though for a weapon only to pat ineffectively at his waist. If not for Hitoshi’s grip on the kid, he half-expected the middle schooler to literally fling himself at the villain. That couldn’t end well.

Hitoshi didn’t let go. He didn’t remember how.

His tongue felt like it was glued to the roof of his mouth.

“You don’t get to make demands here, brat!” the villain bellowed, posturing with a menace that could only be gathered by an over inflated ego.

There was a digital *click.*

Hitoshi looked down in the deafening silence and—*When the hell had Hayate gotten his phone?!* And sure enough, there the kid stood, brandishing his phone like he owned it with an expression so smug it would have made Midnight-sensei proud.

The villains appeared to have realized this at the same time Hitoshi did, because the clamor they made following that was downright explosive.

“COME BACK HERE, BRAT!”

*Oh, fuck.*

Water surged, again, and Hayate slammed backward hard enough to knock himself and Hitoshi out of the bank and out of immediate reach. Before Hitoshi could do more than stumble, Hayate snatched his wrist and dragged him down the street.

A clawed hand grabbed for them from a nearby alleyway, failing to snatch them solely because apparently Gekkō’s little brother was as impossibly athletic as she was. Hitoshi’s back heel hit a curve in the sidewalk and the middle-school terror kicked a grown man’s hand hard enough to break even clawed fingers.

Hitoshi barely had enough time to think, *What the hell?* before they were zipping off again.

As the pair of them retreated, Hitoshi finally got a good look at the second villain. The first was probably the bigger one, but the second had arms twice as long as a normal human. Each hand had only three fingers, and half of that count was already bent. And he already looked pissed off.

And the other guy was catching up. A *pair* of bank robbers. Of course.

One to kill the security, another to make escape *possible.*

“Shinsō-san, you’ve gotta keep up,” Hayate whispered fiercely, and his hand tightened on Hitoshi’s
wrist.

Hitoshi wasn’t going to be able to feel that hand in the morning. Some absurd part of his brain was already complaining about it. Hitoshi was just along for the ride, and he hated it.

They ran.

Hayate might’ve had eyes in the back of his head or something, because he ducked into alleyways and around obstacles just as a surge of water rushed into the spot where they would’ve been if the kid didn’t zig-zag. Claws almost closed on Hitoshi’s jacket, twice, but Hayate yanked him forward just ahead of them.

Hitoshi found himself wondering, while the kid almost pulled his arm off for the third time in twenty seconds, why the hell there weren’t police or at least witnesses around. The bank had been open and the streets hadn’t been entirely abandoned on a Sunday, so why the hell were they the only ones being hounded by a pair of bank robbers who’d clearly decided murder was fine?

Eventually, though, Hayate and Hitoshi’s luck ran out. The kid juked left when he should have gone right, which put them both in an alleyway with no outlet.

Hitoshi had to force himself to look back, breathing ragged. Some foreign instinct kept him from letting the Hayate lead the way out again, not with two shadows already darkening the mouth of the alley. The kid was faster than he was, but they’d run for a reason. Hitoshi wouldn’t let them past him without a fight.

He clenched his fists as they came into view, putting up a brave front despite the pool of dread in his stomach. Hitoshi had no illusions that he’d be able to put up a decent fight on his own. If anything he would only be a momentary distraction for Hayate to make his escape and call for help. Maybe… if he could just get them to respond—

His thoughts trailed off as a familiar shape came into view.

Behind the villains, Gekkō floated upside-down in the water bubble the first villain was keeping there. As Hitoshi watched, still tongue-tied, she kicked her way back upright and the water shifted, following along as she swam over to the villains and gave the water one bunny ears.

What?

Hayate suddenly coughed, covering his mouth as he stopped fighting Hitoshi’s hold. And unless he was wrong, the kid was trying not to laugh. Hitoshi’s first instinct was to shake the kid by his collar to ask what the fuck, but then a helpful memory came to mind.

“My Quirk is called Tsunami. I can create and control huge amounts of water.”

Gekkō, now swimming above and behind the villain’s head while making rude hand gestures, was grinning with bubbles streaming up between her teeth. She was more inconvenienced than in trouble. She was toying with them.

Hayate’s smile was downright predatory.

They did this on purpose!

Hitoshi felt an absurd laugh trying to escape him, too. The knotted tension in his ribs loosened, letting him breathe and think. Air escaped him all in a rush.
The situation was shitty, but this? This Hitoshi could handle.

There was a plan.

“Hey, assholes,” Hitoshi said, pitching his voice to carry over the sound of distant police sirens and the pounding of his heartbeat in his ears. His smile was all teeth. It helped to force even that much. “What’s black and white and red all over?”

“…What the—” the guy began, and Hitoshi could activate his Quirk. He could and he knew it, and Gekkō knew it even if she couldn’t say it.

Gekkō reached out with both hands, still veiled in flowing water, and slammed her palms together against each side of the water villain’s head. The column burst, spilling everywhere as the villain’s control shattered alongside his eardrums.

Where did she learn to do that?!

Gekkō hit the ground with a splash, water sloshing everywhere as she landed behind the now-collapsed villain. She coughed, once, and started wringing out her hair to get it out of her face.

“Hanamura, what—” the claw villain turned, trying to figure out why he was up to his ankles in water, and he met Gekkō's fist going the other way.

“Move it!” Gekkō snarled over her shoulder, even as she drove her knee into the claw villain’s stomach.

Hayate shot forward with Hitoshi’s wrist once again held in a deathgrip. The pair of them hopped over the water villain and made it back into the open—if empty—little side-street and out of immediate harm’s way.

Hayate turned back, yelling, “Hey, we’re leaving!”

Hitoshi didn’t look back but heard Gekkō anyway, letting out a frustrated grunt just as Hitoshi’s heart finally stopped trying to climb up his throat. None of them were licensed and the police were going to have things to say about how Gekkō was lifting one foot with clear intent to stomp on the downed villain.

Hayate only let go of Hitoshi long enough to double back, pulling his sister away before she could lose her temper.

“Fucking asshole ruined my phone,” Gekkō complained as they tried to put as much distance between them and the villains as possible, holding up the dead device. Water started to drift off its surface, just like it was spiraling away from her clothes and into a long puddle along the sidewalk. “Shinsō-san, mind calling the police?”

“The bank probably had an alarm.” Hitoshi kept his voice from shaking by sheer force of will at this point. He felt nearly lightheaded.

Had he really just tried to use his Quirk on a villain? A real one?

Gekkō’s expression softened. He probably looked like a total wreck. “Right. Well, call them anyway?”

Hitoshi did, naming the address and the direction the villains were last (not) moving in.
And then all three of them escaped the scene of the second crime they’d witnessed that day. It was more due to the Gekkō siblings’ insistence, however—Hitoshi kind of wanted to just sit down and have his well-earned panic attack in peace. Which, apparently, was not something he could count on in the future.

*When people talk about falling in with a rough crowd,* Hitoshi thought distantly, *they probably don’t mean a pair of Eraserhead lookalikes.*

Gekkō was letting her brother handle the probably-destroyed phone with a scowl set on her face. She’d sneakily used her Quirk to dry off, as well as belatedly remembering to do the same for her brother. Who’d been walking around with his entire back wet for like half an hour by now when he didn’t have to.

Hitoshi let them argue over it. Now that the danger was over, or close enough, Hitoshi’s nerves buzzed. He found himself running his hands through his hair, as though expecting them to come away slick with blood. Or a knot on the back of his head the size of an egg, because *that could not have happened.* There were villains, and no heroes, and they were all *alive.*

Hell, the Gekkō pair were back to bickering like nothing had happened.

Hitoshi felt like he was the one who’d been held underwater.

Sometime later, though he had no idea how much time had really passed, two pairs of hands guided him to sit down. While one of them disappeared for a bit, somebody kept making vague comforting noises or trying to prompt him to talk, Hitoshi didn’t quite process this until someone shoved a bottle into his hands.

“Here,” said Gekkō’s voice, and Hitoshi blinked down at the drink. “It’ll help.”

The marble had already been dislodged. Saved him a step. Or four.

Hitoshi didn’t get his voice back until the bottle was empty. He wasn’t sure if he was grateful for that or not.

“Sorry for not warning you,” Gekkō said, once they’d managed to make it back to the beach. “I bet that kind of stuff doesn’t happen to you a lot.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Hitoshi told her bluntly. Even minutes later, his hands shook. That was the closest he’d come to getting killed in his entire life. Holy shit. He might’ve died if things were different.

*Actually…*

“How were you two so calm?” Hitoshi asked, brow furrowing. At the two near-identical blank looks he got in response, he said in a more frustrated tone, “Neither of you hesitated.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Hitoshi asked, but he looked up at his sister for confirmation.

“Most people weren’t raised by Mom,” Gekkō told him, shrugging. As though that explained anything.

“That… Did your mom think you two would just…?” Hitoshi gestured vaguely with his hand, as though to encompass *everything* that had happened this morning.

“Kind of,” Gekkō said, as she tried to untangle her hair.
“Her, definitely,” Hayate put in. “Just self-defense for me.”

Hitoshi stared at them both. Who taught this kid to lie with a straight face? Then, “You’re… Can you teach me how to do that?”

Both of them blinked.

“Which part?” Gekkō asked.

“To not freeze,” Hitoshi said, as he slowly drummed his fingers against his left hand. When that didn’t quite work, he gripped his wrist hard enough to match the bruise Hayate had left. “To fight back instead.”

“I think so?” Gekkō exchanged a careful glance with Hayate, then added, “Not everything I know will be useful for you. But I can definitely teach you a few tricks.”

Hayate looked like he wanted to say something, but bit down on the remark.

“What?” Gekkō asked him anyway.

“Make it a trade,” Hayate suggested.

“Oh.” Inspiration struck Hitoshi squarely. He hated feeling like he owed her something, but this was important. So, the idea of a deal worked better for his half-dismembered pride. Less so for his conscience. “If you can help train me, I can try tutoring you. In whatever you’re failing.”

One eyebrow went up, but Gekkō only said, “Okay. We can do that.”

Hayate nodded in solemn approval, and Hitoshi had to wonder if this’d been the kid’s idea all along.

It took a bit longer to get Gekkō a new phone, but the pair of them exchanged numbers in the end. Little did he know how much he would come to regret that decision.
Training

Chapter Summary

The deal is on.

During lunch on Monday, Kei stopped in with Principal Nezu to let him know about what had happened on Sunday. He could take it or leave it, but she was nonetheless slightly relieved to hear that the water villain would probably get his hearing back. Eventually. In prison.

She wouldn’t have been that happy if the jackass had actually managed to lay a finger on Hayate, but that was an alternate universe she hadn’t allowed to manifest.

*After classes on Monday, Kei and Shinsō met for their mutual tutoring session in the school library.* First of all came studying and, like the good student he was, Shinsō actually had all the notes from the classes Kei variously daydreamed through, missed, or simply didn’t understand. Though Kei did copy a fair portion of them and asked Shinsō for explanations for various topics, a fair chunk of the trouble came from not actually reading the coursework. She’d read more of the Modern Literature coursework in the past hour as a result than she had since the term started, with Shinsō outlining his note-taking strategy in between barely-hidden yawns. Sunday night clearly hadn’t treated him well, but he seemed game enough for their agreed-upon training.

And then, after the sky started to change color, it began.

It was…probably about the physical equivalent of what studying was for Kei. To wit: An embarrassing slog.

*I didn’t realize it was this bad,* Kei remarked to Isobu, while watching Shinsō get warmups out of the way. It’d been a long time since Kei had seen anybody huff and puff that hard after running a mile. Or its equivalent.

Training was all right in theory. Between Hayate’s pestering and Shinsō’s offer, Kei didn’t have much choice other than to study. She just hadn’t expected to have that kind of time while waiting for Shinsō to exercise.

Their route today was in Musutafu, solely because that was where UA was and it saved them train fare. Besides, studying after school meant there didn’t really seem like anyplace else *to go* that still felt like they’d be keeping momentum going. So, Musutafu it was.

By mutual agreement, neither of them were running anywhere near the bank from yesterday.

**You may have forgotten that the majority of humans cannot keep up with a special jōnin in any capacity.**

...*Crap.*

Shinsō managed to catch up to her, eventually. Checking her phone, she timed it out to about ten minutes. Unless the internet was lying to her, Shinsō was somewhat slower than average for a Japanese boy his age, and he was definitely not going to make the cut with the Hero course kids with
a score like that.

Kei wasn’t even winded. She felt vaguely guilty about that, but figured Shinsō wouldn’t appreciate what’d look like pity coming from her.

Maybe she should have started him out with a kilometer run instead.

Once Shinsō got his breath back, he gasped, “Please… Just let me focus on Modern Literature.” Before Kei could pose a clarifying question, Shinsō went on, “If I have…to also tutor you in math… before doing this? I am going to die.”

Kei did her best to channel Gai. It was generally a safe bet. “Don’t give up yet, Shinsō-san!”

Shinso muttered something unintelligible, reaching up to adjust the sweatband around his head. He didn’t seem encouraged.

“Anyway, now it’s time for stretches and cooldown activities.”

Kei’s outlook didn’t really improve from that point onward, though she wasn’t nearly as frustrated as Shinsō was. He made it through most of the stretches fine, though he couldn’t touch his toes particularly well. At the end of it all, both of them were differing levels of annoyed, but at separate problems.

*Are my standards completely broken?*

Yes.

She didn’t even know where to start with katas. She needed more of an idea of his capabilities, even if his physical conditioning wasn’t filling her with confidence.

They went to a completely mundane non-beach park, which was conveniently free of witnesses on a Monday afternoon. There wasn’t exactly much to attract people besides the playground fixtures, and those were a little stooped and sad due to too many Quirk-blessed children attacking the structure over the years. And there was a water fountain, which Kei supposed was probably the only thing to recommend it.

Kei poked and prodded until Shinsō stood across from her on the grass, his feet shoulder-width apart. Given his expression, he was less enthusiastic than she’d been as a kid about the entire process. Then again, her mother had been using a shinai and had, perhaps with a bit too much faith in Kei’s impulse control, given her one to hold while the corrections went on. The trouble then had been keeping Kei still, not getting Shinsō to keep his muscles loose.

“Throw a punch, please,” Kei said, after she was almost happy with what she’d managed.

Shinsō blinked. “Right now?”

“No better time,” Kei said, and before she’d finished the last word, Shinsō had already thrown it at her face.

Kei caught his fist one-handed and said, “Gotta change a few things before you do it again.”

Shinsō huffed. “I’ve only thrown one.”

“And I’m here to make sure you don’t break your fingers on the second.” Kei turned his hand, saying, “Thumb on the outside. Otherwise you can hurt yourself more than the enemy.” She let go of
him and reset their starting positions. “Again!”

A second punch.

“Don’t punch with the flats of your fingers. Knuckles first.”

A third.

“Stop aiming at my face. You’ll hurt your hand worse and just barely break my nose. Too many bones.”

A fourth.

“Keep your wrist straight. Good thinking, aiming for the throat.”

And on, and on, and on.

Shinsō switched arms before he could get tired, while Kei continued to correct him with the patience drilled into her by her mother and by trying to teach Hayate kenjutsu in their younger years. There was a different tempo to this kind of lesson, and Shinsō didn’t have the experience Kei relied on as a fighter to fall into step with the constant demand. Falling into a pattern in a real fight could be fatal, but here she just needed Shinsō to keep pace.

“Enough,” Kei said finally, while Shinsō shook out his wrists. His hands looked a little reddened by the constant impacts. Her own palms hardly tickled. “Take a break.”

Shinsō glared at her, but she ignored it. While he stalked toward the water fountain, Kei tried to think her way through the problem.

Would they get further with pure physical conditioning? The technical details were important, but Shinsō’s endurance wouldn’t really matter in a match with students who’d been training all along. Either he could grab someone with his Quirk and would win the match after essentially trash-talking someone into submission, or he’d be forced to rely on barely two weeks’ worth of training to rally after mind control failed.

_Dammit, if only we had more time._

_That is what everyone says, eventually. But you do not have that kind of time._

Kei pressed her thumb to her lower lip, trying to think.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a familiar flare of fiery chakra, and Obito stepped out from behind a cherry tree in his Tokyo clothes. Jeans and close-toed shoes had been a hard sell for him, but the medical eyepatch and long-sleeved shirts _without_ the Uchiha high collar had been comparatively easy. He still wore gloves to hide his mismatched hands, but otherwise Obito was about as inconspicuous as he ever got.

He had a smiley face on the eyepatch. Because of course he did.


“Kind of weird. Did Hayate tell you what happened yesterday?” Kei asked, hand on her hip.

“A bit. You really do run into a lot of trouble, don’t you?” Obito’s gaze focused on Shinsō, who was making his way back to them.
“Trouble finds me.” Kei gestured toward Obito. “Hey, Shinsō-san, this is a friend of mine. Dropping in to check on me, I guess.”

“Kei needs looking after sometimes. I’m Uchiha Obito.” He inclined his head just slightly. “Nice to meet you, Shinso-san.”

“Likewise, Uchiha-san.” Was it just Kei’s imagination, or did Shinsō give Obito a searching look after all that? “So, are you two close?”

*Oh, great.*

“Uh, we did grow up together.” Obito was oblivious, of course. “So, what’re you two up to today?”

“Training,” Kei said, before Shinsō could dig any further into that topic. “The Sports Festival is coming up, so we’re trying to get in shape.”

Obito brightened. “Can I help?”

“Mark out another…two kilometers,” Kei suggested. With a sweet smile that sat not-at-all on her face without a *twist*, she said to both boys, “We’ll finish with that!”

Shinsō looked like Kei had just signed his death warrant.

Obito trotted off, whistling.

“So, *are* you two—?” Shinsō began with the beginnings of a teasing smirk.

“He’s my best friend, not my boyfriend,” Kei corrected him immediately. With a stern expression, she indicated the direction Obito was traveling. “And we do have a beach. What do you think about running in sand, Shinsō-san?”

Shinsō, even despite his exercise flush, somehow managed to go pale. “I’m good.”

“Thought so. Now, I don’t have much else going on in the afternoons, but I don’t think it’s realistic to meet every day.” Mostly because having a purple duckling following her around would put a severe cramp in her ability to keep up the whole “shinobi” thing. She hadn’t done a proper perimeter circuit since the school year started. “Okay. How about I show you how to fall safely on Wednesday? And maybe throw people.”

“Why Wednesday? Why not today?”

“I can show you how to throw Obito today, but only because his Quirk means we don’t need mats,” Kei explained. She tapped her foot on the grass. “Softer than concrete, but I’ve had concussions that say otherwise. So has he. And he already knows how to fall, so there’s that too.”

Shinsō sighed. “At this point I’m not sure who got the better deal here.”

“I did *say* I was fine if you cut it down to just Modern Literature,” Kei responded. She checked her phone for a cheerful "*Done! 🤘 *( ≥_≥)♡" from Obito, then said, “Let’s go. We’re wasting daylight.”

“I hate you so much already.”

“Big words for day one! Come on, it’ll make you feel better to throw Obito around.”

Shinsō groaned aloud.
Moonlighting

Chapter Summary

Kei and friends do some field work.

While wearing her ANBU outfit, Kei took the train to Hosu on Tuesday night. Not openly—once again, the Transformation jutsu was earning its keep—but she disappeared into back alleys and dark corners as soon as she could get away from the crowds. Skittering up brick or concrete walls like some kind of malformed frog honestly felt like a return to form. Almost like slipping on an old, well-loved sweater, though the armored uniform wasn’t acquainted with sleeves as such.

Still, standing on a roof, in the middle of a real city with real skyscrapers, kind of made her feel like Batman. Hosu was no art deco nightmare, but Kei hardly needed a gargoyle to dangle from. She had a whole skyline and plenty of air conditioning units.

The air split open on her lonely rooftop, and two similarly-uniformed shapes tumbled out in front of Kei.

It was kind of funny how much “tech” was being sneaked back into Konoha through Obito’s constant prowling. In much the same way as a tourist buying up crap for resale didn’t make waves, Obito’s half of the discretionary budget was mainly materials nobody in Tokyo cared much about. His penchant for disguises and vocal mimicry meant he could go anywhere, be anyone, and buy his own weight in kevlar.

Kei already saw the first results of that exploration when she took a look at Kakashi’s ANBU uniform. His armguards were different from Obito’s or Kei’s, even leaving aside how Kei had taken her personal pair from home. Lighter, somehow. Tight black material flattened his white hair to his head, leaving him nearly anonymous. His light gray vest settled differently against his body, betraying anti-stab armor under the cloth. Interlocking plates, apparently.

And no more open-toed shoes.

Konoha learned fast.

“Crane, Wolf, welcome to Hosu,” Kei said, while her teammates sorted themselves out.

“It stinks of smoke,” Kakashi commented almost immediately, and Kei didn’t blame him. City air was just weird after growing up in Konoha. Even the largest cities in the Land of Fire didn’t have fossil fuel dependency anything like this. His wolf mask and the skintight one underneath didn’t filter that much.

Obito patted his shoulder before quickly being brushed off. “You get used to it.”

Kakashi grunted, then his mask angled toward Kei. His left eye-slit gleamed red. “Any patrol rules, Turtle?”

“Avoid everyone.” Kei adjusted her Isobu-patterned mask for a second, just to fidget, then added, “Treat it like infiltrating Suna. The second an alarm goes up, ditch.”
“Easy enough,” Obito remarked, and Kei gave him a sharp look he ignored. The right eye-hole on his mask was also faintly glowing.

“Take the lead,” Kakashi prompted, and the three of them made their way through Hosu’s backstreets.

Though Kei hadn’t really explored this chunk of Tokyo with any intent last time, she’d been reading newspapers and checking maps in her spare time. She knew where major landmarks were, broadly speaking, and heading back to the apartment after this patrol exercise wouldn’t be difficult. If Hosu was known for anything, at the moment, it was a minor rise in violent crime.

Heroes were dying and that had everyone worried.

Kei wasn’t emotionally invested in the hero scene the way the locals were. Whenever caught up in a dangerous situation, Kei tended to rely on her own power first and only look to fellow shinobi after everything progressed past the point of no return. The idea that she could be saved by a hero, paid by the Japanese government to do good, was still a foreign one. Her experience at the USJ did show her the value of heroes as symbols of hope, at least once Obito and other people filled her in on how everyone reacted to All Might popping into the building. However, her concern about the Hero Killer had more to do with the fact that he was a serial killer than anything to do with who he was targeting.

Still, the principal had asked for a quick check-in, and here Kei was. Poking Hosu with reinforcements and a stick to see if the hornets were awake.

And we cannot even justify killing a multiple-murderer if he becomes too much of a threat to contain.

Kei slid down the outside wall of a nightclub, feeling heavy bass rumble up through her gloved fingertips. Law enforcement doesn’t work the same way here.

Of course it does not. Humans in this world depend so heavily on their technology and their heroes that they have made their world safe. Isobu growled in frustration, tails lashing around in the mindscape.

We’ve had this talk before, Isobu. Besides, from what the survivors have said? He’s not exactly in a jinchūriki’s weight class.

Barely anyone ever is.

Kei let him have the last word. Instead, she held a hand up as soon as she heard a sound around the corner of a roof, feeling her teammates freeze before making any extra noise. Kei crept closer to the edge, channeling chakra carefully toward her ears and concentrating on what she was hearing.

Across from her, Kakashi made several hand signals. Fire. Man. He paused for a second to listen to the same footsteps Kei heard, then added, Big.

Obito signed a question and Kakashi shook his head. Probably asking how big, but the angle wasn’t the best and Kei didn’t like splitting her attention.

“Nothing, again. Heading back now.”

Heroes patrolled, too. Just their bad luck that, when Kei poked her head up just before the man walked of easy view, she recognized Endeavor’s hulking frame. Of all the people who “Big, uses
fire, and is a man” fit, the Number Two of all Japan’s heroes was a rather unfortunate find. His Quirk was called Hellfire, and Kei had seen footage of him channeling so much heat through his limbs that he could melt handholds into nominally-solid concrete.

Kei signalled a retreat. Her boys followed her for almost ten blocks before she stopped on a somewhat taller rooftop, crowded with ventilation units, ducts, and antennae.

“Endeavor’s not stationed here normally,” Kei said quietly, retrieving her phone from a pocket. She fiddled with it until she brought up Endeavor’s profile on some official site or other. Probably his. Then she handed her phone to Kakashi. “Stain really must be causing a panic.”

Obito hung back, Sharingan bright behind his mask as he kept alert, and Kakashi settled next to Kei’s left side.

“If a man with his face on fire wants to catch a killer,” Kakashi said after scanning the somewhat-dim screen, “he’s welcome to him. But for him to be here? Those unsuccessful hunts must really be burning him up inside.”

Obito muttered something uncharitable about puns.

Kei shoved Kakashi’s shoulder playfully and snatched her phone back. “We’ll poke around a little longer.”

Truthfully, the patrol didn’t turn up much despite GPS help and rumor-chasing. While Kakashi was primed to detect blood, city scents were overwhelming on a good day. The trio did find an old bloodstain outlined by police tape and blocked by a patrol car, but it appeared the Hero Killer didn’t actually hunt every night. He was an asshole, a murderer, and probably equipped with a dangerous Quirk if he’d managed to overpower so many pro heroes already. But he wasn’t, apparently, all that easy to find.

Besides, cigarette smoke got really bad around crime scenes. Kakashi had signed a No when asked if he could detect anything past that kind of interference. If he’d been a little less disciplined, Kei imagined he might’ve had more to say. Most of it rude.

“One more pass,” Kei said, and they hopped to it.

Between Kei’s phone and Obito’s, as well as Obito’s street-level knowledge of some of the familiar heroes who operated in the area, they managed to make a game out of spotting familiar faces. Fin-helmeted Manual, the Normal Hero, patrolled more during the daytime and seemed to be about in the same weight class as the bank robber from the weekend. Kei managed to find another hero, apparently called Native, whose costume and lack of any notable Quirk just made all three of them scratch their heads.

Well, Obito and Kei did. Kakashi didn’t know or care enough.

Most of the heroes who operated in Hosu, including famous Team Idaten—run by Ingenium and his sidekicks—seemed to be pretty secure in their positions. Maybe that was why Stain kept picking them off, because she couldn’t quite see someone higher on the hero lists getting axed by someone whose modus operandi relied heavily on ambushes. A lot of the higher-ranking heroes were there for power and skill, not just popularity.

“You know, I’m not really seeing anyone who could, like, go toe to toe with us.” Obito commented after they’d passed by a hero patrol. Moving across the city three stories up from ground level had a way of keeping them out of trouble. For now. “Maybe that Endeavor guy. But all of their Quirks are
public. Does no one ever do thought exercises about that kind of thing? I mean, you fought Sensei and if you’d been anybody else he’d’ve flattened you inside of four seconds.”

“Sometimes I wonder,” Kei replied. The fact that she, better than almost anyone bar Kushina or Jiraiya, knew all of Namikaze Minato’s jutsu and his preferred fighting styles meant she’d been probably in a unique position during their spar. The idea of anybody else getting that close was a disturbing one.

There was kind of a reason it was illegal to teach non-shinobi the majority of their techniques. Shinobi from other villages, too.

Maybe that lopsided information was also why underground heroes were a thing.

After a few more rooftops, Kakashi remarked, “Maybe that’s why the firebug is here.”

Obito cartwheeled instead of landing normally as they crossed another roof. “You think?”

“Probably. But he’s having the same trouble we are.” As all three of them slowed to a stop on top of what appeared to be a four-story apartment building, Kakashi went on, “I’m willing to assume that this person we’re looking for is notorious. Distinctive to the point of having a fanclub, apparently. But I don’t think that we’re the first ones with detection abilities who’ve been called in to try and find him. He might genuinely not be here at the moment.”

Kei glanced across the way, toward the nearest train station. She scratched under the edge of her mask, recalling the discussion she’d had with Hayate about technology. Mass transit was a curse sometimes. “You’re probably right. And if he took a train, he could be anywhere by now.”

“There’s probably a way to track him with local methods, but those aren’t workable from our positions.” Kakashi tilted his head back to check the angle of the moon, or perhaps just out of curiosity. Then, “This patrol is effectively over.”

A disappointing result for Team Minato’s first reunion patrol, but there it was.

“I wish we had other agents to hand this off to,” Obito complained, as they changed into more civilian-friendly clothes inside Kamui. The pocket dimension’s obsession with white, squared-off blocks and bizarre lighting meant finding their clothing stashes was a cinch even without Obito’s help. “It feels like we’re leaving a job half-finished.”

“That’s what heroes are for,” Kei told him. Then her head finally popped out of her sweater collar and she started fussing with the neckline and sleeves. Really, throwing on street clothes over her uniform was a bit lazy, but there wasn’t anyone around to criticise her fashion choices. “And a police department. Though I don’t know how much headway they’re gonna make.”

“Not our jurisdiction.” Kakashi reappeared from behind a distant pillar, sporting a cheap medical mask with ear loops. His black turtleneck and jeans were like Tokyo versions of his jōnin uniform. Perhaps not wanting to match Obito, he’d just styled his unruly hair down over his left eye and omitted the eyepatch. When he noticed the other two staring at him, he said, “I’m not due back for another eighteen hours.”

“Oh, oh!” Obito bounced over to his teammates, grinning. “Kakashi, this place has so much weird stuff. It’s great!”

Kakashi blinked slowly at him. There was a slight edge of dawning dread in what Kei could see of his expression. His chakra flickered slightly. Then he managed to say in an even voice, “Such as?”
Obito and Kei grinned at each other. Kakashi was the newbie here.

Kei said, “Well, I know you like the Icha-Icha series, but there are like a million more options here. And there’s about five thousand types of manga. We need to hit up a bookstore, now.”

“Akihabara?” Obito suggested, his Sharingan shifting to its Mangekyō form. He’d been around Tokyo a few times by now, since he didn’t need to actually attend school.

Kei gave him a Gai-style thumbs-up. “Definitely! It’s not past curfew yet.”

“This place has a curfew,” Kakashi repeated incredulously.

“Just transform into Raidō or something if it ends up being a problem,” Kei suggested as Obito held out a hand, swirling vortex in the middle of his palm. “Anybody older than eighteenish. Twenty, maybe?”

Kakashi waited until Obito had neatly deposited them in an abandoned side-street to answer, “I think I’m fine for now.”

“Good!” Kei ushered them out into the street. “Now, let’s go find the bookstore. There has to be one still open.”

In the end, Kakashi got a new three-part romance series from a writer who obviously published under a pseudonym and a pair of truly terrible joke books. Obito bought a tourist’s guide to Tokyo and a multipack of study aids (sticky notes, highlighters, and so on), just before spotting a novel about Yoshitsune and snatching it up, too.

Kei didn’t buy anything, but she did have both of them stay overnight.

While they were sleeping, Kakashi somehow stole the comforter he’d been sharing with Obito, Obito cuddled up to Kakashi like he was some kind of pillow, and Kei woke up with her head propped up on Kakashi’s side and a crick in her neck. And none of them got up before Kei’s alarm clock.

Some things never changed.
Training went on. The eve of the Sports Festival approached—or loomed—and there came a point that one had to just live with the results achieved in that time.

Shinsō improved just fast enough to frustrate himself. Kei, having exchanged notepads full of observations and ideas with Gai (thanks to Obito’s delivery service), was about that much better as a teacher. Likewise, Shinsō was having a hell of a time trying to get much of anything regarding Modern Literature through Kei’s head, even if it was all he had the energy for.

Kei wasn’t sure if Shinsō was an insomniac like she used to be and couldn’t be sure if it’d be too invasive to ask. Still, it got included in her notes, bracketed by question marks, and shipped to an expert.

Gai, like most shinobi, tended to work from the assumption that people their age were already at least somewhat invested in physical training and had been for a fair while. The idea of training a civilian teenager didn’t initially occur to him. Once Kei had a chance to explain (in person, because Gai hadn’t seen her apartment yet and deserved to experience the internet), her fitness master friend threw himself into the challenge. Paperwork flew instead of punches, however. Gai was a bit too overwhelming to throw at Shinsō during their actual training, though, so Kei ushered him back through the portal before Gai could find her first-ever student and hug him until his head popped off like a champagne cork. Or her head, come to that.

It’d help Gai with Lee someday, Kei thought. Gai hadn’t given her a fitness plan, because neither of them were organized enough for that, but he’d taken her list of potential throws, holds, and various dirty tricks and pared them down so she could focus on the ones Shinsō would actually be able to use without hurting himself. Gai had also perfected the vague suggestions on diet, sleep, or off-time training exercises Kei hadn’t used consistently since childhood, and Kei put the ideas to work as soon as she could.

And while all of the background work was going on, they practiced that advice on dummies, on punching bags at local gyms, and on Obito when he felt like helping.

However, there were still stumbling blocks.

Kei hadn’t experienced any real trouble with Shinsō’s motivation to do well in training. The Sports Festival and his dream of being a hero kept him going past the point where an ordinary person probably would have stopped, exhausted. If she didn’t force him to take a couple of rest days, he probably would have hurt himself.

But god damn did that kid carry resentment like a monkey on his back.

Resentment was fine in small doses, Kei supposed. She’d done some interesting things out of sheer spite. For example, she’d learned to hate the Water Prison technique so much that she could break it over her figurative knee nowadays. Obito had been chasing Kakashi’s dust for most of their shinobi
careers, only to finally mellow out at the same time Kakashi did. There were probably other examples floating around before she even got to the evil ones.

But then it started flaring up in other places, and that was a problem.

During lunch period, Kei’s vague plans these days amounted to finding Shinsō and talking about the lessons they’d sat through during the first half of the day. If there was any way to keep Kei from falling more behind, it was keeping up with current work. And they were doing okay!

However, when she didn’t immediately see Shinsō after cracking her bento open, she innocently followed the cheerful voice that called, “Gekkō-san!”

This put Kei at the table with the trio from 1-A. Midoriya, Uraraka, and Iida seemed pretty not-dead for being in the Hero classes, since Kei remembered running across almost everyone from that class training in the gym at one point or another. From the UA pool to training facilities as widely ranging as the USJ (scarily enough), their class certainly seemed to be taking advantage of their resources.

* Might as well say hi, Kei thought.

As if that couldn’t start shit. In hindsight, she probably should have looked for that blond kid from 1-B ahead of time, just in case. He seemed drawn to unnecessary needling.

“Hello, everyone,” Kei said, because rattling off all their names seemed like a bit of a mouthful. She hadn’t set anything down yet. “Classes treating you all right?”

“Classes are fine,” said Uraraka, wiping a loose grain of rice from the corner of her mouth. “But everyone is super focused on the Sports Festival, you know?”

“The class is …enthusiastic,” Iida added, before making a chopping motion with his hands and going on, “but that is no reason for slacking in front of our teachers.”

Kei blinked. “I didn’t realize that was a problem.”

“Only sometimes!” Midoriya said. Then his eyes found someone behind her, and he stumbled over his words. “Um, Gekkō-san, there’s…”

Kei twisted around to look over her shoulder, unsurprised to find Shinsō staring back at her. Though he tried to hide his feelings behind a mask of apathy most of the time, Kei was a dab hand at that exact façade. Even if she wasn’t, she’d grown up with Kakashi. Reading someone’s microexpressions was far more difficult when she could only see a quarter of his face.

And despite the near-glare and a brief flicker of alarm in the back of her head, Kei beckoned Shinsō over to the table.

Perhaps because of the gauntlet he’d been through during the bank robbery, Shinsō visibly rallied and stalked away from the middle of the lunchroom. There’d been a time when he would’ve just snapped at anybody who annoyed him. Any respect she’d earned didn’t keep him from being in a poor mood, which was unfortunately exactly like his behavior even after Obito gamely let himself be tossed around for an hour. It was a bit like watching a tea kettle slowly boil.

“That’s going to be a problem,” Kei said finally, her eyes narrowed. That kind of attitude needed to be dealt with ASAP.

“Is he bothering you?” Iida asked, straightening his glasses.
Kei blinked. “No. I can handle myself, Iida-san. Which…may not be news.” Kei’s smile was deeply crooked. “I am the General Education trouble child, after all.”

“I put no stock in rumors of that sort,” Iida corrected fiercely, making Kei’s eyebrows shoot up. With his hands moving stiffly to emphasize his point, he said, “Nothing during our few interactions has indicated your poor reputation is deserved. So you can defend yourself? Fine. So can everyone who is trying to be a hero. This is not exceptional. We are, after all, fellow students trying to find our path. Rumor-mongering is beneath us!”

Kei’s mouth hung slightly open. Well, damn.

Her second thought was, Do they not teach that in 1-B? It was probably unfair of her, though. She’d only met the jerk.

Midoriya and Uraraka applauded. “That’s our class president!”

“Thank you, Iida-san.” Kei bowed her head over her rice. Despite the heartfelt speech, however, she had to go. “But I think I have to go chase him down. I’ll try to see if I can have lunch with all of you some other time!”

“Good luck with your classmate!” Uraraka called after her, and then Kei broke line of sight.

I’ll fucking need it. Stomping on someone’s pride and hammering their inferiority complexes was a wonderful way to keep in someone’s good graces. Just ask Sasuke. Oh wait.

By the time Kei finally found Shinsō, he’d managed to tuck himself under a tree about as far from the school building as he could go, at least while still hemmed in by UA’s enthusiastic security protocols. She’d had to ask for directions twice to find him, scaring people along the way.

“So,” Kei said, holding up her rewrapped lunch, “mind if I join you?”

“Do what you want.” Shinsō was in a Mood, apparently. His tray was off to one side, plate and cutlery piled up as he checked his phone. He didn’t meet her eyes, but there was tension in his shoulders she hadn’t seen in ages.

With that grudging invitation, Kei sat down on the grass across from Shinsō and waited.

When nothing immediately sprang to mind and he didn’t talk, she ate.

She checked her phone, too.

GreenThumb: think im gonna miss the sports festival (■ □ ∩_\)

GreenThumb: gonna be busy

GreenThumb: so you go kick their asses without me b( ^=\_\)

TMNT-TNT: But should I? I don’t want to make them all cry.

GreenThumb: look

GreenThumb: you are my best friend

GreenThumb: and the scariest girl in town
This bizarre silent standoff continued for a few more minutes. Neither of them looked at each other for long enough that Kei half-wondered if Shinsō was really going to try and out-stubborn her. It’d work for the remainder of the lunch period, but they had training scheduled after school.

The bell rang. Separately, Shinsō and Kei trooped back to 1-C in sullen silence.

*I’ve been talking to those three since before I knew Shinsō’s name.* Kei sighed inwardly as she scribbled out another half-formed note to Gai. *He cops an attitude, I’m running him through the sand.*

**You should do that anyway.**

*True.*

After school, Shinsō found out there was no escape. He tried to ditch her—which was all well and good but mostly futile—only for Kei to grab him by the collar and haul him all the way out to the lunchtime hidey-hole tree. He struggled and complained on the way, but even when she answered he didn’t try to use his Quirk, which was polite enough for the moment. Once they arrived, she plunked him down on a patch of grass and then sat down across from him.

“All right, I’m gonna level with you here. Don’t give me that bullshit,” Kei said, dropping the polite phrasing she’d been keeping up since school started.

Shinsō was staring at her, arms still reflexively crossed. Maybe all that formal speech had been worth something if he was so surprised.

“I don’t put up with it from my brother or his friends,” Kei continued, “and I’m not going to take it from you, either. What the fuck is going on right now?”

His high cheekbones started to turn pink. As did the tips of his ears as he ducked his head. Kei waited until he said, “It’s… Fuck, you’re gonna think it sounds petty.”

“I still wanna hear it,” Kei said, keeping her voice calm and controlled. When Shinsō didn’t immediately answer, she prompted, “It was about the hero kids, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah.” He still refused to look at her. Though Shinsō’s face was turned toward the grass, Kei saw him blinking rapidly. Was he trying to avoid crying?

Kei paused, considering. She’d never tried this emotional support thing with a kid she’d known for less than a year. Obito was the only exception she remembered, and they’d all been eight back then.
“Fuck, it’s just—every time I see them, I get pissed off.” Shinsō ground the heel of his hand against his eye as though that would help. “I have to work that much harder just to get to the starting line, and every single one of them is already so far ahead. Every day feels like I’m just walking in circles.”

“And are you gonna let that envy shape how you act with everyone?” Kei wanted to know. Shinsō’s head jerked up and he glared at her through reddened, shadowed eyes and Kei cut him off firmly. “It’s not healthy.”

“And you’re a real health nut. I can tell,” Shinsō grumbled, still in a poor mood.

Kei’s eyes narrowed. “Cut the ‘woe is me’ attitude, Shinsō-san. You’re better than that.” Kei might’ve tried to be a bit more comforting to, say, Obito or Hayate, but Shinsō had an unbending sort of pride under that sleep-deprived face. “And if I didn’t believe that, I’d never have agreed to help you train.”

Shinsō still looked a little like he wanted to tell her to fuck off, and Kei couldn’t blame him. “It isn’t like I’m getting anywhere, Gekkō-san.”

“The hell you aren’t.” But it seemed like words were insufficient. So, instead of pushing the point, she dug into her school bag and pulled out the most recent of two notebooks. She flipped to the first page with Shinsō’s name on it and held the entire book out. There was way more where that came from. “I’ve been keeping track.”

Still suspicious, Shinsō took the notes. As he started scanning the slightly water-warped pages, Kei watched his eyebrows start to climb. “I—you’ve had these the whole time?”

“A friend of mine gave me an earful for not recording results,” Kei explained, while Shinsō read. “And then I asked if there was anything else I was doing wrong, and he revised everything.”

And where Kei had just been recording raw data, Gai had written margin notes. His handwriting was a bit wonky later due to busting his thumb earlier in the week, but everything in the early parts of this notebook was legible.

Across the section about submission holds, Gai had happily scrawled, “The flames of Youth burn brightly in competition! I wish you the best, Shinsō-san!” after crossing out the names of Kei’s favorite brutal takedowns for being too risky.

Crammed notes crawled up and down the page on Shinsō’s route completion times, suggesting things like eating bananas and making sure his salt intake was normal. The largest notes, including Gai’s signature, was a paragraph of praise for Shinsō’s willingness to throw himself into his training.

Opposite a page where Kei had written out her concerns about rest days and sleep, Gai had written an explanation on three sticky notes that detailed how Hard Work and Youth needed, sometimes, to be tempered by kindness to oneself. That, of all the lessons, was one Kei doubted Gai applied equally to himself, but she’d taken it to heart for Shinsō’s training anyway.

Shinsō eventually made it to the end. There were blank pages afterward, but Gai’s handwriting devolved into smudges and praise barely visible between ink stains, so Kakashi’s much neater hand concluded, “Self-improvement is the greatest and humblest of goals. Two weeks is not long enough to become a genius of Hard Work or Youth, but you should keep the fire burning!”

(There was also a small scribble where Kakashi wrote, “Transcribed, under duress, by Hatake Kakashi.”)
Shinsō closed the notebook. Then, though his hands trembled slightly, his grip tightened on the cheap cardboard. He couldn’t tear his eyes from it. “You… This was all for me?”

“Yep,” said Kei. “I have weird friends, remember? They’re great.”

The notebook still clamped in one hand, Shinsō raised the other to cover his eyes. “You’re… You’re all the most… ridiculous people.”

“We definitely are.” Kei stood up and paced around a bit, checking that no one was around. Once satisfied that the coast was clear, she asked while stretching, “So, training? We can skip the tutoring session today.”

“Yeah, just… Give me a minute.”

And Kei obligingly turned away so Shinsō could dry his tears. She’d show him Obito’s backhanded encouragement later.
The Sports Festival Begins

Chapter Summary

Kei debates the merit of drawing attention to herself, then decides to do it anyway.

The Sports Festival.

Kei had some serious mixed feelings.

On one hand: Legal freedom to use her “Quirk” to get ahead! As long as her Water ninjutsu could be successfully manipulated with enough flexibility to accomplish the task. And in the middle fiddly bits, Kei could punch people.

On the other: A media circus literally inconceivable in the world she’d spent her life in up until this point. The entire world’s eyes were on a bunch of high schoolers and their superpowers, with all the scrutiny that implied. And Kei was a sleeper agent.

On a third hand, possibly generated from Wood Release and flipping everyone off: There was a non-zero chance someone from home could see the competition. Obito and Kakashi would be off patrolling Hosu to make up for Kei being anchored to the UA event, but that still left people like Hayate, but Sensei’s demands since the USJ clusterfuck had included recordings in formats Konoha could process. So, with that thought in mind, Kei had to make any performance good enough not to embarrass the hell out of her team. She had no doubt whatsoever that Sensei, Kushina, and Naruto would get that chance, not to mention her teammates and all her friends. And the UA teachers had all seen her entrance video, so that was just a bit more pressure to not choke horribly with more cameras in play.

“You’ll have to be more passionate, more fiery, than anybody else there if you want to catch the audience’s eye!” Kayama-sensei had told them all, during announcements the day before. Which, given the general air of immediate deflation that swept across the room—with the only bastions of hope being Kei, Shinsō, and the two overworked class representatives Shingetsu Fukurō (Quirk: Head Rotation) and Homura Yui (Quirk: Fire Hair), didn’t seem to help much.

She tried, though.

It wasn’t until later that Kayama-sensei tracked Kei down and had a chance to chat with her, specifically.

“I know you have your own decisions to make,” Kayama-sensei said, with her flogging whip resting against one hip, “and that you’re possibly one of the least-passionate students I’ve ever had—”

She was hardly wrong.

“—but while I am going to be the chief umpire, I want to see you do your best out there. You and Shinsō-kun have been working hard, haven’t you?”

Kei blinked.

Kayama-sensei had seen Shinsō and Kei leave school together a few times. There was also a real
chance the principal had told her about the bank robbers. And Kei had made a point of paying attention for the last week or so, which she was sure the other teachers would have noticed. She’d even asked questions. Such unheard-of developments made news headlines around the world.

“Yeah, I…” Kei scratched the bottom end of her scar, a little embarrassed. “Sort of? It’s been an interesting few weeks.”

“You were a little closed off before, but I understand why.” Nonetheless, Kayama-sensei winked and gave her a thumbs-up. “I’m glad you’re coming out of your shell, though! Kids your age need to live a little.”

“Thanks, Kayama-sensei. I think.”

**That was an unfortunate pun.**

*Considering she’s in on this scheme, I think it’s perfect.*

Ugh.

As a result of regulations and support items the Hero course students would otherwise have access to, what with being heroes and having costumes and shit, everyone in the UA Sports Festival was competing in their gym uniforms. Kei changed in the girl’s locker room with the rest and emerged into the waiting area while still picking at her sleeves for loose ends. Using chakra scalpels to cut the threats off was probably a waste of the precision Kei had worked years to gain, but waste not, want not.

She was still fussing with them when Shinsō stepped forward, because it was easier than worrying about what her boys were up to in Hosu. Leaving her phone in the provided locker went against about five different impulses.

“You seem nervous,” Shinsō commented, though he didn’t seem all that worried.

“Not about this,” Kei replied, finally giving up on her shirtsleeves and sighing. “Everyone back home’s gonna see me in this tournament.”

“…Is that a bad thing?”

Kei pinched the bridge of her nose. “Only if I lose badly.”

Shinsō made a noise that might’ve been a laugh, making Kei glance at him. “With an attitude like that…”

“If I lose to the explosion kid, I will **never** hear the end of it.” Kei sighed. **“Ever.”**

“Why’s that? He’s supposed to be the top contender out of all the first-years.” Shinsō, she noted, hadn’t tried to redirect her vague challenge to him. Maybe he was being more mature now, but Kei didn’t count on it. “Everyone’s aiming at that punk.”

That was a fairly long explanation. And it involved revealing that the explosion kid wasn’t the only person who’d ever blown something up by touching it with destructive intent. Kei probably hadn’t been making her contact explosives for as long as Bakugō Katsuki had been a hazard to public property, but she knew that kind of attack. That kind of pattern.

And best of all, that kid wasn’t using fūinjutsu.
Kei beckoned Shinsō slightly closer, so the two of them were slightly off in a corner of the room, then decided partial truth was bound to be funnier than an outright lie. She whispered, “I once blew up my teacher when I was thirteen.”

In that moment, Shinsō could have been carved out of granite.

“He shouldn’t have taught me how to make the stuff I used, and anyway he was fine. Teleportation Quirk,” Kei said, before Shinsō could look any more alarmed. “He started making fun of me afterward, and then said I could try again.”

“The more I hear about your school, the less I want,” Shinsō muttered, while the other 1-C students started edging away from them. Kei just shrugged while Shinsō tried to incorporate possibly the second-most incriminating detail Kei had ever let him know about into his worldview. The first being the…practical training. And how Kei learned it. “Now I have a headache. Thanks for that.”

“You wanted to know why I was focused, and now you do.” Kei rolled her eyes when Shinsō glared slightly down at her. “There is no way Sensei would stop laughing if I lost to someone like that. He’d call it poetic justice or something and I’d hate him forever.”

“I’m starting to think I should be halfway across the stadium for deniability if you do anything,” Shinsō complained, but didn’t seem to mind too much. He hadn’t started running, after all. But that could mean he just didn’t believe her, which was probably safer for his sanity.

“Pff, no one could blame you for anything I do.”

Shinsō raised an eyebrow. “You’re saying this to the person whose Quirk is literally called Brainwashing.”

“Yep.” Kei was aware of the incongruity. She just didn’t care.

Shinsō settled for rolling his eyes. And then it was time to join the other classes in the opening ceremony.

The Sports Festival took place in what would have been an Olympic-sized stadium anywhere else, dwarfing the Chūnin Exam setup Konoha used. When she looked up, Kei could spot a massive dome stretching far overhead, stage lights off for the daylight event but nonetheless present. Thousands of seats lined the stadium walls, each of them filled with a person who wanted to see a bunch of fifteen-year-olds kick the snot out of each other. She liked the jumbotron-style screens, though she probably could have done without the reminder that everything from this moment forward would be broadcasted live.

Present Mic was the announcer. This was, perhaps, the most perfect job ever fucking devised. A guy with the Voice Quirk and endless capacity for hype generation and shouting. If Kei didn’t already know he was a DJ to end all DJs, she would have wondered if he moonlighted as an American football sportscaster.

General Studies entered second out of the department, announced collectively as “Next up, General Studies classes C, D, and E!” where the Hero classes got separate spiels. Made sense, though—flashy Quirks and ambition were concentrated in those forty students.

Kei just kept silent behind Shinsō, listening to their classmates lose heart. She could draw attention to herself later.

Kayama-sensei stood tall on the podium as the classes all gathered. Kei hung near the back, well behind the hero kids and most of her classmates, while Shinsō was closer to the front. Too many of
the students had physical Quirks that obscured her view, so Kei settled for closing her eyes and expanding her chakra sense outward like a slowly widening net.

Nothing. Wider, then.

“Silence, everyone!” Kayama-sensei snapped her flogging whip, stepping up to the microphone. “And for the student pledge, we have Katsuki Bakugō!”

Kei could almost feel her classmates rolling their eyes.

The kid made his way to center stage, footsteps echoing in the sudden quiet.

And once he was up there…

“I just wanna say, I’m gonna win.”

Kei stuck her fingers in her ears before the crowd around her erupted in shouting. Off-hand, she could pick out the 1-A kids collectively before Iida got loudest, followed by the steel kid from 1-B. And then there was just more shouting, because nobody had bothered to tell the grade’s other resident delinquent that there was supposed to be a speech, not just a challenge.

Kei opened her eyes once Kayama-sensei got control of everyone again. She didn’t even need her whip this time.

“Without further ado, it’s time for us to get started!” Kayama-sensei called, microphone in hand and a smile on her face. “This is where you begin feeling the pain!”

So, is this—?

Please don’t say it.

“The first fateful game of the festival! What could it be?” Kayama-sensei held her arm up and a screen plunked down behind her, showing a single roulette spinning wildly until it came to a sharp stop. “Ta-dah!”

Obstacle race, huh?

“All eleven classes will participate in this treacherous contest,” Kayama-sensei went on, “The track is four kilometers around the outside of the stadium.”

Kei glanced at Shinsō, who nodded back. They wouldn’t team up, but they full expected to see each other in the next round. In this event, they would simply use every skill they had individually to excel.

It wasn’t like Kei could actually tell him not to use his Quirk and show it off. She certainly planned to do…something interesting.

“I don’t want to restrain anyone, at least in this game.”

Before I was rudely interrupted—

Isobu, no!

Kayama-sensei licked her lips, then grinned widely and said, “As long as you don’t leave the course, you’re free to do whatever your heart desires!”
Kei smacked both palms into her face. *Kayama-sensei dresses like that every damn day, and now you’re breaking my acclimatization.*

**I am saying it.**

*Do what you want.* Kei grimaced under her hands.

**That is most definitely a dominatrix.**

*And now I can’t unthink anything about Kayama-sensei’s sex life that you just brought to mind. Absolutely none of it. Thanks for that.*

“Now then, take your places, contestants.”

The entire first-year class gathered at a massive set of double doors. Kei glanced up, made a ballpark guess at the number of students versus the width of the opening, then sighed.

*Three.*

*Two.*

“What should we be paying attention to at this stage of the race?” Present Mic asked Aizawa-sensei, up in the media booth.

*One.*

And when Kayama-sensei screamed, “BEGIN!” Kei watched the inevitable rush that packed the entire place like a canning factory.

“The doorway,” said Aizawa-sensei’s grim voice.

Enthusiasm was rewarded to some degree, but so was planning. And unfortunately, the first years’ energy didn’t work out for the ones in the midst of the crush.

Shinsō was already gone, vanishing into the crowd. It was probably time for Kei to get moving, too.

From a standing start, Kei *leapt.*

No one in 1-C doubted Kei’s physical prowess, but neither could they explain it. Even as ice flowed toward the outside of the stadium, caused by somebody’s Quirk, Kei bounced off walls inside of the tunnel above the students’ heads. Water droplets splattered here and there, making the chill just that much worse as she ricocheted from contact point to contact point. To her fellows, it probably looked like she was using her control over water to stick herself to the tunnel walls and her athleticism to do the actual grunt work. Something, something, surface tension.

Chakra was pretty funny like that.

*Cheating is all in the spirit of shinobi tradition, isn’t it?*

**Indisputably. Now make sure you place well.**

Kei made it back into the light the instant after the ice froze most of the pack leaders of the race to the ground. She landed and rolled, crystals shattering half-formed along her back and snow caught in her hair. All around her, the students struggled in the ice she just brushed away, her gaze focusing forward to the two-toned head of one of the class 1-A students. Some people were frozen, others just slipping on the ice, and they were bound to see more of that as this kid made his way forward.
“Nice try, Todoroki-kun!” yelled one of the girls from class 1-A, as she and several of her compatriots fought their way past multiple waves of sheet ice.

Kei passed Shinsō, who was being carried by three likely-brainwashed students. She waved at him, then darted forward toward the lead position.

Traversing ice wasn’t really any harder than walking on water, no matter how much Todoroki made. It was mainly a matter of sticking to the surface instead of suspending herself above it. Purple spheres falling all over the place was her real concern—Obito had told her how the water villains during the USJ attack got caught, and Kei didn’t plan to repeat their mistakes. And if she passed Midoriya and Uraraka along the way, she at least spared them a friendly wave as well.

The first leg of the race seemed to be pretty tame aside from the other competitors. The obstacles were no-shows so far.

Cue the robots.
Obstacle Course

Chapter Summary

Kei tries to stay within the bounds of baseline human capabilities and considers the efficiency of explosion-based propulsion.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There were more than two hundred kids on the field. There were about fifty with Quirks useful for destroying the robots from the Hero course entrance examination, concentrated heavily in 1-A and 1-B for good reason. Between Todoroki’s initial AOE ice attack and the robot roadblock, most of them were crowded together and hesitating in the face of opposition. Shinsō was one of them, but mainly because he couldn’t guarantee his or his mind-controlled “allies”’ safety without someone else acting first.

Kei strode to the front of the crowd, hands in her pockets.

There were also only about three dozen robots, in whatever configurations were left over from the school’s clearly ridiculous budget.

“Oh, those things are considered obstacles?!” demanded whoever the hell was the fifteenth seat in 1-C. Some guy whose name Kei hadn’t learned.

Which was about when Todoroki, first on the field and still the closest to the homicidal hunks of steel, swept his arm out and turned the robot trying to crush him into the metal heart of a brand-new ice cube. Ice crystals the size of people gleamed all across the robot’s surface, icicles making the angle of Todoroki’s attack and looking like the result of a hideous midwinter storm. The robotic victim was already teetering as Todoroki ran through the gap between its legs.

Present Mic screamed, “And 1-A’s Todoroki puts the villains on ice with one cool move! He’s taken the lead!”

…Oh, that will be an actual, genuine problem. Kei’s “Quirk” stopped where Todoroki’s began, it seemed. Despite her many abilities, Kei wasn’t a waterbender and couldn’t control it in solid form. She didn’t have Ice Release as a bloodline limit, even if she’d fought someone who did during training. That wasn’t going to be a fun match.

And Todoroki, it seemed, was capable of about the same one-attack output Kei was, at least within the bounds of Quirks.

Knowing this does not change the nature of the task in front of us.

Does change how close we’ll go to him, though.

The frozen robot toppled forward, collapsing hard enough to make the ground quake and ripple beneath everyone’s feet. Kei fended off the billowing dust with her sleeve, not missing a beat as she continued to walk toward the mess.
“Excuse me, Midoriya-san,” Kei said as she passed him, the dust barely beginning to settle. “May I?”

Midoriya relaxed his defensive posture once he recognized her voice, though his expression was still pinched from stress. “Oh, Gekkō-san… Um, you don’t need to ask? What are you going to do?”

“Who fucking cares, Deku!” Bakugō snapped, his palms already shooting nitroglycerin-fueled sparks.

Kei ignored him and squared her stance as the other robots loomed. Two boys from the Hero course burst from the guts of the one destroyed robot, but that was fine. If they were busy getting out of the zero-point robot, then they were effectively clear.

Ready, Isobu?

Oh, yes.

Kei brought her hands together. Water Release: Great Waterfall Technique.

The air cracked as the vapor in the air was ripped from it, water swirling up and around Kei’s feet in a brief warning before the force of her chakra asserted itself on reality. What started as a trickle became a geyser, became a storm, and that formed a waterspout at least twice the height of the stadium. At its base, it was hardly wider than the span of Kei’s now-outstretched arms, but that didn’t matter.

And while the children behind her stared as though she was the next natural disaster looming over them, Kei turned the vortex on its side with willpower and a gesture identical to swinging a baseball bat.

Or, in her case, a sword.

The immediate cacophony was a combination of rushing water, the howl of a tornado, and hundreds of thousands of kilos of metal crashing horribly against itself and anything else it touched. Water blotted out the entire view ahead of the crowd as Kei’s ninjutsu ripped the robots to pieces exactly as she’d done in her entrance exam a few months beforehand. The debris stirred up made it impossible to tell exactly what was happening as the targets were pulverized.

“What the hell is that Quirk?”

“Isn’t she supposed to be a General Studies student?!”

Kei snapped her fingers, and then it was over.

Water lapped at the ground as Kei cut her control, forming soft beach waves as it went back to being inert. The track directly where the robots had stood was noticeably scoured, leaving a half-meter-deep trench twenty meters across. The leftover water flowed off in places, into specialized drainage ditches.

Todoroki, unless Kei missed her mark, was also looking back. She’d been careful not to hurt anyone, including him, by twisting the vortex almost in on itself like an ouroboros, though it did reduce the effectiveness of her attack. Even the boys who ripped their way up through the robot were staring at her in shock.

Every zero-point robot lay shredded, but piled high in the center of the course as though shaped by massive, invisible hands. As the silence reigned, the Jenga pile of robot bits toppled exactly like the iced robot had, flattening into something more stable.
“Class 1-C’s Gekkō sweeps all the frontliners in the Robo Inferno away! That’s a wash for the robots!” Present Mic’s grin was nearly audible over the airwaves.

A ringing endorsement, really.

Kei broke into what was, for her, a sustainable run. When the one-, two-, and three-point robots came after her, in the way only truly fearless opponents did, she ducked and weaved through their grasping claws. Water trailed off her fingers more for effect than effectiveness, and she likewise kicked up spray as she dashed across the half-flooded track.

Her work here was done. The kids could take care of the rest. They’d had to in order to qualify to be hero-wannabes, after all.

Shortly thereafter, manufactured metal started to lose to vicious teenagers. Horribly.

The sound of a cannon shot told Kei the students were having fun, even before other robots behind her were torn limb from limb by enthusiastic students. Kei supposed most of the other kids were, if nothing else, practiced masters at using their Quirks. Even if Invisible Girl couldn’t punch a giant robot to death, there weren’t more robots than there were students to happily dismantle them.

It was kind of heartening, actually. Nobody with robot minions would last long against these kids.

Speaking of whom, Kei spotted the tape kid, bird-headed kid, and Bakugō careening overhead before any of them noticed her. Well, again. It was hard not to notice someone who flooded the track and tossed robots around like matchsticks once the destruction phase got underway.

“Move your ass!” Bakugō snarled as he landed near her. He threw himself into a run, explosions boosting his speed in much the same way they’d allowed him to leap over obstacles. “You’re in my way!”

Kei considered this suggestion on its merits, then decided to ignore it. Instead, she let chakra move freely through her limbs like it did during training, dug her heels solidly into the track as her feet fell, and ran.

Even if Kei hadn’t been on a team taught and operated by Namikaze Minato, she would have known how to reach supernatural speed. She wasn’t Iida with his biological engines, but she didn’t need to be. She’d been running her whole life, and one explosive brat wasn’t enough to keep up.

Kei heard, “GET BACK HERE, SEAWEED HEAD!”

Kei flipped him off as she pulled ahead, leaving him swearing furiously in her wake. And it was nearly a literal wake—kicking up water out of nowhere was one of the many ways she could subtly hint that her Quirk was responsible for her speed and strength.

The next immediate stretch of track was mundane. Between the robots and other kids, whoever organized these events clearly thought some good old-fashioned running could help people work up a sweat. For some people, like Shinsō before his training, this might’ve been the most difficult part of the race in some respects.

And then they reached what Present Mic gleefully called, “The Fall.”

“Oh, that’s pretty impressive.” Kei said aloud, eying it critically. It wasn’t like she didn’t have a hell of a jump distance, but somehow the event organizers had managed to basically stick a miniature
version of the Chinese stone forest mountains in a single location. That kind of handiwork was really rather impressive. Even without the trees.

Of course, she also wanted to know what UA thought would save them from lawsuit hell if any kid actually plummeted to the bottom of the crevasse, but that was apparently one of those things she wasn’t supposed to think too hard about. Maybe Power Loader had just worked overtime to get this done?

“GOT YOU NOW, YOU ICY-HOT BASTARD!”

Bakugō didn’t even stop to land. Instead, more explosions sent him rocketing over the obstacle while Kei admired it, shouting threats both at her and at Todoroki. Mostly Todoroki, now that he thought she was out of the race. Without even being punched?

That was definitely a kid who didn’t stop to smell the roses much.

Present Mic cackled. “And class 1-A’s Bakugō surges ahead to take second place! How are the other competitors going to keep up? How’s Todoroki going to keep his lead?!”

“Do you even need me here?” Aizawa-sensei’s dry voice countered.

Kei could see Todoroki’s retreating back and the crumbling remnants of the ice he’d left all over the ropes to cross. It would’ve made for an unfortunate fall if Kei took that route. She did, however, have a plan that did not involve putting herself at risk quite like that.

On a good day, this particular obstacle also reminded her of a certain nasty, spike-filled crevasse in Konoha. And on a good day, Kei would have avoided the problem or flown over it with Tsuruya’s help. But, well…

Isobu chuckled in the depths of her mind. Desperate times?

Desperate measures, Kei joked back.

Chakra flooded into her limbs and, once she’d made the correct hand seals, she thought, Water Dragon Bullet. And then she leapt onto the nearest intact rope and hurled herself into the air.

Once again, the force of her power slapped water vapor from the air in a massive burst, drenching everyone within twenty meters in a sudden rainstorm, Bakugō and his explosively-propelled self included. Directly behind her, a miniature waterspout twisted out of the air and formed a gaping dragon’s maw. As it threw itself between her and Bakugō, shoving him aside with the mass concentrated in its swirling coils, Kei stuck her arm directly into the side of its head.

Liquid fangs bit deep into her gym uniform sleeve, jerked her off her feet, and surged over the massive pitfall at more than forty kilometers per hour. She and her construct—which she called “Haku” on a whim—practically flew across each gap in the ground, pausing only so Kei could land for a split second and gather more water without having to split her attention. It wasn’t gliding in the least—instead, the sheer force of the water she was keeping in the air were tugging her along like a banner ad behind an airplane.

You hardly seem to need the crane, now.

Say that again when we’re actually trying to travel somewhere!

“WATCH WHERE YOU’RE GOING!” shrieked Bakugō, having to redouble his efforts to stay in the air.
Kei didn’t so much as spare him a glance, with her dragon hauling her by her collar toward Todoroki.

“What’s this? Gekkō from 1-C and Bakugō from 1-A are neck and neck, neither giving up second place! Todoroki better watch his back with these two destructive competitors gunning for him!”

*I can’t decide if Present Mic makes it worse. The Chūnin Exams didn’t have announcers.*

**He makes it worse.**

Another lazy curve emerged from the other side of the horrible drop-off, and both Kei and Bakugō landed within seconds of each other. While Bakugō stumbled for a second longer as Kei’s Water Dragon Bullet clipped him on its way to dispersal, Kei dashed after Todoroki with…somewhat less energy than the other competitors were showing off.

It had nothing to do with the spirit of competition. Kei just didn’t want to get her feet iced to the ground this close to the endgame. Especially while her clothes were still wet.

Dirt and rock gave way to cement as Kei ran onward, following the curving track around the bend even as Bakugō trailed her, screaming constantly about something and exploding so much she couldn’t really hear him. Nonetheless, she kept just far enough ahead of him to avoid either backlash or a silly comment from Present Mic.

It was about that point where Todoroki must’ve reached the third obstacle, because Present Mic’s voice blared loud and clear: “And now, we’re finally approaching the last obstacle!”

*Great.*

**It had better be interesting—**

“Everyone had better tread carefully!” Present Mic went on, while Kei kept pace with Bakugō. “You’re stepping onto a minefield!”

*Are you shitting me right now?*

**It appears not. Look.**

Stretching out for another long dirt stretch about as wide as the rope-lined Fall had been was, of course, a literal minefield. The ground was dotted with raised lumps Kei presumed were the mines, badly disguised and clearly designed for a high school competition.

Kei knew better than most what an actual minefield looked like: Nothing, until the first explosions started tearing the earth apart.

“If you look carefully, you can see where those little bombs are buried, so keep your eyes on the ground, folks! By the way, those landmines were specially designed for our competition, so while they’re loud and flashy…they’re not very powerful.”

Kei totally understood the disappointment in Mic’s voice.

“JUST ENOUGH TO MAKE YOU WET YOUR PANTS!”

She understood that a little less.

“Get a hold of yourself,” Aizawa-sensei said, truly embodying the spirit of the times.
What do people even do if there is no one with a running commentary of events? Let them pass in confusion?

_Hell if I know._ Kei ducked an explosion from Bakugō and slapped his hand away as he tried to pass her by force, and nearly got a second blast to the face before she made half a hand seal and spat a gob of water the size of his head to engulf it.

It didn’t last, but sputtering meant Bakugō had to let her go on ahead, just for a little. Certainly it made him stumble far enough away that she could think.

Minefield, minefield… It wouldn’t make it _that_ much better if she just flooded the area, would it? Besides, the mines themselves were relatively harmless. And obvious.

Bakugō chose that moment to rocket past, apparently trusting that being able to make explosions basically made him immune to those caused by others. That wasn’t an assumption Kei was willing to make, for reasons mainly pertaining to how many limbs one could lose that way. But, hell, Bakugō was already yelling at Todoroki as though Kei didn’t exist, so what did she know?

Other students started to trickle in, and by that point Kei just shrugged to herself and darted into explosion hell. Another Water Dragon Bullet had her shooting through the air above the competition, one arm locked in its jaws and her other hand balanced against the curve above its eye. At the same time, the end of the dragon’s coils slammed down on the course, triggering extra mines and swamping anyone caught in the blast.

Bakugō and Todoroki, meanwhile, were trying to get each other killed. Explosions and ice flew, and Kei commanded her construct to curve wide around their little conflict.

“Just like that, a new student takes the lead! The media here is going wild! There’s nothing they love more than an upset!”

Sounded about right.

Iida raced forward, trusting his sheer speed to get him past the mines. Other students were avoiding mines, detonating them under their opponents, or what-have-you. Kei didn’t much care.

Right up until the moment a massive pink explosion went off at the start of the minefield, disrupting Haku-chan’s liquid tail. Todoroki and Bakugō looked up, spotting Kei—which annoyed her, because she’d been planning on using the sun’s position better than that—and a rapidly arcing Midoriya, surfing the blast wave with a piece of robot as his woefully inadequate vehicle.

Kei probably could have reached out to help him land. But he did have a plan, right? He had to.

Midoriya fell past her, toppling slowly forward.

_Um._

**He does not have a plan.**

Below, and now behind, Todoroki and Bakugō set aside their differences to chase the two students now in the lead. Bakugō, at least, had a plan. It was explosions.

And Todoroki _iced the fucking minefield._

Ordinarily, this wouldn’t have been a problem. Kei wasn’t on the ground or technically in Todoroki’s line of sight. At most, he should have created a safe walkway against being launched
skyward by landmines. However, he’d seen her and his frost wave arced upward, trapping Haku-chan’s tail and crawling directly up its back.

Kei ripped her arm free just as the ice reached her and coated her body from fingertip to waist on the same side. It even leapt to her leg, locking her right knee in a bent position as though in a cuff of some kind.

And she was still about ten meters above the ground.

*Fuck you too, Freezer Burn.*

While Bakugō and Todoroki chased Midoriya, Kei used her free left hand to make hand seals against her frost-coated right.

*Water Release: Water Trumpet.* Turning her head, Kei blasted her frosted arm with water before moving it out of the line of fire, and aimed all the rest at the minefield below as soon as she could move her fingers again.

She didn’t bother being cute about it. When she hit the water feet-first, the ice coating her knee burst under the force. Kei’s water blast had dampened the field to little effect, but Todoroki’s ice path was still there. And since water was the only thing that made ice slippery at all, Kei tore after the three new pack leaders without hesitation.

Ahead, she saw Midoriya plummeting to earth to land *head first* and started to wince. That wouldn’t be pretty.

At which point there was another massive pink explosion, because Midoriya took his metal surfboard and slammed it down like a fucking sledgehammer into the nearest mines, using Todoroki and Bakugō as stepping stones for leverage.

Kei bit back a laugh. *Someone* had definitely turned their self-preservation instincts off.

*I knew I liked that kid.*

**I can see why.**

Kei got third place out of the pack of four that entered the stadium in those first few seconds, edging out Sploidy by a nose. She spent the cooldown period laughing too hard at the irony of beating *him* only to lose to rocket-propelled Midoriya to even listen to Bakugō’s threats. In the end, explosions really had made the difference. Just not the way she’d thought.

While the other competitors trickled in—scorched, muddy, and various levels of exhausted—Kei congratulated Midoriya with as much enthusiasm as his classmates couldn’t muster. Todoroki and Bakugō went ignored. She didn’t stop chatting with him until Iida and Uraraka had both arrived, looking happy to see friends around.

And when Shinsō made it, in twenty-seventh place, Kei gave him a fist-bump. Checking the leaderboards over her shoulder, he reciprocated.

“I almost didn’t believe your Quirk was that strong,” Shinsō remarked, shaking his head slowly. “Shows me, I guess.”

“And now you know how I got in.” Kei said. “Robot-killing powers and nothing else.”

“Sure you did.” Shinsō rolled his eyes. In a comically threatening tone, he added, “I will get the
literature unit through your head if it kills me.”

Kei laughed.

Chapter End Notes

And after this, I think updates have to finally slow down.
I'm sure that's not a massive pain in the ass, Kei thought once the new event was plastered across the board. What the hell was a cavalry battle? Did kids here play that kind of playground game and not tag? She’d thought tag was a universal classic.

But no. Today’s big deal was competitive piggybacking. She was half-tempted to suggest Kayama-sensei cut out the middleman and give everyone historically accurate lances, because that was probably safer.

**Luckily, the classmates who were most wary of you have not qualified for this event.**

That’s something, I guess. And in hindsight, tag with Bakugō on the field—and superpowers in general—was probably a bad idea.

A cavalry battle, as it turned out, had some pretty arbitrary rules tacked on top. Standing next to Shinsō, Kei got to hear about such fun additions as teamwork lasting the round, a blanket ban on blasting other teams into next week (or “making them fall on purpose”), a time limit of thirty minutes, and **point value headbands**.

Kayama-sensei was happy as a clam, letting everyone know that the first-place finisher was absolutely going to be target practice for everyone else. The leaderboard cheerfully explained the scoring system—every one of the forty-two students who’d placed during the obstacle race was worth points, increasing in five point increments. Therefore, the last-place finisher was worth five (Steampunk Hatsume Mei), the next up (speech-bubble-headed Fukidashi Manga) worth ten, and so on.

Shinsō’s twenty-seventh place slot was worth eighty points.

Kei’s third place position was worth two hundred.

And the first place finisher, the clever and kind Midoriya, was worth a whopping ten million points. Because, clearly, every sports competition needed a golden Snitch just to spice things up. The poor kid looked like he was going to drop dead of an anxiety attack as nearly all of the competitors’ eyes turned on him with malice aforethought.

Including Shinsō, the ass.

Kei eyed the screen instead.

Kei didn’t know **precisely** what Midoriya’s Quirk was, but she’d seen him break his legs horribly at the USJ incident. Obito said he’d had some kind of strength-enhancing Quirk, but his performance in the obstacle race had been a matter of athleticism and precise explosions. Teambuilding for Midoriya
It probably wasn’t going to be much more fun for Kei. Kei and Shinsō were the only students from outside of the Hero Department to qualify for this shit. However, he’d deliberately held back during the race by controlling three other students instead of running and strolled into the stadium like it was all no big deal. Kei honestly wasn’t sure if, aside from his position on the board, anybody had paid any attention to him whatsoever.

The more Shinsō did things like that, though, the less effective his Quirk would be. And catching people by surprise to mind-control them, while effective, did not have a tendency to make friends among those affected. If anything happened to break his control, they’d dump Shinsō instantly.

Hell, she could see already that Iida was refusing to work with Midoriya. The poor kid was getting more desperate. Bakugō and Todoroki were going to get swamped. She could already tell. Their Quirks were powerful and they’d placed well, and the others around them knew more of their personalities.

What Kei didn’t quite cotton onto, however, was that she had placed third. Two hundred points was nothing to sneeze at when only the top few qualifying teams would get to move onto the third round.

Mostly, people had formed clusters comprised of people from their classes. By the technicality that she was probably capable of picking Shinsō up and running around for half an hour, that could be the case for her team as well. Half an hour was kind of a long time for playing that kind of game, however. However, the points attracted people from 1-A and 1-B. The purple grape-head kid was shoved aside by taller students, even if Kei wouldn’t have rejected him out of hand. The tentacle-armed boy from 1-B was also out in the cold, a bit, but there was no way Kei could really figure out what to do here. There were too many options.

Sure, there was an all-girl team already forming from 1-B’s ranks, and a few pairs sorting themselves out, but that still left a decent crowd around her and Shinsō. Who seemed even less happy about this development than she was.

“Uh, I’m sorry, I don’t know most of you or what your Quirks are…” Kei felt her ears starting to heat up under her still-damp hair. Shit, she didn’t do well with too much attention up close.

“Gekkō-san, was it?” asked the blond jerk from 1-B, whose name she had refused to learn. He nudged Shinsō aside to speak to her, and the look that crossed her friend’s face was fairly ominous.

Nonetheless, Kei answered. “And you’re…?”

“Monoma Neito, from class 1-B. We’ve met.” He smiled. “Would you like to team up?”

After you didn’t make a good impression? No. But what she said instead was, “What’s your Quirk?”

“Oh, it’s called Copy. I can mimic anyone’s Quirk for five minutes.”

And for a second it was like all of Kei’s blood froze in her veins. Shit—

Monoma went on, while a few of her suitors seemed to drop back a bit, “I can add a second burst to any of my teammates’ Quirks. It’s like having twice as many teammates in their specialties! Just think about it.”

He can’t copy what’s not there—

“Pass.” Kei managed to get her voice level, but the spike of dread stayed lodged in her ribs. Not only
was she not going to team up with him, Kei needed to avoid Monoma as much as possible. She was not getting outed as Quirkless by an asshat kid like this, not while thousands of cameras were pointed directly at the field. “Find a different teammate.”

Monoma looked disappointed for half a second.

**If it were to—**

Then Kei’s mind went utterly blank.

“Kei?” Isobu asked. Kei’s cold shoulder could be abrupt, but not like this.

Normally, Kei’s constant stream of chatter made a background noise not unlike lapping water. After the first month, it became almost comforting even in the depths of the mental beach they’d made together. Hearing it suddenly go silent was strange at best.

Getting no response was stranger still.

“What is happening?” Isobu asked again. His thick fingers twitched in agitation, digging into dream-sand.

No answer.

Though it was rare, Isobu could be roused out of concern instead of rage, bloodthirstiness, or even pure curiosity. He reached out with one fingertip’s worth of chakra, nudging Kei’s mind in a way that couldn’t be ignored. Not quite enough to change her irises from black to gold, but Kei was sensitive enough both to chakra fluctuations and to Isobu’s moods that she never failed to listen.

Under normal circumstances, Kei could choose to block him out, but she still didn’t treat that option like the default. Aside from the incident where he’d stolen fūinjutsu knowledge, she seemed to trust him. And even if she did block Isobu, he knew what it felt like for her to put up a wall.

Her thoughts were nothing but static and white noise. There were no emotions behind it—not even a wall that would normally muffle the details. Just nothing.

The ocean started to churn. Dark clouds formed over Isobu’s head, slowly spiraling downward into a gray vortex. His lashing tails spun the epicenter, creating a maelstrom below to match it. Isobu had more control here than he had over the real world when he still swam its waters, but seeing the storm gather still meant something.

Isobu opened his mouth, sucking in this unreal air for a roar. He hadn’t sensed any chakra being poured into their shared tenketsu. Nothing disturbed his seal. And yet, Isobu would still break them free—

*Ow, fuck!*

And just like that, Kei’s voice was back. Baffled, ridiculous Kei.

“—Huh?”

Kei automatically punched back when someone punched her. That was reflex. Years of training meant she could strike while blindfolded, upside-down, and dizzy, and today was not an off day. Sure, when she had time to stop and think about it the knuckles she’d felt didn’t have that much force
behind them, but she lashed out anyway.

There was an “Oof!” and she blinked, finding Shinsō doubled over wheezing in front of her when she could think again. She’d hit him hard enough to bruise any normal person, which he unfortunately was.

Kei was already trying to apologize when her thoughts finally caught up with what she was doing.

_How the fuck—?_

**There you are! What happened?**

Kei was not standing where she had been a second ago. Actually, when the hell had she met up with Tail Kid from 1-A and… the shortest kid in 1-B? Plus Shinsō, but he’d been next to her until the crowd showed up and…

Kei added two and to together and made four. Just to check her work, she said in a flat tone, “Please tell me what the fuck just happened.”

“Uh, I’d also like an explanation,” said the Tail Kid. “Normally, punching someone doesn’t work well as a recruiting strategy.”

Shinsō held up a finger for a minute’s grace while he tried to get his breath back, and the others gave it to him.

Kei tried looking up at the board to see the tailed kid’s name, but the huge screen no longer showed the leaderboards. Instead, it was cycling through a number of groups that _just happened_ to comprise teams for the cavalry battle. She spotted a blurb about Todoroki’s team—Iida was on it—before the screen changed focus and showed her own face and…hm.

Apparently she was on Shinsō’s team now.

“Monoma copied my Quirk.” Shinsō’s voice was practically a growl once he got it back. He shoved his hands into his pockets as he finally straightened. “He ordered you to reject everyone and walk out of the arena.”

Kei tamped down on Isobu’s anger immediately.

**Kill him.**

_Isobu, that was within the bounds of the game. And Shinsō used it on other kids during the race._

**Other students are not you,** Isobu snapped, his forelegs shifting position and grasping at dreamstone that shattered under his grip. _And no one touches our minds without an engraved invitation. Kill him._

Kei replayed the last few seconds she remembered. Then she looked at the chalk borders of the field, taking in which direction she was facing and Shinsō’s expression of angry concern. She bunched up Isobu-influenced anger at the violation and stuffed it into a mental box marked Dissonance For Later. There was way too much baggage to deal with while participating in a school event, starting with genjutsu development history and the Mangekyō Sharingan. They’d just end up going around in circles.

Instead, she took a deep breath and said, “I see. Thanks for jolting me out of his control.”
“It was easy enough to recognize.” Shinsō gestured vaguely at his face, so her expression must have changed while under mind control. Maybe? “Maybe next time don’t punch me that hard.”

“There won’t be a next time, but thanks anyway.” Then Kei glanced around at the other two kids.

“Um…” said the kid from 1-B, who was chubby and ten centimeters shorter than Kei was, “but now we really need to work on our setup before time’s up. I’m the smallest, but—um. I don’t really think I can be the leader.”

“What’s your Quirk?” Kei asked, to give the kid a brief break.

“Twin Impact,” he said, eyes already turned downward. “Um, I’m Shōda Nirengeki, from class 1-B. It’s a close combat Quirk.”

“Ojiro Mashirao,” said Tail Kid. Behind him, his tail slashed through the air. “My Quirk’s a bit obvious.”

Another close-combat type, then. Kei put one hand on her hip as she thought, but still said, “Well, I’m Gekkō Keisuke. My Quirk is Tsunami, but you all know that. It’s nice to meet both of you. I just wish the circumstances were better.”

There were two nods, and despite everything it seemed like they were on board with this team arrangement. They seemed like nice kids, which was true of almost everyone she’d actually interacted with at UA. Shinsō was a little too occupied glaring across the field at one of the only major exceptions.

“Shinsō-san,” Kei said, drawing his attention back to her, “were you already planning on being the rider for this event?” She pointed at the band around his neck.

“Yeah,” he replied, indicating the other two with nods. He had a headband that was worth four hundred and ninety points wound around his neck. He fidgeted with it a little with his left hand, brows still furrowed. “Two close combat Quirks and one… not that. Seemed like a good setup. Then we got you. Sorry about not asking properly, but the rules say the riders have to wear them.”

Also, Shinsō didn’t have the physical conditioning to carry anyone for half an hour without pausing. Even cooperatively. Two weeks of training time really wasn’t enough.

“That you do,” she agreed. Kei clapped her hands together. “And now we’re gonna make it to the third round.”

“Good thing you’re confident.” Ojiro said, trying to keep a smile on his face. “Because I’ve fought a few of the other people here, and they’re no pushovers.”

“I don’t care if they aren’t.” Shinsō’s eyes narrowed as he considered the playing field. “We’re not losing here.”

It probably meant something that Shinsō was using “we” for what amounted to two random strangers he resented for being hero-hopefuls and the person who chased him around Musutafu to make sure he exercised.

A thought occurred to Kei. “Shōda-san, was Monoma telling the truth when he said he only keeps copied Quirks for five minutes?”

“That’s what our Quirk aptitude tests said,” Shōda replied, glancing up at her. He, more than Ojiro, had to look quite a bit up to speak to either Shinsō or Kei. “You know, his strategy got us through
the obstacle course. He said if most of us in 1-B kept to the middle of the pack on purpose, people would underestimate us. Isn’t it working?”

Shinsō frowned harder. “He’s not wrong. But he’s still going to lose.”

Ojiro didn’t seem impressed. “You can’t say that and just make it happen.”

It was nearer Shinsō’s capabilities than those of most of the people here, though. Monoma would only have access to Shinsō’s Quirk for a few more minutes.

“Say, Shinsō-san?” Kei had an idea he probably wouldn’t find fun, but…well. She would.

“What?”

“How much do you weigh?”

“…Why?” Shinsō asked, edging away from her. “Because the look in your eye…”

“I just wanna know if Ojiro-san and Shōda-san can catch you if I throw you.” Kei spread her hands apart as though to draw them into some kind of sneaky plan. Thus far, the boys didn’t seem convinced of her strategizing. “The rules only say the rider can’t touch the ground, right? And you can get up as many times as you have to within the time limit. Since I like using my Quirk with my right hand, but I do better with both…”

“Oh, I see.” Ojiro also started eying Shinsō, who suddenly looked a little nervous. His tail flexed, all muscle. “Well, as long as you warn us before you throw him, it should be fine. Our team’s worth the fifth-most points, so we’re going to be targets. Any advantage we can get will help.” Ojiro added, after a second, “And you made Bakugō-kun mad last round.”

We’ll see how that goes. “Sure did. But I can handle him. Just be ready to catch Shinsō-san!”

Shinsō groaned. “I suddenly regret saving you.”

“Save that moaning and groaning for the other teams!” Kei’s answering smile wasn’t at all nice.

While she’d shoved the emotional upheaval to the side, Isobu was still nigh-incandescent with rage in the back of her mind. Monoma’s little copying trick had nearly set off the world’s nastiest chain of dominoes with every single pair of eyes in the country trained on this sports field. And all this because she’d rebuffed him, twice?

Kei was ordinarily fairly tolerant of petty slights and trickery directed at her. She had to be. But between bleed-over from Isobu and annoyance thus magnified, she was pissed off.

“I’m suddenly a bit nervous, too,” Shōda mumbled.

“You haven’t seen anything yet,” Shinsō complained. “And I’m including the obstacle race in that.”

Still, when Ojiro and Kei offered, Shinsō allowed himself to be maneuvered into place. Because their heights were slightly more even, Ojiro and Shōda were the two rear horses, supporting Shinsō’s weight partially on their shoulders. Kei was in front, with Shinsō’s feet in her hands and Ojiro and Shōda’s hands on each shoulder, at least until it was time to break formation.

Chapter End Notes
1. I had to post this.
2. The chapter title is just the title of the corresponding anime episode. I felt it fit.
Cavalry Battle

Chapter Summary

Wherein stealth and television broadcasts don't get along.

Thanks to Ojiro being in 1-A and Shōda being from 1-B, they had decent intel on the other team compositions.

Team Bakugō: Bakugō himself, Kirishima the Rock Kid, Ashido the Acid Kid, and Sero the Tape Kid. Kei had already seen Kirishima dig his way out of a zero-point robot’s guts, but the others were at least unknowns in temperament.

Team Todoroki: “Freezer Burn” Todoroki, alongside Kaminari the Lightning Kid (whom Kei honestly should have had pegged as soon as she saw his name), Iida, and someone named Yaoyorozu. Whose thing was that she could create anything, and who’d been cheerfully trailed by the purple grape kid throughout the obstacle race.

Team Midoriya: Mr. Golden Snitch himself, supported by Steampunk Hatsume and Uraraka and a kid who basically had a V2 Tailed Beast cloak growing out of his chest. Kei remembered him from the obstacle race, but without much detail.

There were two more setups from 1-A, but mainly? Team Mineta and Team Hagakure were who Team Shinsō was going to be targeting, not avoiding like chronic, automatic bone-smashing was a contagious condition. Their Quirks weren’t totally understood, but Kei was pretty sure they could take them by surprise.

Then came class 1-B: Teams Kendo, Monoma, Tetsutetsu, Kodai, Tsunotori, and Rin (Hiryū).

Kei wasn’t quite sure why there were so many of them, because the last two in particular were definitely collapsible into one stronger team. Jurota from Team Rin (Hiryū) in particular looked like a brown version of Beast from the X-Men comics, and she doubted he was any less tough.

That was when the fifteen-minute timer finally hit zero.

“Okay, all you first-years! I hope you’re happy with your chosen teams!” Present Mic called, breaking the announcer box’s silence. “Let’s get this party started! One final countdown before the game starts! Three!”

Yeah, this was going to be a mess.

“Two!”

Kill the boy.

Would you please stop suggesting that?

“One!” cheered the crowd alongside Present Mic.

No. Kill him.
Kayama-sensei’s whip cracked. “BEGIN!”

The cavalry started with a bang. Bakugō, of course. "DEKU!"

It must’ve been fun to have someone so over-the-top in 1-A. He was a walking noise violation. And when he racked up thousands of yen in damages, there went the class budget. Did his parents get a bill for all the equipment that got turned into charred scrap?

And, though Kei was fairly sure she could put a literal damper on his combat style, it was actually kind of nice that he was busy chasing the ultimate worm on a hook. Unlike most of the other teams, Kei, Shinsō, Shōda, and Ojiro were from more than one class. They needed a bit of time to acclimate to each other’s movements.

Luckily, Shinsō had picked their team pretty well. Though he was the tallest of them, neither Ojiro or Shōda were straining to keep their grip on Kei’s shoulders. None of them were as fast as she was, but they didn’t have to be. They just had to react when ground hazards inevitably got their number.

Like now. Though Midoriya was the biggest target on the field, the game was afoot.

And at least five different teams converged on Midoriya, to absolutely nobody’s surprise. Kei counted the Hagakure team, Todoroki, Bakugō, Tetsutetsu, and extraneous pairs from 1-B converging on the kid, and that was when the jetpack happened, forcing Bakugō to retreat to his team or be knocked down for a while. While Midoriya’s team flew to safety, several of the teams that had initially given chase wheeled around to pursue.

Team Shinsō, way at the far end of the arena, didn’t bother.

“Is this normal for him, by the way?” Shōda asked Ojiro, while Bakugō rocketed across the field like a one-man space program. Without his team, of course.

Ojiro sighed. “Bakugō is always like that. Powerful Quirk, great test scores, and a temper that’s literally explosive. Some of us set him off for fun.”

“Great.” Shinsō leaned forward, tapping the back of Kei’s head. “Gekkō-san, he’s your problem.”

“I have a feeling most of them will be.” Kei shifted her weight to the balls of her feet, prodding Isobu as a reminder to simmer down. They didn’t need to kill anyone.

Lies.

At this point, Team Midoriya’s long arc through the air put them well out of immediate strike range for anyone, leaving the pursuers scrambling to keep up. Kei didn’t expect that running defense to last long once multiple AOE attacks got involved, because the kids learned quick. Todoroki hadn’t even iced anything yet.

Still, it was about time to kick into a gear of some kind. Team Shinsō didn’t have enough points to skate to the next round without stripping several other teams of their points first.

“Who’re we going for first?” Ojiro asked Shinsō, since he had a better vantage point than the rest of the team did.

“Oh, I choose them,” Shinsō suggested in a bored tone, and shifted his weight sharply to force them to face off with Team Monoma.
Who were, in fact, focusing on Team Bakugō and looking clear in the other direction.

Because Monoma had just managed to swipe Bakugō’s headband.

While Monoma stood around with his team and monologued, Kei eyed the competitors closing in on the world’s most explosive team. Almost every 1-B team, bar Tetsutetsu, closed in around Bakugō’s team with clear intent to put the blond in his place. Kei couldn’t hear the exact words said, but Bakugō was starting to throw sparks in the same way a pissed-off Uchiha would start to spit little tongues of fire if angry enough. And besides, it was Monoma. She didn’t doubt he was being condescending enough to hammer every one of Bakugō’s problems.

“If we get any closer, we’re in Bakugō’s crossfire,” Ojiro warned. Because they were on the outside of the circle of doom, they could be easily spotted approaching by anybody on the inside of the slowly closing ring.

“Oh, idea. Ojiro-san, Shōda-san, I can make a fog for us to hide in.” She wiggled her fingers against the bottom of Shinsō’s foot, right next to their hands. Luckily, Shinsō wasn’t ticklish. “I just need my hands.”

“Can you see through fog?” Shinsō asked.

“I can feel my way through.” By using her chakra, pumped out alongside the mist in a type of radar system that unnerved her fellow shinobi. It clung. But the kids here wouldn’t be able to detect that component. “I’ll just keep us away from Todoroki-san and his team. Ice and all.”

“All right.” Shinsō closed his eyes for a second, then nodded. “Do it.”

Ojiro and Shōda obligingly took Shinsō off her hands, and Kei stepped a bit forward to make her hand seal. Well, really, it was more like a wave and not strictly necessary. She could literally punch the water vapor into proper condensation if it wasn’t for the need to make her movements clear to her teammates.

*Hidden Mist Jutsu.*

The world was blanketed in white, billowing mist coursing outward from the air around Kei like she’d smuggled in an enthusiastic fog machine. This technique took their opponents’ eyesight for the low, low cost of barely any chakra per Kei’s view, and she could maintain it for as long as she wanted.

If Kei stuck her arm out all the way, she wouldn’t have been able to see more than a stone’s throw away on a good day. She hardly needed to, though. The fog stretched from their little corner of the stadium to what felt like the middle of the confrontation with Bakugō and class 1-B, so Kei stepped back so Ojiro and Shōda could grab hold of her again.

“And suddenly, nobody can see what’s going on with Bakugō’s drama! Where’d class 1-B go?” Present Mic screeched.

“Class 1-C’s Gekkō put out a fog cloud of some kind,” Aizawa added, “Her team must be trying to stay concealed.”

“What kind of media circus can it be if nobody can see anything?!”

Oh, right. There was an audience, too.

Whoops.
“Well, that’s something,” Shinsō muttered as Kei closed her eyes. “Let’s start picking off class 1-B’s ambush. Monoma last.”

“Anything to say, Shōda-san?” Ojiro asked in an undertone, while the four of them picked their way through the fog at Kei’s direction.


Was a beast-man. Right. She’d have to keep an eye out for him.

“SEAWEED HEAD, I’LL FUCKING KILL YOU!” Bakugō roared from within the soup-like fog, “RIGHT AFTER I DEAL WITH THESE FUCKING B-LIST ASSHOLES!”

And him.

But in the meantime, Kei and her little team of high schoolers crept up on the horse-girl and her praying mantis friend as they did a loop in the mist, trying to locate Bakugō or maybe one of their 1-B fellows.

Kei’s team spotted them first.

“Gullible loser says what!” Shinsō taunted them, and both of their heads jerked around.

“Where did—?” began Kamakiri, and then his expression went completely blank. His entire body stilled, no longer adjusting to Tsunotori’s movements, and he nearly toppled off.

“Kamakiri-san!” cried Tsunotori. “What’s going on?”

“Want a hint?” Shinsō asked, a grin in his voice.

Tsunotori whirled on them, horns already pointed at Kei’s chest. She responded with, “What did you do to—?” And then she, too, was frozen.

“Leave the competition area and go to sleep,” Shinsō ordered, even as Ojiro slipped the headband away from Kamakiri. He passed it up to Shinsō while the duo trooped dutifully away from the now-victorious team.

Shinsō, for his part, immediately started stacking the captured headband in as surreptitious a way as he could. He couldn’t hide it, or any of the others they ended up capturing, but he could minimize the risk that their starting band would be stolen.

“Nicely done,” Ojiro murmured. “Think they’ll be safe?”

“We can try to make sure. Gekkō-san, do you mind keeping the fog inside the white lines?”

“Can do,” Kei said softly, and complied. It was kind of weird to have the fog follow geometric lines at all, though.

“Then people will see them outside the marked zone. It should be enough to keep them out of the blast radius if Bakugō goes off again.” Shinsō shifted his weight back along their formation until Kei was once again the first thing anybody trying to attack them would see. “Sorry if this is weird for you, Shōda-san.”

“It’s fine. If they wanted to win with me, they should’ve asked me to join their teams first.” Shōda shrugged. So the pale-haired kid had some teeth? Good. “Okay, let’s go.”
Though it wasn’t easy, Kei managed to guide them around the far side of the Bakugō Ambush Zone. She made sure to manipulate the fog so it’d sit thickest between them and the fight, leaving bright flashes of light and slightly muffled explosions as the only sound really audible between the two zones. And then a bigger one went off, blasting fog aside just enough that Kei could see what was going on in the epicenter.

Bakugō’s explosions dislodged the fog pretty well, clearing the air between him and Monoma’s team. And boy was he taking advantage where he could.

“Get it together, Bakugō!” said the redhead Kirishima. Water was starting to make his hair sag a bit. “If you don’t calm down we’ll never be able to take back those points!”

There was a muffled explosion. More muffled than the fog accounted for.

“Push forward, Kirishima…” Bakugō growled, his expression composed of only a vicious, deadly menace. “Right now, I’m mad fucking calm.”

Sure he was.

Kei snapped her fingers under Shinsō’s foot and the fog reoriented, circling the impending fight in the middle like the eyewall of a hurricane. Kei would keep track of the Monoma situation, but his classmates were easier targets.

“What’s this? Folks in the cheap seats get a bird’s-eye view of a showdown between Bakugō and Monoma! Gekkō, clear it for the rest of the crowd! Don’t keep us all in suspense!”

Aizawa’s answer was as dry as dust. “That would ruin the idea of ‘stealth.’”

Hah.

**Kill the boy.**

*Isobu, I'm not gonna kill Monoma.*

**Grow a spine! Practice on this one!**

Kei jerked her head to one side as a large shape bolted through the mist and didn’t bother with hand seals. She made half of one with one hand, aimed with her eyes closed, and dropped another Water Dragon Bullet on the encroaching team.

Team Rin (Hiryū) balked at the beast suddenly looming out of the fog, cutting off their advance. Rather than risk Shinsō again, Kei sent a single curl of water rippling out from the dragon’s jaw and ripped the headband from the rider’s head before dropping its entire mass on top of them and sweeping both of them toward the edge of the arena.

She was, however, careful not to actually *dislodge* the 1-B rider. That’d be cheating.

Ojiro caught the headband as Kei sent it spinning onto the end of his tail, grinning. “Two down. A hundred and ninety-five extra points.”

“Good for now,” Shinsō agreed softly, but he reached forward to tap Kei’s shoulder. “You just waiting on Bakugō to kick the hell out of Monoma?”

“No, exactly,” Kei responded, closing her eyes again to concentrate.
Out on the edge of her cloud of fog, she could feel the other competitors moving only if they brushed against it. Todoroki was easy to detect—everything near him either froze or boiled off, because of course his split-tone hair meant something. But his teammates? Harder to pick out what they were doing.

The air started to hum in a terribly familiar way, at least for anybody who’d grown up with Hatake Kakashi as a sparring partner.

Kei’s eyes snapped open and she dropped back, pushing Shinsō into Ojiro and Shōda’s hands again. She needed her hands free. “It’s Kaminari. Brace!”

Kei’s fog leapt from the air in a single, massive microburst. Her chakra pressure slammed downward, drenching every team near them—including Monoma and Bakugō’s teams—just as yellow lightning blasted outward from Team Todoroki. The ground nearest Team Shinsō, however, remained meticulously clear of water in a way it definitely hadn’t been a few seconds ago.

And with visibility back to perfect, Kei spotted the wave of ice rippling from Todoroki’s team before any of the now-stunned teams could.

Kei’s hands blurred through the seal sequence, cut down to half the count and at full speed. And now here’s a Water Wall. Landing on the Tiger seal, Kei spat water at an angle that slammed directly into the wall of ice with as much force as it’d take to match Todoroki. As the two attacks struck each other, ice built up in a near-bowl around Team Shinsō as the cold tried its best to bring Kei’s technique under control.

“Keep the water moving,” Shōda suggested softly from behind her, “like a river in winter. You know?”

Probably better than you do, Kei thought, but did what she was asked. It took a few seconds before Kei was satisfied that the freezing part of today’s program was over, but that left what was effectively an iceberg separating Team Shinsō from the other teams.

“Do you think that’s enough points to pass?” Ojiro asked, craning his neck to see the screen. Unfortunately, the now-ice wall spoiled his view.

“I can see clearly now, the rain is goooooone!” Present Mic sang, horribly off-key. There was a muffled thud as Aizawa-sensei probably tried to hit him. “Hey, watch it! But it looks like Team Todoroki has gotten all the points from all those frozen opponents! Talk about putting the competition on ice!”

“Shōda-san, can you get us through that?” Shinsō asked, as the team trooped up to the ice.

“Sure,” Shōda scooted around so most of Shinsō’s weight was on Ojiro and Kei, then jabbed at the ice with his now-free hand.

Where his knuckles hit, the ice barely got a noticeable scratch. Just behind it, however, the ice wall bowed inward as though someone had driven a freight train into the surface.

“Super cool,” Kei said, and Shōda spared a half-hearted glare for her before he punched again. “Hey, I meant it as a compliment!”

“And a pun.”

Well, true.
It took a total of three punches to put a tunnel through the ice wall, and then they emerged from the
time out corner. Somewhat unsurprisingly, about half of the other teams were still iced to the ground.
a number of Todoroki’s victims were also missing their headbands, while he ran off chasing
Midoriya’s team again.

One of the teams that wasn’t stuck in place was Monoma’s. His team hadn’t escaped exactly, but
they were just far enough out Todoroki’s trajectory that he apparently hadn’t bothered to take their
points.

The other? Bakugō, of course. He had a whole knot of headbands trailing from one fist, spitting
curses as he landed back in his teammates’ arms after another wild attack. He was lucky Sero kept
looking out for him.

“Say, I’ve got an idea,” said Shinsō with a sly edge to his voice, leaning forward on Ojiro and
Shōda’s arms. “Gekkō-san, mind making another dragon? Anything loud.”

Kei calculated the distance between their team and Monoma’s, and then she said, “Sure.”

“Oh no,” said Shōda, who was starting to understand how things worked around here.

“This’ll be fun!” Ojiro, at least, was getting into the spirit of things.

“Get us closer. With fog, if you think it’ll help,” Shinsō murmured, “and then help me catch
Monoma.”

Shinsō, Kei thought, probably should have asked how she planned to do that. All she said was, “Got
it!”

She stacked her ninjutsu this time. Hidden Mist went up immediately before her Water Dragon
Bullet, dropping visibility to jack and shit before her creation fully manifested. As its roar masked
their voices and footsteps, she directed it to snatch Shinsō up by his gesticulating arm.

“Wait, shit—” He’d caught on slightly too late.

“Good luck,” Kei hissed after him. Not that he could hear. The dragon sped off toward Monoma,
any swearing masked by crashing waves.

Kei led their little horse formation toward the action, because while she had confidence in Shinsō’s
ability to spook people into a reaction, it’d still be easier to catch him if he didn’t have that far to fall.

She was close enough by the time Shinsō reached Monoma to hear him snap, “Guess who, jackass!”

The fog slammed downward again, drenching everyone. And that caught the leaping Bakugō,
balanced on an air disk and trying to punch through, right in the middle of an attack. His sparks
sputtered in his hands and he nearly slipped off the shield.

“Wh—?” And true to form, Monoma’s expression went blank for the exact half-second it took for
Shinsō to snatch Monoma’s last headband in his fist.

The dragon hurled him through the air backward, just as Bakugō got through the clear barrier and
blew the chakra construct’s head clean off in a rage, his words inarticulate in the ensuing blast. He
might’ve also punched Monoma, who was still stunned by Shinsō’s Quirk. It sure didn’t last long
enough for Shinsō to order him to do anything.

Ojiro, using his tail as a powerful brace, caught Shinsō almost without anyone’s help. Kei and Shōda
rebalanced both boys quickly, then they ran the fuck away from Team Bakugō before the explosion kid could be reeled back in by his team.

“Team Shinsō pulls a page out of Team Bakugō’s book and swipes Team Monoma’s points like a fly fisherman, moving into second place!” Present Mic screamed, as the crowd went wild again, “Who knew it’d be a trend to throw team leaders around this year?”

“Flashy Quirks aren’t everything. Or am I the only one who noticed the students piled up asleep on the sidelines?”

“I’m completely drenched in the middle of an ice field,” Shinsō said, though his teeth weren’t chattering, instead his breaths were coming in quick adrenaline-fueled gasps. He planted a hand on the top of Kei’s head, giving it a brief squeeze. “I hate you.”

“But wasn’t it fun?” Kei asked with inappropriate cheer, as a quick hand seal had another Water Dragon Bullet cutting off Team Bakugō’s pursuit.

Shinsō grumbled, somewhat grudgingly, “…It was.”

“I’LL BLOW YOU THE FUCK UP TOO, YOU PURPLE BASTARD! JUST YOU WAIT!”

That drew a snicker. “Okay, that’s more fun. Next!”

The third place position belonged to Team Tetsutetsu. And, though perhaps it wasn’t intentional, Shinsō’s Quirk (“BOO!”) kept all four of the 1-B students passive long enough for Bakugō to catch up. While Team Shinsō fled, Team Bakugō wiped them out.

By the time the whistle blew, the top four teams were plain to see.

In first place sat Team Todoroki, having secured the ten million point headband. The rest of their results were irrelevant.

In second? Team Shinsō, by never losing a point to another team and opportunistically attacking nearly everyone not named Todoroki or Midoriya.

Third came Team Bakugō, forcibly dragging their total score from nothing to over a thousand.

And in fourth place, Team Midoriya skidded into the finals with just short of seven hundred points. There were tears. A lot of them.
Lunch Break

Chapter Summary

Kei checks in with everyone during lunch.

Between the end of the cavalry battle and the tournament between the top sixteen—since each of the winning teams were made of four members—there was an hour-long lunch break. Present Mic signed off with an invitation for Aizawa-sensei that was promptly declined in favor of a nap, and nearly everyone else scattered.

And Shōda was, once 1-B snapped out of their collective funk, the subject of many congratulations. Except for Monoma, whose plan most of the class had followed and not done particularly well with, nobody in the class held any hard feelings toward Shōda or what he’d done to get to the next round. He was representing them now, after all. The quiet boy looked a bit overwhelmed at the attention, but then Jurota picked him up and it was like a parade day. They carried him out of the stadium to go get lunch together.

Ojiro, too, got back-slaps and appreciation from his peers who weren’t busy winding themselves up (i.e., Bakugō and his hatred of losing in any sense). Hagakure in particular managed to hug him hard enough that Ojiro had to beg her to let go, which about suited the Hero kids that she knew of, now. Meanwhile, Todoroki stalked off someplace with Midoriya in tow.

That left Shinsō and Kei to figure out what to do for an hour. Besides eat, of course. Kei had already helpfully dried off everyone who’d been repeatedly drenched by her “Quirk,” so at least a change of clothes wasn’t necessary.

Kei was debating if she wanted to follow them or just retrieve her phone from the locker rooms when Uraraka and Iida happened by.

“Hello!” Kei greeted them, waving a little. “I’m sorry I didn’t see much of either of your teams, but I’m sure it was awesome.”

“It was! Iida-kun here was totally holding out on us and pulled off this awesome super-move!” Uraraka said, kicking out in front of herself to emphasize her point. “He totally stole the show.”

“I told you before, Uraraka-san, I was only being tactical. I didn’t mean to keep any secrets;” Iida insisted. He adjusted his glasses. “Nevertheless, I’m glad you both made it to the finals, along with Midoriya-kun.”

Shinsō watched Kei and the others interact, but didn’t seem inclined to join in. Standing more than a meter away, he gave off the impression of just waiting for the conversation to be over. Though the fact that he didn’t stomp off was progress at the very least...

“Oh, I don’t think we’ve met for real,” said Uraraka, noticing him first. She stuck out a hand, though she kept one finger tucked back. “I’m Uraraka Ochako, from class 1-A. I’ve seen you and Gekkō-san around since that whole declaration of war, but I never got a chance to say hi!”

Shinsō blinked, wrong-footed, and shook her hand with only minor hesitance. When one’s first
impression of the Hero course students was Bakugō. Uraraka was a swerve worse than doing donuts in a parking lot. She was really a sweet kid.

“Uh, we've met.” Shinsō paused. “I’m still out to win, though.”

“Oh, same!” Uraraka, now that she realized Shinsō was actually nowhere near as intimidating as he tried to be, seemed to be cheered up immensely. She practically glowed with a sunshiney optimism. “I’m looking forward to seeing who we’re all up against in the finals.”

“You’re not at all intimidated?” Iida asked. “That was a dangerous battle royale just a few minutes ago, and a lot of powerful Quirks were thrown around.”

Guilty.

You still should have—

No.

“Nope! We already all made it this far, so top sixteen isn’t bad,” Uraraka said, then paused, her expression turning uncharacteristically serious. “But I know I wanna be in the finals.”

“You’re not the only one,” said Iida, and though Kei had never actually seen him smile before, the look on his face nearly qualified. Surveying all of them, he said, “I’m sure all of you deserve to be here. The tournament should be interesting this year.”

Kei kinda felt bad. Sleeper agents were not, in the strictest sense, “meant” to be anywhere quite so full of heroes.

“I’m sure I’ll meet you on the way to the top,” Shinsō said, which wasn’t nearly as hostile as he could be sometimes. At his worst, it was a little like trying to interact with a pissed-off cat. The claws would come out fast.

“Well,” Kei said after a second’s pause to observe the stalemate. “Present Mic-sensei said it was breaktime. Want to get lunch together?”

“Just as soon as Deku—” Uraraka paused, then stuck both hands over her head. “Deku, Deku, over here!”

Midoriya, for reasons unknown but probably pertaining to Todoroki, had an expression like he’d been punched in the heart. He shook it off to return Uraraka’s greeting, but Kei had to wonder. She hadn’t seen much of the scramble for the ten million point headband, but she knew Todoroki had won and then dragged Midoriya to the side for a chat. Perhaps the two problems were related. She’d have put money on it, if there was anyone she trusted with her money.

“Hey, Midoriya-san. Good job making it to the next round,” Kei said, as though she hadn’t noticed anything amiss.

“You too, Gekkō-san. And Shinsō-san!” he added, clearly distracted. He was already starting to mutter to himself.

“So are we going to eat, or…?” Shinsō suggested, hands in his pockets as he shifted his weight uncomfortably. Apparently having reached his limit for social nothings for the day.

Uraraka pumped her fists. “Yes, we are! Come on, everyone!”
Iida nodded, already starting to set the pace. The kid was a pretty quick walker. Had to be the engines. “Keep up, everyone!”

“Your friends are weird,” Shinsō said, unable to walk slowly enough to seem unaffected and still keep up with Iida. It was one of those cases where anybody besides, say, All Might would need to lengthen their stride or just speed-walk.

“Pff, you’ve met worse,” Kei replied, ambling after the group.

Lunch passed without anything particularly special happening, at least from Kei’s perspective. Everyone chatted, with the notable exception of Shinsō. Midoriya’s distractibility was through the roof, clearly preoccupied by something he didn’t care to share with the class. Kei retrieved her phone and looked up the already-memefied clips of the Sports Festival thus far and showed off some of the sillier ones.

Like the part where Midoriya had slammed a sled down on a whole crapton of mines to catapult himself to victory. That one had him turning red and mumbling that he hoped his mother didn’t see it.

*Fat chance, kid.*

It was about then that Yaoyorozu and Jirō approached their table with the Cheer Battle Thing. Apparently, per some rumor or other, all the girls in the first year were supposed to dress in the orange-and-green UA cheerleader uniforms for the big event. Kei didn’t know what a Cheer Battle was, other than a filler event between the end of lunch and the beginning of the tournament. Something to get the audience’s blood pumping again after a food coma.

Uraraka was on board. “Sure! I don’t mind if it’s a part of the event.”

Kei was not. “Nope.”

“But Gekkō-san, if Aizawa-sensei said it’s required—” Uraraka tried. The girl was so earnest it reminded her of Rin and Obito. Combined.

“Hell nope,” she still said, looking up from her phone. Kei still kept up her polite speech otherwise, though she could tell the others were surprised. “He’s not my homeroom teacher.”

And even if he was, that was still a hard *no*.

“There’s the delinquent I’ve heard so much about,” Shinsō said in a dry voice, though his eyes betrayed amusement, clearly reaching the same conclusions as she had but apparently choosing not to aid her case. He rested his chin in his palm. “I was starting to think she was all rumor.”

*Jerk.*

“Don’t even start,” Kei grumbled under her breath, jabbing at his ribs with the butt of her chopsticks. He made a funny gurgle and smacked her hand away.

*Was* he ticklish?

“Isn’t Midnight-sensei your homeroom teacher?” Yaoyorozu asked, seeming a little put out by the sharp refusal. “She’d have told your class rep—”

“And Homura-san didn’t say anything to me.” Kei shrugged, ceasing her brutal assault on Shinsō’s ribcage and bringing her phone up as it buzzed like a hornet’s nest. Apparently, the locker rooms had terrible reception and it was making up for lost time. “You can check. She’s the one with blue skin
and fire for hair.”

“I will,” Yaoyorozu said firmly, and she and Jirō made a beeline for Homura and her friends. The fire hair thing was really easy to spot even in a crowded cafeteria.

“You were rather rude just then,” Iida commented, frowning more severely than usual.

Kei glanced up. “You think so?”

“A little,” Midoriya said, which was as close as she’d ever heard him come to reprimanded anyone.

“I’ll apologize to Yaoyorozu-san later, then,” was what Kei ended up saying.

However, as Yaoyorozu and Jirō didn’t return, Kei missed her chance. They were, with the help of Asui, Ashido and Hagakure, apparently hunting down Mineta and Kaminari to get their pound of flesh for...something. Or at least that was what Uraraka told them later.

GreenThumb: rollin in hosu

GreenThumb: \_\_(_\_\_/\'\`

GreenThumb: nothing happening

GreenThumb: saw ingenium twice

GreenThumb: been takin pictures of pigeons

GreenThumb: theyre pretty here d(\^¬\^)

GreenThumb: they come in so many colors

GreenThumb: theyll eat anything

Obito’s observations continued along these lines for another twenty-eight messages. He told her about his observations about city life, people, and took pictures of every cute cat he saw. He even, apparently, had managed to rescue a new cat from a tree while supposedly keeping an eye out for a serial killer. It was an achievement he hadn’t pulled off in Konoha for years.

“This guy ever heard of paragraphs?” Shinsō asked, leaning over to see why Kei’s phone kept buzzing.

“It’s Obito,” Kei said, still scrolling.

“Forget I asked.”

Kakashi, on the other hand, had sent her only two messages at about the same time that Obito’s text storm had showed he was getting bored. He was relatively terse—though when compared to Obito’s happy rambling, anybody would be.

Defib: Saw your cavalry battle on the storefront TVs. Or about half, because of all the mist.

Defib: Nice work. But watch your left side.

And then nothing for the past twenty minutes.
Kei shook her head slowly. Even from another town, he could spot her weaknesses. Ridiculous. But that kind of perception was probably what had made him a jōnin more than two years ago.

Even if it was mainly being put to use in the entirely wrong setting right now.

After texting her boys in a group message to make sure they hadn’t managed to go and die in the last few minutes, Kei waited until they responded before she settled back into lunch.

**Defib:** We’re fine. If something happens, you’ll be the first to know.

**Defib:** Besides us.

**GreenThumb:** go kick some kids ass for us

**GreenThumb:** multiple kids

**GreenThumb:** represent team awesomeness

**Defib:** We’ll probably watch.

**GreenThumb:** (b _-\_\)d(^_\ \d)

Then she put her phone away.

Somewhat unsurprisingly, the group at the lunch table got quieter as the end of the hour approached. Everyone’s nerves were acting up. When Iida, Uraraka, and Midoriya were ready to head out, she and Shinsō trailed behind a bit.

“Nervous?” Kei asked, noting that he’d gone pale at some point during lunch.

“Terrified,” Shinsō told her quietly, while they were out of earshot of anyone else.

Kei made a little noise of acknowledgement, then waited for Shinsō to continue.

“Usually, the top sixteen is all hero-hopefuls,” Shinsō muttered, while they hiked back to the stadium. “Two General Studies students and one Support student is as representative as it’s ever been. And I’m one of them.” Shinsō swallowed. “It’s just…a lot. I have a lot to prove.”

Kei nodded. “You know, even so far, I think you’ve done a lot to get yourself noticed in a positive way.” She counted off on her fingers, saying, “I mean, you made it past the obstacle race just with your Quirk. You took risks and made friends during the cavalry battle while using your Quirk on our opponents, and we had the highest score short of the team that got the guaranteed win. That’s leadership right there.”

“We did pretty well,” Shinsō agreed readily. But there was a twist of doubt on the tail end of his words. “A lot of that was you, though.”

“It was a team event. Most of Midoriya-san’s success was down to Tokoyami-san, wasn’t it?”

Shinsō frowned faintly. “Maybe? I didn’t see anything about that online.”

“Well, it was. Midoriya-san couldn’t even use his Quirk for the first two events. Hideous backlash. I checked.” She hadn’t, actually. She just knew from spy work and Obito’s observations that Midoriya had a bad habit of pulverizing his own skeleton. Then Kei thought that over. “That said, if he does start breaking his bones at you, you’re going to lose. Never go up against someone willing to do
that.”

Shinsō rolled his eyes. “Thanks for the pep talk, Gekkō-sensei.”

Kei snorted. “If I was anything like my sensei, I’d tell you off for that attitude.”

“Or ask me to throw Bakugō at you,” Shinsō shot back.

“I’d live!” Kei paused, then said in a serious voice, “Good luck, Shinsō-san. I know you can get into the Hero course. You have more heroism in you than you think.”

Shinsō sped up in an attempt to avoid her, ears already turning faintly pink. “Nope, none of that. Take that sappiness somewhere else.”

Kei cackled outright as she followed. He tried to block her view of his face with his hand, but she still said, “Well, you ruined my canned speech, so this is what you get!”

“Not listening,” Shinsō insisted.

But even as Kei needled Shinsō all the way back to the stadium, she kept her phone in her pocket.

Kakashi and Obito were still stalking Ingenium several towns away. Many pro heroes were happily attending the event and the nation’s media remained pointed directly at the Sports Festival alongside them. If a monster was going to get the jump on a lone hero in a different city, it was the perfect time. Especially one so prolific that he earned the title of “Hero Killer.”

It was a fight waiting to happen. Her boys versus Stain.

And Kei wouldn’t be able to do a thing about it.
Chapter Summary

Kayama-sensei ordered everyone who’d made it through the cavalry battle qualifier to gather in the middle of the stadium, forming a fair-sized crowd of UA gym uniforms in front of her podium. Forty-two kids all gathered together, all looking up at the big digital screen. Behind them, the imported American cheerleaders were trying their best to get the crowd hyped for the next event. All around, the students who hadn’t made it past the obstacle race were helping event staff roll out game equipment for the “recreational” events.

“Come closer and draw lots to see who you’re up against,” Kayama-sensei said brightly, holding a box braced against one hip. “Then enjoy the pleasure of the recreational games before we start. The sixteen finalists have the option of participating in these activities or sitting out to prepare for battle.”

Kei already knew what she was going to do. She needed time to meditate, not perform like a trained seal.

She shifted her weight slightly, making sure Monoma was within eyesight. It might’ve been a bit judgmental, but being caught unawares by his Quirk just once was enough. Giving Isobu an actual excuse for direct violence would be one of the last mistakes of somebody’s life.

“I’ll start with the first place team,” Kayama-sensei went on.

One by one, the kids picked up their numbers.

The brackets shook out like this:

First up, Midoriya and Shōda. Both of them went sickly pale when they realized they made up the first match, and Kei couldn’t blame them. She leaned toward rooting for Midoriya on the whole, if only because a kid whose fighting style drew so heavily from the Black Knight probably needed to get a pro’s attention and train himself up differently. She’d wave a foam finger for Shōda anyway, though. If she had one.

The second match: Todoroki versus Sero. While Kei thought the tape-using kid seemed nice enough, Todoroki could punch nearly in Kei’s weight class with his ridiculous ice Quirk. If it wasn’t a one-shot fight, she’d be surprised. Few people could overmatch Kei’s Water ninjutsu so easily, at least since she’d properly practiced and learned to work together with Isobu.

The third fight would be between Kaminari and Ojiro, and Kei already knew who she was rooting for there. And it wasn’t the human stun-gun, despite the power output he’d showed earlier. Hopefully, Ojiro would manage to close the distance before getting lit up like a Tesla coil. Outlasting Kaminari seemed easy, as long as the first attack wasn’t a total knockout.

Fourth: Iida and Hatsume, whom Kei had finally identified as a member of the Support Course. She’d been under the impression that the pink-haired Hatsume could be another strange Quirk user
from General Studies, because after seeing engine exhaust pipes growing out of Iida’s legs anything seemed possible. Apparently she was just a less successful Tony Stark, but with binocular zoom built into her eyes.

Kei’s half of the brackets started with the fifth match: Shinsō versus Ashido. She seemed friendly enough, so Shinsō’s Quirk ought to be effective. If not, well, he’d get some use out of what self-defense tricks Kei’d managed to instill. While hopefully not getting melted horribly, because some people’s appearances and their Quirks were hardly on speaking terms.

