# The Tale of the Musketeer

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## The Tale of the Musketeer

by [Dandajiro](http://archiveofourown.org/works/16549325)

### Summary

Izuku Midoriya was always a strong child. In spite of his tears, his childlike innocence, and that go-getter fanboy attitude, his inner strength drove him to seek out the chance to save people. He dared to dream he might one
That dream, that hope, and those leaky eyes are beginning to dry up, as his faith is called into question. But that inner strength still remains. And now it begins to flare with a dangerous new strength. The question now is who it will burn.

In the pursuit of information on All Might, Izuku gets mixed up with the villainous side of society. Taken under their wing, for better or for worse, his life might never be the same.

Notes
See the end of the work for notes.
Izuku looked out over the rooftop. The deep, long stretches of concrete that jutted out from the town's surface cast shadows over the city, and looking at them for too long started to give Izuku a little bit of vertigo. Not like he felt he could possibly be more out of balance with everything than he already felt, anyway.

Izuku’s dull eyes surveyed the town. The people going about their daily commute. Going to work, coming home, the shadows of the skyscrapers reversing themselves as the sun drifted over the sky. Izuku had been doing this for a while now. Making a habit of overlooking the city, peoplewatching. Just trying to put things into perspective. Maybe to try and convince himself that in the long run it might not be so bad.

Maybe life would be fine for him even if he couldn’t become a hero.

The moment that thought entered his head, that moment jumped to the forefront of his mind. “You cannot be a hero.” That’s what he said, what All Might said to him…more or less. It was too jarring, even as he watched All Might’s gaunt and grim expression deepen, before he’d even said anything, Izuku’s fragile heart plummeted. Halfway through his speech, All Might’s words became dull white noise amidst the interior racket of his own thoughts. His disappointment, his shame, his humiliation…

Izuku brought himself back to reality. Tightly shutting his eyes and opening them again, he forced his legs to straighten up, and swallowed heavily. No more falling to his knees. No more crying.

An empty promise, to be sure. Every time he felt it creeping back into his mind, Izuku felt drained again. Is that what it’s like to be quirkless? Is this what it feels like to be born wrong?

Izuku hurriedly slammed his eyes shut again. No more of that, dammit. Just...just look at this realistically, Izuku Midoriya. You can’t do what you dreamed about. It’s not possible. All Might himself, the number one hero, confirmed as much. It’s too dangerous, and you’ve known that for a long time. It’s hardly a revelation, it’s just the way things are. All Might said it so matter-of-factly. Like it was just a painful truth. Like he has said it before. Like it should have been obvious.

But even if it was “the way things are”, even if it was predictable, it still left a sharp pain in Izuku’s chest, as he had tightened his core just sifting through these poisonous thoughts. If he kept dwelling on this, he’d start overanalysing every thing about All Might’s delivery. It's time to head home and think more about this tommorow. And the next day. And probably every day of his life from then on.

Sighing loudly, Izuku let his chest relax, letting go of that tension, at least for now. Pulling up his hood, Izuku quietly started to leave the rooftop. If he stayed up there too long, Kacchan’s cruel comment from that fateful day might creep into his head next. He wanted to have ground-level footing beneath him before he started to sort through that memory.

Before he could leave however, his eyes drifted over a growing tower of smoke in the distance. A black plume of smoke and ash, surrounded by police cars.

No time to think. Izuku had to get there, now. His legs shot down the stairs as quick as they could
Following the towering pillar of grey smog, and the scent of burning wood, Izuku found little difficulty tracking down the crime scene. The smell of wet garbage that hit his nostrils shortly after had to be the disgusting pile of sludge that was causing the mess itself. It was thrashing about and spilling dark grey goo so far away that even at the back of the massive crowd, Izuku could smell what was going on a mile away.

Next, he heard the noise from the accident clearly. He heard what sounded like frequent rapid explosions. Whatever this thing was attacking, it had to be volatile and dangerous.

As it turns out, Izuku was absolutely right. Because the very next thing he heard was the rough, rage-fuelled cry of “DIE!” that could only come from one person.

“Kacchan…”

His childhood friend. His inspiration for what a successful hero should-

“Why don’t you take a swan dive off the roof?”

Izuku’s train of thought was completely derailed by that encroaching memory. Shaking his head rapidly, Izuku tried to squeeze his way through the mass of gawking spectators. Dammit all…he was spending too much time skulking, he should have been paying attention. He should have been here first…Kacchan was in danger-

“Shitty fucking nerd!”

Izuku’s momentary lack of concentration led to a particularly overweight man accidentally pushing him backwards, and he fell back out of the squabble of people. Kacchan was back there, Bakugo was getting hurt, he was being attacked by a villain! A real villain!

Bakugo Katsuki, the model of a determined hero. The one who would never give up…he was the one being held hostage by a sludge villain? Really? So much cockiness, such bold boastfulness, and it still doesn’t amount to him being anything but a helpless hostage?

Izuku slammed his eyes shut and opened them again at these traitorous thoughts. Okay, yes, it was a bit hypocritical, but it’s not like he did a whole lot better when the sludge villain attacked him…

And then he swooped in. Like a musclebound, grinning human deus ex machina, All Might made the wind rumble as he charged into the fray, blasting aside the villain in a flash. The onlookers cheered, throwing their arms up in celebration, and Izuku was knocked a little further back.

He craned his neck to look up at the sight of the arrogant and abusive Bakugo being pulled from the remaining sludge, at his reckless and destructive tantrum being praised by the heroes at the scene, the heroes who were equally ineffective at saving him. The inconsiderate hero All Might, flashing a grin to the crowd that only Izuku knew was a falsehood. And the swarms of people who had stopped him approaching the scene to help, but did nothing themselves but gawk at a tragedy.

And for the first time in his life, Izuku wasn’t excited to watch a hero rescue someone.

He was the first to leave the crowd.
An unfamiliar feeling of discontentment hung over Izuku as he trudged away from the crime scene. Right as the paparazzi arrived to start their interviews too. The part Izuku would usually listen in on to get some wider context for his analysis. Half out of habit, Izuku opened his analysis notebook.

No, he couldn’t bring himself to write at the moment. He wasn’t up to it. It’s not like keeping all that stuff written down would do him a single bit of good anymore. It would only remind him of what he could never be.

“Huh. You walked away. Weird. You looked pretty desperate to get in there a minute ago.”

Izuku raised his gaze up from the pavement. A lanky young man, a little bit older than him maybe, was leaning on the wall of the alleyway, reading the analysis notebook over Izuku’s shoulder. His hoodie almost completely obscured his face, bar a few tufts of light blue hair, but his voice sounded coarse and rough, yet whispery at the same time.

Izuku was a little hesitant to reply. Meeting a man in a dark alleyway rarely ends well.

“Hmm? Weren’t you there because you were a fan of All Might?”

The voice seemed so nonchalant, but Izuku instinctively felt there was some kind of threat behind that question. The man’s hand flexed itself with what looked like impatience. He was clearly sizing him up. One wrong answer could get him beaten up…or worse.

Izuku swallowed and replied, “Um…no. That’s not why I was there.”

He almost felt the man’s smile spread underneath his hoodie. “Really? Then why were you so desperate to see the crime? Everyone’s so in love with the symbol of peace, after all.”

In love with the symbol of peace. Yeah. They all were. But Izuku couldn’t see him that way anymore. Not after meeting All Might in person. Not after learning that the “symbol of peace” and All Might were such different people. Izuku’s eyes averted themselves painfully.

“No. I’m not. It was only for personal reasons. Not him.”

He surprised himself with the disdain he unconsciously lashed out with in that last word.

The thin figure straightened up, facing Izuku. Even though the lighting was dim, Izuku caught a glimpse of the lower half of his face. His cracked lips were neutral. If he had been grinning earlier, he wasn’t anymore. He was still being sized up, but it felt somehow different.

“Really? Huh. There aren’t a lot of people who don’t like All Might. Except villains.”

Izuku rubbed his eyes before he expressed any kind of distress. Even from here he could hear the distant babble of voices praising All Might. People were praising and supporting the same man who had dismissed him, all as a mass. But this man stood alone in his conviction.

Izuku replied, “Y-Yeah. But that’s because All Might always beats them. They’re mad because he’s stopping them from just taking whatever they want.”

The man hunched over slightly to match Izuku’s height. The gesture almost seemed comforting. He looked like he was stooping down to avoid frightening a small animal.

“ Mostly, yeah. But there’s word of some new villains forming. Ones who think All Might is wrong. They’re not after power or money. They just want to show everyone he’s not the hot shit he
says he is. They’ve got deeper convictions.”

“That’s just an excuse for being greedy, I’m sure of it. With All Might gone, they’d get to do whatever they pleased. Crime would run rampant without All Might’s presence warding it off all the time.”

“Does that mean no one’s allowed to point out his faults? Are they not allowed to hate him?”

Izuku’s brow furrowed. Yes, he thought. It’s wrong. Izuku shouldn’t feel this way. He’s a hero, he’s saved countless people, he brings hope to the hopeless. To feel so resentful and hateful towards such a person…of course it was wrong to hate All Might. So why, why couldn’t he bury that thought?

The man smiled a long grin that spread too far up the sides of his face, twisting his eyes. “See? He shouldn’t be given infinite lives when he makes mistakes. You’re not wrong for thinking that way, for hating All Might. Soon, a lot more people will be thinking the same way.”

“I don’t hate All Might. T-That’s too far…”

“Whatever you say, kid.”

The man straightened up, albeit still slouching a bit, and started to walk his way back down the alleyway. He was leaving. The one person he had ever met who didn’t like All Might.

Izuku meekly spoke up, “So…who exactly are these villains?”

The man stopped walking, and looked back over at Izuku. He didn’t think that grin could get any wider, but somehow, upon hearing that, it did.

Chapter End Notes

Hi there!

I'm writing this on the 17/06/2019, which means this first chapter was written just over half a year ago. I've learned a lot along the way. I consider writing this fic to have been one of the biggest moves I've made in terms of putting myself out there for public appraisal/criticism, and I like to think I've improved considerably as a result. That said, barring any punctuation or grammatical errors, I won't be revisiting and editing my previous chapters out of principle. They all come from a place of passion and even down to the old ----- line breaks (before I figured out how to add real ones), I still think they hold up well enough. Even if they were awful, I probably still wouldn't change them. Hiding your earlier works to try and save face isn't exactly admirable, and it'd give new readers an entirely different experience to the ones my oldest readers got if I just went back and changed the quirky (pun intended) nature of the beginning chapters.

I'm aware it's become a pretty long work by this point, but it is all chopped up into relatively digestible chapters. Buckle up, and enjoy!

-Dandajiro
The Child, The Boss, and the Fire

Chapter Summary

Izuku is way in over his head, and is currently most focused on keeping it attached to his body.

But curiosity is leading him ever onward, towards characters the likes of which he could never have imagined before.

The man led him through a series of winding passageways. Izuku hadn’t known there could possibly be so many alleyways in such a small space. I mean, it’s not like he made a habit of walking down them. The graffiti on the walls and broken glass were tell-tale signs this was certainly not a place Izuku would normally be interested in visiting.

The man was guiding him in an almost protective manner, holding his hand, curiously only with three fingers. Izuku guessed maybe he was a germophobe? Maybe it was somehow quirk related? After watching a giant shark-man get fly-kicked by a giant woman with cow horns, he could certainly say he’d seen stranger things than this odd habit. Or his odd habit of scratching his neck that seemed to get worse as he complained about walking down the wrong alleyway once or twice.

Eventually, the lanky man reached his destination. A large wooden door in a back alley that Izuku was relieved to notice was attached to one of the cleaner looking houses in the area. Pulling out a key, he unlocked the door. Then, he turned to face Izuku again.

“Just so you know, I’m not gonna be responsible for you messing up in here. Signal jammers too, so don’t think the cops can cover for you either.”

Izuku gulped heavily. Being physically led on made him forget for a minute about the ridiculously dangerous choice he was making. I mean, these were villains. Real villains, they have KILLED people. He saw one try to kill one of the strongest people he knew yesterday…

“…I don’t like that expression.”

“S-Sorry! It’s just…can you promise me I’ll b-be able to leave? Alive?”

“If they wanted you dead, you’d be dead. I don’t make a habit of leading idiots like you around, why would I do that just to lead them to their death?”

“Still…some reassurance would be nice.”

“Then don’t mess up. Are you coming in or not?”

Steeling himself, Izuku slapped himself on both cheeks. Okay, okay. He just wanted to see what they thought of All Might. Nothing they would kill him over. He wouldn’t get this kind of opportunity again. What did they think? Why do they hate All Might? He couldn’t talk to anyone else about this sort of thing…this was his one chance to untie the knot that was forming inside him. That writhing, angry knot.

Izuku took a rigid step through the door.
Okay. One step completed. Now just-

A rough kick to the small of his back pushed him far into the room, and he hit the wooden planks.

“Just get in the room. Shitty brat…”

Forcing the memories of a certain blond tormentor from his head, he ran a hand across said head to check for bruises. Suddenly, fire filled his vision.

“A-AAAH! WHa…”

Purple, flickering flames. Flames in the shape of a man. A man who was outstretching a fiery hand, shaped like a man’s hand, in an attempt to politely help him to his feet. Not one to turn down hospitality, Izuku accepted the hand up, silently noting he grabbed a hand made of dark flame that did not burn him and supported part of his weight.

The flaming figure spoke, “You grabbed a hand made of fiery fog in the middle of a veritable den of thieves? A bit unwise, don’t you think?”

Izuku had no real retort to that. But at least he was now a bit more reassured at least this particular villain wouldn’t burn him just for fun.

“Ah, where are my manners. I am Kurogiri. A pleasure to meet you. And you are?”

Izuku fumbled for a second, knowing full well out of common sense he absolutely could NOT give this villain his real name. Not wanting to leave a pause and draw suspicion upon himself, he answered with the first pseudonym he could think of.

"Deku, sir"

Kurogiri, his expression unreadable for obvious reasons, turned his fiery gaze upon the man who had led him here.

“Hm. A false name, such as mine. An intelligent choice. Since we are sharing false names, tell me, did you forget your manners, by chance?”

The man scratched as his neck, visibly irritated at being slightly chided by this gentlemanly pyre.

“I just wasn’t stupid enough to say my name in a public place.”

Oh…for all his preparations and attempts at keeping this ordeal calm and collected, he actually did forget to ask this man his name.

The man pulled down his hood, revealing bloodshot red eyes with bags underneath them that seemed unnaturally dark, and dull wrinkles around the upper half of his face.

“I am Tomura Shigaraki. Welcome to the League of Villains, Deku.”

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She tried again.

Another dial tone. “Hi, this is Izuku Midoriya! Sorry, but I can’t come to the phone right now. Please call me back later, or leave a message and I’ll call you. Thanks, bye!”

Inko sniffled a little bit, curling her legs closer to her body as she sat on the couch, worriedly
punching in the number again. He would always pick up on the first two rings, always.

“Come on Izuku, pick up…please?”

One more time, one more time before she filed a missing persons report. Just once more.

Oh, my sweet little baby, where have you gone?

------

“Wait a second…you’re a member. A real villain? Not just someone in the loop, you’re a villain yourself!?”

“…I don’t have time for this.”

Completely unresponsive to Izuku’s distress, Tomura hung up his hoodie and made his way upstairs. Kurogiri stepped behind the bar to the left of Izuku and began cleaning glasses.

Izuku had been speaking to a fully certified villain this entire time. I suppose his smile did look a bit creepy, but he didn’t really look like he had the malice in him to be a fully-fledged villain. He’d talked to him, he’d been dragged along by him, a villain! A real villain!

Kurogiri, noticing his increasingly clammy skin, no doubt, broke the silence, “Yes, he is a villain. Our leader, in fact.”

“THE LEADER!?!”, Midoriya cried, his eyes wide as saucers.

“Shh. Yes, in a manner of speaking. He receives orders directly from the true leader of the League, but he is the one we all take orders from regularly.”

Izuku’s head was swimming. He’d gone far deeper down the rabbit hole than he’d ever intended to far sooner than he had realised.

“You would do best not to judge by appearances, young Deku. He may be young, but he is quite sharp and ruthlessly efficient when he needs to be. Surely you did not view him as being just an idle boy?”

“Well…he was…I did feel like he was trying to get a read on me earlier. Perhaps he wanted to know whether I was a fan of All Might, seeing as he seems to hate All Might and by extension his fans, or maybe he wanted to see if I knew anything about the crime that just happened so he could pump me for information. Then again when he started to straighten up it felt more like he was sizing up my competency or something similarly judgemental albeit now in a positive-“

Kurogiri (somehow) snapped his fingers loudly, breaking Izuku out of his muttering.

“Ah. Oh, sorry, I have a habit of overanalysing things!”

Izuku saw Kurogiri’s eyes narrow.

“That is not necessarily a negative quality. You are small and not especially strong. You came in here incredibly nervous and unable to control yourself. Yet within a few minutes you have already displayed analytical zeal far beyond many of our members.”

Kurogiri placed the clean wine glass down on the table, as if punctuating his last statement;

“As I said before, it is folly to judge by appearances. Take a seat, tell me why Tomura brought you
here. Not many people, especially so young, would walk willingly into the lion’s den, young Deku.”

Though hesitant to be too close to such a large supply of alcohol, Izuku politely sat down on a stool, and began to calm himself down. Close his eyes, open his eyes, there we go. When he opened them, he saw Kurogiri leaning towards him expectantly.

“Oh, yes, right. Why I am here. Well…I have a bit of an…uncommon opinion. About All Might.”

“Do you now?”

“Yes, and I was hoping to speak about All Might with people who, even if it’s for different reasons, feel similarly. Please? I’ve never met anyone before who wasn’t completely in love with All Might. I can’t talk about how I feel right now with anyone else.”

“…I see. So that’s why you decided to come here.”

Kurogiri drew himself away from his work. His expression was unreadable, but somehow you could just kind of…feel it. It was ominous, being conveyed to purely through body language and tone of voice. But he seemed like quite a gentlemanly figure. Polite. He does consider himself a professional, after all. Even evil has to have standards I suppose.

“I will succinctly satisfy your curiosity. Our Sensei believes All Might is a pillar of hope and justice. This is the role he has taken upon himself, and even as he weakens and flaunts false justice, he continues to be a pillar that props up society, even as it stagnates.”

Izu thought back. The strained grin that hid his weaknesses. The crowds that watched and did nothing in this stagnant society…

“However, the important issue is this; that he is the only pillar. Other heroes work for personal profit and glory, but All Might stands as a symbol of justice still, and thus everyone feels content in ignoring their own problems. He is from an age long gone. When All Might is gone, a world that develops like this will not be able to survive alone.”

The box of All Might memorabilia under his bed…

“We believe that attempting to slay the symbol of peace will show this world the folly of their justice. If All Might succeeds, he can continue keeping the world propped up a little longer, and he has proven his strength. If he fails, he will be rightfully removed from his seat of power before a far bigger tragedy strikes. Either way, we dedicate ourselves to his death.”

Izuku had no words. It was conspiracy to murder, plain and simple. But described in such a way that one not paying enough attention would be swept along by a rhetoric that almost sounded like it made sense.

Izuku spoke up, “D-Does he deserve to die? Just for being too weak?”

“No. He deserves to die for providing a false sense of hope and flimsy justice, instead of admitting to his failures and doing something about them. If he claims to be a protector and cannot back that claim up, he is deceiving the whole world.”

“You talk like you know some kind of weakness to him that no-one else does. Why do you think he’s so past his prime while everyone else supports him?”

Kurogiri pauses.
“Haha, Shigaraki, you certainly know how to pick them. You’re a sharp one, mister Deku. But you are in no position to interrogate me, no more than I am in a position to disclose internal secrets.”

Izuku frowns. Figures. He’d hoped the heat of the moment might make Kurogiri spill something, but no such luck. Still, they definitely seemed to know something about All Might. Something crucial…

“So now you have made it clear why you have come here. That's one half of the mystery solved. Now I suppose we must discern the other cause for your arrival.”

Izuku snapped out of his pensive expression, nerves starting to spike.

“What do you mean?”

“Why did Shigaraki decide to bring you here?”

Upon hearing this, a slight chill crept down Izuku’s spine, not for the first time today. His eyes slowly crept over to the staircase Tomura had walked up earlier.

Kurogiri clarified, “Feel free to explore. Don’t try to enter any locked doors.”

Izuku nodded with what he hoped was a confident expression, and, crouching slightly and with every possible effort expended to make as little noise as possible, he began to sneak upstairs.
Run away, runaway

Chapter Summary

Someone give Izuku a stress ball and a mug of hot chocolate

The floorboards, his breathing, his posture, everything felt like it might betray him at every moment as Izuku approached the darkened room labelled with Tomura Shigaraki’s name. There was only a little light coming from there, proof enough that someone had to be inside. As he got just a little bit closer, voices rose up that confirmed that someone had to be inside; more specifically, two people.

The first voice was Tomura’s. Even though it sounded somewhat more light-hearted than earlier, the scratchy yet soft tone was incredibly distinct. The second voice, he had never heard before. It sounded formal, and he spoke with old honorifics and antiquated accents from an era long since passed by. The voice wasn’t loud, but it rumbled softly, like a barely contained power lingered behind restraints. It sounded commanding, a tone that demanded immediate obedience. A voice like that could get you very far in the underworld.

“I trust your judgement, young Tomura.”

“T-Thank you, Sensei…”

Tomura spoke with great deference, a tone Izuku was certain was rare for this man. He sounded elated at this praise. He must respect this man a lot. More importantly, he was clearly paying a lot of attention to what was happening on screen. Surely he wouldn’t notice someone peeking into the room…

His interest piqued, Izuku hesitantly stole a glance around the door. All the lights were off in the frankly filthy bedroom, save for the bright glare of the old computer propped up against the wall. The screen showcased only a bright white sign proclaiming “Video Unavailable.” But the computer was clearly transmitting a voice.

Izuku sat in silence, his ears straining as hard as they could, to hear how much of this mystery mastermind’s voice was distorted by the screen, or by his own insidious nature.

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Kurogiri finished polishing the last glass. Not the most stimulating work, but necessary. At least this Deku character had been kind enough to provide him with some good reading material.

His fiery fingers flicked through page after page of detailed analysis of countless heroes. New and old, popular and vague, strong and weak. The number on top of it implied that this was only part of a greater collection, and yet its detail was by itself encyclopaedic. He even had an article on Eraser Head, the hero who went out of his way to avoid notice!

And yet this veritable hero fanboy claimed to have mixed feelings about the greatest hero of all. He looked confused and unready, but with a guiding hand in the right direction, he could surely be
convincing of the merits of villainy. He wasn’t too far gone, too consumed by the blind adoration of heroes. If anything, his faith in heroes being called into question after having stockpiled all of this information? He would never be riper for the picking than he was now.

Kurogiri couldn’t help but chuckle to himself quietly. Tomura, you really do know how to pick them, don’t you? I don’t think even Sensei would have hoped your first recruitment would be so exponentially lucky.

Yes, this was most fortunate. UA was a minefield of heroes in training that could get in their way on the grand mission of slaying All Might. In such an environment, information gathering and cataloguing on a level such as this was more valuable than gold.

Most fortunate indeed.

-----

Tomura continued to justify his thus far vague accomplishment to the man on the other side of the screen, the one he called Sensei. Even long after he had been assured his judgement was correct, Tomura seemed to feel the need to continue explaining himself, half out of pride, and half out of what Izuku might think was worriment.

“You were the one who told me Sensei. That I needed to be able to take over all operations. Even this one.”

The distorted voice boomed, “Yes, young Tomura. Even this one. It is no easy feat for one as socially deprived as yourself, but you have found what I believe to be a kindred spirit in this boy.”

Izuku clutched his chest. His breathing grew short and tight with fear. Due to the fact he was already stifling his breath to muffle any noise, this was almost too much to bear. He could feel himself turning blue with a mix of panicked nausea and oxygen deprivation.

The voice continued, “Recruitment of the minions, for the upcoming strike? Basic, entry level work. They are but simple goons. Useful, but nothing special. You will soon have to learn to select those with elite potential, young Tomura. This is your first step in that.”

It was all but unsaid. He knew who they were talking about. It was obvious. The only reason he continued to listen in was out of naive hope someone would confirm he was somehow wrong, that this was just entirely unrelated to why he was led here, anything at a-

“Yes, Sensei. This Deku kid will be a massive power up, I can tell.”

Twice today, Izuku’s senses had failed him. Deafened by terror, Izuku didn’t waste time masking his escape, his outright disapproval of everything that had just been said. No way, not a chance, never. He had to get out of here, he had to get out of here NOW, right now this SECOND!

Izuku stomped down the stairs as fast as his legs could carry him, with such reckless abandon some of the old wood creaked audibly under his weight. He rushed passed Kurogiri, who was holding up his Hero Analysis for the Future document. No doubt sizing him up again, checking for whether he would be a worthy candidate, specimen, target, pawn…

“Yes, Mister Deku, wait!”

Kurogiri had no time to react to stop him before Izuku flung open the door and leaped out of it onto the dirty alley road below. The moon shone brightly in the night sky, reminding him of the time that had passed in that death-trap, as well as denying him cover of darkness. Peachy.
His legs pumped, kicking up mud and broken glass with every ragged step he took. His muscles burned and his lungs ached as he struggled to put as much distance between him and his would-be captors as he could.

Left, right, left, left, right, forward, he rushed through alleyway after alleyway. The labyrinth of disparate buildings was nigh impossible to navigate. If he could just make it to the main city streets, he could find his way home from there. Just a little longer, just a little further, please, a main street, anywhere, anywhere PLEASE!

As he rounded the next corner, he slammed into the last thing he expected to see in these alleyways this late; another human being. The sound of shattering glass hit the floor as the man seemed to drop something. He scrambled backwards to put distance between himself and this figure, realising quickly that this guy was far too fat and bulky to be Shigaraki and too…uh, corporeal to be Kurogiri. His fears alleviated somewhat, before the man reached down to grab him by the collar of his neck, and lifted him straight into his broken-nosed face.

“What the fuck d’ya think yer doing, ya little shit?”

His breath smelt like strong alcohol and halitosis. His red face was twisted in anger but some of his features hung loosely, like his slacking jaw. Clearly this man was nearly blackout drunk.

“I-I-I’m sorry sir, really, I need to get away, please let me go!”

“Sorry ain’t gonna bring back my fuckin’ drink now is it, shit-for-brains!?”

With one giant fist, he swung Izuku into a wall. Even as his head hit the concrete, he was half-consciously trying to get a read on this new threat, analysing him even through tear stained eyes. He seemed unnaturally large, maybe an enlarging quirk or-

Another punch to the head stopped that train of thought immediately.

“I’m fuckin’ talking to you, shitty brat! Don’cha ignore me!”

The man dropped him heavily onto the floor, shards of broken glass piercing his clothes, at least one scratching his back. The man looked over the child, spitting onto the floor beside his trembling form. He raised a foot, whether to stomp on the defenceless Izuku or simply to take a step forward was unclear.

The boot landed roughly on his stomach. Breath rushed out of Izuku’s lungs so quickly it felt like it was tearing his windpipe. Izuku went limp and cold.

“SPEAK UP, MOTHERFUCKER, I’LL FUCKIN’-“

A strained, raspy, familiar voice echoed through the walls of the alley, “Ah, finally found you, Deku.”

Izuku lolled his head further backwards. Even upside down, the lanky, hooded, grinning figure of Shigaraki was unmistakeable. Izuku didn’t even have the energy to scream.

“Who the fuck’re you supposed to be, lightweight? Get the fuck outta here before I put you in the ground!”

“Coming to the rescue of a guy who hates me…this is so annoying.”

“Oh, this guy your fucking friend or somethin’?”
His meaty hand went right up to Izuku’s shirt again, picking him up by the scruff of his neck.

“Back off or I’ll split his skull in half, y’hear?”

Shigaraki smiled his same, far too wide smile. This time, this time Izuku could feel it. The malicious intent behind it. The exact same cracked grin, no bigger and no smaller, this time radiated with a murderous, dangerous aura. Clearly the man felt it too, since his grip tightened and voice got louder.

“Back off I said, fuckface, I’LL FUCKING KILL YOU!”

Within the blink of an eye, Shigaraki had jumped from the end of the alleyway to right on top of Izuku’s assailant, grabbing onto his face with both hands. The man gagged coarsely, then grew silent. Izuku felt the grip loosening, the hand dropping him…and then he felt it deconstructing.

“W-wha…WAIT WHAT, AAAAH!”

Izuku couldn’t suppress a scream, as the man who had been gripping him, flush-faced and roaring with life and fury, fell over him like sand, turned into a pile of dust in a second. Izuku coughed and shook violently to try to get the dust that had once been a man off of him, to shake off his flesh, to get the taste of ash out of his mouth.

“Get up, Deku. He might’ve had friends.”

Izuku crawled to his unlikely hero, shakily getting to his feet, taking the three-fingered hand Shigaraki offered to help him up. He flexed his other hand, shaking off the grey powder. His expression had gone back to a true neutral.

“Y-Your q-quirk…he’s d-dead.”

“And you’re not. I don’t have time for this, and neither do you. He had alcohol, too much for one person.”

Shigaraki gestured to the three or so bottles that were seeping sake into the ground.

“That means friends, similarly stupid friends. Unless you want to go for round two, it’s time to quit.”

Izuku’s mind was fried. He’d been there. He was solid, fleshy, warm…to feel that warmth undone in a second, to feel calloused, lively skin become grainy rubble in a second…

“I’ll lead you again. Come on.”

Grabbing his hand with three fingers, Shigaraki led him down the alleyway, back towards the League of Villains, taking care to avoid alleyways that would take them any closer to the loud, drunken yells from a few blocks away.

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Izuku sat on a wooden chair in the bar area of the League, slowly letting his senses return to him. The small blue blanket draped over his shoulders was definitely helping him to get some warmth back under his skin. Kurogiri, behind the counter, was pouring out a (Izuku specified, non-alcoholic) beverage.

"...recruitment?"
Shigaraki, leaning on the counter, placed his cherry cola back down on the counter with a slam. Kurogiri noticed Shigaraki had not used the placemat, and seemed slightly agitated. As ever, it was kind of hard to tell what he was thinking.

"Yes. I was going to recruit you. Not by force, idiot. If I was trying to force you, you know full well I could have forced you."

Shigaraki flexed his fingers again for emphasis, grinning absently. Izuku barely restrained a shudder.

"What he means to say", interjected Kurogiri, "Is that we try to run a higher class of organisation than mere street gangs. We pick our membership not only out of usefulness, but conviction. We thought maybe you would fit the bill nicely."

Izuku stared at the floorboards. "Putting aside the conviction part for a moment... just what makes you think I'd be of any use to you at all?"

Shigaraki spoke, "I let you in because I thought you had the conviction. Not a fan of All Might, a free thinker...lot of potential there. Besides...I was a little eager to recruit my first new party member."

Kurogiri waved Izuku's Analysis Notes lightly, before saying, "As for the usefulness portion, assessing that was part of the reason I allowed you to eavesdrop on mister Shigaraki."

Kurogiri dropped the notes onto the table, opening them to the page on Mt. Lady.

"This hero debuted only a few days ago. To many organisations all over the world, this hero is a wild card, a new unknown factor to consider and take precautions against. But on her very first appearance, you have dissected her quirk, it's strengths and weaknesses, assigned her overall scores, and even taken notes on what she is like as a person, such as your description of her glory-hogging lust for fame, that you generously described as vanity. The detail on more established heroes is even more in depth. To put it frankly, mister Deku, these notes are incredible. World class."

Izuku, despite himself, couldn't help but be just a little bit flattered at this description of his fanboyish scribblings.

"Mister Deku, in this new age of quirk regulations, hero training and wider cooperation between hero organisations, the ability to assess new threats is essential. You have a talent, you truly do, for assessing strengths and weaknesses within minutes. We need that."

Izuku curbed his joy at being praised. It's true, it was manipulative...but he couldn't help grinning at how for once, his skills were being appreciated and sought after by someone. Shaking off that train of thought, Izuku looked up, determined to stand up for himself.

"And you're going to ask me to join? In exchange for Shigaraki having saved my life?"

Shigaraki spoke up, annoyance in his tone, "That's still coercion, brat. Like I said, thats not what I want to go for."

Kurogiri once again elaborated on Shigaraki's brash comment, "What we mean to request, mister Deku, is a chance. A chance for us to help you see things our way. You do not have to officially join yet; your decision to become part of our little family will be a decision that is entirely your own. But if you want to learn more, we would ask that you accompany us on our upcoming expedition. We want you to use your talents to help us categorise and document all the hero
students we will soon be discovering, such that we are not at a disadvantage due to lack of knowledge."

Izuku thought deeply for a second. Yes, they were definitely trying to manipulate him. They hadn't fully answered his questions yet. So much of what they said felt like it was only half of the information. And there was still at least one big secret regarding All Might that they didn't want to share.

"I'll do it. W-With a few terms and conditions."

Kurogiri nodded, "Name your terms, mister Deku."

"Firstly, I don't want to be made to kill anyone."

With surprisingly no resistance, Kurogiri nodded, "Of course. It would be unfair to make you compromise your morals for an organisation you have not, in fact, joined yet."

"T-Thank you. Um...secondly, I won't give up my real identity. Not to you guys, not yet at least. And especially not to any of the students. Anything about who I am, who I am related to, you won't chase that information for yourself. A-And especially don't ever seek out any of my family members!"

Kurogiri looked over to Shigaraki. Shigaraki just looked over and shrugged. Kurogiri sighed and said, "Agreed, mister Deku. Anything else?"

Izuku took a deep breath.

"Your leader. The man on the other side of the screen. I want to meet him. Myself."

A long silence settled. Shigaraki's eyes were wide and surprised, all the more creepy because of it. Kurogiri froze in preparing his drink.

The TV monitor in the corner of the room, voice distorted, spoke up, "Condition accepted, young Deku."
Meeting with the Devil

Chapter Summary

Izuku puts his head straight into the lion's mouth, and prepares to have a nice, civil spot of tea with the most dangerous criminal in all of Japan.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kurogiri outstretched himself into an inky wall of blackness. A great, towering darkness that spread his body so thin, yet left no gaps through which you could see through or past his form.

"Whenever you are ready, mister Deku."

Izuku steeled himself yet again. He balled his hands into fists so tightly his knuckles turned white.

"So, he will be on the other side of this wall? I just have to...step into you, and you'll transport me to where he is?"

"Indeed. He has arranged a short meeting with you. You will be seeing him in one of many secure bunker locations. You will not be allowed to leave the room. When you have finished your conversation, I will arrive to escort you out again."

"So, you're a portal? Really? That is such a versatile quirk, really. The possibilities are limitless in terms of mobility, attack redirection, sneak attacks...are there any limits on what you can bring with you? A weight limitation, are you not able to transport complex machinery, anything like that?"

Without a word being spoken, and without significant facial expressiveness to convey it, Izuku still felt the feeling of raised eyebrows and amusement.

"Ahaha...sorry. Force of habit."

Kurogiri inclined his head, "Think nothing of it, mister Deku. Such zeal is one of your best qualities. Also, for the record, my quirk is called Warp Gate, in case you feel like writing an entry for any of us in those tomes of yours."

Izuku grinned. In spite of all the difficulties that had been facing him this evening, and in spite of the clear unsavoury qualities of these people, they had treated him with nothing but kindness and respect. It was honestly hard to imagine them as true villains.

But from what he could gather, this man would be something else. He sounded businesslike, intelligent, and cunning. Easily the mastermind of the group. Despite his safety having been assured by Shigaraki, he was still taking a huge risk. This man was at the top of the chain...but following that train of thought, if anyone was going to know the thus far withheld information about All Might, it would be him. He'd have to watch what he said, and how he said it. Play his cards close to the chest, and make sure to remain confident. Any sign of weakness or frailty would ruin him.

"Okay...I'm ready."
"Then please, step into the warp gate, and meet him. Good luck."

With a nod, a gulp, and one large step, Izuku stepped into Kurogiri's warp gate.

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The feeling was...somewhat surreal. It only lasted for a small second, but gravity seemed to become a total nonfactor. The sudden glaring difference in lights, location, and even the feeling of the floor changing about in an instant was unsettling, but by the time that second was over, Izuku's foot rested on an entirely new floor in an entirely new location.

The building, if it could be called that, was completely devoid of any defining features. No windows or doors. The walls were made of smooth and even grey stone. In the middle of the room sat a nondescript set of tables and chairs. It was impossible to deduce any features on them or tags or other markings that would indicate where they came from. In other words, everything in this small, claustrophobic meeting room was designed to give the guest absolutely no indication as to where they were.

Nicely done, to be honest. Clearly he was not the only one who had resolved to play his cards close to his chest. The only source of light was a single, unshaded light bulb attached to the ceiling.

Before Izuku could admire the efforts taken to arrange the meeting further, the background sound of Kurogiri's warp gate abruptly cut out. Izuku whirled around, finding nothing but a blank, grey wall. Izuku was all alone in this blank, expressionless room.

Izuku waited for a few minutes, as nothing happened. The room was so lacking in any visual stimulation it created intense unease all on its own. Why wasn't anyone here? Did the voice belong to some kind of small insect? A gaseous matter? What did he know about this thing so far, anyway? Any defining features?

'Let's see here', Izuku thought to himself, 'he's probably quite old, maybe with an unnaturally extended lifespan. His tone of voice and formal mannerisms imply he prefers polite manners and...hmmm...maybe he's waiting for something? Maybe he expects something of me first?'

'What would he expect of me? He wants me for analysing, so maybe he wants me to guess what he's like, right? So...he's polite, old...'

Izuku slowly walked over to the table and sat down in his chair.

"A pleasure to meet you, young Deku."

Within the literal blink of an eye, a figure was sitting in the other chair. He was tall, very tall. He towered over Izuku's humble size. Izuku's head reached up to the top button of his suit jacket, underneath which he wore a plain white dress shirt. He'd somewhat expected a traditional suit from a very experienced villain. But by far his most striking feature was his face. Or rather, his lack thereof.

This man...he had no face to speak of. It was just scar tissue. He had his mouth, but everywhere above his upper lip was a mangled mess of scar tissue and disassembled flesh. Tubes stuck out of his neck and jaw at peculiar angles, presumably some form of life support system. He'd expected a horrific appearance, but this was horrific for an entirely different reason. He didn't look intimidating as much as he looked, honestly, pitiful.

"Hmhm. Shock. Yes? I would say I get that reaction all the time, but that would imply I get a lot of visitors. You, young Deku, are the first to demand a meeting with me in a long time."
This man leaned back in his chair, apparently taking some amusement in Izuku's expression, which doubtless looked like a deer before headlights. Izuku shook his head embarrassedly, trying to avoid being rude or gawking at the sight.

"M-My apologies sir, I didn't mean to offend! That's not-

"Relax, young Deku. One does not rise to such an inflated level of pride and power as I if they cannot shrug off slights with ease."

Izuku cursed himself. His attempts at cutthroat negotiation just got shot in the foot from the very first moment.

"So", the scarred man continued, "Shall we start with introductions? My name is All For One."

"Oh, of course. But...you already said my name."

The man who called himself All For One used his mouth to make an imitation of a smirk. "I think you've misunderstood here. All For One is my real name. Not a pseudonym such as Deku."

Izuku swallowed, trying his best to maintain eye contact with...wherever this person's eyes would be. "Not giving away my real name was one of the conditions I negotiat-"

All For One slammed a palm down on the table, and Izuku had to use all of his self-control to resist jumping in shock. "Don't forget who you face here, boy! I was not merely requesting politely. I have shared with you my true name. You will now share with me yours. I think you will agree that is only fair."

Izuku had to forcibly slow his breathing back down to normal. The man glared at him, a jutted jaw being the main indication of his sheer, furious expression. This doesn't make any sense, he's lost his cool immediately, he's not...behaving naturally. 'I see...' Izuku realised, 'he wants to test my bravery.'

Izuku returned to a confidently upright posture. "You already granted me the right to withhold my identity. You're not getting my name."

A tense silence settled, as All For One slowly leaned forward.

Did he go too far, did he? He was inching closer, he could feel the furious heat just radiating from him, what the hell should I-

"Hahaha, wonderful!"

All For One leaned back into a comfortable position on his chair, laughing, "Excellent. For someone so nervous-looking and timid, when it came down to the wire you held your ground. You have a fire in your heart, my boy."

Izuku released an breath he had been unconciously holding. "I see...I thought that was what you were doing..."

All For One brought his half-mouth into the last vestiges of a grin, "And I believed you would remain calm-headed enough to figure that out. I had made it quite clear earlier that we had accepted your conditions as previously discussed. And I do not break my word, young Deku. That is why I so rarely choose to give it."

All For One adjusted one of his wires. They seemed to go deep into his skin. It looked so painful.
"Ah, more staring, yes? You see now only the remnants of what I once was, young Deku, only the fading embers of a once great fire. A similar fire lies within beings such as young Tomura, and perhaps yourself. This is why I choose to guide those who have potential. That I might light a new flame."

"You were once stronger, you say?"

"Oh yes. The Emperor of Japan, in all but name. I controlled this entire country from the shadows, from petty thieves, to powerful politicians. I ensured the integrity of this nation all throughout the catastrophic emergence of quirks themselves. But now, thanks to All Might, I have been almost totally wiped from the pages of history."

He didn't seem senile, or one to make idle boasts, but really? A ruler from the shadows, completely erased? By All Might? Without leaving behind a single trace?

"You doubt the authenticity of my claims?"

Izuku jumped. This man was good at reading people. "No, no, it's just...I can hardly imagine that sort of world. It sounds so surreal."

"Keep in mind, this was a different time, child. A world where everything was the unknown. One baby, born in China, glowed with bright light. And suddenly, nothing we knew was the same anymore. Quirks advanced and emerged far faster than any laws or regulations to guide them. Some denounced Quirks as unnatural or evil. Some declared themselves gods or immortals based on the powers they wielded that no-one else had, at least until the bigger fish swam along with a more powerful Quirk to dethrone them. Children were being born for the specific purpose of creating more powerful Quirks to ensure their families dominance in this new uncertain world. All of these things I describe, young Deku, actually happened. What do you think is the linking factor between them?"

"...power?"

"Yes, yes my boy, power. The quirkless, vying to avoid becoming obsolete. The ones blessed by great power, attempting to carve out a legacy and force others to submit to their glory before another could prove themselves stronger. And the middling, hoping to create a legacy out of their children, to ensure their survival and power. Quirks took our understanding of what made a man powerful, and completely destroyed it. A pauper with the ability to produce weaponry was suddenly greater than a prince with no quirk whatsoever. And the worst part was, it was all entirely random. Without factoring in the unsightly existence of Quirk marriages, the balance of power could be tipped anytime, anywhere, by the miracle of a new quirk developing at birth. And, amidst this sea of turmoil, of constantly wavering power, then there was me."

Izuku was enraptured by this storytelling. All For One spoke with a description of a real, but truly fantastical world, a world that shared the very same blueprint as the one he lived in now. His ability to tell this tale could only have come from being there himself. He didn't think it was at all possible to imitate this certainty of expression.

"I was the only one who could tip this sea. Who could force the waves to move as I wanted. Everyone else was adrift in an unrelenting sea, but I alone could sail where I wanted."

"How? What kind of power would that take."

"What indeed? What power could I possess that would never be surpoassed by another, bigger fish later on? Well I will tell you, young Deku, of the only way in which you can secure your position
for all time."

All For One leant his empty face forward.

"Young Deku, I alone was blessed with the power to control power."

"W-what does that mean?"

All For One leaned back, returning to a relaxed stance, letting the unanswered question hang in the air.

"Forgive me for answering a question with a question, young Deku, but before I respond, I would be far more interested in hearing what power you possess."

"Me?"

"Yes, this isn't an interview, conversation must flow both ways."

Izuku looked down at the table, hesitant. "Well...if you insist."

"Do continue. We have all the time in the world."

-----

Bakugo Katsuki was never known for his calm temper.

Even in the best of situations, being rescued from a villain and then praised for putting up a fight, he'd have a furious expression. The determination not to let up for a second.

He'd always stuck by that. Even after getting top marks in the exams, and quirk tests, he'd kept pushing forwards with a fiery demeanour that couldn't be matched. Not out of hatred for others, but out of an unceasing desire to surpass them. If his force of will could never be matched, then he would never be matched.

But this. THIS made him angry.

"Missing? Fucking missing!?"

He'd thought that damn nerd had just finally gotten it through his thick skull that he wasn't cut out to be a hero. He'd been pretty stubborn, but he wasn't stupid. Bakugo just figured maybe he'd finally caught on and decided to do something else with his life. He didn't show up, he didn't question it. But maybe he'd been giving him too much credit. It wasn't that he'd finally fucked off and done something else, it was that he couldn't be found fucking anywhere!

"Well fucking check again, bitch! Deku doesn't HAVE a nightlife, he'd clearly already be home by now! Get on it, now!", Bakugo shouted into his phone, while his mother shouted back at him that he still wasn't home and the police were on the lookout for him.

It took every ounce of self-restraint he had to not slam his phone through the wall next to him. Not into the wall, THROUGH the wall.

Picturing his mom trying to console a delirious Inko Midoriya...

That god damn fucking nerd...where the hell could he have gone off to!? 

-----
"Well...I've never been powerful."

Izuku squeezed out his story painfully, as All For One sat, pensive and considerate.

"Please, go on, young Deku."

"Your descriptions...of the quirkless being obsolete...being unable to control your destination...they kind of hit me where it hurts, sir."

"Just All For One is fine. Or Sensei, if you prefer."

"Thank you sir...um, All For One, sorry. It's just, I don't know if this is really selling my talents or anything, but I've always been bullied for being quirkless."

All For One's body became rigid.

"Everyone, even my family gave up on me. My best friend...he turned against me. Beating me up, burning my books...he even told me a quirkless loser like me would be better off throwing myself off the roof, that's how little everyone felt about me. Nothing else mattered except that I didn't have a quirk. And thanks to that, I was already finished."

All For One listened in silence, as Izuku's voice leaked more and more emotion.

"E-Even he...my hero, the one person t-that I thought would be able to console me, to t-tell me how to get a second start was...even All Might told me it was useless to fight against it!"

"All Might. I believe the phrase 'never meet your heroes' comes to mind right now."

"No kidding..."

Again, All For One allowed the discussion to float in the air before continuing. Maybe because Izuku looked to be in a state of despair.

"My boy, I am of the firm belief that power must be held to assert ones ideals."

Izuku froze.

"However...one such as yourself, so adamant, so passionate, so clearly suitable for the job, has been denied time and time again from being able to assert your ideals, no matter how valuable they might be, for simple lack of power. This...is disgusting."

All For One's voice rumbled with power, a low, deep rage that made the hairs on Izuku's neck stand up.

"You challenge my ideals, Deku. For I understand power alone is what prevents your ideals from reaching fruition. And your story has helped me understand that in spite of your lack of power, you are NOT wrong to chase your ideals."

Izuku's heart skipped a beat. 'You are not wrong to chase your ideals'. How could this...how could a villain be so sympathetic, and a hero so cold?

All For One began to roll up one of the sleeves of his suit jacket, exposing strong muscles and a bare hand.

"I have the power to control power, Deku. Put more precisely, the power to take and gift quirks at will."
Izuku's heart skipped a second beat. The power to gift and receive quirks...did such phenomenal power even exist? And if so...

All For One laid his elbow on the table.

"You, Deku, were never gifted by fate. You have never had a quirk."

All For One's hand opened, extending itself to Izuku, waiting to be taken.

"Would you like one?"

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!

The fic has already received a bit of attention and I honestly couldn't be happier for it. I hope to be able to really expand this work over time, so it means a lot to me.
Temptation

Chapter Summary

Izuku has to decide where he stands before work can begin

Izuku locked hands with All For One. A red glow started to emanate from his palms, and Izuku felt the unmistakable pressure of power from that red aura. This was the power he spoke of? The power to shift the balance of power itself?

"Young Deku, what sort of power would you feel most suited to?"

"H-huh? Oh...so, I can pick any power I want?"

"Within reason, I believe I can find a Quirk that will serve you adequately."

Any quirk...any quirk he wanted? Any?

Izuku's mind rattled. He stood on the threshold of boundless potential. Any quirk he wanted, any form of power that would forever lift him from his ordinary, hopeless life.

Anything that would make him less himself.

Izuku stared down All For One with harsh eyes.

"Is this how you intended to have me work for you?"

All For One allowed silence to settle once more, until the tension thickened into an unbearable air of dread.

"I do beg your pardon?"

"Giving me a quirk would indebt me to you forever."

"Young Deku, that would be appalling. What you would chose to do with your newfound power is your own. I would merely give you the strength to fulfil your ideals-"

"Immediately after a speech like that? Of course I would use that power exactly how you intended me to! Because it would be your power, not mine!"

Izuku pulled his hand away from All For One. His expression was difficult to tell, but Izuku could sense the bitterness from his tone.

"You are playing a dangerous game here boy. As I have said, one cannot assert their ideals without power."

"Then I will attain power without you."

Izuku nearly caught himself with how hard a line he was taking with the most dangerous criminal in Japan. But after having said it, he didn't waver, or falter, or try to take it back. Even if it put him in danger to say aloud, Izuku had said nothing more or less than exactly how he felt.
"Hmmm..."

All For One placed a hand on his chin in contemplation.

Izuku, fearing the silence, spoke up, "So...is that okay? Do you accept that I won't take a quirk from you?"

"Accept? It's not my decision to make. I just personally think it is a foolish and moronic choice that reflects a ridiculously idealistic and naive outlook on the world. You truly intend to stand without a quirk, my boy? You don't seem the confident type, neither do you seem foolish."

Izuku couldn't fully explain it himself. Maybe it was because the 'deal with the Devil' scenario never worked out. Maybe it was because he was finally starting to believe in himself, ironically in part due to All For One's encouragement. But in the end, it could maybe be summed up as...

"My conviction. I don't want a fast track to power. I want to have to work hard for this. Because if I don't, I'll be no better than people like Kacc...my old friend, who won the quirk lottery and immediately spiralled down the wrong path. I'll become powerful, All For One. But I don't ever want to be disconnected from my roots as a poor, quirkless kid who learned how all men were not created equal."

"...Personally, I do not see the value in 'being better'. I stand firm in my belief that you are behaving foolishly, young Deku."

"We're not the same, All For One. I'll...I'll stand by this ideal of mine."

Izuku rose from his chair.

"However, young Deku...you do have my support."

Izuku looked down at the former emperor in surprise, "I thought for sure that..."

"Disparate ideals are rare, Deku. And ultimately, entertaining. I do not believe you will survive among us without a quirk. But I also believe that if you do, your message will be more powerful than you could ever imagine. The downtrodden, the discarded, and the quirkless. They will venerate you."

Izuku couldn't quite stifle a smile, as All For One good naturedly clasped his hands together.

"You, Deku, will become the very hero you wished you had to look up to when you were small."

"T-Tha-"

"Of course, I highly doubt the likelihood of these ambitions coming to fruition. But I encourage you to prove me wrong, nonetheless."

Izuku nodded, pride flushing his cheeks. He had set himself a challenge. To show All For One the value of the weak, and quirkless. He would become strong. Stronger than ANYONE believed he could be.

All For One tapped a button somewhere on his person, and a small ringing noise filled the room.

"There. Kurogiri will arrive within a few minutes. It has been a pleasure, young Deku."

"Thank you very much. Sensei."
Izuku bowed at the waist, and as he raised himself up again, the sound of the warp gate opening behind him filled the room. Izuku waved goodbye a little sheepishly, and jumped into the warp gate, landing on the wooden floorboards of the increasingly familiar League HQ.

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All For One remained.

Hmmm...conviction. Such a rare trait for a villain these days. So many of them were merely angry, or upset, miserable or bloodthirsty. Insects that acted only on instinct and let their emotions lead them. But this child had unlimited power waved right in front of his face and didn't even blink.

Nothing about his story seemed particularly special. Quirkless, lonely, neglected...nothing of notice. Unfortunately, there were many who suffered similar fates. But unlike some other criminals, who ruled with an iron quirk, this child didn't have to empathise or pretend to understand the pain of the downtrodden, such as he did. He felt it all himself. And was intelligent enough to fight it, curious enough to chase All Might's secrets, and even more surprisingly, strong enough to resist being bought off with power, even after all he had suffered through for not having it.

He would have to keep an eye on this child, young Deku. His fiery conviction might make him an excellent ally, given time...and the right circumstances.

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Deku took a step forward out of the warp gate, fully immersed back into the League HQ bar once again. Shigaraki was waiting for him, casually leaning onto the counter.

"Hmhm...so, how did your meeting with Sensei go? Have you made your decision yet?"

Izuku couldn't help but noticing Shigaraki was grinning. As if he fully expected Izuku to answer he was going to stay, and join him for the mission. Part of it was endearing. The other part of it was annoying. What a smug smile. Still, he wasn't wrong...

"I will. Not as an official member, yet. But I have to see how far down the rabbit hole this goes. I've still got questions I need answering, either way."

Shigaraki's smug grin extended, and the low beginnings of his hysterical laugh trickled into his voice, "I knew you'd begin to see things our way eventually, brat! Sensei really is incredible, isn't he?"

Izuku smirked a bit, finding himself happy that Shigaraki was happy, "He is. I do think I can learn a lot from him...and maybe teach him something in return."

Shigaraki scowled, "Don't you put yourself above Sensei, cocky freak."

"Oh...sorry."

"...Whatever. It'll be good to have the support for this mission."

Shigaraki nonchalantly slunk upstairs. Izuku quietly approached the counter, where Kurogiri had stationed himself, flipping through news channels.

"I really can't tell what Shigaraki thinks of me at all. He flips attitudes towards me on a hair trigger."
Kurogiri actually chuckled a bit to himself, "I haven't seen him grin so much in my life. He's always that temperamental, mister Deku. Truth be told, I think he likes having you around."

"Really? I mean, what about the other members? Doesn't he interact with them."

"Mister Shigaraki rarely interacts with anybody. And the other members? Ugh, nothing to write home about. There are one or two very exemplary candidates...but for the sake of efficiency we have pulled together a group that sacrifices cohesion and teamwork for sheer numbers and power."

"Never a good choice."

"It was all we had. This operation, even though we'd planned it for a long time...we still didn't have as much time to bring this all together as we had hoped."

Izuku had heard of ominous foreshadowing before. This was it. He didn't really like how ramshackle this whole plan seemed to be.

"Okay...I think I've earned the right to be let in on some of those plans now, right?"

Kurogiri turned around to Izuku, the essence of a sly smile in his mannerisms.

"Have you ever heard of USJ, mister Deku?"

Izuku's eyes widened in surprise. Yes, he had heard of it, and that was why he was absolutely terrified.

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Shigaraki fiddled with the key and door handle for a bit. Since he insisted on only using a few fingers for everyday tasks, navigating drawers and cupboards extended into an obnoxiously long task. Izuku couldn't help but laugh a little to himself as Shigaraki struggled to open the door.

"Haha, why do you always use so few digits? You have at least one more."

"It's my quirk, moron. Decay. It disintegrates items or people I grasp with all my fingers. I got into the habit of not using my pinky or ring finger, ngh, a lot of the time...dammit, so I don't destroy things by accident."

Eventually, Shigaraki managed, and kicked the unlocked door open, apparently in an act of revenge.

"Alright. Finally. Shit. Here, your new room."

Izuku stepped in, coughing at the dust, and looked around. To be fair, it wasn't...that bad. Really. But it was...no, it was pretty bad. Cobwebs lined the windows and corners, everything was moderately dusty. The room had some good furniture, and old cupboard, a bed, a partially boarded up window, and a lovely looking workbench with a knife-sharpener built in that definitely didn't creep Izuku out.

"If you'd like help, call Kurogiri. He's way too eager to clean up around here."

"Thanks. By the way, is it possible I could grab anything from my home to decorate a bit?"

"...are you dumb?"

"Wha-"
"You're dumb. Look...not yet. Maybe soon. Depends on how this mission goes."

Shigaraki skulked down the corridor to his room, shutting the door.

Izuku sat down on a chair that he had thoroughly brushed all of the dust off of before he let it get anywhere NEAR his clothes. Shigaraki was difficult... he didn't seem to dislike Izuku, but he was just so unapproachable. He was just kind of naturally mean and dismissive... I guess living around here and being out of civilised society really would take a toll on you, wouldn't it?

Let's see here... he's reclusive, seems to keep to what makes him comfortable and doesn't explore much. Maybe I should try approaching him with something he's familiar with?

Izuku took one more look around his cobweb-infested room, and grinned.

"Excuse me, Kurogiri, can you come up here and take over room-cleaning duties for me? I'll explain in a second!"

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Shigaraki sat in the darkness. As per usual, the bright glare of his computer screen was all that projected light into the room, a harsh and glaring light.

Just the way he liked it.

Playing games was a nice way of tranquilizing his mind in-between the pain of planning and diplomacy and working on the secret project. This was the time he got to really-

A knock sounded at the door. Really? Shigaraki stood up, grumbling to himself. He'd told Kurogiri never to interrupt him like this-

When Shigaraki opened the door, Deku stood there, smiling a sickeningly sweet smile. He was holding a duvet, his old controller, and a bowl of crisps.

"No", said Shigaraki, trying to close the door on this invader.

"Yes!", said Izuku, small enough to slip into the room regardless.

Izuku crawled over to the computer, plugging in his controller.

"Do you even know how to play any of my games? Or even what you're playing?"

"Nope. I just wanted to spend some time with you. We'll just play what you want, and I'll learn along the way."

Izuku smiled affectionately. This kid...

"Hmph... I don't get many opportunities to play multiplayer. So fine. Just expect to lose. A lot."

"Can't we play co-op or something?"

"We'd still lose, because you'd be sitting on my team weighing me down, brat. Besides", he said, grinning sadistically, "I don't get many opportunities to play multiplayer. I'm going to make this as painful for you as possible."

Izuku sunk down into the duvet he had brought. He grabbed a beaten-up beanbag Shigaraki had in the corner and placed it next to him, putting the other controller on top of it.
"...you're really not leaving?"

Izuku responded only with another grin, meant to emulate the smug grin Shigaraki gave after he got back from Sensei. Of course...

"Well, don't say I didn't warn you."

-----

Kurogiri was cleaning Deku's shelves at the time, reaching high by using the armchair they gave him earlier. They hung above the work bench quite nicely. They could be used to display trophies, memorabilia, works-in-progress, and still be easily accessible from the table. It was made with the purpose in mind of maintaining weaponry. Speaking of which, perhaps I should head out soon and grab some knives, guns or other such tools soon. Giran could acquire them quite easily, and Deku should NOT be sent out into his first mission without adequate prote-

"GOD FUCKING DAMMIT!!"

A wild scream by Shigaraki startled Kurogiri into half-activating warp-gate. He fell off of the chair he was balancing on and got a face full of floorboard for his trouble.

God...his head...any harder a fall and he'd have damaged his metal plates...

"Damn fools..."

-----

Kurogiri had finally finished his job, and as with every job he undertook, pride in his work ensured the room was spotless. Every spot of dust cleaned, every stain removed, every spider sucked into a warp gate and spat out into a volcano. Marvellous.

Kurogiri crept out of the room to tell Deku the good news, remembering how he said he was going to 'crash' in Shigaraki's room this evening. Chances are he would have been kicked out, knocked out, or otherwise in a state of needing to leave, hence why Kurogiri had focused on fixing up his bed first and foremost.

Kurogiri dematerialised himself and stuck his head under the door, and faced a sight he could never comprehend.

Deku had fallen asleep leaning onto the bean bag that Shigaraki had passed out on, where he had unconsciously dropped an arm over the sleeping Deku, causing Deku to be leaning into Shigaraki's leg slightly. Shigaraki was still clutching the controller with two fingers. The computer was still running, and the bright light illuminated the sight with a pale blue light that ensured this scene was perfectly visible to Kurogiri even in the darkness of the night.

The computer was displaying the victory screen in a co-op game.
Izuku pulled his punches too much. That dummy wasn’t going to be moving anywhere if he didn’t learn to strike a bit harder…

Pssht…no, no, enough for today. Izuku had set up a training dummy in his room, the kind that spun it’s arms around at you after you’d hit it, forcing you to block and strike again. He’d been working at it for a full 2 hours. A full 2 hours. Without a break. Izuku’s bones felt like they were creaking, good god.

Anything to improve his physical fitness. It’s not exactly detailed CQC training or anything, but at least it…kinda helps with reaction time, a bit? And if that saves his skin by a little bit when the time comes, it’s worth it. And if it’s making him sweat this much, it’s got to be doing something for his health, right?

It sucks, but Izuku doesn’t really have a sparring partner to work with. Tomura is skinny and not that strong, and one grip in the heat of the moment might cause Izuku to either lose his clothes or lose his face. And Kurogiri was kind of…incorporeal. His flames kind of gave a very vague idea of where he resides spatially. Can he even be grabbed? If so, couldn’t he just use his quirk to slip out?

God, tone it down Izuku. We get it, Kurogiri’s quirk is really interesting. You’ve already bothered him with enough questions about it. It’s getting to the crunch time now, both Kurogiri and you have got to focus on this mission.

To be frank, going to USJ was being thrown in the deep end. No two ways about it, this was an absolute nightmare. Even if he was only going as an information expert, a very generous term for standing around scribbling, there was still a chance one of the students might mistake him for more of a threat than he actually is and dive into him. Being able to outrun them, at least on foot, would be absolutely essential. Which was exactly why Izuku had spent 2 whole hours making this dummies’ limbs spin around more than a ballerina on roller skates with greased up wheels. A routine he’d been keeping up for weeks now, alongside running through the alleys, pull-ups, and lifting heavy objects, usually supplies for the USJ operation.

He chose to go in like this. He CHOSE to go in with less power than he could have. So now, he had to pull his own weight. He had to work a lot harder than other people to earn his keep.

How long had he been training by this point? Too long. Weeks, months...maybe even a year...

A knock at his door. Okay, great. With what little strength he had left in his aching muscles, Izuku dragged his sweaty, exhausted self to the door.

Shigaraki stepped in, noting Izuku’s improved musculature, featuring prominent abs and strong arms. Izuku might’ve detected a hint of jealousy when Shigaraki folded his arms.
“Jeez. You look like a mess.”

“Whew…hah…good to see you too, Tomura.”

“Hm? First name basis now?”

“Are we not? I thought…”

“It’s fine.”, Tomura huffed, throwing Izuku a towel, which he graciously accepted.

“Thank you, thanks. It’s been rough work for me lately.”

“Yeah. It’s…not gonna be enough, you know that, right?”

“Yeah, wait, h-huh?”

Izuku looked disillusioned. What was he saying, he’d been training for months on end! He’d nearly thrown up twice in the last 3 days!

“W-what? Am I not doing enough? Have I been underperforming?”

“No, it’s-“

Izuku immediately jumped and limped over to the dummy again, using his only slightly refuelled muscles to punch the limbs backwards again.

“Deku! Quit it!”

Izuku stood to attention rigidly, listening like a soldier being debriefed.

“Idiot…look, being strong is fine. But it’s not going to save you from these brat heroes in training. They have quirks and you don’t. You know that and so do I.”

“W-Well what more am I supposed to do?”

“Come downstairs”, said Shigaraki, a grin spreading across his face again. By now, knowing that grin was on his side, it felt encouraging. It was threatening to Izuku’s enemies. He couldn’t help but share in the sense of mischief it gave off. “Me and Kurogiri have some stuff for you.”

Izuku’s heart raced. “No way, you’re not talking about…I mean, I know Kurogiri saw my costume designs, but are they really suitable, they’re-“

“Deku. Stop. Breathe more often.”

Shigaraki walked downstairs, lazily beckoning Izuku to follow him.

“Alright. Let me put on a clean shirt, and then I’ll be right down there, Tomura!”

With a slight huff at his first name being used again, Tomura skulked down the stairs. But even the creaky floorboard couldn’t quite disguise the very quiet beginnings of a chuckle.

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Izuku ran downstairs as fast as he could, barely containing his excitement. His bright eyes and trembling mouth immediately made Shigaraki roll his eyes, as Kurogiri led him to the table where a small open box was waiting for him.
Kurogiri started, “Now, this won’t be anything extravagant. We don’t have the resources that people like UA do yet, so we couldn’t fulfil your lofty expectations in your notes. But we have procured some items that will serve well enough for now. Just the essentials, mister Deku.”

Izuku leaned down inside the box, and immediately pulled his finger out, feeling a cold and sharp scratch on his index finger.

Shigaraki mocked him, “Really? Really.”

Reaching in a second time, a little embarrassed, Izuku found the handle of the weapon and withdrew it. ‘A large combat knife. Quite quite large, half the length of his forearm and sharp as could be. Its shine was muffled by a soot-like blackening of its metal, which would no doubt make it far easier to conceal inside a coat. It was tipped sharply enough to slice and stab, but was it counterbalanced well enough to fight with the blade facing outwards? The weight of it was-’

Kurogiri broke up that train of thought, “Mister Deku, you’re muttering again. If you’re worried about the weight, handle it yourself.”

“R-Right. Can’t say I’m that comfortable with blades.”

“Believe me, your comfort will be exponentially increased when the knife becomes useful for the first time. You will be quite relieved to have it. Until then, I would highly advise you ‘get a feel for it’, so to speak.”

Izuku pulled the knife out with a flourish, balancing it on his finger to find its balance. For its size, its light weight was uncanny!

“Made for ease of use, mister Deku. It must be fast enough to draw in an emergency.”

“Thank you, Kurogiri.”

Shigaraki piped up, “Hey, what about me!?"

“S-Sorry Tomura, you too.”

Kurogiri looked surprised. “On a first name basis already, are we? Well, after the sight of you two spending your nights gaming every few days, I suppose friendship is-“

“No-one can know about that, Kurogiri. No one.”, said Shigaraki, leaning in and pointing threateningly.

Izuku smiled sweetly, “So, should we do it again, when this whole USJ thing is over?”

“…sure.”

While Shigaraki tried to avoid making eye contact with Kurogiri, Izuku plunged his hand into the box again.

“Oh my goodness…is this the-“

“We judged it to be the most important piece of gear for this task.”

Izuku removed a large facemask, one that wrapped securely all the way around his face. It looked more or less like the one he had described in his notes, the main difference being the cartoonish grin had been replaced with an even, black tint, completely obscuring his facial features below his eyes. Izuku slipped it on. It didn’t obscure his breathing or vision at all!
“It’s great, but…when you said this was the most important, did you mean that because it was, say, fulfilling an obligation? Like my condition? I might have prioritised body armour over a face-mask in terms of importance.”

Kurogiri huffed, “Finish looking through the box, mister Deku. But…partially. Anonymity is crucial in the world of villainy. Regardless of it being a special condition, you would still not be wise to appear without concealment.”

“And you designed my concealment around my analysis notes. That’s really thoughtful!”

Grinning cheerfully, Izuku reached into the box one more time. Pulling back, with great effort he removed a long, brown coat. Multiple pockets, heavy leather, a sheath for his knife, multiple knives as a matter of fact, even a little internal pocket for his notes. The entire thing felt extremely bulky and tough…

“Is this coat armoured?”

“Of course. This is a temporary setup mind. We plan on getting you something more refined later, but necessity knows no sense of fashion. For lack of time, this was all we could manage. Do excuse the relatively crude appearance of the coat, it really was a matter of function over form.”

Izuku could barely contain his enthusiasm. Izuku snapped the coat on right away, and pulled up the hood. Only his bright emerald eyes could serve as a visible distinguishing feature. Izuku sized himself up in one of Kurogiri’s pristinely polished glasses. God DAMN he looked cool!

Shigaraki snapped him out of it, “Hey, Narcissus. What do you think?”

“It’s…great! It’s just great! The coat and mask make me nigh incognito. And look at this, it’s so easy to draw my knife using this thing. I can slash someone upwards in the same motion I use to draw…the…ehem.”

Izuku stopped himself. Yes, that’s a nice benefit to have. In an emergency, it wouldn’t be cumbersome. But getting too enthusiastic about bloodshed was pretty disgusting. He didn’t want to make it out like he was eager to destroy things like some thug. Getting power, and getting violent and cruel because of it…losing who you were…yeah, he’d seen that before. Patting himself down, mood slightly darkened at the memory of his blond tormentor, he tucked the knife into its sheath and left it there for now.

“So…about fighting. You remember I bargained my right to not be made to kill anyone.”

Shigaraki, “Yes, we’re all aware you’re scared to fight. What about it?”

“Hey it’s not…ugh. Anyway, if I’m not going to be fighting, what exactly is my role? Where will I be?”

“Simple. Me and a large squad enter USJ via Kurogiri, and we all flood the central area while Kurogiri discreetly drops off other villains in some of the disaster simulation areas. Then, we toss the students into the disaster areas and let the villains hold them off while we deal with All Might. You’ll run around the borders and take notes on the class members so we know how to deal with them for next time. It’s part of the reason why we’re not going to take them out this time. They have the element of surprise because we don’t know what they do yet.”

“A-All…All Might?”

“Yes. We intend to kill him.”
Izuku ran those words through his head. Yes, of course, the organisation was made to kill All Might, but specifically to ATTEMPT to kill All Might, if it didn’t work, he was still worthy, if he failed, he could no longer serve as the symbol of peace, it’s not really an assassination attempt and more like a test of strength, it’s not like-

Shigaraki tapped him on the shoulder, “Hey, hey. You’re making a face like a distressed chicken.”

“Sorry, sorry! It’s just, well…All Might is ridiculously strong. Even if you argue his strength is wavering, I saw him quite recently, and he was incredibly powerful. I don’t want to put you down or anything, but…I’m really not sure we stand a chance against him.”

Shigaraki grinned his all to wide grin. This time it worried him for a different reason. He grinned against his enemies, but to grin with such gleeful arrogance against All Might…Izuku couldn’t help but feel paranoid, even as he said, “That’s because you don’t yet know of our secret weapon.”

“What secret weapon?”

“I can’t tell you, Deku, or it wouldn’t. Be. Secret. Ehehe…”

Shigaraki stifled his own insane laughter, leaving before Izuku could ask any more questions.

Kurogiri shook his head, “Ever the drama queen.”

“What did he mean by secret weapon?”

“Sensei has been working on something for a very long time now that will be able to match All Might’s power. Even in the case of a miscalculation, our numbers should more than make up for any failings in the weapon…the Nomu.”

“A…Nomu?”

“Yes. You’ll meet it on the day we begin the attack, it’s appearance is quite unmistakable.”

Kurogiri stepped behind the counter and began polishing the glass Izuku had picked up earlier, indicating the conversation was over.

All Might’s secrets, the Nomu…the more Izuku learned, the more he learned was being kept from him.

If he was ever going to find out what was going on here, he had to prove his mettle. At USJ, he could not mess this up. He could not be seen, chased or attacked. He could not fail to get all these students powers down in his notes. And he could not prove himself so weak he had to be bailed out by Kurogiri or Tomura.

Izuku walked up to the bar and asked Kurogiri to bring in some good food. He’d need all the strength he could get.

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Bakugo was not interested in rescue missions.

As 13 babbled on about how heroes had some kind of duty to rescue people, Bakugo's mind wandered elsewhere. Usually to the mission simulations in the distance, trying to plot out where he could use his quirk for mobility most effectively. Duty, saving people, it's a given, right? If any of these damn idiots had to be told this late in the game that 'heroes have to help people, huhuhu',
then they might as well just fuck off and go home now. They weren't taking this seriously.

Besides, kicking villain ass was SO much more his thing. If there were heroes that worked purely in rescue scenarios like this literal windbag spouting off in front of him, then he should be allowed to work purely in foiling villains, beating the shit out of them, and bringing them in. Since when was the duty of ruining villains, the FUN part of the job, put on the fucking backburner?

The lights started to flicker. An unknown presence appeared in the distance. A black fiery entryway opened out of nowhere, and figures of all descriptions began to pour out, cackling or roaring. In spite of himself, Bakugo couldn't help but smile viciously as he walked to the front of the crowd.

Huh. Would you look at that? I get the chance to beat the crap out of villain scum today after all.

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Kurogiri was spread out like a canvas, a black and purple warp gate that Kurogiri assured Izuku led right into USJ. Shigaraki flexed his fingers impatiently, stifling his insane laughter before he walked through, so he could appear more intimidating.

