I'll Move Mountains

by Dhas

Summary

Toph Beifong is born with an earth quirk. From a young age, she’s discouraged from ever using it. And from a young age, after meeting a boy with an air quirk, she’s determined to prove her worth in the greatest way she can think of—by becoming a hero.
Poppy’s only daughter is born completely blind. Perhaps it’s part of her quirk, suggests one doctor, looking at their family history. Lao’s family claims to be directly descended from the glowing baby, the first recorded quirk in history. Every quirk in his family is a mutant-type, and manifests at birth. Another doctor in the room murmurs his skepticism.

Poppy Beifong doesn’t care. Her daughter is blind. “I’ve failed you already,” she whispers to the infant swaddled in her arms. “Please forgive me, Toph. I’ll do better from now on. I will protect you.”

The baby squirms at the sound of Poppy’s voice, blinking gorgeous green eyes, the color of sea foam. Her smile is gentle and delicate. Such beauty, she thinks. And perhaps Toph’s sight was the price of this beauty. Toph would be helpless in the world—and oh god, the world seems so much more dangerous now—and Poppy would have to shelter her baby from it. She touches the girl’s cheek, so fragile and soft, and a seed of disappointment sinks into her mind. Lao is a good man, deserving of a healthy heir. This girl is not that.

“What are we to do with you, my poor lotus?”

Toph Beifong is no blooming lotus, but a hurricane from the moment she’s born. She screams whenever she’s laid down to rest in her crib, as if offended by silk sheets and the softest pillows. She’s a finicky eater, angry during playtime, and bawls whenever they try to put socks on her.

(She is not fit to be seen, not ready for world, and they hesitate to introduce her at all)

The only time the Beifong child is ever content, it seems, is when she’s curled up against someone’s chest, able to press her face against a steady heartbeat.

That is, until her nanny sets her down on a granite countertop—Just for a moment, Mrs. Beifong, I was only trying to reach for her bottle!—and the infant goes still as stone, quiet as a shadow. The nanny, still reaching for the baby bottle at the time, did not notice the way Toph kicked her legs out, squirmed desperately to explore the counter. She did notice when Toph burst into tears, reaching out for the cool, stable surface after being lifted away.

After that, Toph is incorrigible. She must be on the counter. Or the tiled floors. Or the stone pathway towards the gardens. She gives everyone hell if she’s left in her padded playroom or any sort of baby
“It’s like—it’s like she can see when she’s standing on earth,” the nanny tries to explain why Poppy’s two-year-old daughter looks like a poor farmer’s child playing in dirt one afternoon. Toph digs her fingers into mud like she’s finger-painting, and when the nanny scoops her up the girl kicks up such a fuss that no one notices the disturbed earth; that hard metamorphic rock yields to her chubby fingers as easily as clay.

“I will not have my daughter playing in dirt. If I come home to find her this filthy again, you will find yourself unemployed,” Poppy Beifong promises.

Still, three nannies have to be fired before Lao and Poppy find someone that will do as they’re instructed and keep Toph indoors.

(Three nannies, thousands of dollars, and four miscarriages before the Beifongs realize they must keep their daughter indoors)

Toph is four when she finds a nanny that will help her clean up and hide the evidence of her playtime. It’s around that time that they take her to a quirk doctor to update her file in the quirk registry. She discusses her ability openly, but Toph is only four and no genius with words. “I can feel the ground. The rocks. I can see with them.” She gives a demonstration, navigating easily on soil, gravel, cement and tile. Sand is troublesome, metal floors make her teeth hurt, and glass is unpleasant. She says nothing of her playtime, knowing her mother doesn’t approve. The doctor notes that her sense of hearing is also heightened, and explains her quirk as a mutated form of her father’s Sonar.

Her quirk is given the name Earth Sense; she can use any rock or mineral to sense her surroundings. Her ability manifested at birth, and while it’s not certain that her blindness was caused by her quirk, it’s certainly lent itself to her quirk’s strength, which has steadily increased her range to about a hundred meters by age four through constant use.

They use a lot of other words to explain the details of her quirk—they say it’s a mutant-type quirk, passively-active, no wonder she has trouble on wooden surfaces—and all Poppy and Lao hear is ‘Your daughter is going to continue to play in dirt’ and they both know immediately that they need to put an end to this Earth Sense before it causes them any trouble.

What they don’t see is that Toph is also like earth in many ways—immovable as a mountain, planted like a rock in a river, stubborn and grating like sand. That every time Toph takes a step, she pushes her senses to their utmost limit, straining to catch every vibration, pairing it with every swish of fabric and hum of electricity and thump of a heart she can hear.

When she sets her feet on solid ground, it feels like an extension of herself. So when she insists to her parents I can see, I can see everything just fine, she is not lying.

No one believes her.

Concessions are eventually made. There are no soft-plastic cups or bowls for Toph. Only stoneware, ceramic, fine china.

(Poppy is pleased by her daughter’s fine motor skills, how delicately her flower can hold objects.)

Metals work too, though it takes some practice before Toph can fully sense the shape of a fork without poking herself with it. The only knives in the household are kept high on wooden shelves, as far as possible from the curious little Beifong.
The interior decor of their home does not change much. Lao’s mansion in Japan is modeled after the Beifong property in China, and much of the interior is already wood and stone. Toph doesn’t mind. If she wants to navigate on her own one day, she’ll need to learn how to walk on all sorts of surfaces, from wood to carpet to those god-awful padded mats.

She does mind having to wear shoes, though, and at five-and-a-half years old, she carefully trims down the soles of every pair she owns to the bare minimum with a borrowed knife from the kitchen. A maid walks in while Toph’s on the counter and promptly tattles on her, and Toph learns to keep a foot on her surroundings at all times—and then she finds the new hiding place for the knives. Poppy notices after five months, and Toph isn’t allowed to leave the house for a week, not even to walk in the garden. It doesn’t stop her from doing it all over again with her new shoes.

Her parents just don’t get it. She is earth, she is stone. She needs to feel the ground.

Toph must admit that her father does at least try to understand. Or perhaps he’s just fed up with her tantrums. The doctor suggests taking her on a kid-friendly hiking trip so she can enjoy her quirk safely. Poppy is strongly against it, and they argue about it for days, but in the end, Lao orders a nanny (the one with a stretching quirk, perfect for keeping a child from harm) to accompany Toph for the outing. Lao Beifong has a sensory quirk like his daughter—an auditory one that allows him to use sonar. It was only after exploring his own quirk that Lao realized how he could hone his senses to find new mining sites for metal refinery. Maybe she’ll find something useful about her quirk, Lao reasons.

He’s right about his daughter, for once. Toph Beifong does learns something new about her quirk that day.

Chapter End Notes

hey y'all it's alektos back at it with another unfinished crossover... sorry to everyone reading my Iron Man/Game of Thrones crossover this is what I've been up to for the past three months...

I have over a hundred pages of content I can publish on this story, if y'all are interested. Please validate me.
A Leaf in the Wind

Chapter Summary

Book One: Thunder
Chapter Two: A Leaf in the Wind

It’s way too easy to give her nanny the slip. Toph has perfected the art, and this caretaker is especially lax with the rules. Or rather, Yui-san has learned that damage control is much easier than Toph control.

The only problem is all the trees. And long grasses. And there’s so much loose dirt, Toph can hardly see more than five feet ahead of herself.

“Fuck!” She growls. She heard the cook say it once after injuring his finger, and it feels appropriate even if she isn’t sure what it means. Another branch whacks her in the face and Toph screams as she swats it away, feeling the lingering sting over her forehead. Slowly, she draws to a stop in the brush, scowling. “I know I can do this,” she mutters venomously, slapping her cheeks. “Concentrate, Beifong!”

If she can’t walk through a stupid forest without smacking into every plant, how is she ever going to get by on her own? Will she be stuck clinging to someone’s arm, clutching a dumb walking stick, her entire life?

“Fuck, no.” Toph breathes, and shuts her useless eyes. Concentrate. Be patient. Something tells her she has to be patient. There isn’t much wind, but there’s enough to make everything rustle and swish and crunch and chatter—ugh, it’s all a mess in her ears, she needs more to understand what’s around her. Concentrate, she thinks again, dragging one foot across the ground. Too muffled.

After a moment Toph kicks off her shoes and yanks off her socks for good measure, and when she sets her feet down this time—“That’s the stuff,” Toph sighs in relief, pressing her toes into the earth. She focuses on the sensation, and then stomps on the ground experimentally. The vibrations spread around her as always, but the waves are muddled and dampened. Why? She can feel the earth there, it’s all around, twisting between harder rocks and roots—

Roots. The plants. Ugh, nature. It’s still muddling her senses. If she could just get her vibrations to go further, go faster, maybe—maybe—

Toph stomps harder. Nothing. She can feel the stupid tree on her right, though. She stomps again, shifting her weight as she does so—and there’s a swish of leaves all around her, like the trees are quivering in fright.

Toph grins. Yeah, you better be afraid of me, she wants to shout at the world. She spreads her legs, bending them at the knee to keep her balance. It feels right. It feels natural. Lifting her left leg high, Toph brings her foot down hard, like she’s sending a message through the earth itself.

And the ground trembles beneath her. She can see everything, from the shuddering trees to tiny blades of grass. There’s a crater around her foot, rippling outward in each direction. She did that? But she’s not strong enough to break the rocks beneath her! And she’s stomped on earth before,
she’s jumped and kicked and tapped the ground many times.

But not like this. Not while focusing her mind, reaching out to feel all around. Toph shifts back into her stance, knees bent, back straight—and when she stomps, she tells the earth to move.

A boulder erupts in front of her. Unconsciously, she modifies her stance, raising a tight fist.

Crrr—a a c k!

The punch is sharp and confident, but only as powerful as a little girl could make it. In the same instance she sees the whole shape and size of the rock and shatters it along its fault lines, reducing it to pebbles at her feet.

Her knuckles sting a little, and Toph shakes out her hand. The world before her is crisper than ever, and she doesn’t need to stomp so much to feel the earth. There are natural vibrations here and there, a tree shuddering in the wind, a bug landing on a tall flower, and if she stays focused, Toph can see it all. The earth is alive.

Toph feels alive too.

She hastily tries calling up another boulder from the ground—and nothing. Her heart hammers in her chest. How did she do it the first time? She sent a shockwave through the ground, and the rock responded, right? It doesn’t feel right. Toph screws up her face in concentration and begins stomping, punching, kicking. Just yelling at the earth doesn’t work—just stomping on the ground won’t get it to respond. Toph needs to fight it. Give it an order, and be purposeful about it.

She needs to—to bend the earth to her will.

Toph digs her heel into the earth, and the ground rises to her will. She didn’t even need to stomp this time. The earth just listens to her. She can bend it however she wants. Like in the old folktale of the Avatar, a legendary master of elements. The Avatar could bend the powers of nature.

Earthbending. She likes how that sounds.

She finds a clearing to practice in; an expanse of treeless ground with one side blocked off by a high cliff of jagged rocks. There, Toph finds out exactly what she’s capable of doing.

Leaping off a shelf of earth, Toph roars as she pummels another boulder—this one’s at least twice her height!—into dust. The shockwave ripples out around her, and she can feel the moment a fruit of some kind is shaken loose from a tree. Toph stretches out her hands eagerly, and something round and hard drops into her palms. She’s grinning so hard, her cheeks are going to ache for days. She tries taking a bite and finds out it’s a gross-tasting apple, but still.

The realization hits somewhere between punching through her eighth boulder and raising a (precarious) wall of earth twelve feet tall: Toph doesn’t just see with her quirk, she can fight with it.

And she wants to fight, Toph realizes. Every rock she punches into dust, every tremor she can generate, it’s exhilarating. Using her quirk like this is amazing. She wants to do this every day, for the rest of her life. She wants to show the world how awesome she is, how powerful she can be.

For once, Toph doesn’t mind being blind. Not when she can do this.

Toph digs her hands into the earth, loving the way the ground softens beneath her, yields to her every command. She won’t be treated like glass when she can crush boulders with her bare hands.
They can’t say she’s fragile when she can lift mountains. So she gets to work.

With the skills of her nanny in cleaning up the evidence, Toph is allowed to return to the mountains every other week. Yui-san takes her by train one day while their driver is unavailable, and Toph is carefully quiet during the trip there and back, mapping out her path.

Then, Toph sneaks out on a Tuesday evening while her parents are away and the mansion is mostly empty. She has no train ticket, no money or phone. Her watch will read out the time to her if she presses it, and she keeps track of the hour while she practices. If even one thing had gone wrong, Toph could’ve been in serious trouble. She fumbles a few times, catching the eye of a concerned mother; a whispered conversation between two businessmen wondering where Toph’s going. At one point Toph gets very close to being caught by a ticket inspector, but notices him in time to sneak away.

No one stops her.

She continues to practice whenever she can escape, and the older she gets, the easier it is to fool everyone. Toph learns which trains run late, and pays careful attention to the sort of people she encounters. Villainous activity is higher at night, and while Toph isn’t afraid of anything, she’s not stupid. She waits. She listens. She practices where no one will find her.

And that is Toph’s life for the next year.

She’s a week away from her seventh birthday when she meets Twinkletoes.

It starts with some odd rustling trees. Toph is still focusing on making a boulder three times her size float into the air, and ignores it. But the wind is strange. It’s too… sharp.

“WHATCHA DOING?” A young, loud boy screams at her out of nowhere, and Toph gasps as the boulder crashes down at her feet. “OH MY GOD!”

Toph whips around, trying locate the voice. Why is it so windy? Suddenly the wind disperses and a person steps onto the earth—from where? Did he fly? —and Toph can sense a boy, taller and sturdier than her, standing just a few meters away.

“What’re you doing here?” Toph demands, facing him.

“I’m hunting bugs! How’d you lift such a big rock? You must be pretty strong!!” Something plastic and metal and cloth clatters to the floor by his feet. A box? A net? Whatever it is, he’s abandoned it to talk with her.

She pauses, relaxing a little. “Yeah, I am,” Toph agrees smugly.

“I’m strong too though! I can fly!” And then he jumps up and disappears from her again, completely baffling Toph. He’s gone. Like a bird. She hates birds. The wind disappears as he lands once more.

“Hey, why do your eyes look like that?”

Toph scowls, belatedly fixing her bangs so they hang over her face. “They just do.”
And instead of taking that for an answer, the boy takes as an invitation to run—dance?—right up to her to get a better look. “They’re strange!” He exclaims cheerfully, and Toph flinches back at his closeness.

“Get away from me, Twinkletoes,” She snaps, pushing his chest with both hands. He doesn’t move as much as she’d like.

“Twinkletoes?”

“Yeah, Twinkletoes,” Toph declares with a nasty grin, “Because you walk so lightly, I can barely sense it.”

“Sense it? Whatcha mean? And why aren’t you looking at me? Are you sure your eyes are okay?”

“Shut up,” Toph growls, tensing up. “Or I’ll bury you alive!”

“Huh? Whaddya mean—?”

And then Toph has the earth swallow him up, right up to his waist.

“HOLY MOLY! THIS IS AMAZING!”

Okay. Not the response she was hoping for. “Keep yelling and I’ll bury you all the way,” Toph hisses, carefully listening for any more people nearby. “I’m not supposed to be out this late, you’ll get me in trouble.”

“OH! Oh. Okay!” He whisper-shouts. “Hang on, you can get me out of this, right??”

Toph pretends to think about it. “Only if you promise me something.”

“Anything! I’m Inasa Yoarashi, by the way!”

“That’s nice, Twinkletoes,” Toph rolls her eyes and stomps on the ground, bending him out of the earth. “Now,“ she says ominously, jabbing a finger at him. “I wanna fight you!”

“What?” He flails. She can hear his heart if she listens carefully, fluttering like a hummingbird. She can use that for when he’s in the air, he can’t hide from her that way.

“I don’t wanna fight!” Inasa whines. “I wanna be friends!”

… Friends?

Toph is startled into silence. She didn’t think of that. “You can be my friend IF you fight me,” she decides. “Quirks allowed. First one to give up or get pinned down loses—we’ll be careful, I won’t hurt you if you don’t hurt me,” she promises.

He seems uncomfortable for a moment, shifting from foot to foot. “How about a time limit, too? And will you still be my friend if I win?”

(Privately, Toph thinks she’ll only be his friend if he wins)

“Yeah. Oh, and I’m Toph. Let’s fight for… ten minutes?”

“I have a stopwatch!” Twinkletoes says eagerly, fiddling with the device on his wrist. “Okay, all set, Toph?”
She spreads her legs into a more balanced stance and grins. “Yep. Let’s go, Twinkles!”

He presses a button to start the timer, and then leaps towards her.

Twinkletoes is good. He dances to dodge her rocks, and Toph has to dig her heels into the earth to withstand his powerful gusts of wind. They’re both breathing heavily, hearts hammering, equally exhausted. But he’s never seen someone like Toph fight before, and she’s sure she’s about to pin him down when his watch’s timer starts beeping.

“Dang it!” She huffs.

Toph lets her attack crumble down to nothing as the dust settles. Then Twinkletoes leaps to his feet, sending dust everywhere anyway. “That was fun! You’re really cool, Toph!”

“Thanks,” she grins, panting a little. “Your quirk is hard for me to fight.”

“Right back atcha! They’re like opposites! Earth and air!” He dances closer to her, breathless, with a smile in his tone. Toph earthbends them a bench to rest on, and he takes a seat very close to her.

“Hey…Toph?” He asks timidly, or what could pass for timid in his case.

She dusts off her shirt. “Yeah?”

“Um. Why do you hide your eyes like that? You don’t really seem like you’re shy.” He asks. Toph is a little surprised, but she’s learned through fighting him that Inasa is more observant than he initially seemed.

After a moment of deliberation, Toph pushes her bangs carefully behind each ear, letting him see her eyes properly. She can hear his intake of breath as he puts the pieces together.

“You—You can’t see me, can you?”

She hates the pity in his voice. It makes her want to fight all over again.

“How’d you fight me?” He continues curiously. “You’re so good at it, too!”

Her mouth twitches upward. “I use my quirk. I can use it like another sense, so when your feet are on the ground, I can ‘see’ you.”

“Twinkletoes,” The name dawns on the boy like a bright sun. “But, but you still can’t see me when I’m using my quirk!”

Toph snorts. “No, but I sure can hear you.”

He’s practically vibrating with excitement, and reaches out to grab her shoulder urgently. “Toph, when are you gonna come back? We should fight again! Or, what’s it called, sparring! It’s good practice for when we’re heroes!”

Toph blinks. “Heroes?”

“Yeah!” He pumps a fist into the air, and then looks at her curiously. “Don’t you wanna be a hero?” He asks expectantly. Like it shouldn’t even be a question. “You’d make an awesome hero, you’re so good at it already!”
“Yeah,” Toph agrees, her chest feeling light. His hand is still on her shoulder, a warm and friendly weight. “Yeah, let's be heroes, Inasa!”
Toph is seven years old when she gets kidnapped. She wakes up cold and disoriented, surrounded by the tinny, uncomfortable vibrations of metal. “What happened?” Toph groans, trying to focus her hearing. She’s not the only one here, but there’s only one other person moving. “Inasa?” she guesses hopefully.

“No,” an unfamiliar boy answers, shuffling closer. “I’m the only one awake. Who are you?”

“Toph.” There’s a crackle of fire, and she flinches a little from the unexpected heat. “What are you doing?”

“It’s too dark to see in here,” the boy explains apologetically. Toph lowers her hands, facing the source of heat warily. “Are you okay? What happened to your eyes?”

Toph blinks, touching her face in confusion. “Nothing, I’m just blind.”

“What—?”

“It’s fine, it’s always been like this,” Toph cuts him off quickly, irritated. “Is Inasa here? He’s tall, got a buzzcut.”

The boy shuffles around some more as Toph presses her hands to the steel floor, concentrating. “I think this is him? He’s the only other older kid here.”

Toph frowns, having come to the same conclusion as she feels around the steel box they’re in. In total there are fifteen kids in here, thirteen still unconscious. Most seem fine, Inasa included, but three seem to be shivering from the cold, their movements erratic in their sleep. “You’ve got a fire-type quirk, right? Some of the little ones are too cold, can you help them?”

He pauses, still crouched by Inasa. “Which ones?” He doesn’t ask how she knows.

Toph gets to her feet carefully, grimacing at the ice-cold floor on her bare feet. Determinedly, she points out each kid, and together she and the fire boy collect them together and huddle beside them. “They look like they could have fire quirks,” the boy observes, “So they could be sensitive to the cold.” He shuffles over so the kids are mostly leaning on his left side, and Toph stays on the other side to squish them in.

“That’s weird,” Toph says quietly, half-focusing on Inasa’s breathing.

“What is?” The boy asks.

“Well,” Toph taps her foot rhythmically, “You’ve got fire, Inasa has a wind quirk, and I can control earth. What are the chances we’re gonna find some water-quirks too?”
The boy hums in interest. “You think we might all be elemental users,” he muses. “What’s the last thing you remember, Toph?”

She thinks back, the memories surfacing slow and unwillingly like molasses through her head. “I was... playing with Inasa in a forest. Well, we were fighting, but we always do. And I heard someone approach. They just wanted to watch our fight, so we let ‘em. Then he was all—angry? Excited? Maybe happy.” She remembers the clink of metal and the whoosh of air, faster than anything Inasa’s done. She still tried to dodge, but it nicked her. There’s an ache in the meat of her shoulder, a bruise. “He shot us. Something to knock us out.”

“I was taken from home,” the boy shares. “Dad wasn’t home that night, there were a few people that snuck in. I fought, but they knocked me out with some chemical.”

Toph frowns. “Any idea why we’re being kidnapped? My parents are rich, so I guess could be a ransom thing, but I don’t know about everyone else.” They didn’t even ask for her name.

The boy is quiet. “Well, my dad’s a pro hero. It could have something to do with that? Or,” he pauses again, “Maybe it’s to do with our quirks? Because we have elemental powers?”

“Maybe,” Toph says, “But we don’t know if everyone here has the same kind of quirk. What’s your name, by the way?”

He seems to curl into himself, and speaks with all the confidence of a field mouse, “Shouto... My dad is Endeavor, the flame hero.”

Toph’s eyes widen, but she bites down on her exclamation quickly. He didn’t seem so stiff until now, but his shoulders are tense and his heart is beating rather fast and she doesn’t like it. “Okay,” Toph says casually, placing a hand against the cold wall. “Um. Think you can melt us out of here?”

He shakes his head, limbs loosening a bit. “No, I thought of that. The metal’s too thick, it’ll take ages and it’ll make the rest of the floor too hot to stand on. I can’t tell who’s out there guarding us, either.” Shouto explains. A beat later, he adds, “I’m better with ice, anyway.”

“Ice?” Toph repeats in confusion, lifting her head.

“My quirk is half-hot, half-cold. I... don’t like to use the fire-side that much,” Shouto admits, adjusting his arm around the two boys and one girl between them. They were all younger than Toph, but one of the boys was almost as big as her and it was hard to keep them all warm.

“So it’s like, one hand has ice and the other has fire?” Toph guesses, judging by the way Shouto’s sitting against the kids. It's kinda funny, it sounds like another Avatar myth, but she won't tell him that. “If it’s too much then stop, but your ice can’t help these kids as much as your fire right now,” Toph reminds him.

“Oka—” Shouto cuts himself off as a metal door slams, somewhere outside the metal crate-thing they’re in. Toph goes still, and then gets up from her spot next to the kids to get closer to the source. “Toph, you shouldn’t—”

“Shh!” Toph raises a hand quickly, and Shouto quickly falls silent. She closes her eyes and stands as still as possible, listening. “I can hear them.”

"So you think any of the children are awake yet?" Someone stands by another metal wall—sheet metal, thin and tall, like a warehouse. He latches the door.

"Haven’t heard any crying yet, so no." The new speaker chews on a piece of gum noisily, leaning
against a box like the one they’re in. Are there more people? More boxes of kids?

"You sure it was smart to grab the hero’s kid? We’ve already made the morning news." A nervous man. His footsteps are heavy, and his voice warbles oddly, maybe he has a mutation quirk.

“The boss wanted him for a reason. He’s already halfway there, ya know, he’s a good candidate. We’ll be moving out within the day, they won’t be able to track us after that.” That’s another speaker, one that speaks with sharp authority and treads like Inasa, light and airy. "Once we get to the facility, we can complete Amon’s vision and invoke the Avatar State once more."

Avatar State? They really were using that folklore, the really old stories about... benders. Like her. She named her quirk after the bending art of those old stories. A lot of people do it, like the Agni family in China and the waterbending hero, Backdraft. She told that stranger what her quirk was before he shot her!

Toph doesn’t like this. She doesn’t like this at all, and she doesn’t even know what they’re doing. Where would they be moved to? Where’s the boss, and how was he supposed to summon the Avatar? She doesn’t have a single answer, but there are fourteen other kids trapped in here, Inasa isn’t waking up, and Toph has had enough.

There’s only one thing she can do.

She strikes the wall suddenly, viciously, palm out like she’s striking rock. “HEY! YOU FREAKIN’ CREEPS! LET US OUT SO I CAN KICK YOUR BUTTS!” Toph punches again, hating how the vibrations rattle her teeth. She screams in anger and stomps on the ground, letting loose the strongest vibration yet. “YOU HEAR ME, YOU PUNKS?! I’M GONNA TAKE YOU ALL OUT!”

“Toph, what are you doing?!” Shouto exclaims, and some of the children begin to stir. “You’re gonna make them panic!”

“I’M GONNA GET US ALL OUTTA HERE BEFORE THESE MOOKS CAN LAY A HAND ON US!” Toph screams, banging the wall again. The vibrations she sends out are painful to focus on, but she does it. Eight, no, nine captors. Plus the boss, if he’s around but out of range.

A couple of the captors wander closer to their box. It’s gotta be a shipment container, like the kind they use on freighter trains and trade ships. Her dad’s described them before.

“Hey, I guess someone’s up,” Chewing Gum comments, and kicks the outside of the box. “Quit whining, girlie, it’ll all be over soon.”

Toph screams and punches back, right where she thinks his crotch would be. He startles a little at the sound, but doesn’t back off.

“That’s gotta be the earth girl, she’s got a quirk like that rescue hero. The cat one, y’know.” Flutterfoot speaks again, and Toph is close enough to recognize the voice as the person that went after her and Inasa. “She’s one of the stronger ones, but it’s not a problem. She’s blind.”

She strikes the wall again with a yell. “You’re gonna regret hurting my friends!” Toph vows coldly. “When I bust outta here, I’m going after you first.”

“Uh huh. Keep dreaming, sweetheart. Maybe you’ll be a hero in your next life.”

The threat sends a chill down her back, but Toph just screams and punches the wall again, harder than ever, willing and demanding and pleading for it to just move.
It doesn’t.

Instead, she thinks the wall is *singing*, and it startles Toph so bad that she stumbles away from it, bewildered. “Toph!” Shouto yells sharply, “Get away from there, don’t draw their attention.”

Toph tears herself away from the odd, rippling sensation of the wall, stomping her way over to Inasa. He’s beginning to stir, and she wants to hear her stupid friend’s voice more than anything.

“Inasa,” Toph holds his shoulder carefully, “Are you awake yet? C’mon Twinkletoes, I need your stupid help.”


“We got freakin’ kidnapped, and now we gotta save all these kids, so you’re not allowed to cry,” Toph explains succinctly, her words not a warning but a declaration. She points over her shoulder. “That’s Shouto. Everyone else here is a baby.”

“Shouto?” Inasa rubs at his face, peering at the other boy. “Um. Hi. I’m Inasa Yoarashi. What the heck is going on?”

“Toph just woke everyone up by banging on the walls,” Shouto informs him irritably. “You shouldn’t talk to them, Toph, we don’t know what they want or if they’re—”

“I know what they want,” Toph cuts him off, folding her arms. “We need to get outta here before they move us…” she trails off as the younger kids stir and awaken, and Toph can sense their panic settling in. She clamps down on any panic of her own. “Shouto, gimme some light?” She asks abruptly, helping Inasa to his feet. “The kids are scared.”

“How can you always tell?” Shouto murmurs, but complies anyway, judging by the flare of heat and crackle of flames near her. Toph takes a deep breath and slaps on the sweet smile she usually reserves for her parents and home tutors. She has to act like everything’s okay, that’s what heroes do.

“Hi everyone! My name is Toph. This is Twinkletoes, and that’s Icy-Hot. Is anyone hurt? Can you tell me your names?” She elbows Inasa sharply, making him yelp.

“Yes! I’m Twinkle—NO, my name is Inasa, c’mon Toph!”

“Hush, Twinkles, go check if anyone’s hurt.” Inasa groans dramatically and hops away, apparently over his sleepiness.

One of the kids closest to them giggles at their antics. Another one is still panicking. “Wh-Where are we? I wanna go home!”

Toph kneels, grabbing the girl’s hands gently. Toph focuses on her panicked heart. “What’s your name?”

“H-Himari,” she says softly. She’s maybe five years old, if Toph had to guess.

“Himari-chan, don’t be afraid. We’re stuck in here, and there are villains outside, but we’re going to get out of here soon.” She squeezes the girl’s hands, feeling her shake. “Are you cold?”

“Yes—oh,” she tugs her hands out of Toph’s, cupping her mouth. Suddenly Toph feels the brush of warmth over her face, a sort of pop-crackle to go along with it. “I can make hot sparks with my breath. I can warm up myself!”
Toph nods, not able to quite smile. Another fire-type quirk. They really did gather up elemental kids. “That’s great, Himari-chan. Can you help Shouto warm up the other kids?”

She exhales again, a few more sparks crackling around the girl’s face. “I-I can try?” Toph directs her to Shouto, who is amassing a small army of pre-school children.

“You look funny!” One boy points at Shouto’s head. “Like—a peppermint.”

“Yes,” Shouto agrees serenely, apparently accepting this description. She’ll have to ask about that later on, what the hell did peppermints even look like? “This side makes ice, and this one makes fire.”

A girl gasps in delight. “Icy-Hot! I get it!”

“Icy-Hot, I can make ice too, and water and steam!”

“...My name is Shouto, actually.”

“Can you make snow? My daddy can, but I make bubbles!”

“Ah. I don’t think I should make snow right now, it’s already cold.”

Toph grins, helping another boy to his feet. He’s got tiny, feathery wings attached to his forearms, and he’s very light, as if his bones are hollow like a bird’s. “How do you feel, Feathers?”

“Feathers...?” The boy says tiredly, and then brushes a hand over his arms. “I’m Yuuto, not Feathers!” he declares fearlessly. “And I’m fine!” His heart says otherwise.

“Do you have an air quirk, Yuuto?” Toph asks. “Wanna meet my friend Inasa? He can control wind.”

“I—really?” Yuuto’s heart jumps as surprise overtakes his worry. “The Twinkle boy?”

“I’m not Twinkletoes, I’m Inasa!” Her friend dances over to the clump of kids around Shouto, landing beside Yuuto.

“You can fly!” Yuuto says in wonder.

“Kind of!” Inasa agrees excitedly, and they usher the feathered boy to Shouto.

The half-hot half-cold boy is getting a lot of attention. Shouts of “I like your hair!” and “You’re pretty, Shou-chan!” surround the boy, who seems unable to respond.

Toph stomps on the ground—lightly, but enough to rattle the box—and places her hands on her hips. “Listen up, everyone! We’re gonna be saved by heroes, but until then we have to keep each other feeling safe and warm.” The atmosphere has changed dramatically since Toph first woke everyone up, hearts calmed, breaths unworried. It’s much easier for her to focus now.

“Oh!” Inasa raises his hand for some reason. “We should have a buddy-system. Toph and Shouto and me are the oldest, but we can’t look after everyone, okay? So—pair up! Take care of your partner!”

Toph gives a sharp nod of approval as the kids pair up easily, chattering about their quirks. They’re all young enough to be familiar with buddy-systems that schools give. Most of them pair up with kids with similar quirks, though Himari pairs with Yui, who shoots water from her fingers.
Inasa grabs Toph’s elbow, and mutters to her, “What’s the plan?”

Toph drags him over to Shouto, who’s been very quiet this whole time and is hard for her to read. The younger kids are all distracted, calmer than before, and Toph thinks she can speak without them overhearing anything. “I can hear everyone outside this box,” Toph begins, and Shouto leans closer. “I counted nine, but they mentioned a boss, too.”

“Could ya hear ‘em say anything about what they want with us?” Inasa asks eagerly.

Toph hesitates, and then gives another short nod. “It’s about our quirks. They wanna do something with them.”

Shouto wraps his arms around his knees. “So you think they need us alive. That’s why you weren’t afraid to yell at them?”

“Yeah. But they know your dad’s gonna come after them. Those mooks plan on moving us before the end of the day.”

“You dad?” Inasa inquires, turning to Shouto.

“My dad’s a pro hero,” Shouto says shortly, deliberately leaving it vague. “Toph, what else do you know?”

Toph chews her lip. “Well, about our quirks. They said the boss wanted you, Shouto, because you’re already ‘halfway there’. And you sort of have two elements as a part of your quirk, right? They want experiment on us or something to combine elements. For that to happen, they can’t hurt us until after we’re moved—so now’s our only time to strike.”

“What?” Inasa yelps, before Toph slaps a hand over his loud mouth. He speaks through her fingers. “I don’t like this at all! How can we get help? I don’t even know where we are!”

Toph pulls her hand away, pulling her legs in. “I don’t know,” she snaps. “Pull yourself together, Twinkletoes, we don’t have time for fear, and we don’t have time to be rescued. We need to bust out on our own.” It's what she realized when those villains were talking. To pull off a kidnapping of this scale, they had to have a plan to get them out quickly, but they chose young kids for a reason. There was no time to waste.

And Toph’s blood was boiling, she was not going down easy. Her parents think she's weak enough as is, and she still has to prove the whole world wrong and become a hero.

Inasa whines, but manages to keep his voice down. “Tooooppph, nooo, this isn’t a game! How’re we supposed to fight, anyway? How’re we supposed to get out of this box? There’s ten villains and three of us old enough to maybe fight. And we’re seven!”

“Toph,” Shouto cuts in smoothly, “Are… are you cold? Your feet look blue.”

“Blue?” Toph frowns at the non sequitur.

“That’s what happens when they’re cold,” Inasa explains, shifting to get a better look at her. “Oh, yikes!” He places a hand on her foot and Toph flinches back, almost kicking him in the face.

“Quit it!” Toph snaps. “Don’t touch my feet!”

“But you’re cold!” Twinkletoes protests. “Shouto, help me out. She’s tiny and barefoot and stubborn as a rock!” He dodges a swipe of Toph’s hand.
“That doesn’t mean I need help, Airhead.”

“But you are cold,” Inasa argues.

“...Maybe… put your feet against my thigh?” Shouto suggests awkwardly. “I won’t make more fire, I can just make it warm.” He turns his left side to face her, stretching out a leg. “Put your feet out. You can’t fight with numb toes.”

After a moment of tense silence, Toph deflates and sticks out her feet. She still twitches when Shouto’s hand grabs her ankle, guiding her to rest on his warm side. Inasa hugs her suddenly from behind, engulfing her whole torso with his stupidly long arms, and Toph vows to punch him in the face when they’re out of this mess.

Toph huffs, blowing hair out of her face. “I think I can break through this box,” she says finally, sinking into Inasa’s warmth. “I wasn’t just banging on the walls ‘cause I was mad. I can see through the vibrations. I can feel my surroundings that way. And I was hitting the wall so hard, I was trying my best to feel everything I could…”

She flexes her hands experimentally. They sting a little bit, and she thinks they’re going to be in pretty bad shape by the end of this. *But it's okay as long as I can save everyone.*

Toph clenches her hands into fists. “Metal comes from earth, doesn’t it? I’ll make an exit for us.”

“You think you can do that?” Shouto asks skeptically.

Toph nods resolutely. “I have to, so I will.”

Inasa hugs her tighter. “Toph, how can you just say cool stuff like that? You’re so quotable, like a pro hero, ne, Shouto??”

Shouto doesn’t answer at first, and Toph gets the feeling she’s being stared at. Twinkletoes is hugging the hell out of her, and Shouto is touching her feet, and suddenly Toph isn’t cold at all. In fact, she’s very warm, and maybe feels like melting or punching someone. She vows to punch Inasa twice when this is over.

“Yeah,” Shouto says finally, and Inasa waits for him to say more, but he doesn’t.

“Wah!” The wind boy exclaims. “You’re just as cool! So mysterious! I like it!”

“...Thanks?”

Toph rolls her eyes. “We need a plan. I don’t want any of those kids getting hurt. You guys don’t have to fight if you don’t want to, but—”

“Are you kidding, Toph??” Twinkletoes interrupts, “No way are you gonna fight alone! We’re all gonna save each other, aren’t we?” He looks to Shouto.

“I can fight,” he says solemnly. “But they might have guns, and more tranquilizer bullets to knock us out,” he reminds them.

“Ha! I won’t let that hit me again!” Inasa declares. “I was caught off-guard before, but I’m fast! I can blow them away if I see it coming.”

“Just don’t blow me away too,” Toph mumbles. “I’ll tell you if I hear any guns being drawn. I know what they sound like now. So, here’s what I know about the villains down there…”
The three elemental children huddle together, Toph squished between them, as they discuss their plan. They probably take longer than they should, and have to stop frequently to check on the younger kids, but finally, Toph untangles herself from the boys and gets to her feet. The boys go over to keep the little ones calm, and Shouto forms a careful wall of ice so that none of them try to follow them out.

She cracks her knuckles and stretches her arms, spreading her legs until she’s standing in a deep squat, firmly balanced on the warmed metal floor. Then she takes a deep breath and screams, “HEY YOU DUNDERHEADS DID YOU FORGET ABOUT ME?!” while striking the metal with both hands precisely. It doesn’t move, but Toph isn’t worried.

She stomps the ground again, hands flying out. “IF YOU THINK YOU CAN STOP ME, YOU’RE DEAD WRONG!” She declares, punching the walls before her.

“Oh great, the girl’s at it again,” Chewing Gum is the first to complain. None of them come near the container this time, already familiar with her tantrum. “C’mon kid, pipe down. It’s not like there’s anyone around to hear you!”

Toph roars back, still working the metal. It’s hard. Brittle and unyielding. She slams her hands down again, searching. She screams, a battle cry and a shout of frustration at the same time. “C’mon, metal,” Toph mutters to herself, folding an arm and striking with a hard elbow. Her hands are beginning to ache. “Move.”

Toph leans back, and then punches the wall decisively—and her teeth rattle as the wall sings to her again. She huffs out a laugh and does it again, ignoring the spike of pain down her left arm. Her knuckles might be bleeding by now, but it doesn’t matter. Toph punches once more, readying herself.

“Here we go, nerds!” Toph shouts back to Shouto and Inasa, turning her attention to the far side of the box, out of the villains’ sight. She slides back into her stance. The boys shift, bracing themselves.

Toph explodes through the wall, the metal screeching terribly, and wastes no time tearing a hole large enough for them to escape through.

“What the fuck was that?” A woman demands. Toph is ready. Twinkletoes is practically vibrating in excitement. Shouto’s heart rate picks up.

Inasa screams out a heartfelt battlecry as he leaps off the top of the shipping container, aiming straight for the Flutterfoot, the woman who walks on air. The woman dodges, and that’s when Toph strikes from below, punching out with a boulder and throwing her across the warehouse. Shouto freezes her carefully in place.

Toph laughs maniacally as she reveals herself to the eight others, drawing their eyes. “WHO’S NEXT?!”
The Elementals, Part II

Chapter Summary

Book One: Thunder
Chapter Four: The Elementals, Part II

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Endeavor 
hates 
working hostage situations. He hates working with local heroes, too. And most of all, he hates the fact that it’s been six hours and they still haven’t found his goddamn son.

Enji slams a hand down on the conference table. “There’s been fourteen other cases of kidnapping in the past two days, and I’m only just hearing about this now?!”

“Well,” an officer flounders, “They’re all over the place, and it happened so suddenly. We just caught wind of a villain group gaining momentum. They call themselves the Elementals, and it’s not clear what they want, but all the kids fit the same criteria as their group members—they all have primarily elemental quirks. It could be related to that Avatar religious organization. Your son is the only one with opposing elements as his quirk, I’d say they chose to take him because it’s closer to what the Avatar could accomplish.”

Enji scowls down at the files. The rest of the children taken were nobodies, no ties to heroes or villains or political figures. Except for the rich Beifong girl, whose quirk can hardly be called an elemental-type. Enji frowns at her records, which were vague and unhelpful. Quirk: Earth Sense. What the hell did that mean?

“Chief! Endeavor! We’ve got a lead!” Someone comes barreling into the room, waving a paper in his hand. “Endeavor—your son called! We have a location—”

“What?!” Enji gets to his feet and snatches the report out of the man’s grasp. “Get your men ready. I’m going on ahead.” He turns to the other pro heroes on the case with an expectant look.

The Water Hose duo are already on their feet, so at least they’re taking this seriously. “We’ll get your son back, Endeavor,” the wife promises. Enji huffs and walks away.

What they find when they finally reach the location of the call—a warehouse at the far end of an abandoned shipping yard—is not what any of them expect.

A child screams, and the Water Hose duo sprint ahead, leaving Enji behind. He’s not an idiot like them. The scream devolves into unrestrained laughter as the heroes approach a wide, earthen playpen outside the warehouse, filled with the missing toddlers. They’re screaming like banshees because they’re playing. He's familiar enough with the way Fuyumi and Natsuo screech at each other.

An older kid with a buzzcut is the first to look their way, and he shoots into the air and screams, "EVERYONE, THE HEROES ARE HERE!" before floating back down to sit beside two
other children. “HOLY CRAP, YOU NEVER SAID YOU DAD WAS ENDEAVOR!!”

The Water Hose team deals with the younger kids as they climb off monkey bars and slides, made from a combination of earth and ice. There’s even a pile of snow at the end of one looping slide that must be Shouto’s work. A quick headcount tells him that all fifteen children reported missing are here, and none of them seem gravely injured.

What the hell happened?

Enji’s eyes find Shouto easily enough. He’s sitting between the wind-quirk boy, likely Inasa Yoarashi, and a tiny girl—Toph Beifong, the rich girl with an earth-type quirk.

“Father,” he calls in greeting. Enji scans over his son, wondering why he hasn’t bothered getting up. Then his eyes slide over to the girl. She has her hands flat against Shouto’s icy right forearm, trying to alleviate a mess of cuts and inflamed skin.

“What happened here?” Enji demands, lifting his eyes to search the area for their captors.

“There were ten villains,” Shouto explains easily, watching Enji like a hawk. “Most of them are still unconscious.”

“Toph trapped them in one of those crates to be sure!” The wind boy, Inasa Yoarashi, pipes up, a huge grin on his face.

The girl nods, not looking up from the ground. Her foot taps on the ground erratically. “They’re all in there, even their dunderhead of a boss,” the girl’s voice is high-pitched and a lot more impudent than he’d expect.

Enji looks past them, into the open entrance to the warehouse. There does seem to be a shipping container in sight, warped, coated in ice, and half-buried in the ground.

Again, what the hell happened here?

“Stay where you are,” he calls to them, venturing towards the crate alone. The Water Hose team hover at the exit, on standby as he approaches. It doesn’t take long to confirm the the kids’ story, and Endeavor is walking back to the earth playground before he knows it, feeling distinctly underutilized. He flips on his communicator and explains the situation to the SWAT team.

As the police forces march out to the warehouse, Endeavor crouches beside the three seven-year-olds. It’ll be some time before the ambulances make their way to this remote location, so the job falls to the heroes to look after the victims. “Good. You’ve kept the swelling down enough to wrap up her hands, Shouto,” he says approvingly, unzipping the small pouch on the back of his belt. “Do you have any other injuries, Ms. Beifong?”

The girl huffs, lifting her hands off of Shouto. “Nope.” She holds out her hands expectantly and Enji gets out a roll of gauze to wrap the injuries. “Twinkletoes has a twisted ankle… and Himari-chan is about to freak out, though.”

Enji frowns at Beifong, intrigued by her answer, when a piercing wail cuts through the air as a younger girl begins to cry hysterically. Enji turns back to look at the scene, and sees the husband Water Hose hero frantically putting out small fires caused by the girl’s sparking quirk. Endeavor quickly decides the other heroes can handle that mess.

He looks at Beifong once more, suspicious. “Your quirk is listed as Earth Sense in your records. Is that really all it is?”
She looks surprised at the question. “That’s only part of it. I call it Earthbending, actually, like in the
folktales,” she admits, “And I could only move rocks, but today I punched through steel.” She seems
incredibly satisfied with herself, even with her broken and bleeding knuckles. “So I’m thinkin’ as
long it comes from earth, I can sense it and I can fight with it.”

Odd, Endeavor thinks, still peering at the tiny girl. He would never think a girl of her size would
have much control over a quirk with so much destructive power. Enji had looked at her family
history to get a better idea of what sort of quirks the villains were targeting; the Beifong girl’s quirk
seems like a version of her mother’s crystal manipulation. He doesn’t overlook her decision in
naming the quirk either; if the Elementals were searching for the mythical ‘benders’ of the Avatar
stories, of course they’d go after anyone with earthbending.

But even Earthbending doesn’t explain how she punched through steel. Weird kid.

“That’s how she hurt her hands,” Shouto supplies quietly, his eyes fixed on the girl. “We were all
locked in a shipping container. My fire and Inasa’s wind wouldn’t work without hurting everyone
else too.”

“So Toph just says, ‘metal comes from earth’ and started beating the hell outta the wall!” Yoarashi
continues the story eagerly. “And then she punched us outta there, and she made a plan to beat the
villains together, and then we got the kids out, and then we locked the villains in a crate!”