After that, Tokoyami was up against Yaoyorozu. Having seen neither of their actual fighting styles but plenty of their Quirks, Kei didn’t really know what to think. She couldn’t stop looking at Dark Shadow and seeing a shape Isobu might like to take someday.

Kei’s own match would be second to last, facing off against 1-A’s Kirishima in what’d have to be either the longest brawl ever or a very straightforward use of her “Quirk.” Worse, she wouldn’t be able to throw the match convincingly to the kid whose deal was turning his body into a rock. Her friends back home would absolutely give her shit for losing to Kirishima even on purpose.

The very last match of the first round? Uraraka versus Bakugō. Once again, Kei knew fuck-all about one of the Quirks in that fight and plenty about the other. While she suspected explosions would turn out to be pretty hard for Uraraka to fight, Uraraka deserved to win as far as Kei was concerned.

Midoriya made a noise like a mouse being stepped on, his eyes darting back and forth between his and Uraraka’s matchups.

“This’ll be fun,” Shinsō said, rubbing the back of his neck as he scanned the crowd for Ashido.

Kei nodded distractedly. Isobu’s temper thrummed in her chest like a second heartbeat, keeping her on edge. By the time the recreational games began, Kei was forced to bid Shinsō a brief goodbye to “prepare for the tournament.”

He accepted that excuse, and probably went off to practice zingers suited for Ashido.

Retreating to the prep room instead of sticking around to watch the “fun” felt a little like she was trying to become a hermit, but Kei did it anyway. Even if she didn’t need a few minutes to calm Isobu, she definitely wanted a chance to recover some of the massive amounts of chakra she’d expended inside of an hour. Throwing around that many Water Dragon Bullets, one Water Wall, two Hidden Mists, and one Great Waterfall on top of her other general enhancements was the kind of drain that would’ve been incredibly wasteful from the perspective from any ordinary shinobi. Especially because not one of those ninjutsu had killed anyone. The pride of many a dead Kiri-nin howled for blood.

Kei only really cared about the turtle monster doing the same in her head.

Midoriya made a noise like a mouse being stepped on, his eyes darting back and forth between his and Uraraka’s matchups.

This prep room’s only occupant was Midoriya, with Shōda nowhere in sight. Maybe it was for the best—she’d known Midoriya a little longer, and the kid had a tendency to get caught up in his thoughts worse than a fish in a net. She could keep to herself here and be left alone.

Midoriya raised his head when she entered, waving weakly, before going back to his muttering once she acknowledged his presence with a nod. Probably going over what he knew of the other boy’s Quirk and trying to think around it. By the time Kei pulled up a chair and slumped over the far table with her head pillowed on her arms, he was mumbling about needing his fingers.

She left him to it. Midoriya didn’t need her help. Isobu did. Therefore, Kei set an alarm on her phone
and closed her eyes to drop into her and Isobu’s shared mindscape.

The formerly-tranquil cliffside beach was a wreck of disturbed coral, rock, and uprooted palm trees strewn all across white sand, and the cause of it all sat in the middle of a brand new inlet with his forelegs folded to the sides. When Kei’s mental avatar floated down to his face, he turned it as far away as he could and closed his good eye.

“I am not sorry,” said Isobu, at once in her head and to her face. “I will never be sorry for defending us.”

“I wasn’t gonna ask you to be,” Kei told him, drifting closer until she sat on one of the spikes jutting forward from his head. His entire body shifted so he sat lower in the water before she could entirely settle, sending waves so high they nearly touched Kei’s toes. “You wanna help me clean this place up?”

“No demands to change my behavior?” Isobu asked, though he dragged himself farther onto the beach. His huge digits dug into the gray-white sand and started shifting debris.

“No demands, no,” Kei said, swinging down from his spikes one-handed. Her feet crunched onto the beach sand, strangely warm under her toes. It was all an illusion, but it was still comforting. “I remember what we agreed on, and I remember the thing with Inosuke. And Madara, and Kakashi, and with the butterflies, and like…I get it. Scolding you won’t change anything.”

“It will not.” Isobu shifted a bit, allowing Kei to stoop and pick up coral fragments from under the side of his shell. As she started gathering fish-shaped mental projections and hucking them back into the water underhand, he said, “Of all the ways we could be attacked…”

“I know,” Kei said, brushing her fingers against his shell. As he rumbled, she went on, “It’s awful. I don’t—if I didn’t know it was all just kids messing around during a school event, I’d…probably have reacted a lot like you.”

“How much experience do either of us have with such a situation?” Isobu wrenched a flattened palm tree out of the sand and hurled it out to sea. “Even the most childish of the ‘games’ you have recently lived through could end in dismemberment or death for all participants. And if it was the case, you could have died without knowing what killed you.”

Kei nodded, even as she flung another fish into the surf. “I know.”

“And?”

“And he’s a kid. Messing with powers because it’s what he does,” Kei told Isobu. She sighed and leaned back, staring up at the artificial sun far above their heads. “I am and was angry, and I get why I was angry even before I get to how you influence my mood, but that was dangerous. If me being unable to keep my head is going to mean you’re about to start killing people, we need to talk about this.”

Isobu’s rumble became less contented and more threatening, like an impending landslide. He clearly wasn’t in the mood for a heart-to-heart. Only one of them had a literal heart, but Kei would argue that Isobu’s emotions ran, if anything, more intensely in him than a lot of people.

“I know what Shinsō’s Quirk is like,” Kei said, “even if I don’t remember being under it. Next time, maybe instead of trying to pop into V2 cloak and losing our collective shit, you could try just like…”

Kei paused, then held up an arm so Isobu could see. In here, Kei wore her jōnin uniform instead of
either of the UA sets, and Isobu’s gold-on-red eye laser-focused on her. “Punch me in the face. Just 
grab my arm through our chakra coils and sock me right in the jaw.”

“...I could also just do that when I want to,” Isobu said, instead of acknowledging the practicality 
of Kei’s plan. For him, it must’ve been easier to just tease her.

“If it works to get us out of a genjutsu...” Kei trailed off. She hadn’t been truly caught by a genjutsu 
for a while now, and many of the stronger ones hardly allowed movement. Some couldn’t be broken 
by pain, either. Still, it was something approaching a plan. “Same principle.”

Isobu made a noise like “hmph,” but scaled up tenfold. He abandoned his attempts to clear the beach, 
but the false debris was already starting to fade into dream-stuff. Before he disappeared into the 
waves, he told her, I will think about it.

Kei waved to his retreating tails, and all three of them waved back.

Then her phone alarm beeped.

Kei checked whether she’d drooled onto the table before she sat up. Once she’d determined 
everything was still more or less as she’d left it, minus one Midoriya through a still-swinging door, 
Kei got to her feet and decided to head for the stands. She checked her phone, of course—Obito had 
a knack for spamming the hell out of a groupchat that was difficult to tear her eyes from.

GreenThumb: now we have brackets

GreenThumb: i saw youre up against rock kid

GreenThumb: dont lose to him

GreenThumb: im sure youre thinking about it

GreenThumb: a whole afternoon of not doin anything

GreenThumb: but splodey kid is RIGHT THERE

GreenThumb: and purple kid versus pink kid too

GreenThumb: i dunno how thats gonna go but

GreenThumb: tell shinsō hed better not lose

GreenThumb: i spent too much time gettin used as a trainin dummy

GreenThumb: so

GreenThumb: COME ON AND WIN THIS ヾ(^

Defib: Or throw the match and save yourself the further attention of a rabid media- 
focused world. You don’t need to be in the finals to accomplish your goals. Or on 
television.

Defib: Aren’t you supposed to be more subtle than this?

TMNT-TNT: Probably.
GreenThumb: excuse me

GreenThumb: but this is team awesomeness only

GreenThumb: no killjoys allowed

Defib: Better a killjoy than dead.

GreenThumb: "*°:* +□(◕‿◕)°*°:* +

TMNT-TNT: Aren’t you two literally right next to each other? Within punching distance?

Obito didn’t send any more messages after that. Neither did Kakashi.

Kei tucked her phone away and headed up toward the stands.

The student sections of the audience were divided by class, though as far as she could tell there was no actual ban on visiting the other groups. 1-A had one smattering of benches, while 1-B was next to them, and so on. It was pretty similar to their arrangement within UA’s halls, only there weren’t any massive sliding doors. Walls between the sections were high, though, and few people were already in their seats. Kei stuck her head in two of the doorways just to make sure the Hero course students were where she expected them to be, then wandered to 1-C’s spot.

“Gekkō-san, there you are!” said Homura, her hair and eyebrows blazing away with excitement.

“Um.”

Kei stood there, a little stunned, as Homura took both her hands in hers and said, “Congratulations on getting as far as you have. I mean, I know you were always a strong student, but right now you’re representing our whole class. You and Shinsō-kun!”

“Thank you?” Kei managed, still blinking in surprise. Dang it, now she felt bad for thinking of throwing her match in the tournament. She still would, but it’d be less funny.

And she hadn’t even been particularly nice to any of these kids.

“It’s nice to know I have your support,” Kei said, not entirely sincere because she wasn’t fully certain of Homura’s motives. Some of the other 1-C students weren’t looking her in the eye, and that was certainly not a new development. “Make sure you tell Shinsō-san the same, okay?”

“As soon as I see him, you can count on that!” Homura promised. She let go of Kei’s hands and peered behind her, as though expecting to see Shinsō following her. “Nobody’s seen him for a while, though. I asked Shingetsu-kun already.”

Shingetsu’s head spun around at the sound of his name, though his torso kept pointing in the direction of the pointy-eared kid he was lecturing. “Sorry, did someone say something?”

Homura’s fiery eyebrows dimmed somewhat. “Have you seen Shinsō-kun?”

“Not since the last time you asked.” And then Shingetsu was back to telling the other students why throwing popcorn was bad manners. Or something like that.

“I haven’t seen him either.” Kei scratched the base of her scar. “Mind if I go look?”
“The matches will be starting soon, though,” Homura said, though she wasn’t actually telling Kei not to do what she would.

“Be right back, then,” Kei said, and darted back into the building. It was as much to find Shinsō as to get away from her classmates. As she left, she heard Shingetsu tell Homura something along the lines of “you scared her off,” but didn’t stop to ask.

Weird they were choosing now to put aside their fear of her and make nice.

With the first match so close to starting, Kei wasn’t surprised to find the hallways nearly empty of spectators, students, and everyone else. Not for the first time, she took a second to curse the total lack of chakra available to sense in the general area, which would have made finding people a snap. She ended up effectively circling the stadium twice through the halls and stairways, finding only Midoriya and Shōda up and about (and still quite nervous, despite each getting a quick pat on the back from her), before deciding to search outside the building. She could afford to miss the first match.

The stadium was set at the end of a long cement pathway, but there was a forested park jammed up against the back of it. While trotting along in search of Shinsō, she passed Todoroki leaning against the building and remembered just in time what a terrible mood looked like, so she gave him a wide berth. Tokoyami was up in a tree, his animate shadow keeping an eye out and waving down at her as she passed. It took a little longer, until she was almost on the far side of the trees, before she spotted Shinsō sitting on a root with his back against the tree trunk.

“ There you are,” Kei said, relieved. She came to a stop next to him.

“What’s with that look on your face?” Shinsō asked, sitting up. One purple eyebrow went up. “You look spooked.”

What went unspoken was probably along the lines of, “And I’ve seen you literally being held hostage before, so what the fuck?”

“Our classmates were trying to be nice.” Kei shook her head slowly. “To me. Not in general. But also in general.”

Shinsō stared at her.

“Or at least Homura-san was,” Kei added, somewhat defensively. “It was weird.”

Shinsō sighed. He rubbed the back of his neck and said, “Took them long enough.”

“…What?”

“To get over themselves,” Shinsō said, a bitter look crossing his face. As she sat down in the grass across from him, he rested his chin in his hand. “You’re standoffish as hell, like a cat, so everyone’s been tiptoeing around you trying to figure out what to do. Only now you’re doing well, without them, and it’s giving them ideas.”

Kei thought this was all rather cynical, but, as a cynic, waited patiently for the next part of the explanation. It was only polite.

“When people weren’t wondering when I’d turn into a villain or avoiding me, they’d act like my Quirk was super special. Like they were my friends.” Shinsō rolled his eyes. “But the second they found out I wasn’t going to use it to manipulate anyone because they were ‘so nice to me’ and asked me to, they went right back to spreading rumors.”
“I’m not,” Kei said, once he’d finished.

“Not what?”

“Not using you to get ahead,” Kei told him. She leaned back, bracing her hands against the grass to keep her balance. While a muscle in Shinsō’s jaw jumped and he fought not to interrupt, she went on, “I fully admit to not being a super nice person. I don’t know how people like Midoriya-san do it, to be honest. But... as awkward as that was, I think Homura-san was trying.”

Not particularly effectively, but there was effort behind it.

“I don’t tend to give people much of a chance.” She found herself scratching the lower end of her scar and stopped once she noticed. “I ignored almost everyone at the beginning of the year. But Homura-san seemed like she meant well. It’s not her fault if the rest of the class isn’t gonna follow her lead.”

Shinsō didn’t immediately respond. Instead, he pried at a scrap of loose bark and peeled it off, a pensive look on his face.

“So, what’re you doing this far from the stadium?” Kei asked.

“Meditating. About the only thing I can do now.” Shinsō started tying the strip of bark into a knot. “It’s not really working. I’m still nervous.”

“I think that’s normal,” Kei told him. “But like you said, you’ve made the top sixteen. The parts that wiped out basically everyone else are over.”

“That’s one way of looking at it.” Shinsō sighed again, tossing the bark into the manicured lawn. “How’d you keep calm? During that match your brother talked about?”

Kei paused. Visions of losing her temper as badly as she’d ever done before Isobu, and then having to frantically apologize for ruining Gai’s apology, flashed through her mind. Not her finest moment. “Um, you probably don’t want to know.”

Kei knew the instant Shinsō’s brain caught up with his mouth. He paled a little further, likely recalling the scraps of information Hayate had let slip. “…You know, I think you’re right.” He got to his feet. “Might as well stop putting it off.”

“And maybe our classmates will surprise you,” Kei added, as they headed back to the stadium.

“Maybe.” It wasn’t a no, at least.
Shōda versus Midoriya went like this: Shōda put up a good fight, putting cracks in the ring and nearly catching Midoriya past the judo-flipping he did on reflex, and then Midoriya broke two fingers while lightning ran up and down his arm. The shockwave and accompanying blast of air shot the poor 1-B kid the length of the concrete ring and out of bounds.

Shinsō stared down at the victorious Midoriya, leaning forward even as Shōda staggered to his feet. He slumped as Kayama-sensei rendered her verdict, and Midoriya jogged up to him to say something. It was probably encouragement. That was just what Midoriya was like.

“So,” Kei said.

“He literally broke his fingers at Shōda-san.” Shinsō sounded torn between being amazed and horrified. Likewise, the other 1-C students who sat a meter or so off were wincing as Midoriya’s attack method sank in.

Homura and Shingetsu had elected to sit right by Shinsō and Kei, though Shinsō hadn’t seemed happy about it at the time. Now, all of that was forgotten in favor of appreciating the ridiculous pain threshold Midoriya had to have to get his victory. The attack had even blown Homura’s hair out, sending her fireproof hair tie flying off in the box somewhere.

“I told you so,” Kei said while Homura went to look for her accessory and relight her head. She leaned back, kicking her legs idly. “I mean, this is just me, but I’m glad he and Todoroki are way on the other end of the bracket.”

“No kidding,” Shinsō muttered, while Shōda and Midoriya walked together off the field. Both of them probably needed to see Recovery Girl.

“Todoroki-san and Sero-san are up next,” said Shingetsu. His feathery eyebrows bunched together. “Any idea who’d win?”

“Todoroki,” Shinsō told him without glancing in his direction. “No contest.”

“That was fast,” Shingetsu said.

“It’ll be a quick match, too,” Shinsō predicted.

And it was.

Todoroki, having apparently run out of fucks to give, demonstrated exactly how far his ice Quirk went when Sero tried to grab him in his tape. And the grab went through! It did.

Then Todoroki froze the tape, froze Sero, and froze half the fucking stadium in one massive burst. The ice stopped hardly twenty centimeters from the student boxes, blocking the entire view to the arena and sending frigid air spiraling through the crowd.
Almost everyone in 1-C bunched around Homura, who’d gotten her hair going again.

“Wh-what are you, psychic?” Shingetsu asked through his shivers, curling into a ball on his seat.

“J-just observant,” Shinsō told him, trying not to show how the cold affected him.

Kei reached out and poked the ice thoughtfully with one finger. A little voice in her head was insisting that there was absolutely someone who would lick it and get stuck. Probably in 1-A.

That would be embarrassing, Isobu said, which was his first unprompted comment not related to Monoma in quite a while.

Kei decided to take it. Very.

“S-Sero, can you move?” Kayama-sensei’s voice rang out over the PA system. What, had Todoroki gotten her, too? Talk about collateral damage.

“Are you k-k-kidding me?” Sero stuttered from cold. Though the students couldn’t see him, it wouldn’t be all that surprising if he was up to his neck in ice. In fact, Kei glanced up at the huge screen well above their heads and saw a wonky image that depicted just that.

“Very well. Todoroki wins by immobilization!”

As Todoroki started to thaw the ice and most of the audience started chanting “Good try!” toward Sero, Shinsō turned to Kei and said, “So, what you said about Todoroki and Midoriya being on the other half of the tournament?”

“Yeah?”

“I agree. Wholeheartedly,” Shinsō muttered. Then, perhaps remembering Kei’s knack for wordplay, he added, “And that wasn’t a pun, so shut up.”

“I didn’t say anything.” But Kei was grinning behind her hand. Like most people besides Midoriya and Kei, Shinsō’s name was a pretty direct riff on his Quirk. Kei wondered sometimes if lacking a pun in her name made her stand out, but it hadn’t come up yet.

The next fight was Ojiro versus Kaminari.

Kei considered her options. She hadn’t done anything for Shōda because she’d been not-so-secretly really wanting Midoriya to win, so it felt a bit jerkish to cheer for either. The other fight had been a given.

She looked around at Shinsō, Homura, Shingetsu, and everyone else from 1-C. Then she marched to the front of the box as Ojiro and Kaminari took their places on the concrete, cupped her hands around her mouth, and yelled in the true spirit of Maito Gai, “Kick his ass, Ojiro-san!”

Okay, so maybe Gai wouldn’t have decided to swear. But Kei could show school spirit sometimes. Sort of.

What.

“Uh—” said Shinsō.

“She’s really into this,” mumbled Homura, even as she hopped down the stands to join Kei at the
front. She hesitated, then pumped her arms as she said, “Um, go Ojiro-san!”

“Please tell me you’re not going to cheer like this for the rest of the tournament,” Shinsō muttered, looking faintly ill as he sunk further into his seat.

Kei ignored him. “You can do it, Ojiro-san!”

“The third match is Kaminari versus Ojiro. You may…begin!” Kayama-sensei roared, and the match kicked off.

Almost literally, because Ojiro went directly for Kaminari’s figurative jugular.

As someone without any long-range attacks, Ojiro had no choice but to close the distance as fast as he could if he wanted to be effective. By contrast, Kaminari had great long-range attacks with a backlash almost as bad as Midoriya’s, and also no close-combat skills worth writing home about.

Ojiro aimed a kick at Kaminari’s face, and Kaminari didn’t dodge. Kei wasn’t sure he could.

Lightning flashed, blasting Ojiro backwards. He landed safely, though only because his tail lashed out and caught him. Kei wasn’t sure if that was a reflex or what, because a couple hundred thousand volts could knock anybody on their butt.

There was some trash talk going on down in the ring, but nobody in the stands could hear anything. Kei braced her hands on the edge of the box and leaned far enough forward that Homura grabbed the back of her uniform in sudden terror, trying to keep her steady.

Yellow, almost cartoony electricity exploded outward from Kaminari just like during the cavalry battle, and once again Ojiro took the brunt of the hit. He staggered back onto his feet, tufted tail twitching.

It was a bit like how she imagined a Pokémon battle would look from the stands. Pikachu versus, uh, Sandshrew?

“If this is an endurance match, Ojiro might win,” Shingetsu said, as Kei and Shinsō’s former teammate once again attacked the human stun-gun in melee.

Kaminari didn’t get any better at deflecting punches with his face, but Ojiro got zapped harder the second time. Or at least it took him longer to get back to his feet for round three.

“It’s been a while since my last physics lesson,” Kei said, over Shinsō’s offended, “It was last week!” Ignoring him, she said to Homura, “But doesn’t electricity always try to find the quickest path to the ground?”

“Yeah, unless you’ve got a Quirk that says otherwise,” Homura said, while Ojiro once again nearly bounced Kaminari’s head off the concrete.

Kaminari, for his part, managed to scramble up and retreat from a second tail-swipe that would have knocked him flat. He ducked past Ojiro to the center of the arena, with his classmate in hot pursuit, before he brought both hands down. From his body language and the fact that the jumbotron screen showed off a pretty epic nosebleed, it was probably time for his final attack.

Ojiro didn’t chase him, for once. Instead, he planted the end of his tail against the concrete and seemed to brace for whatever would come next.

As Thor’s hammer came down and everyone in the audience had to shield their eyes, for as second
only the cameras caught what came next.

Kei had her eyes on the screen instead of the field, and therefore saw Kaminari staggering around as though drunk. Slack-jawed and vacant-eyed, he seemed to be mumbling to himself. There was no microphone close enough to catch what he was saying that wasn’t already fried.

He’d burnt himself out like a lightbulb.

And Ojiro, though slightly scorched from the repeated blasts of lightning, was balanced on the end of his tail like Son Gokū in a perfect mountain-top meditation pose.

It really was like a Pokémon battle. And Ojiro was, apparently, the real Pikachu.

Ojiro ended up escorting the stunned Kaminari from the field, though he did make sure the other boy touched the ground outside the arena first. Kayama-sensei declared a victory by ringout, and that was the end of the third fight.

“He used his tail to ground out the electricity and didn’t die,” Shinsō said, shaking his head. “I can’t believe that worked.”

Kei, who was a little less surprised for an entirely different reason, made sure to congratulate Ojiro on his victory in the halls before she took off to buy snacks. She only took requests from Homura, Shingetsu, and Shinsō before leaving. The rest of 1-C could starve for all she cared at that exact moment.

And this turned out to be a perfectly justified decision, because Hatsume proceeded to take the next ten solid minutes to demonstrate her inventions while using Iida as a baffled, indignant guinea pig. Retroactively justified, but still. It gave her enough time to wait through the line before ending up back in the stands just before Hatsume flounced out of the ring.

“So, how was it?” Kei asked upon returning.

“I wouldn’t want to be Iida-san right now,” Shingetsu said. “That was…pretty humiliating.”

“I know they tell people from Support to sell themselves and their inventions, but they don’t mean it quite like that, right?” Homura added, grimacing. “She was completely shameless. It was like watching a commercial, not a match.”

Shingetsu and Homura continued in this vein for a bit, bouncing off each other, and Kei looked around for Shinsō. Unfortunately, it seemed like her purple-haired friend was gone already, given his match was next. She set his overpriced water bottle down on the seat and waited for a bit for the two class reps to quit complaining.

“Iida advances by ringout!” Kayama-sensei called from the field.

“Answers the other question I had, I guess.” Kei cracked the seal on her water bottle and said, when her class reps’ expressions shifted to confusion, “Neither of you actually said who won until then.”

Homura and Shingetsu briefly looked abashed. After they exchanged looks, Homura said, “So, um, Shinsō-kun is up next. Against a student from the Hero course, too. Aren’t you worried?”

Kei thought about it for about two seconds. Then, “No. He’ll be fine.”

“You’re really confident,” Shingetsu said, a little surprised. “I mean, I know Shinsō-kun has been training outside of school, but…”
“Just wait,” Kei said, and settled in to watch.

Present Mic started up again with the announcer gig, though Kei had ignored most of his comments in favor of waiting on a wire for Isobu’s. Which didn’t seem to be forthcoming. Seeing how Shinsō was a relative unknown—at the very least, she didn’t think his Quirk was nearly as played out as Bakugō’s or hers were—she had to wonder if out-of-ring info would end up screwing him over.

Might as well listen anyway.

"Here we have class 1-C’s Shinsō Hitoshi, coming in from the door to Cementoss’s left. And opposite him, we have a proud member of 1-A’s class of standout heroes-to-be, Ashido Mina! Put your hands up, listeners!"

Kei’s eyes narrowed as she stared down at the field. She couldn’t make out Shinsō’s voice over the sound of the crowd, but had no doubt he was already talking. He even waved to Ashido, who waved back and said something in reply. The usual pre-match smacktalk, probably.

Not a habit an enemy wanted to get into when Shinsō was around.

Then it was down to brass tacks, she supposed. And at the exact moment Kei took a sip from her water bottle, she thought she saw Ashido’s movements stutter to a halt.

Present Mic didn’t miss a trick. “What’s this? Ashido is…completely frozen! And what’s with that look on her face? Could this be a Quirk at work? Shinsō Hitoshi seems to have Ashido Mina entirely stunned!”

Got her, Kei thought.

Present Mic said as the crowd fell into relative silence, “He didn’t stand out in the first round much, but the second was another story! It’s possible Shinsō’s crazy powerful, or maybe it’s a surprise!” The huge screen overhead briefly flashed to Present Mic’s face as he pantomimed shock and added, “Who could have imagined this turn of events?” He laughed briefly. “That’s the Festival for ya!”

Present Mic, Kei thought, could have stood to make Ashido stand out a little more before this happened. When a closeup of her face and Shinsō’s landed on the big screen, her expression was… entirely blank. Shinsō was grinning.

It was not a particularly nice grin. Shinsō was still trying to get one over on the Hero kids after all.

Poor Ashido.

Then again, they’d all had Present Mic as an English teacher. Maybe Shinsō’s Quirk was sparing her a bit more of the shouting.

“This is a perfect example of why the entrance exam isn’t rational,” Aizawa-sensei said, and there was a brief sound of papers being shuffled.

“Huh? Why’s that?” Present Mic asked.

“Shinsō failed the practical exam to get into the hero course.” Kei wasn’t sure if Aizawa-sensei really needed to be saying all that on national television, but it wasn’t like she could stop him. “Since he also applied for general studies, he probably figured that would happen. His Quirk is incredibly strong, but that entrance exam consisted of fighting faux villains. Robots.”

Which Kei had flattened more than a few of, by this point. More after today.
“It gave a huge advantage to those who had physical superpowers they could show off,” Aizawa-sensei went on. “Despite his abilities, Shinsō never stood a chance at passing.”

On the screen, Shinsō was saying something. Though Kei could read lips pretty well, she could have gotten it on a blind guess: “Turn around and walk out of bounds.”

Present Mic grabbed the microphone, saying, “What? Ashido’s obeying him! What’s going on here?!”

By that point, Ashido had already spun smartly on her heel and was marching toward the steps to the arena.

“Wait, he’s already got control of her mind?” Shingetsu asked, from Kei’s right.

“He must have. She stopped moving and he’s just talking.” Homura tried to nudge Kei from her left. “Does he always do that?”

“Do what?” Kei asked, distracted by trying to figure out what Shinsō’s trash talk was.

“Does he always just like…keep going?” Homura was frowning when Kei looked to her for clarification. “He seems like he needs to get something off his chest, not just talk for the sake of his Quirk.”

“No, he’s just filling silence,” Kei said, resting her chin in her hands. The front rail of the box was pretty crowded now, with the other 1-C students giving Kei less of a personal bubble as they crowded to the front. Except for Homura and Shingetsu, none of them seemed too comfortable touching her even while cheering Shinsō on.

Over a wall or two, 1-B was also cheering Shinsō and 1-A was kind of freaking out.

Present Mic went on, “Not very flashy, but I guess this match was bound to be over soon one way or another!”

Anyone who’d been watching the screen would know Shinsō had a mental Quirk. The only question was how the rest of the bracket near him would try and work around it.

When Kei looked up at the big screen, Shinsō’s scowl had flattened out. He normally had a pretty good glare, and on a kid with a bit more murder in his soul it’d have struck fear into the hearts of jerks everywhere. But right now he almost seemed calm. Vindicated, now that he’d managed to beat someone from 1-A on his own.

Kei was not. She was eyeing the cameras with distaste.

_This is why they’re losing people left and right to the Hero Killer. And every other two-bit villain with an internet connection._

**It answers a question I never asked.**

Kei wasn’t sure Shinsō could make it past the next match. Two weeks of training plus his Quirk had seemed decent enough for the time, but that scenario depended on Shinsō’s Quirk staying under wraps. With a public win against Ashido, who wasn’t the calm, collected type anyway, Kei had no doubt everyone would be speculating about his Quirk. Tokoyami and Yaoyorozu both seemed way more level-headed than anybody else in his entire half of the bracket. And Kei was including herself in that. If anyone had a strong motivation and the brainpower to figure him out, it was them.
Then Ashido made it to the bottom of the stairs.

“And with that, Shinsō is the victor by ringout!” Kayama-sensei shouted, just as Ashido suddenly snapped out of Shinsō’s control. And though perhaps Kei was projecting a bit, Kayama-sensei looked just a bit happier to see Shinsō win than any of the competitors before him. She was even smiling as she told Ashido there were no do-overs.

1-C’s box promptly erupted in cheers alongside a somewhat confused and slightly-delayed response from the audience, and Kei couldn’t hope to be the loudest among them. Especially not after getting accidentally clocked with a water bottle again.

Homeroom bias could be a wonderful thing.

By the time Shinsō arrived back in the box, the crowd around them was happily discussing the finer points of his victory. Kei caught comments about thinking UA’s practical exam was as biased as Aizawa-sensei did, pro heroes talking about how he’d make a great addition to any agency who wanted a way to pull off nonviolent takedowns, and just being pleasantly surprised by Shinsō’s tenacity in getting this far. And the second he stepped foot into the box, he got mobbed by their classmates.

Shinsō snagged his water bottle from Kei when it was offered so he could hide just how touched he was. It seemed that, despite everything, 1-C was finally communicating. They were finally becoming a real homeroom of sorts.

Kayama-sensei would be proud.

Everyone settled in for the next match together.

Kei waited in the wings because, given her match was after it, she might need to make a quick exit.
Kei finally gets to fight on her own, and the top sixteen becomes the top eight.

The fight between Tokoyami and Yaoyorozu was over in less than two minutes, starting from the moment the two competitors entered the marked battlefield. Kayama-sensei did her best, of course, and Present Mic hyped up both of the competitors. Yaoyorozu could create anything and had the brainpower to put that power properly to use in the obstacle race and during the cavalry battle. Tokoyami basically had a sapient extra combatant springing from his torso that was capable of fighting off most physical threats.

But Yaoyorozu lost the initiative to Tokoyami’s Dark Shadow and just never got it back.

Kei wasn’t as much of an expert at reading fights as Kakashi and Obito were, since she didn’t have a Sharingan. But she would have bet actual money that Yaoyorozu over-thought the problem after being put on the defensive. Once Yaoyorozu created her metal shield on reflex and Dark Shadow’s attacks forced her to block strike after strike after strike, she lost spatial awareness so she could try and come up with a counteroffensive. And whatever planning she’d tried involved more time than she had left to be pushed out of bounds.

A little disappointing for the audience, but Kei guessed the result was closer to “crushing” to the 1-A assistant class rep.

Kei wasn’t able to think more on it, however, because she needed to be down there on the field right now. And while it was true that the shortest route between two points was generally a straight line, and that she could throw herself off some spectacularly high vantage points with little fear of harm, people generally expected competitors here to walk into the arena like normal people. It added to the drama of the moment without becoming a cheesy entrance worthy of professional wrestling.

Therefore, Kei decided against just launching herself from the 1-C box while riding a Water Dragon Bullet and took the stairs like a normal person.

Kei understood the need to keep up the appearance of strength in the face of adversity when it came to large, powerful organizations that could host public events. It was why even villages as badly off as Sunagakure hosted Chūnin Exams in an attempt to drum up money, alongside the prestige. The UA Sports Festival, coming off the USJ attack, was a power play. And it was a lot less lethal by design, with the focus more trained on individuals, but the kids were still trying to prove themselves to the world. She got that.

So, Kei approached her fight with Kirishima as an exhibition match and not a total rout planned to the letter. He needed to demonstrate his strength. She just needed to not completely give her skills away before advancing.

By the time she entered the stadium again, she had an idea.

Present Mic got the party started. “Here we are, listeners: The seventh match of the first round! In this corner, we have Kirishima Eijirō from class 1-A! You may already know him as a one-two
punch of ultimate shield and unbreakable weapon!” Present Mic had used very similar wording for Tetsutetsu earlier, hadn’t he? “And opposite him, class 1-C’s Gekkō Keisuke, the third place finisher from the obstacle race and walking bane to camera fiends everywhere! Take a picture, listeners, because chances are you won’t get any shots later with her around!”

Kei spared a halfhearted glare in the direction of the announcer’s box, narrowing her eyes against the sight of flashbulbs going off constantly all across the audience. Yes, she could ruin their little media circus with a snap of her fingers, but she didn’t have to.

Kirishima waved in greeting as the two of them approached the center of the arena, evenly spaced to Kayama-sensei’s right and left. He seemed like a friendly kid. Sharp. Literally.

Kei waved back on reflex, then put her hand back down. She hadn’t spoken two words to Kirishima before this.

“You’re pretty tough, Gekkō-san,” said Kirishima, his sharp teeth bared in an excited grin. It was kind of familiar. If Kei tilted her head to one side and squinted hard enough, she could make his red hair sort of melt away and form Inuzuka tattoos. “Let’s make this a good match! Don’t hold back on me, because I can take whatever you dish out!”

_The hell you can._

But that was an idea. To actually experiment a bit on someone who was willing to stand there and take it.

“Sounds good,” Kei agreed. She lowered her head in a modest bow, shifting her weight onto her back foot. “Ready when you are.”

“More like ready when _I_ am, though I love the banter!” Kayama-sensei raised her flogging whip. As she watched Kirishima take his own ready stance, she swung her arm down. “Begin!”

Kirishima charged. His fists were raised and the light caught them oddly, like the glint off mineral-rich rock. By the time he swung for Kei’s head, she’d already decided against blocking and swayed back out of the way. Two steps wasn’t much of a loss in exchange for not being decked by solid stone.

Kirishima’s second swing was a straight cross, which Kei ducked before grabbing his solid wrist with her left hand. Her other hand made half a hand seal against his chest, and then she was spitting water in his face with the force of a fire hose.

Kirishima reeled, but her grip on his arm didn’t quite let him control his reaction. He spun to the left, knee digging into concrete as she knocked him off balance. If he hadn’t slammed his other hand over his face and activated his Quirk, Kei’s Water Trumpet would effectively be waterboarding him.

And then she let go, with water snaked around her legs to justify how she kept her footing when Kirishima could not.

Kirishima hit the ground and rolled, chipping the arena floor as he went. Then his arm slammed down like a backhoe claw, hardened fingers gripping concrete hard enough to break everything below them and force him to a stop. His sleeves were absolutely ruined, but it wasn’t like he’d needed them before.

“Oh, Kirishima’s charge is ruined by Gekkō’s Quirk. Where does she get all that water?”

A pity Kei couldn’t flip him off in public.
“You didn’t ask where Todoroki got all his ice.” Aizawa-sensei didn’t sound impressed by Present Mic’s line of questioning. “He made an iceberg. That touched the stands.”

“I’d be asking that question if he seemed like he was spitting it.”

“She didn’t earlier. It seems to be an affectation.”

Kirishima coughed, twice. His hair didn’t shift, which was a testament to the power of hair gel. And he got to his feet again, his skin shifting rapidly to stone-hardness again. “I did tell you not to hold back, didn’t I? Guess I can’t complain!”

Kei shrugged, making the Rat, Dog, and Ox seals before dragging her fingers apart with a web of water forming rapidly between them. “Charge again and you’ll get the same result. Try me.”

Kirishima hesitated for a split second. “That look on your face…”

Kei drew the Water Whip out to its full length, wrapping it around the length of her forearm like a nunchaku.

“It looks almost like Bakugō’s!” Kirishima crowed, slamming his fists together before giving her a thumbs-up. The impact shot sparks everywhere. “Like you really wanna kick someone’s ass! It’s getting me pumped up, so let’s GO!”

What the fuck. All expression dropped off Kei’s face in surprise, leaving her just staring at the kid. Her Water Whip was still intact, but just. Her concentration was in pieces.

“No, no, do it again!” Kirishima waved his arms, then clenched his fists up into a boxing stance. “Come at me!”

Definitely a Gai-type. Most people don’t like being almost drowned, even in this kind of wacky competition.

I have a feeling you are running out of descriptions for people you meet here.

It’s not my fault so many people here are like Gai and not somebody else.

Kei and Kirishima ended up kicking off from their starting positions at the same time. Though his punches were textbook-perfect, Kei slid around them as though he’d hardly moved. While she didn’t manage to sort out her expression past keeping it neutral, her hands flew—the Water Whip wound around Kirishima’s ankles with nearly perfect precision.

Time to test the limits of this Quirk. She’d heard complaints earlier, like he wasn’t sure he could stand out in a field of competitors like this. There were plenty of flashy Quirks around, hers included.

Well, she could help with that.

By the time Kei landed in a crouch behind Kirishima, both hands gripping the thin strand of water, she could already tell he’d hardened his skin around each point of contact. Precision hardening, then. Probably not the most effective attack.

Then she yanked on her line anyway.

There was a thud, but no grunt of pain. Kei glanced over her shoulder to find Kirishima getting back to his feet.

“Nice try,” Kirishima said, still grinning. The rock effect crawled all up his legs, but he could still
move. He re-settled his weight and crouched facing her. “But you’re gonna have to work a bit harder to make me give up!”

“Prove it,” Kei said, more perfunctory than as any kind of encouragement.

“Sure!”

And with that, Kirishima shifted his stance and managed to hook his ankle around the main length of the whip. He slammed a hardened foot down on it, as though trying to pop a water balloon. The Water Whip did care about conservation of its own mass, unfortunately.

Kei had to let go to avoid being dragged into punching range, and the entire construct collapsed under its own weight. There was a reason she’d never invested in this technique much, she reflected dryly. It was good exactly where it was supposed to be used, not as a multitasker.

As the droplets splattered, Kirishima briefly dropped his Quirk effect to flex. The kid was invulnerable to the kind of blunt force she was willing to use before it was time to kill someone.

“Looks like this match is more a question of tactics and submission holds than the pulse-pounding action we’ve been seeing so far. Come on, pick it up a bit!” Present Mic complained.

Kirishima charged again. He pulled a hardened fist back to swing, shouting, “I told you to fight me with everything you’ve got!”

“You asked for it.” Kei made her choice, her hands already moving before she completed the thought.

“Everyone in the stands ready to be in the splash zone?” Present Mic’s voice rang out.

Water Release: Great Waterfall. As she made the last hand seal, Kirishima’s wide-eyed expression vanished under the torrent of water she was creating ex nihilo.

Physics won out. Kirishima was a tough kid, but this ninjutsu had been designed for entire groups of enemy shinobi and, unlike before, she wasn’t deliberately avoiding causing casualties. And this was a waterspout that, while smaller than the one she’d used to clear robots from the track, was pointed squarely in his face.

Kei dropped the ninjutsu the instant she felt Kirishima hit the opposite stadium wall, punching a deep gouge into the concrete. The vortex blew apart, dousing the arena’s artistic flaming torches and drenching everyone in the first few rows of the stands as the remaining momentum did its thing. She had no intention of making the situation harder than it had to be, though Kirishima had already been tossed around like a pebble in a flood. Best not to add near-drowning to the tally.

When the view finally cleared up, Kayama-sensei was wringing her hair out on the umpire’s podium, looking toward Kirishima. He was currently trying to dig himself out of a crater in the far wall, whacking one side of his head to knock water out of his ears. He didn’t seem hurt, though.

Kei relaxed. Though they’d be ankle-deep in water for a little while, the stadium’s drainage systems could handle the rest.

“Because Kirishima is no longer in bounds, Gekkō wins this round!” Kayama-sensei announced, with her whip in one hand and her dripping hair in the other. “Congratulations!”

“So, Eraserhead, what’s your explanation for this one?” Present Mic asked. “How’d this powerhouse competitor end up in General Studies?”
“Poor written test scores,” Aizawa-sensei replied in a bored tone, as though he’d been asked the question before.

Kei seriously debated flipping the announcer’s booth off for a second time, but once again restrained herself. Instead, she made a few hand seals to force water out of her way before walking across the arena to Kirishima. Who had levered himself out of the wall and crashed to the ground unhurt while the commentators were making fun of Kei.

“Wow, I really should’ve expected that,” Kirishima said, rubbing the back of his head. “You showed me, huh?”

“You asked, I delivered,” Kei agreed, and made a couple more hand seals to make sure she and Kirishima were dry for the trek back to the stands.

Kirishima was greeted by back slaps and congratulations by his class, once he was reunited with them. Kei got her share, too, but Shinsō held back.

In fact, he seemed a little worried, eyebrows drawn together in a frown. Once they sat down in their respective seats to watch Uraraka and Bakugō’s match, he said quietly, “That wasn’t as strong as your first one.”

“Nobody noticed,” Kei said. Then she stifled a yawn that was only partly faked. At some point, she’d learned how to yawn on cue, but it had an annoying tendency to actually remind her she was tired.

“Don’t be so sure about that,” Shinsō cautioned. “Especially with people like Todoroki around.”

Kei shrugged and let the comment lie. After all, if she planned to throw one of her matches later in the tournament, some foreshadowing wouldn’t go amiss.

The explosions from the Uraraka vs. Bakugō match drowned out all conversation before Shinsō could come up with a way to get her to talk.

Uraraka lost, but it was close.

Nobody besides Dust Release users could make objects freely levitate back home, so Kei hadn’t been looking up at the tops of the stands any more than most of the audience had. Aizawa-sensei, on the other hand, had caught the nearly solid cloud of rubble forming far above the arena. And he had no qualms whatsoever about shutting down both the pro heroes in the crowd who booed Bakugō and the ones who didn’t appreciate just how clever Uraraka’s plot was. Levitating tons of rubble, masked by the clouds of smoke thrown high by Bakugō’s repeated blasts, was so devious that nobody but Aizawa had expected it of the sunny girl.

It almost worked.

Kei didn’t like Bakugō, partially due to the fact that the boy seemed to have the approximate personality of a honey badger armed with grenades, but she hadn’t joined the booing. There didn’t seem to be any point. While yes, Bakugō made himself an easy target for hate, Uraraka’s plan to drop half the arena in rubble on his head was a beautiful one. She got so close.

But in the end, Uraraka finally pushed herself too far and explosions won the day. She had to be carried off the field as her body gave out under her, even though she clearly wanted to give it another go.

Kei crossed her arms and leaned against the front of the stands, thinking.
With Uraraka out, the top sixteen had become the top eight. Up next, it was Midoriya versus Todoroki—which was like as not to result in multiple shattered limbs and a brand new iceberg. Then, Iida and Ojiro to whatever end that would go. Shinsō up against Tokoyami would the third match, and then Kei would face Bakugō.

Kei wasn’t necessarily looking forward to that. Not when she was still deciding which match to lose.

On one hand, making it past Bakugō meant she could avoid getting mocked to death by family and friends. On the other, she wasn’t sure she could convincingly lose to Tokoyami or Shinsō, since she’d made it past Kirishima already and she knew damn well how Shinsō’s Quirk worked. Tokoyami’s Quirk seemed to be another brute force variety, but with some range. Kei would have had to have made it past worse just to face him.

Kei lowered her head into her hands.

Wherever her boys had gone, she hoped Obito and Kakashi’s day was going way, way better. And that they wouldn’t kill the Hero Killer.

At this point, she’d give quite a bit to be there with them.
Midoriya and Todoroki were both terrifying for different reasons.

In one corner: Midoriya, whose pain tolerance was better suited for creatures without skeletons to pulverize and whose off-hand flick could launch a human being the length of the entire stadium. If not for the fact that the backlash tended to keep to internal damage, Kei thought that it’d be safe for the event staff to be looking for violently ejected bits of Midoriya’s bones in the stands.

In the other: thermodynamic equilibrium writ large in the form of Todoroki, who had apparently only been using half his goddamn Quirk for the entire Sports Festival so far. In addition to on-demand icebergs and tremendous ice floes he could put out at a moment’s notice with his right side, his left could launch the kind of fireballs Kei tended to only see from Uchiha on a rage-bender. This was the kind of unpleasant surprise she got for not paying attention to introductory spiels from people like Present Mic.

Well, at least throwing a fight with Todoroki would be easy.

“Midoriya broke two fingers earlier, and he’s still going into this,” Shinsō said, his eyes narrowed slightly as he sized up each of the other boys.

“It’s Midoriya-san,” Kei said. “He’s…” She frowned suddenly. “Todoroki-san spoke to him earlier, but I don’t know what happened. Something’s different, though.”

“Different how?” Shinsō asked.

“Midoriya-san usually doesn’t seem to be the type to get intense like that,” Kei tried to explain. “He’s the type to back down at the first sign of trouble so everyone can go away happy.”

“What obstacle race were you watching?” Homura sounded utterly incredulous. “He triggered twenty mines at once!”

“That’s not the same thing,” Kei told her. “That’s a competition, sure, but Midoriya-san doesn’t really want to hurt anyone. Even in his fight against Shōda-san, he did everything he could before actually using force. His Quirk is an option of last resort.”

But he had gone full-force for Facepalm-kun at the USJ. Even then, only when he’d been scared out of his mind that the villain was going to kill one of his classmates in front of him. Not that Kei could share that observation with Shinsō. There were certain things she wasn’t supposed to know, and he really oughtn’t find out.

Nevertheless, Kei found her opinion of Midoriya steadily rising. Though he needed a bit of help standing up for himself, she could respect someone who put everything into defending other people. With any luck, though, he’ll never be forced to the extremes she had in pursuit of that goal. He’ll be a hero instead.
Midoriya, down on the field, had his shoulders squared and his arms held in a ready position, putting all of his attention into the fight. His mouth was twisted into the most wobbly smile Kei had ever seen, but that wasn’t really what he was trying to do, was it? Midoriya could put on a brave face for the crowd, but his concern was all about Todoroki.

Todoroki’s expression was so flat Kei could have balanced a level on his nose. And she had to wonder what had hollowed him out quite like that.

“I don’t know him that well, but something put steel in his spine.” Kei’s gaze focused on Todoroki. Whatever that kid had said, Midoriya was not going to back down. The days of Midoriya rolling over and playing dead were dead and gone. “This match might get out of hand.”

Which it did.

The second Todoroki created his fuck-off ice attack, designed to push Midoriya out of the ring, Kei was already at the front of the box with her hands braced on the wall. While the noise was nearly overwhelming, that wasn’t the important part. Lipreading was a shinobi skill, too, even if she usually took the lazy route and brought teammates with perfect or better hearing abilities. Genma was a frequent victim of her team-building philosophy.

There was a noise like a cannon going off in the other direction, blasting the ice apart in one huge wind tunnel of doom that was unmistakably the result of Midoriya’s Quirk breaking another damn finger.

“He has seven more to go,” Kei noted aloud, watching Midoriya clutch at his right wrist.

“Seven what?” Shinsō asked, as a brief hush fell over the crowd.

“Fingers,” Kei said, and Shinsō winced.

Out in the middle of the arena, Todoroki recovered from the attack only to send another wave of ice in Midoriya’s direction. Once again, the would-be glacier ripped across the concrete like it was a living thing, and once again Midoriya blasted it into next week.

More ice.

Another smash.

This time, the snap of Midoriya’s Quirk was strong enough to send Todoroki skidding backwards until he hit an ice wall of his own creation, bracing against any further attempts to hurl him out of the ring.

“Six,” Kei said, trying not to let tension bleed into her voice.

Next to her, Shinsō seemed a bit green around the gills. “I don’t… He’s not thinking past this match.”

“Probably not.” Kei shaded her eyes against the glare, peering closer at the battlefield. “There is no way in hell he’s using that hand like that again. He’s down to a thumb.”

Todoroki’s ice snaked out again, before Midoriya could recover from the backlash of his own attacks. This time, though, a lack of spare fingers kept Midoriya from automatically blocking the attack in the only way he knew how, the ice grasped his leg.

Once again the ice shattered, sending frost and fragments flying all across the audience opposite
Midoriya and blasting Todoroki back.

Kei raised an eyebrow as the air settled back to normal.

Midoriya’s entire left arm was limp, purple with burst blood vessels. Using the entire arm might’ve been a reflex, but nevertheless Todoroki’s attack had fucked him up good.

“Well,” Kei muttered while pinching the bridge of her nose. “He didn’t use that hand.”

“What the hell is wrong with this kid?” Shinsō said faintly, eyes locked on the fight.

Kei didn’t answer. While Midoriya was probably riddled with shards from his own skeleton, he was still upright. That situation would change when it changed.

Across from him, though, Todoroki was shivering. A quick shot of him—standing with his back to an icy wall and short of breath—flashed across the jumbotron screen above. Frost crawled along his face and his right arm, shining in the sunlight.

So his Quirk did have a limit.

The battle reached a brief lull. Though the two kids were being drowned out by the audience, per usual, Kei squinted at the combatants anyway.

“Are they just talking now?” Homura asked, leaning forward.

“Something… about Todoroki-san’s father,” Kei muttered, trying to strain her ears at the same time. It wasn’t working.

Shingetsu gaped at her. “You can read lips that far away?”

“Sort of?” Kei leaned back from the fight for a second, hoisting herself up onto the divider wall and craning her neck to see above their little alcove. Endeavor was definitely in the audience—it was hard to miss a flaming face like that—but she needed binoculars to make out much else. Still, Todoroki had looked that way, hadn’t he?

“Get down,” Homura said sharply, and Kei obeyed.

“Still,” Kei said as she settled back onto solid ground, “there’s something else going on here. And Midoriya-san knows what it is.”

Homura paused. Her hair had gone out, again, so she was wearing a fellow student’s uniform jacket like a turban. “…You mean like why Todoroki-san isn’t using fire? He almost did during the cavalry battle, but I’m not sure either of you could see it…”

“All I saw was a lot of ice,” Shinsō said, frowning. “Seriously, what is Midori—?”

And Midoriya, with all the lung capacity of someone hopped up on adrenaline, clenched his broken fingers into a fist and shouted, “Come at me with everything you’ve got!”

A shudder ran through the entire 1-C box. Someone needed to stop Midoriya before he tried using his Quirk in a headbutt or something and actually managed to kill himself. He was already breaking himself into bits on public television. Todoroki would be an accessory to any death-related crimes.

Todoroki, perhaps having a brainfart moment, responded to Midoriya’s declaration by creating an ice bridge and charging the kid with the almost uncontrollable super strength Quirk instead of just trying to go for ice again at a stretch. He was butting up against his own limits, but they didn’t seem to
involve shattering bones. More frostbite and hypothermia.

Midoriya, probably having an equally boneheaded reflex, punched Todoroki in the stomach with his right arm alight with power. And all his fingers still quite thoroughly broken.

Everyone in the audience gave an awful “oooh” of sympathetic pain as Midoriya finally started screaming.

Opposite him, Todoroki was nearly folded in half by the the punch and blown off his feet. He skidded the length of the stage, coming to a stop only against a low ice wall. He rolled to his feet unsteadily, breath coming in short, foggy gasps. From the screens overhead, ice still crawled along his right side. His personal timer was ticking down.

“Why isn’t Kayama-sensei calling the match? Her or Cementoss,” Homura fretted, her eyes like saucers in the face of all this carnage.

“Technically, neither of them is immobilized, unconscious, out of bounds, or surrendering,” Shingetsu half-guessed. When Homura whirled on him, he spun his head around to avoid having to meet her eyes as her hair flared blue. “I’m just trying to explain their reasoning!”

“Midoriya-san could die,” Homura insisted to the back of Shingetsu’s head.

“He’ll be fine!” Shingetsu countered, sounding more desperate than convincing. Behind them, the rest of 1-C was getting more anxious the longer it took for harmony to be restored. Also, they were horrified by Midoriya and Todoroki’s match because they had pretty decent compassion, whether or not it was mixed with a healthy dose of “how badly it hurt to break a bone” empathy.

Shinsō leaned away from the arguing class reps. Instead, he muttered, “What is Midoriya’s play here?”

Kei’s gaze flicked up toward the screens overhead, again. There was no way audio recording equipment could fully catch what was happening in the ring without being blasted out of existence by one of the combatants in this match. While she could lipread only a fraction of what the cameras showed, it was clear the pair of them were talking.

More ice flooded across the field, and—

“There goes his thumb,” Kei said, while blood flowed from Midoriya’s mouth. He’d used his cheek to get enough resistance to use his Quirk.

“I can’t watch this,” Homura whimpered, hiding her face in her hands.

Shingetsu patted her shoulder, and his hand nearly caught fire when Homura shook her head hard enough to disturb her flaring hair.

“I want to be a dependable, cool, smiling hero!” was what Midoriya had to say for himself. Approximately. “If you become the number one hero without giving it your all, then I don’t really think you’re serious about denying him everything!”

Kei’s mouth pressed shut in a thin, unhappy line. She found herself glancing toward Endeavor again, checking for his reaction. Nothing.

_Midoriya is being Naruto._

_Pardon? He is not a toddler._
Wrong Naruto. Kei crossed her arms on the front of the box, sending a vision of the Naruto-versus-Neji fight from a very different tournament to Isobu for perusal. Particularly the bits before Naruto pummeled Neji into submission while miraculously avoiding an otherwise-earned dental bill. There’d been a lot of shouting Kei couldn’t entirely remember, but the parallels were clear.

Todoroki said something, but Kei didn’t see what it was because her eyes were on Midoriya just as he screamed something along the lines of, “Your power is your own!”

And at that point, Todoroki caught fire. Starting from his left eye, flames crawled up his face and down his shoulder, until the entire upper left side of him was engulfed in a tower of fire.

“So, since Todoroki’s stopped holding back…” Shinsō nudged Kei’s elbow. “Midoriya’s already lost.”

Kei nodded. At this point, it was all over bar the screaming.

Speaking of screaming, however, Kei’s eyes shifted to Endeavor once again. While the boys on the field were probably going to annihilate each other if Cementoss didn’t stand up and do something, the big arsonist himself was stomping down the stairs with his own head almost fully ablaze. He was shouting something, though, and Kei wasn’t optimistic about the chances for those words being helpful, kind, or any good for Todoroki’s mental health.

Kei carefully revised her regard of Endeavor downward. And kept going until she was almost tempted to let him know—to his face—that Itachi had set the themed onesie on fire. An ironic death for that particular outfit.

If I were to extend our chakra in that direction, I could theoretically douse his flames.

That involves at least one chakra tail, doesn’t it?

I did not say it would be subtle. You do not use my power because you want to get away with the enemy unaware of your presence.

True.

In the arena, Midoriya and Todoroki were charging their final attacks. Ice hurtled from Todoroki’s right foot in a wave as overwhelming as one of Kei’s bigger ninjutsu, while Midoriya’s right arm and left leg lit up with the red-streaked light of his ridiculous Quirk. The ice curled around his shattered arm flaked off into nothing as the wind whipped around into the beginnings of a tornado.

Midoriya threw himself forward, over the wave of ice with the exact same technique that had shattered his legs at the USJ during All Might’s arrival.

Todoroki disappeared into yellow-orange fiery light, all coming from his left hand and arm as Midoriya closed in.

“Everybody down!” Shingetsu shouted, while Homura’s hair once again got blown out. He waved his arms and most of the 1-C students obeyed, out of fear of being caught directly in the backwash of the two monster attacks. These two combatants had already more than proved they had no sense of how to scale back their AOE attacks meaningfully.

Five concrete walls leapt upward from the center of the arena before the two boys could make contact as Cementoss finally got off his ass.

That was the last Kei saw before Homura grabbed her and Shinsō’s collars and dragged them behind
the 1-C box’s front wall. It probably saved her a few minutes of flash-blindness from the resulting inferno-slash-shockwave. And possibly her eyebrows.

Hot air flowed over the dividing wall, drying eyes and sending bits of concrete rubble and plenty of dust raining over the crowd. For a second, Kei was tempted to use Water Release ninjutsu just to stave off the worst of the effects, but it was over quickly enough to cut the impulse short. It was the next best thing to a steam explosion that didn’t end in raining limbs, but Kei still found herself up and almost over the front of the 1-C box just to see what happened to Midoriya and Todoroki.

Homura, her hair once again blown down to orangeish embers, made sure Kei couldn’t stand on the divider. It seemed to be a new reflex for Kei’s civilian companions to develop, and Homura was admirably on top of things. Now she just needed to learn to shamelessly blame Kei if she got caught up in ridiculousness.

Not that anyone could see into the ring. Todoroki’s initial ice attack had been pretty thoroughly turned into steam by his follow-up, and the concrete walls that Cementoss had raised were still falling like ash. It was about as bad as Kei’s earlier Hidden Mist ninjutsu, only people without heat-adaptive Quirks were sweating a little instead of feeling chilled.

“Midoriya is out of bounds!” Kayama-sensei announced, once the steam cleared just enough for her to make out the tiny, slumped form at one end of the field. “Todoroki is the winner!”

It looked kind of like the crater Kirishima had put into the concrete as a direct result of Kei’s attacks, but Kirishima could take those kinds of hits. Midoriya, by contrast, could’ve slipped past “unconscious” to “dead” with worrying ease.

But hey, Todoroki was still standing. Barely. And in the ring!

Kei settled back into the 1-C box as the medics carted Midoriya away. Her heart was beating faster than she’d expected, and it took her a second to identify the reason why. While, yes, she’d seen the kid shatter bones before, there was a little tickle in the back of her mind regarding another big-hearted, green-themed kid who’d gotten limbs crushed in a public sporting event. Or nearly.

“Be right back,” Kei said as she nudged Homura aside. “I’m going to see how he’s doing.”

“Midoriya won’t be able to tell you anything if he’s doped up to the eyeballs,” Shinsō told her bluntly.

“I know.” But Kei was already taking the stairs three at a time.

“Tell Midoriya he’s terrifying! And don’t miss my match!” Shinsō called after her, but that was all.

Kei ended up joining the small group of Midoriya’s friends who were likewise trooping toward the medical station, because the center of this little social group was literally self-destructive to a degree that earned him some worry from others.

And on the way up to Recovery Girl’s office, Kei checked her phone.
Intermediate Lawbreaking

Chapter Summary

Obito and Kakashi get in trouble.

Obito really didn’t mind burning a day by stalking a hero. The weather was nice, big screens everywhere were happily showing the Sports Festival wherever Ingenium stopped for a second, and snacks were easy to pick up at any corner store. Kei wasn’t here, but she was keeping up a cover identity. And while Obito wasn’t necessarily happy about it, he’d gotten used to not having Kei around for missions ever since February.

Off to Obito’s left, Kakashi bit down on a sneeze as the two of them hopped across a gap between two rooftops, still following the silver-armored hero on his patrols. The local air was still weird.

If he was being honest, Obito half-expected this method of finding Stain to be as much of a bust as the scent-tracking. The Turbo Hero Ingenium was the leader of Team Idaten agency, and therefore he was one of the better-connected heroes in Hosu. If something did happen, he had a radio where Obito and Kakashi didn’t, so he’d probably be on the scene of any crime as fast as he could. Therefore, Obito and Kakashi were saving themselves a tremendous amount of trouble stalking his various sidekicks by just following the big silver team coordinator around.

It helped that Ingenium’s helmet made it difficult for him to cover his own blind spot. Someone probably ought to let him know.

…Just not until this tactic of last resort was fully explored.

Unfortunately, though they’d tracked down another police investigation, the victim was carted off to the hospital before Kakashi or Obito could Sharingan any answers out of them. The police had already trampled all over the site, making it useless for Kakashi’s tracking technique. And to add salt to their collective wounded pride, Stain had apparently departed the scene via the sewer system. There was a lot Kakashi could do, both with his dogs and on his own, but both Kakashi and Obito had come to the sad conclusion that scent-tracking was just not going to work for this case.

Not that Kakashi would subject his dogs to city air if he could avoid it, but Obito understood. Some situations were a bit too complicated to have an easy solution. And even besides that, summoning techniques didn’t appear to work on this side of Kamui.

Thus, stalking.

Not that Ingenium made it easy. Per Kei’s explanation, this hero had engines built into his arms that helped him run faster or something. Obito didn’t think it compared to shinobi speed, especially since he and Kakashi were some of the fastest people Konoha could throw at the problem, but he definitely took corners way faster than a normal person, and while blowing smoke everywhere. Because roof-hopping required a bit of foresight and Ingenium didn’t seem to believe in slowing down except to make calls, Obito had been leading with his Sharingan ever since this mission started.

“Slow,” Kakashi said, his gloved hand brushing against Obito’s right shoulder. Sensation was a little
dull in that side, but it was definitely a tap.

Obito shook the gleam of Ingenium’s armor out of his eye before he dug his heels in properly. Rooftop gravel crunched under his feet as he skidded a bit, then turned to face Kakashi.

Kakashi jerked his masked head back and then down. Without any further words, he marched back over to the gap they’d just leapt over and dropped down with no ceremony. They’d found their Hero Killer, then, and Obito moved to follow.

At that point, the clank of light metal and rushing air met Obito’s ears. Likewise, an armored shadow passed over him and, when Obito looked up, he spotted a silver figure careening overhead.

Ingenium landed in front of him, elbow pipe things jetting smoke. While his body was angled forward, as though expecting violence, his voice came out surprised. “You—you’re a vigilante? Or a villain?”

Obito shrugged. He raised his right hand to scratch the back of his neck, feeling his face heat up under his mask. To salvage the situation, Obito almost mimicked Ingenium’s voice right back at him just to make the awkward feeling fall on someone else for a change, but then steel met steel in the alleyway below.

Obito had already Kamui-warped from the roof to the ground before he even finished his master plan. Ingenium got a glimpse of a person spiraling away into a ribbony mirage, centered on the right eye of the mask, before Obito stepped out into a dingy alleyway.

“Wolf!” he barked, landing farthest from the street.

Kakashi didn’t respond except to nod.

And from the shadow of a dumpster, the Hero Killer rose.

Taller than either Kakashi or Obito, but hunched as though his head was set a bit too far forward. His arms were bare under bandages running up to his biceps, balancing combat gear resembling cobbled ANBU gear. Obito noted the shift of shapes under his clothes and on belts, his Sharingan alerting him to dozens upon dozens of hidden knives, folding blades, and spare sharp objects. Heavy soles on already-modified shoes indicated yet more blades, perhaps spring-loaded. He was built like someone who fought for a living, complete with a damaged katana and ragged scarf to accompany the tails of his mask. His face was even flattened due to a total lack of nose, probably on purpose.

Stain looked like a jackass, was the point. It was a flexible word. Obito had picked up a few things here and there from Kei’s vocabulary.

Between him and Kakashi, the Hero Killer was bracketed in by an ANBU agent and someone who had all the training and the power to sidestep attacks. Judging by the knife embedded in the brickwork, Kakashi had already deflected an attack or two with his kunai.

…If Stain had enough knives, this would be a very short fight.

Obito slid into a combat stance as Kakashi shifted his grip on his kunai. While both of them could have carried katana into this fight, Kakashi didn’t need one and Obito could grow his own. Besides, that would have implied that either of them wanted anything to do with a fair fight with this jerk. If it was going to be a two-on-one beatdown, Obito would count it as a good day.

For a second, it was a standoff. Kakashi on one side, kunai held defensively in his left hand. Obito on Stain’s other side, right hand flexing like he was going to go for—instead of grow—a weapon.
Wood Release tendrils started to snake out from under his gauntlets, crawling down his leg and toward the nearest wall.

“More wannabe vigilantes trying to bring me to ‘justice,’ I see,” Stain spat, drawing no more reaction than a cocked head from Obito. Seriously, what was this guy’s deal? “Every time I kill you maggots, more just appear. You’re not even worth dirtying my blade.”

Across from Obito, Kakashi’s Sharingan flashed noticeably, despite how he was backlit by the street. His right hand and arm lit up with white chakra lightning, running along gloved fingers like static.

Lightning Release: Stunning Flash. Obito knew that technique like the back of his hand.

Just like Kakashi knew his Wood Release moves, even if he couldn’t copy them. Wood Release: Butterfly Net.

There were benefits to sending long-standing team members on serious missions together.

“The only thing worse than you are those fake heroes you keep dogging, like their fame will wear off on you,” Stain went on, seemingly oblivious to the slowly rising tide of violence.

Then Ingenium hopped down from the rooftop, and the situation got needlessly complicated.

Now, Ingenium wasn’t a bad guy as far as Obito knew. He rescued cats from trees, too, and he walked kids across the street sometimes. He organized people to do good. He seemed like a dependable hero. But he was also big, wore armor, and there was just not enough room in this alleyway for four combatants without getting in each other’s way.

“No—” Ingenium began as Obito flopped forward onto the ground, only just avoiding cracking his mask on impact.

Or so the two Tokyo-natives seemed to think.

Stain lifted his blade and then stopped dead. Just as he realized the broken steel was still clean, Stain tried a follow-up attack that stabbed downward through Obito’s head.

To exactly as little effect as before.

“Nice try, asshole,” Obito said, still in Stain’s voice. He stepped back, watching the man’s eyes...
You're just too slow.”

Kakashi was too professional to sigh, but it was a close thing. Instead, Obito heard him say, “Ingenium, you’re in the way.”

“As useful as his Quirk is,” Ingenium noted, not taking his attention from Stain, “arrests are Hero work. I can’t let you two handle Stain on your own, no matter what.”

“You call,” Obito chirped. Given the funny look everyone gave him, he imagined no one quite expected to hear a cute, piping voice coming from behind his eerie white mask. He stalked behind Stain, putting his hand up against the Wood Release web he’d already started. “But you should still back up, say, fifteen meters.”

Ingenium didn’t, probably because Stain went for him next. A knife flew and struck one of the places where his armor didn’t cover his undersuit, slicing through his tricep on its way to the street.

The hero staggered two steps back with a shout of pain—

Kakashi’s arm lit up until it was nearly blinding—

Stain leapt for Ingenium’s throat, katana curved in a lethal upward arc—

Obito slammed his chakra into his right arm just as a knife whipped out of nowhere and hit him square in the right shoulder. It bit into muscle, but couldn’t touch bone even if slammed home with Tsunade’s strength—his Zetsu arm didn’t have any bones to break. And the pain was only about as bad as a sharp slap. Getting Kamui up first was more important, and his Mangekyō ached again to let him know that was a great plan.

—Obito’s Wood Release vines snaked up from the ground and hardened to something akin to steel bars, blocking Stain from reaching Ingenium as though a door had just been slammed in his face—

—Stain’s tongue slipped through the bars and caught a drop of flying blood—

—Ingenium hit the ground with a thud—

—and Kakashi’s lightning arced out directly for the man carrying the most steel, engulfing the alleyway in white light. Bolts passed through Obito like nothing, making his fingertips tingle.

Obito was pretty sure, after the fact, that he saw his own retina from the flash. He would give Kakashi a thorough ribbing for that later. As he blinked the red out of his vision, he took in the scene.

Stain was upright only because Obito’s Wood Release had made a sort of Hashirama tree in the middle of the alley, and it was awful hard to pry anybody out of the wood without a much heavier weapon than Stain’s sword. They’d be chopping him out with an axe, and hopefully with a lot of heroes making sure he wouldn’t stab anybody again.

Speaking of, it’d probably be easier to be sure of that if Obito stole all his goddamn knives for the police to process. Still, Obito glanced around to be sure his two fellow fighters were all right.

Kakashi crouched over Ingenium, peeling back a layer of undersuit to check on the injury. He’d made a heavy bandage out of gauze and some medical tape, and folded it even as he kept his Sharingan trained on the wound. Then, “It’s not deep. Can you keep pressure on it?”

“I would if I could.” Ingenium’s voice was about half an octave higher than usual. “But I can’t—I
can’t move. At all.”

“Huh,” said Kakashi, and then pressed the pad to the injury as he levered the hero’s arm up and above his heart. “Quirk?”

“Probably.” Ingenium groaned quietly, wincing noticeably even with his full-face helmet as Kakashi worked. “Are both of you all right?”

Kakashi nodded.

Obito idly pitched two combat knives over his shoulder. They clattered to the concrete. “Yep.”

“Good.” Kakashi helped Ingenium sit up, still clamping his hand over the wound. “My communicator is in my helmet. Any chance you could help me reach it?”

“The two of us are outta here the second your sidekicks show up,” Obito warned, kicking a multitool toward the dumpster. He jabbed a thumb at the still-unconscious Stain. “He’s going to jail on his own.”

Ingenium’s helmet canted to the left. “You think I’d try to get you arrested for vigilantism?”

“…Yes?” Obito replied, finally turning away from the Hero Killer. He’d get out of there when someone helped him, not before. “I mean, it’s in all the pamphlets.”

“If I’d tried taking him on alone, I’d probably have died,” Ingenium explained. He still couldn’t move, apparently, but Kakashi was being patient about the whole thing. “I don’t think the police would agree, but it’s a hero’s job to keep innocent people safe even if it costs us everything. Sometimes, that includes legal protection.”

“Oh.” Obito scratched the back of his head, and then remembered he was wearing a full head covering and it was than less effective. “Uh, that’s actually nice of you to say, Wolf, maybe if we make sure the paralysis wears off first…?”

Kakashi sighed. “Make your call, Ingenium. Stain isn’t any more arrested than he was a minute ago.”

Ingenium managed a pained laugh, now that his adrenaline rush was starting to wear off from lack of use. “All right, all right.”

Ingenium got his full movement back (or nearly) a little before his now-alerted sidekicks started converging for real. He was going to be mobbed by worried heroes and carted off to the hospital soon, apparently. Once they were all sure Stain’s Quirk had worn off and the guy still wouldn’t be going anywhere, Kakashi let Ingenium take over caring for his own injury before disappearing ahead of police sirens.

By that point, Obito had managed to wheedle a masked selfie out of the hapless hero—because of course he had to. Ingenium seemed more baffled than annoyed, probably by how quickly events had progressed, and obliged. With a cheery salute, Obito vanished up the wall like a spider caught in the light, leaving the police and pro heroes to deal with the serial killer. He could send photographic evidence to Kei about their successful mission, so she’d finally stop worrying.

He sent it immediately after he and Kakashi were both out of sight and away from any of the swarming heroes. So: ten blocks away.

It took until a couple minutes later, when he went to change into civilian clothes inside Kamui, that he remembered Stain’s knife was still sticking out of his shoulder.
Kakashi facepalmed hard enough to put Kei to shame.
Hitoshi is just as confused as everyone else.

Hitoshi left the 1-C box the second Midnight-sensei announced a break so Cementoss could fix the arena. He didn’t head in the direction of the infirmary, figuring Midoriya had enough guests for the moment. Instead, he headed outside the stadium for a walk. He needed to clear his head a little.

This was, of course, exactly not what happened. Instead, Hitoshi found a spot to sit down and went over what he knew about Tokoyami.

Tokoyami was going to be a tough opponent. He’d battered Yaoyorozu around like she wasn’t a hero-wannabe at all, and Tokoyami hardly had to lift a finger to do it. His Quirk was fast, nearly independent, and had been half the reason Midoriya’s team even made it through the cavalry battle at all. As helpful as she’d been, Gekkō’s tips and tricks were mostly designed to help Hitoshi stay in the fight long enough to attempt brainwashing someone a second time or just scramble if he failed completely. Given how levelheaded Tokoyami seemed to be, getting a rise out of him might take longer than Hitoshi would be able to keep inside of bounds.

Maybe Hitoshi could prey on Tokoyami’s politeness in the initial square-off? His apparent sense of drama? There had to be something he could work with, even if it was as minor as the other boy’s dramatic streak.

Ugh. Hitoshi ran his fingers through his hair, as though it would shake ideas loose.

“What did you two do?!” demanded Gekkō’s voice from the direction of the stadium, startling him.

Hitoshi found himself ducking behind a tree before he realized what he was doing. And immediately afterward, he tamped down on the urge to smack his hand into his forehead. What was he afraid of? Gekkō was as close to harmless as any of the competitors still in the Sports Festival, at least outside of an actual fight. She’d never raised her voice at anyone he could easily recall. It didn’t seem to be her style.

Then again, Gekkō hadn’t lost her temper even when held hostage by a bank robber, so Hitoshi had to wonder what would actually make her angry. It probably wasn’t him, since she was apparently yelling at two people…

Gekkō walked past a second later, stepping out of the sunlight with a frown on her face and her phone to her ear. Her scowl made her scar more intense, but it eased up when she spotted Hitoshi huddled awkwardly behind the tree. She even waved before going back to her call, which was enough to convince him that whatever was going wrong had nothing to do with him.

When she spoke again, her voice came out in a near-hiss directed at whoever she was taking to.

“What happened to staying out of trouble?”

She paused long enough to hear the answer, and Hitoshi thought the person on the other end sounded like a guy.
“You took a picture,” Gekkō snapped at her target. “I spend all morning worried you’re going to get mugged while petting cats or arrested for being jackasses in public, and then you send me a photo update? What the fuck?!”

She didn’t tend to yell out of temper much, and Hitoshi suddenly had no desire whatsoever to have her wrath turned on him.

The victim on the other end of the call said something, and Gekkō pinched the bridge of her nose. “Look, just… I don’t know. Just look after each other and stay out of trouble. Head to my place and camp out in front of the TV?” She paused, listening again. The tinny voice coming from the phone seemed different this time. “Knew I could count on you. By the way, the top eight are—yeah, I made it. Shinsō-san too. He’s right here if Obito—okay, fine. I’ll tell him.”

By this point, Hitoshi’s nerves had settled. Even the tournament got shoved further toward the back of his mind, because seeing Gekkō rant at someone was a bit distracting. He was leaning against the tree trunk almost casually, arms crossed, by the time the phone call wound down.

“And don’t eat all my udon, or I’ll find you,” Gekkō said as she pulled her phone away from her ear. With that, she tucked it away and said to Hitoshi, “Sorry about that. But Obito says good luck with your second fight.”

Hitoshi paused. “Thanks, I guess. Do I even want to know what that was about?”

“Probably not,” Gekkō said, shaking her head slowly. With a sigh, she said, “Sorry. Sometimes my friends even scare me.”

Hitoshi raised a skeptical eyebrow. “Really?”

“Yes, really.” Gekkō raised her eyebrow right back. It was harder to tell with her hair mostly in the way. “So, what are you doing out here again?”

“Thinking, until you showed up,” Hitoshi told her. He couldn’t quite keep a touch of petulance out of his voice, which was as much a front as ever. She probably saw right through it.

Right on cue, Gekkō snorted. “Sorry for disturbing you, then.”

He didn’t want to talk about it. “Is Midoriya going to be okay?” Hitoshi asked instead of mentioning that, which was one of the least-graceful subject changes he’d managed in a while.

“I think so. I heard ‘surgery’ before I got distracted, but it’s Recovery Girl.” That about summed things up, didn’t it? Gekkō went on, “So, about your match…?”

“I don’t plan on losing.” Hitoshi scratched the back of his neck. “But this late, there’s nothing else I can do besides try to stay in the ring and grab him with my Quirk.”

“True,” Gekkō muttered. She snapped her fingers. “Quick warning, though—even if you manage to brainwash Tokoyami, I don’t know if it’ll work on Dark Shadow.”

Hitoshi blinked. He hadn’t seen much of Dark Shadow’s behavior besides the obvious, but a stretchy shadow monster with glowing yellow eyes had a way of making an impression. It had impressive range and strength, which hardly made sense if it wasn’t solid. But if he thought about it… “It doesn’t have its own brain, does it?”

“I don’t know, but I wouldn’t get comfortable.” As though Hitoshi could right now. Gekkō put her hands in her pockets. “Just keep on your toes, all right? Yaoyorozu-san got cornered quickly, so you
have to avoid that.”

“Pretty sure Dark Shadow’s faster than I am.”

Gekkō eyed him. “You’re not going to let that stop you.”

Of course he wouldn’t. Hitoshi gave Gekkō his best “are you fucking serious?” glare. Hitoshi hadn’t come this far to go home empty-handed. If Tokoyami wanted to move forward, he’d better be ready for a fight.

Hitoshi and Gekkō headed back into the stadium once the PA system kicked in, with Present Mic yelling about how hyped up this next match was going to be. Gekkō went up the stairs, ducking toward the 1-C box with a farewell thumbs-up for good luck, while Hitoshi hesitated. Did he really need to head down to the prep room? It wasn’t as though he’d become faster or stronger in the next few minutes.

Hitoshi figured, after a few more seconds, that he owed Ojiro a bit too much to skip watching his match.

Iida versus Ojiro was quick and painless. While Ojiro probably expected to lose, being speed-shoved out of the ring thanks to Iida’s super move and not even managing to trip his opponent was a bit much. Present Mic even sounded a bit disappointed when Midnight-sensei called the match.

Hitoshi made sure to match Ojiro’s somewhat sheepish nod with a firmer one when he passed the other boy in the hall, because Ojiro making it to the top eight wasn’t nothing. Ojiro didn’t have a flashy Quirk to rely on, not like Todoroki or Bakugō. And he’d been a nice guy so far, even when Gekkō and Hitoshi were making weird plans and managing to succeed.

And then it was Hitoshi versus Tokoyami.

“Tokoyami versus Shinsō,” Midnight-sensei announced, her whip held high. Her smile was bright enough to power a house. “It’s a pity this isn’t how we’re breaking in our new arena, but beggars can’t be choosers! Let’s see a good match, boys!”

Hitoshi bit back the urge to sigh. Instead, he said to Tokoyami, “Are all the Hero course teachers like this?” As though he was just looking for someone to share his exasperation. Hitoshi didn’t have any handle on what made Tokoyami tick, so it was the best he could do before starting in on him for real.

Tokoyami’s head tilted to one side, mirrored by the yellow-eyed creature projecting from his shoulder. “Midnight-sensei is your homeroom teach—"

Gotchaa, Hitoshi thought as Tokoyami went still. He was just about to give the order, once again pulling off a dark horse victory against a hero-wannabe without lifting a finger, when the half-formed smirk died. Wait, what is he—

Dark Shadow was still moving, poking curiously at Tokoyami. And while Hitoshi swore under his breath, it raised one mitten-like hand and smacked Tokoyami’s beak hard enough to turn his head. Both of them staggered, and on top of everything the blank look left Tokoyami’s nearly inscrutable face as he peered around in confusion.

Shit. How was that fair? After getting this far, Hitoshi had managed to find the one opponent in the entire tournament who could shake off his Quirk.

“What, did you space out or something?” Hitoshi demanded, throwing out another lure. If he could just catch him again— “This is a fight, not naptime!”
Tokoyami’s red eyes focused on him. His beak shifted, as though he was going to say something, when his shadow smacked him again. While Hitoshi couldn’t read lips anything like Gekkō, he could tell the shadow monster was whispering to its master in a manner less subtle than even a kindergartner. Then Dark Shadow’s yellow glare snapped to Hitoshi and it very pointedly shook its head at him.

Hitoshi glared right back, but he angled his body sideways anyway. If his Quirk wouldn’t make this an easy win, then he’d have to put his limited self-defense training to use. And it wasn’t looking like brainwashing was going to work for more than a quarter-second. Tops.

“Dark Shadow, let’s go!”

Dark Shadow practically flew across the arena, spooling out of Tokoyami like purplish rope. Claw hands raised and everything.

Hitoshi waited for the last second, with a mantra of curses crowding out any real thoughts, and threw himself to the side before Dark Shadow could bat him out of bounds. He hit the ground and rolled, scrambling to his feet a split-second before the cement tile near him cracked under Dark Shadow’s strike. Then he was running the hell away before Dark Shadow could reach for him again.

Maybe those falling lessons were useful after all.

The next few seconds were filled with frantic dodging. Blocking was out, since Dark Shadow was strong enough to shove someone back a meter at a time or more. Besides that, Hitoshi didn’t have a shield and couldn’t make one. Hitoshi got more use out of diving rolls and reflexive side-stepping than he’d ever thought he would, even if the margin for error got narrower and narrower.

He couldn’t keep this up forever.

Six, Hitoshi thought, as Dark Shadow took a strip out of his uniform sleeve on a near miss.

The roar of the crowd was drowned out by Hitoshi’s heart hammering against his ribs the entire time and his breath rasping in his throat.

Seven, was the count a mere instant later, as Dark Shadow’s claws slammed into the cement and split another tile just centimeters from Hitoshi’s foot.

Eight, nine, and ten left stinging welts across Hitoshi’s arms and back, and still Tokoyami hadn’t moved. Dark Shadow could reach everywhere without any trouble. It didn’t matter how many attacks Hitoshi avoided if he couldn’t do anything in return. Tokoyami could just sit there and wait until his Quirk handled everything.

“Do you do any of your own fighting?” Hitoshi snapped at him, even as he tried to look for some way out of this stalemate. If he kept retreating, Dark Shadow would drive him out of the ring in a minute at most.

“Dark Shadow,” began Tokoyami.

Damnit, so close, Hitoshi thought, even as the shadow monster reared up so it was five meters in the air. He was already too close to the boundaries and half in the corner, but there had to be something he could do—

“You’ve had a good fight so far, but now it’s time to finish things,” Tokoyami went on. “Please push Shinsō-san out of bounds.”
Hitoshi was already hurling himself out of the way before Tokoyami completed the sentence. Dark Shadow’s arms swung in wide arcs, almost brushing against Hitoshi’s hair as each close call passed overhead. He had to keep moving—

And then Dark Shadow landed a solid hit on Hitoshi’s shoulder, just as Hitoshi was reaching back to steady himself. Something popped.

He hit the ground shoulder-first, all wrong, and rolled up with near-blinding pain that immediately brought him to his knees again. Immediately, his brain was filled with nothing but a mantra: *Fuckfuckfuckfuck*—

Dislocated? Broken? He couldn’t tell—

“You’re injured,” Tokoyami’s voice said, filtering through the red haze of pain.

“You don’t say,” Hitoshi hissed through his rapid, shallow breaths. His right hand stayed clamped over his left shoulder, with a tiny voice insisting that it wouldn’t do any good now. His left arm hung limp and Hitoshi could barely think through the pain.

Hitoshi couldn’t keep dodging. He couldn’t punch Tokoyami in his bright yellow beak. Between Dark Shadow and a useless arm, he’d already lost.

But Hitoshi wouldn’t go quietly. He was still nearly bent double, almost helpless, but he still had to try. Sweat beaded on his forehead as he forced a wobbly smirk worthy of Midoriya, nearly baring his teeth. “Best two out of three?”

“Maybe some other time,” Tokoyami said, and Hitoshi had him.

Tokoyami went totally still. Hitoshi’s control was like iron with Dark Shadow all the way at the boundary busy harassing Hitoshi, that meant it wouldn’t be able to snap him out of it. Not without giving up the chase.

*Now or never.*

Hitoshi snarled as loudly as he could, “Get out of bounds, now!”

“Stop talking!” Dark Shadow howled, and one hand was already swinging like a giant purplish sledgehammer for Hitoshi’s head.

But Dark Shadow telegraphed those massive swings more than anybody Hitoshi had been sparring with for the last month. He scrambled backward as fast as he could ahead of those claws, barely avoiding the base of one of the braziers. The heat struck his back first, and the white boundary lines weren’t much past them. He didn’t have anywhere else to go.

Then Hitoshi blinked. Dark Shadow wasn’t attacking.

“Owie! Ow, that hurts!”

Actually, it was *cringing*. And was it smaller than before? It’d been big enough to loom, before. Now it was the size of a dog.

*What the hell?*

Hitoshi’s gaze shot up, toward the lip of the brazier. Orange-yellow flames were right where they’d left them, and Dark Shadow wheeled away from the light as though it hurt. Which was…weird. But
Hitoshi didn’t know anything about Tokoyami’s Quirk other than the obvious. Maybe bright lights were its weakness?

“Hey, hey,” Dark Shadow was saying as it retreated, facing Tokoyami. It reeled itself back to its partner like a weird reverse fishing line. “What should I do? Hey!”

*What the fuck?*

Tokoyami didn’t answer, because Hitoshi’s Quirk was still active. And he was already out of bounds, having hopped to obey the moment it’d been ordered. Hitoshi had sort of…yelled, hadn’t he?

Hitoshi let his control snap a second before Dark Shadow experimentally slapped Tokoyami again.

“Tokoyami is out of bounds! Shinsō is the winner!” Midnight-sensei shouted to the heavens. Her flogging whip cracked once, twice, and Hitoshi sank back onto his rear with an exhausted shudder as the crowd roared. “Shinsō advances to the final four!”

*I made it.* It didn’t seem real. If his shoulder didn’t still hurt like hell, Hitoshi would have wondered if he ought to pinch himself to make sure he wasn’t dreaming. *Top four in my first year.*

If he strained his ears, he could hear the 1-C box going wilder than ever before even as he saw Homura’s hair *explode* into a brilliant yellow-orange blaze big enough to make the upper boxes wince. Gekkō was the loudest, climbing on whatever was within reach before the class reps could stop her. Even without a bullhorn.

Hitoshi pointedly looked away as his cheeks burned.

His friends were so damn embarrassing.

Still, he couldn’t wipe the smile off his face, no matter how hard he tried.
Kei faces her second opponent.

**GreenThumb:** look at our purple kid go

**GreenThumb:** no form whatsoever

**GreenThumb:** ¯\_(ツ)_/¯

**GreenThumb:** we tried

**TMNT-TNT:** We trained for only two weeks. I don’t think even he expected to win.

**Defib:** Not bad for an amateur.

**Defib:** He didn’t hurt himself.

**TMNT-TNT:** No, instead he got hurt.

**Defib:** One of us concussed themselves while trying more than one move they weren’t ready for. It’s not entirely new.

There was a brief pause as her boys probably got into a fistfight in the apartment. Hopefully, Obito would make sure to avoid breaking anything and actually dispose of the knife he’d likely carried back with him. Or sent to Konoha. Maybe they’d stop using kunai when the next weapon development upgrade finally rolled out. Kei appreciated the spade-derived design of kunai, but there were only so many ways a diamond-shaped blade could really be used.

Kei wasn’t holding her breath, though.

She did hope Obito and Kakashi were taking it easy, though. They hadn’t quite managed to explain exactly how much chakra they’d burned in the fight with Stain, but Kakashi didn’t exactly have a ton to spare.

**Defib:** Speaking of fights, though, what are you going to do for the next round?

**Defib:** I realize the explosion kid is a personal affront. I just don’t see why you ought to progress any further in this tournament from a logical standpoint.

**GreenThumb:** coolness factor (≡^▽\≡)

**Defib:** No.

**GreenThumb:** i know i know

**GreenThumb:** i promise we won’t make fun of you for losing
Defib: If you can do that with less than half of your skills. But more seriously, you have to avoid advancing. You have too much to do to stay in the spotlight now.

There was a pause from Obito. Kakashi had said his piece.

Kei pressed her lips together as she thought about pocketing her phone. Shinsō was limping toward the tunnel, so she had to hurry if she wanted to meet him before he went to see Recovery Girl.

Homura was still kind of on fire. Kei could probably do something about that, but there was this thing about not using Quirks outside of the actual fights…

So, Kei kept messing with her phone as she slipped toward the door.

Defib: If you think that would work.

Defib: Go ahead. Be a Nara.

TMNT-TNT: I'm not that clever.

Defib: I meant more about being lazy.

GreenThumb: u sure

TMNT-TNT: Uh, yeah.

Defib: I love you both, but that’s the worst pep talk ever.

Defib: We try.

GreenThumb: good luck! (*^_^\)d

Kei escaped the 1-C box as soon as Homura’s hair was back under control and she was busy issuing a dozen apologies to the part of the audience she’d scared. The class rep couldn’t tell her to stop running in the halls if she didn’t get caught. And she didn’t really plan on listening to anybody else. Not even pro heroes.

Her speed was set to Nyoom.
It didn’t take her long to find who she was looking for. “Shinsō-san!”

Shinsō had his left arm half zipped into his gym uniform, as though that would help much with a dislocation. Then again, Kei hardly knew how common first aid lessons were in Japan. At the very least, Shinsō could walk around without totally screwing up his injuries. And while a Yamaguchi-sensei-derived instinct prodded at the back of Kei’s mind, she figured the lady with the magic healing Quirk would help Shinsō faster than she could.

“Thanks,” Shinsō said in a strained voice. Kei’s focus was still on how his arm really didn’t look good.

Then his words registered and Kei stopped short of trying to manipulate his arm into a more comfortable position, keeping the impulse to a vague twitch in her fingers. With confusion probably plain on her face, she asked, “For what?”

“There’s no way I would’ve lasted that long without all the training I’ve been doing,” Shinsō told her, as the pair of them continued to walk toward the nurse’s office. “So, thanks for helping me.”

“Training doesn’t mean much without follow-through.” Kei held out her hand for a fist-bump. “You did great.”

“My arm’s disagreeing with you,” Shinsō muttered, but his ears were a little pink. Probably not from pain. The kid didn’t get enough praise. And he looked at the fist she’d raised as though he had no idea what to do with it. “Um.”

Kei bumped his right hand anyway, though her boys would’ve called it a sad excuse for a friendly gesture. “Then get to Recovery Girl before you get mobbed by fans. I think Shingetsu-san isn’t going to keep them off you forever.”

Shinsō reddened further. “I don’t have fans.”

“You do now,” Kei insisted. Then she snapped her fingers, as though a thought had just occurred to her. “Oh, by the way…”

Shinsō hesitated. Something in her tone was letting him know there was a catch to the positive attitude Kei was throwing his way, and there was. Amazing he could pay attention that well with a dislocated shoulder, really.

Kei took a deep breath. “Don’t pull a Midoriya ever again if you can avoid it. That was way too close.”

“Don’t have to tell me that twice.” Shinsō’s eyes darted toward the ceiling for a split second. “Is he still up there?”

“Last I checked, yes.”

Shinsō frowned faintly. With a glance at his arm and a near-silent groan, he finally said, “I’ll keep an eye out for him. You should concentrate on your match.”

Kei sketched a lazy salute before she passed Shinsō and headed down to the arena once again. “Get yourself taken care of, Shinsō-san. I’ll worry about Splodey.”

Kei strolled into the arena for the umpteenth time that day, stretching slowly as she went. Chakra pulsed through her system in time with her heartbeat. At a glance, her level expression probably communicated quiet determination in the face of one of the most difficult fights in the tournament.
Bakugō’s tenacity was already the talk of the town. Any normal competitor would be quaking in their gym shoes. Or at least considering the fight more seriously.

Kei didn’t really care.

Her conversation with Obito and Kakashi had taken the somewhat self-imposed competitive weight off her shoulders and replaced it with a different one. Rather than debating herself in circles, she had to lose.

**At least it makes things simpler.**

*There is that.*

Kei was not a strategic genius. She’d given up on making the loss convincing, because her acting skills were hit or miss and Bakugō wasn’t as inexperienced as some of the other competitors were. No, instead she’d just show “what she was made of.”

Hooray.

Bakugō trooped to the middle of the concrete stage with about the same aggression toward life as he ever did. Kei didn’t know him well, but she wasn’t sure how much different her impression would be even if she did. Bakugō just seemed the kind of person to act like everybody and everything had resulted in him waking up on the wrong side of the bed today. Every day.

“And here we are again, folks,” Present Mic began, his voice booming across the arena. “It’s the final match to determine which of our awesome first-year students will be making it to the top four! There’s only one spot left, so 1-A’s Bakugō and 1-C’s Gekkō are gonna have to break out the big guns to secure a semifinal fight against 1-C’s Shinsō!”

Kei hadn’t missed the announcer addition to her life one bit. She and Isobu did well enough on their own merits without an fancy Quirk or PA system.

“Let’s have a good clean game, both of you.” Kayama-sensei’s warnings were falling on deaf ears practically before she finished a single word. She didn’t seem to really care. “Or not! Make it a good match. If you have to get down and dirty to pull victory from your opponent’s gnarled claws, do it!”

*Thanks for that,* Kei thought in a dry tone. *I’m sure we’re just in this for a jolly good time, by Jove.*

**What was that accent?**

*I don’t even know.*

“Give it all you’ve got,” Bakugō growled. His palms were already sparking orange and spitting smoke, and his red eyes were locked on hers. “I’m gonna crush you anyway.”

Kei sized him up. Shorter than her by a few centimeters, but athletic, aggressive, and more than capable of changing tactics on the fly, going by his match with Uraraka. His Quirk was powerful, versatile, and frankly something Kei should have thought of when designing her fake personal history.

**Stomp him into the ground.**

*Thanks for the vote of confidence.*

Bakugō’s eyes narrowed. “Got nothing to say?”
Not to you. Kei just shrugged, her hands stuck in her pockets and her attention already starting to wander a bit. More than usual, anyway. Might as well continue this joke now that it was established. Bakugō’s opinion didn’t matter to her either.

Kei was done with the entire damn tournament.

“Begin!” Kayama-sensei shouted.

Bakugō charged, as Kei knew he would. Right haymaker, fingers extended to use his Quirk—

The distinctive funnel-shaped burst of the Water Trumpet jutsu hit him full in the face and forced him to a stop. Bakugō hit the ground knees-first, sputtering, and had to block the bulk of the blast with his back and shoulders to stay on his feet and coherent.

The uniform pockets weren’t quite reality-breaking enough to form full sets of hand seals without revealing one’s movements, but one-handed seals were fine. And Kei didn’t need both hands to spit water like a decapitated fire hydrant at this level.

Kei dropped the ninjutsu a couple of seconds later, turning her head to the side to spit out the leftover water. She wiped her mouth on her forearm and didn’t take her eyes off Bakugō, now looking like a drenched cat with twice as much fight in him. But those red eyes were calculating, and fast.

He couldn’t use his Quirk without being able to sweat.

“And just like that, Bakugō and Gekkō are at a standstill!” Present Mic could stand to be less of a ham. “I don’t think Gekkō broke a sweat keeping Bakugō at arm’s length, but how long can she really keep that up?”

Bakugō’s palms gave off a couple of futile-sounding pops as though to answer the question. He bared his teeth. “You’ve been holding back for this entire competition.”

Kei shrugged again.

“Don’t play dumb with me, you fucking Gen Studies reject,” Bakugō snarled, his voice lower and even more threatening. His hair exploded back into place, providing a neat summation of why Kei’s “Quirk” wouldn’t keep him doused forever. “You didn’t fight Stupid Hair like you meant it. You didn’t give a shit during the qualifiers. And if you don’t think half the fucking audience didn’t recognize your martial arts training, you’re fooling yourself.”

Kei didn’t really care. Barely humoring him, she prompted, “And your point is…?”

“I don’t care what your fucking issues are,” Bakugō told her. “But don’t you fucking dare come at me with anything but your best, or I’ll hand you your ass on a silver platter.”

“Scary.” Kei’s dull tone made it clear exactly how much Bakugō’s pride mattered to her, but she took her other hand out of her pocket. She held both of them up in plain view, then pointedly raised two fingers in a “come at me” gesture Obito and Gai were both fond of. “Prove you’re not all talk.”

Bakugō was quick to meet her challenge, no matter how unenthusiastic she was. His palms shot sparks constantly, until the worst of the damp was evaporated. And then he was after her again, skin blackening with soot here and there as the smoke he produced clung to his skin.


“Not again!” Present Mic screeched as the entire battlefield disappeared at Kei’s command. “Gekkō,
we need to have a talk about your clear problem with the media! We actually want the camera fiends to have fun here, same as everyone else!"

Bakugō was nearly as loud, and he didn’t have the excuse of a speaker system backing him up. The gist of his arguments regarding mist, visibility, and Kei’s fighting style could be summed up as: “Fuck you, you goddamn extra!”

Kei dodged better than Uraraka or Shinsō could on their best days. Wherever Bakugō was, she wasn’t. She danced circles around one of the most adept fighters in the tournament, slipping in and out of mingled smoke and gray fog she produced on a whim as though she was born to it. He could punch as many holes in the mist as he liked—it wasn’t going anywhere as long as Kei wanted it to stay.

She also blasted him with water again and again, which seemed to succeed mainly in making him angrier.

*Water Trumpet,* Kei thought, and Bakugō screamed in rage as his attack vanished under the fine spray of mist he’d made out of her attack.

“Use something other than your Quirk, you hack!”

*Wild Water Wave,* was the next round, and Bakugō was forced to run away from the bulk of the blast before it could swirl up and nab him.

The mist glowed with each blast, because even as she tried to make sure Bakugō’s nitroglycerin stayed in low concentrations, Kei was keeping close track of everything. The substance was ludicrously unstable in its pure form and quite powerful, but it was also oily. Yes, she could basically render him ineffective without hurting him as long as she kept blasting him, but it was a waste of chakra when he was going to accumulate nitroglycerin anyway. Just more slowly.

Still, he was going to run out of stamina before he defeated her mist if he kept up the pace for much longer.

Bakugō lost his temper and most of his restraint in one go. “HOWITZER IMPACT!”

Unless he did *that,* Kei supposed.

“And there goes Gekkō’s camera-defying mist! Now that we can finally get a look at our contenders, it seems like Bakugō’s become something the cat dragged in. Backwards, and through a puddle!” Present Mic didn’t quite laugh at his own joke. “Gekkō’s about the same as we left her, somehow. Guess this match is starting to heat up.”

Kei *had* left the majority of the fight to mid- and long-range techniques. But with the majority of her mist dissipated by raw force and her in plain view, it seemed like it was finally time to properly escalate.

“Wrong,” said Aizawa.

Bakugō’s hands were trembling. While he wouldn’t have admitted it under torture, the kid was getting tired. He was pushing himself harder than before, wasn’t he?

Kei’s eyes narrowed. Any fight, eventually, got to the point where it all broke down. Fatigue and injuries took over, and sooner or later everyone dropped. Her endurance was literally superhuman, but she hadn’t hinted that way. She’d been hoping to lay a trail of breadcrumbs to imply she was reaching her limits, too, but now…
Fuck it. Kei started making hand seals again. She didn’t strictly need them, but sometimes it was best to put on a show anyway.

“I’m not done yet!” Bakugō roared, and charged again. His movements were rougher and wilder as exhaustion started to set in.

Kei completed her seal sequence. *Water Release: Great Waterfall Technique.*

That was the thought in her mind and the power in her hands, at least. However, she didn’t channel the jutsu into its customary doom spiral of sheer overkill. Water leapt up from the ground as though to form the twister, but it just kept going. Drawn by her chakra and Isobu’s just behind it, hundreds of thousands of gallons of water crashed into the arena and doused the braziers, barely avoiding Cementoss and Kayama-sensei as Kei exerted her will on reality.

Bakugō was caught by the rush not two meters from Kei’s face, and he disappeared into it with a wordless yell.

So did Kei, even with her hands still locked in the last seal form. The waterspout snatched her up with all the mercy of a heron to a fish, swallowing her whole.

Inside the death spiral, at least she couldn’t hear Present Mic yelling anymore. Kicking off into the sunlight-streaked mass of whirling water and air pockets, Kei swam for the top. At the same time, a *crack* of her chakra caused almost every other drop of water in the immediate area to freeze in place almost as though Todoroki had willed it. Suddenly, the weight of the structure was entirely on Kei’s will.

Kei broke the surface and blinked, looking around across a changed arena. Where once there’d been a proper waterspout, the stadium was actually fairly dry. It was just that, within the painted boundary lines, it was like someone had emptied a perfectly shaped gelatin mold exactly on the stage’s dimensions. It wobbled when Kayama-sensei touched it or Cementoss tried moving the base, but it was all water.

“Our arena’s become an aquarium in no seconds flat!” Present Mic really needed to stop talking. Kei wasn’t interested. “How is Bakugō going to get out of this one? Can the tenacity of a high school student and young hero overcome the laws of physics?!”

Bakugō was stuck almost in the middle of it, so Kei loosened her control a bit. In an instant, he kicked his way up toward the surface too.

Kei was just a bit faster. And when she put her hands on the water, she pulled herself out with no handholds but surface tension—as interpreted by chakra exercises, at least. Water walking had never been designed to be exploited quite like this.

“She can walk on water?!”

Bakugō did his best to explode his way out of the giant water cube. Once he was able to breathe again, it should’ve been simple.

Except for the bit where Kei was crouching next to him, her shoes perched on the surface.

She didn’t say, “How’s this for holding back?”

She didn’t say, “Looks like you’re all washed up.”

Instead, she thought, *Water Prison.*
Water spiraled off from the cube, swirling up and around Bakugō to trap him in a soundproof, inescapable cage. While the Water Prison technique was one Kei had learned solely to break it properly from the inside, and to avoid allowing her experiences to become traumas, it had a bit of utility. And, when connected to a larger body of water, it kept Bakugō’s nitroglycerin from building up to weaponized levels.

Kei started cycling the water from the cube in and through the Water Prison. Doing so quickly drained the cube and lowered them toward the ground as her power shifted mass around, dispersing everything toward the sad and much-abused lawn around the ring.

Bakugō, from inside the bubble, looked like he wanted to murder her and wear her ribcage as a hat. As soon as he wasn’t under the threat of drowning.

Standard-pattern humans could only hold their breath for about five minutes in ideal conditions. Including training regimens.

If she wanted, Kei could bring the match to an end now. Or wait for Bakugō to pass out.

“Can he move?” Kayama-sensei asked, once Kei’s feet touched tile again. It wasn’t like Bakugō was in a position to hear her.

Kei didn’t immediately answer. Instead, she started backing toward the edge of the stage. In the bubble, Bakugō’s arms and legs strained as he tried struggling in his liquid hell. A stream of bubbles escaped his mouth.

If Kakashi couldn’t break out of this on his own, as an adult shinobi with almost twenty years of experience, then Bakugō didn’t have a chance.

Kei ripped her arm out of the Water Prison before Kayama-sensei could ask again, deliver a verdict, or even say a single word. The bubble collapsed with a sad little splat, dropping a drenched Bakugō to the floor.

His eyes were wild with fury.

Kei favored him with a mocking salute. “I think I’ve made my point.”

And Kei stepped backward off the edge of the cement platform, landing on top of water thirty centimeters deep just as the drainage system seemed to finally catch up. The more distance she put between herself and the arena, the closer to the grass she got.

The crowd and the announcers erupted in a mass of solid noise, helped along by Present Mic as always.

“I—I don’t believe it!” Present Mic was always the loudest. Went with the territory. “Gekkō’s forfeiting the match! She had Bakugō on the ropes and walked out of bounds!”

“Gekkō is out of bounds! Bakugō is the winner!” Kayama-sensei roared.

“F—” Bakugō had to stop and cough, but his heaving breaths let him get out, “FUCK YOU!” with impressive speed. “GET THE FUCK BACK IN HERE, YOU ASS-KISSING DOORMAT!”

Nope, Kei thought, and walked into the exit tunnel without a backward glance.
Exit Stage Left

Chapter Summary

Kei and Hitoshi have a talk about decision-making.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“What the hell was that?”

In the time it took for Kei to get out of Bakugō’s line of sight, dry off, make it halfway back to the 1-C box and discover that she’d managed to destroy her second cell phone in a month, she was just about done with today. The tournament had been a fun distraction, for what it was worth, but she’d wrung every scrap of entertainment out of it before it became a chore to keep going. For a lot of reasons.

That was when Shinsō found her.

“Is this some kind of teenage rebellion?” he demanded. While his glare was intense and his voice was more a growl than his usual drawl, Kei got the sense that he was more hurt than angry. Surprised, maybe a bit betrayed, but more asking for a reason instead of just yelling.

At least he wasn’t literally hurt anymore. Recovery Girl did good work.

“Hi, Shinsō-san. Glad to see your arm’s better,” Kei said, because that was the part of the situation easiest to address.

“Don’t change the subject, Gekkō,” Shinsō snapped. Kei noted the dropped honorific, but more important was way his voice was almost in a knot. “You just—is this just some kind of game to you? Don’t you care about getting anywhere?”

Shinsō probably wouldn’t have appreciating hearing Kei’s honest answer. Still, he deserved something from her after all of this. “Shinsō—”

But he cut her off. “You could have won! You were handing that loudmouth his ass from start to finish,” Shinsō went on, hardly listening. His voice cracked as he stepped forward, not boxing her in but definitely trying to make himself heard.

Kei crossed her arms and bit the inside of her cheek, waiting out the tide. Walking away might’ve been practical, or just mercenary, but this was important. Shinsō was crushed.

“Gekkō, you might’ve been able to win the entire tournament! Anybody with eyes could tell you were sandbagging the entire preliminary, but…” Shinsō trailed off, running out of steam. He backed off and scrubbed furiously at his eyes, before she could prod him for extra space. When he finally met her eyes again, the shadows under his were about as bad as she’d ever seen them. “Why’d you throw it all away?”

Yeah, this wasn’t a conversation for an open hallway. Even if people seemed to think so. “It’s not that simple,” she said, while pushing off the wall. “Come on, let’s find a place to sit down. Then
we’ll actually talk.”

Shinsō did follow her, but at a distance that made it clear he was still rattled. The two of them wandered down the hallway until they reached daylight again, exiting the stadium and heading into the same woods where they’d been having a number of conversations lately. Even Tokoyami had left to go watch the first match of the final four, or whatever, which meant the immediate area was abandoned. It was a lot better that way, in Kei’s humble opinion.

Shinsō ended up taking a seat on a tree root while Kei plunked herself down in lotus position on the manicured grass. Neither of them spoke for a minute or so, which gave Shinsō a little time to calm down and Kei an opportunity to gather her thoughts.

“The truth is… I’m not you, Shinsō-san,” Kei said, settling her hands on her knees. “You want to be the greatest hero you can. You’re working hard to get into Heroics so you can be one step closer to your dream, and performing well in the Sports Festival is one of the ways you can grab the spotlight.”

Shinsō glared, but his heart wasn’t in it. “My whole life in two sentences. Were you always this condescending and I’m only just noticing?”

Kei debated responding, then shook her head slowly. She leaned back instead, bracing her hands in the grass and staring up at the canopy. “Here’s the truth: I don’t want to be a hero. Never have, never will.”

The world we were born in ruined the idea before we ever met. Honoring a person as a war hero there is another way to congratulate them for a life drenched in blood.

Kei sighed internally. You can say that again.

When Kei looked back to Shinsō, she could practically hear the record needle scratch sound playing through his head. She went on, still unruffled, “Don’t get me wrong—I like my Quirk, and I like being strong. But I’ve only ever wanted to live quietly with my family and friends.” She flashed a crooked smile. “My old sensei always used to tell me my worst character flaw was a total lack of ambition, and I agree with him.”

“Then…why’d you become strong?” Shinsō leaned forward, eyebrows knitting together as he thought. He was trying to get a handle on the shape of Kei’s character, and she had to admit he’d been given nothing better than breadcrumbs so far. “Nobody’s Quirk starts out that powerful or that controlled. They have to be trained or developed, and people can try for years without getting where you are.”

That was something Kei would probably tell him a little about, much later. After she’d thought of a properly compelling half-truthful story to stitch together. “That’s…a heavy story for someone I’ve only known for a couple weeks. Sorry, Shinsō-san.”

He eyed her shrewdly, but still hesitated for a few seconds. “Does it have to do with the scar on your face?”

Well, using her powers didn’t not have anything to do with it. Kei mentally assigned him an eight-point-five for logical deduction.

But as for the actual reaction to his words, Kei just shrugged. “Enough. I got as strong as I am because someone had to be,” Kei said, letting her hand fall back to her lap. “I’m not here because I want to make a big impact and change the world. Or even really make a difference, except to the
people I know. But you are.” She waved a hand in the direction of the stadium. “Everyone in that
tournament is. Except me. I just…I hit the point where I realized I don’t matter. The dreams of every
student here are way more important than me wasting opportunities other people deserve.”

Shinsō was quiet for a long time. His fingers formed fists against his thighs for a few seconds here
and there, and then all the tension went out of him at once like a snuffed candle. “So, why’d you
agree to help me get stronger? And don’t tell me it was because you really needed a tutor—your
brother’s a nice kid, but he’s not that persuasive.”

“He’s not,” Kei agreed. She put as much honesty as she could into her voice as she explained,
gently, “I don’t have a lot of drive, but I admire people who do. Even if it sucked and you were
scared, you tried to be a hero when Hayate was in danger and that means a lot to me.”

Shinsō’s jaw worked, but no sound came out at first. “…I didn’t have the slightest fucking clue what
I was doing back then.”

“That’s why you need to get into 1-A or 1-B. You, not me.” As his purple eyes met her much darker
ones, she said, “I’m sorry. It probably doesn’t mean much, but…”

“You wouldn’t actually do anything differently.” And Shinsō had just wandered from “mad” and
“confused” to “disappointed.” He got to his feet, refusing to meet her gaze again. “Look, I’m just…I
need to think. Leave me alone, all right?”

Kei couldn’t honestly say she deserved better, on that front. She just said, “All right,” and she let him
go.

That could have gone better, Isobu said.

Not everyone can be Naruto. Or Midoriya, come to that, Kei told him as she debated the relative
merits of taking a nap in the grass or going back into the stadium.

If Shinsō was any indication, the 1-C kids were as flabbergasted by her decision to throw the match
as Bakugō and Kayama-sensei had been. Present Mic played up whatever reactions he wanted
people to have, but that didn’t mean anything. She was pretty sure Aizawa-sensei was pleased. It got
her out of the way, and the three kids left in the tournament besides Shinsō were all his. Getting out
early saved her trouble and time.

Didn’t seem to have saved her the reactions of her “peers,” though.

Still, even if Shinsō was pissed off at her now, maybe it was worth going back and watching his
match. Between the inevitable explosions and Bakugō’s shouting, he wouldn’t be able to hear her
cheer even if she did, but…

Damn her weirdass conscience.

Hey.

You not only don’t count, but can’t even see the role from where you’re standing.

…Fair enough.

Kei, with a sigh only Isobu could hear, wandered back inside.

Todoroki had already beaten Iida by the time the conversation was over and Kei had a chance to
check the huge screens outside of the stadium. Kei checked the time on an analog wall clock to
confirm that the entire thing had taken less than five minutes, then shook her head. Should’ve figured.

Shinsō’s match with Bakugō was…um. It was certainly loud. And for the exact reasons Kei predicted, even if the contents of the conversation were a little different.

Kei didn’t go back to the 1-C box to watch. Instead, she snuck her way back to the competitor entrance tunnels and sat down just out of view, more listening than bothering to watch. She’d catch the match on video or something once she went back to her apartment, assuming her boys had figured out how to record programs.

And because of the acoustics of the tunnel, she could hear every word the two competitors said.

It was, at first, mostly Bakugō.

“You damn extra, what the hell is that expression for?! What happened to pulling the rug out from under Heroics huh?!” Pause, inhale. “Declaration of war, my ass! You’re just a worthless side character like the rest of your class! Hell, that seaweed bitch is even lower!”

Shinsō didn’t immediately reply, which told Kei exactly how far off his game he was. Then, “What must it be like to get to the semifinals just because your opponent forfeited instead of dealing with your sparkling personality? Oh look, an expert.”

I have become ammunition in a trash talk battle, and I hate everything.

Isobu sent Kei the impression of a shrug, as payback for her sass earlier. You made your bed. Now lie in it.

"Hey, how about we just get this over with real quick before I have to humiliate him?” This remark appeared to be directed at Kayama-sensei, not Shinsō. Which meant that Bakugō might’ve figured out how Shinsō’s Quirk worked.

Not great news.

“Too afraid to say that to my face?” Shinsō ground out, his temper getting the best of him. But it was, as always, both an attack and a taunt. Still, he could’ve been more oblique about it and actually baited Bakugō properly. “Or did getting treated with kid gloves last round mean you can’t find your balls with both hands and a map?”

Kei bonked her head against the wall, emphasizing her frustration to nobody who couldn’t already read her emotions. This is a playground pissing match, and I am going to kick Shinsō’s ass later if this doesn’t work.

…I am not allowed to help.

Absolutely correct. Kei sighed as Bakugō, out on the battlefield, let out an inarticulate scream of rage. Which did not, apparently, count as a response for Shinsō’s Quirk, because the rest of today’s theme song apparently involved nitroglycerin as percussion.

The next couple of seconds were just a series of earth-shattering kabooms, to use the Looney Tunes parlance. Kei almost melted into the shadows of the tunnel, turning her head away as the crowd above groaned and shrieked. It was listening to a huge monster, worse in every way than Isobu or Kurama or Shukaku. There wasn’t really any pity or mercy in that sound. She spared a glance for the unseen audience, as though she could see through solid cement, and then sighed.
There was one final explosion before Kayama-sensei finally intervened.

“Shinsō is out of bounds! Bakugō advances!”

Kei liked to pretend Kayama-sensei might’ve spared either competitor injuries by just jumping in a little sooner than she and Cementoss had with Midoriya and Todoroki’s match. The daydreaming lasted a few seconds, but hearing medical technicians on their way put a stop to that. The tunnel was about to get crowded.

Obito’s chakra and his voice popped out of the wall near her. The usual spaghettifying effect, but in reverse, heralded his arrival in the still-empty hallway. He extended a hand. “Kei, you wanna just head out?”

She thought about it. Once Shinsō recovered, he’d be up against Iida for third place. It wasn’t a match Kei imagined would take long, one way or another. Too little time for her to properly gauge the other students’ reactions or bother navigating the social web.

Today had been fun, until it wasn’t. Feelings complicated even the simple joy of putting her and Isobu’s immense power to work.

“School first. I’ve got a few things to do,” Kei replied at last, taking Obito’s outstretched hand.

And the pair of them made themselves scarce.

Chapter End Notes

Kei in the UA uniform for the General Education department.
Hitoshi woke up in Recovery Girl’s office. It was mid-afternoon, and sunlight streamed in through the window and across the other bed. The ceiling tiles above him were as boring as anywhere else in the school, but for a while he had to concentrate to make them stop spinning. He wasn’t sure how long it took before he could poke at his head with bandaged hands, running into yet more bandages wrapped around his head and neck.

Given the last thing he remembered was Iida’s foot flying at his face, it all made sense so far.

Hitoshi sighed and let his hands drop to his sides. _Lost twice in a row…_

There was a little part of him that accepted that. Bakugō was just stronger, and Hitoshi hadn’t been able to get him to respond fast enough. Victory went to the better fighter in a tournament. Bakugō had a heroic Quirk and years of training, and he’d fought real villains during whatever had happened in the USJ incident. Iida might’ve sealed the deal, but Bakugō was the one who cut Hitoshi off from the top. And Iida was, from what Hitoshi knew, too earnest to genuinely dislike.

Hitoshi’s loss to both of them made sense. He was just a bitter kid with a villainous Quirk and a talent for hammering on people’s buttons. Heroes always won and villains always lost.

Hitoshi hated that meekness. He loathed the instinct to just bow his head and avert his eyes to keep from being rejected again, even though it kept coming back. Now, worse than ever.

He wasn’t going to be the kind of hero who took that lying down.

The usual spike of doubt hit him full in the chest. _You’re not going to be a hero at all!_

But he’d made it this far. He’d gotten to the top four. He’d _done it_. That wasn’t nothing.

It just wasn’t _enough_.

“That’s quite a face to be making after a run like yours, dear,” said a voice, and Hitoshi blinked until the frustration tears gave up and left him alone. When his vision cleared, he turned his head as far as he could and spotted the school nurse sitting at a desk with her feet dangling off her office chair.

“Fourth place in your first year is impressive by any measure.”

Hitoshi swallowed and just nodded, because that was what he was supposed to do around adults.

“How long have I…?”

“I fixed up your head almost immediately,” she told him, “but I decided it’d be best if you slept off the fatigue, especially after you’ve had to visit me twice in one day. And it doesn’t look like you’ve been taking care of yourself, Shinsō-kun.”

What was Hitoshi supposed to say to that? He had insomnia, sure, but it was manageable. His dad’s case was way worse, anyway—if he hadn’t had a Quirk that made it so he didn’t actually _need_ to
sleep, Shinsō Hajime wouldn’t have made it to thirty.

Still, it didn’t pay to argue with people in healthcare. “Maybe not,” he hedged.

“No ‘maybe’ from you, young man,” Recovery Girl said sharply, and Hitoshi might’ve tried getting away from her if he hadn’t already been lying down. “I’ve had to fix entirely too many broken bones this year, so I’d appreciate if you don’t contribute to that.”

*Calendar year or school year?* Hitoshi wondered. But instead of saying that, he said, “Sorry.”

Recovery Girl sighed, like she didn’t believe him. “Apology accepted. Now, you’ve had a few visitors, but I think one young lady has been waiting for a while now to speak with you. Are you going to be all right if she comes in?”

Hitoshi’s first impulse was to say no. His heartbeat thudded uncomfortably as his stomach tried to drop through the bed. He didn’t want to talk to Gekkō yet. But at the same time, the idea that she’d been waiting to see him for a while was almost comforting, in a weird way. He was still disappointed in her choices. She was probably still tetchy over having to talk about near-death experiences, even if she downplayed them a lot. It’d be fine.

Hitoshi nodded, levering up on his elbows as Recovery Girl went to get the door.

“Shinsō-kun!”

And instantly, Hitoshi’s mood plummeted.

The girl who walked through the office door wasn’t Gekkō, but instead Homura. Her hair was a bouncy orange-yellow and her bright eyes were trained on him. He could already see her checking his bandages, like she was surprised he was still wearing them.

“Shinsō-kun, I’m so glad you’re awake—” Homura said, seizing the abandoned office chair so she could sit down next to his cot. Then she got a real look at his face. Her hair darkened and shortened, as though cropped close to her head by invisible scissors. “Oh. I—I’m sorry, were you expecting someone else?”

Hitoshi didn’t even know what expression was on his face at that exact moment, but it must have been awful if *that* was her reaction. He tried to rally, saying, “I—no, I wasn’t.”

Homura didn’t buy it for a second. With a knowing look, she said, “I think Gekkō-san went home after your match with Bakugō-san. None of us saw her afterward.”

“I don’t care where she went,” Hitoshi heard himself snap, and then winced at his own tone. “I mean…”

“Shinsō-kun,” Homura said, in a tone that made it clear how childishly he was behaving, “that isn’t helpful to anyone, least of all you. It might feel better to just react in the moment, but that’s not how anyone gets anything done.”

Hitoshi didn’t respond, resting his chin in his bandaged hands and refusing to look at Homura. So what if it was childish? Today had been that kind of day.

“After you left the box,” Homura said, as though that little exchange hadn’t happened, “we were a little worked up. I mean, tensions run high in crowded places. But don’t think for a second that 1-C isn’t proud to have you with us.” Homura’s hair cast a glow nearly competing with the sunlight. “Fourth place—”
“—is really impressive for a General Studies student, I know,” Hitoshi muttered. He ran his fingers through his hair, which was as much of a nervous gesture as he’d allow himself. “I’ve heard it all before.”

“Especially today, I take it,” Homura said wryly, and Hitoshi eyed her. He hadn’t known she used sarcasm. “I’m sorry if it sounded patronizing. But coming from me? I didn’t even make it past the qualifier. I genuinely do think you’ve done amazing things today.”

Hitoshi glanced back toward her. Then he said, as though the words were being dragged out of him, “…Is it wrong that I’m just… I wish I’d gone further?”

“No,” said Homura. “But is that the only issue?”

“Never is,” Hitoshi responded sullenly.

Homura pressed her lips together. “I’m listening.”

“I don’t know if this is a universal experience or anything,” Hitoshi began, finally dragging himself into a sitting position against the headboard. Because he’d never had friends to be disappointed by. “But have you ever looked at someone who had all the right tools, and just…refuses to do anything with them? Doesn’t it make you angry?”

“I’ve met people like that,” Homura said, and Hitoshi didn’t ask who she meant. “But it’s not uncommon, I think. Sometimes what looks obvious to one person is really just a false impression, because you can’t see everything going on with somebody else. It’s usually not simple.”

Hitoshi’s problems were simple. His Quirk was a villainous one, so he had to prove everyone wrong. He was a bit of a smartass, sure, and he wasn’t a fitness freak like other people he could name. But once he got into the Hero course, it’d be fine.

Not that he’d admit any of that to Homura now. They weren’t talking about him. Gekkō defied easy categorization. What was the point of having all that power if all she wanted was to goof off?

“Did you ever ask Gekkō-san if she wanted to be a hero?” Homura asked, accurately guessing the shape of Hitoshi’s thoughts.