Next to him stood the Nomu. It certainly was…distinctive. By which he meant there was something distinctly wrong with it. Like how it’s dead, glassy eyes almost seemed like they served no purpose, or how it’s brain being completely exposed seemed like an accurate metaphor, seeing as it seemed to obey without question anything Tomura said, lurching aimlessly into the portal, making deep rumbling noises with its feet as it moved.

And then there was Deku, cloaked and daggered up, face-mask obscuring all but his green eyes. Underneath his hood, mask and thick coat, it was almost impossible to tell he was shaking. Anything could be waiting for him on the other side. But All Might was going to be one of them. The greatest hero in the world. The one who dismissed him as useless.

Not wasting any time, Izuku rigidly took a step forward, and entered the swirling vortex.
Trial By Fire

Chapter Summary

Izuku steps through the portal, into the Unforseen Simulation Joint. Hijinks ensue.

Izuku stepped through the gate, noting the massive number of various villains that crowded the area in front of him. Shigaraki stepped in between the Nomu and him. His mouth was barely visible underneath his deeply strange choice of costume, hands clasped all over him. Only his eyes were slightly visible in-between the white fingers clasped to his face, and those eyes were as wide and bloodshot as Izuku had ever seen them.

The sea of villains all had pretty unique bearings to them. Some were aquatic, some were made of stone, some resembled jungle predators, some were combat-enhanced. The reason, Izuku quickly gathered with one enraptured look around the USJ. They were recruited so their quirks could all be used in the most ideal situation. The swimmers in the ship area, the stone ones in the mountan, etc.

“We’ve finally arrived. Where are the students, should I be worried?”

Shigaraki pointed up the stairs, where way in the distance a large group of students and two teachers could be seen. The rescue hero Thirteen, was one. Makes sense, this is a simulation area for rescue missions. Then there was a scruffy teacher with wrappings all over his neck—it was kind of tough to make out who he is. And the students looked…looked…

Izuku’s throat felt sore. Phantom pains from bruises started to grow on his arms, his head. There was no way that wasn’t him, spiky haired. Even the way he moved to the front of the group, itching for a fight, was the distinct behaviour only Kacchan could do.

That had to be him, that was Bakugo.

“Scared, are you? Hehe…don’t worry. You’re not going to be fighting them, remember?”

“Y-Yes, I know. Just be careful okay?”

“…sure. Hopefully I won’t have to deal with the brats either…we only came here for All Might after all. The schedule clearly said he would be here.”

Shigaraki was keeping an eerily calm tone, but Izuku knew his hands scratching his neck was a sure sign of irritation.

Izuku placed a hand on his wrist and ceased the scratching, “Are we still going through with the plan? Kurogiri is still here.”

“Yes…yes, this isn’t a bust. After all, what hero wouldn’t come to the rescue of his precious students?”

Shigaraki aimed his hand at the students, and Kurogiri swept upon them.

“Alright, Deku. Time to get into position.”
Izuku nodded, pushing his fears to the back of his head, and dashed away to the outskirts of the arena, preparing to gather his information. One look behind him showed Kurogiri descending upon the students, swallowing them into the void. Turning his head forward, he saw portals opening over various disaster areas.

Time to go to work.

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What did he say, what did he fucking say!?

Right before he could react, that piece of shit portal guy had whisked him away, but he’d heard it. Out of everything else they were discussing, through all the chatter those goons had been spouting, that hand-faced freak had said something that hollowed a pit in his stomach. It wasn’t a feeling he was used to, or comfortable with. Did he fucking say ‘Deku’?

Bakugo picked himself up, ignoring the slight headache coming on from being dropped on the fucking concrete, and looked around. Another student had been dropped in with him, one of the fighter types.

“Hey, shitty hair! Did you hear what they were saying?”

The guy, hair spiky enough to put his to shame, raised himself up too, clearly hiding the pain worse than he was, “What? Something about making ‘the symbol of peace, take his last breath’, right? Something like that? We’ve just gotta make our way back to—“

“No! Not that, moron! The lead villain, the one in the center? Creepy hands grabbing him, what did he fucking say?!“

“C-Calm down dude! I don’t know! I was more concerned with trying to size up that giant flaming cloud thing.”

Bakugo clenched his teeth. It couldn’t have been…there’s no way that’s a trick of the mind, right?

Stomping feet interrupted him. Villains were coming.

“On your feet, shitty hair. We’ve got bad guys to stomp!”

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Izuku was scribbling like a madman. That yellow-haired guy with a streak in his hair had given away the limitations of their quirk quite loudly, making his job a hell of a lot easier. As terrible as it was, seeing his allies getting the hell kicked out of them by students was a very effective way to chalk up their strengths and weaknesses.

Izuku was running around a rocky overhang. He’d nearly finished writing down whatever he could from the students. The two girls accompanying him…one of them seemed to have a generation quirk, very versatile. It would be very difficult to gather all of its limitations, but it was capable of constructing shock-proof fibres, so clearly, it’s range of production was very high. The other girl didn’t display any uses of her quirk, but she had very long earlobes with…no, it couldn’t be headphone jacks, surely, that would be...a little unorthodox. Best to make sure, he’d probably have to research it later...

Izuku was so busy scribbling, in fact, he barely noticed he was passing by the large building.

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He’d seen that guy from the entryway again. He was walking along, scribbling, muttering to himself. He had green eyes.

“Okay, that’s the last of them, Bakugo”, cheered Kirishima, dusting himself off.

“Sweet punches. Now we’ve got time to get back to-“

Kirishima whirled around, looking about the empty room.

“Yo, Bakugo?”

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“HEY, BASTARD!”

Acting completely on long-since-established protective instinct, Izuku rolled out of the way, narrowly dodging an explosion that sent rubble and pebbles into his back, and he broke off into a sprint even before he’d heard what was behind him. He knew already who it was.

“GET THE FUCK BACK HERE, WHO ARE YOU?”

The language only solidified that he was definitely being chased by Bakugo Katsuki. Great, the one person he absolutely didn’t want to encounter here. Running along the thin rocky trail, with only one wall to ricochet impact’s off of and open air in every other direction, Bakugo had free reign to fire explosives with little risk to himself.

Bakugo fired a projectile explosion, which Izuku heard coming as it shot through the air, releasing a low sound like crackling fire and a high pitched whistling sound, all at once. Bakugo would want to block him off…

Izuku sprinted and jumped into the air. The explosion soared beneath his feet, blowing off the thin pathway beneath him, creating a gap that Izuku jumped over, not even losing momentum. Izuku could swear he heard Bakugo curse under his breath.

“DEKU!? IS YOUR NAME DEKU!”

Izuku gulped heavily. He didn’t quite feel guilty, but he definitely felt threatened. Don’t turn around, don’t answer him, keep running. Don’t do anything to confirm his suspicions. Izuku heard the sound of another explosion, more distant this time. Kacchan had used an explosion to launch himself over the gap in the pathway…

A loud roaring pain shot up his back, the booming roar of the impact softened only by the numbness he felt from the sudden shock of agony. He couldn’t hear anything save for a loud ringing, and the interior wheezing of his own ragged breathing. Izuku fell onto his face. Were it not for his coat, Izuku felt his spine would’ve been shattered completely. Kacchan had fired another shot in mid-air, landing a blow in exchange for launching him backwards, putting some distance between them.

It didn’t matter. Even as far away as he was, Izuku’s movement was crippled. All he could do was wait for Kacchan to catch up with him. He felt the cold steel of his knife pressing into him. He wasn’t defenceless. He wouldn’t be taken in, not like this. If Kacchan got too close…

Izuku crawled forwards, using his arms to pull himself forwards until his legs started to respond to his cries to get up. He pulled himself to his feet, drawing an arm close to the handle of his blade.
Izuku crawled forwards, gradually picking up speed, as somehow, he managed to run again. Clearly, he was only able to move like this out of sheer adrenaline.

He turned around. Kacchan didn’t seem to be on his tail. Maybe he was taking longer to recover, or fallen off the cliffside.

Not one to look a gift-horse in the mouth, looking around warily for any ambushes, Izuku took off, determined to get as far away as possible.

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Bakugo flew through the air, feeling the familiar satisfaction of crunch and fall that indicated his explosion had hit its mark. But before he had time to even feel the satisfaction of his victory, soaring through the sky had given him a clear view of the USJ.

Of a ship, sinking into the depths rapidly, the water swimming with vicious fucking villains. Of two students, making their last stand against certain death. The frog and the pervert.

Bakugo hit the floor, rolling to his feet. This guy, this fucking guy…was he really going to be able to limp away from this shit? Someone called him ‘Deku’, he dodged the floor falling away like he knew what was going to happen. So many questions, and this fucking guy tanked a direct hit, it’d be so easy to bring him in now. One fucking minute, one FUCKING MINUTE more and…

“God FUCKING DAMMIT!”, Bakugo cried, realising this wasn’t a choice he could make and still call himself a hero.

Bakugo readied himself, and began launching himself over to the sea disaster area to bail those two out before they became fish food.

But if that creepy, stalking villainous prick was still there when he got back, his ass was DEAD. And if it was somehow related to Izuku…

“Later. For now, I’ve gotta deal with two dumbasses who need a fucking hero.”

-----

Izuku stood on the crag, nursing his back. He watched from a distance, overlooking the scene. Watching the villains charge, be beaten. Watching the scruffy teacher, now identified as Eraser Head, battle and lose, as Shigaraki finally landed a good hit.

He saw All Might and the other teachers arrive. He saw the secret weapon, the Nomu, the most powerful thing the League had on their side, get blasted outside of the building.

If he was there, he could have told them. How All Might wore a fake smile to match his fake demeanour. How one more push could have tipped the entire balance of power. But with his back in such a state, he couldn’t move well enough to reach the square without being intercepted by one of the students, or even one of the teachers.

Heh, the teachers. Yeah, even if they managed to take out All Might in his weakened state, the teachers would’ve arrested everyone present. That’d be a disaster, not just because Kurogiri WAS their escape method, but…they were his friends. Yeah, his friends. So when it came down to it, Izuku made peace with not being able to reveal All Might’s lack of power. Yet.

Besides, he did promise to keep this weakness secret…even if it was to an enemy. It was pretty obvious by now that Sensei had to know something about All Might’s waning strength. Why he’d
chosen not to inform Tomura was anyone’s guess…but I suppose now he was keeping this secret for two people.

Izuku watched in horror as Tomura took bullets to the legs and arm, nearly injuring himself more in the process. Kurogiri warped him out, shielding him, as he always did. A second later, a small warp gate appeared to Izuku’s left, and, finally letting go of his nervous tension, he crawled inside.

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Tsuyu Asui approached Bakugo, her unlikely rescuer, while they were walking back home.

Everyone was trying to go through what had just happened, who the villains were, anything they could do to help each other settle down and prepare for next time. So next time, maybe Aizawa…they had to be better prepared for next time.

But Bakugo’s impromptu rescue had to come into the conversation eventually, and eventually the frog had to pipe up.

“So, you saved us?”

“What, was I supposed to let you guys fucking die?”

“No, it’s just the sea disaster area was pretty far away from where you were. How did you know where to go?”

“Shut it, frog-face.”

“I’d prefer it if you just called me Tsu.”

“We’re not suddenly best friends now. Don’t get fucking buddy-buddy.”

Tsuyu looked on expectantly, waiting for Bakugo’s defensive demeanour to subside.

“Fine, look, I was chasing another villain, okay? Some guy up on the rocks.”

Shoto Todoroki, up until this moment silent, finally joined the speculation, “I think I might’ve seen him. He was running around and writing rather than fighting.”

Tsuyu pondered, “The pen might be mightier than the sword but…”

Bakugo interrupted, “Yeah, okay, that guy. Look, if any of you fuckers see him again, you come to me first, okay? It’s important. And not just because I want some petty revenge, okay?”

Shoto pointed out, “Well…he was covered in a large coat, and he was hiding his distinguishing features.”

Bakugo wrestled with his confictions. He was going to tell his mother his suspicions, completely confidentially, so she could finally reassure Mrs Midoriya that her son wasn’t dead. Beyond that, he didn’t…he didn’t want anyone to know. Maybe Deku was in shit himself, maybe he was being blackmailed or possessed. Maybe that wasn’t even fucking Deku! Besides, what happened between them would be a black mark on his record…he wanted to straighten that out BEFORE it came to light.

“Look, he’s got bright green eyes, okay? Remember? He wasn’t wearing goggles or anything. You see a guy with his short stature and green eyes, you tell me. I’ll recognise him.”
Tsuyu interjected, “How will you recognise him?”

“I was chasing him, frog! I know what he looks like!”

Hands pushing deep inside his pockets, Bakugo picked up the pace, leaving his classmates behind before he could be interrogated anymore. Tsuyu seemed to be satisfied, or else she just knew not to push Bakugo for any more information right now. But Shoto seemed far more curious…

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Izuku pushed himself to his feet, finally feeling the adrenaline leaving his system, and the small of his back ache horribly. Shigaraki was passionately furious, as he was when he lost at things, screaming at the monitor.

The monitor, displaying no image but clearly on, responded, “No, I was merely optimistic.”

Izuku responded, “Semantics. That still means you were expecting more than we got.”

“Young Deku, you wound me.”

“He got shot. Tomura was the one who got wounded. If the most unlikely, optimistic outcome is the only one that involves NOT getting shot and losing most of our members, you’re gambling heavily against the odds with our lives.”

The monitor grew quiet for a moment. Shigaraki’s eyes turned to Izuku with seething fury, before Sensei finally responded.

“Yes, young Deku. I do not intend to downplay the fact that this mission was a failure, when it could have been a success. I believe we have learnt a very important lesson from this.”

“Have we?”

“Yes. Quality over quantity. I expended our resources in one large strike, without focusing on the quality of their material. This precise task would be better accomplished by a diamond dagger than a brittle claymore.”

Izuku nodded, as Sensei continued his speech.

“We must build anew. Hand picked for efficiency, such as you three, the ones who have proven yourself most powerful. This is not the end. Soon, we shall show this world the horror of our existence.”

The monitor turned itself off.

Izuku hurriedly ran over to Tomura, helping him to his feet, allowing Tomura to shift his weight onto him as they made their way upstairs. At the very least, while Tomura was recovering, Izuku would be able to provide him with some gripping reading material on their new enemies.

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All For One leaned back in his chair.

How interesting. Deku seemed to predict the outcome. He did not sound dismayed. He sounded frustrated. Frustrated enough to question his teacher’s judgement.

Perhaps correctly.
Over the next few weeks, rebuilding, he would have plenty of time to observe and collect new information. As always, observing young Tomura and Deku was always of the utmost importance.

And the more he observed, the more he wondered about the future they would all go down. Both his time and All Might’s was fast running out.

They were both but flaming embers, hoping to light a new fire. To cast a shadow over the future.
Calm after the storm

Chapter Summary

The League recuperates their losses, Izuku gets a surprise gift, and Bakugo gets something off his chest.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tomura had a few bandages wrapped around his arms. By which I mean, he HAD had them around his arms, before he unwound them, and wrapped the bandages around his hands, turning them to dust, seemingly fascinated with viewing his own wounds. This act, while still a little morbid, would still have been far more acceptable if Izuku wasn’t sitting right there next to him.

“You, uh, really seem to be disregarding your own hygiene. What if you end up getting infected?”

“Meh. They’ve clotted by now, I’m probably fine.”

Deftly picking up his controller again, Tomura got back to what he was best at – kicking Izuku’s ass at any kind of game he played, this time a racing game. Granted, his win record was partially due to throwing a strop if he somehow managed to lose, but he was pretty good nonetheless. They kind of agreed that anything with large luck elements was out, since if circumstance cheated Tomura out of a win then something in the room was getting turned to powder.

Normally, they’d be playing co-op. But Tomura was still furious over what had happened in USJ and needed to let off some steam. So Izuku was being his training dummy. Quality time, quality time.

Izuku looked over Tomura’s injuries. The shots were obviously the worst part, but he had a few bruises visible poking through his shirt, and one on his forehead. His neck was a little scratched up, but that was his own doing, having scraped it raw out of stress.

As Izuku managed to match his pace in the race, Tomura almost unconsciously scratched his neck again, recoiling at the burning sensation of his own fingers.

“Tomura, please. You’re hurting yourself.”

“Force of habit.”

Izuku had noticed his scratching sensation. It seemed like he used self-irritation or pain to sharpen his focus, or to punish himself for mistakes. But seeing him like this, when he had actual injuries…

“You’ve got to break that habit. You’ve been hurt this time. You want to put things right, you’ll let yourself heal for a while and relax.”

“Hmph. This coming from the guy who got his back cracked by something he won’t talk about.”

Izuku nervously looked away. His back injuries turned out to not be that bad, it was mostly the backs of his ribs and coccyx. His spine was mercifully spared. But…Kacchan was a bit of a
sensitive subject.

“Well…if you’re not going to talk about it…”

Tomura grumbled immaturely. Izuku couldn’t help but raise an eyebrow. Even if he was expressing it through reverse psychology, Tomura was actually trying to get him to open up. Dammit…he didn’t want to shoot down the first attempt his friend had made to reach out to others openly. Fine.

“It’s just a little personal. It’s from a time when I was…pretty weak.”

“Weaker than now?”

“Shut up. You know I could bench-press you by this point. I’ve had to buy two new training dummies just because I broke the old ones.”

“And I could kill you with a high-five. Decay.”

“Ngh…see, that’s kind of part of the issue. I’m quirkless.”

“Mhm? Yes, we’ve established your tragic backstory, dummy.”

“And there was someone who, um, I used to be friends with, right? Right up until I turned four…”

“Four. The age quirks manifest in most children.”

“Yes…most children.”

“Not you, though.”

“…no.”

Izuku deflated with each word, eventually dropping his controller, drooping over mournfully. Tomura tapped him on the shoulder, leaning forward on his bean bag.

“Used to be a friend?”, Tomura prompted.

“Yeah. He…he turned against me.”

“Huh…I can’t really say I understand. I didn’t have friends.”

“D-Didn’t?”, Izuku said, managing a coy smile

“Shut up.”

“Hehehe…but, yeah. It’d be hard to imagine. Someone who came to all of your birthday parties suddenly rejecting your invitations. Someone who would scheme with you over becoming a hero burning the later editions of the books you wrote together.”

“…”

“…he always wanted to go to UA. y’know.”

“Wait, so you weren’t just going off on a tangent? He did that to you?”

Tomura pulled his fingers away from his neck, once more having reached up to resume scratching.
“Pfft…ow.”

“It’s nothing to get upset over, leave your neck alone. It feels so far away now, anyway. I’d almost managed to forget about him.”

“Until he threw an attack into your back.”

“Until he threw an explosion into my back, yes. Then it all came back to me.”

“…was that a pun, brat?”

“Don’t break anything.”

Tomura flexed his fingers angrily. It was lucky the lights in his room were always kind of dim so he couldn’t see how wide a smug smile Izuku was wearing right now.

“Hnh…so. This guy, this bully, he hates you. Why not just kill him?”

Izuku’s eye twinged, “First of all, I bargained not to kill anyone.”

“Pfft. Like being quirkless, that’s a limitation you put on yourself. Just stab him. It’s much more efficient.”

“I thought about it. When he was getting close to me, I thought maybe, with my knife, I’d…”

“No, no, idiot, that’s just a last resort type thing, why not go after HIM? Get the jump on him, just plant that thing right in his skull, why not?”

Izuku thought about it. It was an incredibly blunt remark, and Izuku wanted to explain it without just saying killing was wrong. Tomura wouldn’t understand that. Murder was on the table for him. So what else was the problem? How else could he explain this? First of all, Izuku’s memories of Kacchan weren’t…all bad. They’d just soured over time. He couldn’t pretend they’d never been friends.

“Don’t tell me it’s because you still care about him? Because that’s…fucking dumb.”

“Well…kind of. I wouldn’t want to actually kill him. I could try to say that’s why I didn’t fight him, that’s the reason why I ran away. But more than that Tomura…he scares me.”

“What kind of cry-baby shit is-“

“No, not because he hurt me. Because of what I know, that he’s an unstoppable hero. Tomura, all my life I…I looked up to him. Because he’s strong, and brave, and will never ever stop chasing the top, no matter what. And I know what happens when you stand in his way. How he treated me when I was below him…I dread to think what he’d do to me now I’m his enemy.”

‘His enemy’…Izuku shuddered, pulling his legs closer in.

“…well, I’d kill him. Make him into a jar of dirt.”

“I know you would.”

“No, I mean I will. I’m not saying what I would do, I’m saying what I will do. If he comes after you, I will end him. I don’t have to care about him, ‘cos to me he’s just another shitty hero wannabe with an even worse record of being a scummy person. If you’re too scared, I guess I’d take him out for you.”
“…I appreciate the thought, but tone it down a bit.”

“It’s not a thought, it’s a promise.”

“Don’t promise that, Tomura, please. It’d still make me responsible for his death.”

“…rough him up? Kick him to the floor?”

“Much better.”

Izuku shifted to the side, getting closer to Tomura, who sighed tiredly as Izuku smiled endearingly.

“Alright, Deku. One more round?”

“Sure. And…Izuku is fine. Just not around the others, please.”

“…first name basis?”

“First name basis. Pal.”

Tomura swallowed a little uncomfortably. Maybe he wasn’t used to getting chummy with others. He did say he didn’t have any friends, after all. He probably had just as rough a time growing up as Izuku did. Didn’t stop Izuku from resting his back on the bean-bag. And it didn’t stop Tomura from sinking into the bag as the night went on, and both of them got sleepier.

It didn’t stop both of them from finally making a friend.

-----

Izuku swept downstairs the following day. Nothing like a heart-to-heart and a promise to beat up anyone who threatens you to really make your sleep restful.

Kurogiri was tuning in to the news. As ever, collecting information. Easily the resident brains, as well as unofficial caretaker, Kurogiri often tuned in to get an idea of new plans, current events, and rumours. The ridiculous level of media coverage UA got all the time made this an absurdly simple task. Apparently Kurogiri sent a character named Giran to investigate any links that sounded interesting.

Sometimes he wondered if that TV monitor was also being tuned in to by Sensei at the same time.

“Good morning, Kurogiri!”

“Ah, mister Deku. Please, I believe I have found something that might get your attention.”

Kurogiri pointed straight to the TV, where a news hostess was discussing something about UA, similarly to every other day of the goddamn week:

“And this marks the reveal of the UA Sports Festival, to be held in 17 days’ time, as ever this event is going to be a true highlight of the year for many hero fans! Tickets went on sale yesterday, and fans are already all over them! Particularly class 1-A has all eyes on them this year as they famously survived an attack by villains earlier this week. The school has notably been dodging questions about how much damage they have caused or how they penetrated UA’s famously strict defences.”
Izuku managed to take both offence and pride in that statement. On one hand, the attack was getting some attention for striking where it was least expected. On the other hand, the media was still stating the truth that the attack was a failure. More reason to prepare for next time. It still didn’t feel good to just spend his time training and not working on anything.

“The UA Sports Festival…oh I used to watch that every year.”

“Hm? You don’t intend to ‘tune in’ this year, mister Deku?”

“Well…I don’t…is it wrong for me to be too good at my job? Y’know, it’s another good opportunity to study the new students in action, and it’s information they’re serving up to us for free!”

Kurogiri folded his arms and puffed his chest, “Still a fanboy, are you?”

“W-Well it’s not like I have a lot of villains I can just walk up to and research, it’s just, I have to keep myself practiced, my enthusiasm will still get a lot of data for the League, it’s-“

“Mister Deku, I was not trying to taunt you. Much. You speak the truth; the UA Sports Festival is a prime opportunity to record information about candidates. The question, therefore, becomes a matter of how far you will go for inside information.”

Kurogiri reached inside his waistcoat, and produced a full pass to all the matches, complete with backstage access, causing Izuku to nearly fall flat on his back.

“A-AH! Oh my god, these things cost a small fortune! H-How did you…actually, no, that’s not a question I should ask.”

“Wise.”

Kurogiri slid the slip across the counter to an internally screaming Izuku, who immediately tucked the ticket into his coat pocket right next to his notebook, because to be fair, if he was using one, he would be using the other.

“Thank you, Kurogiri.”

Kurogiri shrugged, “I felt it was a worthwhile investment for our resident information specialist. But still, enjoy yourself. You have the opportunity to go backstage. Tell me, is your anonymity at risk in any sense?”

“A-Ah…yes. All Might. And one student.”

“Do you know their name?”

“Yes.”

“Avoid them. Never go backstage during a match in which they are present.”

“Of course. Thank you again, Kurogiri. Really, thank you so much.”

Kurogiri’s eyes inched thinner in a way Izuku had learned was him smiling, and returning his beaming grin, Izuku ran upstairs to tell Tomura the news. He could take advantage of the free online viewing.

------
Bakugo walked in the sunset, the orange glow of the sky above creating a pretty good atmospheric mood. Perfect for a confession, a declaration of war…or a dramatic interrogation.

All Might walked down the steps, like any other man. For such a legendarily strong hero, he sure didn’t seem to use his powers a lot. From what Bakugo had been gathering, it looked a little like All Might had limitations to his strength as much as any other. He wasn’t fucking infallible. Which is why Bakugo called him out here.

All Might boomed his jolly voice, being far more annoying than he probably meant to be, “Ah, young Bakugo, good to see you! I’ve got to say, being called here by you was a bit of a surprise.”

“Let’s skip the damn formalities. You know the name Izuku Midoriya?”

All Might flinched, his throat making a distressed noise. You’d expect some kind of wobble in his giant grin, but it stayed firmly visible. “Um…yes. Yes, I remember him.”

“He went missing. You know that too.”

All Might had to gather his strength to answer. When he did, his voice had finally lost all of its bombastic enthusiasm. He was plain and serious. Still grinning like a jackass though. “Yes. He’s been missing for a long time now. I’ve even tried looking for him myself, but…”

“You were the last to see him, am I right?”

“Y-Yes. And I’m not ignorant that you and he had some kind of relationship…I cannot apologise enough for-“

“For what? What did you actually talk about up there?”

“…I can’t talk about all of it. Some of it is sensitive information. I’m sorry.”

Figures. He’s really bad at dodging tough questions. “Tch…then fucking tell me what you can.”

“It’s something I…I am not proud of. I should have handled things with more care, considered young Izuku’s feelings more. But at that point, he had put himself in danger, and knew dangerous things. I was more concerned with making sure he didn’t hurt himself, or do anything rash.”

“What did you FUCKING SAY TO HIM?”

All Might looked visibly distressed. “Well…as gently but firmly as possible, I tried to…no, I can’t be soft on myself. It’s all my fault. I told him, I told him he could not become a hero.”

Bakugo’s mind flooded with his own voice. ‘Take a swan dive off the roof’, ‘How can you even stand in the same ring as me?’, and then All Might saying ‘you can not become a hero.’ What happened…what if he turned to villainy out of bitterness? Did he have that inside of him?

Bakugo glared down at the pavement, as if trying to crack it with his stare alone. He couldn’t know. He couldn’t pretend to understand what was going on inside Izuku’s little, nerdy head. Sometimes the quiet ones end up being the most pissed off when shit gets rough…but Izuku didn’t seem like he’d use his rage that way. If only because he wouldn’t return what had been done to him.

“Bakugo…I take full responsibility for what happened, and I own my mistakes. It has been one of my deepest regrets. I hold out hope his pain merely led to him running away, and I continue to search-”
“He’s alive.”

All Might’s silence was followed by deflation, a feeling of relief. Great. The number one hero was taking so much relief out of an incomplete statement. What a fucking wise and well-balanced hero.

Bakugo pointed aggressively, “It’s ‘sensitive information’ at the moment, so keep it to yourself. I don’t have proof. And if I do, I’m not sharing it as long as you’re keeping your trap shut about the rest of what you and Izuku were talking about up there. Evasive fucker.”

All Might, only slightly deterred from his elation, responded, “I suppose…I suppose that is fair, young Bakugo. But still, if this information might lead to returning Izuku to his family-“

“Not going to happen. He’s…I think I saw him at USJ. With the villains.”

Finally, All Might’s grin started to droop.

“With…the villains? Did he really…does he truly resent me that much?”

Those words hit Bakugo like a train. He had to hold back a spasm in his breathing, disguising it as a cough.

“Look…I know him, that shitty brat. He’s aimed to become a hero for fucking ever. Because of you, idiot. You inspired him more than anyone else. If you could even SEE his collection of All Might toys, I swear to god.”

Those words hit All Might like a train. He remembered the signature, written down before Izuku could even ask him for it. Like his idolisation was a given, taken for granted…

“So, listen. Your words probably shat on his dreams. But knowing that damn nerd, I don’t think even that would have deterred him for long. Something happened to him in that time period. And now it’s our job to get him the fuck out of there.”

“Our job? Bakugo, you have done nothing wrong. I was the one to cause this, and I will-“

“Shut it. I’m playing a part in this, whether you want it or not.”

All Might hesitantly nodded. “Proposal accepted, young Bakugo.”

“It won’t be long before the League of Villains or whatever fucking grade-schooler name they’ve given themselves finally nut up and strike again. I’m going to make sure I’m ready for that. And you’d better be ready too.”

With one more nod from each of them, they went their separate ways. All Might walked back into UA, while Bakugo made his way home. On separate paths, ready to walk towards the same goal.

Chapter End Notes

Just wanted to give my sincere thanks to everyone who’s left me support thus far, it means a lot. Whether this stays small or grows big, I will keep writing chapter after chapter. I have some big ideas for the story, the issue is just writing my way there, XD.
More to come, especially as the League of Villains finally gets to expanding.
For the past two weeks, Izuku had been like an over-shaken can of fizzy drink, trembling, full of pep, and on the verge of exploding. The ticket to the festival hadn’t left his side the entire time, and Tomura commented often that he was acting like a little kid. From his adoring, overexcited face to his disguise, which consisted of a U.A T-shirt and hoodie, it was kind of hard to rebuke this claim.

“Well, it’s like I said, I kind of am supposed to be dedicated to writing down information about heroes. You can’t blame me for being too good at my job, right?”

“I can blame you for being bad at your job because you’re too excited. If you get too into these events, you’ll blow your cover like a moron.”

“I’m going to be careful. All Might is harder to avoid, but he will be in the staff box for the majority of the time, and he won’t be looking for me regardless. And look, I’ve made sure to track whenever Bakugo is out fighting in matches (meaning I can go backstage) and whenever he will be preparing for a match!”

Izuku pulled out a colour coded timetable, showing it off proudly to Tomura, who mostly just facepalmed at how much unnecessary effort he had put in to all of this.

“Look…I don’t care what you get up to. Just make sure it doesn’t blow back on this whole operation. I don’t know if you noticed, but we’re crippled right now. As much as I’m looking forward to…getting my hands on them…we aren’t strong enough yet.”

Wiping his smile off of his face for a second, Izuku gave a reassuring nod. “Don’t worry. If things look rough, I’ll leave. I can get a lot of information at home. But…having a backstage pass to U.A arena? How can I say no?”

“Especially seeing as it’s you…it’s a little creepy.”

“Hey, come on…”

“Just take care, Deku. Don't mess it up.”

Kurogiri bowed politely at the waist, “Good luck, mister Deku.”

Izuku grinned widely, making a small bow before running out the door, ready to take the train to UA. While he was sitting about in the carriage, he continued taking notes, an ever-filling document folder in a messenger bag around his shoulder. He was just making the final touches on the results of the races and cavalry competitions. Exciting stuff, definitely!

Kacchan had been performing as well as could be expected. Watching others boo him publicly for his arrogant behaviour was a little bit of a surprise for Izuku. Everywhere he’d gone before, those more powerful had always been given deference to be as arrogant as they wanted – I guess when every quirk-blessed person out there has that same sense of entitlement to victory they get a bit
more fragile. And Kacchan was backing it up, taking a VERY narrow second place in the race and
the cavalry. What surprised him much more than Kacchan’s exemplary performance, was his
failure to place first!

This Shoto Todoroki kid was amazing. Todoroki…the son of the number two hero, Endeavour. His
quirk, his calm and cool demeanour, everything about him screamed ‘elite’. It was a little insulting
that he was holding back from using his fire side…but since it was making Kacchan furious, Izuku
wasn’t complaining too much. He HAD to keep an eye on him in the future. He would make an
interesting character study…and a potentially ruinous enemy. Anyone who could best Kacchan not
once, but twice, anyone like that was worth watching.

Heheh…’if you’re the smartest person in the room, you’re in the wrong room’. Kacchan was
facing serious competition now and he was finally having to face up to that. And now here
amongst all of this strife and competition was Izuku. A serious threat to the school, ready to go in
there and plot the best way to challenge them, and all as a small, quirkless child who had been left
by the wayside.

It took a long time, and he never ended up there for the reasons he thought. But however unjustly,
it still gave him a sense of accomplishment.

It was nothing like what he’d dreamed of when he was a child. But he’d never been more excited.

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Izuku was stomping around backstage. The sun shone high in the sky, the noonday beams of light
leaving shadows over every interior hallway, enough that Izuku felt comfortable walking around
taking notes. He’d been over to the support room. Mei Hatsume had clearly been attempting to
attract viewers and, to be honest, it was working. Izuku had never seen such inventive costume
pieces in his life. It had really got his mind racing in regards to upgrading his own gear. A face
mask and a coat weren’t going to cover it if he ever planned on getting stronger, strong enough to
take on heroes, and-

“Still a rebel…”

Izuku didn’t react to the grumbling in time, and slammed headfirst into a scorching brick wall of a
man, physically hot to the point Izuku’s forehead felt a bit burned. The figure towered over him,
and Izuku turned up his head to see a face framed by fire, eyes blazing with heat and ever-
suppressed fury. No, more accurately, he was framed by hellflame, for hellflame was the name of
his quirk.

“E-Endeavour…”

Scoffing, the No. 2 Hero reached down, offering Izuku a hand up, temporarily retracting his
flames. Izuku accepted it, grinning from ear to ear.

“Thank you! Thank you so much!”, Izuku said, hardly able to contain himself.

“Don’t mention it. Try to watch where you’re going, kid.”, Endeavour said, turning to walk down
the corridor again, hurrying to excuse himself.

“Wait, sir, if it’s not too much trouble-“

“It is. I have a lot of work to do.”

“But I was going to ask about Shoto. It’d only take a second, I-I think he’s been doing really well.”
Endeavour looked back at Izuku, slightly surprised. “Hmph. Are you with the paparazzi, boy? Do they start training them that young?”

Izuku smiled in a way he hoped looked innocent and harmless, “Nope. Just an overeager fan! You’ve got the largest record for solved cases in the country”, Izuku changed his angle mid-sentence when he noticed Endeavour’s lips curling, “and I can easily see Shoto taking after his father in that regard!”

“Heh. Even using only half his power, you can still see his potential, can’t you? Once he has dropped his little feud with me, he will easily claim the place of the number one hero. He will surpass All Might. And he will surpass this tournament!”, Endeavour said, grinning with indulgence.

He really seemed to value his son. Must be a lot of pressure on Shoto to succeed…maybe that’s why Shoto looked a little cold and business-like. Izuku wrote ‘parental issues’ in his notebook. Endeavour just admitted as much himself. A ‘feud’, he called it. Hmm…

“You seem to be really proud of him, sir!”

“Of course. He’s a perfect recipe for greatness. I have full confidence that under my guidance, his ambitions, as well as mine, will be achieved.”

Izuku circled the part he wrote about parental issues. It didn’t take an information specialist to discern something extremely unnerving or concerning going on just underneath the surface here. Endeavour was quite well known for his heated personality and dismissive nature, but this was sounding sinister. Way too sinister. Unexpectedly sinister.

“I understand, sir. As I stated earlier, you have the highest number of cases solved in the country. Your loyal service has been unparalleled. Why do you feel like Shoto will outperform you?”

“Bah! Have you seen this place? It’s a popularity contest. All Might has always been the ever-smiling symbol of peace, while my achievements were swept under the rug. But not only is Shoto a fresh face, but I truly believe his quirk will surpass mine in both power and versatility. I made sure specifically that he would be born with a quirk that will sweep this entire nation. And as my creation, I will be there to watch as he achieves the glory which I was so unjustly denied. There’s a quote for you.”

‘A quote’. He clearly didn’t believe he wasn’t a reporter. That must be the only reason the famously angry Endeavour was spending time talking to him, to boast about his son. For fear of upsetting the ill-tempered hero, Izuku did not inquire further. But this was a clear case of a ‘quirk marriage’ for the sole purpose of vicariously feeding off of his son’s achievements. He would have circled ‘parental issues’ a few dozen times at this point but he didn’t want to break the happy-go-lucky impression he was giving off.

“Thank you for your time Endeavour. I’m sure your son will perform exceptionally in this tournament. And I’m sure he will be able to give you all that you are rightfully deserving of.”

“Now if you will excuse me, I have work to do. Shoto, as well as I, will be counting on your support.”

Endeavour, looking to be in a slightly better mood, stomped off down the corridor.

Izuku pondered for a second, writing down as much as he could about Endeavour’s interactions. It seems even those at the top of the hero ladder were still unsatisfied with the limitations of quirks.
And they would gladly sacrifice future generations just to climb one rung higher.

So much for the No. 2 Hero. How could someone so blessed be so ungrateful and covetous? Izuku barely resisted the urge to spit in Endeavour’s direction as he jogged down the corridor, making his way deeper into the complex. Now more than ever, he had to find Shoto.

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It’d been deeply concerning that Endeavour had foisted all of his hopes on Shoto Todoroki. Even if he hadn’t said that, however, Izuku was determined to meet Shoto himself, get some kind of information from him. Because by far, he seemed like he was going to be the biggest threat to the League. Like, how can his hot and cold halves interact? Could he fire ice at someone, then heat it into boiling water midway? The creative possibilities were so widespread!

Izuku got to see the sights of really active combat over the next few battles. Kendo and Hitoshi had a spirited fight, but not a very flashy one. Hitoshi’s quirk was a sucker punch; incredibly powerful, but rarely worked on anyone that saw it coming. Its strength lay in it coming as a surprise, and unfortunately Kendo was diligent enough not to be left out of the loop. Before he could attempt to use his hypnotising, Kendo batted him out of the ring.

Izuku felt…a little depressed seeing that. An ambitious student, with a powerful quirk. From the General Studies Department, he had ensured his progression right into the battle tournament. But thanks to the nuances of his quirk, he was denied all his opportunities. Listening to Hitoshi’s story, told through a strained throat to Kendo…this was going to be a long day for Izuku, he could tell. If he got any angrier and he’d break his pencil…

But then, something unexpected happened. The crowd cheered. The General Department praised Hitoshi for his bravery, saying that his quirk could be very useful. His friends were all cheering him on. Wow. Seeing how many good people there were still supporting them had never made Izuku feel more alone and rejected. Even though Izuku had been in such a similar situation, people still saw the value in Hitoshi. They were still giving him a second chance.

Izuku was happy for him. But for once in his life, he felt…jealousy. Before, the gap felt too wide, so insurmountable. It wasn’t worth thinking about. Quirkless people didn’t get a chance. But here Hitoshi was, fighting back and being supported by everyone, cheered on.

Izuku left to get a drink, shattered pieces of wood and graphite littering the floor in front of his seat.

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So that’s why he never used his fire side.

Izuku had stumbled upon a very interesting conversation, noting the orange glow around the corner while he was walking back to his seat. His ears pricked up, and he leaned on the wall, picking up on the father-son talk. Shoto apparently saw some kind of element of his father in the right side of himself. This rage went deep, deep enough that the two of them had no common ground.

Deep enough that right now, he was watching Hanta Sero be thawed out slowly by Shoto, having been defeated in the blink of an eye. The crowd was trying to comfort Hanta, assuring him the difference in power was nothing to be ashamed of.

Yeah, right. Could’ve fooled me.

Izuku felt bitterness festering inside of him. A resentment for everything this place stood for. It
valued arbitrary power, not how that power was used. At least Shoto was behaving apologetically. 

Looking at him, his forlorn face as he unfroze the ice-encased Hanta, he knew that at least Shoto understood the real implications of having real power, and how it must be used.

Which was exactly why this mental block he had over his left half was so infuriating.

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The following few matches featured…let’s see here….Ibara vs Denki, and Tenya vs Mei. Then Mina vs Yuga, and Fumikage vs Momo. And then Eijiro vs Tetsutetsu. That was a solid five matches before he had to worry about Kacchan being anywhere near the arena doors.

Taking his opportunity, Izuku snuck out of the arena, over to the door where Shoto would be leaving.

Sure enough, he was there, and Izuku got his attention before he could make his way into the private rooms. He still looked a little downtrodden, looking down and trying to shirk away from the walls around him.

“Excuse me, Shoto Todoroki? Can I get a word in for a second?”

Shoto looked like he was about to completely ignore him, but eventually relented and turned around, sizing up Izuku.

“…what do you want to ask me?”

“Um…well, it’s about your quirk. It’s easily one of the strongest I have ever seen, but from what I can tell, you’re really holding back your power.”

“…what makes you think that?”, said Shoto, looking unusually hostile.

“Oh, well, um, the name of the quirk is half-cold half-hot, correct? You’ve progressed through the first rounds, but you’ve not used your hot half. Not even once. Don’t you think using fire might have had some tactical advantages throughout the festival? Lifting you above the minefield without creating pressure on the ground, maybe?”

“What I decide to do with my power is my business.”

Izuku started to drop the attitude of an interviewer slightly, becoming more earnest, “But it’s not. You aim to become a hero. People’s lives will eventually hang in the balance of your own restraint.”

Shoto’s look turned to sheer scorn, and Izuku could feel the cold chill of fear rising up his back.

Closer inspection revealed that might have been at least partially caused by the ice collecting on Shoto’s right arm. Izuku’s arm started to rise slightly to the knife hidden in his hoodie.

Somehow, he knew. But that wasn't going to stop Izuku from trying to help.

Shoto’s arm was now encased in a bright, shining glacier, and the floor was frosting over.

“You have a very distinctive eye colour. Bright green.”
Izuku is recognised, for his identity and his conviction

Shoto's piercing blue eyes bore into Izuku's. His every instinct was telling him to run. He knew. Shoto knew who he was. Of course he did, that must have been the only reason he even stopped to give the time of day. Green eyes, green eyes...the only feature of him that stood out.

Izuku laughed, trying to disguise his nervousness, "Haha, green eyes aren't that unusual to be honest. In this arena, I've seen at least 5 people with no eyes at all, a-

"There's more. You're not very tall, are you?"

Shoto took a step forward, putting emphasis on his height to get the point across, half a head taller than he was. Izuku took a step back instinctively.

"What are you so nervous about? I'm only taking a step. You're looking guilty."

Only a step...with his foot.

Izuku jumped forward, adrenaline rushing through his veins as he once again reacted purely on instinct. Shoto's right foot was the one that moved. Izuku followed up his leap with a square punch to Shoto's jaw, rolling to his left side. Sure enough, a large column of ice covered the floor where Izuku stood before. One more moment and he would have been trapped on the floor.

Shoto squared his jaw, and Izuku was satisfied to see a little bit of blood on his cheek. Clearly all that time lifting was paying dividends.

"I'm not here to kill you, Shoto. I came to talk."

"What kind of help would you freely offer to a hero in training, villain!?", Shoto growled, spitting the words out like poison.

Good point. What kind of advice would someone like Shoto freely take from a villain? Even if it wasn't his intention to be intimidating, looking weak right now would clue Shoto in that he had no quirk and no battle plan. Knowing this, Izuku grinned like his wolf-in-sheeps-clothing disguise had been taken away, exuding sinister confidence. He tried to adopt some of Tomura's tone in his voice.

"Let's start with this one. I'm on your left now. If you turn to hit me, your attack will be heavily telegraphed. Why not batter me with your flames?", Izuku taunted

"Like I said, I don't have to explain my decisions to you."

"I'm sure a hero as grand as you won't even see himself worthy to explain to the widows you create by holding to your pathetic grudge. You'll just walk past them, like your righteous father."

That got to him. That dug where it HURT. Shoto jutted out his right foot, turning his whole body
into the movement, releasing a wide burst of ice and snow. Izuku dodged, to Shoto's left once more, only to realise he'd been duped. The ice from before had not only created an obvious and noticeable pillar, but it had also created a thin layer of ice on the floor that Izuku had failed to notice. He slipped over amidst his own momentum, giving Shoto enough time to turn around from his kick and fire another huge blast of ice in his direction.

Izuku dropped to the floor, just barely watching as the ice shot over his head, sticking to the wall behind him. He rolled to the right, narrowly avoiding a small wall of ice that had been sent to entrap him in his kneeling position. Izuku felt his expression sticking to him like a rictus grin. Not necessarily out of joy or elation but just because he was so stimulated right now he wasn't focusing on his facial muscles at all.

Ice, spawned rapidly by Shoto's fury, covered the entire corridor. A large pillar went from the wall and ceiling directly on Todoroki's left now as he faced Izuku, and two ice columns jutted out from the wall just behind Izuku, on his left.

"I have plenty of slippery terrain to work with, Shoto. How do you intend to get to me from way over there?"

Shoto, his scowl becoming increasingly strained, launched another column of ice, slightly higher than the other two. When Izuku dodged this one by sliding over one of the other columns, the three columns poked out in a way that was nearly impossible to cross. Izuku sauntered down the corridor, hoping to bait Todoroki further.

"Hey, villain! What are you doing!?"

"As I said, I didn't come here to fight you. You're clearly not interested in talking. I'm leaving now."

"Don't underestimate me! I've only been holding back...because I didn't want to cause any damage to the building!"

Shoto gripped the floor with his hands, and Izuku immediately felt the temperature in the room dropping. The entire floor was coated in ice, and Izuku's escape was foiled immediately as he turned and jumped, only to watch as the power was still waiting for him when his left foot hit the ground, encasing it in ice all the way up to his knee. The frostbite was unbearable, it felt like shards of glass were numbing his entire circulatory system. He kept his right foot raised.

Shoto walked through the cool, and Izuku had to turn around, craning his neck behind him to see Shoto's advance. His face was looking a little paler, a little calmer, as his overwhelming power expended most of his tension. The room started to creak. Shoto couldn't fire another all-encompassing attack like that without breaking something.

"Don't think I don't see what your game plan is. You were watching us in the USJ incident. You just came here to gather more information on a potential threat."

Izuku had been caught. Trapped. He had to find a way out. His leg felt like it was dropping off right now, but if he could somehow just find a way to escape...not on his first outing, not on his first trip alone. Not on the one mission he had been entrusted to accomplish all by his own power!

"How did you think this was going to end?"

"Y-You s-sure sound confident...brr...for someone only living up to a fraction of their potential..."

"I don't want all of that potential. Not if it means I have to acknowledge that old man..."
Shoto was coming around...keep the conversation going, wait until Shoto moves around. Keep him talking, and he'll walk around you to make eye contact properly. He's already talking like he's won. Prove him wrong Izuku, prove him wrong!

"My Sensei told me...s-something once. S-Something I've been fighting to p-prove wrong about him...as well."

"Sensei?", Shoto said, disinterested tone fading as his curiosity was piqued. Cautiously, he started to move. He was now on Izuku's 7 o clock.

"Yes. He t-told me...he didn't think those w-without power...could ever assert their ideals."

"Villain elitism. Can't you see he values only arbitrary power?"

Izuku whirled around, using his free right leg to add momentum, drawing his knife and stabbing straight into Shoto's left arm. Shoto raised his arm, expecting to block a quirk strike of some kind, and a splash of fire burst forth uncontrollably, warming his leg just enough room to break free. Izuku slid across the floor, bumping into the wall. His leg was fine...completely numb, but still moveable.

"There we go...fire at last. You've finally stopped insulting everyone with your selfishness."

Shoto grunted in pain, patting out his flames, raising his arm for another strike.

His face was twisted in violent anger, "What kind of power do you really have? And what gives you the right to understand this at all!?"

Shoto fired a blast of ice with blind fury. Izuku moved with a speed he didn't know he had in him. Sliding forward using the wet, icy floor, he zipped under the blasts on his knees. Shoto widened his eyes in shock, attempting to raise a leg to strike in retaliation. Izuku kept the slide going, grabbing the raised foot and using the momentum of his slide to pull Shoto to the floor, dragging him along the shining pale surface. When Izuku reached the far wall, he pushed his feet off of it, ricocheting off and leaping in to Shoto's back. Before he could make another strike, Izuku pushed the knife tip into the back of Shoto's neck.

"None, none whatsoever! I have no incredible strength. I have none of the gifts you have been given. But I still use what little power I have to the maximum for what I believe in! Every moment, with everything I have! How can you claim to be superior when you won't even truly fight for what you believe in? When some petty feud becomes more important to you than your life, and the lives of those you put into your care? Is your ego worth that much?"

Shoto spoke, his voice wobbling, his vocal chords ragged, "This isn't about my ego, you idiot...it's about standing against him, my father! For what he did to me! To my mother!"

His mother...Izuku put aside his momentary strain, and reiterated, "Look at me, with only my knife I have you under my weight! For what he did to me! To my mother!"

His mother...Izuku put aside his momentary strain, and reiterated, "Look at me, with only my knife I have you under my weight! I'm still using my strength! This entire tournament, this entire system, they all ignore the true worth of a hero; not how much power you have, not where it came from, but how you choose to use it!"

Shoto's one visible eye widened in shock, as Izuku's passionate anger transitioned into desperation. He was hyperventilating. All his gripes, all of his insecurities, he was heating up. His face was going red from the stress, his hand was getting warm, his knife was burning hot...

Izuku looked down. Shoto's left eye glared up at him, rapidly consumed by fire, the flames licking Izuku's steel dagger to the point it was burning his hands within a second! He moved it out of the
flames, Only for Shoto to roll into the momentum and push Izuku off of him. Shoto got up, his left half blazing with fire that shot off of him like the sun, trailing off into the distance and fading away far from his body, the flames must have extended 3 feet wide. Izuku stood, shaking his knife to cool it down. Shoto glared at him, breathing heavily.

His fire was going to be the end of him. Shoto and Izuku locked eyes again. He wouldn't give in. Izuku defiantly stared Shoto down. If nothing else, he accomplished this. He showed Shoto the folly of-

Wait...what? Shoto was...why was he retracting his flames? Why was he looking so confused?

"It seems as if...I wasn't the only one creating a feud for themselves, was I? You really...must hate such apathy."

Huh? "Wait, what are you-"

"I can't accept that your criticisms of heroes are correct. But myself...I...I angered you, did I not?"

He couldn't do it. Shoto looked so small and vulnerable. His furious expression started to fade. His earnest weakness was almost infectious. Maybe because it looked so familiar to him...

He had to respond, "Seeing someone like you...you knew your own strength, and the responsibilities it bears. Like how huge the gap was between you and Hanta Sero. It's a responsibility I've never had to bear myself. So seeing you like that, made so much less than what you could be, and what a hero should be...hurt me in a way I wasn't expecting when I came here today."

"...Did you mean what you said? About only wanting to talk? You weren't here to hurt me, or just to get information?"

"I could have just watched the matches for that, and you know that."

Shoto chuckled drly. He must've realised Izuku's approach was unnecessary. That's why he seemed interested when Izuku had started talking about Sensei. If he really did believe Izuku was just an assassin or an information gatherer, he never would have listened to him and put himself at risk.

"...you don't make any sense. Are you really a villain?"

Izuku swallowed to himself. Could he really give a response to that? He was imitating the role pretty well earlier, and he counted villains among his closest friends. He felt like he was understanding more the negative opinions of heroes. Seeing what was buried beneath the surface, and looking at the sports festival with new eyes...

"Yes. But not in the way you might be thinking."

"Go on."

"I don't hate all heroes, or all of it's systems. But I detest how it makes people end up like you."

"In that case...", Shoto seemed to be weighing up his options, making a spontaneous choice with the confidence of someone who rarely acts on a gut feeling...

"In that case, you should probably leave here."
"L-Leave?"

"And quickly. If all goes well, we will probably never meet again. The next time we do, you will be arrested."

"I will...take you up on your generous offer. Thank you, Shoto."

"You have helped me...weigh things up differently. For a moment there, I was not thinking about...sorry, never mind. I can't say you've solved my problems...but because of your genuine interest in helping me...I am willing to accept that you just walked by to help me. We talked briefly, and you left. And now we are even. I will not excuse any of your actions in the future."

Izuku nodded, as they reached a silent solidarity. The floor, melted by the heat of a newly kindled fire, was finally dry enough for Izuku to walk on. And so he ran, as fast as he could, straight to the exit, looking back at the rush of spectators who made their way to the small entryway to try and locate the source of the noise that was no longer there.

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Izuku was not able to return to the rest of the festival. After the debris was discovered, the building was beefed up with higher security, and if a scenario like that happened again, Izuku would be ruined. Avoiding capture like he did was a near miracle. And he would not consign himself to luck in order to escape from a jam next time.

Still, his ability to improvise and adapt in the heat of the moment was surprising even to him. Rapidly forming hostile terrain was being used as an obstacle against their creator! I mean, it only worked as well as that because the creator in question was irrationally upset, but the action itself was encouraging nonetheless.

He watched from his phone on the train home, as Mei Hatsume's very long advertising match finally ended after she had showed off all of her creations in great detail, making a guinea pig out of her opponent in order to do so. Poor guy...his name was Tenya Iida. Earnest enough to get baited by Mei...he didn't know what was more disappointing, the fact that such a promising hero fell for that trick so easily, or the fact that Mei basically handed him his victory after she'd spent enough time getting her fill of attention for herself and her inventions. It was pretty entertaining either way.

When he got back home, he sat at the counter and Kurogiri tuned in to the matches for him, immediately transitioning from the small screen to the larger screen. The monitor was still pretty small...but good enough to make out the two super quick matches that went by. The acid girl, Mina, uppercut the laser-naval guy, Yuga, in such a glorious way Izuku could barely stop laughing. Tomura had to come down and see what all the fuss was about. Kurogiri replayed the scene. Watching a hero get his pants pulled down on live TV made him grin a bit. But seeing him get the teeth shoryuken'd out of him made Tomura break into delirious laughter as well. Kurogiri had to pause for a minute, overlooking his immature charges for a moment, rolling on the floor and wheezing, as he wondered where he went wrong in raising them.

The following match, the creation girl, Momo, got the crap beaten out of her by the man with the strange Dark Shadow, Tokoyami. The essence of the match was that it was quick. Momo's very powerful and versatile quirk got no use in because Tokoyami rushed her immediately and ended the battle before it could fully begin. Izuku jotted his notes furiously, because no match gave a clearer example of the weaknesses of Momo's otherwise terrifying quirk than that.

Tetstutetsu and Ejiro's match was redundant much redundant. Their quirks, used in the way they were, were functionally identical. Very tough punches. It was worth noting only in the sense that,
as of this point, they hadn't worked out any other special uses for their skills yet. That would probably be their first priority following this battle, Izuku thought. Seeing how basic and similar their move sets were would encourage them to become more diverse. He hoped so, otherwise the hero course really was doomed.

And then Bakugo took to the arena. Tomura had to be reminded not to turn his glass into sand as the cocksure hero was put through his paces by the gravity girl, Uraraka. In spite of her innocent appearance, she used her objectively rescue-orientated quirk to ridiculous effect, nearly outwitting Kacchan. Her great plan with the rubble and the rocks was quite literally blown away by one blast. In spite of her spirit, arbitrary power from a last-minute panicked explosion was still more valuable. After that, the match came down to slugging it out slowly until she ran out of energy. Kacchan seemed shaken up, however. He could have tried to run in and throw her out of the ring, but nearly being tricked seemed to make him treat her with caution. Eventually, she blacked out, struggling like a real hero all the way. It was sad to watch, but Izuku couldn't turn away...

Kendo and Shoto had their match shortly after the break. Kendo tried her best with what she had, but the inevitable occurred. Ice, ice, more ice, doomed. After a spirited attempt, she eventually got hit, and flew out of the ring. But, Izuku noticed something. Shoto used tiny flecks of fire to melt the ice slightly, letting him strike in the same area twice. Looks like he learned something from Izuku's use of terrain. Not sure if pride was really something appropriate to feel about this, but...it seemed like he was experimenting. Testing the waters. Literally, by making water out of his ice.

Tomura spoke up, "Huh? Picking favourites?"

"Pardon?"

"You're grinning. Are you rooting for the red and white one?"

"...I just find his quirk interesting, that's all. After all, it presents so many opportunities."

Izuku smiled, knowing full well nothing of what he said was a lie. He said nothing of how those opportunities were expanded by him. Or how they were expanded by the ideology of a villain. How he had the wisdom to acknowledge that a villain could be insightful, and correct.

And if Izuku could connect his ideas to the empathies of the strongest hero in UA, how evil, twisted and malicious could Izuku be?

The next few matches went by as a bit of a blur. By this point, the three of them were making an evening of it. Kurogiri was pouring out drinks, Izuku was pretending to commentate over the matches, Tomura was gleefully giggling as the heroes continued to slam each other into the ground. Seemed like they were going to be here for a long time, and not just so Izuku could nerd out and get his work done. What with Kurogiri's proud patronage and Tomura's tired enthusiasm accompanying him, everyone was getting in on watching heroes clash.

Just after the match between Shoto and Iida, Tomura's room started making a noise. Jumping from his half-asleep slouch, Tomura rushed into his room. Kurogiri looked curiously onwards, no longer paying attention to the game. What could be so important that-

A muffled shout came from Tomura's room.

"Stain?"
Malefic martyr

Chapter Summary

It's Stain time. Izuku wraps up the sports festival, and meets the hero killer for the first time.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kurogiri returned. Tomura, expression grim, finally un-paused the matches, and they ran in the background, nearly muffled out entirely by the thickness of the tension in the room. The Hero Killer had come to Hosu. And Sensei, not to mention Kurogiri, saw potential in him. Tomura, however, was less than thrilled.

Tomura asked, "So. What did you find out?"

Kurogiri responded, "He is here. Apparently the pro hero Ingenium was just hospitalised by him, and when we are ready, I can send him our invitation."

"Hm. It seems as if he's far too in to stabbing everything."

Izuku couldn't ignore Tomura's taut body language and contemptuous voice. "Tomura, are you...feeling okay? I mean, complaining about enjoying destruction? Pot calling the kettle black?"

"Stain...I don't know if we really need him."

Kurogiri pointed out, "We are most interested in assembling a specialist team, and building ourselves up once more. No one is more qualified than the Hero Killer. And his notoriety would greatly benefit us, if we were associated with him. It does seem as though he is interested."

"Pssht..."

Tomura didn't look convinced, as he pouted with a bored expression, slightly turning up the volume on the TV. Tokoyami vs Katsuki. See, here's another problem with this system, some quirks just naturally counter other quirks. That's not a test of skill, it's not a feat of anything. It's not even down to natural power. It's like putting water against fire and then pretending to act shocked when the totally reasonable result comes to pass. It doesn't exactly bring across any almighty revelations. Dark Shadow certainly seemed to require more finesse to manipulate than throwing explosions around like an ape having a temper tantrum, but the light the explosions naturally gave off meant no amount of skill was going to save Tokoyami from taking a loss on this one, because why not. Thankfully, Tokoyami put up a good fight, keeping Kacchan at bay until he was forced to use his brain for once, getting behind Tokoyami and delivering a move he dubbed a 'stun grenade'. Another one for the notebooks. The irony of hearing Kacchan criticise Tokoyami for revealing Dark Shadow's weaknesses while Izuku was sitting here writing about his new move was delicious.

The final match...the final match. Tomura's interest finally piqued. He looked all too eager to see Kacchan get stomped into the ground, so he joined Izuku in their quiet support of Shoto. Ice and
explosions rocketed through the arena repeatedly, one after the other, getting larger and more
furious each time as the two of them came to blows more and more. It finally culminated in
Kacchan rising into the air, spinning with an explosion clasped in each palm. Almost as if reacting
to both of his hands being used, Shoto raises his cut left arm, and Izuku could see it in his eyes, the
will, the intention to finally tap into his true potential...before his arm fell down once more, and
those eyes dropped down in a similar fashion, downtrodden. Izuku sighed, almost as despondently.
He was still going through a lot, it seems. Izuku never really did hear his full story, in the end. I
suppose this is a change that will have to be gradual, at best.

Kacchan hit Shoto like a tornado with all the fiery power Shoto could not muster up, knocking him
out of the arena. What followed was the most disgraceful example of victory Izuku had ever borne
witness two. He began screaming about how Shoto hadn't given it his all, how he had clearly held
back on using his fiery powers, seeing his hesitation. He threatened to attack the defeated
opponent, and only Midnight managed to prevent him from tainting his own victory. This left a bad
taste in his mouth that was immediately replaced with overt laughter and mockery when the award
ceremony came on, watching Kacchan tied to a post to receive his oh so well deserved victory.
Tomura was in stitches. In between his laughter, he seemed to have a bit of approval for Kacchan's
attitude, even if the result of it was comical.

Well, would you look at that? Izuku had sabotaged Kacchan's victory. He'd accidentally ruined his
day by denying him his sense of accomplishment. Completely unintentionally, Kacchan's crowning
moment was ruined by his intervention. Karma must have one hell of a sense of humour.

Kurogiri broke the silence, "Hm...I quite enjoyed that. Very spirited matches all around. And I am
sure they provided a lot of useful information, correct?"

Izuku smiled, warmth flushing through his body, "Yeah. I've got enough details on these villains to
last me a lifetime. I have a few more things to consider before we deal with someone as crucial as
Stain...but if heroes get involved, I am confident we will all be ready."

"I see. Very good, mister Deku. I shall delay opening our doors to Stain, just by a few days. Please
use your time wisely."

Tomura started to drag himself to his room, clearly over tired. But Izuku decided if he was going to
even try to give off the impression he could stand in the same ring as Stain, the man who had
killed 17 heroes and put 23 more out of commission, he would need a few upgrades. Time to get to
work.

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Giran might be a little sleazy on the surface, but he sure was good at getting resources, more than
enough to get down to crafting some new gear. Izuku had cleared off his workbench and was
working on his items, tinkering way into the night. Getting a little look at Mei's workshop the other
day gave him a pretty good idea of what he was doing. He had the Vigilante's Cookbook right next
to him, how hard could this be? He might not have that fancy UA budget or training, but this was
going to work. It had to work.

There we go...this was far easier than he thought it would be. White phosphorous and some
blasting gelatine on the inside. Throw it on the ground to activate it, creating phosphorous
pentoxide. Not exactly rocket science. But with a little bit of work and some simple mechanisms,
poke a couple of emission holes...there. Easy peasy. Two functioning smoke grenades. They make
a loud cracking sound, then fill the area with thick grey fog as quick as a flash. He'd learned a lot
from his battle with Shoto. Quirks almost always gave their users a distinct range advantage, and
he should always assume heroes would have at least one person with them for whom attacking
from a distance was an option. This makes retreat very difficult without a backup plan. Voila, a backup plan.

God, they weren't too tough to make, but making them from scratch was so time consuming. He didn't want them to be volatile and makeshift, he wanted them to be quality tools, and as a result he'd spent quite a lot of effort on them. He'd neglected most of his other gear maintenance in the process. Well, with one obvious exception.

Izuku opened the box and brought out the newest in costume innovation; a pair of tinted road-goggles. Large, glass goggles designed to withstand high-speed road debris, fitted with darkened lenses to cover up the distinctive colour of his eyes.

I mean, I guess there was ONE more thing...Izuku had begun trying to develop some kind of infield communication system. Yeah, an ambitious project, to be sure. The first vestiges of it were strapped to the inside of his mask right now, but they weren't exactly functional at the moment. He would need a similar system to be present on all of the villains. His mask had been fitted with an earpiece and microphone hooked up to a closed-signal radio transmitter, but the signal was so far still way too unreliable. Another project for another day. Besides, he might need to be working on another extra headset anyway.

Because if all went well, Stain might be about to join the League of Villains.

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Chizome Akaguro looks out over the city. Seeing the daily commute of the people who entrusted their lives to heroes. He was wiping coagulated blood from his blade, having announced his arrival in a way that was guaranteed to send a message. It was too powerful to ignore. He overlooked the city, scouting relentlessly for his next target. It put things into perspective too. Something to remind him why he worked.

He saw the city pump like a heart. Cars rushing all in a similar direction, pumping the lifeblood of hard work and toil into their jobs, their families, their lives. These people, this world, blind to the fact that their protectors were driven by personal profit, ego and greed. This city differed from a heart in that it had lost its heart, its soul, its character. They lived, they died, under the watchful eyes of profiteers and glory-hogs, people too selfish to truly sacrifice anything for their charges. No one was willing to sacrifice anything anymore for anyone.

Except him. He had sacrificed everything for this chance, this chance to come to Hosu and show this world what heroism truly meant. A chance to oppose this sham-filled society, and force the flaws of these false heroes into the eye of the public with such force that they would have no choice but to acknowledge these faults.

He was the Hero Killer, he would be the herald of the revival of heroes. And for as long as that cause needed a champion, he would be there. Stain would be at his work, forever.

Chizome heard a noise from behind him. Surely no-one was cocky enough to think they could sneak up on him like that. Stain drew his well-loved katana, aiming it in the direction of his interruption immediately. He turned to look upon his opponent.

A man wreathed in purple flame. A request to sheath his weapon. And a proposition to meet an organisation in Hosu, called the League of Villains. Curious, he stepped into the vortex this man created.

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"Childish...spreading bloodshed without cause...makes you the worst kind of scum", was what Izuku heard as he bounded from his room, coming from the rough, rocky voice that could only belong to Stain. It sounded like the negotiations were going great.

Izuku slowly made his way downstairs, not wanting to disturb the scene at all. One second too long of working on the smoke grenades, and Tomura had become impatient and called Stain in immediately. The two of them were in the midst of a stand-off. Both of them were clearly sizing up the other, but the tall, hunched, imposing figure that was Hero Killer: Stain was clearly staring with intensity. His eyes stood out massively, masked as they were by rags. They could just about stare into your soul. And right now, he was staring down at Tomura, and watching how his soul would behave. The feeling of constantly being judged was terrifying. Combine that with his wide range of sharp weapons and cleated boots that looked like they could break through walls, and Stain was so naturally intimidating it was immobilising.

His face, even when not twisted in contemplation, looked unnatural to the most disturbing degree. The loss of his nose made the front of his face appear unnaturally flat and mask-like. His hair was almost as wild and untamed as his blood-red scarf, a blood-red colour that matched his sharp eyes. And this man had been invited in for a chat about potentially being jolly companions.

Izuku was beginning to have second thoughts.

Especially since by the time he made his way downstairs, Tomura was being pinned to the ground by knives. Kurogiri was bleeding from his arm, saying something about being unable to move.

"T-Tomura!", he spat out without thinking.

Stain looked up briefly, putting some weight on his knife as he did, causing Tomura to grunt in pain, smarmily asking, "Hey, hey...less pressure, please?"

Stain licked his lips, those terrifying eyes now boring into Izuku's, "Hm? A late arrival? A kid?"

Kurogiri, rigid and desperately trying to move through frozen limbs, pleaded, "Deku, don't let him lick your blood! His quirk is a paralytic!"

Izuku squared himself up, trying his absolute best to look the Hero Killer in the eyes. Images flashed through his mind of all the previous times he had to stare down an intimidating face, and their images layered over Stain's until Izuku managed to make himself comfortable. Stain returned it with zeal, making a move to step forwards and attack Izuku, when suddenly...

Tomura laughed, grabbing Stain's exposed foot, grinning like a maniac.

Stain scoffed, "You can't hold me here, whelp, you-"

Stain leaped backwards, shaking Tomura off of him as his boot started to disintegrate, the metal plating visibly rusting. Only then did Tomura grab the knives pinning him down and raise himself up. Unlike his usual apathetic demeanour, Tomura was really getting into it now, mocking him, "What a careless opening! I guess conviction can make you do some stupid things. So glad I apparently don't have one!"

Stain growled to himself, "Hmph...this is not a fight you can win. You're a shallow, passionless villain. You could never defeat someone with talent, or a creed they are pledged to."

Izuku took offense to that quickly, "Shigaraki has as much conviction as anyone in this town, heroes included. All Might included. We have a focused goal, a-"
Stain interrupted with a point of his blade, his katana slashed through the air violently to punctuate his preaching.

"That is not a creed! It's just a short-sighted goal! Is it something you would fight for? Sacrifice for? Die for? Or are you just all talk?"

Izuku's face twisted with an anger. To think that lowly of us...what sort of belief did he hold to place himself on such a pedestal?

Tomura, hysterical from blood loss, adrenaline or simply the thrill of the conflict, drew Stain's ire again with another chuckle, then, "Hmhm...fight for? I don't know if we can live up to your grand expectations...but we are focused, as he said. All Might...that garbage...I fight every day to see him burned. Does that count?"

Stain saw something in Tomura that made him flinch, and he begrudgingly smirked a bit.

"Hm...the two of us aren't alike. But I would be lying to say I didn't see it there, in you. A small seed of desire."

Stain tucked his one remaining knife back into one of his many sheaths, continuing, "So until I have seen what grows from it, I will not purge you."

This man was zealous in the extreme. He looked like he believed with every fibre of his being all that he said, he meant every extreme statement that would sound like hyperbole coming from anyone else.

Izuku, calming himself, questioned, "So, are you satisfied?"

Stain replied, "My business here is done. I wish to be released back into Hosu now."

"And your membership?"

"I will not join forces with a sprout until it has bloomed somewhat. Time, as well as danger and risk, will reveal the true character of this man, Shigaraki."

Stain licked his lips, revealing a serpentine, unusually bumpy tongue, still slightly slick with Kurogiri's blood.

"I still, as I ever will, have work to do."

Chapter End Notes

Well...I just noticed we reached 1000 hits. I'm just sat here trying to imagine 1000 people all in a room now, 1000 people that have been affected by my modest little passion project. That's more than all the people I saw on the train to university this morning, probably more than I saw on the streets, more than I saw on the way home. It's insane.

I can't thank you enough for the kind words and feedback I've received for this so far. I know I've been going on about it before, but it's absolutely crazy to me. I intend to keep putting my all into making something great for you guys. I've been a lurker for a while, so getting such a warm reaction to coming out of my shell was a pleasant
surprise. I basically made my account to be able to write this. It feels amazing to be able to give back to the community that has been my home for such a long time, and being able to do it with my writing is all the more stunning to me.

I'm going to work hard on this. I won't let you down!
**Heroism is about perspective**

Chapter Summary

It's still Stain time, and someone's getting upset about that.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Izuku barely had time to strap on his new inventions before Kurogiri warped all of them through to the Hosu rooftops. The expanse of the city sprawled out before him like a map, lights poking out of the blurry mass of buildings, streetlamps, stadiums and signs like torches. Inside the dark alleyways, sometimes it was hard to imagine a life beyond Tomura, Kurogiri, four walls and the occasional thug. But from here, you could see a city that even while it slept was still teeming with life.

Izuku looked over at Stain. He wasn't paying attention to the three villains standing behind him. He was gazing over the streets with intensity, his expression distant but determined.

Tomura rolled his injured shoulder, asking, "We're here. What is it you plan on doing?"

Stain, without missing a beat, replied, "Reform society."

Tomura rolled his eyes, but Izuku saw it was no meagre boast. Not when he was keeping watch that closely. Whether he had the power to actually accomplish something on that scale or not, he still believed truly in everything he said. Was this what it looked like? The face of a man who believed in his conviction more than power?

"Reform society? Grand, powerful meaningless words.", issued Tomura.

"I will do it", retorted Stain, "Because this fake world needs me to accomplish this change. Someone like me must exist to send this message."

Izuku covertly added something to the notes he had written down about Stain's quirk earlier. He was, after all, irrational enough to attack them. His dangerous abandon would only increase now that he was talking with the lonely determination of one who had a serious martyr complex going on.

"Too many heroes these days work only for money, fame...to gain something. Heroes sacrifice everything. They are those that accomplish great deeds selflessly. Until that message has sunk through the skull of society, I will sink my sword into more heads. As many as it takes. That is what I believe in."

Kurogiri praises him, "Your efforts are commendable, Hero Killer."

Tomura scratched his neck, "Hm. Don't you think you're taking things a bit far?"