“And then Shouto and I made a playground and called you from one of the villain’s phones,”
Beifong finished tersely. “Is it just you and the water people here?”


Beifong pouts all of a sudden, blowing on a strand of hair that hangs over her face. “Aw man. I’m
never gonna meet Pixie-bob, am I?”

“Toooooppghhh!” the wind boy whines. “We’re meeting the Number Two Hero! You can’t start
talking about some mountain rescue hero now!”

Toph arches an eyebrow, facing Enji. “Just watch me,” she deadpans. Yoarashi collapses
dramatically. “Pixie-bob makes monsters out of rock and soil. She can cause landslides—or stop
landslides—and basically make mountains if she wanted to.”

Enji pauses to stare, surprised she has the audacity to actually start discussing this with him. But her
hands are shaking, and he suspects that talking helps distract her from the pain. He sneaks a look at
Shouto, who seems just as flabbergasted.

“...The cat-theme they have doesn’t make any sense, but I’ll let it slide. Ragdoll is weird but she can
sense people, and I can sense people, so I like her too. Tiger can stay because he fights in a skirt, and
I respect that…”

At this point the wind boy is laughing boisterously, and Beifong stops to grin. Shouto doesn’t say
anything, but he’s clearly listening. Behind them on the playground, one of the boys trips and begins
to bawl.

“Oh no!” Yoarashi exclaims sympathetically, hobbling to his feet. “Yuuto-chan, everything’s fine!
DON’T WORRY—” And then Yoarashi falls flat on his face.

Beifong’s head turns to him sharply. “Quit running around, dummy.” She slides her foot across the
ground and the rock in front of Yoarashi disappears into the ground. Enji finishes wrapping one hand
and moves onto the next, his frown deepening.
“You shouldn’t be using your quirk right now, Ms. Beifong,” Endeavor warns her. “You’re already injured, and it’s against the law. You three may have been able to fight off your captors, but what if they’d been stronger?”

“Then I’d beat them,” Beifong answers bluntly, lifting her head. “And if they were strong enough to defeat me, I would still beat them.”

Somehow she manages to look Endeavor straight in the eye as she says this. The look on her face is chilling, her expression set in stone. He’s never met someone so young with so much arrogance. Except maybe himself. He can’t decide if he likes this girl’s attitude or if it’s just irritating.

“Toph!” Yoarashi exclaims, rolling onto his back. “You’re so awesome. You gotta marry me, we’re gonna make such a cool hero partners—”

“I’m not marrying anyone that can’t beat me in a fight,” Beifong replies with a mean look, as if this is a common argument between them. Endeavor focuses on her hands, biting the inside of his cheek to stop from snorting out loud. “So that rules out you, Twinkletoes.”

The boy is undeterred. “I’ll be stronger when we’re older! Then I’ll beat you!” He declares it like a heartfelt confession of love.

Enji finishes wrapping her hands and turns to the wind boy reluctantly. “Does your ankle hurt?”

The boy gets the biggest smile on his face and sticks his right foot into the air. “Shouto iced it earlier so I can’t feel it!! I never knew Endeavor knew first aid! This is amazing!”

Shouto and Beifong both scoff at the wind boy’s antics. “Every hero knows first aid,” Enji growls out, testing out the boy’s range of motion. “We’re usually on the scene before any first responders, so it’s necessary. Don’t put weight on that foot.” He doesn’t care for this part of the job, but he’d much rather deal with three slightly-older children than the twelve toddlers in the Water Hoses’ care.

“Roger that!!” Yoarashi salutes him. Enji’s eyes slide over to his son again.

“You’re not hurt?”

“No.” Shouto’s eyes are fixed on the Beifong girl’s hands.

“Good.” Enji stands. “All of you come with me, there’s a van coming to transport you to the hospital.”

“Shouto too?” The earth girl inquires hopefully. She’s moved to be on Shouto’s fire-side, and now that they’re all standing she looks even smaller between the two boys. He shoots his son a questioning look, but the boy doesn’t meet his eye.

“Yes,” Endeavor answers, “Shouto still needs an official check up like the rest of you, and you each will have individual accounts to tell the police.”

“So it’s over?” She asks softly, face turned up to Endeavor neutrally.

“It is,” he promises.

Beifong sucks in a deep breath of air and sighs loudly. Then she turns to the wind boy and elbows him twice in the arm, quick as a cat. It’s oddly graceful, and he wonders if she’s being trained in martial arts.
“OW! TOPH!”

“That’s for being an airhead all the time!” She shouts at him. “I promised to punch you but I can’t wait that long! I’m glad we didn’t die!” her voice sort of breaks at the end, but she doesn’t cry.

“Aw, Toph, I love you too!” He shouts back.

The Water Hose woman coos. “They’re adorable. I can’t wait to have kids.”

“Ah,” her husband looks nervous, still smoking from where his suit caught fire from that Himari girl, “Maybe not too many, please?”

Endeavor supposes this is the best way a mass kidnapping could turn out, but he doesn’t have to like it. He looks away to oversee the other children as they file into the van.

Toph whips around to confront Shouto, who goes stock-still at the expression on her face. She glares at him for a little longer before wrapping her arms around him in a wordless hug, favoring his fireside.

“Thanks for warming us up and everything. And icing my hands.” She mumbles. After a long silence, Shouto lets his arms settle around her in return.

“You’re welcome,” he replies.

Suddenly there’s a shout from Inasa and they’re all but attacked by the bigger boy, and he immediately uses his quirk to lift them up into a spinning, flying mess. “GROUP HUG! WE MAKE SUCH A GREAT TEAM!” He laughs joyously while Toph screams and Shouto silently hangs on for dear life. “WE’LL BE THE ELEMENTAL TRIO OF THE HERO WORLD! Isn’t that an awesome group name??”

“It’s LAME!” The girl shrieks. “Put me down! When I barf I’m gonna aim for you!”

“Hey!” Endeavor barks at the three of them. “I told you to stay off your leg, get down!”

Looking properly chastised, Yoarashi lets them all float lazily to the ground, apologizing over and over. Beifong takes over for Enji in berating the wind boy.

Enji just stares at Shouto. He shouldn’t allow his boy to fraternize so much. There’ll be no need for hero team-ups for the future Number One. By the look on Shouto’s face he’s well aware of that, so Enji says nothing. They’ll be going over new self-defense tactics once this case is properly closed.

Beifong makes to lunge at the wind boy but Shouto deftly catches her before she can throw a punch with her injured hands. “I didn’t say you could hug me!” She howls at Yoarashi.

“But you hugged Shouto!”

“SHOUTO DOESN’T FLY.”

The wind boy settles down, having flown up again to hide from Beifong. “So can I get a hug too if I don’t spin or make us fly??”

Beifong scowls, stepping away from Shouto and Yoarashi to cross her arms. “No. I’ve had enough of this mushy stuff. Hey you brats! Get moving, we gotta go!”

The boys trail after her, helping corral the last few kids. They’ve been reluctant to leave the jungle gym, but Toph’s shout and seeing the older boys follow suit seems to be enough to convince them.
Endeavor shuts the door to the van while the three children are bickering.

Since none of the kids were severely injured, they choose to make the trip to a farther hospital, one in the center of the prefecture and closest to the precinct that was in charge of the case. When the van finally arrives at the hospital, swamped by reports and cameras, all fifteen kids are fast asleep.

The Water Hose duo exchange a look with Endeavor. “I think we should let them rest. It’s been a stressful day for them all.” With that, they begin to carry the smaller children inside in, two at a time given how they’ve seemed to pair up on their own.

Endeavor carries the oldest trio in together, turning off the flames on the majority of his costume. The Beifong girl is the only one to stir, though he expected her to be the most exhausted of them all.

As they pass through the children’s ward she becomes more lucid, suddenly tilting her head so her ear rests firmly against his chest. Enji blinks down at the girl. He can’t recall the last time any of his offspring had tried to do anything like this with him, not even Fuyumi, but the Beifong girl looks comfortable. Did she even know who was carrying her?

“Endeavor,” she draws his attention. “We’re at the hospital?” she asks, though she sounds rather certain of herself. He wonders again how her quirk works.

He grunts in acknowledgement. She then turns to press her face against Yoarashi’s shirt and mutters quietly, almost too muffled for him to hear, “I don’t want to go home.”

Odd.

But, he assumes she’s disappointed that their brief spot in the limelight is over. She seems very proud of her efforts to save the other children, and no amount of scolding could change that. So Enji brushes off her comment as petulant and child-like. She comes from a rich family, and she probably thinks of it as a boring life compared to today’s excitement. A child like her couldn’t understand just how fortunate this situation turned out.

Doubt still stirs in his gut.

“What are you talking about?” Endeavor asks slowly, immediately knowing he’s going to regret it. He should be walking faster so he can get rid of her. But then again, he was walking so slowly so he didn’t have to deal with the toddlers.

Beifong blinks a few times, realizing she had been overheard. “My parents don’t understand,” she says finally, lowering her eyes. “Nevermind. They can’t stop me anyway.”

“Stop you from what?” He doesn’t like how this is all sounding. Beifong is vague, but it’s clear she’s upset about something.

“Doesn’t matter what,” she decides, and turns her head away angrily.

That seems to be the end of it for now. He’ll make a note of it in his report, but there wasn’t much to go off of. Toph Beifong doesn’t seem scared of going home, just… unwilling. But then again, Enji highly doubts that this girl has a healthy sense of fear if she chose to confront ten villains rather than wait for help. And there was another issue of the girl’s quirk not being properly registered by her parents or doctor. Is that what Beifong meant when she said they ‘don’t understand’ her? It’s a huge oversight to mis-identify a quirk so powerful, but given that she’s blind and looks like a doll, she must be underestimated often.
Parents weren’t all-seeing and all-knowing. Her records have a mistake, that’s all.

Endeavor is still thinking about it as he deposits each child on their own cot, leaving Toph for last since Shouto’s still fast asleep. Enji frowns at the angry look on the seven-year-old girl’s face, but as he sits down between her and Shouto her anger melts into confusion.

“Why are you still here?”

Enji rolls his eyes. “You and Yoarashi were injured. Your parents were worried, and I’ll be expected to reassure them as the lead-hero on this mission.” He doesn’t bother hiding the disdain in his tone. He hates talking to parents, they always ask prying questions about his family like they have any right to know the details of his life.

Beifong snorts. “Good luck avoiding a lawsuit.”

He frowns questioningly at her before remembering she’s blind and rolling his eyes. “What do you mean?” he bites out the question. “There were no issues with how we handled this operation. You’re all safe.”

She raises her hands pointedly. “You did that to yourself,” Enji argues irritably, “I wasn’t even there.”

(And damn it does that make him frustrated. While the children are all safe, Endeavor doesn’t believe this case is over. It was too simple. How could the group that simultaneously abducted fifteen children lose a fight to said children? The captured villains were in for a long night of questioning.)

“I’m not the one blaming you,” Beifong replies lightly, though there’s a small frown on her face. “There’s no way my parents are gonna believe it’s not your fault. ‘Our little flower, punching through steel? That’s absurd. How could you let this happen?’” Her voice takes on a mocking, high-pitched tone to imitate her mother. “They’re not gonna believe I did this on my own.” She seems... disappointed, somehow.

“Why not? The evidence is all there.” Endeavor asks annoyedly. He really hopes her parents aren’t as insufferable as she claims.

Beifong lets her hands drop back onto her stomach. “Yeah, well,” she prevaricates again, shutting her eyes. “You’d be surprised how blind people with working eyeballs can be.”

For the first time Endeavor finds himself agreeing with the sour little girl. For the first time Endeavor finds himself agreeing with the sour little girl. He leans back in his chair and crosses his arms with a scoff. He figures now is as good a time as any to bring it up... “Is that why your quirk isn’t properly documented?”

She exhales slowly. He can't read even a hint of emotion on her face. “I’m tired,” Beifong deflects the topic neatly. “Thanks for saving us or whatever.”

So much for brushing this off as a child’s petulance. Now he’s certain that something’s wrong. “You saved yourself, Toph,” Enji admits gruffly, getting up from his chair. “That cannot be overlooked.”

He gives his report after meeting the Beifong family. They’re not quite that horrible, and they don’t threaten to sue him, but they do brush off every comment about their daughter’s quirk up until Enji informs them that her quirk registration will be updated by a physician. He watches the smile freeze on Mrs. Beifong’s face, the stony look Mr. Beifong casts his way.
“That’s not necessary, Mr. Todoroki,” Lao Beifong says at last. Enji bristles at the use of his civilian name. He’s in costume for god’s sake. “We’d feel more comfortable arranging an appointment with our family physician at this time. Toph is so young, she wouldn’t feel at ease with some no-name doctor at this public facility.”

“It’s already been arranged, I’m afraid,” Enji replies flatly. “Her registration doesn’t match up with what we witnessed at the warehouse in the slightest, and unless you want to call into question the validity of over twenty eyewitness reports, I would allow the quirk doctors here to re-evaluate her abilities.”

“I’ll still have to decline,” Lao’s jaw is set, and for once, Enji can see the resemblance between the man before him and his stubborn daughter. “For the sake of my daughter’s comfort, you see. She’s just been through an awful situation, same as your youngest son.” Enji stares. Just what is this asshole insinuating about Shouto? "If you or your people take issue with my decision, please contact my lawyer. We’ll be taking our daughter home now to recuperate in peace.”

There’s already a sleek black car idling by the entrance to the hospital. The girl passes by Enji, a curtain of loose hair shielding her face. Her mother holds her hand, and Enji never would’ve thought he’d see that arrogant brat look so cowed. It’s infuriating in far more ways than he expected. He can’t catch the mother’s eye; she looks straight ahead to avoid him, statuesque and austere.

Sweet Kami, he’s never been outclassed so blatantly. Who were these Beifongs anyway? Enji watches them with steel in his eyes. There is something wrong with this picture, and he won’t rest until he finds out what.

“This isn’t over,” Enji says to Lao Beifong as a doctor he’s never seen before signs off on the girl’s release forms.

He’s met by cold sea-green eyes and a frigid smile. “Yes, it is,” Lao replies, turning his back on the hero.

Chapter End Notes

Have I caught your interest yet??
Fair warning, not every chapter is going to be this interesting, and I'm not set on the perspectives yet. ALSO: I have no update schedule, this is just what I do in my spare time, so I really do update based on feedback/interest from readers. So if you like this, please tell me! And if you have questions or ideas, I'd love to hear them!
“I’m sorry, dear,” is the first thing her father says to Toph that night, just after they’ve finished their last course of dinner. It’s been a whole afternoon of utter silence between the three Beifongs.

Toph immediately straightens up, carefully monitoring her father’s mood. It’s always been hard to tell with him.

“...I’m sorry it took you being kidnapped for us to realize how… poorly we’ve handled your upbringing.”

She doesn’t know what he means. He doesn’t sound worried or angry, just… tired. “It’s okay, father. I don’t blame you for all that’s happened.”

“But you should, dear,” he shakes his head, setting down his chopsticks. “You’re clearly acting out, and it’s gone unchecked for too long.”

The shift in his tone is sharp and biting. Toph stiffens. “What? I—I’m not—”

“Don’t interrupt your father,” he reminds her, and Toph’s mouth clamps shut. “You’ve been using your quirk, in public and unsupervised,” he accuses. “You were taken because of that quirk, Toph. You could’ve been killed because of it.”

The words ring oddly in her head. That quirk. Like he blames the power itself. She frowns. “Isn’t it—isn’t it the villains’ fault? They wanted elemental quirks, I told the officers everything about it, we were picked because—”

“This isn’t about the villains, Toph! We don’t discuss villains at the dinner table, it’s unbecoming,” Lao derails her argument, sighing heavily. Toph purses her lips. “You snuck out. You disobeyed me when we’ve been telling you all along that your ability was dangerous. You went out to use your quirk, and now villains are after you.”

What, like villains didn’t exist before she was kidnapped? “Well—it’s my quirk, what else am I supposed to do? Just—just not use it?”

“Not like this,” Lao answers lowly. “You’re too young to understand. That quirk—all it does is put you in danger. Do you know you sustained eighteen different micro-fractures in your hands? We’re lucky you didn’t damage any nerve endings. You are a Beifong. You are my heir. You will not do anything like this ever again—you will not go gallivanting off to become a hero like that despicable man, Endeavor.”
Toph jolts her in her seat. “I—I never said I wanted to be a hero,” she argues, but it’s useless. They know. That’s what this is about.

Her father is tense, and she can sense his hand moving sharply through the air as he speaks. “Toph, you will never be a hero if I have anything to say about it! That Yoarashi boy has been filling your head with lies, and I’m not going to let it continue. He’s not good for you, Toph.”

“You—you can’t stop me,” Toph exclaims, rising to her feet. “Twink—Inasa’s never lied to me, he’s seen what I can do and he thinks I can be a hero—!”

Lao’s hands slam on the table. “He. Is. Lying.”

“You’re the liar!” Toph screams. “You think I can’t tell when you’re unhappy with me?! You think I don’t know why you haven’t enrolled me in school or let me outside the grounds? You don’t care about what I want or need, you just wish your cripple daughter was gone! Problem solved! The Beifongs don’t have a daughter!” She jerks away from the table, and her chair clatters to the floor loudly. She turns away.

“Don’t you walk away from me, young lady!” Lao barks, and Toph freezes. “Get back here right now!”

She doesn’t move.

Lao stays seated, but she can sense the tension in his body by the stiff movements of his arms, the strain in his voice. “If you cannot do as you’re told, I have different ways of making you obey, daughter.”

Endeavor stares at the files in his hand for a moment longer before they warp and crumble in his fist, and he tosses them aside. Nothing. There is nothing on the Beifongs. He can’t get anyone to talk. Even the detectives he’s supposedly working with aren’t helping. It’s so obvious, even if no one would dare utter the words.

The Beifongs are protected. By who, by what, he can’t figure out. They still haven’t filled out the quirk registration forms, and if they don’t do it within the next two weeks at least Endeavor will have reason to formally request an inquiry into the family.

But until then, he’s stuck with the one crumb of evidence that’ll let him keep the Beifongs on his radar: Toph Beifong’s police interview.

According to Toph Beifong, the Elementals mentioned working with Amon’s Vision. She mentioned the phrase casually, and clearly had no idea what it was—a powerful cult that was broken up several years ago—but it meant the kidnapping case wasn’t closed while he investigated her claim about the cult.

What it meant for the Beifongs though, is that Endeavor still had an incredibly valid reason for keeping tabs on their daughter. Because of her enhanced hearing, she’s the only one that even heard the cult name. And even with that, he’s getting a hell of a lot of pushback from the police force about his inquires into her family.

It’s absurd how much pull those Beifongs have—no detective will touch the case. Saitama’s chief of police has already visited him “just to check in” and blatantly advised against any further investigation.

There’s no doubt in his mind that the Beifongs are corrupt. It’s just a matter of how corrupt, and how
that ties into their treatment of their daughter, if at all. Hell, their daughter’s probably fine! She’s strong. She’s got a great quirk, and she seems resilient enough to withstand whatever nonsense her parents tossed her way. He should focus on the potential for corruption in Lao Beifong’s businesses in Japan and China.

Either way, he’s stuck. On his own he can’t find anything on the Beifongs that even hints towards criminal activity, and using the resources at his disposal would require a formal request for information—something he’s been denied twice already.

A sinister, furious part of Enji bets that if All Might asked about the Beifongs, no one would even bat an eye.

For now, he’ll just have to focus on the kidnapping. Even if the villains they detained on-site weren’t talking and haven’t confessed to any ties to Amon’s Vision. Fucking hell.

“Give it a rest, Endeavor,” one of the detectives leans against the far side of his desk. She peers over the files in his hands slyly, and Endeavor has to stop himself from moving them out of her sight. “I know it still bugs you that they nabbed your son from right under your nose, but c’mon,” she says lazily, “It’s over. The kids are all safe.”

Are they? All of them? The fact that Enji can’t answer that is reason enough to keep digging.

“You’ve read the transcripts from the interrogations, haven’t you?” Endeavor replies evenly, his eyes sliding over to the name stitched over her chest.

“Tch, yeah I have,” the detective rolls her dark eyes. “Bunch of idiots, they’re all still pissed they got caught so quick.”

“You think any of those idiots are clever or powerful enough to pull off a mass kidnapping like this, Detective Ito?” he asks her plainly. “Because even if they were stopped early on, it still takes a lot of resources and coordination to move so quickly.”

The woman frowns slightly, but just rolls her eyes again and scoffs. “I suppose that’s why you’re called Endeavor, eh?” She pushes off from the desk, sipping from a styrofoam cup of coffee. Enji is half-certain it’s his coffee, actually, but he sure as hell doesn’t want it back now. “You just have to keep going, don’t you?” She shakes her head as she leaves, patting his shoulder consolingly.

Endeavor frowns at the files once more. Out of the three detectives he’s in contact with, Detective Ito seems the least problematic, but she’s certainly just as skeptical as the rest of them. He doesn’t blame them. So far there hasn’t been any further evidence of a link to that old cult. And as for the Beifong angle, none of the detectives spoke to the girl the way he had. They were only there to watch Lao Beifong say a few words to a doctor, make a phone call, and then turn his back on the Number Two Hero.

The crumpled files, a series of totally normal financial reports from one of Beifong's mining sites, feel heavy in his hands. There’s no proof. There’s just a blind little girl and her absolute scumbag of a father. Was this even about Toph anymore? Or was it a question of who’s ego was bigger: his or Lao Beifong’s?

He’ll just have to keep working to find out.

Her mother’s heart rate jumps, and Toph hears the swish of fabric as Poppy leans over to touch her husband’s arm. Her voice is a balm, a satin ribbon twisting in the air. “Lao, please. She’s only seven.”
“Like what?” Toph demands of her father, lifting her chin in a blatant challenge. “I’d love to see you try to stop me.”

“Toph, Lao, stop this,” Poppy cries, rising to her feet as well. She clutches her husband’s shoulder, heart fluttering. “My love, there is a better way,” her voice lowers to a gentle, controlled whisper. “I have a better way. Let me handle this. Please sit down, Toph, I know we can work out an agreement.”

Toph’s heart is pounding, a sharp contrast to the gentle, fluttery nervousness of her mother. Toph doesn’t want to work out an agreement. She wants to see Inasa and Shouto, she wants to fight and play and run without feeling like she’s doing something wrong.

Yelling at her parents doesn’t make Toph feel good. She just wants them to understand. And isn’t that the point of an agreement? she thinks. Slowly, Toph returns to her seat, her lips pressed into a hard line. “...Okay, mother.”

Poppy sits back down, her hand slipping off of Lao. “I think we need to start by explaining some things to you, dear.” Lao grows tense at her side, and Poppy laces their fingers together once more. “I’m worried about how this whole event might be affecting you, Toph. And I know you don’t want to tell us when you’re afraid or scared.”

A therapist, not a quirk doctor? Toph isn’t sure what the difference is. If she’s updating her records, that’s what Endeavor wanted her to do anyway, right? That’s the part that’s actually supposed to help her…

“You won’t... make me stop using my quirk?” Toph asks to be sure.

“Goodness, I don’t see how we could,” Poppy replies easily, giving a short laugh. “But we want you to be more careful about it. I do agree with your father about that Yoarashi boy—”

“He’s my friend,” Toph snaps, clutching the edge of the table. “Don’t tell me he’s lying to me!”

Poppy is silent. Toph can feel the tension return to the air, and grimaces.

“I—I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have yelled.” Even though all she wants to do is scream.

Her mother takes a deep breath and continues. “I think he’s made you unruly. But I also think you must be lonely without anyone your age here,” Poppy says tenderly. “That’s why we’re moving to a new prefecture, somewhere safer—” Toph sucks in a sharp breath “—and you’ll be enrolled in school next year.”

The pang in her chest lessens, if only from bewilderment. “...School?”

That had never been an option before.

Her mother’s earrings jingle as she nods, a familiar melody of thin golden hoops. “I told you, my lotus. We can compromise.”
Toph exhales a long, slow breath. “But you won’t let me say goodbye, will you?” She guesses, but the answer is obvious. It’s why, just minutes before Toph knew her parents would enter the hospital ward, she hugged Twinkletoes so hard that neither of them could breathe for a moment, and why she didn’t have an answer for him when he teased her about wanting mushy hugs after all.

“He’s not worth your time, my dear,” her mother answers gently, in a voice so syrupy Toph wants to barf. “If anything, playing with that boy is what put you in danger in the first place.”

“But we were—”

“—He’s the reason you thought fighting villains was the right thing to do,” her mother continues. “Wasn’t he?”

“But mother, Inasa was just—”

“Toph!” She cries, her voice wavering delicately. “Please, my dear. You were the only two children to be hurt today, and the fault lies with that boy. I will not hear anymore about it. Is that clear, my love?”

“Toph, I can’t wait till we’re heroes!” Inasa cries, flopping onto the hard ground. “We’re gonna be so cool together, we’ll be unstoppable! The greatest heroes!”

“Together?” Toph wonders. “Like hero partners? Partners are rare, aren’t they? And they don’t last as long,” she points out. She’s been trying to learn more about heroes ever since meeting Twinkletoes.

“Well, yeah, but they’re not us! I mean, you’re crazy strong anyways, you could go solo too. And so could I. But…”

“But?”

“But aren’t we stronger together? I think we are. Plus, you know if we’re rivals in school, I’ll know your moves as well as you’ll know mine!”

Toph snorts. She’ll always know his moves better than the other way around. But instead of telling him this, she reaches out and punches his shoulder.

“Ouch!” Inasa complains, still cheerful.

“I think we’ll have to be keep being rivals before we’re hero partners,” Toph decides. “How else will I know if you’re even worth partnering with? Ask me again once we’re pros, eh?”

Inasa laughs. “Ugh! Fine! We’ll keep bein’ rivals for now! But—we’re still friends, right?”

“Ouch!” Inasa checks.

“Toph doesn’t care if it’s a contradiction. “We’re always gonna be friends, Inasa.”

“Toph?” Her mother calls her name again. “You’re not going to cause anymore trouble over this, are you? You will not speak of that boy. You will not speak of becoming a hero.”

Her fingers slowly curl into tight fists beneath the table, out of her parents’ sight.

“We’ll meet again, Twinkles, she vows.

“I won’t,” Toph replies resolutely.
When we’re the greatest heroes.

Toph doesn’t have to talk about heroes to become one. She just has to do it.

Inasa doesn’t understand. After Toph stops showing up at their secret meeting place—well, it makes sense, this is where they got kidnapped—he doesn’t know what to do. His parents don’t know her parents. The Beifong family is super rich and impossible to contact. But he’s friends with their daughter, so surely they won’t mind if he visits her? Even just seeing her face would be enough, it’s been weeks since the Elementals incident and Toph can’t still be grounded. He just had to do more chores for a week and then he was off the hook.

But when he tracks down the Beifongs’ address—really, just the biggest mansion in the prefecture—there’s nothing. No one even answers the doorbell at the gate.

He waits a few more days before deciding he has to check it out himself—and maybe it’s not very heroic to trespass, but if the Beifongs caught him, Toph would totally vouch for him anyway—so he flies up over the walls and catches himself on a windowsill late at night. He even waited until the full moon so he wouldn’t have to bring a flashlight.

Inside the house, all the furniture is covered up with white sheets. He can’t see any signs of Toph. It’s just a cold, immaculate palace. Or a mausoleum.

Inasa has a sinking feeling in his gut.

"Why can’t we hang out at each other’s’ houses?" Inasa asks her, splitting his bento with the tiny girl.

“My parents are very protective,” Toph sighs, rolling her sightless eyes. I’m not supposed to play like this. If they knew about you, I’d never see you again.”

Well jeez, he didn’t think she was being serious back then. And she did give him a pretty passionate hug back at the hospital. But—it was okay. He would find her. After all, the Beifongs were super rich, and he was bound to hear about them sooner or later. His moms tended to give him a lot of freedom even though he only just turned seven, so he could probably ride the train to Toph’s new house once the Beifongs made the news again.

Easy, right?

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for all the positive feedback, guys! I love hearing what you think!! (It's good to know if y'all are guessing on the right track or not, haha)
A woman drums her fingers against the steering wheel of her car, adding to the percussion beat of rain against her sunroof. She twists the rearview mirror to get a better look at her hair as she takes out her hair ties. It’s raining a lot today, and it’s ruined the braided bun she usually puts her hair up with. It doesn’t matter all the much, she’s not that vain, but too much moisture in the air makes her feel gross. Damp, cold days are just inconvenient, you know?

She also forgot an umbrella, so there’s that.

Her eyes fall to the picture balanced on her dash, and she smiles a little despite her irritation. She catches movement out the corner of her eye and instinctively she reaches for the picture as the passenger-side door opens abruptly. She leaves the picture face-down as a rain-drenched Endeavor shoves his way into her car, muttering viciously about one thing or another and completely ignoring her.

She raises an eyebrow as the car begins to steam up from his facial… fire-mask thing.

“Hey, no flames inside my car, Mr. Hero,” she warns him, already feeling sweaty despite the chilled air he’s let in. “Come on, Endeavor, I’m serious.”

“What, Ito?!” He barks, clearly not listening. He’s too busy shoving the seat all the way back so his legs can fit in her sedan. “This car is awful.”

“The flames,” Detective Ito says again urgently. “Turn it off! You’re not even in costume!” And he isn’t, for once, instead wearing an overcoat and a regular business suit beneath it. She’s never seen him out of his flaming pajamas before. Honestly, this whole case has been such a mind fuck for Ito.

He just scowls, the flames dissipating quickly.
Ito looks away when he’s done bitching, pressing a button to crack the windows open. She fiddles with the settings of her windshield wipers too. “So, Endeavor—” She turns, noticing that he’s already looking at her with an odd, not-angry expression “What?” She asks instead, and he quickly looks away, having been caught staring.

“Nothing,” Endeavor mutters.

Well, she wouldn’t be much of a detective if she didn’t know when to push her luck. “What’s with the face?” It seems important, he looked pensive. “Endeavor?” He has his arms crossed, so she prods his hand.

“It’s not—” His gaze is still focused on the dusty glove box in front of him. “It’s nothing. Your hair just looks a lot like my wife’s right now.” He bristles like an angry cat at his own words. “It’s none of your damn business, Ito.”

“Oh. Sorry I asked,” she says slowly, bewildered by his train of thought. She did push, though, so this is what she gets. “You’re a little uptight today, I was hoping you taking a day off meant you’d relax a little.” she ventures carefully. After ten days of Endeavor bursting into the precinct to bitch about the Elementals, it was odd to get a phone call from his office telling them not to expect the Flame Hero. “Sure you don’t need another sick day?”

“Just drive, Detective Ito,” he replies coldly, only looking at her from the corner of his eye. “I’m not sick.”

She hums, turning down the heat and holding out her phone to the hero. “Put the address in my phone, will ya?”

Thankfully he takes the phone without question, inputting the coordinates for the prison. “It’s quite far. Are you sure you’re up for the drive?”

“Well, I’m not letting you drive my car,” she answers bluntly. In fact, she’d rather he take a damn taxi to their destination, but technically they need her badge and the approval forms and a few other forms of ID just to get through the front gate. Oh, the joys of bureaucracy. “Make it quick in there, alright? I have an appointment this afternoon,” she warns him.

“Another one? You should just take a sick day,” he sneers. It would be funny if he actually meant it as a joke, not an insult.

“If only I could afford it,” she answers anyway, “I’m not exactly swimming in cash, if you couldn’t tell.”

“I’m aware,” Endeavor sticks her phone back onto the little stand and the directions light up the screen as she pulls out of the parking lot of the precinct. “Your shitty car made that obvious enough.”

Shitty car? Really? Ito glares at the road, but her voice stays sickly sweet as she replies, “You’d be much closer to becoming the Number One Hero if you weren’t such a shitstain.”

She regrets it as soon as the words leave her mouth. He doesn’t answer. She’s going to get demoted for this. Ito risks a glance his way—”Oh my god, you look awful, I’m actually a little sorry now.”

He looks ready to strangle her, but he also looks incredibly stunned (and maybe a little hurt, ha!). “For Kami’s sake,” he growls, turning away. “If you’re so against working with me, why’d you volunteer for this?”

She drums her fingers on the steering wheel again, more nervous than before. “It was either me or
Kanto, we played rock-paper-scissors for it.” She let Kanto win. She didn’t like Endeavor much, but Kanto always sweats a lot around Endeavor and then stinks up the whole office.

“Of course you fucking did,” Endeavor scowls, sinking heavily in his seat. “It’s not like this is important or anything.”

“It really isn’t.” Ito insists, like she has been for the past week and a half of working with this insufferable asshole. “Your source is wrong. Cults like Amon’s Vision rely on a charismatic leader, and no one’s better than Tarrlok. Taking him down brought down the whole thing, it’s as simple as that.”

“AV was all about replacing the Avatar, and so were the Elementals. There’s a clear similarity in their thinking—”

“You know what Amon’s actual vision was, in the legends?” She cuts him off impatiently. “He wanted to take away all bending abilities. It was a power only granted to the Avatar—so yes, technically speaking, Amon was trying to become as powerful as him. That’s the part that AV’s following focused on. But what Amon wanted most of all was equality through the erasure of quirks. Balance between the weak and powerful. That was Tarrlok’s ultimate goal. So why would he be interested frankenstein-ing an Avatar from those kids? He wouldn’t grant that ability to anyone but himself.”

Endeavor gives her a suspicious look. “Is there a reason you’re bringing all this up right now? You didn’t say a word about the Avatar myths while I was actively researching them.”

Ito huffs. “Why give you all the answers, huh? You’re dead-set on seeing this through either way.”

“If you had any sense of duty, so would you,” he snaps, making her flinch. “If you don’t have any real questions about my work than you’re free to stay quiet the rest of this trip.”

She stares down the road, caught a little off-guard by the anger in his tone. Ito knew he had a quick temper, she expected his rage, but to be lectured? Chastised by the Number Two Hero? It’s a strange feeling.

After a moment she composes herself. “Um. So, you got a game plan for interrogating our guy?”

“I did,” Endeavor replies irritably, shifting in his seat. “But Tarrlok’s a skilled waterbender, and with all this damn rain…”

“You don’t think he’ll try anything, do you?” She asks in alarm. “I mean, you’re the Flame Hero. And he’s got a dozen guns pointed at him at all times.”

“He’s serving a life sentence with no chance for parole,” Endeavor grumbles. “He’s got nothing to lose and nothing to gain from this, and the rain makes him stronger.”

“Then why are we even going to meet him?” She complains, deflating a little. “And are you even going to meet him? You’re soaking wet, he could… oh. Right.” She realizes her mistake halfway through her thought when Endeavor gives her a disparaging look. “Hey. For half a second I was actually concerned for your safety,” Ito says defensively.

“You can stay in the car, Detective,” says Endeavor dryly. “I just needed you for the papers.”

“Good to know I’m still useful,” Ito remarks, unable to hold it in.

The Flame Hero just sighs, not rising to the taunt.
After a moment he takes out more files from the briefcase shoved between his feet. He begins reading, and Ito takes the hint, rude as it is, to let the conversation die away. For one of the most successful heroes in the country, Endeavor sure is unsociable. It makes her life so difficult.

Ito isn’t unsociable. The silence is weird. She flicks on the radio to fill the void, picking some obnoxious boy band because, yeah, she’s petty. Her car is fine. She can hear Endeavor swear under his breath.

Yep. Worth it.

It take a few weeks of hero-chasing before Inasa comes across a fight dangerous enough to warrant the Number Two Hero’s help. After being unable to find the Beifongs again he did try camping outside of Endeavor’s office, but the man had to have some kind of secret entrance or something, because Inasa never saw him enter or exit! This is why he needs Toph around, she would’ve figured it out way quicker than him.

Man, he misses Toph a lot. He still practices his quirk in the forest, and he’s definitely improving, but nothing beats training with Toph. She’s a great teacher on top of being a great fighter…

Anyway, that’s why he’s sprinting down the street, towards the huge plumes of smoke a few blocks away. He can’t hear any more explosions so Endeavor probably beat that acid villain already, so he has to be quick. The closer he gets to the scene, the more people there are, crowding the streets either in a panic or as an audience.

Inasa shoves past elbows and flailing arms, grateful that he’s big enough not to get pushed around too much. In his pocket he has a photo. After all the craziness with the Elementals, his parents finally decided it was time to get Inasa a phone. Before that, though, he only took a few blurry pictures with on with his mom’s phone. It didn’t help that Toph had zero interest in taking pictures… but nonetheless, he had ONE usable photo. So he printed it out for reference. A lot people had no idea that the Beifong family even had an heir, and Inasa wanted to make sure Endeavor knew who he was talking about.

And—there he is! “Endeavor!” Inasa shouts, leaping ahead of the crowds. “ENDEAVOR! WAIT!”

He sprints forward, buoyed by a gust of accidental wind, and the hero stops—the wind made his flames kind of flare up, whoops—

“What the hell are you doing?” Endeavor snaps, quickly pulling the flames down.

“Sorry!” Inasa exclaims, tugging the photo out. “But I needed—” The paper is knocked out of his hand so abruptly that Inasa stumbles back in alarm. “Hey!”

“Get out of my way, kid. I don’t have time for autographs.” Endeavor eyes him disapprovingly. Suddenly it seems to click, and his eyes narrow. “Yoarashi, isn’t it?”

Inasa nods vigorously. “It’s me again! I don’t need an autograph—”

“This is an active crime scene, get out of here—”

“—Do you remember Toph?” Inasa steamrolls on desperately, “I haven’t seen her lately, have you?”

The hero goes rigid, and then his expression goes from disapproving to downright cold, “I said get out of my way.”
There’s nothing but frigid rage in his eyes, and for once in his life, Inasa is honestly scared. He steps back, tripping over rubble. He pulls his eyes away, scrambling to his feet and retreating from the scene in a haze.

He doesn’t realize that his picture’s gone until that night at home. But when he goes up to his mom to ask for another one, she gives him an apologetic look and tell him she must’ve deleted the picture when making room on her smartphone.

“I’m sorry baby, but why don’t you just take another one? Who was this girl again?”

“Toph,” Inasa explains, for what feels like the hundredth time. His mother only gives him a mildly interested look. “She has an earth quirk? She was with me during the kidnapping, mom.”

“Oh, that must’ve been awful,” his mom says sympathetically. “I’m so glad you came home safe, you know that?”

“Yeah,” Inasa frowns, because the kidnapping wasn’t awful because Toph saved them. Why was that always the part Mom forgot? “But I haven’t seen Toph since then. I don’t know what happened to her, and Endeavor doesn’t care either!”

“You met Endeavor again?” She asks in surprise. “Oh my, did you get an autograph? I know he’s one of your favorite heroes.”

Inasa throws up his hands in frustration. “I’m going to bed!” He declares angrily, stomping up the stairs.

“Inasa? Inasa, it’s six o’clock, we haven’t had dinner yet!”

Without a word, Inasa pulls hard on the air around himself, whipping the bedroom door closed with a SLAM. Then he falls face-first onto his bed and screams into his pillow until tears trickle down his face.

Toph is gone. Endeavor doesn’t care at all about them. And it seems like his parents don’t care either, with the way they just brush off his concerns all the time! Inasa isn’t being unreasonable! What if something bad happened to Toph?

Or, thinks the cynical part of his mind, What if she just doesn’t want to be friends with me anymore? She used to sneak out all the time to find me, she’s so skilled, if she wanted to keep hanging out she would’ve done it.

But her parents are overprotective. So there’s also a good chance that she’s just being super sheltered by them now. The Beifongs are so rich, they could probably afford a cloaking device to hide away from the world. No wonder Inasa couldn’t find them, he’s not as smart or as strong as a pro hero or anything. Thanks a lot, Endeavor.

Inasa bites down on his pillow viciously. Either way, Toph is gone. And there’s only one thing for him to do.

Become a hero. There’s only one path in life for someone as hot-blooded and good-hearted as Toph Beifong. If they’re both still reaching for the same goal, they’re bound to meet again.

And if you’re not there when I become a hero, Inasa promises, then at least I’ll be able to save you.

Toph isn’t too crazy about school. Her parents enroll her in an elite elementary school that is so well-
protected, many famous politicians, businessmen, and heroes send their children there. So there’s a lot interesting people all around her, and while she’s a little unpopular because of her blindness, the school is accommodating and no one’s going to bother a Beifong.

She goes through an entire year of school with no problems.

She talks to classmates, she does assignments, she even asks questions once in a while. Her therapist asks if she’s making any friends, and Toph shrugs, honestly uninterested in becoming close friends with any of the girls she talks to in class. If her parents think it’s a problem, they haven’t mentioned it. They’re back to basically ignoring her existence now that she’s “settled down.”

The girls in her class are kind of petty. Really, who cares if Best Jeanist has the most luxurious hair ever? What’s the point in knowing whether or not Miho-chan has a crush on Nishiya? Still, Toph endures their gossip. It’s nothing to her.

Her classmates begin to shuffle to their feet, indicating the end of the lunch period. Toph follows suit, giving a smile to the girl on her left offering to straighten her jacket out.

After classes end, Toph is driven home. Her father’s been working in Singapore for the last month, and her mother is visiting a factory in Hokkaido, but she still has a therapy session with Ms. Aiko, and the woman arrives at the Beifong home at four o’clock sharp.

Ms. Aiko is a short woman with a sturdy frame and a generous figure. She wears soft sweaters that make no noise and matches them with clunky combat boots for some reason. Directly after the Elementals debacle, Toph had to meet with Aiko twice a week and explain all about her quirk, her friend Twinkletoes, and what happened during the kidnapping. After about a month they switched to weekly, and then every-other-week sessions.

“Hello, Toph,” she says kindly.

“Hello Ms. Aiko,” Toph replies plainly, flopping onto a leather couch. They use one of the many sitting rooms in the Beifong home for their talks.

“So, how do you feel now that your first year of school is ending?” Aiko leans her chin into one hand, slouching a little in the armchair next to Toph.

“I’ll be a little bored without classes,” Toph answers.

“Oh really?” Aiko says, not too convinced by her tone. “You don’t have anything to fill up all that free time?”

Toph smiles sweetly. “Well, Mother thinks I ought to learn how to play the tsungi horn. I like music, but I’m not sure I want to carry a huge tube of brass around me. I’ll look like a balloon.”

“Toph,” Aiko giggles at the thought, tapping her hand to chide her. “Be honest with me. You’re not still training to be a hero, right?”

“Nope.”

“And you’re not going to associate with any students looking to become heroes?”

“No,” Toph says again. Aiko’s hand on her wrist feels cool and smooth. “All the kids of heroes in my school are pretty lame anyway, y’know. They think they’re better than everyone because they have strong quirks.”
“You have a pretty strong quirk too,” Aiko murmurs. “But you’re not going to do anything dangerous with it, right?”

“No, I—” Toph catches herself. “My quirk isn’t strong. I can’t do anything that could hurt me.”

“Good,” Aiko says in relief, letting her hand slip away. “You’re doing so well, Toph. I’m not sure how much longer we need these sessions, to be honest.”

Toph smiles sweetly at Ms. Aiko, the same smile she presents every day.

When Endeavor finally returns to the car, all the paperwork in his hands from the prison’s records, his mind is racing.

Tarrlok is dead according all the reports, his body cremated just a year ago. But the man in the last recorded images of him doesn’t look anything like the man they captured. He slams the car door shut and tosses the papers on the dash. “Drive,” he tells Detective Ito, who’s tapping away on her smartphone. “I need to get back to my offices.”

“Back to your offices?” Ito puts the car in reverse to pull out of the parking lot. “You’re looking pretty fired up, don’t go smoking up my car again,” Ito warns him. “It’s stuffy enough as it is.”

Oh. He has the flames on. Enji quickly shuts them off. “Tarrlok was supposedly killed a year ago,” explains, carefully placing the files into a leather briefcase.

“So all that crap about AV’s involvement really is just crap?” Ito surmises easily, her eyes fixed on the road. She makes a noise of annoyance and cranks up her windshield wipers as the rain really begins to come down.

“Not at all,” Endeavor shakes his head. “I saw the footage of the riot that killed him. The man in the video wasn’t the man we captured—”

“What?!”

“—He’s been out of prison for over a year and nobody’s said a thing!” Of course the prison claimed to have sent the proper reports out and it must’ve ‘gotten lost in transit’. It was bullshit. This whole case was a shit show.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Ito exclaims, the car swerving a little in alarm. ”Out of prison?!”

“For fuck’s sake woman, don’t you know how to drive?” Enji growls, clutching one of the handles attaches to the car’s roof.

“Fuck you,” she answers promptly. “You just dropped a bomb on me! What do you mean, Tarrlok’s been out for a year? How do you know it isn’t him in the video?”

“He’s too short,” Enji says impatiently. “His build is all wrong. He has the hair and the coloring, but that’s all. If anyone in that prison cared at all, they would’ve noticed the swap straight away.” He scowls. “I can’t trust any of those officers. That’s why I need to get back to my offices, alert the Hero Association, see who else I can put on this case.”

“Ohay, so now you’re accusing the prison of corruption too?” Ito asks annoyedly, shooting him a cold look. The car swerves a little again.

“Pull over,” Enji demands. The rain’s gotten worse. “Pull over, Ito, before you crash your damn
car.” Even if it would be an improvement for the vehicle...

The detective lets out a noise of frustration, but does as she’s told, and the car jerks to a stop.

She eyes him angrily, but doesn’t even comment about having to pull over. “First it’s the Beifongs, then it’s my precinct, and now it’s a prison twenty miles away? At some point you’re gonna have to trust someone other than yourself and the two and half sidekicks you deem tolerable,” she sneers.