“Of course I—” And Hitoshi bit down on the last word, trawling through his memory for any sign he was right to just say the first thing that came to his mind. Had he ever asked if Gekkō wanted to be a hero? She was in UA, same as him, and she’d taken the practical exam to get into Heroics. But if he was honest, Hitoshi had never seen the same drive in her as he had. She’d failed the written exams, or at least some of them, but was it possible to land in General Studies by boosting her written scores with points from a whole different test?

Had she just been trying to get into UA at all?

“I get the feeling,” Homura said distractedly, “that Gekkō-san didn’t come here because she wanted to be a hero. Or even a good student. On some days, it really showed.” She made a thoughtful noise as her hair burned a little brighter. “Not as much anymore, though. She was really having fun today.”

“Not at the end,” Hitoshi said, even as he picked at the bandages around his hands. He could kind of see it.

Gekkō was strong, but she didn’t care about a lot of things that mattered to other people. He’d tried asking who her favorite hero was, getting a shrug and a vague, “Probably All Might?” in reply. And the Sports Festival didn’t mean much for her other than… a way to blow off steam, maybe. Ironic,
considering her Quirk.

Hitoshi glanced up at Homura, who looked around for a few seconds before she dragged a folding chair over to the bed, clearly deciding asking Recovery Girl to move would be rude. The school’s nurse pretended not to hear the scraping.

“Nobody was really happy with how the tournament went,” Homura said, while Hitoshi looked down at the blanket pooled around his waist. She sighed deeply, then went on, “Bakugō-san blew up at Todoroki-kun for not using his flames, you wanted to win everything, and Gekkō-san…kind of just stopped having fun and went home. I wonder if it had something to do with what Midoriya-san said…”

Hitoshi blinked. “What?”

“Oh, I just…” Homura shook her head slowly. “It’s just a half-formed thought. I’d have to talk to Midoriya-san or Gekkō-san to know for sure.”

“…Okay.” Hitoshi didn’t know what Bakugō might’ve done to make it clear how upset he was about whatever happened in the tournament that he hadn’t already done, but clearly it’d been memorable. “Have fun with that. Gekkō-san isn’t going to want to talk to me.”

Homura watched him for any stronger reaction, then her gaze roved around the room, as though looking for a way to continue the conversation. “I think it’s a mistake to jump from ‘Gekkō-san doesn’t care about being a hero’ to ‘Gekkō-san is too upset to talk to me.’”

It wasn’t a mistake if the entire argument was Hitoshi’s fault. Gekkō wasn’t the one who’d just assumed she’d been invested in hero work and acted like she was betraying trust for not sharing the same dream. Even now, a tiny part of him was pitching a fit in the back of his mind like it’d change anybody’s mind.

Hitoshi pinched the bridge of his nose like that would help ward off his headache.

“But… What’s this?” She reached for something on the bedside table, picking up a speckled composition notebook. In the white space where a name would go, a purple pen and a familiar neat hand had written “Training Notes: Part Three.”

Hitoshi’s stomach clenched with sudden dread.

“Oh, a young lady dropped this off while Shinsō-kun was resting,” said Recovery Girl, looking up from her computer.

“Was it Gekkō-san?” Hitoshi asked, as Homura handed him the notebook.

“It was. She was quite concerned, but also in a rush,” Recovery Girl remarked as she turned back to her desk. “When I asked if she’d like to wait until you were awake, she said she wasn’t sure you’d like to see her.”

Hitoshi flipped the notebook open as soon as Homura handed it to him, scanning pages of data and notes as Recovery Girl’s words sank in like needles. He wasn’t sure if Gekkō had started using indigo ink just to be funny. Whatever the joke was, it wasn’t funny anymore. He didn’t know if the punchline even existed.

“Shinsō-san?” Homura asked. “Is something wrong?”

_I don’t know what the hell this means_, Hitoshi thought, instead of saying anything. The dog-eared
pages had pencil lines crowded into the margins. He covered his mouth with his left hand, trying to think through a fog of hurt and fear. Why would Gekkō give Hitoshi another of these notebooks? Why now?

“Shinsō-san?” Homura asked again.

“I—” And that was when he reached the end. The last page in the book was a mass of penciled imprints, having been mostly obliterated by an eraser used so forcefully that it almost ripped the page. If Hitoshi checked carefully, he might’ve been able to make out some of it, but the only remaining line stood out first.

“I’ve got a new notebook,” it read, “but I figured you might like to see how far you’ve come.”

His fingers tightened around the spine of the notebook as he flipped it closed, nearly bending the cover.

Last time, Gekkō had handed over the notes about his progress because she said she didn’t think he believed he was improving. Seeing the data, even in wonky handwriting or cramped between comments about Quirks and the day’s homework, had helped. It meant she was paying attention. That she’d forced her weird friends into helping him improve.

Hitoshi had no fucking idea if this was a real attempt to encourage him or another consolation prize, like getting fourth place in a tournament with only three podium spaces.

“Shinsō-san,” Homura began, and Hitoshi couldn’t quite make himself look at her. “What is that?”

Hitoshi couldn’t decide, at least for a second, whether he even wanted Homura to know. This was personal. It was about him, and…

Homura caught the flung notebook between her hands, like trying to stop a sword. Hitoshi heard her open the book and start turning pages, but he turned his gaze squarely out the window. She could read whatever she wanted.

“Gekkō-san wrote all this?” Homura asked, after about thirty seconds.

“…Mostly.”

“She must care a lot about you,” Homura said.

Hitoshi didn’t answer and didn’t look at her.

The first hint he got of Homura’s frustration was when she sighed deeply.

The second was when the notebook hit him in the back of the head. It was a lot like being slapped.

“Ow! What the hell?” When Hitoshi looked, though, he fell silent with his mouth slightly open.

Homura’s hair was a wild inferno that licked at the ceiling and her eyebrows were like tiny torches. “Quit being so stubborn!”

“Don’t roughhouse in here!” Recovery Girl scolded, somewhere behind all the fire.

Homura’s fire banked, a bit, but she still glared at Hitoshi with her eyes like embers. “I won’t pretend to know what happened between you two, or even what you’re really fighting about in the first place.” She took a deep breath and her hair sank further, now only climbing across her shoulders. “But I think this was supposed to be a peace offering. She cares about you, you ambitious jerk, and
Hitoshi bit down on the first three responses that came to mind, because Homura was still talking. Even if he didn’t like it when people meddled in his business, Homura was about the next best thing to justified—as class rep, she meddled. It was her entire role to take over and interfere where Midnight-sensei might come on too strong.

“You’re overthinking things,” Homura said. “I saw how Gekkō-san acted all day, up until your fight. She might not be super outgoing, but nobody who gets that invested in people gives up just because of an argument.”

Hitoshi swallowed. He didn’t know if Homura’s impression was right. His hadn’t been. “And if you’re wrong?”

“Then I’ll knock your heads together until it’s okay again.” Homura sat down again with a huff, plucking the much-abused notebook from the bed. She suddenly paused, then deflated a bit as her hair almost went out. “…Not that I want to try, given how far you both got today. You’re both tough and smart and should really figure this stuff out on your own, you know?”

“Are you quite finished riling Shinsō-kun up?” Recovery Girl asked, as Homura suddenly blushed deep blue over her usual grayish cast.

“I am. I’m really sorry,” Homura said, frantic. “My temper just flared!”

“I saw,” said Recovery Girl.

“Right, right,” Homura mumbled. She bowed to Hitoshi before she left, nerves abandoning her. “See you later, Shinsō-san. I’ll be on hand to help sort things out!”

Hitoshi watched her go, then turned his attention back to Recovery Girl.

“If you’re feeling better, you can head home.”

“I…” Hitoshi sighed. “Okay. Thanks for looking after me.”

He’d put off the inevitable breakdown until tomorrow. For now, he needed to see his parents’ faces when they finally got the time to see how far he’d come.
Kei avoids potential problems and smacks into a different one.

After the Sports Festival, the students at UA got two days off from school to rest, recover, and reel from the results. Kei did some research. She checked in with the principal and confirmed that General Studies students couldn’t actually accept sponsorships without special recommendations. Given what she knew about the teachers at UA and what they knew about her, she was safe from having to deal with attention directly from heroes looking to pass on their knowledge. The only teacher who’d even toy with the idea was Kayama-sensei, and she knew better than to make Kei deal with that kind of attention.

The public was a different story.

Kei hadn’t been particularly well-known outside of Konoha in…ever. Within Konoha, people knew the scarred, sleepy-looking student of the Fourth Hokage was a jinchūriki, and many of them were wary of her as a result. When people weren’t mistaking Hayate for Kei or vice-versa, anyway. Outside of Konoha, she wasn’t sure she was in a single foreign Bingo Book as anything other than a footnote for Sensei’s entry.

“You gonna be okay on your own?” Obito had asked, though he was just barely creeping out from under the kitten-patterned comforter while Kei tested how well a brush would work on her simulated hair.

Her homeworld didn’t have mass media. No ninja could or would plaster a face across hundreds of thousands of screens across the country. It was like being the subject of one of those cop shows where they posted a zillion wanted posters at the end, with the expectation that somebody would pick the suspects out of a crowd sooner or later. But instead of getting arrested, Kei faced the more terrifying possibility of dealing with the public.

In typical Kei fashion, she dealt with the pressure with as much pragmatism as she could. Specifically, she skirted attention by using the Academy’s classic Transformation Jutsu to look like Kurenai instead of showing her face anywhere somebody might recognize her. Aside from being about the same height Kei was, Kurenai’s only similar feature was her dark, wild hair. Given the spectacular array of physical traits on display in Tokyo, red eyes wouldn’t make a single person blink.

“I think so,” she’d said, taking her eyes off of Kurenai’s face in the mirror.

By the time she turned her attention fully to Kakashi and Obito’s huddled forms, Obito had wriggled onto the floor properly and flopped onto his back. Behind him, a mess of white-gray hair was barely visible poking from the other blanket-burrito, and the entire comforter shifted as Kakashi stole all of the remaining blankets by rolling over.

Using the Sharingan and a Chidori variant yesterday put more strain on Kakashi than Obito’s Kamui usage did on him, so it wasn’t surprising the only ANBU of their team was taking the opportunity to sleep in.
Kei, on the other hand, was going grocery shopping. She poofed back to normal for a second, because she couldn’t leave her apartment looking like this. She’d change again before she reached the train. “Hey, Obito, make sure Kakashi’s okay. And I’m sorry in advance and in retrospect for all the decontaminations you’ve had to go through.”

“At this point, it’s practically a habit,” Obito had said with a shrug. “And don’t worry about Kakashi—I’d have to be a pretty awful teammate to let him just pass out for ages.”

Kei left them to their slow morning and headed out to determine exactly how much damage had been done. Yes, she did actually need to buy food, but she was more concerned with seeing more than just the news feeds on her phone. Her boys weren’t native to this world and didn’t care much for its conventions, so their analysis of the live Sports Festival footage was fundamentally limited. As always, hitting the streets was the best option they had for filling in the blanks.

Kei took the train to central Musutafu, which was ordinarily the same stop she’d use to go to school. There was a shopping district there, too, but Kei’s ultimate goal was really more about watching TV screens through storefront glass and listening to the gossip in the crowd.

While visiting a combini, she did catch a glimpse of the store’s resident TV. As Kei picked out cheap snacks and debating the relative comedic value of marble soda or egg salad sandwiches Obito could ruin in prank attempts, the tinny voice of the newscaster reported the day’s events thus far. She listened with half an ear and checked her phone with her grocery basket on her arm, waiting for buzzwords. After an event like the Sports Festival, and her boys bringing down the Hero Killer on the same day, the newsroom might’ve resembled a kicked hornet’s nest in some less-organized studios.

I cannot tell which result you hope for more, Isobu commented.

It’s been a wacky twenty-four hours. I know what result was good for the mission, but I think I might’ve fucked up the specific details.

As one does.

Kei weighed pre-packaged onigiri in her hands, debating if she wanted to bring cold or hot breakfast back to the apartment before doing a proper grocery run later. She sighed, then scooped several onigiri into the basket before going to look around more.

Getting top eight… I already know I’m going to be ducking attention for days. Kei bit the inside of her cheek. I should’ve just pretended to faint or something after the second preliminary round.

You could never swoon convincingly.

I can faceplant just fine, though.

Kei drifted through the aisles, drawn by the smell of fried chicken. Kakashi would hate it as much as he disliked sweets, but Obito was always up for fun food choices. She’d have to make sure to give him plenty to take home, even if they had to pass inspection before he could hand them out to friends.

“—believe it, you know!” said a woman over by the ice cream coolers. Kei, already heading in that direction to see if there was ice cream-filled mochi, eavesdropped without a single pang of conscience. “They just reported yesterday that the Hero Killer was caught in Hosu, and now he’s on the loose again?”
Kei froze, ironically, with her fingers still reaching for ice cream. Beneath her stolen form’s bangs, her gaze shot to the other shopper.

“I just don’t understand it,” said the woman’s friend, putting her hand to her face. The face in question was slate-gray and her face was dotted with perfect pyramid-shaped onyx stones. “Surely the police could have used Quirk suppressors or something?”

God fucking dammit.

And after all of that hard work, which we had no influence upon whatsoever. Isobu sounded less than surprised, of course. Even if he’d actually been taken aback, he didn’t like to let it show in his voice.

“No one knows!” The first woman shuddered theatrically, shaking to the tips of her six conical horns. “It’s awful.”

Kei took her items to the checkout, snapping up a new cell phone along the way. As always, she picked the cheapest phone with a decent phone case selection. After setting her money in the obligatory tray for the cashier, Kei tried her best to keep up the appearance of being calm even though her thoughts were racing. She made it out of the combini with her disguise still intact, and she started fiddling with her phone to activate it like the last one.

The last two, actually.

Kei needed to stop destroying her phone. Or splurge on a waterproof one.

Still, she had a chance to open up the same group chat function as usual as she headed back to the train with her prizes. And of course, the first thing she did was text Obito while riding back home.

TMNT-TNT: I have a phone again. And we have a problem.

GreenThumb: how

GreenThumb: youre not back yet (^_^)=☆

Defib: You can’t wink with one eye.

GreenThumb: but i can dream

TMNT-TNT: Professional faces, please.

Defib: What happened?

TMNT-TNT: …

Kei checked the news feed scrolling across the train notifications, then the news on her phone. The verdict was damning either way.

TMNT-TNT: Nosey got away.

GreenThumb: ?

GreenThumb: ohshit

Defib: How?
TMNT-TNT: I don’t know. Check the news. I don’t think anybody has a ton of information about this, but basically your hard work just got undone. In the worst way possible.

GreenThumb: oh for fucks sake

Defib: It’s so much fun to hear all that effort was wasted. I’m going back to sleep. He’s their problem now.

TMNT-TNT: Can’t blame you. I’ll be back soon with breakfast.

GreenThumb: uuuuuuuugh

GreenThumb: this sucks

GreenThumb: hows vroom vroom

TMNT-TNT: Haven’t heard anything about him. We’ll think it over after food, probably.

GreenThumb: also i need to program this number

GreenThumb: stop killing your phones

TMNT-TNT: You get what you pay for, and I’m sure there are waterproof phones. But I’m cheap and this is already my new phone.

GreenThumb: quit being such a cheapskate

TMNT-TNT: No.

Kei put her phone away and concentrated on just getting back to the apartment. She’d need to program everyone’s numbers again, just to be safe. Even if it really just meant Obito and Kakashi’s. UA’s was a matter of public record, and she’d never really had Shinsō’s. If she needed to contact people outside of text conversations or bothering them directly in the staff offices, Obito tended to be available to ferry her around.

I’m so fucking spoiled, Kei thought as she left the train.

The world does have its conveniences, Isobu allowed.

I mean more that I should never have started to ask Obito to be my personal chauffeur. Even if he thinks it’s best, that’s a lot of Kamui usage in a short period of time.

Let him be the judge of that.

And she knew how well conversation would go if Obito was dead-set on being helpful.

Kei made sure to shift back to her normal appearance outside of anyone’s line of sight. While there were security cameras here and there in public areas, mainly around intersections, she really just didn’t want a girl with Kurenai’s appearance to be associated with her apartment address or this town. The older residents in her building were retired, so they tended to have the kind of time to actually notice their neighbors. She’d already gotten a funny look or two for what Granny Wakamoto called “having friends over” with significant side-eyeing. As though she could judge.
It was on the walk back to the apartment, while looking both ways before crossing the street, that she was interrupted.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” said a familiar voice.

Kei suppressed her first reaction (which was a heartfelt groan), but she could still feel a grimace trying to work its way onto her face. She forced that down, too, but it took some doing. She didn’t want to deal with this kid on an early morning when she’d already had one disappointment today. It wasn’t anything—no, it was absolutely personal. Insofar as personality clashes were required to be like that.

“Hey, Seaweed Head,” Bakugō growled as Kei ignored him. She could hear his footsteps as he approached. “I asked you a fucking question.”

“And?” Kei asked back, as Bakugō finally drew up beside her. She only glanced out of the corner of her eye at him, noting street clothes and a murderous expression on his face. “Oh, congratulations on winning the first year Sports Festival, Bakugō-san. I’m sure you earned it.”

She could hear his teeth grind from almost a meter away. Fascinating.

Less than a whole day after the fucking Sports Festival and she was already smacking into Bakugō of all people. It probably didn’t take the best observational skills in the world to spot Kei when her face was all over the Sports Festival coverage, even if she hadn’t been the one to personally make a mockery of Bakugō’s second match. Still, after a lifetime of having the kind of face that blended into a crowd, the shift still left her wrong-footed somehow. The sole saving grace of this entire interaction was that Bakugō was still only one person.

A loud person.

Someone she didn’t like all that much.

“To answer what you actually asked,” Kei went on as the crosswalk symbol finally changed, “I’ve lived in Musutafu since my UA acceptance letter arrived.” She didn’t cross yet though. “Did you want something, Bakugō-san?”

Bakugō might’ve been foaming at the mouth if he was an animal, but he obviously bit down on his first several responses. Then, “What I want is a fucking rematch where you stop being so goddamn condescending.” His palms started to smoke.

Kei sighed aloud this time. But she still didn’t take a step toward the street. Instead, she hefted her shopping more firmly onto her hip to spare her arms what weight she could. “No.”

“Why the fuck not?!” was his mature and level-headed response.

“It’d be pointless,” Kei told him. When Bakugō looked like he’d protest, she continued, “We already know how that match ended.”

“You wouldn’t be talking so damn big if I’d been—”

“If you’d what?” Kei interrupted, getting in his space. She got the feeling it wasn’t something that happened often, because he wore an expression like he stepped in something foul, red eyes blazing so fiercely he’d blow her up with sight alone if he could.

People rarely expected a good old-fashioned round of turning the fucking tables. Bakugō was usually the one getting in people’s faces. But Kei had had just about enough of his bullshit for the
next month.

“If you’d had your hero costume? If you’d known how to make explosions underwater? You can say whatever you want if we’re playing the ‘What If’ game, but it doesn’t change what happened.” Kei had already learned that lesson the hard way. Turning to catch the last scrap of time before the traffic signals all changed again, she said, “You already won, Bakugō-san. It’s over.”

“You call that a win?” Bakugō was spitting mad already, dogging her heels. He wouldn’t ever give up. That was a key component of what made Bakugō the person he was. “You threw the match, same as that fucking Icy-Hot bastard. What, do you think you’re so high above me that you can do whatever you want while half-assing it?!”

“I didn’t want to win,” Kei told him, even in the face of a literally explosive response. Though smoke had progressed to sparks and to tiny popping explosions, she’d faced worse. And he was still, against all odds, shorter than she was. “So, I didn’t. That’s the best answer you’re going to get.”

“You think this is over?!”

They might’ve continued in this vein for some time, if not for their argument drawing public attention. Ordinarily, Kei would have cut and run long before the mob showed up, but with Bakugō acting as the loudest thing on the entire street, they were going to inevitably draw eyes before Kei could ditch him.

“Hey, is that the kid from the Sports Festival?”

“I think it is!”

“Oh, that’s Bakugō Katsuki! Did you know he’s from this town?”

“Amazing! I never knew!”

And luckily for Kei, they recognized Bakugō’s blond hair and red eyes a full five seconds before Kei’s plainer features registered. By that point, Kei was already running headlong down the street and disappearing, because screw this entire scenario. She needed to be in the apartment before her boys sent out a search party.

She did, in fact, manage not to jaywalk on the way back. Small victories.
Sore Loser

Chapter Summary

Kei tries to get back into the swing of normal life, and normal life hesitates a bit.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kakashi went home on Thursday morning, instead of the originally-planned Wednesday. While Kei hardly considered her opinion “professional,” his chakra expenditure had been steep recently, so sleeping off the first day instead of reporting in seemed like the lesser of two evils. Besides that, Kei already knew that Kakashi would just end up taking on another ANBU mission if he got downtime, so taking advantage of the twelve-hour time zone difference was about the best she could do to safeguard him.

Obito headed back to Konoha for the remainder of the week, too, but not before asking, “Kei, you sure you don’t need a quick Kamui to get to school ahead of the crowds? At all?”

Kei shook her head. “No, I’m good. Go home and rest, both of you.”

“What about you?” Obito asked anyway.

Kei thumped her chest gently with her right hand, right where Isobu’s seal sat. She smiled. “Jinchūriki, remember? I’m gonna be fine.”

“All right, all right.” Obito ruffled her hair, which was nearly his right as the oldest of their team and hardly made any difference to Kei’s mop anyway. He stepped back, poking Kakashi in the arm.

Kei held her arms out expectantly in their direction, and Obito shoved Kakashi forward.

“Stay safe,” Kakashi said as he wrapped Kei in a hug for just a few brief seconds. He didn’t rumple her UA uniform, but frankly she wouldn’t have noticed if he had.

Before he could let go and leave, however, Kei put her hands to both sides of his head and drew him into a gentle headbutt. She could feel Kakashi’s nervousness about the entire mission tingle through his body, and she murmured, “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do, right?”

Kakashi’s chakra stilled, just a bit. As the two of them pulled apart, he managed, “Right.”

“Next stop,” Obito interrupted in the cheerful manner of a train station PA system, “Konoha! See you in a couple days, Kei.”

Kei was still waving as the two of them disappeared into thin air. Then she spent a few minutes putting her lunch together before heading out the apartment door. She had a raincoat tossed on over her uniform and an umbrella hanging off her arm, but only because she couldn’t legally use her “Quirk” to repel the downpour. Quirk laws really were inconvenient sometimes. If they’d actually gotten in the way of her plan to get to school before any of the other students, she’d have complained more.
The train to the appropriate station was crowded, of course, but between her bulky coat, obfuscating hairstyle, and laser-focus on her phone helping her generate an aura of “fuck off and die” in body language, no one spoke to her. She was also using a tiny wisp of killing intent to not reinforce a nonexistent personal bubble, but instead avoid actually talking to anyone. Nothing could tank her mood faster than being talked at by strangers demanding selfie rights. Obito’s joking reverence of Ingenium aside, celebrity was overrated.

Hiking up the long path to school was a bit damper than usual. Hooray for springtime rain.

The school’s entryway was empty when Kei arrived, with only a handful of umbrellas in the collecting bins when she looked. She shook hers out before putting it aside. Then it was time for changing her shoes for the indoor set, hanging her raincoat up to dry, and generally just getting ready for the school day. The Hero kids were going to hit the ground running. Kei didn’t think the General Studies courses were going to do the same thing.

And back into the incredible saga of lectures, homework, and boredom we go.

Oh, shush. Kei cocked her head to look at the wall clock. Okay. Twenty minutes to burn.

Kei ended up heading for the faculty offices because she had an important question to ask and a small delivery to make.

“Oh of course not,” was Kayama-sensei’s answer to Kei’s clarifying question. While Kei gave a small sigh of relief, Kayama-sensei smiled ruefully and added, “It’s already unusual to have a first-year class bombarded with so many sponsorships. Most agencies would probably think extending offers to General Studies students is a step too far.”

Kei toyed with a long lock of hair. She’d heard “most” loud and clear, which was worrying. “Though it might be a bit, uh, rude, do you mind just preemptively denying anybody who might be interested in me anyway? I really don’t want to even be considered. It saves everyone time.”

“I understand,” said Kayama-sensei. Her expression softened. “Not everyone wants to move into the spotlight. Sometimes, I wish fewer people did.”

You could just say Mt. Lady.

That’d be petty, Kei told Isobu. No one had come off looking great during the interview he was thinking of. To Kayama-sensei, she said, “Thank you.”

“Oh of course,” Kayama-sensei replied. She sat back in her office chair, legs crossed one over the other. “You’re a part of my class, Gekkō-kun. It’d be awful if I didn’t try to keep your feelings in mind.”

Kayama-sensei was, as always, an exceptional person. “You’re the best, Kayama-sensei. Thanks again.”

As Kayama-sensei dismissed her with a smile, Kei peered around the office until she found the signature yellow sleeping bag that marked Aizawa-sensei’s space. She walked over, noted that Aizawa-sensei was thankfully gone, and set a wrapped package of ten alarm seals in his inbox. They’d be useless until Obito came back, but Aizawa-sensei had made decent use of the first one and ten more might last the entire year if they were lucky.

And then it was off to class.

1-C wasn’t empty when Kei arrived, but the only other student was asleep on his desk. Kei thought his name was Ono. She needed to check the class rankings to be sure, but couldn’t be bothered at the
moments.

Kei sat close enough to the window that she could stare out of it if so inclined, and she’d wasted plenty of class periods doing just that during the first week of school. She pulled a notebook out of her bag and flipped to the first page before getting her pencil. Even if she wasn’t going to be civilian-studious in this lifetime, Kei was here twenty minutes early. It was this or read a book she didn’t have.

**Draw me.** Isobu’s suggestions were, as always, more commands than requests. He needed to chill out a little.

It wasn’t like Kei had better ideas. She had a decent doodle of Isobu running across the header within five minutes. She even finished drawing a surfing stick figure being terrorized by Isobu’s teeth before anybody else came into the room.

“Good morning, Ono-kun, Gekkō-san.” Oh, so Shingetsu was here. Neat. Kei waved in his general direction without looking up, still concentrating on her doodle.

**Ought you be waiting for someone?**

_Probably_. Kei had avoided thinking of her and Shinsō’s conversation during the two-day break. After the Sports Festival fuckup, avoiding the problem always ended up being the most tempting option. There were snacks to eat and police security procedures to complain about while she and her boys lounged around. It was easier than dealing with emotional quagmires.

The classroom slowly filled with students. A few of them greeted Kei, which was more than she’d expected after that blatant middle finger of a match. It was actually more of a warm welcome than she’d gotten at the start of the year. People tended to be afraid of the broody loner, even with no corroborating evidence.

Now they had their evidence that she was dangerous as all hell, and paradoxically liked her more. Slightly. It was one of those edge cases where Kei honestly wasn’t sure if the change was all in her head or not.

UA students were weird.

Five minutes before the bell, Shinsō and Homura finally arrived. While Shinsō did his own thing, Homura was generally more of an early bird. Kei had honestly expected to see her around the time she was putting detail on Isobu’s shell. It was strange to see her coming in “late.”

Shinsō sat down at his desk without so much as looking in Kei’s direction. He’d have to crane his neck to do it, but that was a definite change. Instead of bothering, Shinsō spent his time pulling out his school supplies and getting right to work on something. Kei didn’t remember if they had any homework, and it was a bit too late to ask.

Homura looked between them and slumped just a bit, while all Kei was able to do was shrug. Shinsō had asked to be left alone. Kei wasn’t always the best listener, but she tried to respect people’s wishes. This didn’t seem to make Homura feel any better.

**She is trying to tell you something.**

_I’m very aware._

Eventually, Homura gave up trying to get Kei to comply with suggestions conveyed solely through body language. It was just as well, because Kayama-sensei arrived a split second after everyone
finally made it to their seats.

Kayama-sensei went through announcements and did general check-ins, but it was the kind of day where homeroom was short and the rest of their classes were slightly longer. Kei listening to Kayama-sensei’s briefing, feeling just a slight twinge of guilt about ditching the entire afternoon after the Sports Festival. She hadn’t been in the mood to speak to anyone at that point, or to be subject to yet more buzz.

As Kayama-sensei left to teach something or other to 1-A, all of 1-C got out their English materials in time for Present Mic’s arrival. They only needed to be yelled at once to get the hint.

The door slammed open, because of course it did. Present Mic took his place at the demonstration desk with a flourish, grinning as always. “Hey there, listeners! Are you ready for English?!”

Nobody dared disagree.

“I can’t heeeeeear you!”

“Yes, sir!”

English passed almost painlessly. Kei knew English backward and forward when it came to the grammar structures and nouns, though she had an accent from growing up without the right phonemes. The only problems arose during the four times Present Mic caught her staring out the classroom window, which resulted in three comprehension questions and one request to read a segment from the example text. If she didn’t know she’d annoyed him the other day, she’d have assumed he was defensive about not being the center of attention.

Except wait, he is. Both of those things are true.

Maybe, Kei remarked silently, as the wacky English teacher finally left.

After that, Modern Hero Art History with Kayama-sensei. Which, because Kei was going to fail it utterly with or without help, she drowned out by drawing Isobu again. This time he was surfing using an island as a board.

Eventually, lunch happened.

Kei ate in the classroom, seeing as she’d packed her own today and didn’t want to deal with crowds any more than usual. Shinsō left, along with most of the class, though Homura spared her a worried look before she disappeared. Still, it was quiet in 1-C for a little while with most of the students gone.

This didn’t last.

The much-abused door slammed to the side hard enough to crack something. Face like a thundercloud, none other than Bakugō Katsuki stormed into the room and immediately spotted her unpacking cold soba from her bento. He stomped up to her desk and slammed both hands down on its edges hard enough to make the wood bounce.

Are you fucking serious?

He apparently is.

“We’re on campus now, Seaweed! We’re going to the training facility so we can settle this!”

Kei stared at him. Moving her chopsticks with exaggerated care, she slurped the noodles without
breaking eye contact. Then, “No.”

“What the hell, man?” Four students piled into 1-C in Bakugō’s wake, drawing stares from the resident students where Bakugō hadn’t already stolen the spotlight. The speaker, Kirishima, looked exasperated already. “You can’t just eat that fast and expect not to throw up.”

“Shut up!” Bakugō snapped, briefly glaring at his posse. Which, from Kei’s somewhat spotty memory, consisted of Sero, Kaminari, and Ashido in addition to Kirishima. Hadn’t they all been on Bakugō’s cavalry battle team?

“That’s not how you hit on a girl, Bakugō,” said Kaminari, utterly failing to read the room. When he got stares, he added, “Look, the only thing I remember from English is ‘take her out’ can mean both a date and murder. This almost looks like both.”

“It’s neither,” Kei said, and pointed her chopsticks at Bakugō’s nose in the exact correct way to poke him when he whirled on her. The contact made him twitch. In a flat tone, Kei told him, “I’m eating. Go away.”

Kirishima caught Bakugō before he could throw himself over the desk. It was a little like seeing someone snatch a toy dog before it started trying to gnaw on someone’s shoes. “Come on, Bakugō. You’re not making friends that way.”

“I’m not here to make friends with a bunch of useless losers with shitty Quirks!”

Sero looked from Bakugō—now restrained—to Kei and her slowly disappearing lunch. She was still eating. Then he looked back at Bakugō with a pretty sardonic expression. “Uh, were you in the bathroom during the part where she turned the stadium into an aquarium? Twice?”

“And she slapped you around like a beach ball!” Ashido put in cheerfully, rubbing salt in the wound.

“FUCK ALL OF YOU!”

This, it appeared, was not the Bakusquad as Kei had assumed. It seemed more of a Baku-barbeque.

“Sorry for him,” Sero said, while Kirishima and the other two members of this apparent friend group carted their loudmouth leader away. “He’s… Well, I won’t make excuses for his attitude. It’s all on Bakugō. Congrats on placing in the top eight, by the way!”

“And to you for your top sixteen, Sero-san,” Kei said with a little nod. “I hope your internships go well.”

“Thanks! See you around, Gekkō-san!”

Basically, lunch was weird that day. Kei knew she’d never exchanged a properly civil word with any of those kids before this, bar Kirishima. Still hadn’t with Bakugō, but that was par for the course.

Maybe she should have headed to the dining hall anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Given that today's my birthday, I decided to revive the one-a-day posting cycle just for a little. This is the second chapter in 48 hours. :D
Chapter Summary

Kei and Shinso finally talk.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

At the end of the day, Kei waited in the school’s entryway. Most people would’ve started fidgeting within a few moments, and she was the type to drum her fingers on her forearms while she had nothing better to do. There were roles that drummed that kind of habit out of people on pain of pain, and Kei had been in a few of them before. “Civilian schoolgirl” wasn’t on the list. Ordinarily, she would’ve been justified in just going back to the apartment for a lonely evening or taking off on solo patrol.

But earlier, Homura had pulled her aside with the sternest look on her face Kei had ever seen. “Wait by the shoe lockers after school, okay?”

“Well?” Kei asked.

“It’s important,” was all Homura had to say before running off, her flaming hair trailing behind her.

It wasn’t that Kei was entirely oblivious. She did know that ignoring the problem with Shinsō was a poor long-term strategy, and that increasing tensions with Bakugō was probably going to mean he took up more of her time. She knew the school’s rumor mill moved with hilarious speed, even if the information was wrong. The Sports Festival hadn’t changed the fundamental facts of her situation.

She’d also been asked point-blank, “Are you two fighting?” by Ono, who she barely knew. When he woke up from his classroom nap, anyway.

Kei sighed.

**One would think they would learn to mind their own business.**

_In a school with this few students? Hah._

While waiting for Homura to spring her inevitable trap—because Kei wasn’t quite new enough at the school game to not notice a new pattern emerging—Kei glanced at the wall clock. This was taking a while.

She saw Bakugō and his friends leave, though Sero and Kirishima did most of the work in actually getting him out the door without issuing another challenge. Tape was involved. A lot of tape. Kei waved when they left, her phone in her other hand.

“Hi, Gekkō-san,” said Uraraka as she arrived and spotted Kei blatantly loitering. “We didn’t see you at lunch.”

“I decided to eat in the classroom.” Kei scratched the back of her head. “After the morning train, I didn’t want to be anywhere near crowds. Sorry.”
“Oh, right! I’m sorry we didn’t come and get you, then.” Uraraka poked her fingertips together, studiously avoiding letting her thumbs join in. “With Iida-kun and Deku at our table, plus me, we weren’t too conspicuous.”

“It’s just as well that you didn’t. Bakugō paid 1-C a visit and tried to challenge me to a fight.” Kei shrugged while Uraraka’s jaw dropped. “It didn’t go anywhere.”

“That’s—” Whatever Uraraka was about to say got cut off by Midoriya and Iida’s arrival, at least as far as Uraraka’s attention was concerned. “Hey, guys! Ready to go?”

“Yeah! Gekkō-san, hi.” Midoriya blinked upon spotting her. “Um, are you waiting for someone?”

“Homura-san wanted to talk,” Kei explained blandly, shrugging. “So I’m here.”

“You don’t appear to have a guilty conscience, Gekkō-san. You aren’t in trouble, are you?” Iida asked. His arms gesticulated in his usual robot fashion, which was sort of adorable. Robo arms for the engine-leg kid.

“Not that I know of.” Kei didn’t think so, anyway. Homura would’ve told her if she was in deep shit. The secrecy felt like it’d be a Shinsō thing instead. “Thanks for asking, Iida-kun.”

At that point, Homura finally arrived. It was hard to miss someone whose head might as well have been a torch. “Gekkō-san? Oh, hello everyone.” She seemed taken aback by the number of people lurking by the lockers.

Midoriya looked between them. “Oh, um, are we keeping you two here?”

“It’s all right. But I’ll still see you tomorrow.” Unless Kei was wrong, Shinsō would be around the corner somewhere. She waved goodbye to the 1-A crew before following Homura back into the school’s halls.

Homura led her all the way back to 1-C, because either it was the only place Homura could secure for a meeting or because it was some weird Japanese tradition to have after school confrontations once the homeroom teacher fled the building. Kayama-sensei was still around somewhere, but the cliche stuck in Kei’s head like a burr.

“I have to ask,” Kei said, before Homura opened the door, “Bakugō-san isn’t in there, right?”

Homura looked baffled. “What?”

“I’ve been running him into a lot lately, and he’s a persistent one.”

Homura blinked. Then, “No. No 1-A students, unless something went very strange.”

“Good,” Kei muttered. “Because that would mean he got away from his classmates before they got him to the train, and I can’t deal with that right now.”

Homura, it seemed, hadn’t appreciated just how weird Kei could be even during the Sports Festival. “Just go inside, please.” And Homura slid the door open.

And there goes my attempt at stalling.

It was a weak attempt.

Bleh.
Kei walked into the familiar classroom and found Shinsō sitting at his desk with his phone in his hands and an open notebook on the desk. White headphone cords connected his phone to his ears, and he only looked up when Kei sighed to herself and knocked sharply on the demo desk at the front of the room. His mouth opened slightly, then no sound came out. At a glance, he looked about the same, but the shadows under his eyes were paradoxically darker after their two-day break and his expression was closed-off instead of just bored. His hair drooped instead of staying in its usual wild mess, and in hindsight Kei was a bit surprised she hadn’t noticed earlier.

She’d been a bit focused on avoiding everyone else, hadn’t she? Almost to the point of tunnel vision.

The door behind her slid shut, nearly catching the edge of her skirt. Homura wasn’t a part of this, then.

“This is awkward,” Shinsō mumbled, but Kei’s sharp hearing caught it anyway. His gaze darted toward her for a split second. “Homura should have left it alone.”

Well, fine. Kei could be grown-up about this. Shinsō had talked first, after all. “So, what did you think of my notes?”

Shinsō paused, glancing down before he closed the notebook. So that’s why that composition book had looked familiar.

“It was kind of a gamble giving it to you,” Kei went on, when Shinsō didn’t say anything. “I didn’t know for sure if it’d violate the ‘leave me alone’ thing, but…” She scratched the edge of her scar. “It felt wrong just to leave without saying anything after the match with Bakugō. So, sorry if that didn’t quite work out. I couldn’t stay after, so it was the next best thing.”

A longer silence.

Kei walked through the rows of desks until she reached the one in front of Shinsō, then slid the chair out. Instead of sitting down properly, she turned it halfway to use the backrest as an armrest. “It feels weird to be the one doing most of the talking.”

Shinsō gave a heartfelt sigh, pulling his headphones out of his ears. “You shouldn’t apologize.”

“What?”

“I should be the one saying sorry. I’ve… been a jerk, to you and to other people,” Shinsō said, finally looking directly at her face. While Kei cocked her head to one side to listen, reserving judgement, Shinsō continued quietly, “I was so wrapped up in what I wanted that I didn’t even consider anyone’s dreams. I never asked what you wanted out of the Sports Festival or anything else. Getting angry at you over that was uncalled for.”

Very few things in life are, Isobu cynically observed.

Don’t I know it, Kei thought.

“And I don’t want—I’ve never had friends before, and I don’t want to screw this up worse than I already have,” Shinsō mumbled. “I’m sorry for everything I said. So, um… Are we still friends?”

“We were never not,” said Kei.

Shinsō stared at her. “What? I—”

“You heard me. One argument doesn’t end a friendship,” Kei told him, leaning back against the
desk. She smiled crookedly as Shinsō relaxed all at once. Besides, she’d wanted to punch Kakashi’s head clear off his shoulders within a month of knowing him. And look where they were now! “Want to hear a secret?”

“Uh, sure.” Shinsō was still a bit jittery, but smiled hesitantly back.

“It’s a little embarrassing but I really just used the Sports Festival as a way to fight people and blow off steam without getting in trouble for it,” Kei admitted all in a rush. Her ears heated up under her hair, just a bit. “I didn’t really care where I placed, but Bakugō-san was being a jerk to everyone… Soooooo I just decided to be petty and ruin his day.”

Before Kei had finished her first sentence, Shinsō had already started to smile for real. By the middle of her confession, he was snickering under his breath. After it, he’d covered his mouth to muffle his laughter before it could ricochet off the classroom walls.

“I know, I know,” Kei said with an unkind smirk.

“Pfff, you—you are petty. I didn’t think you had it in you,” Shinsō managed, once his giggle fit was back under control. “So that’s where the real delinquent was hiding? You just hang onto it until you find somebody asking for a beatdown? Because wow, that was brutal.”

“You can’t tell me he didn’t earn it,” Kei said with a shrug. “I might’ve just gotten him too worked up for your strategy, though.”

“It’s fine. Fourth place is better than anyone in 1-C’s gotten before, as people keep telling me.” Shinsō rolled his eyes, his chin on his hand. “Every waking hour.”

“Must get old.” Kei stretched her arms over her head. She hadn’t gotten to do a lot today, and the forced inactivity was getting to her. “Speaking of getting old, you’re still up for training with me, right? Now that the deadline’s over, we can take our time.”

“I… Yeah,” Shinsō said, sitting up a little straighter in his chair. “I mean, it worked out great against Tokoyami, but that could’ve gone better.”

“Tomorrow, then,” Kei said, getting out of the chair and scooting it back into place. “Do you want to walk to the station, Shinsō-san?”

“Assuming Homura-san lets us past her,” Shinsō said as he got to his feet, tucking everything into his school bag. As Kei sidled through the desks with him in her wake, she reached the door in time to hear him say, “Uh, Gekkō-san?”

She turned back, just a bit. “Yeah?”

“You can call me ‘Shinsō-kun,’ if you want.” Shinsō said, not looking at her as his ears started to turn red alongside his cheekbones. He added quickly, “You don’t have to. I just… It was a thought.”

“Okay, Shinsō-kun,” Kei said, and opened the door. “Then you can call me ‘Gekkō-kun,’ too.”

Homura was right outside it, and pulled back from the sudden motion as though she’d been caught eavesdropping. Which she had. Blushing deep blue, she stammered, “Is everything okay now?”

“Yep. See you tomorrow, Homura-san.”

“N-not ‘Homura-chan’?” their class rep asked, a little shyly.
Kei paused mid-step, then shrugged again. “Eh, sure. ‘Gekkō-chan’ is fine, too.”

And they walked down to the train station, friendship restored. Homura burned a bright, happy yellow the whole way.

Chapter End Notes

And this makes three chapters in 72 hours. *salutes*
Avoidance

Chapter Summary

Kei continues to avoid the most explosive kid on campus; this time with assistance.

“Fight me already,” was how Bakugō greeted Kei after school on Friday.

Kei, who was kind of in the middle of coaching Shinsō, turned her flattest possible expression toward the interloper.

With Kayama-sensei’s permission and Thirteen’s supervision, the two of them were in the Ruins Zone’s outer periphery. While urban freerunning was discouraged in Japanese cities—except in the cases of hero work—Kei figured they might as well try. When asked, Shinsō admitted to being more interested in underground hero work than the flashy public kind. Because Eraserhead and All Might were the standout examples in Kei’s mind, she decided that the clear answer was to find a place to practice ambushes.

Hide and seek tag wasn’t as fun with only two people, but it would’ve been way worse in the Flood Zone. And Shinsō damn well knew it.

They’d gotten a few rounds in—swapping who was hiding around the simulated town and jumping out to scare each other—before Shinsō nearly took a dive down busted floor and Kei decided to reel it in. While he did know how to fall safely on mats and flat surfaces, turning an ankle was way easier in the half-destroyed zone. Therefore, Kei and Shinsō took a brief break to go over the principle of “tucking and rolling.”

She fully planned on popping out from the crown of a tree next time.

And then Bakugō happened to find them.

“No,” Kei said, and turned back to Shinsō even though her student’s attention was split. She tried to ignore Bakugō anyway. “Shinsō-kun, if you were like, All Might, doing that three-point-landing thing might work. But for most people, that’s how you break your knees. The faster you stop, the more it hurts.”

“S’why hitting water at top speed is like hitting cement, right?” Shinsō made an attempt to ignore Bakugō, too, but he was less subtle about it despite his usually-bored expression. “I saw that on TV once.”

“Same idea, yeah.” Kei was pretty good at fairly specific parts of physics. Most of the math was beyond her.

Bakugō’s glare was undoubtedly trying to drill a hole through her head, but eh.

“Quit ignoring me, Seaweed. You need to grow a fucking spine,” Bakugō snapped.

Kei could see Shinsō’s eyes narrow dangerously. He wasn’t much for a fistfight, especially against someone who knew his power, but people had a weird tendency to forget...
“Ever heard ‘no means no,’ Splodey?” Shinsō asked in the least amused tone he had. There were a few to choose from.

“Stay the fuck out of—” And Bakugō went silent mid-shout.

Kei was already sighing before she turned around, knowing exactly what she’d find.

Bakugō stood there in his gym uniform, blank-faced and unresponsive. She was a little surprised to note the big grenade-like gauntlets still held under his left arm, because it’d been a while since she’d seen them. Other than that, though, Bakugō had less in common with himself at the moment and a lot more with a statue.

“Go sit by Thirteen-sensei,” Shinsō ordered, and the 1-A resident asshole obeyed without a word. While rubbing the back of his neck, Shinsō glanced to Kei and asked, “How many times has he done this?”

“Counting this time? Three.” Kei held up three fingers and counted off, “Day after the Sports Festival, yesterday at lunch, and that. Speaking of, are you going to get in trouble for that?”

“Probably,” Shinsō muttered. “But he’ll try to blow my face off if I let go now.”

“I can punt him into the Flood Zone from here if he tries.” Probably. It was a long shot.

Shinsō shook his head slowly. “Careful. That’s probably what he wants.” He quirked an eyebrow and smirked. “Think he’s a masochist?”

“Don’t even joke about that,” Kei groaned, giving an exaggerated shiver. “I’m just glad all the Hero Course kids are leaving for a week. That much explosion-free time would be a nice vacation.” Kei checked her phone for the time, then said, “I think we can tell Thirteen-sensei we’re done here. After we leave, you should let him go.”

“He’ll keep following us.”

“He’ll have to keep up if he does,” Kei said flatly. “We haven’t done our three-kilometer run.”

Shinsō paled. “I thought it was two.”

“You got better, so the routes get longer. Maybe we’ll get up to ten before finals!” Kei strolled down the empty simulated streets and collected her things from behind a dumpster that wouldn’t ever be used. “Or maybe we could just explore while he’s distracted.”

“If I didn’t think Bakugō was a complete pain in the ass, I’d let him go right now,” Shinsō warned.

“I know. We should still explore, though.”

Wandering the good ol’ USJ found them visiting the Flood Zone, eying the not-a-waterslide and trying to figure out how Shinsō would adapt to being forced to fight underwater. Later, they stuck their heads into the Conflagration Zone before figuring it was probably too dangerous to deal with when they were only exploring. The Landslide Zone, too. The Downpour Zone looked like an umbrella-wrecker, which was great under certain circumstances for Kei’s “Quirk” and for filming horror movies. Just not for Shinsō’s training.

Well, unless they were just dead-set on getting away from Bakugō. There were less extreme options than that, though.
“That trick you pulled on Bakugō-san would be super useful for getting people out of places like this if they’re not injured,” Kei said, as they made their way back to the Ruins Zone. “You know, if they freeze up in the middle of a crisis.”

Shinsō made a neutral noise, because he’d probably considered the idea before. If someone else had been able to use his Quirk on him during that bank robber situation, it might’ve meant he got out of danger faster. That said, it was a little too late to worry about that now. What happened, happened.

“Okay, I think we’re done here,” Kei said after the last stop. “Let’s get out of here.”

Shinsō let Bakugō’s brain go about an hour after the initial grab, all told. Kei didn’t know how long Shinsō could maintain control, but it seemed pretty solid and he made sure they were both out of Bakugō’s line of sight before giving up control. A successful ditch!

They definitely heard him, though.

“FUCK YOU, YOU PURPLE FEATHER-DUSTER!”

Thus ended Friday at campus.

Saturday was a half-day as usual, which meant they were back in the Bakugō Zone. That was no fun at all.

“I’d be way happier if he was a stray cat,” Shinsō said, upon spotting Bakugō heading down the hall toward them. Before the bell, there wasn’t much recourse to dealing with this particular jerk because he was technically free to roam. Kayama-sensei would chase him away with her whip once she arrived. “He definitely follows us like one. Or you.”

“Just ignore him,” Kei said, and ducked into 1-C in time to escape the usual Bakugō greeting of “shouting like a fucking jackass.”

“Internships can’t come fast enough,” was Shinsō’s put-upon reply, but Bakugō did head back to his own homeroom before Kayama-sensei could use him as a demonstration. “Maybe he’ll dig his head out of his ass after working with a pro.”

Kei wasn’t holding her breath.

Class that day passed more or less as usual. Shinsō took better notes, so Kei let him focus and ended up speaking to Isobu for most of Ectoplasm’s attempts to drill mathematics into their collective heads. The guy was cool and his Quirk reminiscent of the various clone ninjutsu, but Kei really didn’t have the same head for numbers she might’ve after nine years of school a lifetime ago.

I could always deal with that boy.

Like you kept suggesting with Monoma.

My ideas are good.

In a vacuum.

I never specified circumstances.

Homework was handed out eventually, and Kei slid hers into her bag with the intention of waiting for a tutoring session to actually explain the material she’d daydreamed through. If she zoned out any harder, people would probably assume she could sleep with her eyes open.
The end of the class day was interrupted by Uraraka and Iida, with Midoriya bringing up the rear while shouting happened in the direction of 1-A.

“Um,” said Homura.

“Terribly sorry to interrupt, but can we speak to Gekkō-san?” Iida asked quickly. “It’s important.”

Homura, who could hear explosions as well as anyone and was banned from being in the same room as Bakugō by a rightfully paranoid school administration, said to Kei and Shinsō, “Well, what are you waiting for? Go!”

“Hi, Shinsō-san!” Midoriya said as the five of them took off immediately. “Kacchan’s being stalled.”

“Who?” Shinsō asked, while Kei dragged him along.

“Bakugō-kun’s been fuming all period, so Tsuyu wound him up enough that Kirishima-kun and Kaminari-kun are acting as distractions,” Uraraka explained while she huffed and puffed. “They think he’s funny!”

“Nice to hear someone does,” Kei said, and soon enough all of them were out of the building.

“I can’t normally condone running in the halls,” Iida said, once they were safely outside and trotting down the hill. Shinsō was, amazingly, keeping up with everyone. “But it appears Bakugō-kun’s fixation on you has been causing trouble. It was best to avoid the situation.”

“Thanks, Iida-kun,” Kei told him. “He’s… Honestly, it’s been tiring to deal with Bakugō-san every day. I don’t know how you do it.”

Midoriya made a noise at the intersection between squeak, hiccup, and laugh. It was a sound Kei had never heard from him before, and she pursed her lips while debating if she could ask.

“What’d you call him, Midoriya-san?” Shinsō asked, while still catching his breath.

“Oh, uh. Kacchan,” Midoriya said, and both Kei and Shinsō blinked. “I mean, we’ve known each other since we were, uh, in preschool. We live in the same neighborhood.”

“What do we do now that we’ve escaped the dreaded ‘Kacchan’?” Shinsō asked the rest of the group.

Kei had an idea. “Well, now that I know you can keep up with Midoriya-san—”

“Don’t make me do five kilometers today,” Shinsō said in a rush. “I’ll die and I’ll take you with me.”

Kei did not have an idea. “Whiner.”
“Sadist.”

“I don’t understand,” Iida said, while Uraraka and Midoriya couldn’t bear to hide their curious expressions. “Are you…training together?”

“Yep. Shinsō-kun traded tutoring for training,” Kei said. She had a little bounce in her step, since the topic was now one in which everyone could participate. “It’s been fun, and I’m not failing classes anymore.”

“You’re better than I am at English,” Shinsō said, to throw a dog a bone.

“And worse at everything else except like…PE.” Kei had an explanation for only one of those things.

“It sounds like you’re both really good friends,” Uraraka commented, her hands behind her back as she walked a little sideways and kept up without a problem. “Did you two know each other before UA?”

“Nope,” said Shinsō. “And—Midoriya-san, what’s taking you?”

The four of them looked back, only to find Midoriya scribbling rapidly in a composition book not unlike the ones Kei used to record Shinsō’s progress. He’d slowed down considerably because he had to concentrate to write legibly, and as he approached they heard him muttering rapid-fire. Kei had focus to make out what was being said.

“—at ease with the concept of a five kilometer run, which may imply she is comfortable performing at that distance or further—”

“Um, Deku?” said Uraraka.

“—has the skill and competence to provide a training regimen for fellow students, which implies experience and—”

“Does he do this a lot?” Shinsō asked Iida.

“Often, but generally when I’ve seen him run into a new Quirk,” Iida said. To Kei, he added, “You must have made an impression, Gekkō-san.”

“Hey, Midoriya-san?” Kei asked, stepping closer so Midoriya would bump directly into her if he didn’t look up and see where he was going.

Her shadow falling over his notebook seemed to break the trance. He flushed red immediately and backed away from Kei, unused to her relatively flexible personal bubble. “Oh, uh, I’m sorry. I just got caught up in, um, analysis.”

“About me, right?”

“Y-yeah, sorry,” Midoriya mumbled. After a split second’s hesitation, he flipped the notebook open and held it out in front of Kei so she could read it. “Shinsō-san, you’re on the page right before Gekkō-san.”

“Cool,” Shinsō said as he read over Kei’s shoulder.

Midoriya, it appeared, was incredibly observant for a high school student. On top of noting the approximate gallon-per-minute output Kei had used during the various Sports Festival events, he’d
taken note of her physical state after each match. He kept track of her various techniques, linking the different forms of the Great Waterfall Technique and the Water Dragon Bullet to the appropriate variations she’d used. The big question marks were actually about backlash, because Kei had put on a show about being tired for a while there, and scale.

“Um, is it all right if I ask you a few questions?”

*Ask me no questions and I’ll tell you no lies.* Kei thought, but said, “Sure.”

The kid looked like Kei’d made his day. “Really? Great! Shinsō-san, do you mind going next?”

Shinsō was nonplussed. Behind him, Iida and Uraraka looked fondly exasperated. “I guess?”

“Okay, so the first question I have to ask is about—”

She spun a story about dehydration and water vapor, but the truth at the core of it was this: Isobu fueled most of the Sports Festival past the prelims. If Isobu didn’t exist, she would’ve had to either play the first two rounds far more conservatively or drop out of the tournament entirely. She probably should have done that anyway, but hindsight was twenty-twenty.

Kei lied a lot, via half-truths and obfuscation and exact wording. It was a part of the job.

And then it was Shinsō’s turn to be grilled to hell and back by a superhero fanboy. Behind them, Kei finally got a chance to exchange contact information with Iida and Uraraka, with Midoriya a bonus after the fact.

Spending the rest of the day just chatting and chilling was a better way to end the week than Kei had expected. Almost a vacation all its own.
Springtime of Youth

Chapter Summary

Everyone has a nice Sunday before internships hit.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“—and then Yūgao and Iruka laughed at me,” Hayate said, slumping as he concluded his story. Kei, who knew her brother better than most, could spot his theatrics at a glance. He was fishing for sympathy from someone who didn’t know better.

“That sucks,” said Shinsō. It didn’t appear the ploy had passed muster. It probably wouldn’t ever work if Hayate decided to be a brat immediately after Kei and Shinsō’s training sessions, because Shinsō didn’t have a lot of room for “woe is me” for anybody but himself after running five kilometers. “Did you get them back later?”

“Not yet. I’m asking everybody for ideas, and some people refuse to help.” Hayate sighed. He stuck his hands in the pockets of his hero-themed hoodie—Edge Shot this time—and grumbled more for effect than anything as he curled up on the park bench to stew.

“I already said I wouldn’t help him with a revenge prank or anything like one,” Kei explained when Shinsō looked at her curiously. “Hayate asked for firecrackers last year and didn’t tell me he was going to mess with someone.”

During his run at the Chūnin Exams, Hayate had managed to get his hands on almost all of the explosives Kei brought to Sunagakure. With her permission and almost her blessing, he’d then used a mix of actual explosives and bluffing skills to get his Suna-nin opponent to surrender when she thought she was overmatched. This, of course, hadn’t endeared him to anyone from the only desert-based country back home, but the victory was legitimate.

It was also the closest thing to a nonviolent victory in the event’s history.

“It was completely rules-legal!” Hayate argued, even as he dug through the duffle bag Kei brought to Sunday training. He emerged from its depths clutching a towel and a water bottle, and both of them got tossed in Kei’s direction.

With the enthusiasm of a well-tread sniping contest, Kei shot back, “That’s the only thing that saved you.” She did catch the items, though.

Hayate let a little cackle loose, then went silent.

“I don’t have context,” said Shinsō while watching this familiar display, “and I don’t want any.” He took the towel and bottle from Kei when she offered, dumping half of the water over his head and then scrubbing at his doused hair with the towel. It was certainly one way to cool down fast.

Kei, for her part, settled into cool-down stretches on the manicured park grass. Shinsō could catch up once he was done making his hair more of a bird’s nest.
Once finished, Shinsō looked less like he’d touched an electrical outlet with a fork. With his hair down, his normally-sharp features were softened with fatigue and purple frizz. As he started going through his assigned stretches, he said, “I wanted to ask you something.”

“And what’s that?” Kei asked, a little distracted. Somehow, Hayate had once again gotten his hands on her phone and was messing with it. Sneaky little thief-brother.

“You two mentioned before that mind control Quirks are, uh, more widespread where you’re from?”

Aw, shit.

“Yeah, we did?” Kei hoped this entire conversation wouldn’t devolve into a series of lies. Shinsō was decently perceptive, so wrangling his ideas about what was going on in Kei’s spotty background would be more difficult than it had to be. And if he thought he caught her in a lie, regaining his trust would be difficult, too. “The mechanisms are all different, though.”

“How so?”

“Well, Inoichi-sensei needs to be able to point at someone within about ten meters,” Kei said somewhat uncertainly, “while making that gesture Hayate did. Different gestures do different things.” Kei paused, thinking. “Kurenai-chan needs line of sight, but hers isn’t mind control so much as telepathic illusion, and people have fought off her control a couple of times. I don’t… think any of them work like yours does?”

“Hm.” Shinsō didn’t seem quite sure what to think, which was all right with Kei. “What’s the weirdest Quirk you’ve ever seen?”

_Hoo boy._ Kei took a second, careful to exclude any powers she or her friends had used within even theoretical view of anybody in this world. Growing trees was a unique ability, but it didn’t take a genius to link Obito’s green thumb with a vigilante if Kei’s phrasing gave too much away. Same with lightning bursts.

“Honestly, half the things I’ve seen at UA are weirder than anything back home.” She rubbed the bridge of her nose. “But… Well, I know someone who can manifest unbreakable chains out of thin air and control them at will.” Kushina, though maybe Naruto would grow up to learn a few Uzumaki techniques? “There’s a couple people who teleport”—to predetermined points, among Sensei’s many other powers—“and a whole family of people who can control their shadows, and those of anybody else they touch either physically or with the shadow. Not like Tokoyami-san.

“And… a couple of people who can change size like Mt. Lady, only it’s fueled by body fat? Couple of calligraphy Quirks, a few animal mutations… A few people with the ability to see through anything within fifty meters of them, regardless of direction…” And who were perennial bloodline theft targets. Kei pressed a knuckle against her lips as she thought. “A woman who could fuse with any body of water she touched”—Hōzuki Nanami—“a girl whose Quirk is basically ‘I am the surgical ward’”—Rin, along with Shizune and Tsunade—“and somebody who can shed his old body like a snake. Worse, actually.”

Orochimaru always stood out in a bad way.

Hayate plonked himself down next to Kei’s left side, “There’s the family who’re all living bug colonies.”

Shinsō choked on spit.

The Aburame clan was really the standout, wasn’t it? Kei only knew two of them to any real degree,
but Shimika and Shibi were quite even-tempered. “They’re nice people. Just don’t ever ask them their opinions on bug spray. Or kill a bug near them. Or say that they can’t possibly name all of them, because they can and a lot of them do.”

“What the hell have you been up to?” Hayate asked, while Shinsō was recovering.

“I try to learn from other people’s mistakes.”

“Apparently,” Hayate sassed back.

“That sounds…interesting,” Shinsō hedged. People always had a hard time getting over the explanation of the Aburame clan’s powers. It wasn’t even a kekkai genkai like the Sharingan was. “My parents’ Quirks are pretty boring compared to all…that.”

“What are they?” Hayate asked, turning his attention back to Shinsō immediately.

“Dad’s is called Insomnia, but he really just doesn’t need to sleep,” Shinsō said after a little while. “Mom’s…it’s like mine, only she doesn’t get nearly as much control. Whatever she says just seems like a good idea for about five minutes.”

Hayate snapped his fingers. “Oh, so like she’s unusually persuasive?” At Shinsō’s nod, he went on, “That sounds like it’d be pretty cool if, like, you were haggling over something and needed someone to see your way. Way more useful than our mom’s thing.”

Shinsō blinked. “Her Quirk?”

“Right.” Hayate’s cheer dimmed a little. “She was—I guess people could call it a villainous Quirk if she used it that way… Kei, what was it again?”

“A type of emotion projection,” Kei said blandly, as though they’d ever discussed this before. “Mom used it mainly to inflict fear.”

Talking about their mother hurt less than it used to, but that twist of grief struck Kei square in the sternum even after more than a year. In October, it’d be two solid years instead. She felt a matching downward swerve in Hayate’s chakra, and he leaned against her almost imperceptibly. Even if it wasn’t really them against the world, feelings didn’t necessarily follow rational lines.

She pinged his chakra though they were side by side.

Hayate, without looking or giving away what he was doing to their audience, zapped her with a tiny static shock before stealing her phone again.

Kei gave him a dirty look as she rubbed at her side. Electricity had a tendency to sneak past a lot of defenses.

At least Hayate bounced back quickly.

Shinsō, meanwhile, had a hard time deciding which of them he wanted to focus on. He settled into a seated position and leaned forward slightly, brows furrowed. He nodded toward Hayate, who was going to kill Kei’s phone battery life by playing some kind of microtransaction game sooner or later, and added, “He’s got a…empathy or mind-reading Quirk, right?”

“Close enough. It works really well if you suspect someone’s hiding something, because nobody can hide all their emotions from him. Always knew when I was hiding extra sweets from him.” Kei made a “ta-dah” motion with her hands. “Mom’s Quirk was more about pushing emotions on other people.
Same principle, but pointed outward.”

As for the question she was almost certain Shinsō wanted to ask, Quirks seemed to follow Mendelian inheritance rules, at least from what her surface-level research seemed to imply. Hayate’s choice of cover did not quite sync up with that understanding of the world once Kei’s “Quirk” was brought into consideration.

“Why fear?” Shinsō asked. His expression was thoughtful. “You could probably do a lot of good if you could do things like Ms. Joke. She makes people laugh too hard to see straight.”

“Mom didn’t like people much, so she used a tiny version to keep people from bothering her on the street.” Kei crossed her arms. “Like, with *us* she’d show love and joy and all the normal stuff, but there were a few times…” Kei lifted a hand and rubbed the lower end of her facial scar. “Basically, if I got hurt when someone was supposed to be keeping track of me and didn’t shrug it off, she’d snap at them.”

Sensei had gotten the rough edge of Gekkō Miyako’s temper on several occasions. Kei didn’t know if he’d still been wary of her by the end, but his version of killing intent was a lot more generalized for most combat usage. It hung over a battlefield like an eerie fog, coming a point only at the end of one of his pronged kunai. The samurai variant was as sharp and precisely placed as a needle in the eye.

“I remember one of them!” Hayate held up a finger, then paused to think about what he’d just said. “That was right after you fought Hima-san and she busted your shoulder. Mom was *so mad.*”

“I got better,” Kei said to Shinsō.

“Clearly.” Shinsō tilted his head to one side. “So, what happened?”

Kei relaxed subtly, because it didn’t appear the obvious question was forthcoming. Neither of them were being that careful with their wording, and if Shinsō paid close attention he’d be able to pick out that their mother wasn’t around anymore. Truthfully, it hardly mattered if he did as far as their cover stories went—sometimes, people just *died* —but bringing it up would’ve upset Hayate. Hopefully, Shinsō would stay clear of that conversational minefield like he had the literal one at the Sports Festival.

“She scared everyone ‘cept me.” Hayate had been all of six years old. Their mother hadn’t been *aiming* at him, because what the fuck.

“She started projecting fear to chase everyone except me and Hayate out of the room. Sensei teleported out.” Kei snapped her fingers. “Every time Mom got mad after that day, he was gone like *that.*”

“And was this the same teacher you almost blew up?” Shinsō raised an eyebrow. “Twice?”

“Explosives are easier to deal with than angry moms,” Kei said sagely. “You’ll learn that someday.”

Shinsō rested his chin against his palm. “Probably after I become a hero.”

“Well, unless something goes wrong.”

Shinsō’s gaze snapped to her. “Like?”

“Like unless you meet Bakugō-san’s mother.” Kei couldn’t quite imagine what Bakugō’s parents were like. Probably ferocious. “That’s explosions and angry moms in one go.”
“Ha,” said Shinsō, entirely unamused.

“Isn’t Bakugō that jerk who won the Sports Festival?” Hayate asked, looking up from Kei’s phone screen. “The one you both fought?”

Kei had briefly, mercifully forgotten that one of the conditions Sensei imposed was that Konoha got footage of the Sports Festival before anyone besides a live audience. Going by the glint in Hayate’s eye, he had not.

“Let’s not talk about Bakugō,” said Shinsō.

“Fine.” Hayate shrugged, then sprang to his feet. Kei’s phone landed solidly in her lap. “Say, do you two need me to get you like, snacks or something?”

“If you could run to the combini, I’d like onigiri,” Kei replied, and she tossed Hayate her (spare) wallet when he nodded to show he was listening.

“I’m fine,” Shinsō answered, moving into calf stretches.

Kei rolled her eyes. “Get him one, too.”

Hayate trooped off at a quick pace, waving over his shoulder as he went. Since his first trip to Musutafu, he was far more wary of hero and villain bullshit, and he was a lot less likely to get caught between maintaining his cover and booking it. After that bank robber encounter, Kei’d told him at length exactly what the Quirk laws covered with regard to self-defense.

Then she’d told him to just run, because it was faster. Cops asked fewer questions if somebody was in the middle of a crowd and fleeing like innocent bystanders were supposed to.

“So…” Shinsō seemed hesitant to break the silence. “He talks a lot. But I didn’t hear anything about why he got sent here. Mind elaborating?”

Kei sighed. “I didn’t want to get a bunch of lies when I asked him, so I just…decided not to ask at all. He seems happier talking about his friends, you know?” As Shinsō nodded along, Kei went on, “Hayate punched somebody who was badmouthing me back home. And kept punching ‘em.” She was briefly interrupted by a low whistle, which was probably appropriate for the occasion. “Sensei figured he could cool off here instead of there, at least until the shouting was over. I don’t think it’s working out the way he intended, but Sensei’s always been a bit lax when it comes to making sure we aren’t complete delinquents.”

“I can’t believe you were worried I’d get in trouble just for using my Quirk on Bakugō.” Shinsō shook his head. “Your brother’s a real tough guy, isn’t he?”

Kei didn’t quite know what to say to that. It was true, but not in the way Shinsō was probably thinking. “I guess.”

Shinsō eyed her for a while, brows furrowing. Then, as though to feel out the shape of the thought before committing, he dragged his next words out. “And ‘Sensei’ just bypassed…your entire family? I didn’t know teachers could do that, at least not once you’ve graduated.” There was a dread in the back of his voice that didn’t want to crawl out into the light, and Kei understood that.

“Sensei’s our legal guardian,” Kei said, because Hayate was long out of earshot. His sensing range wasn’t this wide, either. “Once it’s October, it’ll be two years since our mom died. Dad was…seven years ago, I think. Hayate doesn’t remember him much.”
Shinsō’s jaw worked for a second. If he’d had chakra, Kei would’ve felt his cringe as well at the same time she watched it happen. Then, in a mortified mumble: “Sorry.”

That word always did seem inadequate, didn’t it? Kei leaned back so her weight was mainly on her hands, saying, “You didn’t know. It is what it is, now. And I think it helped Hayate to talk about her.”

Shinsō still grimaced, knowing he’d put a foot squarely on top of a landmine and not wanting to press his luck. At least Hayate had already left to go get snacks.

“Just keep acting normal,” Kei said, as though Obito wouldn’t be coming back to pick Hayate up later that night. Her brother had only been effectively “suspended” for the length of Sunday, and the time zones made bypassing that restriction fairly simple.

“He’ll pick up whatever I’m feeling, though,” Shinsō pointed out. At least he was finished with his exercises.

“Not if he’s distracted. And food always works.” Kei got to her feet. She uncoiled as she stretched, flexing her joints to be sure all of them properly popped. “And you need one, too. So, let’s get started.”

Shinsō obeyed, though he clearly didn’t quite agree. While he had more than a few ideas to argue, his devotion to his training obviously came first. If Kei didn’t know for a fact that Shinsō actually paid attention to rest day restrictions—because she’d gone over her logic for them—she’d have worried more.

Kei slapped his first, hesitating punch aside with her left hand. “Back to basics. Show me how you start out.”

“This again,” Shinsō grumbled. He withdrew and shuffled so his feet were shoulder-width apart, with his weight on his back foot. One fist hovered about even with his sternum, while his other was out in front and slightly uncurled.

“You’re improving, but there’s no reason to slack off now,” Kei replied, keeping her hands away from her torso and stalking around Shinsō to check his stance.

When she found a point where it seemed like he’d gotten sloppy, she’d poke him with a fingertip or nudge him with her shoe, and he’d move this way and that until she was satisfied. When they’d first started, he’d grump the entire time and they’d both lose patience fairly quickly. Now, Shinsō was good enough that the corrections were minor.

“Okay, throw a real—” And this time, his fist lashed out instantly, and Kei’s reflexive counterstrike was another slap that redirected it over her shoulder. He’d almost put enough force behind the blow to qualify as a decent punch. But then, Kei was biased.

“That better?” Shinsō taunted.

Kei caught his next punch and it was on. After all, it was training time.

Shinsō lasted two and a half minutes of actual full-speed, full-contact sparring, which was better than he had before. Normal people didn’t train for the type of impossible endurance shinobi could bring to bear—and frankly most shinobi didn’t either. The only reason the fight went on that long was because Shinsō’s stubbornness wouldn’t let him back down.

Kei was still taking it easy on him, but most fights during the Sports Festival hadn’t exactly been
knock-down, drag-out affairs anyway. And hopefully Shinsō’s hero career would focus on ambushes. Even Aizawa-sensei didn’t have the kind of endurance necessary to, say, wear Gai out. And he didn’t have a ton of fallbacks.

While Hayate’s chakra was still a bright point of light in her mind’s eye, she could hear two voices bouncing back to their spot in the park. “Hey, is that…?”

“Midoriya-san?” Shinsō asked, as the interloper came into view.

“I found the bone-breaking kid!” Hayate announced, throwing his arms to the side as though to say “ta-dah!” The effect was somewhat ruined because both of them had grocery bags dangling from their hands. Midoriya’s bags actually looked heavy.

“Um, I think I’ve been kidnapped. Friendly-kidnapped.” Midoriya looked down at Hayate, who wasn’t really that much shorter than him. He fidgeted. “Gekkō-san, is he your brother?”

“Well,” Kei began, only to watch as Hayate flung a wrapped onigiri at Shinsō. Then he upended the tiny shopping bag and proved definitively that he had, once again, decided to eat her food. “…He’s currently my least favorite brother. Hayate, what the hell?”

Hayate stuck his tongue out at her. “Only brother!”

Shinsō shrugged and stood back to watch the carnage. He was already unwrapping his snack, because he knew better than to get involved with this mess.

“Excuse me, Midoriya-san,” said Kei as she strode past Shinsō. She bowed briefly to Midoriya. “I’m sorry Hayate interrupted your afternoon shopping—”

“—Oh, it’s fine—” Midoriya tried to say.

“—but I need to do something really quick,” Kei finished.

Hayate was already running. Smart kid.

Midoriya watched the Gekkō siblings until they were fully out of view, Hayate apparently fleeing for his life. “Is…?”

Hitoshi bit into his onigiri and chewed for a while before answering. “Get to know her, and you’ll realize this is what she’s really like.”

Midoriya blinked owlishly. “Wow. That’s…not at all how she acts at school.”

“Not even close.”

Chapter End Notes

Hitoshi’s parents (at least as they’re conceived of in this story) are a reference to the artwork of Tumblr user keiid, whose excellent art partly inspired this entire fic.
Doppelgänger

Chapter Summary

Kei gets called to the office again. Well. It’s an office, at least.

On Monday, class resumed for the General Studies students. The Hero kids went off to their internships instead, leaving UA short thirty-nine vibrant goofballs and a Bakugō. From what Iida and Uraraka said, the kids were going to end up all over Japan for the week. Uraraka was going to visit Gunhead and learn martial arts, while Midoriya was bound for the care of an older hero called Gran Torino. Iida was sticking with his brother’s Team Idaten agency, and they’d heard whispers that Todoroki chose his father’s agency and Bakugō was off to Best Jeanist’s base of operations.

Kei was just glad it seemed like it was going to be a quiet week for once.

You have just jinxed yourself in a spectacular fashion.

How disaster-prone can this damn school be?

…Were you not hired for the express purpose of dealing with its known disaster-attracting properties?

Kei tried not to think about that most of the time. She did a fairly good job of not thinking about a whole lot when at school. It was a cultivated talent by this point. Aside from Kayama-sensei and Present Mic, most teachers’ voices just blended together.

And then something happened that hadn’t since the first week of school:

“Oh, did you need something?” Cementoss asked the student who poked his head into the classroom.

“Gekkō-san, uh, could you come with me? A teacher wants to speak to you.”

Welp. Kei got to her feet and trudged out of the room after the messenger, who eventually led her to the faculty offices again. It’d been a couple days since she’d last visited, which was probably a record if she disregarded the lead-up to the Sports Festival. Sensei would’ve been so proud if Kei was actually giving him daily updates. If nothing else, he’d laugh at her situation once Obito told him about it.

The messenger left immediately, and Kei faced down the office door with the vague feeling of unease that might’ve been actual nervousness in someone else. As it was, she was just tired of being jerked around when there were better things to do.

Kei was counting “attending Modern Lit” in that category now. School had lowered her standards.

She headed through the door.

Kei somehow wasn’t surprised to find Aizawa-sensei and Vlad King were the only two teachers in the faculty office. Their classes were both off to different cities for the rest of the week for their internships. The shocker was that, wonder of wonders, Aizawa-sensei was actually awake.
“I was just leaving,” said Vlad King, and Kei scooted out of the doorway to let 1-B’s homeroom teacher pass.

On a personal level, she actually liked him more than Aizawa-sensei solely because she’d found a post online featuring him out of costume with his pet bulldog. On the other hand, Kei had no idea what he thought of her in return. Maybe it was best just to stay out of his way where possible. It wasn’t like she thought of his class as anything more than a mission footnote under normal circumstances.

Ah, well. Every new experience came with a few missed opportunities left by the side of the road.

“What are you waiting for?” Aizawa-sensei asked, and that was Kei’s prompt to sit down in an abandoned office chair across from him. She supposed it wasn’t much of a mystery who’d called her here.

“Aizawa-sensei,” Kei said with a little bow, which was about what he’d ever get from her. She didn’t actually dislike Aizawa-sensei—that would’ve implied that they had more contact than they did—but she did respect his morals and his methods to a degree. Ambush fighting was pragmatic to a fault. He’d push himself past his limit to protect his students, and Kei got that.

Kei was also sure the respect wasn’t mutual. She knew plenty of people on both sides of the world divide considered her more of a walking weapon than a person.

“What have you been teaching Shinsō?” Aizawa-sensei asked, getting directly to the point with no fanfare. Typical of the other times she’d talked to him. He sounded just as tired, too.

“Basic self-defense,” Kei replied, just as blunt. She tried to respond in kind as she ticked off on her fingers, “Along with some general fitness exercises, because he needed them to compete successfully in the Sports Festival. No Quirk training. Limited strategy brainstorming.” She put her hand down. “Shinsō-kun did the rest on his own.”

Aizawa-sensei didn’t blink. Knowing his Quirk, that probably would’ve been more intimidating if Kei actually had one to cancel. And if the guy didn’t always look like he was in dire need of eyedrops.

Kei crossed her arms. “You’re interested in Shinsō-kun.”

It was not remotely a question, and Aizawa-sensei didn’t answer.

Kei considered her options. Though, yes, it wasn’t really her business what Aizawa-sensei did or didn’t do, she’d never been entirely capable of letting mysteries lie. Sometime the answers were worse than the curiosity, but knowing things was how she’d managed to live past thirteen.

Fifteen years and counting.

Hell yeah.

She’d need to throw Aizawa-sensei a bone to get anything in return. Probably hard enough to concuss him.

Nah.

“Shinsō-kun wants to be a hero more than anything. If you give him a chance, he’ll grab it with both hands,” Kei said after a while, While back-sassing you the entire time, because he’s good at it. She bowed again, to exactly the same angle she had before. “If that’s all, I’ll need a note back to class.”
“Not yet,” Aizawa-sensei said.

Kei settled back into place.

She didn’t ask if her association with Shinsō was taking a toll on his chances to become a hero. While she and Aizawa-sensei didn’t like each other much, Kei knew enough about him from observation to dismiss the idea that he’d let his bias affect how he dealt with Shinsō’s prospects. Aizawa-sensei had been the one to speak up during the Sports Festival on behalf of everyone without a physical Quirk, even obliquely praising them while dismissing Kei’s cover persona. If he actually did succumb to the pitfalls of Quirk profiling, she’d be disappointed. Even if it wasn’t her call.

But Aizawa-sensei didn’t seem interested in continuing that line of thought. “You changed your methods after your first brush with combat. Why?”

Kei thought back, looking up at the ceiling tiles. She had fought in a mode visually similar to a primal fury during the USJ incident, but Kei hadn’t been the central figure in the following confrontation with Stain. Other than clobbering people’s spirits during the Sports Festival, she’d been kept on the sidelines. It wasn’t like she was actually going to take the figurative gloves off around a bunch of kids. That would’ve been completely unwarranted overkill.

“At the time, I was busier trying to keep a tough enemy occupied,” Kei said, while leaving aside the little detail that she hadn’t known that Nōmu could regenerate prior to ripping its limbs off its body. Or his. She hadn’t gotten any updates regarding what the hell went into making Chickenface McMuder. “And then there was the other guy. I modified my response based on what I thought the enemy could take from me and survive. I went overboard and was already disciplined for my tunnel vision.”

By being punched out of the building. One could argue that was almost justice, if they had a mind to.

Aizawa just kept staring.

This was probably what it felt like to deal with Batman, but with a superpower. Except that his superpower was basically to knock somebody else down to standard human strength, so maybe that made him what Batman wanted to be when he grew up.

“As for the incident I missed,” said Kei, as Isobu was already thinking of ways to counter Stain’s Quirk in the event she ran into him without her boys, “I went over the likeliest scenarios with them ahead of time, so we could even work separately under the proper rules of engagement. It was a success.” She sat back, finally meeting Aizawa’s gaze again. “But there’s something that’s been bothering me ever since I started living in Musutafu.”

A spark of interest flickered in Aizawa-sensei’s gaze, but it was smothered by affected apathy before Kei could pounce. “And what does your outsider’s perspective have to tell us? You’ve had time to observe the world.”

The thought had bubbled up from the depths of superhero fiction from ages past, but Kei could still remember the gist. She dug into her memory, and Isobu’s, and found the relevant quote under a Russian accent and two layers of method acting.

“If you could make God bleed, people will cease to believe in him. I just have to sit here and watch as the world consumes you.”

Tony Stark wasn’t Yagi-sensei-slash-All-Might, but sometimes plot points and destinies had a way
of repeating themselves. Kei didn’t understand the mechanism by which All Might assumed his emaciated form, but someone had clearly already put the first nail in his coffin. Healthy people didn’t look like that. This world relied so heavily on their faith in heroes—and All Might more than all other candidates by far—that the peace was straining to its breaking point.

The USJ incident might not have been the dinner bell, but the vultures were circling already. Kei didn’t want to see how many more blows the system could take before the entire beast collapsed.

“The peace we’re experiencing has a single point of failure,” Kei said, as though expecting the walls to grow ears, “and that’s...worrying.” Which was a severe understatement. At Aizawa-sensei’s minute nod, she explained quietly, “The World Symbol of Peace is powerful, genuine, and I like him just fine, but I didn’t grow up thinking ‘wow, All Might will always save the day!’ And everyone here seems to just take it for granted.”

“If All Might died tomorrow—though I hope he’s secretly immortal—then people would lose faith in heroes like they never have before. It’s just not sustainable to keep putting everyone’s hopes for societal safety on one person.” Kei rested her chin against her knuckles as she felt around the problem and wondered how to put it into words a way that would be compelling, even if Aizawa-sensei didn’t like her.

If Kei knew her luck, and if she could make a prediction about how worlds with superheroes tended to work, then the decades of peace would present their bill soon. Principal Nezu may not have explained the shape of the threat to Kei or to Sensei, but Kei didn’t need to be a literature major to know that there was a lot coming down the pipeline. It was a feeling based on genre convention and gut feeling, but it was there. Kei’s record of surviving past Naruto being born was down to following that instinct like a compass.

She wasn’t afraid for her safety this time. She was worried about the thousand-odd kids who attended UA at this exact moment.

Kei supposed it was another reason Sensei had chosen her for this mission. Though she often came off as unapproachable, she could grow to care for people quicker than many of her yearmates while not giving up any other advantages of her background. Not that she’d tell Aizawa-sensei about that.

The ability to delegate was what made a change sustainable in the end. Sensei handed work off to subordinates when he knew their skills outmatched his in a given specialty. Here, Kei’s knowledge was worth her weight in gold.

“There are thousands of heroes across the world who owe their current drive to being inspired by All Might and people like him,” Aizawa-sensei explained in a low voice. Kei didn’t ask if Aizawa-sensei was one of them, because she really had no idea how to ask how old everyone was while still saying polite. “Including not a few of our students.”

Kei nodded slowly. The First Hokage and his spotty legacy sprang to mind, though Kei’s reasons for considering Senju Hashirama a lousy role model had more to do with his lack of foresight than anything. “We have—had—a few people like him. Not nearly as important in the end.”

And a fair chunk of them were dead.

“But fame means enemies, like we’ve seen. Once might be happenstance,” Kei said, closing her eyes as she listened to the murmur of Isobu’s thoughts. “Twice might be coincidence if there is a second encounter with villains. But three is a pattern, and every incident could be an escalation.”

Aizawa-sensei was silent for a long time. Long enough that, if he was a guest in her home, Kei
might’ve offered tea. Or—if he wasn’t a guest and was hanging out like Batman waiting to ambush her instead—she might’ve literally booted him out of her building and fifth floor balconies be damned. He was a bit catlike, so he’d probably manage to land on his feet.

“Gekkō,” Aizawa-sensei said finally.

Kei eyed him.

“You’ve said your piece, and you’re reaching conclusions that others might not. Keep those observational skills sharp.” He was already digging the yellow sleeping bag out from under his desk. With his other hand, Aizawa-sensei flicked a signed paper pass so that it neatly landed in Kei’s open hand. “You’re burning class time now.”

She got to her feet, tucking the pass into a pocket. “Have a nice nap, Aizawa-sensei.”

“Get out already,” was his grumpy reply. Someone had missed his naptime.

Kei waited until Aizawa-sensei disappeared under his desk to pull a face because—unlike some people she could name—he didn’t have a literal superpower for detecting sass. Thanks to her status as a jinchūriki, she’d had to interact with more than a few people who didn’t like her for reasons outside of her control, but dealing with heroes who did it always seemed to set her teeth on edge.

We should—

No.

Kei got to her feet with the pass in hand, but ended up holding the door open for someone else to enter. It was the polite thing to do. Vlad King, now carrying a pile of paperwork that might’ve come from the administration center, nodded to her as he passed and slammed the entire stack down on a desk decorated with Present Mic memorabilia. Ah, he’d been tapped as office gofer, then. Always such an honor.

“Thank you—” and Vlad King cut himself off once he got a good look at her face, glancing immediately for Aizawa-sensei’s yellow cocoon. “Ah. Head back to class, all right?”

“Yes, sir,” Kei replied, and once again skittered out of the faculty room. She did not go quite so quickly that she missed the exchange that followed.

“I didn’t know you had a kid, Eraser.” Vlad King laughed.

“I don’t.”

“You sure?”

“I don’t, so leave me alone already.”

“Like hell! I’m gonna go find Mic—”

Kei headed back to Modern Literature without waiting for the rest of that conversation.

Once there, she made an addition to her half-finished sketch of Isobu adorably chewing on a jellyfish. After a few careful pencil strokes, her best brain buddy was gnawing on a wild-haired Eraserhead scribble.

I like the look.
So do I, Kei thought as she added cross-hatching.

**If you want to make it more accurate...** Isobu trailed off, as though realizing for once that he could be a bit demanding.

*Hit me.*

“Are you even paying attention?” Shinsō hissed from his diagonal desk.

“Absolutely,” Kei lied, and added a few extra horns because Isobu wanted them.

“Then what was the answer to the last question, Gekkō-kun?” asked Cementoss from the front.

Kei didn’t know. Checking with Isobu yielded no answers, either, because he was far more interested in his doodle likeness inflicting pain on another doodle subject. Therefore, all she said was, “Military expansionism.”

“No,” Cementoss said, as the class tittered.

Kei shrugged and set her art-hijacked notebook aside, putting on an air of polite disinterest for the remainder of class time. She didn’t get hit with chalk or questioned again, but staring into space just above Cementoss’s head had a way of making the rest of the period pass uncannily quickly. It was why she’d developed the slacker persona in the first place. As with all acting, it was easier to pull off if the mask fit.

After class, Shinsō attempted to soften the trainwreck that Modern Lit always was by helping her study with him in the library before training. It helped exactly as much as it always did—barely at all—but at least he tried. Getting the coursework through Kei’s head was an effort akin to trying to drill through a mountain with his bare hands, but Shinsō wouldn’t have come to UA if he didn’t have the drive to face challenges. Even if he was also getting out of attempting a five-kilometer run at the same time.

In return, Kei held off from telling him about her theory regarding Aizawa’s interest, because she didn’t want to jinx the possibility by speaking it aloud.
Kei manages to find trouble the second she's on her own, because of course she does.

Solo patrol was weird.

To be clear, Kei was never completely alone, because Isobu took up a lot of headspace and usually drank in the sights and sounds of city life with the air of someone who knew the clock was ticking away. Sooner or later, they’d both be back in Konoha and the newness would be gone. But when it came to physical bodies, Kei just wandered around city rooftops until she found trouble or something worth observing. It was inefficient in a world of security cameras and public transit, but it gave her time to think.

And it meant she was pulling Batman-esque schedules without the benefit of either a support network or a shitload of gadgets. Or a day job that allowed her to sleep through the entire shift. Woo.

I cannot bypass the human need for sleep for you.

Don’t I know it, Kei thought.

She’d once again stolen another person’s appearance—Nara Shikane this time—and put an unmarked mask over the false face. That was about the only change.

Kei hadn’t come back to Hosu City until now. Stain’s run-in with Obito and Kakashi had initially convinced her she wouldn’t have to.

Isobu rolled his eye. Wishful thinking.

She didn’t do a lot of number-crunching during her day job (either as a student or a shinobi), but many other people did. Reading news reports and chatting with her teammates revealed a few useful scraps of conjecture. While running across rooftops without teammates, anything helped. Even a mental review sheet.

It is not as though anything in the city can be a threat to us.

True. But it should be a rule that I don’t end up somewhere alone and just end up talking to myself for three hours.

You could try talking to me instead.

Don’t I always? Still, Kei came to a crunching stop on rooftop gravel to rest, think, and see what else she could find.

First of all, the security breach that let Stain loose again was almost certainly the work of the League of Villains. While the organization seemed to have a whopping two whole field agents, the suspect pool was pretty shallow to start with when teleportation was so rare. Thanks to his power and judgment, Kurogiri was vital to their operations. It was just that his utility was also why the heroes hadn’t tracked down the fledgling organization and given the beatdown of a lifetime.
Second, Stain was a serial killer with a known modus operandi and a now-publicized Quirk. While her boys had brought him down with little effort, most heroes didn’t have Quirks specifically suited for fighting someone who could kill at their leisure immediately after drawing their enemy’s blood. Several heroes running around Musutafu weren’t even passable fighters by Kei’s standards. With UA right there, she had to wonder if they became complacent over time. It was a state of affairs that Stain seemed to take as his personal bugbear, if the crime statistics she’d read were accurate. And then people died.

Third, news reports followed the Hero Killer with truly ridiculous focus. There was a hero otaku culture written into the blood of the society, and it came with a corresponding villain-focused counterpart. Kei figured that if at least one world could have serial killer fanclubs—Hannibal Lecter being a premier fictional example—then there were probably plenty of stooges. While she found the entire concept personally distasteful, the information made tracking Stain’s movements easy in broad strokes.

At least it told her he was still in Hosu City. That was still something.

On top of everything else, his stabbing incidents generated a level of paranoia among the hero populace that Kei found more annoying than anything. It was hard to be a masked loon running loose across rooftops and the like if the heroes suddenly started looking up more often.

**If not for this area’s ballooning population, even that wariness would not be a factor. You would have already beaten this human into submission.**

The Tokyo Metropolis had millions of people living in it. Finding a specific person in that kind of haystack hadn’t magically become less of a pain in the ass since Kei’s teammates found Stain the first time.

**You seem bored,** commented Isobu.

*I am,* Kei replied. She sat down on top of a rooftop air conditioning outflow and pulled out a kunai to pry stones from the soles of her boots. While the *scritch-scritch* noise joined the general buzz of city life, Kei pointed her thoughts toward Isobu. *It’s just really weird to be on cleanup duty like this. I mean, I know the principal couldn’t ask us to do anything a second time, but…*

**Battlefield cleanup was once one of your duties,** said Isobu. **This could hardly be more onerous.**

*That was more than four years ago. This is now.* It remained the worst single responsibility of Kei’s Third Shinobi World War experiences. *Events* had it beaten by a country mile, but those were entirely different.

Isobu sighed. **You could attempt a street-level patrol in disguise, rather than continuing to extend your suffering.**

...*I could.* Kei glanced around to make sure no one was in immediate view, then slipped off the side of the air conditioning unit. A quick leap had her over the side of the building and sliding down brickwork to the alleyway below, and she replaced her full disguise with a new one: Sensei, but in city-appropriate civilian clothes.

Look, it didn’t have to be original. Her disguises rarely ever were. And it was still a lot easier to get around cities at night as an adult than as a teenager.

Wandering around the streets was more visually stimulating than rooftops were, at least. At nine-thirty, the streets were less congested than they were during peak commuter hours. It gave Kei a
better view of the heroes on patrol, the salarymen out to find a decent bar, and potential trouble spots as normal people would see them.

Isobu sent a general impression of unease.

Kei noticed. *Does the city bother you?*

**Does it not bother you?** Isobu’s chakra shifted. Beach stone flew. The view is different from the ground. The sheer number of human bodies—

“—so creepy, isn’t it?” said a man’s voice from the nearest bar. He, and his grunge-era counterpart, appeared to be on a smoke break. “I mean, I know heroes have masks a lot, but why haven’t we heard of these new ones? Most heroes have marketing and agencies.”

“Fuck if I know, man,” said the other. “They seem like they’re multiplying.”

Kei wandered closer, keeping partly to the shadows. There was a trick to seeming like one wasn’t eavesdropping was to have a phone out and keeping eyes fixed firmly on the screen while scrolling. She had internet access via her phone, but it seemed like listening to incidental conversations worked out more often than not.

“All these sightings—might as well be trying to spot a tsuchinoko,” said the second guy. “It’s the animal masks that throw me off.”

Kei paused, definitely no longer keeping her attention on her phone. *Hang on, are there any candid photos…?*

A quick search of news sites and…there were a few images. The USJ had been pretty thoroughly mangled by the time Kei had been hurled through the structure, and Kei already knew her V2 cloaked form was considered a random rogue villain not captured in the moment. It was, however, the first time she saw Obito’s ANBU mask in any detail except in person.

Scrolling a little more and digging through a few more equivalents of cell phone video gave her more evidence. Blurry images, mostly, but she could make out the profiles of Kakashi and Obito’s masks. The captions declared the pictures had been taken during the same timeframe where her boys had been chasing Ingenium.

Over nine million people, and nearly that many cell phone cameras.

Well, shit.

Kei made her way to the train station over the next few minutes, changing disguises twice more before landing again on Genma’s form after a mental roulette. The obligatory phantasmal toothpick senbon twitched as she found an alcove and typed out a message on her phone. Her train back to Musutafu wouldn’t arrive for a few minutes, so she waited outside for the first announcement.

**TMNT-TNT:** Your costumes are a no-go. Gonna have to stop.

**TMNT-TNT:** Back to basics, here.

There was no answer to her half-oblique order, and there wouldn’t be for two days. Obito wasn’t scheduled to come back for at least that long. Sensei might need him for something, as far as Kei knew, so all she could do was give her teammate a heads-up and cross her fingers.

Once again, the Transformation jutsu was earning its keep. Somehow.
She was getting a lot of mileage out of the simplest tricks in the ninja book.

At least when it came to surveillance cameras. Kei’s night vision was at least good enough to catch other shadows in motion. One in particular was a little less subtle than he thought he was. She hadn’t gotten a good look yet, but hostile attention kept the hairs on the back of her neck raised. There was a fine line between battlefield hyperawareness and paranoia, and Kei liked to think she knew each side from the other.

Well, there was no reason to potentially get civilians involved in a superpower fight. She’d just have to miss her train.

Kei walked out of the train station and into the nearest dead end.

“Well?” Kei asked the seemingly empty air. She faced the back of the alley as though entirely unconcerned with her new stalker. “If it’s a fight you want, let’s get this over with.”

This particular asshole didn’t seem to be the monologuing type. There was a noise Kei would later describe as an artificial rasp, almost like cloth sliding over cloth. As she tilted her head back, coils of cloth whipped through the air like a living thing and surrounded her before she even turned around properly.

Not precisely the attack she’d expected. Unseen under her transformation technique, Kei made the single-handed seal she used as a mnemonic for her chakra scalpels before the bindings tightened and yanked her off her feet.

You could have avoided that.

Kei was in midair by the time she replied, *Gluing myself to the ground doesn’t seem to work out much outside of sword fights*. Besides, she wanted to see where this went.

Perhaps against her attacker’s expectations, Kei leaned into the tension on the cloth and ended up landing in a crouch even with her arms pinned to her stomach. She let the senbon fade out of existence and twisted her neck about as far as she could, trying to get a better look at whoever thought she was worth attacking. Or thought Genma was worth attacking, given her current disguise.

Her captor was still a little too backlit to properly see. Probably a guy, though.

“You’re under arrest.” And…that was a very familiar voice.

Kei looked down at her bindings. This was a familiar weapon, too. Kind of looked like that goddamn duct tape scarf she’d seen around a lot lately.

*You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me.* She groaned wordlessly in Genma’s voice even as she turned and faced Aizawa-sensei, hardly straining against the capture weapon. “Really? Use your Quirk on me and see what happens.”

I could—

*No thanks.*

Then Aizawa-sensei’s eyes glinted with red light and his hair stood on end more than anybody Kei had ever seen who wasn’t a Saiyan. When his arms weren’t busted and if he got the jump on someone like this, she could kind of see how villains would suddenly find themselves on the losing end of a beating. She’d missed most of whatever had happened at the USJ on his end, at least before bleeding everywhere activated the seal.
And on Kei’s end, nothing happened.

There was a brief “what the fuck” pause.

Then: “Gekkō?”

“I did say …” Kei muttered as she dropped Genma’s form in a theatrical puff of smoke. In her masked form, she concluded in her own voice, “…that I was only using a fraction of my real power. To your face.”

The cloth unbound itself all at once so fast that it cracked like a whip in the still air. Kei watched it pull back, thinking automatically of tape measures, and she flexed her armored arms as soon as she was free. At least she hadn’t needed to destroy his stuff to get free. That would’ve been awkward.

More awkward.

If he’d been a villain, it probably would’ve been fatal for someone. Her curious mood had saved lives and the mission.

Kei didn’t know if she was supposed to say something into the silence. Generally speaking, neither ninja nor wannabe-ninja were much for talking. Kei could, of course, but it wasn’t like she needed Aizawa-sensei to dislike her more. There was no need to keep digging once already at the bottom of a deep hole.

“The train departing for Tatooin station. Train departing for Tatooin station.”

Dammit. Now she’d have to wait another twenty minutes.

“This never happened,” Aizawa-sensei said, once Kei finally decided it was probably fine to just fucking leave already. His scarf was coiled around his neck again, Kei was free, and the train was probably out of reach unless she made a scene.

“Agreed,” she replied in an equally terse tone.

Kei departed the alley by scrabbling up the walls and over the nearest roof. It wasn’t strictly necessary, but leaving like that made her feel better about what had just happened.

A little.

The next day, there was a police report that added the hero Native to Stain’s casualty list.

And the one after that, he made his first move into a different city.

Musutafu.
Shinsō missed the free period on Saturday, which was ordinarily when he and Kei would take a break for snacks. Without the hero kids, General Studies basically had the cafeteria to themselves until a Support student’s experimental design accidentally-on-purpose exploded from inside their bag. There was no smoke, but most of the people who’d already gotten food from Lunch Rush decided discretion was the better part of valor. Kei heard later that Hatsume was involved.

Kei didn’t see him again until free period was over, and he stared into space as much as she did instead of taking notes. Since Kei sat behind him and just outside of peripheral vision, she decided not to risk drawing attention while Ectoplasm was trying to teach mathematics. While yes, she’d snuck notes past people with better observation skills before, Ectoplasm had a penchant for clones and Kei hadn’t built a reputation of being a good student. She ended up waiting the rest of the school day out in time marked by silent sketches.

By the end, she had a decent scribble-comic of Sensei being flattened by all eight of Kakashi’s dogs. It was cute.

It was also distracting her from a serial killer’s blatant escalation. Even if Backdraft was nearly useless in combat, he was a Musutafu hero and Stain had gone after him right in the middle of town. UA was right fucking there. Hell, All Might was right there.

**It is the kind of occurrence that gives one a headache, does it not? I am suddenly glad my brain is all chakra and no meat components.**

Kei did the mental equivalent of throwing her hands up in frustration. *Fuck it. This time we’re crushing his arms. Permanently.* Obito would be around to give her a quick getaway if she needed it. It shouldn’t take this much stressing to put this shithead down.

Supervillains were such drama queens.

And then the final bell rang. With little else she could do as a UA student, she cornered Shinsō by the shoe lockers for an explanation about his earlier absence.

“What happened?” She lived in Musutafu. She had a reason to be jumpy. Shinsō didn’t. That she knew of. But if there’d been an incident with his family—civilian or not—wouldn’t the school have pulled him out of class for the entire day?

Kei’s brain leapt from bad possibilities to worse ones if left alone.

Kei had seen Shinsō shell-shocked after his first real fight, spiraling in frustration, being a smug jerk to get people going, and laughing helplessly at the antics of people around him. The mood she
picked up from him now was...something new. Shinsō’s behavior all day had been dazed, but in a vaguely positive way. Being giddy with excitement wasn’t cool, so Shinsō’d patched his persona together through sheer force of will. It had the side-effect of planting his head firmly in the clouds and keeping a mild tremble going through his body for the entire fucking afternoon.

If he’d had a super speed Quirk like the Flash, Kei imagined he’d have accidentally vibrated a hole through the floor by now. “Seriously. What’s going on?”

Shinsō snapped to attention when she poked him. His eyes darted around, took in the other students seemingly for the first time, and he hissed, “Not here.”

Kei allowed herself to be dragged to one of the first-floor classrooms, which had long been abandoned by the resident class. Ah, third-year students. So studious. So not here.

Kei managed to slide the door shut behind them without Shinsō even really noticing. She ended up settling by the demo desk while Shinsō paced around the front of the room.

“So, are you going to actually say—”

“Eraserhead wants to train me!” Shinsō burst out, his voice almost cracking. And Kei took it back—if she’d thought he was buzzing before, this took the cake. He looked like he’d willingly run a ten-kilometer route with that much energy. If he’d had Uraraka’s Quirk, he’d be dancing on the ceiling.

This wasn’t a surprise, but Kei ruthlessly cut down her second thoughts about Aizawa-sensei and their repeated unpleasant encounters. Her third thoughts went through as, “Congratulations, Shinsō-kun! That’s amazing.”

“I didn’t—I wanted someone to see me in my first year. To see what I can do.” Shinsō paced around the room, whatever product in his hair giving up the ghost as he ran his hands through it. “Holy shit, holy shit—h-he’s an underground hero, exactly like—”

Shinsō talked fast when he was excited. Kinda reminded Kei of Midoriya. Or Rin when a new medical development was in the works and she needed to infodump on all the research she’d done to get it so far along.

“His Quirk works best from ambush, just like yours. And no strength boost or explosions,” Kei put in, because it sounded like Shinsō would appreciate the fuel being dumped on this fire. She kind of liked watching runaway chemical reactions.

“Yeah! Only real hero fans even know he exists most of the time,” Shinsō went on, jumping on the thought bandwagon. He bounced in place a little, eyes shining like they hadn’t since the Sports Festival. “And his main thing is a carbon fiber nanoweave capture weapon, and it’s not a power—I could learn to do that! I-I don’t care how hard practicing might be, I can do it!”

“I’m glad somebody else is finally seeing it,” Kei said warmly. “It’s about time.”

Then again, a month into the first semester of school wasn’t that bad of a record. She’d had teachers who took two months to learn everyone’s names, and if she’d lived long enough in that first life to get a teaching degree, she probably would’ve been one of them. Her skill at attaching names to faces now was a survival instinct.

“Do—you know if I can get something from the Support Department?” Shinsō’s eyes were still wide with excitement. “We’ve talked about ambushes and getting around people knowing what my Quirk is, so if—that thing, the voice-changer?”

“I’ve been calling it a vocoder.”
“Right, one of those. If I could get voice samples and use that to get past people—” Shinsō’s hand covered his mouth for a split second as he contemplated. His thoughts had to be rushing around in circles by now. His internal hamster wheel was pulling overtime. “If I’m not in the Hero Department, I don’t know—”

“I’m sure Aizawa-sensei will tell you about that technical stuff.” Kei pressed a knuckle to her lower lip. “Honestly, I’m not an expert on the rules between departments or things like that.”

Shinsō nodded, suddenly somber, as though something was sinking through the wall built by his enthusiasm. Sort of like ice destroying stone over time. When he finally spoke, his voice was a lot less energetic and his gaze dropped to the floor. “What if—fuck, what if I’m not good enough?”

“Huh?”

“This is Eraserhead,” Shinsō mumbled. He leaned heavily on one of the desks as though his knees had turned to jelly. “Eraserhead. The hero kids keep saying he’s a total hardass. He threatened to expel the worst-performing student at the beginning of the year.”

Kei frowned and crossed her arms over her chest. “He clearly didn’t. His class still has twenty kids.”

Aizawa couldn’t expel people who weren’t in his homeroom class. He’d told her as much the first time they’d officially met under Nezu’s watchful, beady eyes.

“But he has before. He’s expelled an entire class.”

Exactly how badly did an entire class of hero-hopefuls have to fuck up before Aizawa-sensei booted them all out of UA? Kei only knew what Aizawa-sensei was willing to tell her and her observations were colored by her biases, but she doubted that kind of decision was made lightly. Kakashi would hurl someone back into the Academy for a relatively minor fuckup, but even if UA had more safety nets in the forms of the other hero high schools…no. There’d be a rationale behind extreme action.

“Hey, you’ve never given up that easily before. Where’d that energy go?” Kei crossed the room and stood squarely in front of Shinsō, who was slumping on the desk like a wet blanket. “Aizawa-sensei wouldn’t say he wanted to train you if he didn’t think you had potential.”

“I don’t know how long that’s going to last.” Shinsō’s head drooped.

“Who cares?”

“I do!”

Kei shook her head. “No, I meant more… Look, are you going to turn him down?”

Shinsō’s head jerked up as he stared at her in shock. “Of course not!”

Yeah, Kei had expected that kind of answer. “Then what’s the point of worrying? Aizawa-sensei wants to train you, so ideally he’d be teaching along the way. And unless you screw this up on purpose, which I doubt, I’m sure he’ll be willing to help figure out where you might need help. That’s what good teachers do.”

This argument steadied Shinsō a little.

“Not sure if he’ll be as cool with getting backtalk as I am, but hey, it’s a part of your method.” Kei shrugged. “He’s a better teacher anyway.” Seeing as he probably had a degree and all.
Shinsō fidgeted. “If—no, when I do this, it’s gonna be after school. I won’t be able to make it to our training sessions anymore.” He hesitated, then said, “Sorry.”

“For what?”

“We’re not going to be able to hang out as much?”

“Shinsō-kun, the whole reason you even decided to take up training was because you wanted to make it into the Hero Department.” Kei made a sweeping gesture with her hands, as though to encompass all of UA. “Aizawa-sensei gets you one step closer to that dream, so of course you should take the chance.” She let her arms rest at her sides. “And training with him doesn’t mean you’re suddenly not my friend.” She saw Shinsō perk up again. Good. “We’ll just work out other times to hang out instead of beating each other into the ground.”

“I’m pretty sure those training sessions weren’t actually that equal. I can tell when someone’s holding back, now,” Shinsō countered. Steadier, now, that he knew Kei wasn’t going to kick her assigned pillar out from under his sense of normalcy.

“That means you’ve improved.” Kei glanced at the wall clock. “When are you supposed to start?”

“Monday, right after school. I heard ‘paperwork’ before he told me to go away.”

Kei clapped her hands together. “Sounds perfect for a start. So, how about we go celebrate?”

Shinsō blinked. “Right now?”

“Sure. I’ll buy.” Kei walked to the door. “I think there’s a cat café around here somewhere.”

And just like that, the spring was back in Shinsō’s step. “I know where it is.”

Of course he did.

“Then what are we waiting for? Let’s go!” Kei punched the air for effect, and then they were off.

While the usual rubberneackers were hanging around UA, Kei and Shinsō managed to avoid being slowed down too much by their cameras. Neither of them stopped to give a comment regarding Stain, or the Sports Festival, or the attacks on UA, or whatever else was being asked. Tabloid questions, probably. There were some people who weren’t worth answering, especially if speaking to one would mean their faces and voices were plastered across every worthwhile news feed in the country.

Once away from UA, the attention dropped to normal levels. Commuters basically ignored them. Everyone had somewhere to go; someplace else to be.

“I’ve never actually been to a cat café before.” Kei thought of herself as a dog person, though she had a weakness for anything small and fuzzy and cute. Cats fell squarely into that triple-threat category and with distinction.

“You’ve been missing out,” was Shinsō’s response. He readjusted his school bag on his shoulder as they walked. “Does your apartment allow pets?”

She hadn’t asked, but… “No. Does yours?”

He shook his head. “Right, well, I guess we’ve both been missing out at least a little. But the one by UA is pretty nice. Calm.”
“That’s good. I mean, I already said I’d pay,” Kei said with a shrug. “So, are you going to tell your parents the good news?”

“Already did. Though I think my hands were shaking really bad by then. I misspelled half the words the first time.” Shinsō rubbed the back of his neck with his free hand. “They were really proud of me. And then Dad ran off to deal with an emergency.”

Kei blinked. “Is your dad a police officer?”

“No. He’s a doctor. Mom’s a nurse at a clinic in Shinjuku.” Shinsō’s smile was faint, but there. “We’ll come up with something to celebrate after they come home.”

“Sorry for stealing their thunder a bit,” Kei said, but it wasn’t a real apology and Shinsō didn’t take it as one. “But hey, cats!”

Shinsō nodded. “Exactly.”

They eventually made their way to a storefront with four adorable cats looking out the front window. Shinsō, who’d been here before, took the lead in speaking to the attendant once they were inside. Kei just plunked money down—twelve hundred yen per hour—and was already poking through the place before Shinsō sorted out rules and so on. There was food available for purchase, mostly in the form of themed drinks and sandwiches and baked goods from someplace else. Kei’s focus, however, was on the array of bookshelves, cat conveniences, and of course the cats themselves.

The bookshelves were loaded down with manga volumes for series she’d never seen except in Akihabara. She didn’t know what most of them were about. Maybe they were collector’s items, but there was a library inside the café. They had a checkout system with colored plastic shelf markers and everything.

The center of the main cat room was taken up by a huge wooden structure in the shape of a tree. It was literally a cat tree, and four more cats were sitting on or climbing the structure and its little shelves. Most of them were looking at the newest customer with a sort of general friendly air, so Kei turned her gaze away to avoid seeming aggressive. She remembered that much from dealing with strays around Konoha.

“Oh, hello there,” she said to one of the flat-faced cats on the floor. She extended a hand for the cat to sniff, fingers curled, and was rewarded by tickling whiskers. “What a pretty kitty you are. I’m sure you know, don’t you?”

The cat allowed her to gently scratch its ears. In fact, it bumped its head up against her hand and insisted.

Eeeeeee! Kei only belatedly remembered Isobu was also there to complain.

I can hear your gleeful screaming even if you suppress it, you know. It is still audible in your head.

They’re so cute!

And I have lost you. To mammals.

Shinsō walked past where Kei was crouched on the floor, saying to one of the other cats, “Hey, Poki-chan. Do you remember me?”

He got a “mrrrrp.”
“Good girl.”

Kei spent most of the next twenty minutes slowly accumulating cat hair on her school uniform because she insisted on sitting in range of all of them. Dog person or not, the cats here were friendly, calm, or playful by turns. And while she didn’t know much about cat body language, she knew enough to let the cats who didn’t want to be touched leave her reach. And they seemed to think her apartment keys were adequate toys when they were feeling silly.

Shinsō ordered sandwiches eventually. Tuna salad, because of course. It was the only time they really tried to stay away from the animals, who were shameless mooches.

Then Shinsō spotted the cat-ear headbands. He picked one up from the rack. “Want to try one of these?”

“Sure,” Kei replied. She couldn’t get her hair entirely sorted out, but it never was. She mimicked cat paws with her fists long enough for Shinsō to get a good picture, then turned her phone on him. “Your turn.”

Shinsō sighed, but he did put on a black pair of cat ears. “Any good?”

“Your hair’s too tall. I can’t even see them.” Kei glanced at the shelves and picked out another pair, this band white. “Here. Stack this one on top.”

“Now?”

“One more pair,” Kei insisted, before holding up her phone the instant Shinsō was about to follow her suggestion.

“I call bull—” Click. “Dammit.”

Kei flipped her phone around and showed Shinsō his picture, which was of him wearing three pairs of perfectly visible cat-eared headbands. Well, he wasn’t technically wearing the last pair, but it was close enough to count in her opinion.

“I’m going to draw whiskers on yours,” Shinsō muttered, before taking all of the headbands off and setting them aside.

“Could you show me how to do that? I’ve never done photo editing on this thing.”

“Isn’t that like your fourth new phone this month?”

“Third, actually.”

At the end of the headband incident, Shinsō and Kei each had photos of each other to manipulate. True to his word, Shinsō drew whiskers exactly where they’d be on a cat and proved that his art skills weren’t totally nonexistent. Kei managed to instead draw calico cat patterned spots around each of Shinsō’s eyes in his picture so his eyebags were a lot less visible.

Then Kei got back to being swarmed by cats. It was easier once Shinsō bought cat treats and upended the bag on Kei’s lap. Brat.

Kei made sure to throw a few treats at Shinsō to get him swamped, too.

When their paid relaxation time was up, Kei and Shinsō took advantage of the lint rollers the staff kept around for incidents like this. Once de-furred, they made their way back to the public streets. It
was probably the most relaxing afternoon Kei had experienced in a while. Especially considering the patrols she’d been running lately. Even with Obito back, there was still only so much ground they could cover when their target kept defying tracking.

“That was a lot of fun,” Shinsō said, stretching. “I thought you said you didn’t like cats.”

“No, I said I like dogs more,” Kei corrected as they headed down the street. “But cats are pretty great. In the end, I just like cute things.”

Shinsō raised an eyebrow. “That’s…”

“If you say it’s the only girly thing about me, I’ll cram a last five-kilometer run into your bones before you’re officially Aizawa-sensei’s student.”

He held his hands up defensively. “I didn’t say anything.”

They continued to playfully snipe at one another for a few more minutes, passing Tatooin Station as they walked. It was a peaceful Saturday, and a lot of the office-worker types were either at home or out shopping, which fed into the crowds everywhere.

And then there was a familiar voice, just after the most recent train pulled out of the station. “Shinsō-san? Gekkō-san, too! Hi!”

“Hi, Midoriya-san,” said Shinsō. While ordinarily seeing a hero-hopeful carrying his costume in a case would’ve probably sent a little swirl of resentment through Shinsō’s features, it appeared that cats were a panacea for ill feelings. “How was your internship?”

“It was really quiet,” he replied, “but I really learned a lot!”

“Did you fix the bone-breaking problem?” Kei asked.

Midoriya grinned. “Actually, yeah! There was a trick to it I didn’t see, but Gran Torino really helped me figure it out. We sparred and nothing bad happened. I’m sure Recovery Girl will be happy about that.” He held up his costume case. “I, uh, I think I’m supposed to return this to UA… Is Aizawa-sensei still there?”

“Maybe?” Shinsō took the lead. “It’s Saturday, but I’m not sure he actually leaves except to go on night patrols.”

Midoriya shifted his weight from foot to foot. “If I wait, do you think he’ll be mad?”

Honestly, Kei half-suspected he’d allow 1-A to nearly get away with murder. Aizawa-sensei put up a good front, but he’d almost died to keep them safe within half a week of knowing them.

Shinsō shrugged, which about summed up Kei’s perspective too. “You’ll probably be fine as long as you don’t go vigilante while wearing it.”

Kei, however, wasn’t really listening. When she strained her ears, she could hear something past the general city noise of people and vehicles. It wasn’t the industrial roar of jet engines. It sounded like…

**Wings?**

*I thought using Quirks in public was illegal.*

“Then I just won’t put it on!”
“…Midoriya, no offense, but what the f—”

Then the ground shook with the force of a powerful explosion, drowning out anything else Shinsō was about to say and knocking both boys to the ground. Kei stayed on her feet through the power of chakra and stubbornness, arms held defensively over her face until the worst of the heat and force dissipated.

Smoke rose in the direction opposite UA, in a big black cloud that still glowed in the middle. A gas main? Kei wasn’t an expert, but she remembered grainy footage of burning oil fields in a desert someplace, even if she couldn’t recall too many details.

Screams. Crowds. Kei scooped each boy off the ground with a single hand apiece, dragging them up and into a run to follow her away from the chaos.

Behind them, monsters shrieked.

Chapter End Notes

And here is an art link, because Abalisk made ART.
Kei does her best to help people while maintaining her cover. Time will tell how long that lasts.

Okay, okay, okay—

Left?

Kei slammed her shoulder into the first storefront with a push door, drawing Shinsō and Midoriya into the building in her wake. It was all safety glass and about as secure as a kitchen cabinet, but being off the street was Kei’s first consideration when accompanied by civilians. Wannabe-heroes or not, she wasn’t going to stay in anybody’s line of sight if the “anybody” included something that screamed like the creature from the USJ incident.

Supervillains.

Kei hated supervillains. She hadn’t especially thought about it before coming to a world where costumed jerks ran around fighting in civilian centers, but they were obnoxious. On top of everything else.

“Are both of you okay?” Kei demanded, once they’d ducked behind—this was a clothing store. Damn, not a lot of actual cover worth speaking of, and the high-fashion style meant there weren’t many concealed spots either. There was a cashier counter, and there were already five cowering civilians hiding there and three more in the changing area. She could hear a child crying already.

This is less than ideal. From many perspectives.

Yep.

“I’m fine!” Midoriya still had his costume case, and he peeked out from behind the register counter without letting go of the handle.

Kei grabbed his collar and dragged him back out of view. “We don’t know what’s out there, so we’re not going out.”

“Phones are still up,” Shinsō reported, crouched next to a woman who might’ve been a manager. And despite everything, Shinsō’s gaze was clear. He wasn’t panicking. He flipped his screen around and, true enough, he was on the groupchat for 1-C. Out of everyone he could contact, only Kayama-sensei would be useful against villains out here.

“I don’t think all of us are back from our internships yet,” Midoriya muttered. He also had his cell phone out and was probably doing a check-in with 1-A students. On the whole, they had more useful Quirks, but nobody was authorized for combat.

Kei pulled her phone out, too. She already knew who she had to call.

TMNT-TNT: Musutafu is under attack. We got caught out in the open but in cover
now.

GreenThumb: who the

GreenThumb: okay nope its on fire

GreenThumb: where r u

GreenThumb: whos with u

TMNT-TNT: Some store. With Shinsō and Midoriya and bystanders.

GreenThumb: shit

GreenThumb: there in 3

GreenThumb: 2

GreenThumb: 1

Air rippled.

“I’m here and—holy shit,” said Obito’s voice from the back wall of the store, “are you guys all right?”

Several of the civilians screamed.

Obito screamed back, startled.

Shinsō sighed.

Kei craned her neck over her shoulder instead and waved with two fingers as Obito—dressed in a hooded sweatshirt and with his eyepatch in place and right hand bandaged—stepped the rest of the way through the wall and scrambled over to her.

That description wasn't how his abilities actually worked, but who besides Kei could really explain it anyway? Regardless, he’d walked into a dangerous situation and now he had to be truly careful, because Kei didn’t doubt Midoriya knew damn well what Obito’s Kamui looked like after seeing the midair variant at USJ. He’d paid attention to individual hand seals when she used them in the Sports Festival. Telling Obito about that skill was just sound thinking, but he had a tendency to forget things in the heat of the moment.

And given the explosion outside, the situation was pretty far from “chill.”

“Obito, Midoriya-san,” Kei said with a clipped tone, pointing from her friend to her classmate. And back again. “Midoriya-san, Obito. He’s here to help, okay?”

Midoriya nodded, his mouth already fixed into a rictus grin that seemed like he was trying to smile and missing the mark. But he was as centered as any rookie Kei had ever seen. Like Shinsō, he wasn’t actually panicking or freezing in the middle of his adrenaline rush. Both of the boys had been through life-threatening situations before, and at least this particular chaotic mess wasn’t directly targeting them. Just the town.

Kei’s eyes locked on Obito’s scarred face. “Is the street clear?”
“Dunno. I’ll check.” And before the store manager could grab him or Midoriya could ask a question, Obito hopped back out through the supposedly solid wall and vanished.

“Can he phase through shrapnel?” Shinsō asked, tucking his phone away.

“Nothing hits Obito unless he lets it,” Kei replied. Though sometimes he forgot to keep his guard up, as he had about a week ago.

She crawled far enough away from the huddled shoppers to peek around the counter, squinting at smoke and fleeing silhouettes outside the glass doors. They weren’t far enough from the disaster zone. The ground was still trembling here.

Somebody in the back piped up with, “Uh, about your skirt—”

“We’re about to die and you’re focused on that?!” hissed someone else.

“I don’t want to be a casualty in a hero fight!” wailed a third stranger.

Kei shook her head and scooted back into concealment. Some things weren’t worth addressing when there was an ongoing supervillain attack happening just outside.

With all of them huddled on their knees, she faced Midoriya and Shinsō and let a bit of her mission-mask loose. There was no point to pretending to be a jittery mess when survival was more likely if she didn’t. Off came the kid gloves, and gone was any attempt to keep fear on her face.

Sadly, this was as close to in her element Kei had been since the bank robbery.

“Okay, we’ve got Tsunami, Brainwashing, super strength something, and Obito’s tricks. We might be able to get out of here without using any of them. Are you up for making a break for it if we have a chance?” Kei leaned forward a little as something outside smashed steel.

Shinsō and Midoriya nodded.

“Good, because this place is too close to the fighting. If we stay, we’re screwed if a hero can’t get here.” Kei looked around at the thirteen people hiding alongside them. Most of them were adults, but there were a couple non-UA uniforms on teenaged customers. “How about the rest of you?”

“Uh—um, I don’t—” the store’s manager stammered. She was an older woman in a fashionable scarf, and her head was identical to that of a secretary bird. She had human teeth like Tokoyami did, and they were chattering. “I d-don’t think anyone here has a physical Quirk?”

“And if we used them…” said one of the other high school students, who had a slightly glassy cast to his eyes. Terror.