Stain glared at Tomura, "That kind of talk is why I want to see you grow first. When will you take things far? For what reason? What will be your conviction?"
Tomura narrowed his eyes, unable to really respond to an ultimatum like that, "Whatever."

Stain, wasting no more time on the, in his eyes, immature Tomura, jumped down off of the roof, speeding into the alleyways, seemingly either having found a target or just gotten tired of talking to a brick wall made of hands.

"...I reaaallly do not like that guy..."

The unpleasant noise issuing from his nails on his throat was a clear indicator. Kurogiri took a step closer to Tomura.

"Kurogiri...how many Nomu can we procure from Sensei on short notice?"

Izuku stepped forward.

"Wait, hang on, isn't this counter-productive?"

"I don't care. He's crazy. He stabbed me in the shoulder. Right when my gunshot wounds were nearly patched up too..."

"We can't resort to Nomu, Tomura, not now. Like you said, we're injured. Even confirming our presence in this city is a risk."

"Hmph…", Tomura deliberated, "...I still don't like him."

"Well, maybe I could...look, before we release the Nomu, what if I track him for a bit? I could try to show you he's valuable enough to keep alive."

Tomura tilted his head to the side, grumbling lowly to himself.

"Please? Surely seeing him kill heroes for us will make up for it, right?"

Tomura grabbed the sides of his face not already covered by his hands and pulled them down, groaning, before finally sighing loudly.

"NGH...fucking fanboy...fine. I'll let you handle this jerk, Deku. But the second he causes trouble for you, don't hesitate."

Izuku smiled, relieving a full lungs worth of nervously held breath. "Thanks, Tomura."

Izuku slid down the side of the roof, hopping off the side, making his way through the streets and backalleys, hunting the Hero Killer.

Kurogiri and Tomura watched their comrade slink into the shadows.

Kurogiri noted, "Hm...taking the same path as Stain did. I think he made quite an impression on the boy."

Tomura snapped, "Shut up. Request the Nomu. If Deku doesn't return, I'm going to make sure Stain regrets the chance he had to drop dead."

"But surely the Hero Killer wouldn't be that volatile, he-" 

Tomura turned his shoulder wound to Kurogiri, gesturing to it with his remaining arm and head.

"...point taken, mister Shigaraki. I will contact Sensei, just in case."
Tomura stood on the rooftop, looking down into the dark, shadowed, winding pathways that housed the underbelly of Hosu. He continued staring, long after Kurogiri had left.

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Izuku is no fool. Stain may have dismissed him initially, but Izuku isn't just stubborn, he also eats information about heroes and villains for breakfast, lunch, dinner, desert, midnight snacks and anything else he devours between meals. Stain kills for the express purpose of building his notoriety and getting people to look at an issue. Because of this, there is a lot of information about him online, way more than the traditional villain who keeps to the shadows. It didn't take long to notice that all of his killings suffer a disturbingly similar pattern.

In every place the Hero Killer has made an appearance, he has appeared to kill at least four pro heroes. In his rush to get his message through to Hosu as quick as possible, Izuku imagined he'd go straight after another pro. He always attacks in low populated areas, so the backalleys and streets are perfect. All Izuku has to do is trace the maze of decrepit walkways until he gets a sign of Stain. His monologuing might allow enough time to get back on his trail...

Then, he was there. Way over in the distance, Stain, over in the alley just opposite his. Both led out into a large, open street. Izuku took a few steps forward and ducked behind the bins, peeking out to look at Stain's work. He's standing over the broken and bloody form of a hero with a strong tribal aesthetic to him...is that Native? It's Native, definitely. He isn't moving...Kurogiri mentioned that Stain's quirk would paralyze you if he licked a sample of your blood. I suppose it helps to explain all of the sharp weaponry he carries.

Stain raised his katana, hovering over the agonised Native. He looked like he was talking a lot, probably getting too in to sacrificing a hero for the greater good.

Suddenly, something darts from behind the corner of the alleyway, kicking up dust and pebbles, speeding towards Stain like a lightning bolt. That speed, the metallic armor...Tenya Iida, the boy from the sports festival. The one who was messed with by Mei. His hardheadedness would be his undoing here.

Stain evaded, then pointed his blade. Izuku was having a hard time making out the mood due to his poor view/hearing of the scene, but it looked very much like Stain was giving the uninvolved Tenya a chance to flee. Izuku moved forwards, taking advantage of the tenseness of the scene to make his way into hearing distance.

Tenya said something about "my brother...Ingenium...defeat you..." Aaah, Ingenium had been hospitalised earlier. Tenya was related to him. The similar engines on his legs were a hint, but with the hero costume it was so obvious. The starry-eyed younger brother. Izuku couldn't help but whisper under his breath please for Tenya to run away as fast as he could.

He did some running again, trying to attack Stain, a fiery look in his eyes, vengeful and dark. Stain pinned him to the ground and lectured him, saying his first thought should have been to save Native. He's right. Stain has his priorities in order. He really seems to understand what an ideal hero should be, but chooses not to follow that ideal for himself. He said something earlier about what 'a true hero' should be.

Stain raised his blade, preparing to plunge it into Tenya. Izuku felt around for a smoke grenade when...

A shard of powerful ice shattered on Stain's arm, knocking him backwards. Another hero student walked around the corner, wreathed in ice and flame.
Great. Shoto Todoroki.

Iida gasped, asking, "Why...why are you here?"

Shoto responded, evenly and without taking his eyes off Stain once, "I noticed that look you had the other day. If no-one else was going to keep an eye out for what you were obviously about to do, the responsibility would fall to me."

Stain chuckled, drawing himself up back to his full height. Even hunching, he towered over his opponents. "I warn you now. You can turn away right now. But if we clash, the weaker of us will naturally be culled."

Shoto, unresponsive, powered up his left side. Izuku noticed the small scar that had formed on his left arm. Shoto raised it up, aiming squarely at the Hero Killer's centre of mass.

"You will not kill anyone tonight, Stain."

The stream of fire, the determined roar of flame produced by Shoto's desire to stand against the Hero Killer alone, roared through the alleyway, while a small platform of ice manouvered the injured behind Shoto. The flame roared into the alleyway opposite, rushing towards Izuku.

"S-shit."

Izuku rolled around the corner, as a literal dumpster fire raged where he had previously been. The smell was eye-watering, and the garbage made good fuel. Poking his head around revealed nothing but a stray trash bag and high fire. There was no way he was getting back to the fight like this...

These alleyways couldn't be that rough. Izuku dashed down the passages. The second he found his way to the road, he'd be back in a position to monitor the battle.

Images of blades in Tenya flashed through his mind. His legs pumped just a little bit faster.

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Tomura's fists clenched, knuckles turning white, as he beheld the blaze in the distance. His teeth clenched, grinding roughly.

Kurogiri cautiously responded, "Are you quite sure, mister Shigaraki?"

"Of course I'm sure, idiot. Look at that fire. Look at that smoke."

"I know it seems dangerous, but are you not confident that-"

"It's not about that, IDIOT. If we can see that fire from here, who else do you think can see it? Those pro hero rats will be swarming the scene in minutes."

"...and this is your solution?"

Tomura grinned sadistically. "Exactly. Let's divide their attention. Even if they don't affect the fight, they'll help a lot, right? We have a party of three of them correct?"

Tomura turned again to overlook the scene. Not only would this protect Izuku, but it might just give him an excuse to bag that miserable Stain into the bargain.

"Now do as I say, and release the Nomu."
Chapter End Notes

Sorry about not posting a chapter yesterday, real life work got me twisted. Still keeping it up though!
Empathy

Chapter Summary

Stain time is nearing its last minutes, and as the clock counts down, more hijinks ensue.

Choking and coughing, Izuku managed to make his way out into the streets. Dammit...all that navigating just to get into the roadways just around the corner of where he started. Whoever designed the alleys needs to be trapped in a labyrinth with a minotaur. Learn how painful confusing design can be...forget it. The important thing now was getting back to Stain. Just five steps forward, around the corner...

Izuku saw that the fight had been pushed out of the alleyway into the street. Shoto clearly thought having more room to use his quirk was more beneficial to him. He didn't see Native anywhere...maybe the fear of hitting him with collateral damage was a reason Shoto pushed Stain back into the road? What was more suprising was the presence of a certain engine-limbed student.

Tenya was in the middle of clashing with Stain, flipping multiple times to kick as often as possible, never losing momentum and never seeming to lose balance. His steel armor was batting away Stain's weapons as quickly as he could raise them. Izuku couldn't help but notice Tenya's face. He was eerily calm, with an expression like regret. Izuku smirked wryly. It seems even heroes aren't able to simply ignore all of Stain's rhetoric. Stain hit the nail on the head when he criticised Tenya's decisions and vengeful actions earlier, and Tenya knew it. Wasn't stopping Tenya from smashing repeatedly into Stain's guard, breaking him down. Because villains aren't allowed to make good points.

Stain, significantly slower than before, rushed forward with his knives, but Tenya flipped backwards using his engines, and Stain got hit by a rising pillar of ice for his mistake, slamming directly into his jaw and launching him upwards. Stain collapsed in a heap on the floor, taking a blow to the head that would have felled a lesser man. But even as his mask dropped, most of his weapons were scattered, Stain rose to his feet, licked his lips clean of his blood, and readied himself once more. He glared at his opponents with eyes that were glassing over as he moved. Something in him would not let him die.

"I won't...fall here...you fakes...posers! I'll cut down any challenger! For...the name of hero...to be restored!", Stain roared, finally raising his sword.

They say that you become what you behold. Izuku had seen quite a lot in his tenure on the darker side. Things that would have been hidden from him, and that heroes would have pretended didn't exist. Tomura's loneliness and buried kindness. Kurogiri's caring disposition. He'd seen the side of villainy that could be noble. That promoted a sense of unity, even among the very few who tread along that road.

And now, Izuku beheld this man. The man who refused to die. However extreme or abominable he was seen as, he had a mission, a quest that he would die for. A conviction that he would follow to the end, a conviction that made everything else irrelevant. The kind of spirit Izuku had come to value. The kind of spirit he wished to nurture in himself. And he'd seen the truth buried deep underneath Stain's methods. A truth that would have been ignored and locked away, that would
have been trivialised compared to his behaviour.

He couldn't let Stain be taken here.

Izuku found himself in the middle of the streets before he even knew he had moved. His feet had taken action all on their own.

Stain was the first to notice, "Huh...the kid?", he remarked, as he prepared to be either attacked or aided.

Tenya was the second, "Is that a civilian? A villain?", he said, readying a dash.

Shoto noticed last, his eyes shooting wider as he finally recognised Izuku, "Everyone, back up!"

Shoto reared back, ready to fire a blast of fire that would take out Izuku immediately.

Izuku screamed, "Stain, catch!"

Izuku's knife flew far across the battlefield, and Stain, sensing the urgency, jumped to catch it. Izuku's knife, the one he didn't have time to maintain at all, working as hard as he was on the com system and the goggles.

Stain licked the dry blood still coagulated on the blade.

Shoto clutched his chest, and fell to the floor, paralyzed by Stain's quirk. Tenya, shocked, dashed over to Shoto to protect him from any incoming attacks from Stain.

Izuku finally reached the Hero Killer, and grabbed his arm. "Come on, we have to go! Now!"

Stain forced himself to tear his eyes away from his foes. "I won't...these upstart sham heroes..."

"You have to live! Your convictions can't end like this!"

Stain's eyes shot wider. Izuku's pleading had caught him off guard completely.

"Please! I will not let you fall here!", and as Izuku pulled stain's arm to drag him along, Stain did not resist. They rushed around the corner, leaving Iida behind in a massive cloud of dust.

Izuku took flight quickly. Stain was holding back from coughing up blood. The sound of rushing wind approached...

Izuku whirled around and dropped a smoke grenade, smashing it onto the floor with as much force as he could muster. The metal canister exploded into an immediate, white cloud of concealing smoke. Now, Tenya couldn't see any better than Stain. But Izuku was wearing goggles, and he'd seen the structure of these roads before. He guided Stain, who swung wildly behind them, hoping to deter any attackers. They had to keep moving. It was a colossal distance away, but if they could make it back to the building with Tomura and Kurogiri, he could convince them to-

A gigantic wall of red flame covered the entire area in front of them. It reached far and high, completely boxing them in.

"Hmph. So this is what he slipped away to deal with."

The towering figure of Endeavour touched the ground, face filled with bitter contempt.

"Surrender now, Hero Killer."
To punctuate his ultimatum, Endeavour raised his arms, and the wall of fire roared ever higher. Even the noise of the crackling pyre was deafening. Stain coughed out a ball of blood. He shook off Izuku's hand, and took a step forward.

"Never. Especially not to the cold demands of the falsest, vilest, most cruel hero of all...kehe...I've been...waiting for the chance to take you down! False hero!"

Stain raised his katana, drawing Izuku's dagger from his side to accompany it. Endeavour scowled.

"You are injured. Even with the help of one other...do you really think you can stand a chance against me!?"

Endeavour launched a wave of hellflame forwards. Stain jumped across it with energy it seemed impossible for him to still have in him, and lunged for Endeavour's throat. Endeavour flexed his chest, and fire leaped from his body, pushing Stain backwards, where he collapsed to the ground.

"Pathetic. You're crude, murderous, falsely moralistic...I've been waiting to take you out too, you know."

Endeavour paced towards Stain, a grin spreading across his face.

"Imagine how much the world will praise me for bringing the infamous Hero Killer to justice."

Stain jumps to his feet abruptly at this statement, slashing at Endeavour's foot, who barely moves it backwards in time to avoid being cut.

"HYPOCRITE! The streets will run RED with the blood of hypocrites like you! You would bring me in not for justice, or honour, or...kkgghh...to protect...but for a hope of reward!? Glory!? To feed your insatiable desire to sate your bitter hatred...the furthest thing from heroism imaginable..."

Stain's passion reignited, he lurched forward with inhuman calmness. Izuku swore he could see a broken bone in his leg, but he stood upright, showing no signs of pain. Izuku might not have had any weapons, but if he timed the use of his smoke grenade well enough, maybe he could turn the tides.

"You hypocrite...you can never overtake All Might...you lack purpose. You lack soul. You lack the right to be called hero...and after learning about your treatment..."

Endeavour's eyes sharpened into pinpricks with rage.

"...you lack the right to LIVE! ENDEAVOUR!"

Before Stain could step forwards to strike, a purple portal opened directly above the towering fire hero. Endeavour barely had time to react before a thin, lanky man with hands clasped all over him flew out, grabbing onto Endeavour's back and holding on tight. Tomura laughed manically as Endeavour's costume peeled away from the strain, swiftly bucking and kicking to launch the villain from him before his skin could take significant damage.

Tomura righted himself, flexing his hands in anticipation for the chance to grip him again, "Heh...clothes can make my quirk so much less effective...I'll bet your skin's still cracked though, right?"

In the moment Stain had been given, he rushed in to strike Endeavour, only to rush directly into a portal that opened in front of him, closing immediately afterwards.
Endeavour righted himself to strike again, but the portal above his head widened, dropping a whole Nomu on top of him. He roared, batting the creature off him, but the Nomu continued to viciously target him, and he was too preoccupied blasting it with fireball after fireball to focus on his previous assailant.

Tomura rushed to Izuku's position, grabbing him with three fingers by the scruff of his neck, pulling him backwards into a portal. With a jump, the two of them fell inside...

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And they tumbled into a heap on the wooden floor of the League HQ. Stain had buried his sword halfway into the counter, but was standing there also. Kurogiri materialised into position behind the counter, giving Stain a look that implied he was definitely going to have to pay for a replacement.

Tomura was panting heavily. Whether through exhaustion or an adrenaline high, it was hard to tell. Probably both. That was definitely what Izuku was going through. His vision had started to blur somewhat through the last few minutes there...he felt a bit sick.

Kurogiri started, "Thank goodness...the fires led us right to you. I apologise for our late arrival."

Izuku gasped, finally having enough breath in his lungs to speak, "No...that was pretty much perfect timing, thank you."

Stain fell backwards, leaning against the wall. He was still bleeding heavily, his blood soaking into the floorboards grotesquely.

Izuku panicked, "Hurry, hurry! He's been injured badly. That kid, Shoto, and Iida, even Endeavour! They all got hits on him, quickly!"

Despite Izuku hurrying the others to act, he was the one who moved quickest to grab the medical equipment from the bathroom. He sat down beside Stain, and started stitching up some of his wounds. It was a really unnerving feeling, fixing human flesh with wire and steel, but it was far less unnerving than leaving those injuries as they were.

Stain coughed, weakness setting in as the tension of the fight left him. "Gngh...I wasn't prepared..."

"It's okay, Stain. You don't have to talk. That was a lot of heroes thrown at you back then. It's a miracle you were able to hold up as long as you did!"

"...I didn't...if you didn't throw that knife, or the smoke..."

Izuku went a little bit redder from the compliment, and forced his hand to steady itself.

Kurogiri led Tomura out of the room, tactfully giving them some privacy.

"I-It's nothing much. Just a helping hand and a few tools...besides, you would have done the same for me."

Stain looked at Izuku like he was insane. "Who would have? Who in this world would still do that, sacrifice their safety for another? Why did you rush out like that?"

"Well...I thought you were right. About a lot of things. How heroes motivated by personal greed create problems in society. And...if you were arrested so suddenly, after moving to Hosu, one of the most famous hero-oriented cities in the world, your rhetoric would be discounted. It'd look like..."
the second you tried to put your ideals into practice, you were defeated. And ideals like that should be protected...and no amount of power exerted by heroes should change that."

Stain's face changed. His eyes shock began to fade. And his grin started to curve into a...smile?

"H-Heh...eh...how strange."

"Excuse me?"

"You ran out to save someone...based on nothing more than your ideals? The code you stand by?"

"W-Well, and to help you, too. I couldn't just let you be taken in, right? We had just agreed to respect each other, after all."

"I wasn't trying t-to discount you there. Creeds...codes...people need these things to survive. But heroes these days..."

"What are you implying?", Izuku said, slightly nervous.

"You...have some of the qualities that I would admire most in a hero."

A cold shock pierced Izuku's heart at that point. The bitter irony of his statement clamped down on Izuku for a few seconds. Slowly, with breaths, Izuku was able to shake it off, and continued to stitch Stain's wounds.

"Well, I can't be a hero. But if you think that way...isn't that all the more evidence hero society needs to be changed? And if I can't do that as a hero...I'll do it as a villain. It's more effective that way anyway."

Stain's grin had split widely across his face. It looked much like he hadn't smiled in that way for a long time.

"Exactly. Exactly, kid...what's your name?"

"Deku. I'm Deku."

"Deku...I haven't met someone before with ideals such as yours."

"I know they are rare among villains...but I know Tomura and Kurogiri have that kind of ideal in them."

"If you insist...their potential, what I mentioned earlier...I believe under your guidance, perhaps they could develop a conviction as strong as yours."

"A-As strong as m-mine?"

"Yes, Deku. The two of us...we know the cruelties of this trash society", Stain said, placing a hand on Izuku's shoulder, "and we fight against it. I owe you my life because of it. We are kindred spirits, rare in this world. Your conviction is as strong as mine."

Izuku nearly dropped his needle. How was this happening? Is it happening? Probably not, Endeavour just knocked him out, reality is...

"Hehe...you look a bit shocked. I take it you've not been told that before?"

"Not r-really?"
"Tell me, Deku. Where does this conviction spring from? What kind of life motivated you down the same path as I?"

"Well...it's a long story."

"And I have many injuries. I'm not moving for a few hours."

"Very well, Stain. If you insist..."

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Stain listened, as Izuku finished his tale, in silence. By the time he was done, Izuku felt emotionally drained.

"Stories such as yours...if more realised the pain of the quirkless, maybe heroes could start caring for something other than themselves."

"Even All Might...even him..."

"He must either survive your attacks, and get stronger, or he must fall before you, and become the catalyst for change...I see. I see your point. This is the only way he can justify his dismissal of you."

Stain rose to his feet.

"I have decided. You and I...we will share this burden. You will be alone in your battle no longer, Deku. We are brothers in arms henceforth."

Stain locked hands with Izuku, squeezing it tightly. It nearly crushed his fingers. When Izuku squeezed back just as powerfully, Stain looked pleased.

"So then...Stain, um, what of the League of Villains?"

"Hmph...I initially dismissed them as vapid. But with you on their side, they could become great. I will tell your tale, Deku. All will know the League is a place for villains who want to truly change the fate of this world. You shall have my blessing to bring this place to new heights, brother."

Izuku grinned widely. It was like he was being lifted higher into the sky with each word spoken.

"Thank you, Stain...it really means a lot to me. But, the way you are talking...you're not going to join?"

"I cannot. I work alone, and must carve my own rhetoric. But those who cannot work with me will work with you instead."

"Alone?"

"My quirk is best suited to quick ambushes, allowing me to charge in with Bloodcurdle and finish the fight before it has begun. Working with a crew makes this much harder. I battle with hit-and-run techniques."

"I see...will I meet you again?"

"Certainly. If you need me to help you make the final push, I will join you, brother. But I cannot be a dedicated member."
Stain held out an arm to raise Deku to his feet, which he accepted.

"Thank you, brother", replied Izuku, grinning from ear to ear.

"...could you not look so cute? This is a serious statement of comradeship."

"S-Sorry!"

Stain and Izuku locked hands again. He may not be a member, but an alliance had been forged this day.

Izuku's grin shifted from carefree joy into a determined and defiant smile. The future of the League was looking brighter than ever.

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The monitor in the corner. How long would it be until they remembered it?

All For One listened in. This boy...this boy, young Deku, was just full of suprises.

He had quickly gone from apologetic and nervous in the presence of Stain, to an honoured friend and ally. This young one had some serious charisma. The kind of charisma that could not be taught. The kind of charisma that, as All For One could attest himself, could get you oh so far in life all by itself. He had inspired Stain, the ultimate cynic.

And while he had initially been so meek, he was developing some incredible passion for his cause. Genuine, mounting belief.

Perhaps this boy would end up having far more uses than he had realised. Especially while looking at Tomura's development...

All For One leaned back in his chair, contemplating. He turned his terminal over, reminding himself of his medical records and vital signs. They showcased his health in exacting detail. Every unpleasant fact.

All For One contemplated a little more.
Chapter Summary

The League is in the spotlight. A lot is new.

It was dragging on late into the night by this point. Eyes tired, snacks depleted, almost time for the two of them to finally give up and go to sleep.

Izuku was once again exercising his unique privilege to play games with Tomura. One of the blessed few (in fact he might be the only one, since Kurogiri was so busy with other things) that had the special blessing of being allowed to be slammed into the ground in-game if Tomura won, or slammed into the ground in real life if Tomura lost. The guy took his play as hard as his work. Video games were serious business, it was a matter of pride. Izuku eventually found out why - Sensei had used games to teach Tomura when he was little. Things to sharpen his reasoning skills and deductive reasoning without boring the fickle child. Since then, he moved on to more enjoyable stuff, but he still took to gaming sessions with passion and intensity.

Which is why him being quiet tonight was a little suspicious.

"...Tomura? Are you okay?"

"Eh. My shoulder is healing. The healing was delayed by a day or two after the attack on Endeavour. But he's probably worse off...scum..."

"That's not what I meant. You're being a little...well, I think something's bothering you."

"Not really."

Izuku let things settle. He had aired the subject. So maybe in a second Tomura would-

Tomura, with difficulty, squeezed out, "Hey, so, the thing with that jackass Stain..."

Right on cue. Despite being secluded most of the time, he wasn't really any good at hiding his feelings.

Izuku responded in an absent tone of voice, letting Tomura approach the subject at his own pace

"Hm?"

"You kind of...recruited him, right?"

"Yes. Well sort of. I mean, he's not an official member. He's the lone wolf type."

"Uh huh. Sure. You remember how I recruited you?"

Izuku's mind flashed back to that fateful day. A chance encounter in an alleyway, sheer terror, a runaway attempt, sheer terror. Good times.

"Yeah, you were the one who brought me here!"

"...Sensei was the one who told me to do that. He wanted to train me."
Tomura paused the game and leaned over to Izuku, face eerily stern.

"Sensei didn't tell you to do that thing with Stain, did he?"

"U-Uh...T-Tomura?"

"Just answer, Deku."

Izuku worriedly responded, "No, no it was entirely down to me."

"Oh. Good."

Tomura unpaused and continued playing like nothing had happened.

"Wait, hang on, you can't just threaten me and then-"

"Who said anything about threatening? I asked you a question."

"I mean...why were you so concerned about whether Sensei had told me to do that?"

Izuku pondered for a second. Could be he be feeling like...his position is being threatened? Tomura was always so reclusive, he kept to his comfort zones. If he felt like that was being taken away from him, if his safe haven was being encroached upon...that would be horrifying for him.

"Tomura, you know...I'm your friend, right?"

"You keep saying as much."

Tomura had said something about not having friends before...

"Right, right...well, that means you don't have to worry right? We've been living under the same roof for so long now. I'm not here to..."

Tomura ominously replied, "To what, Izuku?"

He used his real name. Okay, the mood here is getting distinctly threatening.

"Well, if you're f-feeling at all threatened or uncertain, y'know, I'm not going to hurt you or anything. I swear. I'd never do that to you, Tomura."

Izuku reached over, placing a hand onto Tomura's shoulder.

"I won't replace or supplant you, and I can't. You have a special place among us, and in Sensei's heart. No new members will take that away from you. Even me. I promise."

Tomura sat in silence for a moment, not moving a lot.

After a few seconds, he emotionlessly replied, "Okay."

"Do you mean that?"

Tomura dropped his hands to his sides exhaustedly.

"...ugh. No, no I don't."

Izuku's face dropped for a second, before Tomura raised himself up slightly, sighing loudly.
His throat sounded strained as he choked out, "What I meant was more like...thanks."

"...Tomura! I just...thank you...", Izuku said, tears welling up. It's the first time Tomura had expressed gratitude sincerely.

"You don't need to thank someone for thanking you. Idiot."

Tomura was putting a hand over his face, kind of like how the hand on his costume shields his expression. Maybe that way it would be harder for Izuku to see his smile.

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Giran chuckled, without a care in the world. Good grief, did this guy take anything seriously? As long as money could be made, it was as if Giran didn't care about anything else. Not Izuku's gear, not his safety, and certainly not the overall merits of the League itself.

Giran, still grinning with his gap-toothed smile, spoke, "So, lemme get this straight, you want all of this gear? Just for yourself, right?"

Izuku stood, his hands pressed down on the table. He was trying to negotiate in a cutthroat style, but Giran was looking increasingly like he'd just seen too much to be phased by anything anymore. Perhaps he shouldn't have tried his first attempt at hard-line diplomacy with one of the most seasoned villains in the business.

He pressed on regardless, "Yes. I think I deserve it. I want to be able to help lead this group, I want to accomplish something big. I think I've moved past a combat knife and armored coat."

Giran smirked, "Damn. An unsatisfied customer. Well...I dunno about weaponry. Maybe I know a guy. The costume though? Sheesh...exacting taste, huh?"

"Well...yeah. Some new designs, I know. I made my old costume designs for...when I thought in a different way. But now? I've got some new inspiration. Is it feasible?"

Giran pondered for a second. Well, not exactly. Giran knew what he was going to say already. But he was pretending to decide in order to create suspense. In order to annoy Izuku, basically.

"Well...it's not that I don't have a way to get it. But it'd be a pain in the ass, and pretty expensive. So rather than just paying me in cash that will definitely not make up for the time I gotta spend working this out, how about you lift some of the work off my shoulders? Equal exchange, how's that sound?"

Izuku got the feeling it wasn't quite going to be 'equal' exchange. But Giran was the only person he knew to go to. And Giran was fully aware he didn't have a whole lot of other options.

"Ngh...fine. What do you want me to do?"

Giran finally stood up straight, and his grin only got wider.

"Aaah, attaboy! So, listen up. I'm a big name in the underworld, alright? So I get to hear all the juicy little rumors. I have all the newest trends and all that stuff down pat. And I gotta tell you, I never expected you to make such a big splash, kid. You've made quite a name for yourself down there!"

"W-what? Other people have been talking about me?"
"Other people have been talking about you. Y'know why? Because Stain's been talking about you. The news clips from the other day, Stain's rants whenever he's on a job, your causes are being seen as one and the same. And Stain's a hell of a popular name to be associated with. Y'know, you keep this up, I'm gonna start to feel like my job's getting some competition. You are marketing yourself really well."

Giran turned on the TV monitor in the corner, and flicked over to news channels. The footage of the fight against Endeavour, the portals, the Nomu dropping in and the havoc they caused, destroying the city before heroes brought them down. The police had drawn up sketches of the perpetrators, and Izuku's sketch was right up there next to Stain's. He was kind of flattered the sketch depicted him as being a little more fierce, chiseled and debonair than he actually was.

"Look at this shit, man. You made the news."

"Well, thanks, Giran. But I'm wondering what this has to do with the job?"

"Right. Side-tracked. The point is thanks to this, Stain, Deku and the League of Villains have been popping up everywhere, to the point that rumours have been circulating specifically to ask how to support your cause. And when villains are interested in looking out for something other than numero uno, you know you're looking at something big."

"The League is finally making it big.", Izuku said, restraining a satisfied smirk.

"Right, your rhetoric is making a stir. So that means a few people have started trying to apply to join. And as a scout of villainous talent, it's part of my job to decide who has potential and who gets kicked to the curb. That's kinda why I don't have a lot of free time to get you the stuff you want me to supply."

"So you want me to be a judge?"

"You? Pfft. No, professionals only, kid. No offence, but this job is WAY trickier than you'd think. You need a lot of practice. It gets really messy, trying to judge a persons talents, quirks, and the quality of their character, 'cos humans are just deceptive bastards. But what I do want you to do might give you a bit of experience, I think."

Giran placed two folders on the table, filled with information about two people.

"These are two of the applicants I think are worth our time. But they seem a little freaky. Plus, they're fans of Stain, and I know two things. First, Tomura has a chip on his shoulder over Stain. He's not been in the news nearly as much as you folks. If they roll right up to HQ, I get the feeling shit might happen, since they'll react to your presence right in front of his face."

That claim had some merit. Tomura did not like Stain at all. He was nervous. He's started to build relationships with people and they were still shaky. They relied on security. He wasn't in the right state of mind to get bombarded by more fans of the Hero Killer right now or he'd blow a fuse.

"Second, since they're here 'cos of Stain's speeches, seeing you personally might be the best way to secure their support. So your job is going to be to head out there and meet them. Answer their questions, then bring 'em back to HQ to join your team. Do that, and I'll fulfill your lofty costume expectations. Plus a little something extra. Deal?"

"Well...are you sure you can actually pull this gear off? Kurogiri wanted it to look good, so some of the designs are a little eccentric."

Without hesitation, Giran pulled a gun on Izuku, pointing square at his face. Before Izuku even had
time to decide whether to stick his hands up, threaten, scream for help, or dive at him and attack, Giran whirled the gun around and pointed straight at himself, the gun resting in the perfect position to shoot his throat clean off.

Izuku moved to smack the gun out of his hands. He pulled the trigger.

A small flame sprouted from the top of the guns nozzle. Giran moved the gun around and lit his cigarette.

"Kid, you really don't need to worry about eccentric taste, okay? I've got you covered."

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Izuku found himself walking down a dark corridor. This was where they were last seen, right? He dug out the folder again. Yup, definitely. Apparently there were reports of missing people surrounding this area. Match that up with the other information given about the person themselves, and it couldn't be anywhere else. The corpses were described as 'exsanguinated'. Yikes.

His feet tapped on the cold, hard stone as he made his way down the corridor. The sunset cast a red light over the entrances, but the deeper he walked down the hall, the darker the shadows became, until eventually the lighting was pretty dim. The spooky atmosphere was tense...okay, relax a bit. You're representing the League of Villains, your organisation. They're counting on you to make a good first impression. Straighten up, puff out your chest, walk with the confidence of a villain who's killed someone once in their damn life...there we go. They'll be expecting an organised murderer. Just give them what they asked for.

The tapping of the cold floor continued, but at least Izuku felt a little less spooked. Keep walking. They probably wanted to meet in a place relatively inwards. Somewhere no-one could see them, less risk of civilians or heroes busting in on the-

A pair of hands shot out of one of the rooms on the side, gripping Izuku's arm tightly. Immediately, Izuku was swung around with force, and the next thing he knew his face had been smashed into the wall on the inside of the room. As Izuku pulled his bruised head from the bricks, he heard the sound of a locking door. His eyes stung a bit...it looked like this person-

In the habit of interrupting him, the figure rushed up, pinning him to the wall with a hand. It was a girl. Blonde, really messy hair all tied in a bun. She was grinning at him with really sharp fang-like canine teeth. Sharp yellow eyes met his, their vertical slits making her gaze resemble a wild animal, like a tiger. The teeth didn't help in that regard. Apart from that, she was pretty, and her blush gave her a kind of constantly excited look to her. But that happily excited look wasn't very comforting seeing as she was making it just after having attempted to knock him out.

The girl tilted her head to the side a bit, "Hey, you're kind of cute."

"Wha-w-wait, hey!"

As if her actions were the expected and natural conclusion to complimenting someone, the girl had raised her knife high in the air, aiming it at Izuku's jugular vein. Izuku was going to try and say something but this girl was way too crazy to listen right now. Reacting quickly, Izuku headbutted her right on the bridge of her nose. She plunged the knife downwards, but Izuku followed through on the movement and dug his forehead into her face, causing him to lean far enough forward that the knife only slashed his back. The girl hit the floor, still gripping her knife tightly.

"Stop! I'm...I'm not a civilian!"
"Oh, that's quite the ego. Rich boys die just as quickly as poor ones, you know?" the girl said, rising to her feet as if joking around.

"No, I mean I'm with the League of Villains!"

The girl kind of froze at that one. She walked forwards a bit, slowly. Izuku still readied himself up. If she broke into a sprint to try to catch him off guard, he would be ready.

The girl's eyes widened, a look of surprise entering her face, quickly turning into...adoration!? She tucked her knife away.

"Oooh...OOOHHH! So that's why I thought you looked good! I'm so so sorry, you're him, right? Deku! The one who Mr Stainy talked about, right?", the girl rambled, bouncing up and down enthusiastically, starry eyed.

"Um...yes. My name is Deku. Nice to...meet you?"

For the sake of decorum, Deku extended his hand. Besides, a hand shaking his was a hand that wasn't currently trying to draw a knife on him.

The girl took his hand, suddenly polite, nodding. "My name is Himiko Toga. It's an honour!"

"Thank you. So, you called me here to talk about potentially joining the League?"

"Yup, that's right! What Mr Stainy has been talking about lately really inspired me, and I'm hoping to follow his ideals, go out there, and make the world an easier place to live in!"

Himiko smiled cheerfully, about as peppy as could be. Did she really change from assailant to ally at the drop of a hat? He began to realise why Giran foisted this job upon him.

Himiko moved a hand up, wiping a tiny drip of blood from his head. "What's that look supposed to mean? Don't worry about earlier. I get the feeling you and I are going to be great friends!"
Izuku walked into the warehouse. All features in the creaking wooden room looked dirty and unkempt, and the dust in the air nearly made Izuku sneeze. In spite of this, he was attempting to keep a calm demeanour. The files indicated this particular applicant hadn't committed any major or 'flashy', as Giran put it, crimes yet. The impression of who he was and where he had come from was vague at best. Even when dealing with Himiko, Izuku was priding himself on representing the League as best he could, so he walked in regardless, keeping his head held high.

Of course, this impression was nearly ruined by the barely restrained girl with the permanent smile walking beside him. She's not...impolite or anything, like, she's clearly trying to be encouraging. But she's hardly giving off a professional vibe. It also didn't help that she'd given Izuku a small gash on his head, and Izuku was wearing a small bandage around his head to compensate. Himiko had looked a little too eager to dress the wound. Exsanguinated victims...meaning they had all the blood drained from them. That's a really distinctive crime pattern. Izuku made a mental note not to get cut up around her.

Izuku called out into the empty room, "Hello? This is the time and place for our meeting, right?"

A short silence. And then, a voice spoke up, audibly coming from above the room they were currently hiding in.

"A meeting for what?"

"A meeting for your request to join the League of Villains. You said you sought out the group who followed Stain's cause."

"...okay, come on up."

A ladder extended from a small hole in the roof. Himiko gestured for Izuku to climb up. In the interests of keeping things serious, Izuku stopped himself from getting upset about that, seeing as they could potentially be meeting someone dangerous.

Izuku nonetheless climbed up. There was a small box TV in the corner, which was playing a few recorded news stories, specifically the ones about Stain's escape from justice, and the righteous speech he gave towards Endeavour and hero society. A shadowed man was sitting in an armchair next to a little table with a lantern, leaning back and watching them.

The man spoke up first, "Had to be sure you weren't heroes, or just crashing the meeting."

"I can't blame you for being a little cautious. After all, our work requires some discretion."

"Discretion, huh? Is that why she's with you?"
Izuku looked over. Himiko had climbed up the ladder, and was waving enthusiastically at the seated figure.

Izuku couldn't really defend himself on that note. Calmness was not her forte. "...yes?"

"...yeah, okay then."

The man leaned forwards in his chair, then snapped his fingers. In a flash, a spectacular blue flame burst into life on the his fingertips. Opening the lantern with his free hand, he lit the candle inside, casting the room in a ghostly blue glow. In the pale light, his features were revealed. Pretty tall, slim. Black spiky hair that resembled Kacchan's, and turquoise eyes to match his fires. But oh boy, that was not the most notable trait of this guy's appearance, not by a long shot.

His face was divided into normal skin and purple, deeply wrinkled, almost burned looking flesh, especially around the bottom half of his mouth and below his ears to his chest, as well as in bags underneath his eyes. There were staples lining the areas where his regular skin and his malformed segments joined, and it was hard to tell if they were there in order to medically hold him together, if they were for cosmetic purposes, or if they were creating the effect in the first place. It was deeply unsettling, and his dull, blank expression only accentuated his zombie-like looks.

Himiko spoke up while Izuku was quieting down out of tact and shock, "Oh wow, you look like a patchwork doll. Made of flesh. Does that hurt at all?"

The figure raised an eyebrow, and his face moved in a way that implied it still functioned as a face. Izuku was a bit relieved.

Izuku sat down next to the figure, and initiated the conversation. "Pleasure to meet you. My name is Deku."

"I'm Himiko Toga!"

She was making this so much more difficult than it needed to be. The man was narrowing his eyes at her, before he spoke, "Are you guys a serious organisation? She's clearly crazy."

"Well, um, she's one of our newest candidates. I did tell her just to go back to HQ for now..."

Himiko grinned, "But I wanted to meet up with other people who were joining the League for the first time. Besides, I had to make sure to fix up De-"

Izuku put his finger to his lips, and Himiko hurriedly quietened down, before taking a seat as well.

"Anyway, you've heard my name, what's yours?"

"You didn't give me your name. That's just your moniker, isn't it? Either that or you're withholding your surname."

"Deku is my villain name, yes."

"I'm not giving you my name unless you give me yours."

The figure looked at him with suspicious eyes, but Himiko broke the silence.

"Hang on, I gave you guys my real name. We don't have to be so suspicious, we're all in the same boat, right?"

"...yeah, she's definitely crazy", the man said, rolling his eyes, "but she's not really wrong either, I
With a soft sight, the man relented. "You can call me Dabi."

Himiko looked delighted, "Great, great. Let's all get friendly fast. After all, we're all fans of Mr Stainy, right?"

Dabi pointed at Izuku sternly, "Speaking of which, Deku...you're the one on the news, aren't you? The one who helped Stain escape, and you teamed up with him afterwards."

Izuku smiled despite himself, too proud of his accomplishments to remain humorless, "Yep, that was me. Stain and I ended up, uh, having a lot in common. Way more that I thought we would."

"Hmh...it took guts to run out like that, and to stand up to...well, Endeavour. I respect that."

"Well, I appreciate it. The League is dedicated to putting themselves on the line for causes like that. Hero society is going to hear us, if not by reason, then force."

Dabi's mouth grinned maliciously, accented by the staples lining the link between his ears and his lips, making his grin appear to extend up his face similarly to Tomura's, "Well, that's just what I wanted to hear. Superhuman society needs to be taught a lesson, and internal changes aren't coming anytime soon."

"Exactly, exactly!", Izuku said, hearing Stain's rhetoric through Dabi's words, "Our world has moved on faster than proper regulations to guide it. Heroes run the show and the weak-quirked are left by the wayside completely."

Himiko joined in, "But if we show them how unprepared they really are, how strong villains are, we'll manage to create a better world! One where we can finally take it easy."

Dabi leaned backwards, "Hey hey, are you implying I have a weak quirk, now?" Blue flames began to dance around his hands, so Izuku decided to drop his big revelation on them to keep Dabi from burning down the building to make a point.

Izuku, expression stone cold, responded, "I mean, it looks pretty impressive! But I'm in no place to judge that. I'm quirkless."

Dabi tilted his head to the side, observing him, probably looking for a signal he was lying. Silence settled, and Himiko looked like she realised why Izuku resorted to a headbutt to get free earlier.

Dabi's eyes sharpened into a thin, shocked glare. "Are you now...that's interesting. That's very interesting."

Dabi stood up, and Izuku did the same, instinctively seeing the finality of his decision.

"Well, at least I believe you're standing by what you're saying. Even if some of your membership seem a bit freaky", he said, shooting a sideways glance at a completely undeterred Himiko, "I can't dismiss the motivations of a quirkless kid putting himself on the front lines. I mean...I assume you've got some stronger allies?"

Izuku smiled confidently, "Two of our key members have some of the strongest quirks I've ever seen, and we're sorting through new applications by the minute."

Dabi put a hand on his charred or rotted chin. "Okay then. I'm in."
Izuku stuck out a hand for Dabi to shake. After a moment's hesitation, he accepted. From the centre of his palms upward, his skin was that strange, wrinkly, purple complexion. It felt kind of like an unpleasant mix of leathery and elasticy. But overall, Dabi seemed pretty reliable. Dismissive, pretty blunt, but dedicated and cool-headed. Aside from that last part, basically quite like Tomura.

Izuku smiled evilly, "Welcome to the League of Villains, Dabi."

"Alright. Let's head to your headquarters. I want to check out the rest of your so called leadership."

Izuku slid down the ladder, and led his two now allies off into the distance. Two new allies, two new quirks, two new minds working to take the world of heroes to task. With some effort, they might just end up turning out to be some of the best of the best. Izuku turned back to them, to appraise them again.

Himiko was trying repeatedly to get Dabi's attention, while he kept his eyes dully on the road ahead. Eventually, she whipped her knife out to try and show it off, pointing out it's craftsmanship and practical applications. Dabi slapped it out of her hands, and she dove to the floor to retrieve it, then started arguing with a smug looking Dabi about how her knives are important to her.

Yeah. With some effort. Maybe quite a lot of it.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the shorter upload, but to be fair it's the second one I've posted today, so think of it as a bonus. Time zones curveballed me in terms of making sure I was updating daily, so I decided I'd add something additional today. Enjoy!
You and me and the devil makes two

Chapter Summary

Izuku, recruits in tow, is pulled away for a moment.

These two made something of an interesting pair. Himiko seemed eager to chat, and while she didn't quite qualify as hyperactive, she was clearly very outgoing. Dabi looked midway between judging you and sticking a boot up your ass, and gave off a distinct vibe of 'don't talk to me'. They both seemed willing to listen to Izuku's instructions though, as he led them through the shadowed alleyways. And of course, sifting through mismatched wall after mismatched wall, finally making their way to the League of Villains HQ doorway, who should they find but Giran, leaning smugly against the wall. Well, he could have just been leaning regularly. Giran just gave off a constant air of smugness.

Himiko slowly leaned over, and covertly whispered, "Is he with us, or is he in our way?"

Izuku motioned for Himiko not to attack him, and walked over to Giran, annoyed.

Giran noticed them, and cocked his head, looking at Izuku's head injury. "Wow, kid. Did you take a tumble or something?"

"I got attacked by one of the recruits that you said was 'worth our time', you manipulative...ngh…"

"Hahaha, occupational hazard, pal. Which one was it? The girl over there? Real crazy eyes, that one."

Izuku wasn't taking it. He didn't let up his glare. "...you really don't care that I nearly got killed, do you? You just wanted to make sure you didn't have to deal with the dangerous ones."

"Look, I'll cover the price of your medicine if you're gonna whine this much. Besides, I just got finished dealing with some dude who hungers for flesh and has a sword-tooth quirk. Don't you come at me with 'dangerous', okay?", Giran said, looking suddenly just as annoyed.

"H-Huh? Wait, you were-"

"Yeah, I wasn't using my free time to take a 5 minute vacation. I was dealing with recruits of my own while I was hunting down your order of new gear."

Giran shook his phone, a pink device with bunny ears on it, "Which by the way, is en route. Your gear will be here in about a day."

"Thanks. But hang on, wait a second, what's this about new recruits?"

Giran's smile broke wider, finally making the enjoyable transition between cocky and evil smile, "Buddy, you got a lot of applications, and a lot of them are strong. Your little family is about to get a lot bigger."

"A-a-and Tomura approved this?"
"Eh. Not yet. He's gonna be meeting these two first."

"Himiko and Dabi? The Stain fans!?"

Giran shrugged, "Trial by fire. Throwing him in the deep end. If he can't accept these guys, I might as well tell the other recruits to go home."

Izuku looked back, a little worried. Dabi seemed cool-headed, and Himiko was usually pretty polite despite her enthusiasm...they'd probably be fine...hopefully...maybe. Giran opened the door, and motioned for them to enter. Izuku made to follow them, but Giran blocked him off with an arm.

"Giran, let me through. These guys are going to need a voice of reason."

"Yeah, look, I'm a broker, y'know. I don't make decisions about what you get to do, I just follow them."

Izuku whirled around. He'd had about enough of Giran's nonsense today. "Who the heck told you to bar me from the interview?"

"The boss. He said he wants a word with you, Deku, in private."

Izuku's face dropped immediately, "Do you mean...Sensei?"

"Yeah, that's what Tomura calls him, anyway. He's got a way to bring you to him, now that you guys have an established close relationship."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm saying, I'm gonna press a button on my phone, and he's gonna take that as a signal to warp you over there. Side note, you might wanna hold your breath. The, eheh, method of transport stinks something awful. This is gonna be unpleasant."

Izuku opened his mouth to ask more questions, but Giran had already pressed the send button. Suddenly, Izuku felt something in his throat, something that expanded and pushed upwards like he was being sick. Before he could react, a thick, black sludge was bursting from his mouth and nose, enveloping him from the inside out. As it covered his eyes, Izuku began to have flashbacks to the Sludge Villain attack, and his breath was robbed from him. He collapsed, senses blinded to such a degree he couldn't tell how he collapsed.

But the next moment, Izuku knew he must have collapsed. Because he was lying on the floor, half-unconscious, eyes fluttering as his body started to bring itself back to reality. Back into a room so featureless it felt like it existed outside of reality entirely. Back to a large wooden table, this time decorated with a tasteful tea set, and the steam in the teapot signified it was ready to be served. Back to a table with one wooden chair for Izuku, and one large chair, different than the one he had seen previously. It was much more bulky and mechanical, with wires, and a heads up display integrated into its right armrest, turned so Izuku could not see it. But just like last time, a familiar half-face stared back at him, seated comfortably.

All For One smiled, "Greetings, Deku. It has been far too long."

Izuku took a seat opposite him, a relieved smile spreading across his face, "It's great to see you again as well, Sensei."

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Tomura looked out over these two brats. The loudmouth and the aloof bastard. Both going on about this and that, wasting time...but Sensei had warned him to be calm. Izuku had selected them himself, Giran told him. Still, they were so irritating, their words were buried underneath their expressions. That was what was important. Their looks betrayed their words to falseness.

He didn't like the way that rotten-faced bastard was looking at him. His reserved, detached, judgemental eyes. They reminded him so much of Stain. The one who claimed superiority over others because of something as inconsequential as a cause or a motto...no, doing something for yourself, because you cared about it, that wasn't enough. Not unless you had people affirming you were doing the right thing. That uppity attitude...it's just semantics. The worst thing was, Stain didn't even have that. He was a lone wolf who claimed to be channelling some great cause, but he was all by himself, and no one supported him before he got help from the very people he dismissed as useless and stabbed in the shoulder. How sad is that?

He could see Kurogiri eyeing him up. He'd only recently been able to notice it, y'know. How much Kurogiri looked over to check on him. He'd seen Kurogiri do the same thing for Izuku, or Deku, making sure he was alright, not going to freak out or get scared. Especially early on, when his face still resembled a dying fish. Only then did he really notice how Kurogiri was watching at him in the same protective way. He could see Kurogiri was watching to see if he'd break into a temper over these two. Could he really be blamed? It's like this zombified bastard was going out of his way to get on his nerves.

No, let it go. Your anger is separating you from your real allies. Sensei told you to make a team. Kurogiri wants a team. Izuku is helping you make a team. Even if these guys end up just being pains in the ass, you'll have at least kept them happy. Maybe Izuku was right about them, who knows. Just let them keep yapping on.

Tomura let his tensed shoulders drop back to his sides, and Kurogiri seemed pleasantly surprised.

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Sensei chuckled good-naturedly, "So, I see you've been busy, young Deku. I'm sure by now I'm not the first to have pointed out that you have become famous by association."

Deku put his hand behind his head, "Well, I just...it wasn't really a conscious decision. I just did what I thought was right."

"And it is precisely because you followed true ambitious conviction that you succeeded, and you rightfully earned all the more praise for it, my boy!"

Sensei's excitement was slightly muffled by a scratchy quality to his throat. And the more time Izuku spent in his presence, the more he noticed that Sensei was shrinking in size slightly. He looked a bit thinner than before.

"I just did what I think you would have wanted me to do."

Sensei leaned back, slyly. "Oh really, young Deku? Do you truly think I would have risked my life to save another? Do you see me as an altruistic man, after all that I have gone through? Of course not. I would never have taken the set of actions you have taken, not in a million years. Your choices were entirely your own. And that is why I have brought you here."

Sensei started pouring Izuku a cup of tea, his movements slightly stiff.

Izuku shied away slightly, "I'm sorry, if this is going to turn into a lecture about how I should be
more villainous and selfish, that's fine, but-

"Not at all. Your decisions seem to be working for you quite nicely. Far be it from me to force my ideals on you. In my hands, your methods would be limitations. But to you, they are boons."

Izuku was once again shocked at how open-minded Sensei was being. "Well then...um, what's your reason for calling me here, sir?"

"Well, in our conversation about methods, I think something has been made quite clear. I'm not sure which ideal is strongest, for our perspectives have never clashed, and we have never been hostile to each other. But despite my doubtful dismissal of your resolve, you have proven to me time and time again that it works for you. Who knows, perhaps you would have been better off accepting one of my quirks and running wild, so to speak. But the important thing is, in my eyes, you have proven the worth of your way of thinking."

Izuku sat in stunned silence. Was Sensei, the greatest villain of all time, really...

Sensei finished pouring his own cup of tea, returning to leaning back in his chair.

"You, Deku, have challenged my way of thinking. The number of people who have challenged my thinking and stood strong for even a moment is very small, my boy. You should be proud."

"I-I'm honoured you think of me that way."

"You have given yourself that honour. You have set yourself goals, and accomplished them. This is all a man can strive for."

All For One looked into his teacup, unmoving.

"I had a goal, my boy. I still wish to achieve it, somewhere deep down. All villains are motivated by a deep, burning ambition. They are not merely idle vagabonds. Those are just criminals. But villains...villains have a dream. I am the same. But now that the infinite has become finite, and the embers fade, I have been forced to consider what is realistic."

Izuku's heart strained. 'What's realistic'. Even Sensei...even this legend amongst men felt these limitations. Izuku found his arm reaching across the tabletop sympathetically.

"Do not pity me, Deku. It is unbecoming."

"I'm not...my apologies, Sensei." Izuku managed to stiffen his face again.

"...You have proven yourself a person who can champion their own convictions, my boy. The offer to accept a quirk from me still stands, if you would take it. You have clearly proven your worth. To everybody around you, I would think, including me."

"But if I took one, I'd lose that sense of worth in the eyes of the person it matters most to. Myself."

All For One laughed slightly, a tinge of sadness in his voice.

"Oh young Deku, you leave me bemused every time! I fail to see the worth of this restraint. But telling you to abandon your own principles, what makes you happy, is the very essence of selflessness and compromise that a true villain would never accept."

"Your words mean a lot to me, sir. Your belief in my worth, a worth entirely my own...I can't thank you enough for giving that to me."
"But I did not just bring you here to encourage you."

Izuku smirked, "You wouldn't waste your valuable time just on that, right?"

"Quite so. Young Deku, when you first agreed to accompany us, you came here with a certain goal in mind, yes? To see the world from the perspective of those who don't like All Might, to be given the freedom to make your own judgements. But that wasn't all, was it? You came here because you had some deep, burning questions, didn't you?"

Izuku didn't flinch. Of course Sensei would've known. You don't get this powerful if you can't read people. He had to do it. If he didn't play his hand now, he never would.

"Sensei, I know you're keeping something from us. I'm sure you already know this, and I know I can't use it as a bargaining chip anymore, so I will just say it. Back at the USJ, All Might intervened. The entire point of the mission was to kill All Might. Any information on the No. One Hero should have been shared with everyone present. That way, All Might would have been more vulnerable. But you didn't. I saw it, Sensei. All Might...we both know of his limitations, don't we? His injury?"

All For One flinched. He actually flinched. His left arm gripped his armrest a little tighter, involuntarily.

"He can't use his power continuously. After a while, his strength runs out, and he becomes very weak. I know that, and you know that..."

Sensei tried to speak, "Young Deku, how-"

"But Tomura didn't! And because Tomura, Kurogiri, and none of the other villains knew, All Might was able to bluff his way out of being killed. Because you kept secrets from us, we failed in our first ever mission, and our entire organisation was crippled. You said at the time it was 'optimism', a miscalculation. No, it was because you withheld information. That was entirely your fault, Sensei! And I want to know why. What kind of secret about All Might do you know that is so important that you would jeopardise your own plans, and throw us all to the wolves?"

Sensei was breathless, and so was Izuku. He didn't realise up until the end how progressively louder he was getting. Sensei looked down. His expression was hard to read, but he looked...mournful. Maybe even ashamed.

"Deku, I didn't...you're full of surprises, aren't you? This story...oddly enough, the irony is that I summoned you here to tell you the very story you have inquired about."

"Sensei, please. We're on your side. Don't lie to me."

"I know, I know. I will explain this. As well as my reasoning for keeping it hidden. Well, this story is...particularly close to my heart, young Deku. It's got an awful lot to it, but seeing as you seem to know about some of the plot twists, I'll focus on the parts that add to your knowledge."

Izuku sat patiently, giving Sensei some space. "Whenever you're ready, Sensei."

"I suppose, to put it concisely, this could best be explained as...a story about two brothers."
"So...Toxic Chainsaw was just a coverup for you?"

"To this day, that name is used synonymously with me when discussing the deception of All Might. If his secret is to be discovered, at least they will have an extra barrier to prevent the revelation of my existence. I am the best kept secret of the modern world, my boy."

"And All Might. The symbol of...the SYMBOL. OF PEACE. The worlds mightiest hero...his power was a gift from you!?"

Sensei nodded solemnly, "Passed down over generations. My brother hid it away. Cultivated it, as all it's subsequent users have. And now I lie here, as my act of compassion mounts on me, ready to smite me from existence, and I can do nothing but wait as it grows ever stronger."

"No, no Sensei, you're not out of the game yet. You're not immobilised completely! You can use All For One to gather power far faster than One For All could ever manage!"

Sensei threw his arms wide, gesturing to his chair. The tubes in his neck and face, just barely sustaining him through the colossal injuries All Might subjected him to. "Look at me, young Deku! I am shattered. My doctors are hard at work, but even with their assistance my portable life support system only works for so long, and when not in use I must be confined to my chair. All Might succeeded in impairing my movement long enough that he can prepare himself to reel back for another blow, and finish the job. My body no longer suits my needs."

Izuku sat still, fear edging its way up his back like a knife.

"This only ends one of two ways, Deku. Either All Might is slain, and All For One's ability to control power regains its monopoly, allowing its wielder to control the flow of quirks, or...something far worse."

"All Might wins."

"You would think that would be the end of the story. The hero succeeds, bright sunny days forevermore. But it's never that simple. I do not look at good and evil, young Deku, I look at power. Power and stability. Back then, my mind was ignorant to the true implications of a long, expansive future. And back then I created a grave chasm in the balance of power than I must undo."

Sensei’s voice was becoming choked up. A man as great as this, a shadow emperor, wheezing out his deepest regrets in a medical chair.

"One For All...it's power will grow indefinitely, and it's power can only belong to the one who wields it. All For One grants its owner control, but One For All grants its owner static power. They become a lone, strong pillar amidst a sea of uncertainty and shifting balance. Young Deku, what do you think will happen when One For All reaches its apex?"
"It will be unstoppable. The strongest power to ever exist. To be honest...I'm not sure if a power like that even has an apex. Like yours, it has limitless potential."

"Yes. But even my power is limited by my contemporaries, as I can only take quirks from others, and I can also spread my quirks to whoever I wish. It is flexible. But One For All will make its owner into a singular god. And one day, they will make a mistake such as the one I made, and pass that power on to someone unworthy of it. And when that day happens, all of the world will know not leadership, but subjugation. I cannot...I can never allow such a catastrophe to pass."

"...Isn't that what you wanted? Control of the world?"

Sensei looked down at his cup, gesturing around it with his hand, as if to occupy himself.

"...Deku, villains don't think purely out of hatred. Envy, jealously, possessiveness, outright hedonism...people can forget sometimes that these are born of love, too. A love that burns too fiercely, and too strong. I wanted to guide this world because I wanted to lead it into my perfect future. And I fear for someone else doing that, lest they lead it astray."

Izuku nodded. He couldn't completely say he agreed, because Sensei was even acknowledging himself that it was hypocritical. But...it was an interesting insight into the mentality of a tyrant. Into the mind of a man who, given the slightest opportunity, would have ruled the world.

"Remember, Deku, Othello was not a villain out of spite or bloody urge. He committed his mistakes because he 'loved not wisely, but too well'. And now, thanks to that, I have been reduced to merely arguing from a medical chair with you. About how much better I would be doing if I could only move. Trying to raise others to perfect a world I will never see with my two eyes again", Sensei said, touching the scarred flesh that stretched across his eye sockets, "and imparting what wisdom I can before I finally return to the earth. So I would only ask that for now, you humor your old teacher, if you cannot forgive him."

Izuku breathed slowly, and calmly. None of what had been said had passed over his head. This wasn't just about heroes and villains, power and conviction. Sensei was of the opinion this was what all of human society revolved around, and the victor would forever shape the world.

Izuku asked, "And what if the owner of One For All dies naturally? Chosing never to pass on his power?"

"And what if they don't? Just as I stand now, trying to pass on myself to others, so to, I know, will they wish to ensure they leave behind a guardian of this world's future before they fade away."

Sensei's dignified tone betrayed a hint of desperation. Izuku had never seen this man look more frail. His paranoia was visible, not just in his expression, but because it was the cause of every injury and every scar riddling his body.

Izuku stood up, "Sensei, I...I want to help you. If I can."

Sensei looked over at him, leaning forwards with intensity.

"Do you think you can?"

Izuku returned the gaze with zeal. He could feel himself heating up.

"I know that I can. And that I must."
All For One watched as Deku was overwhelmed by the Warping liquid and was returned to the League HQ. What a perfect meeting.

He had chosen, of his own volition, to trust in his own judgement over the judgement of others. Rather than trust in future generations of One For All to be responsible for their own fates, Deku had elected to take this responsibility into his own hands, and rule over them.

For someone with such a noble spirit, he was adapting to All For One's teachings rather flawlessly. They say you very much become who you admire.

How interesting.

Izuku finally made back to the League HQ. He stood up. He checked the time, 0:24am, and started walking. He passed Kurogiri. He passed Tomura at the bar, who looked like he was trying to cool off after the interviews. He opened the door, and stepped out into the back alleys. He walked out into the streets, and, throwing his hood up to shield his face, made his way deep into the moonlit city. It was a risk to go outside. But one he felt he had to make.

Izuku carried on walking for about 40 minutes.

After what felt like a century, he found himself on a street corner, surrounded by closed shops, a cozy-looking inn, and no people around. There was a public payphone on the wall outside of one of the closed off-license shops. Izuku walked over, slotted a few coins inside of it, and punched in a number almost from muscle memory.

It was late at night. Sure enough, it went to voicemail.

"Hi, this is the Midoriya household! Sorry, we're unable to pick up at the moment, but if you leave a message we'll get right back to you! Thank you!"

A sharp beep. It was recording.

Izuku took in a ragged breath, and stuttered out, "H-Hi Mom..."

Damn it, he was already stuttering. She was going to get worried about him now...

"This is Izuku. Your son. Um...I know it's been a while. Way too long..."

Izuku's throat was getting tighter. He was already tearing up. 40 minutes to prepare, and his mind was already blanking on what to say.

"But I want to let you know t-that I'm doing fine, okay? I'm okay. A-And you're going to be okay too, I promise!"

So much I want to tell her...

"I'm...*sniff*...dammit. I'm working hard. On something I truly believe in. I'm sorry I left...I'm sorry I couldn't be there..."

Izuku wiped his face, soaking his sleeve in tears.

"But it's going to be okay. I'm h-helping people! Including...those who need it most. I've not compromised my ideals at all, I promise."
Izuku took a breath. Tears were steaming down his cheeks, but he managed to keep his voice steady. For her sake.

"I need you to trust me. Everything will be okay in the end. Trust in me. Trust in the child you know wouldn't ever actually be vicious, or cruel, or nasty. He's not gone away. So I need...I need you to believe in me. I need you to believe that I'm doing the right thing. I promise you I am."

Izuku felt drained of everything. Any more talking and he was going to collapse. His time on the phone was nearly gone as well.

"Goodbye mom. L-Love you."

The phone let out a loud, resounding beep. He couldn't have cut his last words any closer if he tried.

Silently, Izuku hung the phone back up in its cradle. Feeling lighter than he did before, Izuku walked back down the alleyways, careful to keep himself out of sight.

After a quiet, reflective walk back to the HQ, Izuku knocked on the door and entered, walking back into the orange light he felt so comforted by.

Kurogiri inquired, "Are you perhaps feeling a little better now, mister Deku?"

Izuku feigned ignorance, "I don't know what you're talking about, Kurogiri."

"Well, you completely ignored me earlier when I tried to talk to you after you arrived here, covered in sludge. You also have quite a melancholy expression on your face. I can't help but be a little concerned."

"S-Sorry if I ignored you. I don't think I heard..." 

"Think nothing of it. Just take care of yourself."

Tomura, leaning on the counter like a drunkard or a concussion victim, spoke up, "Hey Deku. The crazy girl recruit wanted to talk to you."

Izuku nearly jumped, "Wait, is she still here?"

Kurogiri replied, with a resigned tone, "Yes, many of our recruits are. And so it falls to me to begin the arduous task of preparing all of their rooms. Seeing as Tomura won't help..."

Tomura made a small noise of refusal.

"...and you might find yourself a tad too preoccupied with the package that has arrived for you."

Izuku finally raised his head up a bit, enough to notice a large box with a large amount of duct tape stuck to it all over.

Izuku found himself getting excited already, "Wait, it already arrived? Really?"

"I believe Giran ensured it was sent here abnormally fast. I can't recall his exact words, but I believe the phrases 'drop it off ASAP you goons' and 'or I'll cut off your toes with a fork' were used at some point during his phone conversations. He is a man of many talents. Eloquence, perhaps. Intimidation, certainly."
"Well, make sure to tell Giran I said thank you! And the delivery workers, uh...maybe a little apology."

"I'll pass on your regards, mister Deku. In any case, the contents are all yours."

Izuku hesitated a little bit, "Actually...can I be really boring for a second?"

"If you insist."

"Um, how many rooms are you actually preparing?"

"Unfortunately, eight. There are actually nine recruits, but one of them seems quite content to confine himself to the basement and kill rats for practice. You will be hearing no complaints from me."

Izuku smiled happily, "Well...in that case, I think I'll give you a hand."

Kurogiri looked a little surprised, "I'm not one to turn down help, but are you sure?"

"Yes. I want this...I want to make sure they get a warm welcome. Like mine. Besides, you'll be working for days if you have to clean up all of them by yourself."

Kurogiri, delighted to see Izuku's consideration, picked up a selection of cleaning supplies, and handed Izuku some of them.

"Very well, mister Deku. Let us make this house a home!"

Izuku made his way upstairs. *Yeah, he thought, a home.*
A happy knife is a happy life

Chapter Summary

Izuku is accosted by his former assailant.

Izuku finally finished cleaning the rooms. Kurogiri used his warp gate to act as an impromptu bin, anything in the rooms that wasn't necessary was thrown right out. Sadly that didn't get Izuku out of having to do a lot of the work himself. Especially since a few of them had some pretty specific tastes for their rooms.

One of them was empty except for weights, a bed and a punching bag. One of them was absolutely piled with books and a maintenance bench for weapons. One of them was filled with knife collections and some strange medical freezer. And one of them was filled with more Stain memorabilia than Izuku ever had of All Might, a ludicrous feat seeing as Stain wasn't even promoted by civilian sources. Most of the others were...relatively normal, I guess. Maybe they were planning on keeping their room tastes a secret and wanted to decorate them themselves.

"Okay...mister Deku, I believe we have finally finished our duties. Dabi's room is finished."

The final room, one of the relatively regular ones, had been polished to pristine perfection. Kurogiri took pride in his work. Which unfortunately meant Izuku was made to follow those same incredibly high standards for this bit of work too. His hands felt like they were going to develop callouses. He smelled like lemon-scented detergent.

"About time...eight rooms. Eight rooms!"

"Indeed. Now, mister Deku, you have but a taste of my pain."

"Remind me and Tomura to give you a day off sometime soon."

"I'm quite alright with my current working conditions. After all, someone's got to keep you two from ruining yourselves. If I wasn't there, I believe Tomura might have had a bit of an altercation during his interviews with mister Dabi and miss Himiko."

Izuku turned around, a little bit suprised, "Wait, Tomura wasn't violent? Not even a little?"

"No, as a matter of fact he was able to restrain himself."

Izuku's mouth curled into a small smile, "Well...it's great to see he's making such good progress!"

"I credit that mostly to you being such a good influence on him, mister Deku."

Izuku looked over to Kurogiri. His expression, even given the circumstances of his apperance, was unreadable.

"I implore you, mister Deku, if I may be so bold...do not neglect your time with mister Shigaraki, if possible. He is a very dependant boy. Your company means a lot to him. Even in light of our new membership, he will require your support to interact with them in a healthy manner, so please, take care of him, won't you?"
Izuku felt the responsibility of his friend's happiness weighing upon his shoulders. He raised himself up to carry it.

"Don't worry, Kurogiri. I said I'd be there for him already. I keep my word."

Kurogiri, eyes narrowed in an indication of a smile, said, "Thank you. As for now, I believe you have earned yourself a good night's sleep."

"See you soon, Kurogiri", Izuku said, stretching to unwind from the tenseness of a day spent obliterating cobwebs.

Izuku made his way down the corridor. Every door in this hallway was once sealed up and boarded, but now at least eight of them housed eight new people for Izuku to interact with. In the span of one day. He could see some of them shifting around or walking past while he was cleaning. Dabi, a very muscular man in a tank top, a man with yellow spiked hair, and a man with an absolutely amazing gold-orange overcoat. How these people would act or get along with others in the League was still a mystery. He, Tomura and Kurogiri had their work cut out for them. Izuku wondered whether they came here due to Stain's teachings, or whether they had their own reasons. Maybe they already knew who 'Deku' was by hearing about him from Stain. What had Stain been saying about him? Would that at all affect how he was going to get along with them? What kinds of skills and quirks do they have?

Izuku only snapped himself out of his relentless rambling when he was back inside his own room. Normally he would have kept muttering to himself in the comfort of his abode anyway, but the sudden appearance of Himiko Toga sitting on his bed and waiting for him to arrive nearly made him choke on air.

"W-What the hell!? How did you get in here!?"

Himiko grinned, "I had to go somewhere else while you were cleaning my room. Thanks, by the way!"

"Well...why my room? Why are you here, and why were you waiting for me to get back, and why are you staring at me?"

Himiko got up and rushed over to Izuku, closing the door behind him and smiling up at him relentlessly. Didn't this feel familiar?

"Well, you're Deku, right? We talked about this, right? You met Mr Stainy, the one who kills people in blood-soaked battles to birth a brighter future!"

"If I t-tell you more about Stain, will you promise not to gut me?"

"I wasn't planning on gutting you in the first place, so you've got a deal!"

In spite of her bold personality, she didn't look like she was trying to be deceptive or manipulative. Something about her eager smile seemed quite honest. Perhaps it was alright to risk letting his guard down around her, seeing as he had a very similar problem warming up to Tomura and Kurogiri at first as well...

"Okay, well...what do you want to hear about?"

Himiko leaned against the wall, a finger on her chin in contemplation, "Oh, well, Mr Stainy,
um...why does he do what he does, all that mayhem and slaughter? He's constantly saying it's for a 'better society', but why did he decide he had to fix it?"

Izuku was a little taken aback, "That's...actually a really good question. Um, Stain's motivations...he said he wanted to destroy hero society because of false heroes, and that they are the cause for all of society's problems. Heroes, he says, should be those who fight with no thought of personal reward, and who accomplish great deeds for the sake of the people's safety alone."

Himiko nodded cheerily, "Uhuh, uhuh. Thanks, but I know all that stuff already. Interviews, radio analysts...even the lizard-guy with the sword made of swords could've told me that."

"I beg your pardon, lizard-WHAT!?!"

Himiko, completely unphased, pressed onwards, "Calm down, you'll meet him later. He's a fun guy! Anyway, I was more talking about his 'tragic backstory'. What kind of life he lived that led him to this philosophy, y'know? I want to know ALL about him, every detail."

Izuku faltered a little, "Well...I'm sorry, Stain's never one to focus on the past. He's always talking about the 'better future' so much I don't think he ever wanted to talk about his life before he became the Hero Killer. I'll make sure to ask him about that though, the very next time I see him."

Himiko pouted, "Huh...I really thought you would've known. Still," she said, picking up energy again, "that just means he's keeping his past under lock and key! Isn't that kind of cool anyway?"

Izuku looked on as Himiko threw her arms up happily, remarking, "You really are just a 'glass half full' kind of person, aren't you?"

"Half full of blood, yeah!"

Okay, nevermind. Still pretty dangerous.

"Hey, Deku, do you suppose anyone else around here might know? I mean, I already tried talking to that Stain fanboy..."

"The one with the sword made of swords?", Izuku asked incredulously.

"Mhm, that one. Buuuutt...what about people like Dabi? He's a fan of Stain too, right? Maybe he would somehow know something we don't?"

Izuku squared himself a bit, "Himiko, I mean this in the nicest way possible but...Dabi won't put up with you. He could barely put up with me when I was being perfectly civil. Can we just avoid a fight breaking out for the first few days? Not right after I just cleaned his room."

"...do you just not fight at all?"

"Wait, what? Isn't that a little-"

"You're not asking Stain about himself, you're not willing to spark an argument with Dabi..."

Izuku swallowed heavily. He couldn't explain his motivations properly. Just as a first issue, there were too many to explain in a timely manner.

"Well...villainy isn't exactly something I was prepared for. You actually have a quirk that helps you. I've just got my wits, and that's about it."

Himiko stood still for a second, tilting her head to the side. Her smile dropped, becoming
something less manic and more friendly, as she drew her knife to display to Izuku.

She dropped the knife, a switchblade, right into Izuku's palms.

"Okay Deku, ya wanna know what my quirk did for me in combat? Like, the head-start it gave me in the world?"

Izuku lit up, "Sure, thank you! I always like jotting down the pros and cons of-"

"Nothing whatsoever!", Himiko said, as if she was announcing a celebration.

"..huh?"