Endeavor rolls his eyes. Ito’s a decent officer, and out of the whole precinct, she’s been the least reluctant to help him. “I tolerate you, don’t I? Even though you’ve been nothing but a drag on this investigation, Detective.”

Ito pauses, blinking at him in surprise. “So you do trust me?” she asks haltingly, brow furrowed.

He nods impatiently. “Isn’t that obvious? Why else would I be telling you all this?”

“Oh.” She hums in consideration. “I—I appreciate that, you know.” Endeavor’s eyes slide over to look through the blurry windshield of the car, waiting for the emotional detective to calm down and start driving again. He feels something brush against the side of his hand and suddenly his vision goes foggy, like the whole world is as hazy as the rain-washed windows. There is a voice, molten hot in his mind. “…I’m not sure that you should.”

Be still, the voice says. He can’t move. He can barely think. Thoughts move sluggishly through his head, no matter what he tries. It’s the physical contact he knows it already. He could break this fog if he could move his hand away from hers.

Enji focuses everything on the limb. Move, he wills it desperately, seeing her pale blue hair out of the corner of his eye, ignite, ignite, fire—his finger twitches—bURN, BURN HER, BURN HER, MOVE—

But then her free hand reaches for his chin, and the second point of contact makes his muscles go slack once more. Enji sinks further into a fog.

“You almost had me there, hot shot,” she teases, her tone light and breathy. So benign, so demure like Rei used to be. Why did he tell her about Rei, anyway?

Ito turns his head towards her face until he’s forced to look directly into her violet eyes, and her voice drips like honey as her quirk activates again. “There’s a few things we need to discuss, Endeavor. First of all, the Beifongs don’t have a daughter.”
Chapter End Notes

look i did a draw

Remember when I thought Endeavor wasn’t gonna be a huge part of this story and that it was mostly just Toph? Those were the fucking days.

if y’all wanna me to mildly spoil the next chapter I drew more of my own fanart instead of being a responsible adult: https://flic.kr/p/2cBCT1b
PRESENT DAY

School is boring. Toph starts third grade with half as much enthusiasm as the year before it. She’s been moved into Class 3-A at her elementary school, and it’s full of even more nerds and snobby rich kids than last year’s class.

“Beifong-san!” An eager boy zips up to her desk, practically vibrating with enthusiasm. He’s tall, and his footsteps are heavy but swift. “Sensei said one of us should look after you, and I volunteered!”

Toph continues what she’s doing, methodically setting up her braille reader and notes.

“Um,” he continues hesitantly, “It’s nice to meet you, by the way, I know you weren’t in this class last year, so maybe I could—“

Toph knows where this is heading, and scowls. “I don’t need help,” she replies shortly, folding her arms.

“Oh? But Saito-sensei said—!”

“Well, Saito didn’t ask me, did she?” Toph frowns, drumming her fingers impatiently. “If I needed help, I’d ask. I got by last year and I’ll do it again now.”

The boy is quiet, shifting from foot to foot and still, sort of, vibrating. “Are you certain, Beifong-san? I think Saito-sensei was quite clear when she said…”

Jeez, what a stick in the mud. He can’t even drop the honorific. Toph rolls her eyes. “I’m fine. Go help someone else. I don’t need a babysitter.”

He jerks back a little at her tone, intimidated, and Toph feels rather satisfied. “But…” he goes to argue further, but something about the expression on Toph’s face seems to give him pause. “Okay. If you insist.” After another moment of hovering by her desk he slinks off, clomping away with heavy steps that somehow, improbably, remind her of Twinkletoes. Maybe it’s the enthusiasm.

And maybe if Toph wasn’t being pampered and babied and controlled by her parents every moment, she would have let him help. She could tell by the way he acted that he wasn’t that snobby or
anything, and was probably only trying to make a friend. Like Twinkletoes and his nosy questions...

But Toph is not in school to make friends. School is just another thing her parents are making her endure, and Toph can’t afford to give into what they want. She’ll sit quietly, she’ll do her homework, and that is it.

The bell rings, and class starts just as the tall boy with vibrating feet (what kind of quirk made someone feel like that, anyway?) sits at his desk in the back. Slowly, Toph sinks into her own seat, only now realizing how tense she’d been talking to that Iida kid. But she won’t be friends with someone from a hero family. She won’t be friends with anyone here.

Toph pulls herself away from the dull thoughts, knowing it’s no good. She touches her wrist, reading the time to herself. Only five more hours until she’s out. Her parents are both home for now, but it’s been nearly two years since the Incident and Toph doesn’t have any more therapy sessions, so she’s basically free once she gets through class.

And best of all, it’s a Tuesday.

PAST

“Mom! Mom! Are you still home?!” A young voice cries out. Umeko hears the pitter-patter of tiny feet and smiles as she finishes changing into her office clothes, discreetly tugging the detective badge of ‘Ito’ out of sight.

“Yes?” she greets her son in the hallway outside the bedroom, and raises her eyebrows at the sight before her. “Oh, sweetheart…”

Her son regards her with wide, hopeful eyes. He’s holding a calico cat against his chest. “Dad says I need your permission before we can keep her. So…?”

Umeko sighs, crouching in front of him. He’s gotten taller, she thinks fondly. “Where did you find her?”

At this point his eyes go even wider. “She was left out in the rain, Mom! I’ve been visiting her all week, but her box was falling apart with her in it! Please? She needs a home.”

She sighs again, unable to resist her son’s pleading indigo eyes. “Alright. I have to get to work, but when I get back tonight we need to go over some house rules and figure out what to buy for her.”

“Dad can tell me,” he says eagerly. Then his expression falters. “I mean—I’m just not sure how late you’ll get back, yesterday you didn’t come home until after dinner, and now you have to work on the weekends—”

“It’s just for this week, the case I’m on,” Umeko explains quickly, brow furrowing. She picks at the edge of her jacket, where the pale blue fabric is pilling. “I’m sorry, baby, I know I’m not around enough. It’s just that—”

“Your job is important, and you have to work so much so you can support us,” he finishes glumly. He fidgets with the shivering cat in his arms. “Maybe she should go to the shelter instead. If it’s gonna cost more to take care of her—”

“No,” Umeko says firmly, holding his shoulders. “No, we’re keeping her. She needs a home, right? I won’t always be this busy, it’s just this case that’s getting to me.” Umeko rubs her temple as she speaks. She could really do with a nap right now.
Her son doesn’t look convinced. “You look as tired as Dad,” he notes with a frown.

“You look as tired as Dad.” Umeko teases back, pinching his cheek quickly. “Does your cat have a name yet?”

He shakes his head. “I haven’t decided. What do you think?”

Umeko shrugs, quickly glancing at her watch. “We’ll think of something good,” she promises, kissing his forehead quickly. “I have to go, but think of a few names while I’m gone, okay?” She calls over her shoulder as she steps into the mudroom, pulling on her trusty boots. The ground was still soft from the morning rain, but maybe the skies will have cleared up by now.

“Don’t you need an umbrella?” The boy calls to her, but Umeko waves him off.

“Nah, I’ll be fine. I’m sure it won’t rain that much.”

In the visitor’s lot of Shizuoka Max Prison, Umeko drums her fingers on the steering wheel of her car. Every few minutes her eyes dart over to her phone, still set in a case against her dashboard for when she used the GPS for directions.

Endeavor’s going to be come back to the car in a few minutes, with evidence and reports that, if put into public record, would create all sorts of chaos. Her task is to keep the peace. She’s done it a thousand times, but this… this is different. She’s never had to wipe a hero before. And never someone so strong.

It dawns on Umeko with a sickening twist in her gut that she doesn’t want to do this. And she doesn’t have a choice.

Her phone lights up with a text message. Her appointment for this evening at the Beifongs’ mansion. She doesn’t know how those rich assholes are involved with all this, but they’re supposedly on her side and she has to help them. Too bad they’re rich assholes demanding her to move her appointment from 4 o’clock to 6. Great, she’s going to miss dinner again…

Endeavor’s exiting the building now, she can see his large form past the three chain-link fences between the car and the front doors. It’s a long walk, and with the angle of his umbrella against the rain, he can’t see her at all.

Umeko takes a deep breath, and then reaches for her purse for a small black container, roughly the size of a pencil case, but with a three-digit code on the side. She’d never want her kid to get into this. She puts in the combination and opens it, pulling out a syringe and an ampoule of dark liquid. She measures out the dosage and rolls her sleeve. She doesn’t do this sort of thing, certainly not Trigger, and yet here she is. The version she’s been given is supposed to be diluted, and Umeko’s no addict, but the thought of having to put this shit in her body, to overuse her quirk like this… God, and if it doesn’t work…

Taking a deep breath, Umeko reminds herself why she’s doing it all. That there’s a damn good reason for it, and it goes beyond herself and the few people around her. She doesn’t have a choice right now, but she gave away that willingly. For the cause.

As Umeko pushes the needle past her skin and depresses the plunger, she knows that something good will come from this.

PRESENT
At lunch, Toph lets the cafeteria staff pick out a lunch for her. She usually has a bento from home, but her mother is still looking for a new maid. “You’re too skinny, my goodness!” One of the ladies tuts.


“I believe it, sweetie, you must have a fast metabolism!” The woman sighs, patting her own belly. “If only I could eat as much as I want without burstin’ out of my dress, maybe I’d get a second date! But enough about me, do you want the udon or the soba?”

“Soba, please,” Toph bites her lip, wondering if it’d be odd to reassure the lunch lady about her weight. She’s not actually fat or anything, but her mutation quirk gives her thicker muscles to account for her reptilian legs and tail. “Do people really care that much about the way you look?”

The woman pauses, and then continues to carefully pour out the noodles. “Oh, but you don’t have anything to worry about, ne?” She says dismissively, “You’re just like a doll, and sweet as anything! Before you know it you’ll have all the boys trying to confess to you.”

Toph raises a skeptical eyebrow, having never thought of herself as sweet, and the lady just laughs. “Trust me, dear! Oh, I’m giving you extra rice balls. You wanna be thin, but not that thin!”

“Thanks,” Toph replies, resisting the urge to roll her eyes. She passes by a group of older boys and sits down at a table that’s far away from anyone in her class. The group of boys are whispering in excitement, and Toph can’t really stop herself from eavesdropping on their conversation.

”Have you heard about the new lightweight champ? Isn’t it crazy?” One of the boys asks, voice tinged with excitement that piques Toph’s interest.

”C’mon, it’s fake. There’s no way it isn’t fake,” another boy replies, shoveling food into his face as he speaks. “Scariest fight I’ve seen in awhile, but it’s fake.” He sounds convinced of this. But the way the student’s voice tremors slightly and the fact that he misses his mouth when he goes to take a bite from his dish tells them all a different story.

“Heh, yeah, don’t you know all those fights are rigged, Nishiya?” a third boy snorts. “It was a good fight, it was a crazy fight, but it wasn’t a real fight. You should go watch a hero fight instead.”

“But think about it! Why would someone call themself the Blind Bandit if they weren’t really blind?”

“You’re outta your mind, Nishi,” his friend pats his shoulder in consolation. “No way a little blind girl could win Quirk Rumble 82 all on her own.”

“Well, it’s Tuesday, isn’t it?” Nishiya reminds them pointedly. “She’s fighting again tonight. Let’s go and find out.”

Toph slurps up the last of her noodles, carefully wiping her mouth to hide her wide grin.

PAST

“I can’t make her forget everything, Mrs. Beifong. It doesn’t work like that.”

“Surely you just need a push? You’ve done work like this before, we can supply you with—”

“I’m not going on that stuff again. Endeavor is a full grown man with forty years of memory to compensate for a few changes. Your daughter is seven. These memories are ingrained, they’re essential to her development as a person. I can pick apart certain things, but you say she’s willful. I
“You’ve never needed more than a week to do what is necessary. Aiko, do not take advantage of my generosity. If you think you think you’ll get paid more for drawing this out—”

“God, no, this isn’t about the fucking cash, do you want me to leave your daughter brain-dead, Poppy? I’ve done it before, I’ll do it again if that’s what’s necessary.”

“No, no. We’ll… we’ll just have more sessions. How will I know it’s working?”

“You won’t be able to tell,” Aiko answers tiredly. “You can’t sense her mind the way I can. I’ll know if she truly accepts the alterations or not. And it’s fragile, Poppy. My control can be undone. I won’t make this a permanent fix.”

“That’s fine. We don’t need a permanent fix. For now, I just need to keep her in line. Get her to stop thinking about that boy and becoming a hero. Can you do that, Aiko?”

“Yes, Mrs. Beifong. She’ll obey you.”

Toph slides to the floor of her bedroom, two stories above the conversation between Dr. Aiko and her mother, her heart pounding and her head a mess. Endeavor was supposed to follow up with her police report and quirk registration, but she’s heard nothing about it since she came back from the hospital. He’s already been changed—and if the Number Two Hero was already under her control, there’s a good chance everyone else involved has been mind-wiped as well. There’s a good chance a lot of people have forgotten a lot of stuff, and that there isn’t even a hero out there trying to stop it.

Toph is alone.

She lets out a few gasping breaths filled with utter terror, and then digs her fingers into the cool marble flooring with a wild, desperate sense of resolve like nothing she’s ever felt before.

There is a lot going on that Toph doesn’t know about. There’s a lot that Toph won’t know once Aiko is done with her, because Toph is seven and alone and doesn’t know a thing about mind-control quirks.

But she knows this: she will never obey.

Whatever it takes, Toph will not obey.

**PRESENT**

Names are hard to come up with. Toph realized very quickly that she’s only good at insults and nicknames. So at her first night at the Rumble, she tied a black scarf over the top half of her face and, quite cleverly, called herself the Blind Bandit.

It stuck.

“I think it’s legit, the host doesn’t let phony fights slide. She’s just that good! There’s probably more to her quirk than just rocks, you know they have to keep it secret to keep the fights good. She could be using a magnetism quirk, she cut that bo staff clean in two!”

A small grin creeps onto Toph’s face again. Her last fight in the winter championship was wild. Her challenger almost deafened her with banshee screams. Her head was ringing all day afterwards.

She beat him by drawing up the concrete floor of the arena into armor and then snapped the steel bo-
staff he used to defend himself. It had been a poorly-made weapon, she had felt the fault lines forming in the metal from just a few hits against the ground. It caused her hands to ache afterwards, but it was worth the win.

"It was amazing! It’s like she could read his mind with the way she moved! I’ve never seen an earth-type quirk used like that, she’s brilliant!"

"Sounds like you have a crush, Nishiya,” someone teases. “You know she’s probably some kid, right?"

"Hey, you don’t know that, you’re supposed to be eighteen to enter the Rumble. Some people just look young even if they aren’t!"

"Oh please, like Loban cares if she’s underage. Just look at the ratings! The place is packed whenever Bandit has a fight… Oh, and did you see that porcupine dude in the middleweight tournament? He was scary…"

She was lucky that Loban, the manager of the Quirk Rumble, liked her so much. It took a while to convince him to let her compete, but in the end, the benefits outweighed the risks—after just a few weeks, Toph was one of the most infamous fighter in the Rumble. She can put on a show and beat losers into the ground in the same move.

It’s not the same as fighting villains, but it’s a hell of a rush. And Toph is still improving.

**PAST**

“You have a pretty strong quirk too,” Aiko murmurs in a familiar, probing tone. She says this at every session, checking every facet of her thoughts for the past year. “But you’re not going to do anything dangerous with it, right?”

“No, I—” Toph catches herself, choosing her words with care. “My quirk isn’t strong.” The words are grating, like a mouthful of glass shards, but still true. Her quirk isn’t enough. Not yet. “I wouldn’t do anything that would hurt me.” She never acts with the intention of getting injured, after all. She’s not in any danger when she fights, not in Toph’s definition of danger.

“Good,” Aiko says in relief, letting her hand slip away. “You’re doing so well, Toph. I’m not sure how much longer we need these sessions, to be honest.”

Toph smiles sweetly at Ms. Aiko, the same smile she presents every day to her parents. Her head aches a little, but she’ll never let it show.

After Aiko leaves, Toph sags into the couch like a puppet with all the strings cut loose. She takes a moment to reiterate what she knows and what she’s missing, something she’s been doing all year since the sessions.

**Twinkletoes.**

She can’t remember his real name. Her parents never wanted her to talk about him, and at some point, Aiko must’ve pulled that away from her memories to stop her from thinking of him.

Toph doesn’t mention her nicknaming habits to anyone, though, so she still remembers Twinkletoes: a loud boy, light on his feet, *I’ll find you, I’ll find you, I promise.*

**Shouto Todoroki.** She remembers him. *Stay away.* He has peppermint hair. He’s quiet. He can’t control fire very well. *Stay away, stay away, stay away.*
Toph can’t really figure out why she has to stay away. Every time she tries to think about it a great sense of fear creeps over her and her head starts to throb painfully at the thought of fire.

*Endeavor.* There was an incident. The one she can’t talk about. He’s rude to parents, Toph likes that. *He’s dangerous, stay away.* Well she’s not going near any hero fights. She’s no good against fire anyway.

*Toph Beifong.* Quirk?

...*Earth Sense.*

No. *Earthbending.*

She just wants to punch some people. She’s going to see Twinkletoes again and show off what she’s learned. Eventually. When they’re heroes—

Toph winces at the pain that shoots through her temples. Right, she can’t do heroes. Twinkletoes. *Twinkletoes.* He’s light on his feet, and he told her—he told her they would be partners, and Toph believes it.

She trains because her quirk is weak. This thought has always been the hardest to fit into place, but it has to be true. It is true. She fights, underground and unknown, because she *needs* to fight. That is undeniable. It’s why she started eavesdropping on delinquents and sneaking out at night to find the fights.

Toph’s head throbs in protest, but the thoughts are wedged into place, immovable in her head.

She sighs, rubbing her temples. “Take that, Aiko.”

*PRESENT*

It’s Tuesday. *Quirk Rumble 83* starts with a round-robin for the lightweight fighters and a short, two-day tournament for the heavyweights.

Toph loses her match, but with minimal injury. They have a medic for registered contenders, and Toph gets off with an ice-pack for her shoulder and an energy drink. Toph isn’t too mad about the loss, though she could hear Nishiya and his friends groaning about it from the nosebleeds. She was up against some lady with a jumping quirk Toph had a hell of a time trying to pin down. Apparently the lady was pretty hot, because even though a lot of people had lost bets on the Blind Bandit there were even more people simply distracted by how much skin her opponent, ‘Bunny Babe,’ was showing.

Okay, so maybe that was a weird fight. Toph is nine years old and it’s kinda hard for her to fully accept all the leering that goes on around her. That was the only sucky difference between underground fighting and hero-fighting. Underground fights were subject to a lot more pervs, and sometimes the fights turned into more of a show than a real challenge.

*Can’t believe I lost to someone named Bunny Babe, though,* Toph thinks ruefully, sipping on her drink from the sidelines. They’re onto day two of the heavyweight tournament now, which always gets the most attention. They have to be held in even bigger stadiums than what Toph fights in, and tickets are really hard to come by, so that usually filters out the gross people from the crowd.

“I can’t believe I lost to someone named Bunny Babe, though,* Toph thinks ruefully, sipping on her drink from the sidelines. They’re onto day two of the heavyweight tournament now, which always gets the most attention. They have to be held in even bigger stadiums than what Toph fights in, and tickets are really hard to come by, so that usually filters out the gross people from the crowd.

“Hey little lady!” A thin man plops into the seat beside her. ‘Quick Slice’. He’s another lightweight contender, and a regular at the Quirk Rumble. Some of the contenders can be real dickbags, but others, like Slice, are kinda silly.
“Can’t believe the Babe bested the Blind Bandit! What an upset! And what a show!” He nudges her with his elbow. "It's a shame you can't see. You're gonna miss out on a lot on those R-rated fights!"

Toph stops drinking to reach a hand towards her shoulder. Then, concentrating on the thin coating of dust over her clothes, she flicks out a dense pebble of earth that hits him squarely on the nose. She figured out how to do that against the Muddler two months ago, made it way easier to clean off her clothes.

Slice yelps in surprise. “I'm joking, you brat!”

“Shush,” Toph says, tilting her head. “I wanna hear all the smack talk. This knucklehead is way funnier than you.”


Toph would give him a deadpan look, but she’s still wearing the scarf to cover the upper half of her face. “Mask? You mean the dude with swords?”

“Uh, who else would I… Oh. Sorry B, I still forget. Sword-guy’s wearing a full-face spooky mask. Kinda mysterious.”

Toph rolls her eyes. It’s not mysterious when you can hear sword man cursing under his breath and getting riled up by Iron Arms’s taunts. “He’s just another hothead. He’s not even checking where he is in the ring.”

“Huh?” Slice leans closer just as the smaller fighter is punched cleanly in the solar plexus, sliding uncontrollably towards the edge of the arena. At the last minute he’s able to stab a dagger into the ground and halt his movement, but the knife sinks so deeply he has to abandon it. “Aw, no fair! The ground’s all muddy from the last match!”

"It was already muddy," Toph argues. Despite being called an underground ring, this stadium is outdoors. Toph helped construct it in the middle of a swamp, so she has to stay to help break it down once it’s over. Part of her deal with Loban is working as part of his staff.

"Still! No fair!"

“Quit your yapping,” Toph punches him in the arm, just as sword guy twists out of the way of a punch and pulls himself to his feet. Huh, looks like he’s not out of the game just yet.

“Look at him go,” Slice comments anyway. “Like a little gnat. Can’t believe he convinced Loban to let him compete. He doesn’t belong in the heavyweight ring with those moves.”

Toph wishes she could compete in the heavyweight tournament. It’s pretty dumb to stick to a weight-class system when quirks threw such huge variables into the mix, but without any system it’d be total chaos trying to organize a tournament with all the fighters Loban manages. The weight system simply helps estimate the scale of destruction caused by the fights, though in this case it’s mostly Iron Arms doing the work.

In the lightweight tournament she has to keep the damage to a minimum. Which is fine and all for practicing her aim and the minute details of bending, but it gets a little boring. But this? Iron Arms smashing up the ground trying to squash a small-fry opponent?

She loves this.

“Ooohh!” The crowd winces in sympathy as sword guy is finally whacked out of bounds, ending the
fight. He’s only a few feet from Toph and Slice when he finally rolls to a stop, groaning in pain.

Toph shakes her head. “C’mon Stabby. Even I saw that right hook coming.”

Sword guy clutches at his side. He’s probably got a few cracked ribs. “Aren’t you—too young for this sorta place?” He pants as a few guys step up to escort him to the medical area.

Toph lifts her head to call back, “Aren’t you too inexperienced for this sorta place?” She hears a faint “fuck you” in return, and cackles to herself.

**PAST**

“The Beifongs don’t have a daughter,” Umeko says into Endeavor’s mind, letting her words seep into his thoughts. She can feel it twisting like a corkscrew, blocking off memories and emotions along the way. With the artificial high amplifying her quirk, Umeko can practically see the spider-web force of her words tying up knots and stitching together events and cutting off channels and worming into every crevice—and this is with just one sentence, holy shit—

Umeko blinks, refocusing her gaze on Endeavor’s paralyzed face. The victims to her quirk can maintain some level of awareness while she works. Endeavor looks furious. Umeko feels vaguely sick beneath the high.

She ignores him, moving on with the instructions left on her phone. There’s a few more people and words that need to be pulled from Endeavor’s mind, plus all the evidence he’s collected, but someone else is in charge of all physical traces.

Umeko repeats the last few statements, but keeps her eyes shut so she doesn’t have to see the tangled web of thought she’s weaving through his headspace. Her quirk usually allows her to follow along someone’s general train of thought as she adds to it, but this is much more complicated. Mental blocks are usually enough to erase certain events or ideas from a mind, but with the gravitas of what she’s changing, it’s… dizzying to look at.

“You’re putting a lot of time into this case, hero,” Umeko mutters to herself, sinking back into her seat. She has both her hands wrapped around Endeavor’s fist. It’s a good thing he wasn’t wearing his costume today, otherwise Umeko would’ve had to grab him by the ear or something to catch him.

“Take a break, you flame freak. I sure as hell would want one after this investigation..” She wants to go home. God, she just wants this to be over so she can be with her son and figure out cat names, she deserves a vacation…

Umeko pauses, opening her eyes to look at Endeavor. “You’ve been obsessed with this case from the start…. So why did you take that sick day?” she asks, prompting his mind to turn towards the memory. Umeko frowns, and dives deeper into the memory. A hospital. His wife? Oh, Rei does kinda look like Umeko with her hair down. His sons, however, take after him…

It occurs to Umeko that she doesn’t really know anything about Endeavor. He has some children, his wife is ill. There’s a lot of emotions that are hard for her to parse through. “What happened to them?” Umeko whispers, “What happened to your sons?”

She presses into his mind again, and all she can see is fire.

**PRESENT**

Someone tall and lanky slinks into the seat directly beside Slice, silent as a shadow. Toph lifts her head in acknowledgement, and Slice pauses in his cheering.
“B? What’re you...AH!” He whips around and jolts back in surprise at the stranger beside him. “Whoa, uh, hi, who the fuck are you?!?”

“You two were in the lightweight fights tonight, weren’t you,” the stranger states. He leans back in his seat lazily, and Slice’s heart rate skyrockets. Wow, Toph wishes she could be that intimidating without actually lifting a finger. “Quick Slice and the Blind Bandit.”

“Yeah?” Slice answers quickly, matching the stranger’s bored tone. “What’s it to you, kid?”

“I’m not a kid. I want to join the Rumble.” Now that, at least, catches Toph’s interest.

Slice barks out a laugh that seems far more confident than Toph knows he is. “Oh, you’re definitely a kid. Whaddya think, B? Student-aged for sure, and we don’t do that here!”

Toph rolls her eyes, flashing an amused grin. The stranger does sound young, with a quick heartbeat that belies youth rather than nervousness, much like her own. “A delinquent student no less,” she notes, taking a long sip from her bottle. “You can’t even view the fights if you’re under eighteen, buddy.”

“But there’s no way you’re old enough to—ugh!” Just as Toph expected, the teenager’s pulse jumps in surprise for a moment at her guess, even though it’s painfully obvious that a lot of students watch the fights and not all the contenders are legitimate ones. “Quit beating around the bush. I want to enter. Where do I sign up?” He snaps.

Toph purses her lips. Loban made an exception for her, and she doesn’t think the manager will appreciate her introducing more risky fighters to his tournament. “You can’t sign up unless you check all the boxes, hotshot,” she explains tersely, setting her drink aside to fold her arms. “And since I don’t know how you fight… Tell me the truth, Slice—does he look like a contender?”

Slice is silent for a moment, humming and scratching his cheek in consideration. The teenager’s pulse creeps up again as he tenses in place, but he doesn’t say a word. Then Slice leans towards Toph. “He’s about as scary as you are cute, Bandit. Could be fun to throw down with this dunderhead.”

The stranger exhales an angry breath of air through his teeth, foot tapping on the ground. “I’ll see what I can do, eh?” Slice decides, hopping to his feet. “Keep an eye on the kid while I’m gone, BB!”

“Thanks,” the teenager grunts out, curling his hands into even tighter fists.

Toph snorts. “You got a fighting name yet, or should I just call you Hotshot?”

The teenager freezes in place for a moment, his foot pausing mid-tap. “I actually need a fighting name for this shit?”

She grins. “Did you think my given name was Blind Bandit?”

“Shut up,” he huffs, scratching his head in rough, sharp movements. “That slice guy just uses the name of his quirk, so I thought I’d do that.”

Toph though her reaction was pretty self-explanatory, but whatever. “Loban won’t accept just any name. It’s gotta fit with your theme.”

“My what-now?”

“Oh my god,” Toph sighs. “You’re not a hotshot, you’re a hot mess. Did you put any thought into this before you waltzed over here and asked to sign up?”

“Fuck off, kid, you’re half my size. If you can do it, why can’t—“

“And at this point, buddy, you better stop before you go from hot mess to just a mess on the floor,” Toph interrupts him loudly, rising to her feet. The hotshot goes silent, if not in fear then at least in surprise. “I’m only trying to help, asshole. If you can’t handle common decency you can leave right now.”

She can practically hear how tightly he’s clenching his jaw. His hand is twitching too, and Toph zeroes in on the movement, waiting for him to make a decision. She doesn’t know a thing about this chucklehead’s quirk, but if he’s a hothead, there’s a chance he’ll lash out like an idiot.

If the ground beneath his feet tremble slightly, it’s too faint for him to feel it.

“Maybe I should just go with Hotshot,” he mutters, shoulders lowering. In one sentence, the tension building between them melts into thin air. Tooh’s glad. She doesn’t need Loban yelling at her for wiping the floor with an audience member.

Maybe she’s overconfident, but Toph doesn’t go down easy. It doesn’t matter how strong this dude might be, with a temper like that he can’t be much of a challenge.

“You think?” Toph says neutrally, taking a step back.

He grunts in response, bringing up a hand to rub his chin. “You really are blind, right?”

Toph cocks her head to the side. “Yeah. It’s no gimmick.”

“Then how’d you guess it?”

She has no idea what he’s talking about. “Guess what?”

“Hotshot,” he repeats, like that’s an answer. Toph’s lack of reaction says otherwise.

He gives a soft huff of exasperation and folds his arms again, fidgeting like he’s itching for a fight he can’t get. “Nevermind. You’ll find out if I get in.”

Toph shrugs. “Guess I will. Good luck with that, Hotshot.”
“Nope. No way.” Toph crosses her arms firmly, raising her chin. “Why would you even ask me that?”

“I second that,” a bitter teenager grumbles next to her, trembling with rage and exhaustion. “I’m not getting lessons from a toddler.”

Anger spiking, Toph flicks her foot, sending a piece of rubble flying into the offender’s temple before he could so much as blink.

“What the FUCK—”

“Both of you cut that shit out,” Loban’s stern voice slices through the thick, smoking air. Hotshot’s still rippling with anger, but he’s out of it from his trial run. “You’re not competing until my employees approve it. You’ve already trashed one practice ring, I can’t imagine the shit you’ll pull in a real fight.”

“I can control it,” he mutters, shifting his feet unsteadily.

Toph can’t help but laugh. “No, you really can’t. But wow, I can’t say the name doesn’t fit.” Now she gets his question from the first time they met.

He growls. “Just put me in the heavyweight group then, they fuck up your stadiums all the time.”

Loban growls right back, and it sounds a lot more intimidating from someone with a Tiger-mutation quirk. Hotshot is unnerved even if he doesn’t say it, Toph can tell. “Not the problem. The problem is the burning. We can handle minor injuries, but burns are different. You know how hard it is to nab a medic that can treat third or fourth-degree burns? It’s not cheap, I’m sure you know that.”

Hotshot goes stiff as a board for a second. “No, I don’t. Quillfish is fine, no one got actually hurt, just like you asked.”

Toph twitches. That’s not strictly true. Because while Quillfish—terrible match up for a fire quirk
anyway—only has a mild rash and a few bruises, but Hotshot himself…

“And here I thought *Bandit* was the blind one!” Loban snaps, striding up and grabbing Hotshot’s wrist. He flinches badly at the contact, and when he yanks his arm away Loban lets him go. “Either you control yourself, or you’re out, and I never want to see your face at my tournament again. Y’got that kid?”

Hotshot is mute. But Toph assumes he nods, because Loban doesn’t yell again.

“I’ll owe ya one for this, Bandit. Can you handle fire or not?”

Toph thinks about it. Fire is more dangerous to her because she can’t anticipate it like most solid objects. She’s never actually fought someone using fire. Not like Hotshot’s quirk, which spread to half the stadium in seconds.

It’s a frightening power. She is frightened of it, whether she wants to be or not. I’m sure he’s scared of it too, by the way he’s acting, Toph thinks. It must be pretty sucky to be afraid of your own power.

She shrugs, turning to Hotshot. “Guess we’ll find out.”

Hotshot’s whining under his breath as they leave the arena, shoving a jacket on with great reluctance. “Where are we going, brat? If we’re gonna train, shouldn’t we do it here instead of wrecking another place?”

“Which train is it?”

He pauses, and then grunts in annoyance and goes rifling through his pockets for something. The next time he speaks, his voice is muffled by a surgical mask. “I don’t like the train.”

“Tell me about your quirk.”

He gives a long-suffering sigh, but answers. Loban’s *Rumble* sure does pay well, after all. “I generate fire. It’s blue and hotter than normal fire.”

“Is that why the arena fell apart so quickly?” She asks. “Even the ground was disintegrating.”

He gives another hum of acknowledgement as the step onto the platform. “Which train is it?”

“The one headed towards Ueno.” It’s pretty late that there’s only a few trains running, and the platform is virtually empty. Toph keeps her voice low, but casual. “Is it backlash from generating fire, or are you getting burned after it’s made?”

“…Not sure.” He fidgets, and Toph can still smell acrid smoke on both of their clothes. Actually, she can smell a chemical too, the kind she smells at home after her mother gets her hair dyed.

So, a surgical mask, dyed hair, and a burnt (?) face. He’s really embracing the punk-rock delinquent life. *I bet he has piercings too.* Toph wants to convince herself that Hotshot’s some idiot loner, but he also seems kind of cool.

He shuffles his feet, scuffing a heel on the concrete idly. “Either way, it can’t be helped. That’s just
what my quirk is, it’s called \textit{Cremation} for a reason.”

Toph rolls her eyes. “You can call it whatever you want. According to Loban, I get to decide what you can do.”

“I’m aware,” he grits his teeth, but there’s no real edge to his tone. Good. Toph already knew he could reign in his temper, now he just had keep his quirk in check alongside it. Passion is great and all, but letting your emotions run a fight never ends well.

“Why’s he asking a little kid like you to train me?” Hotshot continues after a moment. “You don’t even \textit{have} a fire quirk, I’m sure there’s someone else that knows more about it than you.”

Toph remembers the sound her bones make when they fracture. She’s only done it a few times since she was kidnapped, pushing her body too far and too hard just to prove a point in the ring. In her case, fractures are easy to treat as long as she gives herself the time to heal properly. And because her senses are so good she can adjust her movements to avoid future breaks.

“Because I fight to win.” Loban’s known this for a while now. He doesn’t like it, but her appeal as a contender goes beyond her quirk, it’s her resolve that fans admire. “I love fighting. I like getting better at it. And sometimes I break my hands in the process.”

There’s a rumble in the earth, indicating that a train is near. The PA system of the platform crackles to life, announcing the train to Ueno as it chugs onto the platform. As always, the sound grates on her ears and Toph scowls as they pick seats in the train car. This is one of the only reason she bothers to wear shoes on a regular basis. Since moving further into Tokyo, the trains and cars leave the ground constantly buzzing—not to mention the constant stomp of pedestrians all over the place.

Hotshot clears his throat unsubtly. “So your quirk can injure you.”

“Rocks are hard. Fire is hot.” Any quirk can be dangerous.

“Wow, that’s so helpful.”

“Shut it, Sparky, I’m being profound.” She really isn’t.

“Are you sure.”

Toph resists the urge to punch him. “Elemental quirks are pretty simple, but that doesn’t make them easier to master. The more power you have, the more control you need. Still following?”

“Shut up,” Hotshot mutters, growing sullen. “You think I haven’t tried controlling my fire before? I’ve been training my whole life, and it still isn’t enough.”

Toph picks at her ear idly. “Then why are you still here?”

He pauses. “What?”

Toph lifts her head, flicking away the dirt from her nails. Hotshot likes to talk big, but Toph can read him like a book. He can complain and question her all he wants, it doesn’t change the fact that he’s still listening—still hoping for something more. “Buddy, if you were so sure you’ve tried it all, you would’ve quit when Loban made his offer.”

“I…” The words die in his mouth. “I don’t know,” he says finally.

Toph crosses her arms. “I think you’re here because some part of you hasn’t given up yet. And if
“you’re willing to put in the work, so am I.”

The train rolls to a stop, and they exit the car in silence. Toph leads the way, headed towards the outskirts of the city. They stop when they reach the beginnings of a forest. Or, more specifically, a swamp.

“What is this place?” Hotshot asks, seeming rather repulsed as he pulls his foot out of muck.

Toph grins, kicking off her sneakers without hesitation. “This is the Blind Bandit’s Swamp Boot Camp—no shoes required!” Her feet sink deeply into the blend of plant, earth, and water. The perfect place to snuff out any errant fires and practice her own powers in peace. “Really, take off your shoes, they’re gonna get ruined.”

Hotshot is silent for a moment, baffled, before he mutters something about the state of his loafers and tugs them off. “I’m already regretting all of this.”

Okay. Toph swore to herself when she started school that she would avoid any and all hero-type punks that could get her into trouble with her parents. First year—perfect, untroubled, no problems. But it’s been two weeks since she was moved into class 3A and holy shit she’s gonna murder this class of pansies.

Once word spread that Toph was 1) super blind and helpless and 2) heir to a huge fortune, the goodie-two-shoes of class 3A were scrambling to befriend her, because they’re all crazy ambitious or greedy bitches or—Toph doesn’t even know, could you be a gold-digger at age nine? Kanto sure seemed like one. Her previous class wasn’t nearly as interested in her, but this class is the “smarter” section, the “top tier” of the school, and they’re all assholes.

Just declining invitations to lunch or after-school hang outs isn’t enough for class 3A. They’re persistent, and it’s getting on Toph’s nerves. She’s not trying to make waves or anything, but if a girl physically grabs Toph’s arm in order to “hang out” with her, that girl better be prepared for a verbal smackdown at the very least.

“Beifong-san!” Tenya Iida, newest bane of her existence, calls out, popping up next to her just as the class ends for lunch break. She’d be startled by the abrupt greeting if not for the all clomping, metallic steps he makes. Toph can sense Iida coming from a mile away, literally. She’s never been so bothered by the way someone moves, but man does Iida like to move.

Apparently his quirk is having engines in his legs, and as soon as Toph overheard that, she tried to focus on the shape and size of the organic-mechanical mutation—big mistake.

It’s so loud. It’s as if now that she’s heard it, she can’t un-hear it, which is something that’s never happened to her before. The vibrations he makes are sharper than other footsteps, a rumble that rip-roars to life whenever he activates his quirk.

“What, Iida?” Toph answers, hoping to convey as much reluctance and irritation as possible in the fewest words. Maybe that’s not only Iida’s fault though, she’s also still sore from sparring with that Jello-Head fighter. The Quirk Rumble had a few medics on hand in case any of the fights got dicey, but there wasn’t much to do about muscle fatigue.

“I noticed you haven’t been sitting with any of our classmates during lunch,” Iida continues, his voice slightly more muted than usual.

Toph scoffs. “Neither have you,” she shoots back, and immediately regrets it. She’s not supposed to
know that, but she really can pick out his footsteps from anywhere in the school.

“Wh—How would you know?” Iida exclaims.

She frowns deeply, thinking fast. “Because you want me to sit with you at lunch?”

“I—well. Yes? I think we got off on the wrong foot the other day. You’re clearly very capable and a good student, and I should not have assumed otherwise because of your blindness.”

Toph rolls her eyes. “That’s right.” She shoved her belonging into her bag and stands from her desk. His engine legs were rumbling a lot, making him vibrate in place.

“Beifong-san? You haven’t answered yet. Would you mind if we ate lunch together? I would like to know more about you!” Iida insists, oozing earnestness.

Toph is quiet. She doesn’t care who she sits with, first of all. If her parents find out she’s “consorting with hero kids” that won’t go over well. But do they even care anymore? Should she worry about them bringing that creepy therapist back? It’s not like she hasn’t been going behind their backs already.

“No.” His quirk is giving her a headache anyway.

He freezes for a moment, shocked. Toph goes to walk around him.

“But… Beifong-san, I…” He reaches a hand towards her.

“Get out of my way, Engine Legs,” Toph says plainly, deftly turning her shoulder out of reach and walking quickly down the hall, leaving Iida at the edge of the classroom.

She’s halfway to the cafeteria when he does this sort of vibrating-revving thing and then whoosh.

Her hair flies up, pulled out of her headband from the sudden gust of wind in her face. Toph is startled, and for a second she’s overcome by the familiarity of it. Twinkletoes did it all the time. Except this is Iida, Iida with footsteps like thunder and a prep-school smugness that makes Toph want to commit murder.

“Beifong-san!” He skids to a stop at her side. “What was that! I was lead to believe you were blind!”

Toph’s face scrunches up in confusion. He seems surprised, and a little suspicious of her, and Toph can’t fathom why. “I… am blind. I got the sunglasses and everything,” she points to the glasses on her face. They’re round and have dark green lenses that match her headband, according to the nanny that picked them out.

“Then—then how did you know about my legs?”

Toph raises her eyebrows in alarm, because, oh shit she’s not suppose to know that.

“Uh,” Toph says eloquently, “Because… someone… told me you had engine legs?”

“... Oh,” Iida says sheepishly. “Sorry, that was a foolish question. I couldn’t help but wonder, you tend to move and act like a normal—sighted—person most of the time.” He’s trying to be more careful about his wording now, at least. “So I was thinking—do you still have spatial awareness, and only partially blind?”

He’s more observant than Toph gave him credit for, even if he’s wrong. “Why are you so interested me, dude?” She asks instead. “Have you been watching me or something?”
“N-No! Not in the sense you are implying! I was only concerned!” Iida backtracks immediately, suddenly waving his hands in wide, fast arcs. Or at least that’s what it seems like. His legs are vibrating again, throwing off her senses. “You just seemed very isolated from our peers, so I wanted to show you that you weren’t alone!”

“Isolated?” She’s not isolated. Who even says that? And who uses that as a reason to talk to a classmate? “You took pity on me is what you’re saying,” Toph surmises. “And quit moving around so much,” she warns him, shaking her head.

“What—this isn’t pity!!” Iida yelps, and he does another chopping motion with his hand, like he’s slicing the air, very nearly smacking her in the face. “Please do not twist my words, Beifong-san! I only want to be friends!”

He punctuates his sentence with another whoosh of his hands, and this time Toph reacts instinctively, deflecting his hand before he whacks her head. “Quit it!” Toph snaps, grabbing his hand in mid-air and yanking it down to his side. Her hands curl into fists in her skirt so she doesn’t try punching him. “Maybe you’re the one feeling isolated, Iida—and it’s your own fault, for acting so high and mighty all the time. You’re just like the rest of this class.”

Iida splutters in surprise and stops in the middle of the hallway, but Toph just keeps moving. Great, she’s gonna get to the lunch line late because of this weirdo. But maybe he’ll give up on following her around and her headache will go away.

Alas, luck is not on her side. Iida jogs back to her side in a few seconds, making up the distance with a few long strides rather than using his engines. “I’m very sorry for almost hitting you,” he says slowly, “But—but you’re also very rude, and—and I have had enough of it.”

Oh, wow. There’s no mistaking the anger in his tone now. Toph is surprised, to say the least. They both slow down without realizing it, just at the edge of the lunchroom. Toph crosses her arms, waiting. Iida says nothing.

“Well go on, Sensei, don’t stop now,” Toph arches a single eyebrow at him.

He’s actually shaking. “You are the most—belligerent—person I have ever met. I have been nothing but kind to you, and you refuse to act civilly with me! What have I ever done to you?!” He sounds so offended. She's not the only one put off by his weirdness, so why's he blaming her?

Toph rolls her eyes, even as her gut twists in discomfort. “Take a hint, Iida. I don’t want to be friends.”

“And I don’t believe that!” Iida snaps.

Toph’s jaw drops. “What do you mean you don’t believe me?!” She splutters. “What, you can’t believe someone wouldn’t want to be friends with your annoying ass?!”

“No! I mean you’re—you shouldn’t speak like that! I never said—”

“Go bother someone else,” Toph cuts him off, rubbing her temple. “We’re done here.”

Finally, when she leaves, Iida doesn’t follow her. Instead, she’s haunted by a headache and a distinctly shitty feeling in her heart.

The headache never really goes away. Next Tuesday, she almost wants to forfeit her match because of it. But like hell is she gonna bow out like a pansy.
CRASH

Toph dives out of the way just in time, rolling inelegantly back to her feet. From the sidelines, she hears jeering. Her mouth burns. Growling to herself, she spits out a glob of blood, having bit the inside of her cheek.

“What’s the matter, little girl?!” Her opponent taunts, quickly reeling in his clunky fist. His long-range attacks are faster than Toph expected, and she’s already been nicked by two of his fist-throws. He’s been taking hits too, she can tell by the way he’s limping.

Toph kicks the ground, throwing up a few stalagmites to knock Reel Pop off-balance and give her some time to think. She hasn’t even been knocked down, but her head’s kind of killing her. She should’ve taken some ibuprofen before getting in the ring.

Reel Pop’s already winding up for another strike, dodging around her obstacle course for a clear line of fire. She can feel his moves, and she knows there’s only a few spots he can take a clean shot from, so—

WHAM!

Her mind blanks. She can’t feel anything.

His fist deflected off the rocks, Toph guesses in dismay.

Then, slowly, like water rushing back in, she’s barraged by vibrations all around. The ring. The stands. The low buzz of fluorescents. Her own breath, blood pumping, muscles creaking. Head pounding like a motherfucker.

Reel Pop stepping towards her. She shuts out all the other noise.

Toph lurches to the right, but then her knee makes a horrible sound as the punch connects. Teeth clenched, Toph digs a hand into the ground and forces up a burst of dust particles. Before Reel Pop can even react to the distraction, she lifts her hand further to bring up an uppercut of hard concrete.

It connects. Reel Pop goes flying out of the ring.

“WE HAVE OUR WINNER! THE BLIND BANDIT PREVAILS ONCE MORE!”