Kei prioritized “survival” over “obeying the law” even when she wasn’t under ridiculous restrictions. Still, she took a deep breath for effect and nodded to the other people hiding here. “Okay.”

“Gekkō-san,” Midoriya began, while his eyes darted around for some kind of advantage, “how long until Obito-san gets back?”

“If I had to guess? Three, two, one…”

And Obito popped back into the building, striding out of the wall blocking the dressing room from sight. He ducked into their hiding place again, nodding to Shinsō and Midoriya as he squeezed in. He was taller than either of them or most of the customers, but he managed.
Kei nudged his right shoulder. “Anything?”

“The streets *that way* are a mess,” Obito reported, indicating the direction of the explosion. He scanned the situation in the store for a second time. There were too many people around to save using Kamui and risk exposing his secrets, even if the chakra cost wasn’t already high. Shaking his head, he added, “A bunch of creeps without skulls are running riot over there, and the first heroes are just arriving.”

Midoriya leaned forward, eyes blazing. Green lightning briefly crackled around him, making the nearest civilian jump. “Like at the USJ!”

“Oh, maybe?” Obito blinked, pretending ignorance with ease. “Point is, nobody who’s *not me* can get out that way without getting caught up in the fighting.” Obito pointed directly at the wall Kei might’ve demolished for an escape route if not for all the witnesses. “But that way is pretty clear. It’s just that most of the people who were gonna run already *did*, so a group like ours is gonna stick out. We’d have to run like hell to have any chance of the villains not noticing.”

“We were already going to do *that*,” said one of the other customers. He sounded like the one who’d been worried about Kei’s skirt, so she glared at him for his total lack of prioritizing skill.

“Do you have anything helpful to say?” Shinsō snapped, even as he kept his attention mainly on Obito.

“I was just—” The man snapped his mouth shut of his own accord; no mind control required. Instead, he cowered under the weight of the other civilians’ glares.

Good enough.

Midoriya started running his fingers over his hero costume’s case. It was a nervous gesture, to a point, but Kei and the others were close enough to hear him muttering as strategies occurred to him: “One street-side entrance and no cover means we’ll have to make this as quick and quiet as we can. If Obito-san can keep an eye on the villains without being seen or hurt, then we have an intelligence advantage and we might be able to keep out of danger zones as we run and find a hero. None of us have our provisional licenses, so if we get into a fight, it’s going to be a mess and we’ll need to run as soon as we can to avoid getting expelled or arrested. Once we’re out of danger, we need to start finding aid stations or shelters. The subway? Maybe, assuming the villains don’t go out of their way to try and grab hostages…”

Shinsō’s eyebrows rose at the same time Obito’s did. “Midoriya?”

“Sorry, I just—I mutter sometimes. It’s a habit.” He fidgeted, still tracing routes against the case.

“I can tell,” Shinsō replied. He nudged Midoriya with his elbow. “Any good ideas in there?”

“I—yeah, I think so!”

Outside, the monstrous shrieks sounded like they were getting closer.

“Obito,” Kei said, and his gaze shot to her, “signal when it’s safe for us to move.”

“I can do that, easy.” Obito got to his feet and stretched. “Everyone? We’ll get out of here in one piece, all right?” He smiled reassuringly as he walked backwards toward the door. “We can’t stay here. So, we’ll leave on my signal.”

There were some affirmative answers, at least from the store’s staff. Shinsō had his eyes locked on
the people too frozen to respond, brows furrowed and his expression calculating.

“If worst comes to worst,” Kei muttered in a voice no louder than what was necessary for Midoriya and Shinsō to hear, “Shinsō-kun can hit a few people with his Quirk to get them to move. I’ll make a water shield for everyone that’ll last long enough for us to get away.”

As long as no one dies, I’ll fucking deal with the consequences.

Spoken like a shinobi. And if a human does manage to die, I will deal with the offender.

Thanks for the vote of confidence.

You hardly need it.

Midoriya clapped a hand onto Kei’s left shoulder, and she nodded back to him. His smile was a little strained, but it was still present.

“On my mark,” Obito announced. He was pressed against the wall that was closest to the chaos and peering around the corner with his Sharingan active. Kei could feel it. He kept his hand in sight, too, ready to give a signal.


“Ready,” Shinsō replied as he shuffled toward the back of the store. He ignored the rest of the events at the front and concentrated on speaking to the other civilians in a low tone Kei could hardly hear. Kei didn’t check to see if he was using his Quirk.

Midoriya nodded as green lightning played over his body. His grin didn’t falter more, but it was still cracked from the outset. The light danced over the walls. “R-ready.”

“Three,” Obito announced from the front of the store. “Two—”

Kei hopped over the counter in one smooth movement, ahead of any signal on Obito’s part. He needed the shield up front ahead of the squishies.

“One!”

Kei drew level with him and caught a view of the outside. Smoke, screaming, and shrieking monsters.

So, nothing much had changed.

“Go, now! It’s clear!”

As soon as the words left Obito’s mouth, he was out the door and trying to direct traffic. Civilians surged after him in a rush, aided mainly by Midoriya and Shinsō’s efforts at extricating them from their hiding places.

When in an emergency, people had three basic reactions: fight, flight, and freeze. By ducking into the store, the civilians had chosen “freeze” without consciously thinking about it. However, this wasn’t cover and was barely concealment, and was definitely not a shelter. To avoid negative panic reactions that could leave them trapped, emergency response personnel were trained to be firm, straightforward, and not to be fucked with.

The hero kids were getting the idea.
Kei owed Thirteen an anonymous fruit basket.

Midoriya led the pack out of the building, being far faster than most of them and the only person who was still smiling worth a damn. Shinsō brought up the rear, poking a pair of consensually-brainwashed high school students into a controlled jog and nodding to Kei as he passed. They were running down the street at a decent clip and heading away from trouble.

That was enough for now, at least. Sometimes that was the best she could hope for.

Kei turned her attention to Obito. “Well? Coming with, or…?”

Obito shook his head slightly and, when he turned his head toward her, his Sharingan spun in its Mangekyō form. “Gonna go around and see what else is going on. See you soon.”

Obito vanished in a spiral of color disappearing down a drain, and Kei turned to chase the civilian crowd.

The running part of the mini-mission didn’t last that long. While, yes, the disaster was ongoing, a bunch of high school students and middle-aged shoppers didn’t attract the kind of attention superheroes did. Part of the difference came down to brightly colored costumes. The rest… Well, even if the average villain was more of a threat to the average civilian than a pro hero, there was a certain sense to dealing with the ones doing the righteous punching when a fight broke out. Civilians were only hostages if the heroes didn’t lay down the law (on a villain’s skull) first. Not everyone could take a flying Death Arms to the face without being subdued mid-plot.

Therefore, their little herd of terrified bystanders passed most of the chaos unnoticed.

Between Midoriya, Kei, and Shinsō, they knew enough of the town’s layout to find the nearest underground train station even in the middle of a massive brawl. They ducked around alleyways and destroyed vehicles and doubled back around collapsed bits of building to get that far, shepherding everyone without a combat-suitable Quirk because that was all they could do.

The city attack wasn’t over yet.

But they made it. Everyone was tired (except Kei) and covered in soot (except for the young lady with the weak air control Quirk), but they started scrambling down to the improvised shelter. Police officers and lower-tier heroes were helping usher people farther below, though from the looks of their uniforms they hadn’t exactly been in the middle of the chaos. It looked like the attack caught the local authorities off-guard, too.

“You’re safe now.” Kei tried to reassure people at the first landing, but the fact was that the lights were rattling above their heads. There was only so much she could lie when reality was giving her a solid middle finger.

“You—you’re kids.” The store manager boggled at them as she passed. “I mean, thank you for guiding us here, but shouldn’t you be heading down two levels with us?”

She had a point.

“In a second,” was Kei’s reply.

“That’s everyone,” Shinsō said. Kei didn’t know when he’d resorted to the kindergarten teacher tactic of constant head counts, but it was serving him well. He only relaxed when he was sure everyone had made past the first layer of police protection. Even the ones he’d brainwashed to get this far. “Everyone who was with us, anyway. Where’s Uchiha?”
Midoriya looked around wildly. “Wasn’t he with you, Gekkō-san?”

Kei shrugged as she started to eye the area for bathrooms or other concealed spots, unconcerned. She’d ditch everyone through a different exit and then join Obito in the anti-villain patrols. “He said he’d be back, but we’re still clear—"

That was when Midoriya, who’d ended up taking rearguard during the last stretch and was still at the bottom of the first escalator, was yanked off his feet by his UA jacket by a thin, grayish thing stretching from the street.

“Drop him!” Shinsō snarled, just as he missed grabbing Midoriya’s hand by a hair. “Midoriya—!”

“Oh, no you don’t!” Kei heard herself say, before she even processed the dinner plate-sized hand tangled in Midoriya’s collar that was reeling him in. Reflex had her bolting over the barrier between escalator directions and bolting up the center divider before Midoriya had a chance to scream.

Kei threw herself over the entrance turnstile and back into the street, feet skidding on concrete. Water surged around her, hand seals or not, and the impending storm surge reared like a cobra at her back and ahead of each arm. And she wasn’t sure that the bludgeoning power of water alone would be enough to bring it down.

No braincase, gray skin, bulging eyes—that’s a fucking Nōmu clone. It was at least as tall as the creature from the USJ, but with spindly limbs and dark gray skin. Its single, lidless eye was in the center of where its forehead should’ve been, and its mouth was an uneven mess of broken, jagged teeth. It held Midoriya under one of its arms, twisted impossibly like a python and preventing him from getting leverage to hit it in the fucking face.

Kei mimed a gun with her right hand and sent a spear-thin shot after the skull-less villain—

The creature blurred with clearly superhuman speed, ducking the wave without a problem. Midoriya, glowing with green-tinged lightning, shouted in sudden pain as he was jerked around like a fish on a line. His uniform was ripping under the strain.

Fuck civilian personas. Fuck them so much. Kei fought down Isobu’s influence with his assistance, because her anger was automatically pulling at his chakra. The last thing she needed was to start glowing red out of protective rage. As it was, her eyes itched in a sure warning sign that the leak was still going through.

“Stretchy, strong, and a speed Quirk and not talking,” Shinsō breathed, clearly well out of his depth. Kei hadn’t been able to hear him scramble up to the street again, thanks to all the noise. “Crap, crap, crap—"

The creature took a split second to adjust its grip on Midoriya, pinning his arms to his sides. Then it turned away and started running as fast as its bowlegged, three-limbed gait could take it.

Kei pursued without a second thought.

“Gekkō, wait—"
Chapter Summary

Kei notices that finding allies seems to be easier than keeping them in one piece.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Kei was already halfway up the street before she heard Shinsō running after her.

He wasn’t fast or an endurance monster. Any number of dangerous people in this situation could kill Shinsō. A glancing hit from about half of them would splat him like a bug on a windshield. On top of everything else, adrenaline was giving him just enough of a boost to compete.

And Kei couldn’t break baseline human limits with witnesses. For that purpose, Shinsō counted.

Kei stopped short of following an impulse that said putting him a submission hold was a great idea, but she grabbed Shinsō’s arm and kept him from heading any closer to danger. “Shinsō-kun, you need to go back.”

“And you don’t?” Shinsō could only push her aside because the majority of her focus had to be on the Nōmu and Midoriya. “I’m not going to sit down there with my thumbs up my—”

Kei yanked Shinsō to the left just as a public trash bin went flying through the space he’d just occupied to argue with her, hurled across the street by a monster’s thoughtless backswing. There was a metallic crash behind them, with cigarette butts and paper scraps scattering to the winds. Across the street and through entire city blocks, the fight continued unabated.

“I’m sorry, you were saying?” Kei’s tone was withering. She let go of Shinsō’s shaking arm, scanned the area, and wasn’t heartened at all by what she saw amid the dust and smoke. And the screaming. Damn this city’s population density.

Shinsō hesitated, swallowing hard. His eyes darted around at the chaos. There was a subtle tremble running through his entire body that only Kei was close enough to see. “I—”

“If you’re coming with me, don’t fall behind and don’t argue,” Kei said, before Shinsō could gather enough of his composure together to come up with a snippy one-liner again, even as a defense mechanism.

The Nōmu monster was just barely in sight, still jerkily making its way down the street.

Shinsō nodded, mouth pressed shut so hard his lips were nearly white.

This was probably a terrible idea, but Kei still said, “Okay. Stay close, Shinsō-kun.”

The creature wasn’t so hard to track, if only because it charged directly through mostly-abandoned streets and was shaped like a spider was asked to comply with human skeletal layouts. There wasn’t anybody else running around in its wake to act like some kind of current made of people, and so the only obstacles to catching it were its speed and debris from superpowered fights. And after Kei had
ducked past one overturned car, she’d more or less dodged them all.

They chased it for almost twenty chaotic blocks.

Block one through five: A hero got hurled through a transit stop by a yellowish version of the thing that had grabbed Midoriya. Kei grabbed Shinsō’s arm and hauled him along faster to keep him away from flying glass as the monster was distracted by its arms suddenly spouting blood—Snipe was around.

“Do you have a teacher’s number?” Kei asked, while the two of them followed the monster through an alleyway.

“I—yeah!” Shinsō panted.

“I don’t want to distract them,” Kei said, as she kicked aside a trash can to get it out of Shinsō’s way, “but some specific backup would be really nice right now!”

Especially since Kei’s actual mission was as much to defend UA students as it was to help bring down the villain called All For One. Because there only seemed to be one major goal at risk at the moment, she was going for it.

Midoriya’s status was probably going to have to be updated to “friend” properly after this point. Getting kidnapped near Kei seemed to be a rite of passage.

Block six through ten: Present Mic arrived on the scene and screamed with his directional amplification at full blast, knocking a flying creature out of the air and into range of Death Arms. The villain was punched back up the street and into one of its compatriots, and Shinsō and Kei passed unnoticed as they followed the monster as it jerkily swerved for a side-street.

Their ears still rang, but at least their eardrums were intact.

“Where the hell did Uchiha go?!?”

“No idea!”

Though it’d have been convenient if Kei did know. Obito could take care of himself, but Kei would really appreciate if he took the time to look after Shinsō too. Kei wasn’t sure if she could at the moment.

Block eleven through nineteen: A shadow passed overhead as Mt. Lady stepped over a small storefront and into the chaos. Behind her, fire burned bright and rained down like artillery fire on a creature that looked a lot more like the one from the USJ.

Kei led Shinsō into a side-street opposite that whole deal, because the Nōmu seemed to be about as bent on avoiding heroes as they were. Its gait was actually even worse than she’d expected, which was saying something.

Shinsō’s breathing was getting ragged. Still, he refused to just give up and hide.

“You know, if you—”

“No, Gekkō!”

“Shinsō-kun—”

“He’s my friend, too!”
Kei hated how much leeway that statement wrung out of her doormat heart. When people hurt her loved ones, there was little Kei wouldn’t do to turn the situation around if she could.

This would be so much easier if you had been caught in a different disguise.

You think so?!

Still, it wasn’t all hopeless. While the creature was fast, most of its success was not because of its speed Quirk. Instead, it only seemed capable of making intermittent use of a superspeed burst —less than a second for each usage, by Kei’s reckoning. While that made its ability to dodge attacks almost as good as a shinobi for the length of its Quirk’s duration, it also meant there were up to twenty seconds at a stretch where it had to rely just on its distorted limb length to keep ahead. That, and Kei’s need to adhere to human limitations.

Kei needed precise timing, but thankfully that was easy enough. As she and Shinsō chased the wildly careening Nōmu down alleyways and past dumpsters, she made half a hand seal and started forming a appropriate-sized Water Dragon Bullet to entangle its spindly legs.

Block twenty: The monster reached the inner alley T-junction and went for the right, but this time Kei was ready. Watery whips lashed out from puddles and grabbed its right arm and leg just long enough for the Water Dragon Bullet to surge overhead and block its exit.

Midoriya sputtered, thoroughly drenched, but his captor shrieked like an angry bird before trying to turn on Kei.

Try us, recalcitrant beast.

Coming from you, that’s hilarious.

Shinsō slammed into the arm Kei threw out to block his advance, in the exact manner of a protective soccer mom. He got the wind knocked out of him, but the threat getting into melee combat with a monster made him unlikely to argue.

In direct response to the monster’s reluctance to free Midoriya, Kei tightened her Water ninjutsu into more water chains than water whips. She passed control of the Water Dragon Bullet and its meters-long coils to Isobu, banking on breaking its arms like matchsticks before it got its speed boost Quirk back instead of letting it dash away again. It had inhuman strength in the same manner Obito did, and Kei’s willpower went mainly to keeping it from just jerking free of her grip. And while she’d played nice with Kirishima, this creature was going to throttle itself for her if it kept wriggling.

And for some reason, the creature’s attempts to struggle free didn’t involve phasing through everything with Midoriya in tow.

Kei already had an idea why before she and Shinsō caught up to it, and confirmation came in the form of Aizawa-sensei’s flying double kick to its face. Because she had no intention of making his life more difficult than she already did, Kei let Aizawa-sensei pass through the water chains and dragon head without getting clotheslined by three separate obstacles. This meant that when he hit the monster, everyone went flying.

Do not let your guard down, Isobu hissed.

In front of them, the bargain bin ninja, the Nōmu clone, and Midoriya stopped when they finally hit a dumpster hard enough to drive it into a brick wall. Metal squealed and rubber skidded, but the combined weight of everyone involved didn’t manage to flip the dumpster.
The monster opened its mouth to roar, only to meet resistance when Midoriya, wreathed in green lightning and an uncanny glow, drove his free fist directly into the creature’s jaw from below and snapped its head back. While its brain hit the collapsed lid of the dumpster, Midoriya scrambled out of its grip and onto solid ground just as Aizawa-sensei commenced the curbstomp.

Kei sent a questioning glance at Shinsō with one arm extended toward the impending fight.

Shinsō, nearly doubled-over panting, held out his phone. The contact photo on display had a photo of a black cat wearing a miniature version of Aizawa-sensei’s combat goggles and capture weapon. The call was still ongoing.

That explained that, Kei supposed.

Shinsō also ended up being the one Midoriya crashed into first while staggering toward safety, with Kei stepping forward to block the creature’s line of sight with the watery dragon’s head at the ready. Behind her, she could hear ragged breathing from both boys. Kei wasn’t even winded, but her heart hammered from nerves now that she had the time to notice. That had been far too close.

And as far as the beating the monster got, it was rather gentle despite Aizawa-sensei’s use of his Quirk—signaled by his flying hair—and also his fists. The monster got a busted jaw and probably a concussion before being wrapped in the carbon-fiber capture weapon and tied to the dumpster. It was, at the end of the day, nicer than how Kei would have reacted if not for witness testimony potentially causing problems.

For one, the monster got taken alive.

For “USJ Two: Electric Boogaloo,” today wasn’t as horrible as it could’ve been. Yet.

As soon as Kei thought that, Aizawa-sensei turned to them.

Welp. Kei dropped the dragon head and the chains with a splat, letting it trickle away into the storm drain. If the city wasn’t on fire and if Aizawa-sensei hadn’t been wearing goggles, Kei imagined he’d turn the full force of his glare on them. Especially her, for using her “Quirk” so recklessly.

“Get to shelter, now.” If Kei had been a normal teenager, that icy tone would’ve sent her knees quaking. As it was, she wondered where Obito had disappeared to and why he hadn’t met up with their group ahead of a guy who explicitly couldn’t teleport.

Midoriya managed, “R-right, Aizawa-sensei!” on his second try.

Behind him, Shinsō didn’t even bother making the attempt.

Aizawa-sensei still said something under his breath that probably wasn’t supposed to be uttered in front of children. Thankfully, school was out for the day. Rather than focusing on that, though, Aizawa-sensei raised a hand to his ear. “Eraserhead to dispatch. I’ve subdued one of the villains. Get me a transport.”

There was an electronic crackle before a tinny voice piped up on the other end.

Aizawa-sensei rattled off the address in answer, then started detaching himself from the length of capture weapon necessary to keep the monster bound. Kei noted the combat knife used to trim the cloth away. She was reminded of kevlar, though the comparison was somewhat weak. The capture weapon probably wasn’t bulletproof.

It hissed at everyone when Kei edged forward. Negotiation appeared to be no more on the table now
than with its weird cousin. 

And…the Nōmu was a lot freakier close-up. Sure, one eye put Kei in mind of mythological creatures from half a world away, but a bunch of other details didn’t make sense. Her medical training was incomplete and her understanding of Quirks woefully insufficient, but…that definitely looked like a human brain. Many animals had differently-shaped cerebral cortices and tended not to have nearly as many folds. She couldn’t see any damage done specifically to its head—that hadn’t come from Aizawa-sensei—but where exactly had this thing come from? Was there a family somewhere that all developed the exposed-brain-with-superv-strength Quirk at age four? Or was this a situation like that one Future-Sasuke-adjacent kid named Jūgo, and the family had a base Quirk that went bananas due to environmental factors?

It probably wasn’t a mystery that would be solved today.

“Midoriya-san, Shinsō-kun, are you both all right?” Kei whispered, while Aizawa-sensei did his thing. She didn’t drop her guard, but she did nudge Midoriya with her elbow as she backed away from the Nōmu-thingy.

“Um, I think so.” Midoriya wasn’t glowing anymore, but neither did he seem hurt. With the Nōmu clone unable to threaten anyone, it was just down to how much experience he had in combat. And adrenaline crashes. “Just, uh, a little shaky. I’ll be fine!”

Shinsō couldn’t take his eyes off the monster. Someone who didn’t know to look for it wouldn’t have seen the tremble in his limbs, unrelated to his still-ragged breathing. Kei made him run for training, but three kilometers at panic-speed was nothing to sneeze at. “What…who the hell is that?”

“At this point,” Kei said as Aizawa-sensei finally turned his attention back to them, “that might be the wrong question. Eraserhead, where’s the nearest shelter?”

Aizawa-sensei definitely noticed her use of his hero codename, but didn’t comment on that. Instead, he looked like he was about to give an order.

Kei would listen, if only to respect her cover.

This was about when, as Kei learned later, Endeavor squared up against the enemy ten blocks away and hit one of the other freaky clone creatures with an inferno. The creature mimicked the same attack in return, but with far less control.

The first anybody in their little stretch of city back-alleys learned about that was when the shortest route back to the train station became a towering inferno that turned the sky orange above their heads. Though Shinsō and Midoriya flinched, Kei just dragged a new water construct umbrella between their group and the impending heat to cut the impact somewhat. It made an interesting pattern of colors against the smoke and clouds behind the water shield, but Kei had to wonder how much trouble would be coming their way.

Shinsō summed up everyone’s feelings by saying, “Well, that’s just great.”

Kei sighed, but decided it wasn’t worth complaining about at this point. The direction of that huge firestorm was about what she would’ve guessed was the fastest path back to the train station. Hopefully, the civilians over there were still safe. Hell, they needed to be in a much better position than Kei and her current group of hero-and-hopefuls to still be alive.

Aizawa, of course, couldn’t be bothered to be surprised by his fellow pro heroes’ idea of restraint. Or massive fiery explosions in general. He’d been in the game too long. He just said, “Follow me.”
Midoriya and Shinsō rushed to obey. Once they were past him, Aizawa-sensei’s goggle-clad face pointed directly toward Kei’s, and he jerked his head slightly in the direction he wanted them to move.

Kei was, in fact, bringing up the rear. Semi-officially.

_Hooray._

She trotted after the rest of the group with approximately half her attention on the twists and turns of the city, while the rest of her brain kept the gears behind her chakra sense grinding away. She still hadn’t seen Obito. He’d said he’d be fine, and Kei was generally inclined to believe him, but Kamui made his eyesight deteriorate and had a limit of five minutes. Once his endurance ran out, Obito was far more vulnerable to conventional attacks than Kei was. It was just that he used his chakra pragmatically enough that the issue rarely came up during most fights.

Where the hell was he?

…Besides possibly camping out in Kamui waiting for her to finally ditch the non-shinobi. That was a possibility, however remote during a crisis. Normally, Obito either didn’t or couldn’t suppress his signature enough to escape her chakra sensor skills. He only pranked her when they had the leeway for humor.

There is…a different possibility.

_I’m trying really hard not to worry, you know. That’s not helping._

Nevertheless.

Aizawa-sensei led the group of bedraggled students (Kei included, though she maintained a constant state of low-level dishevelment) through the city’s mazelike backstreets. Given what she’d seen so far, Aizawa-sensei was acting like a traceur taking it easy on the newbies. She had a hard time believing anybody in their group aside from Shinsō would be slowed down by terrain or physical conditioning if they took to the rooftops, but banning public Quirk usage extended even as far as getting out of dangerous situations.

Inconvenient at best, as usual.

Shinsō broke the extended awkward silence with a cautious, “You know what you said a while ago about getting in trouble with Quirks?”

“Yeah, I do.” Kei had said quite a few things. She’d thought far less charitable ones in larger numbers.

“Are you going to be okay?”

Kei shrugged. If she wasn’t, there were options. She wouldn’t delve too deeply into them until she had to.

“I’m serious, Gekkō-kun.”

“Is this really the best ti—?”

Aizawa-sensei shushed them sharply, silencing both.

As Aizawa-sensei directed them into the shadow of what looked like another long string of
restaurants, shops, and whatever else went on side streets, it seemed like that time was probably approaching. The mess of buildings around here was probably farther from the fighting. Otherwise, even the world’s least responsible pro hero would keep them moving.

“If you follow this street,” Aizawa-sensei said as he turned back to them, “take a right and speak with the police cordon. They’ll take you to a shelter.”

Kei was just settling into this thought—into her noncombatant façade—when her attention snapped sideways at nearly the speed of sound. Whatever else Aizawa-sensei tried to say faded into a gravelly rumble as she turned around and started running back down the alleyway.

Obito’s chakra, bright and wailing like a fire alarm in action, cut through her awareness at the exact moment a second fiery blast lanced upward from about five blocks away. Both cut out in a split second—

Kamui.

The fire wasn’t him. It wasn’t chakra at all. Obito couldn’t do both at once.

Kei rounded the corner while trailing water like deadly ribbons, cutting line of sight from the Tokyo-natives, and accelerated—

The next few seconds were a blur.

She found her problem. She did. She also had severe tunnel vision through the rooftop trip, even while using her “Quirk.” It didn’t feel like her brain turned on again until she dropped off the second-story flat roof and landed in front of her best friend, even if she had to slide down a drainage pipe part of the way to keep up the charade.

One: Obito, with blood trailing from his eye and two combat knives sticking out of his Zetsu arm. The blood was smudged across his cheek, and he wasn’t moving under his own power.

Two: Todoroki Shōto, in a hero costume instead of the UA uniform and still keeping a grip on Obito’s left arm like he was rescuing a civilian.

With half a rampage putting an edge into her thoughts, Kei wondered if Obito’s line-of-sight teleportation skills might’ve needed some work. Or maybe he’d run out of chakra before he could get himself out of trouble with a passenger. The rest of her brain was demanding, independent of Isobu’s influence, that she march directly up to whoever had done this and tear faces from skulls.

No one hurt her friends and walked away.

This seems like an excellent time to throw all rules of engagement out a window.

“Obito, Todoroki-san—” Kei began, after wrestling her anger back down to something manageable. “I—what happened?”

Todoroki levered Obito up against a stretch of brick and said, “He threw himself in front of a knife. I don’t know why.”

“Hi, Kei!” Obito said with a sardonic tinge, even as Kei crouched in front of him. At least four veins in his right eye were wrecks, and Kei didn’t know where the hell he’d been using up all his time, but she sure hoped it was worth it. “Anyway, you should ask that creep over… thataway! He tried to stab this kid!”
Kei paused. She knew what it sounded like when Obito lied. He knew exactly who’d put him in this position. And this was a blind alley.

“Another wannabe hero,” said the backlit figure closer to the entrance. She saw the shadow of a chipped katana as she turned fully, water coiling around her forearms like serpents.

Well, well, well.

This day just kept getting better.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay!

(Also, for an example of ridiculous minutiae I remember in case it might be relevant: Everyone on Team Minato aside from the man himself has type O blood.)
Frostbite

Chapter Summary

Kei deals with the situation in front of her.

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the delay. It's been a whirlwind of holiday prep over here.

Kei didn’t immediately attack. Between her temper and Isobu, the strain of keeping still meant she was trembling from head to toe. Miraculously, keeping a lid on that impulse to remove the rest of Stain’s face from his skull didn’t result in her muscles vibrating off her bones. Instead, she unclenched her jaw enough to say in a cold voice, “Who are you supposed to be?”

“No one special,” was Stain’s deceptively quiet reply. “Just the only person willing to put fake heroes in their place.”

On one hand, Kei hated banter and that went double for chitchat with people who stabbed her friends. On the other, this guy would’ve been the perfect target for Shinsō’s Quirk if he caught up with them.

**Kill him. It will save everyone time and energy.**

On a spare Zetsu hand, Isobu had a legitimate point. Stain was probably already overdue for either multiple consecutive life sentences or death row.

“So, you jumped two teenagers with a sword?” Obito piped up from behind Kei. Todoroki failed to shush him, if he even tried. “Did you take a minor in doublethink to go along with that poli-sci degree or what?”

“Obito, now is not the time,” Kei snapped, without looking back.

Obito was *such fun* to have around while he was reduced to his “boastful loudmouth” role from their childhood. His insults got more creative because he couldn’t do anything else. Knowing that, Kei should never have introduced Obito to *1984* and its ilk for ammunition. Or the concept of university. Or let him come along into a situation where he could run out of Kamui usage right in front of a remorseless serial killer high on his own ego and get stabbed for it.

Today was…a day.

Kei had poured months of work into her cover, and it was being chipped away inside of an hour.

Todoroki drew level with Kei, and she glanced over to find his left cheek smudged by blood under the burn scar. It didn’t look like his. Actually, despite soot and sweat, Todoroki didn’t look hurt at all. Maybe Obito’s injury had spared him that fate.
“Ice and fire?” Kei asked, out of the corner of her mouth as she returned her glare to Stain’s masked mug.

“Yeah. And water, for you,” Todoroki said. Now that Kei actually heard him talk, his voice was pretty controlled and calm, considering the situation. Then again, he and his entire class had been confronted by villains before. Maybe this was normal.

Maybe he was sizing up her reaction the same way and coming up with a bunch of question marks.

“None of you appreciate the gravity of my work,” Stain complained, but using a tone that seemed to indicate he thought a lot more of his self-imposed quest than any of them did. He raised his chipped katana until it was level with his face, and—okay, he ran his overlong tongue along the back of it to avoid slicing, but that was a solid eight in the Orochimaru-vibe scorecard. That was far higher than it had any right to be in a world that hadn’t spawned Orochimaru. “Endeavor’s son and the girl who scoffed at the Sports Festival spotlight. To change anything in this world—to become a hero worth anything—you need conviction. You need willpower. And that’s the thing that makes both of you weak.”

Kei considered Stain’s point for about five seconds. It was true she lacked the kind of conviction to be a hero, but when the actual fuck had she ever said she wanted that? People around here were so presumptuous. As for Todoroki, well, she’d missed his semifinal match and wasn’t sure what Stain was talking about.

“You can walk away,” Todoroki said, in an admirably calm voice. The thread of anger that stitched him together seemed muted somehow, and that had been an awful lot of fire earlier. “Just turn around and leave us alone.”

If he’d said “no harm, no foul,” Kei would’ve spun Freezer Burn around like a ballroom dancer to force him to take a better look at Obito. So what if Obito could ultimately shrug off a lot of damage and had been stabbed in the arm that didn’t bleed? He shouldn’t have gotten hurt in the first place!

The water along her arms vibrated unhappily as Isobu made his opinion known. Stain was the type of person who needed a good push off his high horse, verbally or otherwise. Too bad for him that Kei wasn’t the right person for it. He’d stabbed the best candidate she knew.

“Go fight an actual hero,” Kei growled. “Someone who gets paid to deal with people like you.”

Kei wasn’t about to admit her mercenary roots to a twisted idealist like this. If he was already screwed-up enough to decide that murdering high school students was his moral imperative, there probably wasn’t any point to adding fuel to that flame. Not unless it was literal.

Kei’s point was that she kind of wanted to see Stain set on fire.

“The weak of heart, the fake heroes, and the criminals will purge,” Stain said, ignoring the offer of clemency like he thought he was a fucking martyr while throwing himself into Isobu’s jaws headfirst, “will no longer pollute this society.”

I realize we could probably beat our heads against a brick wall like this and get through eventually, said Isobu, but it seems as though a better use of our time would be to kill him right now.

“Until this society wakes up and rectifies itself in accordance with justice, I will never stop,” Stain finished. He leveled his sword at them with a flourish Kei’s mother would’ve scolded her for using in a real fight.
“So, fun fact: Stain’s Quirk paralyzes you if he swallows your blood! Get cut and you’re screwed!”

Obito called from behind them, drowning out the remainder of any self-aggrandizing speech the serial killer might make. He let out a slightly hysterical laugh as Stain glared more intensely than before. “It sucks and I hate it!”

Kei pinched the bridge of her nose, right where her scar crossed it. This day had become a clusterfuck from the second she’d walked past the train station.

Diplomacy sucked. Everything sucked. Even as Stain started stalking closer, Kei thought more uncharitable things. But she was a professional in the end, and shifted position until she and Todoroki stood nearly back-to-back to present a united force against someone who wanted them all dead.

Ice lanced out from where Todoroki planted his right foot, arcing down the alley as quickly as it had during the Sports Festival where he directed the main mass and freezing the rest of the alleyway in a centimeter-thick layer. Hoarfrost coated refuse and mud and pavement, and everyone’s breath was visible in the sudden cold. Without saying a word, Todoroki established control of the battlefield and made it clear that any attempt to approach would be met with a quick trip to Antarctica for the offender.

I wonder if he is attempting to cover for a close-combat shortcoming?

To be fair, Todoroki probably didn’t spend most of his childhood training to fight with and around swords. Kei slid into a taijutsu starting stance ripped off of Kakashi’s, because Gai’s was a little less compatible with her cover. Her water ninjutsu would have to stand in for the customary knife, though.

A less experienced fighter would’ve charged headlong at the two Quirk-equipped kids with reckless abandon, assuming their rookie status would mean they’d break and run or just hesitate a second too long. It was the same fight-flight-freeze instinct, dialed up still further than the civilians in the shop had faced barely ten minutes ago.

And if Stain had rushed them, Kei wouldn’t have stopped punching until he stopped moving.

Stain was a little better than that. Two knives came flying at Todoroki’s face, making him jerk away and break off his attack. His attempted dodge was too little, too late, and would’ve resulted in an impaled hand—

—except for how Kei snapped a water-wreathed arm out into their path, cutting across Todoroki’s field of view without thinking and slapping the blades aside. If Stain thought he’d win that easily, he didn’t know who he was threatening. As was only proper, for a fight involving a shinobi.

Metal clinked against concrete, and it was on.

Kei ducked, and Todoroki’s fire blasted over her head close enough that it nearly made her damp hair curl. She wasn’t used to fighting alongside a walking, talking flamethrower in the specific way Todoroki was one, but she’d been on Team Minato since she was nine and training alongside Obito in particular for longer. Not for the first time, that teamwork drilling came in handy.

While Todoroki shifted stances behind her, she prepped the battlefield by soaking the alleyway with three centimeters of water. Right on cue, columns of ice rose like frigid stalagmites, forcing the serial killer to back off or get impaled.

When dealing with someone whose ranged options basically seemed to come down to kunai-
throwing, Kei might as well have been the ultimate shield.

People generally flinched when stuff got tossed their way with intent, whether it was dangerous or not. Most brains just didn’t process high-speed projectiles quite fast enough to make the distinction, resulting in things like ducking the wrong way or treating everything as a potential hazard. It was generally safer.

Kei was just a little too used to having sharp objects thrown at her face.

Ice shattered under a single swing of Stain’s chipped katana. If nothing else, the ice served as a decent baseline for Stain’s strength. Down on one knee, Kei slashed with two more needle-thin water whips to knock yet more throwing knives out of the air. Metal rained around Kei’s feet.

Once again, Stain tried to close the distance. And for a non-shinobi, he was quick and maneuverable. He did a lot of the same parkour bullshit Aizawa-sensei did, likely for the same reason—to take advantage of a Quirk with restrictions that only mattered if he couldn’t get first blood. And not a lot of people in Tokyo went through their workday prepared to be jumped by a jerk with a katana, even among heroes.

Kei was. Kei had been the jerk with a katana on more than one occasion.

Fire chased Stain away again, followed by a rush of icy spikes from the ground and alley walls that deflected yet more incoming knives thanks to luck. Kei dealt with the rest, but she had to wonder: How many did he have?

“How many did he have?” Todoroki asked, barely audible over the rush of fire and the almost-immediate crash of ice that followed. “I’ll handle extreme range.”

And on a better day, she would’ve been happy to sit back and watch Todoroki do all the work. Not today. “Or don’t, while I just make his life difficult.”

Kei’s patience thinned to the snapping point. Screw heroism, screw dealing with this. This entire fight was pointless; she didn’t need to be here, and Stain’s beliefs were such useless tautologies that he hardly warranted a literal soapbox. Therefore, she wouldn’t allow him any further chances to talk.

Kei’s hands moved in a blur. Water Release: Water Wall.

A miniature typhoon filled the space between their little group and Stain, water roaring like the dragon Kei so favored during the Sports Festival. She strode forward as the burst lashed at the entire length of the alleyway and drenched everything from the dead end to the street, almost sinking her arm into the depths of the swirling mess of fight debris.

There were people who could control water or swim well enough to avoid the steel-edged trap she could lay in an instant, but Stain had to go and stab one of them. And without even gaining any material advantage for later encounters.

Anyone who’d seen her at the Sports Festival would be able to guess her next move, but Stain had gotten a bit too pigheaded in his pursuit of a “just society.” Ribbons of water spiraled away from the masked murderer, draining the alley-blocking flood into a compact sphere from which there would only be escape if Kei allowed it.

Water Prison, Isobu murmured alongside her thoughts. It was as much a statement of aligned goals as it was a promise that he’d eat the chakra cost of today’s activities.

That left Kei holding a Water Prison with Stain inside it, alongside her right arm. Perhaps as a mild
warning, her hand was squarely clamped around his throat. With a grunt, she dragged him bodily away from the middle of the alleyway, where he was at best a speed bump, and slammed his thoroughly waterlogged form against brick. The Water Prison deformed, but it held even as she slowly cleared his airways and let his face out of the bubble.

Even now, she knew the rules.

Ice crawled around the water bubble as Todoroki stepped forward, right hand just barely resting on its surface. When she glanced at him and raised one eyebrow under her damp bangs, he just said, “You don’t look like you’re carrying handcuffs.”

He had a point.

Kei admitted grudgingly, “The second I let go, it breaks. A little help?”

Todoroki nodded, as though weird powerhouse girls fell out of the sky in front of him every day and got in fights with criminals to boot. The bubble shifted from water to ice as Kei lost control millimeter by millimeter, starting from the outside and working its way in toward her hand and thus Stain’s face.

Kei waited until Todoroki’s chill left only a sad little tunnel, then extracted her arm with the faintest of splashes. She left Todoroki to check his work on the world’s first cryo-pod, immediately darting back toward Obito. Stain could stay stuck to the wall like someone had duct-taped him there for as long as it took for the police to haul his ass to prison.

“How’d it go?” Obito asked expectantly, his eye firmly shut even as watered-down blood continued to follow tear-tracks down his face. “I couldn’t see any of it, but it sure sounded like a fight!”

“It was, no thanks to you.” Kei levered him up against the brick. While Obito was talking and smiled when he caught the concern in her voice, he was about as responsive and helpful as a sack of rice otherwise. Stain’s Quirk clearly hadn’t worn off yet. “What happened?”

“Oh, uh…” Obito’s smile dimmed a little. “I spotted Todoroki over there, and since Stain was obviously going to jump him, I tried to stop him!”

“I thought it was the other way around,” Todoroki said dryly.

“Aw, come on! That’s uncool!” Obito whined. Kei had already gotten out an unopened (and miraculously un-ruined) pack of pocket tissues from her uniform and dabbed experimentally at the blood on his face, muffling his voice as he continued, “I rushed in like a badass—”

“Like a hothead. And his Quirk failed him,” Todoroki concluded blandly.

“I didn’t expect to run out of juice right then, dammit! I was trying to help as many people as I could, including you!”

“I didn’t need to be saved.”

“Shut up and be grateful, you—”

Obito bit off the last word with a hiss as Kei tugged his ear sharply, which cut off his tirade about thirty seconds early. His chakra crackled with wounded pride, but it wasn’t nearly as serious as he was making it sound. He puffed his cheeks out and sulked instead of continuing, and Kei didn’t pick up any of the spikes that would indicate “woe, I have been stabbed” in someone without a Zetsu arm.
Just as well, she supposed. While chakra was invisible before enough power was pumped into a given technique, the only reason she’d logically need to hold her hand over Obito’s eye was to perform a medical scan. And holding a pad of tissues there screwed with the readings. Instead, she focused on keeping to entirely mundane, I-am-definitely-a-civilian levels of medical skill.

Wait, had the blood already been smudged? “Obito?”

“Yeah?”

“How exactly did Stain get your blood?”

If Kei hadn’t had her hand over his eye, she imagined Obito would have rolled it. “He licked my face, duh.”

“...That’s creepy.”

“There’s way too much to unpack ‘cept like, uh, in a trial. That’s barely the tip of that iceberg,” Obito said. He paused for a split second, then groaned. “Aw, man. I swear I didn’t mean to make that pun!”

Too late. Kei already felt her lips tugging upward. “Come on. Stain will keep. You need to be getting back to Rin before she kills both of us.”

“It’s not even your fault I got hurt, though.” Obito didn’t actually protest as Kei dragged one of his arms over her shoulder. “And it’s not like I’m that hurt. I really wasn’t even that scared.”

Todoroki had made his way back over to Kei and Obito by this time, and said, “You were stabbed, paralyzed, and then we got cornered by him.”

If Obito could have, he’d probably be shrugging. With his eye still closed and a cheeky little smile, he said, “I wasn’t scared. I knew Kei would come find me.”

Todoroki was right to look perfectly skeptical.

“That’s no excuse for throwing yourself into danger,” Kei muttered, as though she hadn’t just done the same to help make sure Midoriya was safe. *And I’ve failed you before, Obito.* Instead of dwelling on that thought, she turned to Todoroki and asked, “Todoroki-san, do you mind giving me a hand with…?”

“Okay.” There was another brief pause from Todoroki. “Are you sure you don’t want me to carry him?”

“Nah, I’m good. I’ve done this before.”

Obito groaned. “Can you two not talk about like like I’m not here?”

“Why not? We’re doing it to Stain way more.” Kei dropped to one knee so Todoroki could help the still-paralyzed Obito onto her back.

After a bit of internal debate, she settled for a piggyback where most of his weight was on her shoulders, with his arms tucked carefully around her neck. Obito couldn’t help, but also wouldn’t stop complaining about a bridal carry straining his neck. Sure, leaving his deadweight partially on the knives sticking out of his right forearm wasn’t great, but…

Well, Todoroki noticed. That was probably the least-great part. “These wounds aren’t bleeding.”
“It’s not a real arm. I lost my real one way back when. It sucked way worse than this.” Obito injected more cheer into his voice than was perhaps strictly necessary. Or convincing. “But it comes in handy.” There was a brief moment of realization before another groan escaped him, only this time his face was close enough that Kei whacked him with the side of her head. “Ow! Why can’t I stop making puns?”

Kakashi must have gotten to him. “Resistance is futile.”

“Ugh. And I can’t even move yet.” Obito couldn’t tilt his head away, so Kei caught the full blast of him raising his voice to say to Stan, “Hey, dickhead, when’s your Quirk wear off?”

“I c-can’t tell you that,” Stain hissed through chattering teeth. “Even if I cared, which I don’t.”

“Thanks a bunch!” was Obito’s sarcastic reply.

Todoroki ignored this exchange. Kei initially wondered if this was due to disdain, like an emperor on high above a gladiator fight, but Todoroki just said, “Did you see any heroes we could report to? None of us have the authority to arrest him. And I can’t leave him in the ice forever.” A slow, two-toned blink. “He’ll start getting frostbite.”

And then his flesh would die and he’d start losing extremities and so on. Kei couldn’t muster a lot of sympathy and certainly hadn’t a hope in hell of showing remorse in her expression. He’d hurt Obito, and thus Kei was doing well in just not wanting him horribly dead. It was another nod to local customs.

Todoroki didn’t really sound like he cared much either, but Kei didn’t know him well enough to judge.

“You could call your homeroom teacher,” Kei suggested once she got herself back under control. “He’s in the area.”

“Oh, did Midoriya and Shinsō get to the train station okay? I was kinda expecting to see ‘em still following you around town. Even with all the chaos,” Obito said, as though the idea had just occurred to him.

Todoroki’s gaze locked on Kei’s as they started leaving the alleyway, in search of an appropriate authority on whom to foist Stain’s welfare and future unhappiness. Perhaps actually leaving the supervillain frozen to the wall was a single step too far. Literally.

“They’re all fine.” That she knew of, anyway. Midoriya could have gone and broken a few more bones in the last minute or so, though the lightning and the glow he’d displayed earlier seemed promising. “Eraserhead took out one of those freaky monsters just fine. But…I’m sure he’ll be angry that I ran away.”

Let Todoroki believe Kei had just panicked. There wasn’t any way to explain Obito’s distress flare in a way that sounded reasonable in Quirk-Tokyo.

Todoroki sighed, then pulled out his phone—which he had with him, whereas Kei’s was still in her schoolbag somewhere—and flipped through his contacts list. Soon enough, he was reporting Stain’s location to Aizawa-sensei. He was also careful not to take his eyes off the imprisoned murderer, because that would’ve been dangerous at best.

As he did, Kei and Obito peeked out of the alleyway. Earlier, there had been three Nōmu-critters running around town as far as they knew. Three alone, though, wouldn’t have stalled out a town’s worth of pro heroes for all that long. Unless the particular model of Chickenface McMuscles was less
proof of concept and more production, the creatures Kei had seen so far today were failing to live up to their debut and needed numbers to make up the difference. She wasn’t sure if that would be a relief in the long term or not. This was proving to be a very strange family, and the idea of more of them waiting in the wings was disquieting.

You would be able to defeat them easily.

Assuming none of them had sufficiently bullshit Quirks, yes.

But at least the chaos outside their little unofficial police cordon was quiet. Aside from Stain’s shenanigans, this area’s fighting remained concentrated about two blocks further up the street.

The first Kei knew of Aizawa-sensei’s arrival was an errant footstep on the rooftop of the nearest building. The second hint was when Obito suddenly got all of his muscle control back and jumped as though someone had shocked him. He let go of her neck to make sure he could, in fact, move even his Zetsu arm, and made a gleeful noise.

Kei dropped Obito on his butt.

“Ow! Keiiiiiii, that was mean!” But he let Kei step past him and instead focused on ripping the knives out of his right forearm. Whitish-orange goop splattered across his pant leg, behaving less like blood and more like thin tree sap. Or maple syrup, if only to extend this farce that much further.

Aizawa-sensei’s hair was lying limp again, but his goggled face was pointed toward the still-stuck Stain. Then, he raised a hand to his ear and said into the same radio as before, “Eraserhead to dispatch. Another villain has been subdued—” There was a half-second’s pause as his head twitched slightly in the direction of the kids, taking in details at a glance, before he went on to cite the address.

“On a scale of one to dead, how much trouble do you think we’re in?” Obito asked, wiping the knives on his sleeves as he tossed them underhand toward Aizawa-sensei. Metal clattered to the asphalt.

Kei leaned sideways until she could whisper loudly in his ear, “Why don’t you go find out? Go home.”

Obito wasn’t quite able to think of an excuse not to obey. She saw him trying, but Obito’s cover was even thinner than Kei’s was. He needed to leave before anybody else got too much information. Put a different way: She needed him gone. As it was, Kei was already going to have her hands full before a single person even breathed a word about operational security. Obito sticking around would not help.

Before Aizawa-sensei could quite finish his spiel to the dispatch officer in charge of coordinating hero shenanigans, whoever that was, Obito walked directly into a brick wall and vanished.

He’d be better off with an expert to look at his Sharingan.

“Todoroki-san?” Kei asked, as though that hadn’t just happened.

“What?”

“Why are you still in your hero costume? I thought the internship week was over.”

“The last day isn’t over yet,” was his dry correction.

Or: My dad is an asshole, so please stop asking.
Aizawa-sensei didn’t react to Obito’s disappearance, continuing the speak in his grumbling voice. The situation was fairly under control: Stain was trapped, Kei and Todoroki were unharmed, and presumably Shinsō and Midoriya were safely hiding somewhere else. He could afford to ignore one wascally teenager—whom he knew was a plant—making a quick getaway.

It was still probably one of the more anticlimactic ways to put a superpowered rampage to an end. Kei crossed her arms and waited for the sword of Damocles to fall.

The radio connection died with a click audible even from where Kei was standing.

*This should be fun.*
Todoroki Shōto considered the situation he’d found himself in, now that he had the time and breathing room for it.

To one side, he had Gekkō. She and Shōto had never spoken to each other before today. After the UA Sports Festival, Shōto got the impression she was a powerful—but completely unmotivated—competitor. Being in the same prefecture as Bakugō also meant Shōto got a decent view of his repeated attempts to challenge Gekkō to a rematch, without success. Bakugō hadn’t bothered harassing Shōto with nearly the same level of persistence. In truth, beyond the Sports Festival fallout, Shōto had more or less forgotten that Gekkō was the girl with rumors swirling around her. People talked to fill time. Most of what they said wasn’t important.

Gekkō didn’t look much like someone who’d stab a classmate in middle school. Mostly, she looked like Aizawa. Just younger, with a different scar, female, and with a completely different Quirk.

After Midoriya’s reaction to a similar thought, Shōto decided not to mention his developing theory until Aizawa was out of earshot.

Gekkō caught his gaze for a split second, rolled her eyes, and then kicked another fallen knife farther down the alley. It was a basic takedown safety procedure, but done with less desperation and more squeamishness.

While waiting for Aizawa to finish his radio call, Shōto let his gaze slide sideways to the wall “Obito” had walked through. He didn’t know how a transformation Quirk like that was really supposed to work, but neither Gekkō nor Aizawa really seemed surprised to see a high school student just decide to ghost through solid brick. Gekkō obviously knew him, and maybe Aizawa just expected to be able to track him down later and give the other boy a lecture for unregistered Quirk use. Shōto wasn’t sure he was allowed to ask.

“Who was that?” To Gekkō rather than Aizawa.

“My disaster-prone best friend,” was her quiet reply.

That would explain her ferocity from a minute ago.

“When I hand him over to the police,” Aizawa began, pushing his goggles up on his forehead, “am I
going to need to report any potential medical complications to the arresting officer? Other than the obvious.”

“No,” said Todoroki, glancing at Gekkō.

“Not that I know of,” Gekkō said, looking down at her shoes. Her expression was unreadable thanks to her wild tangle of hair.

“Good.” Aizawa put his goggles back over his eyes. His capture weapon started flowing around him like it was alive. “Shōto, de-ice him.”

Shōto didn’t question it. If Aizawa was using his hero name, it was an order and not a request. He stepped forward and put his left boot on top of the trailing edge of ice nailing Stain to the wall. Just like that, the ice started to hiss and steam as heat rose off him. A few flickering flames sprang up along Shōto’s left hand, but they were quickly snuffed out before anyone could comment on his lack of practice. And for safety’s sake, he made sure to start thawing the edges farthest away from Stain's torso as he could—if something happened, he’d still have to chip himself out before he could hurt anyone.

Gekkō stepped forward as the ice dwindled, shunting meltwater away from all of them and toward the sewer grate.

As Stain was slowly melted free, Aizawa deputized Gekkō only to collect all of the Hero Killer’s spare weaponry. Even setting aside all of the knives he’d thrown at Shōto and Gekkō earlier and the sword still frozen to his hand, there was a lot more to worry about.

Aizawa, even while slowly coiling his capture weapon around Stain’s wrists as Shōto thawed them out, took the time to say to Gekkō, “Don’t get any ideas. Those are all going straight into a police evidence locker.”

He was giving Shōto weird ideas faster than Gekkō was generating any, going by her disinterested expression. She piled everything in a corner, dropping the chipped katana on top with an uncereomionous clank amid the nest of metal. Shoto spotted four switchblades, a number of serrated utility knives, at least two daggers, and a tantō among the mess. Stain didn’t have tattoos, but the only people Shōto knew of with this much cutlery on them were people in old yakuza movies. Not that he’d seen any, but Natsuo seemed sure about that kind of thing.

Now that he was consistently talking to Natsuo again, anyway.

At the end, Shōto’s efforts left Stain sitting bound in Aizawa’s capture weapon, but also soaking wet from head to toe. If he’d gotten any leeway during the thawing process, Stain probably would have leapt for his weapons or at least bitten one of them, given his Quirk. But that wasn’t how Aizawa operated in the field. He understood all too well that villains would happily take advantage of any weakness they saw. So, Aizawa gagged Stain with his capture weapon to stand in for a bite hood.

Shōto wasn’t under any illusions regarding whether his and Gekkō’s presences were changing anything, but Aizawa hadn’t been the one to bring Stain down in the first place. Even that fact didn’t really change the fact that they were both first-year high school students.

Aizawa didn’t ask either of them to make sure Stain was presentable for the police. Shōto was sure he didn’t care.

In the end, Shōto and Gekkō were left to sit and wait until the next adult showed up to take this situation out of their hands. Gekkō leaned against a wall, ensuring Stain would have to go through
her (and fail) to get to his weapons, and Shōto felt at loose ends even though no one was saying anything. He usually didn’t, but at school there were people who liked to fill dead air, starting with Present Mic and circling the whole of Musutafu twice. Even on his internship, his father couldn’t stop barking orders. The only time Shōto got any quiet was when he could carve his own space.

It felt lonelier now than it used to, but at the same time…not. Midoriya was out there and knew what Endeavor was like. Natsuo came home sometimes to talk with him and Fuyumi. Fuyumi ran interference between him and Endeavor, so Shōto visited his mother on Sundays without being bothered.

All of that added up to something. He wasn’t sure what shape it would take, yet, but it was different.

The silence took about forty-five seconds to be blown wide open.

“Your heroine has arrived, everyone!”

Shōto looked up at the same time that Aizawa said, “What took you, Midnight?”

“Rude as ever, Eraser!” Midnight replied, and strode around the corner with her whip leading the way. At least until she had a chance to see everyone standing around. Then the gleam in her blue eyes turned calculating, and she said, “How about I take a bit of the workload off your aching shoulders? You’ll be almost bent double at this rate.”

“That is why I called you here.”

“I like the way you’ve turned taking down a villain into a learning opportunity,” Midnight said. She tucked her whip onto her belt, then strode forward until she could look Stain directly in the face. With long nails, she tore a strip from her left sleeve and pinkish mist started to waft off her skin. “Now, for another practical demonstration.”

Aizawa stood back, hand over his nose and mouth. Gekkō mimicked him, watching Stain intently, and Shōto decided to follow their lead. He’d seen the footage of the end of the Sports Festival, but he’d already been unconscious by the time Midnight deployed her Quirk against Bakugō.

Midnight waited for at least half a minute longer than it took for Stain to stop moving. It was probably safer that way.

Then: “You can have him. I’ll take Todoroki and Gekkō somewhere a bit safer in the meantime.”

Aizawa nodded. In the distance, they could already hear sirens blaring.

“Come along, then. Gekkō-kun, and…ah, Shōto. I’m sorry for forgetting your codename.”

“It’s fine, Midnight-sensei. And…Endeavor is around here,” Shōto said, though only because his father was always in the midst of the heaviest fighting. Shōto would learn something from watching a fight like that, even if he hated the man’s guts.

“He’s busy.” Midnight paused for a second, scanning the streets before they made their way into an apparently-peaceful chunk of city. Then she said, “Eraser isn’t the type to stash someone without knowing exactly where to find them afterward. And luckily, my homeroom class has been wonderfully chatty during this crisis.”

Gekkō broke her silence of several minutes with, “It was Shinsō-kun, right?”

“Among others! Speaking of… Gekkō-san, are you all right?” Midnight tilted her head to one side.
“I didn’t want to ask earlier, but you did seem a bit stunned.”

“I’m okay.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, Midnight-sensei. I’ve had worse days.” Which was not the same thing. Even Shōto knew that. Gekkō just shrugged. “I’m okay.”

“Mm-hm. We’ll still be talking about this later. And you, Shōto?”

“I’m fine.” He couldn’t afford to be anything else in public.

Midnight, surprisingly, let the topic go after staring them both down for a few tense moments. But, in the end, Shōto had weathered worse critics and come through alive. Someone who seemed to actually have his best interests in mind was easy mode, at least in comparison. He still wasn’t looking forward to any future discussions, especially once his old man finished quelling the other villains, but this was fine for now.

Gekkō, for her part, seemed to agree. She dropped back alongside Shōto as Midnight led the way to a shelter, expression as unreadable as his usually was.

“Why did you fight him that way?” Shōto asked, finally breaking the silence of his own initiative. As always, what he said and what he meant didn’t quite come across the right way.

Gekkō blinked, as though to ask if he was really talking to her. Then, “What way?”

“Up close like that, on defense. You could’ve blown him away anytime after you realized he was there.”

“So could you.” Her tone didn’t sound like an accusation, but the words stung anyway.

“Not without hurting him a lot worse.” Worse than Shōto eventually did, regardless of their respective snap decisions. Prison transports had safety blankets, though. Stain would probably be better off than most of his victims.

This wasn’t what he wanted to say. While, yes, it was a minor concern that Gekkō hadn’t used the full extent of her Quirk to get Stain out of their way sooner, Shōto had other theories floating around that needed more information first. For one thing, how had she managed to react so quickly to all of those knives? Shōto hadn’t even seen the attacks coming before she deflected them. It didn’t make sense.

“I wasn’t really thinking,” Gekkō admitted, after they’d followed Midnight for a little longer. “Well, I was, but it went something like…” She held up a hand and started counting down on her fingers. “‘Oh, knives. I can deal with knives. And if I can’t deal with knives really fast, that Quirk will get me and I’m gonna die and he’s gonna die and then Obito’ll die. And that can’t happen.’ Sort of like that, but without words.” She shook her head. “I was pretty much running on nothing but reflex at that point.”

“I didn’t realize you thought so little of me.”

“Huh?”

“He’s a S-rank villain,” Shōto explained, “but I was there, too. You didn’t need to prioritize my safety like that. Even with your friend behind me, I wasn’t just going to sit there and get stabbed.”
“Well, yeah. If Obito wasn’t there, you probably could’ve iced the entire area and just walked away. Assuming you got the first hit in. But I saw your fight against Midoriya-san in real time, and I saw the one with Bakugō-san a while later,” Gekkō replied. Under his questioning gaze, she said, “You don’t fight like someone who’s used to a lot of people getting close enough punch you in the face. Anyone who does is the kind of person who has to get past everything else you can throw at them anyway. And you’re the scariest long range specialist in all of 1-A, but that can leave gaps. It’s not a matter of practice—or even talent—but of experience.”

“Are you two kids playing nice?” Midnight asked over her shoulder. She didn’t actually look back to make sure they were still following her, but it was a safe assumption.

Gekkō winced. ‘Um, that’s what I think, anyway.”

“...That’s…” What kind of life did someone have to live to get used to the idea of knives flying at their face? It was, by far, the longest single thought process anyone had shared with Shōto since the beginning of the year—except for some of the things Midoriya said. Shōto got the impression that Midoriya’s brain moved faster than most people’s did, test scores or no. Or at least down several different lines at once. Gekkō seemed to be cut from a different cloth, though. “...I guess that’s an interesting point. Thank you, then.”

She looked away and didn’t say anything else. Maybe she was embarrassed. That happened to people, though Shōto didn’t know what the problem was this time.

Midnight broke up the awkward conversation with a bright, “Here we are! You’re safe now.”

The “shelter” turned out to be a train station. It was completely normal, except for the fact that nobody was coming out of it on a theoretically busy Saturday. Instead, Midnight spoke to a police officer and hero pair who were looking out for stragglers, waving Shōto and Gekkō down the frozen escalators. Not literally frozen, but Shōto wouldn’t have tripped even if they were. As it was, they made it down to the second row of turnstiles, and then to the underground mall, before anybody stopped them.

“Gekkō-san! Are you all right?”

“Where the hell did you go?”

Shōto blinked, and suddenly Midoriya and that purple-haired Shinsō kid were in front of him. Shinsō was the ruder one, getting directly in Gekkō’s face, but Midoriya—

“Todoroki-kun? What are you doing here?” Midoriya asked, while Shinsō hissed something and Gekkō tried making her excuses.

“I was in the area. They only wanted pro heroes out there, so I’m here now.” Shōto looked around, watching huddled groups of civilians here and there, all across the platform. They were staying carefully away from the tracks, but trains weren’t running at the moment. Even the cheerful public address system was silent.

“Is that really it?” Midoriya asked. His green eyes were huge with concern, and Shōto couldn’t really blame him. Actually, Shōto wondered if he couldn’t spare a bit of that worry for himself—Midoriya’s UA uniform was a rumpled, vaguely damp mess, and both of the sleeves were partially torn.

What happened to him? “I’ll tell you if you tell me what happened to you.”

“Oh, uh. One of the villains grabbed me. It was the one with one eye, but I got away thanks to
Aizawa-sensei.” Midoriya fidgeted. “Well, partly. Shinsō-san and Gekkō-san chased him after he grabbed me, so I wasn’t alone, and I sort of punched him really hard in the face to get him to drop me? Before Aizawa-sensei beat him up.”

That was a lot more than Shōto had been expecting. Midoriya was a bit of a trouble magnet, wasn’t he? Still, he’d made a deal and decided to answer first. “My old man was out there looking for the Hero Killer. He didn’t find him, but I did after getting separated. And then all this happened.”

“Were you with him when that happened?” Shinsō asked Gekkō.

“Yeah. Obito was there, too, and there was a fight, but none of us got hurt! It’s just been a…very long day,” said Gekkō. “We’ll probably have to sign a non-disclosure agreement at the end of this.”

Shinsō pressed his hands to his face, blowing out a frustrated breath. “Gekkō-kun, how the hell…?”

“It’s the exact opposite of a gift. Maybe it’s even a curse,” Gekkō agreed. Then, as though a thought just struck her, she said, “Todoroki-san, this is Shinsō-kun. Shinsō-kun, this is Todoroki-san. His hero name is…?”

“Shōto. Just that.” Gekkō didn’t look like she believed him.

Shinsō looked like he had a headache. “I don’t know if I can call you that.”

“It’s all right. Todoroki-kun isn’t the only one in our class who doesn’t have a codename.” Midoriya tried to sound encouraging. “It just takes a bit of practice to get used to thinking of it the right way.”

“Yeah, no. Not doing that.” Shinsō shook his head. Maybe he didn’t have a headache. “So, that non-disclosure agreement. What happened?”

“Two teenagers beat the Hero Killer enough that he got arrested by Eraserhead and Midnight,” Gekkō replied, “and we might be on the hook for unlicensed Quirk use, since Todoroki-san was unsupervised and… I’m just a lone wolf, acting on her own. It could even be vigilante stuff.” She scratched at her scar.

“If it’s a choice between ‘take credit and get arrested for unlicensed Quirk use’ and ‘let Eraserhead take the credit and not get in trouble,’ I already know which one I’m going for. I actually want to keep going to school.” Shinsō sighed. “You’re the worst trouble magnet I know. We’ve only been in UA for half a semester!”

Gekkō sighed. “Like I said, it’s a curse.”

This seemed to be the group consensus, or near enough. Gekkō was cursed. Or maybe just a troublemaker with an alibi. Shōto agreed she was weird, but couldn’t say anything else for sure.

It took a little longer, but they ended up taking up a little corner of the underground mall near the vending machines, with all of them sitting down together in a little group. There wasn’t much left to do but wait for the incident to be over. Shinsō did manage to make Gekkō smile by revealing he’d tracked down her school bag, but otherwise they just sat together. UA students, waiting on a knife’s edge.

Maybe that was a tasteless metaphor.

Midoriya broke their little quiet bubble with, “Gekkō-san, did you see any other heroes out there?”

“Uh… Death Arms and Mic-sensei? And Eraserhead-sensei, Midnight-sensei, and…” She paused,
bringing a hand to her mouth before saying, “And I guess Mt. Lady. Very briefly. Endeavor, too, but I didn’t actually see him. Todoroki-san is here, after all.”

Midoriya’s face fell a little. “Oh. I was kind of expecting to hear about All Might, but…” He trailed off uncertainly, glancing at Shōto. Then: “Not to be overbearing or anything! It’s okay if you didn’t!”

“Midoriya-san, I saw maybe two actual streets and a lot of alleyways. Every hero in Musutafu was probably out saving the day somewhere.”

“Oh. Well, that’s okay.” Midoriya tilted his head to one side, then retrieved a battered notebook from his school bag. “Can you tell me what you did see?”

“Oh, I might be able to talk about Stain? What do you think, Todoroki-san?”

Why was she asking him? Midoriya probably followed social media like everyone else. Stain’s Quirk was going to be all over the internet soon enough, like a lot of villains. The old man had a whole PR team keeping track of that stuff for him, both to manage his own reputation into something palatable and to comb the world for information on possible targets. Endeavor may have been a complete bastard, but he was a ruthlessly competent hero. Nobody else even approached his success at quelling villain incidents.

All Shōto said was, “It’s fine.”

Shōto peered over Midoriya’s shoulder while Gekkō spoke in rambling, incomplete thoughts. To his surprise, Midoriya was actually taking notes as she spoke. Was this one of Midoriya’s hobbies? It seemed…mundane, for someone like Midoriya. Almost too practical.

It was kind of nice to hear normal conversations, even if he wasn’t a part of it.

“And there he goes,” Shinsō muttered, just loudly enough for Shōto to hear. When he looked up, Shinsō was staring right at him. It almost made Shōto want to ask if he had something stuck to his face. “Hey, Todoroki-san.”

“What?”

Grudgingly, Shinsō said, “Thanks for looking out for her.”

Shōto blinked, confused. Where had that come from?

Shinsō seemed to notice his surprise. “Not used to getting thanked or something?”

“She didn’t need me.” That felt true. From the moment she’d showed up, Gekkō seemed in control of herself. Nothing that Stain did surprised her enough to let him draw blood. It was like she’d been there before, or at least a situation a lot like it. “I don’t think thanks is necessary.”

That thought sat strangely on Shōto’s brain, but it worked.

Shinsō pinched the bridge of his nose. “That’s not the point. Just accept it.”

“But—”

“You’re making this awkward,” Shinsō grumbled, interrupting him. He slouched in place, leaning against the side of the vending machine. The back of his head hit the red plastic with a muted thud and he threw an arm over his face. “Today’s been way too long.”
Nonplussed, Shōto just said, “Okay.”

―And that’s all I remember,‖ Gekkō concluded. She and Midoriya had kept talking while Shinsō tried to say…something, and now she sat back as Midoriya continued to scribble and mutter to himself. To Shōto, she said, “So, are you okay? Really okay? Not like how you answered when Midnight-sensei asked.”

Midoriya’s head snapped up. “Wait, Todoroki-kun, you’re not hurt, o-or tired, or anything like that? Right?”

Shōto considered the idea. His right side was no longer shaking, with the ice long since melted away, and his left side wasn’t overheated. He probably needed to go to sleep early tonight—not that it was likely, given how his old man treated training and obedience and discipline as all the same thing. Other than that, though, a bone-deep exhausted ache was sort of dulling his reactions to things. He’d used his Quirk for more, and for longer, so it couldn’t have just been that… “I’ve had worse.”

“Are you feeling the adrenaline crash?” Gekkō suggested.

“Maybe.” He’d been here before. There before. Both? “…I guess it might be sinking in.”

“What?” Shinsō asked, without moving.

Midoriya, surprisingly, answered first. “We faced a bunch of villains today, and we could’ve all died.”

Shōto nodded. Not-dying was tiring work.

Shinsō snorted. “Welcome to the club, then.”

Gekkō pushed him hard enough to knock him over. Once Shinsō was sprawled out on the linoleum tile, she grumbled, “Don’t be a jerk, Shinsō-kun.”

“It’s true, though,” Shinsō said as he sat up again. His purple eyes fixed on Todoroki and Midoriya in turn. “None of us froze until everything was over. We did heroic things without pro heroes involved, just using our brains and our bare hands, and it worked. What else were we training for?”

“The power to throw a decent punch, duh.”

Shinsō rolled his eyes.

“You two train?” Shōto asked. When he got two nods, Shōto found himself asking, “Why?”

“Not everyone starts out in the Hero Department, Todoroki,” Shinsō replied. Shōto probably wasn’t imagining the hostility there. “But I’ll get there. I just need to get stronger.”

“Ah.” Shōto hadn’t even taken the entrance exam to UA, but he did remember half a sentence from Aizawa about Shinsō’s attempt, back during the Sports Festival. His old man took the choice and the challenge from him in one fell swoop. “Maybe that’s the wrong question.”

“Maybe,” said Midoriya. “Um, how about this? What kinds of things do you practice when you meet, then? Because I’m kind of curious, too.”

“It’s not anything super special. Shinsō-kun and I just spar— without Quirks—after school a couple times a week.” Gekkō hesitated. “Usually. It’s pretty basic stuff, sometimes, but we do think about possible tactics. We even got to run around the USJ once, with Thirteen’s permission.”
Well. That was…
Shōto would be lying if he said he wasn’t curious. Gekkō, as far as he could tell, was a monster in melee combat. She wasn’t as strong as Kirishima or Satō, and nowhere near the power level of Midoriya’s incredibly destructive Quirk, but she had technique that effortlessly made mockeries of her two Sports Festival opponents. It was still strange to realize that the reaction speed and flexibility necessary to completely neutralize Stain was contained in a first-year high school girl.
Shōto still didn’t know why, and it didn’t seem like Gekkō wanted to share that story.
Shōto understood that feeling. Telling Midoriya about his old man’s true nature was enough of a risk for the rest of the school year. Gekkō probably had her own closet skeleton. Lots of them.
“That sounds really cool!” Midoriya bounced in place. “Is it all just about technique, or are you—?”
“It’s just basic self-defense,” Gekkō said, nonplussed.
That sounded suspicious.
Shinsō gave her a suspicious look. “Is that why I had to run five kilometers last time we met up after school?”
Gekkō countered, “Running away is a valid tactic.”
Shōto interrupted the comment battle with, “Which you might need more practice with.” The line was delivered a little uncertainly—was cutting in like this all right?
“It might’ve helped me a little…” Midoriya mumbled, not bothered by anything except what was in his head.
Apparently, Shōto hadn’t broken any rules. Good.
“You got randomly grabbed.” Gekkō pointed out. “Running was kind of out the window, Midoriya-san.”
“Are you two asking to join?” Shinsō raised an eyebrow. Never had an invitation sounded more like a provocation. There was a curl in the back of his voice that loomed like the jaws of a bear trap. Shinsō didn’t really want Shōto or Midoriya there, did he?
“Maybe?” Midoriya looked more uncertain than usual, which was saying something.
“Shinsō-kun,” Gekkō said in a flat voice. “I already said not to be a jerk.”
“I’m not.”
“Sure you aren’t.”
“I’m no—”
“I-I’d really like to learn something like that!” Midoriya interrupted, stammering. When Shinsō and Gekkō stopped their argument to acknowledge his answer, he went on, “And maybe Todoroki-kun does too, if that’s okay? Maybe?”
Shōto thought about it. Knowing his old man’s training schedule, the UA homework load, and in-class sparring… It would be tough, but the stakes were low. He doubted two General Education students would be as strict about attendance as either UA or Endeavor. “Is it just sparring?”
“It’s more like hanging out time, but with punches,” Gekkō corrected. “And since Shinsō-kun’s schedule is changing and he’s gonna be busy all the time, I need more friends.”

“Ow, Gekkō-kun. Ow.” The sardonic expression made it back onto Shinsō’s face and he theatrically clutched at his heart. Shōto didn’t know why. “You’re breaking my heart, here. The only way you relate to people is by getting in fights with them, isn’t it?”

Gekkō rolled her eyes. “If it works, who cares?”

“Not the point!” said Shinsō.

Shōto looked curiously at Midoriya. “Is this what they’re like?”

“Kind of, yeah!” There was a story behind that comment.

Shōto didn’t really have a much clearer idea of who these two were than he had this morning, but at least they seemed nice. Weird, but nice. Also: potentially dangerous. But nice. “Wednesdays?”

Gekkō said, “Sure.”

“Why not?” said Shinsō.

“This will be fun!” was Midoriya’s contribution. “I’ll take the best notes.”

And just like that, it seemed as though Shōto had joined a very strange club.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: This chapter was originally going to be the one from Aizawa's POV, and then Todoroki snuck in. On the other hand, at least it's long?
Slap on the Wrist

Chapter Summary

Kei: Take refuge in being a fifteen-year-old girl.

Chapter Notes

Sorry 'bout the massive delay, folks. Life's been wild lately.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sitting around a train station for an hour was not Kei’s idea of fun, but at this point no one else had the energy to be bored.

From what she understood, Midoriya’s day had started with his internship ending, continued with the Musutafu attack, and thus far seemed to be destined to end in a train-station-turned-bomb-shelter. He was still jittery, jumpy, and other words starting with J. Burning off all that nervous energy meant that his fashionably scorched notebook was rapidly filling with all sorts of thoughts, so Kei gave him one of her spares in case he needed it. He didn’t, but he thanked her anyway. Midoriya was polite like that.

Shinsō’s day had been a rollercoaster from hell. It went something like: “Yay, internship! Hooray, cats! Oh no, the city’s on fire for some reason! Oh shit, villains are attacking! Okay, let’s be heroes! Hey, give me back my friend! WHERE ARE YOU GOING, GEKKŌ?!” Therefore, and quite reasonably, he’d formed a pillow out of his bag and his uniform jacket, leaned back, and gone to sleep with a notebook over his face. It drowned out the pinkish light from the nearest store, but didn’t do much for the tinny pop music playing from someone’s phone in the back.

Todoroki, the last of the UA students Kei had run into today, seemed okay. He was quieter than either Midoriya (who muttered even now) or Shinsō (who seemed to have enough sass for two people), but he seemed nice. A little thrown off by Kei’s occasional stream of consciousness assessments and adrenaline-crash-fueled comments, but willing to roll with it. Kei wasn’t sure if he was very patient or just oblivious, but the calm was appreciated. He had his eyes shut, but he was still upright.

Everyone was just plumb tuckered out from today, and Kei couldn’t blame them. Her stamina hadn’t been tested much by comparison, but the last hour or so was comprised of the kind of rapid emotional whiplash she’d hardly needed to see in her friends.

And Kei still hadn’t reached a physical point where she could make a lot of cup ramen and swear into her pillow about it. Obito wasn’t going to be around to share once she was, either. There was no justice in the world.

Todoroki hadn’t asked about Obito, past his first question. She wasn’t sure if she should be worried about that or not. Todoroki didn’t seem to a chatty kid.
Well.

Kei ended up buying vending machine drinks for all of the boys, and then essentially sat on her hands for the next thirty minutes. She followed news based on social media feeds and the occasional ludicrously brave reporter, with her phone’s battery slowly dying along the way. As a nominal civilian, there wasn’t much else she was allowed to do during a crisis. Hell, Todoroki had to sit down here like every other kid, even though he was still wearing his superhero costume. Aside from a rumble or two from above, none of them got any information better than what was given to any other rando on the internet.

You may die of old age before anything is meaningfully resolved, Isobu muttered in Kei’s head. It will be a dull funeral.

Kei took a sip of the vaguely-orange-flavored Second Maid and thought, I’ll make sure to take some jerks with me, just to spice things up for your amusement.

See that you do. Isobu’s tails lashed, making Kei’s chakra twitch. I had a thought—

Hooray for you.

Stop that, Isobu complained, and Kei sent him an impression of her drawing her fingers across her mouth like a zipper. Mollified, he went on, This little lukewarm human is your newest stray. Is that a good idea?

Probably not. But I do a lot of less-than-optimal things because people look sad. Kei screwed the cap back onto the bottle and started batting it back and forth between her hands. Though, on a different topic? That ninja-cosplaying dickhead was a pushover, wasn’t he?

If it had been more dull, I might have fallen asleep.

You don’t sleep.

Exactly.

Well…I guess the fight with that first Nōmu cousin was interesting? Up until I got punched out of the building.

That was nearly a month ago. The only exercise we have had since then was bloodless. And there was a significant drive built into Isobu’s hindbrain that said if he stretched his tails, humans had to bleed. Maybe Kei should have kicked Stain in the mouth to satisfy everyone’s bloodlust.

A month ago still counts. Kei had gone months at a stretch between life-or-death battles before. She’d even go as far as to say she made a habit of pushing truly dangerous fights off the end of her calendars when possible. But at home, there was usually someone around to train with her. And her missions generally had more scenario variety than this one did.

When the all-clear finally blared over the train station’s public address system, startling Shinsō awake, a total of about two hours had passed since the initial incident. All around the semi-isolated UA corner, people were becoming ordinary citizens again and not terrified mice in business casual daywear. Kei even spotted another group of high school students, huddled up in a group that occasionally broke into relieved hysterical laughter. She didn’t recognize the tartan pants, though. Public schools made a lot of strange choices for the sake of being distinct to truancy officers.

And while Kei was on the topic of school paranoia…
Shinsō yawned. “Did you check the group chat? Because I’m not seeing Homura-san freak out any less than she was when I got here.”

Kei had not, and set about fixing that as their group waited for the platform to clear out a bit. Checking the chat turned out to be worse than the time she’d turned her phone off during the Sports Festival and ended up ignoring Obito’s messages, because there were more than five times as many participants. Over a hundred and fifty messages awaited her, shouted into a twenty-one-member chatroom. From a quick glance, the only person who hadn’t responded to Homura and Shingetsu’s sound-off—or started freaking out, or posting weird pictures of cats in hats—was in fact Kei herself.

Oops.

Kei typed a quick message that consisted of, “Safe, not hurt, bored.”

Homura’s response was a picture of a safely smoldering campfire, complete with a fire safety bucket off to the left. It had Backdraft’s masked mug on it.

“What is this supposed to mean?” Kei asked Shinsō, holding up her phone’s screen.

“I think she finally triggered the sprinkler system, wherever she is,” Shinsō suggested, rubbing his eyes and slumping his shoulders a little.

Kei didn’t see how she was supposed to get that from the picture, but Shinsō was the one who knew their classmates better.

“Well, I’ll apologize when I see her in class.” With that, Kei put her phone away instead of bothering to read the rest of the groupchat. She had her own concerns now that the crowd was finally moving, even if her friends were at the very back of the pack.

One of those concerns was standing just outside of the train station, manifested in the form of both Aizawa-sensei and Kayama-sensei. It was only through the power of post-disaster organization that Midnight, at least, wasn’t being mobbed by camera-toting fans. Kei wasn’t sure most people knew who Aizawa-sensei was.

Oh, great. Good cop, bad cop. And neither of them are even cops. I think.

Midoriya’s and Shinsō’s participation in today’s glorious clusterfuck ended after Aizawa-sensei arrived on the scene the first time and literally stomped the exposed-brain dude into the asphalt. Kei, being the recipient of a lifetime achievement award at forgetting minor details in the heat of the moment, had crashed Todoroki’s encounter with Stain and Obito without bothering to disguise herself first. There was probably legal precedent for at least a bit of that situation, and Kei understood it mainly as “vigilantism.” As committed by a pair of fifteen-year-olds who’d been operating under the (correct) assumption that their enemy was going to absolutely kill them if he got a chance.

“It’s time for us to talk, darlings!” Kayama-sensei’s whip cracked, and the motion left her arm pointing squarely at…an ambulance? Two ambulances, and an aid station, and a number of heroes and police organizing people into lines. “We don’t want any unsolicited interruptions, and all of you need a once-over anyway.”

“None of us got hurt,” said Midoriya, but he was blinking rapidly at the bright sunlight and could be spared a few seconds of being dazzled.

“You expect me to believe that.” Aizawa-sensei pointed squarely at a tiny woman who turned out to be Recovery Girl when poked her head out of the ambulance. “Midoriya, move.”
“Y-Yessir!”

Aizawa-sensei turned his bloodshot glare on the rest of their little group. “Anyone else feel like lying?”

No one said anything.

“Good. Midnight, Shinsō and Gekkō are yours for the first round.” With that, Todoroki ended up following Aizawa in Midoriya’s wake. It was probably faster for everyone involved to get checked out by Recovery Girl anyway.

“What a killjoy.” Kayama-sensei tutted, but recovered neatly with, “Shinsō-kun, Gekkō-san, let’s go over here. Neither of you are hurt, as far as I can tell.”

“I had a stitch in my side earlier,” Shinsō said, just to be contrary.

“And it clearly hasn’t slowed you down one bit, so hush.”

Eventually, Kayama-sensei led them to a medical worker. Recovery Girl was in the middle of the medical center of all this mess, handing out candy and kisses in equal amounts to people who came into the area with blood all over them. Once they were actually pronounced in full health, if shaky, she blew out a relieved sigh and stopped fussing quite so obviously.

Kayama-sensei even made sure they actually saw Recovery Girl, which was a tad overkill. Kei hadn’t even managed to split her knuckles on Stain’s face. She did receive a handful of gummy bear vitamins in the bargain, though, which made it a little better.

“After all that, we get candy,” Shinsō muttered, sounding unsure and properly a teenager coming off the jittery uncertainty of a disaster. It was under the trademark sullen snark somewhere, detectable only by Kei’s expertly trained ear.

“I’ll take it.” She was less fussed about being patronized and ended up eating the candy anyway. Second Maid wasn’t making up for a lack of sugar in general, and this was a paltry sacrifice to her sweet tooth, but it at least felt similar. Anything in a pinch.

Shinsō eyed her for a second or two, worrying at his lip. Then, “You’re really not shaken up by any of this?”

“Ask me after I’ve tried to go to sleep tonight,” Kei replied, closing her eyes briefly against the sunlight reflecting off some hero’s outfit. She brought a hand to her face as though trying to fight off an expected headache. A little muffled, she went on, “It might’ve not hit me yet.”

And it never would.

Hooray for horrible foundational combat experiences.

Kayama-sensei got them settled in one of the many tents for the inevitable talking-to. The air seemed to thicken like dread was a physical force. Anticipation, at the very least. Anticipation was the true appeal of holiday gift-giving and the absolute worst part of any sit-down with a supervisor, whether Kei accepted hero oversight as something meaningful or not. She liked Kayama-sensei, but wasn’t sure if she’d obey her outside of her cover.

**Probably not.**

*Probably not,* Kei agreed.
You would end up obeying her regardless of cover status because you have a backbone made of gelatin.

Hey!

Kayama-sensei cleared her throat, then said, “First thing’s first: I’m glad you’re both safe and sound. It isn’t the trial by fire I’d want for any of my students, but you handled it well.

“Shinsō-kun, while you were reckless chasing after your friends, getting Eraserhead on the scene was a good call.” Kayama-sensei crossed one leg over the other and went on, “If I know you, you let your heart rush in without your head getting a say, right?”

Shinsō nodded, looking a little ashamed.

“We’ll work on that. But from what I’ve heard, you only used your Quirk when there wasn’t any other option for getting away from danger safely.” Kayama-sensei tried for a reassuring smile, but Kei wasn’t particularly antsy. It probably helped Shinsō more.

“Gekkō-san, do you know where you could’ve handled today’s events better?” Kayama-sensei asked.

Kei thought about it. Not using the half-dozen methods she had to give herself an alibi was a definite bad call, but it wasn’t an excuse she could use out loud. On the other hand… “I should’ve kept the group together better. And not run off on my own. Right?”

“It’s not a matter of finding the right answer on a test, Gekkō-kun. You don’t get second chances around villains.” Kayama-sensei’s tone wasn’t quite scolding, but there was a warning there nonetheless. “Don’t treat it like one around Eraser.”

This isn’t a game.

This is absolutely a game, and we are winning.

Shaking off Isobu’s opinion, Kei nodded and lowered her gaze as though properly chastised.

“Still, I’m glad you’re all safe. That’s all anyone can ask for.” Kayama-sensei had mastered the art of the compliment sandwich. There was definitely an air of that emperor from Mulan, only not eighty years old and a Chinese guy. Made sense that Aizawa-sensei would be bad cop, then.

With that, Kayama-sensei dismissed Shinsō and Kei to another relevant authority. More specifically, Kei went first into the ambulance that had, apparently, been set up as Aizawa-sensei’s mobile office. There wasn’t a cop in immediate line of sight, which made Kei wonder if this was going to be swept under the rug. Somehow.

Aizawa-sensei didn’t yell. His disapproval wasn’t the type that resulted in raising his voice. In this lifetime, Kei’s most prominent authority figures favored the “I’m not mad, I’m just disappointed” tactic. In fact, only Obito would have yelled, and he was only an authority when preteens allowed it. However, most of those people knew Kei and her hangups, hopes, and what lines she wouldn’t cross.

Aizawa-sensei didn’t. His questions were pretty blunt.

“Did you give him a chance to walk away?”

Wouldn’t have if I was alone, but… “Yes. He didn’t take it. Same with the guy you brought down.”
“Is there anything else you could’ve done to get away without attacking him with your Quirk?”

*Probably, but it would’ve involved me stabbing him with his own knives. A lot, given how bullheaded Stain is. “It seemed like the only option that would keep all of us safe.”*

“What made you decide to chase after Stain in the first place? From what you’ve said so far, there was no way for you to know that Todoroki was in trouble. Your friend wasn’t in any shape to send a message, either.” There was an edge at the back of his bored monotone. Like a sword rasping in an ill-fitting sheath.

Kei’s gaze flicked sideways almost reflexively, toward where Kayama-sensei had corralled all the rest of the students involved in this very, very long day. With any luck whatsoever, her honesty would go unnoticed. “I can always tell when my friends are in trouble, at least if they’re within thirty kilometers. As soon as Obito got hurt, I knew.” Ignoring Aizawa-sensei’s skeptical eyebrow, she went on, “There was no way I wasn’t going after him. And in the end, even Stain could’ve walked away from the fight if he hadn’t been restrained. We were all safe.”

“And that’s one of the few excuses you have for Chief Tsuragamae,” Aizawa-sensei replied. His eyes narrowed in a glare, or maybe that was just the way his face worked. “Self-defense is clearly defined in our legal system, but he might let you off with…a pat on the head, and zero credit, if I know him.”

Kei scratched the base of her scar as she thought, *Your legal system. Just to be contrary.*

“It helped that while what you and Todoroki did stretched the definition, Midnight and I are going to corroborate your version of events.” What? “With your vigilante friend left out of the story.”

“Thank you,” Kei said with as much relief as she could muster. In liquid form, it might’ve filled a shot glass. As Aizawa-sensei seemed to consider the matter closed, it was probably sheer inertia that got Kei to say, “I’m glad that Todoroki-kun won’t get in trouble.”

Aizawa-sensei blinked, which was the only indication that she might’ve caught him off-guard. “Why Todoroki?”

“He was the only one with me besides Obito when we ran into Stain. I know Shinsō-kun and Midoriya-san both want to be heroes, too, and it means more for them if they get in trouble with their Quirks, but…” How to put this…? “Todoroki-kun is Endeavor’s son. He was specifically targeted by Stain for that, and it just seems…it seems like Endeavor would be, um, upset if he got in trouble.” She paused for effect. “In a way that wouldn’t be good for Todoroki-kun.”

Kei had never dealt with abuse in a meaningful manner. While Obito’s treatment by his clan put her on the periphery of a whole clan’s worth of neglectful guardians, a child couldn’t take meaningful action in a situation like that. Wanting to give his older cousins a pair of matching concussions was a mere fantasy, especially when she’d been all of eight years old. The problem hadn’t really resolved itself. She wasn’t sure it ever would past the cold war ceasefire becoming the new status quo last year. Obito didn’t talk about his clan much, even compared to Madara. Maybe the blowup with Fugaku and Sensei had been enough.

The point was this: Kei’s only recourse regarding abuse had always been to provide as much safe harbor as she could. But Aizawa-sensei might have more options. Far more than she did.

Kei nearly always had options in a physical fight as long as she was willing to accept the fallout. In an arena like this one, the rules were different, and the potential blowback stood squarely at “unacceptable.” She’d have to maul half the hero establishment to get Torodoki out of his father’s
blast radius, and that entire thought process involved being unrealistically optimistic on several different fronts.

To his credit, Aizawa-sensei didn’t ask if she was joking. Perpetually disheveled or not, he was a pro hero, homeroom teacher, and likely a mandated reporter. While he didn’t let the calculations show on his face, he didn’t have to. Kei had seen enough adults react to potentially alarming news to get the gist. At the same time, though, mentioning those suspicions had definitively taken the issue out of Kei’s hands.

She didn’t know what else to do.

“Aizawa-sensei?” Kei asked with a cough, interrupting his thoughts a bit.

“What is it?”

“The truth would probably be harder to believe,” Kei said, resting her chin in her hand, “but…if it helps you feel better, the reason I wasn’t all that broken up over today is because I’ve had worse. I even told Shinsō-kun that my mom had a fear-inducing Quirk.”

“But it’s only a lie because the truth is too big to let anyone hear,” Aizawa-sensei concluded. Still, he didn’t tell her to stop.

“I just like letting people draw their own conclusions. I don’t care if they make up stories, as long as they don’t know enough to make a real guess.”

“Which is what you’re doing right now.”

“Yeah, a bit. But my mom really did have the power to make people afraid, even if they were way stronger than she was. And even if it wasn’t a Quirk, she was my first combat teacher. Stain fought like she did, but sloppier.” Kei was careful to refer to her mother in past tense, to drop an anvil-sized hint in Aizawa-sensei’s lap. She didn’t bother looking at him to see if he got it. “I…I can’t help people here like I could at home. So, I guess I’m entrusting the stuff with Todoroki-kun to you.”

Aizawa-sensei let her go without further comment, ending the inquisition. At least, from the hero side.

When Kei did end up speaking to the police around ten minutes later, the chief behaved as Aizawa-sensei expected. She got a “good news, bad news” reel from Chief Tsuragamae, as expected, and was dismissed alongside her classmates in relatively short order.

Kei honestly didn’t remember half of what anybody said, because she was too busy being stunned to silence looking at the guy’s face. Shinsō handled most of the human interaction while Kei tried to get her brain to reboot without physically whacking herself in the temple.

The chief of police has a dog’s head. For a head. Why did no one mention that?

Isobu, as always, was eager to throw fuel on the fire. And the detective over there was a cat.

…Did I fall into Sesame Street without anybody noticing? Kei only vaguely remembered seeing Weimaraner dogs in costumes on some public network at least a lifetime and almost twenty years ago, but the details were rapidly filling in with Chief Tsuragamae’s face. It was downright eerie.

“Chief Tsuragamae stopped talking like a minute ago,” Shinsō said, elbowing her to get her attention. Todoroki just looked placidly confused, while Midoriya was peering at her with his hands over his mouth, clearly nervous. Shinsō went on, softer, “You okay?”
Kei sighed deeply. “Starting to think the answer’s ‘no.’ I’ll call Hayate or Sensei tonight. Or eat my weight in ice cream.”

“Why choose?” Shinsō wondered aloud, but he seemed mollified by her relatively quick response.

“Fair point. Are you going to be okay? All of you,” Kei said, extending a hand toward Midoriya and Todoroki in turn. “Because, wow, this was a day.”

Todoroki glanced around, then said, “I can handle going home. My old man will just have to deal with it.”

Yeah, that was about the kind of answer Kei had expected from him.

“You don’t need to worry about me, Gekkō-san! The danger’s over,” Midoriya said, managing a wobbly smile. As she watched, it became more genuine as he glanced between Todoroki, Shinsō, and her. Like seeing all of his friends intact was the important thing.

She could sympathize with that. And if he was sure, like Todoroki, Kei wouldn’t stop him from taking off.

“And I’ll be fine.” Shinsō waved goodbye as he started walking. “See you on Monday.”

The four of them split up, because by this point at least two of their three families was probably losing their collective shit. Kei wasn’t sure about Todoroki’s family situation, and her own would be cut off until Obito could make contact again. But Kei, as always, would be fine until the situation stabilized.

Just in case, though… I hope UA has psychologists. Those kids are gonna need ‘em.

**I would not have the first clue about that.**

*Didn’t figure you would.* Kei started walking in the general direction of her apartment. *Wanna watch a movie tonight?*

**Only if I get to choose.** Isobu’s tails curled into contented S-curves. *I want Godzilla.*

*Sure.*

Chapter End Notes

And now, the Stain arc is over--bar the potential screaming caused by the League of Villain’s talent scout meeting success.

(This is totally unbeta'd.)
Chapter Summary

Kei gets an oblique hint after a very awkward conversation.

Chapter Notes

The end of this chapter isn't beta-read. Sorry.

School life returned, as it tended to. Kei kept mainly to herself and her friends, as always, but even she felt the slight shift in the atmosphere. While Isobu griped in the back of her mind about a shortage of challenging fights, Kei settled back into just being an ordinary student for her apparent day job. This meant keeping one ear tuned vaguely to the school’s grapevine—a vast improvement over her record from earlier this year—and actually doing her homework.

“If I can keep up with our classes, even after training,” Shinsō told her on Tuesday, after his first session with Aizawa-sensei, “then you have no excuse.”

Apparently, lack of interest or relevance didn’t count as a reason why homework wasn’t really Kei’s problem. Past that, she could hardly tell Shinsō that she was still moonlighting as a vigilante. Therefore, she sighed and put at least a token effort forward. Besides, he looked more sleep-deprived than usual when he showed up for class on Tuesday morning, and it seemed too much like whining to argue against a hero-hopeful who was putting so much effort into his dreams. Especially when Shinsō didn’t have the energy to nag anymore.

Kei still didn’t think homework was worth her time, but turning in something half-assed seemed to be working out better than ignoring it entirely. At least Modern Hero Art History didn’t ask her to care about Jackson Pollock’s drip artwork. She still didn’t see much point in researching the dawn of modern mass hero media any more deeply than an online article, but nothing looked like a mass of tangled power cables in a dark drawer.

She was handling it. More or less.

In any case, Wednesday was the first afternoon when Kei and Shinsō were due to meet with Midoriya and Todoroki. She’d already made it clear that they weren’t going to be using their Quirks, which meant staying at UA (and bothering a teacher) wasn’t strictly necessary. After bothering Midoriya and Todoroki during lunch, she was able to text them all the meetup location.

Still, she did try to accommodate other people’s schedules. Since everyone except Shinsō lived in Musutafu, and he took a train to school just like the rest of them, she sent them an address of one of the lesser-used public parks. She’d also suggested they bring exercise clothes for the little field trip, because she had no intention of screwing up her backup uniform. At least not before she’d gotten another replacement.
The tie could stay in hell where it belonged, though.

Three solid days at home had also given Obito time to go home, rest, and recover. And—as of an hour ago—return. One minor side benefit of Kei not using Water ninjutsu to jet herself, Todoroki, and Obito out of danger was that his phone was still intact. It was a minor miracle.

**GreenThumb:** \(\text{\(^{\wedge}\wedge\)} \text{ im baaaaaaack}\)

**GreenThumb:** what r u doin today

Typing ensued.

**TMNT-TNT:** It’s a training day.

**TMNT-TNT:** I’m going to see what these kids can do.

**GreenThumb:** which kids

**TMNT-TNT:** Shinsō, Midoriya, and Todoroki.

**GreenThumb:** Σ(°Д\(°\))

**GreenThumb:** u gonna fight em all

**GreenThumb:** kick all their asses at once

**TMNT-TNT:** No?

**GreenThumb:** please say yes

**GreenThumb:** aw thats boring ( - _) \text{zzZ}

**GreenThumb:** u could take em

**TMNT-TNT:** No. Even if I wanted to, this is supposed to be me seeing what they already know. If I can take all three of them in a fistfight, they learn more about me than I do about them.

**GreenThumb:** booooooooring

**GreenThumb:** im gonna nap

Shinsō sat down next to Kei just as she was trying to decide if she wanted to type a paragraph to Obito. When she glanced up at him, he just asked, “Something interesting going on?”

“Not really. Obito’s just bugging me about sparring.” Kei dropped her phone into her duffle bag, all too aware that it’d start buzzing again soon.

She’d made sure to bring four water bottles for hydration’s sake, even if she supposedly had a water creation Quirk. Fifteen years old physically or not, she was an adult at least somewhere in her goofy headspace, and that meant being responsible.

At least in some small, sort of ignorable way.

“Glad to hear he’s okay,” said Shinsō, stretching his shoulders carefully. He wasn’t wearing his UA
gym uniform, having apparently elected for one of those generic fitness company T-shirts, basketball shorts, and sturdy shoes. “He gonna join in?”

“Probably not. He likes you and all, Shinsō-kun, but he’s still getting over Saturday. I don’t think he’s up for getting used as a training dummy.” Kei rolled her eyes for effect, then changed the topic with, “So, are you learning cool stuff from your new…sponsor? I think?”

“I’m probably more of an intern,” said Shinsō. He rubbed the back of his neck, gaze focused somewhere out in the middle distance. It wasn’t like the park was interesting—Kei had specifically chosen it for its lack of playground facilities, weird modern art, or other draws. There was a tennis court, though. “It’s only been two days.”

“Yeah, and?” Kei had learned Sensei was obsessed with paperwork within the first twenty minutes of meeting him. She’d also realized he actually paid attention to Kei’s and Obito’s report cards, which was a novel and terrifying experience.

Shinsō side-eyed her, then said, “He got me started with assessments. How fast I was, what my balance was like. Stuff like that. And I think he was kind of impressed?”

Kei waited for the punchline. While Shinsō’s enthusiasm seemed tempered by the reality that training with Aizawa-sensei was probably fucking exhausting once he got going, the underlying sass was still fully present.

“Well, he actually said I wasn’t as bad as he’d expected, given my fitness scores from the start of the year. And then we trained.”Yeah, that sounded about right. Meanwhile, Shinsō smirked. “He really is a better teacher than you, though.”

Kei threw a crooked grin back. “Told you.”

“He also had a bunch of other ideas for how to get around my Quirk’s limits,” Shinsō went on, “which I’m really looking forward to.”

And Kei probably could have left it at that, or maybe asked about these secret solutions because Shinsō seemed excited about them. But instead, she went with, “The other day, you were practically vibrating on the spot. Not quite as excited anymore?”

“I’m running on three hours of sleep and had to do like fifteen muscle-building exercises yesterday. You tell me.”

“What I’m hearing is that my training was too easy.”

It was at about this point that Todoroki and Midoriya finally showed up, so Kei had to hold off on any further probing questions. Instead, she stood up and waved, drawing both boys in their direction. They probably would have seen Shinsō—a purple bush was hard to miss with the sun still high in the sky—but ultimately Kei didn’t have the patience for anyone else’s ability to scan the environment.

“Hi, Gekkō-san, Shinsō-kun.” Midoriya trotted over, as eager as a new puppy. Midoriya had taken her advice and was wearing a green tracksuit. It looked vaguely familiar, though she wasn’t quite sure why.

Todoroki was just wearing the UA gym uniform, because it saved on laundry or something. Kei didn’t know if Todoroki gave enough of a shit to bother with workout clothes. Maybe he didn’t get a worthwhile allowance, or hated shopping. He nodded to them, which was about it.
“What are we even doing today?” Shinsō asked, hands in his pockets.

“Well, I’d like to sort something out first. Who’s actually been taught to fight for longer than a year?” Kei asked, surveying the gathered group. A bunch of teenagers. Absolutely going to constitute the scariest thing villains had ever seen…in about five years.

Unsurprisingly, Todoroki was the only one to slowly raise a hand.

“How long?” Kei asked, keeping her voice neutral.

“Since my Quirk came in,” was Todoroki’s blunt response.

Well, then. “And you, Midoriya-kun?”

“I’ve fought people before and I’ve been training for a solid year—fitness training, stuff like that,” Midoriya said. He fidgeted a little under Shinsō’s worn-out stare. “But I didn’t have a specific master until my internship, and that’s about a week.”

Kei finished thinking uncharitable things about Endeavor, then shoved them into a mental box for later. “All right. So, we could split into pairs—”

“You didn’t say how long you’ve been doing this?” Midoriya interrupted cautiously. “I mean, I’m just curious.”

“I got lessons starting when I was five.” The boys stared. The simplest and least-incriminating way she could put it went thus: “Mom thought I needed an outlet.”

“An outlet? You really are a delinquent to the core.” Shinsō couldn’t help teasing, it seemed.

Kei rolled her eyes. “Whatever. Hey, Midoriya-kun, go ask Shinsō-kun to show you how to throw somebody. You’ve got about the same amount of experience, so you’ll both learn something. Shinsō-kun, ask Midoriya-kun how he built that much muscle mass.”

Midoriya glanced at Shinsō, eyes a little narrower than usual as he thought his way through the scenario. Though Kei had only been guessing before, she was now sure that Midoriya outweighed Shinsō by a fair margin. The kid was built like a brick shithouse for some reason, and Kei was willing to lay credit at the feet of whatever genius devised his training schedule.

Still, the boys obeyed. They trekked maybe a dozen meters away, then started putting their bushy heads together to talk.

“What am I supposed to do?” Todoroki asked, watching them go.

“You get to spar with me first, Todoroki-kun.” Kei turned so her right side faced Todoroki. “I know where Shinsō-kun is, and I can guess what Midoriya-kun can do without his Quirk. But I need to know where you are.”

Todoroki automatically squared up.

Kei kicked off the ground and almost got him in the face with a roundhouse.

Todoroki’s idea of a fight had an element Kei had seen before—ninjutsu specialists tended toward it. His Quirk—both halves—could technically be used at point-blank range, but that wasn’t how Todoroki fought. He could punch, he could throw, and he could block, but all of it was clearly designed to get people out of his face long enough that he could, say, freeze their feet to the floor. It
was an efficient battle tactic that made the most of his advantages, and in its most extreme form he could just stand out of reach and lob fireballs at a target. But without his Quirk in play, Kei was faster, stronger, and far more experienced than she hoped he’d ever have to be.

Kei pulled her strikes. What might’ve been an arm bar became a technically advanced shove. A punch to the throat became a warning tap. A punch to his stomach barely constituted an open-handed pat. Todoroki returned the favor, catching one of her kicks with difficulty before letting her foot drop safely. He didn’t even try to use the follow-through on a jab that might’ve hit her in the chest, but there were probably other reasons for that kind of hesitation.

“You’re better than you were during the Sports Festival,” Kei muttered, after letting Todoroki shove her out of his space. She turned a possible stumble into a roll, coming to her feet a few meters away. Todoroki’s right arm briefly seemed to glitter, then didn’t. Through a flat monotone, he said, “My old man insisted.”

**I assume that is a euphemism for abuse.**

*Sometimes it sure seems like it.*

Kei was, by trade, a fairly dirty fighter. If she could go for eye gouges or bite someone, she would once no better options were available. Stabbing someone while they were looking away was part and parcel of being a shinobi. Most people around here weren’t trained to think of fights the way she did.

But she wasn’t a monster. Instead of continuing, she held up a hand and said, “Aaaaand we’re done.”

Todoroki paused, catching his breath. “Why?”

“I think I know what might help you.” Kei looked down at her hands for a second, and when she looked up, Todoroki was still eyeing her expectantly. Well, at least he was an attentive audience.

“Did you want to ask something first?”

“Two questions: Who taught you?” Todoroki asked.

“In order?” Kei made a show of thinking about it, then counted off, “Mom, my friend’s adopted dad, Sensei, and this one guy to help me control my Quirk.” She sat down on the grass and patted it, so Todoroki followed suit. “The last guy was actually sitting in the halfway point between our Quirks. He could control water and make ice whenever, but not nearly as much as either of us.”

Yuki Shirozora was also a dad who was doing Chinatsu (and Konoha, more obliquely) a favor by training with Kei at all, but she’d been a quick study once someone could show her how to be creative with Water ninjutsu. Not that she usually was. It was just that coming to a Quirk-filled world made it so she only had one trick card to play in public, and Isobu’s backing meant she could overpower even the pro heroes whose Quirks were tied to water. It was a weird position to be in for a shinobi.

“But that’s a different topic,” Kei concluded dismissively. As she dug around in her duffel bag for a water bottle, she asked, “What was your second question?”

Todoroki blinked, odd-colored eyes reflecting light strangely. While he’d listened politely while Kei spoke in vague terms about her history, now his interest had sharpened again. Then, “Are you and Aizawa-sensei related somehow?”

Kei fumbled with her water bottle and not-quite-accidentally flung it in Todoroki’s face. What a day
for the teachers’ joke rumor mill and the student one to have a fun little crossover. And if Kei had been drinking anything at the time, she might’ve sputtered.

“Midoriya-kun did the same thing,” Todoroki said, after catching the projectile with one hand. “Is this mine now?”

“Oh, sure. But the same thing as what?” Kei asked blankly.

“I asked if Midoriya-kun was All Might’s secret lovechild. And he flinched and started scrambling for answers,” was Todoroki’s reply. He cracked the water bottle open without bothering to look up at her.

Before Todoroki even finished his thoughts Kei was already pinching the bridge of her nose. Thankfully, Todoroki hadn’t decided to air this idea while Shinsō and Midoriya were within earshot and not punching each other yet. Now, it was just the two of them and this little conspiracy theory.

Isobu wasn’t helping. He was too busy laughing.

Kei tried to ignore him, because being unhelpful in social situations was a fundamental component of Isobu’s existence. She cleared her throat and said, while holding out both hands as though the truth would appear if she waved them enough, “And, what, you think I could be related to Aizawa-sensei?”

Todoroki nodded.

There was only one response to that. “Why?”

Kei wasn’t precisely sure of the timelines involved, but she did know that Aizawa was probably more closely related to Shinsō, Midoriya, and Todoroki than he was to her. People native to this world weren’t even obliquely equipped with chakra systems, passed down through generations as solidly as every other part of their genetic code. There was at least one school of evolutionary thought that would probably view Earth-humans and their lack of chakra as a kind of throwback to pre-chakra life. While Kei probably knew more about the narrative behind some of the differences between the two forms of humanity than she did about the biological differences, particularly where the Elemental Nations seemed to have some crossover with other continents that otherwise didn’t exist.

But it was all an excellent way to earn a headache before someone hit her in the face, so Kei sighed and let it go. Todoroki looked like he had a few things to share.

“It was mainly because of your physical resemblance.” Kei wasn’t sure that resemblance was more than superficial, but she let him continue. “Not to mention your attitudes. Neither of you seem invested in heroism at first glance, but it’s really about not liking the celebrity part.”

“Following you so far,” Kei said, because that was nicer than saying, “You’re flat-out wrong.” She finally shrugged to herself (or Isobu) and sat down on the manicured park grass, legs flopped out and leaning back on her hands. It seemed like the kind of ridiculous conversation best held while everyone was off their feet. “Okay, what’s the next point?”

Todoroki didn’t quite mimic her. Instead, he managed to sit in seiza with his feet folded neatly underneath him. She was pretty sure it was because he wasn’t fully capable of relaxing in a public space. “This is more a coincidence, but you have the same habit of picking at your scars.”

“Pretty sure they were earned in two separate incidents,” Kei said. She leaned forward and dug a second water bottle out of her duffle bag. “You’ve got a scar, too, but it’s not like we’re cousins.”
“No,” said Todoroki, “but he keeps pulling you aside—”

“Because I’m a giant pain in the neck,” Kei interrupted gently. She pulled her feet in until she sat criss-cross on the grass. “Superficial resemblance aside, Shinsō-kun is probably more closely related to Aizawa-sensei than I am.”

And most Quirks use more straightforward Mendelian inheritance rules than anything else besides the damned peas. Shinsō’s Quirk is based on willpower and ESP or something, which I think almost describes Aizawa’s.

To turn the question around, the only nullification power you possess is best directed at other jinchūriki, and it was your choice entirely to pursue that power. And the closest he could ever come to manipulating water—

Finish that sentence and I swear I’ll find a way to get a song you hate stuck in my head.

Mutually-assured destruction should not be your first resort.

I know a song that gets on everybody’s nerves, everybody’s nerves, everybody’s nerves—

Stop that.

While Kei argued with the voice in her head and began to gain ground in the ongoing war, Todoroki appeared to consider the alternative idea. “Maybe—”

There was a shout from about fifteen meters away, and by the time Kei and Todoroki looked over, Shinsō was lying on his back like an overturned turtle. Midoriya was flailing, apologizing furiously with his arms resembling a particularly defensive hummingbird.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, are you okay—?”

“What the hell do they feed you?” Shinsō asked as he sat up, rubbing his head.

“Oh, uh… I do have a diet plan,” Midoriya was saying, hauling Shinsō back to his feet one-handed. “But I mostly just do a lot of strength training.”

“Define ‘a lot,’” Todoroki suggested.

“Please,” Shinsō added. He scrubbed a hand through his hair, but Kei honestly couldn’t tell if it helped or not. The usual purple bird’s nest didn’t meaningfully change. “Share your secrets with the class, because last I checked, you’re ninety percent muscle somehow.”

“Oh, well…” Midoriya took a deep breath, then said all at once, “Shinsō-kun, I’ll tell you if you tell me how you did that thing earlier.”

Shinsō raised an eyebrow. “Thing?”

“I wasn’t using my Quirk or anything, but you just sort of…swayed out of the way? How did you know I was going to punch you right then?” Midoriya paused. “And I want to know how you did that finger lock thing.”

“You telegraph too much, and Gekkō-kun can show you the other thing.”

Honestly, it was probably better for the kids to spend at least some of the time—or all of it—learning bits and pieces of compatible techniques from each other. But it wouldn’t do for Kei to stand entirely
in the background when she was, by far, the most experienced. She’d only sparred with Todoroki so far, and she hadn’t broken a sweat.

**Ah, here we go.**

*Hah.* “Midoriya-kun, are you ready?”

Midoriya’s starting stance was a mess, but he got into it anyway before saying, “Yeah!”

Kei mentally awarded him brownie points for enthusiasm. “Then show me what you can do.”

It wasn’t until after the sparring session was over, and long after everyone went home, that Kei finally went over the events of the day and had a chance to wonder how *All Might* factored into Midoriya’s situation.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is dedicated to my dog, Lucy. Gonna miss you, girl.
Chapter Summary

Kei’s fight club involves far too much talking for its name.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I like Yaoyorozu, but what in the world is that costume? (Also, sorry about the delay. February’s been a clusterfuck.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Time rolled onward, students swapped to summer uniforms, and exam season approached.

Kei had survived the midterms earlier in the year by virtue of the same skills as always—namely, English, science, and not much else. She wasn’t hopeless at the other topics (except for social studies and literature and art), with math muddling along per usual. Not outright failing meant she wasn’t dead last in the rankings anymore, but “top fifteen” out of twenty students (with assistance) was still pretty lousy. If she’d had anyone in her life who actually cared about the class rankings other than her school friends, it wouldn’t have been something she could just brush aside without thinking.

As it was, dodging Homura was probably the only extra work Kei did as the exams approached. Shinsō was too tired from his training with Aizawa to nag her, and Todoroki and Midoriya probably assumed that none of that was their business. They had enough of their own concerns to occupy their time.

Speaking of heroes in miniature, they were the only department to have a practical exam. Where a normal high school might, for example, ask kids to speak in English for half the grade on their English exam, the hero kids got to “demonstrate their learning.” From the rumors she’d heard in the lunchroom, many students suspected robot enemies were in their future. Kei, who’d fought the giant combat drones on two occasions already, couldn’t help but doubt them. Fighting robots once was a moderately useful preliminary assessment of hero-hopeful kids’ combat skills. Twice made for an interesting scrapyard in the middle of the Sports Festival racecourse. Three uses of the same type of enemy wasn’t going to prove anything the first two fights hadn’t.

Kei let Midoriya and Todoroki in on her theory, then left them to it. Robot-punching was only fun when it was her turn.

It was bizarre to find that—other than the steadily increasing viral campaign for the thoroughly defeated Hero Killer—most of June passed without much action. Kei headed out almost nightly throughout the month, alongside Obito or Kakashi or both of her boys, but the trouble they found was fairly minor. Pro heroes had increased their time hitting the streets in the wake of Stain’s attacks and arrest, making it more difficult for shinobi to patrol effectively without being seen. Then again, perhaps their earlier ease at finding their way through cityscapes had ultimately been a product of neglect on the pros’ part. It would make sense.
There was progress on a social front, despite the stalemate on the pure ninja one.

Kei had never been the most popular girl in class, but the hero kids did a lot more sparring amongst themselves than the General Education students did. Because Midoriya and Todoroki took the quick takedown skills she showed them back to their classroom, they’d eventually explained to their classmates where their new throat-punching habit came from. They were nice kids. It was what they did.

This, somehow, resulted in Iida and Uraraka showing up for a later sparring session.

Iida was fast. The added weight of the biological engines in his calves made him a very strong kicker, but his technique was lacking outside of it. He overcommitted to kicks because Recipro Burst usually made him too fast to stop.

“So am I going to see the Recipro—?”

“Using Quirks outside of UA’s campus is strictly forbidden, Gekkō-kun!”

With the Quirk ban in place outside of school, all he had going for him was the weight of those structures. Kei didn’t have trouble compensating for it. This was not true for everyone.

Leg-locks and Iida were a bad mix, but Kei managed to knock him off his feet anyway.

“My turn!”

Unlike Shinsō, Uraraka’s combat style alongside her Quirk—which apparently only required her to touch someone with all five fingers once to activate—made for a pretty strong package. She’d spent her internship with Gunhead, the Battle Hero, and gotten lessons from a real dojo. A week wouldn’t make her a warrior, but if Uraraka had taken up aikido before the Sports Festival, Bakugō probably would have come within a hair of losing.

Kei decided not to mention this fact to anyone but Isobu. No point in dwelling on the past.

Coming from you, that is quite the statement.

I know, right?

Training had gone from four students to six unusually quickly, at least compared to the month Shinsō and Kei spent practicing on their own beforehand. Kei adapted to this by expanding training nights so not all of them would meet each time, and by pushing Shinsō to practice with as many of the others as he could stand. This wasn’t a slight on them; rather, Shinsō could only fight so many of them before his Eraserhead-brand training finally laid him out flat. He was the first to throw in the towel because he was doing so much extra work outside of their sessions. It rankled.

But thus far, there’d been no actual complaints from Shinsō’s end. Good enough for now. It probably helped that Kei would consistently hand every other kid their asses, but hey. Hopefully Shinsō would start using the others as better gauges of his progress.

Despite some hiccups, this six-person sparring group got along all right, until one day.

Midoriya might’ve asked the fatal question. Kei had been running late, due to a villain incident blocking part of a street, and missed the conversation.

She imagined it went something like this:
“Hey, Todoroki-kun?”

“What is it, Midoriya?”

“You can bring friends, too.”

“What?”

“It’s just—I invited Iida-kun and Uraraka-san and I guess you should have a chance, too? Shinsō-kun and Gekkō-san seemed okay with the idea.”

“…Okay.”

And Todoroki somehow managed to invite Yaoyorozu.

Kei hadn’t spoken to Yaoyorozu since the Sports Festival, mainly due to lack of interest and Kei’s amazing ability to make a bad first impression. Her Quirk was frankly awesome, but Yaoyorozu didn’t quite have the experience to use it with the gleeful abandon Kei knew she would use if she could make swords on demand.

(Kei was a very specific kind of dork. It helped keep her busy.)

Anyway, Kei hadn’t expected to run into Yaoyorozu outside of the lunchroom, and said as much.

“I hope I’m not imposing, Gekkō-san,” was Yaoyorozu’s response.

“Uh, no, you’re fine.” Kei scratched at the base of her scar before she remembered to stop herself. It was rude. “I just want to know what you’d like to get out of this. We’ve mostly just been practicing some self-defense things I know, what Uraraka-san picked up from Gunhead, and…” Kei trailed off with a shrug. “Yeah.”

Luckily, Yaoyorozu smiled despite the underwhelming sell. “I’ll be happy to see what you have for me.”

“Well, in that case…”

All was well, for a while. Teenagers punched each other, Isobu conjured a mental Netflix screen and started binging shipwreck documentaries, and so on. Kei’s “students” had fanned out across the park to start their training sessions. This mainly meant Midoriya faced off against Iida and Shinsō got tossed by Uraraka.

But Todoroki was standing by.

Therefore, Kei threw Yaoyorozu at him and got to watch him lose.

She was told later that Yaoyorozu was 1-A’s first place finisher of the Quirk Assessment Test, whatever that meant.

They took a break about half an hour into sparring, because no one was there to tell them not to. And then the topic of heroes came up. Kei wasn’t sure how (because she’d been busy hurling Iida onto the grass for the third time in three matches), but the conversation got their group together near one of the park’s few picnic tables, while Shinsō passed out water bottles. While they rehydrated, the hero kids went around in a circle for the sake of the poor General Education students, whose heroic dreams were either daydreams still or running jokes.

“Isn’t it confusing to have your hero name and your weird nickname be the same thing?” Shinsō
asked, half-lidded gaze locked on Midoriya.

“Not really? It’s actually kinda cool to be able to *make* it have a totally different meaning now,” Midoriya said. “Uraraka-san was super helpful there.”

“No problem, Deku-kun!”

Shinsō nodded slowly, watching the rest of the kids bounce off each other. “So, then we’ve got Tengenium—”

“That’s not the final version!” Iida insisted.

“—Deku, Uravity,” Shinsō listed, gaze flipping to each kid in turn, “Creati, and…Shōto.”

Todoroki, halfway through a protein bar, didn’t bother to reply. Shinsō left the implication of the hero moniker’s lack of appeal dangling, and Todoroki wasn’t the type to rise to that particular bait.

“Do you have a hero name in mind?” Yaoyorozu asked Kei.

“Not really. Shinsō-kun?”

Shinsō rubbed the back of his neck. “I don’t—um, maybe…” His ears started to turn pink. Put on the spot, ideas fled. It was like stand-up comedy, but worse. “…Mind Blank? Maybe something like that.”

“It’s descriptive and easy to remember,” Yaoyorozu said, nodding. She hadn’t whipped out a dictionary or other reference text, so Kei figured the comment was genuine. “I don’t have any doubt you’ll come to a decision you can be happy with, even if it’s not Mind Blank in the end.”

“After you’ve been called something enough times, it tends to stick,” Midoriya put in, perhaps with a slight wry twist.

Shinsō smirked. “Kacchan would know, wouldn’t he?”

“Maybe!” Midoriya brightened. “Oh, have you both seen our hero costumes? Todoroki-kun’s is super cool, but you and Gekkō-san haven’t seen the rest of them, right?” He held up his phone. “Come on, look.”

“It’s not just cool,” Todoroki said, while Midoriya flipped through the pictures. Everyone else gave him blank stares until he said, “It’s also warm.”

Yaoyorozu and Uraraka smiled, catching the pun.

Shinsō stared at him, trying to figure out if Todoroki had made a joke on purpose.

Iida couldn’t seem to decide if he wanted to demand Todoroki clarify further or just let the situation lie.

Todoroki ignored all of them and bit into the protein bar again.

*You know, he’s funnier because he doesn’t laugh at that kind of thing.*

**Keeping a straight face is a key component of comedy, but Todoroki is not likely aware of it.**

“Iida-kun’s is mostly decorative but *so awesome,*” Midoriya continued, not apparently noticing anyone else’s reactions. “And then there’s Yaoyorozu-san—”
“Midoriya-kun,” Kei interrupted, “can I see that?”

“Oh, sure.” A bit of his enthusiasm fled, but he still dropped his phone into Kei’s expectant hand.

“Thanks.” Kei cleared her throat. “Yaoyorozu-san?”

Yaoyorozu frowned just slightly. “Is something wrong?”

“I don’t know how to put this better, but is this really your hero costume?” Kei heard herself ask, flipping the phone around.

Yaoyorozu’s hero outfit was, in Kei’s opinion, basically equivalent to a scarlet swimsuit with high-heeled boots and a yellow utility belt. It also didn’t make sense. While Kei understood that Yaoyorozu’s Quirk worked by pulling (or ejecting) her creations out of her skin, she didn’t get why the other girl wasn’t allowed to at least wear shorts. Worse, her Quirk didn’t provide an automatic defense like Kirishima’s, so why wasn’t she allowed to wear sensible boots and armor pads? Knee pads and gloves would go a long way in an urban combat environment, to say nothing of rougher terrain, and—

“That’s…inspired,” Shinsō said at length, staring at the screen.