"My quirk used to just give me disguises. That's it. I can adopt someone's physical appearance by ingesting some of their sumptuous blood...buuut it didn't do anything else! I couldn't use their quirk, it still doesn't help me replicate their movements, nothing. No offensive or defensive applications whatsoever except it gave me the opportunity to land a sneak attack once sometimes. I even have to take care of all the stealth and infiltration aspects myself, so it's not even like my disguise is infallible. I had to work on it, Deku. Work on it hard. And it's because of THAT that my disguises always work!"

"Oh...that's...honestly really impressive. The utility of that quirk is intense, but without any fighting methods, how do you-"

"Well I'm so glad you asked, because that right there is my solution!", Himiko interrupted, tapping the knife in Izuku's hand. "I use those, I use them well, and I use them often. I've trained hard enough with my knives that I can make delectable blood rain anytime, anywhere, and it's all thanks to the hard work of my own beautiful self!"

Izuku was kind of taken aback... she was so carefree for someone who clearly put 100% of her effort in to her work. Her not having a strong quirk and just working by hanging on by the skin of her overly sharp teeth... it hadn't even really crossed his mind. He would've thought someone so confident and chipper might be so confident because they had some natural power...actually, she did say something earlier about wanting to make the world an easier place to live in, could-

"Deku? Earth to Deku? You're mumbling to yourself."

"Sorry, sorry...but really, if what you're saying is true, you're incredible!"

Himiko clasped the sides of her face in excitement and embarrassment, "Awww shucks, you're gonna make me blush..."

"Aren't you kind of doing that already? All the time?"

"Hey hey, look. I'm confident, you're not. So how about we cure my boredom and your skittishness in one fell swoop!"

Himiko leaned in close, pulling out her own knife. Izuku started to panic, but what she did next was scrape her knife blade and the blade of the knife she had given to Izuku together.

The blonde-bunned girl locked eyes with him empathetically, "Look, my quirk lets me do a lot more these days. I get the full package, Quirks, the whole shebang. I had to really get comfortable in my own skin, first, embrace who I really am. My powers only really hit their tour de force after I'd been using them for a while. So hey, maybe if you put in the same work, you'll start growing in power too! Soooo..."
Himiko spun the knife in her fingers, finally raising it up to her face.

"Deku, what I'm gonna do now...is I'm gonna learn ya how to shank somebody."

"Do you mean, like, weapons training? You're going to teach me?"

Himiko's ever present smile widened, "Of course! We're friends now, right? I know exactly the kind of situation you're going through, y'know. This is what friends do, right?"

Izuku found himself immensely calmed down. The sight of the girl who had nearly broken his nose during their first encounter was quickly becoming a joyous sight. Her grin was infectious.

Izuku nodded firmly, "Yeah, that's what friends do. Let's get to it!"

"Yeah, friends always teach each other violent combat techniques! Let's get moving, let's start with that dummy you've got over in the corner there! I'm gonna show you how to cut someone right down the middle!"
Izuku felt the beads of sweat on his brow. One misstep, one false move here, and it would be over. Himiko bore down upon him, the dull shine of the steel in her hands cutting through the dim light of the room, as she leaned her full weight into her shoulder, launching the knife downwards with lethal force. Izuku grabbed her arm, halting her advance, feeling the force of her strike pushing against him. They could both feel her strength pushing Izuku's arm backwards, inch by inch, and Himiko's eyes glinted with that same lethal, dull shine. Izuku could feel her weight pushing the breath out of his lungs.

Panic took hold of him. With the last of his strength, he whirled around, shooting his one free arm over to the side-table, grabbing a lamp in a desperate last defence. He swung it in an overhead arc, bringing it crashing down towards Himiko's forehead, who blocked it with an arm, grinning but shocked.

"Holy shit, the lamp? The lamp?"

"It was all I could think of and as a villain I should be abusing my surroundings as much as possible to be able to escape this alive-"

"You tried to hit me with a lamp you idiot!", Himiko said, giggling to herself so much she fell off of him, curled on the floor laughing.

_Dammit. A full two days later and Himiko still kicked his ass every time._

Izuku was conflicted between pride and shame. On the one hand, he was ashamed he wasn't quite able to get one over on Himiko's knife skills yet, and chances were things would stay that way until he got some real life practice and learned from experience. On the other hand, Himiko was a truly incredible CQC fighter. She was showing him ways to engage without the use of quirks that he never would have even thought of.

If it weren't for her off-beat personality, highlighted by this example of her being reduced to a wheezing laughter-coma, she would be the worlds most vicious soldier. However, what she lost in goofy demeanour she made up for with a healthy dose of bloodshed. She seemed to get pretty excited whenever Izuku got slightly nicked during training.

"You're, uh pretty amused about that. D-Do you need any help? Himiko?"

"Hehe...ehehehe....thelamp...hhheehaha..."

Himiko was too busy laughing to respond. She only responded when a loud knock resonated from the door.
Izuku got up to respond, and saw Dabi, who was accompanying the big tank-top man in lifting a large box into the room. The box full of Izuku's gear.

"H-Huh? Is that my stuff?"

Dabi nodded, "Yeah. And Kurogiri was getting sick of it being in the bar. So he told Shigaraki to move it. He gave some excuse like he couldn't grab it with all his fingers or something."

"Oh, right, that is actually a part of how his quirk works, y'know."

"Seems like a pretty convenient excuse for being lazy too, don't you think?"

Izuku nodded, "That's...probably also true."

"Figures. So Muscular here decided to hand it over to you so Kurogiri would stop complaining."

With that, Muscular roughly dropped the box in the middle of the room, with an annoyed expression that implied 'I'm not here to clean up your garbage'. Izuku tried to wave a thank you to Muscular. He grunted with apparent distaste, and walked out of the room.

"Thanks very much, Dabi."

"It was more bulky than heavy. But still pretty heavy. Must have some good stuff in there."

Himiko cut in, "Oh, a box full of goodies? Well, only one response to that!"

Himiko swung her knife, slamming into the roof of the box with force. Once the blade was hilted in the succulent box-flesh, she backed off and gestured for Izuku to finish the job. Dabi leaned against the doorframe, apparently curious to see the contents too.

Izuku grabbed the handle and tore open the top of the box, reaching in for his first piece of loot.

Izuku withdrew his hand. it was clutching one member of a large leather belt of flashbang grenades, with a little note attached to it. It read, "Here's that little 'something extra' I promised you. The belt can be rupurposed to pouch any number of your wierd science projects. Don't ever say I did nothing for you, kid. Enjoy - Giran."

Dabi twitched his finger. Himiko shot him a look letting him know if he tried setting them all off with his quirk, he'd get a knife to the liver.

Izuku was grinning widely, "Oh god, these are SO much better than the old smoke bombs! My tinted goggles offset some of the negative effects of the flashbangs, so I should be safe with them."

Izuku reached in again. He pulled out a paper-wrapped package with a...scroll tied to it? Izuku unbound the scroll. It was written in very traditional japanese script, and the ink seemed like it had been applied in a very archaic style.

He read the scroll, "Greetings, my brother in arms. It has come to my attention that your knife is still in my possession. While I certainly feel you have outgrown that simple weapon, leaving you without one would weigh heavily on my conscience. After all, you gave it to me in my hour of need. As such, I have secured you a few upgrades, so that your blade will not merely be used to sneak-attack offending enemies, but one that will tell the world 'I am Deku, I am here, and I am to be feared'. May it serve you well. Until we meet again - Stain."

The name 'Stain' looked like it was signed in blood. Which was one of many reasons why Himiko
was making a high-pitched fangirl noise right now. She was squeeing uncontrollably, "Oh my god it's Mr Stainy himself you do know him he called you brother he signed in blood he's so AMAZING!!"

Dabi rubbed his temples, "Please, calm down. Crazy...you're gonna give me a headache."

Izuku smirked maliciously, "He did sign in blood, didn't he? Someone elses, I think. Good to see he's doing well, then."

Dabi nodded in approval. 

Izuku unwrapped the package, revealing... *oh my god it's beautiful. And terrifying. And beautiful.*

The dagger, more in line with the length of a shortsword, easily the length of Izuku's forearm, glinted even in the dim lighting the room offered. It looked like it could've been made of silver, or at least been plated silver. The design was definitely still that of his combat knife, but amp ed up into a monstrous tool. The handle was very large and far too bulky, wrapped in bandages, and the pommel of the weapon unscrewed to reveal a small vial of poison to coat the blade. The hilt had a small decorative red piece of cloth tied around it, resembling Stain's scarf. *Ever the dramatic one, my brother in arms,* Izuku monologued, smiling.

He removed the cloth, since it would flap about and get in the way, revealing a small slot, or maybe a clip... Izuku used a fingernail to fiddle with it. The blade of the dagger...popped off! Izuku looked over, and noted multiple alternate blade styles. This thing...could be used as a knife, sword...all with the same handle. Familiarity fused with variety. Izuku clipped on his classic combat knife blade.

Himiko was drooling, "Holy crap I want this thing inside of someone else right now."

Izuku noted, "It feels...similar in counterbalance to the knife I had before. It's larger, sharper, and more lethal, but the weight distribution is about the same."

Dabi shrugged, "I guess he wanted to give you back something as close to that knife he took as he could."

Izuku reached in to the box another time, hands meeting heavy fabric. He grinned, already knowing what this was. With a tug, he pulled it out of the cardboard immediately.

Kurogiri was right. Necessity knows no sense of fashion. But this was what happens when you've earned the right to do both. He'd taken inspiration from Kurogiri, and some very heavy inspiration from Sensei's suit, but he didn't want to get too dressed up and be unable to just relax and take things easy like Tomura, who proved being a little underdressed could work fine. He felt it toed that line quite well between the sense of villainous legacy he was trying to represent, and his own modern touches.

An armored black waistcoat over a white dress shirt, with black dress trousers, black boots, and a dark green tie to bring it all together. Armored knee and elbow-pads, thick black gloves, and a harness containing a gun-holster and a knife sheath.

The archetypal villain. Perfect.

Simple, but effective. However, that's not even including the trick costume-wear he ordered from Giran, nor the rest of the gear.

He pulled out a thick iron respirator, fanged grin-patterned, a dark mockery of All Might's smile,
built to his exact specifications. He fit it over his head right then, just to be sure. Not too heavy, but it would definitely not be breaking anytime soon. Izuku had sent in very specific design choices. Air filtration, voice modulation to help him remain anonymous, and when the time came that his project was finished, his nearly complete voice-com systems would link right into the interior of his respirator, which reached right above his ears, strapping around the entirety of his lower head.

Dabi commented, "Hm...lower face covering. Are you trying to rip off my style here?", pointing at his purple skin segment and letting out a very slight smile.

Himiko jumped on the opportunity, pointing at Dabi, "I knew it, I knew you had a sense of humor!"

Izuku unlocked the respirator, letting it hang around his neck. It was comfortable, and didn't weigh him down or get in his way if he wasn't using it. Perfect.

Dabi pointed at the clothes, "Are you sure going out to fight in a suit is the best idea?"

Himiko pointed back, "You're the one wearing a low-cut white shirt! Low. Cut."

"I'm getting a new costume."

"Does it replace the unarmoured, low-cut white t shirt?"

"...no."

Izuku held a hand up, "It's not just a regular suit. The dress trousers and waiscoat have all been fitted with armor, and they've been fireproofed too. They provide a ton of extra protection!"

Dabi mocked, "Huh. Your armor. Armored sleeveless vest, armored trousers...your protection distribution looks a lot like Stains. You do know that, right?"

Izuku waved his arms, embarassed, "I wasn't even thinking about that, I'm not trying to copy anyone!"

Himiko cheered, "It makes sense, seeing how Deku and Mr Stainy are best friends!"

"...Yeah, I guess it does. I can hardly blame him for being influenced by Stain's ideology."

Dabi began to walk down the corridor, flasing an eerie, cold look back at Izuku before he turned completely.

"Even if it's just gonna get him killed."

Before Izuku or Himiko could respond, Dabi had already made his way downstairs, his final message echoing more than the tapping of the wooden floor.

Izuku smoothed out his dress trousers, walking through the door and into the training hall. Himiko waved him in, leading him over to a new training dummy. Since they had grown in size and resources, they had purchased a neighbouring building to use for practicing. No real League operations went on here; it was just here for the sake of giving League members a chance to test their strength and build it up, and maybe, just maybe, socialise with others and become a team at long last.

Muscular, as well as the lizard-guy and one other transgender woman who he'd been informed was
named Magne, were all making quick work of the tasks they'd set themselves. Evidently they relied a lot more on physical strain to work with their tasks. Muscular was standing next to a small pile of destroyed dummies, every tremble of the floor signifying he had crushed another one flat with his rippling, exposed muscle fibres. Magne was performing pull-ups, and the lizard-guy was completely absorbed in his sword-fighting practice.

Himiko told him earlier that it was best they moved their operations over here, but that notwithstanding she was still a common sight over here. Tomura, however, was a much rarer participant, and he was standing right next to her.

Izuku ran up, new gear fitting him like a glove, as Tomura appraised him, finally concluding, "Hm. You went for a suit? You've really been affected by Sensei, right?"

"Eheh...is it that obvious?"

"Yeah. But it looks good on you." Tomura said, barely managing to say the last few words without sounding uncomfortable.

Izuku encouraged his attempts to break out of his shell, cheerily replying, "Thanks Tomura! What are you doing here? Training?"

"Huh? With these meatheads? Of course not. My quirk is still just as ruinous whether I'm musclebound or not. Also, injured."

"Oh...did Himiko call you over here?"

Himiko flashed a small thumbs up behind him, as Tomura responded, "I'm here to stand around, not really doing anything, while I watch you train, try out your new gear, get exhausted and fall into a pile of your own misery repeatedly."

Izuku rolled his eyes, "Thanks Tomura. I appreciate it."

"After all...that is what Himiko tells me friends do."

Izuku looked back at Tomura, touched. "Well...thank you, Tomura. I'll be sure to keep it up. I'm going to make sure our next mission goes off without any problems."

Tomura grinned sadistically, "Alright then, get moving. I want to see you collapsed in a heap within the hour."

Izuku nodded, then got to work. With a flash, his knife twirled in his hands, and within the second it was raised high into the air, reeling back for a vicious attack. Izuku shot out, punching the dummy with his free hand, causing it's wooden head to reel back on its spring. One downward slash separated its head from its body, severing the spring in a neat cut. It hit the mat with a dull thud. Himiko clapped.

Tomura shrugged, "An opening strike. It's not gonna be that easy in a real fight, not even close."

Tomura turned around, pointing at Muscular, "Hey, you. Toss us about ten more dummies. We're going to be here a while."

As if showing off, Muscular stooped down, picked as many dummies as possible in each arm, and literally tossed them at Tomura, who fought his natural urge to raise his hand and block. Instead he rolled out of the way.
Himiko raised a finger, "I think that one's on you for your phrasing."

Tomura huffed, "Shut up. Set up the damn dummy. I've got to get it through this losers head the kind of stuff that goes down in a real fight."

Tomura turned over to Izuku, his sycophant smile already clearly showing he was intending to put Izuku through his paces.

Izuku returned the villainous grin, finally feeling natural. It was the same smile his friends sported. The defiant confidence to stand against hero society.

"Bring it, Tomura."

"So...Mrs Midoriya received a message?"

"Yeah. My old lady gave me a call about it. Some of what 'Izuku' said seemed pretty fuckin' suspicious."

All Might and Bakugo sat, facing each other in a private faculty room. The sun was high in the sky, but the room was cast in it's shadow.

All Might rubbed his chin worriedly. "Some of the phrasing, correct?"

"Shit like 'I'm doing the right thing', and 'I haven't compromised my ideals'. His fucking voice..."

Bakugo punched his knee in barely contained fury. He was gritting his teeth painfully. All Might let him go on for a second to collect himself. Young Bakugo was clearly going through a lot of conflicted feelings right now. He knew that, because the same was true for him.

Bakugo took a sharp breath, continuing, "He's been indoctrinated completely. Weak fucking nerd...fallen completely in line. I knew it was him on TV, that stupid fucking attitude, running out there, not fighting back and just trying to get that bastard Stain out of there...GOD DAMMIT..."

Another closed fist slammed into his knee. If he kept this up, he'd end up hurting himself.

All Might stretched out an arm, "Young Bakugo, I beg you, try to calm down just a bit. We can't spend so much time mourning this that we are unable to fix it."

Bakugo, nearly growling, rubbed his eyes and sat up straight again.

All Might solemnly proclaimed, "I'm going to do everything in my power to fix this, young Bakugo. I swear to you. I have retained all I have of myself...that I might fix the problems I have caused."

"Hmph. That's if I don't find that damn nerd first."

"Bakugo, please try to restrain yourself. Beating up someone just for your own satisfaction is not very heroic."

"That's not what I meant, fuckwit! I mean I'm gonna do it first! I'm gonna drag him out of that den of thieves, kicking and screaming if I have to!"

Even as Bakugo roared, his noble purpose could be seen in the glare of his eyes. And All Might couldn't help but smile wider at this. There's only so long you can run on anger alone, after all.
"Again...idiot, I know this guy pretty well. Whatever they've done to convince him rolling with murderers is a good idea, it's gotta be pretty far out there. No-one was more into the idea of being a hero than him, save myself."

"Do you suspect brainwashing?"

"Fuck no. It was exactly like his intrusive, pain-in-the-ass personality to run in there and try to help Stain. He's still himself. Not brainwashing, but like I just fucking said, it's indoctrination, it's way worse. They've actually convinced him he's doing the right thing. He had the fucking balls to stand there and try to tell his mother that, he's got some kind of passion for this."

Indoctrination...well...Tomura doesn't seem persuasive enough. But with the Nomu's multiple quirks too...no, it couldn't be. He's dead, surely?

Bakugo, wringing his hands to eliminate sweat build-up, mumbled, "The fucker...saying he's 'helping people'. He's forgotten what that means..."

All Might felt a cold sweat starting on his head. "Young Bakugo...did he say anything about...any other villains? Any sources of inspiration?"

Bakugo relented, "No. He wasn't that dumb."

It sounded like the same kind of charisma. It could be...oh god, if there was even a chance it could be...

Bakugo had noticed, "All Might...why have...you've stopped grinning."

Chapter End Notes

Hey look a talented guy drew something for this, I'm shook beyond all belief:

https://iriidiium.tumblr.com/post/180230764709/i-wanna-watch-the-world-burn-art-for-the

Unbelievable. I'm never going to stop saying thank you to all of you guys in my life, s'just going to be a continuous stream.
Chapter Summary

Izuku, unfortunately, needs to learn more than just stabs.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Izuku really wished he brought something like a wheelbarrow, or a stretcher. Just anything that could be used to carry him back to his room without him having to use his legs. The again, there was no guarantee Himiko or Tomura would agree to take his weight.

And so it was that Izuku found himself, exhausted as could be, trudging back to HQ. He had managed to destroy about six dummies utterly and thoroughly, and Himiko (under instructions on how to fight from Tomura) had clashed with him at least three times. His memories were getting a bit hazy and he was obviously well overdue a bit of relaxation and a drink to replenish the small river he had sweat into the training hall today.

He pushed open the door to the HQ, only to see that all of the people there were peering up at a figure standing atop a chair. He was cheering, "Gather round, gather round!"

It was the man in the large golden overcoat, with a tophat and a strangely-patterned mask. The mask was still unorthodox, but he could swear it looked a little different than it did yesterday...Izuku couldn't help but wonder he was doing grabbing everyone's attention like this. Was it an emergency?

"Come, feast your eyes on this!", he said, pulling out a small, shiny steel marble. He began to pass it between his fingers with incredible dexterity. Was he genuinely...was he performing a magic trick? Like a stage magician? Izuku found himself drawn in despite himself, and took a step forward. Magicians were always pretty incredible for him, their ability to delight and astound...

"With a simple pull...", the man closed his fist, with his palm facing towards himself. He began to wriggle his hand around as if casting a spell. Not so slick, Izuku noted, it would be pretty obvious if the trick was simply that he rolled the bead down his wrist and into his sleeve. There's probably more to it.

He opened his hand with a flourish very quickly afterwards, revealing that the bead was gone. "And, immediately, the spell has worked. The bead has vanished completely!"

A young guy in the crowd spoke up, his voice slightly muffled by the large green gas mask he wore, "Oh please, you clearly snuck it down your sleeve! Next, you're going to put your arms down for a moment, and it'll just 'magically' roll back down into your palm. Pitifully simple, magician!"

Rather than rising to the boast, the golden man threw his hands up, making sure the trick couldn't be performed in the way the gas mask boy had just described, "Aha, not a chance, Mustard. For you see, the bead really has vanished. I don't have it anymore, and so I cannot retrieve it. If you want to find that steel bead once more..."
He turned, and even though his face was hidden behind a mask, Izuku could tell he was staring straight at him, "...you will have to check Deku's pocket."

Izuku shot his hand into his right pocket, nothing, he shot his hand into his left pocket... no way......he pulled out a small metal bead. "H-How, how the...how did you pull that off??", Izuku spluttered out, incredulous.

The boy called Mustard spoke up, "Oh please, come now, he's probably a magician's assistant!"

The man in the golden overcoat replied, a tone of delight in his voice, "Why, Deku and I have never spoken. He couldn't name me, much less collaborate with me. You know, Mustard, if you keep overthinking like this, you are going to end up pushing too much common sense out of your head. In fact, if you check under your helmet...hm?"

Mustard, rather than remove the mask, slid his hand up the side of the large, World War inspired contraption, and immediately jolted. He removed his arm, holding a small steel metal bead between his thumb and forefinger. "A-a-ah...w-what? You're kidding me..."

The man in the golden overcoat took a large bow, twirling his cane with a flourish, "Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, you've been a wonderful audience!"

As a few of the 'audience' members gave off a round of applause, the magician took a step over to Kurogiri's counter to get a drink, and, of course, Izuku absolutely had to follow him, quickly taking a seat next to him. His pumped-up expression must have been obvious, because both Kurogiri and the man in the golden overcoat seemed to chuckle to themselves.

Izuku spoke up, a little louder than he meant to, "That was amazing! How did you...I can't even believe it!"

Kurogiri noted, "I'm made of fire. After all you have seen thus far, mister Deku, this magic trick is the point at which your suspension of disbelief carries you no further?"

"Well, I mean, um...I just thought it was impressive...more importantly, I wanted to know if it had anything to do with your quirk? Is it teleportation?"

Kurogiri chuckled, "Again, I think I fulfill part of that role..."

The man in the golden overcoat turned to face Izuku, palming a small glass of wine. "Well, you know what they say, a magician never reveals his secrets. But I might as well tell you about my quirk, seeing as it had nothing to do with my trick whatsoever!"

Izuku grinned at his showmanship, only for his smile to become an expression of shock as the glass in the man's hand shrank, twisting in on itself like it was under pressure from every angle, finally resulting in its transformation into a tiny blue marble, which he began to spin in his fingers like the metal marble from before.

"I can compress anything in a spherical area into a small marble, reducing its weight in the process! And I can release them at any time, transforming them back into their original state, completely unharmed. This is the quirk that makes my moniker, my stage name; I am Mr Compress!"

With a flourish, he decompressed the wine glass, and with a quickly fading blue glow, it returned to its size. To make his point, Mr Compress slid his mask to the side, and took a sip of the wine through his balaclava.

Izuku's grin had become massive with enthusiasm, "That quirk has so many potential applications!"
Mr Compress looked proud. "Anything within a spherical area that I am in direct contact with, mister Deku. Say, mister Deku, Mr Compress...", he chuckled.

"Just Deku is fine, if that's okay. Just let me take some notes on this, this quirk is too powerful for me to not want to write about it."

Mr Compress tilted his head, intrigued, "Say, why do you suppose it's strong? Surely the ability to compress an area of space isn't that useful."

Izuku looked up, "You're not giving yourself enough credit! In combat, it can be used offensively to mutilate, defensively to eliminate attacks, it can be used for instantaneous pacification of opponents, you can compress obstacles or decompress them to shift the environment in your favour, you can decompress allies after flinging them halfway across the battlefield to give them an instantaneous opportunity to engage."

Mr Compress interrupted, clapping his hands, "I'm impressed, I'm very impressed! You're already considering all the possibilities, no time wasted at all!"

Izuku became a little self-conscious, "Well, it's just...it IS strong after all. And what with you being a magician, and already proving your worth in tricks and hiding things, I think it'd be an incredible quirk!"

"As it happens, you think a little bit like a magician yourself, you know that? A creative thinker. You're already trying to think up all the options your opponent has before they can even come up with those ideas for themselves! That's a pretty amazing example of being 20 steps ahead of your foes."

"If I didn't think creatively enough, I wouldn't be very good at my job, would I? I'm an information specialist."

"But you could easily do better for yourself, Deku. Stay, humor me for a minute. I'm going to show you a few tricks", Mr Compress cheered, pulling out a beautiful pack of cards from his pocket.

"Card tricks...I mean, I always appreciate the help, but how will this help me?"

Mr Compress chuckled, "Why, I'm going to teach you the art of misdirection, my friend."

Izuku was walking back to his room. The exact same thing he was trying to do before he spent two hours with Mr Compress learning how to deceive the eyes of others. He'd got the fundamentals down, although some of what he was teaching seemed too specific to just performing card tricks. He'd chase his words with poison if he was wrong, but he was pretty damn certain the skill of 'false shuffling' a deck of cards had no practical applications in the field.

The smell of smoke hit his nostrils. Fire? He turned his face up. It wasn't a fire. It was the man with blond, spiked hair smoking in the middle of the corridor because apparently he either didn't read or didn't care about the no smoking sign.

Now that Izuku got a closer look at him, he looked like he had a painful set of stitches right down the centre of his forehead...the scar didn't look too dissimilar to Dabi's, actually.

"Um...hi. Not to be a jerk, but you're not supposed to smoke indoors."
The man looked up, pale blue eyes of stress and energy looking him up and down. "Oh, is that so? Well, I'll fucking smoke wherever I want, jackass! But thanks for letting me know, I'll put it out. Sorry for the inconvenience, won't happen again!"

Izuku looked on, completely thrown for a loop, as the man extinguished his cigarette with his boot heel. He walked into his room and chucked the remains out the window, before coming back around to lean against the wall again.

"Um, pleasure to meet you, what's your name?"

The man smiled, and answered, "Well, uh, you can call me Jin Buba...Bubaig...can he call me that? Am I...tch..."

The man clutched his head, doubling over in sharp pain. Izuku walked forward to try and help, before 'Jin' raised his hand to stop him.

"One sec...I'll be certain in a moment, okay, just a year..."

The man scrambled to reach into his pocket, pulling out a grey-black split mask, which he pulled over his head with the urgency and instant relief of a drowning man finally reaching fresh air.

"Whew...okay...whew! Okay, the name's Twice!", he said, throwing out a thumbs up like none of what just happened had happened.

"P-Pleasure to meet you, uh, Twice. Should I be at all concerned about what happened earlier?"

"Hm? Oh, what, the smoking? Don't worry, I'll take care of it."

"That wasn't what I was talking about. And by take care of it, do you mean you're going to do more of 'the smoking', or are you going to stop like I asked you to?"

Twice waved his hands dismissively. "Eeeeh, details, details. One of the two."

*Well, Izuku, at least these new recruits are just as colorful as you had hoped they would be.*

Finally, Izuku had enough time to change back into a regular black shirt. Winding down. Watching as the moon once again flew high into the sky through the slits of the night he could see through his barricaded window. He'd sharpened his knife, deconstructed one of the flashbangs to check how to make more, and then put it back together again. Maybe finally he'd get the opportunity to have a quiet night in. Just pencilling in the last of his notes in his bed as he drifted to sleep...

A knock on his door let him know that he had no such luck. He'd dealt with some colourful characters today. I mean, all very likeable, but right now he was on the verge of his knees buckling underneath him as he just hit the deck, knocked out entirely. He walked over to the door. Maybe they weren't crazy. Maybe it was just Tomura, or Dabi, or-

He opened the door, and on the other side was the lizard-guy with a Stain-style scarf, pink hair, goggles, and a sword made out of smaller swords tied together.

NoPE loOks likE we'RE GOinG For ThE HaTtRiCk tODay.

The lizard-guy looked like he was bouncing on his heels. He looked pretty excited about something. "Hi. Um...you're Deku, right?"
"Um, yes, I am. Pleased to meet you, what's your name?"

He grinned, apparently a little nervous, "M-My name's Shuic-Spinner! I mean, my real name isn't as important anymore. I'm committing myself fully to my villain work."

"Well, I'm really glad to hear it. Tomura and Dabi are really trying to stress work over the next few days. Apparently they're planning something big."

"Yes, yes they are. Um...look, I came here to ask something, if you've got the time. You look a little tired..."

Izuku smiled in spite of himself, "No, it's fine, really. What did you want to ask me? Is it about my hero notes, do you need to borrow any of them?"

"A-Actually...I don't know if you'd know this, but I'm a fan of Stain. Like, an absolutely MASSIVE fan of Stain."

Izuku looked at Spinner's scarf. "No, I can tell."

"I want to do my absolute best to follow his ideology. I will carry his tenants to my very last breath."

He spoke with a determined glare. A glare Izuku realised he had helped create. A conviction in his eyes that was shared by him, and that he was responsible for.

"So...you wanted to know about Stain?"

"No. I actually came to ask about you, Deku."

"M-ME?"

Spinner nodded. "You're the one that Stain has partnered with. His brother. A bond like that...Stain must have seen something special in you. I wanted to check around for the same thing. And to let you know that as long as you're working to reform this broken hero society, you've got a brother in me too, Deku."

"A-Ah...well...I don't know what to say, I'm honoured", and in an effort to live up to his expectations, Izuku flashed a grin of encouragement, "I look forward to working with you, Spinner!"

Shuichi smirked, "And as long as we're working towards Stain's goals, I wanted to give you something to help out." Spinner picked out a small sword from his back, which was actually not currently attached to his sword of swords. "This is meant as more of a sidearm."

Izuku raised the weapon. It was a traditional weapon, in very good condition, and looked like it had been recently sharpened and cleaned. It was like a smaller Katana..."A Wakizashi, right?"

"Good to see you know your weapons. It's not too much larger than a knife or dagger, but I thought it was right about time you got an upgrade. I mean, it is commonly called a 'companion sword'."

It wasn't exactly something he was trained for...but it was light enough to be slung into a sheath on his harness without taking up any room. And besides that...it was a sign of confidence. And how fitting was it that one of his allies, a fellow Stain follower, gave him a 'companion' sword? He couldn't refuse it.
"Thank you, Spinner. I'll wield it with pride."

Spinner outstretched his hand, "Who knows if it'll come in useful. But we're in this together. So at the very least, I hope you'll treat it a sign that I'll have your back when we reach the fight soon."

Izuku took his hand, squeezing it in the same manner he had used when he had bonded with Stain. Spinner returned his grasp with zeal.

And after they had said their goodbyes, Izuku's sleep that night came to him much easier than if he had left the door closed.

Chapter End Notes

Just a fun little piece of trivia, I've read from a few sources that the villains in My Hero Academia were designed as a second set of protagonists initially so that their designs from that point fit the evil parallel motif they were going for. And you know what?

It shows.
Cracking knuckles

Chapter Summary

Everyone is on high alert. Also known as 'Deku, move over for a chapter'.

"So let me get this straight...you are specifically choosing to keep Izuku out of the loop on this one?"

Tomura Shigaraki smiled back, "That's the plan. The plan you're gonna carry out for me, Dabi."

"And here I thought you were just terrible at communication."

Dabi was accompanying Shigaraki for another planning session, one of many that had been going on for the past week and a bit. And not once during this week did the state of Shigaraki's room seem to get any cleaner. Or dirtier, for that matter. The trash stayed where it was, all laid out on the floor, and what was clean remained pristine and unused. It was an atmosphere of complete stagnation.

"Uh-huh. So you're going for a plan that leaves this underprepared, quirkless kid in even more danger, is that the plan you're going for?"

"Shut up.", Shigaraki spat back like a viper.

"I think you know this kid better than I do. So tell me...don't you think he'd want to know who you're targeting? It's a new recruitment, you know."

"Shut up. That's the point."

Dabi raised an eyebrow, "That's the...the point?"

Shigaraki whirled around on his chair, facing Dabi with his frayed, manic grin, "You see, recently Deku's been taking all the fun from me. All the new recruits, all the attention...and Sensei's favour...it's all been his. Don't you think it's about time I get to do something to push the League forwards?"

"...so this is all about petty entitlement?"

"Shut. Up. Dabi. This has to be done. I can't just let that brat walk in and take over everything. It'll help Deku too...I mean, even if he doesn't want to join, we can let Deku kill him, right?"

"Yeah, sure. If he suddenly decides he wants to break one of his restrictions that he's upheld ever since joining..."

"It'll be cathartic", Shigaraki said, flinging his thin arms wide, "right? Haven't you ever felt the joy of seeing your worst enemy grovel before you?"

Dabi's look became a little distant. "My worst enemy...heh. I don't think either of us has, yet. Not yet."
"Exactly. Imagine how much STRONGER Deku will be without this kid's weight on his shoulders. He'll either get a brand new rival or he'll get some sweet, sweet vengeance, and he'll have me to thank for it."

"So...stealing his thunder is a good thing? I thought you and him were supposed to be friends?"

"...okay. Well...I don't see your point.", Shigaraki said, blank faced.

Dabi thought it best not to respond. Shigaraki's idea of friendship was clearly a bit dilapidated. As long as he'd convinced himself it would help out Deku as well, he wouldn't be persuaded otherwise. Especially not by him. If Dabi had known he was going to have to be at the beck and call of this grown-up toddler before he joined...

"And you're sure this guy, Bakugo, is going to be okay with joining?"

Shigaraki's expression became more dismissive, "Yeah. Seems destructive enough."

"...well. I'm not in the position to go against you on this issue even if it's clearly a train wreck waiting to happen."

"No, you aren't. I've laid down these plans. Make it happen."

"The fuck do you mean?"

"I mean you're in danger, Bakugo. If Izuku is among them, it is doubtless he will have told them about you. You might be singled out amongst the villains. I've seen it time and time again...the way that man would use vengeance to drive someone into his service. Make them cut off treasured relationships in the process to drag them in deeper, ruin their chances of escape...soon they've destroyed so much, they can't go back. Their lives belong to him, and the choices he had them make.", Toshinori lectured, desperate to convince young Bakugo to act even just a little bit more cautious,

At the words, 'Treasured Relationship', Bakugo bristled, clearly hiding something. "If that weakling comes at me, I'll knock him right back down to his place. Quirkless little..."

Toshinori's breath caught in his throat. Even though they'd been working together, the secret injury stayed secret, and in his presence the muscles remained rippling and strong. And this was a secret beyond a secret. The nature of the power of All For One...he couldn't explain so recklessly why Bakugo's assumption might be so extremely off the mark. How this child might be entirely transformed.

The more he thought about the situation as if All For One was involved somehow, the more pieces fit into place around this mystery. The quirkless, embittered boy was promised power, an opportunity for revenge against him, and most of all, a quirk...the thing that had led even his idol to dismiss him. Every day, Toshinori felt himself rue his own pathetic decisions more and more. But now wasn't the time for regrets. Not right here this moment, in front of young Bakugo. They should be formulating a plan.

"I think you are severely underestimating the power of a vengeful soul, young Bakugo. As long as his anger remains directed at me, you may eliminate the possibility of you being attacked. But you being childhood friends only increases the odds, I'm afraid" Toshinori explained to an increasingly furious looking Bakugo, "In order to draw him in deeper to the underworld, anything connecting him to his old life must be severed. Then he can truly embrace his villainous life. For your sake, as
well as his, you must remain vigilant. If you want to save your friend, you must-

"I HEARD YOU ALREADY, ASSHOLE!", Bakugo screamed, shattering the desk next to him with a thunderous boom muffled only by his glove.

"B-Bakugo, why are you-

"I'm not gonna sit by the sidelines based only on your bullshit assumptions, All Might! You're pretending to know a whole lot more about this whole deal than you do!"

"You have to listen, you're going to-

Bakugo shot to his feet, leering over Toshinori, "Shut up! You're going on and on about how you know best and trying to list out everything that has and will happen, when your lack of ability to see even three fucking steps into the future was exactly what led into this in the first place!"

Toshinori couldn't respond to that. He was right, of course...but why now? Why was he getting angry now? Why was he stabbing him where it hurt only now, when days before he had been perfectly fine? Was there something...was it something to do with his attitude earlier? He was hiding something from everyone...

"Young Bakugo...you're right. I don't know everything that's going to happen. But if I don't...wouldn't you like to enlighten me?"

"What are you-

"You're hiding something, Bakugo, I can tell. I'm not the most observant, but your face clouded immediately when I mentioned your past friendship with Izuku."

Bakugo stood there, huffing air in and out of his lungs rapidly. His face was wracked with painful fury. After a few moments, he turned away, stomping towards the door.

"Bakugo, please, you-

"I'll be handling this my own way. Don't order me around."

The door slammed closed. And it left Toshinori with a few more questions he began to try and work through. Even more questions...

*All Might...guess it comes with the territory of being a big shot hero.*

Bakugo kicked a can down the hallway, hunched over slightly, stewing with concentrated, stern effort.

He was so busy focusing on his own flaws, he couldn't see...'childhood friends'...

Bakugo kicked that tin can as hard as he could, sending it careening across the room, denting it against the far wall.

This wasn't just All Might's problem. Because, even if those fucking 'friends' that indoctrinated that nerd were by far the worst offenders...All Might didn't even consider the part he'd played. It's not like he's a mind reader. Bakugo hadn't told him. About what their old relationship had been like. How Deku had condescended to him. And how he'd reacted...
Bakugo found himself snarling at his own memories. At how much of a remorseless, guilt-tripping bitch the gift of hindsight was. At how it showed so clearly that Deku had been...

Bakugo rubbed his eyes roughly. No, not a chance in hell this was all All Might's fault. This unrelenting, ever present dread wasn't a feeling sitting in only his stomach. The fears of the worst possible outcome, the nightmare of seeing him standing above you with an expression impossible on the face you thought you once knew...

And as long as that was the case, All Might wouldn't be the only one to fix it. There wasn't a chance Bakugo was going to run from this, or hide, or make excuses. He'd face this, head on. Full force. Without condescending, for both All Might's sake...and Deku's. Because this had to be faced for this feeling to finally go away, and he wasn't going to let it beat him.

Because heroes don't do that.

Tomura hunched over his work desk. Meticulously planning, drawing out the details so precisely even that stupid Dabi couldn't get it wrong. Who goes where, who engages who. The dense cloud of gas, the forest fire...a mile-wide pincer manouver. He found himself giggling at the thought, seeing the heroes all bunching up to avoid the walls of chaos, squeezed tighter and tighter...

And in the end, he'd get his prize. He'd show everyone his worth. He'd show Izuku his worth. He'd finally regain his pride, his place in the room.

A-And Izuku would be happy too, of course. He'd be pleased. Because at the end of the day, Izuku would get a reunion, a chance to settle things. A concrete enemy with which to finally get some closure. The feeling he'd never got the privilege of. To stop everyone who'd passed him by, and did nothing...to count every scar on his face, trace every wrinkle...if it wasn't society, then he would still be stuck with a very tall order list of individuals to make pay.

Maybe he'd show Bakugo a new way of life. Maybe he'd end his life. Maybe he'd get to make his feelings known, let them crawl their way out of his heart, through his ribcage, out his mouth in a viscous slew of just and noble bile and hatred. Sweet ambrosia, release from the torment this kid had put him through. Bakugo would be welcoming his freedom, or his release. Poetic, really. Either way, Izuku would be happier.

That's why this was happening. His conscience was totally clear. It was all for Izuku's sake. Tomura's feelings were an afterthought, and didn't drive this act of kindness at all. Telling him about it would ruin the surprise, but if he did, Izuku would be on board with this plan. Definitely.

It'd make him stronger, not weaker. He'd be happy, not angry.

Yeah.

*Right?*
Izuku has to make the best of what he has. Very little.

When Izuku woke up, the building was empty. A small bell from downstairs letting them know an emergency has arose was what woke Izuku from his slumber, so he immediately suited up. Armored costume, knife, companion sword, respirator. He stomped down the hallways, boots pounding the floor, and looked into the other villain's rooms to check if they were okay, or if they were still asleep. But the every single one of these rooms was empty, and Izuku was all alone. Shigaraki's room was locked, but unresponsive. Maybe he was okay...but unusually, he was not coming out to help him.

Izuku swallowed heavily. Whatever was downstairs...was blocking his only way out. He wasn't going to have any backup. His allies had either already escaped...or worse, they were...

Izuku swallowed again. But even while he hunched down to hide his noise, he drew his dagger, feeling the comforting weight of his weapon spinning in his gloved palms. He inched his way down the stairs. They wouldn't be expecting such a late attacker, if he landed a good blow, maybe he would-

"Ah, mister Deku. I have been waiting for you. You're late."

Kurogiri stood there, calmly polishing his glasses, a large radio set up beside him.

"Late for what? I wasn't told that-"

"For the mission. Mister Shigaraki has already sent everyone out there. I am here both because I am their getaway vehicle, and therefore too valuable to place on the frontlines for this task, but also in order to shuttle out last valuable member into the squad."

"Why am I the only one who isn't already there!?"

"Mister Shigaraki felt it would be rude to disturb you sleeping. If I might be honest, mister Deku, I feel like at this point he might actually need your help."

"This mission...does it involve everybody in the League?"

"Apart from me and mister Shigaraki, who is still nursing a wound, everybody in this building, yes."

Izuku, adrenaline still shooting his speed through the roof, quickly said, "Okay then, before you take me there, hang on a sec, there's something I think I should bring with me."

Izuku ran upstairs to grab something. He'd been working on it for a while. If he was going in blind on a big team mission, this might just end up being a perfect addition.
Izuku, carrying a small cardboard box, stumbled out of the portal onto a large crag, overlooking a dimly lit forest. Sure enough, all of the members of the League were there, although those without masks had been graciously provided with some. Muscular looked like a slasher villain. Mr Compress had a different mask on than before, again. And Himiko-

Himiko had run up to Izuku before he could finish that thought, "Hey, Deku's here! Look I have a face-mask just like yours!"

Sure enough, Himiko was outfitted with a massive mask over her face and an even larger fanged-teeth print scarf. Izuku couldn't help but wonder why she would need a mouth-concealing scarf if she already had a metal mask, before remembering that this was Himiko and she didn't care. She probably just wanted to avoid being too cold. What was more noticeable were the multitude of metal canisters she had on her back, held in place by transparent tubes and her new utility belt.

"I'm a little upset that my new gear isn't a little bit cuter...at least your costume provider had a bit of style, right?"

Izuku shrugged, "I wouldn't really be complaining about having some extra protection, Himiko."

Dabi walked over, stretching out a hand. "Deku. So glad you could make it here."

Dabi said this line with a sheer biting coldness, the kind of tone that implies he was not at all happy with the fact that Izuku had made it here. When he took Dabi's hand, he returned with a bit of a glare, defiant.

"Glad to be here, Dabi. You're in charge of this mission?"

"Yes. We're the Vanguard Action Squad, Deku."

Izuku looked out over the members of the squad. Most of them had been given new equipment. Mustard was spinning a new gun, a revolver. Spinner's sword looked like it had somehow had even more new additions crammed into them. Even Dabi was wearing a new jacket. Everyone looked like they'd been given new gear for a task that they all had plenty of time to prepare for. So why was Izuku not given any advance warning. Simple. Dabi had no intention of bringing him along. If it weren't for Kurogiri, who probably directly disobeyed Dabi's order to drop him here, Izuku would never have been a part of this attack. That much was obvious. So the question now was this; why did they specifically want to leave Izuku behind?

Dabi called out, "Okay everyone, get ready. Today, we prepare to strike deep into their hearts. We will create a brighter future with their deaths, and show them that from here on, their peaceful lives are at an end."

Quickly wrapping up his speech as if he was rushing it incredibly, Dabi motioned to move out, and the members of the Vanguard Action Squad started moving forward to initiate their plan.

"W-Wait!"

Dabi looked back, "Get out of here if you value your life, Deku."

"It's not about that, I brought some gear for everyone!"

The small swarm of villains halted their advance. Muscular, troublingly, looked like he had to struggle with himself to avoid rushing into the woods.

Izuku dropped the box on the ground, and cracked it open. Inside lay a large variety of wireless
headsets, most of them in different styles or models since he had to make do with whatever headsets he could get his hands on. Each of them had a matching symbol printed on the side of a small chip that was embedded in the right side of the headset, the chip Izuku had manufactured himself. Himiko immediately grabbed one of the blood red ones before Izuku had even explained what they were.

Mustard piped up, "Headsets...what are these supposed to be for?"

Izuku proudly motioned widely, "A communications network! With these, members of the League will be able to keep in direct contact with each other at all times. We'll be able to share tactical information, and ensure the safety of other members of the organisation. We'll know who's seen who, and map out where all the heroes have been spotted last."

Dabi nodded, then picked up one of the plain blue headsets, snapping it on. "Hmm...that's a surprisingly inspired idea. When did you start working on this?", Dabi asked, narrowing his eyes.

Izuku responded, "I didn't make it just for this mission, since I didn't know about it until right now this second. The com system is just a pet project of mine. I'd hoped to make it a little more organised...the headsets are all in a disparity of forms..."

Himiko giggled to herself, "You w-wanted them to match? Pfft..."

Izuku continued, ignoring her incessant amusement, "But since Kurogiri has a radio signal already established, y'know, so he can be called in to evacuate everyone, we already have a signal we can tune in to! If I'd known about that" Izuku said, glaring at Dabi again, "then I could've finished this project a lot faster. I hope what I've brought with me for now suffices."

Mustard tapped his helmet, "Some of us have full headgear. Your 'genius' plan seemed to forget about that part."

Izuku tossed Mustard a barebones wire headset and some tape. "Tape the microphone and earpiece into the ear and mouth segments of your gas mask and you'll be fine."

Dabi concluded, "Well. I'm surprised. This com system might make this mission a lot smoother. Everyone grab a headset, that's an order!"

Everyone picked one out, even Moonfish, though he had to be coaxed over there by Magne and Spinner in order to get it on his head firmly. Perfect. Now, if someone didn't listen, they had no-one but themselves to blame.

"So, that's my com system. What role have I been assigned in this Vanguard Action Squad?"

Dabi hissed in air through his teeth, put on the spot, "Your role..."

Dabi grabbed Izuku by the shoulder and led him off away from the rest of the group, waving away pursuers.

"Deku, you're not supposed to be here."

"I know that. Why am I not supposed to be here?"

"I'm going to be clear with you, Deku. You're not ready for this. This is a frontal engagement. This mission's success will be decided by the skills and experience of every individual member. Any inexperienced punks that join in will only get in the way. You're still inexperienced. The best thing you can do on this job is call the shots from a distance and avoid even seeing any of the heroes, so
"Dabi, you've seen me. I've been training for weeks. I'm at least good enough that I can tag along with members like Himiko, who also rely mainly on knife skills."

"If you do, you'll be sabotaging her attempts at remaining stealthy. Do you see the problem here?"

"The problem is that you're not telling me everything. If you had shared with me in advance, I would have a route of my own to take, and I would be just as effective as Himiko. If I'm not prepared, you, the mission leader, have only yourself to blame. Now why-"

Dabi reared back and punched Izuku straight in the side of the head, pain rocketing through Izuku's mind as his centre of gravity ceased to exist. Izuku hit the dirt roughly, the ground slamming into his chest.

"W-Wha-"

Dabi grabbed Izuku's head and yanked it back up. He whispered directly into Izuku's ear, quiet, gravelly and menacing.

"You're forgetting your place, brat, and that place is nowhere near this squadron. You are quirkless, young, weak, and work as an information specialist, and you're talking like you own this place. Don't go getting cocky, and don't you think you can talk to me like that. I won't stand for it, mister negotiator, because you haven't got a single bargaining chip that makes you worth putting up with."

Dabi dumped Izuku back to the ground on his knees, walking off to rejoin the rest of the group as Izuku spat the taste of dirt out of his mouth.

*Dammit...*

The phrase about 'not all men are created equal' burned at the forefront of Izuku's mind right now. But even in front of that anger, Izuku was weighing up his options.

Let's see...he could rejoin the squadron and move out with them, being pressured into a minor role by Dabi and forced to stay out of the fight...he could radio Kurogiri with his respirator headset and head back to HQ...or...there was a third option, he supposed...it's just that it was really, really stupid.

Without further deliberation, Izuku ran further into the forest. He was going to play a part here, and if that meant going rogue, so be it.

Dabi wondered if he'd been a little too harsh. Oh well. It's not like he was here to make friends in the first place. Whatever got that wimp to call Kurogiri and get out of here was what had to be done.

At the very least, the target of the mission had never come up. Some of them looked like they were getting suspiciously close to leaking it...Dabi should've known Himiko's friendly relationship with Deku might cause them to spill vital information. That kind of cohesiveness in a team was good. Except for right now this moment. Because Deku wasn't part of the damn team.

Dabi tapped on his coms system. His headset had only a few options. Mute microphone, mute audio, turn off (which effectively did both). He listened in for a while. Mustard was getting in to
position on one side as Dabi made his way to the other end of the forest. Himiko began stalking through the brush, excitedly testing the mic's capabilities. Muscular spoke up only once to say he was going to the mountainous looking areas. Spinner and Magne proclaimed they were going to meet the enemies head-on and take out some of their heavy hitters. Twice told Dabi his clone would be more than adequate to battle some more hard-hitters, wasting their time further. Moonfish just groaned down the mic gormlessly. Mr Compress assured everyone that he will take the first opportunity he has to compress and abduct Bakugo.

And happily, Izuku's over-eager voice, which he expected to already be marking down hero positions to prove his value, was completely absent from the system. Maybe he'd taken a hint.

Dabi made his way closer and closer to the centre of the forest's growth, ready to start the wildfire of the century. Everything about their plan was back on track.
Izuku found himself straggling the rocky areas. If he strayed too far to one side, the fog would envelop him. It wouldn't be the worst outcome, since he had a respirator, but until Mustard needed some form of backup, he'd rather avoid the area so he could get a lay of the land. The thick mist would make it impossible to see. But on the other hand, sticking to the other side of the area would get him burned by Dabi's forest fire. The smoke was beginning to rise. Heroes would almost certainly be being called into action right now. To one of the far sides, but above the fire; the cliffs were the only viable option.

Dabi had humiliated him. Izuku might talk a big game by this point, but no matter how many good points he made, they wouldn't be heard over the incessant howling impression made by a powerful quirk. He found himself getting furious. With himself. With Dabi. With quirk society in general. But there had to be something even he could do. He wasn't weak. He wasn't useless. He knew that. And it was about time that smug jackass did too.

So much bluster...no, he had to calm down. No matter how much his cheeks burned with rage, he had to cool down. Raging and rioting wouldn't accomplish anything. He wanted to be useful. Becoming overly volatile would just make him a liability. But if he stuck to the brush carefully there were certain to be heroes he could battle. Or, more crucially, allies he could protect.

He shimmied his way along, rounding another one of many corners-

Muscular was about to kill a child.

Izuku took like a fraction of a second to acknowledge that, seeing his massive frame looming over this kid, cowering in fear, but it was something he couldn't actually process and understand. To really work through the details of how and why this gigantic man was killing a kid. What joy did he get in slaughter, really? There was no glory of battle, not against a defenceless child. He wasn't killing for food, or blood, or a cause...a cause. Hang on. What was he even doing here?

Izuku stood atop a small crag, overlooking the scene. Maybe he could break up the action before...that...happened.

"Wait!", Izuku cried aloud, getting Muscular's attention.

The titan tilted his head up, meeting Izuku's emerald eyes with one rough brown eye, and one scarred eye socket, with a replacement eye lodged in it that stared back, alert and unblinking.

"Hehehe...well look here kid. You've got two to deal with tonight."

Izuku looked over. Muscular was picked out for his strength. If Giran could see him now, how he was using that strength... "How does this accomplish our mission goals, Muscular?"
"I got the impression you'd left the mission? Your coms are off."

"So are yours", Izuku pointed out, tapping his headset. He'd only muted his own audio. Clearly Muscular had done the same, seeing as his voice wasn't being echoed down the radio lines. But Izuku was guessing he'd actually turned off his headset altogether. "What's the matter? Wouldn't the team be interested in hearing how your mission to murder a young boy is going?"

"I turned those coms off. I don't need anyone telling me where to go from here on out."

The child was trying to take the opportunity to inch away from his attacker. His terrified face... Izuku shouted again, trying to keep Muscular's one and a half eyes focused on him.

"Muscular!"

"Get lost, Deku."

"Why did you come here?"

"For this, idiot! I'm collecting what's owed to me. You wanted me here so I could use my quirk without limits, that's what I'm doing!"

"T-This isn't what we're here for! This isn't what the League stands-"

"I do not. Care. Jackass. I'm doing exactly what I said I would. You don't wanna get in the way of me and my intents, wimp."

Muscular was glaring at Izuku with an intense rage. Good. He was still looking at him. Because he was an eyesore.

"I don't want us to be at odds either, Muscular. I want to be useful, not an obstacle. I don't want to harm one of my own."

"Ahahah! One of my own, he says! Like he can even THINK of ordering me around. Quit playing the tough guy. Or you're gonna regret it, kid. Move."

Muscular activated his quirk. Tendons, muscle fibres, wrapping around his arm in a taut, meaty second skin. He bent his arm, showing off the sheer thickness of his biceps, the way one swipe from it could knock a man's head clean off.

But Izuku was focused on a few other things. The fact that his replacement eye lacks eyelids. The fact that this child had inched within reach of Izuku's arms following a short slide down the cliff. And most importantly, a way to potentially make this brute useful.

Giran himself had noted picking out a villain candidate was harder than it looked. So powerful, so bloodthirsty. So shallow, so uncontrollable. This must be what it looked like when you picked someone for power without considering their goals or values. Izuku moved his right arm over, showing Muscular he was making a reach for his knife...

"I don't see you moving!!", roared Muscular, taking a running start at Izuku, leaping to grab him, pushing himself above the ground like a rocket.

Izuku threw a flashbang straight into Muscular's face with his left arm. Classic misdirection. Muscular tried to shield himself, but at least one of his eyes was going to eat that searing glare no matter what. Izuku slipped himself down the cliff, as nearly the entire platform he was standing on was crushed underneath a giant red hand.
"FUCK! SNEAKY LITTLE COWARD!"

Izuku scooped up the child with an arm, taking off into the woods as fast as he could, dodging a wild, blind swipe from Muscular as he made his way to the forest entrance. The kid, too traumatized to even speak much, clung onto Izuku's clothes tightly, looking behind him intently.

The child screamed, "B-Behind you! He's-

Izuku leapt to the right, narrowly dodging a large chunk of rock that was smashed into the dirt next to him. Izuku snuck a glance behind him. Muscular was throwing debris rapidly. He was covering his watering replacement eye with a hand, a scowl on his face.

"GET BACK HERE YOU COCKY FUCKIN' FREAK!"

Izuku stuck to the shade of the trees. That way if Muscular was going to pursue him, he couldn't do it by leaping at him.

The child whispered, "Don't drop me, please don't drop me, h-he's a murderer, he k-kills, killed..."

Izuku muttered quietly, patting the child on the back, "Stay with me, okay? Try to keep quiet. If we're quiet we might be able to lose him."

True, if they were quiet, they'd be able to lose Muscular, and he'd give up and go do something useful.

But that wouldn't be nearly as fun as what would happen if he chose to follow. If he followed, it'd prove he was more focused on petty violence than anything else. Izuku would feel no remorse about what happened to him beyond that point.

Izuku noticed a tree falling to the ground behind him with a colossal crack. There he was, perfectly predictable. Predictable, but nearly unstoppable. Izuku pounded the floor heavily. He was slower than normal, weighed down by the kid. Sticking to the heavy greenery, abusing his smaller size, that was the only way to get out of this alive.

"I'M GONNA BURY THAT KID'S HEAD IN YOUR RIBCAGE!", roared Muscular, a roar that was getting closer and closer, until Izuku could hear the stomping of his feet, his boots ripping up foliage as he beelined for Izuku...

Suddenly, the child began shooting water out of his arms? He was trying to slicken the ground behind Izuku and make Muscular trip. And according to at least one furious noise made by Muscular, it was working! The kids eyes were stinging with tears, but he was still trying to save himself. To save Izuku.

Izuku found himself gaining a burst of speed. Not today. Muscular was not going to take this kid today. Izuku's breath scraped painfully up and down his lungs. He would not be allowed to tarnish the name of the League of Villains. Izuku would not allow it! And he had the strength to refuse!


"Little guy, quick, fire some water at my face. My eyes in particular."

"W-Wha!? But won't that hurt your vision?"
Izuku grinned in a gesture he hoped would comfort the child. Now he knew what All Might's smile was for.

"Don't worry. We're going to make it. Trust me, just do it."

Aizawa was having a rough day.

His students were in danger. He had nearly been killed by a man with a fire quirk who wasn't even here in the first place. He disintegrated on touch... either he was capable of teleportation, or he was some kind of illusion. Maybe a copy or body double... since he was able to use fire, it was unlikely that his disappearance was the result of his quirk, maybe someone else's... one of his buddies.

Aizawa heard a noise coming from the trees. Another villain. He unravelled his capture tape, whirling it around himself threateningly. If it was that pyromaniac kid again...

Suddenly, some green-haired kid, couldn't have been any older than his students, came bolting through the forest at full speed. He was covered in tears, and his expression was one of sheer terror and panic. He was carrying an even younger child, curled up in shock.

The kid screamed, "Help, help us! Villain, right behind me! H-He's after the child!"

Right as he explained his problem, the problem rushed out of the trees to meet them. A goliath of a man, blonde-haired with rippling muscles. Literally rippling, his muscle fibres visible. Some kind of muscle augmentation quirk. Powerful, very powerful. But it didn't look like a mutant-type quirk. Too bad for him.

Aizawa rushed forward to protect the two kids, but the massive man was gaining on them faster than Aizawa could reach them. The villain raised his fist, ready to land a running punch right into the older kids back. It'd put him six feet underneath the ground if it hit. He was clearly banking on landing the killing blow right here. Too bad for him.

Aizawa's eyes flashed crimson. The man's face turned pale as his muscle fibres painfully shrank back under his skin. His fist connected, and his considerable strength sent the kid rolling into the ground. He curled up into a ball, protecting his younger charge and taking a blow to the head and back as a result as he skid across the ground, and once the roll was finished, he ended by rolling back onto his feet, running without losing momentum. Not bad, not bad at all.

The titan roared, "W-WHAT DID YOU DO!?"

Without a response, Aizawa wrapped capture tape right around the confused bastard's neck, and deactivated his quirk again before pulling and slamming him straight into the ground.

He blinked. The man had used this opportunity to push himself back to his feet, grinning manically. In response to the loud impact with the ground, Vlad King stepped out of the building, already building up a pool of blood at the sight of his enemy.

The huge man spat, looking at the sight of his new opponent, "You'll be bleeding far more than that by the time I'm done with you, mongrels!"

Aizawa prepared himself for a long battle.
Izuku kept running. He quickly turned around to look back on his escape and whether anyone was following him. Sure enough, Eraser Head's quirk ensured he had to continue staring at Muscular in order to keep him weakened. Even if he wanted to keep an eye on the poor, defenceless kid, his battle style ensured that the two of them would be able to leave uncontested.

And how perfect was it that Muscular, who prided himself so much on his quirk, had to go up against someone who could completely negate it. 'Quirkless, weak, wimp', well let's see how you do without your muscle fibres, shall we? Either Eraser Head would end up being the David to his Goliath, or Muscular would succeed, defeat the heroes, and end up being actually useful for once.

By this point, the heroes would be launching a counter attack against key areas. He checked his coms. Surely enough, Mustard was laughing manically like a complete idiot. It would be far easier to take out the source of the gas cloud than it would be to tackle the tall blue wildfire Dabi had created. That should be his next highest priority...

The kid had finally stopped hyperventilating so much. He was still midway through an adrenaline rush. Yeah, dropping him off was probably the most immediate concern.

Izuku kept walking. His back had been damaged, both by the punch and from rolling afterwards. Damn...it was definitely bruised. Not broken, thanks to Eraser Head. He touched his head. He was bleeding from his forehead. He probably looked really grizzly right now.

Izuku set the two of them down a short walk from the main base of...the Wild Wild Pussycats? Oooh, so that's where they were. The hero students must be performing either an internship or some specialist training. He could fanboy over the popular hero team later. Izuku had to attend to the kid right now. He placed a pair of hands on his shoulders to keep him from falling backwards.

"Breathe slowly. We're safe now. The heroes are tackling Muscular right now."

"He...he'll win...he's too strong."

"I doubt that." Izuku smiled widely, wiping down his face of blood and water, and re-equipping his respirator. "He's so proud of himself and his quirk...I don't know if he'll adjust to fighting without it, especially not against such tough opponents. Either way, you're safe, okay? C'mon, look at me now."

Izuku tilted the kid's chin up. He was crying slowly, but finally starting to regain some control.

"Hey, what's your name?"

"K-Kota...who are you?"

"I'm Deku."

"Deku...is that some kind of hero name?"

Izukus nerves were shot with something midway between fear and fury. "No...no, I'm not a hero."

"Y-Yes you are...I mean, you saved me, didn't you? Isn't that, w-what heroes are supposed to do?"

He was only something like four or five years old...it'd be difficult for him to understand all the long-winded details. He hadn't seen what Izuku had seen...

"Not always. I'm a villain."
"No, no you're not. You risked your life for me! Villains-

"Listen...I am a villain. But I also chose to save you. That beast, Muscular, is also a villain, but he chose to attack you."

Kota's expression darkened ominously. "So...heroes don't do that? They don't save people for no reason?"

Izuku really wanted to affirm Kota's opinion. Spread the misery. Make the League of Villains seem more popular. But something about this kid felt...unbalanced. Saving a kid just to indoctrinate him and turn him to your side afterwards...even Tomura held himself to higher standards. And he did. During Izuku's recruitment, he allowed him to make choices and decisions for himself. Kota needed a balanced viewpoint. He was owed that much.

"Heroes can. Those heroes earlier, they put themselves between us and Muscular, remember?"

"...so who...who's on the right side here...if everyone is so unpredictable?"

This kid is kind of sharp. The kind of sharp that only exists if you've had to grow up really, really fast.

"You've got to, well...judge on an individual basis. Some heroes are good, some are bad. Some villains are good, some are bad. You've got to start looking less at what box they've been put in and more on their actual actions, what they do, who they are as people."

"...that's not an easy answer. It's hardly an answer at all."

Izuku smiled, empathetically. This realisation had been a tough one for him too, after all.

"You don't get easy answers in the real world. But, it means you get a bit more freedom to decide for yourself, if you start looking at things that way."

"Huh?"

Kota was looking up at Izuku expectantly.

"Stop looking at labels, things that tell you how to look at people. Make your own judgements."

Kota grabbed his head, "...Muscular was pure evil. But you're not. You saved me. But my parents..."

Izuku froze.

Kota's voice cracked, "My parents...they saved people. But they left me..."

_Ah. Oh god. Muscular killed...Izuku's knuckles went white with anger._

Kota's tears began to run down his face in streams, "I know you're right...m-mom and dad were doing the same thing you were doing. But if they weren't bad people...if it wasn't heroes, and it's just him, not all villains...why did they leave me? W-Why..."

Izuku pulled in Kota again, holding him tightly as Kota roared in frustration. He grabbed onto Izuku's clothing tightly, just like earlier. The same level of fear and tension was inside him, even though the risk of death was far behind him. His fear this time was because he couldn't understand the past, or see the future.
"There there...there there...", Izuku quietly muttered, holding Kota's head gently.

There are no easy answers in real life. Kota was understanding that now. But with that, he was finally letting go of his bitterness, because he wasn't avoiding the issue by putting his parents, the heroes, or the villain who killed them into groups of people that he could resent and hate. It was just...a tragedy. That's all it was. Now, he could understand his parents intentions, not as heroes, but as people.

It's such a tough reality to face at so young an age.

But now, without thinking about heroes or villains, Kota was finally getting the chance to mourn.

...  

After Kota had been given enough time, Izuku wiped his cheeks clean, and let him run off to the heroes.

Izuku felt himself breathing heavily. A feeling was growing in his chest, like bubbling, cracking lava coming to the surface of the earth.

Right now, he felt like he was stronger than Muscular.

This guy was not going down easy. Aizawa dodged another punch, but keeping his eyes solidly focused on this guy all the time was becoming a major strain. Every time Vlad King tried to secure him to the ground, he'd break out the second they blinked. His fury was too strong, and they had no way of dealing direct damage to him.

The sound of another pair of running feet began behind Aizawa's back. He whirled around, whipping capture tape around the approaching figure.

"Pull me in closer!", yelled the kid from earlier, running into the battlefield with a knife and shortsword drawn, bearing a vengeful, malicious glare, his face hidden behind a metal mask. His expression was completely the opposite of what it had been before, but somehow, it was definitely the same kid. The capture tape was wrapped around his torso.

Aizawa didn't know quite why, but he was tempted to acquiesce to his request.

Vlad King, occupying the villain with more slices of blood, cried out, "Eraser Head! Any time now!"

_They didn't have a lot of options anyway..._

Aizawa pulled at the capture tape, winding it tightly around the kid's torso. He whirled the kid around through the air with his whole body weight, spinning once around himself for wind up speed, and then, activating Erasure to ruin the villain's defences, he slammed the kid into the giant villain like a ball and chain, and he landed a huge flying kick on the villain that produced a loud, audible crack. That was at least a broken jaw. The kid rooted himself onto his back with both blades, anchoring onto him.

The titan spoke up, barely enunciating through his mangled mouth, "A-AH WHAT THE...TRAITOR! WHY ARE-AH, AAAAH FUCK!"

The kid spoke back, "You betrayed us when you stopped using your powers to accomplish real
change! You're a disgrace!"

The kid grabbed the villain's face, pulling his head back. He said something in a low, threatening voice, and he slammed what looked like a small...grenade in the guy's mouth!?

Aizawa's vision flared white. An explosion of some kind, it was actually a grenade! His ears were ringing! *This kid! If his eyes were off the villain, the bastard would regain his quirk, he'd...what...what?*

The titanic villain, mouth wide open, soot covering his face, had hit the ground hard. He was making a low groaning noise, but seemed either unresponsive or unconscious.

Aizawa looked around. The kid was nowhere to be seen.

The villain said he was a traitor. That kid was a villain? Did that mean...the villains took out one of their own? When he was such a threat to the heroes? Either that kid was a rogue agent, or this big guy was the rogue agent. How disorganised were they?

Aizawa finally broke out of his tense battle stance. The kid used the blinding effect of the stun grenade to make his exit. If he knew the grenade would do that to the muscle villain, without killing him completely, he either manufactured the grenades himself, or knew the guy who did. Either that or he really didn't care if the villain survived or not. That's a distinct possibility.

This guy was some kind of anomaly and a half, and now they had to deal with a wild card running around amongst the other villains, including the blue-flamed guy, the guy who kept helping him get away by letting him disintegrate, and god knows what else was out there attacking his students right now.

Aizawa shrugged his shoulders. This was turning out to be one hell of a rough day.

Chapter End Notes

I was right, by the way. Forest Training Arc. Lot of moving parts. Kind of rough to write.

By the way, if anyone has any suggestions on how to tag this work, I would gladly accept them. I'm unsure at which point I overstep the boundaries of modesty. Many thanks, as always!

EDIT: Sorry for the late updates, work has me tied down slightly. More to come, but there might be a small delay. Thanks!
Smoke and more smoke

Chapter Summary

Izuku tries to keep the plan on track.

Izuku was making his way through the brush, the anger in his chest giving way to a sickly feeling with every step he took. He was so pumped up on adrenaline and loathing at the time it didn't really sink in that he was taking on Muscular. And that he'd end up having to fight two pro heroes at the same time if he succeeded. The flashbang was the only way to get out of there alive. Because again, Eraser Head can't look away from his target. Vlad King was the part that Izuku was really worried about, but at the moment he wasn't being hunted down. Vlad King must have taken quite the beating earlier in that fight.

Sneaking through the twisting forest pathways, he looked off into the distance at the sound of noise. It seemed like Spinner and Magne were occupying some of the enemy...two of the Pussycats, in fact, Mandalay and Tiger. They looked like they had things covered...but Izuku didn't trust that they'd be completely fine by the end of this. He made a mental note to swing by here if the coms indicated they were in trouble.

A gunshot rang down the com system. Mustard's revolver. Someone had found and engaged upon him, how the hell they had managed that, Izuku had no clue. Only a limited few people would be able to walk through Mustard's tremendous clouds of gas unharmed...they must have some kind of gas mask...

Izuku felt up the respirator on his face. It'd work right? The gas wouldn't knock him out. If there wasn't anyone else who could step into the gas safely, then there was nobody to back Mustard up. He was entirely alone. Izuku was the only one who could help him.

Izuku bolted through the woodlands, as fast as he could without completely breaking his stealth.

It really felt like a warzone out here. And he probably looked like he was part of a warzone by now. Blood all down his front from Muscular in two streaks where he anchored himself on to his massive shoulders. A leaking trail of blood from his head. Probably a bit from his back too, but, y'know, he couldn't tell. Can't see his own back. With or without a back injury helping the look out, Izuku still appeared like some kind of horror-movie victim. He guessed playing victim to trick heroes is less likely to work next time.

Izuku tried to run a map in his head about where everyone was. He gritted his teeth, finding it increasingly frustrating that Mr Compress and Himiko didn't have a precise location.

As he reached the other side of the forest, he looked out over an absolutely gigantic, towering, solid wall of pink-purple fog, a swirling vortex that was pressing inwards upon the rest of the landscape. It had stopped growing larger. Mustard was busy reading the gas for movements because he was being attacked. Which means if he's paying attention, he'll know he's about to recieve backup.

Here goes everything.
Izuku took a couple of steps forward, and took in a little breath. Then a few more. He wasn't being put to sleep.

He ran as fast as he could towards Mustard.

Izuku could see the air physically rushing by him as he approached his targets, the gas being whipped through the air as he dashed forwards. Izuku looked ahead. Three figures were clashing. The gears in Izuku's head started turning fast as he matched up their appearances with the notes he had taken on them.

One was shiny. Tetsutetsu. Turns his body to steel. Izuku veered slightly away from him. His knife and sword would be of little use against him. As much as he wanted to prioritise Tetsutetsu, he had little way of landing a solid blow with bladed weapons against such a tough exterior.

The other one had huge hands, flanking Mustard to give Tetsutetsu more chances to engage. Kendo. The fists have significant force, so she'd still be a major target, and one that Izuku could engage on safely.

Izuku picked up the pace. They had their backs to him, they were facing Mustard. He could run up on Kendo before-

The devastating crack of a gunshot rang out, and Izuku felt a rush of pain in his left arm as it rolled back in its socket, unbalancing Izuku. He had to stand still for a second to keep his balance, especially since his eyes snapped shut with agony for a moment as the bullet lodged itself in his shoulder.

Mustard, manic aggression in his voice, cried out, "You needed even MORE backup to challenge me? Pathetic, you're-"

Kendo and Tetsutetsu turned around. Izuku held up a knife to challenge them.

Mustard paused for a moment, making a low noise of shock with his throat, before screaming, "Oh good god, no. What are...what are you DOING HERE you IDIOT!?!"

Kendo and Tetsutetsu needed no further prompting. Instead of performing the apparent pincer manoeuvr that they had planned on Mustard, Tetsutetsu naturally charged in against Mustard's new backup, launching a devastating right hook. Mustard fired a shot at the ground where Tetsutetsu was going to step on, preventing him from engaging. Kendo approached him, flexing her fingers menacingly. Mustard turned his gun nozzle back over to her, stuck between defending his ally and covering himself.

Mustard reported down the com system, "Shit...Deku is in the field, Deku' in the field! He's with me!"

Kendo started waving her arms about, creating large ripples in the air. Mustard's gas started to disperse slightly. Tetsutetsu growled, but took advantage of the opportunity Kendo was giving him to engage his real target, dashing away from Izuku. Mustard, thinking Tetsutetsu was busy with a different fight and with his gas dispersed, had no way to see the incoming blow...