Toph lifts herself on one knee, and raises one fist in victory.

She can hear Hotshot yelling on the sidelines, barely acknowledging it over the throbbing pain of her leg. “Bandit, you dumbass. Jello, go get the fucking medic, she can’t even stand.”

Toph lowers her fist, then points in Hotshot’s direction to flip him off.

“Fuck you too, Sifu.”

Sifu. Hah. Hotshot’s a headache too, but he’s a lot more fun.

Chapter End Notes

i’m not crazy about this chapter, mostly because i feel bad for iida, so sorry if the
dialogue is a little unnatural!
(Tuesday)

Fuyumi Todoroki can pinpoint the exact day that her father began to change. It wasn’t anything sudden or unusual, but it had a cause and now, two years after Touya ran away from home, their dad is different.

It’s not a very-good different, or a very-bad different. Nice, if you ask Fuyumi, and Absolutely Meaningless, if you ask Natsuo.

“Yeah, he’s different,” the eleven-year-old rolls his eyes, brooding over his iced tea. “But he’s still a dick—a jerk, sheesh, Fuyumi.”

She still gives her brother a pointed look, unable to back down on this topic. “First of all, you’re too young for that language. Second of all—can’t you admit dad’s trying, and that means something?”

Natsuo crosses his arms. “Yeah, it means he doesn’t wanna ruin the rest of his offspring.”

Fuyumi deflates. “He cares about our feelings. About Shouto’s feelings too.”

But her brother just shakes his head, carefully setting his glass in the sink and wiping his hands. “Fine, he doesn’t want us to end up like Mom or Touya. But don’t kid yourself, sis. Being decent now doesn’t make up for what he’s already done.”

Dad never mentions Touya.

But if a shouting match started up between Natsuo and him—as it does, too often and too passionate—it was more likely to end with Enji storming out of the house to cool off rather than Natsuo sneaking out in the middle of the night, never to be seen again. While Enji still trains Shouto most of the time, he also lurks around the courtyard of their home and yells at Fuyumi to do her physics homework. He demands a curfew for Natsuo when he’s working at a friend’s house, and when Fuyumi asked if she could have a cake for her birthday, Enji came home early enough to corral her brothers so they could all have supper together.

Granted, he has a busy schedule and it was actually four days after her birthday, but the effort is real.

And the most important difference for them all is Shouto. Shouto is still quiet, is still, painfully, the favorite, but after Touya’s disappearance, Fuyumi starts to see him around the house more often, usually eyeing the book she’s reading or the handheld game Natsuo is playing. Which means their dad isn’t training as much with their youngest brother, and wasn’t trying to separate them anymore.
And it's so nice to get to know her youngest brother. Before, she didn't know a thing about him.

One day, while the three of them are home at the same time for once, Fuyumi gets up and shows Shouto that she’s reading poetry for a literature class. She reads out a few of her assigned poems and explains what they’re about. And Shouto doesn’t say anything at all while she talks, just roams over the text with mismatched eyes.

But when she finishes talking, her eight-year-old brother looks up at her and says, frank and simple, “This isn’t half as good as the way you explain it. I bet your poetry is a lot better than this crap.”

Across the kitchen, Natsuo explodes into laughter, startling both of them. Fuyumi flushes, at both Natsuo and Shouto, because yeah she does have her own poetry but no one’s even read it before, and also— “Sh-Shouto, you shouldn’t speak like that! Who taught you that word, one of your tutors?”

Shouto gives one slow blink, and then replies, “The old man.”

There’s a muffled “Oh my GOD,” from Natsuo, and Fuyumi slaps her own forehead.

“Shouto, don’t call him that! That’s not very nice!” She insists.

“That’s how he talks,” her youngest brother answers, raising an eyebrow. “And Natsuo calls him that too.”

Fuyumi stares, conflicted between admonishing her brother and simply being in awe of his cheekiness. She's oddly proud of him.

“Correction: I call him damn old man!” Natsuo informs them, pausing in the middle of a math problem to join them on the staircase.

“But,” Fuyumi flounders, setting her book aside. “But it’s disrespectful? He’s our dad! And he’s not that old!”

“That’s what the old man says too,” Natsuo agrees with a wicked grin. “Don’t listen to ’Yumi, Shou-chan. Or dad, for that matter. They don’t know what’s good for you.”

“And you do?” Fuyumi shoves at Natsuo as soon as he plops down next to her. “Don’t confuse him, Natsuo, he’s only eight!”

“Then…” their youngest brother draws their attention, “Then who do I listen to?” Shouto asks flatly, his brow beginning to furrow. “I don’t want to always listen to Dad, but you two keep saying different things to me. And… Mom’s not here. So.”

His two older siblings pause, and exchange a quick look between each other.

Fuyumi chews on her lip for a moment, but when Natsuo doesn’t speak up, she answers. “Yourself, Shouto. I think that’s what Mom would say.”

Their little brother looks back at the two of them with a little less conflict in his eyes than before, and Fuyumi thinks she’s said the right thing.

As Shouto slips off to start his tutoring session and Natsuo returns to his homework, Fuyumi knows it’s because of Dad that the conversation even took place. And Natsuo might not get it, but Fuyumi is grateful for the family she still has, Enji included.
On good days, she feels like a gardener. A creator. A shepard. It’s not so bad, thinking of her role this way. She plants seeds and fosters them into great, blossoming worlds of knowledge and truth. It feels right. It resonates truth. It is beautiful.

Now, though, as a young boy lies thrashing on the operating table, screaming for someone that will not do a thing, Umeko Shinsou only feels drained.

“We’ll fix it,” the nurse beside her assures Umeko. “You haven’t seen our full staff, we can reverse the procedure if it goes too far.”

She centers herself. Ensures that her voice won’t waver, will not leak any of the spiraling emotions in her head. “Hasn’t it already?”

The nurse only gives her a pitying smile. As if Umeko has yet to grasp the importance of their work, as if Umeko is an outsider. But the nurse, a simple tool in the grand scope of their undertaking, could not be any farther from the truth.

*Is this the only way?*

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**(Tuesday Night)**

Her leg is kind of fucked from the match, according to Hajime the medic. Toph listens with a deep frown on her face, feeling herself shake from the pain rather than the adrenaline. The lacerations have been sealed up completely, but there’s serious muscle strain and the possibility of a tear from what the medic can assess. She can’t put much pressure on her leg without it sending jolts of pain up her body, and there’s nothing more Hajime can do about it.

Toph leans her head back on the cot. “Well, fuck.” Her eyes are watering, but she couldn’t care less. It *hurts*. She’s in trouble.

The medic huffs. “Watch your tongue, missy. I don’t know why Loban lets you fight, you’re a liability to the Rumble like this.”

Toph sticks her tongue out. “I-I’ve been doing this for months, usually I just get scrapes,” she argues, but her voice wavers dangerously. It’s beginning to get hard for her to focus on the sounds around her, and trying to sense vibrations is out of the question.

Hajime tsks. “You need a hospital. At the very least, you need a brace for that knee.”

“I can’t wear a brace,” Toph snaps, shaking her head roughly, wiping at her eyes again. There’s already a roll of stretchy bandaging material on the cot, ready to be used, and Toph knows it’ll be too noticeable during the day. She hears the door open, and for once, she can’t bothered to sense for who it is. The answer’s apparent as soon as they speak anyway.

“You’re still in here, brat? Fucked up that bad, eh?” Hotshot strolls toward her at a slow, even pace.

“What’re you doing here?” Toph snaps again. “Get out, asshole.”

The footsteps stop. “Can’t you tell? Doc, does this need to be sealed or not?” Hajime leaves her side, and Toph frowns again. She’d assumed Hotshot was just here to annoy her, and she couldn’t sense an injury.

While the two of them were preoccupied—Hotshot just had a long shallow cut that needed gauze—Toph sat up on the cot, carefully stretching out her right leg until her toes brush against the floor.
Nothing.

*What the fuck*—oh, wait, it’s back. Toph shudders, gripping the papery bedsheets beneath her. For a moment she couldn’t make sense of the vibrations around the room at all, and the world felt about as orderly as a tower of blocks toppling over. Toph shakes her head. She did get punched in the head, maybe that’s causing the delay.

“Hajime, how can I tell if I have a concussion?” She asks, and then remembers that fucking *Hotshot is right there*. “I’m fine,” she adds quickly, reaching out to feel for the wall. She can balance on one leg for now and escape.

The medic is already rushing towards her. “Sit, sit! Good grief, kid, don’t you try to stand with that leg!” He’s in front of her quickly, pushing her back onto the cot.

She lets him without complaint. Holy crap, her knee hurts. Her eyes are watering again. “You have painkillers, right? Nothing too strong…”

“What you need is localized anesthetic,” Hajime worries, carefully avoiding her leg. “What’s this about a concussion? Are you feeling dizzy or sensitive to sound at all?”

Toph scrunches up her nose. She only feels dizzy from the knee pain. As for her sensitivity… “Not really. If anything I’m less sensitive, I can’t even—” she pauses, concentrating, and then she’s able to locate Hotshot again, sitting in a fold-out chair to her left. “Ugh, I’m just *tired,*” Toph says dismissively.

“Bandit, if you have a concussion on top of this knee—”

“I don’t,” Toph says more confidently. “I’m okay. I’ve got a hard skull, you’ve seen me break through concrete head-on.”

The medic sighs irritably. “You still need to get that knee looked at. Stay here and ice that leg. I have other people to check on, and I’m telling Loban you won’t be in the ring for a while.”

“What?” Toph raises her eyebrows. “Hold up, I didn’t say—”

“No, I’m saying it,” Hajime rises, dodging her grabby hand. “Unless you get Recovery Girl to kiss you, you’ll be out for at least two weeks.”

“Who’s that?” Toph asks, bewildered. “Wait, Hajime—” she lurches forward, swears colorfully at how her knee moves, and then the door swings shut behind the medic, leaving the room painfully silent.

Hotshot shifts in his seat, which reminds Toph that he’s *right there*. She grimaces, reaching for the ice pack Hajime left for her. What the hell is she going to do? How could she fuck up in a fight so badly?

“What happened?” Hotshot says after a moment. “Reel Pop caught you off-guard. I’ve never seen you go down like that.”

“I didn’t go down,” Toph denies immediately. “*I won,* remember?”

“Sure,” he answers, but his voice is thick with sarcasm. “You ever heard of a pyrrhic victory?”

Toph scowls. “What the hell does that mean?”
“You don’t—?” He snorts. “Whoops. Sometimes I forget you’re an actual child.”

“You call me a brat, like, all the time.”

He snorts again. “Yeah, yeah. Anyway, a pyrrhic victory is when you win, but you’re so fucked from the fight that you might as well have lost.”

“Oh, so like all of your fights,” Toph quips, though it does sound about right.

“Hey, fuck you too,” he replies, but at this points it’s delivered more like a casual greeting than an insult. “What are you gonna do about that leg?” he asks her, oddly solemn.

She’s been trying to figure that out since Hajime told her she couldn’t be fixed by him. Toph traces the swelling outline of her knee lightly. “...I can’t hide this at all.”

Hotshot simply hums in agreement.

She can wear leggings under her school uniform, it’s still cold enough for her to do that. But walking on it, without painkillers or an ice pack… She has a driver to take her to school and back, and a maid that sees her out of the house each morning. She could make it past them, but a whole day of classes, with people like Tenya Iida breathing down her neck…

“Bandit,” Hotshot calls to her quietly. “Is there anyone you can go to for this? Anyone that knows you fight here?”

Toph doesn’t answer, biting hard on the inside of her cheek.

“I’m not trying to rat you out,” he continues, “We don’t use our real names here for a reason, I get it, but maybe you should talk to Loban about it. He has connections, he could get you treated—”

“I go to school, Hotshot,” she cuts him off. She thinks over her words quickly and carefully. “And I can’t show up with a brace or a cast or any indication I’m injured. That’s the problem, nothing else.”

She rubs her face, feeling the tension over her brow. “I-I’ll get treated if I can, but no one can know what really happened.”

“...Okay,” he concedes after a moment, still sounding oddly serious. “You’ve held up alright with bruises before. How’s the pain?”

Toph trembles, shaking her head. “Bad. I can’t walk. But I haven’t been given and medication yet.”

“Well, I think we can do that much,” Hotshot decides, rifling through plastic bottles. “Ibuprofen should bring the swelling down too. Take one now, don’t take any more for at least four hours.”

He hands her a pill. Toph frowns. Since when did Hotshot know anything about treating injuries? Also, she can’t tell if the pill is what he says it is. It’s hard enough for her to trust their actual medic, Toph can’t just do whatever Hotshot says.

Her trepidation must be visible on her face (and the fact that she hasn’t moved to actually swallow the pill), because Hotshot huffs and drags a chair over to her. “I’m not trying to kill you or anything, kid. I swear it’s just a painkiller.”

Toph listens hard. He’s sitting close enough for her to hear his heartbeat properly now. “Say that again,” she requests. “Promise me.”

He scoffs. “I promise it’s just ibuprofen. It won’t kill you,” he repeats with exaggerated slowness.
She’s heard him try to lie before, and this… sounds truthful. Toph takes the pill, chasing it with a sip of tap water. Then she downs the whole cup of water, feeling absolutely parched. Hotshot gets up without a word. Instead of leaving, though, the faucet turns on, and he fill another paper cup with water. “Drink more,” he instructs.

She can’t tell where the cup is without putting her foot on the ground, so she just holds out her hands and waits for him to pass it to her. It’s what she does at home, where Toph has to make it painfully obvious that she’s blind. She hates having to do it here, but it takes too much concentration to use her senses right now.

Toph sips on the water silently. Hotshot retakes his seat. In the back of her mind, Toph knows that this isn’t like him. They might not be as rude to each other any more, but Hotshot’s never been voluntarily helpful. He’s never missed an opportunity to tease her about her height, age, or blindness. They don’t hang out except to train, and usually it comes with a lot more cynical humor and broody teenage drama.

But right now, with her knee hurting like crazy even with the painkiller and ice pack, with no idea how she’s going to make sure people don’t get suspicious of Toph Beifong, she doesn’t care why he’s being nice.

“Who do you have to hide that injury from?” Hotshot asks suddenly.

Toph bites her lip. She won’t give away anything else. “I can’t show up to school—”

“Yeah, you said that, but you could make up a story for school. Not everyone’s going to look so carefully. So who are you really hiding it from?” He presses. “Because my money’s on your parents. If you go to school, they’ll want to confirm your story with whoever you live with.”

Toph glares. Forget being nice, she doesn’t need this stupid teenager sticking his nose where doesn’t belong. She can’t let anyone know who she is, she can’t let them know—

“I told you, brat, I’m not gonna rat you out. But jeez, quirk fighting right under your parents’ noses? Pretty fucking ballsy.” He lets out a low whistle, leaning back in his chair until it creaks from the weight.

“That’s one word for it,” Toph replies reluctantly. “No one can know I got injured like this in the ring. It wouldn’t just get me in trouble, I promised Loban that I wouldn’t be a risk.”

“I know,” Hotshot agrees. “Anyone could raise an alarm and get the Rumble shut down if they knew either of us were underage contenders to begin with.”

It was the inability to confirm their ages that kept the Rumble out of trouble. Quirks could manifest in all sorts of weird physical ways, and it’s not much of a stretch for a person to appear younger than their actual age, regardless of their abilities. But if Iida or one of her teachers thought for a second that she was doing something dangerous at all, they wouldn’t hesitate to raise some concerns about her.

The paper cup feels fragile in her hands. Toph thinks hard, and feels the cup crumple under her fingers. “I think I have a solution,” she says cautiously, picking up the roll of elastic bandage laying on the cot. Maybe she can fake an injury at school, and pass it off like that. “Help me wrap up my knee.”

“What’re you thinking?” Hotshot asks skeptically, even as he unrolls the bandages. “If anyone asks…”

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“If I can do this right,” Toph says firmly, “Then no one will ask anything. Tomorrow is Wednesday, I’ll get treated and I’ll see you on Saturday for training.” She might feel sick to her stomach in the process, but it’s still true. It sounds bizarre in her head. She’d have to, what? Trip down the stairs? Get Iida to run her over? Toph doesn’t like that idea at all. She has secrets, but she’s never had to lie like this. She can’t put the blame on someone else…

Hotshot is quiet, focusing on wrapping up her knee tight enough for her to move around in. “And if I don’t see you?”

Toph lets the breath whoosh out of her. When she first sat down on the cot to be treated, her eyes began tearing up as soon as she moved her leg. But she didn’t cry. There was no outright sobbing. She doesn’t do that, not at the Rumble. But she feels like crying now. “If you don’t see me, that means…”

I should tell him, Toph thinks randomly. Isn’t there a sort of safety in telling a stranger your secrets? He has no interest in getting her trouble. But what can she even tell him? Her identity? Her suspicions about her parents? The kidnapping?

Do not speak of that, the order abruptly sears across her thoughts like a hot poker, and Toph flinches. “H-Hotshot,” she whispers, but no other words come out. She can’t breathe. What is happening?

“Oi, kid,” she can hear him faintly, but it’s as if she’s trying to listen through ten walls. Through ten feet of earth. There’s a bitter metallic taste in her mouth again, and Toph recognizes it as blood. She bit her tongue. She can’t breathe.

Then someone grabs her shoulder and shakes her. “Hey, Bandit, what the fuck just happened?”

Toph gasps, dropping the paper cup and grabbing his shirt sleeve. “I don’t know. I can’t t-tell. I can’t tell anyone—” she bites down hard on her lip this time, and no matter what she does she can’t speak. She can’t think this way. “I’m not allowed.”

Do not speak of it. She hadn’t known how much power that order held until now. She’s never tried to talk about the kidnappers before, has she?

“Breathe, kid. Just breathe for a minute, okay?” Hotshot says, rather frazzled now. “I can get Hajime back here, let me just—”

She tightens her grip on his sleeve and shakes her head. “No.” She tries breathing like he said, and doesn’t know why she keeps breathing so fast, but she has to calm down. “No, I’m fine.”

“It looks like you’re in deep shit and panicking about it,” Hotshot says flatly, not moving. “And I’m definitely not the one that can help you right now.”

“Shut—up,” Toph hisses, listening hard for her own breath. And he does shut up, long enough for her to hear his lungs again and try to match his even breaths.

Soon, she can hear properly again. The pipes in the walls, the faint cheering from the ring. Hotshot’s heartbeat, the cot creaking under her weight. She lets go of his shirt and he leans away from her, but he doesn’t leave to find the medic.

“We’re not going to talk about this,” Toph decides resolutely. “Not a word.”

And she already knows that he’s uncomfortable with it. He folds his arms and gives an exasperated sigh. “It’s your life, brat. You can do what-fucking-ever with it, it’s not my problem.”
He’s not a good liar. Toph rubs her face tiredly. “I’ll figure it out. And I’ll come back.” Nothing can stop her from coming back to the Rumble. *Nothing.*

Hotshot pats her good knee. “…Good luck,” he says, as though he understands the thin line she’s walking between school, home, and the Rumble. Toph still doesn’t know much about him, so maybe he does.

Toph nods. “Thanks.”

He’s silent again, leaning back in his chair to think. “Fuck. Okay, you don’t have a phone, right?”

She raises her eyebrows. “No?”

He shoves himself to his feet and rummages through the medical equipment. “Don’t use this unless you have to. And don’t—shit, you can’t read either, you’re so difficult—”

“What are you doing?” Toph demands, frowning. “I just said I’m coming back—”

“Yeah, yeah,” he walks back over to her, taking her wrist. “And if you don’t have a way back, then you call me.” A sticky-note is pressed into her palm. “Can you read the numbers? Should be clear enough…”

It is. There’s small indentations in the paper, ten digits and a few characters that are harder to make out, but still enough—

“Is this your name?” Toph realizes suddenly, because the characters don’t spell out Hotshot or anything like it. “Like, your actual name?”

He huffs. “Yeah. Don’t fucking use it though, don’t even call me unless you need to.”

“I know,” she agrees softly, tucking the note carefully into her sleeve where she won’t lose it. She holds out her hand to him. "But for the record, it's nice to meet you. I'm Toph."

(Wednesday)

Endeavor has changed. But it never really struck Fuyumi as a bad or unnatural change for her father. Not until today. What started as a simple Wednesday turns into nightmare, as she watches the Hero Billboard Chart announce that *Endeavor the Flame Hero has dropped from the Number Two to Number Three Pro Hero rank following a shockingly lackluster year of work.*

It feels *wrong.*

To her left, Fuyumi hears Natsuo stop slurping his ramen to watch the events unfold. A clatter of utensils as he sets down his chopsticks. “…Fuyumi?”

Her eyes are glued to the screen, trying to make out Endeavor’s expression. “We should warn Shouto,” she says faintly.

“I’m here,” Shouto says out of the blue, and Fuyumi tears her eyes away from the screen. Her youngest brother stares back evenly. He’s standing in the kitchen, a glass of water in hand. Fuyumi ought to show him where the juice boxes are.

“He’s... going to be mad,” Natsuo whispers. There’s no inflection of worry or fear in his voice, though, only uncertainty.
“Doesn’t it feel kind of wrong?” Shouto asks slowly. “Endeavor is still reaching to become Number One.”

“It’s not a mistake from the Billboard Charts,” Natsuo points out. “He just hasn’t been on as many cases this year, has he?”

*Because he’s been at home instead? Did we do this to him?* Fuyumi wonders. But that doesn’t seem right either. *His hours haven’t changed that much.*

“That’s not what I mean,” Shouto frowns pensively. “Sometimes, Dad is really set on training, and then other times he’s just... not?”

Fuyumi shoots him a curious. “What are you talking about? He’s got a lot on his plate, but he’s always focused.”

Shouto stares at his glass of water, and then shrugs. “Nevermind.”

Natsuo rolls his eyes. “Anyway. He’s totally gonna flip. He’s fine now on TV, but the damn old man’s gonna burn down the gym or something when he gets home.”

“Don’t call him old man,” Fuyumi says instantly, shooting her brother a pointed look. “He’s not even forty.”

“And yet he’s already passed his prime, what a shame.”

“Natsuo! Don’t pick a fight with Dad when he gets home, I’m sure he’s already sad—“

“Sad? Sad, Fuyumi? Quit acting like he’s not an insensitive prick—“

“No swearing! Not in front of Shouto!” Fuyumi says desperately.

“The old man swears in front of me all the time,” Shouto argues, making Fuyumi grimace. “It’s okay, he doesn’t swear at me that much.”

“Not the point,” Fuyumi sighs, sinking into her seat. She checks the time. “Dad told me he has an appointment today anyway, so he won’t be home for a while.” *Hopefully he has time to cool off.* “Hey, Shouto, lemme show you where we keep the juice boxes.”

**Chapter End Notes**

Hopefully this chapter doesn’t feel too slow, but I needed to reiterate Toph’s slow decline into insanity. There’s no clean way of saving yourself from mind control, after all. No one is safe.

wow thats so dark sorry guys
Toph doesn’t even make it to school the next day. She barely sleeps, but is woken up abruptly by her nanny, ushering her into her school clothes. Toph has the sense of mind to insist she dresses alone in her room, but it takes twice as long and she can tell her nanny is already suspicious.

“Your breakfast is waiting downstairs. I’ll go make your drink,” the woman says through the door, and leaves for the kitchen.

“Okay,” Toph replies through gritted teeth. She waits until the nanny is out of sight. She takes four steps down the stairs, and then loses her grip on the railing.

The pain is, for lack of a better word, blinding.

The last thing she hears is her nanny crying out in alarm, and heavy footsteps surrounding her.

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“—can’t explain this injury, then I will be forced to fire you, Koharu-san.”

“Please, I don’t know what happened, she was fine yesterday... will call an ambulance for her—”

“I’ll take her myself. You should worry about packing up your things, and finding a new career. Don’t expect to find any more caretaker work from now.”

“Mrs. Beifong, I-I can’t afford to lose this job—”

“Get out of my sight!” Poppy’s shrill voice draws Toph’s attention for a moment. She’s on a sofa, she’s still at home—

“Mother,” she calls, and can hear Poppy shift towards her. “Mom, it was just an accident...”

Cool hands grip her forearm. “Don’t bother lying,” Poppy says quietly. “I thought we were doing well, but... We’ll fix this. We can still fix all of this.”

Despite the certainty in her mother’s tone, Toph doesn’t feel reassured. “It’s just a sprain, it’ll heal...”

“Rest, my lotus,” Her mother pushes her back against the cushions. “I know what this is Toph. I know. I don’t know how you’ve kept practicing with that quirk, but it doesn’t matter. You will be fine once we get to the hospital.”

She wants to argue. She has to. Her mother isn’t talking about her leg, but she’s so tired now.
“I’m so sorry, sweetheart.”

The next thing Toph remembers isn’t the pain in her leg, but her arm. Her arm feels wrong. Pinched. Burning. Toph thrashes, reaches through empty air and seizes an arm. A loud cry tells her she’s broken someone’s wrist, and then everything fades again.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t think it would go this far.”

The burning isn’t there anymore, but the memory of a fight tingles in her arms and face. Maybe she got punched. Maybe she punched someone. That voice…

“Toph, you sweet girl… I’m so sorry. It might hurt, but you can remember now.”

That voice again. This time when Toph hears it, there is no fuzziness, and no question as to who that voice belongs to. “A-Aiko,” Toph breathes. Her legs brush against the rough fabric of a bed. She twitches when a warm hand skates over her forearm. This can’t be right. She’s done with this. Aiko ended their sessions over a year ago, Toph had convinced them all—and yet.

And yet it feels as though Aiko’s been saying this for a while. As if Toph has been here many times. She can smell her therapist’s perfume and the scent of disinfectant in the air. “Where am I?” She asks, even though the answer is already creeping up into Toph’s mind, haunting her senses. The hum of fluorescent light. The subtle drip of an IV. The rumble of life, muted by walls, just outside the door.

“This has all gotten out of hand,” Aiko sighs instead, resting her elbow on Toph’s cot. She is in a cot. In a hospital of some kind. “And I’m responsible for a lot of it, aren’t I?”

Awareness returns with a rush of fear. “How did I get here? What did you do to me?” Toph demands, suddenly flexing her hands, her feet, straining her ears—there are tight straps over her limbs, and she can’t hear much past the room. “Where’s my mom?” They’re alone, and Toph can’t pretend any longer. “You messed with my head. My memories. Give it back.” Twinkletoes, where was Twinkletoes?

What a liar. She can’t remember shit.

Aiko gives a small huff. “I was trying to take away your willfulness, actually. For such a gentle-looking girl, you can be so stubborn.”

Toph is so sick of being told how she looks.

“I’ll show you stubborn,” Toph snarls, lurching off the bed threateningly. She doesn’t even given her injured knee a second thought, but it’s it a tight brace now. “I’ll show you you willful. Tell me what you’re doing to me or I’ll bust out of here before you can say ‘delicate’.”

And Aiko does not hesitate. Her heart holds a steady, quick beat. “They’ve been trying to remove your quirk.”

Toph stops breathing for a moment. She thinks the rest of the world stops for a moment, too.

“Th-that’s impossible.” She draws back. “You can’t do that.”

And yet.

All those strange words from her mother. The headaches. Her quirk acting strangely at the Rumble—
she blamed it on exhaustion, she thought she had just lost her focus, but there may have been
moments while Toph was in the ring and she couldn’t see.

“You did something to me,” she whispers her guess, barely remembering the pinch and burn of a
needle in her arm. “My mom knows about this already.”

“They know, yes,” Aiko murmurs. “And I’m supposed to make you forget about it each time.”

“Each time,” Toph repeats weakly. “It’s not working.” She would be dead by now if they actually
suppressed her powers. Fuck, she could’ve died in the ring. “Who’s doing all this?” Her parents are
rich, not supervillains. She would have noticed if they had been planning this all along. “Why are
they doing this?”

Aiko hesitates. “You don’t need to know—”

“Of course I need to know!” Toph all but screams. “Just tell me, you’ll wipe my brain after
anyway!” Not that she’ll let this go. Toph isn’t sure if they’ve had this conversation before but
fucking damn it, she can’t forget this. She can’t, she can’t—

“I can’t.” The woman sounds as if she’s suppressing a sob. “I can’t do that, Toph, because I-I’m not
going to keep wiping you.”

“What does that mean.”

Aiko grabs her hand suddenly, and Toph represses the urge to jerk away, instead squeezing the
hand, searching for a pulse point. “We only have so much time alone, sweetheart. When I joined, I
never thought I would be agreeing to the sort of experiments they do, the sort of company they keep.
Amon’s Vision used to be so much clearer, honey, a-and now it’s run by gangsters and villains.”

“You are a villain,” Toph says with vicious, unrepentant certainty. “You are a villain. You wiped my
mind. You wiped Endeavor’s mind, too,” she adds furiously, and the woman doesn’t deny it.

Aiko squeezes her hand. “I-I don’t regret that. There’s a lot of anger in that man’s head. I’m sorry I
had to wipe you from it, but it’s for the best.” She pauses. “Not even Endeavor could stop them,
Toph.”

“Amon’s Vision, that’s just a bunch of lunatics,” Toph says angrily. She knows that name, they were
the ones that tried to take her. It doesn’t make sense, not if her parents are involved, but when have
villains ever made any sense? “If you’re so scared of them, if you didn’t agree with them, you’d go
to the police and the heroes with everything you had.”

A pause. Aiko sighs.

“I never could get you to yield, Toph,” she says, and her tone is surprisingly tender. “I should’ve
known better. You are resilient. Your quirk is too. It’ll take years and years before they can really
transfer a power like yours. Earth is the element of substance, after all.”

It irks her, but the turn of phrase resonates with Toph. It’s a common saying among Avatar myths.
She’s heard Loban say it too, marveling at her strength. “You believe those stories, don’t you?”

She feels Aiko nod. “If you knew what I did, so would you. But I can’t do this anymore. You’re just
a child. You all are.” The fear in Aiko’s voice is real, at least. “My son is your age, Toph. I’ve
known enough minds to know I’m being irrational, but—whatever I may believe, this isn’t the way.
This can’t be our salvation. Perhaps none of us are worthy of it anymore…”
At this point her heartbeat picks up again, fluttering as her hysteria rises and she begins to ramble.

Toph can do nothing but listen.

Amon’s Vision. Quirk-suppressants. Debts, bribes, failed experiments. Nonsense, it’s all bullshit to her. “You weren’t supposed to be taken with those other children,” Aiko says at one point. “But once you were, once they saw your potential…Your parents had a choice, just like me. But I could never make the decision they did.”

That part, by far, pains her the most. Toph doesn’t have much left in her to worry about her parents anymore. She keeps listening, even though Aiko doesn’t make sense.

In the back of her mind, she recites a phone number.

“—But you… You, Toph. I’ve never met a bender like you. After seeing your mind, I don’t think there are many benders like you at all. And I think if I help you escape, I might escape this fate as well.”

“You’re crazy,” Toph mutters, raising her eyebrows. “But if you mean it, then untie me from this stupid bed.”

“Part of the quirk. But enough about me. We have to move quickly.” Is this Aiko lady even real? Toph’s head still feels a little light. “I’m real, Toph. I can help you, but no one can know.”

Toph shakes her head resolutely. “I can’t just escape these people. My parents put me here. You need to help me turn them in, get the heroes involved.” That’s what she should do. That’s the right thing.

“The Beifongs are a part of this,” Aiko agrees, already reaching over to remove the IV drip from her arm. “But it’s not just them.”

“Who else is there?” Toph asks, tugging her arms free. “What do you mean?”

“They’re everywhere,” Aiko whispers, gripping the metal edge of the cot tightly. “And they know everyone.”

The conviction in her voice is frightening. And Toph doesn’t think she made this decision out of nowhere. This lady saw something—something so bad it frightened the fanatic right out of her system. And she expects Toph to keep her head down and let them go?

“You have to do something. Don’t–don’t half-ass this stupid rescue attempt.” Toph regains her calm, mouth set into a deep frown.

The woman just sighs again. “I can’t let them get to my family, Toph. They would kill me, they’d take Hitoshi away. I can get you out, but nothing more.” But she’s told Toph a lot. Surely Toph could just go to the police anyway…?

If she wants to alert the authorities, she has to be sure Aiko won’t just mess up her mind on the way out.

She stands, and unbuckles the straps around Toph. Toph leaps to her feet, unsteady, and pushes Aiko’s hand away when she tries to help. “Don’t touch me. Don’t ever touch me,” Toph tells her. She wants to sound threatening, but thinks it comes out more like a plea. That’s fine by Toph.

Aiko lowers her hands away from Toph. “It’s not something I can stop on my own,” she answers,
melancholy and soft. Like her whole world is shattering.

No. Toph doesn’t want to pity her. Hell, she has her own crummy world to deal with. She ignores the woman’s odd shifts in mood to ask, “Is there a phone in here?”

“By the door,” Aiko pauses. “I’ll check if the coast is clear—you need to go left, and take the first right towards the east stairwell. It’ll take you to the back of the building, between the hospital and an office building. Get Hotshot to meet you there.”

Toph is alarmed that she even knows the name Hotshot, but now isn’t the time to question it. The lady’s a mindreader, after all. As Toph reaches for the phone, Aiko slips into the hallway—and is immediately called over by another nurse. Toph pauses to listen.

“Aiko-san! You’re needed downstairs, there’s a visitor for you.”

“Can it wait?” Aiko says distractedly. “I still have work to do.”

“I don’t think so, looks like an emergency!” The woman’s voice is a bit shrill, and Toph finds it strange.

“...Okay. But please don’t disturb my patient, I’ll be back soon.”

“Oh, no worries about that,” the woman calls back to Aiko as she leaves. “I’ve got my hands full with A-21, he’s showing a lot of activity today!”

Toph frowns. There were other people being experimented on right now, right here. How many? Was Toph the only one Aiko bothered caring about?

Her leg was still hurt, but not as badly. Her mind was clearer now, though she wasn’t sure if Aiko planned on fixing all the memories she messed with. Toph can’t just run away now. Not without knowing more.

She sets the phone back on its receiver and carefully stomps the ground, analysing the multi-leveled building for anything familiar. She can’t tell who’s on the cots scattered on this floor and the one below, but she can sense the doctors and nurses walking around. She can feel Aiko as she steps into the lobby.

And she can sense a huge, muscular man at the front desk, arms crossed and fuming.

Aiko stutters to a stop as it clicks in Toph’s mind. She can hear Aiko’s heart pounding erratically from a floor away.

“Endeavor?”

Fuyumi is expecting a storm to run through her home. She supposes that excessive cleaning is her way of battening down the hatches, at least spiritually.

It’s so exhausting to watch her father get upset. It hurts her heart more than anything else. It hurts more when he fights with Natsuo and Shouto, though she hasn’t seen that happen in year or two.

But anyway, back to her cleaning. If they’re lucky, Natsuo will still be hanging out at his friend’s house when their father gets home. Shouto... well, Shouto knows he must be upset. Fuyumi finishes with the kitchen, and goes to sort through the coat closet. She hasn’t tried to sort that closet in years,
it’s kind of scary how much of a mess it is. But Fuyumi can certainly lose herself in organizing it, and forget everything else she has to face, so it’s the perfect time to tackle that monstrosity.

And, just as she suspected, it takes ages to sort through. Soon, she’s surrounded by piles of clothes, and half the closet is still on hangars. There’s Natsuo’s jackets—the ones he’s too big for and can be given to Shouto, the ones he doesn’t wear and should be donated, the ones he does wear but only on special occasions…

Wow, why does Natsuo have so many coats?

Then Fuyumi frowns. Some of these were Touya’s. That’s even further up on her list of ‘Don’t Think About This’, so, back to sorting clothes.

It’s much easier to find your things if they weren’t so mixed up with everyone else’s jackets… Well, maybe not for her, since her jackets were mainly pastel colors… Hm, it’ll make more space if she takes out the winter coats, they don’t need those yet.

As she tugs a big raincoat out of the closet to straighten it, something clatters to the floor. Fuyumi blinks, reaching down for the plastic rectangle. She turns it over in her hands, and is thoroughly confused by the picture in the little frame. At first, it looked like Mom was in it, but the woman’s hair was lilac, not white. I think I’ve seen her before, Fuyumi wonders. But why is there a family portrait of her in the house? It was a woman, a man, and a young boy that looked very much like the two of them, with purple hair and violet eyes.

Just then, the front door unlocks. She looks up and Enji is there, slowly taking off his shoes in the mudroom. “I’m home,” he announces flatly.

Fuyumi looks back at the raincoat in her hands, and then the picture frame. “Dad? Do you know these people?”

Perhaps he hears something unusual in her voice, because Enji’s head snaps up. He looks kind of dazed rather than angry. Fuyumi’s sure he’s had a lot of bad press to deal with already, and doesn’t need to be bothered with this, but something about the picture frame unsettles her. She offers him the photo.

Enji’s eyes go from scrutinizing Fuyumi’s face to the mess of coats all over the entryway to skimming over the photo in her hand. “What the hell is all this?” He says, not quite reaching annoyed but surely on the way towards it. He reaches for the photo, nonplussed.

He blinks a few times. His face goes slack.

“Dad?” Her eyes fall to his hand, holding the picture frame. There’s a tremor running through his arm now. “Dad? Dad, I’m sorry, it just fell out of your coat?” But he doesn’t look mad. Fuyumi has no idea how to describe the expression on his face, only that it’s no expression at all. Like a trance. That worries Fuyumi even more. Tentatively, she puts a hand over his, lowering the photo from his face. “Are you okay?”

After another agonizing moment, his blue eyes focus on her again. And there’s no mistaking the look of anger on his face now. Fuyumi draws back, and Enji holds onto the photo.

“I’m fine, Fuyumi. I need to go out.” He steps back to the door, pulling his work cellphone out. “Thank you.”

Thank you? Now she’s sure something’s up. Her dad doesn’t thank anyone! “F-for what? Dad, are
“You sure you’re alright?”

“Take care of your brothers,” Endeavor calls back to her—and he’s in Endeavor mode now, she can see it in how he’s stomping around, how his fire-beard flares up every once in a while. This is so weird. He’s so weird, he never talks this much to Fuyumi. “I don’t know how long this will take.”

The door shuts firmly behind him.

Fuyumi stares, bewildered. She still has his raincoat in her other hand.

“So,” a voice says from behind her, making Fuyumi shriek in surprise. It’s only Shouto, of course, and he doesn’t look the least bit sorry for startling her. “Does that mean we can have soba for dinner?”

“Endeavor?” Detective Ito, dressed in nurse’s scrubs and a badge with the wrong name, stares at him in polite surprise. “What’s all this about?” She asks innocently.

But Enji knows better. Hell, she knows it too. Her face might look calm and innocent, but he can see the dawning dread in her violet eyes. His gaze darts from her to a few other nurses in the lobby. Some are busy, but others pause to gawk at the Number Two—Number Three hero in their hospital. Fuck, he wasn’t prepared for that little announcement. It rocked him to the core, to find out he had fallen a spot in the rankings. And then that picture—that *fucking* picture, he could barely remember taking it but he did—

Rain, humid and chilly at the same time. A woman chatting beside him. Tarrlok out of prison, paperwork in his hands. *It was a spur of the moment thing, amongst a million other thoughts in his head—there was a turned-over picture frame on Ito’s dash, and he swiped it because he was naturally suspicious and angry and confused at the burgeoning conspiracy in his hands.*

Two. Fucking. Years.

He’s sure Amon’s Vision has grown since then. He’s sure, because some of the so-called medical personnel around them are watching warily, anticipating something others know nothing about. He’s prepared for that.

“It’s over for you. If you come quietly, it’ll be better for everyone,” Endeavor says steadily, holding back the rage he feels for this backstabbing maniac.

The woman offers a pretty, bemused smile. “I don’t understand.”

“Don’t make this difficult, Shinsou. You know what this is.” She flinches at the sound of her real name, and Endeavor steps forward. “Umeko Shinsou. You’re under arrest. Don’t make me list all the damn charges.”

She steps back, her facade crumbling. It looks like she’s caving. But there’s a ‘doctor’ on her left that looks furious.

“I…” Umeko looks frantic now. Her eyes dart around, realizing what this is culminating into. “I’m sor—“

And then the lobby bursts into motion. A doctor charges from the front. A screech from his left indicates another target shooting out a stream of razor-sharp water his way.
Endeavor lifts a hand and everything burns.

People are screaming now. It's chaotic, but Toph has enough sense to know it's a fight between Endeavor, a handful of heroes, and a crazy bag of lunatics.

And Toph can't leave. How can she just run away now? But the faint hum from the phone line beckons her. She wants this to be over. She wants to see Hotshot and fight in a ring with Quillfish and the others. She wants to... to...

There's a tremendous crash from the floor below her, hard enough to knock her off her feet. All around, medical supplies are clattering and smashing and people are wailing—kids are crying. Kids are crying. Inasa is crying.

.

Toph bolts out of the room, staggering around other people. One or two of them address her—someone grabs her, and she bites their hand so hard she can taste blood. Inasa is crying. He's across the hallway. She can remember his so clearly now, she knows his voice better than anyone else's. The door is locked. Her knuckles bruise, split open, creak and snap alongside the metal lock—

"Twinkletoes?" She yells at the boy, who's tripping and gasping as he climbs off a cot.

He's on the floor, and makes an awful wailing sound. "Toph?!" He chokes out, and she wraps herself around him, tugging him to his feet. "S'that you? What—it hurts—"

Inasa is too big for her to carry, but she hugs him and drags him towards the door anyway. "We gotta go, they're fighting downstairs!" Not that Toph knows where they'll go, or who can even be trusted. Her stomach churns in unease, wondering how Twinkletoes could've gotten stuck in this place too. Wondering what they've done to him.

"You're here," he wheezes, and man is he out of it. They're both out of it. Her hands hurt like a bitch, her leg does too. "You're—here?"

"No shit, Inasa, now help me out and stand up."

It's a struggle. She's never felt so exhausted before, and Inasa's heartbeat is sluggish and freaking her the hell out. But he stands up, breathing heavily, and they shuffle into the hallway again. And then they're immediately spotted by a nurse.

"What the fu—stop! You two!" She shouts, garnering the attention of two others. Toph lets go of Inasa to stomp on the ground, uncaring of the delicate tiled floor, and punches out the first nurse without blinking an eye.

Holy moly does it hurt, though. Another person yanks her by the hair, and she cries out—Inasa yells too, being dragged away by the other person. "Let me go!" Toph screams, twisting around his grip. She claws at the man, catching his cheek, and then there's a sharp pain across her face as he backhands her.

"Toph!" Inasa gasps, "No, stop it! Stop it—"and then he abruptly goes quiet.
The man holding Toph staggers backwards. The woman holding Inasa freezes. "No way..." she mutters, teeming with excitement.

A rush of wind brushes Toph's face, and the whole building seems to be trembling. Rattling. She can hear pipes screeching in the walls, on top of the frenzied fight happening on the floor below them. The wind whips past Toph suddenly, and the two adults are blow off their feet. One crashes into a wall and moans. The other hits an elevator and crumples, silent. Toph tries to feel for Inasa, but he's not there. The wind blows harder, circling around where Inasa once stood.

"Twinkletoes?" she calls to him, confused.

When Inasa finally speaks, it's with a voice that sounds like a hundred people at once. It's a bellow of anger and power that shakes Toph to her bones. It's the voice of something much more than Inasa.

"ALL OF YOU—WILL BE STOPPED!"

Chapter End Notes

Well, you got what you asked for. Toph isn't under any mind control anymore. She's got a lot more to deal with now, though.
“Reports are flooding in as Cato Hospital, a privately owned medical facility in the Saitama prefecture, continues to be evacuated by local authorities. According to some sources, the private hospital was the center of a massive conspiracy, spanning years and several cultist organizations, the most prominent of which was thought to be expunged over five years ago—Amon’s Vision, the fanatic-turned-terrorist-cell many still remember as being responsible for devastating attacks in Japan and many other mainland Asian nations....

“...We’re receiving footage now of Endeavor, the Flame Hero, who lead the raid. Questions are already stirring as people wonder about the judgement to enter the hospital so brazenly, as it’s unclear what methods were used in securing any civilians and patients that may have been caught in the crossfire. Still, this is what the Flame Hero had to say when our crew member on the scene questioned him:”

The screen flips to shakier footage, a blue-haired man holding a microphone up to reach Endeavor’s face. The hero, carrying two small figures, scowls, and rears back so the camera can’t see the victims clearly.

“Endeavor! Endeavor, were you the one to recommend a raid of this proportion on such short notice? How did you find out that AV was still active, despite its leader being put away years ago? What caused the explosion on the second floor that destabilized the whole building?”

“Get out of the way,” Endeavor growls, shaking with exhaustion or anger. “For Kami’s sake, I’m in the middle of a rescue here. The Hero’s Association will hold a press conference later.”

“Who are those children? Are these patients caught in the crossfire, or were they part of the cult —?”

Endeavor shuffles the kids so he can hold them with one hand, muttering a litany of censored curses. The footage is blurry, but the victims are clearly young children. With the other hand blazing, Endeavor reaches towards the camera and the footage cuts off with a fizzle.

Hitoshi flicks to the next channel, and then the next, but it’s all the same for another hour until new information is dispensed—the list of villains captured and killed.
A part of him already knew it, though.

“Among the dead is one of the most infamous villains of the decade, Puppetmaster. Though known by many aliases, as her quirk allows her to manipulate the thoughts and memories of those around her, it was Endeavor that finally uncovered Puppetmaster’s legal name: Umeko Shinsou. In the firefight that followed The Flame Hero’s confrontation with AV, Puppetmaster and several other high-ranking members of AV were killed—”

He knew it the moment she died, because it was like a fog lifting in the distance. Hitoshi began to wonder when Mom would be home, like he’s done a million times—but this time he wondered what she was doing, what kind of work she did, because he couldn’t for the life of him remember what her job was.