Yaoyorozu didn’t blink. “I think it’s got plenty of public appeal, doesn’t it?”

Kei considered which answer would be least likely to cause offense. She discarded the first three. And the fourth.

If I could—

Help. Help, helphelphelp. I don’t even know where to start.

The outfit is asking for serious injury in a way most human clothing does not.

Thanks.

“What does your costume do?” Kei asked, flipping the phone back around. She dragged her fingers across the screen, to Midoriya’s red-accented green costume. Then she kept scrolling, trying to find more practical examples.

…Was the invisible girl in their class seriously going into combat naked?

“It provides the easiest access to fat storage to produce objects with my Quirk.” Yaoyorozu adopted a calm, almost lecturing pose while Kei demanded more of Isobu’s assistance. She even kept one finger up as she made her point, which made Kei wonder blankly if she’d done this before. “The gaps in my costume are closest to the optimal object-producing points, and larger objects have a bad habit of destroying parts of my costume anyway.”

“Okay, but even you have to admit the boots are a bad idea.”

“They make me taller, though!” Yaoyorozu replied, and Kei hoped that was a joke. “More seriously, heroes need to worry about their image and marketability even as early as their internships. It helps me stand out from the crowd, too.”

Kei avoided rolling her eyes only because Yaoyorozu looked so damned sincere. It was a struggle to keep her hands from smacking into her face with the next point, though.
“I have high heels, but I also have spring-loaded shoes,” Uraraka put in. She held up her phone, alongside a picture of herself in full costume that could only have been taken by a different hand. Perhaps the invisible girl, because it wasn’t like anyone would ever be able to see her fingers over the camera.

“Yeah, but your boots are functional,” Kei argued, possibly fruitlessly. It wasn’t as though she knew if Uraraka got anything out of those off-brand Moon Shoes. “If Yaoyorozu-san wanted to have a costume that combined form and function, the first thing to go would be the boots.”

“You feel very strongly about this, Gekkō-kun,” Iida commented. He had somehow acquired orange juice.

Kei gave up and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Yes. Yes, I do.” *Fuck if I know why, though.* “Any outfit you wear into a potential combat zone—on purpose—shouldn’t interfere with your ability to fight. I just don’t see how this doesn’t, and I get into fights all the time.”

“So you’re actually admitting that?”

“Shinsō-kun, you’re not helping.” Kei sighed. “Look, I say this as someone from 1-C, whose homeroom teacher is Midnight.”

There was a pause as everyone considered the cause of the first hero costume decency laws.

“Some of the costumes your class uses are super impractical,” Kei concluded. “I just don’t understand these…design choices.”

Yaoyorozu considered Kei’s stance, then said, “You have a very pragmatic viewpoint, Gekkō-san. If you had to decide right now, what would you wear to fight?”

“If I couldn’t have some kind of armor or protective gear, I’d probably just go for this,” Kei replied, waving a hand over her head and torso. Tank top, yoga pants, crossfit shoes. Boom, done. She shrugged again. “I can move in it, and my running shoes hold up fine. I don’t really need much else, besides maybe athletic tape to keep my knuckles from bleeding.”

“I see. I have to admit, that kind of viewpoint isn’t well-represented among pro heroes.” Yaoyorozu touched her lips with her curled fingers, thinking. While her expression remained mostly neutral, Kei saw her other hand clench into a fist against the table. “Of course, there’s Aizawa-sensei, but he’s an underground hero of no renown, on purpose. He doesn’t enjoy the spotlight much.”

“That’s not quite true, Yaoyorozu-san,” Midoriya broke in, practically bouncing in place. “For example, Mt. Lady has to have her costume formed out of a super-stretchy material to grow with her when she uses her Quirk. Present Mic’s costume comes with a powerful directional amp so he never hits anyone except the villains, on top of knee pads and elbow pads and gloves. Gran Torino’s costume has jet vents in the boots so he can use his Quirk to shoot himself around like a rocket, and then there’s Midnight and her costume’s tearaway sections and—”

He said all of this with only a single pause for breath. Mainly because he got *faster* toward the end. Kei couldn’t help but think Midoriya’s cheery ramble had started to lose the topic a bit at that point anyway.

Todoroki handed him a water bottle to cut him off, and it worked despite all doubts.

Yaoyorozu giggled at Midoriya’s amazing ability to rattle off pro hero facts, but rallied. “Well, you could feel free to prove your argument if you’d like, Gekkō-san. While I don’t have much time before our class’s final exams, I could take an afternoon off to attend a supervised spar on UA’s
campus. It should be a friendly match.”

“You probably don’t want to do that,” Shinsō muttered, though he hid his initial reaction well. It wouldn’t do for the 1-A students to see him rattled.

“Are we all going to be attending this?” Uraraka wanted to know.

Iida’s eyes disappeared behind the gleam of his glasses. “I am, if only to ensure fair play!”

“Same with me! Yaoyorozu-san won’t lose,” Midoriya added, and a fraction of the hair-thin cracks Kei’d seen in the girl’s confidence started to mend.

“Challenge accepted,” Kei said, ignoring the rest of them.

She and Yaoyorozu shook on it.

It was one way to burn a little time before finals, after all. Why not get in one good argument before then?

Chapter End Notes

Happy birthday to Abalisk, who has been the main editor for this story.
Chapter Summary

A week and change before finals, and Kei still manages to get into a fight. Hayate is less than surprised.

Chapter Notes

Any errors are my own.

“I feel like a bully.”

Hayate, halfway through his little stockpile of melonpan, looked up. Crumbs fell from his face as he asked, “Why? Did you punch someone in the face?”

Kei rested her elbows on her knees and sighed. “It’s school drama. Sort of. And no, I didn’t punch anybody outside of sparring.”

“Then, what? Did you start picking on somebody?”

“A bit,” Kei admitted, and pulled her phone out from under the pile of melonpan wrappers to flip through her photos. Midoriya had been kind enough to send her a compilation slideshow of all the hero costumes he knew of, and she kept scrolling until she located Yaoyorozu’s costume. “See this?”

Hayate scooted around the low table until his knees jabbed Kei in the thigh, snatching the phone from her hand. In the same motion, he replaced the phone with another melonpan like a champion magician, if not for the part where Kei watched it happen and let him.

Minor mission accomplished, the Gekkō siblings looked down at the phone together.

Silence reigned long enough for Kei to look askance at her brother.

Hayate’s mouth opened, but no sound came out. His gaze fixed on the glorified swimsuit as though nailed there. While Kei watched and Isobu started to laugh in her head, Hayate’s entire face started to turn faintly pink.

Well, Hayate was a teenager and this was his first impression of Yaoyorozu. Maybe Kei should have predicted this reaction.

“I’m starting to see how that costume might be effective sometimes,” said Kei, jolting Hayate out of his stunned state.

“Sh-shut up,” Hayate managed, jerking his head away to hide his blush.

This particular indignation lasted until Kei bounced melonpan number five off his head. It ricocheted onto her folded futon as Hayate whirled back around, glaring.
“You are a bully,” Hayate whined, but his chakra said otherwise. Lightning buzzed, a bit embarrassed, but it wasn’t a real reprimand. “So, who is that?”

Kei waited until Hayate was ready to talk about the situation, then said, “She’s a girl in my year at UA. Now, if you could take a look at her shoes…”

Hayate kept pouting, but looked when Kei shifted the image away from Yaoyorozu’s cleavage. Then, once the boots were about the only thing on the screen, he said, “Oh. Those are a really bad idea.”

“I mean, in some ways our sandals aren’t better—”

“The hell they aren’t,” said Hayate.

Look, cultural icons weren’t immune to criticism. Especially the type that earned more stubbed toes than protected ankles. Kei liked having toes.

“Shush.” Hayate grumbled, but he did obey. Kei went on, “Anyway, I started talking to Yaoyorozu-san and realized how impractical her outfit was. So, I pushed her on it, and she ended up saying there were two major factors in her costume decisions: marketing and her Quirk.”

“Start with her Quirk,” Hayate suggested. He pointedly did not look at the photo again.

“She produces objects from her skin, somehow using body fat as her fuel reserves,” Kei explained, in what was probably not the most accurate statement. Kei rested a knuckle against her chin. “That might justify removable panels, or maybe a tube top, but I don’t see why she can’t wear armor where she can. Her Quirk doesn’t let her shake off damage at all, so why invite someone to stab you in the chest?”

Hayate’s brow furrowed. “And since she’s your age and not, uh, Tsunade-sama, you probably said that nicer…? Or should have at least tried…?”

Kei groaned, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Sure. Probably. But I kinda wasn’t, and now I guess I’ve volunteered to fight her in her hero costume. Because of course I did.”

“I think you’ve gotten into more fights since coming here than you ever did at home.”

“Don’t remind me.”

Hayate poked her in the shoulder. “This is me reminding you.”

“Everything I do here becomes a thing,” Kei grumbled, batting Hayate’s hand away. “If it’s training Shinsō one week, then we have more people in a month, then more people, and now this.”

“You kinda swamped a stadium in front of a live audience.” Hayate was rolling his eyes when Kei glared at him, and it was justified. “Even back home, that’d earn attention. Most of it bad.”

**The miniature you has a point.**

*I don’t remember you complaining at the time.*

**I am a Tailed Beast. Since when do I care about the reactions of a human audience?**

*Point.*

“Oh, speaking of attention,” Hayate continued, “you know your birthday’s in less than two weeks,
Kei blinked. “I… Oops?” It was already almost the end of June. Keeping busy apparently meant remembering days of the week, but not necessarily their significance.

“So, what do you think you might want? Don’t say anything about Kushina-san, either. I already got her stuff for you.” He must’ve found her True Wallet at long last. Dangit. “But like, I don’t know if I’m gonna be here on your birthday, and I haven’t heard anything about you coming back, either.”

“It’s in the middle of the week.” Which, unfortunately, meant school. She’d have to find a way to ditch her multi-tiered social obligations during the weekend. It’d be a nasty culture shock after five months in Tokyo, and the massive time zone difference would be a pain, but home was something Kei could never fully leave behind. She had to hope it wasn’t leaving her behind, either.

“So?” Hayate demanded.

“I’ll… I don’t know. I’ll have Obito ask. But most shinobi don’t get their birthdays off in the middle of a mission, Hayate.”

“I know that. But this isn’t a normal mission, since you can only get home through Obito’s portals and you can, because he’s almost always around keeping up with you,” Hayate protested. “And I can even visit! There’s no way this is a normal mission at all. Even a bit.”

Kei sighed and gave Hayate a one-armed hug. Normal missions meant days or months on the road, far away from home. In a way, this mission’s bizarre parameters made it even harder to adjust to.

“I can’t wait until the bad guy’s dead so you can come home,” Hayate muttered. He leaned heavily into Kei’s side, rubbing the back of his hand against his mouth. Crumbs had finally left the building.

“So. Fight tomorrow?”

“After school, yeah.” Kei drummed her fingers against the table. “You know, if Obito gets here on time, there’s a chance you could come watch. He might be able to talk to the principal into giving you a day pass.”

“Really?”

“Maybe. UA has some pretty scary security systems.”

Hayate snorted. “Sure.” He wriggled out of Kei’s grip and said, “If you can get me in, I won’t miss it.”

“Good. Now, clean up the snacks before Obito gets here. I’ll make actual dinner.”

“Fiiriiine.”

Why does your kid brother have a security pass?” Shinsō asked, which was the correct response to Hayate’s cheeky grin.

“Magic,” Kei suggested, dragging her heels a bit as she led the way toward test area number bajillion. UA had enough for at least ten schools. Ten hero schools.

“And I’m not that much younger than you are.” Hayate crossed his arms, putting on his best judgmental persona. His ID tag dangled from a lanyard around his neck, proclaiming him a “Visitor.” From both out of the school and out of the country, if only to those in the know. “You’re
only like fifteen.”

“Sixteen in two days,” Shinsō corrected, but otherwise just accepted the fact that there was now a(n assumed) middle school student wandering around UA’s campus. It was getting to be a habit, made easier by his general lack of energy. Aizawa kept him busy. “So, what do you think of the total circus this turned into?”

The situation had been a casual gathering of a few first-year peers and their willingness to beat the crap out of each other. Once Yaoyorozu talked to Aizawa-sensei and Kei mentioned the idea to Kayama-sensei, it sort of ballooned into something bigger. For one thing, Homura was going to follow along with half of 1-C, and so was freaking Bakugō. With him, the Baku-Barbecue joined, and then word really got out. In the end, all of 1-A would be attending.

People needed to stop letting the rumor mill run wild during lunch. There were too many pairs of ears involved.

Sure, all the kids would be piled into an observation room, but it was still more than Kei was fully comfortable thinking about. It was like the Sports Festival again, but with fewer people to make it just that much more taxing on Kei’s interpersonal skills. Funny how that worked.

At least it was going to be educational.

Kei said, “It is what it is. At this point, it’s too late to turn around and tell everyone to go home.”

“No, it’s not. The trains are still running,” Shinsō replied. “And will be for the next six hours.”

“Shinsō-kun,” Kei said, in a tone that couldn’t quite manage to chastise even the guiltiest of consciences. What he’d said was true.

“Whatever.”

Hayate sniggered. “Well, I get to meet all the weird people who make up a hero school. The principal was pretty cool, though. It was a good place to start.”

Hayate had more experience with administrative positions going to talking animals than to people who could, for example, pull their eyeballs out of their heads as though their optic nerve was made of rubber. It said something about Konoha, and about Tokyo, and Kei didn’t want to think about that too hard. There were more frogs in that thought process.

Kei busied herself with arranging her hand-wraps, deciding against voicing any of that.

“So, since your birthday’s in a bit, are you going to do anything?” Hayate asked.

Shinsō scratched the back of his head. “A thing with my family. Nothing big.”

“If you change your mind, I can help—”

“You do not want his help,” Kei interrupted. Hayate did not plan parties. He planned pranks, and those were generally messy affairs. “Not unless you want to try and figure out why there’s chopped onion on the ceiling. Hayate isn’t allowed to plan that kind of thing alone anymore.”

“Hey!” Hayate snapped, betrayed.

Shinsō rolled his eyes, being far too used to their shenanigans by now, and said, “I’ll go with your sister on this one, kid.”
“Fine, fine, but you’re missing out.”

“I’m sure the regret will eat me alive. And here’s your stop.”

Kei sighed. She’d been doing that a lot lately. “I’d say you two need to look after each other, but I’m not even sure which one of you will cause trouble first. Just try not to get into a sideshow fight.”

“Okay!” said Hayate.

Shinsō didn’t bother, which was just as well. Hayate just lied to her face.

“Both of you are pests,” Kei said, and finished tying off the wrist wraps before she waved them off.

They both went to join the student crowd who were undoubtedly already in the observation room, chatting in front of a dozen video monitors or whatever.

Kei hoped Hayate would stick to just sniping at Shinsō. She didn’t need him punching anybody in public on this side of Obito’s Kamui. She’d have to send him home without dessert, or something.

Kei’s talk with Kayama-sensei had basically boiled down to, “I’d like a chance to spar with someone totally different, but with Quirks!” She’d said yes, as long as the match was supervised. Preferably by her or another pro.

Yaoyorozu’s, on the other hand, probably didn’t go the same way. Regardless of what was said, Aizawa-sensei agreed to show up. Probably with his sleeping bag and capture weapon, looking as tired as ever. Kei imagined there was a tired glare with her name on it, but the match would proceed apace.

This weird little city arena, despite being a dozen square blocks of mockup downtown space, would be the site of the costume test. At least, that was what Kayama-sensei called it. The way Kei had explained it to her, the match was less about proving combat superiority and more about making sure people’s gear stood up to even the most basic maneuvers. Kei already knew her stuff would, but there was a Point to be made here. And Kayama-sensei didn’t even seem to disagree that much. She’d just be grading papers a bit while things got started.

In previous special training sessions, Kei had asked for permission to use the USJ under Thirteen’s supervision. It wasn’t actually utilized that often, because it was far enough from campus that students usually had to use buses to get that far. Unless the student was named Shinsō and biked to school. But hey, this weird little arena could take the beating the USJ wouldn’t have to. Today.

Kei hoped they still had the same opinion if Yaoyorozu put a cannonball through a support beam.

**She will only get the chance to produce one if you permit it.**

*Fair.*

“This should be interesting,” Kei muttered aloud, and walked into the building.

It was actually one of the few battlefield types where her footwear wouldn’t factor into her strategies as much. The fountain, by contrast, would only matter if Kei gave enough of a damn to actually use higher-tier abilities. The chance of this was not high.

Kei didn’t know if Aizawa-sensei and Kayama-sensei had decided to give the “edge” to Yaoyorozu, but she figured a Nara-lite kind of student probably didn’t deserve to have a waterspout dropped on her head in the opening seconds. And she wouldn’t use that level of power except to be an
obnoxious pain in the ass. The Sports Festival already proved Kei didn’t need specialized equipment or environments to dominate a kids’ competition.

“Hey, Yaoyorozu-san,” Kei said upon spotting the other girl. She stood just outside the foyer of some building perpetually frozen in a half-completed state.

“Good afternoon, Gekkō-san.” She gestured to the building. “Would you believe I’ve been here before? Our first day of hero training took place here.”

“Neat,” was Kei’s distracted response.

Speaking of, yes, Yaoyorozu was wearing her hero costume. Encyclopedia and all. The entire ensemble wasn’t any less ridiculous in person.

Kei had her gym uniform, running shoes, a tank top, and MMA hand wraps. To be more accurate, she had Gai-style hand wraps, but she doubted many people around here would recognize them as such. It at least looked like she was taking things seriously.

“I almost wish we were just testing rescue scenarios,” Yaoyorozu admitted, fully turning to face Kei.

“It’d probably be more fun. I’ve always liked team-building exercises.”

Yaoyorozu’s eyebrows rose. “You’ve…struck me as a bit of a lone wolf, so far. Though I admit we’ve only had three or four real conversations.”

Kei shrugged. She didn’t trust that many people in Tokyo. Most people didn’t come off as social to near-strangers. “Understandable.”

Yaoyorozu and Kei stood about three meters apart, shoes squeaking as they adjusted their stances and tested the floor. Kei didn’t imagine Yaoyorozu would be sticking around to brawl it out.

They didn’t have to wait for long.

“In a proper match, I’d be using an arena buzzer, but not today. When you hear a whistle blast from me, that’ll be the end. I reserve the right to call the match whenever I feel like there’s a clear winner, or everyone gets bored,” Kayama-sensei said, while something metal rattled on her end. “Both of you should probably take it easy with your Quirks, as much as I hate to say it. It’s a week before practical exams, so nothing ought to send either of you to the hospital. You’ll begin when ready.”

Fair enough. With the superpower to make whatever she liked, Yaoyorozu could make at least a portion of multiple scenario zones worse than the *Home Alone* movies. Probably by a wide margin. Here and now, it was down to fighting skill with whatever they could lay hands on.

“I expect an interesting match, you two!” Kayama-sensei reminded them. “But don’t get too badly hurt.”

She will be disappointed. Somehow.

Kei covered her fist with her other hand and bowed, looking at her opponent only when finished.

After her own bow, Yaoyorozu fairly thrummed with tension.

A “Quirk” like Kei’s engendered a certain caution. Perhaps to excess.

Yaoyorozu needed a chance to get her confidence back, and Kei had no way to be completely certain that was how today’s match would affect that. There was a reason therapy generally didn’t
happen in the middle of a fistfight unless one of the participants was named Naruto.

She was pretty sure how the fight would end, though.

**As if it was ever in doubt.**

*Mm-hm. Note to both of us: Yaoyorozu isn’t magically more durable than a bog-standard human. We’re going to have to pull our punches.*

**And now I am bored again.** Isobu sighed as though Kei told him he wasn’t allowed to have dessert. If he ate food, ever. **Bother me when something interesting happens.**

*Will do.*

Kei didn’t shift to the Strong Fist starting stance like she had with Kirishima well over a month ago. If the Gentle Fist attacked the tenketsu and organs, the Strong Fist was good for inflicting blunt force trauma. Rin’s method of getting out of brawls involved hamstringing people with a touch. Kei wanted none of those results. She had a different solution in mind.

“Let’s get this started! Try to make this match fun to watch!” Kayama-sensei did *something*, filling the air with a piercing shriek far more annoying than a buzzer would be.

*But it was on.*

Kei rocketed from her starting point in a blur of blue and flying water droplets, ready to meet whatever tactic Yaoyorozu could come up with under pressure. Kakashi’s acrobatic fighting style would serve that purpose well.

Yaoyorozu’s right arm started to glitter like an art project gone wrong. Purple, blue-green and pink sparks flew, and a steel kite shield materialized just in time to block Kei’s attack. More specifically, it blocked the hastily-reoriented palm strike that had been a punch a few nanoseconds before.

Yaoyorozu was on the way to holding her own.

It might’ve worked, if not for the follow-through.

Dark Shadow bounced off the shield only because Tokoyami’s whole strategy was relentless offense until Yaoyorozu ended up out of bounds.

Kei’s entire body weight drove Yaoyorozu back just the same, briefly shoving the shield out of a direct defensive position. If not for good positioning, Yaoyorozu’s back might’ve slammed against the nearest concrete wall. With her belt and encyclopedia, a hard enough impact would have snapped her spine with the wrong angle.

Yet another risk not worth taking in the first place.

*I’ve possibly never fought a battle for a worse reason.*

**You call this a battle?**

Kei stepped back twice, skirting Yaoyorozu’s attempted shield bash.

Yaoyorozu swung again, shouting to give herself that extra boost.

Kei didn’t bother blocking.
This is boring.

“Not very original,” Kei admitted, half to Isobu. This was shaping up to be a rehash of the Sports Festival. Shield, then her next call would be—

And just like then, Yaoyorozu produced a quarterstaff in another rain of sparkles.

_Dammit, kid. “Tokoyami-san didn’t lose to that combination.”_

“Who says it’s the same one?” Yaoyorozu replied, and a smoke grenade canister dropped from the underside of the shield.

Kei drew water from the air and around her in time to watch the grenade explode. Smoke blasted outward, drowning all light out immediately. Even with her arm over her nose and mouth, there was no way Kei could see through this.

That didn’t mean she couldn’t hear.

Heels on cement floors were easy enough to track.

_Two can play at that game._ Kei made a hand seal, eyes still closed. _Hidden Mist Jutsu._

_There we go._
Debate Club

Chapter Summary

Kei’s Charisma score fails her, but her weapon proficiency does not.

Chapter Notes

[THE AUTHOR appears, furtively, as though delivering mail to a booby-trapped home.]
Author: Look, the thrilling conclusion!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Cramming more than thirty people in this room had been a mistake. Even though the 1-C kids were mostly along for emotional support, such that it was, they were almost all too intimidated by the hero-wannabes to be much use. Homura was an exception, because Gekkō worked like a weirdness inoculation, but Hitoshi didn’t even bother thinking this cheering section affected anything. Hell, it seemed more like they were here for him than for Gekkō, who hardly needed help.

Add in Hayate, who basically looked like a junior high edition of his sister, and something was going to happen sooner or later. Only Hitoshi and Midoriya knew the kid, leaving the rest of the group unprepared for smartass remarks or worse. Worse, Midoriya didn’t have enough traction with him to really rein in his spiteful impulses. This made Hayate somehow Hitoshi’s responsibility.

“You all seem pretty cool,” Hayate said, upon being introduced to the room of high school students. “I’m just here for the day, but please take care of me!”

Hitoshi didn’t even have to look at the kid to know he was putting on a mask. This was the same kid who broke a grown man’s fingers within fifteen minutes of meeting Hitoshi. He just had to watch and wait for the polite smile to drop, which happened the instant Hayate was out of the ring of girls—mostly from 1-C—who apparently thought he was adorable in a panda kind of way. Maybe more approachable than his sister.

Hitoshi sighed and dragged Hayate, by his hoodie, away from Bakugō before the match kicked into gear. Gekkō owed him big for this.

“I wasn’t gonna do anything,” Hayate hissed, just below hearing range for most of the other students.

“I wasn’t born yesterday,” Hitoshi countered, equally quiet. “Just stay out of trouble.”

“Why do people keep telling me that?”

And at that point, Yaoyorozu and Gekkō both used smoke and fog to totally blot out the entire arena. Several students screeched in protest at once, making Hitoshi glad he’d decided to stand at the back of the crowd with Shōji, Tokoyami, and Todoroki. It was easier to hold side conversations when the excitable kids were elsewhere.
“Aw, man, why does she always do this?” Kaminari groaned. Yellow lightning arced in his hair before dying down. “Gekkō-san, we kinda came to see this match! What’s your problem?!”

“Maybe she has a grudge against cameras,” Asui suggested, one overlarge finger thoughtfully tapping against her lower lip. “Or she doesn’t want us to see how aggressive she can be.”

“Too late! That ship sailed months ago,” Mineta said, piping up from somewhere near the front of the crowd. “So, I think she wants to hide it when they both take their clothes off and—”

There was a FWOOM and then a lot of shouting from Iida and Homura, which conveniently drowned out most of the rest of whatever sleazy remarks Mineta wanted to make. It also kept too many people from noticing when Hitoshi clamped a hand down on Hayate’s shoulder before the kid could launch himself at Mineta. While socking the half-pint would be viscerally satisfying, Hayate needed to not get thrown out of the building.

“I have a question,” Hitoshi said to distract him, while Midnight-sensei frantically searched for another camera to project onto the big screen.

“Go ahead,” Hayate replied, twisting his ID tag around in his fingers. It was probably a better option than using his ridiculous martial artist speed to start a brawl, especially with two pro heroes right here.

“Can your sister see through the fog somehow? I figure she has to, but back during the Sports Festival she was running around with her eyes shut part of the time.” Hitoshi kept his eyes on Hayate, but in the periphery he could see a couple of students drift closer.

“Um, duh? Part of how her Quirk works is by being able to feel where all the water she controls is going.” Hayate pointed at the white cloud still engulfing the relevant cameras. Nothing was visible yet, except for the occasional drift. “If anything’s in the mist, she can tell where it is. It’s part of what makes her super annoying to fight. Or watch while fighting.”

On-screen, the mist thinned enough for one of the external cameras to spot Gekkō scaling the building like some kind of ninja. Using water like some kind of ridiculous popgun, she launched herself from window sill to window sill, briefly peering inside before throwing herself another floor higher. Midnight-sensei swapped the camera, and there was the briefest glimpse of Gekkō before she smashed a window with one bandaged fist and dove inside. The part of the crowd stuck in the front rows groaned all together, thwarted once again of the vicarious thrill of a fight.

“I hope Yaoyorozu-san trapped the entire building,” said Hayate.

“Uh, you do know it’s your sister in there who’d have to deal with that, right?” said Jirō. If not for Yaoyorozu, Hitoshi doubted Jirō would’ve bothered to show up here at all.

Then again, Hitoshi and Hayate wouldn’t be here without Gekkō being a fight-happy weirdo, so he wasn’t in a position to throw stones.

“So? It’s more fun that way.” Hayate’s shark grin convinced Jirō to turn around and pretend he hadn’t said anything.

Hitoshi nudged Hayate once the kid stopped his Bakugō impression. When he looked up, back to neutral, Hitoshi said, “So…try that again, but with an actual explanation.”

“If Yaoyorozu-san didn’t trap the building, it’s just gonna be the Sports Festival again. Nobody wants that.” Hayate pointed at the screen again. “Remember how she used a shield first thing? She did that back with Tokoyami-san, too, and Kei hits at least as hard as he does. And that didn’t work.”
Tokoyami made a noise in the back of his throat that sounded a bit like a laugh, but in the “isn’t this kid’s naïveté cute?” kind of way. It lasted exactly long enough for the main monitor’s image to shudder, right as a Gekkō-patented deluge smashed through the front foyer of the building and launched steel and concrete a block away.

“Nope!”

*Yaoyorozu’s plan, Kei thought, probably would’ve worked better against anyone else.*

True to the Nara comparison Kei assumed before, damn near everything in the third floor was trapped. She found the old standby tripwires linked to everything from cinder block launchers to bundles of razor wire. Caltrops littered the floor. She’d found a theoretically functional claymore mine in a blind corner, though she wasn’t really optimistic about its chances of successfully detonating.

And every single one of those traps was unceremoniously washed into the lobby.

*When one is under pressure, often the first solution becomes the only solution through desperation.* Isobu harrumphed. *Disappointing.*

*I guess.*

Kei spotted a security camera on the ceiling fifth floor landing and waved at it, but otherwise kept following her mist-derived indication of Yaoyorozu’s location. She severed the third tripwire using a water-shrouded chakra scalpel, then drew it out into a blade long enough to touch the ground. *That* tripwire had been attached to a Napoleonic smoothbore cannon, loaded fully with grapeshot when Kei checked.

Yaoyorozu wasn’t fucking around, then. Much.

On the second floor, Kei had found an off-brand equivalent of a Bozo the Clown inflatable doll, only redrawn to resemble Yaoyorozu. It was cute, but clearly only there to serve as a distraction. Besides that, the toy didn’t move enough like a person. If, say, Yaoyorozu’s abilities had including making actual clones in the vein of ninjutsu, then Kei might’ve been more worried.

As it was, a Yaoyorozu-shaped void in Kei’s overwhelming mist was carefully navigating a trap-riddled room. From the way the mist shifted around her, she was carrying the quarterstaff alone. The shield had been used in a trap earlier and didn’t seem to warrant a sequel, not when Yaoyorozu was basically backed into a corner anyway. The final confrontation felt like an impending brawl.

While her opponent could line the very walls with snares and other hazards she liked, Kei just had to drench every floor to make walking a hazard. Much like ice for Todoroki, slip hazards only worried the unprepared.

*She is lucky you are walking to the confrontation point.*

*Mm-hm.*

On the fifth floor, there were only two rooms. There was the unfinished side, which had tarp or drop cloths covering exposed scaffolding. A skeleton of a room. On the other, Yaoyorozu had decided to make her stand. Anything that went through her door would get stabbed, blown up, clubbed, or just generally made miserable.

Kei sighed internally and stopped well short of the only door. Damn corporate meeting rooms and
their one-exit/entrance policy. It was a fire hazard and a moderate inconvenience.

 Fuck doors. Kei placed her left hand against the wall and pulled her chakra up into watery doom mode. She made only three hand seals, derived from Tenzō’s few formerly-exclusive jutsu. It was a lot of fun to have friends who were willing to share techniques…and other friends with both a Sharingan and training time. Time to pull a Fourth Raikage.

**Can I say it this time?**

**Go for it.**

_Ahem._ Kei could only assume Isobu picked up the habit of clearing his throat from her, because it wasn’t like he _needed_ to. Ever. **Water Release: Tearing Torrent!**

Water exploded from Kei’s palm in a blast that ripped straight through sheetrock and cement supports, alongside any metal struts that were clinging optimistically to the idea of staying solid. Rubble flew, hitting the opposite wall as Kei hopped through her newly-created entryway. The shockwave and tearing winds created by plowing through seemingly-solid construction blew an even larger hole out the opposite wall, sending more building plummeting to the mockup streets below.

Kei turned to face Yaoyorozu, improvised water blade still humming in her right hand.

Yaoyorozu got to her feet, quarterstaff still in hand, and tensed. She’d torn her leotard producing one thing or another, leaving tied-together cloth in a sort of weird crop top. She seemed thinner somehow —was producing that many objects that dangerous for her? If it was, Kei had to end the fight sooner rather than later.

Yaoyorozu’s gaze shifted between the damage done to the wall, to the blade, to Kei’s general countenance in half a blink.

“You didn’t even stop to actually deal with my traps, did you?” Yaoyorozu asked, with a little self-deprecating chuckle. Unlike Shinsō, Yaoyorozu actually knew a bit of weapon-handling to fall back on, when all else was lost.

Kei shrugged. She raised her right hand and the water blade, edge at forty-five degrees and her supporting hand hovering near her forearm. “Ready when you are.”

“There was a door,” said Tokoyami, not apparently surprised by the destruction. Of course he wouldn’t be.

“Yeah, and its other name is ‘deathtrap,’ Beakface. If there’s a gap in the wall that _everyone knows is there,_ the first fifteen guys through that gap get torn in half,” Bakugō snarled. His eyes were fixed on the screen. “The best way out of that kind of shit is _through._”

“In a way, it almost looks like the way Midoriya-kun dealt with the exercise on the second day,” said Iida, brows furrowed thoughtfully. He still hadn’t let Mineta leave grabbing range. “Only there’s no bomb or docked points, now.”

The hero kids went on like this for a while. Hitoshi let them.

For Hitoshi’s part, watching Gekkō rip her way through the entire obstacle course from hell was _almost_ cathartic. Yaoyorozu got into UA on a recommendation from a pro, came from a family of pros, and had one of the most amazing Quirks in her year. Hitoshi’s shriveled little jealous side wrapped itself up in an outright gloating session at her misery, though it wasn’t fair. Gekkō against
anyone short of Todoroki could only end one way once she decided to stop playing around.

Yaoyorozu was nice. Gekkō’s Endeavor impression was very much not.

Most of the hero kids (barring Bakugō and definitely Mineta) didn’t deserve to see their every effort thwarted.

At Hitoshi’s side, Hayate rolled his eyes. In a disappointed grumble only Hitoshi could really hear, he said, “All this and she can’t even show off.”

“She… I’m sorry, Hayate-kun, but what part of this isn’t showing off?” Homura asked, glancing down at their youngest fellow audience-member. “Her performance at the Sports Festival was hard to miss.”

Clear as day, Hayate bit down on the first thing he wanted to say. Hitoshi wondered why, because the kid never seemed to slow down or put thought into his remarks before. He avoided some topics, sure, but mostly just said whatever came into his head. He lied a lot, either to spare his sister’s feelings or to skate by consequences, but this felt different. Like he’d said too much and couldn’t backpedal now.

“You don’t have to say anything if you don’t want to,” Hitoshi said, because Gekkō wanted him looking out for her kid brother. Even in the face of such deadly foes as the 1-C class rep.

“It’s kinda like… I don’t know what she’s—”

Before Hitoshi could ponder that non sequitur, the crowd groaned all at once (“What the fuck!?” shouted Bakugō), cutting off the rest of his sentence. Everyone’s eyes darted back to the screens and all thought of interrogating Hayate was conveniently driven out of their heads.

The quarterstaff met a chakra-based water jet cutter going the other way, and Yaoyorozu’s quarterstaff fell from her hands in two pieces. Lines of blood, thin as paper cuts, appeared on her upper arm and chest from flying wood fragments and spillover from the attack.

At that point, two things happened instantly:

First, Kei snatched the longer remnant of the staff from the air. The sharp, severed edge was pointed at Yaoyorozu’s throat between heartbeats, held as much like a katana as Kei could manage. One-handed, anyway.

Second, the usual kaleidoscope of colors appeared in Yaoyorozu’s left hand and spat out a recognizable stun gun. And she didn’t hesitate before ducking past the point of the broken quarterstaff and jabbing it toward Kei’s closest hand.

_Nope!_ Kei brought the quarterstaff down at a noticeable fraction of her top speed, hitting Yaoyorozu’s fingers with a solid _crack_ noise. The stun gun flew out of her hand to smash against a wall.

Before Kei even completed the stroke, Yaoyorozu’s _other_ hand created a similar device with prongs, and she’d already pulled the trigger.

Replacement Jutsu would’ve gotten Kei out of trouble with time to spare. Only she couldn’t _use_ it with witnesses. The same went for high-speed dodging, nerve strikes, and just slapping Yaoyorozu upside the head with a bomb tag.
I swear, the things I put up with—

Two prongs punched through skin on Kei’s bicep and stomach at once, and they both delivered their payload.

The noise that escaped Kei’s mouth sounded a lot like “Rrrghf!” in hindsight. For what had to be five solid seconds—but felt longer—her entire body cramped at once. Static filled her brain, like it was trying to figure out what the fuck had just happened. Hitting the floor barely changed things.

The pain hit about halfway through. Sort of like getting hit by a hammer exactly as big as she was. It hurt, but in a generalized way Kei had never associated with combat before. And after that, her entire body was doing the limb-fell-asleep thing. Unpleasant, but workable. Just really, really weird.

Kei had her breath back and adrenaline pumping, grabbing the little wires with her free hand and ripping the prongs out of her body. She scrambled into a crouch, quarterstaff still in hand, and was already back in the fight before the pain fully left.

Getting zapped by Kakashi hurt worse than that when he wasn’t being serious.

Yaoyorozu reeled harder from getting her fingers unceremoniously busted. Well, fine. They probably weren’t actually broken, but getting hit somewhere without any armor—or fat, if someone was busy insisting on not wearing any padding—hurt like hell.

Kei considered her options for long enough that Yaoyorozu almost recovered. She got as far as barely balancing on her heels, about to surge upright and maybe headbutt Kei in the chin. A classic maneuver.

But nope. Kei kicked the other girl in the shoulder, bowling her ass over teakettle backward across a puddle. The heels didn’t help recovery. “Neat trick. Won’t work twice.”

Yaoyorozu scrambled to her feet before she could take a second hit. She had training, but those goddamned heels were getting in her way. For however long it’d taken to shake off getting tasered, Kei had almost forgotten about them.

That was the entire reason for this ridiculous sham of a fight. Jeez.

“It’s not that you’re good, is it?” Yaoyorozu panted, still cradling her hand. “It’s not talent. You’ve done this for a long time. You’ve fought people tougher than me.”

More true than you know, kid. Kei shrugged. “Kirishima-san was.”

Yaoyorozu laughed bitterly. “You and I both know that’s not what I meant.”

“So what?” Kei kept her improvised sword trained on Yaoyorozu, wary of any further attacks. When none seemed forthcoming, she sighed. “You’re going to be a hero. Fighting people tougher than you is just life. People will depend on you to win anyway, all the time. For your entire career.”

Like Sensei. Like All Might.

Kei knew a few too many blond, blue-eyed powerhouses.

“You don’t have to worry about any of that.” Yaoyorozu looked up, glaring immediately. “Your Quirk is nothing like mine. Coming here and lecturing me like this isn’t making me a better hero. Don’t you know that?”
“And that’s why you’re a hero-to-be, and I’m not.” Among many other reasons. Starting with Kei’s entire life and working backwards. “Look, you can take it or leave it. I’ll fight you anytime you want to test new gear. Or something. Or if you just want to fight.”

Yaoyorozu stared at her. Her lip wobbled. Oh jeez. “What—then what am I supposed to do?”

_Heel, thy name is Kei._ “Yell at the support companies? I don’t know!”

“You’re not helping, Gekkō-san!”

“I’m sorry! I’m not the person who fixes problems!”

“What use is someone who only points them out by fighting?!”

“I already said I’m sorry!”

The two of them made gaping goldfish faces at each other for a couple more heartbeats, then burst out laughing. They were both hopeless, weren’t they?

“Just so you know,” said Kayama-sensei’s voice over the intercom, “I cut the actual audio about when you two started arguing. Have you two figured things out?”

“I think so, Midnight-sensei.” Yaoyorozu said.

“Yeah,” Kei added, in case Kayama-sensei needed her input.

“Good! I’ll speak to you both soon.”

_Click._

Yaoyorozu sighed and kicked off her boots. She held up the underside for examination as Kei wandered closer. One heel dangled by leather and plastic, even as sparkles produced a pair of tennis shoes from Yaoyorozu’s left hand.

“I see what you meant, and your fighting skills are undeniable,” she said, handing over the wreck of a shoe. “But you really need to work on your communication skills, Gekkō-san.”

“Gekkō-chan.”

“Hm?”

“You can call me ‘Gekkō-chan,’ if you want.” Kei rubbed at her scar. “Sorry for all of this, again. It got really out of hand.”

“Stop apologizing, please.” Yaoyorozu put her new shoes on and tapped the fronts on the floor to test the fit. Then, “I’ll come up with some modifications. Even if you hadn’t fought like you did, I’d need to change things a little for the final exams. It wasn’t a waste.”

“Um.” Kei pointed to Yaoyorozu’s bruised shoulder, then added, “And sorry about that.”

“Stop apologizing,” Yaoyorozu repeated.

“S—”

“Stop! I get it already!”
“Okay!”

**What were you saying about being hopeless?**

*Just because you’re right doesn’t mean you should say it.*

And as Kei and Yaoyorozu finally shook hands to officially end the fight, Kei’s head filled to the brim with Isobu’s laughter.

The next day, Yaoyorozu showed up in 1-C for the first time all year. She made an immediate beeline for Kei, who was just getting books out of her bag, and smiled brightly. It was a little off-putting, until Kei remembered that the hero-hopefuls didn’t seem to build as much resentment about losing fights as people back home.

“I’ve come up with a new idea. Here, please take a look!”

Kei eyed the sketchbook that landed squarely on her desk, but opened it and flipped through the pages until the end. “Oh!”

Yaoyorozu’s new costume idea had firmly ditched the high heels in favor of solid-looking (but still red) boots, each of which looked like they could kick a door in with rubber soles and steel caps. She’d draw in a request for elbow and knee pads that seemed to be made of plastic and kevlar, and each hand would have combat gloves not unlike the ones Kakashi wore as ANBU.

“What’s this mesh made of?” Kei asked, jabbing a finger at the cross-hatched lines Yaoyorozu’s new costume had along the thighs, upper arms, and most of the torso. It appeared they’d even run under a tearaway panel (also kevlar) in the center of her chest.

“I’m thinking of using my hair,” Yaoyorozu replied, looking over Kei’s shoulder. “I heard an upperclassman has a Quirk that doesn’t work on his clothes, like mine, so it seemed like a good idea to ask the Support Department what options I had. And they came up with this! It’s still in the design phase, but it should be ready soon!”

“Well, you have a week of written exams before the practical,” Kei said, pleased. “Congratulations, Yaoyorozu-san. I hope this new design works for you.”

Yaoyorozu smiled and crossed her fingers. “Here’s hoping! And you can call me Yaoyorozu-chan, too. Or maybe Yaomomo? Some of the other students came up with that name for me, and I’ve never had a nickname before, so…”

“Sounds good, Yaomomo-chan.” Kei handed the notebook back, then added, “See you around?”

“Of course! Have fun in homeroom!”

Which never happened, but hey, Yaoyorozu tried. Once she was gone—nearly running over Shingetsu in her quick exit—Kei leaned over toward where Shinsō had just been staring while Yaoyorozu did her bubbly thing. Diagonal desks were a bit of a pain.

“So,” Kei began, as though that hadn’t happened.

“So,” Shinsō prompted.

“Why was my brother so weird when he went home last night? He didn’t tell me.”
“He ‘accidentally’ tripped Mineta on their way up the stairs. That I saw, anyway.”

What? “…Why?”

“Mineta decided to be a pervert, and Hayate overheard.” Shinsō yawned, covering his mouth a little late. “Sorry. But yeah, Mineta apparently does that a lot.”

Kei waited.

“And he also implied that you’ve been holding back whenever you fight, a lot.” Shinsō shrugged even as their other classmates tried desperately to hide their eavesdropping. “Which people would know if they hung out with you at all. You’re like some kind of weird puzzle box.”

Kei glanced around the classroom for a second, noting that about half the class wouldn’t meet her gaze. It was actually a step up from the beginning of the year. “Noted.”

“Try to warn me if you’re going to pull more weird rabbits out of your hat,” Shinsō said, entirely too bored-sounding to be serious. “I want a mercy lead.”

“Hah.”

Chapter End Notes

Edited 3/4/19 to provide more of an ending here.
Kei has a long overdue chat with the Symbol of Peace.

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the delay, folks. Been working a lot more hours recently.

“I can understand all of the words, but…” Kakashi muttered, staring down at Kei’s Japanese literature study materials.

Honestly, the weirdest part about Kei’s assignments from that class was that there were no assigned books. American high schools read things like 1984 and Catcher in the Rye. Japanese high schools had assigned reading time, but no direction whatsoever on what to actually read. Kakashi’s light novels were more consistent than Kei’s school work. The entire affair was a bit nonsensical.

Shinsō’s efforts produced a workable guide to the topics covered in Cementoss’s class, but asking for any more direction probably would’ve made his brain melt at this point in the year. Kei lacked the malicious ignorance required to ask anything else of him, at least until finals were over. After that was summer break, so prying her purple friend out of his semester-is-over slump was almost a responsibility. After the fact.

Yaoyorozu helped with the rest.

In the meantime, it was a little like slowly boiling alive. Lobsters had it easy.

“Give me something less brain-breaking.” And Kakashi hardly helped at all! Darned education system differences.

With a completely innocent expression, Kei handed him her English homework.

The eye-rolling she got in return was worth it.

Kei cleared her throat and snatched a better option off the pile of paperwork at her side. “Trade you a light novel. This stuff isn’t on you.”

“I sure hope not. I’m not getting paid for this.” But Kakashi accepted the volume of his most recent purchase—a story about a girl with mechanical arms and a typewriter—and flopped down on the paw-patterned coverlet. They’d patrolled for hour, found nothing notable between the lack of villains and the smell of city life, and now it was just back to school time.

After glaring down at her assembled study materials again, Kei sighed and scooted over until she was sitting on the futon too. She dragged the table along with her, then started scribbling out a half-assed solution to a quadratic equation. She didn’t bother with half the necessary work underneath it. The TV droned softly in the background, filling the room with white noise.
It was around dinner time before Kei decided it was probably time to take a break. The fact that this was the moment Obito came back from a successful food expedition was a complete coincidence. Definitely.

“Your hero has arrived!” Obito said, walking right through the front door because the laws of physics couldn’t stop him. He waved his arms and nearly knocked over a lamp. Grocery bags had a habit of doing that in a cramped apartment, with or without Obito’s assistance.

Thankfully, the neighbors were used to him.

Kei shoved all her study materials to the side to make way for food. It was not even a contest.

“How’s yours,” Obito said as he sat down, divvying up the bags and passing out food. In true take-out fashion, all of them were different. “And yours, and this one’s mine. Dessert’s gonna stay here. Let’s eat!”

Convenience store fried chicken and curry rice, hooray! Obito had somehow also managed to procure pizza buns, which were one of Kei’s many weaknesses. And onigiri alongside a prepackaged bento for Kakashi, because he wouldn’t eat fried anything even if held at knifepoint. Or the dessert.

He has been held at knifepoint too often for it to have any real effect.

The point still stands. Kei sent him the impression of a shrug. Food now.

“Y’know what was weird?” Obito asked, after he’d about destroyed his portion of chicken.

“What?” Kakashi asked, still in the process of unwrapping the third onigiri. With his mask down, he actually looked like a kid their age and not a disease-conscious street punk.

“The people who work in stores here are super polite. Somebody in front of me had to wait like forty-five seconds for a fresh sandwich and the clerk apologized for the wait.” Obito was not allowed to gesture with chopsticks, and a sidelong stare from Kei failed utterly to remind him of it. “I get it, but it also kinda felt like I was unintentionally threatening them by being there.”

“Don’t flirt with anyone who’s working, accept all apologies, and don’t eat while walking.” Kakashi shrugged. “The clerks probably forgot you existed ten minutes later.”

“Still felt weird. Anyway, how far’d you get on your study stuff?” Obito asked.

Kei frowned. “You were gone for less than an hour.”

“What? You’re smart.”

“I also only partly ever learned how to study.”

“That’s something you have to learn?”

“And suddenly your Academy scores make so much more sense,” Kakashi muttered.

Obito grinned and flipped him off. This world wasn’t a bad influence, but it was trying.

Dinner concluded without any murders. Or attempted murders. Six years of nearly continual contact had done them all good.

“So, are you going to spend all of this week in study mode?” Obito asked, sitting on the futon. The
fact that he was digging both elbows into Kakashi’s back when he lounged around seemed to bother neither of them.

“Not entirely.” She had offered to train with the other kids for one last physical cram session before their practical exams. Shinsō would be coming along anyway, though 1-C’s exams didn’t have a punching component. Besides that, though… “I think I need to talk to All Might again.”

“I thought you had everything sorted out from that first…incident,” Kakashi said, while Obito made a face at the mention of the USJ clusterfuck.

“Oh, yeah, we’re cool on that front.” Kei reached for a package of candy, then thought better of it. She sighed. “It’s just that Todoroki-kun said something a while ago that’s been bugging me.”

That got two confused looks.

“Todoroki-kun brought up the idea that there’s some connection between Midoriya-kun and All Might.” Or Yagi-sensei. Kei still wasn’t consistent on that front, since it wasn’t like she talked to the guy often. “And I’ve thought about it, and rewatched parts of the Sports Festival, and I kinda think he’s right. It might not have much to do with the mission, but All Might is hiding something.”

“Like the fact that he’s actually two hundred kilos lighter than he looks on the news?” Obito suggested.

Telling Obito about the inflatable All Might issue might’ve been a mistake. “Besides that.”

“Both topics could be related,” Kakashi suggested, not looking up from his book. “Quirks only make so much sense to us. A veteran hero might know more, assuming he’s willing to talk to you.”

Kei shrugged. “No harm in asking.”

“Exactly!” Obito said.

Kakashi looked like he was going to say something directly counter to that, but bit his tongue instead. Sometimes, it was better not to live up to one’s reputation as a snarky person. Instead, he just remarked, “Don’t be surprised if he lies. Some secrets are either too important or too personal to share with people like us.”

“Shinobi?” asked Obito, while tearing open a packet of sugar stars.

“Teenagers,” was Kakashi’s dry response.

Fair on both counts.

Tracking All Might down in the middle of testing week was simple, because the man wasn’t employed by UA for his ability to administer written exams. With only two hero-hopeful classes to manage, he had more free periods than any teacher Kei saw regularly. Given how he was not one of her teachers, that observation said a lot more about Kei’s knack for ending up wandering the hallways than it did about anything else.

“Yagi-sensei?” Not perhaps the strongest opening move, but courtesy never hurt the proceedings. Kei’s entire school year thus far almost qualified as an extended trial in just that skillset. “Can I talk to you about something?”

Being polite about her request was more likely to mean progress. She was learning.
I am reserving judgement.

“Oh, Young Gekkō. Please, come in,” said the Symbol of Peace, likely because Kei caught him before he could escape into the little side office where she’d once met up with Aizawa-sensei and the principal.

Maybe he hid in there with his lunch on Tuesdays. Kei kept enough track of the dynamics between teachers to know Aizawa-sensei could be a real storm cloud and didn’t like All Might, so it could be true. Aside from his general grump status, though, Kei didn’t really know why Aizawa-sensei and All Might didn’t get along. And she didn’t really intend to ask.

Maybe All Might needed to take him to a cat café.

Kei shook her head to clear it. No time for that. She dug around in her pockets and produced a slightly crumpled privacy seal, sticking it to the wall next to the door as soon as it closed. It looked like a nondescript paper talisman to most people in Quirk-land. Didn’t make it any less effective.

All Might sat down on the slightly squashed couch. Despite being well over two meters tall, he seemed shrunken in the middle of the cushions. “What was that supposed to do, Young Gekkō?”

At least he wasn’t upset about it. It wasn’t vandalism if the sticky backing only lasted a short time.

“It keeps any sound from passing through that wall.” Let him wonder why she could do that. Kei settled into the chair across from him, then said, “I’d like to know more about Nōmu, please.”

_Dammit!

That was not what you intended to say?

_I panicked and thought I’d ease him into telling me anything?_”

A useful excuse for the inevitable report.

All Might paused. His skeletal face settled into a grim visage, brows furrowed and frown firm. This, apparently, was not the topic he’d expected and not one he approved.

Kei wondered if it was due to her age or her status as a student, no matter how finely she walked that line. The age thing was at least mostly valid, if one completely ignored her totally different foundational experience. She definitely wouldn’t be telling Shinsō any of what she heard here, but by age almost-sixteen Kei had managed to muddle through eye surgery, being kidnapped, and killing a lot of people. And helping people escape the influence an evil old ninja who kinda wanted to see the world burn.

Her point was that she _had_ this. There wasn’t anything All Might could tell her that would be worse than what she’d already seen.

“I’ve already run into and fought two members of the Nōmu family,” Kei said in the face of that silence. “I just figured I might need some clarification before I fight a third.”

“They aren’t a family,” All Might said, once Kei’s word vomit was out of the way. He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees, mouth mostly hidden behind tented fingers. The shadows across his face stood out sharper than ever. “I wouldn’t be telling anyone your age this under normal circumstances, but we’ve established already that this situation is far from normal.”

Kei nodded.
I am willing to declare this provisional progress.

“The ones we’ve been calling Nōmu are the victims of Quirk experimentation,” All Might said quietly, eyes downcast, “by the villain known as All For One.”

Kei sat up straighter in her chair. Her hands clenched almost imperceptibly. Now they were getting somewhere. “How so?”

Already, she was thinking of comparisons to the Zetsu legions native (or distinctly not native) to the other side of Kamui. She knew they grew from the corpse of the Ten-Tails, were genetically modular, and had the approximate physical properties of cooked pudding, but this was new. All For One really was this world’s Madara, wasn’t he?

“All For One’s Quirk is the power to take the Quirks of others and keep them for himself,” All Might explained, “as well as grant them to others, or combine them into stronger versions. He’s left hundreds of victims behind wherever he goes, using people he’s suborned as a private army. And the Nōmu are those who…” All Might swallowed hard. “They call them artificial humans. But the truth is, they’re the victims of mental burnout when All For One forces them to accept a second, or even a third Quirk. They’re forced to be All For One’s shock troops.”

Kei listened with wide eyes, pretending that she hadn’t heard at least bits of the story before. Nezu’s decision to hire her on had included a bit of a briefing about the fact that All For One was a criminal mastermind on the rebound. It was one of those things most of the major powers around here hadn’t concluded at the time.

All the same, it was nice to get more details from the guy who clobbered All For One so badly he thought he actually punched his ticket, even if it cost All Might horribly to do it. Kei didn’t think the Skinny Steve mode All Might used as a civilian guise was one that he’d come by willingly.

And All For One hadn’t had the good manners to stay dead.

Isobu asked in a grumble, Would it have stopped you from taking the mission if you had heard all of these details then?

Probably not, given what we’re being paid. Would’ve been nice to establish early, though. The only kind of power thief she really feared at this stage was Orochimaru. Her various teachers, including Isobu, had given her means to fight back against most of the others.

“I see,” Kei murmured. She glanced up at All Might, because she’d been staring down at her hands for about a solid thirty seconds, then said, “I hate to say this, but this kind of brutality sounds familiar. Is there anything we can do for the victims?”

“Not that we’ve found,” All Might admitted. His voice dropped a bit in regret as he said, “The Nōmu you and I fought was once a young man with a minor criminal record, but All For One’s experiments turned him into an individual with four Quirks and, unfortunately, it doesn’t seem like his personality survived what happened to him.”

All Might really did want to save everyone, didn’t he?

I think I see the shape of Nezu’s plotting. All Might was still alive to confront the ultimate bloodline thief, and Kei’s powers didn’t come from Quirk bullshit. They were chakra bullshit. It was quite possible that the differing origins and power output was supposed to render All For One’s power-stealing useless long enough for someone to turn him into road pizza. Again. This time for good.
Killing All For One wouldn’t be a matter of murder alone. Really, they’d be putting him down and out of everyone else’s misery.

“Again, sounding familiar.” Kei grimaced. Leaving aside the generally higher levels of violence in Kei’s world, the experimentation angle reeked of Madara, Orochimaru, and Danzō all at once. Not a fun combination.

Kei would’ve been willing to take this bodyguarding gig regardless of the particulars in All For One’s plot, but the familiar shape would make the beatdown satisfying by proxy. Sort of like whacking a training dummy with a cartoonish evil face drawn on it. Madara’s face.

“Not many of the Nōmu from the other day survived the battle,” All Might said, after the length of the silence got a bit awkward. “If only—” He sighed again, but his breathing hitched and he started coughing.

And kept coughing.

Holy shit, was that blood?

What little medical corner of Kei’s brain that still remained started freaking out instantly. Kei fumbled for the box of tissues on the table and managed to get it into his lap. When the fit subsided, both a wad of tissues and All Might’s pocket handkerchief were flecked with blood.

Kei used a blob of water to take the tissues away and hurl them into the nearest trash can. She was not touching blood outside of a medical context.

Rin would have solutions. Or at least ideas, because that was really bad.

Still, she couldn’t focus on that now. All Might didn’t invite commentary on things like ongoing health issues. Inquiring about his problems would be prying, wouldn’t it? If she was still using courtesy and mission priorities as her angles, she couldn’t push in that direction.

Time for a different tactic. “Yagi-sensei? How do you think Facepalm-kun comes into this?” Wait, no. “Or whatever his name is. There wasn’t a lot of time at USJ to talk about things.”

“Shigaraki Tomura,” All Might corrected her. Fair enough. “As far as anyone knows, the young man is a new villain—inexperienced, rash. There’s no one with a registered Quirk like his at his age, though. He must have slipped through the cracks and been taken in by All For One’s forces.”

Kei mentally slotted All For One that much closer to the villains of her past and potentially her future. Certainly her world, at the very least. For some reason, all of those conniving fucks liked recruiting troubled young men and indoctrinating them to their cause. At least Obito had gotten away. Shigaraki…well, after enough murders in a new master’s cause, saying he was the poor, misunderstood kid who only wanted to hug bunnies seemed like a real stretch.

Kei drummed her fingers on her knee. “The last time I heard a story like that, the old man was grooming the kid to be next in line to take over. Think that’s what’s happening here?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if it was.” All Might didn’t look at all happy about it. “After the battle that left me like this, All For One sustained similar injuries. He’s still undoubtedly dangerous, but a man like that doesn’t stay so completely hidden in the shadows for six years without a purpose. Even I—” All Might’s mouth snapped shut, his eyes wide.

Saying too much, huh? Time for a shot in the dark. “Midoriya-kun is your successor, isn’t he?”
All Might flinched. Bingo. “That’s—Young Midoriya is a student here on his own merits, Young Gekkō. I would never force a student to—”

Denying something badly was worse than staying silent.

Someday, Kei would probably learn that lesson.

“I don’t know Midoriya-kun that well,” Kei interrupted softly. She glanced out the window, hair falling almost over her eyes. All Might would have some difficulty making out her expression. “But I don’t think you’ve forced him into anything. I think you saw something in him that said he was going to be a hero, and you decided to encourage him. It’s just that, between that drive and his Quirk, he’s gonna chase that goal no matter what.”

All Might stayed silent.

“I came from a place a lot rougher than Tokyo,” Kei added, because this conversation was a lot more than just a prod for information. It mutated quickly. “I know better than to say anything.”

Kei wasn’t losing track of who knew her secrets, thankfully. It made keeping her lies in order a lot easier.

“Young Gekkō, I’d never threaten—”

Even while seated, Kei bowed. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t saying you would, but my point is that you don’t have to. It’s between you and Midoriya-kun, Yagi-sensei.”

All Might was careful not to take so deep a breath that he started coughing again. Then, “…You seem to be taking this well. Better than anyone should have to ask of a teenager. Once again, you’ve surprised me, Young Gekkō.”

“It’s not—I don’t really know how to say this,” Kei said, half to herself. All Might made an encouraging sound, perhaps intuiting that she needed to get something off her chest. He was wrong, but kind to lend an ear. “Yagi-sensei, there are some parts of the All For One situation that hit kind of close to home. It means a lot to be able to stop someone like him from hurting anybody else.”

**By which you and I mean that we are happy to kill him.**

*I’m trying to play it nice, Isobu.*

**Honesty is also a virtue.**

*When applied well.*

“I see,” All Might said, at length. He leaned back a bit, into a more natural sitting position, then said, “I won’t force you to speak about your situation, but if you ever need an ear again, Young Gekkō, I’m here to listen.”

“Thank you, Yagi-sensei. I’ll keep it in mind.” Kei got to her feet, bowed, and headed to the door. She stopped long enough to peel her privacy seal off the wall, adding, “Have a good lunch.”

With that, Kei headed back to class to scarf down her lunch. Five minutes would be enough if she rushed.
Hitoshi tries to wrap his head around Team Minato and gets one step closer to a headache.

After paper exams were over, Kei ended the slow process of boiling alive due to academic stress. Students in General Education didn’t get an earlier start on summer vacation than those in the Hero Department, but the tests were out of the way at last. All everyone had to do now was wait for the hero kids to do their thing and watch the bulletin board until the grades were posted. Kei didn’t even plan on checking. She was doomed.

“Well, it’s just us. Better get going,” Shinsō said, once 1-C was mostly cleared out. Pencils and random homework—because of course Shinsō finished his exams early—disappeared rapidly into his backpack.

The hero students had already gone through their last collective sparring session, so all they had left was to get walloped by their practicals.

“No Aizawa-sensei today?” Kei asked, slinging her bookbag over her shoulder.

“He’s doing something with the practical exam.” Shinsō rubbed at the bags under his eyes. His resemblance to a panda had only increased over the past week, which made Kei wonder if it was time to make panda onigiri to tease him. Perhaps not yet. “So, do you have plans?”

“Hm.” Kakashi and Obito were sitting around her apartment with patrol not due until nightfall. “Well, Obito dragged one of my other friends into town for a while. I should introduce you.”

“Are they anything like Obito?” Shinsō asked, hesitant.

Considering that the very periphery of their UA social circle included Kirishima and Ashido, somehow, Kei considered being upset on Obito’s behalf. On the other hand, well, Obito could be a lot to deal with while running on three hours of sleep and two cups of coffee.

“Not in the slightest. Kakashi’s pretty low-key.” Watching Shinsō sigh in relief and recognition, Kei turned away to hide her smile and dig her phone out of her bag. “Hang on, I’ll just let them know the plan.”

**TMNT-TNT:** Obito, are you and Kakashi busy?

**GreenThumb:** did u no daytime tv sucks

**TMNT-TNT:** That…answers that question.

**Defib:** Why?
GreenThumb: bc im bored

Defib: I am literally sitting less than a meter from you. Why are you answering me through text.

GreenThumb: idk y r u

TMNT-TNT: You two are hanging out with me and Shinsō-kun. Meet you at the beach in half an hour.

Defib: What?

Defib: No.

GreenThumb: sounds good meet u there

GreenThumb: wont let this jerk miss it d(^ー\)

“Okay! That’s our afternoon plans taken care of.” Kei led the way out of the room, with Shinsō trailing behind. She paused. “Wait, were you gonna suggest something else?”

“Not really. Honestly, just eating ice cream on the beach sounds pretty much like what I need right now,” Shinsō replied. As they headed down toward the shoe lockers, he asked, “Are you paying?”

“Sure.”

“Good. I’m broke.”

“Hi, Shinsō-kun!” Uchiha waved with both hands, bouncing in place. Beach clothes and the background of an afternoon sun and sea suited him. So did his huge grin, pulling at the scars on the left side of his face.

Hitoshi hadn’t asked about those and never planned on changing that policy.

Honestly, Hitoshi barely noticed the rest of the scene, because Uchiha rushed up without waiting for a reply. Right hand out for a high five from Gekkō—which he got—Uchiha soon whirled in a blur of limbs and said brightly, “So, I didn’t see anything about any actual plans, so I figure we’re gonna talk and walk and fry in the sun. Sound good?”

“I’ve been in a classroom since seven this morning,” Hitoshi said in a slow, dry drawl. “I’m up for anything.”

“Have fun trying to take that back,” said the fourth member of the little group, whom Hitoshi had briefly overlooked.

Turned out that Uchiha was accompanied at a safe distance by a white-haired guy, who blended into the background a bit. Like Uchiha, he was taller than Hitoshi by a few centimeters and his hair was mainly spikes without enough gel. Where Uchiha was a smiling goofball with an eyepatch, scarred face, and long sleeves, this guy seemed like he wouldn’t know a joke if it reached up and bit him in the nose. Not that it’d find his nose—that allergy mask (with little paw prints) made it so Hitoshi could only see the top third of his face. At best. Also, one of his eyes was dark and the other was red with...weird shit?

Ah, what the hell. Hitoshi had seen weirder, in both behavior and appearance.
Shinsō-kun, this is Hatake Kakashi. He’s the one who transcribed some of those training ideas for you after Gai broke his thumb,” said Gekkō, so Hitoshi gave him a little nod to acknowledge he existed. It wasn’t quite a “thank you,” but he hope Hatake got the idea. “Kakashi, this is Shinsō Hitoshi-kun. He’s the one I’ve been training.”

Another person Gekkō addressed by his personal name, and no honorifics? How long had these two known each other? What a name, though. If his Quirk turned out to be something to do with farming, Hitoshi would probably have to give up his claim to “most prophetic name ever” for the first time since middle school.

“We’re taking him for a walk, or else he’d just be reading all day,” Uchiha quipped, stepping back to jab at Hatake with his elbow. “Sitting around being all broody, like some kind of chicken.”

Hatake caught the attempted ribbing without looking and tossed Uchiha on his ass in the sand. The landing raised a little cloud of disturbed sand, and Hatake ignored all of it like that hadn’t just happened.

“That happens a lot with these two,” Gekkō admitted, while Uchiha squawked indignantly. As she went to go help him up, she said to Uchiha, “Obito, that hasn’t worked in ever. It isn’t gonna work now.”

“Blegh,” was his response. He spat out sand with a grimace, but allowed himself to be dragged to his feet. Then he started dusting off his pants, while Gekkō wandered back to their group with a sigh.

Huh. Neither of them wore school uniforms. Did they get out earlier, or were they on vacation? Hitoshi didn’t let himself wonder for too long, since, well, he was in UA. If there was a more high-profile or sought-after high school in the entire world, Hitoshi didn’t know what it could be. If Gekkō’s friends were enrolled in a vocational school or dropouts or something, then it’d be crass to bring it up.

“How long have you two been waiting?” Gekkō asked Hatake.

He looked up from a light novel he’d produced from literally nowhere, saying, “Maybe five minutes. Obito got excited.”

Uchiha rolled the one eye Hitoshi could see, making a face behind Hatake’s back. He strolled back to their little clique, saying, “Kei, I saw an ice cream shop over there. Did you see it?”

“Yes. That’s the next stop,” Gekkō said, and was already turning to go. “Hey, Kakashi, I was gonna ask you something…”

Hitoshi would’ve tried to catch up, but it seemed like Gekkō and Hatake actually did have something private to talk about. They bent their heads together, and their voices became a little indistinct, pitched just under the general crash of nearby waves so the individual words became so much seafoam. Hitoshi didn’t bother trying to read their lips. If he was already thinking in weird sea metaphors, maybe he needed to focus on ice cream instead.

And in the meantime, Uchiha was about to get in his face. “Speaking of conversations—and speaking in conversations—I wanted to ask you something, Shinsō-kun.”

“What?” Hitoshi asked. Aside from using this guy as a cackling training dummy, Hitoshi hadn’t really spoken to Uchiha much in the months they’d known each other. He couldn’t name any siblings the guy had—if any—or details about his background. And his uncharacteristic seriousness set Hitoshi on edge, even though he wasn’t sure Uchiha meant to do it.
“Did all the training stuff we worked on really help?” Uchiha asked, earnest enough that Hitoshi’s nerves settled. Staying mad at this guy was like trying to stay mad at a kitten that accidentally stuck someone with its claws. “Kei tries to keep me updated, but I wanna hear it from you. So, did it?”

Maybe he was getting antsy over nothing.

“It really did,” Hitoshi told him. There was an extra spring in Uchiha’s step even before Hitoshi added, “I’m grateful for all that help, even if I don’t say it much.”

“That’s not a big deal. I just wanted to know it was working from the guy we were working on,” Uchiha replied easily. “Kei said you’re basically an apprentice for a pro hero now, right?”

“Yeah. It’s been…really cool.” Hitoshi took note of the word “apprentice” and filed it away. He watched Uchiha grin as though the victory had been his own, then said, “You guys really aren’t from Tokyo, are you?”

Uchiha deflated. “Is it that obvious?”

“A bit,” Hitoshi replied, which was understating as much as he could while avoiding actual lies. Did they even notice that all three of them moved without making any noise? Without knowing what to look for, Hitoshi might’ve missed how Gekkō and her friends all moved with the same kind of grace as Aizawa-sensei when he was being serious. And while he knew they had to all be fighting champions—which only Uchiha didn’t seem to take seriously—Hitoshi had to wonder if they just grew kids tougher out in the country.

Probably not. Which meant there was a secret.

“My great-aunt said I’d never really be good at faking anything. Even knowing city life, I guess.” Uchiha grumbled a bit, then said in an exasperated tone, “And I thought we were getting better! Kei and I dragged Kakashi to Akihabara like the second time he’d even set foot in Tokyo, and we all made it out of that just fine. None of us even got caught past curfew.”

“Can any of you figure out train schedules? Or remember to ignore everyone in public? Or stop staring at skyscrapers?” Gawking tourists were a common sight in Tokyo. There was a kid in 1-D whose hobby was taking pictures of them like exotic animals, and finding weird crap like that on the school’s news feed on occasion reminded Hitoshi why he didn’t use most of the official social media.

“Kei can,” Uchiha said, but he conceded the point. “Then again, she’s been here since February. Constantly.” He sighed. “Home’s been boring without her.”

“Can’t imagine why.”

“Huh?” Uchiha’s visible eye darted between Hitoshi and Gekkō’s retreating back, baffled. “What’s that mean?”

“Don’t worry about it.” Besides, there was ice cream waiting for them.

**Gekkō’s hometown must be some kind of dojo retreat,** Hitoshi theorized as they caught up with Gekkō and Hatake. **Maybe a ninja training camp? Extreme sports hotspot?** Basically, she was way too…much for any normal town. Small town life didn’t do that in Hitoshi’s experience. People farmed. They had a long commute to work. There were cows.

Granted, Hitoshi had barely ever been out of Tokyo in his entire life, but he saw documentaries. Sometimes.
Gah. Gekkō was a headache even when she wasn’t angling unsubtly to show him how to split skulls. Still, Hitoshi didn’t say anything out loud.

…Mainly because something else had utterly distracted the group.

Gekkō gawked openly at the poster at the front of the nearest ice cream shop, which hadn’t been there last month. Hitoshi didn’t bike out here much, but was still surprised when he heard her nearly shriek, “Ice cream comes in rolls?!”

“It says ‘Thailand ice cream rolls?’ But look at these cute things!” Uchiha hovered just far enough from the front counter to avoid being mistaken for a customer, but that wouldn’t last. The clerk already faced their direction. “This is better than roll cake!”

Even Hatake looked intrigued.

“You’ve never heard of it?” Hitoshi asked. He got three blank stares in return. “I mean, it’s not super popular, but it’s been around for a bit. They use dry ice or liquid nitrogen or something.”

“Maybe city people get to be spoiled and have awesome ice cream science,” Uchiha complained, “but no. Man, Rin would think this was the coolest thing! They’re using science on food!”

“We have to get it,” Gekkō agreed instantly.

“It’s your money,” said Hitoshi, but both of them were focused on a harder target.

“No,” said Hatake.

He sounded like an old man. Even Hitoshi’s grandfather would at least join in when everyone else was having fun.

“Come on, you giant killjoy. It’s scientific!” Uchiha insisted.

“That argument would work on Rin, not me,” Hatake replied.

“Kakashi, they have coffee flavor and green tea. Those won’t be too sweet, right?” Gekkō said. She shifted from foot to foot, like if Uchiha’s excited body language was more contained. “I mean, I didn’t know this was a thing until just now, but I have to have one. And if you don’t like it, well…” She appeared to get an idea. “Hey, I’ll get green tea, and then we can share. You don’t have to try more than a bite.”

Hitoshi hadn’t known Hatake for ten minutes and could already tell that striking him actually speechless was an accomplishment. Then, after a hitch just too long to be casual, Hatake finally said, “Fine.”

“There you go!” Uchiha said, as though it wasn’t entirely Gekkō’s persuasive powers that got Hatake to agree. “I want strawberry and chocolate. I have to tell Rin everything about this.”

Maybe it was only super obvious to Hitoshi. For all he knew, these three had been doing this weird dance around each other for ages. He just wished they’d let him spectate from a distance, instead of being caught up in their bullshit.

“Blueberry,” Hitoshi said when Gekkō looked at him, since he really had no choice but to embrace the absurdity.

“Got it,” Gekkō replied, and stepped forward to speak to the clerk. Hatake followed, more as a spare
pair of hands than anything.

That left Uchiha and Hitoshi standing around lurking. Uchiha already had his phone out and was taking a picture of the front of the shop with himself as a neat little bonus, which was nearly the peak of touristy behavior. To win the grand prize, there either needed to be a follow-up photo involving the ice cream viewed through artistic camera work, or maybe Uchiha needed to find a crappy logo hat.

“You know, if you keep frowning like that, your face is gonna stick that way,” Uchiha said, once he’d finished embarrassing Hitoshi by proximity. “Just ask Kakashi.”

“Wouldn’t know about that,” Hitoshi replied. He twirled a finger in front of his own face, saying, “I’ve never seen his face.”

“Eh, fair. I didn’t until like…right before Kei came out here. Damn.” Uchiha shook his head in disbelief. “He’s got some kind of trick for eating without ever letting anybody see his face. Keep an eye out for it.”

“That is not even the third weirdest thing about him,” Hitoshi said flatly.

“Hah, yep.”

Speaking of weird things, though… “So, I’m guessing she doesn’t know?”

“Doesn’t—oh, nah. Kei’s never been able to tell when someone’s got a crush on her.” Uchiha was such a sap for aiming a fond look at both of his friends. “It’s actually pretty funny, unless you’re Kakashi. We even have a betting pool back home. If she figures it out before he says anything, I win.”

“That’s…huh.” These three were weird. Today was weird. Hitoshi weighed his options, then figured it might as well be a day where he contributed to the general goofy atmosphere instead of watching it creep up on him like a tide. “You know, I thought you were her boyfriend the first time we met. You were the first person she’d talked to without going into formal speech, besides me and her brother.”

Uchiha laughed. “Nope! We’ve just been best friends since forever.”

“And here’s ice cream!” was the call that broke the conversation, and the rest was down to a potential sugar rush. Gekkō handed over all the cups except her green tea one, saying wryly, “Purple, Shinsō-kun?”

Hitoshi took the ice cream from her and said, “I own every joke at my expense.”

Obito snickered. “Sure you do.”

Honestly, the ice cream was pretty good. Pricing only mattered when Hitoshi was the one paying, and that was not the case here. Uchiha devoured his portion like a bottomless black hole in the shape of a teenager, as expected. He at least got the touristy picture first, which nearly forced Hitoshi to roll his eyes. And when Hitoshi got distracted by that, a bite of ice cream disappeared from Gekkō’s bowl while she was goofing off on her phone. There was no evidence that Hatake had done exactly as asked, but Hitoshi side-eyed him anyway. Still, it was a calmer moment. Hitoshi needed those. Friggin’ exams.

“Question,” Hitoshi said, while the other three were variously juggling the empty ice cream bowls and used spoons (Uchiha), observing the oncoming disaster (Gekkō), or reading from that magical
disappearing novel (Hatake).

Gekkō made a “go ahead” gesture.

“Do you have any girl friends outside of school?”

Honestly, it had been sort of bugging Hitoshi for a while now. She didn’t hang out with Homura when they weren’t in class or dying of exam stress, and the same went for Yaoyorozu and Uraraka to different degrees. Hitoshi couldn’t judge, exactly, because he hadn’t had any friends before UA, but Gekkō’s action hero vibe and delinquent streak weren’t the same kind of anti-friend-making material as Hitoshi’s Quirk. It wasn’t like she was Bakugō either.

Hell, by UA standards, she was almost popular. With 1-A, at least.

Gekkō didn’t seem put off by the question. “Well, there’s—”

Uchiha, who prior to this question had been trying to see how many things he could keep in the air at once, said in a distracted voice, “I have a girlfriend. Does that count?”

“…Good for you.” What the hell.

Hatake caught one of the spoons out of the air and, without looking, nailed Uchiha in the ear with it.

“Hey! What was that for, you jerk?”

Gekkō watched her friends start to argue with spoons and books as their primary weapons, then leaned toward Hitoshi and said in a stage whisper, “They’ve been like this since we were kids. Only I don’t play peacemaker anymore. Never really did.”

Hitoshi stared as Uchiha tried to stab Hatake with a spoon, only to be stopped by the novel’s cover and sheer affected apathy. Turning to Gekkō, all he had to say was, “This explains more about you than it doesn’t.”

“Growing up was an adventure,” Gekkō admitted.

Eventually, though, it was time to pack up the mess and start heading home. Gekkō stacked all the paper cup things neatly together, then said to Hitoshi, “So, exam burnout any better?”

“Think so.” Hitoshi cracked a smile. “Thanks.”

At the very least, Hitoshi had a lot of different things to think about now. He didn’t quite have enough of a grasp on Gekkō’s background to go “Ah, yes, this explains literally everything,” but he was starting to see the shape of it better than he might’ve if he’d never met the second of Gekkō’s “old friends.” Hatake was almost Todoroki-like. Uchiha was like a cross between Kaminari, Midoriya, and Kirishima, without the attention span of any of the three.

Maybe that was why Gekkō seemed so unaffected by the random assholes who ran around UA. And casual violence. And solving problems by punching them or ignoring them. The people she grew up with were all worse.

Still, all of them were exhausting, and so Hitoshi was happy enough to head home and sleep the entire evening away.

“See ya, Shinsō-kun! Enjoy summer vacation, okay? No more stressing or staying up super late! Try not to get mugged by weird people and chased around the city!” Uchiha knew how to say goodbye.
Sort of strangely, but it worked. Hitoshi’s life was now officially wacky enough for it.

Hatake gave him a two-fingered salute, which was about what Hitoshi expected.

After the pair of them whooshed away into Uchiha’s weird (illegal) portal Quirk, Gekkō shook her head and just said, “See you tomorrow, Shinsō-kun. Good night.”

One day left until summer vacation. Hopefully, nothing too dangerous would happen before then. “Same to you, Gekkō-kun.”

The day after ice cream happened, Kei had Obito deliver her “oh fuck we need a Mangekyō Sharingan wielder here immediately” tags to Aizawa-sensei, All Might, and Nezu. Getting into UA wasn’t difficult even for Kei—campus was technically still open if students needed the facilities—but Obito was faster and wouldn’t get asked questions if no one saw him. He wasn’t a student, but eh. Portals made some considerations obsolete.

Not even two days into summer vacation, Nezu used one of those tags to make a special request. Through Obito, said request became a discussion topic around Kei’s sole apartment table.

She needed more furniture, but wasn’t interested enough to want to assemble any of it. Bare floor and a repurposed kotatsu would have to do.

“I know he’s really only our employer, and that’s not the same as our boss, but it almost seems kind of fun?” Obito said, while sitting on Kei’s folded futon. “You could just tell Shinsō you’ve got a summer job or something, and we’ll go haunt the hero kids while they train.”

“Did Sensei already approve it?” Kei asked, leaving the “summer job” comment alone. Shinobi work was a lifestyle, really. And right now, her shinobi lifestyle was pointing toward a new armor upgrade. Hers was the last to be modified, because Kei hadn’t returned to Konoha at all for the better part of five months, but the three of them needed to match if they were going to present a united front. Therefore, she needed to get the uniform fitted. It was psychological or something. “And get off my futon. It’s not a couch.”

“Double pay for extra work,” Obito confirmed, sort of flopping off her futon and hitting the floor with a muffled thud. Goofball. He wasn’t missing that many bones. “We’d have to introduce ourselves to the hero team, but since the UA teachers all know your deal—or enough to count—it should be fine.”

Kei nodded, mostly to herself, and then nudged the third member of their team with her foot. That’s what he got for sitting slightly out of arm’s reach. Inconvenient jerk. “What do you think, Kakashi?”

“If that’s where the mission takes us, so be it.” Kakashi looked up from his book, mostly so Kei would stop poking him, and added, “‘Villains targeting UA students’ seems to be a theme so far. We may as well try to get ahead of them.”

And since they didn’t know where the bad guys kept their secret supervillain hideout, lying in ambush was probably a reasonable move. Kei’s water ninjutsu would have to take a back seat to a “Quirk” less likely to get her ANBU persona outed as a sixteen-year-old drama queen, and Obito’s portal powers would…eh. He’d already used Wood Release. Kakashi had never revealed a superpower while not in uniform, so he could do whatever he wanted.

In the middle of nodding agreement, Kei’s phone buzzed in her hoodie pocket. Given that the usual suspects were in the room with her and less likely to text when everyone was in attendance, Kei fished her phone out and checked her messages.
It was Uraraka.

**SpaceSlam:** Hey are you there?

**SpaceSlam:** You weren’t at the mall today so I thought I’d say what happened.

**SpaceSlam:** It’s going to be on the news soon.

**SpaceSlam:** Everyone else probably knows or will know.

**SpaceSlam:** But I didn’t know if anyone was going to tell you.

**TMNT-TNT:** What’s wrong?

**SpaceSlam:** Don’t freak out okay?

**SpaceSlam:** I’m doing that enough for both of us.

**SpaceSlam:** Everyone’s fine right now. The police showed up and so did pro heroes.

**TMNT-TNT:** I promise I won’t freak out.

**TMNT-TNT:** What happened?

**SpaceSlam:** The hand villain showed up. Shigaraki Tomura.

“Shit,” Kei said aloud, drawing her boys’ attention. As they crowded around her, Kei set her phone down on the table. The little text bubbles on the screen almost seemed to glow with ominous power.

“In public?” Obito hissed, clearly remembering the encounter back at the USJ.

Her boys’ respective Sharingan matched the screen in eerie brightness. The red gleam in their eyes was actually heartening, at least in Kei’s mind, but enemies had better watch out.

**TMNT-TNT:** Did you see what happened?

**SpaceSlam:** No.

**SpaceSlam:** Shigaraki had Deku by the throat when I got there.

**SpaceSlam:** He let Deku go but he didn’t get caught.

**SpaceSlam:** He’s still out there.

**TMNT-TNT:** …I see.

**SpaceSlam:** Deku’s talking to the police and I’m still freaking out.

**SpaceSlam:** Sorry.

**TMNT-TNT:** Uraraka-chan, freaking out makes total sense. Running into a villain without being able to stop him is one of the scariest things I can think of. But you’re okay. Midoriya-kun is okay.

**TMNT-TNT:** You sound a bit like you just needed a second to yell at someone.
TMNT-TNT: It’s fine. I can take it.

SpaceSlam: …Is it weird that I actually kind of do feel better?

TMNT-TNT: Not at all.

TMNT-TNT: Text me if you need to yell more.

SpaceSlam: Okay.

SpaceSlam: I can do that.

SpaceSlam: ˚´(´„Δ¨)˚

“Well,” Kei said, turning to her teammates. Eyebrows pinched, she rapped a knuckle on her chin as she murmured, “I’d say we have a bit of catching up to do, don’t we?”

“Yes.” Obito cracked his knuckles, with his left hand making all the noise. Look Ma, no bones! “Sounds like they’re gonna keep us busy!”

Kakashi snapped his book shut. His chakra formed little white sparks as it ran across his skin, almost like shaking the dust off a long-unused weapon. It made his hair stand that much more on end. “Then let’s get started.”

Chapter End Notes

The beginning of the end.

(For those of you wondering, Kakashi and Kei were mostly talking about the implications of someone running around with the ability to bestow superpowers and the maliciousness to do so the way that All For One does. And the idea that All Might have a successor, in a similar manner as a Hokage might.)

EDIT 4/9/19: This chapter has been modified for pacing purposes, including one more ninja scene.
Chapter Summary

Everyone's got their own motivations.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Summer training camp was nothing like Izuku imagined back before finals. Then again, it was hard to come up with the mental image of being hurled off a cliff along with his entire class, having to fight for almost eight hours through monster-infested forest, and getting punched in the crotch by a five-year-old. Or getting threatened—twice!—by Pixie-Bob for accidentally drawing attention to her age, which was definitely going in a journal when he got home.

Overall, it was probably in his top ten list of most ups and downs in a single day. Izuku didn’t know if that was a bigger burn against him or his life choices.

Probably both.

Still, even after a tough day and the looming threat of definitely not getting any time to relax for the rest of the week, staying in the onsen was about as close to heaven as Izuku figured they’d get. For now, he was totally content sitting around with his classmates, who were all nearly as tired as he was, and trying not to move very much. One For All put the “pain” back into “no pain, no gain,” on days like this.

And Mineta was facing the big wooden partition and mumbling.

“The food and stuff is fine…” Izuku missed what had to be a few words. “…somethin’ else… Heaven’s waiting…” Behind him, Kaminari splashed Ojiro and briefly drowned out Mineta’s voice.

This sounded kind of serious. Izuku raised his voice to say, “Are you over there mumbling to yourself, Mineta-kun?” Silly question. He clearly was.

Did he have—yeah, Mineta’s face was pressed up against the wall. Why?

Izuku didn’t know if he was friends with Mineta, exactly. He and Kaminari roped people into weird schemes sometimes, and Mineta muttered to himself almost as much as Izuku did. And while Izuku bailed Mineta out of serious situations without a second thought—the team effort at the USJ and this morning’s dirt monster rodeo sprung to mind—sometimes he wondered if he should’ve also dragged Mineta away from non-violent situations. He seemed to have a real knack for saying just the right kind of thing to get Asui to slap him upside the head with her tongue.

“Babes—my angels—” Like now.

Izuku caught on about half a second before Mineta started making his move. “Mineta-kun, don’t—”

Too late. Mineta pulled two purple balls off his scalp and was already climbing before Izuku could retie his towel. Pop, pop. “I know now why I was born with this Quirk! It’s right here, right now!”
Iida started shouting, too, as he stomped across the onsen with water flying everywhere. “You’re to stop this at once, Mineta-kun! Your behavior is a complete disgrace to you and our female peers!” He climbed out of the water, furious. “You should be ashamed of your blatant misconduct and get down here immediately!”

Mineta, to exactly nobody’s surprise, blew him off with strangled-sounding, “Shut up, you prude! Mind your own business!”

Iida’s engines started spitting smoke at the exact moment Izuku clambered out of the onsen, silently cursing his aching muscles. Someone was going to fall off that wall, and Izuku had to make sure nobody was going to get hurt on his watch. While Iida yelled about reporting Mineta to Aizawa-sensei—as soon as he could get his hands on him—Izuku happened not to be looking up at the exact moment Mineta let out a shriek.

Then everyone was.

Mandalay’s nephew Kōta stood at the top of the barrier, small face fixed in a death glare. Shadows—of the night sky, or made of mist, or something—loomed behind him and made the kid look twice as angry.

What—?

As Mineta froze, still in mid-motion and gaping up at the sight, Kōta slapped the reaching hand aside and growled, “Before you try to become a hero, try being a decent person first!”

The shadow, bone-white face and all, mimicked Kōta’s movements perfectly.

Mineta didn’t get to stay up there for very long. Maybe three seconds, because Kōta didn’t hesitate to give Mineta a second slap that sent him toppling. He screamed vengeance on the way down, slamming into Iida’s face and knocking them both into the water. That took a few seconds to sort out, with both of them shouting at each other until Izuku and Kirishima were able to pry them apart.

It gave Iida enough space to grab Mineta like a disobedient dog without getting glued to anything.

“Mineta-chan’s just the worst,” said Asui’s voice, from the other side of the wall.

Ashido agreed. “Thanks, Kōta-chan! We owe ya one!”

“Thank you, Kōta-kun!” Iida shouted up at the kid. “This won’t happen again!”

Kōta snorted, but he did duck out of view. There was a tiny clapping sound from the top of the divider, and the rest of everything was drowned out by Iida dragged Mineta out of the baths entirely, with Mineta complaining the entire way.

Had that shadow been real?

Izuku carried that thought with him even after everyone cleared out of the baths. Even after Iida came back and told everyone to go to bed by nine, the image wouldn’t leave his head. What was that weird thing?

And, solely because he ran into Mandalay before curfew, Izuku found himself asking hesitantly, “Um, Mandalay… Does…Kōta-kun have an illusion Quirk…?”

“…No?” Mandalay sat in an armchair in the manager’s office, while her nephew napped on the nearby couch. It looked a little like Izuku had interrupted her while she was trying to wind down
from a long day of waiting for Hero Course students to get anywhere, and the apology was on the tip of his tongue long before she said, “No, his Quirk is Water Creation. Are you sure your eyes weren’t playing tricks on you in all that steam?”

But…that didn’t… Wait. Connections raced across synapses like lightning from One for All, as years-old hero otaku backlog caught up with Izuku’s mouth. “I…I don’t think so. But, um, can I ask you a different question…?”

On the couch, Kōta rolled over. Mandalay and Izuku watched him curl up tighter under a long, black blanket, which looked like someone’s overcoat. It was almost Aizawa-sensei’s style, except for the reality that a long, cumbersome coat would never make it into the wardrobe of a man who was so unrelentingly practical. Whatever his opinion on dusters, it definitely didn’t suit any of the Pussycats.

When the kid didn’t wake up, both of them let out near-silent sighs of relief. Kōta seemed so much smaller when he wasn’t walking with his resentment flowing around him like a cloud.

Izuku wondered if he already had an idea what the reason was.

“Just ask,” Mandalay said in a tone barely above a whisper.

Izuku nodded, then murmured, “I just… I noticed Kōta doesn’t like heroes. He doesn’t seem to like Quirks, either, or the superpower-based society around them. It’s just the opposite of everyone I know, including me.”

Mandalay’s expression darkened.

“S-Sorry if it’s an insensitive thing to say. I don’t meant to pry.”

It’s not your fault, Midoriya-kun, said Mandalay’s voice in his head.

While Izuku took a second to internally squeal over Mandalay using her Telepath Quirk on him, holy shit, she turned her head toward Kōta again. Izuku managed to get his inner fanboy to shut up before she turned back.

It’s because of what happened to Kōta’s parents. They were the Water Hose hero team.

“The—oh. I-I’m so sorry.” Izuku’s stomach twisted into knots. He remembered the Water Hose heroes. The Izumi couple were rescuers through and through, specialized differently than the Wild, Wild Pussycats. They weren’t the kind of people to take risks…except when a villain forced them to make their choice—defending civilians or surviving.

It might’ve not been a choice at all.

But Izuku remembered, repeating like a clip show from hell, how the media talked about the heroic choice they’d made. He remembered thinking, even in middle school, how proud everyone was that the Water Hose duo had done everything to save people, even until the end. How brave they were.

He didn’t learn until later what it truly cost to put that kind of heroism into practice. Not until the day he’d met All Might.

To the world, they’d made such a brave choice. But to the three-year-old son they left behind… Mandalay shook her head. But to Kōta, it was as though the whole world was celebrating his parents’ deaths. How do you even begin to explain to a child, whose whole world was ending, that they died honorable deaths?
Izuku’s vision started to blur. He closed his eyes against the oncoming burn, which helped exactly as much as it ever did.

*He doesn’t really even seem to like us that much, because we’re heroes like they were. Heroes just don’t make sense to Kōta,* Mandalay went on, even her mental voice starting to waver. *After all, if his parents hadn’t been heroes, they’d still be here.*

Shigaraki’s voice, as clear as if he’d borrowed Mandalay’s Quirk, said in Izuku’s head, “He’s why these morons can keep smiling—because that garbage pro is smiling, too!”

“I…” Izuku rubbed at his eyes. His tears didn’t quite fall, but that was more due to the sudden *spike* of anger deep in Izuku’s soul. People like Shigaraki hated heroes—hated *happiness*—so much that they’d throw lives away just to hurt the ideal. Just to hurt the image. They didn’t *care* how many living, breathing people they crashed through along the way.

Izuku didn’t hate them.

He just…wanted to make sure no one else had to live through a story like Kōta’s. Not while he could save them. “I’m sorry for bothering you, Mandalay.” It was the only thing he could think to say. Nothing else could even begin to encompass how much words wouldn’t help any of this.

“You didn’t,” she replied. She shook her head, then added, “Midoriya-kun, I should apologize for venting like that. It was unprofessional.” She sighed, staring down at her lap for a few seconds. “Just…do what you can to become a great hero. Train hard. Stories like this one will happen, but our goal as heroes is always to make things better. Always aim for the happy ending, Midoriya-kun. Do you understand?”

Izuku nodded.

“Good.” Mandalay’s smile was sad, but honest. “Work hard tomorrow.”

He went to bed with a heavy heart, but no less determination.

It wasn’t until Izuku woke up in the middle of the night—because everyone was snoring their skulls off—that he realized why the freaky ghost shape in the steam was so familiar. Why Mineta had screamed bloody murder, and why Mandalay ignoring the idea stuck in his brain the wrong way. Why *everyone* writing the whole thing off as a hallucination was just *wrong.*

He’d seen the same bird mask at the USJ.

The next day, Aizawa-sensei had everyone up by five-thirty in the morning to begin Quirk training. Izuku remembered worse schedules, from back during the ten months of frantic prep work for the UA entrance exam, but that…wasn’t an endorsement at all. It was actually kind of terrifying.

All four Wild, Wild Pussycats burst onto the training scene not long after Kacchan’s second go at the ball-throwing test. Izuku didn’t have a chance to gush—though Tiger’s Pliabody and Ragdoll’s Search Quirks were so *cool*—before being immediately put to work. He was the only member of 1-A with a pure strength enhancement Quirk, and thus was instantly enrolled in Tiger’s idea of boot camp.

“GO BEYOND!”

And Tiger’s method involved a lot more of Izuku getting kicked across a clearing to assess his progress than All Might’s did.
“IF YOU DON’T PUSH YOURSELF, YOU WON’T SHRED YOUR MUSCLE FIBERS, AND THEN YOU WON’T GET STRONGER!” Tiger roared.

Izuku struggled to his hands and knees, every limb trembling. “S-Sorry…”

“I CAN’T HEAR YOU!”

“Yes, sir!”

“You want to be Plus Ultra, don’t you?” Tiger’s voice fell to a growl, every bit as scary as Aizawa-sensei when he smiled. “Then show me what that means!”

“YES, SIR!” Izuku shouted, levering himself up on one knee. He wouldn’t be defeated here!

Class 1-B arrived at some point, which was great because that meant Shōda, Kendo, and Shishida got to join Izuku’s muscle hell training. When Tiger was busy yelling at them and shouting encouragement in turns, it gave Izuku a chance to flop back in the grass and breathe for a few seconds. Drenched in sweat and body aching worse than yesterday, despite how it wasn’t even noon yet, Izuku didn’t get a lot of chances to think for the majority of the morning. His blood was busy trying to keep the rest of him alive in the face of Tiger’s training, so his usual levels of self-reflection proved impossible.

Surface-level stuff trickled back in almost as soon as his back hit the ground.

First, Quirks. Always Quirks, and who talked about them, and especially what people said about One For All.

_The Quirk All Might passed on to me was more than I deserved. And then Gran Torino taught me how to use it in a way that wouldn’t destroy my body._ His head filled with All Might’s voice, talking about training and somehow, someday, accommodating all the power that overflowed inside him. _It’s up to me to move forward and make this power my own!

He didn’t quite get up on the first try. Tiger was still ordering Shōda into the correct exercise position, barely avoiding poking him with those clawed gloves.

Izuku had a bit more time to think, and his thoughts instantly jumped tracks.

He’d talked to Mineta—briefly—this morning, about the shadowy figure behind Kōta, but all he got was a rant about being cut off from spying on the girls. Mineta’s priorities were firmly in the exact wrong direction to be useful. Izuku left the conversation feeling like Mineta hadn’t even _seen_ the shadow, even though he knew otherwise.

What really worried him was that Iida didn’t seem to remember either. Oh, he’d complained to Aizawa-sensei that night and gotten Mineta placed in remedial ethics classes, but he didn’t say anything about a masked creep hanging out on top of the divider. Bad angle or not, there weren’t a lot of people who could hide behind a five-year-old boy. Not enough to go unnoticed.

_How was that possible?_

Izuku’s first answer was, as always, a Quirk, but… He didn’t have enough pieces to this puzzle.

Something was going on here. Something Ragdoll might know more about. Nobody could hide from her Search Quirk, right?

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING STILL ON THE GROUND, MIDORIYA? NO MORE LAZING
IZUKU THREW HIMSELF TO HIS FEET WITH A YELL, BECAUSE TIGER WAS RIGHT. HE HAD TO GET STRONGER—

“TEAR THAT WEAK QUIRK APART AND MAKE IT STRONGER!”

—but Izuku didn’t know if Tiger knew that the masked people were now part of his reasons for it. If something happened, Izuku had to be ready.

By the time five in the afternoon rolled around, he and the rest of his classmates were so strung out they looked like the extras in an American zombie film. Their souls had left their bodies. Everyone’s final wish was to be buried in the remnants of their destroyed hero dreams, because ow.

And then Iida snapped back to normal at the suggestion of cooking, like he hadn’t been running laps around the entire training ground for seven hours today. Because nobody was getting dinner without forty teenagers breaking out the camp cooking equipment, everyone pitched in. Sure, Kacchan blew up a grill, but dinner prep went smoothly otherwise.

Instant curry helped more than Kacchan did.

Izuku was the last one to the dinner table when everything was being served, probably by about five minutes. This still meant that the students serving had gotten all the curry to everyone already. Even after such a long day, food soothed the worst of it. Aside from the remedial students—including Mineta, who was stuck with Aizawa-sensei in a four-hour ethics course—everyone was looking forward to the rest of the night. And sleep, mainly. Five camp tables were filled with chatty, carefree students.

Izuku was, therefore, the only one to spot Kōta leaving.

Izuku took a detour to the crowd, carrying a plate, before following.

An angry kid—lacking a Quirk like Hagakure’s—wasn’t that hard to track down, even when he started climbing the hill behind the camping ground. All Izuku had to do to stay out of sight was avoid making the kind of noise that’d make Kōta turn around and scream at him. With a headwind, he couldn’t smell the food Izuku brought along, either.

The trip should’ve been pretty straightforward.

Izuku’s hair tried to stand up on his neck as soon as he left the lantern-lit clearing behind. Sure, it was dark. And sure, the total absence of city life going on around him made it entirely different from the city, even if the cicadas were still shrieking. But despite how hidden this training camp was, Izuku’s brain wouldn’t let it go.

Someone was absolutely watching him.

It was the same feeling—the suspended, not-quite-there terror creeping in at the edges—that he’d gotten so familiar with during the USJ, starting from the instant that purple-black mist appeared and Aizawa-sensei and Thirteen-sensei didn’t know what was going on. Again, during the Musutafu Nōmu attacks, before he’d even gotten grabbed. And again, right when he’d seen that mask above the baths.

Green lightning sparked along Izuku’s left hand, sputtering more than usual due to his exhaustion. Still, One For All was at his fingertips in case he needed it.

Kōta was just around the corner.
That was when he saw the paper. About every five meters or so, rectangular stickers dotted the earth-and-stone wall and the path he was still following toward Kōta. Some of them were plain, dull brown, while others had writing on them that Izuku couldn’t read by starlight. But despite the remote location, they didn’t look like hiker trash or graffiti.

Maybe these are Kōta’s…? Sero hadn’t been up here, and he didn’t just randomly stick paper to everything. Tape, maybe, but not paper.

“—useless! Everyone down there is just killing each other, and grabbing attention, and for what?” Kōta’s voice drifted back across the cliff. “Just so they can call themselves villains, or heroes, and…”

Izuku rounded the corner, spotting his quarry sitting with his back to the rock. Alone, aside from a half-empty plate of curry next to his feet.

But—didn’t he leave without getting dinner? Izuku knew Kōta hadn’t been carrying anything when he left the big downhill dinner party. While, sure, making Izuku feel silly for his concern might’ve been something Kōta would do, it didn’t actually make it any more possible for the kid to have brought a plate of curry all the way here without Izuku noticing.

“Kōta-kun? Who were you talking to just now?” Izuku began, noticeably making the kid flinch.

“None of your business!” Kōta snapped, standing up with his fists clenched. “How’d you find this place?!”

“O-Oh, I just followed your trail up here.” Izuku’s ears started to heat up. “I thought you might be hungry, so I brought you some dinner before it gets cold. I guess I was wrong.”

“Yeah? Well, I’m just fine, so get lost!” Kōta lowered his head with a mulish expression. “I don’t wanna hang out with you, so forget about my secret hideout!”

“This is a secret hideout?” Izuku asked, looking around. Well, it was pretty isolated. Ragdoll’s Quirk probably reached his far, but nobody else would be able to see a kid on a cliffside.

Rock rolled behind him. The dread from earlier reappeared with a vengeance so strong his back snapped straight, and Izuku barely avoided jumping. He did turn, though, and One For All almost flared to life in his hands.

Nobody was there.

His heartbeat pounded in his ears, but there wasn’t any more sound to drown out. Nothing happened.

“Didn’t you know?” Kōta sneered as Izuku turned back, clearly enjoying the spectacle. “This mountain’s haunted, so just stay away!”

“I-I…” Izuku shook his head.

Just like last night, he didn’t know what to say. It was worse, even—Mandalay was an adult. Kōta was just a kid. A kid who didn’t have any reason to think Izuku was anything other than some weird high-schooler who didn’t know anything about what he was going through.

Inspiration struck. “There’s someone at school who sounds a bit like you,” Izuku said, as he set the curry offering down, a respectful distance from Kōta’s angry aura. “She’s not in my class, and not really a fan of heroes either…”
“So what?” Kōta growled.

“I asked her once why she felt that way,” Izuku said, half under his breath as he recalled Gekkō’s stone-still expression. “She said…she thought the fame was kind of insulting. Wrong, even. It didn’t put enough responsibility on making sure villains never happened in the first place. A hero’s job shouldn’t be famous just to be famous. She wanted heroes to use their power to make sure things change.”

Not in so many words, though. Gekkō didn’t talk all that much. She tried to make her points faster than Izuku’s thoughts whirled, though at the time she’d had an advantage because of an unsuccessful backflip. And then felt bad because Izuku had a headache for the rest of the training session.

“I don’t know if that’s the kind of hero anybody is gonna be,” Izuku went on, mostly because Kōta hadn’t screamed at him yet. “But I can tell it was the kind of mindset that happens because she lost somebody, too. Maybe to villains, maybe not. I don’t know. And I guess… I guess I just wanted to say it’s okay. To not be okay with the world.”

Kōta stared at him, jaw working like he was grinding his teeth.

“I-I’m sorry for bothering you.” Izuku bowed, then turned to go. “I’ll leave.”

“Whatever,” Kōta said. Better than getting his head bitten off at the end of the conversation. “Don’t get lost and die. You’ll be a crappy ghost.”

It was as close to acceptance as Izuku was going to get.

But before he was entirely out of sight, Izuku looked back. Not because he didn’t trust Kōta to stay safe, but maybe because that last comment got to him a bit.

Kōta was glaring after him, and there was a tall, white-faced shadow with its hand on his shoulder.

Izuku whirled on the spot, eyes wide. “Ghosts aren’t real, ghosts aren’t real, gh-ghosts aren’t real—”

“…You okay, Kōta-kun?”

“I-I’m fine. I don’t wanna t-talk about it, okay? Even to you guys.”

“Okay.” A pause. “Take as long as you need.”

Chapter End Notes

Sadly, because the characters decided to be practical about the Camp Arc, the heroes-to-be don’t get to know that there are three ninjas running around the mountains with them.

Kōta does, though!

EDIT [4/9/19]: This chapter has undergone a major revision for pacing purposes! In order to avoid causing trouble with continuity, a new scene has been inserted! Thanks for your patience!
Ghost Stories

Chapter Summary

Izuku continues to juggle anxiety chainsaws.

Chapter Notes

Hi, everyone! If you've gotten to this chapter, please take a second to look back on the two that came before it. They've undergone heavy revisions and had at least one new scene added, so reading those first will probably make this chapter make a lot more sense!

Content warning for this chapter: Mostly Bakugō being a dick, per usual.

The next day was a lot like the one before. Tiger kept drilling everyone like he had a degree in it, which at one point ironically made Kaibara throw up. Izuku spent the day in yet more strength exercises, noting only distantly any problems the other students had during the course of their own particular torture sessions. It wasn’t that he didn’t care—it was a lot more that Tiger had a way of making everyone feel like they were going to die, all the time.

Aizawa-sensei had warned them.

“I think I know what Shinsō-kun feels like,” Izuku mumbled, staggering his way back toward his training spot. At least the line for the bathroom hadn’t been long. “Except Tiger is way tougher.”

“You can only push someone so hard outside of Quirk training,” was Todoroki’s somewhat distracted reply. He was still sitting in a tub of hot water, right hand out and prepped to ice the immediate area. “I think Iida-kun’s run ten kilometers today already.”

Izuku made a little noise of agreement, gulped, and picked up his pace before Tiger “had to come find him.” He’d already spoken (briefly) to Aizawa-sensei about any other pros ending up out here, gotten a negative, and known deep in his thrice-broken bones that All Might wasn’t gonna save him from that.

Dinner that night went smoother. Kacchan got himself taken off of fire-starting duty permanently, but he was quick with a knife and cutting board. Izuku ended up on fire prep duty, because, well, why not? Everyone was working on other jobs. Even Iida had picked up a potato peeler, though it was pretty clear he didn’t know how to use one.

“Hey, Midoriya-kun,” said Jirō, making Izuku nearly drop the latest piece of firewood.

“Um, yeah?” Izuku craned his neck to see her, and spotted Kōda right over her shoulder. Jirō was calm, and Kōda…well, he was never really calm, but he seemed even more nervous than normal.
“You went into the woods last night, right?” At Izuku’s nod, Jirō went on, “Did you see anything… weird?”

Izuku let out a nervous hiccup that almost sounded like a laugh and, pretending that Todoroki wasn’t staring at him, said, “Ah… Uh, define ‘weird’ for me?”

Kōda whispered something, mainly to the top of Jirō’s head, and she said without missing a beat, “Kōda-kun says the animals have been really worried over the last few days. They weren’t specific, but did you see anyone?”

Izuku did not want to talk about ghosts. At all. Frantically, he flipped through his mental scrapbook of last night’s events, then said, “I saw a… lot of paper? The only one out there besides me was Kōta-kun, but I don’t think he did it.”

“Paper?” Todoroki repeated, forgetting to pretend he wasn’t eavesdropping.

“Yeah, like…” Izuku mimed placing a sticker flat on the brick sides of the grill. “Like just stuck there.”

“I see.” Jirō turned back to Kōda and said, “Well, we have litterbugs.”

Kōda could not have looked less convinced if Jirō had told him the sky was green.

“Um,” Izuku broke in, before he could think better of it. When the other three were looking at him again, he mumbled, “The paper didn’t… exactly look like that. They were more like ofuda, now that I think about it more.”

“Why would someone raid a shrine just to plaster talismans out here?” Jirō wanted to know.

Well, that was fair.

“Oooh, maybe there’s some secret mountain shrine out here!” Ashido suggested, almost literally headbutting her way into the conversation. “Or a ghost!”

Kaminari, likewise, popped up out of absolutely nowhere. “Are we gonna tell ghost stories? It’ll be perfect for the test of courage later!” He grinned. “Come on, Midoriya, don’t leave us hanging like that!”

“It’s, uh,”—Kōta’s safe spot—“not really my business, Kaminari-kun. And we’re supposed to be making dinner right now.”

“Ghosts aren’t real, you idiots!” Kacchan snapped, not even looking up from his cutting board. “Just shut up already!”

Izuku flinched at the sound of his voice, but luckily, no one noticed.

“Why don’t you come with us, then?” Jirō challenged. “Or are you actually scared?”

Izuku rapidly finished placing firewood, then got out of the blast radius.

“WHAT WAS THAT, EARLOBES?!”

Uraraka jumped, and a potato floated away.

“This is getting out of hand. Let’s not be here,” Todoroki said, as he and Izuku both retreated from a potential explosion-slash-food-fight.
“Right!”

It wasn’t until they were safely out of range of the teachers’ wrath that Todoroki went on, “Is there a reason you didn’t want them following that trail?”

“Not really, I just…” Izuku sighed. “Kōta needs a little space. The only place I know to find all the paper slips leads right to him.”

Todoroki’s expression softened, just a little. “I get it.”

“Great, but—”

Before Izuku could even complete his thought, Jirō, Kaminari, and Ashido disappeared into the forest. To be fair, it was a pretty short run, and Iida was busy yelling at Kuroiro and two other kids from 1-B to notice their escape. They’d be back soon enough.

Izuku honestly had no idea how they expected to get away from food prep long enough to actually investigate, and it turned out he didn’t need to worry.

Because they came back. Immediately.

“Um,” said Izuku, as the three of them looked blankly at each other. “What just…?”

Todoroki cocked his head to one side. “Wait for it?”

As they watched, all three of them about-faced and headed back into the woods at a trot. It looked like they were following the same path Izuku had the night before. It wasn’t like it moved.

…Or did it? Because, right on cue, the three of them emerged from the woods exactly as they had before, only more out of breath like they’d run a marathon.

By now, Todoroki and Izuku’s blatant staring was a communal activity. Uraraka and Asui to start, then Sero and Tokoyami and Ojiro. Shōda had his hand out to poke Monoma and get his attention, and it seemed like word was spreading fast.

Iida still hadn’t noticed yet.

Ashido looked like she was ready to tear her hair out. “What the heck! We followed the path and we didn’t turn even once, so why are we back out here?!”

“What’re you even talking about, Raccoon Eyes?” Kacchan snapped. “Get back to work!”

“That until we figure out this mystery!” Kaminari shouted back.

Jirō groaned and didn’t join in the third time the forest expedition left, trudging back over to where she’d left her basket of carrots. Apparently, the appeal of taunting Kacchan had worn off. “This is pointless.”

“Is there someone around with, uh, a disorientation Quirk?” Uraraka asked Kendo. “Or maybe illusions?”

“Nope,” said Asui. “Did you see anything strange, Jirō-chan?”

Jirō shook her head. “It’s just really weird. I swear we were walking in a straight line the whole time,
At this point, two screams rang out from just beyond the treeline.

Iida snapped awake, or something, because Izuku honestly didn’t know how he’d missed the stuff happening just over his shoulder. His head-count procedure was faster than any kindergarten teacher’s, and he came up two short.

That was when Ashido and Kaminari came barreling out of the woods like they’d seen their own deaths, and Iida met them before they could hide in the crowd. “Where have you two been?!”

“Th-th-there was a face!” Kaminari stammered, shaking like Todoroki had just iced him over.

“That’s not even original,” Jirō scoffed. Everyone avoided telling her that only taking the first two trips with Ashido and Kaminari didn’t actually make her innocent of skiving off work. Or a skeptic.

“It was like a noh mask!” Ashido wailed, not even paying attention and apparently doing her best to suffocate Jirō in a panicked hug.

Iida didn’t listen to their excuses. “Back to work, you two!”

And thankfully, no one besides Todoroki and Uraraka could see the color drain from Izuku’s face.

After dinner and cleanup duties, everyone was supposed to gather in a clearing for the test of courage. Basically, the two hero course classes were going to take turns scaring each other silly. Class B had the first turn, since they’d won the coin toss between Iida and Kendo. They left early to get set up, which didn’t bode super well for 1-A’s chances of leaving with their nerves intact.

This was going to be…fun. Sort of.

When 1-A was finally given permission to head into the forest, Iida had to lead the way because he was responsible. Uraraka and Todoroki, though, hung back as Izuku dragged his heels a little.

“Hey, Deku,” Uraraka said, while the rest of the crowd trudged on.

Izuku blinked, shaking off his thoughts. “Yeah?”

“You looked kinda pale earlier. Are you sure you’re okay?” Uraraka had held off from calling someone to take Izuku to the infirmary, which was nice of her. But then, she’d been there in the mall when Shigaraki showed up, so maybe she had more reason to be concerned than most.

Izuku laughed nervously. “I’m fine.”

Todoroki eyed him. “You might be, but something’s on your mind.”

“Oh.” Izuku slumped a little. “Am I that obvious?”

“More like a bad liar,” Todoroki replied.

Fair enough. Izuku bit his lip, then said, “Um, do you remember the USJ attack?” When he got two solemn nods, Izuku continued, “When we were all separated, uh, I saw someone in a white mask there, right next to the villains. I think I told you that, Uraraka-san? The one that showed up right after that red monster.”

Uraraka nodded, though her brow was now furrowed in concern.
Todoroki didn’t, because he and Izuku hadn’t spoken for the first time until midway through the Sports Festival, but he prompted, “And…?”

“I saw someone like that again.” Twice. In two days. “Uh, once next to Kōta-kun, when Mineta-kun got thrown off the wall.”

Uraraka grimaced, but said, “I thought he fell?”

“Yeah, because Kōta-kun pushed him.” Which, frankly, Mineta deserved. Izuku hit his stride, though, and that meant couldn’t stop to worry about that. “But right behind him, there was somebody else. I tried asking Mandalay if Kōta-kun has an illusion Quirk, but he doesn’t. I don’t know who that could’ve been, but I have ideas now.”

“I don’t remember anything like that,” Todoroki said, frowning just as much as Uraraka. “Are you sure it wasn’t—?”

“I’m sure, because I saw them again last night when I went to go talk to Kōta-kun,” Izuku insisted, though he hated to interrupt. It felt like his heart was trying to crawl up his throat. “And when Kaminari-kun and Ashido-san ran into the woods earlier, they said they saw a scary white thing, so…”

“A villain?” Todoroki suggested, and that gave Izuku pause.

“I…no? Maybe? That’s what I’m not sure about.” Izuku covered his mouth with his scarred right hand, trying to force his thoughts into some kind of order. “No, they—if there’s more than one—they never hurt Kōta…”

And they’d never hurt a UA student; not really. At the USJ, the bird mask guy set the red monster on the League of Villains. They kept their backs to the UA students almost the whole time, cutting off attacks and keeping Nōmu from hurting Aizawa-sensei more than he’d already been. That red monster had been the most terrifying thing he’d ever seen, even past the Nōmu and every villain there, and Shigaraki two months later, but at the time he hadn’t realized the truth: It only cared about hurting the Nōmu. Even when All Might arrived and sorted everything out by punching both monsters out of the dome, the bird-masked guy hadn’t actually done anything besides yell until his voice cracked. Then he left, the same as the League did.

Izuku followed hero news more avidly than even most pro heroes he could name, and he remembered the reports of creepy white-masked figures that sprang up after the USJ incident. But, once again, nothing actually happened besides a lot of people posting shaky cell phone videos and making bad analysis editorials on their Youtube accounts. The reports had even died off recently, dropped entirely by the news in favor of basically anything else.

Todoroki tried his best to interrupt gently. “Um, Midoriya?”

Izuku snapped back to reality with a jolt. “Huh? What?”

“You’ve been muttering this whole time…” Todoroki said, expression blank.

Izuku’s face had to be on fire—nope, not going there. “I—oh. I was?”

Uraraka nodded. “Don’t be embarrassed, though. It’s fine!” She pressed her fingertips together in a nervous gesture, then said, “Though if what you’re saying is true, they’re probably not bad people… whoever they are. And that might be the real problem.”

Heroes didn’t hide their identities. It wasn’t what heroes did. Which meant they were dealing with
vigilantes.

“How did they even find us here, though?” Izuku wondered, even as he noticed they were catching up to the rest of the group. “Aizawa-sensei said this camp is so secret not even All Might knows where we are. It’s all to keep us safe from villains.”

Oh no oh no no no no why do they know where we are—?

“Do you think the red monster’s here, too?” Izuku muttered in a squeak, half-frantic as he stared at his friends. It was safer than looking into the woods.

Todoroki and Uraraka didn’t look like they’d thought of that, and that the idea, once planted, was not a comforting one. Because while the red monster appeared to be on their side, it had a deeply unsettling, Nōmu-like mode of pure savagery that covered half the central plaza of the USJ in blood. Izuku didn’t have to think too hard to imagine what it might’ve been capable of doing if it hadn’t decided that Nōmu was the only target it cared about. Worse, whatever-it-was just showing up had done almost as much to freeze everyone in pure terror as seeing Aizawa-sensei get smashed into the concrete in front of them.

Maybe the bird-masked guy hadn’t brought it this time.

Maybe Izuku needed to tell someone right now, only to be stopped dead by this thought: Mandalay knows.

The coat the other day hadn’t belonged to any of the Pussycats. He’d known it instinctually and not made the connection.

“DEKU, SHUT THE FUCK UP ALREADY!”

It took him a couple of seconds to realize the high-pitched kettle whistle was coming from his own throat. He clapped his hands over his mouth before anybody could say anything else and managed to stop, but it was a close thing.

“Deku? Deku, you’re, uh, not looking so good…”

“Wow, class B hasn’t even gotten started yet! What’s going on with you, kitten?” Pixie-Bob asked, and Izuku finally snapped to attention to realize that every single person in the clearing was staring at him.

“Um.” Izuku swallowed hard. After a few slow breaths, he said, “It’s… Sorry, this is really getting to me!”

As long as no one asked what “this” was, he’d be in the clear.

Kacchan scoffed outright, and Pixie-Bob seemed to leave the issue alone in favor of trying to hype everyone else up for the walk through the creepy woods. It wasn’t that the woods weren’t creepy during the day—especially with earth monsters running around everywhere—but night made it so much worse.

“It’s okay, Deku,” said Uraraka. She patted his shoulder with four fingers. “Look, let’s just concentrate on seeing who ends up having to go first.”

“R-Right…”

“Midoriya,” said Aizawa-sensei, which stole the calm Izuku had almost managed. He stood a bit
apart from the other pros, so the Wild, Wild Pussycats could tell everyone more about tonight’s events, and Aizawa-sensei could catch a nap in the meantime. Maybe. He always looked like he needed one. “A word, please.”

“Y-Yes, sir,” Izuku said, and followed him to the edge of the clearing. They weren’t exactly out of earshot of everyone else, but Tiger’s shouting covered for a lot of things.


Izuku took a careful breath. Under Aizawa-sensei’s impassive stare, he forced his hands still and his voice even again. It worked, to some degree. “Somebody’s lurking around the camp.”

Aizawa-sensei…blinked. Waited, like…

“Did you…already know? About the masks?” Izuku asked, his voice pitching upward instantly.

The sigh Aizawa-sensei let out was the loudest Izuku had ever heard from him. And he’d been close enough to listen when All Might slammed the classroom door open on the fifth day of school. While Izuku stared, Aizawa-sensei reached up to slowly pinch the bridge of his nose like Izuku had just given him a headache.

“Midoriya, don’t worry about that,” Aizawa-sensei said. “They aren’t worth getting worked up like this.”

“But—wait, them?” How many were there?

“They’re not dangerous to you students.” What? “Just stay on the forest path tonight and you’ll be fine.”

“But Aizawa-sensei—”

“Midoriya, we know.” He nodded toward the forest, hands in his pockets now. “They’re not as public as UA teachers, but they’re here to help.”

...What? Are they underground heroes? “But—”

“Do I have to get one of them over here to apologize for giving you nightmares?” And true to his natural poker-face, Izuku wasn’t sure if he was serious or not.

“Uh…”

Aizawa waited until he got a more coherent response, which didn’t happen. Izuku’s brain skipped like an old-timey record.

Instead, he looked out into the woods and said in a grumble, “Well? Don’t keep us waiting, Wolf.”

As Izuku watched, a branch just above head height shook slightly, and one of the masked shadows faded into view in a crouched position. The mask wasn’t birdlike—this one had a series of red marks and a prefabricated face that, in the moonlight, looked a little like a stylized wolf. A dark gray overcoat—not completely black, not one color—hid the rest of the body shape from view, aside from metal-backed gloves and solid combat boots.

Izuku did not squeak.

Aizawa-sensei just said, “Are you apologizing or not?” without even looking directly at the figure.
It—he?—nodded once.

Izuku barely managed to nod back, which would have to stand in for a bow.

“Good. Now get lost.”

And the mask, the person, and the weight on the branch just…disappeared. Like a mirage.

“Um, Aizawa-sensei?”

“What is it?”

“Can I go back to the group now?” He needed to tell Todoroki, Iida, and Uraraka now.

“Go.”

Izuku staggered back to his friends, very much done with anything besides the test of courage. Holy crap. Holy crap. That happened!

“Deku?” Uraraka said.

“I think I just saw a ninja,” Izuku replied, still a little numb because holy shit!

“Other than Aizawa-sensei?” Todoroki asked.

“Uh-huh…” Izuku slumped a little in place. “Can we just get this test of courage over with?”

“What kind of attitude is that, Midoriya?!” Tiger demanded.

“You still have to draw lots for your turns, kittens!” Pixie-Bob said. She held out a cat-like glove filled with little paper slips, then shook it like doing so would scramble the draw. “Choose your partners!”

Izuku groaned.

Chapter End Notes

To those who don’t read comment sections and are interested in a schedule for this story, I generally try to update this fic at least once a week.

You can also check out the Full-page Index option up at the top of the page, which lists every chapter alongside its upload date, just in case you want some kinda confirmation.
Test of Courage

Chapter Summary

Kei's turn to juggle chainsaws. On fire!