Izuku threw his knife as hard as he could, aiming for Kendo's gas mask. Tetsutetsu tried to move his arm to swat it out of the air but a well-placed shot from Mustard knocked his hand out of the way, throwing him back a bit, exactly like what had happened to Izuku only a moment ago. Nicely done. Kendo ducked to the side to dodge the flying weapon, and Izuku took advantage of this
He was strong, really strong, but how strong can someone be without the ability to breathe? He could feel his skin becoming more pliable by the second, even as Testsutetsu expended the last of his energy to shake Izuku off of his back. After a short struggle, Testsutetsu ran out of energy, and fell over, limp. It could have been from breathing in the gas, but knowing this guy, it was more likely he passed out from oxygen deprivation first - refusing to take in a breath to the very last moment.

Izuku heard the loud sound of clattering, followed by a loud smacking noise. Mustard's gun rolled on to the ground in front of Izuku. Mustard rolled on to the ground in front of Izuku, his gas mask all but destroyed by the worlds most devastating backhand.

Kendo spoke up, "About time he ran out of bullets. So reliant on his gun, the coward."

Damn...in his panic, Mustard had become too trigger happy. Izuku pocketed the empty revolver into his gun holster, then stepped over his ally, shielding him from Kendo. She kept her distance...she didn't know what this new foe was capable of.

Around them, the purple mist began to disperse. Mustard, unconscious, was no longer able to sustain the sleeping gas. Which meant Izuku only had a few more seconds to exploit the intimidation factor. He pressed a button on his respirator, warping his voice with a robotic tone.

"You did well to take down Mustard. You must feel very proud for taking such an advantage in numbers."

"These are lives on the line, villain."

Izuku grabbed Mustard, throwing him up onto his back. Without half of his gas mask, Mustard's small form was surprisingly light. "His life is on the line too. We're leaving. I think this way, we both get what we want. Don't follow me if you value your life. After all, your life is on the line too."

Kendo wasn't going to be that easily dissuaded from engaging. Heroic overconfidence. She began to take a step forward...

"Catch!", Izuku cried, throwing Mustard's body at her with full force. She panicked for a split second, since her instincts really did not instinctively tell her to smack an unconscious human from out of the air. Mustard slammed her to the floor before she could react. By this point, the gas had been dispersed entirely.

Kendo had pushed Mustard's body off of her. Again, he wasn't very heavy. But to get her hands underneath her in order to push herself off of the ground, they had to shrink for a split second..

Izuku rushed forwards as fast as he could, landing a running kick right on Kendo's head as she tried to get to her feet. Her hand expanded right behind Izuku's legs, her defences brought up just a moment too late. Steel-toed boots powered into the side of her head, and Kendo hit the floor again, knocked out, and her hand deflated back to normal size.

Izuku crossed the scene and grabbed his knife, slotting it back into his sheath. He'd need both hands if he wanted to carry Mustard for real.

He made his way over to the collapsed figure of his ally, crumpled up in a way that looked deeply painful and uncomfortable. He had probably bruised his back pretty badly.
Now we're even, trigger happy. He supposed...it did make some kind of sense he'd assume any new arrivals must be another attacker, since the only other villain who could cross the fog was Izuku, and Mustard thought he had left the squad...still that was just a little bit rash.

Izuku grabbed Mustard, hauling him onto his back, arms under both of his legs to support him, letting him lean onto Izuku comfortably, so his injuries wouldn't be exacerbated. He made his way back into the woods. He'd have to find some way to hide with Mustard until the vaguely titled 'mission goals' had been fulfilled. Then, they'd be able to escape at the collection point.

Thanks to Izuku's efforts, Mustard, through bruised and battered, was at least able to get away safely, and two students had been downed.

So much for being useless, Dabi...Izuku smothered the thought. If he focused on just working to show that guy up, he'd start getting bitter, short-sighted, and angry. That's not attitude to take while you're carrying a downed ally.

Huffing and puffing slightly to himself, Izuku started to make his way back into the forest, Mustard in tow. There were still a lot of rash allies that needed a hand with...whatever it was they were doing here.
Back into the fray

Chapter Summary

Izuku makes his way back into the dense forest.

Izuku decided to perform a short head count of all his injuries. Just to make sure he had enough to ensure no-one could deny his contributions today. His grand total was one small head wound, a blow to his back, and a bullet in his shoulder. Compared to Tomura's grand record of three or four bullet wounds from Snipe at USJ, Izuku still had a ways to go. Didn't stop him from feeling incredibly groggy though. Not in pain, but massively tired.

Mustard's unconscious form started to groan very slightly. Sounded like he might be waking up, but after a blow like that even if he was awake he might not be the most, um, functional. A backhand from Kendo was like being hit by a truck. All that Izuku could do now was keep him safe. Avoid large combats, and try to secure the safety of other allies. Nodding to himself, Izuku pressed the switch on his coms.

Moonfish was clogging up the mics with moaning about flesh, indicating to everyone he was engaging in a tough battle, and he was talking as if there were multiple 'fleshes' involved, so he was fighting multiple people. Strangely, the others seemed to be supportive of him instead of annoyed at his incessant noise. Maybe his battle had something to do with the goal of the Vanguard Action Squad. But, escorting an unconscious Mustard ensured Izuku couldn't get involved.

Just another push forwards, and-

Himiko was being pinned fo the floor. The gravity girl, Uraraka, had knocked her to the ground, where Himiko was chatting up a storm. Himiko was grinning. Both because she was going on about being friends and doing all sorts of things together (even while Uraraka was glaring at her disdainfully), and also because her captor hadn't noticed Himiko manouvering one of the spiked canisters close to her leg.

Izuku strolled around the scene. Himiko was easily strong enough to resolve this on her own if her new 'friends' decided they didn't like her company. What would ruin this is if someone else showed up and ruined Himiko's vamp session. That much blood would let Himiko impersonate Uraraka for a VERY long time.

Izuku looked around the edges of the scene, peeping into the surrounding bushes. and....oh god. Triple threat. Shoji, the multi-armed guy. Tokoyami, the one with Dark Shadow and the inexplicable bird head. Shoto, the one Izuku helped and then sabotaged. And Kacchan. They were coming right this way. Himiko had to get out of there now!

Izuku reached into Mustard's pockets, pulling out a couple of bullets. They were getting closer, Uraraka was nearly in sight. Izuku clumsily fit bullets into Mustard's revolver. He'd never done this before, his hands were still slippery with blood and sweat and the stress wasn't helping either, his shoulder was keeping him from holding his arm straight, c'mon, c'mon...

Izuku finally slotted one bullet into the gun. He snapped the cylinder back into place, aimed it straight up and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. They were a STEP away!
Izuku cocked the hammer and the gun made a small noise, then he tried firing. The bullet shot into the sky with a resounding crack. The shock made Uraraka jump a bit and Himiko knocked her off, skittishly withdrawing to the sidelines. Izuku hunkered down to the floor just before this group of heroes could see him. He had to stay hidden. If that many powerhouses tried to jump him at once, to even stand a chance at escaping he would need to drop Mustard. Mustard's dark uniform also, coincidentally, served as a little bit of camouflage in the dark. Chuckling, Himiko retreated. The frog girl, Asui had to stop the suprisingly headstrong Uraraka from chasing her. Seems like Izuku wasn't the only one exploiting the 'unknown quirk' factor. Nicely done.

They made their way into the area, one by one. Shoji, Shoto...wait, wasn't Tokoyami in front of him? The heroes were starting to panic too, so they hadn't just wondered off.

Mr Compress emerged from a nearby tree, laughing at the scene under his breath. He was palming two marbles as if showing off. Izuku couldn't help but grin. He is still such a showman, after all.

Mr Compress was booming with his voice, loud enough for Izuku to hear clearly even from within the shrubbery.

"I took him with my magic!"

Shoto flared up, literally flaring up his fiery half to challenge Mr Compress. Perhaps he planned on cutting off his path with another wildfire.

Mr Compress continued to spin the marbles around his fingers.

"This talent is too good for the likes of the heroes side."

*Hang on, what are-*

"We'll take him to a stage where he can shine more."

Izuku could feel his eyes starting to bug out.

*They wanted to recruit more people. Even more people. And somehow, they chose Kacchan. Bakugo Katsuki.*

*No wonder they didn't tell him...*

Izuku gripped the gun, loading it full with all six bullets, his nerves as calm as steel, taut with cold fury. Gritting his teeth, he aimed it at the heroes...before breathing very heavily, and with IMMENSE difficulty, restraining himself.

His options right now were severely limited. He couldn't shoot all four of the heroes to the floor before they managed to catch up to him. And as much as he wanted to hear more of Mr Compress' speech so he had some ammunition for Dabi when he next saw him, or take out the heroes so he could give Mr Compress an earful personally, he couldn't stay to hear the whole thing. Because Mr Compress was providing Izuku a very good opportunity to sneak away while he was distracting them with his grand oratory. Getting to his feet, hoisting Mustard, he started to creep out of the brush.

He made his way into the clearing. A massive number of trees over in the distance looked destroyed and tipped over...his allied really must have had their work cut out for them.

Izuku tuned into his coms again. The incessant groaning of Moonfish was no longer audible.
Suddenly, Mr Compress spoke down the coms, "Mission accomplished, ladies and gentlemen. The target is secured. Along with a little something extra. We're done here. Everyone has 5 minutes to make it to the collection point to escape. Good luck."

Izuku spoke down the mic for once, "Which is where, Mr Compress?"

Total and utter silence.

That persisted for about 5 seconds.

Then, Himiko. "Deku! See, he was here!"

Dabi spoke up, "I see Mustard wasn't delusional. He said he saw you earlier."

"He's knocked out. I took out his two attackers for him. I have to get him to safety, where is the collection point?"

Dabi paused for a second. "So, where are you?"

"Just outside the clearing where Mr Compress was."

Mr Compress muttered something down the mic, apparently angry at himself that he didn't see Izuku at the time.

Dabi replied, "Heh. Alright then. You've been sneaking around all this time, right?"

"Yes, yes I have."

"Tail behind the heroes who are chasing Mr Compress. Dash to safety and get behind us. We'll cover you. You don't have time to stealth this one if you want to get here in time, just run. Kurogiri's not going to keep the warp gate open for long."

Izuku factored this into account. He didn't have time to rush into the distance to save Moonfish. He was far heavier than Mustard, and making such a huge detour would ensure he couldn't get to the collection point. Then everyone would be captured.

Izuku, wasting no more time, hitched up Mustard, who was starting to groan louder, and took off towards where he'd last seen the heroes.

Damn. Seems like I'm not quite as good at 'persuading' as I want to be. Well, either that or I just didn't factor in that Deku is kind of insane.

Twice chattered to himself, "So he really was here this entire time! I knew he was still here! I thought he'd gone home, but isn't it good that he stayed! He's helped Mustard! But now he might just end up getting captured, and Mustard will still be lost too. Should have left while he could, I say!"

"Quiet, Twice. You're going to give me a headache."

The strange thing was, in spite of how contradictory it was, Twice wasn't wrong about anything he was saying. Deku ran in on his own and started doing major shit on his own. Which would be fine, if it somehow didn't result in disaster. He was hauling Mustard around, which would be great
provided he didn't just end up getting arrested trying to save him.

Dabi looked off down some of the pathways, anticipating new arrivals. Himiko, Mr Compress, Muscular, Moonfish, Spinner, Magne, The Nomu. And of course the incoming storm of heroes. Then, maybe, just maybe, Deku and Mustard.

Dabi smirked. The kid talked a big game, but even after being smacked down, he still put his money where his mouth was. Alright, respectable. But it's only helpful if he can actually win that bet, cash that cheque, and fulfill his own stupid expectations of himself. So in the end, to quote Muscular, it just came down to how well he could follow through on his intentions. Everything about Stain's message would be crippled if Deku made it look like he was weak and foolish, if he got captured for nothing. It'd be proof that 'conviction' and 'spirit' wasn't more important than ability and skill. That's why he had to keep himself safe and uninvolved.

But so far, Deku was getting way further than Dabi had ever expected. He hadn't quite fallen yet. So Dabi was feeling cautiously optimistic.

*Come on then, Deku. Let's see what you can do. Follow through on your grand ideals.*

"Alright, Twice. The heroes are heading our way. Get ready to hold them off while our allies return. We'll have to make time, and keep them occupied."

"You're not the boss of me! But right away, sir!"

Izuku was running, hard and fast. By this point, he'd need to shower for three years to remove all the blood and sweat.

Bakugo Katsuki. Were they stupid? There was no way on earth Dabi could have thought he'd make a willing or effective addition to the team. He was headstrong, uncooperative, single-mindedly focused on his shallow and corrupt idea of what a hero should be, and only used his brains to further his ability to punch shit he disagreed with. Kacchan was just...a horrible choice!

Izuku could understand if they were trying to 'strike fear into the hearts of our enemies' or something, attacking the heroes where they least expected it. This attack would really be a blow for confidence in heroes. But who in their right mind would make it their goal to try and convert the most stubborn human being on earth to their way of thinking? Dabi didn't give off the impression of someone that close-minded and immatu-

*...Dabi's just the mission leader.*

Izuku tried to pick up the pace. He didn't succeed much, he was already running for his life. But he still tried. Because if this mission wasn't Dabi's idea to begin with, then a whole lot of pieces started to fall into place.
The last hurdle

Chapter Summary

Izuku has to make his escape.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It didn't take long for Izuku to find them. The trail of dust they kicked up behind them as they ran ceaselessly into the distance was kind of hard to miss, and they were making even less of an attempt at subtlety as he was. They were trying in vain to catch up to the shockingly quick Mr Compress, who was darting from tree to tree rather flawlessly. Thankfully, Izuku's own dashing was quite far behind the distracted heroes, and for the moment he was just focusing on tailing them.

For now, Izuku's heart pounded louder and louder each moment. He realised in a few seconds he would have to try to break past the heroes to get back to his allies. Even if they didn't know it, any one of them could probably break Izuku's back with a good kick. That Uraraka girl, easily the softest looking of the bunch, had managed to slam Himiko into the ground. If that wasn't just a deception on Himiko's part to get some of the blood of her 'friend', then Izuku stood no chance whatsoever if they focused on him.

He eyed up his opponents backs again. Shoto, immensely powerful, the only advantage Izuku would have against him is that he has fought him before, and knows some of his moves. But it would be foolish to assume a hero in training wouldn't have come up with some new fighting methods, after all, that's one of the reasons U.A even organises trips like this.

Mezo, the one with the freaky looking multi-arms. Getting grabbed by him would be the end of Izuku's adventure. He'd be piledriven immediately, and a glancing grip with a fingertip from Mezo, after the application of his quirk, would turn into a three-hand strong hold.

Asui, the....

Tch...just stop it, Deku, stop it. You're torturing yourself.

Izuku shook his head, squeezing his eyes tight shut and opening them again. He would just end up making himself paranoid, overthinking things yet again. He knew what they all did. He knew that Mr Compress had nearly reached his destination. He knew that a fight was about to break out. So there was nothing left but to do it.

Izuku had just managed to reach this conclusion when a flying shard of ice struck him straight in the gut.

Uraraka Ochaco had just enough time to acknowledge Shoto had turned around, and just enough time to hear the words "Get down!", and just enough time to hit the deck with all her might, the crushing feeling of the floor hitting her body only slightly less concerning than the sudden and
fleeting yet still scorching cold of an icicle flying just over her head. As she got up, she had just
even time to hear the sound of another body hit the floor, turning around just in time to see the
villain rising to his feet. Shoto had hit him just in time to stop the metal-masked and vest-wearing
figure from dashing towards them. All in all, a lot of things went down to the wire in the space of
about three seconds.

The new face, masked as it was, rose to his feet, glaring determinedly at Uraraka and her friends.
Mezo, after shooting a short glance at her to ensure she was okay, chose to turn and shield them
from the villains nearby. They had noticed the scuffle and were slowly circling around the scene,
looking for the opening that Mezo was not giving them. Despite her fear, she still had her priorities
in order.

"Guys, you've got to keep moving. Bakugo is-"

Shoto spoke up, "This guy again..."

Uraraka jolted slightly, "Hang on, is this the one you and Iida talked about!?"

"This is him", Shoto said, turning about, teeth clenched, "This is the one who protected the Hero
Killer."

The menacing figure rose to his feet. In spite of his malevolent aura, and in spite of the fact that
most of his features were covered up anyway, he still looked...a little shorter than he was described
in the news. Maybe he liked to exaggerate his fear factor? Napoleon complex? Uraraka would have
poked fun at this if it weren't for the glare he gave that reminded them he was still out for blood.
Still, he looked about the same age as them, like that villain girl from earlier.

His voice, masked by twisted robotic filters, finally spoke up. "Move aside."

Shoto replied. "I think we've done that enough."

Uraraka couldn't help but shoot a sideways glance at Shoto. Did these two have some kind of
history?

Mezo, whispering with a mouth on one of his dupli-arms, shielded from sight by Asui's careful
positioning, whispered a game plan, "We don't need to defeat him. If we can corral him and herd
him away from his allies, we'll be able to deal with him any time. We need to block him off while
still keeping up with Mr Compress. We don't have much time before their escape arrives. What do
we do?"

Shoto looked deeply angry, clenching his fist with a deep rage, and Uraraka got the instinctive
feeling that his anger was not solely directed at the person in front of him.

"Shoto? Shoto, c'mon...what's the plan here?"

Her friend, radiating intense heat and equally bitter cold, began to dilute both of his halves. Thank
god...a sign he was calming down.

Shoto, voice finally more levelled out, spoke, "I'm sick of letting this guy keep showing up,
without us being able to deal with him."

Mezo whispered, "Perhaps that is intentional on his part?"

Uraraka got everyone back on track, "We don't have time for this! Do we fight him or do we run
after Katsuki?"
Shoto, after slight deliberation, uncurled his fist. "The answer...is obvious. Saving an ally is more important than defeating an enemy. That is the essence of heroism."

Shoto turned away. They began to take off towards their destination. Only Uraraka was close enough to hear him mutter one last statement under his breath.

"After all...it's how I use my power that's important, right?"

Izuku watched as they started to make their way for the group of villains. It seems like they had dismissed him as a threat. While he was furious at the lack of respect, his relief at being given the chance to slip away from fighting literally all of them at once far outweighed that. Izuku was practically left limping by that icicle just a moment ago, and his injuries pierced his focus like painful needles. But he might be able to slip back to his allies.

Izuku slipped over to the bushes on the side of the road, retrieving Mustard. If he hadn't thrown Mustard to safety when Shoto first started to turn around, maybe he'd have been able to dodge the attack. Just another thing that Mustard owed him this evening.

Izuku took a trip into the forest once more. They might have taken their eyes off of him, but he couldn't just walk by them to get to his allies. Time was running out. He literally had about a minute left.

Izuku tried to approach around the side bushes, pushing through increasingly thick leaves and vines. If he could make it to the rocks, he'd have some cover with which to sprint to-

A hero. He was hiding behind the rocks. Covering himself with his arms, and quaking in fear. Such a distinctive belt...Yuga Aoyama. The hero with the navel laser. He only ever fired it in short bursts. Such a powerful quirk, with so short a firing space. Either there was a delay on firing it, or it was one of many quirks that had a downside if used too much.

Shaking himself off a little bit from analysing in such a key situation, just what the hell was he doing? Hiding in absolute goddamn terror while his allies worked to engage the villains? What a hero...

Izuku silently took out Mustard's revolver. He cocked the hammer, aimed carefully...and fired. The loud crack of the gun and the still quite shocking recoil gave way to the sound of impact; broken glass.

Yuga, shocked and panicked, quickly saw the massive crack in his navel laser belt. He couldn't fire it anymore, leading to a panicked cry of "Mon Dieu!"

Izuku jumped out of the brush, readying a powerful kick. Yuga raised his arms to protect his face, leading to Izuku slamming his hands into his head using his steel-toed boots. Yuga hit the floor, still conscious. Izuku raised himself above to finish the job when-

A laser flew past his face, and Izuku ducked back. This...this guy could use his quirk solidly even without the belt? Yuga stood up, a large tear in his costume around his midriff. Izuku readied himself, while Yuga, with his closed smile still plastered on his face in spite of the horror in his eyes, rose to fight.

But before either of them could do anything, blue flames roared through the scene. Dabi stood atop the rock, sending waves of fire straight at Yuga, forcing him to duck behind the rocks. Izuku jumped up, grabbing the left hand extended to him, as Dabi helped him atop the rocks, and Twice
escorted him to the centre of the villains, all facing off against the heroes crowding around the entryway.

Dabi spoke "Looks like you've really-

A long tongue slapped Dabi across the face from a mile away. Asui jumped towards the rocks with her powerful legs and froglike dexterity, knocking Dabi off balance. Yuga fired another laser, tearing...oh my god, Dabi's head...he flew into the air, part of his head taken clean off! He, oh god, he only came up there to save-

Izuku's wide-eyed panic dissipated as the midair Dabi melted into a puddle of grey liquid. Twice shook his head and gave a thumbs up to Izuku as he reached the centre.

The real Dabi greeted him, eyes wide, a grin in his normally stoic face.

"Hey, hey hey, not a bad ambush. Have you been getting up to that all day?"

Izuku, panting, barely had enough breath to respond "P-Pretty much...yeah..."

Himiko glanced over, a grin on her face. Her grin and blush began to rise exponentially. Her pupils seemed to widen a bit. After a second of staring, she turned around again, facing off the heroes and twirling her knives, apparently emboldened by seeing Izuku make it home safely. Maybe she was happy he brought Mustard back? She looked a bit too happy.

Dabi muttered something under his breath, apparently having had his fill of crazy from Himiko today.

Izuku asked, hoping despite himself, "So...did Moonfish make it?"

"Either he gets here in 20 seconds or we're leaving without him. Same goes for Muscular."

Izuku wrung his hands nervously, "Oh...about Muscular-"

"I know, he was an asset. But he turned off his coms and I didn't see him doing anything helpful all day. You reap what you sow, I guess."

Dabi waved his hand dismissively. Either he really didn't know what happened, or he was giving Izuku the chance to plead ignorance. Izuku decided to take that offer.

Dabi continued, "The heroes are crowded up. Apart from that frog and the fashion guy over there, they're all over by the entrance. Any ideas?"

Izuku fumbled, bringing out a flashbang. Dabi snatched it from him.

"H-Hey, don't just-"

"Quiet, Deku. It's a good idea."

"Really? Then why are you taking it from me!?"

Dabi smirked, "I have an idea. In the meantime, let's just confirm something...Mr Compress?"

The tophatted man walked up, producing a pair of small blue marbles.

He made a short bow, theatrically presenting them to Dabi. He raised an eyebrow...before throwing them straight at the heroes!?
They jumped forwards, attempting to grab their captured friends. Mezo grabbed two of them, Uraraka grabbed a third...a third?

Mezo yelled, "Wait, why do you have-"

Mezo's two marbles became blocks of ice, suprising him. Uraraka's marble became Izuku's stun grenade, suprising her much more.

The grenade exploded as the portals opened behind them. Ecstatic, Izuku slipped into portal. Yuga fired his laser weakly, before falling to the floor, clutching his stomach. Asui's tongue cleaved the air, hitting Twice slightly on the back, knocking him into the portal. Mezo ran forward in vain, trying desperately to close the distance in time. Shoto threw ice and fire, creating colossal structures that blindly missed their targets amidst the deafness, blindness and confusion caused by a point blank stun grenade.

The purple swirls overtook him, his vision darkening as the warp gate overtook him, while the heroes vision was plagued with too much bright white light.

And when he moved his left foot again, he heard the sweet, familiar, homely sound of his boot hitting the oak wood floorboards.

And the enraging sound of Tomura clapping.

Chapter End Notes

I have come to the conclusion that the grand agenda of the comment section is to permanently dye my skin a shade of blushed red with embarrassment and joyful pride.
Recourse and Reunion

Chapter Summary

Izuku has finally escaped high risk of death. Now it's just medium.

Tomura was clapping with joy, grinning like a kid at Christmas. He was looking expectantly at Dabi and Mr Compress, his eyes scanning the scene...until they landed on Izuku, laying Mustard out on one of the tables.

Tomura looked honestly confused. He glared over at Dabi, his confusion instantly giving away to gross anger.

Dabi shrugged, "I did everything I could, boss. He went rogue."

Izuku returned Tomura's glare, forcing their eyes to lock. Tomura definitely looked annoyed, but he looked a little nervous, or dissapointed. Like he was a little upset his suprise was ruined.

"Tomura Shigaraki, what the hell do you think you're doing?"

Tomura spread his arms wide, in a manner somewhat similar to that of Sensei, grinning confidently. "I've struck right at the heroes core, Deku. The second they stepped out of their comfy little school, we hit them where it hurt, and abducted a student in their midst! What clearer a statement could we give?"

"Sure, sure, if that was all there was to it I might not be so FURIOUS with you. But it's not. You targeted a specific student, right? And kept me from participating. Because you know I do NOT want to see him."

Tomura walked over to Izuku, chuckling slightly, placing his hands, minus a finger, on Izuku's shoulders like he was giving a lecture, "Deku, you're my friend, right?"

Izuku, more distraught, replied earnestly, "That was my understanding, Tomura...so why would you-"

"And my friend, friends help each other, right? Well, Deku, do you remember how you became my friend?"

Izuku recalled, "Well...I remember...it was kind of funny, actually. I kind of...I barged into your room, and-"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. So you helped me, right? You called it 'breaking me out of my comfort zone', right?"

Izuku bristled, "Tomura, t-this isn't the same thing! You're-"

"Breaking you out of your comfort zone, Deku~", Tomura crooned, his smile spreading wider, filling Izuku's vision, "Because we're friends. And friends don't do things to please others, they do things to make them better, stronger. Help, right? You hurt my safe spaces to make me feel better, Deku, and now I'm getting better at leading. At growing. At becoming the person Sensei wants me"
to be. Why can't I do the same for you, my precious friend?"

Either Tomura didn't care about the people observing as he commented on deeply personal relationships, or, worse, he was aware that doing so put Izuku in a bad position. Dabi looked reserved. Himiko was quite excited, but knew to keep quiet.

"Tomura...you don't understand. This guy is never going to join us."

"How would I know that, huh? You never told me much about him. Because you're scared of him. You're WEAK. It's holding you back. So I'm gonna serve him up on a silver platter for you Deku, I'm gonna do what I've always done. Give you the reigns, and then let you decide what to do from there. Becuase when you finally meet this Bakugo, I'm not going to do a thing. You're going to face him, and become strong. You've not let me down yet, Deku."

Tomura's grin indicated not a trace of lying. At least in his own little head, Tomura was telling the truth. But not the whole truth, Izuku guessed.

"And...what if we recruit him?"

"Well, that'll be great. If you're wrong about-"

"If I don't attack him, then you will have recruited an incredibly powerful asset, and against all of my protests and doubts, proving your capability as a leader. Tomura, don't lie to me. You've got your own motivations for this, and you don't just want me to destroy Kac...Bakugo."

"...I believe in your strength, Deku."

"That's the point!", Izuku said, backing up from Tomura's touch, "You know I won't kill him! You're fully confident I won't break my own code, so you'll be certain to recruit him and get the approval you want!"

Tomura tilted his head to the side, observing, "...well that's not very nice of you. Don't friends trust each other, too?"

"You didn't trust me on this mission, either."

Shigaraki's eyes narrowed smugly, "Well, if you want to make sure I don't get any credit at all, I guess you've got to kill him."

A silence settled. One could've cut the tension with a knife. And since that was the case, the one most associated with knives cut through the tension.

Himiko piped up, "Do you guys know each others real names?"

Both of the two participants in this stand off immediately turned their attentions to Himiko, raising a hand up like a child in school. Trying to retain some politeness even while interjecting.

Izuku was the first to break from his bewilderment, especially since Himiko was looking a lot more lucid now, "Um...well...I'm not comfortable with everyone knowing. I have family out there."

Dabi made a huffing noise. Izuku darted his eyes over to Dabi, but it looked like Dabi didn't have anything more to add.

Himiko continued, "Well, okay. But if you're such close friends, you've told Tomura."

Izuku swallowed a bit. "Well...yes. He knows my real first name."
"And Tomura, your name is on display, right?"

Tomura looked at her as silently as a stone statue. No expression at all. She took that to mean 'yes'.

"Great! My name is on display too. Because I want to open up to everybody here, and really bring this team together. Himiko Toga is my real name."

Himiko took a few steps forward.

"I know not everyone here wants to volunteer their identity. But you guys giving that information away, isn't it proof you've already trusted each other with so much? You're already in deep. Two villains, who know each others real details. You can't throw that away over somethi-"

Tomura spoke up malevolently, "Shut up. Now."

Himiko was taken aback for a second. Tomura's words were laced with venom. The sudden display of hatred almost felt like it darkened the room.

Tomura seemed to look down for a moment. He wasn't looking at the floor, clearly. He was recalling something.

Tomura spoke up, bitterness in his every gesture. His curled lips, scowling brow, hands shoved deep in his pockets. Was there even a way to reach him through this? Without doing something dangerous?

"Tch. Names aren't-"

"My name is Izuku Midoriya."

The room was shocked. It felt like the energy of that remark brightened the room, as silent thoughts ran through every villains head.

"I f-feel like I can tell you all that. Or, I can now. We've fought together. Bled together. I don't plan on betraying anyone, and I trust that everyone here won't betray me. I'm going to be here with you all for a long time."

Izuku walked over to a stunned Tomura.

"So...don't v-view us all as some kind of competitors, okay? We're friends, but not rivals. We're a team. Rivalry...is kind of what created all the problems with Bakugo in the first place for me."

Tomura avoided his eyes.

"I don't want that to happen with you too."

Tomura didn't say a word. After a couple of seconds, he sighed heavily. And his shoulders sagged, his back returning to its usual hunch, like a deflating balloon.

He looked guilty. But...no, this was different. Tomura didn't back down on his arguments like this. Izuku knew that. He was too stubborn. Why was he getting upset? Why get guilty now? Did Izuku accidentally strike some other nerve? He looked really upset.

Tomura quietly walked out of the room. He pulled up his hood as he left, obstructing his face.
"So, how's Mustard's recovery going?", Dabi asked, playing with a small flame in his palm.

Izuku took in a deep breath from the cold night, replying, "Apparently quite well, thank god. His blow to the head didn't cause much lasting damage. He was just being knocked out. Kendo must have some real practice in hitting people to knock them unconscious without killing them."

"Seems a bit impractical."

"Yeah. You seem to prefer punching people, don't you?", Izuku shot.

Dabi chuckled wryly. He kind of guessed this line of conversation would be brought up eventually.

"Is that why you joined me out here, Deku? About what happened earlier? Or, uh, should I start calling you Izuku now?"

"Deku is fine, if you prefer it."

"You use my pseudonym, I'll use yours."

Izuku, a little annoyed, continued, "And yes, it is entirely about that."

Dabi bluntly replied, "If you're asking me for an apology, it's not gonna-"

"Would you do that again?"

Dabi raised an eyebrow, "Is that some kind of request?"

"I mean, knowing what I can do now, and how my ambushes worked out...would you still dismiss me?"

Dabi clenched his fist, disposing of the small blue light.

"I was mission leader for that thing. It's my job, and I want to do it right. For the League, for Stain's message, and for a better society. By all rights, you going in there should have resulted in a figurehead for the League being arrested for his own foolishness. You're trying to take on heroes? You'd be decked."

Izuku barely contained himself, "But evidently, I didn't get laid out. I fought well, and I saved one of our own!"

Dabi smirked, "Well...that just makes you even, doesn't it?"

"W-wha-"

"You gave away pretty freely that you knew something about where Muscular had gone. What did you do with him?"

Izuku raised his hands, "Listen, I don't...I'd never...he was trying to kill me, and an innocent kid!"

"I don't blame you. I hated that guy."

"Hang on...excuse me?"

"Not gonna just overlook you turning against a teammate just because you don't like him, but I'm not gonna judge your character for it. If anything, that whole business shows how closely you follow the path of real change. You valued personal integrity over wanton destruction and raw
force."

Maybe it was because of his patchwork face, but Dabi was always hard to read. His aloof attitude, tired out expressions, quietly spoken tone...but this time he was flipping back and forth between complimenting and reprimanding Izuku.

"But more important than that, Deku, is the fact that you managed to do that. You telling me you beat Muscular?"

Izuku nervously recalled, "Well, I tried to make him helpful, but...I learned some things about him, and what he'd done. I kind of...I kind of lost it."

"Maybe you should lose it a bit more, kid. Because if you managed to beat him, that's impressive."

"I mean, it's not like it was just through my own strength or anything, I had to-"

"We're villains. We do what we have to. All those semantics about proper method have to be put aside. Fact remains, you beat Muscular and saved Mustard."

Dabi straightened himself, turning to face Izuku.

"Look, I don't know if I can just say I'd do anything differently. You're still a quirkless kid, and I would never have chosen to send you into battle. You had no goddamn business being as effective as you were. But you still did it. So it's kind of tough for me. Because it's hard to reliably tell how useful you can be just by looking at your quirk, muscles or experience."

"I mean...I've been training, and continually getting more experience as I go on missions."

Dabi conceded, "So I guess that means all I can do is make sure to remember you're full of surprises. I can't ever say 'I know for sure Deku can do this'. But I can hope for the best, and you seem to keep meeting those hopes. Keep doing that, and I'll end up having to think you're actually consistent."

Izuku nodded. Dabi was finally giving him a chance. "Thanks, Dabi."

"After all, how are you going to get experience anyway if I don't let you on missions?"

Dabi clicked his fingers, creating another flame.

"Hey, do you smoke?"

"N-No! I mean...I'm not even old enough to buy them."

"You're a villain. Being arrested for underage smoking is the least of your concerns."

"Well...thanks for the offer, but I'll pass."

"No problem. I only offered because Giran has a habit of using me as a human lighter."

The two of them stood there, outside the building for a little while longer, finding themselves needing no further excuse to silently come to their own understandings under the sparkling night sky.
Everyone had to get some treatment for something or other after they captured the student, so Dabi was leaning on the wall outside the medical bay, where a few of the most injured were resting and healing. Well, actually, they ended up kidnapping a pair of students, thanks to Mr Compress’ sporadic decision to try and recruit another student, simply because he possessed a powerful quirk. Dabi would have okayed using some forceful procedures, but out of respect for the higher moral code that kid Deku was enforcing upon everyone, we’d stick to some simple techniques. Show him our way is the best way.

Dabi was still kind of banking on Izuku not killing the captive. No matter what their history is, it’s unlikely Deku could hate him that much. Not now that he’s got some actual allies to fall back on now. He’s got a place he can belong now, so at the end of the day the past doesn’t really matter at all. Izuku can leave it behind.

Dabi envied that kind of strength. Good for you, Izuku Midoriya. Good for you, I guess.

Dabi’s thinking was interrupted by the ever-present interrupter, Himiko. Another day, another migraine.

"Hi Dabi! Dropping by to check in on some of our most injured?"

"I'm just keeping watch. Might just be because of the argument Izuku and Tomura had, but something's making me a bit tense. Don't feel quite right, y'know?"

"I'm a little restless too. Though I think it might be for different reasons..."

Himiko placed a hand on her heart, blush growing deeper, eyes softer. Her blush always made her look a bit lovestruck but...

Dabi raised an eyebrow, dreading the answer to his questions, "Oh god...you're not nursing feelings for someone, are you?"

"Pretty sure I am! I...", Himiko leaned in close, confiding in Dabi, "I think there's a boy I'm interested in. I don't want to say who, becau-"

"Deku."

Himiko's grin nervously twitched for a second, and she got a little clammy. "Um...well, I won't tell you if you were close, but-"

"You kind of shot him a look earlier when we were mid-combat. It's pretty obvious. You're so transparent. For an infiltrator, you really seem to lack any subtlety in your mannerisms. I'm just wondering why you're nursing one now when you'd already known him for quite a while. Did he grow a six-pack overnight and I just didn't notice?"
"Ah jeez, it's...just, well...", Himiko stuttered out, before gripping her hands into tight, energetic fists, enthusiastically leaning closer, "Don't you think everyone looks better in red?"

Dabi tried to lean away from her, "Blood? You liked him after you saw him with blood on him? What the hell? I knew you were bloodthirsty, but not bloodthirsty. That's pretty messed up."

"Lots of deep, coarse wounds...and I couldn't help but feel really, really, really proud that a lot of that blood wasn't his, too! He fought so well! He wouldn't have been able to lose all that blood while still being that comprehensible. Trust me, I know...uh, well anyway, I just adore bloodsoaked guys, passionately brutal! He's got the killer instinct now, he can USE those blades! A bloody guy who can make others so, so much bloodier, like Mr Stainy but cuter...I'm burning up just thinking about it!"

Dabi couldn't really disguise his disgust. She was talking like someone learning to have their first crush, and applying that same gossipy sense of attraction to murderous gore.

"Himiko, you do know...Deku's not exactly got a killer instinct. He had a gun, he didn't use it. Could've capped that fashion freak kid right in the head, chose to disarm him instead by shooting the belt."

"I know, I know. But he'll get there! One of these days, Izuku's going to learn how FUN it can be to act without hesitation. How truly refreshing, how liberating it is! I mean...Izuku is who he is...but still, I think soon he's gonna start marching to the beat of his own drum!"

Dabi narrowed his eyes suspiciously, "...huh. So, is this about Bakguo, then?"

Himiko's enthusiasm dipped a bit, "What?"

"You're hoping he's going to kill Bakugo, get a taste for it, and learn to enjoy getting his hands dirty, right?"

"H-Hey! That's not fair!", Himiko said, stomping a foot, "You're making it sound like I don't like Izuku for who he is already. I know him pretty well by now."

Dabi smirked, "Aaaah, no, it's deeper than that. You want him to do that to prove he'd be okay with going out with you."

Himiko's eyes flared up animalistically, "Dabi..."

"You know if he's willing to cross that line, he's got a wild streak. Wild enough to take a chance on a fiend like-"

Himiko's knife zoomed through the air and pinned a clump of Dabi's coal-black hair to the wall.

In a bored, muted tone, she simply stated, "Hmph. I expected a more interesting conversation, Dabi. Nah. Just more of you thinking you can read people. See ya. I'm going in for a nice hospital visit."

Himiko put on some kind of hat and cheerily walked into the room they were using as an impromptu medical ward.

Dabi reached up to the knife, and tugged at it. The damn thing resisted pretty strongly. It was lodged in there pretty tight.

He grabbed the handle with both hands, leaned his full body weight behind it, and threw himself
forward. His scalp rushed with a shock of pain and he recoiled, his back against the wall again. The knife still hadn't moved an inch.

He waited a few minutes, still. Then, he rushed forward, like if he did it suddenly enough he would somehow surprise the knife. Leaning his full force into it, the thing still wouldn't budge. Not an inch.

*You've gotta be...are you serious with this shit?*

Izuku's hospital bed was a little uncomfortable. The mattress wasn't exactly 'hospital' grade, it was just Moonfish's bed. Muscular's was nursing Mustard right beside him. He was probably feeling the uncomfortable effects a lot more, since he was honestly a lot more banged up than Izuku was.

Now that Izuku was getting a good look at him, Mustard looked pretty young, actually, even younger than him. He had light, ashy brown hair and brown eyes. Very appropriately, it was a helmet-head kind of haircut, ruffled and relatively short. He looked a lot skinnier without his mask too, though that might also be due to lack of energy right now. Overall, pretty normal. In stark contrast to some his teammates. He looked like the kind of kid who blended in automatically.

Mustard hadn't been saying anything, even though he'd been awake for a good 15 minutes now. Kurogiri had been doing his best to take care of the injured, but everyone contributed once they were well enough to do so. Mustard, however, hadn't left his bed.

The silence was unbearable. Izuku had to try talking, if only to make absolutely sure Mustard was alright.

"Mustard...um, are you okay?"

Mustard squirmed slightly in his bed, apparently in a manner akin to shaking himself off.

"Not exactly."

"A-Are you hurting? Should I call-"

"Don't. Call anyone. I just want to talk."

Mustard's sharp tone, despite it's commanding nature, wasn't filled with Mustard's usual disdain. Izuku respectfully kept quiet.

"I'm just...angry. Really, really angry."

"I know your first mission didn't go as planned, but-"

"Nothing you can say will make it any better, Deku.", Mustard said, bitterness creeping in to his voice again, "I had my chance, and I blew it."

"You were doing well, Mustard. You cut off their efforts for a very long time."

"Yeah, I was doing alright. Then I got a taste of an extreme high, got cocky. I was laughing, laughing with pride, the kind of pride I despise. And in the end, I got attacked anyway and ruined my entire plan. And in the end, I was only salvaged because of **you**."

Izuku stifled his reaction to Mustard's attitude. Mustard needed to get this off his chest right now. Mustard sat upright, becoming more animated.
"I mean...really!? I go on and on about 'pampering', and still...god...still, I ended up being saved by some quirkless kid."

Mustard curled up in rage, pulling his knees up to his face, hiding his gritted teeth.

"You had to bail me out. Absolutely worthless...you're the only reason I'm here right now. This isn't a place, time or lifespan that I've earned. The only thing I earned is a one-way trip to jail."

Izuku reached into the harness by his bedside table. He pulled out Mustard's revolver, spinning the empty cylinders around.

Mustard raised an eyebrow, sneering. "Well, there it is. The gun I used to compensate for being so useless. Still lost, though. I was wondering where it had gone."

Izuku smiled, "Mustard, without this, neither of us would be here."

"What are you talking about?"

"If I didn't have this, Yuga, uh, the kid with the lasers, he would have shot me into kingdom come before I could have closed the gap between us. This gun saved us both. And I only got to it, and you, because you managed to put up such a good fight. You're not bad, really you're not."

Mustard shrugged, "That means nothing. Just shows that you even managed to use my gun better than I did."

"I did, in the end. But if I can do it, so can you, Mustard."

Mustard scowled, "What kind of garbage statement is-"

"And no, I'm not going to say it's because you're better than I am, or any other meaningless comforts."

Izuku sat up on his bed, facing Mustard.

"I worked hard every day to get better with weaponry. To climb the ladder. I started on the absolute bottom rung, a quirkless kid. But I still ended up fighting better than you could."

"Thanks, Deku, real nice."

"Let me finish. This time, though, it's not natural talent at play here. Not at all. You're mad at society because of quirks, and the privilege they give you, right?"

Mustard hesitated, "Well, yeah, that's right. Quirks are a fast track to success. Better jobs, better education to recieve those jobs, free costumes, free gear, free fame, free life. Nothing is fair anymore."

"Well, absolutely nothing about why I survived the fight and you didn't can be attributed to me having 'natural talent'. It's not about my luck of the draw in birthright, it's just training."

Izuku stood up, extending an arm, a determined stare lining his eyes.

"So get mad, Mustard, get mad at yourself! Harness it! But don't you dare make excuses about how this comes down to life not being fair. You're angry about this, not because I'm on a level you'll never attain, but because you can learn to do everything I can do and more, and you haven't done it yet! Get angry because you can be so much better than you are!"
Mustard looked down for a second, melancholy. But then, he raised an arm, clutching Izuku's hand. Izuku pulled Mustard to his feet.

Mustard smirked in spite of himself, "Heh. I didn't think you'd really get it. But...yeah, you're right. No worthless pity, no excuses. If I'm going to make those elitest bastards pay, there are certain goals that I DO have to set myself. Thanks for understanding, Deku."

Izuku grinned, and for once Mustard didn't seem to feel put off by his optimism.

Izuku grabbed Mustard's gun, leading the grip to Mustard's palm, but when he reached it, he pushed it away.

"Keep it. Something to remember me by. Besides...you've kind of helped me realise what a crutch that thing can be."

"W-Well, if you're really sure."

"I'm sure. Even though it's a really sweet gun. If you get that thing all rusty, I'll never forgive you."

Izuku holstered the weapon in his harness. "No, I won't. I'll treasure it."

"You'd better.", Mustard said, "But don't start using it too much. If you do, I'll start shouting 'hypocrite' at you right away!"

And then Mustard smiled. The first time Izuku had ever seen him smile without his helmet on. And somehow, even though in theory he could've been grinning a lot of times underneath that full set of headgear, Izuku could still somehow tell that this smile was laden with the relief of someone who hadn't smiled honestly in a long time.

Mustard had finally moved back to his room. In spite of Kurogiri's protests, he said he would be much better off in his own room. Izuku knew that was just an excuse to get some early practice in, while he was still inspired. Izuku was getting tired, but still awake. He was starting to go off on a tangent inside his head about where he might go to get firearms training. It's not like he wanted to specialise in guns, but since this revolver had so much personal value, he felt he should wield it with the utmost efficiency. I mean, that principle applied to all his weapons and armor. If he used them, he had to make sure he was great at using them.

Before he could mentally mutter to himself more about his tools of the trade, his door opened.

"Hi Izuku!", Himiko exclaimed, bounding into the room excitedly. She was wearing a bright, fanged grin and a small nurses cap.

Izuku, fear stricken, whispered, "Oh dear."

Himiko laughed to herself and repeated 'dear' quietly, before walking over to Izuku's bed side. He should have left, he should have asked to go back to his room too. God, why didn't he ask about going to his room? Could he still ask? Do time reversal quirks exist? Could Sensei give him one? Right now?

"Wow, you're looking really pale right now, Izuku! Probably from all the blood loss, right, right? Don't fret, Nurse Toga is on duty."

"Where did you even get that hat?"
"Oh, that's one of my favourite stories. You see, one day, I found myself-"

"Stop, nevermind. I don't need to know all the details. I'm pretty sure I can guess how the story ends."

Himiko tilted Izuku's head downwards, bringing Izuku into a bowing position. Izuku noticed Himiko's eyes get a little wider, probably at the sight of the injury she could see. Izuku was entirely prepared for the worst at this point. Her knife flashed as she brought it into her hand.

"Here, let's see here...mhm, yep, this should do the trick~"

Izuku closed his eyes squeamishly at Himiko's devilishly lighthearted pitch. After a few seconds, however, he did not feel agonising pain, a tongue licking his blood, or Himiko running out of the room at a suspiciously fast rate.

He opened his eyes up. Himiko was holding a large set of bandages, and was wrapping them around Izuku's head with gentle care.

"Huh? You're treating my wound?"

"Well, of course. What did you think I was going to do?"

"Oh. Um, thank you Himiko."

Himiko nodded cheerfully, humming to herself slightly as she tended to the hit Izuku had taken, finishing the bandaging off with a layer of soft, plush, fabric bandage to make lying down more comfortable. She cut the bandage off from it's roll with her knife, and tucked it away again calmly.

Izuku leaned back, resting his head on the hospital bed. Himiko, satsfied with a job well done, made her way to the door.

"That was really sweet of you Himiko! It's almost a little unexpected, to be honest. I know you really like blood, kind of violently really, so...I'm sorry I was a little nervous."

Himiko peeked her head around the door, "Oh c'mon. It's not as if blood is the only thing I like, after all."

Himiko stuck her arm around the door, waving, "Good night, Izuku!"

After a full two seconds of waving positive vibes through the door, Himiko shut it behind her. Almost immediately, Izuku heard some loud, angry sounds from the hallway outside. Tables breaking, glass smashing...good grief. Seems like trouble follows in Himiko's wake most of the time. But she was doing her best not to bring it to him.

After about five minutes, the ruckus subsided. And Izuku was left with the opportunity to enjoy a well deserved and well needed nights sleep, his head resting far more comfortably on his bed than it had before.
The moment he was freed, he attempted to fight back. Classic hero behaviour, textbook. Still, his fight was vehement. Restraints had to be fitted straight away. Large gauntlets for his vicious hands, a clamp over his mouth to muffle his furious noise.


It was paramount that the whole team be here to interview them, but in the meantime, they had concocted a plan on where to keep them, and how they would be introduced.

When the time comes, this one will be bound to a chair, brought before the entire League, and talked to. They would be shown how much more freedom could be afforded to them, how they could break the chains they had been confined by this whole time. Atsuhiro knew all too well that society these days was being constricted by the notion that powers had to be used a certain way, that there was only one way to see the world that was 'right'. As a moral obligation, such a thing is fair to teach, but never to impose on someone through law, and the silencing of other perspectives. And now the best and brightest, such as Izuku, were finally beginning to sniff out the rotten nature of this indoctrination.

Ah, how they might see things differently if they looked upon this merry troupe Atsuhiro was bound to now. Every one of them colourful and unique, and they all had their own reasons for being here. But society these days was just labeling them as wrong and refusing to see them as products of their environment. It dealt with the problem, not the cause, to just blame the existence of villains for everything.

But with the guiding hand of Mr Compress, if the villains refused to go away for long enough, if their escapades spoke to a large enough audience, maybe the message would finally be pounded far enough through society's thick skull that REAL change would begin.

Atsuhiro wasn't naive. He performed the very tricks that relied on the childish wonder and foolishness of his observers. But he did have hope. Izuku, one of the most vulnerable and damaged of them all, with no business being as clever as he was, still found a way out of that rabbit hole. Maybe this one would to.

His captive struggled, knocking his elbow into Atsuhiro's hip.

"Oh, come on now. I could recompress you with but a touch. You can't honestly expect to escape here, do you?"

Another deep, digging elbow of defiance hit the hip again, in the same spot. It was actually starting to chafe somewhat, even through his coat.
"Being a sore loser will avail you nothing. After all, failure doesn't have to be the end. My advice for you is to keep your mind open to the possibilities, my friend."

Carrying the captive, Atsuhiro made his way to the opening of the basement. It had been so much quieter without Moonfish around, now that his teeth were no longer ricocheting on the metal, reinforced roof. He had at least dealt with the rat problem very well before he left, before the security of the basement had been vastly increased, to compensate for the basement's new occupant. Farewell, old companion. You will...sort of be missed.

His captive began to struggle again, twisting violently in Atsuhiro's grip.

"Again, you have no where to go if you-"

Atsuhiro noticed the look in his eyes. Fear. He was struggling to get away. He locked eyes with Atsuhiro, even behind his mask. It was a look that implied the outcome of pushing this any further would be bad for everyone involved.

"I know, I know. But I think this will be an educational experience for you. Enriching. You've been taught never to use your full power, to embrace your true nature. Entirely for the benefit of others, you were taught to wear your own muzzle. I think being left down here for a while will be not just a chance to come to terms with your potential...but maybe it will be a chance to pursue a little bit of soul searching."

His captive only became more distraught at Atsuhiro's words, moving more violently. A shame. Atsuhiro thought he was being quite reasonable with his explanations. Still too fargone, it seemed. There was nothing else to do now but challenge him directly.

"Goodbye for now, young Tokoyami."

Atsuhiro threw the bird-headed hero down the stairs, and he landed heavily on the floor below, amidst complete and total darkness. He righted himself quickly, reaching his desperate, cuffed arms for the door, running, roaring with his gagged mouth, attempting to escape the black room.

Atsuhiro slammed the heavy door closed. He fit all the iron bars across it he could, and activated all of the locks.

As he walked away, he could faintly hear the muffled sounds of the struggle beginning. Of items being knocked over.

Bakugo had been restrained in his chair for at least 10 minutes solid without anyone saying anything. Each and every one of these condescending fuckers hadn't said a word, but most of them gave their intentions away by how they looked at him. The sharp-toothed girl's animal eyes, the magician's arrogant glare, the lizard's judgemental focus, they all gave off the same kind of impression. They were sizing him up. Testing if he was 'worthy' by their twisted standards. Something like that.

Struggling probably wouldn't accomplish much, yet. Key word being 'yet'. The very second these wastes of flesh let their guard down, which they would, he was taking the first chance they gave him to get the hell out of here. The longer he stayed here, the longer he was being a fucking pawn and an inconvenience.

Still...Bakugo looked around the room carefully, examining the entrances with some trepidation. Someone wasn't here who should be. Someone he had to find before he broke out of this place.
Maybe they were too scared to face him. Maybe they were going to run away from the problem, just like they'd done when they joined this pile of garbage organisation. Bakugo sighed. No, that's probably wishful thinking. He's on his way here. It was probably why the other villains hadn't made any conversation with him. They were waiting, both for their leader, the fucking creep with the hands clamped all over him...and the guy who knew him best so far, Deku.

Right as he was thinking this, he began to hear shuffling footsteps approach the far door.

Izuku had chosen to appear as he was. Warts and all, essentially. The goggles and coat he could use to hide his identity had been left behind. No signs of weakness. He'd thrown on his villain costume, respirator hanging around his neck. His harness, now equipped with weaponry on both sides, strapped over the top. He managed to get a quick glance at himself in the mirror. He thought he looked natural, the brief glimpse he got of himself.

But that was only his perspective. He'd been there for all of the events leading to his current look, all the small, gradual changes. As the mirror vanished behind him, he wondered, maybe it'd look like a wild transformation for Kacchan. Like he'd become someone totally different. To be honest, there was a decent part of him that hoped that was exactly the case. Then there wouldn't be some plea for his return, an appeal to his humanity. Some request or moral appeal that was only asked of him when it suited Kacchan to ask it.

If he was dismissed as a monster, then at least where everyone stands in this whole mess would finally become clear.

At this point, he'd take anything but pity.

Tomura walked beside him. Keeping true to his word, he hadn't said anything, or done anything to sway Izuku's decisions one way or the other. But where Izuku had expected a taunting sneer (either for Izuku or Bakugo), Tomura's face was quite cool and calm. As usual, his expression was very difficult to read underneath the 'father' hand clamped over the top of it, but Tomura seemed to be keeping an icy distance.

Izuku realised he was dragging his feet somewhat. He straightened himself up, forcing himself to stand tall. Whatever might happen, he was going to rule this room.

Izuku opened the door.

All the other villains had already arrived. Only a few had the gall to acknowledge Izuku's entrance, as opposed to keeping their eyes on the captive to intimidate him. There he was. In all his glory. Hair still as spiked as the day they last met. His eyes seemed more focused than they were before, although maybe that was just the intensity of the situation. His mouth was covered by a metal plate, strapped across his head. His arms were clamped in heavy gauntlets or manacles, pulling his arms down, arms that looked more muscled than before, from hero training no doubt. Apart from that though, Kacchan looked like he hadn't changed a bit. That's...unfortunate, to say the least.

Tomura pointed at Magne, "Do we really need that mouth restraint?"

Magne, not wanting to show off her quirk, simply undid the straps with her own considerable strength, freeing Bakugo's profane mouth to the world. Mercifully, he spared everyone a lengthy diatribe on how he was going to explode every last one of them the first chance he got, since the little restraint he had must be warning him of the futility of that action. His eyes, however, told a different story. Or rather, the exact same story Izuku had always seen in Kacchan's eyes for years.
now. He still planned to destroy everyone. He just wasn't doing it yet.

Bakugo's eyes hadn't left Izuku's this entire time. They were set into a scowl by default, but they felt like they were trying to absorb every detail of his face. Compare that information to what he knew. And some part of him didn't like what he saw, apparently, since his face started to drop by a fraction.

Tomura slunk behind Izuku, tapping him on the shoulder. He whispered, "This level is all yours, Izuku. You'd best begin."

Izuku, tilting his chin up in an aloof manner not dissimilar to that of Dabi, walked up to his old friend, standing closely in front of him. He'd start with the formalities. Mostly because they were necessary, and he didn't want to start this whole event by bringing it down to emotional arguments and insult slinging.

"The League of Villains has kidnapped you, for the specific purpose of-"

Bakugo wouldn't let him finish, probably noticing the slightly robotic tone with which he regurgitated his dialogue, retorting, "Purpose of what? Blackmail? Hostage trading? Doing to me what they did to you?"

Izuku looked down, disdainfully, "They didn't kidnap me, if that's what you're implying. I joined of my own free will."

Bakugo raised an eyebrow, snarling, "How're you so goddamn sure? There are an awful lot of quirks that affect the mind. If you're not willing to see at all how they've been fucking with you, then don't even bother coming at me with that 'keep an open mind' shit."

Izuku leaned in close, invading Bakugo's personal space in a way Himiko loved to do to control the conversation, "I know more about what they've been up to than you do. I saw Tomura murder a man on my very first day. Do you really think I'd stick around after that if I had no good reason?"

Bakugo wasn't taking it. He leaned further in like a dog pulling at a leash, nearly headbutting Izuku in the nose, "Then I think it's about time you started talking! Explain yourself, now!"

Izuku decided to take a step back. Giving Bakugo a good view of the room, and the villains he called friends, might illustrate his points better.

"You taught me something, Kacchan.", Izuku began, loving the growl Bakugo made at being addressed like that, "Something that villains these days are all acutely aware of. Not all men are created equally."

"Oh boohoo, poor Deku!", 'Kacchan' shot back, getting no reaction from Izuku in return, who had long since accustomed himself to the name, "You still had good grades, a home, a fucking family! What about them, huh? Were they not fucking good enough for you, that you'd just leave them by the wayside and go join the people who love to torment them?"

Izuku sneered. Like Bakugo had any right to bring up the mother who's child he tormented as an argument point. The mother who fed him cookies and milk that helped him grow up big and strong, so he could deliver a better blow to Izuku's face.

"I could've settled for my lot in life, and blindly accepted the hand I'd been dealt. But...we both know I wouldn't leave things alone like that, don't we? Where there's an issue, I follow it. That habit of mine...it's made me quite a lot of enemies, wouldn't you say?"
Izuku flashed a smile, like the good natured ones he remembered he used to give Kacchan back in the day. Smiles now reserved for those far more deserving. Guilt was lighting an uncomfortable fire in Bakugo's head, and it was clear he was struggling against his restraints on the chair.

Izuku continued, gesturing to the people around him, "So I kept looking. I dug a little deeper. I learned some of the backgrounds and true characters of the demonised and the dark. And discovered they were worthy of assistance too, with all the qualities of a good person, left behind by the rest of the world. What a radical way of thinking, that villains are human beings too! It really makes you wonder why **more people don't try to help them**, doesn't it? Must be something to do with all these heroes."

Bakugo roared loudly, "Like hell it does!! These guys kill people for a fucking living, you goddamn idiot!"

"Really? Oh. I suppose I don't have all my qualifications yet. I haven't killed a single soul."

"W-WHAT!?", Bakugo exclaimed.  
"I've carried on a message I believed in, with people I believed in. But none of the missions I've been associated with have resulted in any deaths. Not the USJ attacks, not the Stain rescue, not even the Forest Training Camp escapade that brought you here. Because I don't want to tarnish the name of a cause I know can achieve real change."

Bakugo looked on, as Izuku's presence in the room got gradually larger and larger. His defiant glare was barely masking disgust, or even fear.

"Bakugo, where do you think villains come from?"

Bakugo shot back the challenge, refusing to let what he probably saw as Izuku's delusions overcome him, "Villains are those that put the value of their own asses over others, and crush them to obtain what they want."

"Close. But as with anyone else here, you're only getting half of the story."

Izuku began to walk around the room, gesturing to each of his comrades, his friends, meeting each of their eyes as they gave their seal of approval to his words.  
"Villains feel the need to escape their situation. They aren't happy where they are. They're in pain, Bakugo. Villains are born from pain. No-one who is entirely happy with their lives just decides to go about attacking people, right? Especially for no benefit to themselves. It's pretty simple if you stop and think about it. But some people don't think about it. They blame it on 'bad seeds', or brainwashing like you just did, or anything that can't be attributed to civil responsibility and social problems. Because if villains just appear out of nowhere, people can cut ties with them, and stop thinking of them like humans."

Low murmurs from his allies began to fill the room. Himiko nodded, the most solemn she'd ever looked, Dabi closed his eyes, breathing softly. Spinner gripped his hand fiercely, Mr Compress nervously straightened his hat. Even Tomura looked down at the floor in contemplation, apparently in complete agreement.  
"Heroes just love doing that. They love cleaning up the symptom, not the cause. Heroes get paid for capturing villains, it suits them. Even the symbol of peace himself is a liar."

Bakugo, disgusted, screamed, "You shut your mouth Deku! What kind of bullshit are you going off on!? He-"
He does what again? Destroys heroes? Is that all it takes to place your trust in someone these days?"

Bakugo reduced himself to a low tone.

"You've changed, Deku. Of all people...how could you lose faith in All Might?"

Izuku replied, "I don't have time to list all the reasons why I think having only one pillar holding up an entire generation of rapidly mutating toddlers is a good idea."

Izuku straightened himself up again, regaining control of the room from Bakugo's fury.

"It's like I said, Kacchan. All men are not created equal. Some men become heroes, and some men become destitute from the genetic luck of the draw. It's a fact! To look away from that is to look away from everything on which our world is built!", Izuku continued, prompting a stern nod of approval from Mustard.

"You know this is true, Kacchan. When we turned four years old, two friends became completely different. You got fame and power, I got ostracised and beaten up. Villains are what happens when someone decides they don't like that fate very much."

By this point, the murmurs in the room had become far more vocal support. Even Kurogiri's prim demeanour gave way to leaning over the counter to listen in.

"Heroes exist because sheer, coursing pain is rife in this society, Kacchan. It spreads through the underbelly of this world like a set of cancerous roots. And as I have said, pain creates villains, those who have suffered enough to decide they must escape their pain by climbing on the faces of others as their footholds. Heroes, who uphold this continued inequality, create villains! And they won't dare bite the hand that feeds them! For as long as it suits them, they will defend a system that values only arbitrary power, through the use of their arbitrary power."

Himiko stuck a knife into the table, begining prompting everyone to cheer "Yeah! to punctuate Izuku's statements, as they joined in. Izuku began to feel like he had an entire army at his back.

"Do you know how long quirks have been around, Kacchan? Huh? Generations! For generations, no-one has bothered to protect or even speak up about the millions that have been deemed to have no place in this world. If human history is any indicator, this pattern is going to continue for years! Through the lives of our children, and our childrens children! I won't live in such a world, I won't shut up about it and go back to my home with my tail between my legs, not now."

Dabi had to put out a small flame he had started creating in his hand involuntarily. Izuku's malefic aura had become infectious. Bakugo's eyes had grown wide and sharp.

"We're not going to let this be the end for us. We're not going to take the road leading to an unremarkable life that has just been set out for us. We're going to persist. We're not going to go away, and we will stay for as long as it takes for the root of the problem to be adressed! We won't be dragged down! Villains, villains never accept a compromise, a compromise on the prospects of their entire lives!"

Izuku gestured openly, spreading his arms wide in the way Sensei does. It had taken a while to realise how a grin had crept onto his face.

"We are the League of Villains! And together, we will fight tooth and nail to ensure that no one, no matter how small and weak their quirk, is forced to life a life like ours ever again!"
The room erupted into applause, as his friends cheered and hollered in support. While Bakugo sat, watching the monster in Deku's face soak up their admiration.

Tomura spoke up, "Alright, alright, keep it down."

He walked forward, standing next to Izuku. His calmness in spite of the fiery rhetoric that had been circling the room was noticeably eerie. A few people quietened down.

Izuku, still amid a bit of a high from the support he'd received, looked over to Tomura.

Tomura, his expression still, without hesitation, responded, "I'm sorry, Izuku. I shouldn't have..."

Izuku's grin gave way to a smaller, empathetic smile, and he reached up to place a hand on Tomura's shoulder.

"It's okay, Tomura. I feel a lot better now."

"Yeah...among all that, I don't really...I feel bad about trying to recruit him now."

Tomura rolled up his sleeve slightly.

"I think maybe it's best if we just kill him and be done with it."

Before Tomura could make a move, before Izuku could move forwards to stop him, before Bakugo could react to dodge, before anyone could react to what Tomura had just said, everyone was frozen in place.

Someone had just knocked on the front door.

Chapter End Notes

Don't worry folks. I'm scared of the next chapter too.
Cry for the Devil

Chapter Summary

A new starting line.

An extra long chapter. That's how you know it's going to be painful.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Izuku took the time to quietly take one scan of the room, absolutely certain that all the League members were here. Even if it was impossible that any of them could have left in between the time Izuku had addressed them and that knock a half-second ago had sounded, he had to affirm his fears. Sure enough no-one had left. There was no member of the League left unaccounted for. A moments glance at Bakugo implied mild confusion too. That didn't mean they weren't an ally of his, just that no-one, including Bakugo, was expecting him.

But it absolutely wasn't a friendly presence. What villain in their right mind would use the front door?

Izuku fitted on his respirator, urging, "Everyone...back away from-"

That's when the wall was destroyed. Their attackers leapt in before healthy scepticism caused them to fall back. A cascade of bricks caught the tense villains in a small landslide, and amidst the ashy dust, Izuku was certain there were vague figures there, ready to strike.

They'd been found. Was there some kind of tracker on Bakugo? This can't have been prepared in advance, this was one of the least effective ways to utilise the element of espionage. Izuku reached across the table, hoping to grab one extra improvised weapon. Maybe throwing a flashbang into a bottle of alcohol would-

Even if he hadn't been muttering up a storm in his panic, his half-dodge attempt wouldn't have really worked on the small network of roots and vines that snaked up to him. The name 'Kamui Woods' just had enough time to come to Izuku's head before his torso got slammed by nature's wrath, giving him no time to formulate a defence. Izuku tried to look around, to check on his allies, vainly hoping to make something out through the thick layer of rubble-borne smoke.

By the time the smog had cleared, it was clear everyone was caught by this suprise attack. The entire rogues gallery had been entwined. Dabi's one attempt to free everyone was ended by the fast leaping kick of one elderly hero.

Izuku's glare turned to the dust where the breach had been created, trying to make out the attackers. Kamui Woods was here of course, the old man...they were so completely outgunned by pros, this was ridiculous. How many....h-how...many...

He found himself struggling to supress a scream.

The silhouette of All Might was leading the attack. He'd burst through the wall. He'd found them. He'd come to reap the sinners.
Izuku prepared himself as best he could with his arms so firmly pinned to his sides. Even beneath his mask, he gritted his teeth. He knew the kind of play that the 'symbol of peace' would feel obligated to make in a moment such as this.

Sure enough, All Might began heartily booming, "Bakugo! I'm glad to see you've kept a brave face, my boy!" Izuku dryly noted Bakugo's contempt for this; clearly they didn't know each other that well if All Might didn't realise Bakugo's endless ego would have him take such a statement as being condescended to. How interesting. Not that it matters now, Izuku admitted, realising that even if they still had some chance to get out of this situation, that analysis probably wouldn't help them. Force of habit, I guess.

Tomura looked to be on the edge of a nervous breakdown, even more so than usual. He craned his neck over to Kurogiri, screaming, "Quick! Bring in our reserve party! Why aren't you..."

Tomura's look became one of horror as Edgeshot's reveal behind Kurogiri quickly answered his half-finished question. He began rapidly trying to move his hands enough to grip onto anything he could, kicking his feet. He ended up decaying a corner of his shirt with his desperate grasping.

All Might sauntered over to him. He could see it in his expression. How his carefully practiced grin dropped a bit, how he intentionally put effort into trying to appeal more to Izuku's sensibilities, his saccharine token attempt to plea to his better nature visible in his every action. How quintessentially heroic. Doing the exact same unique and bold redemption plea every time. People never get bored of it.

All Might spoke, his voice low, "Young Midoriya..."

The other villains eyes grew wide. All Might knew who Izuku was. Tomura stopped struggling, peering out at this scene through the corners of his panicked eyes, not even turning his head in his frozen stillness.

"There is so much I want to tell you. So much I wish I had told you before."

Izuku observed cautiously. His tone didn't sound like it was for the benefit of his peers, or the oggling masses. It was one of true vulnerability. The vulnerability he tried to disguise from the public for so long.

His voice had become solemn, and earnest, "I can't explain all of this here and now. Just know that I am so sorry for the path you have fallen down. I have regretted how I failed you every day. I will do what I can to help you, and keep you from a heavy sentence. And do what I can to explain my actions, if not justify them."

Izuku could feel it. At the edges of his voice, the incessant call of nobility he injected into his lines. The shell of deception behind his words. But only barely. On the surface, his call for help sounded not only like an appeal for the sake of Izuku's health...but his own.

Tomura broke into the scene, crying out, "Get away from him, you pile of trash!"

All Might's personal moment was gone. He raised himself up, addressing Tomura with all the righteousness and obnoxiousness of the symbol of peace.

"You underestimated us, all of us! Pro heroes, the police force, and even the unwavering spirit of youth. This League of Villains has come to an end, Shigaraki. This game is over!"

Izuku quietly spoke up, hoping to basically silence the brainless cheers All Might was about to inspire, "What exactly do you think you've stopped, All Might?"
All Might turned around, looking slightly upset his thunder had been stolen slightly, "The League of Villains. One of the most notorious criminal organisations of our time."

Izuku glared, "Exactly. As long as you think destroying criminal organisations is the first and only solution...people like us will never die."

Even amidst their peril, his allies began to stir. Izuku was refusing to let his words turn on him, even now that he was bound. Consistency is key to bringing through a message like this. You can't let yourself down, even for a moment. Izuku was beginning to realise the kind of drive Stain had. It's because he'd already committed himself so much, and had to keep the power behind his words by never leaving room for hesitation or hypocrisy. It was momentum.

His friends began to recover from the despair of their capture. Himiko's smile returned. Magne began to struggle against her restraints. Spinner's face lost it's fear, becoming a mimic of Stain's stern composure once more.

All Might's expression became nervous. Not from Izuku's words, probably. His faith was unshakeable. It was about how Izuku had phrased it. That sense of superiority. The way he had condescended to All Might just then by 'bestowing wisdom' or advice...it was too similar to that man to ignore. Izuku realised he might have made a slip-up. All Might began to take a step forward, when suddenly, Izuku was overwhelmed by a familiar feeling.

A disgusting sensation like something growing in his throat, expanding and pushing it's way up like he was being sick, a smell like foul garbage. Izuku grinned in ecstatic relief, knowing exactly the cause of the liquid. It was kind of amusing to see most of his companions panicking at the unpleasant sensation that accompanied their rescue.

Nomus began to drop into the room as quickly as the League of Villains were being evacuated. A decoy ploy. Which implied time must be bought for them to make their real escape. Izuku suppressed his joy, quickly realising the larger battle was yet to come. A battle, heralded by his arrival.

Izuku's mouth opened, and he was swallowed up by the warping liquid. All Might's fear began to peak, something so rare, the last sight Izuku saw before his vision blacked out.

*Sensei has come to save us.*

The moment Izuku was aware of his consciousness again, he spluttered and coughed himself awake. Judging from the fact that, even with his eyes tightly shut, he managed to spit out some of the warping liquid, he'd clearly woken up pretty quickly. Flushed with pride, he opened his eyes.

But he didn't open them in the blank, empty room he had expected. The wind touched his skin, the night sky was open above him. He was in the middle of some kind of dilapidated warehouse. No, dilapidated didn't do it justice. It was like the site of a bomb dropping. Most of the area was rubble and craters.

Izuku looked behind him first. He had to make sure that...*okay, thank goodness.* His vision was hazy, but quickly returning. His teammates were spawning from black liquid puddles beginning to form behind him. Seems like that warping liquid can't be stopped. He was worried All Might would have snagged one of them with his incredible speed...

Izuku's attention was quickly turned to what was in front of him. A hand, large and hardened, was
being extended to him. It was attached to an arm, an arm wearing a black suit jacket...

"S-Sensei?"

Tomura crawled up behind Izuku, finishing his thought for him, "Your...your life support..."

Sensei stood in front of them on his own two feet, lifting his pupils to stand as well, his hand easily grasping both of theirs and helping them up. Tomura only grabbed the hand extended to him with one of his fingers, apparently taking every effort to ensure he could never activate his quirk by mistake on Sensei.

Sensei cleared his throat, his voice somewhat muffled by the large helmet he wore. Special attention in the design was paid to his mouth and neck area, a large metal collar which functioned as his mobile life support system. Pipes from the back side of the collar connected to the back of the large glass mask, angular and shadowed similarly to a skull, looking like the very incarnation of death itself. Well, that look was somewhat offset and humanised by the classic dress shirt and suit jacket he also wore. Death in business casual.

Sensei's distorted voice finally spoke up, "Indeed. I can't be away from my chair for too long, yet. My time is somewhat limited. However, this is time well spent."

Izuku spoke up, eager to inform him, "Sensei, All Might is here. He knew what we were trying to do, I think Bakugo had some kind of shaky alliance with him, he must have!"

Sensei lowered his hands in a calming motion, "Calm yourself, young Deku. I have deduced this information myself as well."

"What? How did you-"

Tomura smirked, "The TV monitor in the corner, remember?"

Sensei chuckled, "I wondered how long it would take one of you to remember."