The TV clicks off. He drops the remote aside, and a smoky gray paw immediately pounces on his free hand. Hitoshi looks down at the cat blankly, automatically going to pet her glossy fur. He isn’t sure what’s supposed to happen next.

“Hitoshi,” his father calls. His voice is strained, but he crouches by Hitoshi to speak softly. “Come put on your coat, we need to go to the police station.” The door’s already open, and beyond it he can see two uniformed officers waiting.

Dad looks tired. More than usual. Besides that, he doesn’t give anything away. Hitoshi swallows the lump in his throat long enough to ask in an uneasy whisper, “Did you know?”

He’s greeted with a blank, silent stare. “Let’s go, Hitoshi,” Dad repeats more firmly. “Please.”

It’s in the early hours of the next day that Shouto finally hears the front door open, and someone shuffling into the house. He’s awake though, having been abruptly startled by his own memory sometime that evening and unable to shake the feeling of dread all night. He has no idea why he’s suddenly thinking about the time he was kidnapped, or the two kids that he met that day—but it’s been two years since then, so why didn’t he think of them sooner?

Something feels wrong about it, and when he tried explaining it to Fuyumi she just frowned in worry and told him to wait for Dad to come back.

So he waits. And waits. And waits. Shouto doesn’t bother checking the news, because his old man is always in the news anyway, and the last time he checked it, it was a bunch of talk shows talking about the Number Three ranking. But maybe he should’ve been checking the news.

That way, he wouldn’t have been so shocked when Endeavor finally did get home—him, and a very familiar girl.

“Toph?” Shouto examines the girl in confusion, standing up from the kitchen stool he’s been waiting at. His father flicks on the lights, frowning at Shouto. Toph is limping, wearing grey and white sweats that swamp her figure and a black brace over one knee.

“What are you doing up?” Endeavor grumbles, but Shouto ignores him, getting a closer look at the girl.

“I remember you. Are you okay?” Shouto asks bluntly, because she looks stiff and uncomfortable and tired as Endeavor.

She opens her mouth, only to close it and bite her lip. “Shouto…” she sniffs, and there’s a tear running down her face now.
Alarmed, Shouto looks to Endeavor, but he resembles an exhausted deer in headlights. Endeavor raises a hand and makes a quick gesture towards Toph, mouthing the words ‘Do something’.

Really? That’s all you can think of? Shouto gives his father a dark, disdainful look before stepping towards Toph and pulling her into a tentative hug. She returns it with full-force, squeezing the living daylights out of him, but her sobbing ends pretty quickly.

“I missed you,” she says into his t-shirt. “Everyone forgot, didn’t they?”

Oh. Well, things are beginning to make more sense now, at least. “I missed you too,” Shouto responds obediently, but it’s also the truth. “Even if I didn’t remember, it felt like something was missing,” he admits softly. She squeezes him harder, but it doesn’t bother him. There’s a question on the tip of his tongue, about the other missing piece, but Shouto finds himself scared of what the answer could be about Inasa Yoarashi.

He hears footsteps on the staircase, and Natsuo appears, yawning loudly and rocking some wild bedhead. “What’s all the noise, huh? Oh.” He blinks at the scene before him, and Dad sighs. “Um…?”

“Go back to bed, Natsuo. Shouto, you too. We can talk about this in the morning.” Enji decides, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “This is Toph, she’ll be staying with us until the paperwork goes through for her new guardians.”

Shouto is still young, but he can tell that this is far different from the usual rescue work Endeavor does. There has never been cause for the pro hero to volunteer his own home to a victim, and even if there was, Endeavor wouldn’t be the first choice for any guardianship role. Despite being in the Top Ten for most of his career, Shouto’s family has never been a part of Endeavor’s spotlight, before or after Mom was sent away.

But one look at the old man and Shouto understands. He’s never seen Endeavor look so raw and unsettled before. Something went wrong during that kidnapping case two years ago, and Endeavor felt responsible for it. Shouto doesn’t let go of Toph.

“Where’s she going to sleep, then?” Natsuo cuts through the silence, and there’s a laser-sharp focus to the gaze he settles on Endeavor.

For a moment, it looks like physical pain flashes across the hero’s face, but it’s gone even quicker than it came. He looks down, beginning to pull off his jacket and undo the highest button on his rumpled dress shirt. The only reason he’d have changed clothes in the middle of the night would have to be for a press conference, and Shouto makes note to find it online tomorrow. “We have an empty room, don’t we?” Endeavor says finally.

That’s true enough. Shout has to admit, he hasn’t thought much of the room, nor the person that used to live with them. He left them, after all.

A variety of emotions flicker across Natsuo’s face, before he settles on forced calm. “I don’t think that’s right,” he replies tersely.

Enji blinks up at Natsuo, annoyance emerging in his eyes, but Shouto cuts in before they can start anything. “Let’s put another futon in my room, then,” he decides, leaving no room for discussion. That’s how Fuyumi often cools down the room, though her track record of successfully doing so isn’t the greatest.

Luckily for Shouto, it’s three in the morning and his earthbending friend—and she is his friend, he knows it in his bones even if they only had a handful of hours to know each other—is still clinging to
him like a baby koala bear. There’s nothing left in any of them to argue further, not when everyone can feel the gravity of the situation in the air. Shouto doesn’t even know what happened, but it feels wrong to snap at each other right now. Natsuo and Enji slump like puppets with their strings cut, and murmur their acquiescence.

“I’ll get the futon,” Natsuo volunteers.

“I’ll get the sheets… Where the hell do we keep the sheets?” Enji grumbles. “Do we even have sheets…” he mumbles.

Natsuo rolls his eyes. “Go to bed, Number Three, I’ll handle this shit.”

Enji doesn’t even try to snap at him. He just shuffles upstairs in silence.

If you’re wondering, the answer is no.

Enji Todoroki has no idea what he’s doing.

The next morning he wakes up and checks his phone for any updates on the Yoarashi boy or the Water Hose team, whom he’s recommended for Toph’s new guardianship, but there’s nothing. When he reaches the kitchen, later than he normally would for breakfast, he comes across all the kids at once and it’s really, really too early for this.

Fuyumi, the goddamn godsend, is making omelets. There’s already coffee made—though it looks like Natsuo decided to take most of it, and since when is he even old enough to like that stuff?—and the earth girl and Shouto are arguing over… Enji doesn’t know, rice versus rice noodles. Nonsense.

At least no one’s crying their eyes out anymore, he knew that earth girl was made of tougher stuff. She had been so meek the night before while giving her account.

“Morning, Dad,” his daughter greets him with a small, wary smile. Her eyes keep darting over to Toph and Shouto, but he assumes someone filled her in before he got up. “Your omelet is next—or do you want omurice? I can do that too—”

He quickly waves off her incoming rambling. “Turn off the stove, sit down. I said I’d talk about the situation, but I’m only doing it once.”

When Fuyumi’s settled between her brothers, Enji crosses his arms. The three Todorokis look up at him expectantly with a series of gray and blue eyes, while Toph pushes rice around on her plate, starkly different with jet black hair and wearing a paisley shirt from Fuyumi. He can tell by the solemn look on his youngest son’s face that he already knows most of the story, but Enji ought to get them all on the same page. No point in dragging this out.

“When Toph and Shouto were kidnapped, the case was wrongfully closed. The villain group responsible kept to the shadows with the help of a mind-control quirk. That was the woman you saw in the photo,” He nods to his daughter, who looks startled at being addressed. “They were experimenting with elemental quirk users, mainly by drawing blood and testing drugs without the user’s knowledge in order to give and take quirks from them.”

“Except for Inasa,” Toph interrupts him flatly, reaching for a glass of water.

“Yes,” Enji continues. “In some cases, victims were kept for weeks at a time for testing, still without anyone noticing any issues. The whole hospital was part of the conspiracy, though not everyone inside knew it. Toph’s parents were involved with the organization, and they were especially
persistent in keeping her from using her quirk or speaking of the kidnapping. But that’s over now. The victims we found have been monitored for any drugs in their system, and are being released to their families as we speak. I haven’t heard any updates on your friend yet,” he adds, seeing the girl’s mouth open to ask.

But that’s not enough to sate her, and she glares into empty space. “Inasa’s gotta be fine by now, the doctors said he just overused his quirk. There’s no reason to keep him there any longer.”

Well, at least she’s back to arguing with him. For a while it seemed like she would never speak again. “We’re not sure what they did to him. We know that he demolished the second floor of the hospital, but he has no recollection of how, and we have no live witnesses to—”

“I was there, you ignorant dumpster fire!” Toph retorts, turning to face him properly (and making Enji retract all previous concerns for her). “There wasn’t anything unusual or unnatural about it! He lashed out with his air quirk, he was scared and hurt and he doesn’t deserve to be treated like a science experiment because you dunderheads can’t take my word seriously!”

“Be quiet,” Enji barks, already feeling a headache forming. “The boy will be monitored for a while longer, and then his parents can take him home. Stop jumping to conclusions, girl.”

“Don’t call me girl,” she says shrilly. She snaps a finger out towards him, pointing right between his eyes. “I have a name, and you better not fucking forget it again!” Ah fuck, her eyes are all watery again. “Toph Beifong! Inasa Yoarashi! What the hell have you been doing all this time, you flaming cheeto?!”

He bats her hand out of his face, nostrils flaring. “Stop interrupting me, you’re being childish,” he snaps, inwardly wondering how long she’s been building up the fire insults for.

“I am a child!” She shrieks, pushing herself to her feet. “So why was I the one to find Twinkletoes? Why was I the one that had to deal with that heartless bitch, Shinsou, ripping away anything that still mattered to me, while you and the heroes wandered around like headless chickens for two years?!”

For once, Enji is speechless. He searches her livid face for some sort of answer, and finds none. While she has every right to be angry, Enji can’t fathom why it’d be directed solely at him when she knows he was brainwashed too. They were all caught off-guard, and there hadn’t been a way to get her the help she needed while Puppetmaster and the other leaders of AV were pulling strings alongside her own parents.

Ah. The Beifongs.

Enji looks at Toph with new eyes. She had been resisting for two years just for the right to use her quirk, and her parents were to blame for it. All that anger, anger that Enji is intimately familiar with, and he was standing in front of her, recounting the whole mess to her face. It’s not like she’ll have the opportunity to confront her folks any time soon, after all.

He always thought her temperament resembled his own. And there’s only one outlet for himself that works. Enji takes a deep breath, putting his hands on his hips. “That doesn’t matter now. You still have your quirk, don’t you?”

The turn in conversation throws her, but she’s no less enraged when she spits back, “You bet your flame-beard I do!”

“Follow me,” he says curtly, and without waiting for an answer, makes his way to the spacious courtyard at the center of the house. He strides over to the far side of the complex, and the girl comes
to a stop at the other end, already understanding what he’s offering. “Show me, Toph.”

“Dad,” Natsuo hisses to him, as if no one else will hear it, “What the hell are you doing? She’s nine!”

“Shouto’s sparred with me plenty of times,” Enji addresses all of them at once. Fuyumi is immensely uncomfortable, and Shouto looks vaguely concerned, but Toph is still standing with a menacing scowl on her face. He wouldn’t do this out in the open yard with Shouto, but it’s no different than how he trains his son. “She’ll be fine.”

Thanks to what Shinsou did to him, he isn’t concerned for Toph, and neither should any of them.

“That’s not an excuse either!” Natsuo exclaims, glaring between the two of them. “This is not the way to—”

Before he can even finish the sentence, Toph punches a solid brick larger than her head straight for Enji, and he breaks cleanly through it with a burst of flames. The force of it, however, makes him stumble back farther than he expected. He’ll have to put more power into his moves.

He looks back at Toph, who’s already shifted into a fighting stance. “Rules?” She prompts him bleakly.

“Keep it contained. It ends when you give up.” Enji expects the next attack, leaping aside from the earthen pillars jutting up around him. He takes a stride closer and a wall erupts right in front of his feet, but he’s already rearing back to pummel through it.

The wall crumbles easily, and as he draws a fist back he can see Toph shifting again, but there’s no new attack—save for the squeeze of gravel over his arm, all remnants of the thin wall, snuffing out his flames. Containment. A good move against an emitter like himself. Enji grunts, dragging his free hand over the stone to release himself, and a burst of dust explodes around him, blocking his view. Two more stones sail towards him, and he dodges one and deflects the other—and gets walloped in the back when she pulls back on the first rock he dodged.

He foregoes his arm to clear the air forcefully, driving Toph to protect herself with another stone wall against the expanding fire, and takes a moment to ask, “Have you fought against fire before?”

“Don’t jump to conclusions!” She sneers right back. Sheaths of rock jet towards him from her shield, and Enji knocks each one aside, striding even closer. The rocks bleed away from his hand as his flames reignite, and he punches through the last of her defense while she’s still behind it, throwing her off her feet and flat on her back.

“Get up. You can handle this,” he goads.

With a snarl, she shoves herself back up and makes a sweeping arc with her arms, throwing all the rubble straight towards Enji from all angles. “I can handle anything, no thanks to you!”

“I never suggested otherwise.”

It’s like the rubble is magnetized to him, and a particularly large rock smacks his ear before he centers himself and expels them all with another forceful burst of fire. “I never suggested otherwise.” He catches another huge brick coming for his chest, exploding it to bits with both hands.

This would end a lot quicker if he actually attacked her indiscriminately, but that wouldn’t solve anything. She’s panting now, every move sloppier and more powerful than the last, but she’s not trying very hard to subdue him. Enji’s pretty certain, for once in his life, that he can read this kid like a book. This is a tantrum.
“Shinsou is dead, Toph, she can’t hurt anyone anymore.” He tells her out of the blue.

“Wha—I know that!” Another volley of rocks. Well, he’s gotten tired of looking at the same old courtyard anyway. He vaporizes the rocks without a second thought, marching closer.

“Inasa will be fine, he’s not going to disappear,” Enji adds.

“I know!” She lifts a hand again but Enji reaches her first, twisting the arm behind her back and pinning her to the ground in one smooth motion.

“Your parents can’t hurt anyone either,” Enji continues resolutely, crouched beside her. She struggles, and it doesn’t take much more pressure for her to realize it’s entirely futile against someone his size.

He’s close enough to see tears glimmering underneath her long bangs. “You can’t promise that,” she mutters, jutting her chin upward—and sending a series of pillars into his side to knock him away.

The pillars aren’t strong enough to push him, though. It only makes Enji buckle. He places his free hand against her head to prevent another attack. Her leg is still injured, so she won’t be trying to move it as much. “I can promise it because they’re facing charges now. They will see justice. You don’t have to see them ever again if you don’t want to.”

“That’s even shittier,” she gripes, letting her head press against the stone. “They’re my parents! Why did they try so hard to change me?! They’re not supposed to get taken away! They’re—they’re supposed to do better than that!”

“Having an answer won’t change what happened, kid.” Though in all likelihood the Beifongs won’t face much prison time, if any at all, and it would be Toph that gets taken away from them for negligence. “No point crying a river over them.”

“I’m not crying!” But it’s pretty obvious she is doing just that, and Toph grows silent, breathing heavily as more tears track down her cheeks. Then she squirms. “Get off me,” she demands.

Enji shakes his head. “I told you the rules. Give up.”

“I don’t give up!” She declares angrily.

“That’s a good mindset for a hero,” He answers evenly. “But you need to give up for now.” Give up on your parents is what he really wants to say, but Enji is hyper-aware of his own kids watching this debacle, and he’s done enough bullshit already to drive one out of their home. “I’m not the one you’re mad at anyway.”

Toph is silent again, forehead pushed against the ground and eyes squeezed shut.

“None of it is fair, Toph. But this is pointless.”

And she caves. “...I yield.”

He releases her immediately, and she pushes herself onto hands and knees. Finally, his kids enter the ruined courtyard, wide-eyed. Fuyumi crouches at Toph’s side, rubbing her shoulder silently. Natsuo walks away, and that stings more than the boulder Toph threw at his back.

Shouto steps up to Enji, mismatched eyes boring into him. “I’m sorry,” Enji says belatedly, eyes darting between Fuyumi and Shouto. “I know you liked the courtyard how it was,” he adds, though that isn’t what he feels sorry about at all. He glances around the destruction, frowning at the damaged
flower beds. He’s certain there had been a type of flower grown here that Fuyumi and Rei liked.

“Hey,” Natsuo calls from the edge of the yard, settling Enji with an even, indifferent look. “Are we gonna finish breakfast or what?”

It wasn’t much in the end, the manipulation Shinsou used on Enji. Besides altering the case history for AV, all she had to do was make him relive Touya’s last training lesson over and over again, unable to dismiss the memory as anything other than his own fault. She might be gone, but he won’t shake the vile thought for a very long time. It changed him. But Enji doesn’t want to think that anything good came from Shinsou’s crimes, and he’ll never acknowledge her influence at all.

Hell, he even dropped a rank because of her. And somehow, he feels stronger than ever.

When Toph finally gets to see him at the hospital, Inasa grins hard enough for Toph to hear it in his voice. “You’re back! I missed you so much, you look different now!”

She arches an eyebrow, skeptical. “C’mon Airhead, I don’t look that different.”

“You’re smiling now,” he points out cheerfully, swinging his legs over the edge of his cot. “And you did get a little taller, I swear!”

She is smiling, she hadn’t even realized it. Toph punches his shoulder lightly. “Ouch!” Inasa exclaims, undeterred. “See? Y’got stronger too!”

“So have you,” She replies, leaning on the bed. He’s pretty much ready to leave the hospital, with no more monitors or needles poking him. “Quit growing, would ya? You’re stupid tall as is.”

He laughs, though it doesn’t have the same ring as before. “I can’t help it! Mom says I could get as big as Endeavor if I keep eating the way I do!”

Toph hums, shaking her head. “Endeavor says I’m going to be living with the Water Hose team now,” she says suddenly.

Inasa pauses in surprise. “Well that’s awesome, Toph! You’re part of a hero family now!”

She picks at her fingernails. “But I don’t want another family.”

He’s quiet, digesting her words thoughtfully. “I don’t think they’ll mind that.”

“But I mind it,” Toph huffs, crossing her arms. “Why’d it have to be them, huh? Why’d I have to be born to a family of evil jerks?”

He leans against her side. “There isn’t a reason. You didn’t choose this, neither did I. I mean—” he sucks in a wavering breath, “I didn’t ask for it, but they did something to my quirk.”

Outside, Toph can hear the murmur of the Yoarashis talking to Endeavor and a physician. She lowers her voice to ask, “Did they really do it? Make you into the…”

He exhales a huge gust a wind, enough to rustle the blinds and tangle up Toph’s bangs. “There’s no such thing. You can’t just make one.” He skirts around using the word. “Nobody knows what’s changed. And I’m not about to test out any earthbending, that’s for sure.” He shakes his head briskly. “But that’s not the point. Point is—is—okay, um. We don’t have a lot of choices,” he throws up his hands. “Family, crazy villains, yada yada. But we’re friends. We chose that part. So that’s the part I care about. That’s the—that’s what still counts. I could still remember you, even when I didn’t
think I did.”

Of course, Toph already knew they were friends. Knew they’d always be friends. But finally being next to him, hearing him say—it’s a lot more relieving than she expected. It felt good when Shouto told her too. “You remember what we promised each other, right?”

He wraps an arm around her, giving a quick squeeze. “We’re gonna be the greatest heroes together. See? That’s our choice too. Nothing else matters as much as that.”

“Okay,” Toph agrees, leaning into his hug for a second longer. Then she pushes him away with a huff. “Alright, enough mushy stuff!” Inasa chuckles. “C’mon Twinkletoes, let’s get out of this stuffy hospital.”

“No arguments here!” Inasa agrees, hopping off the bed.

His feet hit the ground with more force than usual, firm and solidly against the tiles. Toph knows he just claimed that he doesn’t know what the experiments actually did to his quirk, but to her it feels like...

Well. They can talk about it another day. They have time, now.

Toph moves in with Miyuki and Kano Izumi, otherwise known as the Water Hose duo, three days later. They’re a young and cheerful couple, and Toph is fine with living with them under the circumstances that she gets to stay in contact with Inasa’s and Shouto’s families.

“We’ll make sure they get plenty of playdates!” Mrs. Water Hose exclaims, beaming at Enji and Shouto. “It might take time before Toph makes any new friends, so it’s good to know she can still rely on the Todorokis!”

Man, Miyuki can be so sugary-sweet sometimes that it makes Toph wanna barf. She drags a hand over her face, embarrassed for herself and for the Todorokis.

“Right,” Endeavor agrees with palpable sarcasm. “Playdates.” She thinks he might be flaring his nostrils too, like a crotchety dragon.

“I still wanna hang out,” Toph puts in her stubborn two cents as they say their goodbyes. “Shouto’s my friend. And Natsuo, he’s funny.”

“Hey, what about me?” Fuyumi complains, twirling a finger around a strip of red hair. “I thought we were getting along fine!”

Toph pouts. “You keep lecturing me. I don’t need another preppy professor-type bossin’ me around!”

“We’ll try to keep in touch,” Endeavor compromises, ignoring her.

“You’d better!” Miyuki laughs. “You’ve got loads more practice than us at this!”

They part ways, and it doesn’t feel nearly as awful as it used to. Natsuo voiced his doubts earlier about Endeavor actually allowing Shouto to quit training long enough to play with friends, but Fuyumi insisted she’d make it happen. And the Izumis seemed eager to let her see Shouto whenever they had the time for it.

Besides, Toph knows where the Todorokis live now. Endeavor might not know it yet, but he
SIX MONTHS LATER

Hitoshi is half-asleep on the train, already exhausted at the thought of facing more stares and whispers about his name at his new school, when things go to shit. By shit, he means that the train screeches to an abrupt stop, and he yelps “Shit!” when his forehead smacks painfully into the metal pole he was holding for support and everyone in the train is jerked forward.

There’s a gasp of surprise to his left, and Hitoshi reacts instinctually to stop the girl next to him from toppling to the ground. She grabs his arm back, steadying herself against the metal pole, and her head whips around in bewilderment.

_I think she’s blind_, Hitoshi notes absently, rubbing his head. She doesn’t have a cane or anything, but her eyes are pale green and unfocused. “You alright?” He grumbles.

“Yeah,” she says over the growing murmur of the crowded train car. People are beginning to panic. “How’s your head?”

“I’m awake now,” Hitoshi answers sourly, not bothering to ask how she knew when the sound his head made against the metal pole was quite clear. She responds with a brief grin. He takes a moment to look at the uniform she’s in, beneath the woolen coat she’s wearing. “Do you go to Okubo?” He asks suddenly.

“Yeah?” She says blankly. “Why?”

“I... go there too,” Hitoshi explains haltingly. “You’re wearing the same uniform as me.”

She looks surprised for a moment, and then she gives a sly grin and teases, “Is that so? Y’mean you’re wearing a dumb skirt too?”

He snorts. So she is blind, then. “Of course I am. Stockings and all.”

She snickers, a wide smile crossing her face. “Do you think we’ll...” but her question trails off, and her head cocks to the side. Then her eyes widen, and he’s yanked down by the shoulder.

“What—?”

There’s an awful, rumbling, screeching, tearing noise above them. The windows shatter. There’s a light breeze through the train car that wasn’t there before. When Hitoshi opens his eyes, the ceiling’s gone. In the distance, there’s a seventy-story monster flinging the metal roof of the train at a building. He blinks slowly at the sight. “Am I still sleeping?”

There’s a tug at his arm. The girl’s eyes are still unfocused, but there’s urgency in her expression. “We have to move, Snoozles!”

He stumbles after her as she pushes towards the exit. “Snoozles?” He repeats, affronted, but she doesn’t respond.

Someone’s already gotten the door opened but people are swarming to get out. Hitoshi shifts his arm so he’s holding the girl’s hand more securely, and after a few suffocating, freaking-out-just-a-little moments, they’re free from sweaty businessmen and breathing fresh air. Hitoshi takes the time to savor the lack of human stench and vow to take his bike out more often to appreciate how clean the air can be.
He glances at the blind girl, still holding his hand. Her face is tilted towards the battle, quietly focused on the distance roars. “I think the whole city’s being shut down for this,” Hitoshi catches her attention, eyeing the traffic jams and police barricades ahead. They walk away from the tracks, onto the grass through a side exit along with the other passengers. There’s a few policemen ordering some people into evacuation points, but they’re far enough from the fight that things aren’t too hectic.

“So, no school then?” She quips lightly, releasing his hand.

“Probably not,” Hitoshi muses. However, as much as he was dreading school, he doesn’t want to trek back home to an empty apartment either. He scuffs his shoe on the ground idly, debating the best course of action.

A phone buzzes next to him, and he watches the blind girl answer it. “Hey Izumi-san. No, the trains were stopped before I could get there. I’m with another student. Uh…” she pauses for a moment, “We’re near Kouta’s daycare, I can walk from—no I’m not staying at the daycare, that’s so lame. I’ll go home. Good luck.” She ends the call and nudges Hitoshi. “Y’got somewhere to be? Let’s get food.”

Surprised by the offer, Hitoshi blinks down at the girl. She seems about the same age as him, though quite short in comparison and apparently old enough to carry a cellphone. Her hair is jet black and combed into a sleek bun, held back with a green headband with tiny pom-poms on either side. Her face is dainty and porcelain white, and there’s a tentative smile on her face. She’s… delicate. She’s the last person he’d expect to be so calm in a huge villain attack, and yet there she is, waiting patiently for an answer while he can hear a full grown man sobbing hysterically under one of those emergency blankets.

“Don’t you need to get home?” He hedges. Is it that easy for her to trust him, because he told her they go to the same school?

She shrugs. “Yeah, but no one’s gonna be home till this evening. What about you?”

“My dad’s working all day,” he admits, scratching the back of his head. Man, he couldn’t get a comb through his hair this morning, but at least this girl won’t notice that. “I don’t have much money on me, though.”

“I can pay for you,” she offers hopefully. “And if you wanna pay me back, well, I could always hunt you down at school.” Her smile turns a little vicious at that.

Hitoshi raises an eyebrow at her. “Jeez, you sound like a gangster,” he mocks her, but the offer is tempting. What else is he supposed to do all day, wait around in a safe zone? Plus, what’s he gonna do when she asks for his name, and then recognizes the surname of a recently-killed villain? What if she just gets spooked and runs away? What if she goes back to class tomorrow and spreads more rumors about the villain kid with a brainwashing quirk?

“Ugh, you’re taking too long, Slowpoke,” the girl exclaims, hooking her arm around his and jerking him forward. He almost loses his footing, she’s so forceful. “I can’t bum around all day, let’s go!”

Hitoshi doesn’t argue.

It takes a week before Toph realizes who Snoozles is. He’s quiet around her, doesn’t acknowledge her at school—they’re in different classes, and Toph is busy enough trying to do well for once in class. They hang out after class, by the park or just sitting next to each other on the train ride home, because they're some of the few younger students that travel on their own. It just never came up,
asking more about each other. Snoozles is snarkier than her, and there’s a billion other things they can talk about beside themselves.

It’s the whispers that give it away. First, it’s the mention of ‘Shinsou’ around the classroom, the villain’s kid. Which made Toph feel weird, but she wouldn’t go out of her way to find him. Endeavor kept her and Twinkletoes out of the news coverage, so no one knew she had any involvement with the Cato Hospital raid. The Beifong family was known among the elite students of Soumei, but Okubo Elementary was a public school. No one paid her more attention than she wanted, and she was grateful to the Izumi family for choosing the place.

Then she overhears a few people goading Snoozles into using his power, asking him to do random shit. “Careful, don’t answer him! You never know when he might brainwash ya!”

Her stomach churns unpleasantly. Someone in her class asks if she’s alright because her face goes pale. It’s been months since she moved in with the Izumis, and they’re quite kind. If she asked to switch schools it wouldn’t be a big deal to them. But that’s stupid. It’s just a stupid coincidence that she met Snoozles to begin with.

Still, she doesn’t make an effort to find him on the train that day. But after two stops she can hear him shuffle over to stand near the same exit as her. “There you are,” he says lightly, elbowing her. “You’re so short, it took me ages to find you.”

“Ha, ha,” she rolls her eyes, but then she doesn’t know what else to say. She just chews on her lip. Snoozles isn’t anything to be scared of. He’s a doofus. He likes cats. He’s never doubted her abilities because she’s blind. He’s never said a thing about her blindness, and that means a lot to Toph.

He shifts beside her. “You found out,” he says flatly, but he’s rigid as a board, giving away how apprehensive he must feel.

“Is it that obvious?” Toph mumbles, picking at the hem of her jacket. “Yeah, I overheard some people at school.”

Snoozles seems to sink in on himself. She can hear his heart rate pick up too. “I—I figured this would happen. You don’t have to worry about my quirk, I would never use it on you or anyone for fun—”

“I don’t care about your quirk,” Toph interjects, her brow furrowed in thought. She really doesn’t. Even if he has a brainwashing quirk, he’s never done anything to make her think he’d use it now. “It’s just…”

“Just what?” He asks tersely. “Just that I might use it? Just that my family’s already got a shitty record, so you can’t be too cautious around me?”

“No, shut up,” Toph snaps, turning to him. “I mean…” No, she can’t tell him she was one of Puppetmaster’s victims. She hasn’t told anyone since switching to Okubo. Toph huffs, annoyed at herself. The train slows, and the exits slide open to Snoozles’s stop.

“Forget it,” he mutters, moving to leave. “I won’t bother you.”

Toph’s mouth is open, but no words come out. She snaps her jaw shut with a frustrated growl, and marches off the train just behind him. “Hey!” she barks, catching him by the sleeve. “That’s not what I meant.”

He snatches his arm back. “Whatever. I get it.”
“No you don’t,” she argues right back. “Stop jumping to conclusions.”

“What, y’need me to brainwash someone for you? I don’t do that either—”

She punches him in the arm, hard. “No!”

“Ow, what the heck was that for?!?”

“Stop being dramatic, I said I didn’t care about your quirk!” Toph shouts. She can feel the travelers around them pause and murmur at the sight of them. “Would you just—come on, let’s go to the bike trail,” Toph decides, gripping him firmly by the sleeve of his jacket.

“Why?” Shinsou demands suspiciously. “Maybe I don’t want to!”

“Cry me a river, you big baby!” She retaliates, tugging harder. “We’re going!”

He sighs, and follows.

By the time they reach the trail, Shinsou’s heart has slowed considerably, but he’s still tense and quiet. Toph isn’t dragging him anymore, and crosses her arms when she faces him.

“So.”

“So,” he repeats dryly, crossing his arms as well.

“I think—I think we should actually tell each other who we are, now.” Toph starts slowly.

He scoffs, kicking a few rocks off the path and leaning against the trunk of a large tree. “Sure thing. I’m Hitoshi Shinsou, son of Umeko Shinsou the freaking Puppetmaster. I can brainwash people.”

Toph nods, centering herself. She can’t buckle now. If anyone deserves to know more, isn’t it Shinsou’s son? “I’m Toph Beifong. I’m an earthbender. A few years ago, my parents hired your mom to brainwash me, so now I live with the Water Hose hero team.”

He stops what he’s doing to look at her. “What?”

She nods again resolutely. “I was at Cato Hospital when they raided it,” she whispers. “I haven’t told anyone about it besides the heroes in the case.”

“They kept all the victims’ names out of the press,” Shinsou muses.

“My parents were able to keep their name out of it too,” Toph adds bitterly. “Endeavor’s still caught up in the defamation case they filed against him. But they were complicit in all those crimes.”

Shinsou lets himself slide down, until he’s sitting in the grass against the tree. “So I don’t blame you for not telling me your name. And calling you a villain because of your mom would be hypocritical.”

“Oh,” Shinsou answer eloquently.

“Yeah,” Toph agrees, huffing to herself.

They’re both quiet and unsure for far too long.

“It sucks talking about this.” Shinsou hums in vague accord, still hunched over with his arms wrapped over his legs. Toph holds out a hand to him. “Can we race or something? I’ve had it with the dramatic backstory stuff.”
“Please,” Shinsou agrees, letting her pull him to his feet. He dusts off his pants, and takes a deep breath.

“First one to that maple tree?” he asks, and then he just starts running.

Toph shrieks, trying to catch up. Stupid long legs. “I don’t know which one is the maple, you jerk!”

“Cry me a river!” He shoots back at her.

Hello guys, quick note: I have a tumblr solely for my fanfics now.... blease like the fanart i draw for my own stories at grilledsquids

Chapter End Notes

Here it is, some much-needed resolution. I can't make my hero kids suffer any longer. There might be one more chapter of 'Book Two' before we move on to the really fun stuff—UA!! I miss the rest of the hero kids!! I want Iida back, I couldn't fit him into this chapter! I NEED TOPH TO DRAG BAKUGOU!

Tell me your thoughts on this chapter, I hope it's a satisfying resolution! Was Endeavor's attempt to Dad good enough? Are y'all ok with Inasa Might-be-the-Avatar Yoarashi? Was it too contrived for Toph to meet Shinsou? It felt contrived but I wrote it anyway.

NOTE: I replied to a comment about this, but I should make it clear that Endeavor basically goading Toph into a fight is NOT a constructive way to parent, it's just his attempt. In the long run, Toph can't deal with problems this way, but she's nine. She really be out here having a tantrum.
Winter

Chapter Summary

*Interlude: Seasonals*

*Chapter Twelve: Winter*

Chapter Notes

I've decided to explore the remainder of Toph's time before she starts high school as a series of short tales: Winter, Spring, Summer and a Fall. This one takes place while Toph and Shouto are still ten years old, but keep in mind there will be time skips and I'll be keeping track of their ages in the author's notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She's never been around adults like the Water Hose couple before. Miyuki is bubbly and sweet, but not overwhelming to be around. Her presence isn’t stifling or fake, the way Toph’s nanny was. Or Poppy. And Kano is sure and patient. He wasn’t around as often while Miyuki was on maternity leave for Kouta, but now that they’re both back to full-time work, Kano splits his time evenly to look after Kouta. He’s gentle and silly around his son, but he doesn’t belittle Toph.

They give Toph distance, because it’s what she asked for. They give her help when she asks for it too. The one downside to living with them is the same as it was with the Beifongs—she can’t practice her quirk freely. But unlike her own parents, the Izumis compromised with her when the issue was brought up: she started taking martial arts lessons to hone her fighting skills, and she can use her quirk at home if there’s a trusted adult around to watch her.

And, luckily for Toph, Enji and Fuyumi Todoroki both count. (Fuyumi turned seventeen recently, and she’s honestly more of an adult than Endeavor and the Water Hose duo combined).

Ever since Toph demolished half their courtyard, the yard space in the center of the Todoroki household has been re-done into a proper practice area. Well, half of it. She and Shouto were allowed to practice their quirks as long as they didn’t touch the hedges and flowerbeds that had been shifted over to surround the small pond and tree on the western side of the yard. Toph felt a little guilty over all the hedges she’d torn up, but at least she hadn’t gone near the pond.

Still, it’s no Quirk Rumble. Toph has to keep her structures to a manageable size, and she can’t dig very deeply into the earth for substance—otherwise she’ll hit one of the metal tubes or wires down there, and probably flood the house.

Shouto, on the other hand, *thrives* in the open yard. “I only practiced with my dad before this,” he explains breathlessly, pressing his left hand to his ice creations to melt them down. “And only in our training room. He wants me to fight the way *he* does, and he’s way stronger, so it’s—it’s never fun.”

Toph thinks fighting is *always* fun, especially going against someone bigger and stronger than herself—but she kept her mouth shut about it. She’s yet to ask Shouto about his oddly reserved opinion of
Endeavor, and Natsuo’s loudly negative opinion, but now’s not the time for it.

“Well duh, Endeavor’s not as cool as me,” she says instead, lightening the mood with a smirk. She’s spread out on the ground like starfish while Shouto melts his ice, lazily leveling out the yard with as few movements as possible.

“You’re not cool, Toph,” Shouto denies with a careless half-shrug, and Toph arches an eyebrow in suspicion. “...You don’t even have ice powers.”

Toph digs a hand into the earth and flings a clump of dirt at Shouto. It doesn’t make contact; he freezes it in mid-air and it shatters on the ground between them. “I rest my case,” Shouto says solemnly.

She sticks out a tongue. “You’re getting faster.”

“Or you’re getting more predictable—” he flash-freezes her foot to the ground before she can leap up and tackle him.

“Hey!” Toph yelps. “That was cheap.”

“You made me fall on my face the first time we did this,” Shouto replies evenly. “Don’t talk to me about cheap shots.” Ugh, he’s always so chill, it’s impossible to rile him up before he ends up riling up Toph…. Chill. He is the cool one, isn’t he?

“I buried Twinkletoes alive the first time we met,” Toph replies threateningly.

“No wonder you’re so popular,” Shouto muses dryly.

“You Icy-hot bastard!” Forgetting herself, Toph takes a swipe at him with about as much grace as a puppy—and he just freezes her other foot, and scampers away. Toph squeals in horror. “It’s COLD! Augh!”

Forced to give up on attacking him, Toph focuses on disrupting the earth beneath the ice to break it up. By the time she’s done, Shouto is sitting by the pond, silently shaking. It takes her a moment to realize he’s trying not to laugh out loud at her. “Jerk,” she huffs, sliding to sit beside him.

“You’re the jerk,” he shoots back in a mild tone, elbowing her. “What do we do now?” Shouto prompts, not for the first time.

Every time they’ve hung out he’s asked her this, allowing Toph to bulldoze onward to another activity of her choice. She knows he’s never really been around other kids besides herself and Twinkletoes, and he’s always uncertain about what they should be doing besides training. She’d give him the option to choose, but Shouto is, for lack of a better word, uncreative. He never has any good ideas. Though to be fair, Toph doesn’t have many hobbies outside earthbending either.

Toph rests her chin on one hand, thoughtful. There is one hobby that Shouto has, one interest she shares with all her friends. “Let’s check the news for heroes,” she decides, and she can sense the way Shouto perks up at the idea.

“I haven't heard anything about All Might in a while,” he agrees, getting to his feet. Toph rises as well, and begins to walk away when Shouto takes her hand and gently pulls her in the opposite direction. “Wait, Toph.”

“Hey! I know where I’m going,” Toph frowns instantly, resisting him. “Your room is this way.”
Shouto shakes his head. “Yes, but Natsuo left his laptop in the dining room,” he says by way of explanation.

She can feel her face color at his words. “Oh. Right.” Toph follows, annoyed with herself.

“I wouldn’t try to guide you unless you asked for it,” he tells her placidly, squeezing her hand, but it does nothing to erase Toph’s chagrin. “You obviously hate it.”

“I know…” Toph scowls to herself.

“So don’t snap at me,” Shouto suggests idly. “There’s no reason to fight. I’m your friend.”

She exhales noisily, plopping down at the dining table next to him. “S’hard not to. Everyone assumes I need help, all the time. Even the Izumis do it.”

“Is it so bad that heroes want to help you?” Shouto asks. “Or your friends?”

His question reminds Toph of Tenya Iida, someone she’s avoiding thinking about for a while. When it came down to it, there was nothing that terrible about Engine Legs, even when he nagged her. If they could start over, Toph thinks they would be friends, especially because he came from a hero family. “No,” she admits sullenly. “But I don’t want people to assume I’m helpless. I’m not.”

Shouto hums in acknowledgement, but doesn’t respond. He boots up the laptop and begins typing on it. Toph scoots on to his chair when he offers her an earbud. Inasa’s too big to share a chair with, but it’s easier to split the earbuds if she sits closer to Shouto. She makes sure to stay on his left side every time, and it’s a lot more comfortable that way.

They listen to news broadcasts and a few old interviews they’ve already seen, commenting here and there. Sometimes they’re loud and excited about what they’re watching or hearing, but there hasn’t been much news about All Might since he fought with Toxic Chainsaw. Shouto reckons he’s working abroad for now, and Toph suspects he’s either doing undercover work or testing out equipment at that super isolated island lab, because even when Japanese heroes work in Asia or America, they’re in the international news.

“What if he’s injured?” Shouto wonders suddenly, a sliver of genuine worry worming into his tone, making Toph lift her head from her hand. “I can’t tell if any of this is recent news.”

“Shouto… that’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.” She hears him tsk in annoyance, but Toph doesn’t care. She flicks his forehead. “But you’re right, none of this is new. What’s that samurai guy doing? I like him.”

“Yoroi Musha,” Shouto echoes, typing again. “Oh, he stopped Mego-Volter on Monday. That’s interesting, isn’t his armor conductive?”

“Uh, yeah, it’s a steel-based alloy,” Toph says slowly. She’d be more interested in this if she hadn’t just been throwing rocks at Shouto for two hours. Now would be a good time to just lay around and do nothing. “Any press release about it?”

“Yoroi Musha,” Shouto echoes, typing again. “Oh, he stopped Mego-Volter on Monday. That’s interesting, isn’t his armor conductive?”

“Um, yeah, it’s a steel-based alloy,” Toph says slowly. She’d be more interested in this if she hadn’t just been throwing rocks at Shouto for two hours. Now would be a good time to just lay around and do nothing. “Any press release about it?”

“There’s an analysis video…” Shouto clicks on it, and oh, Toph knows she’s gonna fall asleep. It’s from a vlogger that has the most soothing voice on the planet, the kind of voice meant for nature documentaries and lullabies. She doesn’t protest his video voice, though.

They’re both asleep before the analysis reaches the climax of the battle between Mego-Volter and the hero. She wakes up briefly for dinner, then Natsuo carrying her, and again when Shouto drags her futon over to his left side, and the rest of the day is spent in peaceful quiet.
Enji returns to a quiet home, something he didn’t expect while Beifong was supposedly visiting. Fuyumi intercepts him with a timid smile as he takes off his shoes. Hm. If Fuyumi’s home then they must be in the house as well. He frowns at his daughter in question, and she points wordless upstairs. Still doesn’t explain why Beifong isn’t being obnoxiously loud. Shouto is the quietest Todoroki, but he has a bad habit of provoking the earth girl into a tirade, Enji suspects, just for shits and gigs. “What are they doing?” Enji finally asks, watching Fuyumi suspiciously.

The fair-haired girl just shakes her head, refusing to give up any more information. So, Enji climbs up, closely followed by his daughter, now vibrating with joy and unable to hide it. Fuyumi has always been very open about her emotions, and while it was annoying when she was a toddler, Enji finds new appreciation for it—his sons are closed books in comparison, and let themselves simmer until they’re ready to blow a gasket.

As they approach Shouto’s room, Fuyumi puts a finger to her mouth—he wasn’t talking anyway, but fine—and carefully slides the door open.

… What? “Why are they—?”

“Shush!” Fuyumi smacks his arm, though there’s no force behind it.

Enji looks at his phone, checking the time. It’s nearly seven o’clock, and they’re ten, too old for naps. There’s no reason for them to be sleeping. “Fuyumi—” he tries again.

“Oh! Gimme your phone!” She gasps quietly, holding her hands out and wiggling them. “Quick!”

He hands it over, not really understanding her urgency, and she immediately flips to the camera function to take pictures from various angles. “Hey,” He frowns, snatching the phone away. For Kami’s sake, how did she already take twenty photos? “Stop it. Why are they sleeping?”

“They’re tired,” Fuyumi says it like it’s obvious, eyes wide. “They practiced for longer than usual, Natsuo and I had to carry them up here.” Enji just gives her a look, making it perfectly clear that he disagrees, but Fuyumi just ushers him away and back to the kitchen.

“You can’t let them fall asleep whenever you want, ‘Yumi,” Enji lectures, crossing his arms. He flips through the photos on his phone idly, deleting a few blurry ones. Shouto’s turned over to show only the white half of his hair, and Beifong is wrapped around his left arm like a koala, zonked out completely. It’s… peaceful. Like puppies after going to a park. Regardless, Enji shakes his head. “They’re too old to be sleeping together like this.”

“I don’t think so,” Fuyumi reveals quietly, her brow furrowing. “Maybe it should stop in a year or two, but right now it’s just cute. Natsuo thinks so too.”

“Hm,” is all Enji says in reply, looking back at the photo. Fuyumi makes a small noise, and when he looks back up at her, she’s covering most of her face. “What?”

She puts her hand down, revealing a wide smile and glistening eyes. Another downside to Fuyumi, she’s often overemotional. “Oh, you just didn’t disagree with me. They are cute, aren’t they?” She presses eagerly, a new gleam to her turquoise gaze.

Enji takes note of her keen expression, which is quickly evolving into a knowing grin. This is a trap. “They’re just sleeping,” he states neutrally, glancing at the photo again.

“Then delete all the photos,” his daughter suggests brightly, holding out a hand, and he
unconsciously moves his phone out of her reach. There’s nothing sweet at all about the grin she wears now. “I’m sure Water Hose won’t want to see them, if it’s not cute.”

Send cute photos of the kids to Beifong’s parents? That’s the last thing in the world Endeavor would do and Fuyumi knows it. “What do you want from me?” he demands, distrusting the look in her turquoise eyes. It’s odd to see Fuyumi so… smug.

It occurs to him a moment later that he’s already admitted to himself it’s a cute photo. Stubbornly, Enji decides that Fuyumi won’t hear him say it.

She shakes her head, relenting. “Nevermind, Dad. Send me the photo, please?”