And fight someone who compensates for bad judgment with muscle mass.

Chapter Notes

This is unbeta'd, and I'm on cold medicine. Hooray.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Three days into haunting a forest like in her not-so-distant genin childhood, Kei thrummed with nervous energy.

Not that watching the hero kids train, and fail, and train again wasn’t at least a little entertaining, but Kei had more than a few reasons to be wary. The most persistent one started with “v” and ended in “-illains,” because of course it did. This entire world came down to a wacky, flawed paradigm that placed a bunch of first-year high school students squarely in the crossfire. Or with bullseyes painted on their collective backs.

Maybe it was for the best that they were all training to have more impressive power outputs.

After the USJ attack, the Musutafu incident, and the persistent media circus, it would be difficult to conclude the enemy does not have a firm target in mind.

Yeah, but the question is if they have a specific target, or if they’re just trying to harass the entire class until somebody fucks up.

Or died.

Most villains seemed pretty okay with the idea of murdering teenagers. Kei didn’t exactly have much moral high ground to play with, but, dammit, at least she chose to not be a serial killer. Hell, her first kill had been someone younger than any of the friends she’d made here, and she could still see exactly where the line was between her and any of the villains she’d encountered on this mission. And she hadn’t followed through on her or any of Isobu’s impulses toward permanently ending threats to her clients.

She kind of wanted to meet a Hero Killer fanboy, for the sole purpose of giving them a piece of her mind.

In the meantime, Kei waited. Coiled, contained. For now.

The kids would do their little test of courage thing and be fine. Kei still thought the entire concept was bizarre, though.
It wasn’t that she didn’t understand it. Haunted houses and corn mazes and other goofy diversions were popular among teenagers the world over. But, well, her instincts still rattled like dice in her head. This was not a useful exercise.

A spooky night of fun…which was cheerfully causing every irritating security risk that implied. With almost all of 1-B in the woods, lurking with the intent to spook 1-A, the only person who could keep track of everyone at once was Ragdoll. Obito and Kakashi did their best, but neither of them specialized in spamming Shadow Clones to scout for everything. Kei’s chakra sense was the next best thing to useless. It wasn’t a great situation.

How dare they let kids be kids, right? Gah. She didn’t resent anybody involved in this, aside from the villains, but it was frustrating all the same.

Kei couldn’t pinch the bridge of her nose through the mask, but she did rest her chin in her hands. This was going to be a long night.

**I have a question, seeing as we are not moving.**

*Yeah?*

**Your cover during this stage of the mission is that you and your friends have gone home for vacation. You are not expected to report in to anyone during this time, except for your teammates. Correct?**

*It is,* Kei replied warily.

*I would like a vacation, too,* Isobu rumbled thoughtfully, hands resting on each other. In a quieter tone, he added, *I miss Yin and Yang Kurama, as pathetic as that is. They likely do not miss me.*

*Well, only Yin Kurama might admit it. Yang would tell you to go to hell.*

Isobu snorted. *That might be. I should ignore Yang Kurama and see how he likes it.*

*Isobu?*

*Hm?*

*When we go home, let’s hang out with those two again. It’ll be fun. Especially if we get to see how their calligraphy is coming along.*

This time, Isobu’s rumble was a bit more optimistic. *I look forward to it.*

Kei tapped her throat microphone with one finger. Once she heard the faint beep of her boys clearing off the open signal, she said softly, “Status report. Any changes?”

Her voice came out husky and moderately scrambled thanks to the vocoder in her Isobu-shaped mask. There wasn’t anyone close enough to see or hear her—not while she sat on the roof of the Pussycats’ lodge and behind an air conditioning unit—but it was never a good idea to get lazy about stealth. Too any casual observer, the only thing to see were the bright lights and paw-shaped sign on the building. A little white-faced gargoyle, tucked into shadow, was the next best thing to invisible.

“This is Crane. No changes yet. Ragdoll confirmed it,” was Obito’s reply, equally warped by electronic noise.

According to Kei’s mental map of the area—reinforced by her chakra sense, security seals, and
having two teammates in the woods—Obito stood roughly ten meters from the group’s only fully
functioning sensor-type person. She knew he was there because they’d all done the introductory
song and dance three days ago, and because her Quirk didn’t let genjutsu slide. Obito’s job was to
snap up Ragdoll at the first sign of trouble and get her back to her teammates, regardless of other
considerations. Once the human-radar and the teleporter got that out of the way, an ambush could
properly take shape.

It was so much easier to make sure everyone got a complementary stab wound if there was a list to
check their progress.

**And for once, all of you are armed appropriately for the task.**

Isobu wasn’t wrong. For the first time in months, Kei and her teammates all had a full ANBU
mission loadout. Armor upgrades were nice, but her hand kept drifting back to the handle of the
katana she hadn’t used in far too long. Unlike Obito, she’d brought her own instead of filling out a
requisition order. Hers was better than the standard-issue katana anyway. As expected, the rest of
their kits included exploding tags, illusion and barrier seals, and at least one of the hilariously botched
camping equipment seals from ages ago.

“Wolf reporting. Eraserhead exposed my position to Midoriya. Relocating now.” Even with his
voice sounding more like a pack-a-day smoker in a Darth Vader mask, Kakashi still managed to get
his irritation across.

Kei sighed, mostly to herself. That kid was going to get killed someday, probably by sticking his
nose into the wrong mess. “Understood. Continue as normal. Turtle out.”

Isobu waited until there was less of a chance one of Kei’s teammates would report in, then said, **I
hope one of the humans steps on a landmine.**

Kei rested the back of her hooded head against the vent, feeling the buzz through her entire skull. **I
hope the kids don’t touch any of the seals on the perimeter.**

They weren’t nearly as dangerous as the explosive seals—which she had deliberately left
underpowered for the sake of obeying pro heroes’ murder/manslaughter taboos—but slamming an
unprepared person into a genjutsu was probably at least considered “rude.” Before this stage of the
mission, Kei hadn’t even been sure genjutsu would work on the local humans, only to get a
volunteer in the form of Tiger. Turned out that yes, they did. And even accidentally running into a
tree (to no effect) wouldn’t snap someone out of them.

Detection seals would let Kei know if any humans crossed their thresholds, which gave her team
warning enough to meet the problem if it came overland. The forest was littered with them in every
direction, radiating outward from the lodge. The spiderweb seal array ensured Kei would know the
exact position of any intruder—but only once. Knowing the enemy had a teleportation option
sometimes meant the best option was to catch them mid-attack. The day’s worth of work for Sensei
and his clones wouldn’t go to waste, no matter which day the villains showed up.

The problem was still that they would. Even without his dogs, Kakashi’s sense of smell was sharp
even to pick out a large group of humans traipsing through the woods for the last two nights. After
haunting the kids’ training ground for twenty minutes the day after, he’d confirmed that none of them
had wandered that far. After discounting all the pros, that left either lost hikers or deeply unpleasant
creeps. With only those two options, Team Minato’s summer vacation was spent going around
loaded for bear.

Figuratively, anyway. They’d chase off any literal bears, too.
I have been storing chakra for months for a proper confrontation. Isobu rubbed his hands together, which was about as evil as he got without explicitly threatening to eat somebody.

**Having to manage more than forty potential civilian casualties says that might have to stay on the backburner.** Kei thumbed the guard on her sword, sliding the blade a couple of centimeters out of the sheath. Then back in, with a soft clicking noise. And out. It was kind of meditative. **Still, I suppose it depends on what the villains chuck in our faces next. Do you think you can keep me going at V2 for longer this time?**

**Of course I can!** Isobu huffed. **Even if one of your opponents hoped to match the Hokage—which I doubt—I learn from my mistakes.** As ought you, given how much chakra you expended during the tournament months ago. Regulating chakra output will be all too easy.

*Thanks, Isobu.*

**Thank me by using it properly.** And kill something.

Kei pursed her lips and said nothing, letting her silence stand as an answer.

**I can hear your judgment.** Pah.

*I might make an exception for like, a Nōmu. But the rest of the people we’re fighting probably fall under the heading of “We’d absolutely be charged with murder.”*

**Only if they find out.**

Kei rolled her eyes, pleasantly exasperated. With friends like these, she never needed a cheering section. Did need a better conscience, though.

**I made you laugh.**

*Maybe. Give me half a decade to figure out how to return the favor.*

**I can wait.**

It turned out that they didn’t really have to. Roughly ten minutes of silent banter later, Kei got the first inkling that the situation was entirely untenable. The perimeter detection seals on the far side of the kids’ playground didn’t go off—because why the fuck would they actually function as intended with a teleporter around—but the internal network did.

In ten different locations. Then eleven, then twelve.

Kei let out a subvocal growl as she felt more and more pings against her chakra sense, as lopsided as the effect was through seals figuratively wired to her brain. *Fuck you, Kurogiri.*

“Turtle to all points,” Kei murmured, finger on the transmitter. The open channel was traceable, but only by people whose technology was as wonky as Konoha’s. “A dozen intruders have entered the forest. Stand by for grid coordinates.”

Her ears briefly filled with static, thanks for several people trying to respond at once. Kei got to her feet, sheathed her katana, and peered out into the dark. Despite everyone’s lack of perfect night vision, the villains’ decision to attack on a full moon gave the defenders about as much of a leg up as they could have.

It wasn’t saying much. Still, the pros and shinobi snapped into combat mode as though they were
born to it.

Right on cue, given the haze of blue and smoke starting to rise from the forest.

A flame-producing Quirk, probably in conjunction with other bullshit Kei could handle if she was out of *this* persona, exactly as it always seemed to be. Damn them.

“Wolf to Turtle. There are still more than twenty students at risk.” A pause on Kakashi’s end, just for a split second. “Enter the forest on my signal, not before.”

“Crane to all points. Ragdoll’s been relocated. Heading to rendezvous with Wolf.”

“Ragdoll to all points! The Wild, Wild Pussycats are here and ready to go!” Her voice seemed a little off, but that was probably a side effect of moving through Kamui for the first time.

Isobu hummed in the back of her mind as he wove a camouflage genjutsu over Kei’s form, making her shape that much harder to pick out in the dark. He didn’t even need her to make seals.

“Eraserhead to Turtle and Ragdoll,” was Aizawa-sensei’s bitter reply, “Give me those grid coordinates, now.”

Between Kei and Ragdoll—mostly Ragdoll, because Kei’s seals were a one-and-done sort of deal—most of the villains’ positions were identified. But, for better or for worse, there was no way to automatically know their Quirks without getting within spotting range and damn well figuring it out.

There were still forty students to defend from villains who were probably going to be all too willing to kill every single one.

At least the remedial kids were already inside. Not that they couldn’t fight, but there were fewer potential casualties to track. That meant Monoma, Kirishima, Ashido, Sero, Kaminari, Mineta, and Satō were all probably well out of danger. Small mercies.

All right, everyone. *Keep your radios up, because this is going to get messy and my Quirk only works in one direction,* Mandalay’s voice said, presumably ringing in every hero’s head at once. *We have multiple villains in the forest, some of whom are dangerously close to our students. We’re going to regroup at the lodge, so do everything you can to defeat the villains and get everyone out of danger!*

“Crane to all points: One of the villains has a fire Quirk!” Obito’s voice barked over the line. “Heading to engage!”

*Shit.* Enemies with AOE attacks were nobody’s idea of fun.

Kei wished, not for the first time, that someone shelled out for night vision goggles. If she wasn’t going in the forest without Kakashi’s permission, then she needed to find something else to make herself useful. Maybe dropping an actual rainstorm on everything would keep the kids that much more safe.

**Ready when you are.**

It just so happened that Aizawa-sensei ran out of the building at almost the exact moment Kei was about to drop off the roof. The blue fire building in the forest would distract any responsible adult who had kids out in the thick of it. Aizawa-sensei was many things, but a deadbeat was not one of them.
But Kei looked before she leapt, and spotted the figure hiding around the blind corner with enough
spare time to draw her sword.

Aizawa-sensei nearly got char-broiled for not taking the time to look left.

“Your concern has you distracted, Eraserhead.”

“Vlad—”

The difference between being a pile of ashes and a live hero turned out to be the width of a
fingernail. Blue fire lit the front of the building in a near-spherical explosion, but Aizawa-sensei
managed to swing himself to safety like hobo Batman using his capture weapon. That put him about
three solid meters above the villain’s head, and about one below Kei’s feet.

“Guess you really are a pro—”

The capture weapon lashed out as soon as Aizawa-sensei neutralized the villain’s Quirk,
extinguishing all but embers. There was a gag in some cartoons that had a character getting instantly
wrapped up like a mummy, but it was the first time Kei had actually seen it happen.

What the hell. Aizawa-sensei had this.

She sat on her heels and peered over the edge of the roof as Aizawa-sensei proceeded to hand out
free beatdown, sort of like the one he’d pulled off against the Nomu ages ago. Only this time he
apparently wanted the guy alive.

And conscious. To answer questions.

Kei would’ve clubbed him unconscious with a cast iron frying pan and sorted it out in a police
holding cell after the crisis was over.

Still. Blue flames here. Blue flames in the forest. Which were ongoing, despite the Erasure Hero
having canceled out the immediate threat. The fire wasn’t even changing color like it ought to in
absence of propellant. Wood fires burned in the warm parts of the color spectrum.

Unless Quirk bullshit.

Kei had a hunch. It hinged on the idea that, due to weight of numbers, there probably weren’t two
villains with Quirks for producing blue fire. And that there was a reason why the number of villains
went up after they all showed up at once, even with a teleporter who’d probably learned the getting-
punched-in-the-face lesson once.

It probably wasn’t sound logic.

Then again, she’d spent the better part of two years of her life possessed by a turtle monster.
Rationality filed for divorce ages ago. Clones were definitely a thing.

“Wolf to Turtle,” Kakashi said, over the radio. “Stand by for telepath burst from Mandalay.”

It seemed the rain would have to wait.

“Turtle to Wolf and Mandalay. Standing by,” Kei responded, as Isobu’s chakra began to stir
properly. Genjutsu was hardly taxing.

Mandalay’s mental voice was…well, Kei had asked for things to kick up. Selfishly. Seemed about
right that the voice was sharp enough to split her skull. Turtle, find Kōta! Midoriya-kun went to find
him, but Ragdoll says there’s a villain already there! Mandalay rattled off the grid coordinate their
group was using, indicating a spot not too far from the lodge. You might be the only one who can get
to them now!

Specifically, the spot was Kōta’s hideaway.

There was a little part of Kei’s brain that turned off. Everything short of her professional mask
drowned in a cold, merciless tide.

**Isobu, cloak!** Even as they used the Body Flicker with enough force to make the world blur into dark
grays and greens, Kei tucked her sword away. It would be better to keep it sheathed until she had
someone worth stabbing for real. *Just like we did when Sensei tried to outrun us!*

**I thought you would never ask.** Isobu’s chakra boiled out of the seal on Kei’s chest, wrapping her
in translucent orange-red energy. His laughter rattled through the entire cloak as she used tree after
tree as launchpads, sending a blast of killing intent out in all directions. **Let us give a human a
beating he would do best to forget.**

Isobu’s “night vision” was adapted for the depths of the ocean. One eye or not, Kei didn’t need to be
a Hyūga to see where she had to go when he felt like sharing his senses. Between the firelight, stars,
and the full moon, the forest around the Pussycats’ lodge might as well have been under spotlights.

It took Kei less than fifteen seconds to reach the fight, and an instant longer to assess the situation.

**Villain:** All hail the Meat Mountain, god of performance-enhancing drugs. Over two meters tall even
before his transformation into a walking jerky advertisement, the guy had one eye and a camera
installed in his head.

Kei dropped out of the sky in front of him.

Addendum: The villain was also blond and looked as though half his face had been held to a belt
sander. It might be useful information later, for all she knew.

Midoriya: Alive, but badly injured, barely standing, and throwing green lightning everywhere even
as he bled into the dirt. At a glance, his left arm hung limp as he stood there and panted, and road
burn meant he’d be spending time under a healer’s watchful eye after tonight was over. The crater in
the cliff also looked Midoriya-sized.

Kōta: Alive and unhurt, which Kei appreciated. She owed Midoriya a thank-you later.

Or now. By saving his life.

“What do we have here? Another wannabe hero?” He smiled like Hidan. That expression belonged
on someone who killed people for fun.

Kei’s eyes narrowed behind her mask, even as she rested her right hand against the hilt of her sword.
With Isobu’s chakra filling the air around her, fear was maybe the second-last thing on her mind.

The first, by far, was getting this guy’s attention on *her*. Irrevocably. She’d tanked a hit from All
Might; this guy was a featherweight in comparison.

“Y’know, I was just thinkin’ this was too easy,” he went on, muscle fiber swishing like fish fins in a
current. It was gross as all hell, even without blood. “Forty baby heroes are easy pickin’s, pros or
not. Maybe Vlad King or Eraserhead or Tiger would be worth botherin’ with, but that’s a lotta kids
runnin’ around unguarded. Maybe you’re the vanguard, like me…”
This guy’s Quirk seemed to make him the chatty counterpart of the USJ Nōmu. It wasn’t that he bulked up—instead, his actual muscle fibers behaved like Kakuzu’s black threads and moved according to his whim. Even outside of his skin. It was like looking at someone with All Might’s full-sized build, but after having been flayed alive and painstakingly pulled apart in some macabre anatomy exhibit.

Kei wasn’t the type of person who could banter with sworn enemies, even if she wanted to. Everything came out trite and dull as dishwater. Or she screamed at them, which was an excellent way to turn heads, but nothing else.

Kei raised a hand and used Gai’s “come and get it” gesture. Good enough for a beginner, and it gave her time to get her right hand back to her katana afterward.

“Hah! Or are you another sorry-ass Stain groupie like Spinner? Touting your ideals—”

Complete amateurs blathered instead of fighting. A pro could do both.

The villain’s fist cracked the ground where Kei had just been.

A meter away, Kei idly bobbed from foot to foot as though she hadn’t just poured on a bit of shinobi speed to dodge that strike.

The villain followed, with all the grace of a boulder bouncing downhill. “—like they make you any better—”

Swing and a miss. The guy barreled right past her and into a cliff, making the Midoriya-sized crater look like a pothole. Was this his actual top speed?

“— than a guy who just enjoys killin’?” The villain spasmed, muscle fibers exploding out of him like someone dropped dynamite in a paint can. “Ain’t you gonna give me somethin’ to work with, here? Some declaration of ‘justice’ or how you’re gonna protect everyone?” Pinkish flesh coiled around his arm and chest, while a grin of pure anticipation and bloodlust curled across his face. “How about—”

Basically, it was super creepy.

Midoriya gaped. “Wh—”

“Turtle!” Kōta shouted, as the guy drew back his well-hidden fist. Kei could only tell he was winding up for a haymaker because the stance looked familiar. Everything else vanished under writhing muscles.

Kei’s thoughts, as the villain swung, went something along the lines of: Why the fuck had a kink in genetics given this guy the ability to turn into a homicidal meatball? How was this necessary? Hardly matters. Oh, and—

Replacement Jutsu, they thought together.

“LET’S SEE SOME BLOOD!” The monstrous fist crashed down, launching a reasonable facsimile of Kei’s form into the cliff before slamming bodily into it. A second blow fell, then a third, while the villain laughed like his damn life depended on it.

In the heartbeats between the villain committing to his attack and Kei reappearing behind him, Midoriya crossed the combat zone and managed to scoop Kōta up with his right arm. His left still hung limp, but his eyes fixed on Kei. The look on his face mingled fear, determination, and a scrap
of hope that was gone before Kei could be sure, but one thing was clear: Midoriya would prioritize Kōta.

He was fast, clever, and very invested in not getting smashed into bone paste by this dickhead. With any luck, he’d avoid breaking his other arm in the process.

Kei would get the wannabe Kakuzu clone all to herself.

**Fine by me.**

Kei stood back a bit and waited for the villain to notice he was punching splinters into stone. A split-second ninjutsu like that didn’t have a long life expectancy anyway.

It took a surprisingly long time. Upward of ten seconds. By that point, Midoriya had already activated his wacky Quirk, spiriting Kota away and around the corner. His footsteps were entirely drowned out by the sound of rock splintering. Hell, by the time the sound stopped, Midoriya and Kota were both poking their heads back around the corner, like they couldn’t believe they were getting away with this either.

…What the fuck was wrong with this guy? Besides the obvious. Most people Kei knew would know the target had left the building after the first strike.

This guy was emphatically not worth her time.

“His name’s Muscular!” Midoriya shouted, because he had no self-preservation instincts. At all. “He has a muscle augmentation Quirk, Turtle-san! He’s a murderer with the League of Villains!”

Midoriya swallowed, a greenish glow flaring up around him and nearly blotting out Kōta entirely. He was death to night vision.

Before he’d even finished that first sentence, Kei shifted so she stood in the middle of the quickest path between the villain and potential victims. The guy thought and moved in straight lines. Like someone going a hundred kilometers in the wrong direction.

In this scenario, Kei was a spike strip.

Muscular lurched, finally tearing his gaze from what had to be the longest-lasting Replacement in history. Kei’s report on this moment was going to have this section circled twice in red pen and dotted with question marks.

“You’re tricky,” Muscular said with a grin. “I like that. But you’re not so fast that you can outrun—”

The jinchūriki pair were in agreement. Isobu shook his chakra loose from its vague cloud around Kei’s body until his head and forearms manifested in a translucent ghost. Bits of shell followed, as did all three of his tails, resulting in his form overlaying Kei’s ANBU armor like the world’s angriest glitchy hologram. A purplish Rasengan spun to life in his right palm, half-concealed by his armored fingers.

Kei, for her part, thumbed her katana free of the sheath just as Muscular’s Quirk kicked into overdrive.

“—SOMEONE LIKE ME!”

Muscle fibers breached his skin in greater mass than ever before, long crossing the threshold from intimidating to just grotesque. No ordinary attack from an ordinary Quirk would be able to get through that mess. It was a perfect defense and offense at once.
Too bad for him there was really no such thing.

_Curve of the Moon!

_Tailed Beast Rasengan!

The kenjutsu art landed first, carving through flesh to reach bone and skin. The amount of chakra poured into the technique projected the edge outward in advance of the actual swing by at least a meter, and Kei’s half-forgotten medic-nin training turned a samurai cutting tool into surgery in the way an ethics committee would dub horrific. Blood sprayed across the ground.

And then Isobu’s remix of the Rasengan struck the middle of Muscular’s newly-exposed gut.

Credit to Muscular: his sheer mass caused the Rasengan to take a half-second longer to kick Newton’s First Law awake. Then he flew off his feet, unable to even scream.

Credit to Isobu: He’d turned a jab into a haymaker, and the Rasengan’s trajectory launched Muscular _into_ the cliff instead of into freefall. Isobu didn’t use the technique on his own, and his had been larger than the standard Kei preferred, but he’d observed and made mental notes and figured out what he wanted from the jutsu.

Which was Muscular was currently lying in a heap while in the middle of an impact crater and therefore was no longer a problem. His muscle fibers retracted with a disturbing _vlorp_ noise when he lost consciousness, leaving him just a man. An asshole of one, but still alive to complain about the fight later.

Kei sheathed her sword with a _click_ as the chakra cloak faded.

When she turned, Kōta and Midoriya were both staggering in her direction. The kid was still fine, though tear-tracks cut through the dust on his face and his clothes were scuffed up, as expected. Midoriya, on the other hand, still made her inner medic-nin search for the big red panic button.

Kōta had one of his hands fixed in Midoriya’s tattered T-shirt and the other on Kei’s belt. His entire face crumpled as he began to bawl, hiccupping and dragging both Kei and Midoriya to their knees as he curled up.

Adrenaline was a funny thing.

“You—you took him out, right?” Midoriya panted, his left arm dangling uncomfortably. That _had_ to be broken. “Turtle-san?”

Kōta sniffled into Midoriya’s side, since was there and not wearing body armor. Seemed best. The Turtle persona was _not_ built for being a huggable comfort object.

Kei nodded. She raised her left hand and patted Kōta’s back, because she had to _try_, then said in the computerized, unrecognizable voice, “He’ll stay down for a while. Why are you still here?”

Midoriya’s face went grim. “If something went wrong, I couldn’t let him hurt Kōta-kun.”

And if they’d been jumped on the way back to the lodge, Muscular would have probably done exactly that. Going through Midoriya didn’t seem to bother the guy who made that kind of first impression.

“H-h-he’s the one,” Kōta managed, through his tears. “The one I-I told you about, Turtle-san. He k-killed—”
Midoriya pulled Kōta into a one-armed hug, though he winced when Kōta reciprocated. Rib injuries? “Muscular’s killed Kōta-kun’s parents, and he—”

Kei had already known that, but something in Midoriya’s expression kept her from saying so. “What is it?”

“He—Muscular asked me something, right before you got here.” Midoriya’s breathing was still a wreck, but the expression under the blood and pain was distilled determination. “He’s after Kacchan. That’s why they’re attacking in the first place.”

*Oh for fuck’s sake.* Were it not for the Turtle mask and the circumstances, Kei’s hand would be on a collision course with her forehead. And she’d be swearing properly. As it was, Isobu bit down on some of her anger and drowned it in the depths of their mindscape.

“Th—that’s not what he said,” Kōta broke in, still shaking. “He—he wanted to kill you.”

*And Midoriya’s a target, too. Great.*

Midoriya seemed to ignore that. “I need to get to Mandalay. I need to tell her—”

Kei shook her head, cutting him off. The airwaves were too silent for Kei’s liking anyway. Or her nerves.

As Midoriya and Kota watched, she raised a hand to her radio and, in a clear, firm voice that didn’t betray any of her actual feelings, said, “Turtle to all points. Kōta-kun and Midoriya-san are safe. The villain Muscular is down. The League of Villains is behind the attack. Their capture target is Bakugō Katsuki. I repeat: The League’s target is Bakugō Katsuki. They’re targeting other UA students, but he’s their priority. Over.”

Midoriya stared at her.

The radio maintained its stubborn silence.

“How did you know?” Midoriya asked. His wide-eyed expression didn’t look like the fear Obito had been gleefully inflicting on the hero students for a few days now. It looked like a realization. “How’d you know Kacchan’s real name?”

Behind her mask, Kei’s face froze. *Oh shit.* But her mouth, spurred by Isobu, went with a dismissive, “My team has been monitoring UA for more than five months.”

It was technically true, and therefore the best kind of true. Besides, damn near everyone in Japan had been doing the same thing.

*Eraserhead to Mandalay,* Aizawa-sensei’s voice cut across the connection, making Kei automatically raise a hand to silence any further Midoriya questions. *‘Broadcast to the students: ‘Members of Class A and B, I, pro hero Eraserhead, hereby authorize you all for combat’. ‘*

It echoed through all their heads, leaving them ringing. Midoriya and Kōta reacted after Kei, because there was still a delay on Mandalay’s end, but the message came through loud and clear.

Whatever happened next, the kids would have a chance to legally defend themselves with Aizawa-sensei potentially taking the fall.

**They should have had that right before this ever started.**
When in Rome… Kei didn’t sigh, but it took some effort. Too late now.

Then there was Mandalay’s follow-up: We’ve identified one of the villains’ objectives! Bakugō Katsuki, avoid combat as much as possible! Stick together in a group and return to the lodge as soon as possible!

“Midoriya-san, can you take Kōta back?” Kei asked, wary of his busted arm.

“I—yeah. I can.” He shuffled on his knees until Kōta could easily climb onto his back, which went well considering everything else. Midoriya’s legs still both worked. He was a quick kid when he had to be, and he needed something to do. Now. Before he got into more trouble. “What about you? Or the fire?”

Right, Kōta’s Quirk. He was the only one openly capable of dealing with a blaze, barring maybe Pixie-Bob.

“No civilians in a combat zone. You’re clearing out until it’s safe,” Kei said in a flat tone. She considered her potential arguments, then revised them rapidly to “arguments that would be made by an otherwise reasonable person ignorant of Midoriya breaking his bones at people on national television.” They were few. “Eraserhead and Vlad King will know where you can get that arm looked at, too.”

As though that would motivate Midoriya to actually use that option. The stubborn set to his jaw said as much. “All three of us should head back. It’s not safe out here.”

Kei wasn’t sure if she was supposed to take that as Midoriya arguing that the woods were full of villains (which they were), or if he was worried for her safety (which was pointless).

Luckily, Kakashi’s voice spared her that internal debate. “Wolf to Turtle. Your next target is the Nōmu. Stand by for coordinates.”

“Copy that, Wolf.” With that, Kei shrugged off Kōta and Midoriya’s justifiable caution. She backed off a couple of steps, turning her mask toward the forest without taking her eyes off them. “Midoriya-san, you are a hero in training. Your job right now is to protect yourself and Kōta-kun. I’ll escort you as far as the lodge, but then I’m gone. Got it?”

Midoriya and Kōta both nodded.

Kei reached into the back of her mind and tapped Isobu’s shoulder. Figuratively.

Finally, he said.

The chakra cloak flared back to life around her until it solidified into an opaque, rapidly-shifting V2 cloak. Under it, Kei’s stance shifted forward until she balanced in a quadrupedal crouch, with one tail slicing through the air behind a newly-manifested spiky shell. To a casual observer, she was more beast than human.

To Midoriya Izuku, she was the nightmare from the USJ.


Midoriya, held together by determination, endorphins, and the solid-steel core that was built into him as a future hero, glowed green and ran.
I reshuffled the order of the Muscular vs. Midoriya and Eraserhead vs. Dabi fights. My justification is that, unlike canon, everyone has radios. Why would they not have radios. The *villains* have radios, even if it's just between Dabi and the walking chainsaw dude.
Obito vents his spleen, and Izuku does his best to get his head around a bad situation. As a result, both have very different experiences following the botched Test of Courage.

This thing hasn't been properly proofread, so I apologize in advance. And sorry for the long wait!

(The chapter title is basically a really lame pun.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Turtle to all points. A dozen intruders have entered the forest. Stand by for grid coordinates.”

“Wolf to Turtle. There are still more than twenty students at risk.” A pause on Kakashi’s end, just for a split second. “Enter the forest on my signal, not before.”

Obito ran rings around people. It was as close to a day job as he had. After all, he was Namikaze Minato’s trickiest student.

Before the night’s horror show kicked off, the two operating teams hadn’t exactly discussed their big strategy. The only firm point they’d all agreed on involved getting Ragdoll back to Mandalay to help support the full Pussycats team. Without Ragdoll, there was no way to know where everyone was at all times. Obito, at least, needed that kind of direction to make his Kamui usages count. He couldn’t grab all the students on his own, but getting the drop on a villain would ruin their night wonderfully.

“Wow, this is…super weird!” Ragdoll said, once Obito joined her in the blocky landscape of his Kamui world. Its indirect illumination and the thin air felt almost like home to Obito, but he knew all too well most people didn’t feel the same. “It kinda feels like I walked all the way to the top of a mountain and took a deep breath, only I didn’t.”

“It’s harmless weird, though.” Obito’s voice came out about as low as Shinsō’s, which was pretty fun. He could imitate that bored drone on his own, but the device over his mouth was harder to forget about in the middle of a fight. “And it’s empty.”

“No kidding! The only person I can pick out with Search here is you!” Ragdoll bounced on her heels. “As soon as we get back to the forest, you’ll keep an eye on our kittens with my help. Hah! An eye, get it?”

Obito winced, both at the idea that her Quirk could basically see through his masked identity and at the pun. Mostly the pun. Still, he offered the crook of his elbow to her, to be polite. “Ready, Ragdoll?”
“You bet your beak I am, Crane!”

He held out his elbow for her to take. “Watch your step.”

“Cats always land on their feet,” Ragdoll said, and disappeared in a midair spiral as soon as she touched him.

Someone was going to distract Obito one of these days with a pun, and he’d trip and break his neck and die, and then they’d all be sorry. He liked puns well enough, but everyone seemed so dead-set on beating him over the head with them. It was too much. Someone was gonna owe him a chocolate bar as hazard pay at this rate.

Still, he warped in after Ragdoll, though about fifteen meters away and behind a tree. The whole place was pretty dark, only a few kids were around while waiting their turn to go into the haunted forest, and a whole buncha shit was already going wrong. Like, starting with the fact that there were clouds of dark, blue-lit smoke rising from the woods alongside pinkish mist. And everyone looked kinda edgy, because that probably wasn’t supposed to happen. Nobody was even looking at Obito as he stepped back into the world.

“Crane to all points,” Obito said into his radio, “Ragdoll’s been relocated. Heading to rendezvous with Wolf.”

And then things got exciting before Obito had even fully turned around to go.

Pixie-Bob lit up with a pink aura that tugged her off her feet. She flailed around, shocked, and hurtled toward the forest.

Based on how everyone else reacted, this was about all they could process before shit went down. Obito, however, had a Mangekyō Sharingan and plenty of experience using it. Therefore, the rest of the next half-second broke down a bit differently for him.

First: The glow didn’t look like the Quirk of any of the pro heroes or students who were supposed to be here. Even if it was, they wouldn’t target one of the Pussycats.

Second: The forest hadn’t been directly scouted in a while. Kakashi was somewhere around the far end of the trail loop, kicking somebody unconscious. Kei was busy beating a guy senseless with her jinchūriki powers. That left Obito here, having just gotten back from Ragdoll’s old position, didn’t have an update waiting for him.

Third: The Sharingan might’ve needed full daylight to work at maximum effectiveness, but he could still tell Pixie-Bob’s trajectory and speed were nowhere near unpredictable enough to evade Obito, even with a fifteen-meter head start.

Conclusion: Body Flicker!

Between one blink and the next, Obito closed the distance in a blue of dark gray and white.

“Oof!”

He scooped Pixie-Bob out of the air, left arm wrapped around her waist and chakra gluing his feet to stall out her flight path. Her entire body swung around like he’d caught her plummeting off a cliff. It was like the world didn’t quite work right, but for only one person. And she was still glowing.

In the brief scramble when people struggled to react to how fast Obito could be, something swung where Pixie-Bob’s head would’ve been.
Obito adjusted his grip on Pixie-Bob’s costume, pivoted, and used the Replacement Jutsu when the emerging figure came back for a second pass. The copies got their heads bashed off—for the split second until brain, bone, and blood became just another log—but reappearing five meters back gave everyone some breathing room.

At a glance: Two villains, one taller and one a lizard. Sharingan-fueled perception allowed Obito to note far more details. Bad haircuts for both, like membership tokens. Sunglasses at night. Why? And then there were weapons to consider—blunt object wrapped in canvas, a “sword” that made the Samehada look coherent—and potential Quirks. The pink glowy shit had to be theirs. And they had to be villains. There weren’t exactly a lot of other labels flying around for the taking, other than the rapid accumulation of “potential casualty” status.

And then reality finally caught up with Obito’s accelerated view of the world.

“Well, I suppose there’s no point in putting it off anymore,” said the taller one. She was about Tiger’s size, brown-haired and wearing sunglasses. Obito didn’t recognize “popped collar with cargo pants” as a villain costume, but that kind of shit was what the heroes running around were supposed to explain. The sunglasses—at night—were his real sticking point with the ensemble.

Then the one in green stepped forward, arms out like a presenter on a stage. “Greetings, UA and assorted guests! We are the League of Villains’ Vanguard Action Squad!”

The students still in the clearing had their moment to freak out, but Obito kept his eye on the villains even as Ragdoll started organizing the evacuation. He let Pixie-Bob up, too, now that she’d stopped glowing, and strode forward so he was ahead of the Pussycats by about three solid meters. Without looking, he already could tell Mandalay and Tiger were going to back up their teammate.

“I’ll introduce myself properly,” said the lizard-dude. Obito, busy calculating how hard he’d have to hit someone with a potential Mutation-type Quirk to render him unconscious instead of dead, focused hard on the Stain-like gear the enemy wore. Like Stain, the armor was cosmetic except for the boots and knee pads, likely to avoid getting stabbed when his cobbled-together sword fell apart in his hands to litter the ground. “The name’s Spinner. I’m the one who carries on Stain’s dream!”

Tiger spoke next, though. “The woman you just tried to kill is a proud hero who’s always putting her best foot forward. Your blatant disregard for the good she can do is reprehensible!”

What am I, chopped liver? Obito frowned under his mask. If verbal taunting worked so well to disrupt the original Stain’s concentration on their second encounter, this groupie likely wasn’t much better at keeping his temper. As an example of the same kind of overcommitment: He and his friend were willingly taking on five-on-two odds.

“Heroes don’t have the luxury of resting on their laurels! And all you fakers are just as unworthy as those Stain cut down!” Spinner shouted back, making to rush forward.

Obito could probably kill both of them single-handedly, without even using Kamui. The glowy aura shit hadn’t outright killed Pixie-Bob, which already made it less dangerous than Kei’s jinchūriki cloak. And the speed of the pink aura was slower than Nagato’s repulsion powers.

Mandalay’s Quirk must’ve been going without telling anyone besides her teammates, because Ragdoll and the kids immediately took off. Pixie-Bob leapt backward, out of theoretical grabbing range, and the earth started to rumble underneath their feet. Earth monsters had to be on the move already.
“Ragdoll to all points! The Wild, Wild Pussycats are here and ready to go!”

“Eraserhead to Turtle and Ragdoll. Give me those grid coordinates, now.”

Glad to hear they could operate independently. And that they were going to be rescuing students, because Obito wasn’t sure if he’d have to time. Instead, he darted to the middle of the impending brawl keep both Tiger and Spinner from ripping each other to pieces.

Kei and Ragdoll rattled off the enemies’ positions, which Obito was—once again—the best suited for reaching in a timely manner. If only he could use Shadow Clones to speed this up.

Just a second! He had a thing to do.

“Question,” he rasped, through a voice changer that made him sound almost exactly like a man who smoked thirty cigarettes a day. “For Spinner.”

“What do you want?” he demanded, even as both combatants skidded to a stop.

Obito’s smile, though hidden, was no less unpleasant than his tone. It felt like nothing more than baring his teeth. Vicious satisfaction coiled in his chest. “I get the feelin’ you look up to Stain, right? The Hero Killer?”

Something in Spinner’s expression twitched, as did his partner’s face. “I just said—”

“He was a pushover when I fought him,” Obito drawled, electronic whine buzzing in the back of his voice. Adding his own fake layer of vocal mimicry was actually kind of fun. “He thought he could take me, and it all it took was one attack before he was out cold. Talk about a glass jaw.” A chuckle, ripped straight out of Madara’s voice. “Or did you really think Ingenium kicked his ass on his own, like the media does? People are so gullible nowadays.”

“Spinner, don’t lose focus—” the other villain warned.

“But Magne, he—”

“That wouldn’t shut up,” Obito cut across them, drawing both of the villains’ attention and making Spinner in particular heft his weapon with deadly intent. Good. He had their undivided attention. “Going on and on about his ‘noble calling,’ like talkin’ that whole time didn’t give me a chance to kick his teeth in. Almost literally. All I saw was a killer who aspired to be a mass-murderer. Talk about pathetic!”

A good taunt, tailored for the receiver, kept attention on the one who could most afford to take hits. Angry people made mistakes. Angry, impatient people doubled down when they should have backed the fuck off. The absolute master of trash-talk wasn’t a crown Obito aimed to claim, but he could dangle this particular piece of bait right in front of Spinner’s nose.

Sensei would’ve been proud. Of course, Sensei could make Shadow Clones and was faster still.

“Shut your lying mouth!” Spinner screamed back, because Obito had no qualms about stomping on his buttons like an arcade machine. Franken-sword in hand, he charged and swung for Obito’s face.

Obito ducked under the swing, grinned under his mask, and flicked Spinner in the nose before he was entirely out of range.

“You bastard!”
This was too easy.

“Swing and a miss!” Obito crowed, before once again making Spinner look like a five-year-old in a tantrum.

But all fun things came to an end, even if they only lasted fifteen seconds.

All right, everyone. Keep your radios up, because this is going to get messy and my Quirk only works in one direction, Mandalay’s voice said, ringing in Obito’s head. We have multiple villains in the forest, some of whom are dangerously close to our students. We’re going to regroup at the lodge, so do everything you can to defeat the villains and get everyone out of danger!

Which would be great if the forest wasn’t on fire. When the hell did that happen?

Great. Now all that effort to grab Spinner and Not-Spinner’s homicidal attention was going to waste.

“Betcha can’t catch me, you second-string hacks!” Obito shouted, as though his choice wasn’t already made. The Pussycats could handle these jokers. Then, before Spinner could try for his second attempted murder of the night, Obito raised a hand to his radio and barked, “Crane to all points: One of the villains has a fire Quirk! Heading to engage!”

He’d stop by Ragdoll first to confirm the location, but Obito knew fires. How they’d spread. And how to keep from getting burned.

“Don’t think you can get away from me!” Spinner snarled, swinging his blade abomination toward Obito’s head. “I’ll destroy all the fake heroes clogging our society, so Stain’s will is fulfilled! Die!”

The mess of knives passed harmlessly through Obito’s torso as Kamui shifted him around it. The would-be sword slammed into the dirt just to the left of Obito’s boot as Spinner overextended, and this time Obito didn’t feel like humoring another jackass in a cheap mask.

Kei would’ve laughed at the look on Spinner’s face. “What the f—?”

Obito kicked Spinner in the kneecap with no warning, exactly like Gai hadn’t taught him to. The padding saved him a broken leg, but the guy still hit the ground with a pained yowl. Ligaments didn’t like bending that way.

“You’re worse than Stain,” Obito hissed, while Magne charged for him. Five meters, four—

Spinner glowed blue at the same time an identical halo of energy lit Obito from head to toe.

Behind him, Tiger was in the middle of a charge toward Magne. And there was yet more blue light.

Spinner didn’t have anywhere to go other than toward Magne’s grasp, so he skidded about half a meter backwards and into her grip. Braced. Still blue.

Obito and Tiger, on the other hand, got bounced.

Tiger was taller and just larger in general, but his angle of approach meant he skidded head-over-heels backwards across the clearing. Between his reflexes and his Quirk, it probably didn’t even hurt that much when he hit a tree on the edge of the woods. The tree came off the worse in that little exchange.

Obito, on the other hand, hurtled skyward as though Nagato—thankfully not here to see this—decided he needed to learn how to fly. Wind tore at his uniform and the edges of his mask, with the
roaring blocking all sound in his ears. He flailed around in midair, watching the clearing almost
disappear in a blur of pink and blue pinpricks and half-unseen treetops. Earth monsters, courtesy of
Pixie-Bob, blotted out the remainder of the clearing with their massive bulk.

And just around there, he could see the fire and also pink...smoke? Clouds of gas? This damn
mission...

Still, other than the surprise he’d already tamped down on, Obito refused to let any fear move his
chakra around without his say-so. Kei would notice (again) and ditch her mission (again) to save him
(yet again). If she could. There were too many other kids in distress for her to waste time worrying
about little old him.

Besides, Obito had Kamui. Not forever, but definitely now.

Obito activated it again, with the snap of thinner air and total change in lighting telling him he’d
made the shift successfully. One of the white pillars was in his flight path—momentum sucked—so
Obito braced his entire body for the impact and wiggled around until he’d hit it feet-first.

“Agh!” All in all, not one of his better landings, but nothing broke or tore. Better than some people
still learning how not to turn an ankle. Sure, hitting the side of the pillar without splatting like a bug
was an old shinobi trick—if not under these exact circumstances—but whatever. He was intact. He
could still fight.

Magne probably should’ve really gone into some kinda people-hurling sport with a Quirk like that.
But no, all of these villains aspired to murder hero-hopeful kids. Kakashi was as ambitious as a tree
sloth in the dead of winter, but even he’d have stuff to say about their bullshit if it wasn’t for his big
bad mission attitude.

Okay, playtime’s over. Obito climbed to the top of the pillar, mentally tallying up the situation. He’d
been using chakra fairly consistently for the beginning of the week, up until the last couple of
minutes. His Sharingan didn’t require as much as the one in Kakashi’s head, but Kakashi also
couldn’t use Kamui.

Already, Obito’s eye throbbed. A headache nipped at its heels, as always. If he was going to kick
some bad guy ass without draining his reserves, he needed to hit them fast and hard, without
worrying so much about fancy. Probably by knocking one of them into the minefield. As many times
as it took to shut them all up.

Dammit.

Kei and Rin were both going to yell at him about overextending again. Kakashi never got lectured—
though now that he thought about it, Kakashi was the one usually knocking himself unconscious
through chakra exhaustion. Maybe they were just easier on someone who was already bedridden. It
felt a little like bullying to yell at someone who couldn’t even argue back properly.

Okay then. Obito flexed his right wrist, feeling the first few twiggy extensions of his Wood Release
flechettes coming to life. He still carried kunai, but having a nasty trick up his actual sleeve was
always useful. Just to be careful, he also pulled a few shuriken from his pouch. Time to go.

This time, Obito dropped out of Kamui in the middle of the forest fire. Bright blue flames prevented
him from getting his feet on the right side of the portal—for now—but that wasn’t important. Instead,
he flung shuriken at the nearest random jerks in his way.

Weird Bodysuit Guy and Staple-Face each took a chunk of steel—shoulder for the former, forearm
for the latter—before they even knew he was there. The first guy shrieked like he’d stepped on a nail. The second did not.

“Twice, another clone, now!” growled the dark-haired guy, turning fully to face Obito with his right hand extended.

Obito mirrored the gesture without thinking and threw a Wood Release flechette at his face.

“You got—” And that was all Obito heard before the fire engulfed him.

Izuku did a lot of lowkey freaking out. It wasn’t something he was proud of, and getting caught up in his head made some of his reactions slower than he could afford. Kacchan knew that. His whole class knew that. Yaoyorozu even shared that problem, not that he knew what she was up to right now. Even if there was no way to guarantee everyone stayed safe in the middle of a villain attack—the USJ and the Nōmu attack on Musutafu proved that—he hoped they were anyway. He had to. Even if Izuku could barely draw enough air to fill his burning lungs, he had to hope.

Tonight didn’t give him enough time to do much, other than to hold onto that hope like a candle in the wind and keep running. A broken arm meant bad things when nobody had a healing Quirk, Kōta clung to his back, and One For All kept him hurtling through the forest at breakneck speeds. He might’ve hit a tree once or twice, if not for the constant reminders—in the form of both Kōta’s quiet sniffing in the back of his neck and the USJ monster crashing through the woods at his heels.

Or Turtle-san. Which Izuku already knew had to be some kind of codename.

“Turtle—” Kōta began, adjusting his grip on Izuku’s neck and shifting a bit. Felt like he was turning around. “Turtle-san, are the Pussycats okay?”

“Yes.” A faint radio crackle creeped out from behind the roiling Quirk, and Turtle tossed their head. And as though to confirm that, the ground rumbled hard enough to make Izuku stumble for a second. He didn’t crash into anything, even if Kōta’s weight wasn’t helping and Turtle definitely didn’t lend a hand, but instead ended up leaning heavily on a tree for a second. Still, the earth rolled.

“Can you feel that?” Izuku asked between ragged breaths.

Kōta nodded. “That’s—”

In front of them, trees buckled and dirt flew. Then, while the sound of rocks tumbling downhill filled the air, the five-meter shape of one of Pixie-Bob’s earth monsters writhed its way out of the ground. Its head was shaped like a pair of excavator buckets glued together by forest debris, and the rest of its body was like a hulking mud gorilla, plus a lizard’s tail to complete the look.

Turtle let out a noise that might’ve, in a different time and place, been a laugh. The two-tone reverberations made Izuku nervous.

“There’s your proof. Now, I have to leave,” Turtle suggested, pointing a black-armored hand at the earth monster looking down at them. As much as something without eyes could, at least. The edges of it rippled, as though the emitter-class Quirk fueling it was made of the same stuff as Tokoyami’s Dark Shadow. “I have a job to do.”

“You aren’t going to kill anyone, are you?” Izuku asked, despite the lump of fear in his throat.

Armored shoulders shrugged. “Hopefully not.” Turtle dropped onto all fours again, striding past the
earth-beast’s tail and heading back the way they’d come. The electronic buzz cut through the air, and Turtle’s head jerked as though a fly landed on one of those dark spikes. “Now, get going. **Eraserhead is down this path somewhere.**”

Izuku didn’t see a path, but the earth-monster took one thunderous step forward and cut off any chance to reply to Turtle before they disappeared into the forest. Going by the crash of wood and underbrush, they’d been holding back to act like Izuku’s one-person rearguard. It was more in line with what he’d seen when Muscular picked a fight he couldn’t hope to win.

Izuku hitched his shoulders higher, winced, and then said to Kōta, “We’re almost home free. Just hang on a little longer, okay?”

“Mm-hm,” was his quiet reply, and he pressed his face into the back of Izuku’s shirt. “Go fast?”

Izuku activated One For All again. “You bet.” And they were off, as fast as Izuku could manage. They outpaced the earth monster in seconds, but heading directly away from it meant nobody could approach them from behind. It was almost as though Turtle was still guarding their backs.

Aizawa-sensei, when they finally found him, was not happy. Midstride when Izuku and Kōta hurtled into his path, he skidded to a stop so he’d avoid crashing into them. And from the looks of things—like the smell of burning cloth—he’d had about as peaceful a night as they had. The scowl on his face looked so permanent they’d never get another evil grin out of him again.

Kind of a shame, but Izuku was too busy sagging in relief because he finally had a friendly face to greet instead of a monster one. He’d take Aizawa-sensei at his absolute grumpiest over anything else right now.

“Midoriya, what happened to you?” Aizawa-sensei demanded, careful not to touch his broken arm as he eased Kōta out of Izuku’s grip. Even though a five-year-old hardly weighed anything, especially with One For All and endorphins running rampant through Izuku’s veins, seeing Kōta in the arms of a pro hero eased just a bit of stress. The rest remained.

“One—one of the villains, Muscular—” Izuku swallowed. His throat was dry enough to crack. Had it really been less than an hour since they gathered for the Test of Courage? “He tried to kill Kōta. He broke my arm when he hit me.” He winced as his ribs screamed at him again. “And then he hit me into the cliffside. I might’ve broken something else.”

“I’m not hurt!” Kōta piped up, with his face nearly in the midst of Aizawa-sensei’s capture scarf. “But I would’ve been if he hadn’t showed up.”

Aizawa-sensei’s expression softened, but only insofar as he wasn’t angry at Izuku anymore. It didn’t take a mind-reader to know he was still in pro hero mode and not troll-his-students mode. “Did you do any damage to yourself? Using your Quirk?”

_Do you believe someone will come save you after you destroyed yourself again? Whichever way you look at it, your Quirk is a liability._

“N-no, they’re less—” Shattered? “It’s not as bad, Aizawa-sensei.” Izuku could only cradle his left arm and bite back the pain. It wasn’t working. “One of those, uh, vigilantes showed up and beat him down before it could get worse. Everyone’s alive.”

Though unconscious. Muscular was probably the only person on the planet who had a problem with how that fight had turned out.
“I see.”

“I-I’m sorry, it was before the combat authorization came through,” Izuku said, before he could stop himself. Kōta would tell him later if Izuku didn’t now. “I didn’t use my Quirk to attack him, though, just to keep Kōta safe. Only, um, he was faster than me. But I still couldn’t just run and save mys—”

“Midoriya,” said Aizawa-sensei, cutting him off. As Izuku peeked up at him through his curly bangs, Aizawa-sensei sighed and said, “You did the best you could with what you had. We’ll discuss it after the crisis is over, understand?”

“Yes,” Izuku managed, though the tension thrumming through him didn’t abate. “Sorry.”

“Apologize by getting yourself to safety.” Aizawa-sensei frowned down at the top of Kōta’s head for a second, torn. Izuku was badly injured, but not so badly that he couldn’t carry a five-year-old, and Aizawa-sensei needed to be where the villains were. Otherwise, his Quirk was about as useless as Izuku’s right now. “Midoriya, can you make it back with him?”

“Definitely, Aizawa-sensei,” Izuku said, though he once again hid a wince.

“Good. And if you see a villain with dark hair and burn scars…” Aizawa-sensei’s expression darkened still further. “He has a fire Quirk. Stay out of his way and let Vlad King handle it.”

Izuku, all too familiar now with the acrid tang of smoke, nodded immediately. Kōta climbed up onto his back again without a problem, even more careful of Izuku’s injuries than before.

“Go.”

Before Aizawa-sensei went his own way and faded from view, Izuku spared enough time to hope that everything would be okay. The villains would all be subdued, Kacchan would be fine, and they’d all get to go home safe.

A strange little puff of a laugh echoed in his head—a memory.

Shinsō’s voice, strangely. “Don’t taunt the universe, Midoriya. It can’t take a joke.”

Chapter End Notes

It kinda feels like the Commencement Arc again, but with fewer Kei POVs.

Also, Vlad King is absolutely going to trash the Dabi clone offscreen. Everyone’s running around like headless chickens at the moment, so why not?
Kinesthetic Learning

Chapter Summary

Kakashi is the world's least suitable kindergarten teacher, but he is keeping this group alive come hell or high water.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long wait, folks. But hey, this one's a doozy. >:3c

(Also, there ought to have been a "graphic depictions of violence" warning on this particular chapter when it went out. Sorry for the late notification!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kakashi could multitask like a champ, but this kind of situation begged for not just extra brainpower—which he always had—but at least twice as many people. Many hands made for light work, and forty students at risk were quite the weight to carry.

Unfortunately, only one of their team had any aptitude for Shadow Clones, and Kakashi's nose identified Obito square in the middle of the growing blue fireball visible even now over the treetops. That was the kind of distraction clones just didn't have the initiative or sense to avoid. Obito would be fine, but he was as pinned down as he ever got just by deciding to pick a fight the fire-spitter and whatever other villain was with him.

Kei, on the other hand, currently carried the stink of blood, steel, and Isobu's chakra like a banner, and the wind carried that to Kakashi alongside smoke and fear. Going by the distant sound of screaming and the metal-on-metal engine noise of what sounded like a power tool, she'd found her mark. The Nōmu reeked of hospital chemicals and cleaning fluid, with a trace of humanity partially buried underneath it all. Knowing where the creatures were born didn't change the facts: It would have to be killed. Heroes even agreed—or at least Endeavor gave that impression. No one mourned the Nōmu.

Even if Kakashi's status as a “sentimental sad sack”—per Obito—wasn’t widely known, and he could turn off most of his compassion for the mission’s sake, his stomach still twinged unpleasantly at the thought of what the Nōmu really were. In another life, Tenzō might've ended up like them.

Hopefully, Kei’s partnership with Isobu would deal it a quick death.

“Get out of the way, you Icy-Hot Bastard! I'll kick his ass without your help!”

“What part of ‘fire hazard’ can’t you get through your head?”

Kakashi sniffed the air just once, confirming the smell of destroyed trees, smoke and explosives, alongside what had to be saliva and bone dust. The last villain compensated for his many personal failings with a knack for finding the correct target, then.
Unlike Kei, Kakashi and Obito didn’t attend high school, which gave them plenty of time to be a little more productive than just sitting on their hands or behaving like tourists. That meant reconnaissance, research, and resting between bouts of activity. Aside from Obito’s Kamui and trips back to Konoha, the pair of them used less chakra while tucked safely into the nondescript Musutafu apartment complex than they did on any normal mission. That gave them the time and (partial) focus to research potential opponents.

Since Stain’s debut, dozens of minor criminals—only earning the rank of “villain” once they used their powers—worked their way out of the underground with varying degrees of effectiveness or notoriety. Kakashi methodically looked up and then disregarded villains too far below his team’s paygrade, because Kei’s mission parameters forced him to prioritize S- and A-class threats. Few others were likely to attack established superheroes without some kind of advantage, whether in powers, numbers, or both.

And then there were these “fucking jackasses,” to use Kei’s wording.

And specifically, here was the notorious death-row inmate called “Moonfish.”

ANBU didn’t exactly give Kakashi expertise on codename conventions in a Quirk-ridden world, but his novels *almost* did. That, right there, was an eyesore of a name.

Blade Tooth, a Quirk of a type that should’ve belonged squarely to the Kaguya clan, let the straitjacket-wearing cannibal maneuver the battlefield like a Suna puppet. He whipped through the trees with extended enamel leading the way. Off-white, branch-like death shot from his mouth all across the forest, lancing through trees and dirt and nearly people before retracting for another go. Between his full-body black suit and power, he didn’t care about smashing through the canopy to follow his quarry—Bakugō, Todoroki, and 1-B’s Tsuburaba, in this case.

He also utterly failed to notice Kakashi’s presence.

Ice crashed nearby as Todoroki brought up another defensive wall, and Moonfish’s transforming teeth gave him the world’s *most* improvised crampons.

Kakashi watched Bakugō throw himself skyward on the power of his explosions, miss, and nearly impale himself on an icicle without doing any substantial damage to anything. Moonfish’s maneuvering was just that tiny margin too unpredictable. With Obito’s eye open and already attempting to give him a headache, though, Kakashi could see exactly where the villain was going to land.

“Flesh… Show me your flesh…” Moonfish rasped, drooling down the length of his extended teeth.

Kakashi detached himself from the shadow of the tree all of the fighters somehow avoided mangling, then aimed.

*Body Flicker.*

In a blink, Moonfish jerked out of the air as Kakashi planted a boot between his shoulder blades and slammed him *down*, hitting a different tree on his way to the ground. Moonfish’s body struck a thick branch, folded, and then the branch snapped under his and Kakashi’s combined weight when Kakashi smashed into him again. There was an abortive shriek of pain and surprise, and then Moonfish struck dirt with Kakashi’s sparkling hand on his head, and knee crushed into his back to make sure he hit face-first.

Several of the white enamel spines shattered when the ground met Moonfish’s open mouth. Blood
oozed, and for the first time, it was Moonfish’s blood instead of a student’s.

“D-do not snatch my pri—” the villain burbled through blood and broken teeth.

“Bakugō, don’t—!”

Kakashi let go of Moonfish and leapt out of the way just in time for Bakugō to charge through the space he’d just occupied, palms exploding. Moonfish wheezed, thrown six meters and rolling from the impact of Bakugō’s attack.

And yet, though half his teeth lay scattered across the forest floor, Moonfish got to his feet.

Bakugō, slightly out of reach of either of the other fighters, twitched in Kakashi’s direction solely because he was closer. His red gaze whipped back and forth between the two of them, because he wasn’t sure.

Kakashi considered his options for maybe a fifth of a second. Bakugō was a pain, Todoroki was holding back, and Moonfish was still upright. Done.

Thus, he took advantage of the lightning still arcing through his arm and the placement of Moonfish’s metal accessories, and hit the villain with a bolt strong enough for a taser. When he remembered another key detail of Kei’s encounter with Yaoyorozu, and Moonfish didn’t stagger properly, he increased the energy output until Moonfish toppled into the broken earth and smashed the rest of his teeth into uselessness.

And he kept going, blue-white near-plasma connecting his hand and Moonfish’s writhing form as the villain spasmed on the ground. Giving Moonfish a full seizure wasn’t a part of the plan, so Kakashi cut the lightning short when the feedback from his jutsu told him the man was finally unconscious.

Genjutsu tags would’ve been easier, but Kei’s work functioned best when the victim wasn’t already in mind-scrambling amounts of pain.

Speaking of, the ground trembled faintly with the power of distant exploding seals. Kei must have managed to drive her enemy into the perimeter. Knowing the Nomu line’s durability, subduing one of them would take a while. Maybe more time than any of them could afford.

Still, that was elsewhere. Kakashi let his hand rest at his side again, no longer tingling with tamed lightning, and shook splinters free before picking his way through enamel shards. He kept going until he cleared the ice wall, putting himself deliberately between Todoroki and Bakugō to minimize the chance that either would attack. They could, but a miss would absolutely put their counterpart in danger.

So, Kakashi had nullified the chance that Todoroki would try to charbroil him. Bakugō’s unilateral aggression didn’t care as much.

“Get back to the lodge, now.” Kakashi heard the electronic reverb in his mask as it twisted his voice into something closer to Jiraiya’s more bombastic tones, frowning slightly. He understood the concern about having his voice recognized, though he’d never formally met any of Kei’s school associates besides Shinsō. And didn’t plan to. “This villain has been neutralized.”

“Who the fuck are you supposed to be?!” Bakugō snarled, stomping forward with both of his palms spitting smoke. He got within four meters before Kakashi’s hand shot to his ANBU-issue katana, stopping him short. It seemed Stain had left a mark on the hero students’ collective consciousness.

Or it was just a sword, and that was enough.
Out of the corner of his eye, Kakashi saw how the frost coated Todoroki’s right sleeve, and he still had his arm raised in Kakashi’s direction. Assuming hostility was as close to prudent thinking as these students had now. Running still would’ve been better, even if Kakashi wasn’t as intimidating or uncompromisingly hostile as Moonfish. Then again, he had just clobbered Moonfish into the dirt.

“I’m talking to you, you masked freak!” Bakugō really was a yapping dog, wasn’t he? Just much less charming than a real one.

“Bakugō, this isn’t helping.” Ice cracked, and Todoroki’s left side briefly lit up in orange before snuffing himself out.

Kakashi closed his left eye to spare himself further chakra drain. The attack wasn’t over yet, though he already wished, just in the back of his mind, that it was.

“Shut up, Two-Face! You can’t trust every nobody that swoops in to save your lazy ass! He’s wearing a mask, and he hasn’t fucking said anything to tell us who the fuck he is! He can’t be trusted!”

“They’ve been here for days, Bakugō.” Todoroki scowled, shifting Tsuburaba on his back.
“Midoriya spotted them the first night we were here.”

“Oh, well if Deku saw them,” Bakugō repeated mockingly, temper flaring up yet again. “You’re so fucking gullible—”

Kakashi was going to have a headache an hour early at this rate. He was starting to understand why Kei permitted or even encouraged people to antagonize Bakugō. And why, given the chance, she’d forgone her ethical concerns about mind control to have Shinsō shut him up for a while.

“Shinobi-san,” Todoroki said, while Bakugō hissed and sparked and cursed up a storm, “what did Aizawa-sensei want you to say when you met Midoriya earlier?”

Kakashi watched Bakugō’s rant crash to a halt, which—he’d admit—was about as entertaining as anything right now. “He asked me to apologize for scaring Midoriya-san so many times,” he replied, shrugging.

Just for a second, all the fight seemed to go out of Todoroki at once. His shoulders sagged and he let out a breath that was a little ragged, though things were calm now. Kakashi didn’t know the kid that well, but his relief was palpable, and the ice coating his right cheek hissed off into steam.

“…That’s it?” Bakugō asked, expression caught in perplexed fury, his fingers still curled in a claw-like stance. “That convinces you?”

Todoroki set his jaw, then wrestled himself back under control enough to say, “Shinobi-san. Which way is the fastest route out of the forest?”

“Turtle to Wolf,” Kei’s voice said in Kakashi’s ear. Her voice boomed with Isobu’s undertones, but not to the same degree as before. “The chainsaw Nōmu is down. The gas villain is down. I spotted
Tokoyami, but I think he’s headed your way, and Dark Shadow’s gone wild. I can’t stop him yet. Over.”

“Crane to Wolf! Fireboy and Double Trouble ditched thanks to that purple mist bastard, so things are less on fire. I’ve been picking up kids and getting them back to the lodge.” Obito dragged in a ragged breath, then added distractedly, “I’ve got…ten? I think? Where do you want me? Over.”

“Vlad King to all points: We’ve got twenty-eight students accounted for at the lodge, and two more on the way. Over.”

When it rained, it poured. At least not everyone was on the same communication channel for the entire mission. If they had been, Kakashi’s eardrums would’ve blown out ages ago with the sound of hero chatter.

Kakashi held up a finger to Todoroki’s question, then started rattling off commands, “Wolf to Turtle. Scout the area and bring down any remaining villains with extreme prejudice. Crane, pull back and pinpoint my location. You’re on standby to collect Bakugō.” He couldn’t give direct orders to the heroes, but he could try warning them. He was just lucky none of them had realized he was fifteen years old. Adults had a hard time taking teenagers seriously here. “All points: Stay on guard.”

He got a storm of confirmations, and then it was time to leave.

Todoroki, who had waited patiently thus far, said, “Well?”

“Stay on your guard. We’re moving to an extraction point.” And by saying that, Kakashi knew he’d as good as nailed his own feet to the ground. Bodyguarding missions like this were immeasurably easier in a world where his team could actually use all of the tools available to them. Haring off into the forest to hunt down the enemy ahead of time was a better use of everyone’s resources. It was proactive.

BOOM.

But no. That would be too easy.

He wasn’t Genma, but Kakashi could hear something crashing through the forest nearby, bringing the smell of blood with it. The same scent Moonfish had been carrying around, up until Kakashi broke his face.

Well, then.

Kakashi scowled under his mask, and his arm immediately started emitting blue light and sparks from fingertip to elbow. “Get back, now.” He didn’t look to see if the two hero students obeyed.

And then a writhing mass of living shadow exploded out of the trees. Two burning points of red glare marked where Dark Shadow’s eyes glowed like spotlights, and the beak was lined with foot-long razor teeth made of darkness. It was like a jinchūriki’s V2 cloak run rampant, but no jinchūriki Kakashi had ever met was ten meters tall. Almost unnoticed, Shōji scrambled past both Bakugō and Kakashi, one hand bleeding, and looked like he was about to shout a warning.

He probably needed to conserve his chakra first of all. And Tokoyami’s weakness was, in the end, public record. Kakashi sighed inwardly as he let the sparks die.

This place.

“Bakugō?” He probably didn’t need to prompt the kid to do anything. Ever.
“Gotta do everything myself around here!” Bakugō, of course, hurled himself forward with typical calculated recklessness. Dark Shadow didn’t have enough sense to keep its face guarded when it’d just flattened a decent chunk of forest. “SHUT UP, YOU BIRD BRAINED BASTARD!”

There was an explosion, against which both Kakashi and Todoroki shielded their eyes.

“What a reli—who are you?” Shōji stared at them all, poleaxed.

“Wolf, I think. He’s been around.” Todoroki could handle introductions, even if he was about as enthusiastic as ever.

“Let me see that arm,” Kakashi said instead. Or arms, really. Shōji could’ve had up to six hands, but one of those arms ended in a bleeding stump. And for all Moonfish’s skills, it looked like making a clean cut had worked out in the hulking student’s favor.

Shōji visibly hesitated. Kakashi spent enough time looking at his own face in a mirror to be able to read a mask like that. “Um.”

“Just fucking go with it. Bleeding everywhere’s unsanitary,” Bakugō snapped, even as he hauled a gasping Tokoyami back to his feet.

Shōji, thanks to either blood loss or the stress of the situation, acquiesced once he was sure Tokoyami was all right and could sit against a tree trunk. One of the few intact ones. “…Okay.”

“My apologies, Shōji-kun,” Tokoyami said as he settled down for a brief break, too. “I lost control of myself, despite all the training I’ve been doing to avoid exactly that. You shouldn’t have had to deal with that on top of losing your hand.”

“I’ll be fine,” Shōji replied. “It’ll grow back eventually.”

The two of them shut up and allowed Kakashi to dig out a medical pack from a storage seal on his hip and get to work, which was all Kakashi could ask for. His field-medec skills left several elements to be desired, starting with a lack of true healing or any medical ninjutsu, but Kakashi practiced on enough dummies to have gotten the idea. If he hadn’t, Rin would’ve developed Kamui herself and reached through the space between worlds to smack him upside the head for neglecting any useful—life-saving—skills.

Shōji’s wrist was wide enough around that Kakashi needed both hands to wrap it. Humans were weird here.

“Do you need a break from Tsuburaba-kun, Todoroki-kun?” Shōji asked, while Kakashi worked.

“…Maybe. But you’re hurt.”

“I have five more hands. I’ll be fine,” Shōji insisted. One of his hands turned into an eyeball and followed Kakashi’s movements, probably in case he had to redo the dressing later by himself. “You need both of your hands free to fight effectively.”

Todoroki looked like he was about to argue, but deflated instead. “I… Fine. Okay.”

“We already know that Bakugō is the main target,” said Tokoyami. He’d given up on his apologetic kneeling and instead gotten to his feet again. Dark Shadow was nowhere in sight. “Do we have a plan?”

“Easy. We just get your Quirk to rampage again, but pointed the other way,” Bakugō put in, crossing
his arms. With his jaw jutting defiantly, he went on, “Icy-Hot and I can keep your bullshit under
control if it’s a problem, and Catch These Hands guards the 1-B deadweight. Mask Freak can circle
us or something. Fuck if I’m getting caught off-guard by another one of these creepy bastards.”

“Done,” Kakashi announced, as though he hadn’t heard a word any of them had said. He wasn’t
necessarily happy with his work, but hopefully this would lead to less of a blood trail. He helped
Shōji up, which was likely unnecessary, and then went to his radio. Shōji could keep the medical kit.
“Wolf to Crane. I have four students with me. Can you take them?”

All four boys paused as Kakashi waited for a response.

Instead of Obito, though, Kakashi heard, “Wolf, we have two more Nōmu in the forest. I ripped the
first one apart and it duplicated once per separated limb. So I guess we have five now!” There was
a muffled thud audible over the connection. Then ten solid seconds of animalistic shrieking and
crashing that overwhelmed the microphone’s intake and nearly made Kakashi pluck the earpiece out
to drown out the electronic scream. “I-I think another Nōmu is headed your way.” Kei’s breaths
sounded less cavernous now, like her lungs were finally the right size. “It’s different, but—”

Kakashi noticed the creature before Kei finished speaking.

“—bring it down!”

He’d already drawn his katana, charged it with chakra, and used the Body Flicker to get behind the
target. He was too busy stabbing to absorb details about its appearance until blood splattered over his
hands.

It didn’t fall.

Over three meters tall, pebbled gray skin and a mouth like a bear trap. Broadly humanoid, but
paunchy and lanky in a way that had nothing to do with body fat—the lumps, even from its back,
looked inflamed and cancerous. Its arms were too long to be human, and its breathing hadn’t even
stumbled when he jammed the katana halfway through its bloated torso. Up and through where a
lung should be, spraying blood and lymph everywhere from the exit wound.

It was the kind of strike that would drop a normal human instantly.

The creature staggered, but that was it. Blood dribbled down onto its ragged pants, but neither knee
hit dirt.

“What the f—” Bakugō was closer than he had to be. Closer than he should be.

Its head jerked, and thirty centimeters of bone spikes exploded out of it like a pressure plate trap.
Kakashi’s fingers missed impalement by a few millimeters, and the scrape of bone on steel was a
noise nobody needed. It flailed wildly, trying to rake Kakashi with its new spines and rend him to
pieces.

Lightning Release: Lightning Rod. Electricity crackled from Kakashi’s hands and down the blade,
lashing across the Nōmu’s nerves. It arced between spikes, charring flesh where it could. The
creature yowled in agony and snapped with its teeth, its head jerking around on its shoulders so it
could try and bite at his mask.

“Bakugō, get out of the way!” Todoroki shouted, and ice cut the students off from the fight.

And when Kakashi retreated with his katana wrenched free, the Nōmu’s body gave a sickening
lurch. Bone crunched in its head and shoulders, and then the stab wound itself—still dripping red—
sealed itself as soon as the obstacle was gone. Turning, the creature dropped its jaw and revealed a second row of teeth, backed by a red maw. It let out a roar that was half-human and borderline demonic. The sheer noise was more akin to the Nine-Tailed Fox in a rage, but nearly person-sized and in his face.

Kakashi didn’t falter. He’d cut his teeth in combat on animals and humans, and eventually Zetsu creatures. He’d killed on assassinations and infiltrations and on bodyguarding missions. He’d fought for lower causes.

He’d faced worse creatures and worse odds.

This Nōmu could dig out every trick in its kit, and it would not get past him.

A shriek and a hiss, and the spines retracted. The Nōmu swiped at him with too-long fingers that ended in claws, catching only air. Furious at its failure, it crashed forward while shrieking in an unholy frenzy.

Ice bracketed them on one side, trees on the others, and Kakashi shot from one tree branch to the next to stay off the ground. The creature threw itself after him, howling loud enough to wake the dead. Its spines extended again, catching on and carving into anything it touched, its claws bisecting trees with brutal efficiency.

Ninja wire, kunai, there—

Lightning surged from his fingertips, down the line, and blew one of its eyes apart from sheer heat where it struck. The other was already pierced, deep enough to cut into a human brain. The creature stumbled onward, a faint glow burning inside its ribs as four more eyes ripped their way open along its torso and neck, and a fifth one grew from above where one ear ought to be.

Not doing that again. Adaptive regeneration?

Its pustules quaked, squelching audibly as they changed positions under its skin. The creature hissed and wailed, unerringly tracking him even in the dark, despite the staccato rhythm of its shivering irises.

Kakashi darted away, trying to lead it as far from the students as he could manage. Even while baiting it, Kakashi’s next strike popped one of the abdominal sacs like a disgusting balloon. Greenish pus splattered across its front, and the creature doubled over as though in agony. Spines curled around its joints and sprang anew from its back, splitting skin and exposing a glowing orange organ that pulsed —

Something clicked, and then it was in his face, toothy maw opened wide as it blurred back into visibility.

Screaming, it ripped his armguard off in a single swing and tried to sweep his head closer to its teeth, jaws nearly closing on the nose of Kakashi’s mask. Its huge claws bit deep into his left forearm and sprayed blood across the branch as he toppled out of the tree. Kakashi curled around the injury just long enough to duck under its follow-up when he hit the ground, then whipped the katana across and down . He’d have to thank Kei for this trick later.

Hunting Tiger Strike.

The creature might’ve hurt him, but he took its monstrous claws apart in two swings. It reeled, keening, and Kakashi took that chance to retreat beyond the edge of Todoroki’s ice field.
Enhanced speed had not been its thing a few seconds ago.

Still, given the lack of secondary pain beyond the injury itself, Kakashi was going to have to let the wound sit for now. Treating contact toxins of any type were just that far beyond his current abilities. And even Rin wouldn’t have started treatment in the middle of an ongoing fight.

Instead, he tucked his left arm close and leveled his katana with his right, channeling lightning once again. The entire blade lit up blue-white and cast the Nōmu’s horrific face into sharp relief.

“Get away from him!” Todoroki’s voice called out, just before ice swamped the area.

Entire trees were encased from root to crown. Ice chunks pelting the creature as it dodged, jolting from place to place in a parody of the Body Flicker. Even when struck it squarely in the brain, it just kept moving.

What would it take to put this thing down?

It was unfortunately Kakashi’s job to find out. No matter how many tries it took.

*Body Flicker.*

This time, Kakashi plunged the blade home in its neck. Through the back of its open mouth, blade angled up, and *sliced*. Electricity arced through him and into his target, cauterizing flesh. The air filled with the smell of smoked meat and burning fat as he split the Nōmu’s head vertically from below.

It gurgled and snapped ineffectually at the steel, but even that was more than any rational creature would have managed with its skull cut in two. He kicked off its chest and landed in a crouch, within stabbing distance.

Spines exploded out of it again, farther this time and forcing him back step by step, and the pustules along its body shuddered. The pierced one continued leaking greenish pus. The two halves of its now-separated head wobbled dangerously.

Then the spines closed up over the injury, pinned its brain back together like nails, and the chase was on again.

The ground briefly rumbled beneath them, and ice caught the creature’s legs as it stumbled drunkenly this time. Whatever speed it had seemed intermittent, like the street-level Musutafu Nōmu Kei had fought.

Ice shattered as it flexed, and Todoroki’s voice was drowned out by the sudden sound of yet more explosions.

“DIE, DIE, DIE!” was Bakugō’s war cry. His voice cracked on the last word, and Kakashi thought he saw fear in those red eyes as Bakugō’s attack made contact.

The creature was thrown by the blast, hitting a tree and crashing through the undergrowth. It was at least tossed away from the other students, but between the acrid smell of smoke, the blood, and whatever the Nōmu carried in those strange sacs, Kakashi couldn’t be entirely sure there was no one else in range of the fight.

“It won’t work,” Kakashi said, when Bakugō landed next to him. He couldn’t feel his arm yet. He was going to pay for that later. “The Nōmu is healing from everything I do.”
Bakugō’s head whipped around, face twisted in both confusion and frustration, eyes darting to the wound on Kakashi’s arm. Sweat trickled down his face as the realization struck. Then he rallied with a breath just a bit too rough to be called calm, growling, “It’s not like your Stain impression is working either! I got you breathing room, didn’t I?”

He had, but now Kakashi had to worry about not letting the key mission target get killed in the middle of a melee. And slipping in his own blood. And that thing getting its third second wind.

It wasn’t worth arguing now. Strictly speaking, the Nōmu wasn’t healing. Not entirely. It was gluing itself back together, worse each time. It had to be dealt with first. Kakashi couldn’t pass out before then.

“Turtle to Wolf—shit—do you have a way to kill it? I don’t know if you’re fighting right now but—”

The Nōmu got to its feet again, and the clicking noise—

Bakugō shot to the left with an explosion powering his escape, and Kakashi took the creature’s attack head-on.

Or rather, a Replacement took the brunt of it. Imaginary blood splattered across the grass as a fake Kakashi got ripped in half.

Someone screamed.

The log died under the creature’s claws, and then the fake-out faded and revealed the two chunks of wood left behind. The Nōmu had enough time to start turning back—probably toward Bakugō—before the log exploded in a ten-meter fireball. Not all of Kei’s explosive tags had been downgraded or turned into mines.

Kakashi hopped down from his vantage point and put Bakugō in a one-handed wrist lock when he tried to blow him up on reflex.

“You—! I—! Don’t fucking do that,” Bakugō snapped, eyes wide, but Kakashi heard the relief in his tone. Kakashi’s twist on the Replacement technique was a bit more visceral than standard. “You were just—”

He let Bakugō up and pointed wordlessly at the blast that had engulfed the Nōmu. With his good arm.

And when the smoke cleared, it was singed and thoroughly crisped, but still standing. And the trees weren’t on fire, because Kei’s explosives were mixed differently than Bakugō’s version. Seals did that.

“—complete cauterization to stop the thing!” was what Kei’s voice concluded, once there was time to process it. “I had to hold mine down and let the V2 cloak burn it out. All five of them.”

And Kakashi, despite the circumstances, was fairly sure he couldn’t ask Todoroki to burn it to death. The Musutafu Nōmu that had given Endeavor the most trouble was the one that regenerated, as far as Obito had seen, and he’d done so because there seemed to be no other practical manner to stop its cells from dividing. He’d also needed only to carbonize its head, where Kakashi’s going theory involved turning the creature into literal ash and dust.

Todoroki wouldn’t have the stomach for it. Neither would Bakugō, if he could concentrate his explosions to that degree. Kakashi knew who might, though.
“Wolf to Crane,” Kakashi said into his radio as the creature headed their way. Theoretically, they could outrun it, but its bursts of superhuman speed were unpredictable. There was a real chance whoever got caught under its claws would die if they didn’t either have great reflexes or a physical Quirk. Nobody here was going to have both for long. “Can you make it to my position?”

The Nōmu wavered for a split second. Its open jaw gurgled and spat dark red gunk, like tar was bubbling out of it.

“Can’t. I can’t—I can’t see,” Obito croaked.

Damn it. While Kakashi didn’t know if the heroes were the ones to blame for Obito overcommitting, Kei would’ve known not to ask for more than he could give. And Obito was selfless enough to almost kill himself for other people’s safety if they were desperate enough to ask.

“But all the kids are safe…’cept for yours.” Obito’s voice paused for a second, before he managed, “She’s headed your way. Sit tight.”

There was only one “she” in this context. With a grimace hidden by two masks, Kakashi admitted silently that it was likely their best option. Even as Todoroki encased the monster in ice again from his vantage point atop the artificial glacier, knocking this thing unconscious didn’t seem workable. Kakashi had already landed three killing blows by any human standard, to basically no effect.

“MOVE YOUR ASS, BIRDBRAIN! QUIT SITTING ON THE SIDELINES!” Bakugō roared up the ice structure.

Dark Shadow crashed down in a tidal wave of murderous, thrashing blackness, landing directly on top of the Nōmu.

If people could stop trying to get themselves killed, Kakashi thought, this would be over already.

Though Dark Shadow could smash trees into splinters, and having either Todoroki or Bakugō on standby meant they had a decent way to stop the process, Kakashi’s Sharingan tracked the Nōmu unerringly. Even though his vision was starting to tunnel, it didn’t take much to tell that while Tokoyami’s Quirk could rip huge gouges of flesh out of the creature, it was still trying to kill him back. Better, even, as each torn chunk stitched back into place like some spiny nightmare.

There was another ominous click.

Bakugō was just close enough to finally hear it. “What the fuck is that noi—?”

The Nōmu tore itself out of Dark Shadow’s grip and sprouted yet more barbs. Two of its pustules exploded when it pierced its own flanks with those spikes—not pale green, but a sizzling white that sparked and briefly flash-blinded Kakashi’s normal eye.

Tokoyami screamed.

“How—” Bakugō’s voice began, before Kakashi shoved him sideways hard enough to send him sprawling.

Immediately after, the air whooshed as a bone spike shot through the space where he’d just been standing.

Blinking lopsided spots out of his vision, Kakashi sidestepped the worst of the creature’s next attack when it headed his way. Bone spikes, launched just like the first one, glanced off his remaining armor and sliced into the back of his cloak. But superficial damage was acceptable.
Tokoyami was still in trouble, and that thing was still alive.

*Body Flicker.*

Navigating the storm of flechettes took more time and chakra than Kakashi could spare, but he still managed to snatch up the huddled Tokoyami and toss him bodily out of melee range. Another spike grazed the top of Kakashi’s mask and cut a line into the surface as he ducked, but there were no closer calls.

In a battle of endurance, Kakashi couldn’t use the Chidori. Until every other enemy was dead or neutralized, this fight counted.

And he was already flagging.

The creature roared again, and Kakashi didn’t move until the split-second when he felt—rather than saw—an ice wall block off Tokoyami from direct attack.

Another click.

When he laid eyes on the thing this time, it was because its direct charge bowled him off his feet—and impaled its own throat on his extended katana. Again.

Kakashi shoved the blade all the way through, lightning arcing with enough chakra behind it to make the entire sword glow and nearly blind everyone in the area. The Nōmu’s blood splattered hot and then ashen as Kakashi kicked his way free from its bulk, and even then the spikes carved bloody lines into him before he could get clear. His back was on fire.

Ninja wire connected his gloves directly to the base of the sword’s blade, and the entire creature thrashed wildly as he grabbed all its nerve endings and tried to burn them right out of its body.

Last shot.

It grabbed the wire in hulking, spiny hands and dragged itself up—or him down to its level.

His feet skidded on the upturned earth. His arms strained, wire biting into his gloves—

*“Clear a path, everyone!”*

*Finally,* backup. Kakashi’s knees nearly went weak with relief. Every limb ached from overextending his lightning transformation and all the other chakra costs he’d built up during the fight. Blood loss made his head spin. His sword sheath would be more of a cane than a weapon by now.

But that didn’t matter.

Kei slammed into the clearing hard enough for the earth to buckle. A curled tail of red-black chakra scooped Kakashi up by the back of his cloak with more care than he really needed, then flung him out of the Nōmu’s immediate line of sight and nearly on top of Bakugō.

What remained of his reflexes let him avoid landing on his head, with barely any assistance from Bakugō. He felt the other boy’s hands latch onto him, flinching away for a moment when his hands came away stained in blood, then come back to lower him the rest of the way to the ground.

Kakashi could feel Kei’s attention on him. The immense pressure of that chakra signature was almost a physical weight, but a comforting one. She’d kill the Nōmu.
She’d kill just about anything now.

“You’re fucked up,” Bakugō said, while Kakashi struggled to see what was going to be left of the Nōmu. “Don’t move, dumbass!”

Kakashi elbowed him with his good arm.

“Well, fuck you too,” Bakugō griped, before pivoting and shrieking into the forest, “Hey, Hands! Get out here, we need bandages!”

Then Kei’s chakra flared, and she turned her attention to the creature that had been harassing them for so long. Kakashi heard Bakugō’s breath hitch—Killing intent was never fun to experience for the first time.

“You’re dead,” Kei’s voice rumbled, through a synthesizer and enough Tailed Beast chakra to fight Sensei.

When the Nōmu tried to grab her and tear into the V2 cloak, Kei lashed out with both of the outer tails. Spikes that put the Nōmu’s to shame punched into its wrists with mechanical efficiency, with the third tail dragging the creature down to Kei’s eye level. Jaws as dark as blood let out a roar that split the air, and two chakra-armored arms wrapped around its thrice-pierced torso.

“That’s—” Bakugō croaked, still hovering like a guard dog. The kid was half-obscured from the fighters’ perspective by a broken tree trunk, which was enough like cover. It could work.

Kakashi let Bakugō do whatever. He managed to get to his knees as well, but only after a few seconds and only with one hand. His thoughts were filled with a faint buzzing noise as he closed his Sharingan—likely until the end of the night. A headache pounded behind his eyes. He leaned back against a tree stump to take a breather.

Behind them, Todoroki slid to ground level. Like Bakugō, he dropped to the ground and army-crawled over to their vantage point. Touching Kakashi’s blood made him freeze—hah—until he saw where it was coming from.

“Is he—”

“Can’t do shit until Hands gets here,” Bakugō snapped. He’d had enough of the fight, and instead formed a pressure pad of improvised bandages out of Kakashi’s ANBU cloak. Oh, this was going to hurt. “But he’s alive. Help me keep the fucking pressure on the arm.”

“That’s the monster from the USJ,” Todoroki said, while the Nōmu screamed and screamed. He couldn’t quite take his eyes off the fight.

Neither could Kakashi.

“Which makes this masked freak…” Bakugō trailed off. He blanched when the screaming intensified and he saw why. “Oh, what the fuck is it doing—”

Kakashi didn’t comment. He was covered in blood, out of chakra, and his nose burned from what felt like the worst kind of sensory overload. Instead, he propped his head up on his good hand and watched with a distantly satisfied feeling as the Nōmu adapted to the sudden massive infusion of Tailed Beast chakra the same way everything else did.

Namely: By dying.
Its flesh started to burn and flake off like ash. Already, its strange sacs bubbled away in a disgusting, blackening slurry of blood and pus. Its spiky limbs seemed to ignite from the inside, leaving skin and bone for last as muscle shriveled under the onslaught, and its struggles weakened in turn. That tongue flared and fell like cigarette ash. Its exposed brain cooked outright.

Kei wasn’t going to stop until the enemy was nothing but bones. That process would take a few minutes, during which the students honestly should have run to make up for the time they’d lost with the Nōmu in the first place, but Kakashi now knew that they’d obey him about as well as Naruto did. So, he let them watch until both Todoroki and Bakugō finally had to look away, sickened.

It was probably easier for their nerves if they concentrated on tending to him. He might’ve told them to focus if he could form the words.

Kakashi was the only one still watching when the Nōmu finally died.

The ligaments clung to those bones a little longer before they collapsed right out of her grip, but Kei didn’t linger on it. Instead, she dismissed the V2 cloak, leaving just a white-masked figure standing amid pure carnage.

Kei turned to face them and leapt, landing just in front of Kakashi’s folded legs. She took up almost all of his fading vision when she knelt in front of him, and he let out a barely-audible sigh of relief when she finally said, “Enemy neutralized, Wolf. Time to go.” Her voice sounded like Tsunade’s after a long shift. Worry ate at her. Why? “You with me?”

“Crane?” Kakashi heard himself ask faintly. His voice sounded nothing like it ought, and only partly because of the device in his mask.

“Stable. Recovering, even.” Kei turned her head toward the hero students, and they all—when had Tokoyami and Shōji gotten here?—flinched. To varying degrees. She stood up. “What are you all still doing here? You need to get out of the forest before someone else finds you.”

Something happened. Kakashi blinked and missed it, but there was screaming. His head was going to split in two like the Nōmu’s had.

“Don’t mind if I do!” What? Whose voice was…that?

Kakashi’s world pitched forward, with exhaustion catching him on the way down.

Chapter End Notes

This episode’s most persistent villain award goes to the Nōmu, whose particular set of Quirks was inspired by a wild combination of the "Iron Maiden" Regenerator variant from Resident Evil 4, the Alpha Deathclaw from Fallout: New Vegas, and a smattering of the "Beast of Legend" monster template from one edition or another of Dungeons and Dragons.
Child Endangerment

Chapter Summary

Kei takes back over the narrative, but this whole night has been the worst.

Chapter Notes

This chapter hasn't been beta-read.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Even before Kakashi passed out in her arms, due to both chakra exhaustion and an alarming amount of blood everywhere, Kei’s view of the situation was somewhere south of “bad.” Obito needed time to recoup his chakra losses from Kamui overuse. Kei had killed one-Nōmu-that-became-five by burning them out, taxing her tolerance of Isobu’s chakra in the process, and kids were screaming, and Kei didn’t have the fucking time for this.

Kakashi needed medical attention. She’d felt his chakra start fading a while ago, but being unable to actually get to him earlier resulted in…this. At least he was still alive. For now. Todoroki and Bakugō, going by the blood on both of them, looked like they’d tried to help.

Then the stage magician showed up, and things managed to get worse.

Bakugō—hanging back out of Kei’s immediate reach—disappeared into a green marble, which vanished up Top Hat Guy’s sleeve. Shōji, Tokoyami, and Todoroki whipped around, nearly tripping on their way to scramble a defense together, and that left Kakashi in Kei’s arms alone.

The magician bowed, like this was just another magic trick and not the world’s most efficient kidnapper. “Bye now!”

No, no, not after all this—

“KILL YOU—”

And Kei’s chakra hitched. Isobu was pulling back, because the greatest threat to Kei’s health right now was the same trick that let her kill all the Nōmu earlier. Her skin was seared from his chakra and rubbed raw by her uniform. Everything hurt. If she kept pushing for too long, she could burn herself out just like them.

Kei—

I don’t care! I’ll fucking burn if I have to! Kei lifted her head again, weight shifting so Kakashi rolled harmlessly out of her grip and to the ground. Killing intent flooded out of her like a physical force as she stepped over him, partial V1 cloak hissing like an angry kettle. She could barely keep the tails stable.
No more V2. Not now.

You will not be caught here, Isobu snapped. You will not die here. Listen to me! Isobu refused to allow any more face-melting, and Kei couldn’t fight him on it.

Kei snarled as the distant bones of the dead Nōmu finally collapsed into ash. Everyone’s eyes were on her. Out of mortal terror if nothing else.

Shōji and Tokoyami were the first to buckle under the weight of Kei’s murderous intentions. Neither fainted, but both hit the ground as their legs refused to support them any longer. Dark Shadow, still small, coiled over them and Shōji’s 1-B passenger, cowed but claws still raised.

She stomped past them. Neither barred her way.

Todoroki took longer—he was stock-still, but standing, and both of his Quirks were acting up in terrified self-defense. He didn’t get in her way. He didn’t even try. Both of his odd-colored eyes were fixed on her as she dashed past him, picking up speed.

The magician glowed green and vanished. Another marble blinked into existence, then fell amid the glorified landslide wreckage that remained from Kei’s earlier entrance.

Wha— Kei skidded to a stop, on the far side of the clearing. One of Isobu’s chakra tails loomed and lashed the area around her as she searched frantically for the villain. As foliage buckled under the force, Kei’s mind spun. It couldn’t have been another teleportation Quirk, could it? The villains already had one, and the Nōmu from before had something like one—

“Missed me!” the magician taunted, from the tree line. What was left of it, anyway. How did he get there? “Not as fast as before, are you?”

Kei launched a tail in his direction, purplish Rasengan leading the way, and the impact of that much solidified chakra pushed his sternum through his spine. Blood splattered everywhere. He splattered everywhere.

Gray-brown sludge. Not blood.

That is not a person.

I—the cloning villain—?! No, no, where is he—? The trees were in her way. Obscuring her line of sight when her chakra sense was useless.

So all three tails whirled out of her chakra cloak, bashing any potential cover to pieces and cutting a swath of the forest away. The trees groaned as they toppled. Wooden splinters flew, hopefully with enough force to dissipate any remaining clones or false leads.

Two sets of eyes swiveled around and spotted the purplish black portal—just the edge of it, near the Nōmu’s charred corpse—as a heavily scarred figure plucked something off the ground. Already halfway back into Kurogiri’s Warp Gate, and then everything was blue fire. Harmless in Kei’s desperation-fueled mind.

But not to the kids behind her. Isobu’s half-spectral jaws opened and the sky split. Chakra pressure alone blasted into the fireball, compressing and distorting its range. Blue flames warped back the way they came, in two separate, rotating storms, and that left the gate amid smoke and ash.

It was all of a meter tall, well off the ground, and a face was still visible. The same face.
“That’s a neat trick,” Scarface remarked, hand still raised as a satisfied smirk curled on his mouth. He sunk further into the gate, darkness encroaching over his features. “You’re a vicious bastard, aren’t you? Better luck next time.”

Isobu’s tail, narrowed to a point as thin as a katana’s edge, whipped through the gate less than a second after that face disappeared. Feedback told her glass shattered under her swing, and then the end of the tail stopped responding. Dissipated, right off the end of Kei’s control.

Cut like Kamui.

Nobody and nothing moved for what felt like a long time. It might’ve been a few seconds in real life.

Kei let Isobu’s chakra go, dissipating like steam in a breeze. The seal on her chest ached like a huge, ugly bruise, even if she couldn’t pry off her armor to examine it right now. She’d need to later. She’d need to practically peel her uniform off and curl up somewhere out of sight, just to recover from scorching her own skin. Not off, not yet, but fucking ow.

But right now, there was damage control.

Kei picked her way back up to where she’d left everyone else, forcing her mind away from the pain and the mounting frustration. The mission was still ongoing. The clearing was a fair bit larger than it’d been before, between the Nōmu and Kakashi and Tokoyami and Todoroki and also Kei slamming into everything, but that was a detail.

Isobu reached out to the back of Kei’s mind, armored fingers gentler than they had to be, and dragged her anger down into the water.

It wasn’t a real solution. She’d still explode later, or cry, or something, but that was later. This was now.

Kei raised a hand to her radio. “Turtle to all points.” She waited for a distant crackle of confirmation that someone was listening, then continued brusquely, “Wolf is down. I’m taking operative command. Two students are injured. Bakugō was abducted by the League of Villains. Barring further villain incursions, the situation is resolved. Over.” She took a steadying breath as she finally approached earshot—or what counted, given Shōji’s Quirk—of the UA students. Then she rattled off coordinates to give the heroes somewhere to converge.

“Crane to Turtle. Copy that,” said Obito’s digitized voice. Or something like it.

“Copy that. I’ll prep Wolf for the trip.” Kei let go of her radio when she was finally close enough to speak to the still-shellshocked UA students without having to raise her voice.

Todoroki angled his body so his ice half would have the most lead time to pin her in place, but there wasn’t much point in expecting an attack this late. Tokoyami’s expression was hard to read on a good day, but he was helping Shōji keep pressure on Kakashi’s mangled arm. He didn’t even have to let go of the still-limp 1-B student to do so.

The medical kit they were using was even the one Rin had given Kakashi as a promotion present, what felt like ages ago. Kei could see the charm from here.

Back then, the world had seemed simple for a blissful few days.
No time for that now.

“Shōji-san,” Kei said as she approached and wasn’t reflexively iced. Taking that as a good sign, she knelt just across from Tokoyami. “I can take it from here. The heroes will be here soon.” She produced her personal medical kit as proof, which was as good as she was going to manage for now.

And if Pixie-Bob had any delay on her damn earth monsters, she and Kei were going to have words.

All three of the boys hesitated. But, very slowly, the hesitation rattled out of them in fits and starts. Kei was as near an authority figure as they had right now, by dint of murdering someone in front of them and not trying to kill any of them. It was like dominance gestures, but exponentially more likely to blow up in her face in about ten minutes.

Todoroki let out a heaving sigh and sat down where he was, staring down at his hands. They were still covered in rust-red bloodstains. Tokoyami, after some hesitation, sat down next to him and started trembling.

Kei wished she had shock blankets to give them. Todoroki’s left side would have to do for now.

Shōji was the last to give in to panic, likely because he’d been looking after people for long enough that the focus kept him glued together. Like any survivor, latching onto something to do—or someone to protect—could keep a person moving when nothing else would.

She knew that feeling all too well. “Shōji-san, please keep an ear out for anybody heading our way. I won’t be able to.”

“R-right.” Two of his backup hands shifted slowly into ears, and he sat hunched between Kei’s surgical theater and his classmates for the next few minutes.

Good enough. Kei dismissed the UA boys from her thoughts for the moment and brought up a diagnostic jutsu between her gloved hands and Kakashi’s chest.

Lacerations and blood loss and chakra exhaustion were all, unfortunately, knowns. And for Kakashi in particular. Luckily, there didn’t appear to be any toxins in his system. Nothing she could identify. Rin would’ve been the expert here, but only if Kei operated under the assumption that a modern society couldn’t create more poisons than a pissed-off Suna puppeteer managed for the length of two wars. If there was a nonstandard mix pulsing through Kakashi’s bloodstream, the best thing Kei could do for his sake would be to get him out of here as fast as she could.

Strangely enough, the single worst contributor to Kakashi’s current state was still chakra exhaustion.

Kei knew how to deal with this. And neither condition required transfusions until after they were out of the jurisdiction of field medicine. While the good news was merely mitigating bad news, she’d take it.

_Triage. Deal with the situation as it is, not as you wish it was._ Like it or not, there was nothing Kei could do for Bakugō right now.

“In through your nose, out through your mouth,” Todoroki was saying, while Tokoyami leaned heavily against him and panted. “Just copy me, okay? One, two…”

“I’m sorry about this,” Tokoyami managed, after the third repetition.

“It’s fine. Again.”
Kei cleaned and dressed Kakashi’s arm with the same efficiency drilled into her from her earliest days as a shinobi. Armor off, antiseptic applied, excess blood cleared, bandages wound tight—but-not-too-tight. Between motions, between thoughts, Kei’s medical ninjutsu patched what damage it could for now—but carefully, like she hadn’t been with her power nearly all night.

Kakashi would live.

Kei’s fingers found her radio again, and she said through the connection, “Crane, get Wolf and bring him home. I’ll stay behind.”

It was a testament to Obito’s fatigue that he didn’t argue with her. Obito was in, then out, with the bare minimum of a Kamui portal to warp himself and Kakashi out of the forest entirely. Even with her chakra sense pointed squarely his way, she might’ve missed his presence if he hadn’t been the only source of chakra around.

Afterward, the only evidence he’d been there at all was the pool of drying blood and the absence of a source.

Then the air was filled with familiar wingbeats. One of Pixie-Bob’s earth monsters slammed into the ground hard enough to make everyone bounce. It was shaped like a budget pteranodon, the size of a house, and carried both Aizawa-sensei and Pixie-Bob herself. And what seemed like half a squad’s worth of emergency supplies.

“There they are!”

It was about goddamn time.

Kei didn’t voice that thought. That would be inappropriate and unprofessional—as though she had managed to avoid either tonight.

The two pro heroes slid off the creature’s back, Kei surveyed the damage. Not just to the forest—as unwarranted as some of that had been—but mostly the human cost. The Nōmu was down and irrevocably dead. And for the low cost of a brutal murder, extended fight, and immense trauma to all of the students conscious enough to comprehend what had happened, they were alive.

Bakugō was gone, but dammit, the rest of them were still here.

She turned to go, but caught Aizawa-sensei’s calculating gaze before she went. If she was in any condition to hold that conversation, she might’ve bothered sticking around for the headcount. But no. Her entire body still felt like she’d gone three rounds with an auto shop and gotten sand-blasted, and she was not dealing with heroes after this shitstorm until her head was back in order again.

Kei left to lick her wounds in peace.

It took a while.

Some days you win, and some days you let a teenager get kidnapped by creeps due to a series of fuckups.

There was nothing else she could do from her position and role while the students’ world fell down around their ears. Emergency service arrived a whopping two hours late to the party, too late to do anything other than mop up the aftermath. Kei watched the “rescuers” and their searchlights mill around like a disturbed anthill in the distance, then ducked her masked head so she could go back to removing traps. All the explosives were spent, in a frustrating waste of time and ink, so it was down
to the genjutsu tags now.

For a few more minutes, there was relative silence. Digging up her own minefield would’ve taken longer and been louder, but luckily genjutsu tags disarmed when touched by the right person. Aside from the overhead scream of an airtanker dumping fire-retardant foam all over the mountainside, Kei continued working in peace.

More than half of the students required hospitalization, thanks to the middle-school supervillain who called himself “Mustard.” Moonfish and Muscular had been captured alive, and six Nōmu corpses lay scattered across the forest—including the newest model of higher-ranking, jet-black drone. Only one was taken alive, and it hadn’t been either of the more effective murder-monsters. If not for their presence, Team Minato’s efforts might’ve eked out a different result. For now, they’d have to content themselves with a lack of deaths on their side.

Or rather, Kei would, given how this mission—and specifically the extended fights—put both of her teammates down for the count with chakra exhaustion.

Chakra exhaustion wasn’t difficult to identify, even in the heat of the moment. Unless bleeding to death or poisoned, the fatigue was honestly harder to ignore than not. But while trained medic-nin like Rin could accept Isobu’s chakra in a pinch, Kakashi and Obito had to make do with stimulants and non-Akimichi food pills. For Kakashi in particular, it just delayed the inevitable. Obito, on the other hand, misjudged his limits or deliberately overextended despite Kamui’s steep stamina cost, because the Mangekyō Sharingan only gave a partial fuck about chakra limitations when it had its own resource pool.

Neither of them were going to be leaving Konoha’s hospital for a while.

And they were in the hospital. They had to be.

Shoving that thought aside and meditating with Isobu’s help gave Kei time to grow most of her skin back. And to start working, because she always had something that needed her attention. She’d crash later.

Ahem.

Or sooner, I guess. Once we’re done here.

Acceptable, for now. Isobu felt contrite at best, withdrawn. Like he’d failed them both.

Kei ripped the last genjutsu seal from its tree, biting back more than one frustrated growl. With Obito barely scraping enough chakra together to squeeze out a last use of Kamui, Kei was left alone for the immediately foreseeable future. On cleanup. Again. It gave her too much time to think.

History might not totally repeat, Kei hissed silently, but it sure as hell rhymes.

You and the Nōmu do share some aspects of your personal history, Isobu said carefully.

And right now, so does Bakugō, Kei snapped, then sighed to herself. Bringing up Kannabi or the mission where she and Isobu first got shoved into the same headspace were both low blows. Sorry. I just really hate this. This situation sucks, but I shouldn’t snap at you. It’s not your fault.

The fault lies squarely with the villains, Isobu agreed. He tucked his hands underneath his shell, sort of like an immense and spiky cat. Though self-blame is a talent of yours.

Only the best for you, Kei replied, with about a quarter as much energy as she’d had when the sun
Of course.

She dusted off her gloved hands once the last of the genjutsu tags was safely stowed in her many pockets. This entire night wasn’t a total bust—they’d caught three villains and killed as many Nōmu—but losing Bakugō boded ill. Now that she’d actually had time to process some of the events, she had come to one conclusion.

Tonight needed to be over.

After the emergency cleanup crews cleared out, Kei would finally be able to leave. Arranging that much with the heroes was going to be delicate work, given how heavily scrutinized they’d be over the next media cycle, but like hell was Kei staying on this damn mountain longer than she had to. Aizawa-sensei and Vlad King almost certainly got shipped off with their classes as soon as the emergency crews packed up, so that meant she’d need to bother the Pussycats.

*The ambulances are leaving,* said Mandalay’s voice in Kei’s head, right on cue. She sounded tired, too. *You can come back down now.*

Probably more secure than a radio. That was about all in the way of the positive things Kei had to say at the moment.

She ninja-hiked her way back down the mountain. Picking out a secure path was easy enough; while she’d probably smashed through more forest than she’d explored lately, familiarity didn’t care about what *exact* experience spawned it. Kei made a mental note to apologize to the Pussycats about their destroyed homestead, but also admitted she’d probably forget to follow through within seconds. Fatigue dragged at her limbs and made her thoughts slower, if more spiteful. Even while healing, her brain was too taken up by everything else to bother with niceties.

**I know you do not appreciate hot springs, but…**

*But I’m not gonna start now,* Kei agreed, once she could see the lodge. Her shoulders sagged. It’d be nice to get out of this uniform and try to soak the pain away, or to just rest. She’d probably never be able to wear it again anyway. Even the inside of her mask smelled too much like blood and burning.

Post-fight crashes were not fun.

Kei slipped in through the office window, which had been left conveniently open. The lights were on and the room was occupied, but only by familiar faces. Namely Kōta and Ragdoll, now that all the business of locating lost children was over.

For now.

“Turtle-san!” Kōta jolted up, wide-eyed. He’d been lying on the couch under Obito’s spare coat, but there he was again. Alive, safe, and more than a little red-eyed.

He could keep the coat.

“Hey, Kōta-kun,” Kei said, and winced internally. Even through digital manipulation, she could hear how exhausted she sounded. “Good to see you’re okay.”

“But you’re not! You’ve got a limp,” Kōta said, even as he very carefully hugged her.

It stung like hell, but Kei had carried nastier injuries for worse reasons. Though she hadn’t noticed
the limp, it made sense. At least one of the splitting Nōmu had gotten a decent hit in, even if it was already almost healed. Still, she knelt down to Kōta’s height despite her knees popping, then said, “I’ll be fine. I heal pretty fast.”

Kōta frowned, skeptical to the end, before saying, “If I say I believe you, will you stop lying?”

“…No.”

“Fine! Be like that,” Kōta grumped, but he kept hovering even after he let go. When he patted experimentally at her arms, she winced, and he noticed. He stopped trying to hug her after that.

“I heard from Pixie-Bob—do you want to know if your friends okay?” Ragdoll asked. Climbing over the back of the couch, she almost rested a paw-shaped glove on Kei’s armored shoulder before obviously thinking better of it. Her customary smile fell. “Oh, you really don’t feel good. I wasn’t sure if I got a good view of your friends before they left, but…” She bit her lip.

Right, her Quirk. Keeping track of sixty-odd people was still well within her capabilities. Kei couldn’t say the same.

Ragdoll went on, “They’re going to be okay, Turtle-san. Wolf-san was badly hurt, but Crane-san should be able to get him where you need to go.”

Good to hear that that dosing Obito with both types of food pills and shoving a ration bar down his throat had gotten him that far. Kei hadn’t been sure he’d recover fast enough, Uchiha or not. But she supposed that, barring specific injuries she hadn’t scanned for, it was probably better than not getting a report from Ragdoll at all.

Ragdoll’s enthusiasm dimmed when Kei didn’t immediately answer. “Turtle-san?”

“I’ll need about eight hours to fully recover,” Kei finally admitted. She forced herself back to her feet again, then leaned against the office wall with her arms crossed over her armored chestplate. If she sat on that couch, she wasn’t getting up for a while. “But I can’t fall asleep until it’s over.”

Sensei needed one to explain what the fuck happened to two of his kids. Kei also had an eyewitness report for Nezu, but was less sure of the principal’s viewpoint. Or when she’d be able to covertly get her messages across, given that she’d left her cell phone in Tokyo and Obito wasn’t an option.

“Turtle-san…” Ragdoll brought one of her claws to her lip, thoughtful, then said, “I assume you don’t mean to push yourself because you’re planning reporting to us. But it would be really helpful to know what happened out there.”

Kei’s grimace pulled on too-new skin. Always fun. “Maybe. But Kōta-kun needs to go to bed first.”

She half-expected the kid to puff up indignantly. Instead, he crossed his arms in a fair imitation of her body language and looked down at his shoes. He scuffed his toe in the carpet. “Um… Maybe once Aunt Shino gets back.” He trembled when Ragdoll dragged him into her lap. “Please?”

“You got it, Kōta.”

Ragdoll picked Kōta up fully, rocking him like someone who wasn’t totally sure how to do it, but was determined to get it right on the first try. A rescue hero probably needed that kind of skill, though mission control like Ragdoll likely wouldn’t be an expert compared to Tiger. Or even Pixie-Bob.

Kei watched them with dull eyes, trying to pinpoint the moment when chakra exhaustion became
less pressing than the purely physical version. Isobu’s influence reduced the pain by near-imperceptible increments, but she still needed to stay awake. She sat down against the wall at some point, legs crossed and arms forcibly held in a meditation pose because there was nothing else to do.

Kōta fell asleep inside of the next twenty minutes, probably due to exhaustion. Emotional and physical. The coat was once again wrapped around him like an emergency blanket.

**You could have a report of your own waiting by the time you get to your base,** Isobu remarked, though Kei had been almost shutting him out for about an hour. No hard feelings, then.

Kei sighed, which was just barely loud enough to overcome Kōta’s snores. *Probably be fastest if Kushina did the heal bite thing, but I don’t know if it’s necessary.* It hadn’t felt necessary. If she went down that track, though, she’d just end up stewing for hours. That wasn’t the point of meditating.

Isobu hummed, then subsided.

When Tiger and Mandalay finally arrived, neither wearing their hero costumes, Kei lurched to her feet again and said in a voice pitched not to wake Kōta, “I can explain a rough version of tonight’s events, but please understand that I…cannot discuss certain details of my employment or my presence. Even now.” She drew a careful breath, then added, “But I’m willing to bend that under one condition: Is there any way you can get me back to Tokyo tonight?"

Both Mandalay and Ragdoll frowned. After a quick glance at each other, Mandalay said, “Are you sure you don’t want to stay? You’re only sixt—” Mandalay cut herself off and tried again with, “Your report—"

Kei shook her head. “At this point, I don’t care if you throw me out of a moving vehicle if it’s in the right city.”

“We won’t do that,” said Tiger, with most of his bombast tamped down. Maybe he knew Kei wasn’t in a state to appreciate it. “But I can get you there and listen to your story at the same time. Hope you don’t mind small cars.”

“I’ll live with it,” Kei replied. Ungrateful of her, sure, but she couldn’t find any fucks left to give. “Let’s go.”

Not long after getting into the car, Kei fell asleep in the back seat soon after finishing her somewhat censored take on events, despite her best efforts. The sound of the road and the passing light of street lamps attacked her dulled senses, and it was more effective than any lullaby she’d ever heard. She didn’t wake up until they were pulling into the Tokyo city limits.

**Chapter End Notes**

Shenanigans with space-time and size-changing strangeness are the *worst* to deal with.
Bring Your Own Device

Chapter Summary

Kei has some overdue conversations that are facilitated by neglected, much-mistreated Burner Phone III.

Chapter Notes

So after accidentally posting chapter 54 twice, I felt a bit bad, so here's chapter 55 in actuality.

Between the unscheduled car nap, running back to her Musutafu apartment over entirely too many rooftops, and finally holing up in the bathroom and stripping out of her ruined armor, Kei wanted nothing more than to roll out her neglected futon and crash face-first into it. All the caffeine in the world wouldn’t have kept her awake once she got to her pillow, even if she had an IV drip and death metal playing from the TV at max volume. If she made it that far, she’d be unconscious for fourteen hours straight. At least.

But no. Stuff to do.

Always something else needed to get done.

She turned the lights on once she emerged from the bathroom after a shower, finally wearing proper pajamas and a towel over her still-damp hair. Her skin was all back, and finally red for a different reason. She no longer reeked of blood and death. Even so, exhaustion deadened her limbs and made each footstep fall almost like thunder. It was a struggle to keep her business-mode brain active.

Opposite her futon’s resting place was a small cabinet that contained any clothes not in her closet. On top, quite inconspicuous, was an All Might wall scroll. Classic circus strongman pose, but no misplaced underwear. The border was lined with All Might’s iconic eyebrow-sigil set on a blue background. It was quite possibly the most American thing she’d ever owned, and it didn’t even count. Not signed, of course, and suitably tacky for an aspirational teenager on a budget. Midoriya probably would’ve been able to pinpoint the exact costume model and potentially even the photographer who’d made the shot. Kei just used it as camouflage.

Kei reached out and flipped it so the print image faced the wall. Two meters’ worth of space-time fūinjutsu decorated the borders of the back side, at Sensei’s insistence. Obito wouldn’t always be available to run messages back and forth. This was a back-up plan.

With her left hand holding her head towel in place, Kei picked up a nearby ball-point pen and started writing. I’m safe and back at base, Sensei. How are they?

The ink disappeared as soon as she put the pen down, and then all she had to do was wait.

By the time Sensei replied, Kei’d already scrubbed her hair dry through friction and towel power
alone. Her hair was getting a bit shaggy, and if she’d asked Obito would’ve been willing to help her cut it, but it was too late for that now. Water droplets rained everywhere as she shook her head out, but hell, it was summer. It didn’t matter if everything would dry soon.

They’re recovering, appeared on the page in neat characters.

Kei let out a sigh of relief she didn’t know she’d been holding.

I’ll get a verbal report soon enough. Kei glared at Sensei’s familiar handwriting, because she knew a deliberate omission when she saw one. She wanted details, but his writing continued, Rest for now. We’ll need you at full strength soon.

It wasn’t like her full strength made a difference a few hours ago, but Kei refused to resort to whining to Sensei about how much a given situation sucked. Some of her negativity needed to stay buried, or else she’d never get anything done. Understood, Sensei.

I mean it, Kei. We haven’t lost yet. There was a brief pause, and then Sensei’s handwriting continued as though he’d remembered what else he had to say. You haven’t made your report to the client yet, have you?

No, Sensei. Being exhausted and previously covered in blood sort of precluded showing up in a literal former lab rat’s office. She had some standards, and she wasn’t sure if Nezu had some significant triggers or not. Best not to try keeping herself awake like that when she was already half-smudging her writing, even after as much fūinjutsu training as she’d had throughout her career.

That’s fine. By the time you wake up in the morning, I’ll have something set up to help with the report. It should arrive around… seven your time, I think. Sensei paused again. Good night, Kei. Sleep well.

Good morning. Seemed…almost appropriate. Adequate, at least.

Then Kei kicked her futon into approximately the correct shape. Staring down at the mess for a little while and deciding that, yes, she probably needed to not wake up with a crick in her neck, she then got to work putting the futon in order. Along the way, she excavated her cell phone from the depths of the sheets. She’d shoved it somewhere into the depths the same night she’d left Tokyo for the mountains, since the cloth would muffle even its loudest alerts if there were any. It wasn’t until she got the pillows situated that she finally took a look at her poor, neglected smartphone. The screen glowed automatically when she picked it up, and then all she could do was wince.

137 messages, said the screen. Below that, there were six call notifications, a failed attempt at sending a picture, and a reminder to update her operating system.

Fucking hell. Kei sat on her bed and pinched the bridge of her nose. Did she want to deal with this now?

I think we both know the answer to that.

Technology, Kei thought as she unlocked her phone with her thumbprint. Can’t live with it, can’t— Kei paused. The screen readout wasn’t mind-boggling, precisely, but that was a lot of missed notifications. She thankfully only had one messaging app, though there was a chance her habit of turning off the bells and whistles of other functions might bite her in the ass here. Oh, boy. I’m suddenly really glad cell phone companies all offer unlimited texting and data nowadays. Even for pay-as-you-go plans.
I assume that means they didn’t in the past.

You’d be right, Kei thought, while scrolling through the mass of contacts who’d tried to get her attention over the last few days. The not-quite-future was still strange if she thought too hard about it, so she didn’t. Instead, she started from the source that had the lowest direct message count first, because it seemed like as good a place to start as any.

SpaceSlam: Hey, are you there?

SpaceSlam: Gekkō-chan?

SpaceSlam: You’re probably already on vacation.

SpaceSlam: I’m really sorry we can’t all hang out for the first week! Please try to have fun without us hero-hopefuls, okay?

SpaceSlam: ...Do you even have your phone?

SpaceSlam: Helloooooooooo?

Given the timestamp, Kei had already buried her phone under Mount Futon and left for the camp ahead of the hero kids by the time Uraraka started texting her. That made sense, since none of the hero kids could’ve kept up a conversation once the training camp properly kicked off. Or they could have, but Kei had a vague notion of GPS data as a security hazard and hoped everyone retained enough foresight despite exhaustion to turn their damn phones off.

The next message had arrived about two hours ago.

SpaceSlam: Everything’s…bad right now, but I promise I’m okay. Don’t watch the news for a little while, at least until after we talk? Please?

Kei did a bit of mental math and concluded somewhat uncertainly that Uraraka probably sent the message from the hospital. If not, from her apartment after getting discharged. Her internal timeline of this spectacularly bad night was patchy, and she genuinely wasn’t sure where Uraraka and Asui had been or who they’d run into during the forest fight. Maybe Obito knew, but he wasn’t in a place to talk about it. Had they been hurt?

Kei’s fingers hovered over the onscreen keyboard as she tried to figure out what to say. What had she told Shinsō she was supposedly doing for the last half-week?

TMNT-TNT: I went home for the first couple days of break and just got back. Did something happen?

SpaceSlam: What happened to your phone?

Well, that answered the question of whether or not she was still awake. Poor kid.

TMNT-TNT: Small town, and I broke the other one. And you didn’t answer my question.

SpaceSlam: You sure you want to hear it? It’s late. I mean, you should be in bed, I should totally be in bed, but my brain’s keeping me up and it sucks, but I don’t want to keep you up if you’ve been traveling all day?
TMNT-TNT: I think I can make that call for myself.

TMNT-TNT: I promise I didn’t see the news.

SpaceSlam: No, it’s just

SpaceSlam: It’s hitting me all at once and I can barely see the screen and it sucks

SpaceSlam: i don’t think i can.

TMNT-TNT: Deep breaths. If that’s all you can do right now, that’s enough.

Uraraka’s typing icon flickered indecisively.

Kei backed out of that conversation and flipped to another one. Homura, instead.

LampLamp: Your sense of humor is terrible. Why LampLamp of all things? I’m not talking to you until you change it. (≧.defer≦)

Given the lack of other messages, Homura had given up trying to contact her after not getting a response. And she hadn’t figured out how to change the chat settings, despite mastering something as complicated as emphasis. Oh well.

Then the entire screen blanked out as Uraraka called.

“Hello? Uraraka-chan?”

“Hi, Gekkō-chan.” To be frank, Uraraka sounded horrible. Snuffy and snotty and super stressed-out. “I can’t really—um, I’m sorry I told you not to watch the news. It’d be easier if you knew. I th-think.”

“It’s fine,” Kei said. Even if she hadn’t been running around all night, it was past midnight and perfectly normal to have a croak for a voice. “What happened?”

“You know how we had that training camp?” Kei nodded, though Uraraka couldn’t see her. Either way, Uraraka went on, “It ended early. And the reason it ended early is because when we—we weren’t…” Uraraka took another deep breath. “There was a villain attack, and I just got off the phone with my parents, and I’ve just been worrying constantly, and now I can’t get to sleep!”

“That’s—what happened?” Kei raised her voice on the last word like she hadn’t been there in the forest the whole time. It was easier to lie without looking Uraraka in the eye.

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“That’s—what happened?” Kei raised her voice on the last word like she hadn’t been there in the forest the whole time. It was easier to lie without looking Uraraka in the eye.

“Tsuyu-chan and I got jumped in the forest. This—Toga? I think? She attacked us and drained my blood, and she was a part of the League of Villains!” Kei blinked at the ceiling. Well, that confirmed where the creepy schoolgirl had been. “I fought her off, but she got away. Almost all of class B breathed in knockout gas and are in the hospital, and so are Jirō-chan and Hagakure-chan. Shōji-kun lost a hand and Deku broke his arm, and—”

Kei let Uraraka get everything off her chest. She made appropriate listening noises when Uraraka stopped, but there wasn’t really anything she could say to make things better. Being in her shoes—more than once—didn’t make Kei any better at platitudes. This was a time for venting.

“—And Bakugō’s gone.” Uraraka sighed, and Kei got the distinct impression she was staring as hard at her ceiling as Kei was at hers. “A lot happened. Things are bad right now.”
“Sounds like it. I’m sorry.”

“*It’s not like you were there. It’s not your fault.*”

Kei flinched like Uraraka had punched her. Unintentional guilt trips were the worst. “Even so. All I can do now is listen, but… Do you feel better?”

“A bit.” Uraraka’s voice was a little muffled. “*But now I’m—I just want to sleep and hope today didn’t happen, you know?*”

“Yeah. Take care, okay?”

“Okay. *Good night, Gekkō-chan.*”

Kei didn’t feel like going through the rest of her messages after that. There were a few incidentals left—Iida and Kirishima and Shingetsu—she could put off until later. Yaoyorozu hadn’t sent anything since before camp, never mind during, and they’d all been about costumes and Quirks. Given everyone’s uncertain status, Kei decided the best course of action was to hold off until she could start thinking properly in the morning. Maybe.