Tomura spoke up, giving in his mission progress like an evaluation, "The mission's a faliure. Deku has made it clear Bakugo would be a volatile force to recruit."

"I respect your judgement, young Tomura. You cut your losses and showed some restraint, so do not blame yourself. Your work alongside Deku this evening is a show of how you two can both afford to learn from one another. I do hope you will continue to remain close, that you might do better next time."

Tomura and Izuku shot each other a quick look. Something about being placed directly in front of Sensei seemed to have the same effect on both of them. They both kind of looked ashamed. Like their problems were immediately petty and small. For Tomura, Izuku could tell it was because he delegated so much authority to Sensei, and followed him dogmatically. For Izuku, it was because Sensei had taught in the wider goals, and the risks that were at stake here.

Izuku eventually spoke up, hesitantly, "So, what is our next move, Sensei?"

Sensei looked off into the distance, apparently towards where the heroes had last been seen. Where they were likely approaching from.

"Your next move should be to duck, now!"

Without questioning why, Izuku hit the deck immediately, pulling Tomura to the ground with him,
and the flurry of thuds indicated that the League behind them had followed suit. Like a missile, All Might dropped out of the sky, slamming with his full force towards Sensei, his skyscraper-felling fist rocketing with all the force he could muster.

Sensei caught his fist, pushing back with a force equalling it, a force that should be impossible to match from a position like that. He could hear what sounded like wind pressure building up as they clashed, struggling to nullify the others first move. Izuku wrapped an arm around Tomura's torso, sensing an incoming explosion...

Debris began to move, rocked around by the sheer force of the blow, as the action finally resolved, sending a gigantic shockwave bursting from the point of impact, and Izuku, Tomura, and the entire remainder of the League of Villains were blown backwards like scraps of paper, the ground battering them as they skidded across the uneven rocks.

Izuku, painfully pushing his face from the floor, looked up to see All For One and All Might, holder of One For All, standing across from each other, unharmed. Sensei had just blocked a full-force blow from All Might with his bare hands alone...

He hadn't been scared of what had happened before. Not of Bakugo, or the hero attacks. But now. Now he was scared.

Sensei raised his arm once more, to meet All Might's next charge. Only this time, his forearms rippled with energy, stretching his suit, his skin, his muscles...

Izuku couldn't be here. He couldn't be a weight around Sensei's neck right now. If Sensei had to fight while protecting the League, he'd be forced to hold back, and then-

A cataclysmic rush of wind fired off from Sensei's arm, gouging a path through the streets, the buildings, anything in a solid line where he had directed the strike, including All Might, who soared through the ruins of the blast zone like a pinball. It was hard to tell what was more terrifying, the sheer destruction Sensei was causing, or the fact that All Might was still very clearly moving mid-flight, and somehow would have the strength to return and fire another punch.

Izuku pried himself from the floor, shaking Tomura's shoulder, "Tomura, come on, we have to go, now!"

Mr Compress, behind him, was already compressing unconscious allies to take them to safety, "Yes, we can't stay here! One downward strike from All Might, and it's curtains for us!"

Tomura shook off Izuku's hand, growling, his teeth bared like an animal, "Never! We're here! We have to help him!"

Izuku understood how he felt, but, "We're only hindering him by staying here! He'd want us to get to safety-"

"Then run, coward!", Tomura roared, delirious, "Run from the man who loves you, cares about you!"

Izuku's chest tightened. Tomura was out of his mind with worry...and pre-emptive grief. He was worried Sensei wasn't going to make it out alive. He knew Sensei best, and he looked incredibly worried to see his body in such a state, in his life support system. He understood Tomura was worried...and it felt wrong to leave right now, Izuku felt the same way, but...

Izuku hardened himself, fighting his wobbling voice, "Tomura, please, we don't have a choice!"
Tomura refused to back off, shaking Izuku's arm away, snarling.

Izuku sadly reflected on how powerless he was. For Tomura, right now, looking at these titans clashing, he must have felt as insignificant as Izuku felt his whole childhood. Watching magnificent feats being accomplished right in front of you, and not being able to do anything about it either way. His entire face was scowling, he was in denial. Raging at his own weakness, how he couldn't affect something he cared about so, so much...

With the final opportunity to bring Tomura with him gone, Izuku turned to run, to hide behind one of the nearby destroyed edges of the warehouse. He stopped by Mr Compress on the way, whispering covertly, "Compress anyone who can't run, and get them out of here. If Tomura refuses to leave, compress him too, I don't think he'll leave of his own will."

The remaining League members waited behind, hoping to use their skills to aid everyone else's recovery.

But Izuku, quirkless and alone, could do nothing but get out of the way.

The very moment he had made his way behind the wall, he felt a strong tug on his body. A pulling, like his gravity was functioning in a...Magne. Magentism!

Izuku gripped tightly on the wall he was stuck to, digging deep, refusing to be moved. Whatever madness caused Magne to-

And Izuku looked over the wall, to see everyone being sucked into an escape portal opened by the apparently unconscious Kurogiri, Sensei's elongated fingers plunged into his body to apparently forcibly activate his quirk. Everyone was escaping alive, even Tomura.

Izuku was by himself.

Once the portal closed, and Sensei stood alone, confident in his ability to go all-out, Izuku peered over the wrecked stone foundation, shielding himself enough that he could watch and observe this battle between two legends. The fated battle that Sensei said would determine the fate of the entire world.

An emperor, a titan, and a boy watching from the rubble.

All Might charged forth once more.

His ears were ringing, and the attacks between these two giants were deafening. The strikes, one after the other, the constant need to duck beneath the wall to avoid being blasted apart.

It was like a warzone out there, except with incredibly personal taunting and monologuing mixed in, as they tried to break each others spirits along with their bodies. Sensei had lost his mask. All Might had lost his muscular form.

Endeavour and Edgeshot joined in to force Sensei's attention onto them, so that these heroes could share the load.

The entire time, a single name was playing over and over again in Izuku's head, repeating from the moment he heard it. Even amidst all the dust and the strikes, he wouldn't let it leave his head.

"Tenko Shimura."
Suddenly, Izuku's panic ended. His hopes soared, when he looked up, seeing Sensei releasing the true potential of his quirk, and the infinite quirks that lay within. If he had the power to control the flow of power, right now he was forcing it into a tidal wave. His right arm grew monstrous...infused with muscles, minerals, spikes, rivets...it was revolting and glorious to behold, as he held himself aloft with this gargantuan fist clenched, flying towards his target.

All Might caught the strike with a punch of his own. The resulting explosive shockwave knocked Izuku backwards, thrown into the wall behind him as a chunk of the city was blown away in an instant. His respirator flew from his face, denting itself on the wall.

Izuku lay on the floor for a while...faint buzzing, distant noises as his vision and hearing returned.

By the time Izuku looked up, a small pit had formed in his stomach.

He watched as All Might pushed Sensei back, and opened him up for the final strike.

All For One saw that Izuku was watching as All Might closed in for the final strike. All For One's vision wasn't based on line of sight, thanks to his Radar quirk. Even if that had been the case, the Search quirk he had just acquired was keeping tabs on young Izuku Midoriya regardless.

Izuku was terrified. With his irrational heartbeat, his image burned bright red in All For One's mind, overheating and stressed. It was a shame young Izuku had to be put through something like this. But this final push would be exactly what was neccessary.

All For One had many regrets. This was one of them. He had not honestly expected to be making a ploy such as this so soon. He'd underestimated the strength with which All Might had fought back. He had intended to show off the strength of villainy much more, the power of All For One. And Tomura...he needed more training...there was always a chance he would mature enough to cut out the middleman...

No. There was no time. This was a risk well worth taking. For the future of villains. For the control of the world. For one final and defiant spit in All Might's eye.

All For One still had plans, laying in motion. If all went right, this would not be the end for him. It wasn't guaranteed though. Something horrible could happen before the scheme had reached it's conclusion, and this could all be for nothing. It wasn't in his nature to commit to a plan that had this many variables. But he had miscalculated, as All Might's swing went lower, and he had no other choices.

Besides, he thought, it feels so exciting to make a decision in the spur of the moment again.

As All Might's smash reached the point of no return, All For One completely lowered his guard.

Izuku's legs ran forward, before he could even think about it. His feet had taken action all on their own.

Toshinori's attack struck like thunder against All For One, as he spiralled, rocketing into the earth limply, creating a gigantic crater in the impact zone. Every bit of wind in his lungs, strength in his muscles...everything had been put into that final strike. The United States Of Smash. And
miraculously, it had worked. They were safe now. His old nemesis...defeated at last.

Toshinori put his feet back on the ground, barely feeling it underneath him. His body felt so, so tired. The crowds around him were hushed into silence. A deafening, tense silence. They needed to know that he was okay. They needed to be reassured they were safe. It was in his blood to respond to their distress. They needed him. So, faint as his senses were, he pulled himself back into a solid stand.

And then, a voice, crying. Toshinori whirled around, to see a small figure rushing from behind the wall. He was okay, they mustn't risk themselves by trying to make sure-

*Oh no...*

The green haired boy called Izuku Midoriya ran forward, screaming and distraught, shedding tears for his fallen mentor. The one person to shed tears for the fallen monster. All For One lay on the ground...

.....*no....*

...with blood leaking from his head.

All For One wished he had eyes again.

His adrenaline kept him conscious. He was pretty sure it was the same reason All Might was still conscious in spite of his own injuries. Even if his weren't quite fatal. All For One needed to stay awake and alive for just a little bit longer to get the gears turning.

As Izuku cradled his teacher, screaming "You MONSTER!!" as loudly as he could, All For One didn't wish he could see his face, pushed away from the heroic path irrevocably.

As the people saw All Might's face drop in despair, he didn't wish he could look around, to see for himself the civilians that still stood, worried that All Might hadn't moved yet, terrified.

His every moment, his every decision, his every nurturing word had led to this. He had carved Deku from Izuku Midoriya. Acceptance and compassion had created a bond between the two of them that All Might had cut through. Izuku was in many ways the perfect candidate. Only now was he truly ideal, becoming exactly what All For One had fashioned him to be. Villains are born from pain. And now heroes themselves had created a wound, a real wound. A wound created not by denying him something, but by taking something away. Something precious.

He would do just fine. At least until Tomura was ready. But since it was doubtful he would be ready to accept All For One within the lifespan he had left...this wasn't a bad outcome either. It doesn't hurt to hedge your bets.

No, he wanted eyes because they were the windows to the soul. They tell everything. They can send very personal, private messages. And he wanted to be able to look All Might in the eyes to send him a message right now, just between the two of them.

He would never have overshot his mark this badly, dealt fatal damage, if he had already chosen a successor. His sense of responsibility was his final flaw.

All For One had secured his legacy first. So right now, all he wanted was to be able to look his nemesis in the eyes, to say:
"I win."

"HOW COULD YOU!?”

All Might stood still, the look on his face one of pure, stupid, ignorant dumbfoundedness, "Y-Young Midoriya, I...I didn't..."

"MURDERER!", Izuku screamed for the world to hear, hoping his cry would seep into the hearts of all who heard him, "You killed him! You filthy MURDERER!"

All Might stuttered, "I'm...he shouldn't have d-die...please, we could get him to a hospital, before-"

Sensei's life support machine made a robotic beeping noise, the droning tone slowly lowering it's pitch. It was powering down.

"Sensei? Sensei, no, no SENSEI!"

Sensei coughed, spluttering through weak lungs.

With one last breath, he managed to squeeze out the sentence, "I...will not die...in Tartarus."

He flexed his fingers, waving them through the air softly. As he did so, faint purple flames began to materialise, trailing behind his movements...

All Might screamed, "NO!", stopping halfway, dropping to one knee amidst his own internal bleeding.

A large purple vortex opened beneath Izuku and the dying Sensei, and they dropped down through it, whisked away from the scene.

Izuku closed his eyes, and held on tight.

Toshinori fell to his knees. Gran Torino approached him, walking with more trepidation than he ever had before in Toshinori's memory.

He clutched his head in disbelief.

Gran Torino placed a hand on his student's shoulder.

Toshinori's voice softly wheezed out, "What...what have I done?"

Izuku, curled over the far larger form of Sensei to protect him however he could, fell upon a stone floor. The wind howled around him. Opening his eyes, rubbing away tears, he scanned the area. It was a rooftop on some flat somewhere. There weren't any signs of the chaos they had just been in. Everything here was quiet, and still, as this suburb slept quietly through the clash that would dictate the world's path.

He backed up, unfurling Sensei. He laid him out on the floor, as slowly as possible. He could have a serious spinal injury, maybe if-
Sensei muttered softly, "Don't look so concerned, young Midoriya. You mustn't worry. It's not as if I'm going to survive this."

His dry humor caught Izuku off guard, and he replied hoarsely, "Sensei...you didn't have to do that. You didn't have to do any of that at all."

"No, I didn't...hhehe...I could have left, I suppose. It would have been difficult, and it would have left you behind, but I could have. It's my fault, again. My damned optimism..."

Izuku kneeled, overlooking the body of his mentor. Blood was pooling on to the rough floor beneath him. There was no way...how could...even with all his strength, he was still completely wiped out. Killed, in one blow...by All Might. Just like that.

"Izuku...I need you to listen to me. I'm running out of time to put my affairs in order."

Izuku looked around, as if a cure-all would just magically appear out of nowhere if he looked away, then looked back, "I-I know. I'm not...do you have nothing that could let you live through this?"

Sensei tilted his head, meeting Izuku's face with his own. Sightless though he may be, he was still making an effort to comfort him. "No. No, Izuku. I must die here. I'm...so sorry for doing this to you."

"It's"...Izuku took a deep breath, scrunching his eyes closed, as tight as they would go. Don't mourn now. Mourn later. Or else you'll fail him now, and have far more to mourn.

"It's okay, Sensei. W-what is it you want? Is it about Tomura? Or...Tenko?"

"Hahah...you heard me, then? Yes...hergh...ngh...", All For One restrained his coughing as much as he could, "Izuku, I did not select him merely to mock Nana Shimura's memory. It's because...he grew up with the most pain a villain can experience. It's because...he truly knows the struggle of those who have been left behind. He's intuitive, and he has so much more room to grow...I truly believe that in time, he can be the villain we all need. But I have run out of time to lead him to that day."

Izuku nodded solemnly. He could feel the hairs standing up on the back of his neck, vaguely detecting Sensei's foreshadowing.

"When I said I am so...so very sorry for doing this to you, I didn't mean dying. Not entirely...hngh...It's...It's more the task that my absence will saddle you with."

He raised his palm, shaking and wobbly, as it began to radiate a deep red glow.

Izuku's eyes grew wide, "No, no, Sensei, you mustn't, you can't be...I don't want that power, it's-"

Sensei's voice begged, "Izuku...please?"

A long silence settled. If he accepted, he would have a sacred duty. The kind he had been supporting. But all that weight on his shoulders...even Stain's creed had been hard enough...if he refused, though it would all be over. He either had to champion this cause personally, or let it end.

"I know you can handle this, Izuku...All For One cannot die here. It can't."

Izuku let out a long breath, steadying himself as much as he possibly could, "If I truly want to stand by my beliefs...I can't refuse. I don't know if I can fulfill your expectations...but I want to make you proud."
"My only expectation is for you to take it, young Izuku. However you use it from there...I know it will create a better world."

Izuku reached his hand across, locking hands with Sensei. He squeezed his hand, in a way that was becoming all too important to him.

Sensei, his voice rattling in his lungs, continued, "The coordinates for the League's new headquarters...and for my room..."

He handed Izuku a small slip of paper, with digits on them, and small pictures, ripped from a notebook in his blazer pocket.

"Warp to my room...look underneath my life support c-chair. Then, find your comrades...and do give Kurogiri his quirk back once you're done, won't you?"

Izuku smiled, in an attempt to comfort his teacher, "Of course."

Sensei's voice choked up momentarily, "And...please remember to take care of Tenko for me. Help him grow, as I would."

"Of course. I promise."

Sensei tensed his shoulders, an action that was taking up the last of his energy, to grant himself one final burst of focus.

"Izuku...brace yourself...this will be excruciating."

Izuku felt a pounding sensation in his arm. The red glow began to burn with a powerful heat, pushing into his arm, pulsating like a heartbeat. It felt like the energy of a sun was coursing through his veins, ripping him apart from the seams, cutting into every part of him as it found it. Izuku's fingers locked up, even though his shock would have made him recoil ages ago, the sheer pain was like rigor mortis, he couldn't move at all, the burning, it pushed it's way up, into his chest, he could feel it working it's way to his heart, spreading through his body like white-hot roots...

"Hold on...Izuku...", spoke Sensei, his voice becoming increasingly faint.

He had to keep going. Sensei was putting his all into this. Everything he had, the last vestiges of his life. Izuku pushed into the encroaching force, pushing the power inside of him. This was the kind of agony that would cause numbness, but he was not being granted his well-deserved reprieve. Izuku could feel his breathing becoming shallow, as he put every last bit of effort he had into powering through this.

Just a little bit...just a few more seconds...

He felt the power cracking through him, pushing further, reaching his left shoulder now...

Izuku hit the ground. His arm was still clinging tightly to Sensei's even after he blacked out. Even while incapable of any other action but pulling in and pushing out breath, Izuku could still experience the pain.

The pain that signified he hadn't given up yet. The pain of a job well done.

He lay there, unmoving, unsure of how much time was passing. Breathing and suffering.

He felt the pain crawl through him further, inching along until finally it covered his left pinky
finger, wrapping around him entirely.

The pain stopped. He was left with nothing but a pumping sensation in his ears, like drums, and a cold sensation in his lungs. He was still clutching Sensei's cold hand.

And that wasn't enough to stop him from passing out, this time completely, falling flat on his face as he did so.

Chapter End Notes

I can't thank you enough for the feedback on this chapter. Really, thank you so much. This was easily one of the biggest risks so far I've taken so far with the development of the story, and the reaction has been overwhelmingly more positive than I could have believed. Full disclosure, I was always planning for the tale to move in this direction. I have had a lot of the main plot swirling around my mind, and I mostly started writing this so I could put my ideas on the page and free up some headspace.

I put a ton of extra effort in, not just because this big reveal deserved a hell of a lot more detail than my usual chapters, but to celebrate reaching 5000 hits. So I went to sleep, nervous as shit about what I'd wrote. I wake up the following day. We hit 5500 while I was sleeping. I mean...I never thought my little passion project would ever become this important to me, let alone other people. I've seen certain people regularly commenting, getting some back and forth going, I've read every single comment posted thus far and miraculously not ONE of them has been telling me to eat faecal matter. On the goddamn internet, that's ridiculous.

I know I may sound like a broken record, but after the feedback on this, I've got to say it; thank you. Thank you all so much.
Izuku could gradually feel himself returning to life. When he did, there were three sensations that caught his attention in exactly this order.

First, the grating pain in his right cheek. He'd hit the ground hard when he had passed out, he'd cut something on the side of his face and grazed the rest. That was painful, good grief. Izuku quickly pushed himself up enough that his head was off the ground.

The second was...weird. It was a sensation of heartbeats. Heartbeats all over his body, pumping without moving blood. Heartbeats that were not his. Very softly, he could feel them all over his body, two in his wrists, one in his palms, one in his right shoulder, one in his right fingerbones, one in his left knee...the sensation of many discordant heartbeats, flexing and moving at their own rates, all drowned out by the pounding of his own heart, which was still going at a pace faster than normal due to the fact that he was injured and yesterday was...

Yesterday...

Izuku investigated the third sensation. His right hand was still clutching something. It wasn't as cold as he'd expected, his body heat had been in contact with it even while he slept. But rigor mortis had made Sensei's hand far, far stronger. His hand was raised up, and the rest of him was as still as could be, rigid and straight. Like he wanted to at least make sure his corpse was presentable. Grandiose until the very end.

"Thank you, Sensei...thank you."

He'd spent the very last of his energy passing on All For One. Izuku had to use it properly. Okay, using a quirk...how do you do this?

Izuku slipped his hand out from Sensei's. He flexed his fingers. The heartbeat sensation indicated that something had changed, but was he really...did he really have All For One? How would he tell, was this something that required training? He'd never had a quirk before...if All For One stole a mutant quirk, didn't he have to turn that quirk on to use it, even though most mutant quirks are just active all the time? So...so All For One requires concentrated effort to use. This was, this was a disaster, I mean, Izuku had never had a quirk before, this wasn't supposed to...

Izuku looked carefully at the piece of paper. The coordinates, maybe Sensei had...

A small bit of writing on the paper said "Right shoulder."

Right shoulder? What about it, he didn't feel any injuries there or-

No. But he did feel that faint heartbeat. One of them did feel like it was emanating beneath his shoulder.

Do I have to...?
He focused, flexing his right shoulders muscles, trying to concentrate on the heartbeat's movements, the second system of veins and hearts he could feel underneath his skin. He felt like...some of his energy was...it was hard to put into words. It was as if he only had a tiny amount of 'blood' in this new system. But he moved it as much as he could, focusing with all his might on the right shoulder...just when he'd scrunched up his eyes so tightly he was going to pop a blood vessel...

He felt that heartbeat move faster, and louder. Something had changed.

Without lapsing his concentration, Izuku opened his eyes.

When he moved his right hand, purple, misty, flickering flames followed in his wake, gently hissing on the tips of his fingers.

_H-H-HOLY...oh my goodness..._

Izuku looked at the piece of paper, hurriedly looking at the coordinates before he could mess up and lose power over the quirk. He pictured the coordinates clearly in his head, and waved his hand around.

As it turned out, he might have waved it about too much, since the portal he opened was massive. It was huge, the size of the side of a building. That portal, the portal he had made.

With one final glance at Sensei's body, Izuku toughened himself up, and walked through the portal.

There would be time to mourn later. Right now, his friends were damaged and alone. They needed him.

So he needed to learn.

Toshinori sat in the room again, with Bakugo opposite him. It'd become almost routine by this point, as the two of them aired their points on the rising villain, Deku.

But after yesterday, Bakugo had very little to say. Honestly, Toshinori understood. He understood far too well. An old friend turning to darkness...he'd never known Midoriya that well, but he seemed like a good kid. A very good kid, strong-hearted. And he'd let him down. It made sense that Bakugo wouldn't be feeling very comfortable with speaking to him.

But seeing him like this...staring at the floor, blankly...Bakugo had to get his thoughts off his chest. Even if it was going to open him up to receiving anger or vengeful scorn, this had to be done. For young Bakugo's health.

"I know you're...not going to naturally want to share, or, or to..."

Shit. He was losing it already...

Bakugo, suprisingly, cut in, "This is it, huh? Y'know, he said something like this earlier. How you lied to the public. I thought that damn nerd was just talking out of his ass, but..."

Toshinori looked down at his arm, the one that poked through his oversized suit sleeve like a twig. His slender, weakened fingers. You could almost see the veins and ligaments in his slender frame, now that his strength was so depleted. After that incident, his time had been...shortened. Even retaining as much strength as he could, he was still suffering massive repercussions for the
struggle he was involved in.

"I'm sorry, Bakugo. It's...it's always been my job to give people hope. I just...I didn't want them to see me like this. They supported me, even once my form was revealed..."

"Yeah, they did. Fucking idiot. You really thought they'd lose hope in you just because you became thin?"

"It was more the question of, well...if they knew I was injured, they would ask about the injury. They'd look into the villain 'Toxic Chainsaw'. He'd become more popular, as the one who wounded All Might, the symbol of peace. And...they wouldn't find enough information on him to keep them satisfied. Even putting my personal feelings aside, my own shame, my own will to preserve a shining light for the future...it was my responsibility to ensure the dread shadow of All For One never be made public knowledge."

Bakugo scoffed, "Well, you kept to the lie, and now he's returned anyway."

"I...suppose you're right, young Bakugo."

Bakugo leaned forward, pressing on his knees with his elbows, "So, he knew, right? About this weakness?"

"...yes. He discovered it at the same time as I...as I told him he could not be a hero."

"Didn't you kinda notice how that could be seen as being a giant fucking hypocrite?"

"I have already learned to regret my actions."

Bakugo looked conflicted about something. He didn't look any less furious...no, actually, he looked more angry now. And he looked nervous. He kind of looked to the side, out the window somewhat, to avoid making direct eye contact.

"Young Bakugo...I cannot bear to see you like this anymore. You must tell me."

"Why? So you get to feel a little better? So you get to feel like less of a screw up...", Bakugo bowed his head, defeated, scowling, "...just because you're not the only fucking screw up here?"

Toshinori kept himself still. He wasn't able to disguise his surprise, but he didn't want to impose anything. Bakugo looked to be on the verge of collapse.

"He...he didn't order my kidnap, he told me to piss off. He told me how much he valued his cause, how fucking important it was. Y'know why, huh? Because every line was trying to make me, and all his shitty little friends feel like I wasn't worthy to join them. That I wasn't worthy to join him, to be a villain! He was telling everyone I wasn't worth their time, that I didn't have what it takes! He was mocking me, like I wouldn't be worth pissing on if my face were on fire."

Toshinori wanted desperately to make Bakugo stop yelling so much, but it was so very necessary he get this out of his head. It didn't feel right to sit back and let his student suffer through this...

"It was so childish...like...because he never felt worthy to be a hero, he wanted to justify why I wasn't worthy to be a villain. Like being banned from a treehouse, then fucking off to your own treehouse and banning everyone. Except he's not sitting there all alone and spiteful, he's got poisonous friends on his back. He's been driven deep in there, and he's getting so much affirmation and support there he's never gonna want to leave, even if he has to use blood to glue together his shattered ego!"
"Bakugo, please...you shouldn't be blaming yourself for this. I'm the one who-"

Bakugo cried out, nearly tearful for the first time, "Why don't you fucking get it!? It's not your fault! It's not..."

Toshinori gently prompted, "No matter what you say, I'll never feel less guilty for the part I have played in this mess. So...you can tell me. You don't have to face this alone."

Breathlessly, Bakugo responded, "When me and Deku were kids...I...he idolised me, and I put him down. Scorned him. Punched him. Ruined him. I told him, over and over again...a quirkless kid like him could never be a hero."

You cannot be a hero.

He'd heard it not once, but twice, from people he trusted.

"You keep...god...you keep calling me his 'friend'...you have no fucking idea what we were like, y-you don't even fucking know. You keep looking at me and you think I was some pillar of support, some light in the darkness, knight in shining armour. No!", Bakugo screamed, his anger flaring up at himself more than anyone, burning into his core, "Everything...from the start...everything about this is MY FUCKING FAULT!!"

With his last hoarse cry, Bakugo buried his face in his hands. If he was crying now, he was hiding it.

"I stood there. Seeing him twist into something unrecognisable, I felt like...like I'd thrown away Izuku entirely. And now I had to deal with Deku. The one I replaced him with. Me, and no one else."

Bakugo rubbed his eyes, meeting Toshinori's, his face bright red, his mouth twisted into a grimace of pain.

"Which person would you feel more rejected by, more hurt by, if they turned against you? Your hero, or your friend?"

When Izuku's foot hit the floor, the tap of boot on stone echoed throughout the small, blank room he was standing in. It somehow felt even more featureless and dead than ever before. No meeting, no occupied chairs, no anything. Just a blank, featureless stone room. The only identifying features about it were the coordinates Izuku was holding in his hand.

Izuku walked over to Sensei's chair. A large, metallic thing with wires everywhere. It was powered down at the moment. And there wasn't exactly an on switch. If there was, Izuku might've been a little tempted to see what Sensei's medical conditions were, or how healthy he was before...

Izuku shook himself off. Don't get too sentimental, right now. Keep your focus up, we don't know exactly how All For One works yet.

Izuku leaned down. Wedged in-between the bottom of the seat and the mechanical wheels of the chair was a large metal box. Izuku pulled it out.

A big metal box with an oak lid, a small hand on the side, and a built-in lock. The words 'Dominant hand fingers' was etched into the top.
Sensei, you sly dog...

IzuKu felt the heartbeat in his right fingers, and powered his energy into it. He could feel the swirling energy moving slowly from his shoulder down to his hand. Sure enough, as he felt it drain from his shoulder, the portal he had opened closed up behind him as the quirk deactivated. And soon, as it reached his hand...

His finger bones started to crack audibly, twisting and reshaping themselves. It wasn't painful at all, and Izuku wasn't sure if that made it more or less disturbing. His skin toughened up, becoming steely and metallic...his index and middle fingers had fused and transformed into a metal key.

IzuKu slotted the key into the lock. He could feel his hand-key shaping itself while inside the lock, shifting it's shape to fit the interior. After it stopped moving, Izuku turned his hand. It, uh, it got stuck. He twisted his hand the other way. Okay, there we go, the lock clicked open.

IzuKu opened the box and a wave of smoke burst from the interior, causing Izuku to pull his face back and cough for a second while it dissipated. When he was done, Izuku found, encased inside, a large set of papers and documents. He picked up the first one, and began to read.

If you are reading this, then it is safe to assume I am dead, and I have passed on All For One to you.

IzuKu winced for a second, but quickly recovered his composure.

I would never allow my quirk to be taken from me willingly, and I would never pass it on were I not on my deathbed, and accompanied by a worthy successor. If you are that successor, then right from the very beginning, I wish to let you know how very, deeply sorry I am. Because, as the new holder of All For One, you are saddled with a monumental and extremely dangerous task.

The holder of All For One is the one who commands power over the flow of power. It is not only your duty, but your responsibility to direct the world. To rule it, and safeguard it. Any quirk that may mutate and arise in the future, any ancient quirk that may return from the grave, every single one of them is still subject to YOUR will. Heavy is the head who wears the crown, young one.

I have collected these documents, that they might serve as some form of guidance to you. The myriad of quirks I have acquired with All For One over the years is incredible. Evidently, you might already be beginning to work out how the flow of power throughout All For One works, seeing as in order to access this case, you had to activate one of the quirks I possess, Skeleton Key.

IzuKu waved his hand a bit, and within a moment, his metallic fingers shrunk back to their original size, and that sense of heartbeat and empowerment in his right fingers had disappeared.

The flow of power around All For One is complicated, because every single quirk attached to it is unique, and also must be activated by the user in order to take effect. Even mutation quirks, which in their original user are permanently and passively active, when stolen by All For One, need some kind of active stimulus to manifest their effects. I have come to equate the sensation of controlling the flow of power between quirks as like having a second cardiovascular system. Multiple hearts. That's what it feels like. I believe you will find this comparison very apt from your experiences already. If not, please stick with me. It is nonetheless a good metaphor to
explain my quirks workings.

Izuku understood what Sensei was saying. He could feel the sensations of heartbeats...they weren't exactly hearts, but it felt like multiple organs, vying for energy to be fed into them. Energy that he could control.

To begin with, young one, this quirk will not offer its full potential to you. The peak of my empire did not begin until I was already a man, after all. I spent much of my young life trying to master my quirk. First, I learned to channel my energy into one quirk. I practiced swapping between two given quirks, getting faster each time. Eventually, as I had more energy to play with, I fed two heartbeats at a time, activating two quirks at once. As time went on, I got better and better at it, until no-one could stand a chance against me.

Izuku could tell...he didn't feel like he had much energy in this 'second system'. Enough to activate a quirk at a time, and swapping between them was cumbersome...the energy of All For One felt like it flowed through his body like molasses.

In order to aid you, I have complied a list of my quirks. How to train them, how difficult they are to manage, and some examples of how they blend with quirks I already possess. If you wish to grow and survive, you must collect powerful quirks, add them to your current pool, and experiment with them. Do not rest on my laurels, successor. You must keep moving forward.

Izuku looked underneath the case. Files upon files of notes, packets and folders of detailed writings. They looked...Izuku's heartstrings twinged at the realisation that they resembled his own quirk analysis notes.

Before you go, I have one final set of warnings. All For One will not submit to you easily. You must hone your skills, swapping between quirks until it is so fluid it becomes second nature to effortlessly activate your most powerful abilities. As you grow, the level of power you can exert will increase, until every heartbeat in your body can pump as one, the system fully functional and synchronised. Until then, do not go over your limit, or their effects will dampen, or turn against you. These quirks...I do not fully understand it, but something essential about them to remember is that they are not yours. Only through time and practice may they become yours, but even beyond the point that they fully bend to your will, they will still feel peculiar.

There is something about a quirk that is inextricably linked to their owner. Even once stolen, you can feel, deep inside you, a faint shadow of the people that your quirks belonged to previously. Even beyond their death, their essence lives on in you, as you use their powers further. Sometimes, when the world feels quiet and still, with meditation, I can see them. Silhouettes, with bright eyes, watching me. As if to judge me for my use of their powers, as I make them my own. Do not interact with these figures, and they will not affect you in any way. You cannot avoid them, for you will need to meditate to analyse and understand your quirks. It is necessary. But I encourage you to avoid responding to them. I am not one to believe in the supernatural, but something about these imprints disturbs me.

The fate you carry on your shoulders is a difficult one. But it is yours, and yours alone. Wear it proudly. Master your quirks, master your foes, and master your own fate.

I do not wish to reveal whether or not I had anyone in particular in mind who I would pass this quirk on to. I wanted my advice to be useful to anyone who would wield my powers, without
paying any heed to who they were in particular. Who you are as a person, however, will
doubtless affect how you use All For One, and perhaps even how All For One will react to you.

However, as I have said, I would not pass All For One on to anyone unworthy of wielding it, or
to anyone not capable of handling such an extremely dangerous task. So, I must have known
you quite well. We must have been allies, students, companions. Perhaps, against all odds and
despite all my qualities that would prevent it, we were even friends. Therefore, I will
say...goodbye. Whoever you were to receive this responsibility from me, I can only say...you must
have been extremely special to me. I would hope someone that special to me would also be
equally hurt by my passing. Do not weep for me. Use my power, and carry on. I will live on in
the actions of the one I have chosen, in your actions, and your life.

A leader of America, Abraham Lincoln, once said; "Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if
you want to test a man’s character, give him power." Therefore, your test is not over once you
have overcome my death, young one. Your true test is now. To face the future, with the power
you have been blessed with. To test your character, I have given you power. I am confident you
will succeed. So, for the last time, I set you a task, knowing that you will not dissapoint me.
Farewell, young one. I wish you all the luck in the world, and give you the opportunity to take it.

Izuku slowly put the page back into the box, locking it away once more, for now. He picked up the
box by it's handle and stood in silence. He overlooked the large metal chair that his teacher had
occupied. The chair from which he had taught him in, argued with him in, inspired him in. The
chair that now lay in this forgotten, featureless bunker, that only he could ever find again.

"Farewell, Sensei."

His mourning calming him, slowly coming to terms with the life of All For One, Izuku felt the
power flowing through him, reaching the Warp Gate quirk again. The portal sprung open behind
him with a wave of his fingers, and after giving himself one final second of contemplation, Izuku
turned to his exit. He felt more ready than he ever had been to face the world.

Izuku took a step through the gateway, intending to teleport to the second set of coordinates on the
scrap of paper. The new hideout.

He had a team to find.
Sewer rats

Chapter Summary

Izuku must rebuild, and re-establish contact with his friends.

The coordinates stated this location would be the "new hideout" for the League. To be fair, Izuku didn't think it looked...terrible.

Stone foundations, apparently a decent way underground, like a bunker. He supposed that meant there were no walls one can smash through to reach the hideout. Fool me twice, shame on me.

Izuku began to walk around, step by step. There was a stairway leading to a hatch on the surface. Looked pretty sturdy, and the stairway had multiple corners from which the pathway could be defended. Pretty good. There was a large common area, featuring big couches and a large TV, and down the stairs below that a huge, huge gym area. Mostly empty for now, but that'd soon be changing. There was a small escape tunnel just off of the common room. Izuku poked his head through, quickly discovering from the smell that the pathway lead into the sewer system. The vast, labyrinthine sewer, which offered countless escape routes to anyone more knowledgeable in navigating them than their pursuer. Thank god the seal was apparently airtight.

There was a hallway, leading to a large series of rooms, almost like dormitory rooms. Izuku opened them, one by one. Most of them were blank and featureless, waiting to be filled with life by their inhabitants. Their old rooms...Izuku briefly entertained the idea of trying to sneak back to the old hideout and see if any of their stuff was still there before he smothered the thought. He couldn't risk it. They had to build a new home here, and Izuku wasn't going to shoot that opportunity in the foot right from the start.

Honestly...Izuku was tired. It had been an emotionally draining past few hours. Izuku slumped down into the couch, plush and comfy. He made a mental note, however, to order in some bean bags sometime soon. That was essential. Paramount. Top priority.

As Izuku allowed his sense of humor to slowly return to him, he tilted his head to the right, before jolting to attention. A small letter was on the table.

He ripped the envelope open, taking out a printed letter, typed in a plain font.

"Hey there, kid."

Giran?

"Sweet pad, right? The boss paid me a lot of money to carry this job out...post mortem. My condolences, by the way. He also gave me a notice that from here on, all the contracts I was under are now delegated to you. So congratulations, kid. Every time I hear your name pop up, you've gone up in the world again. I'm gonna make sure to tuck a golden crown away for when you innevitably get promoted to king of the universe. Jesus Christ, man. Usually you have to be actively working to kill your superiors to get promoted like this."

Izuku chuckled to himself, so glad to hear from this smarmy bastard again. He could've been a bit
"So essentially, you're the de facto leader of the League of Villains now. The only challenge to your authority that I can really see might be that Shigaraki kid, or the patchwork doll, Dabi. But listen, regardless of who you want to chalk down as being an ally or an enemy, you're gonna need a way to contact them and bring together the team. It's basically common sense for the League members to split up immediately following an incident like this, if only for a few days or so. Divide and disperse, so that the police can't find you. If they don't get an 'official' (as official as you can get in the underworld) message to call them into action, they're not going to be stupid enough to respond. If only you knew someone with that network of connections, huh?"

Again, exercising his knowledge that he knows he's the best resource we have.

"Let's talk business, kid. Or I suppose I could start calling you boss now, if you prefer. Either way, I'll be hanging out at a place called the Sewer Rat over the next few days, waiting for you. I've listed a set of instructions on where to go. I didn't install that escape tunnel just because it's a great backup plan for getting the hell outta dodge. The criminal underworld...a good bit of it is in the actual, literal underworld, and even the elements that aren't have direct links to the sewer system. Every manhole, every pipeline. You get what I'm saying? All you need is a pair of nose plugs and a flashlight."

Izuku smiled, looking down at a crude map stapled to the letter that Giran had clearly drawn himself in what looked like pink crayon.

"The Sewer Rat is pretty much an oasis for a guy like me. Gambling, drinking, gossiping, private business deals, and a hard ban on weaponry and violent quirks so no-one gets to mess up my beautiful face while I'm behind its doors. It'll be good to get familiar with the place. Get over here as soon as you can. If you're lucky, maybe I'll even buy you a drink, as long as you promise you won't tell your parents."

"Looking forward to it, Giran."

He then signed his name, again in pink crayon.

Izuku felt a lot more relived already. Of course Giran would have a safety net...but Izuku was still worrying a little bit about his friends. But this, this was great. It sounded like they'd each managed to make their way to safety. Izuku could feel himself gradually getting lighter and lighter, like a literal weight of stress was sloughing off of his body.

Well, he was also feeling a little sick and the feeling of varied, pulsing powers in his body were definitely not helping, but at least those were concerns he could deal with at a later time. The immediate threat to his friends had dissipated.

For now, Izuku had a meeting to get to.

Izuku couldn't quite suppress his reaction to how professional and dangeresque that sounded. *He had his own underworld appointment arranged for him! He didn't even have to make a call, he was just naturally expected!*

Taking a brief moment to compose himself, the excitement of his friends safety compunding with the new hideout and Giran's letter, Izuku tightened his tie, and opened the hatch leading into the
Even if Izuku had meditated, scoured his long list of quirks and had fully understood his repertoire, if he truly had the vastest level of knowledge he could on all the possibilities available to him, all the potential combinations and hybrids of power, the skills to destroy cities, crush armies, build empires, nothing, and I mean nothing, could have been done to eliminate the foul stench of traversing the sewers for 15 minutes without any kind of protection. Izuku could feel his eyes watering as he traversed the winding stone walkways.

Thankfully, the sewers contained farm more than just waste pipes. Some of the areas of this subterranean maze were dedicated to water pumps and even some electrical wiring. Copper wiring from the beginning days of electrical outlets, before everyone came up with more efficient methods. It was in one of the water pump areas that the Sewer Rat was located.

Izuku turned, looking around through the corner of the rough, hand-carved passageway that was just tall and wide enough for two people. A cardboard sign on the outside said 'Sewer Rat' in an amateurish style of writing that was nonetheless better than Giran's, so props to them for that at least. What disturbed Izuku far more was the taxidermized rat, stuffed (thank god), and mounted on a spike right above the sign. It was deeply unsettling. *I guess that's how you know it's genuine?*

I wonder down the hallway, coming across a large wooden door, far grander than he had expected, covering the entire corridor. It looked like it could withstand a barrel of dynamite. He knocked, and waited.

After a few seconds, a slide on the door opened, revealing one bulbous, paranoid eyeball. A voice like sandpaper asked, "Who're you, then?"

*Classic shady scenario. Just act like this is natural to you. Like you've done this a million times already.*

Izuku responded, "I'm here to see Giran."

The eyeball stared Izuku down, peering deep into his bright green eyes.

"Yeeeah, okay then. Your name?"

"I'd like to remain anonymous, if at all possible."

The eyeball closed, nodding understandingly, and Izuku could hear the sound of about a million locks, chains, security systems and alarms being deactivated on the other side of the barrier.

The door opened. And eerily, the eyeball and the figure it supposedly belonged to was not behind it.

The figure had respected Izuku's privacy. So Izuku walked forward into the dimly lit hallway, intentionally not looking behind him, in spite of the feeling of eyes on his back causing the hairs on his neck to raise up a bit.

After a few seconds, he reached it. The Sewer Rat. A veritable den of thieves. He was in the middle of a massive, hollowed out cavern that looked like it'd been carved out of a small nuke detonation. What wasn't safe to walk on had wooden flooring fitted over the top of it. At least a quarter of the room was occupied by a titanic bar, and a good half must have been occupied by the myriad of gambling tables. New Orleans Jazz played from speakers around the room, a tasteful
contrast to the occupants. Izuku could clearly see at least two passed out drunkards, but what was most surreal about it was seeing their tables right next to men with gold rings, fine suits and sunglasses. Kingpins and crime bosses right next to addicts and destitute drunks.

*Okay, Giran wouldn't be drinking since he knows he's about to be put to work on a job. He probably wouldn't be waiting in a private room since he wouldn't know when I'd arrive, so he'd probably be killing time...*

Izuku looked over to the gambling tables, an arena of lady lucks favour. After a few seconds of looking, Izuku picked out his obnoxious pink blazer from the crowd, his enormous scarf trailing down the side of his chair. Giran was playing a game of chance with three other very imposing figures. The only thing more intimidating than them was the size of the pile of money on the table...

There were a few decks of cards and sets of poker chips over by the entryway, apparently for guests to pick up and use in games. Izuku still felt that sensation of eyes on his back. He moved over to the counter and surreptitiously slipped a black poker chip up his sleeve...

"Put it back, shitstain."

Izuku turned around, jumping halfway to Jupiter and throwing his hands up in the air exaggeratedly to face the sandpaper-voiced man who caught him. He looked...oh my. Where his head should be was a mass of tentacles topped with eyes. His mouth was apparently located somewhere on his neck, covered by a turtleneck, judging from the way his clothing moved when he talked.

"I-I'm...oh god I'm so sorry, I just wanted to...I've not-"

"You've not been here before, have you? Who told you about this place?"

"A-A friend."

"A crap friend he is if he didn't let you know we abide my common courtesy here. You're a guest here. Remember that."

"Yes, of course...sorry."

Izuku replaced the poker chip. The eye-stalked man slunk back to the door, grumbling. The other patrons who were watching returned to their works, dismissing him as a fool.

And the deck of cards Izuku had slipped up his other sleeve, then flattened out against his arm when he threw his hands up, remained hidden.

Mr Compress would be proud. Classic misdirection.

Giran had never expected to come across such a massive goddamn score in his free time. Making a fortune while goofing off between jobs. He truly was a master.

He'd been running his opponents ragged all day, and they looked about ready to break something. He'd put one of the three chumps out of the game with a well-timed all in, and he'd been winning incremental victories consistently all game. It's one thing to play poker, but it's another thing to play people. And Giran could do both.

If only crunch time didn't decide to rear it's ugly head when he had such a lousy hand. A four and
seven of clubs were not ideal by any means. And his opponents seemed to mutually agree to work together on this one to stop Giran from knocking them out of the game entirely. This was gonna go around in circles until he ran out of time and got kicked out.

Suddenly, something started stirring underneath the table. Giran, masking his shock like a pro, managed to keep quiet while purple sparks started to emanate right from beneath the table. Mostly because after a second he realised they looked pretty much like Kurogiri's flames...

The fat one boasted, "Whassamatter jackass, finally got dealt a bad hand?"

Giran took advantage of the taunt to slam his head on the table in 'despair', throwing his hands under the table for a moment. The portal opened, and spat out two kings, diamonds and hearts, into his hand. In the same moment, he threw his old cards into the portal.

Giran, smirking, raised his head from the table. "Yeah, something like that."

He looked over the shoulders of his opponents, and managed to see Deku over on the far wall, leaning against it and waving at him, looking like he was very proud of himself. Who knows how Kurogiri played into this, where he was, but I guess Kurogiri was reporting to him now, after all. Deku was able to see the hands of his opponents quite nicely from there.

With a well-baited all in, a earth-shattering scream of rage, and a cockily delivered "read 'em and weep, fellas", the game was over. Giran scooped up the remaining chips, shoosing away his defeated foes, having doubled his personal wealth in the span of a single evening.

Deku sat down on the table opposite Giran, grinning from ear to ear. "So, there's your advance payment for this job, Giran."

Giran returned Deku's smile with one of his own, an enthusiasm that didn't emerge often from this cynical soul, "Kid, I am definitely buying you that drink now."

"Just a mocktail for me, thank you."

"...you never cease to amaze me, pal."
Spite is hollow

Chapter Summary

Izuku's contact reaches out to his allies, and Izuku does some self-reflecting.

Izuku walked back into his new room, trying to set things up in a way that felt familiar. That bench with the knife sharpener wasn't coming back, but he could order in something similar...maybe with some time, he'd be able to fix this mess up. But it wouldn't really feel like a home again without his friends...

From the beginning, characters like Kurogiri and Tomura were guiding him forward, bit by bit. He was sure getting too attached wasn't exactly the callous evil mastermind behaviour that Sensei would have encouraged. But he did say that it mostly came down to whatever works for you. Some villains out there would use any means they could fathom to achieve their goals. Building a healthy, cohesive team was, in fact, an option he had.

He had a little bit of time before Giran tracked everyone down. Alright...Sensei wrote something about meditation, right?

Izuku sat down in the middle of his room, closed his eyes, and started to concentrate. He focused his mind on the inside of his body, the pulsating, unstable power that was All For One at the moment. He began to feel increasingly scared just being alone in his own head, feeling like the weight of the power he carried collectively drowned out the sound of his own heartbeat. Feeling this new, foreign strength overpowering what Izuku already had and what he already was. But at the same time, now that things were quieter...he could really dig in to what he had.

Izuku's right fingers...that was Skeleton Key, the quirk he'd used before. He felt it moulding itself to fit the lock earlier...presumably it shaped itself to unlock any given door or object. Maybe that could be true for key cards, passwords or even retinal scanners...it all depended on what the physical limitations of the quirk are. He got a unique feeling from his fingers, upon close inspection. A kind of scratchy, metallic feeling, something that felt unique to that quirk alone.

His right shoulder, where Kurogiri's Warp Gate quirk was currently stored. He was starting to get the hang of it, and it was proving itself just as versatile and amazing as he'd imagined it to be. It'd almost be a shame to give it back...Izuku was starting to get why Sensei found stealing quirks like this addictive. But ultimately, the more hands the better. A quirk like this would be better in the hands of a useful ally and friend. No matter how many quirks he collected, Izuku would still be only one man. Well, unless Twice was involved. Warp Gate felt smoggy and smoky, like a thick black mist, suspiciously warm. Like smoke from a fire pit.

Izuku tried to explore his other quirks, but other than vague feelings, he was having a hard time-

Izuku stopped. He'd hit something. Something inside him, something buried deep down.

One large lump of quirk, sitting right in his centre of mass. It wasn't pulsing with any kind of feedback. It felt tough, like it was encased in a shell. Izuku tried to channel power into it like he did with his other quirks, but it felt like the energy just washed over the top of it, or was repelled. The lump felt...nostalgic. What is this? Sensei said all of All For One's quirks have to be activated
Izuku weighed up the possibilities. It could be that this lump was the root core of All For One itself. But if that was the case, activating it should charge up Izuku's hand with red energy, allowing him to steal or gift a quirk. It could be that the lump was something Sensei kept hidden...like maybe the fusion sum of quirks that gifted him his unnaturally long life. Or maybe it was something that Izuku should genuinely talk to a doctor about as soon as he could. It felt nostalgic, but it was dormant, and tough.

Izuku shook this worry off. He started trying to explore the repertoire of other quirks that All For One afforded him. Opening up Sensei's lockbox of notes, Izuku started his age-old past time of immersing himself in his reading.

Skimming over some of the titles...Boil Stone, Cool, Air Canon, Forcible Quirk Activation...

Shuichi had been trying to hide in plain sight. No-one saw him as being too out of place any more. He'd seen at least two dog-headed people today. And at least one person with just oversized dog legs. The only time when he stuck out from the crowd was when he put on the mask and became part of Stain's message. Which was the only part of his job that was a little bittersweet. He wondered whether Stain had ever felt the same way. That becoming a hyperbole was the only way to be noticed.

Somewhere underneath Stain, there had to be a human. Because underneath Spinner, there was Shuichi.

So, this wanted criminal was going to the corner shop down the street from where he lived to buy a sandwich for lunch. He'd cut people, hurt people, robbed people, but he standing right next to an eight year old girl and her mother, watching them bicker over how many sweets they were allowed, and no-one was any the wiser.

Shuichi picked up his meal, and started munching it with his sharp teeth while he walked back down the walkway home, waiting for the day when he'd finally be able to...oh.

Another mugging. God dammit. Doesn't Spinner get even a day off? This wasn't exactly the safest neighbourhood. Punks like these guys never stayed down.

A woman was being pinned by her wrists against the wall by one guy while his buddy fumbled through her purse. They were grinning like sycophants. If Shuichi had taken any longer to get here, this might've gotten really ugly. But now, Spinner was here. And it was about to get even uglier.

Shuichi wrapped the mask around his eyes, a simple cloth bandage. Not so much to protect his identity as much as it was to pay homage to Stain's image.

The one pinning the woman noticed him first, "Hey, we've got compaAH SHIT!"

The woman opened him up by throwing a blind kick to his knee. Spinner approved, grinning a little as he leapt towards his opponent, drawing two of his more concealable knives. He slashed for the guys neck, and he panicked, bringing his arms up to defend his jugular, getting a knife right through his hand. His captive dropped down, putting a bit of space between her and the assailant.

Spinner pulled down his blade, cutting through the entire bottom of his palm, mangling his hand. Before he could swing another blow, the woman pushed him back, snarling. Spinner moved with the momentum, stabbing the brute in the shoulder and pushing forwards. The combined weight
tipped him over into the wall, and a resounding crack echoed through the alleyway as his head hit the bricks. He fell over, immobilised.

His buddy sprung up to run, taking the woman's purse as he did so. As he rocketed down the alleys, his hand touched the wall as it did...

A familiar voice spoke up from down the alleyway, "Boil Stone..."

The bricks his hand was on boiled, bubbled, and erupted in a steaming of hot lava, hissing and splashing all over him. He writhed in pain and surprise, burned by the molten rock.

"Cool."

The voice of Deku was not, in fact, just admiring his own work (though how exactly it was HIS work was incredible), but naming another ability. The lava all over him cooled down to an immediate room temperature, becoming solid rock again. He agonised and screamed as the lava tightened into rock around his body, constricting him and pinning him to the floor with it's weight.

Deku rounded the corner, flexing his fingers, apparently in awe with himself.

Spinner mumbled, "Stendhal... I'm seeing the birth of a new Stendhal..."

Deku noticed him, "Pardon me, what? Wait, Spinner! Hi!"

He waved joyfully, motioning for Spinner to join him.

Spinner rushed over ecstatic, "How did you do that!? Are you finally picking everyone up? Please, it's been so confining living in this dump like a normal human being."

Deku nodded, leading to Spinner pumping his fist in triumph.

The woman looked over at the scene, breath still heavy with strain.

"Who the...thanks for your help. Really. Scumfucks, the lot of them... who are you guys?"

One of Kurogiri's portals opened, and Spinner grinned with excitement, more ready than ever to return to the life he loved, the life that would forge a better world.

Deku turned to her before they left, finger-gunning in a way that looked way better in his head, "The League of Villains. Tell your friends."

Deku led Spinner through the portal, who was barely containing himself.

Deku returned his smile, "Welcome back, pal."

Toshinori stared at himself in the mirror. Not for the first time in the past few days.

How much more could he do? His injuries were creeping up on him. Some days, he woke up feeling nauseous before he'd even moved. Cramps in the left side of his chest were becoming more and more common, his left leg was slowly becoming able to take less and less weight.

Using One For All solved these issues. But for how long would it help? How long would he keep it? Trying to fix his mistakes? And importantly, how long would it take before passing it on wouldn't create a worthy successor in time?
It wasn't a matter of a lack of shining candidates. Many of the students in U.A were talented, courageous, and had quirks that would expand upon the power of One For All immensely. And now that All For One had secured a successor for himself...his death, as horrible as it was to say, had bought him some time. Just a little. But that boy, Midoriya... he couldn't allow him to experiment and grow in power without there being an adequate counterbalance for good and justice. The issue was... Toshinori still felt responsible. He so desperately wanted to make things right, to see this through to the end. This was a disaster he caused. He shouldn't have to force his own students to clean up the mess he'd made.

But...Toshinori looked into the sink, downtrodden. It was selfish. Pathetic. To put his ease of mind over the safety and preparation of his peers. He had tried and failed. The solution now, the only viable option, was to entrust the future to the younger generations. Nurture them, and allow them to grow into their potential. For their sake, he must have faith in them. And put his fears aside.

It was for the best. Toshinori had to pick a successor.
How did that movie quote go? "I like the smell of napalm in the morning". That was probably it. Dabi hadn't really had the opportunity to sit back, kick his feet up and just watch a film in a long time. He'd been hard at work fixing society and dragging the tainted name of 'hero' through the mud. And even now that he was split from the League until further notice, he was still working.

Dabi took in a deep breath, smelling singes. A large group of thugs sat on the floor before him, charred and disfigured with blue fire. A few of them were letting out some loose groans. Dabi was considering whether he should go ahead and silence them. They did try to mug a clearly disfigured guy, after all. These staples, the wrinkled skin, they couldn't exactly plead ignorance. They could plead ignorance to knowing that they were vastly out of their goddamn league, but that doesn't make them more pitiable.

He raised his arm up when he realised that he normally wouldn't even be debating this if it wasn't for that kid, Deku. His standards are fine and all, but they're not going to dictate how his peers are going to behave. Not killing anyone isn't a hard rule for how to create a brighter world.

A strange noise echoed through the warehouse, and Dabi put that thought on hold. He whirled around, redirecting his raised arm, crackling at the seams with power.

Deku stepped through the warp gate.

He smiled cheerfully, saying, "Dabi! I've been looking-"

And then the smell hit him. Deku covered his mouth and gagged, "Oh god! Hngh...oh god what is that!? It's vile!"

Dabi deadpanned, "Burned flesh."

"Oh that's foul...it smells like a..."

"Like what? A barbeque from hell? A crematorium? I've heard them all, Deku. If you're going to throw up, take a step outside first, please."

Deku straightened himself out, uncovering his face, only to immediately reel at the sight of the scorched thieves, "Oh god they've melted...are those the-"

"Yes. That's the source of the smell."

Izuku, revolted, cried, "Jesus, Dabi, what did they do?"

"I don't need a great excuse. But in my unneeded defence, they were trying to beat the hell out of
me to steal my money. Not that I had any cash anyway...this really did turn out as poorly for them as it could have."

Deku raised up his arm, then craned his neck to look out of one of the windows with the classic face of sheer suspicion. Dabi kept his voice down too. Quietly the two of them crept over to one of the paper thin, sheet metal walls.

Soft breathing.

Dabi reared back, sending both hands rushing forward in an inferno, blasting the sheet metal off of its hinges, slamming the thug on the other side of the wall into the ground.

He panicked, picking himself up as quickly as he could, running like the wind.

Deku waved his hands...hang on, what? His fingers were trailing some kind of purple...

WHAT.

A portal exactly like Kurogiri's opened beneath the feet of the running robber, and another opened directly in front of Dabi. He fell into it, landing heavily on his front as he collapsed before Dabi.

"No, no no no, I ain't dyin' here!", the man screamed, raising his hand against Dabi. Dabi grinned, more than ready to slam this guy in return...

Deku rushed into the scene, pinning the guy's hand to the floor with his boot, prompting a howl of pain from the recipient. When his wrist hit the floor, his quirk activated. A decent number of rock chunks burst from the ground next to him, flying into the air as if thrown harshly. They ended up flying in completely the wrong direction though, since the entire motion was being conducted in the wrong area..

Dabi smirked confidently, "I don't think throwing sticks or stones is going to help you."

Panting, the criminal responded, "Shit, shit...look, I was just around the corner okay, I didn't take any part in...I swear it's just-

"Oh. You're not really a friend of theirs?. I guess you won't mind if I just..."

Dabi whirled around, aiming a fist at the pile of scorched muggers, prompting a cry of, "NO, WAIT!"

"Thought so. Good job playing it cool.", Dabi declared, a large blue flame building up along his hand, reaching up his forearm.

Deku interjected on the situation, "Wait, I don't agree with killing this guy. Can we hold on for a minute?"

"I'm not following your pacifist stupidity. This guy deserves punishment."

"It's not just an arbitrary decision", Deku said, holding up his hands, flexing his fingers as if observing them, "He instinctively tried to stop you from burning his friends, shooting his own argument in the foot in the process. It wasn't a great defence or anything and it was pretty obvious he was lying, but that still has to count for something, right? He instinctively protected his allies."

Dabi's eyes hardened. He wasn't going to just take this lying down, "I'm not willing to forgive someone who abuses their quirk for petty shit. He's a common thug."
Deku fumbled on his words for a second, before his face lit up. Not really with determination or joy, his expression just...sharpened. He observed his hands with deep intensity.

"I...I might be able to do something about that. It'd be a fitting punishment. Besides, if I'm right about how I can combine it...a quirk that moves rock would be incredible. Let me see...how do I do this?"

Deku mumbled to himself rapidly, scrunching his eyes shut. He started wringing his hands.

"Okay...I think this is working."

"What's working? You're sitting there, just-"

Trembling, Deku raised his hand. While it was rapidly changing intensity, and obviously unstable, his hand was glowing with a red aura.

"Hey hey hey...your hand...is that a quirk? Did Tomura's Sensei give you something before he..."

Deku smiled a wobbly smile, clearly nervous and keeping his concentration on maintaining his power, "Yes. He did. I'm...still learning how to use it. This feels really, really deeply strange. My hand's gone all tingly and numb."

Dabi's expression grew serious, "Well whatever that power is, you'd better finish using it soon. You're gonna hurt yourself. Losing your senses over the activation of your own quirk isn't healthy."

"I'm kind of still trying to make this power my own. You're right. I should just try this before I'm unable to sustain my quirk any longer."

Deku leaned down, putting more weight on his foot as he did so. The criminal, clearly terrified, winced as his wrist was crushed further.

"Hold still. If this works, you'll get to walk out of here alive."

The mugger tried his best, even pinned to the ground as he was, to lean away from Deku's hand, but in the next second, Deku's hand was firmly on the man's forehead.

Deku doubled over, leaning his weight onto his arm, pushing the man's head into the ground. It looked like it was half out of a lack of energy, and half an attempt at keeping the guy's head pinned so that the connection wouldn't be broken.

After about 5 seconds, Deku jumped up, examining his hand for damages. Wierdy enough, he started doing the same to his left shoulder.

Dabi interrupted, "So, that looked nasty. What did you do to him?"

The man, freed from being pinned, got up, and started to make a break for it. He tried to use his quirk to kick up rocks as he went, but it didn't work. He stopped for a second, trying to throw another, looking more and more concerned.

He screamed in terror, "What!? What the shit!?!

Deku, tensing his left shoulder slightly, raised his right arm. Stones and pebbles flew up off the ground, rapidly pelting the man in the head and chest as he started to realise what had happened. And Dabi started to realise the same thing, a sadistic smile spreading across his double-skinned mouth.
"You're not seriously telling me he...his quirk...even that can be transferred!? You have Sensei's power?"

Deku had a wider grin on his face than Dabi had ever seen before, as he flung rocks freely with a wave of his hand, slowly picking up more and more, testing the weight limit of what he could throw. The mugger, distraught at losing his leverage with which to overpower the weak, fled into the distance, bruised and bleeding.

"I have it. I'm slowly getting a better grip on these reigns. It's happening, Dabi. I'm slowly getting the power to back up my convictions."

Dabi hadn't felt this energetic in weeks.

"I only told you to grow over time. This is like telling someone to get better at subtraction, and they come back with a university degree in mathematics."

Deku scratched the back of his head, "Well...I'm glad I seem to have impressed you."

This god damn kid...

"So, if you're showing up with this new power...I'm taking that to mean the boss is dead?"

Deku looked mournful for a moment, "Yes. He passed his quirk on to me on his deathbed."

"Well alright. Does that mean our organisation is disbanding?"

"I'm here to collect everyone to prepare for our next tasks. Does that mean you actually want to leave now?"

Dabi smirked, "Hell no."

Izuku opened up a warp gate, looking a little bit dazed. Probably from swapping between quirks so much. Some quirks do take a physical strain on your body, after all. Dabi caught a reflection of himself in one of the more polished pieces of sheet metal, wrinkled bags of skin stapled to him all over.

Deku signalled to the portal with cheery bravado, "After you."

Dabi stepped through.

Alright then, Deku. You've started chasing those grand ambitions. Good start. Let's see how you keep up the pace.

Izuku stepped through the portal once again into an abandoned parking lot. Spinner seemed like he was happy to see Dabi again. Stain's disciples have to stick together, after all. He'd put the two to work on reassembling some of their recovered gear. Izuku had been working in his room to try and boost their communications network. They had to grab a new radio transmitter first, and getting any kind of signal from underground was absolutely the hardest part.

Izuku had accomplished the task by hollowing out a streetlight from below using some precise applications of Boil Rock and his new quirk, Geopush. He had to use them one at a time, still...but after softening up the rock with Boil Rock, then moving the lava with Geopush, great things could be accomplished. The weight limit of Geopush was far more manageable when it was just
controlling the flow of lava, and not trying to pick it all up at once and dump it on someone. Stick the new devices up the streetlight, and they had assembled their own disguised radio tower. It wasn't exactly premium airwaves they were getting, but it was at least good enough to send a message that anyone in the area should head to the parking lot at 1:00am.

Places like this were really, really unbelievably creepy at night. They were made to house such a large group of people and cars, so when they were empty, the abandonment and lack of life was even more obvious. The wind whistled effortlessly through the vast concrete structure, the featureless, flat floor that seemed to stretch on forever and ever into the blackness. The walls were non-existent outside of a simple line of stone erected to prevent cars just flying out, but a person could slip through just fine. You could see all over town from up here, look down and see how far there was to go...

"IZUKU!!"

Izuku jumped out of his skin, feeling a massive force upon his back as he was thrown forward, landing heavily on his front. Falling any further forward would have broken his nose or fallen over the barrier.

The happy, high-pitched voice called out again, "God, I was so worried you hadn't made it! I got hit in the face by everybody, they magnetised right into me, I'm so sorry I couldn't help. Ah, I've missed you!"

Izuku chuckled in spite of the peril he was just put in, "It's...whew...it's good to see you too Himiko", Izuku said, turning to see her for real-

Izuku felt his trouser leg being rolled up, then a sharp pain in his left calf, a sharp pinprick of stabbing pain that caused him to sink down, kneeling.

"Ow! Ow, ow, ow ow...good grief, what are you doing!?"

Izuku felt a pulling, sucking sensation from the wound, but after a second, it stopped, and the thing piercing the opening point was removed.

Himiko pulled Izuku around, excited, holding a small canister of Izuku's blood. She handed him a small cookie.

"Thanks for the donation! Here's something to keep your strength up."

Izuku did feel a bit faint. Reluctantly he accepted the compensation for his pain, twisting his body to face Himiko and hide the leg wound. She still ended up intimidating him more than a lot of the other members of the League, even if she seemed to be the friendliest. So he calmly bit into the cookie. Okay, for what it's worth, it was a damn good cookie.

Himiko smiled, as per usual, putting her hands on her hips in triumph, "Whew. I almost forgot to get a blood sample from you."

"You could've just asked."

"No, no I couldn't. You wouldn't have let me. It's for the best you don't get to see the size of the needle."

Izuku gulped, "Um...how big is the-"

"Don't worry about it. Just focus on the good taste of the cookie."
"That's...worrying."

Himiko helped Izuku up, letting him lean on her with his damaged calf.

Izuku held up a hand, "It's okay, don't worry. I can walk."

"Well sure. But I'm the one who opened that lovely wound. I should at least help out."

"Really, I'm fine."

Himiko grinned, walking behind Izuku, no doubt to observe his injury and his determination to fight through the pain. Izuku felt he was being condescended to a bit here. Maybe it had something to do with almost always being in a state of injury whenever Himiko was around, but he didn't want to have to rely on her, this time at least.

"So, who else have you recruited, Izuku~?"

Himiko dragged out the sounding of Izuku's name, in a way that seemed a little childish. It was getting a little hard to tell if she was dangerous or endearing.

"Um, Spinner and Dabi."

"Great, great, two of Mr Stainy's finest! I knew you wouldn't leave me 'till last. Unless you were saving the BEST for last!"

Izuku shook his head, chuckling. Someone like Tomura would find a negative spin on anything. If he was recruited early, he'd say it sucks no-one else is here yet. If he was recruited late, he'd say it was insulting that he wasn't found earlier. Himiko's optimism was refreshing...but Izuku was still nervous for his other allies. And now that he'd started thinking about Tomura...he began to feel uneasy...

"Hey, hey? Izuku? Are you alright?"

Himiko had craned her neck around until she was right nearby Izuku's face, seeing that it was getting a little negative.

"S-Sorry Himiko. Don't mean to worry you. I've just got a lot on my mind right now."

Himiko looked a little contemplative for a moment, before pulling out her knife, dancing it around on her fingers precisely.

"Have you been keeping up with your knife training?"

"Oh, I haven't really had time. I've been doing training for...well, it's complicated, but-"

Himiko clasped a finger over Izuku's lips, halting that thought. Her eyes closed slightly, and her expression became calmer than usual.

"Shh. You've been neglecting your basics. I'm not just saying this from a training point of view, but because you're thinking too hard. It's really easy to get wrapped up in plans within plans, thinking you've got everything prepared, and let that satisfaction carry you forward."

Himiko patted Izuku's knife holster.

"But you're leaving behind some of the simple things that ground you and let you recover. Something as mindless as swinging a knife. You've been bringing everyone back into the
fray...you've taken on a bigger role in the League, haven't you?"

Izuku was a little startled at how well Himiko had just read him, but once he got past that, he reluctantly conceded, nodding.

Himiko smiled caringly, "Thought so. I think it's great you're doing more. You're pretty smart, you can carve people up, and you've got a really cool determination to you. You deserve to be given an opportunity to try harder, y'know, I'm rooting for you! But no matter how important you get, don't forget to breathe in between all the muttering, okay?"

Izuku let out a big sigh, feeling some of the tension from the past few days washed out from inside him, almost like it was leaking out of the little hole in his thigh.

"Thanks, Himiko."

Himiko's cheeriness came back in full force, "No problem! So, where's the new base at?"

Izuku waved his hand, the power coming to him a bit easier this time, opening a portal in the floor, "Right through here."

He turned over to Himiko. Her eye was twitching slightly.

Izuku raised his arm, speaking rapidly, realising Himiko was about to get overexcited, "Oh, oh my goodness, I didn't explain, I ended up receiving a new quirk, it's the one Sensei used to have, h-he passed it to me on his deathbed and he took Kurogiri's quirk the moment the portal closed and I've been using it that's why I picked everyone up and I didn't mean to suprise you so much and-"

"...THAT IS SO AMAZING!!"

Himiko grabbed Izuku's arm, and jumped into the warp gate, pulling Izuku through the portal with her, almost ensuring that he would swing in an arcing angle when they reached the floor on the other side. Izuku covered his head with his arm, ready to be swung into a wall or table.

Please, god, just let me be swung into the couch, please, I'm begging you...

Chapter End Notes

Hi there!

So, believe it or not, I have been paying close attention to the fact that the number of comments on my work has exponentially increased. I want to let you all know I read every single one but I'm replying less to comments than before unless they're asking a question, because I feel it's be very unfair if I answered all of them and artificially doubled the comment count on the work. So consider this a note in advance saying THANK YOU SO MUCH to everyone who's been leaving encouraging comments for me, it really does mean a lot on a genuine, personal level.

Also, I'm sorry uploads tend to slow around Monday and Tuesday, that's usually when I've got obligations in education and work. Thanks for understanding!
Izuku patted his forehead, nursing a decently large bruise. He did not, in fact, hit the couch.

Giran was picking up a lot of the other villains. Magne, Mustard, Twice, and Mr Compress. Which left Izuku with the enviable opportunity to deal with one person he was looking forward to seeing again, and one person he was dreading to see again. It was a strenuous day. Luckily, Himiko and Dabi's bickering was dragging him back to reality.

Himiko was pointing towards various elements of the still mostly bare walls and floors, "So, how long do you think it will take before Kurogiri starts decorating? I'm guessing 3 minutes, he'll get some nice rugs, maybe install a bar counter just to make the whole place feel like home..."

Dabi shrugged, "I don't know. I hope he doesn't bring in as much alcohol next time. Makes me nervous, having so much flammable material right next to me."

"Ultimately though, the BOSS gets the final say, right?", Himiko said, turning over to face Izuku, grinning from ear to ear at her address.

Izuku looked up, humoring her with a confident, authoritative nod, "I suppose I do, actually. I doubt I'm going to have any major problems with anything Kurogiri might suggest through. He helped me get my old room ready, and he was honestly the best at taking care of us."

Himiko threw up a thumbs up, proclaiming, "Yeah, he really was the 'mom friend' of the group. Can't wait to get him back!"

Dabi huffed, "Mostly I'll be happy he's back because that irate brat Tomura won't be reasoned with unless Kurogiri is here. That purple fog-machine man was roughly 90% of his impulse control."

Izuku raised an eyebrow, "So does that mean you will be happy to see Tomura back as well?"

Dabi replied, "If you're insisting on bringing him back anyway, I'll be happier if the attempt doesn't end with the base in ashes and smoke. Again."

"I know how you feel", Izuku said, hiding his own fear behind his oration to Dabi, "But Tomura is more than just an ally, friend or leader. To him, the League is his home. He belongs here."

Dabi and Himiko didn't really have anything to add to that. But he could read Dabi's body language pretty well. He was still hesitant, and might prefer to cut him off. It's...not exactly a bad decision from a purely risk-reward perspective. Even if it would ruin Tomura's mental state, leaving him behind was perhaps the better choice. It was still a risk to try contacting him again. After the final disagreement they had, the kidnapping...and the aftermath of Sensei's last stand against One For All, and All Might.

Izuku continued, "We have to keep a policy upheld that we don't leave our members behind."
"Did you forget the part where we're villains?"

"That's all the more reason to build up a reputation. We're in an industry where your word is the only thing you can offer to get someone to place their trust in you. No laws will back up any agreement you may make. If our word becomes worthless, we will become pariahs just as heinous as common crooks with no values or convictions."

*And far more importantly, I made a promise to Sensei. To protect Tomura, and help him grow.*

Dabi threw up a hand, conceding, "Alright, fine. You're the boss. Don't throw a fit over me giving my two cents. You've been known for pulling off big risks. Just thought I'd let you know that this is, in fact, a big risk."