“Fine.” It was her photo anyway, as far as Enji was concerned. And his daughter knew better than to post it anywhere public. He sends it, and then puts his phone down to scrounge the fridge for leftovers. They have a cook in the house, but they’re rarely all home at the same time to eat together, and Enji prefers being alone. The only reason their personal kitchen gets used is because Fuyumi likes to bake.

“Oh. Dad…” Fuyumi calls, holding back a giggle. “W-wrong chat.”

“Wrong what?” He frowns, glancing at Fuyumi’s amused face. “What do you mean? I sent it.”

“Yeah, but,” She shows her screen as several more messages pop up beneath the photo. His phone is lighting up too, but he has it on silent. “This one’s with Natsu.”

He scans over the series of messages, frown deepening. There’s a lot of exclamation points and capitalization. Enji sighs. “Where’s Natsu right now?”

“He was at soccer practice,” Fuyumi twirls a finger around a lock of fine red hair. “Must be on his way home now.” She steeples her fingers together, deeply amused by this all. Fuyumi mostly owes Rei for her good looks, and they’re similar in temperament. But when Fuyumi focuses her bright blue eyes on him, there’s an inherent fierceness in her, and it’s hard for Enji to look her in the eye when she wears an expression so similar to his own. “Natsu’s going to nag. Do not let him get to you.”

“Me?” Enji gives her an incredulous look. “Natsuo’s the one that takes things personally.” Fuyumi seems doubtful. “I won’t wake them up,” he promises, just as his phone lights up again. This time it’s a notification from Miyuki Izumi.

Endeavor!! They’re so cute!! I’m framing it <3 <3

Beneath it is the photo, of course. And then a photo of her infant for good measure. "God damn it." It’s only been a few minutes. He didn't even know Natsuo had Izumi’s number.

"What happened?" Fuyumi probes. He passes over his phone to her without a word, and gets back to putting together a meal for himself. By the time he looks back at her, Fuyumi's expression has crumbled into a gooey mess of affection. “Aw, Dad, he’s so cute! I remember when Shouto was that little…” She spills into a rambling story of baby cheeks and tiny toes, tugging on the silvery ends of her hair like she can't handle her own sweetness.

He eats at the table, letting Fuyumi continue to talk at him. She doesn’t seem to mind that he doesn’t respond, but he does slap her hand away when she tries to take his tempura. Now that he thinks of it, that’s one of the reasons he won’t eat around her or Natsuo, they think it’s okay to take from his plate. That and Fuyumi has a motor mouth when she gets going, but he’ll ignore it for now.
Just as he finishes his food and Fuyumi begins to wind down, the door slams open to reveal a sweaty thirteen year old with a moon-glow grin. “OLD MAN! THAT’S THE CUTEST SHIT I’VE EVER SEEN.”

“Be quiet,” Enji barks at his middle son, hoping to smother his enthusiasm before it can start annoying him.

But Fuyumi adds fuel to the fire instead, squealing, “They’re still sleeping!”

“NOT ANY MORE!” Toph bellows from the second level, stomping down the stairs. “You icy jerk! QUIT YELLING!”

There goes his quiet night.

Chapter End Notes

Figured I needed to show Toph and Shouto spending some quality time together. Endeavor gets some development too, because I just want the best for my icy hot boy. I don’t care how much of an asshole canon Endeavor is, he sure as hell thinks all his kids are cute. They’re all beautiful and I love them. Natsuo's smile is a gift to mankind, Fuyumi can do no wrong, and I would die for Shouto. Sooner or later my version of Endeavor will feel the same damn way.

Also, I’m aware of how little this chapter has to do with winter. I dunno, it takes place in February? The majority of the characters have ice powers? Close enough for me. Let me have this theme.
Spring

Chapter Summary

Interlude: Seasonals
Chapter Thirteen: Spring

Chapter Notes

Toph has just turned twelve. Hotshot is almost twenty.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When he finally lays eyes on that blind girl again in April, more than two years since she stopped showing up at the Rumble, he feels...odd, murky emotions he doesn’t want to label. Surprise, he can say that for certain. Frankly, he didn’t expect to ever see the Blind Bandit again.

Privately, he’d convinced himself she’d died or something worse.

“It’s you,” Toph says in breathless wonder, like she’s greeting a top-ranking hero or a pop star. She’s lankier now, but still pretty short for her age. She looks better than before, though, not pale and terrified—her whole face is flushed pink from running to catch up to him, and she grins genuinely at him.

No one that could see his face would ever smiles like that at him. For Kami’s sake. This girl really is still oblivious. He scratches at his irritated jawline, frustrated. She’s still a tiny punk of a fighter.

“Yeah, it’s me. The hell’re you doing here, brat?” He frowns at the deserted street they’re on, and at the grimy alley he was about to walk down. “How’d you even find me?”

He didn’t think it possible, but she smiles wider, pointing to her ear. “I could hear you from a block away. I don’t forget voices,” she steps closer, brow furrowing. “I never got to call you about what happened.”

Touya blinks down at her, bemused. Has she really been feeling guilty about it all this time? Granted, on worse days he felt a little responsible for not doing more, but he had no way of knowing if she needed help. Seeing her now—she’s fine. That’s enough. Case closed. A phone call sooner would’ve been appreciated, but fine.

He turns around, walking towards the wire fence separating the alley from the next street over. “You don’t owe me an explanation,” he says flatly. Toph follows him. What a gullible kid. What kind of idiot follows a guy like him into the back of an alley? She really has a skewed sense of danger.

“Well, sure I do,” Toph replies, shoving her hands into the pockets of her jacket. “I bet Loban would’ve liked to know too.”

Loban, that tiger-mutation guy that ran the Rumble. He lets out a sharp exhale through clenched teeth, letting his back fall harshly against the wired fence. Toph’s head tilts in curiosity at the sound.
“Yeah, maybe he would’ve, I dunno,” he says crossly. The girl waits expectantly, eyes facing him rather directly. Touya turns his gaze upward. “I found a better paying gig a while ago. Before they got busted.”

The fighting ring bust was in the news recently, so there’s no surprise at the statement. Still, he sees the girl’s face shift, with a downward turn of her lips. He expects a demand from her, maybe anger or annoyance for dismissing it all so easily. Instead, her expression smooths over. “Are you okay, Hotshot?”

His jaw clenches reflexively. “No one calls me that, Bandit,” he says tightly, looking at her shoulder instead of her open, innocent face.

“I’m just Toph now,” she counters softly. After a moment, when he’s unforthcoming about his name or anything else he’s doing now that he’s out of the Quirk Rumble, Toph leans against the fence with him and explains. “I don’t live with my parents anymore, but I haven’t changed my surname. So it’s Toph Beifong.”

“Toph,” he repeats nonchalantly, but it brings a small smile to her again. “The Beifongs, that’s a Chinese family. They’re pretty well off, aren’t they?” Not that he’s surprised her parents were assholes. Wealthy people get away with everything.

She nods, picking at dirt under one nail. “Yeah, they’re filthy rich. That’s how they paid for a whole hospital of quirk experiments without anyone knowing.”

_Quirk experiments._ He definitely remembers reading about that raid. “Cato Hospital?” Toph nods timidly. That would mean her folks were fanatics, and hated all quirks. “You were there for the raid?”

Again, the girl nods. She never took any of the prize money she earned. And she always said she liked the Quirk Rumble for the freedom it gave her to hone her quirk.

Touya swore to himself he wouldn’t care about this dumb blind brat once she stopped showing up to the Rumble, and it’s been years since then, but… _Is she really okay after all that?_

“What the fuck, Toph?” He asks instead.

“I’m okay now,” she promises, as if reading his mind. “Endeavor raided the hospital before I could escape on my own,” Toph continues blithely, ignorant of the way the name sends a rush of electricity through his veins. “I got sorted with a foster family, and I’ve been with them ever since. If that hadn’t worked out… I would’ve ran away like you.”

_Endeavor._

Touya can’t help it as his fingers dig painfully into the sensitive skin of his forearms. “Hm,” he says in response, unable to articulate a more coherent answer without releasing the white-hot resentment scorching through his mind.

Suddenly there’s a different pressure on his arm, and he looks down to see Toph’s hand, small and firm next to his own.

“You never answered me,” she points out. “Are you okay?” Her hand drifts to his wrist, and she bites the inside of her cheek as she traces the warped path of scars forming. “You shouldn’t be using your quirk like this, Touya.” The name tears at him the same way his quirk does.

He can’t stand it. He can’t stand the look of honest confusion and pain on her face. “Don’t call me
that,” he says evenly, pulling his hands out of her reach. “Don’t ever use that name. I don’t wanna hear it.”

“I won’t tell anyone,” she says indignantly, but that’s not the part that bothers him. He knows Toph wouldn’t give his name to the police or anything. “I promised not to, and I haven’t. There’s probably a good reason you ran away. But if you didn’t want to be called Touya you shouldn’t have told me at all.”

She’s an idiot. He flexes his fingers irritably. “Whatever. It’s not like we’ll see each other again.”

“Why do you think we won’t?” She shoots back, almost sounding defensive. Hurt.

“Because you’re a brat,” he snaps, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “You’re a normal brat now. Me? I was never normal. Never—never up to his standards.” He taps a foot on the ground, and a shred of anger crawls back into his tone. “I’ll never re-enter society like you, with a brand new family. I don’t belong in that world, and I never did.” He eyes her sharply. “Besides, you probably want to become a hero with a quirk like yours—you like fighting too much to give it up. You can’t be seen around me.”

She chews over his statement quietly, hands sliding back into her pockets. “Well, none of that erases what happened,” she finally settles on. Touya stares. “We trained together. I don’t do any of the illegal stuff anymore, and I am going to become a hero, but that doesn’t mean it never happened.” She cracks a wry smile. “At the very least, we’re ex-coworkers, don’t ya think?”

Touya stares. And stares. “You’re a dumbass, Toph,” he grumbles, dropping his arms to his sides. “A real piece of work. Fucking co-workers, like we both had shitty retail jobs or something…” Touya buries his face in his hands with a moan that quickly devolves into slightly-hysterical snickering. “Fuck. Fucking shit. You’re crazy.”

“I dunno, you sound pretty fucking loopy right now,” Toph crosses her arms loosely, expression wary. “You won’t even answer a question properly, but I’m the piece of work, huh?”

“Yes,” Touya confirms. “You are a piece of work. Because if you had even a shred of self-preservation, you wouldn’t have followed me into an empty alley.” He gestures sharply through the air, not caring that she can’t see it.

She gives him a look. “You’re not going to hurt me.”

“Not now I won’t,” Touya concedes. An idiot pass, he thinks sourly, that's all this is. “If I see you again, though? All bets are off.”

She scoffs, like she’s calling a bluff. “I think we established a while ago that I can kick your butt. What’s the big deal?”

He scowls. “You don’t see it.”

“No shit, I’m blind,” Toph quips back.

He pinches the bridge of his nose. “Kid, I’m—I’m not in the Rumble anymore. I got kicked out for nearly smoking someone, and then I found work that pays more and cares less about how I do it.”

“So?” She presses on, not even blinking when he admits to nearly killing a man.

“So,” Touya repeats, painstakingly. Fucking hell, this is like pulling teeth. Does he really have to spell it out for her? He really doesn’t want to. “I’m running errands for a broker. A loan shark. He
deals with all types of shitty people, and I have all sorts of shitty tasks to do.”

“Okay?” Toph frowns, still skeptical.


Toph throws up her hands. “Am I? You’re the one acting all—*squirrely.*”

“What does that even mean?!”

“You know what it means!” Toph explodes. “Touya, you *asshat.* If you can’t even admit you’re a villain, you *probably don’t want to be doing any of this.*” Her glare is directed somewhere near his chest, but her brow furrows in worry. “I asked around for you first, through other fighters. Quillfish told me what you’ve been up to.” She shifts from one foot to another, uncertain. “It took a while to do all that, and I could’ve left it as is, but I wanted to see you myself.”

So she knew. She already *knew* the shit he was digging into, and she still ran after him. You can’t get much stupider than that. Touya straightens up and shoves her backwards abruptly.

“Hey!” She yelps in protest, nearly falling over.

He shakes his head. “Get away from me, kid. You wanna be a hero so bad, you should be far away from me as you can get.” *Is that what this is?* He thinks wildly, *She thinks I need saving, that she’s capable of handling what I am?*

“You can’t tell me what to—”

He activates his quirk violently, feeling his skin scream in protest, and throws a handful of flames between them until she’s forced to move far out of reach.

“Touya,” she says quietly, and finally, finally, there’s a hint of fear in her. Good. It’s worth the dull ache in his arms. “Stop it.”

“I told you to go. Leave, you idiot,” he growls.

“No,” she barks, and with a shift of her foot, the stones dotting the ground of the alley overturn in a wave of neat ripples, smothering the blue flames. In the back of his mind, he does admit she’s gotten better. She stays a few feet away from him, glaring. “You’re hurt. Quit pushing me away, I can help.”

“Worry about yourself, Toph.” He mutters, opening the fence up and sliding behind it. He melts down the door frame until it’s fused together, careful to not let the heated metal touch his skin. “You already tried helping me.” *It’s not your fault I’m like this.* “If we do meet again, I won’t be this nice.”

“...Fine.” Something in his tone seems to hit the mark, because she relents, taking another step back and dropping the emotion from her face. “I’m sorry, Touya,” she says at last, though he doesn’t have the slightest idea what she needed to apologize for. She takes another step, and then walks away.

Her brief talk with Hotshot bothers Toph for a long time, even though she feels some level of satisfaction from being able to find him at all.

Toph dreams about it sometimes. Not in a wishful, yearning sort of way, but as a hypothetical ‘what if’ that explores the choices she’s made to get to this point. *What if she’d left everything behind and ran away?*
She would still live away from her parents, which was her greatest concern, but it would be different. No cushy house with a baby, no school, no friends her own age. But the other fighters liked her a lot. She didn’t have to worry about quirk laws or showing too much strength for a girl of her size and age. Everything she did would be of her own volition, and there would never be an adult around to take that independence away. Maybe she’d be slumming it in the streets, but maybe she’d also make a bunch of money from the Rumble instead of having to beg Loban for a chance in the ring. And yeah, sometimes those thoughts spill over into her actual dreams at night, and it becomes so vividly real and honest that Toph wakes with a start, questioning whether or not she really did call Touya.

Last night was one of those nights, and Toph is in a fog all morning, all day in class, right up and continuing her thoughts on the train ride back from school.

*I didn’t call,* she reminds herself. And she’s… not any better or worse for that decision. After seeing Hotshot for the first time in over two years, it’s obvious that things are different—and if Toph truly wanted to get back into fighting, it would take a lot more work than strolling back into the underground arena. (Loban got busted, but as soon as one ring closed, another would emerge). Hotshot had moved on, and Toph expects that most of the other fighters had too—Quick Slice, Omega Bomb, Bunny Babe, Stendhal, Quillfish, Reel Pop… dozens of other names she could list from her time in the ring—a few of them caught in the police bust—but people came and went as easily as businessmen used a train station. Whatever traction she gained would have to be re-earned, and it… it wasn’t worth it anymore.

She’s *happy* here. She has Kouta and his parents. She has Fuyumi and Natsuo and Endeavor. She gets to see Twinkletoes and build friendships with Shouto and Shinsou.

Speaking of Shinsou, he saved a seat for her in the crowded car, and she gives him a quick nod before sitting. He tends to be in his own fog each morning, and didn’t mind her silence on the way to Okubo, but he’s much more conscious by three o’clock. “Hey Beifong,” he greets her lazily, running a hand through his hair. “I was thinking of heading to the bike trail…”

“Oh huh,” she replies, not really hearing him past ‘bike trail’. Hitoshi Shinsou is one of the people she’s never have met if things had gone differently.

If Toph hadn’t been saved that day, would Shinsou’s mom still have been caught? Endeavor raided the hospital of his own accord, but it seemed to Toph like that lady, Aiko, had been falling apart already.

Regardless of all that… Toph misses Touya and the way it used to be. She misses the rush and the risks she took in the Quirk Rumble. The fun and danger so intertwined they were one and the same. The cheers from a crowd that respected her. She earned all that on her own, no help needed. It was a different life, but to Toph, it was a perfectly valid one. Touya is the only person that might’ve understood that, but he’s moved beyond it already. Her time in the Rumble wasn’t bad. If she’d stayed, would Touya have stayed too?

Is she supposed to forget it ever happened?

Toph has no idea what kind of repercussions there would be if the Izumis or Endeavor knew where she learned to fight. Shouto might keep her secret, but she’s certain it would change the way he acted around her. Inasa would certainly be upset—he’s been awfully strict about his own quirk usage these days, and dislikes it when she puts herself in danger. She’s been meaning to broach the subject of his (changed?) quirk, but Twinkletoes is a tornado all on his own, and difficult to pin down. Talking about the Quirk Rumble with him would be doubly impossible.

Finally Shinsou shakes her shoulder, unceremoniously dragging her attention back to him. “Beifong,
better tell me now if you’re blind and deaf,” he says mockingly, and Toph slaps his hand off with a scowl. “Oh, she lives. Welcome back.”

“What?” She throws back, instantly going defensive when she registers his tone.

“I said I’m going biking, on my bike. Wanna come with me?”

Her nose scrunches in distaste. “What kind of question is that? I can’t bike.”

He flicks one of the pom-poms on her headband, and Toph slaps his hand away again. He’s not a very tactile person on his own, so she knows he’s doing it to annoy her. “I mean you can ride with me, there’s space to stand on the back wheel—” Toph is already shaking her head in horror at the thought. “—don’t give me that, it’s not even dangerous—”

“It’s a bike, I can’t steer or do anything but hold on—” Shinsou gets to his feet, tugging her up by the strap of her backpack as the train rolls to a stop. Toph stands with him and they step onto the platform, still glaring. He’s being cheekier than usual today, forcing her full attention to deal with his antics.

“How’s that different from a train? You still ride trains—”

“—Trains are necessary, this is your terrible idea of a fun time—”

“—it is fun, you’re just being a coward, Beifong,” he says pointedly, but there’s a levity to his tone that makes Toph suspect he’s grinning like an asshole too.

“I’m not a coward—” and then her head goes a little foggy. She shakes away the daze and realizes they’re at the very beginning of the trail, and Shinsou is rolling a bicycle towards her.

Oh, that bitch.

“Are you kidding me?!” Toph gripes, glaring at an approximation of where his head should be and continuing as if he never paused the conversation for his own nefarious purposes—biking. “Where’s my bag?” She demands. He’s not carrying his backpack either.

“Left it at my place. No point carrying around even more dead weight,” he teases, and Toph narrows her eyes.

“I’m not riding that thing,” she spits out, regarding the bike like she’s being asked to cuddle a Komodo dragon.

“You’re already here, you might as well try,” Shinsou cajoles, knowing full well that’s entirely his doing. “I’ll go slow, you won’t fall off.”

Toph punches him in the shoulder for the brainwashing. He’s done it before, with and without her permission—it’s different than Aiko’s, unnerving and invasive but not something she’s worried he’ll actually hurt her with—and while it’s annoying to be caught so easily by it, the bigger issue is the metal and rubber contraption before her now. “I ain’t afraid of falling. This is just—stupid. You’re stupid.”

“It’s fun,” He says evenly. “I won’t make you do it, but you did want to hang out today.” He holds out a hand to her. “C’mon, coward.”

Her nostrils flare, and Toph’s mouth presses in a thin, furious line. Asshole, goading her like this. Toph can’t refuse. She takes his hand and lets him instruct her how to balance on the bar across the
back wheel. There’s very little room, and this can’t possibly be safe. Her hands find his shoulders for support, and she squeezes him until he winces. “I better not regret this, Snoozles.”

“You’re still using that nickname?” Shinsou asks under his breath. He begins to push on the pedals and they drift forward. “So childish, Beifong.”

“I’ll call you whatever I want, dick.”

He pushes them to move faster, and Toph lets out an involuntary squeak as she’s pulled forward. Shinsou laughs wickedly. “Oh my god, that was cute, you’re like a kitten—ow, shit, don’t pull my hair!”

“Don’t call me cute!” Toph threatens, but her voice is tight and high, and sounds more like a whine.

“We’ll crash if you keep that up, kitten,” he cackles, and then they both yelp in fear when he swerves the bike, but Shinsou’s scream devolves into laughter while Toph just focuses on not slipping off the tiny metal bar saving her from disaster.

Trees whiz by, rustling in their wake. It’s different to hear bugs and plants rush by, compared to the hum of buildings and people and machinery when she’s driven through the city. The gears and chains clink in a softer buzz beneath her trainers, and she can still sense the ground rumble under the wheels, though she can’t tell much about what lies ahead.

“How far do you plan on going?” Toph asks, trying to relax. They’re moving pretty fast, and they’ll blow past the farthest they’ve walked on this trail soon.

“You might be a faster runner, but I’ve got more endurance. I could do this for hours,” he brags, and Toph just rolls her eyes.

“Yeah, not happening…” Toph snipes back, spitting hair out of her mouth. She likes the sounds in the bike trail much more than the city, she’s just hearing more of it at once. The wind isn’t bad, though she wishes she’d thought to tie back her bangs properly so she would stop eating hair.

Overall… not terrible. “You okay, Beifong?” Shinsou asks over the wind in her ears.

“It’s fine,” she admits ruefully.

“Obviously, but that’s not what I meant,” Shinsou answers, only slightly winded from pedaling. “You’ve been distracted basically all day, what’s up?”

Her mouth curves into a frown. So he had noticed. “Weird dream.”

Shinsou doesn’t answer immediately. “You’re all glum because of a dream? Seriously?”

She resists punching him, if only to avoid a crash. Toph doesn’t really want to talk about the ‘what-if’ scenario in her head, but it occurs to her that there was a choice she made few people even knew about, least of all Aiko’s son. So before really thinking over her words, she asks, “Shinsou, did they ever tell you what Umeko was doing before the raid?”

“Huh?” He jolts back, startling Toph. “Beifong, what’re you—ah!” Shinsou slams hard on the brakes, throwing Toph forward in a horrified scream as she clings to his neck. “Hey—stop it—get off me—!”

Toph staggers to the ground instantly, straightening her shirt angrily. She scrapes her leg in the process, but it’s the abruptness that makes her lose her cool. “You little shit!” She shrieks, fists
clenches and ready to punch him in his stupid face.

“You’re the little shit! Why would you spring that on me while I’m steering?” Shinsou exclaims, untangling from his bike and setting it on the side of the path.

“I don’t know! I just thought of it now, okay?!” Toph yells back, rubbing her chin where she smacked it against his skull.

“What does that mean?” Shinsou gasps for breath, rubbing his head in equal measure. “What does it matter what she was doing, why’re you bring it up?”

“I was getting to that,” Toph hisses through clenched teeth, still catching her breath. “It’s a long story. But Umeko—she… she released me on her own. She didn’t plan on turning herself in or getting the police involved, but she saw a way out for me and I—I almost took it.”

Slowly, they both settle down enough to stop glaring and yelling. Shinsou takes a slow inhale, and on the exhale, asks, “What was your plan?”

Shouto would judge her, even if he didn’t mean to. Inasa would worry about her. But Shinsou, whose mother was just as twisted as Toph’s, who used his quirk teasingly and toed the line like her because it was naturally how his quirk worked—He might understand.

Or not. But either way, Toph is tired of pretending it all never happened.

So she tells him everything, from the moment her parents started controlling her to the last time she went to the Quirk Rumble. She tells him about begging Loban to let her fight despite her age, just desperate for the chance even if she had to give up all the prize money and build free stadiums for him.

She tells him about Hotshot, who offered her a way out when it seemed like no one else cared. It makes her feel odd to recount it now, especially once she describes her final conversation with the confusing, fiery teenager. Toph doesn’t say his name, but the incongruity of her interactions with Touya grates on her mind.

“You feel bad about what’s happening to this Hotshot,” Snoozles surmises quickly. “But if he doesn’t want help, there’s nothing for you to do about it.” Toph agrees, but she doesn’t have to like it. But it’s nice to know he agrees.

Finally, Toph tells him about Aiko’s last words to her—frenetic, confusing, but certain of her crumbling morals and what little life she had left to shield from her actions.

“She mentioned me?” Shinsou interrupts her again, his voice small and hesitant.

“You said you and your dad never knew anything about what she was doing,” Toph says softly. “She was serious about keeping you out of it, even if she was… well…”

“A psychopath,” Shinsou finishes dryly, but he sniffs rather conspicuously and drags a hand over his face. “I never imagined it was… that’s definitely enough shit to mess you up, but I’m glad you told me, I guess.”

“Yeah, well,” Toph gestures vaguely, trying to pull back some semblance of indifference back into herself, even though explaining it all makes her itchy from the inside out, like she swallowed a cactus and laid down on a bed of needles to digest. “Just don’t go blabbing about it, I haven’t even told the Izumis about it.”
“Aw, and here I was excited to tell all my friends about this,” Shinsou says in a lazy drawl true to form, leaned against a tree like he owned the whole forest.

“Shut it, Snoozles,” Toph throws back at him, a little harsher than she means to, still so full of sharp edges and prickly emotions—falling off the bike didn’t help—that she continues, “Since when do you have other friends besides me?”

“I don’t. Have any other friends.” His answering tone is frank and simple, so unexpectedly vulnerable that she accepts it with the same grace she’d accept a knock-out punch in the face from her 2 year old brother. Shinsou pauses long enough for that to sink into the tense space between them. “You’re the only person that doesn’t treat me like I’m about to snap. I—that means a lot to me and—I’m not about to trash the one person that took a chance on me.”

Shinsou’s answer fills her with a confusing blend of relief and pure, unadulterated anger. “That’s fucked too,” spills from her mouth with the unrelenting force of a landslide, gritty and startling.

“What?” He gapes, taking a turn at being caught off his guard.

“You don’t owe me anything.” Toph proclaims, only just stopping herself from stomping her foot plaintively. “People are asshats for thinking you’re dangerous.”

“Well, yeah—” he says haltingly.

“Yeah, so don’t act like it doesn’t matter because you’re afraid to upset me,” Toph snaps, not really sure where her anger is coming from anymore. “Trash me all you want. I made some shit decisions and I—I’m a criminal-for-using-my-quirk-like-that, I know that and so do you, so don’t coddle me over this—”

“I’m not coddling you, what the hell?” Shinsou finally raises his voice over hers, pushing off from the tree. “Toph, all that you did—that doesn’t make you a criminal. That was—that was survival.”

Toph glares, befuddled. “What part of ‘I beat up full grown men for a crowd’ screams survival to you?”

“The part where your crazy parents were trying to hide you and your quirk from the whole world,” Shinsou exclaims, “The part where my mom tried to alter your own sense of self, and you fought it in the only way you knew how!” He seizes her by the shoulders firmly. “That’s how you coped, Beifong. Not even Endeavor was able to fight her. Maybe it was illegal, and it’s definitely stupid to re-analyze your every choice—but of course you joined the Rumble. You hung onto the one thing you still wanted, when every other choice was being controlled by AV.”

She’s never considered it that way, and she resists it even as she’s relieved at Shinsou for saying it. “I miss it sometimes,” she argues quietly. “Even with everything I’ve been given since then… I should be more grateful. I shouldn’t miss it.”

His hold on her loosens, but he doesn’t back off. “Can’t you be both? Miss what you had, and look forward to your future? I miss my mom all the time, even now that I know all the things she did. For me it wasn’t all bad, and I want that part of my life back.” He takes a breath. “But if we went back to that… you’d never become a hero. Neither would I.”

And Toph desperately needs to become a hero. She knows that much about herself. She can’t see herself doing anything but fight… the Rumble was fun, but it wasn’t fulfilling. She knows what it feels like to be saved, by Endeavor, by the Izumi family. If she could give other people just a fraction of the relief and safety she’s been given—if she could stop other kids from ever being targets or
victims of villainous people like Aiko and Amon’s Vision…

Maybe when she first thought of becoming a hero with Inasa it was a fanciful thing. Not anymore.

“Yeah,” she says lamely, head tilting downward. “I… you’re right. This was…” She pulls back from him with a huff. “I already know all that. This was a stupid talk.”

“Only a little stupid,” Shinsou replies easily. “Can’t believe I’m the one that has to say the cheesy bit, but—it’s not a question of if we become heroes. It’s when. So… stop daydreaming about running away with some Hotshot bad boy,” he delivers with a flourish, and she can practically hear the cheshire grin on his face.

Toph makes a sharp noise of dissent, and tries to punch Shinsou again, but she’s facing him head on and he had plenty of time to catch her arm. “I don’t daydream, definitely not about some fire asshole,” she asserts pointedly, twisting out of his grip. She heads for his bike, if only to escape Shinsou’s relentless wisecracks now that they’re no longer dwelling on heavier topics. “Let’s keep moving, see if you actually have any endurance, Snoozles.”

Shinsou scoffs, but picks up the bike and helps her balance on the back wheel once more without any further stupid comments. At least, it seems like it until they’re going full-speed on the bicycle and he feels safe enough to bother her some more.

“So who do you daydream about, kitten? Me? That airbender kid?” Toph lets out a frustrated growl, unable to properly smack him. “That’s still adorable, it’s like you’re purring.”

“Shinsou, I swear to god, I swear to All Might—” The bike swerves dangerously and Toph screams again, clinging Shinsou’s neck while he laughs. That was on purpose. “I’m going to murder you! I’m gonna break your neck—”

“Then why do you keep hugging me?” He asks, even though the answer is infuriatingly apparent.

“Why do you keep comparing me to a cat?” Toph quips back, eyes narrowed. “Trying to tell me you’re a furry?”

“What—” Shinsou splutters, completely taken aback, but at least he doesn’t swerve the bike again. “Where’d you even learn that word? I’m not a furry—”

“Oh ho, that sounds a whole lot like denial,” she points out smugly, delighted to finally get a reaction out of him. Toph’s usually the one to be provoked first. She can thank Natsuo for teaching her weird things. “The first step is acknowledging the problem, Shinsou.”

“Shut up,” he grumbles, clearly still insulted.

“You started it,” Toph declares with a grin. “Don’t dish it if you can’t take it, kitten.”

Chapter End Notes

So here’s the long-awaited talk with Touya. Not sure I made Hotshot mean enough lol, but I’ll attribute that to age.

It kinda got flirty at the end and the dialogue flew out of my hands, (Shinsou has in common with Todoroki that he can provoke Toph instantly) so there’s that, but I’ll be clear and say I haven’t chosen an end pairing for this (but it’ll probably be Inasa?).
Damn I feel like I should’ve waited longer between posts but I had this chapter all ready to go for a while. The next two will probably come very soon too, because I have very little self control.
Toph wants to gag. Cool, thick cream is slathered over her face, and it prickles her nostrils with a pungent chemical scent. She is Immensely Uncomfortable. And she is trapped, because she kind of agreed to this.

Kano laughs heartily at her misfortune. “Oh gosh, you look like an angry kitten! I know you don’t like it, but—“

“It’s nasty,” Toph groans, already tired of the greasy feel over her nose. And oh god, her poor ears. “Who cares if I get tanned?!“

More than once, Toph’s been compared to a doll (Kitten is a more recent thing, and she’ll make Shinsou suffer for it in time). With how small she was and how pale her skin was, Toph looked like an expensive and fragile porcelain doll, so that’s why people tended to treat her like glass. Natsuo was the one to finally outline that for her. She bit him on the arm and they didn’t speak for two weeks.

Eventually, Endeavor got fed up and made them apologize to each other, but Toph hated being reminded of her appearance.

“It’s not for that,” Miyuki hums, cheerfully slathering baby sunscreen over poor, helpless Kouta. He’s only three years old, unable to fight back. “It prevents sunburn and irreversible skin damage. You’re quite fair, Toph, your skin doesn’t produce enough melanin to protect you from the sun,” she recites easily, like an infomercial. Didn’t they sponsor a sunscreen brand a few weeks ago?

“So what if I get cancer in twenty years? At least I won’t feel like an oil spill anymore,” Toph rebels like a stray animal refusing a warm bath, but her argument sounds weak even to herself. Miyuki doesn’t even bother responding, she just hums as if she knows Toph is wrong.

She picks at the swim suit she’s been blackmailed into wearing. They’re shorts and a crop-top-thing,
and they make this trip ten times worse. It’s synthetic and tight and hugs her skin strangely. Toph is
thirteen now, and her whole body feels stretched out and gangly in ways she’s never considered
before, and for the first time in her life she’s kind of unnerved by the thought of people looking at
her, especially her friends. Boys can be so blunt.

At least she’s not on her period, but now that’s a thing she has to think about too.

This whole thing was a terrible idea she should have never agreed to.

Toph is not going to swim. She will not.

Why did she get stuck with the water-loving heroes? Wouldn’t it make sense if she got to live with
Pixie-bob or something? Or Cementoss. Or Rock-Lock.

But no. Water Hose. And they were determined to give her swimming lessons.

Her parents had flown to China and Japan’s Hero Association had been unable to extradite them last
year, so they’re avoiding charges but getting all of their parental rights permanently revoked. They
were still considered a danger to her because the AV case was still open—and ain’t that a sore spot
for Todoroki-san?—so Toph qualified for witness protection, which her new guardians are licensed
for. Plus, well… They already knew who Toph was, and they wanted her.

Miyuki-san had been seven months pregnant when Endeavor called them, and they shifted around
their whole life to accommodate Toph. But they didn’t even hesitate. She was lucky to have them.
She’ll never agree with their love of water, but whatever. The Water Hose team is pretty great.

Kouta babbles some more, stringing together enough words to make it clear he’s affronted with his
mother for all the chemical cream supposedly made to save his baby skin from nature. “You and me
both, kid,” she fiddles with his pudgy foot, trying to re-strap a tiny water shoes onto him. He cries
out his perfectly reasonable indignation. Toph nods in solidarity, knowing the pain of societal norms
like wearing shoes, but his feet are soft and vulnerable and Miyuki is passionate about this sort of
stuff. “That’s rough, buddy.”

When they get to the beach everything is worse than worse, because sand is horrible and itchy and
she does not want to let go of Kano’s hand at all.

Kano Izumi, a soft-spoken and thoughtful man, squeezes her hand back kindly. “What’s with the
face, Toph?” He asks quietly. “I can see Inasa in the water, want me to call him over?”

She shakes her head vigorously, letting go of his hand. “I hate this.”

“What? The sand?”

“Everything,” Toph bursts like a dam under pressure. “The sand, the water, the stupid sun! I wanna
go home.”

Miyuki goes ahead to set up a blanket with Kouta, but Kano hangs back with Toph. “It’s not as bad
as you think. Swimming is fun when you get the hang of it.”

“Easy for you to say,” Toph snaps, crossing her arms. “You’re a waterbender, Kano. I’m not made
for the ocean. Or the sand. I like my earth solid.”

He rests a hand on her shoulder. “We all have our weaknesses, Toph.”

“I’m not weak!” She contests, gritting her teeth. “I just don’t want to be here.”
“This is the perfect opportunity to overcome your fear,” he points out, but that plucks at an even more sensitive nerve, intentionally, because Kano can play her like a fiddle.

“I’m not afraid either!” Toph declares stubbornly. Is she so easy to read? Stupid heroes.

“Your best friend is just fifty yards away. You’ve been nagging me for weeks to see him. And suddenly, because there’s a little water and sand in the way, he doesn’t matter?”

This is why she hates arguing with Kano, he always talks in slow, calm measures, making everyone else look like a hot mess when they disagree with him. Toph would know, she’s heard Endeavor make a fuss and lose to the water hero before, quite similar to the way all the fight is washed out of a cranky Kouta once he’s placed in the bathtub he loves. Maybe Endeavor’s been less combative lately as well, something that seems to surprise his kids as much as Toph, though she’s never had reason to figure out what’s caused it. Kano might have some insight on it, however, because he’s the sort of guy that knows how people tick.

Including Toph.

All it takes is a soft, sincerely disapproving, “That’s not the Toph I know.”

Her nostrils flare in annoyance, but he’s right. Inasa’s boisterous laugh can be heard from here as he splashes water at his mom. And Toph wanted to talk to Inasa in person, instead of over the phone as they’ve been doing the past few weeks. There’s been a few things bothering her about the way her old friend has been acting, especially since she brought up Hitoshi Shinsou going to the same school as her. His parents never had much time off work and it’s difficult to organize a day for them to meet up. Ever since Cato, Inasa hasn’t been allowed out without his mom’s supervision, even though he’s nearly thirteen now.

“Ugh!” Toph throws up her hands in frustration and marches onto the sand, immediately feeling her ‘sight’ go blurry. She soldiers on anyway, Kano trailing behind her, right up to the edge of the water.

“See? Not so bad,” Kano chuckles.

“It’s cold,” Toph scowls at the innocuous water tickling her feet, but her frown quickly fade once Twinkletoes notices her.

“TOPH!!” Inasa yells, sloshing towards her and sprinkling her with salty water. “C’mon, c’mon, I’ll teach you how to float! We can dive for shells—” without waiting for a response he wraps two frigid hands around her wrists and drags her in.

“Take it easy, Yoarashi-kun,” Kano warns, following them in. Toph bites her tongue, trying not to snap at Twinkletoes as the water creeps up to her thighs. Her bare thighs. She hates swimsuits.

“She’s new at this.”

“You’re gonna do great!” Inasa declares, “Just float!”

She grimaces. “Twinkletoes, um… Maybe… Kano should help me.”

Twinkletoes slows down, letting go of her hands—which is not okay, not at all, and Toph scrambles to find Kano. He’s behind her, thankfully. “Oh. Okay. That’s okay! You’re gonna love it, Kano-san is a pro!” He exclaims, sloshing around some more. Toph can still tell where he is in waist-deep water, but she only knows it’s Inasa by his voice. Water is so weird. Sand is dreadful. The combination of the two is nauseating. “I’m gonna be with my mom, okay? Come play soccer with me when you’re done! Or we can build sandcastles!”
Toph nods, taking a deep breath. “See ya, Twinkles.” Kano crouches in the water and they drift further into the tide. Her feet are still touching the ground, but the sand shifts and stirs with the waves. It’s impossible to keep track of anything, there’s trillions of grains as each one is swept away, it makes Toph dizzier and more lost—

“Stay with me, Toph,” Kano reminds her, calm as a still pond.

It’s hard. It’s harder than anything she’s done, and Toph hates that she’ll never be good at this. But she nods.

“You won’t learn it all in one day,” Kano warns, “But you’ll know how to get comfortable and float, then you can play with Inasa. We good?”

She takes another calming breath. “We’re good.”

While Toph gets her first swimming lesson, Inasa figures he can find someone else to play with. Obviously mom is his first choice, or Toph’s new mom-that’s-not-her-mom, but they’re both in the shade cooing over Toph’s not-baby-brother, Kouta. He wants to say hi too, but he can do that later…

Well, he’s not the only kid at the beach. He can make more friends here!

There’s a group of boys not far from where he is, and they’re playing frisbee. Inasa grows excited. As an airbender, he’s an excellent frisbee player!

“Hey!!” Inasa shouts at the boy with extra-long fingers, “Can I play too?!”

The boy seems startled, and quickly his eyes dart over to the other two. “Uhhh…?” He says, eyeing his friends for advice.

Another kid calls for the frisbee, and snatches it out of the air easily. Inasa looks to him hopefully, and the blond boy flicks the frisbee up and catches it. He does it again. And again. Smirking.

It doesn’t seem like he has any intention of throwing it to Inasa, and that’s—that’s annoying! Very mean! Inasa frowns at him and, channeling Toph, demands, “Are you gonna just stand there like a sad sack of potatoes or are ya gonna throw me the frisbee?”

The boy looks startled at being called out, and then he just sneers. “Fine, baldy. If you can catch this when I throw it, you can stick with us!” He declares, a smug smile on his face.

The other kids snicker, like they know a secret Inasa doesn’t. Man. He isn’t even sure he wants to hang out with these guys anymore. Still, Inasa holds his ground. “Fine then! Throw it as far as you like, I’ll catch it!”

The other boy scowls harder, but nods. He looks around quickly, checking for any witnesses… and then BOOM! He flings the frisbees with all the force of an explosion!

Inasa—both gobsmacked and absolutely determined to catch this stupid frisbees, bursts into motion with an impressive cloud of sand in his wake, zipping towards the speeding object without breaking a sweat.

He jumps high into the air to reach it, and the frisbees slides easily into his hands. Inasa cackles as he floats down and jogs back to the group of boys. He presents the—slightly charred—frisbee back to the boy who threw it, grinning widely. “Told ya!” He chirps as the frisbee is smacked out of his hand.
“What the fuck! Are you tryin’ to show off, baldy?! You think you’re better than me, huh?!” He snaps, red eyes blazing as he marches into Inasa’s space. He’s shorter than Inasa, but that quirk’s kinda dangerous, and his hands are crackling like popcorn. Or maybe something more dangerous than popcorn. Oh boy.

Inasa’s no pushover though. He’s seen Toph throw around insults just as easily as this explosion boy, and it’s never phased him. He holds his ground again, hands on his hips. “I told you I’d catch it, and I did. But I'm not hanging out with you if you’re just a sore loser.”

“What?!” The boy explodes, verbally and physically as sparks fly from his palms. Man, that’s a cool quirk. Too bad he’s so bitter. “Say that to me again, you shitty monk! I’m no loser!”

Inasa huffs. He’s not as good with the insults as Toph, but a monk? That’s so rude! He has hair! Inasa can’t let that slide. He takes a deep breath to center himself.

“You’re right, you’re no loser—you’re a weenie!”

Okay. He can take insults just fine, but maybe he should work on delivering them.

The blond boy screams in his face, and Inasa staggers backwards towards the water. “Don’t you run, air-boy!”

He takes a swipe at Inasa, but Inasa lets the air buffet around him, deflecting the small blast. They’re not even supposed to use quirks in public, but that doesn’t seem to phase this kid. Inasa’s feet are in the tide now, and he flicks a foot up, aiming to spray a bit of water over the fuming kid and deter any more explosions.

Except, well, instead of a sprinkle, it’s more like a wave that drenches the blond boy, knocking him onto his butt.

The boy splutters in surprise, rubbing salty water out of his eyes. Inasa stares back, aghast. His stomach lurches in rebellion, feeling the swirl of water at his fingers. He shakes his leg like it’s been burned. “Uh oh.”

“You FUCKER!” the boy shrieks, clambering back to his feet. His hands aren’t sparking anymore, and Inasa laughs nervously. “What was that?!”

“Whoops?” He tries. And then Inasa sprints away from the boys, aided by the breeze at his back. There’s no way for the angry weenie to follow him, he’s nowhere near as fast, but he can hear him howling in the distance and likens it to the ominous call of a werewolf.

Inasa stops at practically the other end of the beach, right were the soft sand gives way to big rocks and a collection of puddles, panting loudly. Well, that first attempt sucked, but Inasa won’t give up so quickly.

After a moment to catch his breath, he begins wandering, picking up seashells with interesting colors—and then dropping most of them, because Toph can’t look at colors, but maybe Shouto would like the white and blue speckled one. It’s even harder to find time to visit Shouto, but maybe Kano-san will pass it along.

Inasa jumps back in the water for some time, letting the waves carry him to and from the shore. But at one point he feels like the water has calmed down, yet he’s still pushing and pulling himself through the waves somehow, so he stands upright and returns to the sand, ignoring the tantalizing ocean spray for the large, flat rocks that cut off the public swimming area. It’s quieter here, but he can still see his mom’s umbrella if he squints, so it’s fine.
After a few more minutes of meandering, he sees another kid. A girl, sitting by the edge of a tide pool with a lizard-like head. Her face is gray and brown scales, speckled with black, but her hair is bright red and puffy, like a red panda. A little spooky, but mostly just weird! He likes weird! Inasa makes his way over to introduce himself.

“Hi there!” He shouts, making her jump and drop a shell back into the water. There’s a bunch of shells around her, and one of them is moving—“Are those hermit crabs?! So cool!”

The girl looks up at him with frightened yellow eyes. There’s a flash of lemony light, and suddenly Inasa is frozen in place, staring at her. What? He thinks in a panic. The wind swirls around him roughly, and he’s hyper-aware of the rolling water just meters from his fingers. The girl shrieks and runs away, and in another breath, Inasa can move again. She paralyzed me?! He realizes in alarm, looking around for her. She’s gone. How did she do that? What was that feeling? The water is moving wrong. What if it happens again—

“Yoarashi-kun!” Someone shouts to him, and Inasa whips around, tense and turbulent like the churning waves at his back.

But it’s just Miyuki-san walking over to him, a pleasant smile on her face. Nothing to worry about. Nothing at all. The water recedes with the waves. He’s fine. He’s fine. He’s fine—

“Yoarashi-kun, are you okay?” She asks carefully as she approaches him, sharp dark eyes scanning over him.

He tries to say yes, he’s fine, but his sight is blurry and he can’t breathe—“N-no…”

“Oh, sweetie,” Miyuki gasps, pulling him into a hug. “It’s okay. you’re safe. Nothing happened.” She cradles his head against her shoulder and rubs his back. “I’m here. Your mom is by our umbrella. Breathe, sweetie.”

Inasa takes a few shaky breaths, nodding. “I-I’m sorry. I just got scared. I think it was an accident, she got scared too—”

“What?” Miyuki frowns at him, wiping his face. “Who got scared?”

He bites his lip and shakes his head. “It was an accident,” he says more confidently. “A girl used her quirk on me because I scared her. It’s okay.” Inasa doesn’t mention the way the ocean lurched for him, or how the wind howled without his permission. He inhales deeply through his nose, and then out through his mouth, like the doctor told him to.

This happens sometimes. Ever since he got out of Cato, he’s been talking to a quirk doctor about it.

Miyuki looks over him again, and nods. “Toph is waiting for you, she’s learning how to make sandcastles.”