And then there was Shinsō’s little slot on her phone.

The last few messages, out of more than sixty that she didn’t have the patience to read, went thus:

**Purble:** Seriously, did you kill your phone again?

**Purble:** I’ll hold a funeral for that thing.

**Purble:** “Here lies Gekkō’s phone, because she’s a cheapskate who keeps getting cited for water damage.” Your face will be on a wanted poster behind every combini counter. Like in those crappy American movies.

**Purble:** Hell, are you dead?

**Purble:** Gekkō, pick up your phone.

**Purble:** I’m not mad about this crappy screen name.

**Purble:** …Anymore.

**Purble:** Gekkō?

And to think, most of the rest of the messages had been cat photos. Most of their total accumulated chat history was cat photos, internet in-jokes, and scheduling their various training sessions. Shinsō must’ve been beside himself with worry for the past few days.

She sighed and tapped on the screen.

**TMNT-TNT:** I’m alive.

The typing icon appeared on Shinsō’s end immediately. Why the hell was he still awake?

**Purble:** Wh

**Purble:** Where the hell have you been?!
Purble: Did you drop your phone in a lake or something?

TMNT-TNT: Basically. I couldn’t get a new one until I got back to Tokyo. Sorry.

Oh look, the first direct lie she’d told in a while. If she changed the phone cover, it wasn’t like anyone could tell all of her burners apart.

Purble: I’m sitting here

Purble: in the dark

Purble: at two in the morning

Purble: after not being able to sleep for forty-eight hours

Purble: thinking you got KIDNAPPED or something like BAKUGŌ

Purble: And you just

There was a pause. Knowing Shinsō, Kei imagined him pacing his room in a sleep-deprived huff. She’d left her phone here without thinking of any ripples that would cause in an incredibly interconnected world. At the time, the mission came first and distractions were anathema. Maybe it would’ve been less concerning to everyone involved if she’d taken her phone along, but turned all of the location data off?

Probably not. Who the hell would she have texted during all the mission preparations anyway? There’d be too many lies to keep track of, and a cell phone going off at the wrong moment could’ve tipped more than one situation into outright disaster.

It was too late to do anything about it now.

Later, Kei would blame sleep deprivation for her own bout of honesty.

Purble: What happened?

TMNT-TNT: Family stuff. I left town for the past couple of days. I didn’t get any messages until now.

Purble: …Are you okay?


Purble: But…?

TMNT-TNT: Obito and Kakashi aren’t gonna be able to visit for a while. They’re in the hospital.

TMNT-TNT: Stuff happened.

Purble: Are… Look, are you sure you’re okay? Really sure?

TMNT-TNT: Yeah. I just got back after traveling all day. And then I got a call from Uraraka and heard the hero kids got jumped by villains and then there’s the Bakugō thing… I dunno. I just want to go to sleep.
It was all true. Just not the entire story. If Shinsō ever found out about Kei’s many lies of omission, he wasn’t going to be happy. Kei never planned to tell him, of course. Vanishing in the middle of the year with an excuse about Sensei’s overprotectiveness was really more likely, and would feel less like Kei was abandoning him.

Hopefully, by then he’d have enough rapport with the other students that her disappearance wouldn’t be too awful. Especially Midoriya’s group.

Why was she thinking about this now? It wasn’t like she’d be able to leave before All For One got his ass kicked properly.

Kei mashed her left hand into her face and covered her eyes entirely for a few seconds. Two in the morning was a weird time to get all squishy-hearted.

…I am such a sap.

You will not hear a counterargument from me, said Isobu. He was mostly free from sentimentality, at least toward humans. Usually. Or a complaint.

Aww.

Purble: I believe that, at least.

Purble: Hey, do you want

Purble: Uh.

Purble: The cat café’s gonna be open tomorrow. Do you want to go?

TMNT-TNT: Sure. Around lunch, I guess? I need to start summer homework somewhere.

Purble: Okay. I’ll bring mine.

TMNT-TNT: I’m gonna have my phone really loud all day. In case I get a call.

TMNT-TNT: It seems like all my friends except you are in the hospital or something.

TMNT-TNT: Gotta keep track of them all.

Purble: Same.

Purble: I’ll go with you to visit them?

Purble: If you go. It’s okay if you don’t want to.

TMNT-TNT: Only if it’s the hero kids. I’m not buying you a train ticket to the middle of nowhere.

Purble: Fair.

TMNT-TNT: I’d have to find a bed in Sensei’s house for you and he’s got a toddler. You’d die.
Purble: …I’ll take your word for it.

TMNT-TNT: You really would. He wears Hayate out sometimes.

TMNT-TNT: Night now. Try to actually get some sleep.

Purble: I guess.

Purble: Night.

Kei let her phone drop to her chest. Tomorrow morning, whenever she woke up, she’d need to make her way to UA. She still hadn’t reported in to Nezu or any of the teachers yet. It was probably going to take forever, especially if Sensei’s temper held. Knowing Kakashi and Obito could give witness reports while bedridden, Kei’s presence probably barely counted as mandatory. Except that heroes would have questions, and most of them were cleverer than Kei was.

Kei mentally blocked out the entire morning into Business Time, for the sake of just slapping a label to it. It wouldn’t be fun, but unlike police interviews, there was a decent chance it’d be one-and-done. If nothing else, leveraging her status as a shinobi could get her out of having to deal with the teachers’ concern that a minor caused all the damage she had. It’d earned her slack before in some ways and a tighter leash in others.

Kei sighed.

Then she could go hang out with Shinsō and the cats, and maybe force her cover back into place through sheer force of will. And cats. Without her team, she didn’t have the strategic maneuverability to do much else while Tokyo woke up into utter bedlam.

The problem will keep. Should I play a movie? Isobu asked hesitantly. Nothing with heroes. Maybe with talking animals… Though not mice.

With Nezu around, that was probably a bit on the nose anyway.

No, but thanks for offering, Kei said finally. She rubbed her eyes, then rolled over and finally, finally, finally went to sleep. She had a long day tomorrow.
By seven in the morning, the media circus was in full swing. Late night breaking news and her phone blowing up with alerts set the mood as Kei half-drowsed through her morning routine. Only this time, for once, she stuffed the out-of-date ANBU uniform into a storage seal small enough to tuck into a school text like a bookmark. Her better armor still smelled like blood and viscera, and cleaning it out completely would take more skilled hands with more time than hers. For now, the cloth parts could soak in the laundry tub. Cold water and peroxide for all awaited them in the future.

One day, shinobi were going to figure out how to properly meld advanced technology and chakra in a way that caused some type of unintentional uplift scenario. And then they’d all probably die the second the innovations got out, given what the overall culture of Kei’s world was like. The world was not yet ready.

Speaking of culture and shortcomings, though… UA’s closed campus kept reporters out of the way, but Kei had her own ways of getting into the building.

It was called a student ID card.

**The power of mundanity is in your hands.**

*I’ll need it today,* Kei thought as she shouldered her bag. She was in street clothes instead of the school uniform, because hell if she was wearing that during summer vacation, and the school bag was just generic enough not to stand out. Pretending to be a normal person with no connection to UA probably would be easier if she was wearing a different face, but…

Well, Kurenai’s face was going to get some mileage again. Kei needed to tell her about it later. The news was focused on the hero students. She had places to be.

Riding the train was…fine. The concentrated humanity crammed into each car affected her mood less when everyone stayed anxiously glued to their phones. Copying them kept her head down, and the way her hair obscured her face completed her anonymity. And besides, few people wanted to deal with other actual humans at seven-thirty.

Kei’s phone started ringing about halfway up the hill. Caller ID failed her, so she answered it. “Hello?”

“*Are you heading to school?”* Present Mic’s voice asked.

Kei frowned. He’d probably gotten her number from Kayama-sensei. Or hell, any of the class representatives. In her own voice instead of Kurenai’s, she said, “Yeah. I’m going to be at the gate in five minutes.”
“There’s a crowd of reporters at the main gate,” he replied. Annoyance bled into his tone, which was not what most people would expect from someone who had a media-friendly public persona. “Tell them you have an appointment with Midnight if they ask. Which they probably won’t. I mean, they’re too busy baying for our blood to bother one student. Probably.”

Well, it confirmed some of what Kei expected out of UA. If Kayama-sensei and Present Mic were involved at this stage, Kei needed to get up there before her report ended up being completely superfluous. “Do I actually have one?”

“You do now.”

“Got it,” Kei said as she hung up. Sheesh. Still, she trekked onward and upward until the massive security doors loomed ahead of her.

And a crowd, basically camped out on the school’s front step for understandable reasons. There was going to be a press conference within the next two days, so whatever. The crowd was probably comprised half of the media and half with “concerned citizens” of the type that would morph into a mob the second someone threw a rock. Right now, UA stood not as a proud institution of training heroes, but a bulwark against a storm of criticism.

Justified, in Kei’s opinion, but part of that was her fault. The sensation of cold lead in her gut refused to abate.

**Business before internal guilt trips.**

Yeah, yeah, I get it. Now to case the joint.

Going through the front would draw attention, so clearly she needed to find an unoccupied chunk of perimeter wall and go that way. Cameras were immune to genjutsu, but she didn’t need to care about them with proper application of the Transformation jutsu.

Transformation and genjutsu worked out. No one was looking for the squirrel under the camouflage pattern, and if they were, Kei saluted their attention spans. Squirrel or not, she still had her student ID card, so it wasn’t like the automatic security systems would get quite as angry with her as they would with a true trespasser.

Ah, well. If the Transformation wasn’t so easy to screw up or for shinobi to see through, it’d probably break the universe in half.

It probably would’ve been great to get enough time to use stealth during that damn forest fight.

Kei stalked inside, burgeoning good mood deflated yet again. She stopped long enough in the empty halls to locate a locker room, change into her ANBU gear, and then appear in an entirely different place thanks to genjutsu and Water Clones. Just in case someone was watching the security feeds who ought not. The distraction probably wasn’t necessary—she was inside a building secured by allies—but last night’s adventure left her nerves still reeling from everything that had gone wrong.

Kei made it up to the staff conference room with time to spare.

Now, ANBU tradition dictated certain kinds of entrances, because Batman-ing into a room conveyed competence in both shinobi manners and navigating ventilation systems. Kei, who wasn’t a real ANBU operative, had nonetheless burned one weekend afternoon mapping UA’s ins and outs with Obito’s assistance. Many of the rooms were connected to a system that could cut individual spaces off from the main network, and air scrubbers strong enough to defeat a tear gas grenade before it hurt anyone. The conference room for today’s meeting didn’t have the kind of vents that would fit a
mostly-grown human.

The Transformation technique, once again, gave her a bit of leeway there. As did genjutsu, for the sake of prying ears. Kei used both, once again, to make the perfect entrance.

All Might, Kayama-sensei, Snipe, Present Mic, and Principal Nezu all sat around a U-shaped conference table, with Nezu at the head and balanced what had to be the world’s most outsized rolling chair. They were already talking, which was just as well.

“That training camp was meant to prepare students to handle villain attacks,” said Nezu’s voice from below the vent. “The irony is shameful. We knew the League would resurface, but we lacked a fundamental understanding of their plans. They aim to destroy our hero society, and they’ve already started their war.”

“Even if we knew their plans, could we have prevented this?” asked Kayama-sensei. “They’re moving pieces we didn’t even know they possessed. Ever since All Might put an end to most organized crime, we’re all rusty.”

Well, that explained a bit. Not a lot, given Kei’s earlier ruminating on this problem, but at least the heroes were aware of it.

“We’ve definitely gotten complacent during peaceful times without realizing it,” said Present Mic. “I guess deep down all of us thought we’d be riding the sweet life for good.”

Nezu hadn’t. He’d hired mercenaries. Technically just Kei, but she could call on more. It just seemed like the villains’ response was to escalate and start an arms race.

“I will never forgive myself for such cowardly ignorance,” All Might muttered, into the table. He sounded awful. Guilty, not bombastic, and like every year of his true age. Whatever that was. “While our students were fighting for their lives—”

Kei dropped out of the ceiling into the middle of the U, dispelling her genjutsu as she landed.

It was a sign of the times that Snipe, Kayama-sensei, and Present Mic all jumped to battle-ready poses before they recognized her. For Snipe, that meant nearly putting a gun to Kei’s head, while Kayama-sensei had her whip ready and Present Mic just opened his mouth to start screaming. Neither Nezu or All Might reacted, but All Might was still in his deflated true form. Maybe they needed a second to get going.

There was an awkward pause. Hooray for reflexes.

“There was a door, you know,” Kayama-sensei said reproachfully, stowing her whip and sitting back down first of all the teachers.

“But it’s definitely on-brand,” Present Mic muttered. He sat down, too, mouth briefly disappearing under his costume’s directional speaker.

Exactly. Instead of saying that, though, Kei bowed neatly from the waist—not the motion one would use for the Hokage, but he wasn’t exactly here—and said, “Turtle, reporting for debrief.”

Snipe subsided with a grumble and a gun-twirl worthy of a spaghetti western, but he did sit down. She didn’t quite take her eyes off him until everything settled, because she didn’t really feel like deflecting bullets today.

“Thank you for arriving promptly, Turtle.” Principal Nezu clasped his paws in front of him on the
Kei reached into a pouch and pulled out the scroll for the communication array she’d used to speak directly—if in a limited fashion—to Sensei the previous night. It was accompanied by its most recent present for her not-quite-an-inbox: a way to project Sensei’s voice and image on this end of Kamui divide without actually needing to risk the Hokage’s physical safety. As long as Sensei sat or stood in a predetermined location on its far end, he’d be able to get his point across.

Kei tucked the glorified chatroom scroll back into the pouch, but she set the projection seal on the floor and stepped back to draw a kunai.

“Wait, what do you need that f—” began Snipe.

Kei had already sliced a neat, tiny cut into the pad of her thumb, which was exposed by a bit of wear in this glove. As the blood droplet fell to the scroll, she thought, Showtime, Sensei.

An image sprang up from the floor, not unlike UA’s interactive acceptance holograms from months ago.

Namikaze Minato wasn’t a particularly intimidating person to a casual observer. In a Quirk-filled world, he was a tiny bit taller than average and more built for speed than power. He was younger than anybody in the room except for Kei and maybe Nezu—assuming he aged anything like a normal rodent—even if Sensei had likely been in combat more often and with more violence than anybody but All Might himself. He had innocent-seeming baby-blue eyes and blond hair that fell in wild spikes solely because he could never be bothered to tame it. He didn’t look scary at all, really, and through a projection was not the best time to get any use out of killing intent.

He’d solved that problem. Instead of the Hokage regalia’s formal robes or his jōnin blues and flak jacket, Sensei wore the upgraded ANBU gear. Covered from head to toe in black, matte gray, and a coat not unlike what his team of murder-students wore on the forest trip, he cut a pretty spooky figure.

And the mask, otherwise formed from the same mold as Kakashi’s, depicted a fox’s face with the kanji for “fire” dead-center on its forehead.

Kei bowed again, but this time in the full subservient shinobi pose that ANBU favored. “Heroes of UA, I present the Fourth Hokage.” Kei risked a glance at the table, and Sensei nodded to let her know it was fine. “Otherwise known as Namikaze Minato-sensei.”

“Excellent timing, Hokage-dono,” said the principal, who was the only one of the entire staff group who’d ever met Sensei before.

That last meeting had been much like this one, only Kei had been in the ANBU experimental basement at the time and watching a rat wander back and forth adjusting the relative signals. Seals on one side, wormhole science bullshit on the other. When people made first contact in the movies, there was a lot less worrying if everything was stuck in a secure bunker and loaded with enough area denial explosives to outright kill a boss summon. It paid to be paranoid in shinobi-land, whether aliens were involved or not.

Sensei inclined his head slightly to Nezu. In his mild, inoffensive voice, he simply said, “Two of my agents returned yesterday with injuries, and they made their reports this afternoon. Today, Turtle volunteered to make her report to both of us. Or perhaps, all of us.”

Technically, Kei hadn’t, but what the hell. Ducking responsibility wouldn’t change the facts, and this
way no written record of what happened was ever making it near the police.

Not like she had a choice. Hearing that Kakashi and Obito had already recovered enough to be awake and talking was a balm for her frazzled nerves. “May I begin?”

Sensei stepped as far to the side as the projection seal would allow, and Kei took center stage with all eyes on her.

Still using the voice-changer, Kei recounted the half-week spent preparing the forest for a possible incursion.

Not all of her thought processes were acceptable by hero standards, but they didn’t need to hear those unless they objected to what she’d done in practice. If Kei had to guess, it’d be fine up until she got to the part after she separated from Midoriya and Kōta to obey Kakashi’s orders. The Nōmu showing up when they had made the whole situation messy as hell. Genjutsu seals were fine, minefields raised eyebrows, and pranking the students to enforce the campgrounds’ rules prompted a quickly-muffled laugh from Snipe’s gas mask and a smile from Kayama-sensei. Then she explained where the Test of Courage went awry, and all the mirth vanished.

“Bringing down the League might be impossible until they’re pinned,” Kei said, while the serious-faced heroes watched her warily. “Kurogiri needs to be neutralized for the operation to have any chance at success.”

Ultimately, the details weren’t her problem. The kills were.

“He dropped at least three Nōmu on us,” Kei went on, “and while I hate to use the hero Endeavor as an example, two of the three proved too dangerous to subdue alive. We followed his example.

“The first Nōmu was the standard pattern type,” Kei said, while forming a tiny genjutsu of Chainsaw Hands in her upraised palms. Its vacant stare and exposed brain gave it away as a Nōmu, and it waved its tiny chainsaw arms ineffectually. “Yaoyorozu created enough nanotube-reinforced steel cable to restrain this one after I brought it down, but apparently Kurogiri’s Quick grabbed it after we left it in the forest. I’ve heard no reports of this particular creature being arrested.

“Next, we have a Nōmu that was almost certainly designed to counter my powers. Until the League laid eyes on my team, there was just the one. Then this thing landed on my head.” The first mini-Nōmu faded out of her hands and was replaced by a two-headed creature with the same jet-black skin as the one that had attacked the USJ. Its two exposed-brain heads had one eye apiece, and each neck moved asynchronously relative to each other and the rest of its body. It had four arms and heavy vents drilling out of its back, and wore a pair of gray cargo pants to complete the “science lab escapee” look. Its name was Double Trouble. “Its known Quirks include rapid regeneration, kinetic energy manipulation, enough sensory organs to feel me moving around even when stealthy, weaponized secondary arms, and the starfish-like ability for severed parts to grow a new copy of itself.

“I had five of them on me almost before I knew what was going on.” Kei squashed its image between her gloved palms. “Faced with the possibility that they’d spread through the forest, I reduced this Nōmu and its spawn to ash to prevent further student casualties. Doing so reduced my combat viability by half, if not more, but the threat was removed.”

She could feel the heroes’ reflexive disapproval, but Nezu just said, “And to the last, Turtle-san? As I understand, it was the only such creature encountered by Bakugō-kun before his abduction.”

“I don’t have that report,” Kei admitted, while glancing to the side to confirm Sensei did. At his nod,
she went on, “And I don’t know what powers it had besides the obvious, but I’d be willing to back up Wolf’s statement. Please understand—I saw a creature threatening both my teammate and five students, and I’d discovered a method to bring them down with minimal risk to bystanders.” Kei created a last genjutsu; this time the image depicted the wobbly, spiky creature with the sea urchin spines and disgusting healing pattern. Sea Urchin would do for now. Or forever. “I burned it out. There may still be bone fragments in the forest, but by now the crater is the more obvious evidence that it ever existed.”

And she’d turned Kakashi’s katana into slag as a bonus, rendering it just that bit more useless for forensic analysis. The only ANBU-adjacent sword in this world now was hers.

_Silver linings_, she told herself.

“And I have to emphasize that this was _not_ a coincidence from my perspective. The League or the powers behind them recognized a threat nominally allied with UA, and they prepared accordingly.” Kei dismissed the image of the last Nōmu. “They knew enough to stall us, and everything together meant Bakugō was abducted.”

This entire time, Sensei’s faintly flickering image hadn’t moved other than to give her nonverbal permission to do or say what she needed during her report. Likewise, he handed out succinct denials where necessary. Now, he stepped forward and Kei stepped back, out of his way, as he presented a stack of file folders thick enough to probably kill someone.

Then again, Sensei could kill someone with a napkin doodle. So could Kei.

“This is the sum total of paperwork generated by this mission. From expense to combat after-action reports,” Sensei told them, “which will be made available as soon as I’ve made copies.” Sensei slowly tilted his hooded head to one side. “Now, is there anything you would like to bring up in the meeting, now that information is fully available? I can read aloud from my agents’ testimony if required.”

“Please do,” said the principal, “and we will explain our conclusions in turn.”

“First of all,” said Sensei, “about the possibility of a leak…”

By Kei’s reckoning, the two-hour meeting stretched into infinity. Other than her verbal testimony (and going back twice over details) and delivering Sensei’s hologram, the bulk of any strategizing fell outside of her purview. She mostly just stood by the door, a silent sentinel for the Hokage, and waited. Outbursts would not be permitted.

UA needed to be front and center when rescue operations kicked off to save any face at all, and Sensei didn’t want Kei to waste her chakra until All For One took the field. If he did. She didn’t know what outcome to wish for, but there would be no more damned Nōmu fights. No more almost dying while walloping clones into paste. None of that.

In two days, there was a chance she’d have Obito for backup. A _chance_. But neither Sensei or Kei said anything about that to the heroes. Counting chickens before they hatched or something. And Rin would plot treason if Sensei dared push. Or worse: If Obito caught wind of someone needing him, he’d try to escape the hospital ahead of time. She’d know who to blame.

_Sensei’s Paperwork Fairy of Doom versus Mickey Mouse Machiavelli, round two_, Kei thought. It wasn’t especially charitable to either of them. She sighed inwardly. _That fight was…something. More chakra than either of us have used in a while, huh?_
Isobu’s silence was telling. He enjoyed fighting because it was one of the few ways he could exert control over the outside world while sealed. However, he disliked losing almost more than Kei did, even if Bakugō’s plight didn’t bother him that much on a personal level.

Bakugō was a little shit Kei disliked for several reasons, starting with his lousy attitude and constant attempts to get his way by bullying others, but he was also a sixteen-year-old in the hands of people who’d already demonstrated willingness to kill kids. He’d already been gone for about twelve hours. Most kidnapping victims lasted less than forty-eight hours from their initial disappearances. Hell, the first two. And given the existence of the Nōmu, there was no guarantee they’d get back in the same shape.

*If* they did.

Ugh.

“—which will affect further operations in Tokyo, given the lack of pro hero support,” Sensei was saying.

“Even at the height of All Might’s influence, nobody could ask the police to accept covert agents as a standard part of hero operations,” Present Mic replied. Likely sensing his audience’s need for more exposition, he went on, “Even the most underground heroes went through the process of registering their Quirks with the provincial government in a database, long before they ever got their licenses. Only villains need to hide their identities.” He drummed his fingers audibly on the table. “It’s a part of what makes law enforcement investigations effective, even if police keep their work and their Quirks separate.”

Kei didn’t even have to open her eyes to know Sensei disapproved with every fiber of his being. If people knew how his techniques worked, they could partially shut him down. Kei’d proven as much during their exhibition match months ago. And even out of his students, Kei was the only one who knew enough about how the Flying Thunder God Jutsu was put together to get the “nope!” effect necessary to bounce him to the nearest alternative seal. Heroes worked under weird constraints. Much like clan organization, it probably made more sense from the inside.

Probably.

Sensei’s chakra was entirely unreadable, but his tone wasn’t. “I see. Having pushed this world’s tolerance as far as it will go, then, Turtle will stand down.”

Kei blinked, angling her mask just enough to catch All Might’s surprised expression. "I didn't expect you to give in so quickly."

“In case you were not aware, All Might, Turtle and her team have been near-continuously active for as long as your summer training camp was in session. That included investing time, thought, and energy no one can spare forever.” Sensei didn’t go so far as to scold anybody outright, but that fishhook of quiet censure was audible to anyone who knew him or politics. “Without the ability to fully isolate your students from outside influences or data sources, there was no way to call the site secured. My agents acted to their best of their knowledge. In this case, it was insufficient to prevent an attack, but Turtle’s report covered her team’s shortcomings.”

“That’s it?” Snipe asked. “I thought you’d grill us immediately, since those were your kids who got hurt.”

"And if the injuries were permanent,” Sensei told him, "we would be having a different conversation.”
There was a pause.

Nezu broke the silence with, "Your trust is a terrible thing, Hokage-dono."

“It can be. And I’ll admit that the idea of a traitor to UA worries me,” Sensei said, in a tone so placid he could’ve been mentioning the weather. He apparently considered the previous topic dropped with no fanfare. “But as long as the issue doesn’t affect operations again, I won’t insist on a solution.”

That right there counted as more than an awkward moment of cross-cultural miscommunication. That had been a barely-veiled threat.

Still, the meeting droned on. Kei had seen All Might take a call (with his own voice shouting “A phone call is here!” for a ringtone). He’d even walked through Sensei’s hologram in his haste to get out of the room. Something about his police detective friend and a potential location for the strike. He might’ve missed some details, but at least it wasn’t because he’d gotten distracted by a turtle that lived in his head.

“In your soul” is likely more accurate.

Well…

And with that, Kei got into another argument with Isobu, debating the finer points of sealing techniques. She knew she was being distracted, but the meeting dragged worse than a Jeep in spring mud. Her brain latched onto the distraction with both figurative hands.

“Very well,” Sensei’s voice concluded, and Kei stopped staring at the inside of her eyelids when she heard that tone. “If it’s what the client wants. Extend my personal thanks to the Wild, Wild Pussycats for repairing the landscape after those confrontations, and my apologies that they were necessary.”

Kei probably should’ve paid more attention.

Which Kei would not be participating in, regardless. He can’t activate one, but… I’d probably be able to tell where it is.

Fat lot of good that would do right now.

“Nonetheless, Turtle will remain on standby. Give her a call if the requirements of the mission change,” Sensei went on mildly.

The heroes all eyed each other for a second, Nezu notwithstanding. His paw landed on the newspaper article where Bakugō made the front splash page in incoherent infamy. Kei thought the muzzle was a bit…much, even now, but the incident was already history.

Violent tendencies as wild as Bakugō’s weren’t exactly rare with her around. And if it only attracted the League to Bakugō because he’d won the Sports Festival, well, that wasn’t something they could help, now.

“The raid shouldn’t require a sixteen-year-old to fight, no matter how talented,” Kayama-sensei said, her mask no longer blocking what little of her expression would otherwise be covered. “Even Bakugō-kun.”

Kei usually left the strategies to other people for a reason. Several reasons.

“No plan survives contact with an enemy as dangerous as these villains have become,” Sensei replied, mild as ever. “The USJ proved that, even as its ringleader tripped over his own feet. He’s
learning. They all are.”

Unspoken though it was, Sensei clearly disapproved of the continuous failure to break the League in half. Even aside from what this entire incident did to the media, Sensei’s judgment tied heavily into his combat philosophy. He favored the noble shinobi art of stabbing first. And second.

And as many more times as it took to kill someone.

Kei sighed internally.

“That said, there are practical concerns I can’t speak to. Principal?” Sensei inclined his head toward Nezu.

“The ‘Turtle’ identity is compromised, even if the person behind it is not,” said the principal. “The same goes for all of the other masks, now that their existence has been confirmed beyond a doubt. So have their Quirks, such that they are. There was no way to warn students not to report about your agents’ activities, and no way to force the issue even if we had. It would be unconscionable to force students to lie to the police after everything else they’ve already endured.”

“I understand. So does Turtle, I imagine,” Sensei replied. He didn’t so much as twitch in her direction.

Kei grimaced under her mask. She could have dropped her killing intent onto only her intended targets, but only while calm. “Calm” was absolutely not the word to describe her actions in that last few minutes of fighting, and Isobu produced so much murderous hatred that suppressing the waves didn’t work nearly as well as just following the current. It was a side effect of being a jinchūriki and not developing her own supernatural intimidation skills first. Probably.

Sensei managed fine on his own. So had Kei’s mother.

But here, it meant she’d blithely traumatized a whole class of teenagers. Two classes, if two full classes had been able to perceive her. Thinking about it at the time—briefly—didn’t hold a candle to dealing with the consequences. Kei’s gut roiled with guilt already, and she hadn’t even gotten a text from anyone she’d clubbed with her least-discriminating combat power.

“Is there any way to…turn that down?” Kayama-sensei asked. “There are fear-generating Quirks, but most of the people who can use them effectively are already pros. Turtle has other resources she didn’t use in the fight instead of…that.”

“Most of us who are familiar with it largely view fighting alongside it as a matter of acclimatization,” Sensei told her. “It’s most effective when the enemy doesn’t know what’s happening. Allies practice ahead of deployment. That said, its strength has a time and place. Turtle?”

“It won’t happen again,” Kei said. The digitized version of Tsunade’s faint rasp felt strange to her ears, but that was what she had to work with. “I won’t be a problem.”

Maybe she shouldn’t visit anybody in the hospital today. Everything was all jumbled and wrong. It’d been less than twenty-four hours since things went to shit.

Kei shifted her weight from foot to foot almost imperceptibly. She wanted to tell them to prioritize the hero students. Keeping in mind their stress levels and other fun results of the fight last night, the kids needed therapy and time to decompress, which wouldn’t take until this situation was fully resolved. If Kei couldn’t help on her own initiative as Turtle, her only choice was to play the student again.
It felt cheap. Pretending to be normal didn’t make up for any of this.

Kayama-sensei’s lips pursed as she looked in Kei’s direction. Every time the teachers looked her way, the guilty aura in the room intensified. True to form, she didn’t look at all happy. “Turtle-san —” *You are a UA student, just like them.*

Kei didn’t meet her eyes, even under the mask.

Kei normally appreciated Kayama-sensei’s insistence on treating her like a real, ordinary kid. She tried her hardest to be a good teacher even amid the chaos of hero school and with a whole separate career to consider. Right now, though, she cared more that Kayama-sensei was careful enough not to complete that sentence. In front of witnesses, anyway. Kei was still in uniform, and her mission persona didn’t deserve that level of coddling.

Present Mic glared at Sensei from behind his glasses. “What kind of society even pushes kids to be like this? It shouldn’t be your problem to take on people like the League in the first place.”

Kei didn’t have to look around the room to know the rest of the staff held similar sentiments, if not their tongues.

“What kind, indeed,” said Sensei. If he’d been in the room, Kei could’ve picked out the spike of annoyance in his chakra. Not at the accusation—he’d talked with Nezu about it before—but at the sign of a meeting degenerating from useful information exchange to petty sniping.

Kei had no intention of letting any of them bother Sensei about her status as a true child soldier, either. She might’ve made the decision to join Konoha’s shinobi corps while chronologically five years old, but it was still her decision. Enough non-childish reasoning went into the choice for it to stand, even more than a decade on. She wouldn’t be here without it.

And yet, Sensei shook his head.

Translation: Sit out the rest of the meeting, please.

Fine.

It wasn’t like she had anything helpful to say, now. Her part was played out. No mission for two days.

Probably.

Sensei knew she wasn’t happy with this. He’d trained her from a gawky little genin to her special jōnin self of today. Sensei’s concern was a hop, skip, and a dimensional jump away, but she thought she could see just a trace in the way his head canted toward her.

“All Might,” Sensei went on, as though the little exchange between them hadn’t happened. When all eyes were again on him, he said, “Good luck with your operation. And to the rest of you as well, despite our many differences.”

Sensei could stop sticking the knife into the heroes’ guilt complexes any time now. Kei almost wanted to tell them that he’d started off with the business of killing people only a little later than she had, but the temptation faded. The entire shinobi culture was objectively fucked up, and only a few people on the inside had the perspective to really see it. Sensei was one, through discussions with Jiraiya and Kei, but knowing something was screwy and being willing to let outsiders bitch about it were two entirely different things. Especially when this was, from Konoha’s point of view, nearly a joint military operation.

The various not-quite-honest pleasantries made Kei’s skin crawl, but Nezu was apparently a worthy
opponent. This late in the game, Kei didn’t expect last-minute changes and didn’t get any.

She did get bored, though.

**Got any fours?**

*Go fish.*

Isobu drummed his huge fingers against the sand of their mental beach. After a few repetitions, he tossed aside his gigantic playing cards and finally said, **This game is asinine.**

*It’s pretty effective as a sleep aid.* Kei could hardly disagree. The only worse game was probably War.

**How unlucky for us both that I do not sleep.**

*Liar.* He could sleep, after a fashion, but mostly didn’t because he could keep himself busy easily enough. Usually that meant buzzing Yang or Yin Kurama and bothering them if they were in a grumpy-but-not-hostile mood. They’d both *become* hostile damn quick if he started harping on their handwriting, though.

There really wasn’t anything left to do at this eleventh hour, was there? Other than hoping Bakugō was still alive and in a condition to be recovered safely, this was all hero business. Frustrating as it was, Nezu and Sensei and the teachers just talked in circles. She barely even heard the note about moving the students into dorms—she’d be forced to refuse by circumstances that could barely apply until the current crisis was death with.

If Bakugō was lost, there would be no UA.

It all came back to that one damn kid.

In relatively short order (read: more arguing Kei left alone), Sensei walked out of his end of the projection rig and Kei was left to gather up the scroll. The heroes might *not* be able to handle the rest, but they were making it not her problem.

She left school much the same way she came, in about the same mood.

**One does one’s best.**

Kei rolled her eyes and tucked it all away in the back of her mind. She had cats to meet.

Chapter End Notes

> Lotta talking. But hey, a setup chapter is a setup chapter.

> Lemme know if something's off, since this isn't super well-edited.
(Attempted) Fuzz Therapy

Chapter Summary

Two steps forward, one step back. Dammit, Kei.

After getting out of the meeting that made her feel simultaneously too young and too old for the entire situation, Kei stealthed her way as far away from UA as seemed reasonable before breaking cover and texting Shinsō. Mimicking one of Obito’s less-accomplished cousins helped get her enough lead time to avoid the media or a tail, at least. Nobody looked twice at a black-haired, brown-eyed wannabe punk when three were far more interesting targets just up the hill. Star power!

**TMNT-TNT:** I got done with my errands early. You around? I’m like a kilometer from UA.

Kei glanced up just to confirm what she’d just said, then sighed. The meeting had taken up the entire morning.

**Purble:** Okay. Just so you know, we’re not going to the same café as before. So I brought my bike.

**TMNT-TNT:** Why not?

**Purble:** It’s too close to UA.

**Purble:** I’ll explain when I get there.

**TMNT-TNT:** Got it.

Kei found a spot in the shade to wait. Most of the trees in the area were big enough. If she meditated, she almost couldn’t hear the distant crowd’s shouting being carried on the wind. Kicking her heels lightly against the pavement, Kei fiddled with her phone a little longer to try and silence the news app. Pre-uploaded programs were junk.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” Shinsō said as he arrived, astride the bike Kei hadn’t seen in a while. Since taking up training, he’d mostly jogged to school for the rest of the first semester and rode the train home after working out. Bicycles weren’t allowed on trains unless they were the folding type, so it had fallen by the wayside.

“Well, except for the time they’d tried to see if Kei could ride pillion around town. The answer was an emphatic no. Shinsō, who’d never had to bike with a passenger, hadn’t quite been able to get them up a hill. Kei, likewise, couldn’t figure out what to do with her hands or feet in the moment. Getting tossed down an embankment (Shinsō) and being forced to cartwheel to safety after almost doing a dive into the river (Kei) were the kinds of experiences that nobody wanted to try twice without a helmet.

The cop laughing himself sick over the incident didn’t help.

“Hey, Shinsō-kun,” Kei said, raising her hand for a short wave. She brushed dust off her pants as she
got to her feet. “How have you been?”

“I should be asking you that,” Shinsō replied, as though he didn’t look and sound as tired as she did. He put one leg down to balance, as though stopping at a traffic light, then said, “I saw you on Saturday and since then, the internet basically exploded. Sorry I got so upset at you for not answering. Paranoia, I guess. Are Hatake and Uchiha all right?”

Bit of a sharp segue there, but Kei could roll with it. “Yeah. They’re both already up and complaining about not being allowed to do backflips or whatever,” Kei said with a dismissive wave of her hand. She fell into step beside Shinsō as he walked his bike a bit, toward the main bulk of Musutafu. “Typical.”

“Typical?” Shinsō quirked an eyebrow.

“Typical macho crap,” Kei clarified, thinking of the time Rin had caught Kakashi doing push-ups with an IV in his arm. He hadn’t done it again. “So, what’s with the bicycle?”

“I didn’t feel like carrying all the textbooks and breaking my back, and riding is relaxing,” Shinsō replied, shrugging. “And the place we’re going to is a bit farther from UA. I wanted to avoid the…” Shinsō squinted a bit, but the mob at the school gates was well out of view. “Media, I guess.”

“A generous term for them,” Kei said. She preferred “vultures” on a bad day like this one. “Do you think they’re even watching the place we went to? That’s a huge radius.”

“It’s kinda close to where the first brain-freak kicked things off back in May, so I don’t want to take the chance.”

They walked on in relative silence for a while. Kei could’ve kept up if Shinsō felt like riding, solely due to her nearly inhuman stamina, but it appeared he was willing to take it slow. Considerate, if unnecessary.

Peering at him more in concern than curiosity, Kei tallied up signs of fatigue like a doctor going over a checklist. Eyebags? Check, same as her. His hair was less bushlike than usual, meaning he’d probably forgotten whatever gel (?) product kept it vertical, and he yawned more than once while they walked. That T-shirt (legend: “Just Do It Later”) looked almost too big for him, but then, he also wore undersized jackets. Someday—preferably before he graduated—he’d average out the two extremes.

Not that Kei could really criticise him, what with the very chic look she was sporting: Hip-length graphic tee, yoga pants that looked like tights, and tennis shoes. And her friggin’ school bag, just because.

They were the height of fashion. Kei had seen fashion in a magazine once and felt like she was reading Greek.

“You didn’t answer my question. Are you okay with…all of this?” Kei gestured vaguely in the direction of a newsreel blaring from a nearby storefront, with a single-horned reporter patiently interviewing someone with a fancier pressed suit. “Specifically the anti-UA stuff.”

Shinsō frowned at the TV. Similar reports played on the even larger screens all across most cities. Finally, he said, “Sort of. I mean, I don’t like Bakugō at all and… Ugh. But he’s a kid, and he’s a UA student, and people will freak out and destroy anything they can get their hands on just to feel like they have control. UA’s reputation, or heroes, or whatever. It’s like…” Shinsō trailed off, shaking his head. “Everything feels tense, but it’s not directly affecting me. It feels like… like being
in a building with a crappy foundation. And I won’t know how it all crashes down until it *does.*”

Kei, who’d been nodding along, winced when Shinsō’s last sentence sank in. The tide of public confidence was definitely turning. Though the shinobi were all foreigners, even Obito and Kakashi had noted the weak points in a hero-centric society. She couldn’t imagine what the locals were really going through while the house of cards swayed.

She needed a vacation from this mission, and *she* didn’t rely on heroes for her emotional security.

“The pros will get him back,” Kei said eventually. She hitched her school bag a little higher on her shoulders. “Things will work out.”

Shinsō didn’t look convinced, which was fair. Kei wasn’t great at direct lies, and platitudes almost always were.

“Anyway,” Shinsō said with the air of someone firmly closing the door on an unwanted topic, “there’s cats in the immediate future. I’m paying this time.”

The uncharitable thought that came to mind first was, *It’s about time.* What Kei actually said was, “Okay.” She couldn’t let her terrible mood spill out onto other people.

Shinsō spared her a sidelong look, but otherwise allowed her to stew. Instead, they talked about more mundane topics: homework, the hot July weather, and weird internet humor. All the while, it was impossible to fully ignore the atmosphere of fear. It reminded Kei of Sunagakure, but without an innocent two-year-old to blame for anything. People around here balanced on a knife’s edge whether they knew it or not.

About ten or fifteen minutes later, Shinsō parked his bike just outside a multi-story building in a neighborhood Kei didn’t recognize, since it was still closer to the school than her apartment and she didn’t generally wander this area much. If Kei stood back and craned her neck while Shinsō locked , she could just about see a sign on the fifth floor with a cat underneath it. A real cat, peeking out into the Tokyo sunlight.

The sight put a smile on Kei’s face.

“It’s a bit more expensive, but the coffee here is way better,” Shinsō said, holding the door as Kei stepped inside. In turn, Shinsō led the way up five floors’ worth of stairs until they arrived at Cat Cafe Ponta.

Wooden floors, café atmosphere, cats. Specifically, nine cats of some of the cutest breeds out there, an actual coffee menu with *pizza* on the opposite side, and a nice view from the fifth floor instead of the ground-level floor of the last café. Hell yes.

Shinsō paid for an hour and started fussing over one thing other another, but Kei had priorities.

Kei found a patch of sun-warmed couch next to a coffee table and promptly claimed it for their spot. There were other customers around—salarymen, fellow high school students on vacation, and so on —but the red couch had just been vacated. Hers now. And the big, graceful Somali sitting on the table didn’t seem to care that Kei set up shop right next to him and picked up the menu.

Caramel macchiatos were the next best thing to universal, apparently. Hooray for espresso machines. She’d get one when she needed one.

In the end, Kei opened her school bag and started removing summer homework from where she’d crammed it into notebooks and spare pockets. Some of it even emerged uncreased, at a rate of about
one to ten.

“I’m starting to feel like you’re just a disaster,” Shinsō said when he finally sat down, looking at the mess Kei made of the table. The bulk of Kei’s summer homework was arranged around the still-unmoving cat like offerings to a statue of Buddha, but with more eraser bits. Shinsō’s addition of an unopened bag of cat treats completed the look.

“I still fit everything into this bag,” said Kei, as two more cats drifted in their direction. She didn’t actually deny being a lowkey academic trash fire. “That’s probably worth imaginary points somewhere.”

Shinsō rolled his eyes, already offering his fingers to the curious kitties.

“So, I think I understand the math,” she said, like that exchange hadn’t happened. “But Cementoss-sensei absolutely hates me.”

“It’s just Literature,” Shinsō said distractedly. One of the cats was busy clawing its way up his pant leg and trying to squeeze into his lap. “It’s not like you get sick or skip classes.”

“This packet is more of a book than anything we’ve read all year,” Kei muttered, mostly for the sake of being stubborn. Truthfully, it was no more deviously difficult than any work she’d done since arriving at UA, now that she’d had time to adjust. But nobody ever wanted to do homework over summer break. Kei was no exception.

For the next couple of minutes, Kei grumbled here and there about her homework loadout. Shinsō, meanwhile, became more ensconced within a fur fortress as all the cats wandered over. The nearby patrons probably thought he was cheating with catnip.

Hell, Kei started to suspect foul play. She wouldn’t call him on it any more than he’d call her own being able to pick up Obito and throw him. Some things were just mysteries.

“Honest question: Have you ever thought about cram school?” Shinsō asked, leaning back on the couch.

By this point, the Somali and its friends finally ditched him in favor of a blond guy in a tank top that said “No’ Mo’ Rules” with no apparent irony. The guy next to him—hair messier than Kei’s, but… wearing a button-up? And huge glasses?—had an open treat bag.

A betrayal most foul.

“Literally never,” Kei replied. With a sigh, she opened her math packet and added, “I’m already paying you in training, so there’s no point in hiring somebody I don’t know for a job I don’t like. And are you going to do anything, or…?”

Shinsō blew cat hair off the end of his nose with a huff. Then he finally opened his bag and dug out a mechanical pencil and some scratch paper from somewhere in the depths. While the sound of teenagers arguing nearby became mere background noise, he put his elbows on the table and said, “Okay, fine. Show me where you’re stuck on the math.”

Kei didn’t precisely make progress. She definitely filled out some of the blanks, at the rate of one problem per minute, but half her brain was still occupied by thoughts of the mission she wasn’t currently pursuing. After the third indistinguishable one and seven, Shinsō ordered them both coffee to try and curb the impending disaster.

“How’s your family doing?” Kei asked, while the café’s staff worked on their orders. “I didn’t ask
earlier, but…”

“Fine. Mom and Dad don’t really talk to me about work stress.” Shinsō rubbed the back of his neck. “But they’re worried, like everyone else. Same with the rest of my family. What about yours?”

I do not know if you wish to mention your possible departure, said Isobu. But it may be prudent.

I...

“Hayate thinks the villain attacks are almost like a proving ground for heroes. He’s a kid, so it’s all more funny than scary,” Kei said, which was broadly true. She bit the inside of her cheek as she pondered the best phrasing. True, but not the full truth. Hayate didn’t think anything could get in Kei’s way because she was a fair bit stronger than average. “He’s probably keeping busy. Maybe helping Kushina-san babysit or getting into fights.”


“Sensei’s wife. Sort of somewhere between a stepmother and an older sister to Hayate and me.” Kei blew on her homework to chase away lingering eraser scraps. “More to me than Hayate, at least back when they first started talking. But now he’s more her son’s big goofball sibling than I am.” She wrinkled her nose. “One of the benefits of attending UA: I don’t change diapers ever.”

Shinsō let out a dry laugh, shaking his head. “Drowning in homework or diaper-changing. I can see why you applied to a high school in Tokyo.”

“UA’s the best for more than one reason,” Kei said in a very prim tone. The irony at the back of her tongue was thick enough to taste.

Their coffee arrived, and both of them took a brief moment to thank the woman who brought it. Her courtesy smile was top-notch. And so were the cats, two of whom returned to showering Shinsō with attention as soon as they realized he would be sitting still for the immediate foreseeable future. Kei even ended up with the Somali at her side, flopped-over and content as long as she made absolutely no move to pet it.

Shinsō snapped photos of both cats bracketing him, then drummed his fingers against his knee. “Is it wrong that I almost feel guilty? None of the hero-hopefuls can be in a place like this after everything got busted up yesterday. They’re all stuck in the hospital or hiding at home after what happened.”

Can you have survivor’s guilt about something that isn’t remotely your fault, just because it could have been you in their shoes? Kei frowned. What a silly question. “It’s not necessarily wrong, just a bit unrealistic. It’s just that feelings don’t care about how real something is or not.”

“Feelings,” Shinsō scoffed. Kei didn’t have to see his expression to know he didn’t mean as an indictment of anything but his own frustration. “I guess if the Dekusquad blow up my phone with messages, it’s just a part of having them as friends. Which they did. A lot. Freakout by proxy isn’t fun.”

Kei raised an eyebrow. “The Dekusquad?”

“Apparently, our little fight club got absorbed,” Shinsō said blandly. “What, you didn’t notice Midoriya’s friends outnumber us now?”

“Pretty sure we’re his friends too. And friends with all the rest of them.” Funny how socializing worked.
“Yeah, well,” Shinsō mumbled, before trailing off as he clearly got the impression his griping was going to land him in hot water. “I guess they are. They definitely send me enough cat pictures.”

Kei fought to keep a smile off her face. Shinsō was going to learn how to have friends besides her eventually. The sooner, the better.

“Quit being so smug about it,” he muttered.

“Nope! You’re making friends.”

Still, it was a thought that brought back Isobu’s suggestion from before. Shinsō was enough of a friend that he deserved to know, and she owed him enough to tell him to his face. She rolled the pencil between her fingers, fiddling with the idea like a bracelet of meditation beads at the same time.

She really was too sentimental to be an ANBU operative.

Shinsō noticed the shift in her mood. “Are you all right?”

After flipping a mental coin and coming up tails, Kei set her coffee on the table before folding her hands in her lap. Mostly to keep Shinsō from noticing if she drove her fingernails into the underside of her wrists from stress. It worked for visiting the dentist. Finally, she said, “Sensei’s not sure UA is the right place for me anymore. I’m probably not going to be in class when school starts up again.”

Shinsō froze in place, coffee cup halfway in the air. He hurriedly set it down fast enough that it rattled on its saucer. “What did you just say?”

Kei said in a tone as dull as dishwater, “He doesn’t like it when I get into fights, and he doesn’t think the villains around here are under control.” She glanced down at the heart drawn in the coffee foam, then sighed instead of obliterating it with a spoon. She fixed her gaze out the window instead, unwilling to watch Shinsō’s reaction any longer. “Mom died in a villain attack, and Sensei ended up with Hayate and me afterward. I don’t really blame him for thinking UA’s part of the problem.”

“That sounds like he’s buying into the media,” Shinsō protested, but he didn’t raise his voice. Even as tired as he’d been recently, Shinsō understood the significance of any mention of Kei’s mother. It was a sore spot put on display for the sake of the ruse—not that he knew that last detail. “Don’t you think he’s rushing that decision?”

“Kinda. I mean, I moved out here to attend UA. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be in Tokyo at all.” Kei took a sip of her coffee and went on, “And I don’t think Sensei’s thinking much about what me leaving might mean to other parents who send their kids to school here. I mean, if a General Education kid gets pulled because their guardian’s freaking out, it’s…it’s an interesting message to send. The bad kind.”

Strictly speaking, Sensei would bring Kei back to Konoha whether the media suffered a collective heart attack or not. The impression he’d give didn’t even factor into consideration, as it shouldn’t—Kei was no more a real Japanese national than Kakashi and Obito were. Once Kei safely arrived home, there was a real chance she’d never come back to this world again. With all the seal arrays shut down, the only possible access would be through Obito’s Kamui, and that was an intense upfront toll to force on him.

“No kidding,” Shinsō muttered, before taking a long sip of his coffee. “But Gekkō-kun—”

“Might as well be Kei, now,” Kei interrupted gently. When his eyes widened in shock, she continued, “Kei-san at most.”
Shinsō shuddered as though she’d stabbed him. He deliberately set the coffee down on the table with hands that hardly shook, but it was a close thing. “Then…then I’m just Hitoshi. But you’re leaving soon.”

“Maybe. It probably depends on how UA handles this situation.” Kei pinched the bridge of her nose. She wouldn’t be surprised if the heroes’ plan to take Bakugō back was the death knell for her stay in Tokyo. A decent ANBU agent knew when to cut ties and disappear into the faceless mass of humanity. “I don’t know for sure.”

Kei wasn’t a real operative.

If there was no UA, Kei would need to go home because no other organization could possibly allow her spotty, falsified record to stand, nor would they pay for her upkeep. Sensei couldn’t justify keeping her out here if there was no endgame. Likewise, if UA did survive this trial, the dorms plan put a hole in Kei’s schedule the size of the gash that sank the Titanic. Increased surveillance alone meant her days of being able to slip away and patrol the city like a low-tech Batman were coming to a close.

“Kei—Kei-san,” Shinsō—Hitoshi, now. He squeezed his eyes shut, dark shadows standing out even more and his brow pinched. He unclenched his jaw long enough to say, “I know you don’t want to be a hero. We’d go our separate ways eventually. But I guess… I guess I thought I’d have a friend around a little longer…?”

“I’m sorry.” As always, those words landed badly. “I didn’t know how to say it all last night, so I didn’t.” Unspoken: This week’s sucked so far, and I didn’t want to add to it.

And I don’t want you to dig any deeper into what I’m saying now. Being a liar was exhausting.

“I get that,” Hitoshi said. His tone said otherwise. He scrubbed at his eyes with the ruthlessness of someone who hated crying, then took a long, deep breath before he opened them again. Still bright, but Hitoshi seemed to think it was fine. “It’s not final, is it?”

I was never going to be here past the end of first year. “Sensei sounded pretty sure.”

“Dammit.”

Fair. Kei sighed again and started fidgeting as Hitoshi curled in on himself. There wasn’t that much she could say. “Do you need a minute?”

“Think so.”

Kei worked on her homework amid the silence for a little longer, while the other café patrons came and went. The blond guy even gave Hitoshi a sympathetic wince on his way out, which Hitoshi completely missed. So much for a private conversation.

“I think our time’s about up,” Kei said finally, when the staff started giving them somewhat more frequent looks. Strictly speaking, Kei didn’t know how much time Hitoshi had paid for, but every customer in the area had cycled through and been replaced at least once since then. Except them.

“In more ways than one,” Hitoshi said, but the joke fell flat on its face and made both of them wince again. “I should just stop talking.”

“No, get the anger out now,” Kei suggested, even as she started packing her school supplies. There was no way either of them were getting anything else done, even if Hitoshi paid more. Their concentration was shot. “It’s fine.”
“Is it really?”

“It’s better to feel things than let them fester,” Kei replied. Isobu almost certainly had enough experience with her habits to recite back all the times she hadn’t followed that advice, arranged alphabetically and by intensity. Kei couldn’t take refuge in hypocrisy if she wanted to.

You flatter me, or possibly yourself. Isobu sent an impression of him shaking his spiky head. I thought it was a parent’s prerogative to use “do as I say, not as I do.”

Works for older sisters, too.

Hitoshi had his own take. He scowled and snapped, “You sound like a self-help book.”

Water off a duck’s back. Kei had been accused of worse.

“I guess. That’s up to you.” She glanced away, toward yet more storefront newsreels that wailed about the collapse of public confidence. It was no more heartening than before.

Generally speaking, Kei meditated. Or did a lot of shadow-boxing. Or watched TV. Or used one of those paper doll apps on her phone. Or talked to Isobu while doing all of the above and ended up in an argument over whether orange worked better as an accent or primary coloration of anything. Gray-green was right out.

She had more coping mechanisms, was the point. “At least I don’t sound like a joke book.”

Hitoshi couldn’t come up with a reply.

They were out on the street again almost before they knew it. Once again, Shinsō retrieved his bicycle and started walking it alongside Kei’s somewhat faster pace. Clearly, neither of them had quite enough levels in “social skills” to make the conversation light again. Even if they did, looking for silver linings about now would be insensitive at best. Kei just wasn’t sure if it’d be worse on her end or his.

Probably his. She’d known about this impending outcome from the start.

“G—Kei-san,” Hitoshi said, with only a minimal stammer. He coughed to clear his throat, expression pinched until he finally added, “If you do move away, are you going to at least try to keep your phone intact? You barely made it a day this time.”

“I’ll try.” Well, that sure might be possible. Hell if she knew how she’d get a signal from Konoha, though. The phone, intact, wasn’t worth much without a network. She could probably use it as a paperweight. Paperweights were generally conversation pieces anyway, and she could think of no better way to confuse an uninformed friend than by presenting technology that wouldn’t exist in their world for the foreseeable future.

“Guess that’s all I can ask,” Hitoshi grumbled, as they finally arrived at the station.

Looking around, there were no bike racks in immediate view, because of course there weren’t. Those were low-tech inventions that were dotted around Tokyo in more scenic spots, or at least places where nobody had the time or money to build some ridiculous technological solution to an urban problem.

Kei idly tapped her shoes on the ground, as though to adjust the fit. She was really just burying excess energy in fidgets, but no one needed to know that. “Second thoughts about bringing the bicycle?”
“Not really. I’ve been slacking off on training since summer started, since you and Aizawa-sensei were both gone. It’s done its job today.” With that, Hitoshi stepped up to a strange kiosk not ten meters from the station escalators and slid his bike into the rail in front of it. The tires fit perfectly.

“Um,” Kei said, staring at it. The hell?

Hitoshi tapped something on the keypad, and the whole machine let out a chirpy beep. Then his bicycle, along with the schoolwork saddlebags he’d stuck to it, was slowly drawn into a pair of elevator-like doors that opened on the side. It was like seeing a car wash in action.

Kei stepped around the other side, to where a glass half-bubble let her watch Hitoshi’s bike disappear down into some kind of…underground bike-library. That was like seeing the door system from the Monsters Inc. movie, only in miniature.

The whole process took eight seconds. She couldn’t help staring the whole time.

“I’ll get it back once we come back here.” Hitoshi tucked away the card—not unlike his UA student ID—in his wallet. Then he finally spotted Kei’s baffled expression. “Never seen one of these before?”

“I don’t own a bicycle, and there can’t be a ton of these around,” Kei said to cover her ignorance. It never worked, but it never stopped her from trying. “Man, and I thought the UA doom robots were cool.”

“The test robots and an underground bike storage center aren’t really on the same level. You’re such a bumpkin.” Hitoshi almost smiled, but it slipped off his face as he remembered, again, that her being foreign to the city was really half the problem. He rubbed the back of his neck again. “I guess I need more than a minute, Kei-san. Sorry.”

“Take your time,” Kei said, and that was the last they spoke until they got on the train.
Inquiry-Based Learning

Chapter Summary

Mind Blank and Deku: Ace Detectives.

The train wasn’t crowded. Due to summer break and the particular time of day, they could find seats without a problem. Then the phones came out and the usual social screen blocked out any other passengers, as neatly as a sliding door shut in the world’s face. Were Genma here, Kei could’ve made a barrier joke, but probably not without embarrassing the hell out of herself.

But Genma wouldn’t be here ahead of her boys, and they were both still nowhere near mission fitness. Kei slumped in her seat, chin in hand, and felt her eyes glaze over as she tried to keep track of what was going on while her phone’s screen blinked.

At least Kirishima was a beacon of hope. And possibly desperate energy, since she knew he hadn’t been in the forest last night.

EijiRiot: yeah midoriya’s still in the hospital

EijiRiot: i’m visiting right now but the whole class is probably gonna be there at once tomorrow

EijiRiot: today i don’t know

EijiRiot: midoriya’s probably getting out today or tomorrow, yaoyorozu before that, but i think jirō and hagakure haven’t woken up yet

EijiRiot: everyone was planning to give them a melon when everyone was awake

EijiRiot: we all chipped in and were gonna do a big thing

EijiRiot: you don’t have to come to that one if you don’t want to, since it might be a crowd

EijiRiot: all…fifteen of us who can be there, anyway

“Who’re you talking to?” Hitoshi asked, finally moving to relieve that crick in his neck. He hadn’t budged since sitting down, so rolling his neck was about the minimum he could do to avoid more pain.

“Kirishima-kun.” Kei angled her phone toward him so he could see, then tapped out her responses.

TMNT-TNT: It’s not like I was doing any good sitting at home and missing everyone’s texts and calls.

TMNT-TNT: Shinsō-kun and I are already almost there.

EijiRiot: i’ll let midoriya know
EijiRiot: so he knows what to expect

EijiRiot: that villain broke his phone so he’s not been getting any of this

TMNT-TNT: Thanks.

“I was wondering why he didn’t say anything,” Hitoshi said, already turning back to his phone. From a quick glance, it looked like he was poking through some kind of online store. “Nothing from Todoroki either, but I didn’t expect anything.”

Kei made a vague assenting noise as she closed the messaging app and stuck her phone back in her pocket. Talking to Hitoshi now was more awkward than it’d been an hour ago, and blame fell squarely on Kei’s shoulders. Maybe she just needed to sit here and stare out the window until they arrived at the right stop. It’d be less suffocating.

Minutes crawled past, as though under razor wire.

“Hey, Kei-san?”

Kei blinked and glanced at Hitoshi, surprised he’d break the silence. Sure, his voice was low in deference to the other passengers—all four of them—but still. “Yeah?”

“Are you planning on telling the rest of them about leaving?”

Agh.

You should have expected this, scolded Isobu.

“I hadn’t even thought that far ahead,” Kei admitted. She rubbed at her temples with her fingertips. “I hang out with you all the time, so of course I was going to tell you first, but the only thing I’ve been able to think about for them is how much their situation sucks.”

“Is…that a really weird way of saying I have fewer awful things happening?” Hitoshi asked, and when Kei risked a peek his way, his expression had a wry twist to it. Then he shook his head and added, in a much lighter tone, “I’m kidding.”

Kei made a face. “You’re already teasing me about this?”

Hitoshi closed his eyes and leaned back in his seat. “Yep.”

That was a heartening turnaround, but Kei didn’t trust it. “Hitoshi-kun?”

Hitoshi twitched at the sound of his name. “Hm?”

“You don’t need to push yourself.” Ugh, no, that wasn’t the right wording.

“I’m half-asleep, Kei-san.” Still, he cracked one eye open to sidelong at her. “I’m not exactly working hard.”

“That’s not—” Apparently, she and eloquence were not on speaking terms today. “I’m sorry. For dumping that on you.”

“If that’s what you think venting at somebody sounds like, I’m worried about how much you’re not saying.” He’d given up his affected apathy, probably because there was no point. Instead, he leaned her way slightly, with his arms crossed and brows furrowed. On seeing Kei’s wince, Hitoshi added,
“Is the place you’re moving at least interesting?”

“Depends on your definition. It’s just back to my tiny hometown.” At least, Konoha was considerably smaller than Tokyo. There weren’t a lot of cities even on this version of Earth that could compare to Tokyo at all, so no ninja village had half a chance in hell.

Bzzt. went her phone. Kei automatically pulled it out of her pocket again and scanned the messages.

**EijiRiot:** hi gekkō-san this is midoriya

**EijiRiot:** kirishima is letting me dictate because he’s super nice

**EijiRiot:** wait i didn’t actually say that

**EijiRiot:** i mean i agree but kirishima that’s not what i said

**EijiRiot:** kirishimaaaaaaaaaa

**EijiRiot:** okay okay i’ll try to stay on topic

**EijiRiot:** anyway how are you doing

“Did something change?” Hitoshi asked. It was hard not to notice the distraction.

Through the overhead speakers, the computerized train announcer started rattling off the usual “approaching a station” warnings. Something about watching one’s step.

“Well, Midoriya-kun is…okay.” That was probably putting it optimistically. This was a secondhand account at best, even if Kirishima was having fun with gently trolling his friend. “Sorry, what were you saying?”

“You were saying your hometown is a tiny backwater.” Hitoshi sighed as Kei’s fingers flew across the digital keyboard. “More ninja training, then?”

**TMNT-TNT:** I’m fine. Headed your way and already sorry I didn’t think to bring a gift.

Wait a tick.

*What did Hitoshi just say?*

Messages continued to pile up on Kei’s phone screen.

**EijiRiot:** it’s okay

**EijiRiot:** i don’t think i’m gonna be here too much longer since i’m awake now

**EijiRiot:** and kirishima already told me there’s a lot of other things to worry about

Kei only managed to hide her reaction because she was trying to compose her response to Kirishima’s somewhat silly messages. Worrying about Midoriya put her ears on pause for the few crucial seconds required for her brain to miss the moment when Hitoshi said the word “ninja.” Because what the actual flying fuck. As it was, she paused for maybe a half-second longer than she would have normally before hitting “send.”
I get to choose what and who I worry over, Midoriya-kun, so forgive me for choosing someone I can see in a few minutes.

Hang on, I think our stop is next.

To Hitoshi, she said in a voice so cool she hardly believed she’d pulled it off, “I think I should be asking you that. Or did Aizawa-sensei tell you differently?” Redirection skills, hooray. Hopefully he bought that, because, again, what the fuck.

“He hasn’t said anything to me since yesterday.” Hitoshi rubbed the back of his neck again. “I think he has other things to worry about right now.”

“Don’t we all,” Kei muttered. On top of everything else, Kei now had to worry about jokes that passed just a hair too close to the truth. What did Hitoshi know?

Hopefully nothing. It’d be some kind of pathetic to have her cover blown now. She wasn’t sure yet if the last week of July counted as “late in the game,” given the constraints on her mission, or if it was better to think of the situation as her acting only holding out for a single chunk of the school year.

Both were bad.

Everything was bad. Why couldn’t visiting cats have fixed everything?

Because the world is very complicated, and cats are a solution to simple problems.

Sometimes, I hate it when you’re right.

Fortunately, Kei didn’t have much time to argue with Isobu or to avoid talking to Hitoshi or potentially incriminate herself. Instead, the train finally arrived at the correct station and sent both her and Hitoshi scurrying into a new part of Tokyo, stepping out into mid-afternoon sun. The cheerful announcement rang false, though both of them knew the computer behind it could hardly match the creeping dread saturating the city. And if it had, well, that would’ve been a whole different problem.

“I’ve seen Midoriya injured before,” Hitoshi said, while they walked the half-kilometer to the hospital. “But this is going to be worse. I can already tell. Even if he’s broken half the number of bones compared to the Sports Festival.”

At least then, Kei thought, everyone thought they were mostly safe. Though hell if I know how. What she said instead was, “You didn’t really know him back then, either.”

“And apparently, I’m the kind of masochist who needs to be tossed the length of a public park to make friends. What happened to focusing just on the goal?” His eyes were locked on the hospital’s three floors as they approached, mouth twisted uncomfortably. He sighed. “Back then, I wouldn’t have given a shit about any of them. When did I start caring? Hell, when did I get so callous that I didn’t care?”

Kei patted his arm consolingly. “You’re better now, though.”

“I guess. Would’ve been great to get the memo before all this happened,” Hitoshi grumbled, but didn’t shrug her off. Then, “Aizawa-sensei says you’re a bad influence. Worse than Midoriya’s recklessness, even.”

“I bet he does. I’d even agree, if it’s about solving villain problems with violence. Your Quirk gives you better options.” Kei put on a thoughtful expression, mostly for show. She even brought her hand to her chin and bobbed back and forth, to make it clear she was overacting. She wasn’t even irritated...
at Aizawa-sensei’s continued griping, because ultimately it didn’t affect her. It clearly hadn’t changed Hitoshi’s opinion of her in a meaningful way. “And I definitely agree with Aizawa-sensei if it turns out he was talking about school.”

Hitoshi made a noise halfway between a laugh and a cough. “It was on the list. You never have trouble sticking to a training schedule, though.”

“The difference is that I care about training and I don’t about homework.”

Hitoshi rolled his eyes. “Could’ve told me that sooner. I wouldn’t have bothered tutoring you.”

“Ah, but then who would teach you how to break fingers in the super-tough early days of hero training?”

“I’m sure I would’ve picked it up somewhere.”

“But it wouldn’t have been as much fun.”

“Is that what you call it?”

After a second, Kei covered her mouth to keep from smiling, and Hitoshi made a snorting sound that couldn’t have pretended to be anything but a laugh if he tried. The situation wasn’t that funny, but sometimes the only thing left to do was laugh or cry when the tension built to a breaking point. This entire day was just one for ridiculous, painful mood swings. It was absurd.

It was ending soon.

“I’m gonna miss you,” Hitoshi said finally. “That won’t change. First friend privileges.” He took a deep breath and let it out slow, like she’d taught him. “But I think… I’m not just relying on myself anymore. I can be a hero even if you’re not here cheering me on.” He swallowed hard and briefly turned away. “Sorry. We’re about to go talk to people who’ve been through hell, and I’m still whining about this?”

Just in case this conversation got louder, Kei gently took his hand and led them to an alleyway that was a little less open to public view. Really, it was the back side of a clinic stationed near the hospital, but it still counted. And Hitoshi followed her, which said a lot.

Once they were mostly out of view, she said firmly, “It’s not whining, Hitoshi-kun.”

“It feels like it is!” Helpless frustration, turned inward until it boiled. Kei’s gut was all too familiar with the feeling, even if the faces were different this time. He grit his teeth for a few seconds before saying, “We’ve talked about this before. I’m being childish. It’s like when we first started training and I got jealous you were spending time with Midoriya and his friends. It’s worse, because I know a lot better by now.”

Kei pursed her lips. That kind of argument never really helped anyone. And a sixteen-year-old was a child, at least legally. “Hitoshi-kun?”

“What?” He still wasn’t looking at her.

“Do you want a hug?”

That got his attention. He blinked at her, mouth slightly agape, like he didn’t believe she’d really said that. “I—what?”
Kei raised her arms. “You look like you need one. Question is if you want one.”

Hitoshi took her up on it.

Kei was a little shorter than he was, but dammit, she knew how to perform a special Gai-or-Kushina-style variation that left the recipient’s feet dangling off the ground, and she debated putting that knowledge to use. Instead, she settled for encouraging Hitoshi to bury his face against her shoulder, and he didn’t have to bend his neck too far to do it.

“You shouldn’t apologize for being upset I have to leave. I won’t apologize for helping you make friends,” Kei said, as their grips tightened. She heard Hitoshi forcing his breathing steady. “It’s all right to care, Hitoshi-kun. It can really hurt, but it’s worth it.” She forced out just that extra scrap of honesty, because it mattered here. “I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t care.”

It was more true than she could ever tell Hitoshi. More true than she’d ever admitted, even to Isobu. If not for her all-consuming protectiveness of Hayate, she couldn’t see herself deciding to throw herself into the crucible of shinobi life. Not with her parents as her only bonds. But Mom had seen her drive and—maybe realizing how screwed-up her kid was from the starting line—put a sword in her hand to give her an outlet. Then she’d picked up the same fellow-feeling—the one in her chest that sounded like “family” through whispers and shouts—toward Obito, and Rin, and Kakashi and Sensei and then everyone else. Making their lives less terrible wasn’t something she could accomplish on her own, but she’d grabbed that goal with both hands. Wrestled it down until it tired of fighting her—until somehow, there were more people alive than dead. Rin, Sensei, Kushina, and whoever else she could try to steer away from what looked like their fates.

As many as she’d had the power to save.

And so here she was, years later.

Hitoshi gave her one last squeeze before easing out of her grip. His breath left him all in a rush when Kei followed up by clapping him on the back, right between his shoulder blades, but some of his stress was gone. “Ow.”

“You okay?”

“Better.”

“And are you ready to meet Midoriya-kun and Kirishima-kun?” Kei pressed.

Hitoshi closed his eyes and nodded.

Kei clapped him hard on the shoulder, enough to make him let out a reflexive huff. “Then let’s stop putting this off.”

“Hi, Midoriya. You look terrible,” was Hitoshi’s greeting.

“Thanks, Shinsō-kun.” At least he was sitting up in bed. While, once again, one of his arms was in a cast and he had enough bandages to make Hitoshi wonder if the poor hero-wannabe suffered road rash, too, Midoriya still managed to wave with his good hand. “At least you didn’t ask if I was okay.”

“I said I was sorry, Midoriya,” Kirishima said, still sitting at the foot of his bed. He didn’t seem especially contrite. “Shinsō, Gekkō, hey. Midoriya-san stepped out for a second, but she told me to keep her son company, you know?”
“I do,” said Kei. She followed Hitoshi into the room and said to Kirishima, “Can I contribute to the gift fund, or is it 1-A only?”

Kirishima’s smile was strained. He didn’t even show off his signature shark teeth. “Oh, so far it’s just us. But there are enough of us in the hospital right now that I think it’s… covered. Thanks for offering.”

“It’s literally no trouble, since you just refused,” Kei told him, and got a sheepish little laugh out of him. She scanned the room, then settled for leaning on the wall next to the bedside table.

Hitoshi chose the chair, but only after turning it so that its back faced the wall opposite Midoriya. Some lessons stuck.

“I figure one of the better basic survival tips I’ve got for you is this: Never sit with your back to a window or door. You’re the ambusher, not the victim,” Kei had told him once. And at one point, she’d jumped him during their USJ hide-and-seek sessions through a similar method—only hers involved swinging down from a broken skylight like a monkey. “And now you’re it!”

“I didn’t actually know you guys hung out, aside from that weird exhibition match Gekkō-san had with Yaoyorozu,” said Kirishima, once everyone was more or less in place. “When did it start?”

“A bit after the Musutafu…thing.” And wasn’t that an exhausting topic all on its own? Sure, it was over and had been for more than a month, but it was still probably in the top ten of most stressful days of his entire life. Hitoshi just knew the heroics students had way more candidates than he did, though, so he didn’t say as much. “Midoriya here decided he needed to learn how to punch people for real, I guess.”

“It worked out pretty well, I think,” said Midoriya. He held up his still-wrapped arm, then added, “Mostly! I didn’t actually get to throw a punch before this happened, though.”

“I guess you’ll just have to live with saving a kid’s life and not breaking rules about fighting villains, then,” said Kirishima. He sat back on the bed and thumped Midoriya’s knee. “Which was super manly, by the way. All the rest of us did was sit around and wait for the teachers to handle everything.”

Was that a modicum of intent creeping into Kirishima’s tone, or did Hitoshi just not know him well enough to pinpoint his reactions? Hitoshi was generally as near a master at cold-reading people as he could be, since his Quirk’s requirements were fulfilled fastest that way. He needed to know where people’s buttons were to slam on them.

Kirishima, earnest to a fault, was hiding something. More than just the anger of being rendered useless.

“A kid?” Hitoshi asked, focusing on Midoriya. Kirishima could wait a little longer.

“Kōta-kun. He’s Mandalay’s nephew.” Midoriya corrected, but only as firmly as he could. Which really wasn’t much—Midoriya was a pushover when it came to dealing with people most of the time.

Mainly Bakugō, but Hitoshi figured his type of “fuck-off” aura wouldn’t work on the miniature All Might forever. Exposure built resistance.

Besides, Hitoshi couldn’t even pretend to be the scariest of Midoriya’s friends. That title definitely went to Kei, whether Todoroki was around or not. 1-A’s strongest student didn’t have to be talked out of stomping on a downed villain’s head. Iida and Uraraka didn’t either. And Hitoshi sure as hell
wouldn’t get himself into a situation that required anything like that.

“If it hadn’t been for… Um, some outside help,” Midoriya murmured, “I definitely would’ve broken both arms. At least. That villain was way too strong.”

Hitoshi heard it, because he and Kirishima were well inside Midoriya muttering range, but he saw Kei go taut by the wall as well. As Midoriya went on, comparing the villain’s Quirk to his own and audibly crunching numbers until they turned into kilojoule outputs, Hitoshi waited to see when he’d run out of steam. He liked math, but Midoriya liked *Quirks*. Apparently even the ones that could’ve punched him over the Sapporo Dome.

Despite having gotten his ribs cracked last night, Midoriya was apparently back in top form.

“Two questions, Midoriya,” Hitoshi said, since it seemed like everyone else knew what he was talking about. “What outside help? And what villain? I’d heard the League of Villains were involved, but Iida and Uraraka-san didn’t say who or what really happened last night.”

“Iida told me there was a guy with a fire Quirk,” Kirishima put in, since Midoriya was pretty clearly trying to figure out where his words had gone after the ramble. “Kan-sensei kicked the crap out of him—or what looked like him, at first. Turns out it was like a clone? And he made it pretty clear that nobody who was with him was gonna use Aizawa-sensei’s combat permission.” Kirishima frowned. “Though some of us could’ve helped. A lot of us were in those woods. After the USJ, I thought they’d get that we could’ve done something.”

“The one I…‘fought’ was Muscular,” Midoriya said, while Kirishima trailed off. “I didn’t throw a punch. I just tried to keep Kōta alive long enough to get away. Aizawa-sensei didn’t say anything at all until after Muscular was already down.”

“And that’s where the help comes in,” Hitoshi prompted, since it seemed like Midoriya had skipped from point A to D. “What happened?”

If he could have, Hitoshi imagined Midoriya would be twiddling his fingers. He had nervous tics and tells for days. “Um…”

“It’s not really a secret, Midoriya,” Kirishima said. He crossed his bulky arms and nudged Midoriya’s foot with his knee. “It takes a lot, but I pried it out of Todoroki already.”

Hitoshi raised an eyebrow.

“I know! It’s just—I have a hard time talking about her,” Midoriya mumbled. He coughed, then went on with his gaze fixed on the blanket. “You remember the monster who showed up at the USJ? Not the one that got arrested. It’s a little hard to, um, not recognize that face.”

Kei snorted. “It definitely had a thing like a face. Hitoshi-kun?”

He nodded. *Like a face. Yep, hard to miss that one.* Hitoshi’s recollection of the news coverage basically left him wondering for weeks if the thing was Tokoyami’s Dark Shadow with a dye job, but that was neither here nor there. He had an idea of how bad things would have to be if *that* showed up again.

Midoriya’s eyes cut toward her, for just a second. “Um, yeah. Anyway, it turns out she’s a she, her alias is Turtle, and that’s an Emitter-class Quirk. Sort of like Dark Shadow, but um…” Midoriya paused again. His eyes narrowed and his right hand twitched as though for a pen. “Okay, you know how we’ve been training to fight without our Quirks? It helps us a lot with judgment and building reflexes and just knowing how our bodies work that much better, right?”
Hitoshi nodded, figuring Midoriya was building up to something. Kirishima did, too.

Midoriya took a deep breath. “I think I saw what it looks like when someone takes that way too far. Near as I can tell, Turtle’s Quirk gives her super strength, speed, and an animal-shaped aura that makes it so nobody can actually hurt her without having All Might’s strength. From what I saw, it can actually fight without her, like Dark Shadow, but she can shape it so it boosts her attacks, too.” His hand twitched again.

Kei, who’d been busy digging through her school bag, dropped a pencil and a small, unused notepad on the bedside table. When Midoriya looked askance at her, she said, “Seems like you need something to keep your hands busy, Midoriya-kun.”

“Thanks, I—yeah, I do.” Midoriya fumbled with them for a second until Kirishima helped him place the pad on his knee. He tapped the pencil on the pad for a second, then started writing along as he spoke. “For a second, I thought Turtle was going to cut Muscular in half.”

Silence reigned.

“And one of the side effects of Turtle’s Quirk was that she could just—” Midoriya’s voice was almost inaudible now. “Todoroki told me that when the Wolf guy collapsed and Turtle showed up, it was like being iced over. He couldn’t move. And that was still the closest thing to good news we got last night.” His pencil continued to scratch on paper, but he’d stopped writing. Instead, a quick sketch formed.

Hitoshi leaned forward to get a better look. It was a messy image, but he could still make out a gray-black figure with three tails and lots of spikes.

“I was terrified,” Midoriya said quietly, “but honestly? I’m still… I’m glad she showed up to help us. I just wish she and the other masked people could dial it back like, uh, all the way. All the way back to zero? That was a lot.” He took a deep breath. “She killed the Nōmu after Wolf couldn’t. And the other ones, I think. I didn’t learn about that until later.”

“Didn’t stop what happened to Bakugō-san, though,” Kei put in. When Hitoshi looked, she was staring out the open window, seemingly unaware of how she’d brought the mood down. It took a second or two for her gaze to focus again, but when she did, she winced. “Sorry. I just… This is a miserable situation. I hate it.”

Kirishima was fidgeting again. When that progressed to jittering his leg, he lurched off the bed and said abruptly, “I’m gonna go find Midoriya-san. Be right back.”

The rest of them watched him go.

Hitoshi blew out a near-silent breath. If Kirishima was trying to hide something— anything—he was the worst liar alive.

It wasn’t that Hitoshi didn’t get it. Kirishima was one of those active hero types who just needed to be helping people. It was one of the things Hitoshi admired about him. Midoriya was the same, except for how he was currently bedridden by technicality and obviously reeling from the events of last night. He’d been in the middle of the chaos and made a difference, and Kirishima hadn’t. Hitoshi didn’t have to be a mind reader to know when tension like that hit a boiling point.

Kei eased off the wall, then muttered half to herself, “Should I… go after him?”

The question ended up being answered not by either of the room’s occupants, but by her phone buzzing enough that they could all hear it. She fumbled with it like it was on fire, then managed to
get a grip just before she read the screen.

Kei’s expression did something complicated. Then, “I have to take care of this right now. I’ll be right back!”

And then she was out the door, too.

That left Hitoshi and Midoriya. Midoriya was still messing with his improvised sketchbook, and Hitoshi didn’t honestly know what to say. Ironic for someone with his Quirk.

“Sorry about her. She already warned me about how two of her friends are in the hospital somewhere else.” Hopefully it was good news. He missed the way Midoriya bit the inside of his lip for a split second. “Hey, Midoriya,” Hitoshi said, “do you think the pros will get Bakugō back?”

Midoriya blanched. “I-I—” He swallowed hard. “I hope so. I’ve been watching the news when I can, and it’s… pretty bad.”

“Not just what they’re saying about UA. But about Bakugō too, right?” Hitoshi watched Midoriya’s jerky nod, then said, “Kirishima’s hiding something. And so are you.”

Midoriya met his eyes, lip wobbling a bit but otherwise determined. “What makes you say that?”

“Intuition,” Hitoshi told him. He rested his chin in his hand. “If you are planning something, I won’t stop whatever’s going on. I’m pretty sure somebody would smack me for hypocrisy.” How the hell had it already been almost two months since the League of Villains dustup in Musutafu’s streets?

“I wouldn’t!” Midoriya practically squeaked. “Promise.”

“I did say ‘somebody,’ Midoriya. It wasn’t an accusation.” Hitoshi shrugged. “Also, I’m pretty sure a glancing blow from you would literally knock my head off my shoulders.”

Midoriya blinked at him once, twice. Then he let out an awkward giggle, probably purely because he had no idea what else to do. At least he wasn’t cringing—Midoriya did that too, as though he was sure whatever he’d just done was unforgivable and that the people near him were going to slam-dunk him into a trash can. “S-Sorry, I just—”

“My sense of humor’s pretty dark,” Hitoshi warned him, entirely too late. If Midoriya hadn’t figured it out after the better part of eight weeks of intermittent training sessions, he was hopelessly oblivious. “And Midoriya?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m glad you made it back okay. Sorry I didn’t say that before.”

“I’m glad to be back, Shinsō-kun.” Midoriya’s smile was forced, but it was there. Hitoshi would take what he could get. Looking down at his sketch, he carefully pulled it off the spiral spine rung by rung and crumpled it. “Um.”

“What is it?”

He blatantly looked toward the still-open door, then the fidgeting got worse. While Hitoshi’s suspicion mounted, Midoriya went on with that for a few more seconds before saying, “Um, could you close the door? I wasn’t sure if I could say anything before, but I’m sure of it now.”

Hitoshi got up and closed the door, solely because now his curiosity was piqued. And Midoriya’s
brows were knit together like he was wrestling with his thoughts.

“I think Turtle attends our school,” Midoriya said.

The gears in Hitoshi’s brain ground to a halt. Distantly, he heard himself say, “…What?”

“I wasn’t sure until Gekkō-san left just now. Some of the things she’s said—why did she feel like she had to apologize for what happened to Kacchan? It’s not just something people say, since we got past all of that at first.” Midoriya leaned forward, voice picking up speed as he continued, “And Turtle, when she was talking to the pros, she knew who I call Kacchan without being told and sent everyone to try and guard him. She told me it was just because they’d been surveying our class since forever, but I don’t remember ever saying that nickname around the general public. None of the pros knew about it.”

Why were Hitoshi’s ears ringing?

“Um, and you said her friends are in the hospital? There were two other masked people there besides Turtle. I asked. One of them had some kind of portal-generating Quirk, and that’s how we got out of the forest as fast as we did.” Midoriya gripped the thin hospital sheets between his intact fingers, twisting them anxiously. “You remember Uchiha-san, right? His Quirk was almost exactly like how Iida said the one called Crane moved. The self-centered portal. And I know masks are just ways to keep out of the spotlight, and for all I know they could swap in masks or Quirks pretty easily, but it—it’s like what the first masked guy did at the USJ.”

Hadn’t Hitoshi just been thinking of how Kei was the scariest of their entire friend group? From as early as the first time they’d actually interacted, hadn’t he—

“Midoriya—” Hitoshi found his voice, even under the bombardment of Midoriya’s word vomit. “Midoriya, her Quirk isn’t anything like that. She controls water.” Hitoshi gestured vaguely, mostly out the window because what the hell else could he do? “I think we’d have noticed by now if she could turn into a freaky rage monster.”

“It’s—I know this sounds implausible,” Midoriya replied. “I get it, really. But hang on, okay? I have more.”

“Midoriya,” Hitoshi said in a warning tone.

“I’m serious! You didn’t see the way Turtle fought,” Midoriya persisted. “The Quirks were different, and I’m not sure why, but I saw the way Gekkō-san fought during the Sports Festival and I’ve trained with her, too. Their fighting styles are the same and she always fights like she’s not taking things seriously. And there was that time, during the Musutafu incident, where she ricocheted off all the stuff in the alley and over a roof and all she said later was that she was worried about a friend!”

“She’s been using water to help her move faster since the Sports Festival, Midoriya,” he tried reasoning, but Hitoshi’s heart hammered in his ribs. “And she’s—she’s not that good.”

She couldn’t be.

“She ditched Aizawa-sensei and you and me and she clobbered Stain without breaking a sweat,” Midoriya countered. “Todoroki even said she just kept knocking knives out of the air like nothing, barely using her Quirk at all.”

“How were you two so calm? Neither of you hesitated.”

“Is that weird?”
“Most people weren’t raised by Mom.”

Hitoshi’s gut clenched. She was raised out in the country by a paranoid, militaristic mother. Later, by a teacher who apparently didn’t mind nearly getting blown up by his tearaway of a student. It explained things, didn’t it?

Didn’t it?

“Gekkō, you might’ve been able to win the entire tournament! Anybody with eyes could tell you were sandbagging the entire preliminary, but... Why’d you throw it all away?”

Why was she in UA at all? What was the real reason?

Hitoshi’s mind whirled. Conversations he’d dismissed or allowed to be redirected came back to his mind like they’d never left.

"And there was—the same day as the USJ incident? She came in to Recovery Girl's office that afternoon, and I was there, and Recovery Girl said she got her ribs broken.” Midoriya face almost bled honestly. A desperation to have someone believe him. "I asked her why, and she said she'd gotten in a fight with someone with a strength Quirk, and—and earlier, Turtle got punched out of the USJ through the ceiling. By All Might. I think she was gone from your class that day, right? Wasn't she?"

“Here’s the truth: I don’t want to be a hero. Never have, never will. Don’t get me wrong—I like my Quirk, and I like being strong. But I’ve only ever wanted to live quietly with my family and friends. My old sensei always used to tell me my worst character flaw was a total lack of ambition, and I agree with him.”

“Then...why’d you become strong? Nobody’s Quirk starts out that powerful or that controlled. They have to be trained or developed, and people can try for years without getting where you are.”

“That’s...a heavy story for someone I’ve only known for a couple weeks. Sorry, Shinsō-san.”

“Does it have to do with the scar on your face?”

He’d never gotten an answer to that question. He hadn’t pushed then—too caught up in perceived betrayal when Kei walked out of her shot at the finals—but now everything was coming back.

“Shinsō-kun?” Midoriya asked.

Hitoshi must’ve missed some of his rambling. He clasped his hands tightly. “She never talks about her parents.”

“I...didn’t notice?” Midoriya blinked.

“She doesn’t say anything since—they’re dead. She was raised by someone she calls ‘Sensei,’ and she talks about how everyone’s taught her to fight. He’s her guardian.” He glanced up at Midoriya again. “Did—what did Turtle do?”

“Turtle gave Muscular a chance to run. But when he didn’t, she beat him into the ground in three moves.” Midoriya glanced away. “It’s—I’ve never seen Gekkō-san with a sword. Turtle had one and used it. But the thing that strikes me the same is the total lack of...flourishes?” Midoriya was grasping at straws.

So why did Hitoshi believe him?
“Gekkō-san moves the same way Aizawa-sensei does, or even Edgeshot if you watch footage of his fights,” Midoriya went on, unintentionally echoing Hitoshi’s thoughts about Kei’s weird friends. “No wasted movement. And she took down Kacchan the same way, even if the details were different and even if she played nice with Kirishima before that. Anybody who makes her mad gets dismantled. She only left the Sports Festival because she didn’t care. It wasn’t a contest.”

“…Kei-san doesn’t have anything in her background that says where she learned to do all of the acrobatics,” Hitoshi ventured carefully. “But… I think it’s more likely Uchiha is the problem.”

Without Uchiha, this theory wouldn’t hold together no matter how much Midoriya muttered. But with him, the masked people could swap people behind those freaky faces as often as they wanted. Even if Kei wasn’t Turtle—and Hitoshi still didn’t think she was—Uchiha was a sticking point.

“I… Yeah,” Midoriya murmured. He looked out the window for a split second, like the afternoon sun was at all merciful without blinds, but Hitoshi knew he was stalling. “But I—Shinsō-kun, when Turtle first showed up during the USJ, she tried to drown the Nōmu. And not in the pool. She glued the same water bubble thing Gekkō-san used on Kacchan right to his face and tried to beat him that way. When it didn’t work, she ripped his arms off.”

“If at first you don’t succeed, escalate until you do” was definitely a point in common.

“Besides Monoma,” Hitoshi said slowly, “is there anyone you know who can copy Quirks? Or just… do things like that?”

“She was—I guess people could call it a villainous Quirk if she used it that way… Kei, what was it again?”

“A type of emotion projection. Mom used it mainly to inflict fear.”

Hitoshi briefly squeezed his eyes shut. Turtle’s Quirk was a lot of things, but fear was a part of it. Dammit, why did Midoriya have to have anything like a point?

“No, but that doesn’t mean they can’t. Crane grew a root-net while at the USJ when he tried to get Shigaraki away from us.” Midoriya’s eyes shone with what Hitoshi could only figure was the light of investigation. His friend was a conspiracy theorist. “But I—Shinsō-kun, when Turtle first showed up during the USJ, she tried to drown the Nōmu. And not in the pool. She glued the same water bubble thing Gekkō-san used on Kacchan right to his face and tried to beat him that way. When it didn’t work, she ripped his arms off.”

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“I thought his Quirk was literally just his parents’ ones smashed together,” Hitoshi said.

“It is, but…” Midoriya’s mouth snapped shut, expression shuttering in sudden horror.

“Midoriya? Was it something I s—” Wait. Wait a fucking second. “Midoriya, is there something I need to know about Todoroki?”

“No,” Midoriya said firmly, which was a better confirmation than any clumsy backpedaling he could ever attempt.

Hitoshi didn’t have the headspace for Todoroki’s issues, even now that he was sure they were issues. Todoroki’s dad was Endeavor, and that was a whole crypt full of skeletons Hitoshi would probably never unpack. He shouldn’t. There were some problems so far out of his weight class it was almost comical.

Kei opened the door, cutting off the remainder of the tense silence and adding a new one with layers piled on top. She paused on the threshold. “Um. What happened while I was gone?”
“Midoriya decided to get all his unmanly feelings off his chest before Kirishima came back,” Hitoshi lied instantly, keeping his expression completely level through sheer force of will. “We’re not going over them again.”

Kei rolled her eyes. “Fine. And Hitoshi-kun? My call from home included four people making me promise them I’d stop losing or destroying cell phones, so I hope you’re happy.”

Hitoshi barely remembered giving her hell for her destructive tendencies. Midoriya was a fucking curse. “Glad I’m not the only one on your case,” he managed anyway. “Maybe with enough people reminding you, it’ll sink in sometime.”

Midoriya looked baffled. “What?”

“Water and electronics don’t mix,” Kei said, shrugging. “Also, Kirishima-kun got caught up talking to your mother. I told her she should be very proud that you’re such a good person, but only in passing. I’m…not totally sure she knew who I was.”

“She does,” he replied. He shifted in his bed to finally reach for the glass of water that had been sitting there for ages, since his voice sounded scratchy. After gulping most of it down, he added, “She watched the Sports Festival, too.”

“Her and everyone else on the planet, apparently,” Kei muttered under her breath, though Hitoshi heard it. She shook herself out of her complaining mode almost literally, messy hair flying everywhere. Then, “She’s really nice, Midoriya-kun. I’m glad you have her.”

“I—thanks?” Midoriya looked at her like she’d just revealed something terrible. And, to be fair, she had. “Um, Gekkō-san…”

She tilted her head to one side. “Is something wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong!” Midoriya was officially a worse liar than Kirishima.

Hitoshi took over without missing a beat. “Midoriya remembered he didn’t pick up all the summer homework before break started. You still have it, right?”

Kei made a face. “I do, but I wouldn’t copy mine. Ever. Bottom third of the class over here.”

“Sorry, Midoriya, I guess you’re just screwed,” Hitoshi told him blithely. He made a show of shoving his hands in his pockets. “Better luck next year.”

Midoriya tittered nervously, but it looked like most of the energy had left him. He had been talking for a long time.

Kei noticed. “Midoriya-kun, thanks for putting up with us, but I think it might be time for us to head home. Your mother should be back soon. I’m sure you have stuff to talk about that you wouldn’t want classmates to hear. And we’re not even classmates.”

“But you’re friends.” Midoriya was painfully earnest. Maybe that was the closest he could get to lying. “Um. I think?”

Hitoshi didn’t know if he fully trusted it. Still, dismissive suited him better than concern. “Yeah, but still. See you around, Midoriya. Stop taking ‘break a leg’ literally.” Kei bowed before she left, but before Hitoshi followed her out of the room, he added, “You can call me about whatever. Okay?”

“Okay,” Midoriya said, bobbing his head a little. His smile was a little sickly, still, but Hitoshi
figured that was from nerves. He’d barely avoided a major grilling.

Then they were gone. Somehow, Hitoshi managed to fool Kei into thinking everything was normal for the entire train ride back to where he’d left his bike. After visiting the hospital, both of them were fairly quiet. It was easier than the trip there, if only because everything was quiet this time. Hitoshi, mostly, was just tired.

“If I have to call about homework help, will you be around?” Kei asked, right before they parted ways.

“Sure,” Hitoshi told her, as though nothing at all had changed.

It felt like the biggest lie he'd told all day.
House Arrest

Chapter Summary

Kei and Hitoshi: Play narrative hot potato.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Waiting on a knife’s edge wasn’t Kei’s favorite way to spend time. Much less an entire day.

If she’d been home, boxed in by four familiar walls and left with nothing to do but watch responsibilities percolate, this would’ve been the start of a cleaning frenzy. With her younger brother and his friends constantly here and there, or the messy results of her sealing experiments to occupy her time, keeping her hands busy and her mind blank was always an option.

She’d already gone on a run at Dagobah Beach for the entire lunch hour, dragged her futon in from airing it out while the sun was high, and cooked up the better part of a week’s worth of meals to stick in her miniature fridge once she got back. She’d gotten the blood out of all parts of her advanced ANBU uniform with a forceful application of elbow grease, stuffing it into a storage scroll next to its sister, and burned most of the remaining day trying to distract herself with light novels, phone games, K-dramas, and other entertainment that held her attention for all of a few minutes. She ended up lying in the fan-cooled room with a sense of disgruntlement and nervous energy thrumming through every limb.

Her Tokyo apartment offered little. And she wasn’t going to go for a run again unless her plan was to just keep going until she really tired.

Kei glanced at her phone again, lying on its charger. After a brief internal debate, she picked it up again and opened the message app.

Since yesterday, she hadn’t gotten any more texts or calls from mission-related sources. Getting a transmission from an unknown number ought to have been just a spam call, even in the hospital, but instead left a cheery little message in her phone’s voicemail. If it hadn’t been for the text just before, she probably wouldn’t have left the room to listen to it at all, but it had and she had.

She just reread the string again.

UNKNOWN: We got it to work. If you received this message, please send something back when you have the time. — Sensei

TMNT-TNT: Prove it.

TMNT-TNT: Name something no one else out here would know about.

UNKNOWN: On your first trip out of the village, you lectured the rest of us about how volcanoes worked and the age of the land around our destination. Not bad for a nine-year-old!
Blood rushed to Kei’s face at the reminder, even then. She’d thought Sensei forgot about…that. Very few pieces of news would send Kei rushing down a hospital hallway faster without someone else being in life-threatening danger. Context mattered, she supposed.

**UNKNOWN:** And then you had that finals match with Gai-kun, which caused a minor uproar.

**TMNT-TNT:** Okay okay it’s you I get it.

**UNKNOWN:** There was also the time you first met Pakkun and the other dogs, which was very cute. I’d never heard you make the baby talk voice before.

**UNKNOWN:** Oh, good. I have more moments I can name, though!

**TMNT-TNT:** Please don’t.

**UNKNOWN:** I won’t, I won’t.

**UNKNOWN:** It’s good to hear from you.

**UNKNOWN:** Can you change this…chat ID? It seems like everyone else has one.

**UNKNOWN:** Inputting characters is…very strange.

Sensei had never even seen a keyboard in his life before the mission started. Yeah, she imagined it’d be strange to start typing at all.

**TMNT-TNT:** Done.

**FlashyFlash:** This is payback, isn’t it?

**TMNT-TNT:** Yep.

**FlashyFlash:** Fair. Now, did you want the rundown on those Quirks you saw the other night or not?

**TMNT-TNT:** Yes, please.

Sensei left her alone after painstakingly typing up what turned out to be shorthand for all of the League of Villains’ identified Quirks, but it sent a little thrill through Kei’s whole body to know that finally she could contact home like this even without Obito. Even if communication was just in bursts and pictures were right out, it was easier to conceal a cell phone in Tokyo than a scroll. There was a certain spontaneity to this method that made her giddy and homesick all at once. Mostly the former at the time. Mostly the latter, a day after the fact.

Sitting in this apartment wasn’t doing her any good at the moment.

She tapped on her voicemail again.

“Hi, Kei! The Hokage asked me to use this weird device to try calling you, and I think it worked!” Rin’s cheerful voice blasted from the recording like she had no idea what the microphone sensitivity was. Without Obito or Kakashi specifically setting up one of the dozen extra burner phones, Rin had to figure things out for herself. “Since I know you’d want to know first, Kakashi and Obito are both
still resting. But they refused to stay in the hospital, so the Hokage asked them to pile up in his place so he could keep an eye on them. According to Kushina-san, they’re behaving even if Hayate-kun pranks them, which really is a sign of how tired they are. But don’t worry—they’ll be fine soon. And I hope you come back soon, Kei-chan—Kei, sorry. Um, Kushina-san wanted to tell you really important news in person, and I think you’re really going to want to hear it from her! And it’s good news, so don’t worry. Be excited instead! Take care of yourself out there!”

Kei sighed and let her phone rest against her pillow.

She’d called back at the time and gotten more of a quick burst of conversation—the signal strength looked to be pretty weak—and been on the phone long enough to hear a lot of her friends chime in. Not just Rin and her boys; even Genma, Shizune, Kurenai, and Gai got a chance to weigh in on Kei’s adventures in trying not to cause too many waves in hero society. Mostly because they were already in the hospital due to their own shenanigans.

By now, the heroes were undoubtedly gearing up for their anti-League operations. Kei was still sidelined. She wasn’t supposed to offer to help. Part of her wanted to. Badly. But the same parts of her brain that demanded action scoffed at the idea of helping; they just wanted a good fight.

**We all have our own ways of relieving tension.**

*And yours tend to have a body count.* Kei scrubbed her hand over her face and crawled off her futon like gravity carried a grudge. It wasn’t because she needed the time to adjust to being upright; she was just being dramatic. Probably solely for Isobu’s benefit. *I need to find a distraction. Something. Anything to get my mind off things.*

**Then this conversation is not working,** Isobu said. There was a little flash of discontent, but it faded fast.

Kei grunted. She went to her stockpile of snacks and dug out a clipped-shut bag of shrimp-flavored chips. She hated shrimp, but the chip version was at least better than *shellfish.* And it wasn’t like Obito was going to be back in time to eat them before they went stale. Some half-forgotten instinct abhorred wasting food.

After retrieving the chips, she dug out that damnable school bag again and spread her homework across the table. More than a decade’s worth of teachers—across two lifetimes and three worlds—were laughing at any version of Kei that would willingly work just for the sake of keeping her hands and brain busy. Her traditional pastimes were less cerebral and more silly.

But dammit, maybe forcing her brain to understand geometry-by-numbers again would make something click.

**I suppose I could help,** Isobu said, resting his spiky chin on armored hands. **If you want. These types of numbers are really more for art, I think.**

*I sure as hell never used these kinds of basic calculations outside of the classroom.* If Kei had to do the math on angles of her jumps and the like, she’d have faceplanted more often over the last few years. True mastery was when the math—if there was any—was left to other people to argue over. **This** was supposed to serve as a time-killing distraction.

It didn’t.

Math never did.
Perhaps literature?

Maybe. Kei drummed her pencil against the page before sighing. Math was a no-go. Definitely. Do you want to help this time?

Not especially. Call on one of your human friends. By this point, Isobu graduated to tucking both of his armored arms under the sides of his shell. Because his shoulders were well inside his shell, and therefore the armored parts faced outward if he tried to pull them in, he effectively turned into what was his best approximation of a turtle-loaf. He wasn’t as flexible as a sunning cat and several thousand times one’s size, but it wasn’t like his tails were going anywhere, either. Pure loaf-hood was impossible.

Still cute, though.

What are you going to do, then?

Explore the chunk of your memory that your Hokage was referring to.

Kei spared a moment to groan aloud, but let him do it. Instead, she unlocked her phone again with a thumbprint and started tapping on the screen.

TMNT-TNT: Yo.

Purble: What?

TMNT-TNT: Do you know how to summarize The Tale of Genji without wanting to reach through time and reality and throttle the characters?

Purble: …Give me a second.

Kei set her phone on the table and extracted a notepad from her school bag.

While she texted her school friends fairly often, it didn’t take a social butterfly to realize that 1-A was hiding something. Kirishima hadn’t told her anything concrete—aside from his general worry about Bakugō—but Kei could read between the lines. If the hero students were going to pull off something ridiculous, it was really a toss-up whether it’d be better to remain deliberately ignorant or wring information out of them. For deniability’s sake, not knowing was safer. For the sake of not giving herself a heart attack if she was called upon and ran into those reckless jackasses on a battlefield, knowledge was power.

Kei laced her fingers together and flexed them until the joints all cracked. She glanced toward her still-inactive phone again while tucking math back into her school bag for (probably) later.

Hitoshi’s behavior in the hospital was suspect. Leaving aside the stress reactions he had—calm enough in the moment, breakdown later—something about that encounter with Midoriya rubbed her the wrong way even now. Sure, Hitoshi treated Midoriya like he simultaneously deserved a healthy dose of exasperation (that Midoriya hardly shared) and a sort of grudging respect built through nearly two months of sparring matches. It was the kind of thing that Obito and Kakashi had going, at least more recently. But Hitoshi generally didn’t try to get Midoriya to play along; he just stood back and threw out zingers. Maybe it was just because Midoriya was in such a sad state and the situation was dire.

It was a lot easier to lie over a phone than in person, but Kei already knew Hitoshi could brazen it out with the best of them if caught. She hadn’t called him on it then and wouldn’t now.
Kei’s phone buzzed, as though to cut off that thought process before she spent too much time on it. Caller ID? Hitoshi. She tapped the little green icon and then the speakerphone one, saying, “Hello, Hitoshi-kun. Ready to help me tackle the seminal novel in Japanese literature?"

“Does Midoriya break his bones?” was Hitoshi’s sarcastic rejoinder. “The answer is yes, by the way.”

“Yeah, I got that.”

“And it’s not the seminal novel. It’s the first. It’s also a giant pain in the neck.” Something clicked on Hitoshi’s end and kept clicking. Was he typing? “Does your copy have annotations?”

“I don’t even have a copy,” Kei told him. Specifically, Obito had run off with it a week ago and never given it back. Given that more Japanese novels were on the interdimensional grocery list even now, it seemed like Jiraiya was keeping busy.

“I’m not sure if I should thank you or curse you,” he replied. “My mom has the…third most recent annotated edition on her tablet. She looked at me like I had two heads when I asked for it. I have aspirin right now because she convinced me to bring it to my room just in case.”

“I swear we’re only supposed to write a summary. Of one extract.” It was a Modern Literature class, after all. Peeking back into the past for the sake of dragging up literary archetypes was acceptable, but only in roughly the same way someone from a Western society might bring up Heracles. Or something. “Should I just read the manga?”

“It’d be a lot faster. This assignment is practically begging for everybody to cheat.” Hitoshi was probably rolling his eyes. It wasn’t like she could see him, but it was implied. “Just write something about how the main character was a sleazebag or whatever. I mean, most of your answers to these things have about that much depth.”

“Rude,” Kei chided. After Hitoshi audibly scoffed, she added brightly, “But true. Sure. I’ll get a failing grade again. What’s one more?”

“Are you trying to guilt-trip me?”

“Absolutely. Is it working?”

“Fffffff—yes. Fine.” Hitoshi’s typing continued on the other end of the connection.

“Look at it this way: At least it’s not another story where the dog dies.”

“No, just the characters we’re supposed to care about. And it doesn’t have an ending.” Hitoshi paused. “But yeah, no dogs. Honestly, if these people had actual names it’d be easier to keep track of them. And if I have to read another description of Heian-era clothing, even the guilt trip won’t save you.”

“Noted,” Kei replied. She glanced at the clock on her phone—nearly seven—then asked, “I’m not interrupting your dinner, am I?”

“I wouldn’t have answered if you did. Dad’s at work late, so me and Mom are just going to watch TV through dinner or something. Probably the UA press conference, actually.”

Kei crunched her way through more of the bag of chips. She didn’t hate them. And it momentarily filled her ears with the sound of crunching, in a split-second distraction from the whole topic of Bakugō and the League and the media circus. She probably needed to watch that press conference,
too, but…

Well, there would always be a part of human nature that would rather hide heads in sand than look around and see the disaster unfold. Hers had died a quick death when Isobu got crammed into her head, if only because they were a thousand times more likely to be in the midst of chaos and death when they were together. The snag here was that Isobu kind of didn’t care about hero society.

And that whole “not supposed to rustle up fights” thing.

“Speaking of, I guess you’re already on the dinner part,” Hitoshi said, with just a scrap of teasing in his voice. Then, more seriously: “Hey, can I ask you a question before we get started? It’s not about homework.”

“Fair’s fair. It’s fine,” Kei replied. It wasn’t like she had a ton of other activities to pursue right now. “What did you need to know?”

Hitoshi hesitated for at least seven seconds. “Remember how when we were at the hospital, you walked out for a bit?”

Kei felt the frown pinch her brows together even as she processed the strange tone in Hitoshi’s voice. He sounded strained. Not quite sad, but like he’d been holding something back and the weight was going to come off his chest whether he wanted or not. Might as well avoid getting crushed.

“Yeah, I—” Kei paused as someone knocked on her apartment door. No chakra sprang to her attention, meaning she’d have to play it normal. Whatever that meant, with the country so shaken up. “Hang on, someone’s at the door.”

“Fine. I need to think about how I want to say this.” As though that wasn’t ominous.

Kei set the phone facedown on the table, then headed to the door. She still wore her indoor sandals—habit of what others would call a strange lifetime—and paused for a second to check the peephole to see if anyone was still being a pest. She’d gotten a few very insistent salespeople in the past, who astoundingly short of manners and prone to just walking in through unlocked doors. One of her neighbors—a college student attending Tokyo University—learned that the hard way a month ago.

Her view wasn’t great, but it looked like Old Mrs. Suzuhara. Seventy-plus years old, hair fully white, and usually able to make a scoffing noise at Kei’s unkempt appearance when her husband wasn’t around to do it for her. Usually in bed by seven, though. She lived next door and was the type to spy on the neighbors for old lady gossip parties.

“Hello, Suzuhara-san,” Kei said, through the door. “Can I help you with something?”

“Some of your mail ended up in my apartment,” she replied imperiously, like Kei ordered things off the internet with the wrong delivery address on purpose. Often. The voice was a bit muffled through the wood, but the tone came through loud, clear, and familiar. “Take responsibility for your packages, Gekkō-san.”

“I think you’re mistaken, Suzuhara-san,” Kei replied, frowning faintly. She didn’t use the internet for anything that traced back to her apartment, besides her cell phone’s GPS data.

“It has your name on it, Gekkō-san!” Suzuhara insisted.

“Oh for—fine, I’ll see what it is.” Kei was already the subject of ignorant criticism on this floor. If she rebuffed Suzuhara, she’d be the talk of the building. Suzuhara was a petty tyrant and this was her domain. Her hand went to the doorknob and the deadbolt. “Suzuhara-san, what—?”
Hitoshi stared down at his phone for a while longer then buried his face in his hands. What was he doing? “I need to think about how to say this”? Maybe he should’ve just gone for a full course in failure to communicate and said “We need to talk” right when he was almost on a roll. It was the kind of word choice his mom never used. In a household with two different mentalist Quirks and a man who ran on basically no sleep ever (even if he didn’t need it), making everyone’s stress levels spike was a terrible idea.

Midoriya’s half-organized story was one of those things that almost made sense at the time before Hitoshi really had a chance to think through the implications. Yes, Kei was dangerous. And yes, she probably had something to do with the masked people who’d been running around for months like urban cryptids. If Hitoshi looked too close, her story was full of cracks someone could drive a delivery truck through on a bad day. And despite that lingering doubt, he’d decided the only thing he really could do was talk to Kei about it.

He’d heard half a story, bits and pieces of another, and a theory fueled by Midoriya’s tendency toward wild speculation. He’d talked to Midoriya and said if anyone was going to try to do the “I figured out your secret, but it’s okay” conversation, Hitoshi would. He hadn’t gone through the tedious process of shaking Midoriya down for an actual reason why he wasn’t freaking the fuck out like he normally did to hand that responsibility off to someone else.

The teachers knew about the masks and about Turtle and about Kei. Probably. If they knew, the secret was already basically out. Hitoshi just wanted to hear it from Kei herself. He wasn’t even angry at her for lying. How could anyone explain “oh, I’m just a vigilante on my off hours” in a country like Japan and expect not to get smacked down for it? It was a mess, but it was the kind of mess Hitoshi wanted to help Kei with if he could. Not as a vigilante, maybe, but just…to get her to understand that she’d done enough for him. He’d be in her corner if she needed him.

And here he was, stalled at the starting gate.

“Hitoshi?” his mom called, sticking her head into his bedroom. Her hair was way lighter than his, longer and limper, and tucked into a half-bun, and she looked about as haggard as he felt. She’d just gotten home from day shift about an hour ago, showered, and started to decompress, but now she was energized again. While Shinsō Yui was supportive of Hitoshi’s dream to hell and back, she was just as worried by UA’s problems as she was curious about his friends. “Is everything okay?”

“I’m fine.” Hitoshi muted his phone, embarrassed. There wasn’t a single part of the planned conversation that Hitoshi wanted to have in earshot of his mother, clueless teasing aside. “Kei-san needed me to answer a homework question.”

Since meeting Kei at the beginning of the school year, Hitoshi had explained plenty of things about her to his parents. It mostly took the form of complaining about exercise, as far as his parents were concerned. His dad added a bit of teasing after the first consistent week where Hitoshi came home shaky and drenched in sweat, saying that it was nice to see him finally taking his dream to become a hero truly seriously, but Hitoshi decided not to take offense. Back then, he’d had the muscle tone of a lapdog. Now, he actually exercised almost out of habit—and not just on his bike. It was a transformation.

“Have you ever thought about inviting her over so your father and I can meet her?” his mom asked, a mischievous smile crossing her face. “I’ve never heard you talk about any of your classmates as much as you do about this girl.”

Hitoshi fought down the customary embarrassed flush that colored his ears every time this topic surfaced in this house. “She’s not my girlfriend, Mom.”
“No, but she’s your friend,” she told him, smile fading. “Hitoshi…”

Hitoshi glanced toward the phone again, “Mom—”

“Let go of her!” Kei’s voice shrieked from the phone on Hitoshi’s desk, barely garbled by the connection. “Suzuhsara-san—”

“Kei-san—” Hitoshi fumbled with his phone for a split second, unlocking it and turning the microphone back on. “Kei-san, what’s going on?!”

Something crashed on the other side of the phone call. Voices were raised, but the specifics were lost over the sound of furniture and cutlery shattering.

“Gekkō-san, run!” said the voice of an old woman. “Out the window, or something! Just get away!”

A completely different voice—a man, pure smug—said, “Now, let’s not do anything too reckless.”

Glass crunched ominously, the whisper of cloth letting Hitoshi know that someone had drawn close to Kei’s phone. Then, with a voice that slithered like sand sounded, another man rasped, “Don’t get any ideas, or Granny here will meet the inside of an urn ahead of schedule.”

“You—” Kei started to snarl, before biting it off mid-sentence. Her voice dropped into what Hitoshi thought of as her growl, an octave down and aggression amped up. “What do you want from me?”

His mom’s nurse persona slammed shut over her teasing. She didn’t ask if this was some kind of game. Not now. She reached for her own phone as she muted his with a tap, expression completely unreadable. “Do you know where she lives, Hitoshi?”

Hitoshi shook his head, biting his lip.

His mom frowned thoughtfully for a second or two. Then she set her phone next to his own with a recording app open, all too aware that they were in a time crunch. And that nothing she could say would help now.

Hitoshi’s room seemed claustrophobia-inducingly small all of a sudden. With only his mom and his furniture and that phone call, the walls bent inward as though to listen alongside them.

“You can tell a lot about a person by the scars they have... I wonder what story yours is hiding.” The sandy voice was farther away, as though he’d crossed the room. Hitoshi’s heart thudded in his throat as the man made a thoughtful noise, then said, “What do you really think of heroes, Gekkō?”

Hitoshi didn’t know how Kei’s apartment was organized, either, but he had a vivid picture of her standing in the middle of a room, with the hostage and hostage-taker on one side and a second threat still at the door. He was frozen with his phone, mind spinning wildly.

Cautious, but not panicking, Kei replied, “They’re...around? What does that have to do with—?”

“Then I suppose you won’t mind when I do this,” he said. The slow hiss of fire was barely audible over the call at all. Then there was a whoosh, which Hitoshi couldn’t identify. “There we go.”

Kei said, in the aftermath, “You didn’t answer my question.”

Why couldn’t she give Hitoshi a name to work with? His mom was right there, face pinched and just as stressed.
“Think of this like a recruitment drive.” Hitoshi gaped at his phone. At this point, it wasn’t in question that these were villains. It just wasn’t. But fucking what? This was—“One that appreciates refined talents. You have all the points we like, you just seem to lack...conviction.”

“Which is why you took a hostage,” Kei growled.

“Everyone needs to get a foot in the door, don’t you think?” asked Smug Bastard.

“You crushed everyone in your path in the Sports Festival,” Sand Voice went on, like she hadn’t spoken. “Even had some fun with it. It was obvious you had everything in the bag, and yet you stopped. Snubbing every professional hero and what they stood for in the process.”

Kei stayed silent.

Hitoshi wanted to scream. Why wasn’t she saying anything? This—Kei wasn’t a villain. She was only violent toward the people who actually threatened her and sarcastic and didn’t care that much about heroes, but so were plenty of people. She’d still taken the time to show Hitoshi how to be ready for heroics like it mattered to her! She never stopped encouraging people to chase their dreams! So what if she was probably a ninja? Kei was his friend!

“Trying to run out the clock, Gekkō?” Sand Voice sounded almost amused. “The more time you spend in denial, the more time I get to decide how to ‘motivate’ you into finally make a call. No more sitting on the sidelines.”

“I—” Kei began, tone hesitant.

“I want to figure out what makes you tick. You don’t get power like that just sitting on your ass, and you don’t stand stoic in the face of wanted criminals without some experience.” Sand Voice sounded louder again, getting closer to the phone. “Someone crammed you in a mold, and I want to see what shape you really take once you’re off their leash.”

Hitoshi and his mother stared at each other, eyes wide, and hands clenched together so hard that their bones creaked. All of the hair on the back of Hitoshi’s neck stood on end. Cold sweat broke out on his forehead.

He couldn’t begin to imagine what Kei was feeling.

“Someone like you could really run wild,” said Sand Voice, plying.

Don’t do it, Hitoshi thought with a wild bolt of terror running through him. “Kei-san, don’t—”

His mother hissed at him, though both of those things were pointless.

Kei stayed silent for far too long.

“My, still mute after the whole proposal? Well, I think Dabi deserves a better answer than that, so why don’t you think on it? Time out!”

“Wh—” Kei’s voice pitched upward into a scream, cut off mid-note.

And then there was nothing. No more Kei, like she’d never been there.

Hitoshi slapped a hand over his mouth, utter horror overtaking him. He’d been about to go for a pencil and scribble down the villain’s name, but now there was no way he’d forget it.

Sand Voice—no, Dabi—hissed, “I didn’t get an answer.”
“You were taking too long. Don’t play with your food,” scolded Smug Voice, still sounding playful despite everything else going on. “Hm. That went well. Now we exit, stage left.”

“Finally!” said the old woman’s voice. There was a loud splat, and then a much younger voice said, “That form was so uncute. Let’s go home!” She laughed, the sound dissonant in light of what had just happened. Hitoshi’s skin crawled. “Kurogiri-san, we’re done!”

Something whooshed like wind through a pipe, and a cavernously deep voice said, “Warp Gate ready. If you could step lively, now.”

Hitoshi’s breath wheezed in his throat. Hyperventilating helped no one, least of all Kei. His mother’s grip on his arm felt far away.

“Fine.” Something crackled, and the phone call died in a series of sad little “Call Disconnected” beeps.

Static buzzed in Hitoshi’s ears, the beeping of the dead phone echoing like a death knell. Dark spots teased the edges of his vision, his hand fisted into the fabric of his shirt, clutching at his chest like it was the last anchor to Earth, the world fading into a mumble as he just couldn’t get enough air.

“Hitoshi? Hitoshi, breathe!”

With Mom using her nurse voice, what could Hitoshi do but obey? “They took her—” Hitoshi gasped, half-choking, already feeling his mother’s Quirk kick in and forcing his panting to slow down into something useful. Firmer, but still feeling like his heart was lodged in his throat, he continued, “They took her… Holy shit, they took her!”

“I’ll call the police with this recording,” his mother said, pressing her hands to both sides of this face. She pushed her forehead against his, and the two of them just sat there and forced their breathing to even out through her Quirk and sheer self-discipline. “Hitoshi, can you call your teacher? UA needs to be prepared for this.”

Hitoshi shut his eyes against the thought of what they’d just heard as she let him go. The static in his brain cleared what felt like millimeters at a time, but from his mother’s stern-but-not-concerned expression, he’d gotten control in record time. She was utterly focused on the task in front of them now, exactly like she needed to be. Now, they had tasks.

“Okay,” said Hitoshi. No time for panic. Hitoshi woke up his snoozing phone and flipped through his contacts list until he found who he wanted. A tiny picture of a cat in goggles stared up at him, guileless, before disappearing under the call screen.

Aizawa-sensei picked up after two rings. “Shinsō? You don’t have the best timing. What is it thi—?”

“Gekkō’s been kidnapped,” Hitoshi interrupted. Bulldozing right over Aizawa’s sharp inhale, he went on, “By a villain named Dabi. Does that sound familiar?”

“Tell me everything you know.”

“We can do you one better, Aizawa-sensei,” said Hitoshi’s mother. “We have a recording, too.”

“Short version now; longer version later,” Aizawa-sensei corrected himself instantly, all business. “Shinsō—”

“Got it.” And Hitoshi, with a calm he certainly didn’t feel, rattled off what he could.
That's one way to break what's effectively house arrest. Also, Dabi set that All Might poster on fire. And her phone. And maybe her apartment.

Fun fact: Hitoshi's mother's Quirk is called Suggestion. It works like the D&D spell, with a max duration of about five minutes. Otherwise, it's the same as her son's.
“Good evening, Power Loader! Or is it Maijima Higari-san when it’s this late?”

The Excavation Hero paused mid-motion, in the middle of cleaning up Hatsume Mei’s latest engineering disaster. He spun slowly around in his rolling desk chair, wondering why an intruder hadn’t set off every single damned alarm in the building now that the security was mid-upgrade.

A man wearing dark gray and black stood in the middle of the room, leaning against the side of the work table that housed the latest half-exploded jet boots. The most important detail of the man’s appearance, even aside from clearly customized body armor, was the bone-white fox mask hiding his face from view.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but could you please let Present Mic or Midnight know I’m here? I doubt All Might or Principal Nezu are currently available, given circumstances,” said the man. “But someone took my student.” The masked face tilted to one side, affecting nonchalance. “Regardless of what you’d prefer, I’d like to get her back.”

“Who are you and how did you get in here?”

“I’m a teleporter, and I’m a teleporter,” he replied, deadpan. He pushed off the desk and loomed over Higari, but with little intent. He was just taller. Probably around Snipe’s height. “Specifically, my name is Namikaze Minato. I’d like a lead for finding my student, Gekkō Keisuke. The teleportation device in the basement was less than forthcoming.”

Higari debated what to do for exactly two seconds. He extended a claw-tipped hand to guide the man toward the door. “If you’ll follow me?”

“Of course.” Namikaze bobbed a brief bow, and off they went.

Higari only asked one question on their way to the staff room, and it was this: “Bakugō’s status is public record, but Principal Nezu only told the staff about about Gekkō a few minutes ago. How did you know she was missing?”

“Trade secret,” replied Namikaze in a mild voice, “and one that I think may be useful to the rescue
Higari kept his thoughts to himself. The bulk of them went along the lines of, \textit{We’d better get both of those kids back, for everyone’s sakes.} 

He’d heard enough about the mysterious Gekkō kid to have an unsettling idea of what a person who called her “student” would be like. Realizing that the girl was \textit{actually} as old as her records said threw him off, as had the details that Kayama and other heroes let slip while the school year went on.

Principal Nezu had better know he was playing with fire.

If he didn’t, it was already too late.