"If it's any consolation, I'm going to warm up by getting Kurogiri back first."

Himiko threw up a questioning finger, "Um, won't you give him back his quirk at that point? Don't you think it'd be better if you had that for the meeting?"

"Probably. But it's either having slightly more power, or an elusive and crucial ally who is close to Tomura. I'm confident my other powers will be enough."

Izuku waved his hand, throwing open a portal for what he knew could be the last time.

"Wish me luck, guys!"

Himiko waved, "Good luck, Izuku!"

Dabi waved too, albeit more lazily, "Try not to die."

Thinking *good enough*, Izuku stepped into the vortex.

Izuku stepped out of the warp gate -

"Don't take another step and don't move a muscle."

The words hit Izuku's ears, the sound echoing through his mind as his adrenaline spiked, feeling the breath from the threat right behind him.

The moment the portal had closed, before he'd even had time to take in his surroundings, he had been found.

Izuku stuttered out, hiding his surprise as best he could, "W-Who are you?"

The man spoke again, "Hm. My voice would sound different..."

Izuku realised, "Kurogiri!? Why are y-"

"DON'T. Turn around.", the voice replied, a fist gripping Izuku's shoulder. The voice sounded sophisticated and gentlemanly, but less deep. A little bit of the usual timbre and echoey sound to it had gone. He sounded on-edge.

Izuku looked around. This seemed to be a traditional Japanese hotel. He tried to calm Kurogiri, assuring him, "It's okay, it's okay! I'm here to-"
"You don't understand, mister Midoriya. I am no longer capable of serving the League. The loss of my quirk has robbed me both of my abilities and my anonymity. Negotiations will avail you nothing."

His voice was laced with venom. In a severe break of his courteous demeanour, his tone indicated dangerous fury. The fury of a man desperate to protect himself. For whatever reason, Kurogiri seemed to be very nervous about being seen without the active effects of his quirk.

Izuku stuck his hand out behind his back, "Take my hand."

The voice paused for a moment, caught a little off guard, "Mister Midoriya, I appreciate your earnest companionship, but such a gesture will not alter my decision."

"I have a good reason for asking. Please, trust me on this. I won't turn around."

"What possible..."

Kurogiri's voice trailed off, becoming a low wheeze as he quickly guessed where Izuku's confidence was coming from.

"Dear god...what robbed me of my strength...it isn't in the hands of mister Shigaraki? It's yours?"

Kurogiri took a step backwards, shirking away, his hand dropping from Izuku's shoulder. Izuku turned around to face Kurogiri.

He was still dressed in his regular attire, a waistcoat and metal plates but had added a balaclava to his appearance, to protect what little he could of his identity. He had a very sharp facial structure with handsome features, high cheekbones and a strong chin and brow. He had either shaved himself bald, or his quirk had steamed/burned away at his hair follicles. His skin was porcelain white, and looked almost polished. Two sharp purple eyes stared back at Izuku.

At the moment, this new face for an old friend was aghast in shock, "You've been chosen to succeed him? You are the new All For One?"

"You...knew a bit about him?"

Kurogiri composed himself, standing upright once more, "I knew something of his character. Just as I knew from the silence of the radio that my master had passed on. That all I had served and furthered the cause of had gone to smoke around me. But rather than being able to play a part in it's rebuilding, I had been robbed, at the last minute, of my only possible means of recourse. I ran from the building...and stewed in my own despair for many days."

Kurogiri's look became regretful, and he bowed at the waist slightly, "I apologise for startling you, sir. To even think of abandoning my position is not acceptable."

Izuku smiled, "You don't have to address me as sir, Kurogiri. You know me better than that. And your position is waiting for you, if you want it. I won't force you to return."

Kurogiri put up his hands defensively, "No, I wouldn't dream of leaving! Capability was my only...I wasn't of any use to anyone. I allowed myself to get carried away by my negativity. Such an attitude is not becoming of a so-called 'higher class of villain', is it?"

"No, no it isn't.", Izuku said, holding out his hand once again.

"I will be happy to return, mister Midoriya. I will serve you faithfully, as the successor to the
League's direction."

Izuku's breath caught in his chest slightly, "U-Uh...yes, well, I wouldn't say...um..."

"Too much pressure, is it? I would've thought being given the full support of one of your servants would be quite reassuring."

Izuku laughed out of pure nervousness, "Let's just stick with allies for now, please?"

Kurogiri smiled, his eyes squinting just as they did in his normal form, pushed closed by his high cheekbones, "I am already becoming fond of this new management, mister Midoriya."

Kurogiri extended his hand, and Izuku gripped it. With a clenching of his fist, he reached inside his core and activated All For One.

His blood was heating up. He reached inside of himself, finding the Warp Gate quirk in his right shoulder.

Izuku, in between deep breaths, warned, "I think this might...be painful..."

Kurogiri reassured him, "I'm well aware, mister Midoriya. Nothing to be done about it."

He felt the beating pulse of the quirk, felt it's connection to All For One's system, that grid of power and energy...he pushed the quirk through the invisible system of veins, gradually moving it into his arm, towards his palm. It felt like he was driving it through his flesh with every movement, but it was making it's way there. Clenching his teeth, Izuku felt the quirk in his palm, the palm radiating with red light.

He pushed the quirk into the red palm, and suddenly he felt it, outside of his body, like for once the effects of the quirk were piercing his skin. It was partially inside of Kurogiri's hand. Izuku looked up for a moment, seeing that Kurogiri's expression was clouded, and he was begining to show visible signs of pain.

The quirk didn't flow so naturally into Kurogiri's palm. It had to be forced in there, pushed into his system with pressure and effort. Kurogiri stifled a short noise as Izuku slowly felt the quirk's power lodging itself inside of his palm.

When he'd taken the quirk of that thug, it felt so natural. A palm on his head, he could see inside of his system, he could just suck the life out of it and force his quirk up, out and away from him. It wasn't easy, but it was at least easier than this. After about 5 more seconds of non-stop focus, neither of them willing to be the first one to express distress, Izuku felt the quirk fully leave his body, and leant back to catch his breath.

The moment he did so, Kurogiri leapt back, looking panicked. He patted his body, turning around and hurriedly removing his balaclava, placing a hand on the wall just as his hand burst into flames and fog, the black mist surrounding him as he made a choking noise with his throat, gradually growing louder and hoarser. He leaned back as it pushed it's way out of his mouth with a yell, the mist enveloping him completely. The massive mound of writhing, flickering fog turned back to Izuku, shapeless and shifting.

Slowly, the fog began to draw closer, exposing the metal plates as he gradually took a slightly more humanoid form from the neck up. The metal plates bottlenecked the fiery mist until what was left was a roughly head-shaped bit of purple fog. It moved, as if cracking it's neck, before two yellow eyes opened like slits atop his newly formed head.
Kurogiri, his voice booming and joyous, exclaimed, "Oh how I have missed this! I am finally myself once more!"

Izuku walked over to Kurogiri as he gradually dispersed the excess mist, returning his waistcoat and tie to visibility.

Izuku clapped cheerfully, "So, I've got the coordinates for the base on me at the moment. But there's been a sighting of someone I've been meaning to confront for a while now. Would you mind dropping me off to these coordinates before you use the second number to return to your new home?"

Izuku passed Kurogiri the digits.

Kurogiri raised his hand, pulling a warp gate into existence with a clawing motion, "With pleasure. After you, mister MidoriBEHIND YOU!"

A loud rushing of wind, and Izuku felt a shoulder barge into him from behind, sending him spiralling through the shrinking portal. Kurogiri did not manage to dispel it quickly enough to close it without harming its passengers, and Izuku fell through, tumbling through the black mist, bursting through the door of the warehouse on the other side and hitting the tarmac hard. A foot hit his back heavily, pushing him into the ground, before it was gone and his assailant took a step back to deal with the civilians at the scene, screaming.

Izuku, coughing up the last traces of air in his lungs, struggled to his feet, breathing heavily. He turned around, taking in the atmosphere of the pier, ignoring the panicked crowds running away from the scene, trying to find his attacker.

The man circled him like a tiger, flexing his hands. Not in his usual manner, one finger at a time. He was clenching and unclenching his fist, as if to test his grip strength. How quickly he could wrap all of his fingers around his target. How much of an opportunity he would need to break them down, and scatter their ashes to the wind.

Tomura Shigaraki growled, "Deku. You're all out of time."

Izuku rose to his feet, ignoring the pain in his front, "Tomura, please...you don't have to do this."

"But I want to."

Tomura took a step forward. Kurogiri's head shot out from a portal, but Tomura threw his arm out towards the opening, forcing Kurogiri to retreat.

"Uh uh. No assists. This is between you and me."

Izuku raised his arms, trying to concentrate on All For One's power systems, "Don't, Tomura. I'll f-fight you if I have to."

Tomura tilted his head to the side, a grim, disgusted expression on his face, eyes bulging and wide.

"Oh really? And here I thought we were friends, Deku."
Cracked crown

Chapter Summary

Time to throw some hands.

Pretty early in the morning to get called out on a job, but this was an opportunity that could not be missed. Seems like the remains of that scumbag League of Villains organisation slipped up big time.

Heroes had been receiving reports of a very large number of distressed civilians calling for help by the pier, far too many for it to be any kind of hoax. Two villains had appeared out of nowhere and were wrecking the surrounding area. That's about all the information they'd got. Meh. Not a whole lot of info to go off of, but if it really was the case that they could bag two of the escaped League members, this was a lead well worth chasing. *Besides, when has lack of solid information ever stopped me before?*

Nor anyone else, it seemed. Looks like a couple of other heroes are headed to the scene too. *Trying to steal my thunder?* The hero shook the thought away as quickly as it came. It was important that backup was available for this one. It's too important a mission to leave to only one person. Still, it's a little insulting. Working in a team wasn't noble.

Bounding through the streets towards the pier, the sounds of destruction grew louder and louder.

"Keep dodging, keep scurrying away, keep it up for as long as you can! I'll grab you eventually. And when I do, I'll scatter your ashes through the sky! USURPER!"

Izuku shot to the side, ducking under another clawing reach from Tomura, delivering a solid punch to his jaw while breaking away from Tomura's lurching grasp, taking another step backwards along the long stretch of stone platform that made up their fighting grounds.

They were right out on the docks, an intelligent decision on Tomura's part. The water surrounded the jutting stone platform, ensuring there wasn't much room to dodge Tomura's approach. The only exit, back to the rest of the pier, was BEHIND Tomura, allowing him to block the exit. One grab would be enough to end this.

Tomura whirled around, snarling, lunging forwards.

Izuku breathed heavily, having to physically root himself in place just to muster the willpower to do this in such a short timespan, swapping between quirks so quickly. Right bicep, Boil Rock, creating a puddle of lava in front of him. Right forearm, Geopush, to move the lava into a large pillar, pushing up as much as possible in a devastating hill of lava. Tomura rolled to the side, avoiding the wave of magma. Finally, left side of the jaw, Cooling, to return the wave of lava to an immediate room temperature, returning it to solid rock.

Kurogiri created another portal behind Tomura. Unfortunately, it served as nothing more than a momentary distraction as Tomura whirled his hand around, forcing Kurogiri to retreat, and the
portal retracted as quickly as it appeared.

Izuku ducked behind the mound of rock, making sure Tomura didn't have an opportunity to get at him. Tomura chuckled, planting his open hand on the rocky protrusion, reducing it to rubble and sand. He took a step forward...and nearly fell off the platform.

Izuku had melted far more than just the surface of the stone docks. While he'd only pulled up a mound or hill of rock, the rest of the platform had been boiled down into a flat mess, creating a large gap in-between the two of them. Tomura could probably make the jump, but not without having to pull himself up, which would open him up for one of Izuku's steel-toed kicks straight to the face.

Izuku, disguising his panting as best he could, called out, "Tomura, please! Calm down! I'm not here to fight you!"

Tomura stomped his foot on the ground, screaming, "Shut up, shut up, shut up! I'm here to fight you, so that's what we're going to do! I'm not here to listen to your excuses and whining, you useless worm!"

"Tomura, we can't do this right now! Heroes will be on their way any second now, the only way you're getting out of here safely is with me."

Tomura took a running start, leaping across the platform with far more grace than Izuku had anticipated. Without waiting for any synergies, Izuku threw rocks up with his quirk, attempting to knock Tomura away, but when they were solid rocks the weight limit of Geopush was far more punishing, and he didn't pick up nearly enough rubble to knock Tomura off his course. With a roll, he got to his feet, standing on the same platform as Izuku without putting himself in a vulnerable position at all.

That...how did he do that?

Tomura grinned, his too-wide smile accented by a sinister scowl, "Nice job. You broke the platform leading to your escape."

Izuku briefly considered jumping into the water to try and escape that way. But he didn't know of any quirk that would give him an advantage over Tomura. Without that, Tomura's slimmer yet taller size would make him the naturally superior swimmer.

Tomura advanced at a leisurely pace, letting Izuku back up further and further. Izuku withdrew his knife with a flourish. Having to stab Tomura would be a terrible outcome, but not worse than being disintergrated and killed.

Izuku tried to take advantage of Tomura's emotional nature, stalling him with conversation, "I-Is this about Sensei!??"

"Of course it is, Izuku."

"Why? Do you know why you're doing this, or are you just angry at the world?"

Tomura took a sudden step forward, and Izuku reflectively backed up. Tomura seemed satisfied he'd silenced Izuku's bravado, before answering, "You could've left the scene, and gave Sensei room to fight without you hanging around his neck like a millstone. You could've tried to help him, seeing as you were there. You could've done anything but sit there and watch him die, then take his power."
"T-Take!? I didn't take anything! All For One can't-"

"Is that why you were here?", Tomura asked, his voice reverberating with madness. "You held off on the small reward so you could try for the big one? Is that why you've been taking my place? With Kurogiri, the League members, even Sensei? So you could trick him, like a grandchild sucking up to a relative on their deathbed? Huh? Is that it? LEECH!?"

Tomura rushed forward, and Izuku quickly threw up a lava pillar with a speed only accomplishable via adrenaline. The heat wafted into his front, and a small bit of lava splashed on his boot, almost as if to remind him he was running out of room.

"I'm the one who brought you here, Izuku! I'm the one who stuck his neck out for you! You failed him, abandoned him!"

Izuku's mind was nearly blanking on a response as he squeezed out, "I didn't, I would never! S-Sensei was important to me too! You can't-"

Tomura yelled and swiped his arm again, despite knowing full well Izuku wasn't quite reachable with that slowly spreading barrier of lava still present.

"Are you braindead!? Don't you fucking THINK of trying to match what Sensei meant to me, you pile of shit!"

Kurogiri's portal opened once more, this time too far away from the scene to do anything. It closed again, unable to allow Kurogiri to affect the battle without having to tumble over a large gap and directly into Tomura's hands. Presumably he would alter his coordinates to try and pop up in a more advantageous scenario...

What kind of shitshow was this?

The other heroes seemed just as confused, as they observed the scene. The villains were here, and the surroundings were clearly destroyed, but rather than holding civilians hostage, stealing valuables, causing terror or otherwise doing anything remotely productive they seemed to be fighting each other. It went beyond petty squabbling - the quirk of the lanky, shaggy-haired one was the ability to disintegrate anything he touches. Swiping at the other villain wasn't an idle threat.

The other villain though...we'd been told to be careful of him. That he'd been chosen by All For One, and had been given his power. And that although he wasn't there yet, he was being groomed to become the successor to the throne of villainy. This person, this dark figure who'd been built up in interviews, was a small, freckly kid who was dodging and ducking while desperately trying to reason with a man he should presumably be able to blow up in seconds. He didn't match the build-up behind his name at all.

Some of the others seemed to be content to wait until one of them had defeated the other, or until they achieved mutually assured destruction. Since no civilians were in danger, it would make sense to just let them deal as much damage to each other as possible before going in. There were just two problems with that. First, it'd mean risking one of these villains killing the other. No chance. We can't be complacent in letting murder happen, even among our enemies. And secondly, it was just such a cowardly, slimy move. It's shameful.

Without waiting for further discussion, she bounced out into the fray.
Izuku's knife cut through the air in a manner he hoped was intimidating, while Tomura leered over the lava, waiting as it dripped off the platform and into the water below. All he needed was time. Izuku was weighing up his options. Creating more lava might damage his feet, but his boots might soak up a lot of the damage. He was probably stronger than Tomura, would grabbing his wrists work? Perhaps after that it would be possible to throw him in the sea and escape afterwards. What if he tried to blackmail Tomura by threatening to create a gap that prevents him from leaving? It might not work, since he's in such a manic state, he's probably too far gone to listen to reason, but at least-

The sharp sound of cracking pavement stones brought Izuku back to reality. Even Tomura made a half-turn so he could see the source of the noise.

"Alright jokers, fun's over! Hands up or I'll pummel you into the floor!"

*I tried to warn you...the response time of heroes is faster than you'd imagine.*

Mirko, the Rabbit Hero, was walking towards the scene, shaking off the last remnants of the flagstones crushed under the weight of her armoured boot-soles. Kamui Woods was reluctantly revealing himself from a rooftop, his exasperation with Mirko's rashness suddenly turning to glaring anger when he saw Tomura and Izuku. Presumably he had a score to settle after they escaped last time.

*Any time now, Kurogiri...*

Tomura groaned, "Tch...more worthless heroes. Back off. I'm not here to deal with more annoying, falsely moralistic cowards today. Just this one."

Izuku stuck up a hand for a warning, "Tomura, we have to stop this. Kurogiri's going to appear again in only a second, if you don't come with me you're going to be arrested."

Tomura whirled around, glaring with bloodshot eyes, "If it's what it takes, I'll kill you, and then step through the warp gate alone. Now stop getting in my way."

Izuku pleaded, "Tomura, I promise you, I've never wanted to get in your way. Competing is just what ruined my relationship with Kacchan, I told you this already-"

Tomura gritted his teeth, "Then what, am I just supposed to accept that you've beaten me? If I can't compete with you, I can't do anything but sit back and just let you take everything from me. My power, my allies, even my number one spot with Sensei. Am I supposed to just let that slide!?"

Mirko was walking closer to the scene. With her leg-enhancing quirk, she could leap really, really far. No outside help needed, she could just use her thunderous thighs to leap into the air and dropkick the head off of anyone she damn well pleases. And right now, she was looking for an opening. Kamui woods was hoping to get an angle on Tomura to bind his arms. It was only a few moments before they were able to organise a synchronised takedown.

Sensei loved Tomura...and as much as Izuku cared for Sensei’s affection, he was certain he never came between that.

"He told me your name, Tenko..."

Tomura nearly lunged for Izuku's throat right then.
"I...Sensei never stopped caring about you."

Tomura's voice started wobbling again with barely contained fury, "What gives you the right to say anything like that..."

"Even in his last moments, Sensei never stopped caring...", Izuku paused, trying to focus on how to convey this in the very short timespan he had left, "His last thoughts were of you, Tomura."

Tomura turned his nose up, pausing for a second before curtly saying, "...Bullshit."

"He asked me to take care of you. It's the reason he took me in, the reason he gave me his quirk, so that I could continue to help you become the villain Sensei knew you could be. This was all for you. He cared about you more than anyone else. I know me and Sensei were close...b-but I couldn't even come close to your place in his heart, Tomura."

That's not enough. It's hardly enough to just say what Sensei felt. This is between the two of you.

"And I took that task because...because I care about you too, Tomura. Do you really think I would be here if all I wanted was to take All For One and run? I'm your friend. I want to help you too, like Sensei did."

Tomura stood, stunned. He looked confused, like he wasn't able to tell if Izuku was being serious. Like he had no experience in reacting to things like this. He opened his mouth, presumably to ask more...

Kurogiri's portal opened, right in the middle of the gap in the floor Izuku had created.

Mirko cried out, "Go, go go, their escape is here!", before kicking off from the ground and leaping into the air.

Izuku used his Cooling quirk on the remainder of the lava, tackling into Tomura before anything else could happen, throwing them both into the portal just as Mirko finished the apex of her jump arc, and Kamui stretched his Lacquered Chain Prison halfway across the dock.

Tomura's hands shot up to Izuku's back as they spent half a second flying through the purple vortex.

Izuku tried not to be too hopeful about the fact that he was careful to ball his hands into tight fists first.

After a brief period of falling through blackness, the two of them landed on their sides in the League HQ, small pebbles raining down on top of them before the portal closed, and Kurogiri stood over them.

Kurogiri grabbed Tomura under his arms, lifting him to his feet, while offering his other hand to Izuku to help him up, "That was far too close...good grief, are the two of you quite alright?"

Tomura stood up, breathing heavily. His eyes were covered by his hair.

Izuku got up, nervously eyeing up Tomura. He was standing suspiciously still.

Kurogiri dusted Izuku and Tomura down, apparently somehow portal-ing the dust off of them.

Izuku rasied a hand, "K-Kurogiri...I appreciate it, but could you just go tell the others Tomura's
arrived. I think they'd be happy to see him", knowing that being welcomed back would help improve Tomura's state of mind greatly.

Thankfully, Kurogiri was also sharp enough to tell it was an excuse to let Izuku and Tomura talk in private, and he bowed at the waist, saying, "Of course, sir. I'm sure they'll be thrilled."

A few footsteps, a closed door, and Izuku and Tomura were alone.

Izuku tried awkwardly to spark a conversation, "So...I know you've probably got a lot of questions-
"

Tomura interrupted in an emotionless tone of voice, "I wouldn't have believed anything you said earlier if it weren't for you knowing my real name."

"Huh?"

"It's something I never told you. Only Sensei knew. So I think if you knew that name before anyone else...Sensei must have told you some things."

"I see...", Izuku said. It was true that Tomura had a lot of secrets he only ever shared with Sensei.

Izuku asked, "So...why did you only tell Sensei your name? You two were so close, but you never told me what exactly...your relationship was."

Tomura swept his hair out of his eyes, enough for Izuku to see they looked strained and red.

Tomura leaned back against the wall, like he was too tired to stand up straight, "He took me in. When no-one else would. When the whole world simply looked on and pitied worthlessly, he protected me. I've been his ever since."

"So...he adopted you?"

"...Something like that."

A short silence settled. Both of them were touching on subjects too close to them to be forced out.

Sensei was like a father to Tomura. Izuku had suspected this went far above being a simple mentor, but this was a little much. He wasn't just overreacting; even a pretty well adjusted person might react like this if they felt someone else was at fault for the loss of someone that close to their heart and soul.

And Sensei was expecting Izuku to try to somehow fill that kind of role in Tomura's life. Moreover...he needed someone else he could rely on.

Izuku looked down slightly, unsure of himself, "Well...we're all feeling Sensei's loss. He was an inspiration to me too. The first time I met him, it was the first someone had believed in me. But more than that, it was...it really felt like he cared about what I had to say. He wasn't just giving a default response, or encouraging me because it was the 'right way' to respond to someone's aspirations. He was giving a measured response. And I really appreciated that."

Tomura clucked his tongue.

"But you, Tomura...when I came out of the room, you were leaning back, already perfectly sure that I was going to love him. That kind of reverence is really something special. A-And I want to let you know I just, I never meant to hurt your relationship at all. I'm sorry, Tomura. When I said
the League was like a home to you...that statement was far more truthful than I knew, wasn't it?"

Izuku carefully took a step forward to Tomura, edging closer, bit by bit, until he was standing right in front of him.

"Tomura, I want to make sure this is a place you belong. And I know I can't replace Sensei, I would never try to. But I want to be like him, in that I'm not here to encroach upon you, or compete with you. I just want to guide and assist you, like he did. Maybe not as a tutor, but...maybe as a friend?"

Tomura sighed, kicking at nothing with his foot limply.

Tomura dully replied, "You keep throwing that word around, 'friend'. Like it means something on its own."

Izuku placed a hand on Tomura's shoulder, "It means we're in this together. We all are."

"What, you mean the rest of these idiots? It's not as if-"

"Sensei was like family to you, and this is your home. I'm not asking you to immediately open up to everyone. But we're not any kind of invaders or threats. Give them a chance like you gave me a chance."

Tomura chuckled dryly, "So, so what? You're trying to carry the mantle he left? You really think you can fill that gap? After all he did for me? You expect me to believe you'd do the same?"

Izuku held his eye contact, refusing to show a hint of hesitation, "If that's what it takes, yes."

Tomura paused. Then, he tilted his head, in abject confusion.

Tomura's voice cracked, "What?"

"I'm serious, Tomura. I'm going to be here for you. We're in this together. I'm going to-"

"TOMURA!!", cried an all too familiar voice as it's owner, Himiko, burst into the room, dashing right up to Tomura's side and waving happily.

Dabi sauntered in afterwards, commenting, "I was beginning to think you might have just died out there."

Tomura, still obviously tense, bit back, "Shut it, wrinkly. I don't die easy."

Himiko grinned, "God, it's good to have our handyman back. Also, our handyman!"

Izuku and Dabi looked at her in confusion.

"...'cos Kurogiri is the actual handyman, he fixes stuff, puts it together, and Tomura because of all the hands on his, his costume?"

Tomura waited a moment.

After this moment, he placed his free hand on his face, almost as if to shield himself, "...I should have just let them take me to prison."

Himiko looked a little unappreciated, and Dabi somehow looked more revolted by her attempt at humor than Tomura did.
But, Izuku noted, *It was a right side better than ignoring her entirely and just running up to his room.*

Izuku wasn't sure he'd gotten across everything he'd wanted to. It's hard to tell how much Tomura understood, seeing as his emotional receptiveness was so variable. At the very least, Izuku had convinced Tomura that he wasn't remorseless or responsible regarding Sensei's death. And as long as Tomura was staying here for now, that would be good enough.

As long as Izuku could be beside him, so he could prove his earnest care later. It was okay to take these monumental steps one at a time.

Feeling the adrenaline leaving his body, leaving him with only tiredness, Izuku began to retreat to his room, hoping to finally get around to redecorating it in the morning. Also, to find somewhere that dry-cleans armored waistcoats.

All For One has passed on to another, it seems.

The throne of the king of evil is still filled, if only by a placeholder, a small stub.

These whispers passed down the grapevine quickly. A sighting, a clash, a boy with green hair. A prince to the throne.

A contender. Not yet fully grown and best crushed now, before he can bloom into a threat.

And with that, the road to conquest will finally be clear. To a fully cleansed world.
Izuku was dreaming.

He had to have been dreaming, because in this dream he could hear and see people who were close to him. People he wouldn't normally be able to see.

He saw his mother, but he walked past her before being able to see her face, because he had things he needed to do. She seemed like she was doing well. But Izuku didn't know what she thought of him. How she would look at him these days. If she did, before Izuku had done what he needed to do, she would be dragged into a conflict that she didn't have to be involved in. It was all for the best that Izuku kept walking.

He saw Sensei, holding the hand of a small child that resembled and absolutely was Tomura. Sensei looked proudly at both of them. Something hard and shelled deep in Izuku's core, right in the very centre of him, felt like it pulsed to life for a brief moment, before Izuku walked onwards. It was nice to see Sensei again, but Izuku had things to do as well. Sensei would understand. He had things to do too. He always did.

Sensei pushed Tomura on the back, moving him forward slightly. He looked back, as if affirming he had been given permission, and Sensei nodded understandingly. Tenuously, Tomura took a few steps forward, shyly trailing behind Izuku, following him meekly. He looked at everything around him with fear. But he disappeared when Izuku entered the next room.

Izuku kept walking. And then he saw...someone with blonde hair and a thin, emaciated build. He looked to be in pain. Like his choices had led him to the crossroads of a decision he'd never hoped to have to make like this. Izuku wondered for a moment why he made such a quick assumption about such a precise set of circumstances, but quickly dismissed those worries. They had to be true, after all. They matched his expression perfectly, now that he looked at him like that.

He sat, cradling a small spark in his hands, luminescent and bright. Too bright for him to wrap his fingers around. A slew of shadowy figures surrounded him, materialising, looking down upon the bright spark longingly. He looked worriedly around, possessively furtive. His eyes lingered on a few figures more than others. A spiky haired one. A cool, composed one. A bright, smiling one. He appraised each and every one of them, but especially these three. His expression resembled Sensei's when he passed on All For One. He too feared another taking control, lest they lead the world astray. But more than that, he seemed to pity the figures around him. He knew the weight
that would be placed around them. And he wasn't confident his own guidance would be enough to help them.

Izuku wondered how he knew all of this. Then, his gaze turned to Izuku, darkened blue eyes appraising him in a similar manner. Then, he looked afraid. And the spark trembled.

"...AH!"

Gasping for air, Izuku threw himself upright in his bed, his sudden shock nearly throwing him forward. He'd never had a more vivid dream in his lifetime. Elements of a nightmare, elements of...something else. It felt prophetic. He panted for a few seconds, trying to dissipate his adrenaline rush so he could hopefully fall asleep again.

All the while, the tough core part of All For One sat in his centre like a rock.

Izuku made his way downstairs for what he hoped would be a typical day. Giran was taking a break here, since he was spending so much time searching for our other members.

It was as if Kurogiri was not entirely comfortable without a bar setup with which to work from. He'd set up some tables around him as an impromptu counter, promising to get someone in to install a real fixture in the following days. He'd got all the drinks in too. Tomura looked pretty happy. Dabi looked apprehensive. Himiko, Izuku and Spinner didn't drink, but Kurogiri brought in a lot of non-alcoholic beverages for them. And there was only one neutral response for Giran after seeing a bar.

Giran leaned on the counter, pointing to Kurogiri and saying, "Hey, you got any vodka back there? One on the rocks, and make it snappy."

Kurogiri looked at this man incredulously, before pointing something out to him, "Mister Giran, it is 10am."

Giran shrugged, "Fine then, bring along a boiled egg too if it helps."

Izuku thought it best to leave before Kurogiri tried to give Giran a lecture on who knows best, and how to avoid acute liver failure.

He made his way past them and into the common room. Couches, carpets, a big TV, and now Tomura had plugged all of his game consoles into it and had basically commandeered the room. He was there right this moment trying not to pop a blood vessel from a particularly hard and old-looking game about vampire hunting.

Tomura grumbled to himself in a scratchy voice, "God damn...piece of...hate....worthless...trash..."

Izuku popped himself down on the couch nearby, hoping to get the opportunity to wake up before someone flipped out. Kurogiri or Tomura, either one was possible.

"GRRGHAAGH, FUCKING FLYING HEAD BASTARDS!", Tomura screamed, throwing his controller across the room in a strop. Tomura it was.

It was all well and good to live here and do a few basic things, but it didn't feel like a proper abode yet... some key factors were missing. Maybe stuff like the small knife-mark left by Stain in the old counter, or the cracked wall from where Tomura slipped and touched the wall that one time. Those sorts of things. The place didn't feel like it had been 'lived in' yet.
A small rumble shook the building, followed by a distant hollering and cheering. Himiko, Dabi and Spinner were practicing in the training grounds downstairs. Himiko usually forced Dabi to go with them just so that they could watch the fireworks as Dabi made things go boom.

Izuku called over to Giran, "Hey, I have a question."

Giran pulled himself away from his debate on the merits of early drinking with Kurogiri to respond, "Shoot."

"Is there any chance that we could get a few items from the old base installed here?"

Giran took out a notebook from his jacket. "Well I've already got some orders from Kurogiri penciled in. You guys are gonna need a full restock on weapons and armour, got my guys working overtime on that one. As for tech, I'm getting a few security systems set up. Y'know, not enough to attract attention, just enough to keep out meddlesome snoopers. Then we've got-"

"I appreciate the importance of all that, but that's not quite what I meant. Outside of the essentials, can we recover any actual items from the old location? Or similar setups? Just for sentimental value."

Giran looked over at Izuku like he'd grown a second head, "I'm sorry kid, what? Do you have any idea how cost inefficient that would be?"

"I appreciate that, but... I don't know, maybe Tomura's old set of games, Himiko's knife rack, my desktop, something!"

"All I can promise is that your files on heroes are safe enough. Pays to keep them well hidden. Unless they decided to break through the solid stone floor just for the hell of it, that safe you locked them in should be retrievable."

Kurogiri held up a hand to quieten Giran, "Mister Midoriya, are you perhaps feeling as though your new home is a tad uncomfortable?"

Izuku twiddled his fingers slightly, "I'm grateful we even had a second base to go to, but...it's not really the same."

Kurogiri nodded understandingly, "I believe the issue is more to the point that this building has been treated more like some kind of safehouse than a new home. I'm not one to encourage lack of focus, but since the rest of the work falls to Giran in terms of assembling our other valued members, now might be the time to straighten yourselves out."

Izuku nodded, then asked, "Hey, just a quick question...do you know which shops are nearby? How close are we to the major districts in Hosu?"

"I believe it's a short 5 minutes walk away before you can slip out of the underground undetected, then a 15 minute walk to the city centre."

Izuku nodded, a small smile spreading up his face.

"Okay, thank you. I might have an idea. It's a little basic, but...maybe it'll help."

The night was dark. The moon was high in the sky by this time, or so the clock on the wall said. On this day, Izuku had ordered a meeting. How dramatic. He was trying to be villainous. Cliché.
But if he was attempting the be the quintessential villain, maybe that's what he's going for.

Tomura stomped down the stairs, creeping past the stone walls. It was good to see that Izuku was trying to live up to the legacy he'd taken.

Taken, that word...Tomura stopped himself. It didn't seem like he'd...taken it, not forcibly. His actions haven't proven him a liar or a snake. But he'd taken the responsibility upon himself. Yeah, that's what it was. That was more like it. No need to freak out, just calm down.

Tomura walked into the common room. A meeting arranged in the dead of night, blackness shrouding them as they concocted a foul scheme to crush All Might into paste and tear this forsaken society to shreds, allied under the banner of villainy they would-

They were in their pyjamas, on the couch, underneath duvets.

Izuku smiled at Tomura's entrance, waving him to join them, "Hi Tomura! We're just voting on which movie we want to get through first."

Dabi was entirely laid out over one of the couches in regular loungewear. Himiko, sporting a onesie, was right next to Izuku, who was in a old black t-shirt that said 'pyjamas' on it, and trying not to be too obvious about her close distance. She was holding a large selection of slasher films and going into loving detail about how they were all an example of cinematographic genius. Dabi nonchalantly pointed at a few of his selections (mostly dramas, a lot of them family themed). Spinner looked a little sore as he clutched a Stain documentary which Tomura could only happily assume was rejected as an option. He pointed at a few action films.

"What's your taste in movies, Tomura?"

Tomura turned to leave, wanting no part in this stupidity.

"Come on, Tomura, please? Come out of your comfort zone just a little bit."

Himiko cheered, "Yeah, we've got a much better comfort zone right here!", patting a large pile of pillows and blankets by the entrance.

Tomura grumbled to himself. This was one of the most useless, tedious, annoying things he'd ever been...

Tomura turned around, angrily grabbing a pillow with three fingers, "You're a fucking idiot, Izuku."

Izuku shrugged it off, asking, "Really though, what's your taste in movies?"

Tomura pointed to one of the movies Himiko was holding, a movie about a dream demon who kills people in their sleep.

Himiko threw her arms up in triumph, "YES! Thank you Tomura, thank you so much!"

Tomura put his feet up, "Not enough movies with supernatural themes...this'll have to do."

Dabi murmured, "Doesn't that movie involve-"

Himiko interrupted, placing a finger upon her mouth, "Don't spoil anything. But yeah, it's got a good deal of fire."

Dabi smirked, "Eh, good enough."
Izuku looked a little nervous, "Y'know, I really should have guessed that you guys would pick some of the more violent movies..."

Spinner groaned out, "Well, when 2/3rds of your choices are horror films, that's probably going to happen. Don't blame all of us for that, blame Himiko."

Himiko grinned, "I never leave my room's cabinets without a copious supply of my favourite horror films. I mean, I have other interests in movies. Um, comedies are a big hit. And also romance films, if I'm with the right people.", Himiko said, smiling sweetly in a way that Izuku was, as per usual, pretty oblivious to. Urgh...what a perceptive successor...

Tomura began to feel sick at that point, so he interrupted by slamming a fist on the side of the couch. "If you're going to drag me through this torture, play the movie and lets get it over with already."

Dabi got up, walked his lanky, burned form over to the DVD player, and slotted the movie in.

Whereupon the brightness of the TV monitor turning on illuminated the darkness of the room in a way that was oh so familiar to Tomura somehow...

It also illuminated Izuku's smile, and the fact that he was looking at Tomura expectantly.

_Dammit...he knows. He knows that this resembles the old gaming nights and my computer in my room almost perfectly. Except now I've got these guys accompanying me._

_Huh. Maybe he's not that stupid after all. Still stupid, but not that stupid._

Tomura settled himself down for a long night.
Party crasher

Chapter Summary

Someone shows up that was not in any way expected. Pretty self-explanatory.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Izuku couldn't remember exactly when he'd fallen asleep. He'd been so tense throughout most of that movie it was impossible to think he'd have dozed off. Maybe sometime during the credits?

Izuku's head swam back into reality, slowly surfacing from his slumber. Only to quickly find that something warm and breathing was pressing down on him and it would be a crime against humanity to move at that moment.

Himiko had fallen asleep sprawled out on top of Izuku's lap, her stomach directly on top of his legs. It was apparently a half-conscious decision, as her pillow was not cradling her head and she'd accomplished comfort by bunching a large clump of a duvet together to rest her upper body on. She was still asleep, snoring softly, so moving about when underneath Himiko's core would almost certainly wake her up.

Izuku looked around. Nearly everybody had their own novel ways of ending the evening. Dabi had left small burn marks in the couch, apparently by accident. Whether it was from tension, looking forward to seeing the 'idiot horror protagonists' get theirs, or because he actually got scared, it was impossible to tell. He had managed to fall asleep regardless.

Tomura was curled up on the couch Izuku was leaned up against. Parts of his shirt had decayed away, and he tucked himself into the foetal position to sleep. Maybe he ended up a bit cold, since he apparently refused a duvet, and grabbed his arms to keep warm. Stubborn as ever...

Spinner was on the same couch as Tomura, also all curled up in a circular way that almost resembled a snake, using his arm as a pillow.

Good grief, all of them looked wiped out...what had they been doing before the night ended? Himiko had been gleefully cheering for the killer while trying to hype everyone up, Tomura was silently enjoying the carnage with a small, sadistic smile...uh, Dabi looked a little annoyed by the noise and hoarded the snacks while glaring at the screen intently, and Spinner looked at what the survivors were doing to stay alive or fight the killer.

A bomb could have gone off in the room and it'd only look slightly less messy. At some point, Kurogiri had dropped off the massive number of treats requested, and from there the evening had kind of devolved in the best way possible. Some kind of cohesion had been achieved here, looking at them now. After falling asleep in someone's presence, a certain amount of trust has to be formed, right?

Izuku reached over to the side, picking up a bowl of popcorn, holding it in his arms to prevent it resting on Himiko's back. She looked pretty happy. It was kind of flattering. Chances are she just kind of got dizzy from exhaustion and passed out on whatever looked the most comfortable...
Izuku intentionally avoiding lingering on that thought. Izuku was clearly NOT the most comfortable resting place in this room. Her pillow was right behind her, a duvet was just a few crawls away, maybe she was just so tired she passed out where she was. That was probably it. Besides, it doesn't matter! Fact of the matter is, she's here now, so I'm not going anywhere.

Izuku was beginning to think about the common room. It still had room for a lot more furniture or fixtures...they'd probably need more couches or chairs for them to do something like this again once the others got here...who knows if Magne would be up for this, but Izuku was sure he could convince Mustard and Twice. It's more than about time Izuku got to know Magne better either way, and-

A resounding slamming noise shook the room, the trap door that functioned as the main entrance was thrown open, and dim light peered into the base from the top of the winding, defensible stairway leading to the HQ proper.

Izuku snapped himself out of his sleepy state as much as he could. Most of the people in the room were jolted awake, and Izuku helped Himiko get upright. She drew her knife, quietly holding her breath...No, she wasn't holding her breath. But she was breathing with nearly absolute silence. Her movements seemed unnaturally unnoticeable. Izuku had to be looking directly at her to even fully acknowledge she had moved at all. Master of infiltration...

Izuku didn't have his knife...instead, Izuku raised his arm, guarding it by placing his other arm over the top. Air Canon's effects were still a little difficult to control, but if he prepared for the recoil adequately, he should be able to send an assailant flying the moment they rounded the corner of the stairway. The quirk was pretty simple in practice. Create a rippling shockwave of compressed wind, slamming into an enemy like a rocket. With any luck, it'd catch them off guard, since it's not a visible projectile...but Izuku hadn't used it properly before...

The clattering of metal on stone made its way down the stairs. Someone in heavy gear, maybe more than one person.

Tomura had his back against the second corner. After they engaged, he'd rush in amidst the confusion to land a killing grapple. Dabi was just making his way to the scene when a shadow loomed around the corner...

A rough voice called out in a strained tone, "Wait...hold your fire."

Izuku tilted his head slightly. That voice sounded really familiar apart from the tone. It sounded like he had an injury.

Izuku kept his hand held high, "Turn that corner as slowly as possible, hands above your head."

The voice wheezed, "That might...be slightly...difficult."

A tall figure rounded the corner, a large wound on his midriff, cutting deep into his sleeveless armoured vest.

"S-Stain!?"

Stain slouched forward, and Izuku rushed forwards to catch him as he began to collapse.

Kurogiri watched over the sleeping form of the Hero Killer, laid out on a gurney. Izuku was on the other side of the bed, trying his best to tend to Stain's injuries and assist Kurogiri's efforts.
The efforts Izuku made to stitch up Stain's wound last time seems to have been effective, but Stain's clearly been doing some major work, because the stitches strained to the point that the wound didn't heal properly. As a result, Stain's most recent blow caused the old wound to open up as well...resulting in this.

A large gash was visible in Stain's gut area, leaking blood onto the gurney and the floor below. He groaned softly, as if trying his best to protest and struggle even while unconscious.

Izuku, wrapping Gauze around him, looked up at Kurogiri worriedly, "What do you think? Is his condition secure? Or stable? Um, is he alright?"

Kurogiri replied, not taking his eyes off his task at inserting and IV into his arm, "He will be fine if we act quickly. These injuries would be crippling for a lesser man, but Stain is extremely...persistent. If we move extremely fast, his recovery will be similarly sped up."

Izuku nodded, shutting his mouth as turning his full attention to pulling Stain together.

_This is a lot more taxing than it was before. Stain's been slashed badly..._

"Kurogiri, do you think whoever or whatever attacked Stain might end up finding us down here as well?"

Kurogiri tried to respond, but before he could, a spluttering cough came from Stain, as he cleared his throat, his eyes shooting open, sharp and wide.

Stain managed to turn himself around, looking over at Izuku, "You don't...really think I would be that careless, do you?"

Izuku held his hands up calmly, "Stain...you've got to stay down. Try not to make any erratic breaths."

Kurogiri looked at the IV, ensuring it was working as intended.

Stain managed to twist his mouth into a determined grin, "I wouldn't dare bringing harm upon my brother. I'd have sooner...bled out in that damned alley."

Izuku couldn't help but crack a smile, if only to reassure him, "I appreciate the thought. But I'd rather just help battle whatever attacked you. It wouldn't be the first time, after all."

Stain coughed, clutching his bandages to ensure they didn't rip, before continuing, "It was some damned vigilante. He had some form of cloaking quirk...he snuck up on me and slashed me with my own sword."

Stain tapped the sheath for his katana. Izuku drew it from its scabbard, revealing a blade slick with blood.

Izuku covered his mouth, "Oh...oh my word..."

Stain went on, "He left almost as soon as he arrived, hoping I would bleed out, or be forced to get arrested to receive medical treatment. Thankfully...I knew where the entrance to this place was."

Kurogiri grunted, "Thank goodness for that. Any longer and you might have been severely weakened, permanently."

Izuku inquired, "And as for now?"
Kurogiri responded, "Weakened, but not for long. I believe with the right treatment, Stain can be adequately restored in a short time."

Izuku, fearing the worst, asked him to specify, "Okay...how long is 'a short time'?

Kurogiri hung his head a little lower, "A few days at least, sir."

Stain raised an eyebrow, "Sir?"


"Oh dear."

Stain raised a hand slightly off of the gurney, "Wait a moment, why did you just call Deku 'sir'?

Izuku however, had already left the room, in order to look into the common room.

Himiko and Spinner were in the middle of frantically screaming to each other, showing off their weapons and how their fighting styles, ideologies, motivations and mannerisms were inspired by Stain and his creed, threatening to smother the man the moment visiting hours were open. Izuku could see the Nurse Himiko hat in her cardigan pocket, and Spinner had roughly 8 swords strapped to him, not including the sword-of-swords on his back.

*Stain my brother, this is still a better alternative to dying in that alley. But only barely.*

Chapter End Notes

Sorry if it's a bit short, life hit me like a truck the past few days. Enjoy!
Overeager

Chapter Summary

They could use a bomb shelter door for the medical bay, doesn't matter. The League's Stain fans would find a way in.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was literally a line.

Stain's hospital room was being guarded by a vigilant Kurogiri, who was preventing the lot of them from rushing in and disturbing the much needed bedrest of an injured patient, no matter how important they might be. Unfortunately, that didn't curb their enthusiasm at all, and Himiko actually looked particularly like she wanted to see Stain while he was still wounded for reasons that were very obvious to anyone who'd met her.

Spinner seemed by far the most nervous out of all of them, and Himiko looked the most excited, both of which were worrying sights.

Himiko was holding not one, not two, not three, not four, but five knives in her arms, squealing, "The Hero Killer uses swords, I know that. But he has knives in his pockets, so I might still be able to get some pointers from him! Get it, pointers? B-Because, knives have a...sorry, I'm just so unbelievably thrilled, I'm burning up! Mr Stainy is here in PERSON! I knew Izuku would organise something like this eventually!"

Izuku held his hands up defensively, "I didn't organise anything like this! Stain got stabbed, remember? I'm spending a lot of my effort right now trying to find that assailant so we can take him out, I wouldn't-"

Himiko pressed a finger to Izuku's lips, shaking her grinning head rapidly, "Say no more, say no more! You feel free to kick that guy in the teeth! But before you do, tell him Himiko's really grateful because thanks to that she got to meet her idol in person! Her cool, gritty, blood-soaked hero!"

"Himiko, he's not going to really appreciate-"

"Oh, I'm not saying that just to be funny.", Himiko said, expression getting a little darker, "I just thought he might like to know his efforts have only empowered the morale of a villain who will go on to torment society for years to come, and he has played a part in putting a nail in the coffin of this dumb world. And all that grief, that's on him."

Izuku took a step back, thrown off by her sudden sadism, "G-Good grief. Himiko, stop, you're getting scary again."

Himiko shook off her dark expression, shrugging, "I don't appreciate attempted murder of my inspirational figures. I hate that Mr Stainy nearly died, but I love that he got hurt. How bad is the wound?"
Kurogiri sternly levelled with her, "The injury was originally dire, but it is improving significantly. And if your reckless observation of said injury results in further deterioration of his health, so help me god..."

Spinner interjected, "I will make sure Himiko behaves herself in Stain's presence. He's a legend, and I will not let her gawk at the injuries of such an important man. Try to show some respect."

Himiko leaned over tauntingly, "Like you're not going to gawk at him for your own reasons, fanboy. You have, what, five Stain posters in your room?"

Spinner tilted his chin up, trying his hardest to look confident amidst his slight bashfulness in a way Izuku knew all too well, "It's six, to be honest. And I had to construct two myself. The market for Stain-related fan pieces has been somewhat forced underground by narrow-minded heroes, after all."

As the two of them teased each other, the antithesis to their childishness walked through the door to join them.

Dabi waved nonchalantly, announcing his presence, "So, visiting hours are in five minutes, right?"

Himiko waved back far more expressively, responding, "OooOoo, hey! You too Dabi? Can't resist him either, huh?"

Dabi looked a little offended, "I can resist blood and hero-worship quite well. But I respect the man a lot. I've got my reasons for wanting to talk with him."

Izuku inquired, trying not to pressure him, "Is it private? Something you don't want to talk with us about?"

Dabi shrugged, "Pretty much. It's not like it's going to get in the way of my work."

Spinner noted, "Dabi's got secrets. He hasn't disclosed his name as of yet."

Dabi shot back, "Better than nearly blurting it out upon meeting Deku for the first time. Isn't that what happened?"

Spinner again struggled to retort, "Even professionals can get caught up in the heat of the moment! I respect Izuku greatly also, after all!"

Izuku struggled to suppress a wide grin of embarrassed pride. It meant a lot, coming from a friend.

Dabi waved his hand dismissively, "Whatever, as long as you don't interrupt my time you can go ahead and fanboy as much as you want."

Spinner glared, but ultimately decided against prolonging the argument.

Kurogiri checked the clock on the wall, before sighing, much to the delight of Himiko, first in line.

Kurogiri placed a hand on the door, "I believe that should be enough time to give mister Stain adequate recovery from his attack. Visiting hours are open."

Himiko rushed in, Spinner following closely behind, hands curled up a little bit near his chest.

Izuku gulped heavily.

You survived your first attack, Stain. Here comes number two. Good luck, brother...
Stain was laid out on the hospital bed, bandages covering his entire midsection, the pristine white of the bandages covering his wounds making a profound impression when viewed against the dirty, worn bandages he wore as a mask, or wrapped around his arms.

The bandages around his stomach betrayed just the tiniest shadows and dark patches in their innermost layers, stemming the delicious flow of blood. Himiko licked her lips, feeling herself get a little warmer at the sight. However, Stain's suspicious glare brought her back to reality.

Stain spoke first, "So, you two...why are you here, exactly?"

Himiko widened her grin, wanting to emphasise how eager and enthusiastic she was, "I'm a huge fan, Mr Stainy! Your rhetoric about this crapsack world really inspired me to go out there and make this world a better place to live in."

Stain interrupted with a fearsome glare, "Don't call yourself a fan. It's unbecoming."

Spinner recoiled a bit, "E-Excuse me? Stain, sir, we've followed your teachings with exacting care. Even Himiko has-"

Stain interrupted again, clenching his fist, "You are not. Fans. Do you know who has fans? The kind of people fans really are?"

Himiko's expression drooped, the excited atmosphere in the room plunging downward. The room felt at least five degrees colder.

Stain sat himself upright, looming over the scene in spite of being below them, continuing.

"Fans swarm around vapid heroes. They cheer, they gawk, they buy merchandise. They pretend as if they truly care. But they truly never do anything but sit on the sidelines. They are words of encouragement, but actions, far louder than words, are always left up to them to perform. They encourage, but never go as far as to sacrifice anything for doing so. And I believe a large reason for that is because these 'fans' don't truly believe in the ideals these heroes spout. They know a large part of that heroic image is just for show, that they're all talk. Such shallow bravado can never inspire others to act!"

Stain's passion was visible in his grimace, as he threw off the blanket on his bed, sitting with his legs over the side, gathering his strength while wheezing his speech.

"Fans aren't worth...a grain of salt...to a man like me. Someone who wishes to see real change...cannot work on words alone. I will inspire action, and I won't acknowledge those who truly understand my words stand aside and do nothing."

Spinner trembled, his face shadowed by his mask and his head tilting downwards, eyes tight shut in barely contained emotion. Himiko took a few steps towards Spinner to try and help him, but he bristled and raised his shoulders angrily, and Himiko thought it best not to disturb him lest he explode in grief.

Spinner opened his mouth, his voice undulating with something between fear and fury, "Hero Killer Stain...we h-have followed your teachings with ex-exacting care. We've given up our own comforts and h-homes to follow you. How can you stand there and dismiss us!? I've always-"

Stain got up from his bed, taking an unsteady, lurching step towards Spinner. Spinner nearly recoiled from him, but Stain placed a hand firmly on his shoulder.
Stain's stern face clarified, "Which is why are not my fan. Calling yourself a mere fan is an insult to your actions. You've acted in true bravery, and didn't confine yourself to the sidelines. You fight beside me, supporting me beyond what any 'fan' would ever wish to accomplish. You are my comrade."

Stain's face slowly turned into a noble grin, as Spinner slowly lost control of himself amidst relief and pride. The last of his composure had broken down, and his face scrunched up with emotion. Before Stain could respond, Spinner had wrapped his arms around Stain in a hug, crying quietly.

In between sobs, Spinner muttered, "I knew you wouldn't let me down...they so often say 'never meet your heroes'...b-but you're not a hero, of course, and...thank you, sir..."

Stain patted Spinner on the back, seemingly a little uncomfortable, but trying his best to calm Spinner down.

Himiko tilted her head to the side, getting a different angle on the scene...

*Oh, that's why he's looking a little pained!*

Spinner's grip was putting pressure on Stain's injury. Stain was starting to break out in a cold sweat.

Himiko tried to speak up, "Spinner, you-"

Stain placed a finger over his lips, silencing Himiko, as if to say "Let him have this."

So in spite of how this clearly violated their conditions of entry, Himiko decided to keep her fanged mouth shut, and watch as Spinner's fears and apprehensions washed away.

Once Spinner finally calmed down, and had apologised for his behaviour, he swiftly left the room. No doubt he didn't want his idol to view him as a crybaby.

Himiko was pretty impressed! He wasn't as bad at being kind as Himiko had expected. I mean, he had still looked pretty awkward, but it wasn't awful or anything.

Stain sat back down on his bed, looking a bit more tired out.

He looked up at Himiko, quietly standing there with a big smile on her face, before asking, "Why are you still here?"

Himiko waved nonchalantly, "I was just observing you earlier, seeing how you behaved. But now we're alone, I wanted to ask you about yourself!"

Stain became cagey, "I'm not one to prattle on about my life."

"Oh, I know you'll warm up to the idea. Just don't answer if you're uncomfortable!"

"Will you not leave without interviewing me?"

"No."

Stain groaned loudly, before lying down in his bed, accepting this fate for himself.

"Very well. Your name?"
"Himiko Toga!"

"Himiko. Begin and get it over with swiftly."

"Okay!" said Himiko, completely ignoring his resigned tone, "Um...how long have you been doing your work, cleansing society?"

"It depends...when do you believe I 'started my work'? From the first time I started my brutal career, or the first time I adopted my moniker of Stain, and refined my ideologies and goals?"

Himiko rolled her eyes in contemplation, "The uh, the latter one."

Stain nodded, "I took up the name of Stain roughly 3-4 years ago."

Himiko was a little shocked, "Only a few years?"

"Indeed."

"You wanna elaborate? You've clearly got more than four years of experience under your belt."

Stain nodded, "What do you think of vigilantes, Himiko?"

Himiko shrugged, "I think some of them are pretty great, but they're too afraid to go all the way into villainy because they're scared of a heavier prison sentence. They should put their money where their mouth is."

Stain looked curious, "Well, I used to work under the name Stendhal, as a vigilante. I had a few different ways of thinking back then, but a chance encounter with a very determined man inspired me to 'put my money where my mouth is' after all."

Himiko smiled, she hadn't heard about this kind of information before, "So you really were Stendhal...I think that really only circulated in online rumours!"

Stain continued, "Indeed. I lost my nose to his fists, but his resolve bolstered my own. Even I have my inspirations, Himiko. We all pass on our spirits to others."

"Really?", Himiko asked. Stain was clearly a great figure, but talking to him like this kind of dispelled the glory surrounding him. It wasn't a bad thing. But it made him a little different.

"What you fight for is far more important than the fight itself, don't you agree?"

Himiko nodded, "Mhm, mhm. I just adore spilling blood, making beautiful splashes...but your speeches gave me a concrete purpose to fight for! It's not as if I'm just taking an excuse to fight or anything, but now I get to do what I love for what I love!"

Stain smirked, "And what do you love, exactly?"

"Beg your pardon?"

"You've revealed a lot about yourself, Himiko. As you interrogated me, I interrogated you. You cared more about when I adopted my true ideology than the mere moment I began my streak of violence. This indicates you care more for the higher goal than the bloody means of getting there. That is admirable. You are willing to support efforts towards change made by all kinds of vagabonds, but you prefer the extremes, holding nothing back. This too is an admirable trait."

Himiko tapped her foot, "I'm not dumb enough to not notice when someone's asking me questions.
Subtlety is something I have to be good at too. My question is why are you getting personal?"

Stain chuckled, "Well, you've displayed clearly that your resolve is strong. But I feel that perhaps your claims to have been inspired solely by me...might be misplaced."

Himiko's heart skipped a beat.

"Are you quite sure I am your chief inspiration, after all? My former identity as Stendhal is not a mere internet rumour, Himiko, it is relatively common knowledge to those who research my existence. You were merely caught up in the image of a blood-soaked dark horse, that is all. You originally signed up for this League as an opportunity to fight to make the world an easier place to live in. But at the time, these thoughts were mostly relevant to yourself. It was every bit as vapid as I had feared this League to be."

Himiko scowled, "That's just insulting! I've got true convictions, I'm certain of that. I'd fight and kill and die for these beliefs. I might not be as obsessive as Spinner-"

"No, you aren't, but you still have a resolve. A resolve I don't think existed while you only knew about me. The flower of your convictions sprouted in my absence."

Himiko's eye twitched. She could kind of tell where this line of questioning was going.

"I think your inspiration was fostered mostly by someone else. Considering the timing, I would wager...Deku, perhaps?"

Himiko repressed the urge to flick out her knife.

She calmly responded, voice colder than before, "You're treading on thin ice. I don't like to be taunted."

Stain smiled, and in spite of his smiles always looking malicious, he also looked a little fond, "I'm pleased to see my brother has done so well for himself. If he can raise one as initially selfish as yourself to such great heights, there are no limits to the support he can rally to his cause."

Himiko growled, taking a step forwards, "If you weren't a guest, I'd already have sunk a knife in your leg. I keep to my ideals for years, and stay true to myself in spite of all of society pushing me down, and you dismiss all but the past few months of my life as invalid?"

Stain raised an eyebrow, "Did I not admit myself that I have only been Hero Killer Stain for the overwhelming minority of my career? By the time you reach my age, you will have been a villain of true character for perhaps 10 or 11 years longer than I have. I commend your growth. And there is no shame in being inspired by another. I admit I was inspired by an old foe of mine. One who hated me inspired me to new heights, by directly contradicting me, leaving me ashamed of my past actions. Your ideology, on the other hand, has been fostered by a supportive...um, friend, correct?"

Himiko went rigid, "What are you implying?"

Stain raised his hands slowly, "Pay me no mind. The two of you seemed quite..."

Himiko's blush deepened, so she drew her knife, intending to hide her red-faced embarrassment with red-face anger, "Don't start making assumptions, you only just met me!"

Stain shrugged, apparently getting the hint that it was best to defuse the situation, "Well, I believe it's been established that Deku has been a strong inspiration for you. I hope you will continue to support one another. Do not romanticise far-away figures so much you misplace your appreciation..."
for those right in front of you. That leads to hero worship, and none of us are heroes. Just know that I am glad to see our message has struck a chord with you. The quality of your conviction is quite clear, Himiko."

Himiko pulled out all her knives from her pockets, holding them out in her arms, "Thanks! If that's the case, do you think you could maybe-"

"What? Sign them, teach you techniques, trade weaponry? I'm in a hospital bed, and my gear is in a separate room!"

Himiko, incessantly bubbly, approached regardless, "No time like the present!"

Stain deadpanned, "Leave or I will call Kurogiri."

"Oh...", Himiko moped disappointingly over to the door, "Um...some other time then?"

Stain hesitated for a second, apparently not wishing to leave her upset, "...sure."

"Really!? No takebacks!", Himiko celebrated, closing the door behind her, before jumping for joy. She'd managed to convince the famously antisocial Stain to do knife things with her!

Izuku smiled from the chair next to Kurogiri's, "You look pretty overjoyed, Himiko! Did it go well, then?"

Himiko immediately ran into her room and slammed the door, hiding herself.

She could faintly hear Izuku on the other side, puzzled, "Uh...did I say something wrong?"

Kurogiri sighed, "No sir, but you did say something."

Chapter End Notes

Just a quick note to wish every single one of you a very Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays, Happy Hanukkah, any way you're choosing to celebrate this 25th of December, I hope the festive season is treating you well! I know I am, the festivities have made writing time a little scarcer, but I absolutely wanted to push out a chapter today to keep everyone tided over for the yuletide.

Have a great time everyone! Celebrations all around the board!
Running wild

Chapter Summary

The League of Villains has to protect their notoriety

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Let's see here...will these tools still work well? It's been a little while...*

Izuku looked over his selection of gear, trying his best to analyse them as impartially as he could. They'd been serving him well for a long time, but to be honest, it was time they were given a fair evaluation before he goes out into the field with All For One to pick a fight for the first time.

*That vigilante...*

Izuku nipped that thought in the bud. Anger right now would badly skew his judgement.

Izuku's knife, a gift from Stain. It'd been serving him very well thus far, and despite its length and striking power it wasn't very heavy. It was incredibly efficient, and certainly the last weapon he would think about cutting from his arsenal. Which was great, because now that he'd made the impartial judgement that the dagger should stay, he could enjoy the irony of using a weapon from Stain to eliminate the attempted murderer of Stain. Which was only appropriately ironic punishment. Himiko had been teaching him a few more tricks as time went on, but he'd rarely had the chance to use his dagger before. He rarely had purely harmful intent. This was one of those rare occasions.

Izuku's suit...was okay. It wasn't the most practical armor, but it made a statement of his power, and made him look like the archetypal 'big bad guy' villain image he wanted to project; especially for his first big show of force against a slight made against the League. It did have armour weaved into the waistcoat, trousers, etc, but it would be a good idea to improve upon the reinforcement or even get a better set of protective gear for emergencies. But for today, this attack was all about image. So this getup was just perfect. Izuku tightened his tie, sheathing his knife into the harness at his side.

The sword gifted to him by Spinner. The companion sword given by a companion. It was nice, especially now that Izuku had been given some time to practice with it in his spare time. Spinner had been taking him through some of the basics. He was in such a good mood after Stain's meeting with him, he spent a solid 5 hours training Izuku and Himiko in his own blade techniques. Maybe Stain could give him some tips once he recovers and his ribs aren't cracked in three places. Izuku slung the sheath for the sword over his shoulder, allowing it to hang in it's traditional place by his side.

It really did kind of remind him of Stain's gear, an armoured vest on his chest and a sword at his hip...

Izuku sighed. This wasn't just about sending a message for the League as a whole. It all went bigger than that. Izuku was a fresh face, new leadership. Izuku was certain his appearance at the
docks with Tomura would have run its way down the grapevine straight into the ears of every other criminal mastermind that was paying attention. Right now, they were looking towards the throne, envious and covetous. They were waiting to see if the new All For One could be usurped. This show of force was necessary. Izuku had to show he had genuine green-eyed jealousy for his power, and would defend his throne. Otherwise, everyone was in danger.

It would be easy to say that was all that motivated him, pragmatism and nothing more. It'd also be easy to say Izuku had a vengeful feeling towards the vigilante that attacked his brother, that was also true. But he did have slightly more...fragile feelings towards this whole show of force. Izuku needed to prove to everyone, Stain, Tomura, himself, that he was worthy to lead this organisation. That when things came down to it, Izuku could find the courage to defend them from attackers like this. Izuku had been comforting Tomura about his worthiness just the other day. It was far past time he demonstrated that same confidence, and practiced what he preached.

Apart from that, there were a few worries. His actual abilities with his quirk didn't exactly mesh well with the All For One quirks he'd been experimenting with. Also, he'd managed to lose one of his favourite pieces of gear, his respirator, when it got knocked off during the great clash between Sensei and All Might....

What a creepy looking mask...

A sinister, toothed rictus grin pattern was engraved on the front of the metal contraption, like it was a constant threat or warning. More crucially, it looks like some kind of mockery. He supposed it wouldn't hurt to confirm his worst fears at this point. He'd need to get 'in-character' in just a second anyway. He had no excuse not to check.

Toshinori powered himself up, muscles filling his suit out fully, a heroic grin coming to him naturally as he felt the power that empowered and alerted him rush through his flesh...and he could see that grin reflected in the glass covering the mask, like a noble overlay to some kind of twisted mirror image. The mask was like a darker parallel. Toshinori prayed that this design choice was not intentional. Even if this antithesis to his smile was only a subconscious action, it still showed clearly that this villain's mental state wasn't doing well, even from his earlier days...

A voice startled All Might by speaking from behind him, "I recognise that mask. Is this the mask of that villain, All Might?"

All Might lurched forward, catching his breath slightly, chuckling it off, "Ah...my boy, don't scare me like that!"

Shoto Todoroki stood calmly, seemingly quite focused on the respirator. Toshinori's attempt to diffuse the situation hadn't quite worked, it seemed.

"Do you know anything about the man that mask belonged to?"

Toshinori raised an eyebrow, "Well, a bit. You've seen the TV clips, of course. He had some extremely choice words for me at the time."

"Yes, that's true." replied Todoroki, evenly, "Which makes me wonder if you had some past history to warrant it. Do you know anything about what he's like? What made him so insistent on interfering with the lives of others?"

Toshinori was becoming a little concerned, "I'm sorry, I don't...I don't know why you're so..."
concerned, young Todoroki. Do you have some history with him?"

Shoto's eyes narrowed suspiciously, "You don't answer a question with a question, sir. You called me here so we could discuss matters privately. This is a topic I'd like to turn to."

Toshinori stuttered a bit, "Well, yes, I did call you here for a private discussion...with, um...two other people."

Todoroki deadpanned, "...Sir, that's not...how privacy works. At all."

"It will make sense, I promise. And, I'll answer your questions if you agree to follow me on this one, my boy. I believe regardless of what may happen in the future, and where you may go from here, the three of you will do well to support each other."

Todoroki blinked once for emphasis, apparently a little annoyed, "You are being very vague and ominous right now."

"I know, it's just I wanted to tell you all at the same time the situation we're in. And they're just over in the next room. Young Bakugo and a third year named Mirio Togata. You'll get along with them very well, I'm sure."

"Sir, you are aware I've already met Bakugo. He attempted to incinerate me after that final sports festival match had ended, remember?"

Toshinori raised his finger upwards triumphantly, "Regardless of your greivances in the past, your differences will only allow you to complement each other on your joint path to becoming heroes! It's a matter of ensuring that together, you can cover every base. I know Bakugo's a little tempermental, but I implore you to abide by him for a while."

Toshinori kneeled down, a sotto tone entering his voice, "I assure you; this is neccessary. Vital, even. I have come to the realisation that...I cannot reach a full balance in the choices I have to make soon. The prospect of leaving a blind spot for the youth of the future is terrible. Banding together, united in hearts and souls, is the only way we can survive the rising power of villains to come."

Todoroki's expression sharpened with urgency, "What rising power? You are behaving like the world's going to end."

Toshinori nodded, "In the form it previously existed, yes. I believe the world is soon going to change drastically."

A dark silence settled for a moment, but only a moment.

Todoroki looked towards the ground for a moment. Then at the mask. Then back to his teacher.

"It's that serious?"

"Truly, it is. And I need your help, young Todoroki. The world needs your help. It needs the help of all of you, together. Not just one of you, all of you. Your classmates, your upperclassmen, your juniors...everyone. But I believe you three can truly guide them best. You are my final candidates, after all..."

Todoroki let out a low sigh, "And again you say more things that you haven't explained yet."

Toshinori extended an arm towards the door, "Will you allow me to explain, my boy? All the
Todoroki bowed at the waist, and said, matter-of-factly, "Of course. I'd never turn down from something this important. What's the point of my talents if I'd refuse to use them to fight an incoming storm this trecherous? I'll help in any way I can."

Toshinori was immensely relieved, his grin growing a little wider and more exuberant, "Haha, I knew you'd be up to the challenge! Tell me, do you take tea or coffee?"

Todoroki shrugged, walking towards the door, "I'll stay away from hot drinks for today, please."

"In that case, let us begin!"

Izuku took a step into the alleyway. He got out of the sewers by a manhole inside the back alleys. This guy was an absolute amateur, evidently not a particularly powerful vigilante. Stain claimed he must have some kind of stealth or sneaking quirk but he still left an easy to follow trail behind for the criminal underworld to find him. Did he really think none of us would track him, or is this part of some trap he's set up? He's leaning against the wall right there. Dark olive hoodie, sweatpants...yeah, he matches the description.

Time to find out immediately what kind of threat he poses. Izuku concentrated and activated Search in the right temple of his forehead. He closed his eyes, entering a vision in his minds eye, a third person perspective observation of this guy, along with a small slip of information about him. All his weaknesses, laid bare immediately. He had a little bit of a limp in his right leg due to a past injury, a nervous tic in his left eye.

Izuku skipped to the good bit, his quirk. His quirk appeared to be called Blackout. When activated, he saps the light from the surrounding area, eventually snuffing out his opponents vision entirely. Torches, streetlights, none of them will stop this effect and will begin to visibly dim as the quirks effects take place. However, you'll experience a burning sensation in your skin as you use this quirk. The more light you're supressing to achieve this effect, the stronger the burns will grow, until it becomes agonisingly painful. He probably used this subtly to creep up on Stain at night time to mask his approach.

Izuku hadn't masked his approach very well. He was hoping to be intimidating, before realising pretty quickly he was still relatively short and freckly. The man turned around, looking a little confused.

The man spoke up, pointing at him, "What are you staring at me for?"

Izuku took a few steps towards him, to see what he would do. Predictably, he reached towards one of his back pockets, probably to draw out a weapon.

Izuku responded, "Well, rumours have been going around about someone who attacked the Hero Killer Stain. Those same rumours point to you being the one who did it."

The man backed up, raising himself to full height in apparent defiance, "Yeah...yeah, I did it. So, what're you here for? To fight me, or congratulate me?"

Izuku could hear something. Faint rustling. This had all the signs of a trap. Time to give this guy a test of character.

"I'm not much of a fighter. I've only got minimal experience under my belt of going all-out.", Izuku
said, none of which was a lie. The man smirked, satisfied that his question had been answered.

"You do know these alleys, right kid? The guy who hunted the Hero Killer walks these streets. You sure you wanna be here too?"

A few more figures similar in appearance to him slunk out of the alleyways, masked by balaclavas. Izuku surreptitiously marked them with Search too. Five in total, including the filth he was talking to now.

The man pinched the bridge of his nose, "God...I figured people would walk right in here if the message about my attack spread far enough, but I didn't expect to bag a rich kid into this."

*Of course...this was a hold up.*

The man took a step forward, now holding a large kitchen knife, "Look, you clearly got a passion for seeing Stain taken out, right?"

Izuku growled lowly, "Well...yeah, I'm pretty passionate about that, in a sense."

Predictably, the man wasn't even slightly put off, presuming it was just Izuku's anger at being ambushed, "Is that something you'd be willing to give a little for, pal? Your weapons and waistcoat, perhaps?"

Izuku met his eyes fiercely, "People romanticise vigilantes a lot, don't they? I thought you guys were supposed to be better than villains. Clean up the streets, right?"

The man lurched forward, emphasising his height over Izuku, "Don't you talk to me like that. Taking Stain out ain't a job you can do on the cheap."

"I can't get out of this one with diplomacy. I have an excuse now."

The man curled his lip scornfully, "Don't you try any-"

Izuku pushed downwards with his arms with as much force as he could, firing Air Cannon roughly. He didn't have to even think about accuracy, it'd launch Izuku upwards when fired at the ground point-blank. Izuku spiralled into the sky. He got a decent hit of vertigo as he leapt, but using Search to clearly pinpoint where his assailants were gave him a good idea of where he resided spatially. He twisted himself around, firing Air Cannon again to ensure he headed off to the side, landing on the roof of one of the buildings.

"What the shit!? Jumpy piece of garba-"

Before they could react, Izuku mustered his courage and jumped off the building, aiming his arms downward. He fired a pair of blasts below him to cushion his fall, sending two of the thugs rocketing into the ground. They bounced off the mud slightly as they went, in a way that was sure to leave bruises. Not missing a beat, Izuku flung a blast of air down the alleyway, knocking the remaining thugs off their feet to keep them from rushing towards him.

Izuku felt his arms aching, Air Cannon's power was being overburdened. Switch to something else. He didn't have much time, that vigilante was already using his quirk. Izuku could feel his field of vision narrowing, his sight dimming with each passing moment.