Inasa breaks out into a smile. He’ll always smile for Toph, even if he doesn’t feel like it. “That’s great, I’ll help!” He declares, darting past Miyuki to find her. He can feel her gaze on his back, but Inasa brushes it aside. He feels kinda crappy right now, and he hasn’t made any friends on the beach like he intended to, but that’s why he has Toph. Toph makes everything brighter.

As expected, Toph greets him with a sunny smile. “Finally,” she exclaims, getting to her feet. Kouta is beside her on a folded towel, scowling at his tiny toes. “Where’ve you been, dummy?”

Unlike the blonde kid, Toph’s insults roll off his back like water off of Captain Selkie. Even at her
meanest, Toph loves him. He knows her well enough to know this is how she shows affection. “Waiting for you! Now, let’s build something. A castle. Two castles!”

“A really big castle,” Toph suggests, laughing. “Big enough to fit Kouta in it.”

“A FORT!” Inasa exclaims, shoveling wet sand into the biggest bucket. “With a moat!”

“What’s a moat?”

“I dunno, like a pool.” He begins to mime the shape of it with his hands before dismissing the explanation as useless for his friend.

Toph crosses her arms. “More water? Sounds lame.”

“Kouta likes water!” Inasa argues. “Plus, it’s like a protective pool. Around the castle. But let’s focus on the castle first!”

“I thought it was a fort?” Toph’s face scrunches up. “I guess they’re pretty similar.”

“Good point.” Inasa crouches down to Kouta’s height and holds out both hands. “Kouta-chan, wanna be a prince with a castle or a soldier with a fort?”

Kouta stares at him with big red eyes, and then grabs his left hand. “Castle!”

“Prince with a castle it is!” Inasa cheers. Kouta, catching onto his enthusiasm, cheers with him. Inasa dips into a bow so low that his head smacks into the sand. “At your service, Prince Kouta of the Izumi Family!” He smiles adorably with tiny baby teeth. What a good baby. Toph always acts like it’s a chore to look after him, but Inasa would love siblings.

Cackling, Toph bows with gusto as well, which delights the baby boy. It delights Inasa too. She’s so pretty. “Alright, time for the show. Inasa, shield his face from the sand.”

Inasa scoots Kouta backwards a little, and carefully turns him away from Toph. “Ready! Wait. Whatcha doing?”

“Just watch!” Toph smirks, and then her stance shifts into her usual practice position. Inasa loves watching Toph earthbend, she makes it look like a martial art. He can already see her in the future as a hero, moving like a born warrior. She mentioned that the Izumis were sending her to lessons so she’d continue learning how to fight without using her quirk to wreck their yard. He never saw Shouto’s house before Toph bulldozed through it, but the ice-and-firebender described his courtyard’s unorthodox remodeling in great detail.

The sand swirls around, solidifying around Toph’s ankles, and then she pulls a hand in an upward slice. The sand follows her move, jettisoning into a mighty tower. It crumbles a bit near the top, but it’s almost her height.

“Wow,” Inasa lets out a breath. He’s not sure if it was the earthbending or just Toph being Toph that took his breath away to begin with. “I thought you’ve never been to the beach before!”

“I haven’t,” Toph flashes an incandescent smile, sandbending another pillar. “Cool, huh?”

“Uh, yeah,” Inasa cheers, clambering between the pillars. “Make a big one in the middle! With spires!”

She obignes, and before long there’s a massive castle between them, glimmering with shells and fake-
brick detailing. Inasa helps carve out the details and digs a moat around it, and Kano-san comes by to stream some water into it, though it keeps soaking into the sand. It looks amazing. And Toph looks amazing as she works, beaming like the sun with rosy cheeks and damp hair plastered to her face.

He’s not sure how long they build for, because they keep rebuilding: Kouta will knock over some towers; Toph will tear it down to build something else; Inasa will dump water on all three of them and then Toph’ll trap him in sand.—and then they return to constructing, cackling all the while. He could do this forever with Toph.

But as they keep building, Inasa finds himself quieter than usual, especially after watching Kano-san pull water into their creation to finally fill up their moat. His mind keeps returning to the lizard girl with the paralyzing quirk, and the hot-blooded blond boy he drenched with water. On both occasions, his gut reactions weren’t normal. In the past, he would’ve picked up a whirlwind and blown around sand if he got too excited. Maybe create a gust of air strong enough to knock the boy off his feet. But instead the ocean water pushed and pulled in rhythm with Inasa’s intentions. Without ever doing it before, Inasa knew the water would bend and change if he asked it to.

And Inasa did not want that. His skin crawled at the very idea. What business does he have waterbending? It’s wrong.

“Inasa?” Toph calls him out of the blue. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course!” He agrees, though something in her tone is off. There’s no smile on her face anymore, but she’s not frowning either.

“Why don’t you wanna meet Hitoshi?”

Ah. Shinsou. Inasa’s good mood doesn’t evaporate, but it certainly fades a bit. “You know why.” He hasn’t said it in many words, but it must be obvious. “I’m not gonna stop you from hanging out with him, but. I wish you wouldn’t.”

“And I’ve told you he’s nothing like her,” she replies evenly. “You’d like him. And he wants to meet you, which—” she huffs. “You boys are so weird,” Toph shakes her head with a pout.

Inasa pouts right back, though it’s probably not as endearing as her’s. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Shouto,” she says flatly, exasperated. “Shouto wants to meet Hitoshi, but with Endeavor being the one to, uh,” she grimaces, “Stop Puppetmaster, Hitoshi doesn’t want anything to do with the Todorokis. And on the other side, he’s totally down to meet you, and you want nothing to do with the Shinsous!”

“Can you blame me?!” He exclaims, brushing sand off his hands to busy himself. “None of this is normal to begin with, so don't call me the weird one!” This isn’t something Toph could ever understand, though. She sent a picture of the two of them once. That Hitoshi kid looks just like his mother, and Inasa can’t. He can’t! "I'm not meeting him. I barely have time to see you anyway."

He doesn't think Miyuki-san will mention it, but the lizard girl with paralyzing eyes? Inasa really doesn't try to judge people by their quirks, but mental abilities like that just don't... he doesn't want to look like a crybaby in front of Toph. Better to avoid it while he can.

“Plus, I—I don’t blame Shinsou either, about Endeavor,” Inasa continues quietly. He believes Toph wholeheartedly that Hitoshi is different, but Inasa knows he can’t handle more reminders of AV. And Shouto looks a lot like his dad, so it’s probably the same kind of sore spot for the brainwashing
kid. “If he doesn’t wanna meet, he doesn’t wanna meet.”

“In conclusion,” Toph looks at him sourly, “You boys are weird. I know we’d all get along.”

“Toph…” He knows she can be stubborn, but they’ve been at a stalemate over this for months already. The same way they’ve been at a stalemate over his quirk, which Inasa refuses to experiment with. Talking it out in person won’t change a thing. “Just let it go. Please. I never get to see you anymore, and I don’t want to argue.”

The despairing expression on Toph’s face kills Inasa inside, but he’s only trying to tell her the truth. He’s never been so adamant about avoiding confrontation before, but this… this is something he’d rather neatly pack up and push to the back of his mind. And Toph knows it, because she slumps in concession, nodding minutely.

“Okay, Twinkletoes,” she sighs. “But you can’t avoid this kinda stuff forever.”

“I know,” Oh, Inasa knows it. And she’s not only talking about Shinsou. “But… just a little longer.” Another day, another month. Inasa might not face it for years, but he won’t tell that to Toph. “C’mon, we need another tower,” he switches gears, and slowly, they continue their sand work.

True to her word, Toph doesn’t bring any of it up again. Her smile returns, softer but just as brilliant, and that’s all he needs.

“Toph!” Miyuki jogs over to them. “Time to reapply!”

“No!” Toph rebels immediately, sinking her hands into the sand. The action disrupts the tower she’s building, and it collapses into a pile. Again.

He watches, pitying his friend as Miyuki drags her and Kouta back to the shade for a healthy dose of gloopy cream.

Inasa opts for his mom to spray him all over with a clear sunscreen, holding his breath, and then he’s back at the castle, figuring out how to bundle twigs together for a drawbridge.

It’s at this point that the blond boy finds him again, stomping over with a permanent scowl etched onto his face. Inasa watches him with a slight frown.

“You! Bald-head!” The boy points an accusing finger at him. “You coward, you ran away!”

Inasa drops the sticks, hastily shaking the sand off his hands. “I said I didn’t wanna hang out with you,” he declares, only raising his voice a little. “So leave.”

The boy fumes, nostrils flaring. His hands are popping again. Red eyes dart to the large castle, and Inasa is instantly on guard. “What’s this, a sandcastle? Are you a baby or something?!”

“Stay away from it,” Inasa warns. Him and Toph could easily make a new one, and they’ve already wrecked it several times on their own, but that’s their castle, not this kid’s. The thought of him trampling over something meant for Inasa and Toph is—is unacceptable.

The boy scoffs, taking a threatening step forward. “Ooh, what’re you gonna do if I touch it? Splash more water? Run away?” He barks out in laughter, and reaches out a hand.

“Stop it,” Inasa warns.

“Make me!” The boy sneers. “I’m just here to finish what you started, so fight me!”
...Fight him? *Fight him?*

“What?!” Inasa demands with a splutter, leaping to his feet. “*No way!* Do you think this some joke? We’re on a beach, my mom would kill me if—where’s *your* mom, huh?” Inasa narrows his eyes, getting a better idea than chewing out this jerk. He sucks in a huge breath of air, and bellows at the top of his lungs, “**STOP TRYING TO EXPLODE EVERYTHING YOU BIG WEENIE!**”

Everyone at the beach stops what they’re doing to look at them. He can see Miyuki-san and his mom rising to their feet. Toph looks up in surprise too.

The explosion boy looks *furious*, blown back a foot but still on his feet. “You COWARD!” He shouts, but his head whips back and forth in alarm. “Gonna cry back to mommy now, you stupid, *bald*—”

“**KATSUKI BAKUGOU, YOU GET BACK HERE THIS INSTANT!**” a terrifying woman hollers at them from the far side of the beach. “**I’LL GIVE YOU TEN SECONDS, YOU LITTLE BRAT!**”

A satisfied grin stretches over Inasa’s face. “It was nice knowin’ ya, Katsuki Bakugou!”

Bakugou growls, but then he looks back at his fuming mother and stomps away, hands sparking and smoking with small explosions. “This ain’t over, baldy!”

Except, it really is. Inasa’s mom and Toph walk over to him and the castle to investigate, and Inasa greets them with a victorious smile. “What the heck was *that*, Inasa?” Toph demands, but there’s an undercurrent of concern in her expression.

“Just some kid trying to ruin our castle,” Inasa says dismissively, shooting his mother a reassuring smile. Toph’s eyes are still narrowed, and her head is tilted like she’s trying to listen to what Bakugou is saying to his mother. “Hey, Toph!” He draws her attention away.

She blinks. “Yeah?”

Inasa dives for her, sweeping her up into his arms before she can retaliate, and throws both of them into the side of the sandcastle.

Toph shrieks, smacking his arm and spitting out sand. “You jerk!” She laughs, pushing at his chest. Inasa lets himself fall backwards to crush more of the castle, and flicks out a burst of wind to knock her down too. “I’m never getting all this sand off,” she moans.

“We could always go back in the water—”

“No!” Toph denies, and makes his feet sink into the sand up to his knees. “No more water! *Only land!*”

He cackles at her sour face, pulling more wind around to tangle her half-dried hair. He’s gotten very good and fine-tuning how strong his winds are. “How about air?”

Toph sticks her tongue at him, and then coughs from getting more sand in her mouth. Inasa snickers, and she takes a big clump of sand and dumps it over his stomach. Then another clump over his knees.

“Wha—are you burying me??”

“Yes!” She grins.
“Well, it was nice knowing you,” Inasa says solemnly. “Tell my mom I love her!”

“Tell her yourself, she’s right here!” Toph points at his mom, who’s been watching from a few feet away the whole time. She’s taking photos and Inasa grins hugely for her. He’ll have her print out pictures from today.

“Oh, right!” Inasa waves a hand before Toph grabs it and encases him in sand. “Mom, tell Toph I love her!”

“Shut it, Airhead,” Toph mutters with pink cheeks, punching his arm. Oof, she’s gotten stronger, if not much taller.

“I can’t speak, I’m dead now,” Inasa points out, but he’s more interested in the blush coloring her face now. “You’re just hearing my ghost.”

“What, now I’m being haunted?” She teases, rolling her eyes. Her hair falls over her eyes once more, and the blush fades.

“You did bury me in a shallow grave,” Inasa reasons, wiggling his fingers. “I have to. Ghost rules.” For some reason that makes Toph frown, but Inasa doesn’t get the chance to address it.

“Alright guys,” Kano-san jogs over. “It’s getting late, Kouta’s already napping.”

“And you two need baths,” Inasa’s mom adds with a smile. That sets off Toph all over again, and she instantly dives into a passionate tirade over the absolute waste of time that is bathing. It’s all just big talk, Toph never wins against Kano and she doesn’t really try to either, but it brings a smile to Inasa’s face nonetheless. This is normal Toph, normal mom and normal family things.

This is the sort of underwhelming average-ness that Inasa has been missing.

When he’s alone with his parents, they still get a fearful look in their eye whenever Inasa isn’t home on time. They still usher him off to the quirk doctor with tense expressions, forever waiting for the day they find out something is really wrong with Inasa because of what they did to him at Cato. There’s always an undercurrent of uncertainty in his daily life because his parents periodically check up on the AV case, which won’t be resolved until Tarrlok and the rest of the shadowy organization faces justice.

Inasa just wants his life back to the way it was. So he clings to moments like this with all his might, burning the sight into his memories so he’ll never be told to forget Toph. All the while, the ocean waves push and pull at the sandy edge of the beach, yearning and insistent.

Chapter End Notes

I know many have been looking forward to seeing all of Toph's friends together, but it's just not that easy. (You'll have to wait for the next season, because Fall brings change.)

We haven't seen them all together yet, but how about Inasa calling Bakugou a weenie? It's not the canon character appearance you wanted, but it's the one we all deserve.

Oh! That lizard girl with paralyzing eyes is a real character too! She's Tsuyu Asui's middle school friend, and is canonically terrifying.
Lastly—I have a question for you guys! You’ve heard of the Dekusquad. The Bakusquad. Besides the obvious ones, who’s in Toph’s squad??
Chapter Summary

Interlude: Seasonals
Chapter 15: And a Fall

Chapter Notes

Toph is 15. Shouto is 14. Inasa is 15. Kouta is five and a half. Touya is 24. Fuyumi is 21, Natsuo is 17, Endeavor is 44.

I should preface this with a minor warning because there's some canon character deaths. Most of you have probably seen this coming.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The week before the entrance exam for UA, the Water Hose team is brutally killed while apprehending a villain. Toph is whisked out of school and into a hospital, but there’s nothing to do. Miyuki Izumi is dead on arrival, and Kano takes his last breaths before she arrives. Kouta is still at preschool, and Toph absently tells her social worker—Kaneko, a woman with knobbly zebra legs—that he shouldn’t be allowed near the hospital at all.

“Your emergency contacts are listed here as Enji Todoroki and Shino Sosaki.”

“Sosaki?” Toph repeats quizzically, not recognizing the name immediately.

“You may know her as Mandalay. She’s Miyuki’s first cousin, but she’s about three hours away. I think Todoroki-san won’t mind bringing both of you home for tonight, but I believe custody of Kouta-kun will be transferred to Sosaki-san,” Kaneko admits frankly. She’s never been one to pull her punches. “In your case, it depends on what you work out with either Todoroki-san or Sosaki-san. If that doesn’t pan out, I’ll take it from there.”

Toph simply nods, letting Kaneko turn back to her phone to work. She has Toph consent to two different documents, one for Sosaki’s fostership and one for the Todorokis, because Toph doesn’t mind either option. They’re in the lobby on the ICU level of the hospital, a totally different place than Cato, but it still chafes at Toph like a poison-ivy rash. At some point Kaneko tells her that Kouta is being taken to Todoroki’s house, and that Natsuo will be here soon, but the words drip over her, a steady drizzle of rain with virtually no effect. There’s a TV in the corner of the room, the volume set low and hardly audible over the buzz of lights and the murmur of people throughout the building.

It’s playing news coverage over the Water Hose team, though, and Toph can’t bring herself to block out the cold, infuriating sound of strangers picking apart the fight that killed them.

Of course, the newscaster praises them thoroughly too. Lays on the commendations like a syrupy blanket to mask the bullshit they’re spewing along the way. ...Mistakenly chose to engage the enhancer-quirk villain instead of waiting for back-up… Clearly outmatched by the infamous strength...
of the perpetrator... Costly fight for a newly-renovated commercial area... Outstanding performance in order to prevent civilian casualties... Agency is scrambling to arrange a press conference to address the damages... Villain is in custody thanks to their last moments of bravery...

“I’m going to take a walk,” Toph announces softly, and Kaneko gives her consent because it’s a beautiful day. It’s only one o’clock, and though it’s autumn, the air is still warm and the skies are clear. The fact that Toph leaves with her school bag goes unnoticed.

She ends up passing Natsuo by the front desk, and tells him, in a spur of the moment choice, Kaneko-san needs a word before we go, I’ll be waiting outside. Toph gestures to her bag, and he doesn’t question it further. He knows better than to coddle her, anyway.

The air outside is crisp and pleasant from a recent rain. Toph scrubs a hand through her hair, letting more of her bangs out from her headband—and then removing it entirely, because she wears it every day. Face angled at the ground, Toph takes a brisk pace towards the nearest train station.

This isn’t her running away. She just needs her walk to last a little longer than a standard stroll.

On the train, Toph slides her finger over the seams of her cell phone, popping the battery pack out. She steps out of the car at a random station and sits down long enough to peel off her socks and shoes. No one really cares about a kid going barefoot these days, though the Beifongs used to make it sound like a capital crime. Toph gets back onto a different train, and no one bothers her as she rides it all the way to its last stop in Ueno.

She chose Ueno for a reason. At the very edge of this part of the city, there’s a large swath of empty wetland that has yet to be purchased and built upon. Basically an empty swamp, with only an abundance of flora and fauna as her witness. Touya clearly doesn’t use it anymore. She trudges deep into the marshes, uncaring of the muck gathering over her calves or the grasses sticking to her skirt.

Toph places her school bag high up on a twisty branch, tips backwards into pool of muddy earth, and sobs her fucking useless eyes out for the Izumis. She screams. She punts rocks forty feet away and smashes her fists into unsuspecting tree trunks. Sloppily, she pushes her hair out of her face, smearing mud everywhere, and cries until her chest aches too much to keep going.

“They’re dead,” she says out loud, unwilling to say it in the presence of anyone else. Her voice is raw and shaky and weak, so Toph doesn’t want anyone to hear it. She can’t let anyone hear it. Endeavor dealt with enough shit from her when she was finally removed from the Beifongs’ custody, Toph needs no repeat of their ruined courtyard.

Except this time, there’s even less blame to push around. The Beifongs were criminals because they had an agenda that went against everything Toph was born to become. But this? Toph has no doubt this would’ve happened regardless of whether or not Toph was around. Muscular was attacking in their patrol route, the same city they’ve operated in for years. There was no way support could’ve reached them in time. The Izumis died in the line of duty, they got what they signed up for. It’s entirely that villain’s fault, Toph knows.

It’s just fucking unfair.

None of it is fair, Todoroki-san’s voice filters back into her mind as she lays in the mud. Toph breathes in the thick, earthy air around her. And this is probably pointless, she finishes the thought bitterly.

She emerges from the earth like a reanimated corpse, and decides she’s going to be senseless for a little while longer anyway.
Shucking off the dirt as best she can, Toph trudges out of the swampland. Her bag slides off her shoulder as she walks, and she swaps her shapeless blazer for a faded navy zip-up hoodie. She unravels the already-loose tie from her neck, still damp, and stuffs that away too. She shuffles out of her school uniform’s pleated skirt into the basketball shorts she uses for gym period. The muddy dress shirt is exchanged for a soft gray t-shirt.

Toph isn’t quite trying to disguise herself, but at the same time, she doubts anyone looking for her will expect a clothing change. Her school bag is the same as everyone else’s, so that won’t give her away either.

She keeps going. Toph dives into her senses, each vibration unique and separate from each other to build her world. Her quirk gives her the ability to see through vibrations, but not just the tremors from her own feet. Everything vibrates, from the air around a bird’s wings to the tremble of gravel beneath the tires of a car. Toph has learned to pick through sound and seismic motion, only feeling for what she needs to, but today she lets it all in.

That way, there’s no room for her thoughts.

It’s getting late now, past sundown. Moisture collects in the air, and Toph is minutely aware of it in every breath she takes, in every swish of fabric and in the beads of sweat that cling to her skin. She ducks into a small store just moments before the first drops of rain hit the pavement. She’s surprised it’s still open.

It’s blessedly uncrowded, only one register open with a sleepy cashier scrolling on a phone and two customers ambling down the narrow aisles. The air is stale, but cool and dry compared to the growing rainstorm just meters away. She’ll go back outside soon enough. When it pours like this, Toph can see a great deal.

For now, though, she has some petty cash left in her wallet. Toph doesn’t feel particularly hungry after missing dinner, but maybe she could use a drink. Toph shambles over to the refrigerated section in the back of the store. The bottle shapes are familiar enough, and she’s not picky about what she gets as long as it’s liquid. Maybe a soft drink, or milk tea.

Her hand falls onto a glass jar, and she gives it a tap with her nails. Kimchi. Kano-san liked to get the really spicy kind to put in his rice, and the smell would linger throughout their house for hours. Miyuki hated it, but Kouta liked the spiciness. Unbidden, Toph’s eyes are welling up with tears. Not now, she thinks in helpless frustration. Not in a grocery store over a jar of kimchi.

But oh god, she’s never going to smell it again. Spicy kimchi spilling onto the just-cleaned table, the cut grass from the small backyard, Kano’s minted breath, the baby sunscreen Miyuki insisted she and Kouta wear every day—that mixture of scents was just a memory, now and forever. Why did they have to die? Why would they leave her so quickly?

A light tap on her shoulder drags her back to the present. A gravelly voice, muffled by something. “...hear me, kid? I asked you to move over.”

“...huh?” Toph answers numbly, stepping to the left. “Sorry.”

“They’re not gonna hit you, kid. Just move.”

“Afraid not. It’s been a long day.”

“Afraid not. It’s been a long day.”

She quickly ducks her head to rub her eyes, and shakes her head. “Fine,” she says, unable to come
up with any other words. He’s wearing a scarf, that’s why his voice is muffled. Strange.

He’s still standing there. Then he shifts his weight from his left foot to his right, and Toph realizes with a jolt that she does know him. “Kid, you sure you’re—“

“I know you,” She interrupts him softly, surprising both of them as she turns her face up to him. “Stendhal.” They never even spoke to each other, actually, but she remembers the name. She can feel the heavy clink of metal, a short blade beneath his jacket, a few switchblades strapped against his ribcage. Idiot, she should’ve noticed that earlier. He’s armed.

As expected, he goes still. That’s confirmation enough for Toph. “What did you just call me?”

“We’ve met before,” she explains half-heartedly. That was stupid, calling him that. He’ll want more information… but it’s such a strange fluke. She hasn’t spoken to anyone from the Quirk Rumble since Touya, and it’s been years since then.

“I don’t recognize you,” He says in a quiet, tense voice, hunched over slightly to (presumably) scrutinize her. It’s late, and the grocery mart is practically empty as the last customer makes their purchase. The only employee is shuffling papers at the register, out of hearing range. “How do you know that name?”

She tucks her long bangs behind her ears, stalling to get her thoughts in order and figure out what she can say without risk. “That was your fighting name. I had one too.”

Stendhal is silent for a long moment, but she can sense him relaxing out of his tense stance. “You’re so young. I knew that tiger was bending the rules for you,” he says ruefully, exhaling a long, harsh breath. “You’re the Blind Bandit.”

“I was,” Toph admits curtly, not really up for discussing it further. It’s in the past. She’s moving forward. “Do you know where the Calpico is?” She asks, changing the subject rather conspicuously.

“I… sure.” He straightens up and moves to the far side of the refrigerated section. Toph follows. “Right up there.” He points, and does nothing else.

Toph furrows her brow critically. “C’mon dude,” she says exasperatedly.

“Eh? Oh.” He honest to god smacks his own forehead, and she almost, almost, cracks a smile. It’s kind of nice when people forget her disability. “Shit. You’re blind. Fuck, you’re so much shorter in person, can you even reach up there?”

Toph rolls her eyes. She never fought the sword guy because they were in different weight classes, but if anything she’s taller than she was at nine years old. “Just grab me the lychee one, please.”

Finally, he hands her a bottle. “Thanks.”

“No problem…”

He doesn’t sound particularly friendly or interested in speaking with her further. He’s not leaving, though, and when Toph turns to walk away first he speaks up. “What are you doing here alone, Bandit?”

“Toph,” she corrects him adamantly, clutching the bottle harder. “I don’t do shit like that anymore. It’s Toph Beifong.” She isn’t that worried about him tattling on her. There’s a certain solidarity from the Rumble between fighters, between most people that frequented the underground ring. Plus, they’ve already been busted.
He makes a clicking noise with his tongue, annoyed. “Alright Toph Beifong, what’re you doing here on your own?”

“Shopping,” she says flatly. “S’raining outside, I’m waiting it out.” Not really, but it’s a divergence from what he’s asking and Toph hopes he’ll drop the conversation there.

He shifts his basket onto the other arm. “That doesn’t explain much. You in trouble?”

Was she? Toph isn’t sure there’s anyone left to feel troubled by her absence, after all. Her phone is off and it’s only been a few hours. Maybe she’s missed a call from Kouta’s aunt, or Todoroki, but what does it even matter? She’ll go back eventually. Toph doesn’t respond, but her mouth thins into a straight line and she shakes her head.

Carefully, Stendhal reaches over and places a large hand on her shoulder. “Follow me, Beifong,” he says. It’s an offer, not a demand, but Toph takes it and follows him closely as they go to the register. He elects for the automatic station, which Toph can’t actually operate alone. When she turns to the cashier station, he plucks the soda bottle out of her hand without warning.

“What gives?” Toph shoots him an irritated look. “I have money.”

He just gives a vague grunt in response, picking up a crinkly protein bar from the shelf as well and scanning everything into one purchase. He bags up the groceries in cloth bags, likely reusable ones like Miyuki-san uses.

Toph swipes at her face again roughly. Was everything in this fucking grocery store going to remind her of the Izumis? She should’ve stayed in the swamp.

Stendhal makes for the exit without calling to her, but Toph trails after him. He still has the stupid lychee drink. She could always get another one, and just leave Stendhal to his own devices, but it felt like he intended to continue their conversation elsewhere, away from the grocery mart.

“You’re an idiot,” she can hear Touya chastise her. Well, she’ll avoid any alleyways if Stendhal tries to lead her there, but Toph’s already dug herself a hole by introducing herself.

As they exit into the street she hears the click and whoosh of an umbrella unfolding, and rain plinking against the cloth above her. Then the umbrella’s handle is shoved into her hand, and Stendhal begins walking away.

“Hey,” Toph says in sharp annoyance, forced to follow. “Where are we going?”

“Not far,” he answers in a clipped tone, giving away nothing. But it’s not like Toph has anywhere else she wants to go. She’ll face consequences for her ‘walk’, but not yet. And he’s not hostile. Somewhere far away, Touya is probably cursing her out. But it really isn’t far; the destination is apparent when Stendhal steps into the public park around the block, heading for an empty, uh, Toph doesn’t know what it’s called, but it’s circular and sheltered from the rain and it’s used in soppy movies that Miyuki cries at.

Toph folds the umbrella back up while Stendhal sets the groceries down and sits on a bench. He gives little warning, but Toph catches the soft drink he tosses to her without issue. She doesn’t always catch things that people—Shouto—throw at her, but she’s gotten better at it. He gives a quiet, surprised little “huh” at the quick response, and Toph turns her head to scowl at him.

“What was that, a test?” She zips through the relative silence to target the stupid impressed huff he
made.

“I was curious,” he answers, unaffected. “That’s a tricky quirk you got there.”

The comment is probing, his tone grating enough to push her to spill more details, but Toph shoves aside the urge and narrows her eyes. “Wouldn’t you like to know, Stendhal,” she settles on, wrenching the bottle open.

He makes a growly sort of noise, one that Toph would’ve been wary of if he hadn’t already bought her a soft drink and walked out to a gazebo—that’s the word—to talk. “That name’s not public information, kid. You know what I am.” Something darker enters his tone.

“Huh?” Toph hesitates, the bottle just touching her lower lip. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Silence. Then, Stendhal groans, sliding further down the bench like he’s suddenly been turned to jelly. “For Kami’s sake. Don’t tell me you don’t know.”

“Know what?” Toph says with some heat, lowering the drink without taking a sip. “You were in the Rumble, what else is there to know?” He’s probably still doing something underground, armed the way he is, but Toph’s not one to care. People that take that route rarely have any other option.

But she hears him smack his own forehead again, meaning she’s got it wrong. Then he rifles through his bag and tears open the crinkly-wrapped bar. “I don’t fight with those fools anymore,” he reveals through a mouthful of protein bar. She can tell it’s one of those health bars because it’s dense and gummy, and smells like one. “My cause is more principled than senseless violence.”

The language doesn’t escape her notice. Cause? Principles?

This conversation is taking a turn that Toph did not expect. She’d be less surprised if cats began to fall from the sky in lieu of rain. Alarm bells go off in her head, but Toph keeps her face from showing it. “Why did you fight with them at all if you’re so high and mighty, huh?” Toph hooks her claws into the one fact she’s certain of.

“I had yet to find my path. Why did you fight, little girl?” He shoots right back, but Toph won’t play this game. “You’re strong, but too green to be involved in that shit.”

“It was wrong and illegal,” She concedes with a ruthless sort of efficiency, cutting through to the barebones she’d finally understood once she talked to Shinsou about it. “But it was the only thing I could control in my life. I have better ways now to train.”

“Train?” he echoes, and his voice takes on an odd lilt. Amused. Disdained.

Maybe she shouldn’t tell him this, not if Stendhal is what she thinks he is. If he has a cause, if he’s principled. But a part of her needs to declare it to the world every day—especially today—and she can’t be afraid to acknowledge what she wants. “I’m training to be a hero,” she says frankly, taking a sip from her drink at last. “You got a problem with that?”

“I think you might have a problem with getting licensed,” Stendhal replies, voice dripping with a new level of loathing. He makes no move towards her, but Toph remains tense. “You don’t think anyone will ever give the police a tip about the little earthbender who used to fight for cash?”

“I never fought for cash,” Toph denies earnestly. Stendhal makes a small noise of confusion in the back of his throat, taken aback. She arches an eyebrow in question. “Is that why I’m getting attitude? Loban didn’t pay me a cent for those fights.”
“What?” He says, staggered by her disclosure. “Why the hell would you fight then?”

“To fight,” Toph says like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. “To train, specifically. Like I just said.”

“You could’ve died, the fuck is wrong with you?” He’s a few decibels away from yelling now. Toph gets the distinct impression he’s looking at her like one would regard a rabid animal. “What—what did you mean by ‘the only thing you could control’?”

Toph chugs half the bottle of Calpico, annoyed. “Quid pro quo, Stendhal,” she decides, putting heavy emphasis on the name she’s not supposed to say. “Is that your vigilante name now?”

He tears through the rest of his protein bar, hunching over in an aggrieved slump. He sneers. “Gonna report me, little hero? I probably do more good for this society than half the heroes you know.”

Toph’s hand tightens over her plastic bottle, breath caught in her throat as she remembers why she’s out here in the first place, arguing with an old ‘co-worker’ in a thunderstorm. She swallows down the thick, murky emotion rising to her tongue, begging to defend people that aren’t here. It’s hard not to rise to the bait—very freaking hard—but she’s not an angry nine year old anymore. Now she’s an angry fifteen year old, and she resists. Toph molds her fury into something dry and disgruntled.

“Y’see, that’s why I need to become a hero first,” she replies casually, extending a tenuous truce between them. “No one would follow up if I reported you now. It’s hard for people to trust the word of a little blind girl, no matter how right I am.”

The response catching him unaware, she can tell by the hesitation in his posture before he hunches over again in a strange show of confidence. Of faith that she’s no threat to him, and a measure of truce on his part. He still sneers at her though. “So you want to be heard. Want that authority. Power’s a slippery slope, girl.”

“Funny, I’d say the same thing about vigilantism, dick,” Toph fires back. “I’m principled too, y’know. If you’re still on the same shit when I’m licensed, I hope you’re prepared to face me.”

He barks an odd, gritty sort of laugh, and Toph grins back into the liminal space they occupy between friends, enemies, and strangers meeting for the first time. Having known of each other for so long, and yet knowing nothing now that they’ve met. It’s funny that after all this time—six years, a lifetime of change for Toph—they’re in each other’s orbit far more personally than when they shared the Rumble.

I better not make a habit of this, though, Toph thinks cautiously.

“I’m not going to stop,” the vigilante rasps, a firmness to his words like he needs to impress upon her this point. But Toph remembers his fights very well, having expected to eventually move up to his weight class and take him down a notch. Stendhal fights ferociously, cleverly, with dogged determination you can’t help but respect even with the odds stacked against him. He’s armed, and there aren’t any no-kill rules in this arena. “Not until this society changes for the better.”

“Society,” Toph echoes hollowly. She thinks of the cheering crowd after Water Hose’s final victory, as it’s being called. The praise showered over silent graves. Criticism and pessimistic analysis talks over their fight patterns. The unrelenting questions Kouta will ask. If society changed, maybe it wouldn’t be so suffocating to deal with all this. Maybe there would be fewer villains and fewer bodies in the morgue. Yeah, society does need to change, but probably not according to Stendhal’s vision. “Lofty goal you got there,” she replies, controlled and neutral. “A little radical, if you ask me.”
“We have to aim high to get anything done,” Stendhal says grimly, and Toph jerks her head around.

“‘We’? You got a fandub?” She probes, expecting some hint more about what the hell this vigilante thinks he’s accomplishing.

Instead he just scoffs. “I mean you and me, kid. You’re some brand of radical yourself, to hop into the ring before you’ve reached middle school.” He fiddles with the wrapper in his hands, the noise crackling and loud enough to hear over the thousand plinking drops of rain overhead. His words solidify with shards of glass neatly cutting from within her. Maybe she is a little radical. “It remains to be seen whether your goal is worth reaching.”

The implied insult of her career path is easy enough to grasp. And still, Toph refuses the bait. She knows she has a short fuse, but today… today she’s too drained to let it control her. The swamp swept all the fight from her, and Toph is determined to leave it in the mud.

He’s probably killed people. She doesn’t know his quirk, but he fought with blades and always seemed, like many fighters, too savage for just the Rumble. Toph is in no position, no condition, to fight him or stop him here and now. Not with everything else going on. She isn’t sure what his principles are, but she doesn’t want to ask.

It’s clear enough to her that they’re on separate sides at this juncture.

Toph raises her soft drink in the caricature of a toast. “Not sure I’ll ever see what you do, Stendhal.” She sips her drink again, close to finishing it now. “You sure as hell can’t see like me, and I don’t mean because I’m blind.”

He gives another grizzled sort of snort, shaking his head. “Maybe so,” he concedes, rather ambivalently. He huffs. “This is the strangest conversation I’ve ever had.”

“You’re telling me,” Toph sighs, but she’s somehow thankful for it. “Why’d you buy me this?” She waves the bottle for unneeded emphasis. “I didn’t even know what you were, just your name.”

A low grumble vibrated from his throat, and he crosses his arms. Eventually, the words tumble out like unpleasant admission. “...Y’looked like you needed help.”

And doesn’t that just hit her like a truck? Toph turns away, not sure how to take that answer.

He continues with a muttered, “Was I right?”

“None of this has actually helped,” she points out, stubborn till the end. “Nothing’s changed.”

“Well, that’s not true,” Stendhal rasps, suddenly rising to his feet. Toph tenses for the briefest moment, but Stendhal doesn’t seem inclined to fight her. He just makes a vague gesture around with his hand, cutting through the moist air definitively. “Haven’t you noticed? The rain stopped.”

It has. Rainwater drips down from trees onto the gazebo roof, but the air is quieter. There’s nothing to muffle their words besides the scarf over Stendhal’s face. She can feel the odd space they inhabited shrinking in on itself, filling the void back with reality. Stendhal picks up his groceries, and then his umbrella from the steps. He walks right past her and out the gazebo.

“Hey,” she calls out, unwilling to let him have the last word. He pauses at her call, and Toph clenches her fingers around the plastic bottle in her hands. She doesn’t want to thank him, and doubts he’d appreciate it anyway. “You’re right. And I don’t plan on stopping either. So when I’m licensed —”
“You’ll try and stop me,” he finishes the thought in a flat tone.

“No,” she cuts him off stonily, voice unyielding as her element. “When I’m licensed… We’ll see which one of us changes society.”

There it is, the shift she’s been anticipating since the start. She hadn’t come out here wondering what sort of hero she wanted to be, but the uncertainty cropped up anyway, thrust upon her by Stendhal’s presence and the dread surrounding Water Hose’s end. Where there was once a question now laid a line in the sand. Until now she hasn’t truly contested anything he’s said, only clarified her own choices in the Rumble while his motives emerged, murky but solid.

“We’ll see,” he repeats in a murmur, a promise, and then he’s plodding away, out of Toph’s range in moments.

For a time, she sits in silence in the gazebo. Alone with her swirling thoughts, maybe for too long. Guiltily, Toph plugs the battery back into her phone. It buzzes like crazy for a moment, loading up messages and missed calls. Then the phone rings, and Toph answers.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Enji Todoroki fumes like a cranky dragon, bursting out of the sleek car parked in front of her. He snatches her arm and tugs her into the back seat before she can get a word out, slamming the door just shy of her bare toes.

It’s an abrupt shattering to the silence of one in the morning, but Toph clicks her jaw shut as he all but throws himself into the driver’s seat. It is one in the morning, after all.

“Where the fuck have you been?” He growls out, gunning the engine as Toph pulls on her seatbelt.

“I went for a walk,” she says half-heartedly. “Are we going to your house?”

“Of course we are!” He makes a rather aggressive turn. She’s never actually been driven by Todoroki-san before, his family has two drivers. Now she knows why. “And don’t change the subject, you took the battery out of your damn phone.”

Toph resolves to keep her cool for as long as she can. She leans her head against the window, hoping they don’t make any more sharp turns. “I didn’t want to be bothered.”

“You were missing for twelve fucking hours,” he hurls back at her, resentful and unforgiving.

She winces at that. “I did tell Kaneko I was taking a walk,” Toph points out futilely.

“And then you lied to my son’s face and disappeared into thin air,” Todoroki snarls like a beast. “What kind of idiocy is that, Beifong?” He demands frigidly. “I had to use my damn agency’s resources to track you, and even then you fucked off and no one had a clue where you’d gone!”

Her face twitches in irritation, but Toph stubbornly keeps herself from becoming defensive. “Well, I’m here now,” she says lamely.

And Todoroki-san lets out a bonafide scream of anger, slamming on the brakes hard enough to make the tires squeal. Toph is jerked forward with a gasp, wincing at the sound of rubber protesting against gravel. Suddenly the pro hero parks the vehicle, ripping off his seatbelt and throwing himself out of the sedan.

Okay. Maybe now Toph’s a little affected. She braces for him to wrench open the side door and yell in her face. But no such intrusion occurs.
Instead she hears him stomp around on the sidewalk like an absolute madman.

“What is wrong with you kids? Fucking insane!” He howls. “You don’t see how fucking—selfish—ignorant—! Stupid, bratty—fucking disgraceful—!” He kicks a lamp post, and yells some more curses into the night.

He’s not really directing it at her, but Toph is properly frightened by his ranting. Worry begins to curl in her gut. Toph unbuckles herself and opens the car door, causing Todoroki to whip around and seethe in her direction.

“Beifong!” He bellows, loud enough to make her flinch. “Do you have any idea of how moronic this has been?!”

Toph grimaces, her hand tightening over the car door. “It wasn’t that long.”

“Wasn’t that long,” he repeats, dripping with sarcasm as he stalks toward her. “Wasn’t that long. When you and Shouto went missing, you were only gone for a total of nineteen hours. Nineteen. That was long enough to sedate fifteen kids. Long enough to put you in cages. Organize transport to a secondary location, where your chances of surviving drop by half.”

“I wasn’t abducted,” Toph scowls. “I’m fine.”

“And how was I supposed to know that?! How was I supposed to know if AV had gotten to you first and shut off your phone? How would I have known if the Beifongs had sent someone after you?” He pauses for a beat, and continues with even more fury. “You’re fifteen, female, you fit perfectly in the target group for sex trafficking too.”

She glares, refusing to be cowed. “Now you’re just trying to scare me,” she accuses, folding her arms and stepping out of the car entirely.

“Am I?” Todoroki asks scornfully, blazing like his quirk without using it at all. “Alright then—How was I supposed to know you hadn’t run away to join another fucking fight club?”

This time, Toph rears back like she’s been slapped in the face, and the blood drains from her cheeks. “I-I would never—”

“The hell you wouldn’t. Don’t you lie,” he rumbles, hovering over Toph. “I had to learn that from fucking Shinsou’s kid of all people, because no one else knows a thing about that little detail.” A part of her is pained and crumbling and furious at the breach of trust, but a much larger part of Toph just plunges into shame.

“I was never going to do that,” she insists, feeling like she’s shackled to an anchor and being dragged under the surface. “It was years ago.”

“The Elementals was years ago too,” Todoroki seethes, kneeling to plant heavy hands on her arms. “Doesn’t change the fact that we had no leads, Beifong. No contact. Just some surveillance footage of you leaving a train.” He squeezes her. “You could have died, or worse. You’ve been fucking blessed to escape those situations before, and you still ran off like an ignorant little girl.”

That slices through Toph like a knife. It burns. She bites the inside of her cheek and breathes through her nose. She’s already cried so much, she’s exhausted from it. But he’s right, he’s completely right, and Toph doesn’t know what to do.

“I—I’m sorry,” she says, having never felt so small before in her life. Todoroki-san has never yelled at her like this, and Toph trembles under the weight of it. “I’m so sorry, Endeavor, I was just upset.
and I wasn’t thinking.”

“Damn right you weren’t,” he admonishes. “Damn right you should be sorry. Do you have any idea what you just put us through?”

“I do now,” Toph admits bitterly, hands fisted tight enough to whiten her knuckles. “Please forgive me.”

“Tch, I’m not the one you should be begging,” he scoffs, and then continues with dreadful significance, “Kouta-kun.”

Toph exhales something halfway to a sob, her heart wrenching. No, she wasn’t thinking about Kouta much at all.

Todoroki presses on. “He’s just lost his parents, and then his sister disappears too. Mandalay’s already taken him home, there wasn’t a point in waiting around to see if you popped back up.”

“What do you mean?” Toph feels cold. She doesn’t even register the tears anymore, but grips back against Todoroki’s arms securely. “He’s already gone? When can I—”

“You’ll see him at the funeral if he goes to it,” Todoroki answers flatly. “That’s in two days. Other than that, you’re grounded.”

Bewildered by the sudden statement, Toph frowns. “Grounded? You can’t—”

“Well, seeing as I already signed all the papers while you were moping, I can,” Todoroki remarks evenly, releasing one of her arms to pinch the bridge of his nose. “You’re grounded. You can go to the funeral. You can study for the written exam. That’s it.”

She listens in a daze. “So. You’re fostering me, not Mandalay,” Toph surmises, somewhat unconvinced after listening to Todoroki scream at her for so long.

“No,” he answers frostily, but the severity begins to leak out of his tone. “This isn’t some glorified sleepover. You piss me off, Beifong. You worried all my children, freaked them the fuck out. I’m adopting you, you absolute menace.”

The Izumis had adopted her after a year of her living with them, but she hadn’t expected... Kaneko never even mentioned it...

“Oh.” Her breath hitches. “I’m s-sorry for causing y-you trouble,” Toph barely gets the words out before she’s weeping again, her stomach twisting in sorrow even as a huge burden is lifted from her shoulders. Todoroki-san gives a long-suffering sigh, and then pulls her into an awkward hug. Toph doesn’t care if it’s awkward, she presses her face beneath his chin and loops her arms over his neck.

Toph can’t imagine he’d do anything like this nine years ago, when she was first rescued by Endeavor, even if he’d known her as well as he does now. A lot has changed since then. Even five years ago, when the Beifongs were finally caught, Todoroki-san had never really comforted her. She’s never seen him hug Shouto or Natsuo.

“I’m sorry for you loss, Beifong,” he says quietly, patting her back. “They didn’t deserve this. You don’t either.”

“None of it’s fair,” Toph echoes sadly, but there’s a measure of acceptance in the statement now.

“Yes,” he agrees, ruefully and subdued.
He releases her and corrals her back into the sedan. Before he closes the door behind her this time, Todoroki rubs a huge hand through her hair roughly, completely out of the blue.

“Stop it,” Toph swats his hand away. “What the hell was that?”

“Why are you so dusty?” Todoroki exclaims, mystified. He looks down at himself, and then begins to brush the excess dirt off his casual clothes with a dissenting grumble. “Did you roll around a construction site?”

“It was a swamp,” Toph admits, scratching at a spot of dirt on her neck.

Todoroki groans, going back around to the driver’s seat. He starts the car back up, and is only a slightly more cautious driver than before. Toph buckles up quickly. “At least it wasn’t my house again,” he grumbles. “Is that all you did?”