Kei crossed her arms and started drumming her fingers against her biceps, as though being trapped inside a tiny green marble happened often enough to become mundane. Not that she could see anything while the marble was in Compress’s pocket, but there was no need to panic. Even when crammed into a space too logically small to fit a person, the situation was about as under control as anything else in Kei’s life in the moment.

And hey, Kei wasn't stuck in her apartment anymore. Because it was currently \textit{burning to the ground} amid blue flames that’d incite panic as soon as people made the connection between it and the attack on the Pussycats’ training camp, but she’d deal with that when she got out of this particular mess.

A thought occurred to her. \textit{I kinda wish I’d gotten one of those supermarket membership cards at this point, only for kidnappings. I wonder how many experiences it’d take before I qualified for some kind of freebie?}

Isobu rolled his visible eye, which was a purely human gesture. \textbf{One can only wonder. Perhaps you ought not to have killed all the perpetrators last time?}

\textit{That was a team effort and you know it.} Besides, Isobu had helped her. Possibly unintentionally, but Kei’s recollection of that event involved an awful lot of burning orange-red chakra.

In the mental incident report Kei compiled second by second, she already knew using a villain incursion to get around Sensei’s orders would raise some eyebrows back home. But dammit, if the League of Villainous Wannabes wanted to get their asses handed to them this badly, the least she could do was answer their invitation. Sure, \textit{actually} saying “yes” to anything Dabi rambled about back in the apartment would have been a fucking terrible idea with that phone call still running and Hitoshi on the other end. And there was definitely going to have to be a chat with \textit{someone} about who the hell was giving out her address to creeps who could mug her neighbors for flawless disguises. Finally, the fire villain destroying both her fourth phone and her communication sealing array was \textit{deeply inconvenient.}

But it could’ve been worse. She’d managed to avoid being kidnapped for two years!

…That was a very depressing statistic. It said a lot about the events of Kei’s life that such a statement even qualified as a silver lining.

\textbf{It could be far worse, still.} Since he’d stopped raging inside her head, Isobu had yet to coil up into his relaxed pose again. He anticipated as much violence as Kei did. He encouraged it most of the time.
Isobu considered that, now that she'd called him on the carpet. Then he said, **You could currently be on fire.**

With Dabi around, that was almost a genuine sentiment. Aside from being trapped in a marble and realizing that she’d been fooled by Toga Himiko’s Quirk-transformation into Mrs. Suzuhara, Kei figured she was still in the black. Leaving aside how the event probably traumatized Hitoshi and she was likely now short one civilian neighbor, but…

No. She couldn’t think about those problems now. Not when she couldn’t really address them.

Kei could start strategically stabbing people once she was out of Compress’s pocket. Going by what she knew about their relative powers, Compress and Kurogiri would have to die in the first few seconds to keep any of the others from being able to escape or mount an effective counterattack. Dabi would have to die either before them or immediately after, too, because massive AOE attacks were a pain in the ass and he’d set her stuff on fire. Shigaraki was at least as dangerous as Compress if he got a hand on her, but only if she couldn’t get Isobu’s chakra up and the battle aura in place. Spinner… Eh. She’d take his swords. Magne? Gravity fuckery was going to mean Kei would need to stab her, too. Probably in the throat. Toga was target practice without an offense-focused Quirk.

But that still left the issue of tracking down All For One.

Getting Bakugō out would serve at least some of her purposes, but she needed the League defeated and more specifically **All For One** brought back down to earth. Banking on the connection between the League and All For One was a risk she could afford to take solely because she was a jōnin-level shinobi on a vertical power curve. Anyone else would’ve rightly just kicked Dabi in the face to cut the scenario in the apartment short and broken their cover in the process. And they might’ve not even won the ensuing fight when outnumbered three to one.

**When shall we attack?** Isobu asked. His patience stretched further than expected, but violence was still plan A, B, and C. And so on, until the alphabet was a distant memory.

Kei bit her lip. *Let’s see how this shakes out before we commit to causing seven deaths. The one we really need probably won’t be sitting conveniently out in the open.* Mastermind-type assholes never did.

And that was the last they spoke before the marble surfaced from the depths of darkness into amber light, popped, and let her loose.

Before Kei even hit the ground in a habitual crouch, two different hands locked around her upper arms. A quick glance to either side confirmed the presence of Magne and Spinner to her left and right, and Compress was still behind her.

Speaking of, the first thing that budget magician said was a cheerful little, “Let’s see. I think we have something in your size, don’t we?”

The pair with a grip on her forced her wrists behind her back into what was clearly a submission hold. “Ow, ow, ow! Let go of me!” Might as well pretend that attempt at security would affect her for more than four seconds, right?

Ahead, through her bangs, she spotted Shigaraki sitting at the bar with a dessicated hand over his face like it ever counted as a mask. Toga lounged just next to him, with her chin propped up on interlaced fingers, and Kurogiri was standing exactly where a bartender ought. Dabi was on the far
side of the room and out of direct punching range as he hovered near a wall. Same with Twice. Clearly, the villains had no intention of just letting her wander around.

And just to the left of her immediate view—

“What the fuck are you doing here, Seaweed Head?” There was Bakugō, bound from shoulder to foot to a chair with more straps and buckles than a professional racecar seat. His hands were hidden entirely under a steel immobilization rig that she recognized from the Sports Festival.

Kei let her bangs flop away from her face and allowed herself an incredulous, “Bakugō?”

And then handcuffs clicked shut around her wrists before she was shoved to her knees, just off to the side of the Chair From Hell. With both of them facing toward the bar and the TV, it was pretty clear today’s agenda involved a workplace safety seminar.

Or something. Kei was still scanning the room for weaknesses.

Brick construction, but it basically looked like any hole-in-the-wall bar in any city in Japan. There were no local advertisements or other convenient markers to help her pinpoint a city. Even the alcohol was as generic as Kei could determine at a split-second’s glance. No obvious angles for improvised weapons besides the barstools and bottles, but Kei wasn’t above just breaking everything she could get her hands on and then running people through the Great Waterfall Technique on “Blend.” She’d be able to access the building’s plumbing as soon as she freed her hands. The wall behind Kurogiri, though, had a couple of strange little details.

One wonders if any other building could have two Wood Release flechettes embedded in the inner wall. True to Isobu’s sarcasm, Obito’s attempted impalement left a pair of now-flowering wooden stakes sticking out of the back wall of the bar. It looked like a couple of bottles of whisky hadn’t survived.

“Interesting. Cat got your tongue, Gekkō? Don’t think any of us buy the scared little kid act,” Dabi remarked, leaning back against the wall. If she paid close attention, she could see his near-glowing green-blue eyes tracking her every movement.

Kei jerked her head away from him as though flinching, still surveying the room in a manner that looked more like fear than her more comfortable calculation. Staying quiet was easy enough for other people to misinterpret.

Besides, there was an even bigger gouge into the opposite end of the liquor display, where Kei and Isobu’s chakra tail had crashed through the black portal before dissipating. Nobody even attempted to patch up the hole in the wall, probably figuring that the watermelon-sized damaged portion ought to be a landlord’s problem.

Kurogiri wasn’t as fast as he seemed. Those portals took time.

A shinobi of her caliber could see him dead before he hit the floor. The USJ attack had already long since proved that Kurogiri’s Quirk didn’t come with an auto-dodge function like Kamui—his body was still solid amid all the shadows, if difficult to see. If Kei landed a solid attack on his real body, he’d drop like any other standard-pattern human.

But perceiving weaknesses worked both ways. In turn, the League’s eyes were on her. Now, definitely, but for how long beforehand? And what kinds of information did they really have access to? Her “Quirk” was a matter of public record and internet memes. She was familiar with the idea of feigning weakness—even specific ones she didn’t have—but this was a new development. It was
half the reason she’d been so obvious about using hand seals in the midst of the tournament, especially if they were the more noticeable kind. If Midoriya could link that particular cause (hand gestures) with an effect (apocalyptic amounts of water out of nowhere), the villains probably could. If she had to guess, the handcuffs were supposed to either prevent her from punching someone or making hand seals—in line with what she’d demonstrated during the Sports Festival—or else there was something unique about them. She’d heard of Quirk suppressors before, but wasn’t sure what they looked like or what went into them. She didn’t have a Quirk factor to suppress, either.

“Gekkō Keisuke,” rasped Shigaraki, drawing her attention back to him. “Sixteen years old, enrolled in UA High School after moving to Musutafu in February. Orphaned at fourteen by a freak accident that left you in the care of your middle school homeroom teacher. Your only blood relative is a thirteen-year-old brother.”

Kei glared up at him through her bangs. “So what?”

“It’s interesting,” Dabi said slowly, taking up the thread, “how none of those things account for the power output you showed at the Sports Festival.”

“No training on record,” Shigaraki said, picking up the thread. “No family history, either. Your parents’ Quirks are only listed as emotion projection and human radar in any Quirk registry Kurogiri found.”

Kei’s mission face didn’t shift. She could keep it up over longer periods and with worse stimuli, whether she faced potential disintegration or not. Strange that villains had found a hole in her story more quickly than a relevant authority, but then, Kei pissed people off from certain factions faster than others.

“You’re a true mutation, or maybe something different,” Shigaraki concluded. He leaned back against the bar, as though changing his body language would somehow counter the inherent creep factor in wearing multiple dessicated hands. If not for the stronger smell of humans in close quarters and spilled alcohol, Kei wondered if he’d smell like a hospital specimen refrigerator. “One who could be so much more free if those chains came off for good.”

“Do you even hear yourself talk?” Bakugō snarled, before Kei’s silence could set up shop. He had a way of pulling all the attention in the room back to his eminent, explosive self. Or imminently explosive self, if his hands were free. “All I’m hearing is ‘blah, blah, I can’t hold a normal fucking conversation without kidnapping people!’ Get a fucking life.”

Kei also didn’t think Bakugō knew how to hold a normal conversation, but the situation was already strained enough without her saying so.

“This is the part where new party members join up,” Shigaraki remarked, beginning to scratch at his throat, which already looked raw from previous activities. “I’d hate to have to stick you both in storage after all this effort. Magne, Spinner, let her up.”

“Are you sure about this?” Spinner asked, though his grip on Kei’s shoulder loosened anyway. “She fought Stain and walked away.”

And kicked his ass, Kei corrected silently.

“Her Quirk is based on hand gestures, which she can’t make,” Shigaraki told him, twisting his head like was rolling his well-hidden eyes. “Just do it.”

“Don’t worry, Spinner,” said Magne. She’d already let go of Kei’s shoulder, and continued with, “I
can have her bouncing off the wall in no time.”

Spinner made an annoyed noise, but he did move away. So did Magne. That left Kei still kneeling on the floor, head whipping around periodically to track the villains’ movements. It took a few seconds for her to decide looking helpless was better than trying for defiance at the moment, and settled next to Bakugō’s chair like they had her cowed. Still, not being held down was a slightly more advantageous position.

“There we go. Isn’t that better?” Shigaraki asked.

Kei didn’t answer.

“This is a bad idea,” said Dabi, eying her with deep suspicion on what bits of his face still carried expressions well. “She’s watching us.”

“It’s not like they can watch anything else,” said Toga. She probably had knives. Kei wanted to get her hands on them five minutes ago. “Come on, we could make ’em really squirm if we wanted. Maybe start with some blood. They can lose a liter or two!”

“Pretty sure they can’t,” said Twice with some worry, before his body language shifted to lackadaisical. He immediately backtracked with a bright, “But it’d be fun!”

Oh good. A Zetsu knockoff, but in Quirk-land. Like this whole situation wasn’t already screwy enough already.

“Hey, you,” Bakugō said under his breath, while the villains argued.

Kei made a briefly inquisitive noise, not taking her eyes off the various menaces in her immediate surroundings. Not for the first time, she was glad that she hadn’t gotten that haircut Obito kept bugging her about before the mission kicked up a notch.

“Why the fuck are you here?” Bakugō hissed.

Kei wanted, however briefly, to sass him, even with villains right there. But when she looked up at him through her bangs, she finally put together the faint tremor in his voice and the sweat tracking down his face. All of his muscles were tensed at once, and his eyes darted around just as much as hers did out of habit.

But his version was fueled instead by fear.

Bakugō had been here for too long. He knew the same statistics she did.

So, Kei replied under her breath, “Staple-face over there. I think he burned down my apartment.”

Bakugō’s red eyes locked on the man in question, his face pulling something complicated. “Sounds like him.”

Dabi was dangerous by most measures. Based on how much fire he could produce and for how long, he easily outpaced the average Uchiha. He’d boil anything Kei threw at him if he saw her attack before it landed. Bakugō probably knew that better than she did, given that his Quirk made him a walking tinderbox.

If Kei had been expecting further insight, she was destined to be disappointed. Bakugō clammed up after that comment.
“The girl pretended to be one of my neighbors to get me to open the door,” she went on quietly, since it seemed like having a story to concentrate on was helping Bakugō focus. She was the closest thing to non-malicious human interaction in the building. She could put in a little effort. “And then the magician happened, and here I am.”

“What are you two talking about over there?” Compress asked, over the combative voices that made up the rest of his group.

“How ugly your face must be if you wear a mask all the goddamn time,” Bakugō snarled back on reflex, “you fucking prick.”

Magne tittered as though Bakugō’s defiance was the height of comedy. Toga toyed with a knife, produced out of basically nowhere, and the other villains relaxed a bit at the sight of Bakugō futilely bashing against his restraints.

“Don’t let his mouth influence you too much,” Magne said to Kei, like she gave a fuck about anyone’s opinion at this point.

“And I’m sure you’re very cute, Compress,” Toga put in, as though to mock Bakugō’s efforts that much more. She hopped over the bar and dropped to Kei’s new eye-level, fangs flashing in a babyface smile that reached her eyes and was no less terrible for it. “Ooh, what’s this?”

Kei leaned away from her on reflex.

“Come oooooon, why don’t you tell us about yourself?” She reached out with one finger and traced the length of Kei’s scar along her face, starting from its lower edge. “This must’ve hurt when you got it. Didn’t it?”

Kei fought down the urge to latch onto that finger with her teeth and all the bite force she could muster. Not something she’d do normally, but Isobu pushed for it with the kind of quiet insistence that could easily change her eye color. And it almost seemed like a good idea.

**You cannot tell me that you do not wish to kill everyone in this room. Perhaps barring the explosive one.**

_I need their boss, Isobu. If I can’t get my hands on him, he’ll just start this whole process over again with a different group of disaffected jackasses. She clenched her jaw. I don’t know how much time he’s invested in Facepalm here, but it can’t be more than his Quirk-using Legion of Doom from before All Might punched him out. And if he can rearrange people’s Quirks like All Might rearranges faces, the mission will require follow-through I can’t accomplish._

This was her best chance to get to All For One. Bakugō being here was an inconvenience, but not more so than the fact that the villains apparently found her sullen silence amusing. Or maybe an invitation to taunt her. Hard to tell.

“You were just talking plenty to Bakugō-chan,” Toga said with a little pout. When she spoke, she exposed teeth halfway to vampire fangs. “You don’t like him more than me, right? You beat him up during the Sports Festival.”

Dabi’s eyes were on her, too.

How long would it take for the heroes to get their act together? And how long would it take before All For One got off his ass to come see how the new recruits were faring? Kei weighed her options, but not with perfect care. She could probably stall, at least for a little while, but there wasn’t any way...
of knowing what the endgame would be until things kicked off with a bang.

“Yeah. It hurt,” Kei said at last, glaring straight into Toga’s smiling face.

“That’s it?” Toga asked. She cocked her head to one side and propped her chin up in the heels of two closed hands, with a scalpel gripped in the left one. “You can do better than that!”

“Three years back, someone tried to kill me. He didn’t quite pull it off,” Kei told her, warier now that it was harder to hide her microexpressions. “He was faster than Stain was.”

“Faster than Stainy?” Toga was…worryingly intrigued. So were Dabi and Spinner.

Shit. Kei didn’t lie well when the people around her were more likely to ask a zillion very uncomfortable questions. Dealing with small fry sucked.

“So what did you do?” Toga demanded, her nose nearly touching Kei’s. She was a bubbly nightmare in the shape of a blonde teenager with pigtails. Her yellow stare bored into Kei’s with uncanny energy. “Fight him? Kill him? How did you do it? Drowning, like you did with Bakugo? Spill!”

“It was a guy with an invisibility Quirk,” Kei said, trying to lean back from Toga’s intrusion into her space without success. She jerked her head away upon failure, jaw briefly clenched like fear was the sole source of her frustration. “He—I figure—I didn’t let him do what he wanted, and then he did this.”

Kei’s fingers itched with the urge to stab Toga, but at this point it her actual presence was only half the problem. Instead, the situation conjured memories Kei hated.

More specifically, Kei knew going into the Kannabi mission would involve at least one invisible enemy. Taiseki of Iwagakure wasn’t a pushover for a pair of thirteen-year-old chūnin. Sure, Sensei had already killed the forward scout by then, and she and Obito had brought him down eventually, but not without injury. They hadn’t had a choice—getting Kakashi back was their first priority.

And they’d only lost Obito in the process. Leaving him to Madara.

Kei’s screwups got people around her killed.

The parallels were close enough to honestly feel worse than the fact that there were villains in the room. Even if she wasn’t as helpless now, that day still sent despair curling in Kei’s gut to think of Kannabi at all.

“Come on, details!” The point of Toga’s scalpel rested on the bridge of Kei’s nose. Her eyes briefly crossed to track it before she returned her attention to Toga’s clear glee. “I’m begging here!”

The hell she was.

“Get your knife out of her face and she’ll tell you,” Bakugō snapped, sending his chair rocking as he lunged to no effect. It did startle Toga just enough that the knife withdrew.

Kei let out a sigh of relief that only Toga and Bakugō could hear.

“I wasn’t going to mess up her cute face, though. I was just going to follow the line to add some blood,” Toga said, pouting just a little. Then a thought occurred to her. “But I guess Bakugō-chan trying to defend Gekkō-chan is cute. I just still think it’d be cuter my way.”
Kei didn’t like the idea of Toga focusing on Bakugō any more than Bakugō apparently liked the idea of Toga fawning over her. She ventured, “Toga-san, is it?”

“Yep! Feel like talking now?” Toga asked, bouncing back instantly.

Kei watched her approach a second time. Toga didn’t bring the scalpel up again, apparently obeying Bakugō’s order. “I guess I just wanted—”

And without any notable break in the sentence or tone, Kei lunged forward and cracked Toga square in the nose with her forehead.

Toga fell back with a shriek, clutching at her face with both hands. Magne caught her and got the scalpel away from her face before she accidentally stabbed herself with it.

“—to pay you back for burning my apartment down,” Kei snarled, dropping formal speech entirely. That wasn’t what a traumatized teenager would say. But sometimes breaking character was what the situation called for, more than playing at being a statue. “Stick that in my face again and I’ll tear yours off.”

“Oh god, there’s two of them,” said Twice, covering his face with one hand. A split second later, his body language shifted enough to make a strangely cheery thumbs-up, and he said approvingly, “There it is!”

“So the mask slips,” Dabi said, drawing Kei’s gaze back to him. The smug satisfaction rolling off of him was almost like heat. “Was that so hard?”

“I don’t know,” Kei told him in a growl. Let them think they’ve won. Toga’s blood dripped down the side of her nose, tracing her scar. “How about you tell me? Stain tried to kill me. You set my stuff on fire and kidnapped me. Maybe—just maybe—I’m a little stressed out.”

“Why don’t you stop holding back those destructive impulses? Playing the passive observer doesn’t suit you,” said Shigaraki. Going by the twitch of his head, he glanced to the side. “Toga. Get up.”

“I’m fine!” she called, lurching back up from her graceless sprawl. Her tongue darted out of her mouth to lap up her blood as it poured from her now-broken nose. “What a rush.”

Great. So, Toga was a tiny Hidan—just without the cult. Was it related to her Quirk or just something she did for fun? While Kei knew bloodline limits that warped the user’s mindset, Quirks were harder to pin down. Most of the degeneration she’d seen was a direct consequence of All For One’s interference, but she couldn’t come up with more theories right now.

“I’m done talking to you.” Kei glared as though she’d spontaneously develop Cyclops’s heat vision and put a hole in several heads. And walls. She clamped her teeth together with such force that she knew a muscle in her jaw stood out from the strain, just as intended.

“I don’t think you’ve convinced her,” said Compress. “Shigaraki-san, do you mind if I put her in time-out for a little while, to think about what she’s done?”

Kei suppressed her reaction to that idea, if only because she’d already wasted several minutes being stuck as a shrunken toy. Repeating that experience sounded bad.

“No,” said Shigaraki, “I think we should leave her as-is. Twice, turn on the TV. The UA press conference is starting soon.”

And when the others turned their attention to the television and the blaring news story, Kei waited
until their attention was well and truly caught.

Then she folded her fingers into a one-handed seal, without shifting her shoulders or otherwise giving the game away, and split the handcuffs with a chakra scalpel with an edge the length of her hand.

This is threatening to be fun, said Isobu. Avoid ruining it.

Kei made a noncommittal noise and, with her hands held together like she hadn’t just invalidated part of the League’s plans, she primed herself to pounce on the only prize that mattered: All For One.

“Midoriya, where the hell are you?”

Izuku blinked, feeling his friends’ eyes on him even as he tried to pretend the rest of the train couldn’t listen in. He cupped his hand around his phone’s speaker, frowning. “Shinsō-kun? Uh—I’m at home. Right now.”

For a long couple of seconds, Shinsō said nothing.

“Shinsō-kun, are you—? I mean, I answered your question.” Izuku added the last bit almost petulantly before catching his tone.

“What I just heard was an insult to my intelligence. Which I’m ignoring. You think I can’t figure out exactly what you’re planning, when the pros are chasing their tails over Bakugō? After we talked in the hospital and Kirishima acting like he was dancing on coals? I know you.” Shinsō made a noise from between his teeth that sounded like nothing less than a hiss. He took a deep breath. “If I can’t get anything from you, put Kirishima on.”

“But he’s not—” Izuku tried again, before cutting himself off when his brain caught up with his mouth. Shinsō was a better liar than he was. “Shinsō-kun, if I tell you, you’ll be implicated. What we’re doing isn’t something you should be involved in. It’s not even—it’s not something we should be doing, either.”

“Listen to me right now, and ask yourself if I sound like I care about that,” Shinsō told him. “I’ll give you a second to think about it.”

More than anything, he sounded desperate in a way that punched through Shinsō’s affected apathy in a way Izuku hadn’t heard since the time the League attacked Musutafu. The nearly three months since then, and most of the intervening time made it clear that while Shinsō wasn’t a born first responder, he didn’t like losing his cool. He wouldn’t, if he had any choice.

“I’m—” Izuku’s eyes darted frantically from Todoroki to Kirishima and Yaoyorozu and Iida. All in a row. Their entire class already knew, and Shinsō was quick off the mark, so Izuku made a decision. He hoped none of them would regret it more than they already knew they would if they just sat back and let the pro heroes do whatever. “I’m on a train to Kamino right now. We’re going after Kacchan.”

Another sigh. “Okay. Fine. I’m gonna guess and say you’re already halfway there, right?”

“Right,” said Izuku, though his friends were matching his baffled expression. “Um, Shinsō-kun, why are you calling if you already knew all of that?”

“I was trying to tell my brain to shut up,” Shinsō said, with a voice turned inward. “If you were already on your way by the time I called, there was no way I’d catch up. So, I won’t try.”
Kirishima leaned close, curiosity and concern practically pressing his hair to Izuku’s face as he tried to listen in on the call. Izuku obligingly shifted the phone to his other ear so he and Kirishima could both speak without using the speakerphone function. “Hey, Shinsō, why the third degree on Midoriya? What’s going on?”

“Kei-san was kidnapped an hour ago. By a villain called Dabi.” Izuku felt his gut twist immediately. “I just finished handing the call recording over to the police and talking to them about what we overheard. Her apartment was still on fire, last I heard. Blue fire.”

“Oh shit,” said Kirishima, his red eyes wide with horror.

“As far as I can tell, they took a neighbor hostage to keep her from kicking their asses into next week,” Shinsō went on. To Izuku’s discerning ear, it sounded like his voice was kept even through sheer force of will. “And honestly, I don’t know what you’ll find where you’re going. You might just get spotted by pros and dragged to the police station. But if you don’t, and if you have to fight some villains instead, she’s there, too. And at least she’s a goddamn team player.” Shinsō fumbled with something on his end of the call. “If things go wrong, don’t leave her behind.”

“Gekkō will be fine.” Kirishima sounded more confident than Izuku felt, but they were all jittery now. Gekkō was strong enough to be in the top five of even the hero course students, but it was more important that she was their friend. “You hear me, Shinsō? We won’t fight, but we’ll make sure Bakugō and Gekkō come home.”

Shinsō let out a loud sigh. “You can’t promise that.”

“I guess I can’t,” Kirishima admitted. He squared his jaw. “But I can try. All of us can.”

“All of you can,” Shinsō corrected, but without heat. He cleared his throat. Izuku imagined he was curled around his phone, racking his brain for anything that might help them now. “Kirishima, Midoriya, I don’t know what your Quirk training in the hero program is like. But if you want to make sure Kei-san gets away, there’s a couple things you need to know before you get in the middle of that.”

“We’re listening,” said Todoroki, just pitching his voice enough to carry.

Luckily, no one else on the train was paying them much attention. There were only a handful of other passengers across its entire length, and this car was nearly abandoned except for a sleeping salarywoman leaning on a girl wearing cat-ear headphones.

“First: If Kei-san gets a chance, she’ll hit full-force as a first move in a real fight.” Shinsō’s voice was grim. “And by ‘a real fight,’ I mean anything where pro heroes aren’t there as witnesses. Before we started training together, we got jumped by villains and she waited until we ran to an area with no cameras before taking them both out in seconds. If her brother hadn’t stopped her, she would’ve literally stomped on their heads until she felt like stopping.” There was a faint drumming on his end of the call. “Once she gets rolling, get the hell out of the way. And you will be in her way.”

“I—” Iida seemed at a loss for words. While not rude enough to shove his face near Izuku’s, his hearing was pretty good. “Shinsō-kun, that’s a lot to take in.”

“Second: Her Quirk interferes with Bakugō’s, and I can almost guarantee she’ll put his safety first,” Shinsō said, either not hearing or ignoring Iida’s remark. “And that’s where the violence comes in. She’s good on defense, but Kei-san only does defense if there’s someone nearby who needs it.” He paused. “I don’t think I can emphasize this enough. Don’t do anything that makes her have to
“babysit you, because while you care about combat authorization, I can almost guarantee you Kei-san won’t when things get desperate. And you have to assume they will.”

“Is this the kind of thing you’ve been training for?” Kirishima asked, sounding doubly worried now. “You know her best, right…?”

“Yes, we did, and yes, I do,” Shinsō said. Izuku wasn’t sure where this well of confidence was coming from. Maybe it was just down to the sheer intensity Shinsō and Gekkō poured into their regimen? “Third: Don’t fucking get caught. By pros, by villains, or even by some random jerks on the street. I didn’t have to attend a bunch of funerals today, and I don’t want to see any for the next week, either. You got that, Midoriya? Same goes for everyone with you!” This last was a snarl, nearly as bitter as his barrage of insults from the Sports Festival. But instead of anger, Izuku heard the worry loud and clear. “I am not getting into the hero program by climbing up a pile of bodies or expulsions or whatever other hell you might trip over while frolicking out there. I want to see all of you in UA when the semester starts, alive and well.”

That was the angriest declaration of friendship Izuku had ever heard. And Kacchan didn’t count.

“And I already told Aizawa-sensei what happened. First thing, even before the call to the police,” Shinsō said, much quieter. “The pros know that she got abducted. I just don’t—there’s a lot that could happen next. And you need to know what you might run into. Stay safe.”

“We will,” Yaoyorozu said. “Don’t worry, Shinsō-kun. We won’t take any risks we don’t have to. You can count on that.”

Shinsō laughed bitterly. It didn’t cover fear well. “Go ahead and prove it, Yaoyorozu-san. And in case I’m wasting your planning time, I’ll get off the phone. Bye, everyone.”

He got a quiet chorus of goodbyes in return, then hung up.

“Midoriya, what was he talking about?” Iida asked. “Bakugō’s…Bakugō, I suppose, but Gekkō?”

Izuku worried at his lip with a tooth, then sighed. “How much time until we get to the right stop, Todoroki-kun?”

“How much time until we get to the right stop, Todoroki-kun?”

“About an hour. Why?”

“I think this is going to take most of the time if I want to explain in detail,” said Izuku.

Todoroki frowned. “Take the time.”

Chapter End Notes

Obito’s still on bed rest. And Minato is a cheerful nightmare of a man.

Kei is not going to settle for small fry when there’s a proper mastermind supervillain for the taking. Second prize doesn’t result in a mission completion.

Phone calls are fun. And so are train rides with a group you abruptly realize has had quite a lot of contact with the person you suspect of being a child soldier. And…that the guy on the phone basically threatened you because he is worried. Friends are weird. Iida is there because this group ever-so-badly needed a damn babysitter and Tokoyami
just straight-up refused. I don't blame him. ¯\_(ツ)_/¯
Parent Pickup

Chapter Summary

Three dads arrive at the scene and a fourth dad makes a Mistake. There are too many dads.

Chapter Notes

This, too, has not really been edited. Have fun!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Watching TV while surrounded by hostiles was a novel experience. Konoha didn’t really do public programming or television or really have much of an electrical grid, and Kei’s apartment was ash and slag by now. On the streets of Tokyo, Kei barely ever stopped with the crowd to watch the big screens plastered across the fronts of office buildings. And anyway, she didn’t have time for it when there were people around who needed to be punched.

The League didn’t give her or Bakugō much of a choice.

Kei sat with her shoulder leaning against Bakugō’s highly disturbing chair, still tracking everyone in the room, as she listened with about fifty percent of her attention span.

It wasn’t a bad press conference, really. The single weirdest detail was that Aizawa-sensei was actually clean-shaven for the first time since she’d ever laid eyes on him, but suits looked almost normal on everyone else. While watching Toga for any sign of movement, she heard Principal Nezu field questions about the safety of the students, heard the press get more annoying in the way that reporters always did, and eventually heard Aizawa-sensei lose his temper in a more controlled manner than she expected. It was all yet another round of either losing face in public or being painted as ineffectual, which was the Achilles heel of a society that relied so much on heroics to maintain their sense of security.

If the heroes weren’t capable of taking care of the threat and reassuring the public, what were they other than dangerously powerful drains on the public purse? This world was built on inequalities and pretending they didn’t exist—with the distribution of powerful Quirks as a footnote among many—but kicking the anthill hard enough was more reflex than sense. People like Stain, who seemed to think that their great new idea was going to make things better, had all the foresight of a star-nosed mole. All For One’s direct lackeys likely had a more realistic view of what would happen next.

Kei had a very good idea of what happened when superpowered people stopped being subsidized. Stain’s ideals railed against monetary compensation for heroics, like the only real way to save lives was if it was done by pure volunteers. But people needed money to live in a society that ran on the stuff. If the heroes stopped being able to both survive and juggle a life-risking career at the same time, then the total hero population would nosedive.

The villains wouldn’t. Most of them weren’t being compensated for their time anyway, so they’d
carry on as usual.

This place only retained peace because its threats were currently being handled by an ever-alert bulwark of powerful fighters willing to go out and risk their lives so the rest of the populace didn’t have to. What if, eventually, the situation shifted so that status quo couldn’t keep being so?

The result was probably going to be a reskinned version of Kei’s extremely dangerous homeworld. Not immediately, and not the same way, but it was a potential outcome. Time would tell if another Clan Wars era awaited them in the future. The addition of technology and even more esoteric superpowers threatened to make any potential collapse a fancy remix of the chaos All For One originally wrangled to his advantage. That was probably the point.

Kei wasn’t enough of an ultranationalistic fool to believe the shinobi-dominated world as it stood was something to aspire to. At all.

One line of the press conference stuck even in Kei’s distracted mind as more immediately relevant, though. Somewhere amid the third degree, Aizawa-sensei said, “If the villains think they can turn Bakugō to their side, they’re sorely mistaken. I can guarantee you that much.”

Before being dragged here, Kei might not have agreed. Now, though—Bakugo was trying to be a hero. That he did it in a bullheaded, needlessly hostile manner was a mark against his maturity, but Kei didn’t have a lot of room to throw stones. She was already refusing to talk to the League despite any information she might be able to weasel out of them. Their respective personalities already looked similar to strangers. Why bother arguing about who was the least bratty?

“We’re doing our best with the information we have. I have no doubt the police will break this case very soon,” said Principal Nezu, in the wake of the reporter clearly deciding Aizawa-sensei was full of shit. “We won’t rest until our missing student is returned to UA.”

Shigaraki turned the TV off with a click of what looked like a remote. Then he turned his “masked” face toward Bakugō and Kei with a smug satisfaction winding its way into the room. For a man whose face didn’t make many appearances, he had body language figured out well enough to compensate.

“Why are heroes getting criticized? Their response time was a little too slow. Is it because their job is to protect the kids? Everyone makes a mistake or two! It’s not like they’re supposed to be perfect, are they?” Shigaraki slowly shook his head. “Modern-day heroes sure have it rough. Don’t you think, Bakugō?”

Spinner snorted. “Once a hero receives payment to protect people, they aren’t a real hero anymore. That’s what Stain’s actions taught us.”

Kei mentally added a footnote to her internal essay, which went along the lines of “Staple a link to fire fighters’ union websites to Spinner’s face.” He’d match Dabi that way. They could be proper bros.

Bakugō, just off Kei’s shoulder, nearly vibrated with rage.

Kei sent a tiny tendril of water snaking up the back of the restraint chair to pinch the back of his shoulder, unnoticed by anyone else. The damp spot left behind gave the game away only to her intended target.

He froze for a second or two, but the next noise he made was still closer to an angry dog than a human. Tempering Bakugō’s…temper was going to be someone’s job long-term, ideally for a
“A hero in this current system only cares about money and glory. And since society buys into those idiotic rules, anyone deemed a loser is shoved aside.” Shigaraki leaned forward, his actual hands moving to emphasize his words. His face-hand did not. “So we want to pose some questions. What is a hero? What is justice? Is this society truly fair? Soon everyone will be asking. That’s how we’ll know we’ve won. And you like winning, don’t you?”

What a pretentious asshole.

Bakugō’s head was bowed, but Kei could just barely see the muscle standing out along his neck and jaw. His red eyes flicked to her face for a split second while a fine tremble made its way through his frame, fear easily the first emotion at play even before he jerked his gaze away.

The villains were circling like vultures. She couldn’t verbally assure him of anything.

Shigaraki’s head turned slightly, so Kei was in what amounted to the spotlight. “And it’s interesting, isn’t it, how the heroes won’t acknowledge you at all? They’re so… protective of their image. Can’t have a second student disappearing in less than two days, can they? That would bring it all… crumbling…down.” He shook his head slowly. “Even if it means leaving you all alone.”

Kei kept her mouth shut. Even if she planned on breaking her silence, Shigaraki’s taunt ultimately meant nothing. She didn’t want to be the subject of a nationwide investigation, because it would bring unnecessary scrutiny of her and her false background. She needed just enough oversight to confirm that she existed, but not enough to notice any of the more incriminating details.

“Nothing to say? After getting first blood, too,” remarked Magne.

Kei briefly debated providing the same kinds of offhand details that made Hitoshi give her progressively more worried looks each time her childhood came up in conversation, then settled for sullen-seeming silence. It was easier for these people to draw their own conclusions when she wasn’t giving them any ammunition to play with.

Bakugō didn’t need to know those stories either.

“Hm. Dabi. Let them loose.” Shigaraki sat back, of course, because like hell a decently-ranked villain was going to take the risky job himself. He definitely hadn’t been in the forest the other night.

Dabi stared at Bakugō and Kei in turn. Then, clearly remembering that there was such a thing as continuity of character, he said, “It’s too soon. They’re just going to go ballistic.”

Yes, they were.

“It’s fine. Sooner or later, we have to treat them as equals. Since we’re scouting them and all. Besides…” That hand-face turned their way again. “They should be able to tell from the current situation that they have no chance of winning. After all, UA students are so clever. But in the interest of serving our current members? Bakugō first.”

And Shigaraki was too busy being self-congratulatory to realize that.

Dabi, equipped with more sense but not enough spine to actually argue against the boss with disintegration superpowers, said, “Twice, you do it.”

“What?! Me? No thanks!” Twice protested instantly, because he had a survival instinct. The bit of him that probably made up the White Zetsu equivalent immediately went to go untie Bakugō,
because he didn’t. “You got it!”

Dabi, having not gotten the response he wanted from Kei and apparently not noticing that his boss had the same hangups regarding Bakugō, was probably the third-largest threat of the bunch. Or something. All Kei really knew for sure was that Spinner and Toga were at the bottom of the list. The rest could do the risk assessment shuffle.

Could he boil off a tidal wave before she gave him a concussion? Isobu itched to find out more than Kei did.

Kei kept her hands where they were, hooking her fingers together to keep her wrists from getting too far apart. It’d give the game away too quickly. With the links between the handcuffs severed, they were basically unfashionable bracelets by this point. Not, perhaps, the best thing to be caught wearing after being bound by something previously more functional.

“I apologize for the rough treatment earlier,” Compress stepped forward, like he expected Bakugō to be swayed by pretty words. At this point, the only thing Kei expected to affect Bakugō’s decision-making process was whether or not she decided to punch someone at the same time he did. “However, please understand that we’re not just a bunch of hoodlums committing crimes without a third act in mind.”

Except that they kinda were.

Kei’s presence kinda proved that. Not that they knew, she supposed.

Kei watched the villains hover, like they anticipated this bananapants scheme actually working out.

Shigaraki took up the thread, because why the hell not. “Everyone here has different circumstances, but people, rules, heroes—we’re all shackled by them.” He stood up and strode closer to the still-seated Bakugō as he spoke, rasp never changing tone except to entreat. “You of all people underst—”

The very instant Bakugō was free, Twice got violently elbowed and Shigaraki took an explosion to the face. Bakugō went from seated to swinging for the fences in so little time that it was almost impressive, but the ensuring yelling was the important part.

“Shigaraki—!” Twice began despite the attack, before Bakugō cut him off.

“I stayed quiet and listened to you blabbering on and on,” Bakugō snarled, while the dessicated hand dropped to the floor from Shigaraki’s face. “Can you not get to the point or do you just love the sound of your own voice? It’s all down to you want to cause trouble and that you want me to join you.” Bakugō’s eyes almost glowed. “Well, screw you.”

Watch the hands, not the face. Wasn’t that some kind of magician mantra? Well, now today’s lesson was “Watch the ninja, not the liberally and literally explosive loudmouth.” Which no one was following.

Fun.

“I like to win.” Bakugō was up on the balls of his feet, leaning forward and prepared to spring every-which-way. The slightest hitch in his voice showed where the bluster was scraped away and nerve-jangling fear took root, but he barreled on anyway with, “I wanna win just like All Might. No matter what you have to offer me, that will never change. You got that?!”

Well put. Now, if only an alternate universe version of Sasuke was that…uh. “Self-aware” was
potentially the wrong word. Nonetheless, Kei assigned Bakugō a mental score of eight for explosions at the right moment. And he’d figured out the key to all this: If the villains wanted to recruit him, they needed him alive.

Kei knew perfectly fucking well that this was not the entire case. Bakugō didn’t know where Nōmu came from.

“Unlike some people,” Bakugō said, briefly wavering before stepping forward aggressively or backing away from villains with instant-win conditions, “I can still fight you here and now!” He stood his ground. “Come at me!”

“He must’ve figured out he’s important to us,” murmured Magne, like it hadn’t been pretty obvious. “Clever boy.”

“He’s an idiot,” Dabi droned, having apparently not really been on-board with recruiting the explosive kid.

“Let me stab him!” Toga suggested.

“A clever performer would’ve acted like we were winning him over,” said Compress, shrugging. “Now that he’s broken character, he’s finished.”

“Is he, though?” Kei slowly rose to her feet by slipping from seiza to the tips of her toes, and then smoothly rose on the spot in the wake of Bakugō’s smoke starting to dissipate. It was a little like being the monster in a horror movie that took the opportunity to prove to the audience (and then its victim) that being immune to bullets was most definitely a thing.

“I only do what I want to, and I won’t even pretend otherwise,” Bakugō retorted, “especially if the enemy’s not observant enough to notice when it’s not even one-on-seven anymore.” He tilted his head a bit and seemed totally surprised to see her, silently taking up space to his right. “Right, Gekkō?”

Kei brought her hands up, with one handcuff still dangling from each obviously free wrist. With her hair shadowing her eyes and her interest in talking to these people basically nil, charades fit the moment. Water coiled up each of her arms as though to replace her nonexistent sleeves, and she tugged experimentally on the plumbing.

Something creaked.

Bakugō took this agreement, then said to the villains, “I’m tired of being surrounded by a bunch of lame-ass wannabes, so you can go to hell.”

They were two for two on attacking villains while in a supposedly disadvantageous position. From a certain point of view, that common factor transformed into camaraderie now.

Shigaraki stared down at the hand on the floor, still muttering in a way that was much, much creepier than when Midoriya did it. His hands twitched—never a good sign in a man with a one-hit-kill facepalm technique—and tension suffused the room as soon as the smoke truly cleared.

“No, Shigaraki Tomura! Stay calm!” Kurogiri blurted, black mist almost exploding off his face. But the lack of a portal indicated that he still felt like Bakugō and Kei were far lesser concerns than Shigaraki potentially murdering everyone.

And was that word Facepalm kept saying “Father”? Because that wasn’t causing Fullmetal Alchemist flashbacks at all. Obviously.
Why the fuck was he saying that to a preserved human hand? All the associations clamoring in Kei’s head were bad.

Shigaraki’s glare was pointed squarely at Bakugō. Red eyes in that scarred-up face was more disturbing than it had any right to be, given that Kei knew far more people with that exact eye color and various facial configurations than she figured was statistically average. She felt more than saw Bakugō flinch, but it didn’t last.

Neither did Shigaraki’s impending temper tantrum.

“Don’t lay a finger on them.” Shigaraki insisted, even as he stooped to pick up the hand. It said a lot about Shigaraki’s leadership style that Kurogiri’s headlight eyes were still wide with either fear or shock. “He’s still an important piece. And they can’t fight us all off if they wanted to.”

Kei could. She wanted few things more than to do exactly that, especially if the process required exploding the building from water pressure alone. It’d be fun.

“I wish you would’ve listened to what I had to say. I thought we could come to an agreement,” Shigaraki said, with a cloying sort of regret that marginally increased Kei’s urge to bash his head into a table.

“What, you think we’re the same? Not a chance!” Bakugō could not act for the life of him.

Shigaraki barely paused, because clearly Bakugō’s actual opinion was immaterial. Brusque, he said, “The heroes said they would keep up their investigation, so we don’t have time to stand here and talk.” He slowly turned around, facing the darkened TV screen. Two lights were still bright. “Sensei? Lend me your power.”

Oh, hell yes. While it wasn’t a complete guarantee Shigaraki really was All For One’s direct subordinate, a happy thrill ran through Kei’s brain just ahead of the customary half-Isobu aggression. Now, a name would be very helpful, but past a certain point no one could expect villains to be quite so laughably incompetent. While the “Sensei” title was almost guaranteed to be needlessly confusing, this was a situation creeping closer and closer to her ideal scenario.

It was enough to make her giddy, had she been anyone else.

Finally!

“Kurogiri, Compress, I’m done talking to them for now. Pack it in,” Shigaraki said, a dismissive wave already in motion. “They’ll be easier to deal with later.”

The magician heaved a sigh. “They’ve been such bad audience mem—” was as far as Compress got.

Water Whip.

A tendril of water shot past him from Kei’s right arm, coiling around Kurogiri’s apparent neck and head. And Kei’s shinobi speed proved superior as she jerked her arm and chakra at once, slamming Kurogiri face-first into the wooden bartop before any of them could react.

“Kurogiri!” yelled Twice.

The whip surged again without her apparent input—even as she turned and was already making half-hand seals with her left, Isobu’s control made sure to bounce his head off the liquor display wall to boot before dropping him in an artless heap behind the bar. Call it spite. He was lucky Isobu’s whim
didn’t impale him on one of the Wood Release spikes like an old-time letter.

“Hey, no fair!” yowled Toga, knives appearing in both hands.

“I knew she was faking!” Magne extended a hand, though she didn’t have to. Her Quirk’s range was slightly larger than the length of the room.

Kei stepped forward until she was standing in front of Bakugō, blocking most of the villains’ view with her body. Not for the first time, Kei could be a human shield.

She was pretty good at it.

Magne’s focus meant Kei lit up in a pink aura that tried desperately to jerk her off her feet, but chakra control’s answer to that question was a solid “Nope!” Gravity had tried and failed to kick her ass in this juncture before. That water surged up from the floor to cover Kei’s sandaled feet meant she had a visual alibi for her “Quirk” if needed, no matter how thin the excuse.

She definitely felt gravity shift and let herself stumble, but she wasn’t going anywhere.

“So she’s figured out how your Quirk works?” murmured Compress, even as he leaned forward. Compress lit up blue, because of course he fucking did. Obito’s description was spot-on. Still, Kei refused to budge. “Clever girl.”

*What was your first clue, genius?* Kei wasn’t a special jōnin for nothing. And keeping her mouth shut out of apparent stubbornness had the wonderful advantage of giving her plenty of time to think, even if she didn’t have reports to bolster her observations.

Isobu snorted, more disappointed than before. **And no one ever seems to expect aggression from you, for some reason. How long is human memory, again?**

*Apparently, breaking someone’s nose is a love tap around here.* But hell, here it all went. Kei’s allegiances in *this* room were never really in question.

Magne was already picking Kurogiri off the floor, trying to rouse him with only minimal assistance from Toga. Instead, the girl sized Kei up like stabbing was about to become a communicable condition, and Twice outright cowered.

By contrast, Dabi was lit up with blue flame from palm to elbow already, the water nearest him hissing away into steam, while Shigaraki stood up so quickly his barstool was on the floor and disintegrating. Spinner’s blade pointed squarely at Kei’s face, while water continued to creep along the floor and slowly turn the bar into more of Kei’s playing field than theirs.

“One down,” Kei muttered out of the corner of her mouth, so only Bakugō could hear.

“Yeah, **one,**” Bakugō growled, but agreement was good enough. His palms both started crackling enthusiastically. “Stay outta my way.”

Someone knocked at the bar’s back door.

“Hello? I got a pizza delivery here!” said a muffled voice from behind it, sounding bright and cheerful and not at all like someone who might’ve just heard a man’s head used as a percussion instrument.

Everyone blinked. Kei took that opportunity to summon a blob of water the size of a yoga ball in the air in front of her, so she had more resources for blowing a wall out at short notice—
The wall opposite the bar exploded inward in a rain of brick, mortar, and—

—Kei’s wave leapt up, shielding her and Bakugō in the instant between from the debris blast. She once again blocked any attack aimed toward her tentative ally with her body, without thinking—

“SMASH!”

—And then there was one two-meter primary-colored superhero amid the chaos, kicking it into overdrive.

“Kurogiri, give us a—” Shigaraki started.

Before he could think through that order and realize his error, a rather more arbor-based hero swung in through the same hole left in All Might’s wake, arm exploding into a branch attack not unlike Obito’s Wood Release at its best. Kamui Woods, then; one of the native Musutafu superheroes that Kei barely paid any attention to on a good day.

“Lacquer Chain Prism!” And that was the League all bundled up for the police. Branches wound around each of the members, including the unconscious Kurogiri.

Dabi tried lighting up with yet more blue fire, only to take a tiny old man with jet-boots to the face. A single forty-kilo strike put him down for the count, held up only by Kamui Woods’ bindings. Turned out that the walking flamethrower had a bit of a glass jaw.

It would’ve been convenient to learn that a while ago. Say, about three or four hours.

Without him, the only League member who could get through the branches was Shigaraki—and human arms didn’t bend quite the right way to let him get his hands in the proper position. If anyone had been briefed on how his powers worked, he wouldn’t get an opportunity to murder people.

“Just what I’d expect from an up-and-coming new hero!” All Might said, in the midst of this rapid-fire chaos. “And a veteran pro who’s faster than the eye can see! You can’t run anymore, League of Villains. Because we are here now!”

…Sure. But hey, another speedster whose theme color was yellow was a neat bit of trivia.

Kei cautiously dropped the water screen and let Bakugō force his way closer to All Might, tension thrumming in every limb.

There was a flicker of chakra, nearly imperceptible if not for Kei’s sensitivity. Nowadays, anything that wasn’t from her, Isobu, Hayate, Obito, or Kakashi was worth noting and probably investigating. Luckily, this signature was just as familiar.

Sensei’s here? Since when?

I would not know.

She turned her head toward the gap in the wall, looking futilely past Kamui Woods in an attempt to get a look at the night outside. While Sensei was more than capable of suppressing his chakra to nothing, he generally didn’t. There wasn’t anyone else in this world to detect him ahead of an attack, and Kei generally welcomed his assistance.

Then again, she was still currently in a building loaded with hostiles and multiple heroes. Maybe Sensei hadn’t wanted to distract her before All Might pulled a Raikage and decided doors were for plebs.
Well, at least she could ask once the chaos died down.

That still left them standing amid a bunch of tied-up villains, sort of between Twice and Compress and basically immediate immobilization and bodily harm, but that was cool. Out of her hands, though.

Kei stared at the floor, watching her ninjutsu form a slip hazard. It’d look like shell shock to other people.

It wasn’t like she’d just potentially lost her chance to get her hands on All For One, unless the man behind the TV screen was every bit as spiteful as she hoped. No, she got to have brick dust in her hair that immediately needed to come out oh geez.

She sneezed four times while the villains complained and Edgeshot folded his way through the back door or something. And Kei had the good manners to cover her mouth with her elbow, dammit.

When she recovered, everything was even more crowded.

Apparently, the entire friggin’ police force showed up to the big shebang, too. There were uniformed, armored people all crowded behind that now-open back door, filling the dingy alleyway that had to be over there. So, between the cops, Kamui Woods, Edgeshot, All Might, the old man, Endeavor, and Sensei, the entire location was locked down tight by both police and heroes. With Kurogiri down, there wasn’t exactly a ready escape route for the League.

Unless their boss had an ace up his sleeve.

Kei had mixed feelings about that, now.

All Might heaved a little sigh of relief, drawing everyone’s attention back to him. “You must have both been scared, but you stayed strong. I’m sorry. You’re safe now.”

The expression on Bakugō’s face was a somewhat bewildering mix of the cracked façade of fury he’d been hiding behind for the last two days, the clear urge to cry, and a refusal to let either of these things come to pass until the balance tipped. All Might’s presence was like dropping a dumbbell on one of the ends of the emotional seesaw.

So, Bakugō exploded more figuratively this time. “What?! I wasn’t scared! Not even close!”

All Might accepted this in the spirit it was intended—pure bluster—and turned to Kei. “And you, Young Gekkō? That looks like it could be a serious injury.”

Kei rubbed experimentally at the blood still drying on her face and found it flaking away easily enough onto her fingertips. Gross, but unfortunately familiar. To All Might’s question, she just shrugged and said, “I think I’m good. This is from when I headbutted Toga-san a bit ago.”

This was somehow met with an approving thumbs-up, though Kei wouldn’t be able to read any skepticism in that expression if she tried. The smile took up too much space. All Might’s Symbol of Hope persona was a far better mask than Kei’s stoicism.

Her primary concern was what she should do when Sensei was barely fifty meters away. How did he get here? And did the heroes know he was there? The only other way to access this world was through UA’s teleportation device if Obito was still bedridden, which meant the UA staff almost certainly were aware of his presence. The question, then, became “How involved is Sensei in this entire operation?” followed by “Does he want me to change what I’m doing since he’s around?” Despite Kei’s immense chakra reserves, Sensei was the Hokage. If he wanted to redirect her, she’d
happily go along with a new plan. Kei’s plans were kind of up in flames right now.

Kei probably needed to turn down the constant mantra of the various ways she wanted to mangle the people in the room. The heroes wouldn’t approve, and Sensei wouldn’t really be able to cover for her at the moment. To that end, she picked an intact chunk of wall and leaned against it with her arms crossed over her chest, which was nearly universal body language for “I do not currently want to deal with people.”

Isobu groaned. **But you were nearly able to make a concrete impact.**

*I figure the impact of Kurogiri’s face to the bar will work for now. Also her forehead to Toga’s nose, but that was less likely to result in a true head injury.*

Edgeshot, spooled up in a form not unlike a spindle of yarn, idly probed at the unconscious villain and inspected the blood he’d left on contact. No teleportation for them.

**Pah.**

*Also, the excess aggression bleedover is getting a bit…noticeable, so can you turn it down a notch or twelve? Sensei’s here now.*

**Fine,** said Isobu, and the steadily building urge to dismember people finally plateaued, before dropping at a much slower pace.

And that was about when Kei noticed a change—her eyes had **stopped** minutely itching.

*Isobu.*

**Yes?**

*How long were my eyes gold instead of black? Dammit, she must have missed the sensation while percolating in murderous impulses. Bakugō probably flinched for more than one reason.*

**I have no idea. That particularly narrow application of my power is your prerogative.**

Isobu couldn’t be blamed for all of Kei’s violent urges. Not even remotely. She’d been killing people before he ever came along to accentuate the edges, and in nearly every emotional state. Isobu was just helping her stay in the moment. If it was a very angry moment, so what?

She mentally patted Isobu’s armored hand in apology.

He huffed, but he allowed it.

Kei sighed internally once that was settled, at least for the moment. The lights in the bar were dim amber mood lighting instead of bright LEDs or fluorescent lamps. And near as she could tell, no one had ever seen her eyes shift over to anything like Isobu’s while she was here. Using Tailed Beast chakra was a *Turtle* thing, not even approaching a Kei-as-normal-student thing.

The art of spacing the fuck out when both All Might and Shigaraki were pontificating at each other was one Kei had never honed in this specific scenario, but it didn’t matter much. When she came back to reality, Kamui Woods’ branches woven throughout the room into a kind of wooden net thicker than jungle undergrowth. She and Bakugō were outside of the villains’ reach in a fenced-off safe zone, though they could still both see and hear everything going on.

Nominally. Kei zoned out better than most people.
“Wake the fuck up,” Bakugō growled, shoving her shoulder. He’d followed her to her meditation “corner” at some point. “This isn’t the time for your bullshit.”

“Get out of my face,” Kei told him instantly. Snapping at him was as reflexive as his omnidirectional bad attitude was when aimed at her.

Sensei’s presence, even indirect, was enough to dull her sharp tongue to something broadly manageable. She wasn’t looking forward to the debrief.

Bakugō withdrew his hand, though. Maybe he understood, just a bit.

“This is all your fault,” Shigaraki howled at All Might, still bound in branches and thrashing like an enraged wild animal. His voice cracked like glass as he shouted, “I HATE YOU!”

Just as Shigaraki finished that last word, two fountains of black goop burst into being in midair to each side of his shoulders. With all the fanfare of a backed-up toilet, two slack-jawed Nōmu faces pushed through the slime, with their corpse-gray arms extended toward the nearest potential victims. All across the room, within seconds, more of the signature exposed brains and blank eyes appeared and the bodies surged through soon after, crowding the room even worse.

“Get Kurogiri!” bellowed Tiny Jet Grandpa, even as the creatures’ moans started to drown out normal human voices.

“He’s still unconscious. This isn’t him!” Edgeshot replied, still in ribbon form.

*There are clearly other possibilities!* A bubble of discomfort took up residence in Kei’s chest. Water swirled around her right hand like Saturn’s rings, each drop warping into a needle the faster it spun.

It was like each goop font was a portal—

*Oh crap.*

“Baku—!” And then she was bent double, choking on what *definitely* wasn’t a mere case of late-onset nerves. Emptying her guts on her worst day wouldn’t leave what looked like hot black tar suspended in front of her face. Doubly so for when it leapt *back* and covered her mouth, engulfing her head fast enough to disrupt her half-formed jutsu.

Kei disappeared in a wave of teleportation *sludge*, because her day just kept getting better.

All For One wasn’t the type to send an engraved invitation anyway.

Nōmu poured from midair in a tide of eerie, groaning bodies. Bullets ricocheted off their tough hides. The police refused to panic and scatter, while the Flame Hero Endeavor immediately launched a target skyward with an uppercut that ended in a massive gout of flame and force. It was only one of many, launching themselves haphazardly at anyone who might die to their gaping mouths and dead hands.

The building with the hole in the wall promptly exploded, sending yet more Nōmu through the air to crash into the street below.

Another Nōmu hurled itself forward into the crowd, only to be blasted with enough fire to torch an entire house. While concentrating his blast into a sphere, Endeavor shouted, “More of them? I thought we were supposed to have a handle on these!”
“I can’t get in contact with Jeanist!” Tsukauchi replied, hand on his shoulder-mounted radio. Flames flickered all around him, with smoke following in its wake. “Something must’ve happened at the Nōmu factory!”

Endeavor, without an iota of worry for his comrades whose crime scene had just exploded with enough force to cause a minor earthquake, roared back, “This is putting a lot of strain on my power!”

Maybe he couldn’t feel it.

*Pop.*

Endeavor looked down.

“That’s unfortunate.” A man long black coat stood between Tsukauchi and Endeavor, turning a fox-masked face toward the hero. Sleeves shifted and two three-pronged knives appeared in each gloved hand. “Then please allow me to assist.”

“Who the hell—”

The masked man *rippled,* disappearing like a mirage. Wind ripped through the street, stronger than a typhoon come early—

—several Nōmu fell dead with deep gouges and slashes along throats and exposed brains—

—Tsukauchi’s jaw dropped—

—guns went silent—

—And the black blur cut through the rest of them faster than the mythical *kamaitachi,* the disturbed air making Endeavor’s flames ripple in their wake. The wind died down at the exact same moment the man came to a stop, jerking one of those disproportionately small weapons out of the palest Nōmu’s face with enough force to splatter the nearest meter of street in its blood.

Ten Nōmu on the street were dead. Seven were still standing and moaning, oblivious to their losses despite being hurled toward the sides of the street by the air wave. When the heroes would inspect the mass of corpses later, each bore a single fatal wound.

“There we are.” The figure in black flicked his other knife, sending yet more blood to meet the pavement. He turned toward the building, ignoring Endeavor’s presence. “A clear path.”

Endeavor started forward, fire blazing even hotter to defy the air that had briefly banked it. “Answer the question. *Who are you supposed to be?*” He reached forward, attempting to grab him, only to meet air as the figure vanished and reappeared standing atop a Nōmu corpse.

“Fox, if you need a name,” replied the figure, three meters out of reach. That had to be purposeful. Once again, he didn’t bother to face Endeavor even as the flames mounted. Instead, his hooded head twitched before he leapt for the gap in the building’s wall. He hit the landed easily on the lip, calling out something like, “All Might! Are you alive in there?”

All Might emerged from the building, covering a cough from the smoke—one of the Nōmu must have had a fire Quirk. Or else his strength turned the inside of the building to dust. Hard to tell.

More goop started bubbling up, spitting out more blank faces and moaning creatures. Endeavor punched from the hip and set two on fire as soon as he realized they were there.
The figure held out his hand to All Might.

All Might looked at him like an equal. Then: “Endeavor, can you handle things here?”

Endeavor had enough of a handle on his temper to growl back, “Does it look like I’m having any trouble? Worry about your own responsibilities, you fool!” Even as he sent more Nōmu crumbling to earth in scorched, carbonized heaps, he snarled, “If you’re gonna go after them, now’s the time!”

“Right. I’ll leave you to it.” All Might turned his attention back to Fox and grabbed the still-proffered hand, far smaller than his own.

And then they, too, were gone.

Endeavor gritted his teeth, turned to face the still-spawning creatures, and threw himself into the fray.

Chapter End Notes

The three dads mentioned in the summary: Dad Might, Foxy Dad, and Fiery Asshole Dad. The fourth dad is All for One.

Shinobi speed is wild, folks. Especially Minato’s.

Also, a preview: (muffled evil laughter)
Outside Looking In

Chapter Summary

Katsuki and Hitoshi provide their perspectives on current events. Outsider POVs for all!

Chapter Notes

I am so, so sorry for the wait. The last month and spare change has been...wild.

And can you believe it's been nearly exactly a year since this thing was first posted?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Katsuki hit the ground coughing, bent double at the waist as his rolling stomach heaved. The black sludge had coated his entire mouth, worse than cheap cough medicine and three times as thick, reminding him far too much of the villain attack in his last year of middle school. Flashes of constriction and suffocation came to mind, making him retch more, his entire body aching from the force.

Nothing but bile came up. When was the last time he’d eaten?

Next to him, Gekkō retched twice before getting herself under control.

“Dammit,” Katsuki gasped, once he was done coughing, voice a painful rasp. He wiped the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand, eyes darting up to take in his new surroundings. “The hell—?”

What the fuck is this.

“Broken concrete and debris” was an accurate description. From the look of the wreckage and the surrounding area, something knocked a crater into the earth that pulverized the ten nearest buildings and probably made a concrete-based warehouse explode. Bits of wall, roof, and wall-plus-rebar were strewn everywhere like a smashed sandcastle. Just past Gekkō’s shoulder, Katsuki could see shattered bits of what looked like whole baths of chemicals, and a few Nōmu lying in pieces either in puddles or under wreckage, some moaning and others still.

The whole area was swept clean of people, barring a few major exceptions. The limp, denim-clad form of Best Jeanist in the middle distance, amid a pool of blood. Past him, the full-sized but likewise unconscious Mt. Lady and Gang Orca were in the debris field, neither of whom were going to be much help now. Not with Best Jeanist down for the count already.

And a guy wearing a suit from the neck down and a black ventilator mask from the neck up. No more than two meters away.

Katsuki did the math and knew instantly who’d come up short. This guy took out three pros that fast?!
“Bakugō?” Kei spoke from the corner of her mouth, gaze darting from him to the supervillain standing squarely in front of them, then back again. “You okay?”

Bakugō slipped just that much closer to her extended arm, refusing to take his eyes off the guy. “Fucking fine, alright?” he hissed in reply, too tense to bother with anything more complicated.

This guy, life support mask or not, set Katsuki’s teeth on edge even worse than the clown brigade he’d been dealing with for two fucking days. He was at least as tall as All Might, with an air of someone that was getting on in years but was still pumping iron as well as anyone in their early twenties, and would outpace them to boot. He was too artificial, too fabricated to be natural, like he took a bunch of attributes and mashed them all together.

Just looking at him made every single nerve in Katsuki’s body scream with fear. What was he?

“My apologies to both of you,” the man said, in a deep voice only half-warped by reverb inside his full-face mask and the myriad tubes running all over the black surface.

Gekkō made a noise pretty close to a scoff.

“Sincerely,” he added, as though her opinion mattered. It couldn’t—not to something like him. “But here, we have more guests to greet.”

Behind them, more gross squishing and splashing sounds accompanied the arrival of the goons. Katsuki reflexively glanced over his shoulder, watching with a kind of transfixed horror as each one of the villains appeared. They were mostly just as shaken up by the goop as he’d been, but recovered fast and were surrounding him in a loose ring. Even without the boss guy right here, Shigaraki was kneeling within lunging distance and no one had taken out the magician before they got here. Even without the warp guy or the pyromaniac, that was still bad odds.

Before, All Might could’ve taken all these guys with one arm tied behind his back.

Without All Might, Katsuki couldn’t. Even with Gekkō, the odds were shit.

Gekkō squeezed his arm.

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, still trying to keep the encroaching ring of villains in sight, but froze.

Her eyes were glowing. Two amber rings, right where the usual emotionless black pits ought’ve been, both locked on the masked guy harder than targeting lasers in any game Katsuki ever played. Her bangs blocked some of it, but with no shitty bar lighting to mask the glow, it confirmed Katsuki’s suspicions.

Gekkō was a fucking liar. Her Quirk didn’t—

She grimaced and shifted her stance, exactly like she had at the Sports Festival. Without saying a word, she stood back-to-back with him and blocked Shigaraki for the second time.

She’d clocked the vampire for looking at Katsuki funny. Even after being talked down to and nearly getting her face cut up, Gekkō still didn’t actually do anything about it until their taunting dragged him into things. Then, when Gekkō got loose, she took out the warp guy without letting things get worse. Or letting any of the villains get closer to either of them.

The meaning went unsaid but he understood: “I’ve got your back.”
That said however: How the fuck even. What was wrong with this girl?

“Hey,” Katsuki whispered as the boss villain went to greet what was clearly turning out to be his lackey-brigade-slash-cult, “you got any more tricks up your sleeve? ‘Cause I think we're gonna need all the firepower we can get.”

Just in his periphery, Katsuki saw Gekkō shake her head slowly. Oh, for fuck’s sake—

“Sensei…” Shigaraki was on his knees, covered face pointed squarely toward the man, in a stance akin to worship.

No one’s eyes were trained as hard on them as they were on the guy that made Shigaraki sit down and pay attention.

"Don't fuck with me right now,” Katsuki bit out, still half-frozen by the bone-deep realization that if neither of them could pull a rabbit out of their hats, they were screwed. His face wouldn’t stop twitching, the façade he wore cracking the longer they stood with their thumbs up their asses. “We're in deep shit and I know you're lying.”

Gekkō avoided answering for a few seconds. Then, “...Ever heard of a secret weapon?”

“Fuck your secrets,” he growled.

Okay, okay. She was a shit liar and she’d basically confirmed it, so what the fuck did that mean for them right now? From how deep did the well of acting-like-a-weakling spring? What were their actual options? Sure, she could wait around and try to drown them like she’d done with him at the Sports Festival, but Katsuki got the feeling these guys had a lot more options than he had.

Especially the boss.

“So, you’ve failed once more, Tomura,” said the boss as he approached his kneeling rookie counterpart. Or something? Somebody chewed up and molded into this new shape like gum in a mold. Katsuki’s brain was throwing metaphors that couldn’t fit even if he cut them down to size, the sheer terror of being held captive and lead by the nose like a rabid ox was grinding on his nerves.

Katsuki watched the big boss with the unwavering attention of a small animal trapped in the presence of an apex predator, and he hated every second of it. At the same time, he crept farther away from the inevitable dogpile as slowly as he could manage while keeping Gekkō at his back. Once they were facing the same way—backs to a wall instead of a whole gang of hostiles—it was easy enough to accomplish.

“What’s your fucking plan?” Katsuki demanded, just barely keeping his voice down.

“I—” Gekkō began, before biting off the end of the sentence and tilting to one side, like a dog hearing a new sound. Gekkō lifted her right shoulder in a one-sided shrug the villains wouldn’t see.

What? But Katsuki didn’t have the patience to interrogate Gekkō. Or the time.

“But you must not be discouraged. You’ll try again. That’s why I brought your associates back with you.” Big Boss didn’t even look back as he arrived in front of Shigaraki like a king, leaving his back wide open. There was no doubt in Katsuki’s mind that, despite the mundane clothes and the total lack of eyeholes in that mask, the boss villain did not give half a meandering fuck what the hostages would do. He didn’t have to. “Even these children, because you judged they were important pieces on your game board.”
Katsuki had no idea what kind of twisted drama was playing out in front of him, but the confusion only added to revulsion building in his chest. Never, in his entire life, has he wanted to be somewhere else so badly.

Fuck this entire week.

“Start over as many times as it takes,” All For One continued, extending a hand for Shigaraki to take. It was an offer, plain and simple. Picking his minion off the ground. Out of the gutter, even. “I am here to—”

And at this exact moment, there was a *fwish* of cloth and displaced air directly in front of Katsuki and Gekkō.

Before Katsuki could do anything other than jerk away from the sudden shadow and reel back for a reflexive explosion, a blue and yellow blur shot past, and a massive fist was already buried in that dickbag’s smug, masked face.

“DETOUR SMASH!”

Katsuki’s jaw dropped at that oh-so nostalgic shout, his heart practically leaping into his throat. *ALL MIGHT*?!

The air pressure from the impact knocked them off their feet, but neither Katsuki or Gekkō hit the concrete fence to their backs. Instead, Katsuki felt a hand snatch the back of his T-shirt before he could fly past and pinned him to the earth, while the same whoever-the-fuck did the same for Gekkō not a meter away. Whoever it was, they didn’t have any trouble staying put while the League were tossed around like ragdolls.

Dust and debris flew overhead, and Katsuki kept his nose barely out of the dirt until the wind stopped.

No—not stopped. It was *muffled*.

He looked up, and the blast passed over them without issue. If he watched carefully, Katsuki could make out the borders of a dome, looking just like a typhoon eyewall. Dust still blocked their view out instead of clouds, but they weren’t being pelted with gravel anymore.

Katsuki got his hands under his shoulders, ready to spring to his feet at a moment’s notice despite the hand still on his back. There was no way he was getting stuck to the ground during an ongoing fight. He wouldn’t die facedown in the dirt like a dog.

And Gekkō, amid the destruction and the sound of Katsuki’s heart pounding in his ears, let out a breathless little laugh and a weak, “Nice timing, Sensei.”

If the wind hadn’t died down at that exact moment, Katsuki would’ve never heard it.

“I couldn’t miss the same party twice,” said a heavily modulated voice in reply. Definitely a guy, but the rest of it was all electronic interference to make it sound deeper or echo more. “And this is Bakugō Katsuki, if I’m not mistaken?”

“No mistaking him.” Gekkō let out another *heh* of laughter.

And if they hadn’t *kept going*, Katsuki would never have believed it.

Katsuki jerked his head up and twisted as far as he could to look the newest freakshow in the eye.
White, like bone. A fox-like mask loomed over him with red paint smeared over it like blood, outlining a snarling face and painted eyeholes. Each was was blacked out by a lens, making it impossible to tell what was going on behind them. Beyond that, though, the body armor and the mask and the hood were all the same make as Wolf’s.

What the fucking fuck.

“All Might’s got All For One distracted, but that does leave his organization,” said Gekkō’s teacher, who was apparently one of the many masked ninja fuckers running around all over Tokyo for the last entire semester. He kept kneeling in the dirt like his flunkies hadn’t been kicking villains in the teeth recently—hell, now—but he let go of them. “Here, on your feet.”

Katsuki scrambled out of reach. This masked man at least let him go without a fight.

Actually, he let both of them up with no problem. Gekkō dusted herself off like nothing was wrong, stretching her hands until her knuckles popped. Her eyes still showed up as creepy backlit yellow.

She wasn’t rattled. She was just constantly putting herself in the way, just like Wolf had.

It clicked.

“You’re one of them,” Katsuki said, half under his breath. When Gekkō blinked guillessly at him, like she didn’t know fucking exactly what he meant, his palms sparked in warning. “You just fucking called him your teacher!”

“You can call me Fox, though maybe that ought to be a thought for later, Bakugō-kun,” said the masked guy, cutting neatly between the two of them. With a literal knife, complete with two extra points. “There are several more immediate problems.”

The League was definitely still there. Katsuki was just absolutely fucking positive that, unless they dropped another one of those Nomu monsters in the middle of the wreckage right now, the League was going to die.

“How did All Might get here so fast?!” said the lizard guy. Spinner? Fidget spinner, maybe. The others were too busy trying to get back to their feet to comment—Spinner’d stuck to the ground or something.

“And who the hell are you?” Shigaraki hissed. “Who invited the miniboss?”

“Keep wondering,” said the guy Gekkō called “Sensei.” Fox. Another codename. A second knife appeared in his empty hand. “Kei, deal with them.”

“Sensei?” Gekkō stared at him.

“The time for hesitation is long gone,” He turned back, just far enough so both of them could see the black lenses blotting out his eyes. How the hell could he even see with those things? “The League goes down with All For One. Don’t let them run.”

The next two seconds were too crowded to process.

Gekkō doubled over, howling with laughter that started out normal with a side of hysteria. Then, from head to toe, her entire body began to fade away under an unearthly orange-red glow until the light went opaque like blood. The ground beneath her form buckled and cracked, with her teacher idly maneuvering Katsuki out of the danger zone as though this shit happened every goddamn day. In seconds, five meters of the space around her were just crater, wind, and a steadily deepening
cackle that just got worse and worse as it poured out of warping lungs.

Katsuki couldn’t tear his eyes off it.

The thing that emerged from the pit didn’t look human. It looked like Dark Shadow if the damned thing was turtle-themed instead of a bird. Horns above hollow white eyes, a twisted human shape bent double under a shell, and three tails curling out behind like pennants, each one barbed all the way to the end.

The air around them froze. Breath knocked out of lungs all across the existing blast radius of the boss guy’s unseen blast. Two of the villains screamed, while Katsuki felt every muscle lock in place worse than anything he’d ever felt before. It wasn’t like the boss—this was something that tore at every living thing in its range with bone-deep hatred. One was dread. The other, terror.

Gekkō was Turtle. Gekkō was the thing that tore apart a monster that took everything Wolf had to throw at it and then some. The thing that might’ve haunted Katsuki’s nightmares if he’d slept in the last two days.

Gekkō had been hiding everything from everyone she’d interacted with since the beginning of the school year.

Katsuki’s suspicions were right all along.

“As for the rest of you,” said Fox, with the impenetrable mask and not an iota of mercy. He spun one of the knives in his hand until the point faced directly toward the villains. “Don’t blink.”

Shigaraki rattled with rage, on his feet despite everything. Magnet-Hands wasn’t as lucky, and the magician was busy cramming his still-unconscious teammates into green marbles. So, basically, no Dabi or Kurogiri for the foreseeable future.

Good, Katsuki thought with vicious satisfaction.

Faintly echoing across the ruins, Katsuki heard the boss villain’s voice say, “Enhanced Air Cannon.”

Fox turned his head in that direction. “Kei—”

Gekkō slammed her clawed hands into the ground. Off-pink gunk surged up like a shield, cracking as it expanded too fast for its own good and totally blocked the villains from view.

Katsuki threw himself flat again before the hurricane, even his brain stammered. Reflex took over.

The blast, when it came through, wasn’t even aimed at them. Through the sound of raining glass, splitting concrete, and faint screams, Katsuki watched a hole appear in a line of apartments. All of that—gone. The top third of the gunk wall shattered like it was made of snow.

The little flicker of blue and yellow he’d seen at the start—All Might—didn’t seem real. That couldn’t be—All Might couldn’t be losing.

Fuck.

Katsuki couldn’t see him anymore. Just the villain in the suit, flexing his distended arm, after Gekkō crumbled bits of her wall with a swipe of her tails to get it out of her way again.

Fox vanished between blinks, leaving only dust stirring in his wake. The next thing Katsuki knew was the suit villain being slammed into the ground with a huge blue energy ball, the impact rattling
the earth beneath his feet and kicking up a dust cloud.

Gekkō’s three blood-red tails coiled over her back and lashed through the air, whipping up wind as much as All For One had, dispersing the cloud in one fell swoop. She didn’t follow through—instead, her roar blasts the other recovering villains flat once again, just from the air pressure, the sound hollow and grating and bigger than herself.

Terror passed over Katsuki like a mid-ocean wave, only briefly brushing against his awareness. It wasn’t aimed at him. The crawling, choking fear wasn’t nearly as strong now.

It hit the villains instead. Toga looked like she was gonna throw up, her already pale features now taking on the pallor of paper. The rest didn’t have fully visible faces, but Katsuki could see the terror shoot through their body language.

When the boss villain—All For One—got punched into next week by All Might, the complete body paralysis gave way to this…generally wary, generally sorta jumpy feeling. Katsuki could hear more people shouting in the distance, between All Might jumping back into the fight and everything shattering around them.

Going by the villains’ faces, though, Gekkō’d figured out how to keep all her bullshit pointed in one direction.

“This feels better,” said Gekkō in that completely distorted voice. Her gaping mouth, though lit from the inside as much as those fucking creepy eyes, didn’t move as she spoke. The horned head angled toward the League. “Hello again, Shigaraki-san.”

She took three heavy steps on all fours until she was squarely between Katsuki and any potential villain attacks. Even without the goop wall, her tails’ reach and the extensions to her limbs—the battle aura armor—meant anybody who’d want a piece of him would meet her first.

Just like before.

“Seaweed Head,” Katsuki bit out as she passed, teeth clacking together uncomfortably.

That horned head tilted to listen, without turning back. “Yes?”

“Fuck them up.”

That jagged mouth curled into a ghoulish smile.

And Katsuki, for the first time in his life, turned and ran.

At his back, the Gekkō-Turtle- monster threw herself into combat with a terrible battle cry, and the rest was just screaming.

“We’re coming to you live from Kamino Ward,” said the reporter on television, barely audible through a cracking voice and a potentially faulty microphone. The sound of helicopter rotors muffled most of the remaining sound, but there was no way anyone in all of Japan—the world, even—could tear their eyes away now.

Hitoshi and his parents were no exception.

His dad arrived at home when the police were just leaving, having taken statements and the recording in the hopes of finding out what the hell happened to Kei. They left an officer behind—
Yoshizawa, from what Hitoshi gleaned over the course of a two-hour interview—but she got maybe three words out before Hitoshi’s mom filled in the rest.

Hitoshi figured his dad heard the whole thing when he crossed the living room real fast and practically yanked Hitoshi off the couch and into a bear hug. The impact made it hard to breathe for a second, but it helped his brain settle. Mentalist Quirks fed off feedback, and every little bit helped.

“I’m okay, Dad,” Hitoshi had muttered into the doctor’s coat, mostly muffled by fabric.

“I’ll believe that when I see it,” his dad had said, and sat down on the couch with him.

“I’ve got the remote,” said Hitoshi’s mom at the time, and she sat down on his other side. With the officer and her radio hanging out awkwardly in the kitchen, maybe it was okay to turn it back on again. All of them faced the television, which had been off since the police arrived.

What else could they do?

Nothing, other than try to wait for something to change.

His dad still smelled like hospital antiseptic and his coworkers’ cigarettes, and his mom still had that pinched look on her face, but hell if Hitoshi would let either of them up now.

Now, none of them could have left their seats if they wanted to. Hitoshi barely noticed Officer Yoshizawa leaning over the back of the couch, every bit as transfixed as they were.

The camera couldn’t show much compared to daytime—no one wanted to be the one holding a spotlight and becoming a giant villain target—but there was enough detail to set Hitoshi’s stomach rolling.

Hitoshi didn’t hang out in industrial areas. While he knew heroes operated in as many places as they could, his parents didn’t want him wandering the city at night any more than they did. He got it, really. But that meant that the only frame of reference he had for what he was seeing was the USJ’s Ruins Zone, where he’d trained with Kei a few times earlier this year. Broken buildings and a long crater that cut through everything like a giant’s sandcastles.

Seeing it in real life—even from a distance, even so high off the ground—carved through the unreality of the situation.

Then the reporter’s voice registered.

“Just minutes ago,” the reporter continued, raising her voice almost to a shout, “All Might arrived on a scene of devastation. I can’t—sources confirm that Gang Orca, Mt. Lady, and Best Jeanist were in the area before an explosion destroyed two entire city blocks, but our camera can only pick out Mt. Lady in the chaos. What we can confirm is that All Might is here, and that he’s fighting an unknown villain.”

The chopper shook and the reporter let out a reflexive shout, but the view soon stabilized again.

“Zoom in, now!” someone off-camera shouted, and the cameraman obeyed.

There was a man in black, all the way on the ground. And in the time it took for Hitoshi to think that and realize All Might was missing, the reporter’s voice went on, “All Might was—I can’t see—”

Blue light lit battlefield as another black figure slammed some blowing death-ball into the first one, knocking a new crater into the ground. The second then vanished, dust circling all around.
Just out of view, huge piles of rubble shifted just before All Might appeared again, and the cratered villain did something that warped the ground underneath him like it was alive. All Might hit him head-on anyway, stopping dead when his fists met the villain’s.

Hitoshi knew that stance. He’d sparred enough with Kei to recognize when someone caught a punch, and to know not to do it unless there was some serious strength differences going on. People broke their wrists that way.

And here this guy was, treating All Might like a kid in a playground scuffle.

*All Might is the strongest hero,* Hitoshi thought frantically. *He can’t lose!*

He didn’t realize he was out of his seat and kneeling with his hands on the kotatsu, eyes riveted to the screen, until he felt his mom’s hand between his shoulder blades. Hitoshi looked back, finding her worried violet eyes fixed on his, until the TV let out a horribly broken electronic shriek.

When speakers overloaded, the entire box vibrated and the TV stand started rattling. For a full four seconds, the helicopter rattled dangerously.

“All look, look down there!” shrieked the reporter, finger just visible in the frame as she pointed the cameraman toward the window. The helicopter’s angle must’ve been extreme to get a proper view of the ground, but they got it one way or another.

Hitoshi’s first thought was that the helicopter must have traveled somewhere else. The rubble of the warehouses was gone—in its place were spires of shadow, cement, gaping mouths and black lightning. The immediate danger zone was blasted down nearly to subway level, exposing pipes and tunnels that crisscrossed any Japanese city worth the name, with purple and orange flames blasting upward from the shattered ground. Huge spikes of concrete floated in midair, orbiting slowly around a barely-visible figure in black. The only reason Hitoshi could even pick him out against the chaotic background was his massively distended arm, more than three times the mass of the rest of him and bulging like a malformed sausage.

Then he swung it, aimed directly for the camera.

The helicopter’s occupants screamed.

“This is…” Hitoshi’s dad began, before falling silent. What could he say?

The screen went black, shifting focus to a ground view. While the newsroom reporter in charge tried managing the audience’s terror by saying they’d get back to the helicopter view eventually, Hitoshi barely heard him. A news ticker streamed uninterrupted across the bottom of the screen, declaring that the new camera was located not far from the original. Just a hundred meters closer to whoever the hell that was.

Hitoshi deliberately unclenched his fists, a finger at a time, when he noticed he’d driven his nails into his palms. It didn’t hurt—yet.

It would.

The screen wavered uncertainly, but whoever the ground level camera operator was caught the falling helicopter almost perfectly in frame. It hit the ground and exploded in a massive fireball, amid the flames already consuming the area.

“I’m on the scene—I—” the ground reporter stammered. “Wait, is that—”
With no warning, two people dressed like other reporters and a pilot appeared directly in front of the camera, stumbled, and landed at the ground crew’s feet. There wasn’t any hint of how—

“How the—” the baffled reporter began, only to be instantly stalled by the only person who hadn’t tripped and faceplanted.

“You need to be about forty meters farther away,” said the man in the stylized fox mask, with the electronically garbled voice and the jet-black longcoat. “Make yourself useful by helping people out of his attack range.”

“But—”

“You can be there and helping, or here and dead. Pick one,” said the man in black. The coiled tension in his stance and the electronic reverb of his voice cut through the reporter’s stammering.

“Wait, who are—?” And that was as far as the reporter got before the masked man turned and instantly disappeared.

Amid the purple flames and smoke, Hitoshi caught a glimpse of that coat’s flapping tails for just a second afterward. Then the camera view changed from the field crew to the newscasters behind the desk, and there was nothing to see besides the frantic newsroom and several people trying desperately to find their coworkers from an impossible distance.

Hitoshi looked back over his shoulder, toward his parents. His dad had his hand over his mouth, still staring wide-eyed at the screen. His mom, meanwhile, was already in the kitchen and boiling water for tea. Watching her fuss was familiar enough to be comforting even now, even if the police officer kept getting in her way.

“Dad?” Hitoshi rasped, almost surprised at the sound of his own voice.

“I—” His father swallowed hard, then said in a steadier tone, “Hitoshi, I’ll change the channel and see if we can’t get another view. You should probably grab your phone.” His dark eyes were thoroughly weary, but he didn’t complain. “We need to know what’s going on.”

Hitoshi glanced at the screen again. “I’m surprised you’re not telling me to stay off the internet or something.”

“You’re sixteen,” Hitoshi’s dad said, “and you want to be a hero.” He sighed, then rubbed a hand over his face. “I’ll let you decide what’s too much, here.”

“Okay.” Hitoshi drew a slow breath. “Okay. Thanks, Dad.”

Hitoshi’s dad nodded, and the two of them attended their separate tasks while the kettle boiled in the kitchen and Hitoshi’s mom made small talk with Officer Yoshizawa. Preserving tiny scraps of normalcy, right now, was the main priority.

At some point, keeping under control during a disaster was going to be more than just a survival trait. When he became a hero, it’d be a job requirement. He pulled himself together by fingernails and stubbornness, born half from his experiences with being stuck in the middle of villain attacks and his training with Aizawa-sensei. The hours of tension surrounding Kei’s disappearance stretched all of that like an overtaxed rubber band, but Hitoshi couldn’t afford to let it consume him. It would.

Hitoshi unlocked his phone with a fingerprint, and his stomach dropped to his knees as he saw the parade of text messages.
Most of them were from Midoriya, which was…distinctly not good. His fucking suicide mission seemed survivable, sure, but there were forty of them in short blips.

Hitoshi flipped to the bottom immediately, checking the timestamp. At the same time, he couldn’t help reading the last few messages automatically.

**SmolMight:** Shinsō if you’re getting this

**SmolMight:** Please try literally any news channel

**SmolMight:** Before you ask Kacchan’s safe and so are the rest of us but she isn’t

**SmolMight:** The USJ monster was right in front of us

**SmolMight:** She’s still fighting

The timestamp helpfully informed him that the last message was sent two minutes ago. There was only one “she” Midoriya wouldn’t name in a potentially traceable message, after everything that’d happened over the last few days. Why did his phone have a silent setting?!

**Purble:** WHAT

The bubbled ellipses typing icon appeared instantaneously. Hitoshi’s heartbeat pounded in his ears. Anticipation alone would kill him stone dead.

**SmolMight:** TURN ON THE FUCKING NEWS, YOU

**SmolMight:** FU

**SmolMight:** L

**SmolMight:** ser

Hitoshi blinked down at his phone. *The fuck?*

**SmolMight:** I’m so sorry, Kacchan’s just angry

**SmolMight:** You don’t deserve that

**SmolMight:** It’s just a lot

Hitoshi glared down at his phone. *Good to see you’re not dead, asshole.* Hitoshi wasn’t quite irritated enough to wish Bakugō had gotten far enough out of danger to stay the hell out of contact with him, ever, but he saw the temptation looming. Fuck it, he had better things to worry about.

“Dad, did you get—”

“—like a scene out of a living nightmare,” said the TV, and everyone in the apartment looked to the TV like they’d all been drawn in by magic.

 Barely visible amid smoke, gloom, and then the glare from an explosion, four shapes ricocheted all across the camera’s wobbly view. Fox Mask flickered around the battlefield with no continuity, noticeable only when flames grew brighter and backlit his coattails enough for them to stand out against the background. The man with the distended arm—the one from before—got knocked off his high ground by the blue light punch, and shot headlong into the grip of a creature Hitoshi honestly
had no idea how to categorize.

His first thought was *Dark Shadow*, even though this monster glowed an ominous, dull red. As the camera strained to keep it in view, three of its seven limbs coiled around the displaced arm and constricted like serpents. Its hunched, shelled back was lined with spikes, as was a bowed head and those tails, and light poured from the holes in an almost cartoonishly indistinct face.

The noise from its mouth was pure hell. Wind whipped around it and its captured target, howling almost more than the monster itself.

The air popped, prompting whoever was holding the camera to nearly drop it. While Hitoshi could barely track the movement, the bound arm shifted back to what counted as normal size at the exact same instant the *other* arm burst into the same length and breadth of the first, sending the monster into the ground. Concrete buckled and cracked under the impact.

*Kei*, part of Hitoshi’s brain babbled at the rest of him, as though in a voice belonging to someone else. *That’s Kei—Turtle—*

“Get up,” Hitoshi heard himself say, just above a whisper, watching in rapt terror as the rubble where Kei lay didn’t move. He could just make out a blood-red arm, still glowing as it stuck motionless out of the crater.

“You’ve fallen a long way to need backup, All Might,” said the villain, turning away from the crater. Like it didn’t matter. “I almost pity your current state.”

The camera panned to the side, focusing in the middle distance only with severe difficulty. Hitoshi squinted at the screen until the view stopped wobbling, nearly giving himself a headache, and felt hope die just that little bit more inside his chest.

All Might was everything a hero aspired to be. He was the Symbol of Hope with the emphasis as loud and bright as the man himself, from his bunny ear hairstyle to his heroic boot-soles. He always appeared like the paragon of power and confidence. People looked at him and felt *safe*. That image had taken a nasty hit for the last few minutes, solely because of how fearsome this villain was, but Hitoshi—like everyone—held on to hope.

But this man—if that was All Might—looked liked someone had stripped muscle from bone while leaving skin intact. The man was skeletal, bleeding from behind his hairline and from his mouth, and an arm that was at least fractured.

Hitoshi stared, mouth open with no words forming.

“Wait, is that *All Might*?” Hitoshi’s dad breathed. Hitoshi didn’t bother looking back to see what face he was making.

“That’s—that’s not possible,” said Hitoshi’s mom, while Officer Yoshizawa rattled off something indistinct into her radio. She made her way across the room and sat next to Hitoshi, tucking him against her side. “How did—?”

Hitoshi shook her head. What could anyone *say* to that? What was going on?

“**Truly, of the two of us—**” The voice bit off suddenly, choked, and the camera only focused back on him in time to catch the aftermath. It didn’t show *what* had made the horrible squelching sound or the rushing wind, but Hitoshi could make a guess.

Whatever the villain was about to say didn’t get said. Instead, breath left that terrible mask in a hiss,
and a huge mass sloughed across the ground.

The distended arm was just—gone. The man staggered, hopefully from shock and pain.

A red band of color—straight and unforgiving as a falling I-beam—whipped back through the air to its source in the wake of the would-be monologue. The tail returned to its normal length and shape in time for the monster to burst its way back into view, glowing face-holes and all, with off-pink gunk clinging to both arms and the other tails as it trampled the earth. Cracking it. It—she—bellowed, triumphant.

Hitoshi’s heart was in his throat. He didn’t want anyone who could toss around All Might walking around like he owned the place, and if this was what it took to stop him—no, it was still all bad.

Kei should’ve never had to do this. This—becoming a monster, fighting a villain who had All Might on the ropes, having to live a double life like this—it was too much for one person. Too much for anybody their age.

Yet there she was, dead in the middle of a fight that might decide the future of the entire world.

Kei wouldn’t run, would she? Not from something like this.

All Hitoshi could do was sit here, too far away to make a difference, and watch it all play out.

Chapter End Notes

All For One is going to get out an entire villain diatribe exactly never, as long as Kei and Minato are pestering the shit out of him.
Curtain Call

Chapter Summary

Kei: Complete this goddamn mission objective already.

Chapter Notes

This is a two-part update. This bit sat best on its own, so the other half of what was originally gonna be chapter 63 is now chapter 64.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The battlefield was a godawful mess.

On one hand, that meant massive civilian casualties that Kei couldn’t afford to worry about right now, all because All For One was a gigantic asshole. Even if this was nominally an industrial district, All For One’s air cannon blast punched through warehouses and into residential areas like nothing. He probably preferred racking up a massive kill count, just to spite All Might.

On the other, all that debris kept heroes and police from cluttering the fight and adding to the body count. That kept them out of the potential blast radius if Kei got permission to launch a Tailed Beast Bomb within city limits; even a small one would level even more of the surrounding area. Unless Tokyo had another All Might—and all evidence pointed to the contrary—any new combatants would just be in the way.

And on all three of Isobu’s flesh-rending tails, there was such a thing as damage saturation. Once the area was cratered enough, there wasn’t much else to do until everyone hit the literal bedrock.

Having none of the tools necessary to deal with the first two options better than specialists, and acknowledging the truth of the last one, Kei threw herself and Isobu fully into the fight.

As soon as Sensei ordered her to tackle the League, Kei’s path was set in stone. In V2 cloak, she handed out concussions like candy and sealed the helpless villains in coral as soon as she got her hands on them properly. With Shigaraki, this meant leaving him spread-eagled in a giant lump of pink almost-rock, hands unable to reach his bindings. Spinner and Toga were easier still, because neither of them could destroy restraints without outside help or tools Kei wouldn’t let them keep. Magne? Pinned to an exposed pipe and left without a single person still within her Quirk’s effective range. Same thing for Twice. Compress’s daring escape in the form of a marble meant only being entombed alive in a space barely two centimeters across.

Taking them alive was…useful to a degree. Even in a battle haze, Kei and Isobu applied their acquired knowledge like paint to a beautiful, deadly canvas. If they survived past being captured, however—well, there were some things that no fighting jinchūriki had time for.

Two of Sensei’s clones moved the captured villains away from the fight—toward a flame Kei barely acknowledged as real—before dispersing. Neither of them had been hit, but there was smoke, and
bits of Kei’s brain wanted more to drown in bloodlust than focus on harmless details.

*I think...he’s using Sage Mode?* Kei thought vaguely, while a tail sliced through one of the towers of flesh and concrete and forced the floating All For One to dodge.

**Possibly.** Isobu took a deep breath for a person without lungs. **Now, focus.**

The world snapped back into focus.

Sensei and his clones kept up the assault. Between blinks, he buzzed around All For One like an angry black hornet. Whether it was really him cutting deep gouges into a rapidly-regenerating villain and getting covered in dark blood, or a clone in the right place at the right time, didn’t ultimately matter.

Not with All Might landing haymakers that could split a city block. Meeting a man in midair and throwing the laws of momentum out the window resulted in a supervillain being launched downward like a meteorite.

*Body Flicker.* Kei poured on the speed to reach All For One before he hit the ground and made yet another crater. The impact rattled her bones even inside the chakra cloak, but it was worth it to get her claws and chakra teeth into the man’s respirator.

Metal buckled under her grip. Gas hissed from broken pipes and abused machinery, and that horrifically scarred half-face twisted under the influence of almost-destroyed muscles.

All For One didn’t bother talking to her—instead, he bunched an arm into a cartoonish caricature of a limb and hammered down. Air left Kei’s lungs in a *whoosh*, but she was more stunned than hurt as her paradoxically protected face slammed into the bedrock. Pressure did plenty, but Isobu’s chakra cushioned the impact and washed away any pain from creaking ribs or split skin.

They were too far into the dance to stop now. Even if Kei would pay for this kind of damage later.

Kei heard All For One talking while rubble rained down on top of her, but couldn’t pick out the words he used to seal his victory. Too much crashing, and his busted speaker system meant there was no amplification, and anyway Kei didn’t really care. Instead, she focused on gathering the faintest wisps of mist amid dust and debris.

*Target locked.*

**There we are,** was her partner’s deadly rumble. Isobu sent a baby Rasengan spinning along the length of one tail, cleaving neatly through broken bits of building as it grew.

Coral seeped from between flashes of chakra along Kei’s arms and her shell, forming thick plates as she waited for Sensei to move out of the way. Years of exposure hadn’t actually helped her pick out which one was a clone until it exploded, but Sensei knew better than to keep her from fighting now that the order was out in the world.

Kei’s face wasn’t exposed to much of anything, air or otherwise, but her coral’s growth pushed rubble far enough out of the way for her to hear.

“*You’ve fallen a long way to need backup, All Might.*” said All For One, as Kei felt him start to move away. At the very least, his fancy designer shoes disturbed the mist somewhat. “*I almost pity your current state.*”

Oh, good. Sensei was giving the guy what looked like breathing room.
Body Flicker.

“Truly, of the two of us—”

Two of Kei’s chakra tails snipped his Hulk arm right off his body like a pair of gardening shears pruning a bush. If he couldn’t recognize a trap when it closed its jaws around him, he deserved the massive trauma and blood loss.

Kei shook the rubble from her shell, with Isobu’s now-formed Rasengan still spinning on the spiky tip of a different tail. Though her mist detection field couldn’t tell her what expressions anybody made, she knew before her head cleared the lip of the crater that All For One was on his knees and gushing blood everywhere.

Sure, he was also regrowing his arm at about half the rate that good ol’ Chickenface McMuscles had during that fight, but it seemed like he’d used his good Quirks a bit too soon and on minions instead of hoarding for the final round.

Pity.

A low growl built in Kei’s chest and resonated as though trapped in Isobu’s cavernous belly.

All Might stood amid the wreckage of what seemed like a whole district, blood dripping down his face and from his mouth. His withered form—true form—moved with a bowed spine on the best days. This wasn’t his best. One arm was obviously broken or at least afflicted with severe road rash, but damn it all. He was still standing and speaking.

His voice didn’t echo like it might’ve before, but he was still here.

“All For One, you have reached the end of the line,” he said, which was quite something coming from a man who looked like he had one foot in the grave. “Surrender now.”

“No, All Might?” All For One responded testily, not even twisting his mangled face in Kei’s direction. All Might’s old beatdown—if that was what had caused the man’s head to be all scar tissue—made it hard for Kei to tell if All For One knew what everyone else was doing. Or if he cared.

But hey, he still had that regenerating arm. All Might’s injuries, by contrast, weren’t closing.

Sensei vanished again. His chakra split into threes, with at least some of the individual bits probably going on a search-and-rescue mission for the sake of time.

“Your League of Villains is already dismantled,” said All Might, with the faintest wheeze at the back of his voice. He sounded so tired. “Your legacy stops here, as it should.”

In the distance, a flesh pillar collapsed under its own weight and probably Sensei’s prodding.

“I never needed them to face you, All Might,” All For One hissed. A rusty chuckle ground its way out of him, with the noise rasping horribly in his mask. “But I have to admit, you were clever. Having someone masquerade as a student and spending months to snare Shigaraki’s attention… A masterful stroke, if I thought you were solely responsible. You don’t have—”

Sensei appeared between All Might and All For One, one Flying Thunder God kunai plainly visible. It gleamed in the dark, blood dripping off the three points.

“And the mastermind shows his face.” All For One’s arm was now a throbbing mound of meat,
slowly building back up to its previous bulk, pulsating and twisting like some horrid caricature of a beating heart. “Mask and all.”

“Flattered, but…” Sensei bowed, as polite as ever. “Not quite.”

“Pity,” All For One growled.

Even with that regenerating arm still a work in progress, All For One held out the hand that wasn’t a biological hazard waiting to happen. His fingertips shifted from plain, blunt nails to black-tipped points, and each extended like the world’s worst putty. They branched and split off, slicing through the air toward All Might and Kei simultaneously.

**Oh, this could be fun,** Isobu said with barely-hidden glee.

*Uh—* Kei began, before the needles sank into her shell.

“Turtle—” All Might began, startled. Worried, maybe?

**Wait for it.**

“I wonder what this looks like at full power,” said All For One, while Sensei cut the attack on All Might to ribbons so quickly that his arm was just a blur. His scarred face turned toward Kei. “Forcible Quirk Activation.”

A beat.

Two heartbeats.

Kei’s nose itched. She and Isobu looked over at the bladelike appendages stuck in their shared shoulder, reached up, and snapped them off like Pocky.

“Did you expect that to do something?” Sensei asked, managing to sound genuinely curious.

All For One’s fingers surged back to their usual dimensions, and *oh,* did he ever look rattled. Even with his regenerating arm now back to its original shape, it was as though all the calculations about the sanctity of his plans were suddenly demanding a rework. All at once.

“You have so many stolen Quirks,” All Might said, stepping forward until he was even with Sensei’s shoulder. “But what do you know about fighting when all your tricks are useless?”

Purple fire, banked until now, built up around them again. Unlike the fire still spewing from nearby destroyed gas mains and whatever the hell else was broken around here, Sensei’s chakra was so thick in the air Kei could almost taste it. Like points on a grid, four clones stood at cardinal corners from each other, out of sight but not out of Kei’s sensing range. The Flying Thunder God seal on her collarbone felt like a brand.

And as the barrier went up, Sensei, All For One, and Kei-and-Isobu remained inside the burning perimeter.

On Kei’s V2 cloak, coral covered the backs of her hands like gauntlets. Portions of Isobu’s green-gray shell crawled up her arms, and the smallest iteration of his shell rested heavy on her back. Each tail’s armor plates built up slowly along their length. Crown spikes and jaw became a helmet and faceplate, and the weight of it all forced her onto all fours for good.

Sensei’s coat flared as the wind picked up, two tails whipping wild in the gale. His right hand held a
spinning Rasengan, identical to the one Isobu still nursed like a grudge, while the other held his iconic kunai. Slowly, he brought those hands together. The Rasengan deformed around the blade, spiraling up from his hand and out into the shape of—

Was that a sword?


All For One stood between them. An icon to a falling age of heroes and villains, just as his counterpart watched from beyond the killzone.

The Rasengan following the lines of Kei’s chakra cloak rolled into her waiting hand, as though nothing was wrong. When it arrived, the purple-tinged chakra was so dark that it looked like a miniature Tailed Beast Bomb that glowed instead of resembling a gouge in the universe. Air warped around it anyway, and even All For One’s suit started to flatten to his body.

The ground rumbled, but All For One’s doom pillars only formed from the wreck inside the perimeter. For all that Sensei was still second to Kushina in barrier-based bullshit, he knew enough to make sure a force field wasn’t stopped by something as petty as the ground it was written on.

“So this is your legacy, All Might.” All For One turned his head in what was about fifteen degrees off All Might’s actual position. “No grand final speech. No going out in a blaze of glory. Just a pair of masked mercenaries here to kill an old man.”

“Fox,” All Might said, in a warning tone that came across as half-surprised. The edge in his voice just barely made it through to Kei’s brain, but Sensei wasn’t half-subsumed by the urge to rip someone apart.

“Don’t think you can miss the fun,” All For One snarled, and then All Might started coughing black gunk.

Oh, hell.

Sensei’s killing intent went wild, and his Flying Thunder God jutsu activated four times in the span of a heartbeat. Before All Might even appeared fully inside the barrier, snapping back to his muscular form unevenly out of what looked like reflex, All For One’s off hand glowed with a sickening green light.

Kei’s Rasengan shot forward like a cannonball, aimed directly at All For One’s face.

Sensei grabbed All Might by his shoulder, having dropped the Rasentsurugi before teleporting.

All Might’s fist smashed into All For One’s elbow, directing the blast—

And then the world exploded.

—down.

On an instinct as deep-set as Isobu’s hatred for humanity at large, Kei’s tails and shell coiled around her in an automatic guard position before she struck the side of Sensei’s barrier. The clone he’d left to finish the job burst into smoke under the air pressure, even before Kei ricocheted back into the ground with a world-shattering crash.

The tails wrapped around her unfurled first, like antennae. Sensei—outside of the barrier. All Might probably was. Kei couldn’t check, with eyes or water sense or any other option. She had to trust
Sensei had things handled.

Air pressure didn’t kill the clones maintaining the Four Violet Flames Formation, and it didn’t kill the barrier. They were all sealed tight inside their little boxes, never to emerge.

But that did mean that, despite the intensity of the explosion and the micro-storm trying to punch its way out, All For One was still sealed inside with Kei. The heat and dust wreaked havoc on her ability to pick him out of the background noise, but he wasn’t the only one who could just attack everything at once.

A coral sword oozed out of her palm. Kei and Isobu brought their chakra together as one while the blade extruded fully and hardened in the thrice-ruined air.

A ball of mist condensed far above their heads, just at the apex of the barrier. As neatly as watering a neglected garden, a microburst blasted the dust out of the air and to the shattered ground.

All For One glared at her with an eyeless face, bleeding from both scarred ears and grimacing with a now-exposed mouth. Half-buried in rubble from his attack’s immense blowback. His limbs would take longer to regenerate if broken instead of removed. And if he’d had that power, he ought to have used it earlier.


Sensei’s kill order hadn’t been revoked.

Kei and Isobu lifted their new sword.

“Shimura died screaming,” All For One spat, as though Kei knew who the hell that was. “See what proud All Might thinks of that as his age of heroes crumbles without its center. All of this, for nothing!”

Kei said in Isobu’s guttural growl, “You talk too much.”

Curve of the Moon.

All For One died in the mud, amid the ruins of a lifetime of cruelty and destruction he’d caused. His head rolled the same as any other and landed squarely amid the sprawling destruction he’d left behind.

Kei crumbled the coral sword in her hands until only pinkish dust remained. No mementos. No more legacies for this one.

Just faintly, as the barrier ninjutsu came down, she could hear Shigaraki shrieking.

When a monster left the world, ripples spread.

Same thing, Kei thought, as her gaze landed on the withered All Might, his expression devastated, with heroes.

You have had enough, Isobu murmured, beginning the process of unhooking himself from Kei’s coils. Armor faded first. Rest, now.

Wind swirled around her, stirring the dust back up into a cloud that obscured everything. But unlike before, Sensei’s chakra kept the worst of what would’ve been abrasive lashing away from her,
putting her square in the middle of the storm.

The world couldn’t see anything now. She could faceplant square on the cement and no one would know.

Instead, Kei made a neutral noise and sank to her knees next to the corpse while still in partial V2. She ached all the way from her skin down to her bones, and peeling away Isobu’s chakra this carefully made every part of her start wailing as feeling came back bit by bit.

The satisfaction of “mission complete!” ringing through her head didn’t make up for that, but it sure tried.

Sensei’s long cloak landed on top of her head like a shroud.

“Well done, Kei,” Sensei told her, as he bundled her up and scooped her into his arms. “Just leave the rest to me.”

Kei closed her aching eyes and let her head bob down until it rested against Sensei’s shoulder.

And then she was dead to the world.

Chapter End Notes

Y’all seen bits of the shaky cam found footage genre? And not gotten motion-sick?

Yeah, the media is going to be so very unhappy.
“Your change,” said the clerk at the corner store, looking about as haggard as Hitoshi felt. The bags under her eyes probably weren’t permanent, but nobody he knew had slept well for the last couple of days.

How could they with All Might’s last stand plastered across every corner of the collective consciousness?

“— Thank you, Kabara. And as for the remarkable events surrounding the Clash of Titans at the Kamino Ward, experts are cautioning that all remain clear of the wreckage as scientists comb the area for the source of potential contamination,” barked the corner store’s TV, effectively cutting through Hitoshi’s thoughts. He eyed it while the cashier took the cash tray back, noting the two news anchors looking just about as worn as everyone else. Just with more makeup. “While it’s not clear if there is any danger, scientists are urging caution as the energy source is currently unknown.”

“Thank you,” Hitoshi said, accepting what he had to and turning to leave. Change went in pockets, grocery bags over the wrist, and everything else in its place. The cashier appeared to be in a bit of a daze, watching the screen intently as they showed work crews in hazmat suits scanning what was basically a warzone.

“Furthermore, there have been no follow-up sightings of the creature dubbed ‘Genbu’ by online commenters and forums — ” The camera shifted, showing a shaky image of Kei as Turtle, her red-black form glowing eerily in the gray devastation of what was now a quarantine zone, “— spotted during the catastrophic events at Kamino Ward, leaving conspiracy theorists to run rampant and many to wonder at the creature’s origin. Police and hero patrols are on high alert, so if you suspect you have seen this villain, do not approach! Use caution and contact your local heroes!”

Hitoshi watched the cashier turn the TV volume down from the corner of his eye, then walked out.

As he stepped into the sunlight with his hand shading his eyes, Hitoshi dragged his thoughts away from Kamino Ward with sheer force of stubbornness. Here, in Musutafu, UA’s classes were due to start up again in no time at all. It’d be a boarding school this time, and the risk to students would be way lower with teachers around all the time. Hitoshi was already enrolled and going to transfer to the hero course by next year if it killed him trying.

It’d be okay.

Maybe if he laser-focused on that thought for long enough, the rest could finally fade.

*It’s bright out even for August. Maybe I need sunglasses.* The inanity of that thought was a red flag in front of a bull, but Hitoshi shoved the breakdown further away as he headed up the street. He’d
get his bike from the machine and go home and listen to relaxing music and not think about—

“Hey, Shinsō, it’s been a while!”

Every single one of Hitoshi’s thoughts crashed to a halt at the sound of that voice. He spun on the spot, heart in his throat, and nearly punched Uchiha Obito square in the nose.

Uchiha deflected the punch as neatly as Kei ever had, before backing off instead of wrenching Hitoshi’s arm into a submission hold. He held up both hands in a pacifying manner, single eye wide. “Whoa, whoa! Ease up, Shinsō. You’re okay.”

“You—” Hitoshi let a breath hiss through his teeth. Wary though he was of strangers on the street, hauling his self-control back into place took an embarrassing few seconds. His breathing didn’t fully cooperate, but he managed to grit, “Uchiha. Where the fuck have you been?”

“Home?” Uchiha’s smile might’ve sent Hitoshi’s blood boiling with frustrated worry, but there was a gleam in his eye that held him back. The light hit it at such an odd angle that the iris looked red. “Nah, seriously, I was gonna get Kei a new cell phone. For once, she didn’t break it.”

“I—you—” Hitoshi’s eyes darted toward the people around them. Some of them were staring. “Let’s talk somewhere else.”

“Sure thing, man.”

Uchiha let himself be steered up the street and into an alleyway, where the two of them ducked around another corner to mitigate the risk of being seen or overheard. Hitoshi all but collapsed against the wall, as though his legs wouldn’t take his weight anymore, and Uchiha was the one who kept his grocery bags from flying all over the place on apparent reflex.

Considerate, for a ninja.

“Is Kei-san okay?” Hitoshi asked dully, while Uchiha fussed and tied things. “I haven’t heard from her.”

Uchiha nodded absently. “She is, but it’s pretty clear you’re not.” Once all the bags were secure, he sat back on his heels and peered at Hitoshi’s face, assessing. “I mean, a fire’s not a big deal for a girl with a Water Quirk, you know?”

Wait.

“She wanted me to apologize if I found you, since she’s been out of contact and in the hospital for the last couple days,” Uchiha went on. “I didn’t expect to find you right away, so this is actually pretty convenient.”

What.

“I only got released last night, so I wasn’t able to get here before.” Uchiha scratched one of his compression scars. “Sorry, by the way. I don’t have your number so I wasn’t exactly gonna be calling for updates.”

Oh hell no. Temper already kicking in with a vengeance, Hitoshi finally snarled, “I already know she was in Kamino Ward. You can stop feeding me lines any time now.”

Uchiha’s jaw dropped. “I don’t—”
“And I know that she’s Turtle, that you’re one of the masked vigilantes, and that you’re half the reason any of them could get anything done,” Hitoshi pressed on, looming as best he could over someone he already knew would be taller if he stood up. He jabbed a finger into Uchiha’s chest.

“Your Quirk allows people to travel around doing whatever, but you actually have at least two, don’t you? Just like Kei-san does—that thing at the USJ was her.”

Uchiha stayed silent as he stared up at him, brow furrowed as he listened.

“I talked to people who were at the USJ, and I was there when the brain guys started attacking Musutafu,” Hitoshi said, refusing to name Midoriya aloud. Uchiha didn’t need to know. “And the only person anyone’s ever heard of with two Quirks—or more—is them. I don’t know what happened, but they used to be human. And I don’t know if anything they went through has ever happened to—to Kei-san.” Hitoshi forced the thought out as though it was poison. “But some of the stuff she says…”

Uchiha was nodding along now, looking thoughtful. He stuck out his lower lip like those mental gears were turning hard enough to squeak.

“And since the start of the year, you’ve all been fighting—everyone. Stain, the League, whoever else…” Hitoshi shook his head. “That’s—you’re really my age, aren’t you? Kids, like everyone else who keeps getting caught up in villain business, but for you it’s on purpose.”

“I’m actually a year ahead of you,” Uchiha admitted, hand on his chin, “but basically.”

He wasn’t denying anything. Was it really going to be this easy?

“That doesn’t make it better.” Hitoshi took a deep breath, even as the anger started draining away in favor of worry. “So, again—is she okay? Fighting that villain wrecked half the town. And I’m pretty sure the news was on a delay so we didn’t see her kill him. Hell, the shaky-cam look made it hard to tell what was even happening. The reporters couldn’t even stand.” Hitoshi dropped back to the ground, dirty as it was and curled around his legs. “After all of that, could anyone be okay?”

Uchiha leaned forward, extending his right hand—the one that always had gloves, except for this moment. Up to the wrist and probably past it, his skin was uncannily pale and nails ill-defined, but it was still a hand. Then Uchiha opened his mouth and said, guileless as anything, “I could show you, if you want?”

Hitoshi gaped at him. “What?”

“You wouldn’t be able to leave the room, but Kei’s got her own spot in the hospital while she recovers. She’s already spent like seven months in Tokyo, so it’s not like you could get her sick now,” Uchiha went on, as though that explained anything. “And she’s really the best person to explain this kind of thing, and she’s so bored she might just do it.”

“I—” Couldn’t do it? Need to tell my parents? Don’t even know what the hell I’m getting into? All of Hitoshi’s clever words were even further back in his mind. His composure trainwreck wouldn’t survive any more hits like this. “Uchiha, is that—what the hell are you even offering?”

“Exactly what I said. You’d get to see Kei, and know for a fact she’s okay,” Uchiha said. While Hitoshi tried to piece together a response to that, Uchiha frowned a bit and just kept going. “Oh, but I’m probably screwed if I do that without permission. Can’t just show up in the hospital unannounced. Rin would kill me.”

Uchiha’s thoughts were like listening to someone have a full-on conversation with himself.
“Actually, I wanna clear something up first,” said Uchiha to Hitoshi’s stunned silence. He patted Hitoshi’s knee. “Before anything else? You’re Kei’s friend. All the secrets in the world—if you know ‘em or not—don’t change that. She’s just that kind of person.”

Against his wishes, Hitoshi still felt his heart lift a little to hear it. He was supposed to be upset with everything right now, and it sounded like Uchiha agreed, but—it helped. A bit.

“Tell you what.” Uchiha climbed to his feet, offering Hitoshi a hand up. After hauling Hitoshi to unsteady feet, he said, “I’ll ask if I can bring you to see her. I’ll be back in a couple minutes at most, so uh… Wait. No. I’ll get a phone first, then I’ll do that stuff. That way you two can still talk even if somebody’s screaming at me.”

“You’re…really casual about this. And okay with me finding out?” Hitoshi winced as soon as he said it, in case it reminded Uchiha that hey, ninjas were also supposed to assassinate people. And even after putting that thought into words, Hitoshi’s pulse barely jumped.

“Pff. Thing is, you’re just worried about Kei, aren’t you?” Uchiha waved a hand as though shaking the thought away. “You might not know—scratch that, you definitely don’t if you’re asking that.” Uchiha cleared his throat. “I dunno if you need to know everything about us, but you’re a friend. And I think, like Kei does, that the bonds between people are something you’ve gotta appreciate. She doesn’t take that for granted, considering what she’s been through.” And on that ominous note, Uchiha concluded, “I’ll check in and see what I can swing for ya.”

“Wait,” Hitoshi said. When Uchiha tilted his head curiously, Hitoshi mumbled, “Do you know what phone to get?”

“Oh, not really. I figure I’d get another one of those cheap things she keeps buying.” Uchiha shrugged. “Not like there’s a difference, right?”

“There’s definitely a difference,” Hitoshi corrected, deadpan.

“Really?” Uchiha’s eyebrow rose, a grin curling his lips. “I guess you’re the expert, then!”

“Yeah. I’ll help you make sure she gets one she doesn’t break four times in six months,” Hitoshi mocked, because it was easy. It was familiar.

And it made Uchiha laugh and say, “She’ll swear up and down the fourth wasn’t her fault.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Hitoshi said. “Come on, we’ll check out waterproof stuff.”

“Finally!” Uchiha scooped up one of Hitoshi’s bags out of sheer politeness and threw his other arm over Hitoshi’s shoulders. “I’ve been telling her that for months.”

“You and me both.”

They trekked at least a few blocks away before finding the store Hitoshi figured would best serve Uchiha’s needs. If the phones themselves weren’t waterproof, they could at least find accessories that were, and Uchiha had enough money for both items. Hitoshi, now that he thought about it, didn’t really want to know where that cash came from.

“I don’t know if you’ve heard, but UA is going to be turning into a boarding school,” Hitoshi said, as they were heading back to the totally nondescript alleyway.

Uchiha grimaced. “Really? That’s either way overdue or just kinda…a thing to deal with.” He shrugged. “Kei wasn’t gonna be back for the fall anyway, but that’s a lot to put on you guys at short
Hitoshi’s stomach was still somewhere near his knees, even after their earlier conversation, and it sank a little further at the thought. “Yeah, I… She told me she might not be coming back. Guess it’s a certainty now, isn’t it?”

“I mean, she’s not going back to UA, given… y’know,” Uchiha said. He mimed putting a mask over his face, but it mostly ended up looking like he had a headache that encompassed his entire forehead. “Dorms are supervised by teachers, right? Kei’d never deal well with that long-term, even without the part-time gig.”

“…No, she probably wouldn’t.” Hitoshi sighed. So much for that faint hope.

“Hey, chin up. You’re gonna be a hero, ain’tcha?” Uchiha nudged his shoulder with an elbow. “Save the world and all that?”


“Kei can visit, same as me,” Uchiha said, “so don’t go worrying about your cheer squad.”

Hitoshi flushed. “She’s not—”

“And—look, Kei never said this.” Uchiha lowered his voice to say, “But even when stuff sucks here, it’s better than what we came from. Brighter. More peaceful. You do your best to keep it that way, and don’t let kids end up like us once you’re grown. If you can try to do that, you’re as heroic as anybody who’s ever claimed a fancy name and costume.” His smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. “You and the rest of the hero kids are gonna be great.”

“Ahh, that’s… Thanks, Uchiha.”

“No problem, Shinsō.” Uchiha paused. “By the way, that thing you mentioned about the Nōmu?”

“Yeah?”

“Kei knows how they got made. And she knows what that villain the other night was like, and that he made them, and a bunch more awful stuff. She’s been talking a lot since she woke up.” Uchiha gripped Hitoshi’s shoulder again. “Stuff’s happened to us, and some of it was almost that bad, but we got out and we came here to help. Even if it doesn’t feel like a victory to make it out of a bad situation, we’re here.” He sighed, tilting his head up toward the morning sky. Without looking at Hitoshi, he said, “That guy needed to go down, and maybe Kei shouldn’t’ve been the one who had to do it, or like that, but that’ll be something you talk about with her. Maybe with the rest of your little fight club.”

Hitoshi hadn’t even thought about grabbing Midoriya for this kind of opportunity. He put his hand over Uchiha’s, feeling his brows draw together. “Uchiha, are you okay?”

“It’s a process, sometimes.” Uchiha shrugged again. This time, oddly, his smile did reach his eye even, as he let go and made sure Hitoshi ended up with all the same bags he’d had at the start of this side-adventure. “Thanks for everything, Shinsō. The worrying, too. I’ll get back to you as soon as I can about visiting!”

Between a shop’s shadow and the next pedestrian, Uchiha was gone before Hitoshi could muster a response.
TMNT-TNT: Yo.

Purble: !

Purble: How are you??

TMNT-TNT: How am I what?

Purble: You

Purble: How much did Uchiha tell you?

TMNT-TNT: He got yelled at by about five people. But I got the phone and I’m talking to you, so.

Purble: Hey.

TMNT-TNT: What?

Purble: Stuff’s complicated, but…

Purble: I’m glad you’re okay.

Purble: I’m probably not going to express it super well the next time I see you.

Purble: But I wanted you to know first.

TMNT-TNT: Even after figuring out the big secret.

Purble: Oh, we’re gonna talk about that. But yeah, even after everything.

Chapter End Notes

Next: denouement.

End Notes

And now: Art links for Shell Game. Because that's what everyone really wants. :D

Kei in one of her Tokyo street outfits, Close-up version.
Kei in a sort of school uniform.
The Water Dragon Bullet Train.
A version of the UA school uniform that has pants! Or leggings, at least.
If UA tolerated the yankee look.
Kei in a different Tokyo-compatible street outfit.
Kakashi also wanders around Tokyo occasionally. Here's his non-ANBU outfit.
Tried drawing Kei in another variant of the UA uniform. Still needed to learn that UA doesn't allow workout clothes as a part of the uniform.

Obito shows up to help with the training montage.

Obito discovers the magic of smartphones.

Hitoshi and the cat cafe adventure.

More Tokyo outfits for Kei.

Team Minato in Tokyo outfits, but with more color!

Kei and the turtle-themed hoodie. Harajuku is amazing.

Hoodies are back in style. Kei thinks they never left.

Two false ANBU masks and a real one, for Team Minato's use.

Kei in the art style of the universe she's not native to.

The post-tech upgrade ANBU combat uniform, as modeled by Kei.

Workout clothes for Kei's Tokyo stay! Or at least sit-at-home-and-watch-TV clothes.

The world's scariest sukajan jacket model (and design).

The Nomu from chapter 53!

Kei plus her Tokyo clothes, via a dollmaker thing.

Kei in her outfit from chapter 57, barring some detail and polish. But at least the T-shirt's accurate! Ish.

Kei, colorized!

Kei, probably as viewed through a crush filter.

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