She hesitates too long. “...Well.”

“Beifong.”

He’s finally not yelling anymore. This is just going to make things worse. He’s a hero, she probably has a mark on her record already about the Quirk Rumble. “It’s not a huge deal.”

“If you don’t tell me I’ll ground you for longer.”

“I don’t even know how long I’m grounded for,” Toph reminds him, chewing on her lip.

“Spill. Now.”

She sinks lower into the plush leather seats. Crosses her arms. Braces for his bad driving. “Is there a vigilante called Stendhal active in Ueno right now?”

“Is ther—? VIGILANTE?! You—what did you do?!” Todoroki splutters, but keeps driving. “Toph! What do you know?”

“I think I met him. In a grocery store. He used the same name to fight in the… fight club,” Toph explains flimsily, clutching her seatbelt. “It was actually a total coincidence.”

“How is that a coincidence? You talked to him, alone? Why are you like this?”

“We talked about the Rumble, mostly. I can’t really identify him, and there wasn’t anyone around to report to anyway. I can give a statement if that’ll help.” She’s not sure how that’ll work without incriminating herself over the Rumble, but Toph’s making an effort here. Todoroki-san yelling at her feels like shit.

“First of all,” he mutters, “You can give an anonymous tip about that Stendhal bastard, I’ll work it out,” Todoroki says begrudgingly. “Second of all, you’re grounded until high school. No sparring. No hanging out with friends.”

Toph’s jaw drops. That’s nearly six months. “What about Shouto?” He can’t separate her from his own son, it’s not fair to him.

Todoroki gnashes his teeth. “He’s pissed too, Beifong. That boy knows how to hold a grudge.”

Toph pales. “Does… does he know about…?”

“Your delinquent years? No, only Shinsou and I know. Sweet Kami, I can’t believe you’re so dumb.
I can’t let people know I adopted an idiot.”

“So,” Toph says haltingly, choosing to firmly put aside all the insults for now. She called him much worse after Cato anyway. And he still adopted her. “So, no one knows what I did? It’s not on my record?”

“Your record’s a shitshow already, Beifong, ever since Lao mis-registered your quirk. That ring was busted years ago. No need to drag it out, you’d just reopen the case for Loban’s lawyer.” Todoroki-san sighs. He sounds tired. “It’s almost 2 AM, please tell me that’s all you did.”

Toph curls up on the seat. “That’s all,” she promises.

“Thank fuck,” Todoroki-san exhales noisily, the final note before silence takes over the car.

Toph shuts her eyes, feeling the last dredges of her energy drain away. When she wakes up again, it’s because the car door is being opened for her, and Todoroki-san is shaking her. She hums in protest, but stumbles out of the car obediently. She passes through the mudroom in a haze, barely registering Endeavor’s aggrieved noise when he realizes she hasn’t been wearing shoes the whole night.

“Sorry,” Toph mutters blearily, suddenly finding herself sinking into a futon. “Don’t like shoes.”

Todoroki-san is at the threshold of the room, grumbling. “Yeah, yeah. Welcome home.”

Chapter End Notes

This brings an end to the interlude, Seasonals. Winter, Spring, Summer, and Fall. Four seasons and a world of change. Four seasons and four kinds of love. The Todorokis, Inasa, Shinsou, and the Izumis. They’re all kind of mixed together throughout the chapters, but they were important moments for me to write. I hope you’ve enjoyed them.

And I know this is pretty out of character for Endeavor, but hopefully you’ve understood the trajectory he's on in this story by now. Maybe it's not realistic, but I'm going with what seems right to me from my own knowledge. In the end this is all fictional, though.

If you recognized the Water Hose team, then you knew this would eventually come up. I'm sorry, but this was one of the events I planned from the start.

On a lighter note, the next chapter we will finally, FINALLY, move onto UA. Specifically the entrance exam. Godspeed, Aizawa.
Chapter Notes

We’re finally here. It's Book Three, Avalanche! Ahh!!
Oh lord is this a long chapter. There wasn't a better way to break it down! I know you've been waiting for this moment, so let's just dive in!

As much as Toph has been looking forward to this moment, she feels hollowed out that morning. It’s not a good way to start the entrance exam, but it’s the truth. And there’s nothing that the Todorokis could do to fix it. She has never been more certain of her future until now, and yet it’s still blatantly, awfully marred by the absence of the Water Hose team. It’s only been a few days, so maybe she’ll get used to the gap in her life with time.

For now, it’s less complicated to pretend the hole in her heart isn’t there.

Toph shuffles into an enormous auditorium alongside her best friend, letting his excitement leak into her own state of mind. Inasa Yorashi is a force of nature on his own, and Toph falls into his whirlwind of enthusiasm like a pebble in a landslide. “Man, look at all these hot-blooded hero hopefuls!” Inasa must be grinning like mad. “I just love it. We’re gonna be heroes, Toph! Heroes!”

She breaks into a grin, something effortless around Inasa. “Hot-blooded? That’s a strange way to put it.”

“But it works, Toph. That’s what you have to be, to be a hero! Endeavor, All Might—they love justice! They’re passionate! They’ll do anything to win! It’s their hot-blooded-ness that makes them the greatest!” He hooks an arm around her in a brief hug. “And who’s more passionate than us?! No one! You’re gonna do great!”

“So will you,” Toph rolls her eyes. Now that the written exam is over, they’re going to be briefed on the rules of the practical exam. She lets Inasa find her seat assignment, though Toph was given a tablet with access to all the information she needed in braille. “Hey,” she says warningly, catching his elbow before he leaves. “I dunno what the test will be, but you know—”

“Aw, c’mon Toph! You know me!” Inasa insists. “I’ll stay out of your zone, and you’ll stay outta mine! Easy-peasy, you’ll know I’m near if the wind’s too hard!”

“We’re judged separately, so don’t count on me to save your ass,” Toph reminds him anyway. She’s not even sure how the exam works, but better safe than sorry.
“If only my ass were that lucky,” he quips back.

“...What?” Toph asks after a perplexed moment.

“I-I’m kidding, Toph!” Inasa laughs loudly. He squeezes her hand once before twitting off to his place like a bird. He’s somewhere off eight or nine rows below her, and parts with an excited “Good luck!!” that Toph returns, albeit much quieter.

Her face is definitely still red. Toph would rather not examine the reasons behind it.

The auditorium very noisy, but that’s expected with over a thousand students in one room. Toph is much better at navigating in crowds these days, though, and she can pick out Twinkletoes’s eager chatter with the person next to him. Actually, he’s not the only one Toph can pick out. Up in the right corner of the room is a deep, sharp tone, but what really gives it away as Tenya Iida is the fact that he’s giving bossy orders to random people around him.

She should’ve expected Iida to go to UA. Toph isn’t sure why he didn’t go through the recommended students exam, though. Maybe he wanted to prove himself the normal way, like Toph. Endeavor couldn’t give a recommendation for another student in the same year as Shouto, but he could have had his agency ‘distinguish’ her. The whole idea feels like a cop-out to Toph, because there were only a handful of students tested at a time, and (maybe arrogantly) Toph think it’d be too easy to stand out with so little competition. The normal exam was harder—not just because the practical portion was a free for all among hundreds, but because her written exam was weighed heavily too. Toph’s scores are kind of average, but she’d been studying a lot in the weeks before the exam (plus that’s all Todoroki-san allowed her to do once she moved in). And as for the practical portion… well, Toph’s a good fighter, but she’s never actually distinguished herself in a legal or official capacity. Now’s as good a time as any.

Either way, Toph dismisses Iida—this is exam day, and Toph can feel a visceral need to crush all the competition rise in her chest.

“Beifong?” Someone says suddenly, stopping at the empty seat beside her. Toph lights up.

“Shinsou,” she greets, holding out a fist. He fist-bumps her and sits down, fidgeting. They must arranged by school districts. “What’d you think of the written test?” she asks, knowing that mentioning the practical exam right now would probably turn him into a nervous wreck. They both now she’s a better physical fighter than him, and he’s not one of the people Toph needs to totally annihilate.

“Not too bad,” he admits, scratching his neck. “I think I did fine…” He clears his throat. “Um. Sorry about… telling Endeavor,” he adds lamely.

Toph just shakes her head. She last saw Shinsou at the Izumis’ funeral just four days ago, and it hadn’t been the right time to confront him about the whole Quirk Rumble thing. Now’s not the time either, but she reassures him anyway. “It’s already done. I’m not mad about it.”

He relaxes minutely beside her. “Are you in trouble?”

“Oh yeah,” Toph reveals with a grimace. “I’ll tell you about it later,” she promises. The less time she spends thinking about the Izumis and the Todorokis, the better she’ll be able to focus on the exam.

If she didn’t have the exam to focus on right now, Toph thinks she might just shrivel up and turn to dust.

Kouta didn’t attend his parents’ funeral.
Toph glares at her desk, nostrils flaring. Man. She can’t afford to keep flip-flopping through emotions like this, it’s messed up. Shinsou elbows her roughly, and eases the tension building in her temples a little. “Let’s meet after the exam,” he suggests.

“Can’t,” Toph mutters back, though she appreciates the gesture. “But I’ll text you.”

Just then Present Mic enters the room, screaming, and the majority of students quiets down as he enthusiastically explains the guidelines of the test, which is basically:

Robots, each with different point values. Ten minutes to gain as many points as possible.

*That’s it?* Toph’s a little surprised.

Shinsou… is not well. By the end of the explanation, his heart beat is so erratic Toph has to stop listening for it. “We’re in different locations,” he says, and she has to give it to the guy—Shinsou sounds pretty unaffected when he speaks. “I guess they trying to avoid biases among students that know each other. You’re in Battle City A, I’m in C… I’m so fucked,” he groans, head in his hands. “Robots. I can’t even…”

She reaches out and holds his shoulder firmly. “You’ve always known it was going to be harder for you to reach your goals… This is just the first step.”

“C’mon Toph,” he says, bitterness leaking into his tone. “You’re probably going to max out the point-count system. If this is the first step, I’ve already—already *failed*. This exam isn’t meant for me —”

“This exam is meant for *heroes*,” Toph retorts, brow furrowing. Like you, she thinks.

“Which is why it doesn’t make any *sense*,” Shinsou mutters angrily. As he speaks, Tenya Iida leaps to his feet to shout a question at Present Mic about zero-pointers.

“What do you mean?” Toph raises her eyebrows, focusing on Shinsou. Iida is reprimanding someone for muttering too loudly—yeesh.

The tired boy shakes his head. “I dunno, I didn’t expect UA to be just for the flashy villain-fighting heroes. Over 60% of heroes are classified as *rescue heroes*, so I though…” He huffs, folding his arms. “Forget it. It was just wishful thinking.” Shinsou admits dismissively.

But Toph isn’t so sure anymore. “You’re right,” She frowns thoughtfully. “I mean, how often does the average hero go up against anything like this?” Her mind drifts to Muscular, the S-Class villain that showed up out of nowhere. The Izumis were prepared, but an opponent like that had been a statistical anomaly. “And… it’s never just about stopping the villains,” Toph adds softly. “There’s always more at stake.”

Shinsou is quiet, but he seems to pick up on what she’s thinking of. “A real hero doesn’t *just* stop villains,” he agrees in a subdued tone. “...Maybe there’s more to this exam then getting points.” He muses, but then he gives a heavy sigh. “Even then, I’m not cut out for something so flashy. I don’t mean to be *jealous* or anything, but—”

“I know, I really do have a good quirk for this,” Toph cuts in brusquely. She might even get some metal-bending to work on their opponents, but it’ll depend on how thickly they robots are armored. “That doesn’t mean you’ll fail. Don’t sell yourself short, Snoozles, we’re both going to become heroes.”

“Could I borrow your confidence for a while?” Shinsou laughs half-heartedly, getting to his feet with
the rest of the students.

“Only if you give me your resting bitch face,” Toph replies, following him. “If I could scare off everyone with a look, I’d be unstoppable.”

“Exactly why I can’t share the secret,” Shinsou points out solemnly. “No one human should hold such immense power.”

Toph flashes him a grin, and whacks him on the back heartily. “Good luck, ya meathead. Don’t fall asleep during the test.”

He snorts. “I’d tell you the same, but I’d rather take all the luck I can get. Go break a leg so I can steal your spot.”

Toph’s grin turns sharp. “Oh, you are lucky. If we were in the same city I’d let a zero-pointer crush you.”

“Ha ha,” he deadpans. “I’m so scared. If only you could see me face, you’d know how intimidating you are.” He cackles as Toph takes a swipe at him, missing him by a hair. “Later, Beifong.”

Toph just smiles to herself as they part ways. Present Mic is coralling students into the entry point for City A, and she takes a moment to stretch her arms and legs. Funny enough, Inasa is in the same city as her, but he doesn’t bother approaching. He’s talking to someone loudly about his favorite passionate hero—currently he’s into Hawks, no surprise there—but Toph does her best to pull her attention away.

The city is built from mostly concrete, and she’s already close enough to identify the various robots clambering around. The chatter falls away, leaving only the land and Toph’s feet. There’s hundreds of them to fight, if she has the mobility to reach them. Some are already climbing towers, crumbling fake office buildings here and there.

She’s just thinking about how many structures Cementoss has built for the school when Present Mic screeches, “Okay, START!”

The earthbender lets loose, jettisoning forward when the ground pushes under her feet. Some are slow to start, but not many. Inasa’s already gone from her sight and there’s a series of crackling explosions on her left quickly propelling ahead. Whoever it is, they’re a nuisance. Their quirk is so loud they should be cited for noise pollution.

Toph does her best to map out the streets before her, and the robots approaching. Her feet slam downward, and the earth juts up in a pointed pillar, directly through the center of a 2-point bot.

*Oh, Toph realizes with great relish. The pillar, simply formed from Cementoss’s pavement, cuts through the machine like a knife through butter. She barrels through another bot with a boulder. Takes out a three-pointer with the same boulder, flinging it back like an especially unwieldy boomerang. The robots might be big and clunky, but they’re practically hollow.*

This is probably as close to euphoria as Toph’s ever been. Saying that her quirk was a good fit for this test was an *understatement*.

Toph beams like a maniac, pummeling robots left and right. She loses track after twenty points, too busy pulling up a sidewalk to literally pull the ground out from under a few bots. The only thing holding her back from completely dominating the city is the other examinees, fluttering around with all the effectiveness of fruit flies. She pauses one attack to redirect a pillar towards a building, where a support beam was compromised.
“Move, idiots!” Toph barks at two strangers, bumbling around under the shadow of an unsafe building. They begin to scramble out of the danger zone, but Toph tears off the arm of a three-pointer and wedges it against the crumbling edifice just to be safe.

Toph wipes dust from her face and moves on. There’s four more bots in the next alley, and Toph dashes off with a huge grin on her face. She’s mostly been using earthbending to hit the robots from a distance, but she’s been itching to test out her fists against metal. So she lets a one-pointer in close, barely dodging its arm swinging towards her. As Toph moves, she gives the bot a few knocks with her palms, testing out the tinny, teeth-vibrating shockwaves it creates.

The bot reaches for her with a clawed leg, and Toph side-steps it to bring its center mass within range. Not even hesitating, she punches with her fist—feeling, warping, bending the metal in the same movement—and the bot staggers and freezes with her arm up to the elbow in its wiring. Ow, okay, it’s a little more brittle than Toph would prefer.

Yanking her arm out, Toph slams it downward, then backward, manhandling the bot into a manageable hunk of sparking metal. Before her are more bots, but other examinees are quickly trying to confront them.

Then they activate the zero-pointer.

Toph didn’t notice it, laying dormant and half-concealed by a building, but it’s unfolding itself now, large enough to shake the earth. On the other side of the city there’s another, but it’s too far to worry about.

It’s much, much larger that the other robots, towering over the highest building. But Toph can feel its shape. It’s built sturdier, but the material is the same. Toph doesn’t have time to metal-bend the machine, there’s only four or five minutes left in the test. She’d need to build up a lot of force with a boulder to bring it down; not worth the energy.

Examinees begin to warn each other and retreat to other roads, but the zero-pointer is fast. She can’t feel Inasa’s wind, so she assumes he’s clustered with other examinees on the far side of the city.

There’s still bots she wants to take down herself in this street, and several students are having trouble maneuvering around the broken robots and rubble. Toph slams her hands down, forcing hunks of earth to shift and push away rubble to clear more pathways. Someone shouts a battle cry in the distance, still fighting, but the zero-pointer’s so high up, it’ll probably knock them down before they can reach its body. Besides, he’s going for the smaller bots, trying to take them out before the zero-pointer reaches him. Still, the robot’s reach was far. He’ll get trapped sooner or later.

Just to prove her point, the zero-pointer punches the earth, blowing dust and rubble everywhere. If someone hasn’t been hit already, they will be if the bot isn’t stopped.

But who said Toph had to be close enough to reach its head? And who says she needs to use a boulder?

She has a perfectly sturdy projectile right at her feet.

Toph takes a deep breath. Rears back—

*BANG!*

She front-kicks the remnants of one-pointer down the street with wicked force, shooting it like a bullet from a gun. The projectile nicks two smaller bots, knocking them out of commission—and slowing it down. The spear-shaped bot still has enough force to pierce through the outer shell of the
zero-pointer, but it only staggers back a little.

“Shit,” Toph scowls. Well, she can’t just half-ass it like that. Toph dashes forward, foot aching like a bitch. She kicks up a chunk of rubble created by the zero-pointer and vaults it into the same spot—it slams against the metal spear and finally tears the zero-point bot into two.

“What the FUCK?!” A boy screams. “Don’t take my kills, you showboat!”

“But it’s not worth anything?!” Toph yells back, breaking off to the left to tackle more two-pointers. The zero-pointer took a lot of her energy, exhaustion creeping over her now. Definitely not worth the effort, but now there were eight bots in the street and only one person left to fight over the points.

She thinks the boy hollers back, but then he’s right in front of her, blowing up one of the two pointers before she can. Toph tears apart the other bot before he can reach it.

“Out of my way!”

“Out of my way!” Toph shrieks, finally distracted enough to ignore a robot for the explosion kid.

“TIME’S UP!” Present Mic bellows, and an alarm echoes over the demolished city.

“FUCK!” The boy howls.

Toph slumps, letting herself lean against some rubble and just breath. How many points was it overall? She took down at least forty bots, but Toph doesn’t remember what type each one was.

“Ow,” she mutters to herself, lifting her right foot. The adrenaline’s wearing off now, and not only her foot hurts. Her arms ache fiercely, her knuckles are raw and her shoulders burn. But her foot is the worst. It can’t be broken, she reasons, I was still running on it for a minute or two.

“You!” A low voice growls at her. The explosion boy stalks towards Toph. Funny, his voice is kinda familiar, but she doesn’t know anyone with a quirk like his.

“What?” Toph’s eyes narrow, and she lets her right heel press against the ground—ow, no, bad Toph.

“The fuck was that with the zero-pointer?!” Suddenly he snatches the front of her shirt, lifting her up towards him. “Trying to show me up, you extra?!

Toph staggers, barely keeping her footing. “Extra?! Get off me, dickhead!” She braces her forearm over his chest, pushing across his collarbone to create some breathing room. Ow, ow, ow, her hands hurt. “Let go of me!” Suddenly the boy freezes.

“Are you blind?!” He screams at her.

“Are you deaf?! I said let go!” Toph shrieks right back. Why does he smell like a bakery?

“How the fuck are you even allowed in this test, huh?!”

Wow. Fuck this guy. She can hear other students approaching, and Toph does not care. She switches her grip, pulling him close—oh wow he really does smell sweet—and chomps down on the back of his hand.

“AHH! You bitch!” He shoves her back, and Toph actually does fall this time rather than put pressure on her foot. “You fucking bit me? What the hell are you?!”

“Better than you, that’s for sure,” Toph hisses, and then a burst of light wind ruffles her bangs. Inasa
touches down just a few meters away. Explosion boy makes a choking sound.

“Toph!!” Inasa cheers. “Hey!! Oh my gosh you broke your foot!”

“Did not,” Toph hobbles to her feet. Her shirt’s all damp now, what’s that about? Was that from Explodo-boy?

“YOU! You’re that water freak! From the beach!” The strangers points accusingly at Inasa. “I’ll kill you!”

“Ah—” Inasa makes an odd noise. “Uhh nooo…. Maybe… yes-sorry-but-that’s-a-cool-quirk-though?”

“Of course it is, you extra!” The boy howls. Inasa doesn’t flinch, but he does laugh nervously, stepping in front of Toph. “Whatever! Fuck this!” he growls, stomping off.

Toph shoves the hair out of her sweaty face, reaching out to brace herself against Inasa. “Is my foot really broken?” She asks the airbender tiredly.

“I think so!” Inasa exclaims. “But no worries! Recovery Girl can fix you!”

“Did she already heal you?” Toph asks, hobbling alongside him. “You don’t seem hurt at all.”

“Ah, no—” Inasa huffs, “Guess I was more careful than you, eh? That’s no surprise.”

His tone is off, somehow, but Toph can’t figure out why. Then Recovery Girl smacks a kiss on her leg, and Toph’s too tired to care.

In the control room amongst UA’s teachers sits Aizawa, glaring morosely at the destruction on the screens. The exam has just finished, but there’s always the most calamity in the last moment of the test. Some boy in a teal tracksuit obliterated a zero-pointer in one punch, shattering his limbs. And a girl split a zero-pointer in half, though it took longer and she also manages to crush her foot.

“The eggs look promising this year,” Kayama clasps her hands together in delight. “Such passion!”

“That’s one word for it,” Aizawa muses. I’d call it hubris, he thinks, eyeing the short girl in City A. Or idiocy, he adds, noting the trembling boy in a tracksuit.

Vlad King is staring avidly at footage from City C, grinning at the rescue work of a lanky student. Aizawa narrows his eyes at the fellow teacher. He's had his eye on a few in City C too. This is a fairly new experience, the two of them having to negotiate over which student goes to which class. Aizawa usually doesn’t care so much... no, he still doesn’t care, what is he thinking?

“Oi, oi, what’re they doing?” Cementoss says worriedly, pointing at City A again. A blond boy is confronting the earth girl, grabbing the front of her shirt. She pushes back, yelling—and then bites him.

The argument breaks up before it devolves further, but Aizawa isn’t impressed. He awarded rescue points for her actions during the test, but he almost wants to take it back now. At least he didn’t give any rescue points to the blond. Still, Aizawa knows better. He can’t continue to evaluate the students once the ten minutes are up.

The Erasure Hero flips through a tablet of student files, finding the earth girl, Toph Beifong, and the explosion boy, Katsuki Bakugou. I guess I’ll just have to evaluate them in class, he decides, placing
marks on each of their files. After another moment, he flips to City B and highlights Izuku Midoriya as well. He’s sensing a pattern. *Hope I get the purple kid too, he seems reasonable.*

“Oh, what did you think of Young—uh, Mido-ri-ya?” All Might asks out of the blue, reading out the student’s name with exaggerated slowness. “Quite an interesting student, r-right?”

Aizawa doesn’t have any idea why All Might looks so awkward, but he also does not care at all. He glances at the student’s file apathetically. “He’s one of only two students that successfully took down a zero-point robot,” Aizawa states the obvious.

“Yes! He is! Very unusual for more than one student to confront that obstacle to begin with—”

“At least the girl didn’t shatter three limbs to do it,” He grumbles, cutting off the number one hero. “He better shape up. I don’t coddle my students.”

Eraserhead realizes his words just as it dawns on All Might, and the hero grins blindingly, still an effective weapon in his smaller form. “Oh! You’re already thinking about which ones will be in your class!”

Aizawa stares at All Might expressionlessly, making the blonde man falter. Internally, though, Aizawa’s just annoyed at being called out.

“HA HA HA!” All Might’s deep laughter echoes through the house, startling Fuyumi.

“Are you kidding me?” Toph screeches from the kitchen. “They sent a hologram?!”

“It’s All Might though!!” Natsuo exclaims in sinister delight as Fuyumi rushes in. “Wait, wait, let’s wait till Dad’s home—” Fuyumi shoots the white-haired boy a disapproving look.

“I’m not waiting so you can all see something,” Toph rolls her eyes, smacking the projector again to resume the message. “Everyone shut it.”

“HA HA HA! TOPH BEIFONG!” The All Might projection addresses the girl. Fuyumi watches Toph from the corner of her eye, pleased by the wonder emerging on the teen’s face though she quickly tries to conceal it. “Congratulations young lady! You performed spectacularly in the exam, scoring sixty villain points! That alone would put you in the Top Ten! But WAIT! There’s MORE!— Ah,” All Might seems to falter after hearing something off-screen, as the image switches to footage from the exam.

Natsuo and Shouto perk up in interest, quietly explaining to Toph what they’re seeing.

All Might continues. “Blind? Shouldn’t we just send an audio recordin—? If you say so... Well! Throughout the exam, Young Beifong, you showed a keen awareness of your fellow students, keeping them from harm’s way! And, though your quirk can cause a great deal of destruction, you did minimal damage to the city with it, choosing to exploit existing rubble and clearing paths for others! Brilliant work!” He laughs again as the footage rolls, and Fuyumi lets out an audible gasp as a huge robot appears at the end of the street. “And let’s not forget your admirable take-down of the zero-pointer! But—you may be asking yourself—none of that got you any points!

“But you would be WRONG! Because you see…” he pauses dramatically, and Natsuo rolls his eyes. “We also award RESCUE POINTS!!”

“Is he always so excited?” Toph makes a face, carefully lowering the volume on the projector.
“You should be excited!” Natsuo grins at the two younger kids. “Fuyumi, you missed Shouto’s letter, he’s in class 1-A!” He informs her.

“That’s amazing,” Fuyumi smiles at Shouto, and he ducks his head.

“That’s right, rescue points! And for your deeds, we’ve awarded you TWENTY more points, giving you a total of EIGHTY POINTS! That places you at the very top of the exam! YOUNG BEIFONG, WELCOME TO CLASS 1-A! WELCOME TO YOUR HERO ACADEMIA!” All Might strikes a dramatic pose. Fuyumi’s heart is pounding at the intensity. What a hero.

Toph shuts off the projector as soon as he gets the words out, startling Fuyumi again. Natsuo makes a noise of complaint. “Alright, that’s enough yelling for me.” She flashes a grin and elbows Shouto. “Class 1-A, huh?”

“Congratulations,” Shouto smiles back.

“AHH! I’m so proud of you guys!” Natsuo cackles gathering both of them into a hug. “Good luck at UA, brats!” Toph sticks out her tongue, but Shouto leans into the embrace.

Fuyumi smiles behind her fingers. She wishes Dad were here to congratulate them, though she’s not sure how receptive Shouto would be. Or how nice Dad would behave, now that All Might’s apparently teaching at his alma mater. But either way, he’s not in the house this evening. Her brothers don’t know, but Enji did confide in Fuyumi about his periodic absences when they first began, and she’s tremendously grateful for the trust.

She takes out her phone, figuring a text message wouldn’t be too disruptive. **Toph & Shouto are in 1-A together!** Fuyumi hits send before she can second-guess herself. She takes a picture of the two kids (and Natsuo harassing them) and sends it too.

The reply comes back a few minutes later as Fuyumi sorts through the fridge.

**Good. Please print that picture for her.**

**Of course!** Fuyumi replies. **Mom’s going to be so proud.**

“You’re in 1-B.”

Inasa gulps down his anxiety. There’s no way to miss the disappointment in her tone. “Uh, yep! But that’s okay, I’m super-glad you have Shouto with you! I’ll be just down the hall—we’ll probably have joint training with your clas—”

“Twinkletoes,” Toph sighs. “What happened during the test?”

He balks, but they’re talking on the phone so she can’t notice it. “What do you mean? I smashed a bunch of robots for points!”

“How many points?”

The airbender presses his lips together at the question. Of course Toph could tell. It’s Toph. He tried to stay away from her area during the test—and he tried his best during the test as well! He tried. He really did. But in the end he barely scraped by with enough points to make it into the hero course, a measly thirty-five.

“It’s—” But the words are caught in his throat. He hasn’t been able to articulate the problem for a while now. And in the exam, the way the robots crumbled buildings, rattled the earth—he remembers the sparks crackling to life in Bakugou’s hands, the sun beating down on his back. “It’s just…”

It wasn’t just the water that called to Inasa these days.

There had been twelve other children besides Inasa and Toph in Cato Hospital. None of them had any lasting injuries from the experiments. But they all remembered what they went through. There was no physical injuries to any of the kids. But Inasa remembered being hurt. He remembers being put back together, again and again.

And Inasa isn’t supposed to know, but several of the kids were having issues with their quirks, even years later. They were too scared to use them, or in some cases, they simply didn’t work anymore. Just because they were put back together doesn’t mean it was done properly.

Inasa knows what he is. And he doesn’t deserve what he’d been given. Not while he knew the cost.

He wants to be a hero so badly. But not like this. Never like this. He pushes it down, suppressed the unnaturalness of his actions whenever he can. And his air quirk is suffering because of it.

Inasa runs a hand over his face, sighing. “It’s just bad luck, Toph,” he huffs. “I wasn’t as strong against those things as I thought I’d be!”

After a moment of tense silence Toph relents, sighing dramatically. “I was looking forward to being in your class, Airhead!” She admits mournfully. “You better catch up to me, Yoarashi, because I’m not going to wait around for you.”

Inasa laughs freely, always up for the challenge. Though, a part of him is thankful he’s not in Toph’s class. The more she saw of his quirk, the more likely she is to notice how odd it’s been acting. “At least you know Shouto in your class, right? You won’t be alone!”

“Uh huh. Neither will you,” Toph says dryly.

“Eh?”

“Hitoshi is in your class,” she reveals smugly. Inasa’s stomach does a swooping sort of tumble. “Now you’ll have to get along. Or else.”

“Oh,” his voice is about three octaves higher than normal. “That’s… that.” Now Inasa really doesn’t know how to feel. He met Hitoshi on only one occasion, and there hadn’t been much room to get to know each other: at the Izumis’ funerals. It hadn’t been that bad to look at the boy, though. Shinsou was a funny guy, a little ill-mannered the same way Shouto is. They’re not friends, but maybe Toph’s right, and they will be. “That’s great news for him,” Inasa says finally. “Tell him for me?”

“I will. Congrats, Twinkletoes,” she says softly. “We’re—We’re really doing it. Becoming heroes.”

He grins into his phone, practically melting at the wonder in her quiet voice. “Yeah, Toph. We’re on our way.”

Shouto’s first day of high school passes in one long stream of events melding into each other. He’s never been to a public school, so it’s all a little overwhelming. If he could re-do one thing, he would pay more attention to everyone’s names.
He and Toph arrive together at the gate of UA in a shiny silver car. As they exit, Shouto sees a jet-black sedan speed away, and a tall girl with a ponytail standing on the sidewalk. She notices him before he can look away—she was a recommended student, he recalls.

“Oh, Todoroki-san, right?” She lights up eagerly, approaching them with a tentative smile.

“Yes,” Shouto nods. “I’m sorry, I don’t remember your name.”

“Th-that’s okay. I’m simply not as… memorable as you.” She looks away. Todoroki supposes she’s right, his scar and hair are quite unique. “Um, but I’m Momo Yaoyorozu!” She gives a short formal bow, and he can see Toph’s unimpressed look. The ponytail girl looks past Shouto to Toph—and with despair, he can see the exact moment it occurs to the stranger that Toph is blind, because her face immediately switches to pity. “Oh my…. Who’s this girl, Todoroki-san? Your sister, you’re helping her to class?”

Todoroki gives Yaoyorozu an equally pitying look and shakes his head.

“This girl is Toph Beifong, and I can answer questions just fine on my own,” the earth girl answers curtly, eyebrow raised. She walks towards the front door, and Shouto follows. Yaoyorozu is nice, but he doesn’t quite know what to say to her.

“Oh, sorry for the mistake,” Yaoyorozu catches up, looking between Shouto and Toph questioningly. “But—I know your family, the Beifongs from Gaoling, yes? I had no idea they had a daughter my age!”

“No,” Shouto interrupts before Toph can, watching her face flush with emotion. Mostly anger. Thankfully, he’s learned a lot about defusing Toph Beifong over the past few years. “Those Beifongs don’t have a daughter.”

Yaoyorozu blinks in surprise, but clearly realizes another question about it would not be welcome. It’s not really Yaoyorozu’s fault, but she happened to press all the wrong buttons in the span of a few minutes. “Oh, n-nevermind then. So. What classes are you guys in?” She tries one more time, and Shouto thanks Kami for the change in topic.

“We’re both in 1-A,” Toph answers for them both, blowing at the bangs in her face. Todoroki glances at the building directory and takes a left turn. “So are you, right?”

“Yes,” Yaoyoro—wow, it’s tiring to say that, Shouto ought to switch to her first name—Momo exclaims, clasping her hands together. “Oh, wow, that’s wonderful, Beifong-san. Todoroki-san. I look forward to our time together!”

He nods. Toph rolls her eyes. “Ok then, Sugar Queen.”

“Here’s the door! Oh, it’s so large, I suppose that’s to accommodate all types of quirks?” Momo muses. Then she freezes, glancing at Toph. “Wait, what did you call me?”

Toph pushes the door open without answering, stepping into—chaos.

“—insist that you remove your legs from the desk immediately! These desks have been used by generations of heroes and—”

“Oi, oi, oi!” A blond boy pulls his legs off his desk to stand, staring directly at the small blind girl next to Todoroki. “Sure you’re in the right room, Earth Girl? Didn’t you read the sign?” He sneers.

*Is this a school bully?* Todoroki muses to himself. *He's shown his colors so quickly.*
Toph goes rigid for a moment, then she just turns to Shouto, genuine curiosity on her innocent face. "Hey, did you hear a fart?"

*Oh Kami,* Shouto prays as the blond boy’s desk bursts into flames. *Why couldn’t I be in 1-B?* A few students begin to snicker from their desks, whispering loudly amongst themselves.

"YOU WANNA GO, BLIND BITCH?!" The blond screeches, lunging forward.

The tall boy in glasses shoves himself between the two students, and Todoroki moves to hook his arms under Toph before she can try to earthbend anyone into the classroom below theirs. "I’LL TAKE YOU DOWN ANY DAY OF THE WEEK, SPARKY!"

The door slides open behind Shouto, and the blond’s eyes dart to the newcomer. "Ah! *Kacchan*?!"

"DEKU?!" He sounds even madder now. "*THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING HERE?!*"

The person behind Todoroki begins to babble in fright. This whole situation is so confusing. Shouto’s never been to a public school before. He wonders if they’re all this hectic or if it’s just this high school in particular? All he knows is that it’s quite early. If he were still being homeschooled he would be sleeping right now.

While Todoroki mourns his lack of sleep, his friend hisses like a rabid animal. "What the fuck’s a Deku?!" Toph howls, squirming in Shouto’s grip. "Let me go so I can kill Blasty!"

"I’ll kill you first!" Blasty screeches back, though he doesn’t try to get in front of the glasses kid, preferring to foam at the mouth from a distance.

Since Blasty’s not attacking, Shouto lowers Toph until her feet touch the ground again. "You realize this is the first day you’re off the hook," he tells the girl quietly, reminding her of the six months of house arrest she just completed. It was awful waiting around at home the day the Izumis died, not knowing what Toph had been doing all that time but knowing she was furious enough to get herself into trouble. Shouto was over it by now, but that didn’t mean Toph gets a free pass to fly off the handle again. "Don’t get suspended on the first day of class."

"Fuck you too, IcyHot," Toph pouts, straightening out her jacket and stepping back. "What’s your problem, Sweaty Hands?" She demands, pointing a finger at the blond. "You’ve been on my case since the exam!"

The boy stares at her, furious all over again. Todoroki might be alarmed by the anger on his face, but he can’t help but think it’s hilarious that Toph has no concept of fear. "*Sweaty Hands?!* Who the fuck do you think—"

"I don’t even know your name!" Toph complains, cutting him off. "So just fuck off, or I’ll make you fuck off."

Sweaty Hands splutters. "What does that even mean? You’re gonna fight me?!"

"Only if you ask for it!"

"*Please stop this at once!*" The glasses kid cries out, making a slicing move with his hands. "This is *unacceptable behavior* from UA’s top students! Class hasn’t even started yet!"

"Ah shut it, Glasses!" Sweaty Hands barks at Glasses, throwing himself back into his seat. He props his feet back up onto his desk defiantly, garnering Glasses’ attention once more. "You’re not the boss of me, *Private School.*"
Toph rolls her eyes, turning away from the two kids. “You know where my seat is, Shouto? Otherwise I’ll look it up.” UA sent her an ‘accessible tablet’ last week, equipped with most of the information she’d need to look through before attending. The surface was malleable enough to create multiple braille patterns, essentially creating an entirely haptic version of a smartscreen.

But there’s also a seating chart by the door for all the sighted people, which is a lot quicker to look through. Todoroki taps his nails on a desk in the back row, and Toph nods in appreciation. Momo is already in her seat, having snuck past the chaos peacefully, and Shouto takes the desk beside her, between the two people he knows by name.

Thankfully, Toph ignores the other students—especially Glasses and Blasty—as the remaining kids trickle into the classroom.

“This is a strange class,” Momo comments, softly amazed. She glances at Todoroki, so he assumes she’s talking to him.

“Maybe UA is just strange,” he proposes in return. “I wouldn’t know.”

“At least it’s interesting?” She offers a wry smile, looking just as unsure as he feels about school. He remembers the jet-black sedan she arrived in. She also clasps her hands daintily, like Fuyumi tends to do. Maybe…

“Yaoyorozu,” he repeats, mostly to himself. It’s a familiar family name too. Momo looks up inquisitively. “You’ve never been to a public school.”

“Ah,” She nervously pushes a lock of hair behind her ear. “Is it that obvious?”

“No, that was just a guess,” Todoroki admits, a little startled. He didn’t think he’d be right, but at least he’s not alone. Toph snorts from his other side. Momo looks confused now, but he doesn’t get the chance to explain—a yellow sleeping bag inches into the classroom, and their homeroom teacher emerges from it like a huge, human-sized moth. Aizawa reprimands them all squabbling so loudly he could hear it down the hallway, and then orders them all to get changed into gym clothes instead of attending the opening ceremony.

They do a quirk evaluation, and Aizawa promises to expel the weakest student. Momo proves again to be very resourceful, just as he remembers from their exam. Shouto and Toph don’t have trouble passing either. He learns that Glasses is Tenya Iida when he greets Toph, but Shouto’s a little unclear on how they already know each other.

“Went to school with him for a while,” Beifong admits begrudgingly, picking at dirt under her nails. Shouto waited for more, but that’s all Toph says on the matter.

A nice round-faced girl breaks the record for the ball toss, so Shouto now knows her as Infinity Girl. A green-haired boy breaks his finger doing the ball toss. And then Sweaty Hands tries to obliterate the green boy, calling him a ‘deku’, and Aizawa erases his quirk, thus introducing himself as the Erasure Hero, Eraserhead.

“Oh, and I lied about expelling the student in last place,” Aizawa adds as an afterthought, and a truly manic grin stretches over the man’s tired face. Todoroki is oddly reminded of Shinsou. “It was a logical ruse.”

The class is understandably distraught as they shuffle back into their school uniforms. Todoroki had believe Aizawa too, but he hadn’t been very worried about his own position in class, so it didn’t
matter in the end. The grape boy seemed especially frazzled by the whole experience.

Almost immediately, Sweaty Hands stirs up a ruckus in the locker room. Shouto doesn’t see it coming, unfortunately, and is rather blindsided when the grape boy slams upside-down into the locker next to him. Todoroki shoves his pants on, figuring he’d rather be clothed properly if this escalated further.

“Bakugou!” Someone shouts in protest. “This is crazy!”

“Grape fucker got what was coming to him!” Sweaty—Bakugou—hollers at a six-armed student. “Shitstain’s been bothering me all day about bullshit! Fucking perv!”

The explosive blond catches Todoroki’s eye, and something about the look on his face alerts him to something deeper about this argument. He turns to the short grape boy in question.

“What’s your deal, Bakugou?! I just wanted to know how you keep getting the hot girls to talk to you!” The small boy snaps, valiantly struggling out of the locker. Shouto feels a deep-seated primal urge arise from the pit of his stomach. He’s not sure what it’s telling him to do yet. “Have you copped a feel from the blind one yet?”

Before he knows it, Todoroki shuts the locker and ices over the handle.

“TODOROKI!” Iida gasps in horror. “You can’t do that to a student—!”

“Are you going to let him out?” He asks evenly, piercing the taller boy with a steady look. Todoroki wouldn’t say he’s angry. No, this is more visceral, more abrupt than the steady simmer of his usual frustration. “He’s talking about Beifong.”

“I—I should—” Iida’s face contorts in distress. “He was absolutely despicable—Beifong and the other girls must be respected—but that does not excuse—” He looks like an error sign on a laptop now. “I—won’t let him—”

“I say we leave him till the ice melts,” A bird-headed boy murmurs wisely. “A few moments in the dark may be enough to pay for passage in the light.”

“That’s so manly,” A redhead whispers. “Tokoyami’s right, the ice will melt. Let’s just get to class.”

Shouto shrugs. He doesn’t catch Bakugou’s eye again, but there’s a shift in atmosphere among the students. A good one. He exits the locker room and finds his friend waiting for him down the hall, slouched against a wall.

“You sure took your time,” she notes sourly, fiddling with the elastic in her hair.

“Did you hear any of us?” Shouto asks, somewhat worried.

“Why the hell would I want to listen?” Toph crosses her arms, leaning towards Shouto as they walk down the corridor. “Aizawa’s a piece of work. I don't think he decided not to expel anyone until the very end of the test. This place is so weird.”

Shouto nods his wholehearted agreement. They walk at an even pace, just a little behind their peers for privacy. Most of the students are discussing each others’ powers, completely overlooking the grape left in the locker room. “At least it’s interesting,” he echoes Momo’s words as they walk back to the classroom.

“You know what’s more interesting?” Toph whips around, a sharp look crossing her face. “The fact
that you didn’t use your fire at all for those tests.”

It’s a good thing Toph is blind, because Shouto’s so surprised by the turn in conversation he has no idea what his face looks like. “It wasn’t necessary.” Something pulls at his chest as he says it, the lie gnawing at him uncomfortably. As much as Shouo trusts Toph, it’s hard to articulate what he means, or the aching frustration he feels about his left side.

“Seems like a good source of propulsion,” Toph counters lightly, cracking her knuckles. “Y’know, for those tests you sucked in, like the standing long jump.”

“I got second place,” he counters, eyes narrowed. That was one of the last tests, and his energy had been flagging at that point. “I did better than you in the long jump.”

“And you would’ve been even better than Blasty if you balanced yourself out with fire,” Toph replies adamantly. “Just a thought, Shouto. I don’t call you IcyHot for nothing.”

Shouto’s beginning to understand what Inasa means when he calls Toph pushy. “I know,” he murmurs. He spent a long time not knowing how to treat his left side—years and years of back and forth with Endeavor, wanting to be just like him and also nothing at all like the man—and even now, Shouto’s still figuring out what sort of hero he wants to be.

“I know you want me to use it, and I will,” Shouto admits quietly, bumping shoulders with Toph. “But I need time. I’m a little behind, you know.” If he’s going to use fire, it needs to be in the best way possible—on Shouto’s terms. He’s been refusing his father’s training for the past few years, choosing to develop it on his own instead. It’s a slow, sometimes painful process, but Shouto needs it to be this way.

And he’s not ready to put it into practice at UA just yet.

The blind girl slumps, her frown melting away like water washing over the shore. “Alright, Todoroki,” she punches his arm. “If you need target practice, just know I’ll volunteer Twinkletoes any day,” Toph vows solemnly.

“Thank you for you sacrifice, Beifong,” Shouto lets himself smirk as they reenter their classroom and the chaos that is the other 17 students of their class. The green boy who broke a finger staggers into the classroom just before the bell rings, likely exhausted from Recovery Girl’s healing. Grape boy comes back halfway through their English lesson, glaring at Todoroki and Bakugou like a furious little ant. The rest of the day passes without much fuss.

Yeah. If Shouto could re-do his first day of school, he would only try harder to learn Green Boy’s and Infinity Girl’s names. They seemed nice.

Chapter End Notes

So, here's how things stand in the fic right now:
- There are still 20 students in Class 1-A. Mineta is one of them, so he can be dealt with as a proper delinquent student.
- Rikido Satou is in 1-B, alongside Inasa Yoarashi and Hitoshi Shinsou.
- I'm sorry to the ones that didn't make the cut: Hiryu Rin, Kosei Tsuburaba, and Kojiro Bondo.
- Inasa is suppressing his power. It may seem a lot like Todoroki's issue in canon, but I
promise, it's going to be resolved quite differently.

- Shouto does not reject his left side, but his relationship with Endeavor is pretty shit. This kinda-maybe-wishy-washy-ness about his fire is a whole problem on its own.
- Iida is so, so confused. He had no idea Toph could earthbend.
- Eraserhead is so mad they didn't let Hitoshi into his class. Vlad King lorded it over him for months.
- Endeavor has been going to therapy for the past like, five years. Fuyumi is the only one that knows. He got the idea to send photos of the kids to Rei from Miyuki Izumi, who was an avid photographer and recorded every moment of the kids together.

Lastly, here's a fun fact: Bakugou is the only person to have ever seen Inasa waterbend (and live). It pisses him off that no one seems to know about it but him, but he's too proud to ask about it.

Please let me know what you think of this chapter, I'm so nervous. I'm finally interrupting canon events, I hope you still like it all <3

Shoutout to the reviewer calling me out for my math error lmao

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