Izuku used Boil Stone, taking large portions of the wall at the end of the alleyway, and sending it spiralling outwards in a surge of lava over the exit. The criminals jumped back from the threat, but Izuku used Cooling to freeze the Lava into a splash of stone that just about covered the exit,
blocking their escape. Izuku smiled defiantly, causing the one at the front of the remaining group of three to get really upset...

The only exit now was behind Izuku, and this guy knew it. He ran at him, panic overtaking his senses as he stepped over the forms of two of his dazed comrades. His knife raised, he-

Izuku fired a small burst of Air Cannon, hopefully not enough to cause further fatigue, flinging one of the downed thugs backwards just as the charging thug's foot made to step over it, tripping him up and letting him crash his chin painfully into the ground. Time for a classic finisher.

Izuku ran up with full force, hitting his head full-force with a steel-toed kick from his boots. The idiot gave out a low moan, then passed out.

"Alright you creepy fucker..."

Izuku's vision blacked out completely. He lost his sense of where he was. He lurched to his left, or he told his body to do so, he no longer had any indication that he was actually doing it anymore. He got some feedback when his hand felt the rough bricks of the wall that he thought would be there, although he had to lean to the left far more than he was actually comfortable with to find it.

He could hear everything, his ears felt like they were growing wider. The sounds of the passed out thugs, the wind howling in the background as it was pushed through the confines of these labyrinthine streets, the sound of rapid movement and the stomping of running feet, getting louder and louder.

Izuku could vaguely sense them approaching with Search, he knew they were getting closer, but the alleyway itself was devoid of light, so monitoring them from a distance wouldn't do anything at all. He was completely blind, this wasn't-

*Oh. Blind.*

Izuku looked deep into his little well of power. In the right side of his centre, next to the shelled core, there it was - **Infrared Ray.** The power that allowed Sensei to see in spite of his total lack of eyes.

Izuku switched it on, scrunching his eyes up tight. Suddenly, like a radar, Izuku could see it all. Outlines of them, glowing with their heat. They looked very red and colourful, while their sleeping allies looked much bluer and greener. Izuku could see his own hands again, his own body. Time to abuse their asusmption that he lacked fine motor skills right now.

Izuku pulled out his knife right when the two of them were upon him. Izuku shot his foot into the vigilante's good leg, knocking him over, since his bad leg wasn't quite strong enough to prevent his momentum from toppling him. Izuku took his knife and lunged at the last guy, plunging it into his chest with the full force of his body.

The guy howled in pain and Izuku followed through, shoving him to the ground with Izuku on top of him. Izuku removed the knife and stood up, leaving him to tend to his wound, out of commission. Somehow, seeing his infrared readings turn colder was deeply, deeply unsettling.

"I'm gonna fucking KILL YOU!!"

Izuku took a punch to the back of his head, knocking him backwards. The vigilante didn't stay down as long as Izuku had expected and he shot across the alleyway as a result, slamming Izuku into a wall. He saw a storm of red and orange in front of him as the man's frothing face filled his vision, and Izuku felt a knife rush towards his gut.
Izuku reeled back, aiming as best as he could with his cloudy vision for the bridge of this guy's nose, headbutting him as hard as he could. A resounding cracking indicated he'd been at least roughly correct, and his head turned to the side.

Izuku threw his knife into his other hand, considering for a moment plunging the blade into this man's exposed neck. It'd be a fatal blow, for certain.

No. Not this guy.

Izuku spun the knife around and delivered a nasty punch to his neck with the pommel, causing another cracking noise and a raw wheeze from the man. Izuku pushed against the wall with his legs, pushing the man into the mud, getting on top of him, aiming his knife at the vigilante's throat.

The vigilante was breathing heavily, and made to struggle, but the sharp sensation of steel on his throat made him freeze up almost on instinct.

"Huff...god dammit...how the hell did you-"

Izuku cut across him, placing just a tiny bit more weight on the top of his knife, "That's a nice quirk you've got there. A very nice quirk. What a shame it didn't work on me like it did everyone else. Including the people you've robbed, and Stain."

"Who the fuck? What kind of kid are you?"

Izuku, revelling in the opportunity to check his notoriety, leaned forward, "Don't you recognise me? Why do you think I'd come after you? Considering you attacked Stain and all."

Izuku pushed his green hair out of his eyes, and that was the final hint the man needed before his eyes shot wider than a human's eyes should ever go.

His voice cracked completely, "Oh fuck, oh fucking god you're from the, from the TV, you're..."

Izuku got into a kneeling position, his boot still firmly on the man's chest. He was secretly really proud he was actually recognised.

"I-I'm sorry, I didn't...I'm not trying to-"

"To what? Make an actual impact on the world? You're going to resign yourself to robbing civilians?"

The man managed to calm down his voice slightly, "I just...it's not that simple, okay? I'm sorry, don't kill me, please. I'm fucking begging you here."

"Why'd you attack Stain?"

"It's simple, okay, okay!", the man quickly spluttered out, trying to explain himself as fast as he could, "It was just to lure people, okay? L-Like nasty people, people who hate the League or whatever. I m-mean, I actually, y'know, the League's pretty great actually, I didn't mean to actually hurt you guys, that wasn't why I did that at all, honest!"

Izuku wasn't quite sure if he was telling the truth due to his intense panic, but he was clearly trying to butter Izuku up either way to increase his chances of being spared. Which was kind of slimy anyway.
Izuku asked, "So, you're a fan of the League then?"

The man nodded, before swallowing heavily as Izuku raised his palm, radiating with a deep red glow.

Izuku smirked, "Isn't that something you'd be willing to give a little for?"

Chapter End Notes

So...that's....ten thousand. Good lord.

I made a special thank-you for everyone when I reached 1000, because it's mind-blowing to me. On occasion, once in a blue moon, I go outside. Because I have to, University obligations. Whenever I do, I had to somehow live with the knowledge that more people had read my story than I had seen walking through the streets of the city for that entire day.

Now that number has multiplied by ten. And I'm not ever going to be certain how to process that.

So in the meantime, all I can do is say...thank you. The support from A03 is more than I could have ever asked for. I've met some great people, had some great discussions, and I'd like to think I've genuinely improved some of my writing skills over time as I've written this. This has been one of the most nerve-wracking but greatest decisions I have ever made, to publish and share this with all of you. I'm grateful for every one of you, always.

In case I get caught up again, and don't get the chance to say it on the day, have a happy new year too! Make sure you go out and enjoy yourselves. If you're anything like me, you might need some reminding on that one. Here's to me, the story, and you going strong into the next wild year! Have fun!
When Izuku had finally arrived back at HQ, he was looking pretty pleased with himself. A big, beautiful smile on his face, wiping his hands clean with a small handkerchief... *Oooh, does that mean he's been fighting someone? Fighting dirty? So he actually did manage to find him!*

Himiko bounded up to Izuku, wearing a smile to match his, partially blocking him from seeing the rest of the room.

"Izuku! Hey, are you alright? You look great! Well, what I mean is you don't appear to have any life-threatening injuries!"

Kurogiri chimed in from the central lobby, where his bar counter had been halfway constructed. He was in the middle of literally hammering some of the rest of it into place when he said, "Yes, and how pleased I am to hear it. I have enough work on my hands right now without dragging another hospital bed into Stain's abode, sir."

Izuku asked, "Don't worry. That vigilante didn't give me any trouble. How is Stain doing, by the way?"

Himiko replied, "Great! He's doing great! Recovering well, walking around on his own two feet now. Do you want to go see him, huh?"

*Darn it, she'd acted too eager. Izuku looked a little suspicious.*

Izuku raised a questioning eyebrow, "Himiko, you're being a little overt. Even for you. What happened while I was out?"

*Oh boy. Keep him distracted, Himiko, just for a few minutes.*

"Nothing, nothing. Hey Izuku, did I ever tell you you've got really nice green eyes?"

Izuku leaned back a little, apparently scared out of his current train of thought, "Himiko, stop. You're staring at me a little too closely. I mean, my eyes are... is it something to do with my disguise? Did someone recognise them while I was out?"

Himiko shook her head slightly, locking eyes with him intently, "No, no, nothing like that. I just want to look at them. Here, look at mine. People always tell me they look a bit animal-like. See, look! Yellow, like a tiger! J-Just keep looking at them okay?"

Izuku's expression became stern for a moment, "Himiko, are you trying to keep me from looking around the room?"
Himiko blinked, her smallest visual tell for a lie, and before she could even say anything further, Izuku slipped past her into the common room.

*Okay, not how that was supposed to go. In a disguise, Himiko can blend into a perfect liar, but it's hard to trick Izuku on the best of occasions... thankfully, he didn't seem to notice any changes in the common room.*

"Himiko, where is Tomura's game console?"

*Mother of god, could she not stall him for 3 minutes!?!*

"Oh, Tomura's console?", Himiko questioned, leaning to the side in a caricature of cluelessness, "I don't know, maybe he took it up to his room. I think he might've ordered some-"

Izuku, his expression hardening with every passing second, pulled up a section of the rug, checking around the room for signs of shady activity like a policeman doing one of those searches. He was actively looking for signs of tomfoolery.

"Izuku, can't we sit down and just watch some-"

With a resounding **CRASH** of crushed steel structures and cracked stone, Tomura was flung up the stairs to the training room, covered in rubble and the remnants of wooden training dummies.

Tomura, not even registering the other people in the room, roared aloud "**MAGNE!**", and ran back downstairs, where more noises of combat erupted and a battlecry of "**I'M GOING TO GUT YOU!**" before the door below them closed again.

Izuku turned to face Himiko, with an expression sterner than she'd ever seen on him before. It made the temperature in the room drop a few degrees, as he interrogated, "Himiko. Explain this, now."

*Well, it was worth a shot.*

Himiko threw her arms up defensively, panicking, "Um, Big Sis Magne showed up and Spinner asked her to try using her quirk on someone so she could explain how her giant magnet weapon worked 'cos she didn't explain much about how her quirk works with regular magnetism, but she magnetised Tomura while he was playing a game and he was playing on a really old console with cartridges that had small metal parts so his game crashed 'cos he attracted the cartridge and dislodged it right when he was fighting the boss and now they're locked in the middle of a battle to the doorstep of death that was supposed to end before you got home!"

Izuku nodded, rolled up his sleeves slightly, and calmly stepped down into the training hall, barely hiding an exasperated sigh from her as he went.

Kurogiri raised his head from his work, "Do you want to explain why you didn't bring this to my attention, miss Toga?"

The hairs on the back of Himiko's neck stood up as Kurogiri towered over her, his angular eyes even sharper than usual.

Himiko scratched the back of her head, hiding this fact as well as her relief that Izuku didn't freak out, "Well...I just thought allowing them to let off some steam is only healthy, especially for those two...and if you knew about it, you'd stop them, of course. You are the responsible one, after all!"

"Flattery will get you nowhere, miss."
The sound of Mustard's gun firing a warning shot caused the noise downstairs to dissipate right away.

"I was gone for about 2 hours. A fight should never have broken out in that short a space of time."

Magne retorted, "And in that time, Tomura found an excuse to try and lay his hands on me."

Izuku retorted immediately again, "Yes, but you were the one who set him off. I mean..."

Izuku relented, realising fairly quickly that Magne accidentally spoiling his chance at beating the final boss that one time wasn't justification for attempted murder/maiming.

Magne huffed, "Yeah, thought as much. If you're insisting on keeping that asshole around, keep his leash a little tighter. Next time, he's going in the ground."

Izuku replied, "Look... I'll try to make sure Tomura's calmer in the future. He's getting there."

"I dunno how you can stand him. Why not kick him out?"

Izuku stifled his anger over that comment so he could try to find the words to explain.

"Well, uh, you know how I was introduced to the League, right?"

Magne tilted her chin up, "Yeah, kind of. You were the wimpy, cute looking one."

"Not that. Not your first impressions of me when you first saw me, how I joined the League."

Magne put her thumb and index finger on her chin for a moment in contemplation, before pointing at Izuku, saying, "I might remember... weren't you scouted by... no, it actually was Tomura, right?"

"Right. He helped me see an entire new side to the world."

Magne waved her hand, "Pssht. Aimless gratitude isn't going to-"

Izuku interrupted pointedly, "I want to do the same for him."

Magne looked a little confused. She was looking at Izuku like he was some kind of nuts.

"Tomura hasn't really... had a normal life. I don't know all the details yet. He hasn't told me, and I've thought better than to ask him."

Magne pointed out, "Yeah, because he's an unstable lunatic! You know as well as I do he'd crumble you to dirt if you pissed him off bad enough."

Izuku held up a couple of fingers, "That's not quite what I meant. I'm not afraid of him, it's just to be tactful. Look, I might not know all the details yet, but I know enough to understand he's not really got any experience with people, or friends, or living a normal life. He never had a chance to make his own choices about his life. To be free. The world robbed him of that."

Magne's expression became more serious. The word about 'freedom' in particular really seemed to strike a chord with her.

"I want to show him another side to his life, the same way he did for me. He's been raised like a villain his entire life, and I lived comparatively cosy and happy. We've been educating each other
over time. I think there's a middle ground to be found in there. Somewhere."

Magne, with less gruffness in her voice, inquired, "Alright then. What about the rest of us, huh? Are we going to have to risk this guy's temper tantrums until then?"

Izuku shook his head, "If I thought Tomura was a risk, I wouldn't keep him around you."

Magne seemed a little curious, "What would you do with him if you had to kick him out?"

"W-Well, I wouldn't kick him out per se, not really! I might have a few places I can take him. It's still my duty to take care of him."

Magne's tone had returned to complete seriousness, "...that something the old boss asked for?"

"...yes. Still, Tomura's my friend, so even without being asked by Sensei, I'd be looking out for him."

Magne shrugged, then waved behind Izuku's shoulder. Izuku turned around to see the edges of a pair of black trousers and red sneakers disappear around the corner.

Izuku whirled around to confront Magne, "Did you know he was there the whole time!? Why would you do that?"

"Frankly, I wasn't the most thrilled about coming back here, Deku. New leadership and all that. You hadn't exactly made any kind of impression on me."

Magne leaned against the wall, apparently disengaging from her confrontational stance, "So I wanted to see what kind of guy was in charge now. Test your mettle, touch base. See whether what I love about the League is still around and kicking. Freedom, acceptance, and some backbone."

Izuku let out a half-smile, hopeful, "So, your judgement was favourable?"

"Yeah, pretty much." Magne said, a smile lining her thick lips, "Can't say I'm too happy about sleeping under the same roof as that madman, but I'll just... see how this goes. See how well you do, too."

Izuku bowed slightly at the waist, politely, "I will try to meet your expectations, Magne. Welcome back!"

Magne gave a joking salute, then hoisted her magnet onto her shoulder to carry it to her new room.

Izuku called out as she began to walk off, "Don't let the cloth come undone, okay? Spinner will never forgive you if you disassemble his sword!"

Magne shooed Izuku away with her hand as she walked up the stairs. But as she turned the corner, she moved to slightly adjust the rope keeping it tied up.

Chapter End Notes

Hi folks, just checking in!

Real world obligations, what a drag. All of them will be swept under the rug by the
11th, but until then I have to devote myself to not failing at life and lay off the fic for a while. I'll try to upload a chapter in the meantime, but until the 11th I can't focus on this fic since I am writing furiously on other necessary things. Thanks for understanding. Freedom's in sight now, I've just gotta make it there!
Another hill, another shadow

Chapter Summary

Present your message to the king, jester.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He had joined them.

Izuku sat in the middle of his room, quietly meditating on top of a nice soft rug he had placed there the other day, which unfortunately did nothing to make him more comfortable when he was faced with something that was this level of unsettling.

That man, the vigilante, had joined the ranks of the people he could see when he closed his eyes and explored the inner workings of All For One. It wasn't really so bad to look at them before, because he didn't know who they were even on the occasions their faces were recognisable. Some of them were only faint imprints, and most of them didn't look directly at Izuku. There were one or two that were just balls of light, and didn't seem to resemble a person at all. Maybe they were extremely powerful, or maybe they didn't have a human form. Maybe one of them was a representation of how All For One just magically came to exist in Sensei. Maybe one of those orbs of light was Sensei.

Izuku felt far stronger now. He'd been able to flawlessly rob a man of his quirk. After the fight was over, he had little to no power to resist All For One ripping his quirk away from him. Within 4 seconds, the weapon he had used to rob and attack was now in Izuku's possession. With a little bit of practice, Izuku could probably learn to make the process as easy as breathing.

So all in all, Izuku decided it was worth it. It was decidedly more unnerving to have someone he recognised among the characters he could see out of the corners of his eyes during meditation. It was extremely unsettling that the figure often looked at Izuku directly. But as long as he didn't respond, and asserted his own strength of will, nothing bad would happen. Sensei said as much.

Blackout, Skeleton Key, Air Cannon, Rock Boil, Geopush, All For One... these tools weren't nearly enough yet...

Izuku searched deep inside himself, tapping once again on the solid shell right at his core. It didn't give way any more than it usually did. That is to say, not even a little.

Izuku had his own ideas about what it might be. Maybe it was a coalesced pile of All For One's old quirks, like the Strength Enhancement quirks, Rivet, Spearlike bones, stuff like that. Maybe he'd be able to access these quirks with time and patience. Perhaps this dark rock in his chest was actually the imprint of the quirk that granted Sensei his unnaturally long life.

Well, whatever it might be, the fact of the matter was that it wasn't currently doing anything. Better to leave it be, for now.

I still need more power... but I suppose taking Blackout is a good start. I've just got to be patient,
Izuku breathed heavily, slowly getting to his feet. He opened his eyes slightly, shaking off the way they'd adjusted to the dark as he'd held them closed for so long. It probably didn't help that he'd turned the lights down low as well.

It was beginning to look more like home in here with every passing day. He'd added a bedside table, a work desk that kind of resembled the one he had before, a tailoring stand to hold up his villain costume when not in use so it could be repaired easier, that sort of thing. Best to keep it simple. Izuku had collected a bit of paraphernalia related to other villains too. Not much, but enough that he could keep track of their popularity. Destro's autobiography was still sitting on the desk, half finished.

A villain so powerful he was able to publish an autobiography about himself safely. It was even pretty successful. Clearly there was some powerful competition waiting just around the corner.

Izuku flicked the side of his head in an attempt to jolt himself out of that spiral of negativity. He jumped from one foreboding train of thought straight into another.

He stretched his back and began to walk to the door, realising pretty quickly that if he wanted to prevent himself from stressing out, the best thing to do was to get out of his room, and distract himself.

And the colourful rogues gallery of characters he called his friends were some of the biggest distractions he knew of.

"It's not a fucking smoothie you dumbass. Shut up already."

"Of course it is, think about it for like one second!", Himiko cried, waving her arms in the air wildly as if that'd make her point more compelling, "It's a fruit that's been blended up into a juice-mush thing, that's called a smoothie!"

Tomura leaned onto the counter to get up in Himiko's face, both of them nearly literally butting heads with each other, "It's called fucking tomato soup, you idiot. What kind of worthless idiot refers to tomato soup as a smoothie?"

Himiko smiled smugly in a way that only infuriated Tomura further, "An original and creative thinker! You're just not open to new ways of looking at things, Tomura. It's a smoothie and you can't convince me otherwise."

Tomura clenched his fingers, dragging all but one of his nails across the table and creating an audible scratching sound, "You're delusional, you dumb shithead."

Himiko turned to the side as Izuku walked downstairs, hoping to get a reaction out of him before he realised the danger of the situation, "Izuku, Izuku! Is tomato soup a kind of smoothie or not?"

Izuku froze mid-step, looking as they both turned to face him. Tomura's eyes looked murderous. Izuku tilted his head to the side cautiously, "What the..."
Kurogiri interrupted that thought, ruining the fun as per usual, "Do not answer that, sir. Miss Himiko and Mr Shigaraki are having a... slight dispute."

Izuku's eyes hooded over in exasperation, "Calm down, please. Please? At least wait until Stain is gone before you start breaking furniture over petty issues."

Himiko raised a fist in protest, "It's not a 'petty issue', it's the truth!"

Tomura was visibly struggling to restrain himself from scratching his neck furiously, "Don't tell me you're giving this braindead idiot any support in this, Izuku."

Izuku raised his arms defensively, making his way to the common room.

Kurogiri called out, "Mr Stain is in the training area, sir."

Izuku called back as he began to walk down the stairway, "I know, thank you. Good luck with these two."

Kurogiri looked over at Himiko again, quickly enough that her attempts to reach into her pocket and withdraw a knife were foiled immediately.

Kurogiri began to expand in size, stretching out to cover the breadth of the room. Himiko and Tomura's looks became those of sudden fear pretty quickly as Kurogiri's presence began to block out the room's light sources, and they scrambled back as Kurogiri's Warp Gate began to function.

Kurogiri growled, "Children, all of you."

Izuku could hear the familiar sounds of combat training before he was even halfway down the stairs. The sound of a fist colliding with a wooden dummy as it gave way to your force, swinging back. The sound of harsh hacking as a bladed weapon was used to block and strike, as the dummy swung around again, the quiet creaking of its joints as it swing around, rotating with the very force you struck it with previously.

Izuku knew all of these sounds because he frequently made them himself. Punches, bladed weapons, quick movements. It all sounded pretty similar to his routine.

Of course, that was before All For One...

Izuku pushed open the door, seeing Stain in the midst of going a round with the large oak model, testing the full range of his movement. He was trying to ensure he'd completely recovered. Any remaining injuries, cuts, bruises, if there was anything at all that was still wrong with him, performing this many flips, dodges and slashes would surely reveal them.

It was so relieving to see he was moving about so freely. Seeing him moving about like this made Izuku's worry leak from him like air from a balloon.

Izuku cupped his mouth and called out, "Stain! I'm here!"

Stain pulled back from his squared stance, turning his body around to meet Izuku's, a grin spreading across his flat face.
He walked over, rolling his shoulders into a loose position and stretching his neck. Stain looked very different without his mask on. His features were pretty plain and small, leaving a large proportion of his face as flat and regular. The only feature of his face that took up significant room was his mouth, which stretched quite far into the sides of his head and encroached upon his upper jaw. Izuku did see that a large part of this appearance was down to him lacking a nose, however. His red eyes were quite high up as well, which only accentuated this effect. Maybe it was because of his training, or his thrill at his own recovery, but Stain's eyes radiated the same intense energy even in this casual situation.

"Hello again, brother. I'm pleased to announce I seem to have recovered flawlessly. I must thank you again for allowing me to reside here while I recovered."

Izuku shrugged, "We're in this together, aren't we? You really don't have to thank us for doing something that normal."

Stain folded his arms triumphantly, "In the world we find ourselves in, gratitude and obligation are a valuable currency."

Izuku smiled, "Given freely to those in need. You might not be among our ranks very often, but you're one of our most valued members!"

Stain chuckled lightly to himself, in a way that was awkward not just because of the delivery but also because laughter didn't sound like it came naturally to him, "Yes... I appear to be quite popular among some of your members, I must admit."

Izuku couldn't quite stifle a stutter in his breathing. Himiko, Spinner, Dabi, Magne… a large proportion of them were here specifically because of Stain's rhetoric, it's true.

Stain continued, "I will admit, I despite blind followings. I'd rather hope that my message would be the most powerful part of my story, not my character. Spinner's costume was already rather unsettling, but when he pointed out the amount of memorabilia surrounding me, peddled by charlatans… pssht."

Izuku gritted his teeth. Even if it was Stain saying it, it wasn't acceptable. Izuku objected, "I know they're odd, but they clearly care more about your message and goals than your appearance. They're very driven people, every single one of them. I'd trust them with my life, and on certain occasions I have."

Stain nodded, "I agree. These people have sacrificed and worked hard to carry their morals. They have put in more effort into achieving their ambitions than most heroes ever have. I'm proud to work alongside them."

Izuku was a little puzzled, "Well... what's with the harsh language, then?"

Stain scoffed lightly, before continuing, "I'm beginning to be worried about the spreading 'cult of personality' surrounding my name. I would loathe for my image to become too prevalent. It makes my work quite a bit harder."

Izuku pointed out, "I know you're afraid of your image blotting out the impact of your message, but isn't your rising popularity a sign more people are becoming interested in your cause? Even if it's just on a basic level?"

Stain raised his chin, "And I suppose you'd know all about 'rising popularity', brother."

Izuku swallowed heavily. That damn grapevine... it seemed even Stain had heard some of the
rumors… and that apparently he'd heard about them even before he was injured.

Izuku looked down, "So... what did you hear?"

Stain's expression became a bit more grim, "There are portions of the underground that support you. But it's mostly based off of your relationship with the previous leader of the League. Out of all the things you could have done to first introduce yourself as the next great king of evil, participating in a destructive infight with your own lieutenant at the docks was not the best option."

Izuku tried to contain his disdain at being looked down on, "They think I'm weak?"

Stain placed a hand on Izuku's shoulder. "There were many who coveted the throne of crime. A great many. Now would be the prime opportunity for them to take it, before you can grow any stronger. You are in a perilous position."

Izuku nodded, meeting Stain's eyes, "I know. I've been trying to improve. Even that vigilante... his power is now mine to use. I'll need every bit of help I can get, after all."

Stain raised an eyebrow, "So that rat isn't dead? Well... I suppose if he crawls back into the sewers and tells all the other rats of your power... I suppose I can let him scurry away, this one time."

Izuku couldn't help but crack a smile at that, "Thank you, brother. Good to see you've got my best interests at heart."

Stain straightened up slightly, "Indeed I do. Which is why I plan to remain in the nearby area over the next few weeks."

Izuku's smile widened a bit just picturing the joy on his friends faces to hear that, "Really?"

Stain turned to the door, "Yes. Don't get too excited. I'm remaining nearby because I feel it would be in your best interests, after all."

The unspoken words hung in the air. Because someone might try to kill you.

Izuku tensed up a bit. It's not as if the threat wasn't already obvious to him. But seeing someone like Stain show concern for him put that danger in much sharper perspective.

Izuku straightened up too, intending to force the fear out of him, "I won't let them stop us now. If they try to attack me-"

Stain interrupted, "If they try to attack you, then no matter how confident you are that you can crush them, I will be sure to protect you as well. It's about time I begin paying back the debt of gratitude I owe you, after all."

It would be foolish to let pride get in the way of accepting vitally needed support. As much as Izuku wanted to prove himself, pragmatism had to come first. Stain was a friend as well, after all. There's no shame in collaborating with a friend.

Izuku bowed at the waist courteously, "I appreciate it, brother."

Stain approached the sewer exit, kicking it open with a steel-toed boot, wrapping his ragged mask around his eyes.

"Think nothing of it, Izuku Midoriya. Now, I think you should return to the counter with Kurogiri. I believe he said he'd have something for you once you were done talking to me."
With a small incline of the head and a wry smile, Stain dropped through the exit. He brought the doors down behind him as he left, a resounding metal clang indicating he'd left.

Izuku briefly pondered aloud, "Something for me?"

Izuku made his way back up the stairs. A significant amount of noise was waiting upstairs. It sounded like everyone was meeting up there. Well, they were being louder than usual...

Then, it hit him.

"O-Of course!"

Izuku dashed up the stairs, running through the lounge into the main room, where the entire counter-area was filled with the League members all meeting and greeting the three remaining friendly faces.

Giran noticed Izuku immediately, leaning back and gesturing, "Surprise, kid!"

Mustard, Mr Compress and Twice were finally back where they belonged. Mustard was enjoying explaining how he managed to evade the authorities, Mr Compress was reuniting with Kurogiri and theatrically explaining his plans on what the League should be doing next. But after Twice had finished excitedly chatting with Himiko, he made a beeline straight for Izuku, jumping to attention in front of him like a soldier.

Izuku took a step back, "Woah, is everything okay?"

Twice replied without missing a beat, "I've been told you're the new boss around here, is that right? I have no idea why they'd put the guy with the smallest kill count in charge of a team of VILLAINS, but... still, you've definitely got all the other qualifications! Analytical skill, a tactical approach, I guess a guy like you might make a great leader-figure!"

As usual, Twice jumped back and forth between positivity and negativity at the drop of a hat. It was sometimes hard to tell what he was actually trying to say. Izuku tentatively responded, "Well, I hope I can exceed your expectations. It's good to have you back, Twice."

"Same to you! Look, I don't know if you have time right now, but you've absolutely GOT to listen, I've found something incredible!"

He'd managed to keep a consistent look of giddy anticipation, and he seemed genuine. "Well, okay, let's hear it. What's the discovery?"

Twice looked like he was barely containing himself, "Look, it's risky, okay? I don't know about this guy, seems like it could be problematic, but I am absolutely 100% positive that this guy I've found would make a perfect addition to the League of Villains! I've seen a guy, okay, I wanted to talk to you first since you're the new leadership, but he just seems like the perfect kind of crazy, okay?"

Izuku grinned widely as Twice started to go into detail about the man he'd found. His excitement only made the room seem even brighter.
A new potential member? Finally, some good news.

Chapter End Notes

Finally back! My real-world work is now out of the door, so until I inevitably get slammed over the head with more in the future, I'm finally free to return to writing the stuff I actually really care about! Hopefully I won't have to have another hiatus like that again, but if I do I'll try to post it right from the outset instead of explaining myself in an edit made later. The work crept up on me this time, sorry. Anyway, enjoy!
Undermining

Chapter Summary

A new face, plain, reserved, clad in a beak.

Being the lookout really wasn't the best use of his talents.

Dabi did suppose it made sense. Anyone else other than Mr Compress or Kurogiri would be a little more temperamental than he was and might sound the alarms when it wasn't needed, and those two had to be in the room to negotiate because it's the only conceivable way to counteract the crazy stupidity of people like Himiko and Twice.

Still, it was a damn shame his talents with fire had to be wasted on recon duty.

Dabi had a pretty great view from the roof of the warehouse. The second this recruit showed up, Dabi would know about it. Why exactly it was necessary to keep an eye out for this guy hadn't been very clear.

And then he saw him, walking right out of an alleyway. He made his way towards the building, wearing a furred coat, a weird beak-mask thing and latex gloves. Dabi decided that he was walking a bit too confidently, and took a quick look around the perimeter...

*There they are. This is looking more like a sting operation with every passing minute.*

A few other figures were shuffling to the sides of the building, waiting outside while this guy went inside to scout things. Either these goons were here to provide backup if things go wrong, or worse, this is some kind of ambush. Police, a rival crime organisation, doesn't matter.

Dabi tapped his earpiece, "Mr Compress, we've got an issue. This guy brought backup and they're surrounding parts of the building. If he jumps into combat, I've got a clear shot to jump two of them right now."

Mr Compress, his voice rippling a bit due to the echo of hiding an earpiece inside his mask, responded, "It's understandable that a crime boss would bring lackeys, either to avoid getting his hands dirty or to ensure his own safety. Keep an eye on their activities. If he engages, follow up only once you've determined that their quirks won't negate your opening strike."

Dabi smirked, "So either make sure their quirks won't stop my fire because their quirks can't do that, or make sure they can't stop my fire because they won't have time to use their quirks."

Dabi could feel the smugness in Mr Compress' voice as he responded, "Precisely. I like the way you think."

Dabi replied, "Okay, they're getting a little closer to the warehouse now. I'm going radio silent in case they notice me up here. I'll message you again if something changes."

Dabi clicked his earpiece off for good measure. No point in making extra noise, and there is the off chance they might be able to detect some radio signals.
He hunched down, glaring at the figures creeping towards the warehouse with a predatory gleam in his dull eyes.

Izuku tried to ensure he kept himself in an upright posture. The balance between looking confident and looking like you're desperately trying to be confident is so much harder to achieve when you're actively trying to do so.

Izuku reconfirmed, "So this guy definitely has a reputation?"

Mr Compress nodded, "I'd wager he must have some power to be at leisure to bring allies with him to meetings such as this."

Twice jumped in, nodding doubly as fast, "Yeah, this guy leads his own squad of miscreants, just like us! I thought I told you as much."

Izuku growled, "No, you didn't, and that's why this is coming as a nasty surprise."

Tomura reprimanded him, "Bickering over this is a waste of energy. Let's focus that energy on not looking like pushovers. If this guy thinks he'll be leading the debate because he brought backup, we've gotta show him he thought wrong."

Izuku tugged at his collar slightly, before gearing himself up. This would be his first major negotiation with another criminal organisation. This might make or break his impression in the underworld. The League was counting on him, right here and now.

Cold footsteps signalled the end of his preparation time. The lone figure walked into the warehouse, calmly closing the door behind him with the heel of his shoe.

He was something of a sight. A large plague doctors mask, a green jacket with purple fur around the collar that looked eccentric enough to massively contrast the dignified black shirt and tie he wore underneath it. He had three piercings in his left earlobe, and cold, calculating gold eyes that Izuku could tell were immediately taking in and analysing the scene. But they didn't do it the way Izuku did it. They analysed things in a very disdainful way, with a purposeful negativity.

Izuku took a step forward. Mustard seemed to bristle up a little as the man approached, while Kurogiri and Mr Compress became extremely still.

The man tilted his head to the side, clearly expecting Izuku to introduce himself first. Just this one time, for the meeting to progress, Izuku obliged him.

"I'm Deku. The acting leader of the League of Villains." Izuku gestured to the group of people behind him. Some, like Himiko and Twice, smiled encouragingly. The rest, however, ranged from neutral to cautious. Dabi's warning had evidently filled them with trepidation.

The man seemed to be focusing intently on Izuku now. After a few seconds, he responded, with an eerily even tone, "You look similar to your news footage appearances. Although I expected you to be taller."

Izuku expected this sort of tactic; asserting dominance as quickly as he could. Not missing a beat, Izuku responded, "There are a lot of things people don't expect about me."
The man didn't seem amused, but he took a step forward making a slight bow. Perhaps it was somewhat notable he was obeying the traditional customs of an invited guest, even though he was clearly doing it out of obligation.

After he rose from his half-bow, he removed his hands from his pockets, revealing white surgical gloves, introducing himself at last, "My name is Overhaul. I am the captain of the Shie Hassaikai."

Kurogiri would've raised an eyebrow if he had one. Instead, his left eye sort of rose up his face slightly as he pondered, "I recognise the name from somewhere..."

The man named Overhaul responded, checking his gloves were rolled all the way up with something of a paranoid expression, "Either you've familiarised yourself with the main tenants of Buddhism, or you've some familiarity with the Yakuza."

Izuku nearly went through a double take. The Yakuza weren't exactly as prevalent as they had been, but their history was notorious for anyone paying attention to the criminal underworld. So naturally, Himiko spoke up, asking, "The Yakuza? Are they another family of villain organisations?"

Mr Compress clarified, "The Yakuza were the organised crime syndicates that controlled the majority of the underworld in the many years before quirks emerged. When heroes started their rise to stardom, many classic crime syndicates were forced out of the spotlight and into jail, and the Yakuza were no exception."

Overhaul interrupted, "There are exceptions. Sections of the Yakuza have refused to simply roll over and die. The Shie Hassaikai is one such organisation. My organisation."

There was nothing to either his tone or delivery that made him sound any harsher or more dangerous than his previous sentences. But Izuku still felt some kind of hidden tenacity to his words.

Overhaul looked over the grubby hideout with squinted eyes, apparently disgusted, "So, is this your hideout?"

Izuku asserted, "No, we organised a separate meetup space. We didn't want to attract any attention to our base of operations."

Overhaul's expression shifted again, though his mask made it unclear if it was a smirk or a sneer, "I'm hurt you don't trust me with access to your real hideout, since the alternative is this thoroughly unclean shack. But at least you've maintained some professionalism. Maybe there's something of value here..."

Overhaul took a step back, looking over Izuku to his allies, taking in their appearances. *It seems like this guy values professionalism... the League is a bit ragtag.* Izuku began to get a little worried about some of the membership currently staring back at Overhaul. Himiko and Twice were probably too unusual for his tastes, and Magne was giving him a pretty aggressive look right now.

Izuku snapped his fingers and got Overhaul to return his gaze to him, "So, Overhaul. Twice invited you here to discuss whether you'd like to join the League of Villains. But you seem to have an organisation of your own that you're proud of. What did you have in mind?"

Overhaul took a step back, looking over Izuku to his allies, taking in their appearances. The plague-masked man shrugged slightly, "Actually, I'm far more interested in hearing what you
have in mind. For the League as a whole. If I were to join, what kind of goals would I be supporting?"

A test of ambition.

Izuku responded immediately, "Reform society. End the hypocrisies of hero society, and ensure that the downtrodden and quirkless aren't confined to a life of destitute shame due to the circumstances of their birth. Quirks right now determine power and skill, but that power is born solely from a genetic accident and not by ambition or conviction."

Overhaul placed a finger and thumb on his chin, the latex making a slight rubbing sound, "You see yourself as a revolutionary. Against all of these quirks and mutations, against this vast world of sickness, you think you're just going to be able to walk in and fix it without protection?"

Izuku was getting annoyed at Overhaul's judgemental questioning, finishing, "If we succeed, we'll have proven that we can do just that. Failure isn't an option, but refusing to even try to forge a better life is even more unacceptable."

Overhaul stood still for a moment, then responded, "You have ambitions. But that doesn't constitute a plan. You're being a little vague, don't you think?"

Overhaul took a step backwards. "I, on the other hand, have a plan. A plan for the world, a plan for my organisation, a plan for me. Your convictions aren't worth much without the foresight to back them up. You're only espousing platitudes."

Magne and Himiko nearly made to take a step forwards, but restrained themselves. Izuku had to maintain his stern demeanour, so he couldn't really express his concern that Overhaul's taunts might cause the more passionate members of the League to begin getting very, very angry.

Overhaul admitted, "I didn't come here to join the League of Villains today. But I did come with a proposition."

Izuku narrowed his eyes harshly. This man didn't come here for the reasons they had claimed they had. And he'd surrounded the building. Izuku put his hands behind his back and held up two fingers, signalling Mr Compress to contact Dabi.

Overhaul continued, "Deku, I think you and I have some common ground. We both want to change society, and we both want to challenge the state of the world. But if I'm correct in my assumption, we've also got one more thing in common. We both want to rule the underworld. And there aren't two thrones for two rulers."

Izuku subtly made sure his energy was focused on Air Cannon so he could quickly respond to an ambush attempt.

"But I have a plan, and you don't. If you wanted to actually get somewhere with your message, you could use my plan. If you really care about your 'reformation', you won't let pride get in your way."

Izuku responded, a bit of bite in his voice, "What are you suggesting, Overhaul? Get to the point."

Overhaul ignored the attitude, "It's quite simple. I'm suggesting that you work under me and my organisation. You'll have a plan to work with in order to achieve your goals and ambitions, and in exchange your manpower and popularity will fuel my aspirations to take over the criminal underworld."

Izuku could hear the feet rushing forward behind him before he'd even looked. His preparation
paid off in a way he didn't expect as he threw two minor blasts of Air Cannon to either side of him. The approachers were stopped in their tracks. Small exhales from Himiko, Tomura and Magne identified the aggressors. *Better safe than sorry...*

Overhaul smirked, "So, is that your quirk?"

*I see... he was baiting my teammates to get me to show my hand.*

Izuku calmly responded, "Not quite. You've read the news reports, so I'm assuming you have some basic understanding of what I can really do."

Overhaul replied, gesturing downwards with his hand, "Calm down. I'm merely proposing you join my organisation. Is the shoe really that uncomfortable when it's on the other foot?"

Magne piped up, "The fuck it is! Why would we go about trying to be free just to end up bending knee to a smug bastard like you?"

Izuku raised an arm to silence Magne before she made this any worse than it already was.

Izuku clarified, "They're right, you know. Working underneath you would contradict some of the message we want to send; that the quirkless and downtrodden can accomplish these great changes against far more powerful and greater quirks all on their own merits. In pursuit of that goal, we can't accept outside aid."

Overhaul shrugged, tilting his head up a bit condescendingly, "So do you intend to just shamble aimlessly, hoping to eventually reach your goals without any idea how you're going to get to them? Your enthusiasm needs to be curbed by focus, and I will offer the guidance and leadership you need to accomplish that."

Izuku felt his gut tightening up. He wasn't really wrong in his assumption that the League's long-term goals were vague and hazy. He offered a level of certainty, in exchange for taking a measure of control.

Himiko's previously friendly smile towards a new member had turned sour in the face of a contractor, growling, "I don't think we need you. Did you really expect to just walk in here and take over our operations, just like that, no strings attached? Not a chance, many strings! Many, many strings, enough that you'll get tied up and *CHOKE* there are so many strings involved here."

Mr Compress stepped forwards, hurriedly making his way to Izuku's side.

Izuku whispered, "Any reports?"

Mr Compress replied, "It seems Dabi's muted his mic to keep himself better hidden, so I didn't hear any response from him. We'll hear back from-"

Overhaul looked over to the door as a knock sounded on it. He opened the door, using as few fingers as he could to move it, revealing a collection of various faces, clad in similar masks to the ones he wore.

They dumped a battered and bruised Dabi directly onto the ground in front of them, whereby Overhaul swiftly removed his glove and held his hand over Dabi's bleeding head threateningly.

Overhaul's measured gaze returned to the group.

"Well, it seems we have yet another thing to negotiate over."
**Tense negotiations**

Chapter Summary

Diplomacy; /dɪˈplɒməsi/, noun: Being willing to work with people you'd like to kick in the mouth.

Their options were severely limited. But Izuku knew his friends well. He felt the air around him grow hotter as every last member of the League heated with fury over being condescended to, especially in the face of the capture of one of their own.

But again, their options were limited. They could allow themselves to be assimilated by threat, or they could try to rush down Overhaul now, before even a single second of threat could escape his masked mouth.

If they waited any longer, they'd lose their last opportunity to take the element of surprise. The rest of those yakuza were making their way into the room.

Ultimately, though, the decision wasn't entirely Izuku's to make. Yes, he's the leader of the group. But still... something felt wrong about ordering them to fight and sacrifice their own lives to uphold a policy of pride. It didn't feel right. If Izuku was to feel comfortable ordering this now or in the future, ever, Izuku needed to wait just one second. And see how they all responded.

Within a second, his felt his allies surreptitiously reach for their weapons, he felt the heartbeats of their quirks quicken with power. When his allies rushed forwards this time, Izuku did not stop them.

Magne magnetised Dabi as fast as she could, focusing on getting him out of the fray first and foremost. Kurogiri stepped forward and Himiko slid so she was directly opposite Dabi with a mere nod from Magne. Blowing a raspberry at the yakuza across the room, she glowed pink with polarising magnetism from Magne's quirk, sending Dabi flying towards Himiko. Only a few feet in front of him, a purple warp opened to swallow Dabi and guide him to safety.

Overhaul shot his hand out towards Dabi. His hand seemed so confident, and his reach didn't seem to be aiming to grab or clutch at Dabi to keep him; the hand lurched forward only in an attempt to brush against him. Whatever Overhaul's quirk could do, Izuku could see making direct contact with Dabi would mean certain death.

Izuku bent low to the ground and sent his arms rocketing outward with the full force of his stoop, firing unrelenting blasts of wind. Izuku's low pose helped prevent some of the backlash from the reckless blast of Air Cannon, but even then it still nearly sent him flying backwards. He dug in with his boot heels and stood his ground, powering through until the blast became concentrated on the group of faces conveniently funnelled through the doorway, tightly clustered together...

Overhaul was thrown backwards a few paces as Dabi leapt into the portal, but a man stepped in front of Overhaul before the more concentrated burst could hit him, summoning a massive barrier around the remainder of the group as they squeezed through the entrance, beginning to spread out into a group, trying to circle around the League.
Dabi was spat out of a portal Kurogiri opened behind him, landing heavily on the floor, cursing under his breath. Within a moment, he'd gotten back up on his feet and turned to face the Shie Hassaikai with the rest of the League of Villains, snarling furiously.

Dabi spluttered incredulously, "Those bastards ambushed me!"

Izuku responded evenly, not for a second taking his eyes off of the yakuza in front of him, "No-one is blaming you, Dabi."

Mr Compress responded, "I think you probably should have used your earpiece, you know. Backup can sometimes help."

Dabi tapped his head in aggravation, drawing attention to the fact that his earpiece was clearly no longer on his person.

Mr Compress tilted his head slightly, "How on earth did you lose-"

Dabi pointed at one of the yakuza, the one with the black beak and visible eyes, his blond hair covering the right side of his face. He was spinning Dabi's headset in his hands mockingly.

His dark-ringed eyes lit up as he jeered, "Don't underestimate us, you hear me?"

Dabi growled, "It was a quirk. Of course I'd have called for backup if I could. He vanished my earpiece away from me before I could so much as blink."

Izuku measured up Overhaul. He still had the same dispassionate expression, marred by surprised anger at his bargaining chip being taken away from him.

Izuku prepared himself for a major Rock Boil activation, hoping to drop as many of the Shie Hassaikai into lava as he could.

Tomura wrung his hands, stepping forward, "I think we've already got a policy for murderous shits like you."

A black-suited figure with a stitched white mask stepped forward, pointing a disproportionately long and thin arm at Tomura, screaming, "Well then you shouldn't have sent out spies, should you, you little weasels!? We run a higher class of organisation here, we're the goddamn Yakuza!"

Izuku pointed out, "As it happens, we had good reason to conduct recon on you. It turns out we discovered very useful information; we're dealing with vindictive and arrogant villains who will happily resort to blackmail to get what they want."

Overhaul responded with unnerving sharpness, "Of course. Are you naïve? Do you not yet understand the position you are in?"

Izuku took a moment to look around him. Overhaul's demeaning attitude would eventually give way to anger and an organisational battle if nothing further was done.

And then he saw it. He noticed the second Mustard dashing towards the group, as the real Mustard stood proudly with his hands on his hips and as Twice shirked away in a terrified pose while laughing hysterically.

The Mustard clone dove into the ranks of the Shie Hassaikai in a puff of pink Sleep Gas, as much as it could put out in the short timespan it was allowed. Mustard's cockiness faded slightly when he remembered that the lot of them wore plague masks that made his gas-based quirk less effective,
but the rest of the League took it as a signal to attack while their vision was still impaired.

And then, Izuku got a good glance at something truly terrifying.

Overhaul slammed his hand into the clone of Mustard, turning it into a stain on the floor. Shattering it into an absolute pile of gunk and mashed fleshy body parts. In the brief moment before the bloody mess turned into the liquid remnants of one of Twice's clone, it looked like Overhaul had completely disassembled Mustard, right down to the very matter holding him up.

Izuku got a good glance at the kind of power a real supervillain had. The kind of power he wanted and needed.

The League began to get stuck in, and Izuku tried to call out for his teammates to hold their defensive positions, but most of them had already began to rush the enemy down.

Izuku watched as, from Overhaul's body outwards, the ground began to shift into a sharp mass of jagged spikes. With one hand on the ground, the ground itself seamlessly reshaped to his liking.

Izuku activated Rock Boil, thankful for his preparation, pushing outwards with his arms as if to knock over the obstacles himself. The lethal spikes drooped over, collapsing onto a pool of lava and magma. Overhaul looked over at Izuku's strained expression, suddenly making the transition between annoyed and furious.

His allies were still tumbling towards the lava. Izuku swallowed something deep inside himself to give himself room to breathe, pushing his energy through himself as quickly as he could. He felt a burning sensation in his body as his power rushed through him like a jet of steam, pushing it's power into Cooling. He pushed outwards again for emphasis, lending power to his movements almost like he was encouraging the power to rocket out from his outstretched arms...

The lava cooled down into hard rock just as his allies rolled into it, while the Shie Hassaikai had been forced to take a step back from the rolling waves of molten rock.

Dabi, despite his lurching stance, held a handful of flame right up at the face of one of Overhaul's subordinates, the largest one, like he was looking for any excuse to blow him up. Himiko had a knife in each hand, coiled up to pounce on the one with a burlap sack on his head. Mustard was holding lest his quirk knock out everyone present, and Magne was looking for an excuse to magnetise the one with the barrier quirk to keep him from salvaging the situation. It also helped that she was about ready to baseball-swing at someone with a giant magnet the size of a girder.

Overhaul raised an eyebrow, then held up a hand to quieten the more aggressive members of his team. In particular the big guy looked as if he was about to scream and charge every single one of the League members he could.

Overhaul returned to an upright, composed appearance, quietly noting, "Hm... the rumours seem accurate... I wonder how much power you really have from that quirk of yours."

Another interaction to get me to show my hand!?

Izuku was barely able to hold back his rage, "You held one of my own teammates hostage. You don't have the luxury to just stand there, muttering to yourself! Are we going to finish this, or not!?"

Overhaul blinked, once. Afterwards, he held up his hands in defeat, "I would risk losing too many valuable subordinates by engaging you here and now. I'd rather not repeat mistakes such as the ones you made in throwing away pawns like Muscular and Moonfish."
Izuku levelled Overhaul's expression, refusing to accept his apathy, "Moonfish was regrettable. But Muscular was no mistake, I took care of him myself."

Overhaul's raised eyebrow became confusion, "You threw away one of your own valuable assets?"

Izuku spat back, "Yes. He revelled in the slaughter of children. He was a disgrace who would've tarnished our name. No matter how valuable he might've been, we won't compromise the value of what we hope to achieve just to make it easier to achieve."

Overhaul paused. He clearly didn't agree with what Izuku was saying... but he still looked like he understood, at the very least.

Overhaul eventually spoke, "You've made yourself quite clear. We clearly have far less common ground than I thought."

Izuku pressed on, "I repeat, Overhaul; are we going to finish this, or not? If you've no further business with us, leave before my friends here run out of patience."

Overhaul responded, "On the contrary, I think we have far more in the way of business now than before. Thesis and Antithesis compliment each other, after all."

Izuku had heard that kind of sentiment expressed before. That willingness to be challenged by another's philosophy. Here, it rang hollow.

A part of him really wanted to give the order to attack. They had the advantage, and were holding a few of their members up. Most of them were silently encouraging him to just attack this guy. It'd be so simple, if he was so willing to throw his teammates into the fires they seemed intent on jumping into.

Izuku relented, "If it's another attempt to encourage cooperation, I hope it's better than last time. We're not joining your organisation. We will accept nothing less than being your equals, at the very least."

Overhaul took a brief glance to his side. The eyes of his teammate were obscured by the mask he wore, but somehow Overhaul got something out of the look anyway.

Overhaul reached into his jacket pocket, throwing a small card towards Izuku. It had a logo printed on it of an angular lotus blossom.

Overhaul gestured to the rest of the League, "I feel it would be best to discuss these arrangements at a later date. This atmosphere is contrary to forward progress."

Izuku stuck his hand out, and waited, looking at Overhaul expectantly. For a moment, he looked nervous, then members of the League, most of them looking angry both at Overhaul and Izuku, cautiously stepped aside and gave Overhaul no excuse to not accept the chance to prove his sincerity.

Overhaul stepped forward, looking at the outstretched hand with no attempt to disguise his disgust. Eventually, he put out his own hand, and shook it. And in that moment, their eyes met. And they both had the same look on them; could I use my quirk right now, to end this?

All For One doesn't activate quickly enough to steal Overhaul's quirk. If Izuku tried, he'd be blown to smithereens. Overhaul couldn't use his quirk right now because his back was to the majority of the League of Villains. In that moment, something was established. This alliance could only be temporary. They were only allies until they weren't anymore. Overhaul would not factor in Izuku's
kindness at overlooking his aggression. His eyes showed hostility clearer than anything else.

He pulled away from the handshake first, wiping his hand on his trouser leg. All signs pointed to him being pretty badly germophobic.

With a short bow, Overhaul walked out of the door, signalling for the Shie Hassaikai to follow him. After a huff, they did, leaving behind Dabi's earpiece on the ground.

Izuku walked past the rest of the League to retrieve the earpiece. Most of them looked deflated. Disappointed.

Izuku stooped down, picking up the headpiece. When he got back onto his feet, Himiko was standing in front of him, gripping her knife tightly enough to have clear white knuckles.

She began to lean aggressively, Magne and Spinner following suit.

Izuku chuckled dryly, "I know. I'm too cowardly a leader, aren't I?"

Himiko tried to say something, stuttered, caught herself, then answered, "Honestly... yes. We're not working with them."

Dabi pointed towards his arm, pointing out multiple cuts and bruises, "They ambushed me, you're not expecting us to-"

Izuku interrupted, his expression changing to a sharp determination he'd never shown before. Because he'd never ordered the start of a mission before.

"We're not working with them."

Mr Compress put a hand to the chin of his mask, "We're going to... pull a fast one on them? Is that wise?"

Izuku gestured harshly, "They expect us to be behaving like that. Going back and forth on whether we 'need' their help, unsure of ourselves. I'm telling you there's no way that Overhaul's plan for the future is compatible with ours. I'm sure of it."

Tomura smiled, "I'm with Deku on this one. They're bastards. But still..."

Tomura looked at Izuku expectantly.

"Doesn't mean we can't trick them, right? Pretend to work with 'em, to find out what they have planned."

Izuku returned the smile proudly, "Exactly. This is our chance to undermine an organisation more prepared than us without throwing our own members into the fire."

Kurogiri rose up, "I appreciate the sentiment, but the question of 'how do we take them out from the inside' has no immediately clearer an answer than 'how do we defeat them in open combat'."

Himiko grinned at the idea of infiltration, "Well, we'll only know that when we actually know their plan, right? This is all for intel."

Izuku threw Dabi his earpiece, "I want to make sure we keep up our track record of returning attacks on our membership tenfold."

Dabi grunted, rolling his sore shoulder, "It's nothing. This ain't about me, lets not kid ourselves.
Don't use me as a goddamn excuse for you taking initiative."

Izuku was kind of put off by Dabi's hostility. "H-Hang on, what?"

Dabi leaned forwards, "You're starting a battle you aren't sure if you can win, so you wanna use the fact they injured me as an excuse for you making a big move in case it doesn't pay off."

Izuku grit his teeth, "I'm certain, Dabi. We're not going to fail. We can challenge them and win."

"Then just say it."

Izuku took a deep breath.

"We're going to take down the Shie Hassaikai."

Dabi wiped a little bit of blood from his head, smirking, turning to the rest of the group.

"Alright, looks like we've finally got some orders."
Meeting with a Demon

Chapter Summary

"Will you keep this power and use it well?"

Since the very beginning, Mirio Togata was the kind that had to struggle to achieve greatness. He was grateful for the quirk he'd been given, it was extremely powerful. But he had to work to make it powerful, mastering each and every technique he put into his training routine. The downsides of Permeation would ruin him if he didn't take some effort to fight it.

From what we knew of him, it seems like Midoriya feels the same way, just with an added dash of intense bitterness. He didn't have any opportunity to grow, he wasn't given a chance. To be born quirkless in a world like this... Mirio could only imagine the kind of pain he must've faced. If Mirio hadn't been able to pursue his dream at that age, his dream of rescuing a million people...

It didn't excuse his actions. This villain was going to put innocent lives on the line. Mirio couldn't let his empathy get in the way of doing what needs to be done. It's just, in terms of villains who wielded the kind of catastrophic power Midoriya did, you could get much worse.

"Mirio? My boy? Are you feeling alright?"

Mirio snapped out of his contemplation. All Might stood there, worried concern lining his thin, sharp jaw. Seeing the symbol of peace like this was never easy. But mostly because it ended up making Mirio concerned for his health. In terms of heroism, it was kind of inspiring; seeing someone fight on for the good of all, powering through his own frailties. It was inspiring. A sign that almost anyone could be a great hero if they put their soul into it.

Well... almost. In light of the recent information given to Mirio about the nature of All Might's quirk... it made all the more sense why Midoriya had sunk into the darkness, so willingly.

Mirio put on a smile. The last thing he needed right now was for All Might or any of the others to start worrying about him. Staying strong in times like this is what makes or breaks a hero, after all.

"I'm doing fine, All Might. It's just that there are a lot of factors to consider. Becoming a beacon of light at this time would be an intense role to take up. Especially considering that, y'know, Midoriya has already taken up his role, too. It feels like the holders of those two powers are almost destined to clash."

All Might bowed his head slightly, "Yes. I'm sure that Midoriya will be your greatest obstacle. Inevitably, you will have to face him."

Mirio clucked his tongue a bit, frowning, "Is there no other way? I don't know if this is really alright for me to say, but... I don't know... is it true he's not got any confirmed kills under his belt?"

All Might nodded, "He's still... inexperienced. However he has stolen the quirks of a few figures around town. He is amassing power. And when he gets enough of it..."
Bakugo spoke up from the wall he was leaning on, a snarl having built up on his face as the conversation went on, "If you have any qualms about this, let me take the fucking quirk. I'd deck Izuku in a heartbeat. Trust me, he's not going to give up this poisonous shtick without having some sense beaten into him."

All Might continued, "One For All is for life, not just for this mission, young Bakugo. I admire your passion, but you must be prepared to carry the burden of this strength the rest of your days, and use it for the betterment of the world tirelessly."

Bakugo couldn't quite hide his frustration, but eventually he quit leaning against the wall, standing upright.

Bakugo growled, "Well, what are me and half-and-half doing here, huh? I didn't take time out of my fucking schedule just to watch a glorified crowning ceremony for this round-nosed bastard."

Todoroki rolled his eyes, indicating to Mirio that Bakugo did not speak for both of them. They made quite the pair, those two! But as a team, the coolheaded one and the fiery one should compliment each other nicely. It'd be up to Mirio Togata, Lemillion, to steer them in the right direction.

All Might settled them down, "Calm yourselves. The two of you have very important roles to play. I'm not stating for certain that my quirk will go to Mirio yet; what I am saying is that he's certain to guide you best as a leader. I have confidence not just that he will do excellently, but that he will encourage you two to do your best as well."

Mirio smiled cheerfully, "I know it's a great responsibility. But I won't let you down!"

"Yeah, I know, you won't let us down. But I'm still not sure I believe you know what you're doing here."

Dabi looked down at Izuku, who was spinning the card Overhaul had given him in his fingers, apparently to calm himself down.

Izuku chuckled nervously, "Well... it's all part of the learning experience, isn't it? That's why I've got some friends to help show me the ropes."

Tomura groaned, "Look, it's not like we've got a whole lot of formal villain training either. Especially in the dumb business side of things. Sensei... never really got to teach me that stuff."

Izuku gulped a bit. It's true that Sensei's loss was affecting the League in many ways. It'd be massive stretch to call the League of Villains 'professional' at the moment. Thankfully, they did have a few among them who had quite a lot of knowledge...

Mr Compress span his cane around once, tapping it against his side when he was done, "It's very simple, Deku. He's left you a card with coordinates to organise a Black Communion. If you're able to attend one of those and strike up some kind of agreement, you might be able to leverage some of the details of his plan away from him."

Izuku stiffened up for a moment, his eyes nervously straying from side to side.
Seeing his fear, Himiko asked the question Izuku was too nervous to vocalise, "Um... what's a black communion?"

Mr Compress paused for a second, "Well, I don't suppose you'd know... simply put, it's an ancient tradition among villainous organisations; a meeting in which no secrets may escape, no propositions disclosed may ever be mentioned again, and not a hint of the meeting's existence will be recorded. It's also a tradition that no violence will occur during such a meeting but, well, ups and downs, you know?"

Mr Compress laughed heartily, trying to bring Izuku out of the nervousness his explanation had just put him in.

Kurogiri, the other 'expert' in this debate, spoke up, "Up until now, our organisation has been extremely passionate, with a kind of devotion that most greater organisations can only dream of. But now, we've got to pack all of that energy into a tangible, solid form. A plan, a structure and an ultimatum we can give to the world."

Tomura quipped, "So what he's saying is, don't mess this up. Find out their plan, so we can make our plan."

Izuku was able to press himself into a determined glare, a hint of a smile on his faces. His companions needed some confidence that Izuku could handle this tactfully and carefully.

Himiko piped up, "Also, just a side note, if you can find a way to get someone's blood without anyone noticing, collect it please. I can use that to maybe help out in further infiltration efforts."

Twice, who'd been downtrodden this entire meeting spoke up, "Yeah, what she said! It's incredibly unlikely that you'd be able to find blood without hurting anyone. It's a terrible idea. But got for it! I have full confidence in you!"

Even Twice, who'd been upset thus far about the meeting with his recruit going so horribly, seemed to still have faith Izuku would be able to walk into the belly of the beast and come out the other side alright.

Izuku looked over at the clock on the wall. 10:00pm. About an hour before he could meet with the Shie Hassaikai, if he headed to the right location.

Izuku forced a smile once more, faking confidence until he became confident.

Matter-of-factly, he said, "Well... I'll need to head out now if I want to make it to the meeting point in time."

Dabi, apparently still upset over the hostage situation, interjected, "Y'know, if you want, I could head to the meeting point too. Give Deku a bit of backup, just stay by the sidelines in case of emergency."

Kurogiri clarified, "Your caution is warranted, but unfortunately if those yakuza detect any other person but mister Midoriya waiting nearby, they will simply refuse to show up. If we need to appear as reinforcements, my portals will do more than enough to facilitate our arrival. They were foolish enough to give me direct coordinates, after all."

Dabi huffed, "Fine. No revenge today. But at least we've got a way to get there quick, I suppose... stay safe, alright?"

The atmosphere in the room was pretty tense. They were all concerned about Izuku's safety, which
was touching enough that it almost overpowered the sense of dread that came from this many people fearing for Izuku's safety. But it didn't. Izuku was still pretty anxious.

Izuku kept a mask of confidence on, finishing, "I'm going to head out. I'll signal you with my earpiece if anything goes wrong."

Tomura was flexing his fingers irritably, obviously agitated by the whole situation. With great difficulty, he squeezed out the League's final farewell, "Good luck."

Izuku nodded, then headed up the stairs, to the hatch that lead to the outside world.

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Izuku had been standing at the meeting place for about 10 minutes, which was 10 minutes too long. It was in the business district of the city, on one of the rooftops; in a position that any one of these buildings could be linked to the yakuza, but the meeting point itself was far enough away from the public that villains would likely not be seen.

The Shie Hassaikai seemed to pride themselves on their punctuality and organisational prowess. Which meant if they were late to the meeting, they were late on purpose. Forcing Izuku to wait out in the cold for a while...

A man, clad in a black suit and not wearing one of the plague-masks from earlier, walked up. A regular yakuza worker or hired thug, apparently.

The man spoke roughly, "So... what are you here for? With the cold air and whatnot, it ain't pleasant. A kid all alone on a rooftop... a guy might get concerned, y'know?"

*All alone on a rooftop... it wouldn't be the first time.*

The last time Izuku was on a rooftop, he'd thought very differently to how he did now. He'd looked out over the cityscape and wondered why everything had turned out the way it did. He'd been small, weak, powerless and blind to the truth. That shame, humiliation... it felt like it was a lifetime away.

It's incredible how the same view looks so different to him now. Where he once felt these towering buildings were unchanging and opposing, he now felt like he could topple them and build anew. When he looked down at the people below, previously jealous of the certainty and confidence they had in their lives, he now knew that they were blind to the true character of the world.

He'd grown so much. He'd met so many great people. And he'd become so much stronger.

He reached into his pocket and flung the business card at the man. He caught it, flipping it over to ensure the lotus insignia was genuine and not some kind of forgery.

The man mumbled, "Huh... so you're the guy, huh?"

Izuku nodded firmly, having had about enough contemplation up here. He'd found his determination.

The man walked to the door, gesturing for Izuku to follow him, taking him on a walk through the city to find one of their bases hidden entrances.
Chapter Summary

Izuku delves into the Shie Hassaikai headquarters to have a nice conversation with a yakuza boss.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The tunnels ran deep. A maze of grey walls, steel doorways, and tiled that made loud, echoing taps as your feet landed on them. It seemed pretty clinical and organised, but the fact that all the doors were sealed, he had to be led through the building by a guard, and the overall lack of lighting made for a dangerous atmosphere. It was like that unnerving feeling you get before you visit the dentist.

Izuku, however, was managing to keep himself calm through all this. He tried to get as much information as he could out of his surroundings, but it seemed as if the walls had been laid bare before him. He didn't see a single other person as he was led through the halls. That in itself told him something.

Eventually, the man leading him stopped, opening one of the doors in front of him wordlessly. Izuku knew better than to look like an amateur by asking something dumb like "so is this the place?" and quietly stepped inside.

Two couches. One of them was seemingly empty. The other was seating Overhaul. Without his jacket, elbows resting on his knees, in his shirt and tie, he looked almost like a respectable high-class businessman. Or he would have, were it not for the ear piercings and the massive plague mask.

Overhaul gestured to the other chair, "Won't you take a seat?"

The man who had led Izuku here didn't even have to be told to leave. Without entering the room or even looking in Overhaul's direction, he closed the door behind them and walked away.

Izuku sat down on the couch, across a small table from the yakuza boss. Overhaul leaned forward, his head tilted expectantly. Again, he was trying to get a read on Izuku, and he wasn't being subtle about it.

Izuku took a deep breath. Change your perception entirely. You're not sitting down next to Overhaul to gather information, or harm him. You're just here to propose a deal. Eliminate all other thoughts from your mind. He'll see them, eventually.

After a while of testing Izuku for cracks in his composure, Overhaul began, "So, you've made it clear you have no interest in joining our ranks. But you still followed the card's instructions. Have you changed your mind?"

Izuku had to prevent Overhaul from performing a hard sell. He replied, "No. I think it might be difficult for either of us to blend with the other. Whatever you think of the League of Villains, we are proud of ourselves and our motives. We can't compromise."
Overhaul's eyes hooded a bit, with something close to a smirk in his eyes, "I have ambitions I will not compromise, also. It really does seem like it is impossible for us to work together."

Izuku raised a finger, "It is, but only if we are focused on assimilating each other. What I'm proposing is more like... a partnership."

Overhaul raised an eyebrow languidly, "As equals, you mean?"

Izuku nodded firmly, "Precisely. If we respect each others boundaries, I think both of our goals will be closer than ever."

Overhaul took a hand to his chin, "Hmm... what if our goals conflicted with each others? I haven't told you anything about my plans, after all."

He's getting right to the root of the issue; information. How much of it can I get him to share before I have to dig deeper by myself?

Izuku disguised this with a slight forward lean to shield his eyes a bit, responding, "That's true. That's why I followed the instructions to meet you, in your base, to discuss your plans. You already know all about us, after all. Once I know who we would be working with, we can discuss whether there's a way to operate in a way that lets us both prosper."

Overhaul straightened up a bit, eventually rolling his neck about as if to shake off fatigue. He rose to his feet, tapping on the glass of the metal door. A loud clanging noise issued from the framework, as the door's highly-powered locks opened up, and Overhaul pushed the door open with his shoe.

Overhaul looked back, waving Izuku to follow him.

Overhaul talked as he walked, his voice echoing down the corridor, "You're starting to sound far more reasonable. I'll indulge your nosy attitude, if only to prove to you the value of a truly well-explored plan."

When Mustard was finished training that day, he'd managed to give himself about 2 stitches and 4 bruises from falling over. Bumps and scratches obtained from trying to push himself to the maximum limit. It didn't help that he had to remain calm and collected to really control the amount of Sleep Gas he released with his quirk.

But progress was progress. When those jackass mafia punks rolled around again, Mustard would be ready. He'd prove his strength, and consolidate his position as a valuable member of the team. To Izuku and himself. He'd be worth saving. Which was why he put himself through hell and back today. He was kind of limping.

Might've overdone it a bit...

Overall, he wanted to rest and relax. It'd been a long day. So when he saw Himiko pacing back and forth rapidly in the main hall, he made to pass by her as quickly as he could. No way he was going to be roped in to another event of lunacy by her. Dabi was over on the couch, presumably listening to her rambling.
Dabi was muttering, laid out on the couch but paying attention, "So what, you're... excited, then? It sounds like you're getting what you wanted, right?"

Mustard had reached the other side of the room. He had just enough time to notice that Himiko had an unsure, nauseous expression on her face, before she whirled around to meet Dabi, bursting into a grin.

Himiko clasped her hands together cheerily, "Definitely, yeah! Exciting! That's a good description. It's just... we're stuck, sitting here, y'know? We could probably be doing more to help. I'm the infiltrator, for goodness sakes!"

Dabi's expression didn't shift, "I get that you're the restless type, but don't you think that'd be doing stuff just for the sake of doing it? Are you bored?"

Himiko waved her hands around dismissively, "No, no, that's not it. I'm on the edge of my seat over here! I'm wringing my hands, uh, twiddling my thumbs. Occasionally shivering a bit, to be honest. It's kind of like boredom, in that I can't sit still, and I feel like I've got to head out and do something..."

Dabi leaned his head back, looking at Himiko quizzically, "Hang on... you said you were kind of 'unsure how you were feeling'. I really am not sure I wanna know the answer to this but... are you just worried?"

Himiko's smile melted into a half-smile. She looked down at her feet, deflating.

Dabi leaned forward, frowning with something midway between disapproval and concern, "Excuse me, what the hell are you trying to imply here? You ain't been worried before? Scared?"

Himiko picked herself up a bit, trying to explain herself, "Of course I've been afraid! It's just... y'know. It's a reaction to being attacked, or the anticipation of it. It happens when you're threatened and it quickly passes. It's adrenaline. But this form of fear isn't going away, and I'm not in any peril that'd make me feel that way. Is this normal?"

Dabi's face twisted up at her last statement. 'Is this normal'. Mustard became aware that he'd been standing still in the archway leading out of the common room, but by this point he didn't even care. What kind of a life do you have to live to not ever be concerned for the well-being of anyone else?

It's one thing to ignore the danger another person faces. But to not ever encounter it? How is that possible?

Mustard whirled around, trying to butt in, "Hey, hang on here, you're worried? About what?"

Himiko went quieter than she'd been before. By now, her smile had faded entirely, her fangs obscured by a neutral expression. Her eyes looked dull.

Dabi answered in her stead without missing a beat, almost like he knew Himiko wouldn't be able to, "It's about Izuku's mission. He's in enemy territory, after all. I don't get what this crazy chick wants. She was the one encouraging Izuku to be bold and act a little braver. Wilder. And now she's stressing out about it."

Himiko quietly muttered, "...I kind of thought we'd be there with him, though."

A scratchy voice called out from right behind Mustard, "You don't have to worry about Izuku."

Tomura walked into the room, walking straight in front of Himiko.
Tomura steadied himself to look straight into her eyes, even as they tried to avoid his, "I'm sure he's going to pull this off. Relax."

After a moments pause, Tomura clamped a thumb and forefinger on Himiko's shoulder, shaking her, "Hey. Look at me."

Tomura managed to retain his gaze as she looked up, finally meeting his eyes, "I'm absolutely certain he'll be alright."

Himiko took a deep breath, slumping down a little bit like she'd pushed a bit of tension out of her spine.

Himiko managed a small smile, "Thanks, handyman."

Tomura took a step back, looking around the room. Dabi looked like he'd been slapped across the face with shock over what had happened, and Mustard's surprised expression was mercifully hidden behind his helmet.

Tomura announced to anyone who could hear him, "I've known Izuku for a long time now. I have full confidence in him. Sensei chose him to lead us, okay? We've just got to be patient."

After that final statement, Tomura slouched over to his usual demeanour, making to walk out of the room.

Mustard waited by the archway, a little bewildered by Tomura's sudden change in leadership capability.

Mustard tried to catch his attention as he walked by, asking, "Why don't you ever sound that confident when Izuku's actually around to hear it, huh?"

Tomura simply said, "Shut it." And kept on walking, going back the exact same way he came from.

Izuku found himself in a small laboratory. It looked like merely a storage container for some of the products created in a much larger scientific research facility. There were simply too many plans and products in this space for it to have all been created here.

Overhaul held up a small bullet in two of his fingers, letting Izuku have a good look at it. Afterwards, he signalled for Izuku to hold out his hand, and dropped the bullet into his palm.

Izuku held the bullet in a similar fashion. It looked to be completely custom built. It's shell seemed flimsy, but it was too heavy to be hollow. Something was inside this metal casing.

Overhaul asked, "Do you have any idea what this is?"

Izuku curled his fist around it, as if trying to feel out its weight a bit better, or maybe shake it to see if it contained powder. Out of caution, he tapped into All For One.

And he felt something. By this point, it'd been reduced to a tiny swishing sensation, not the thumping heartbeat of full quirks, like the ones he possessed. But something was there. Some presence that felt like energy.
Izuku nearly stuttered over his response. He hoped Overhaul would just take it as a crack in his confidence, rather than the birth of suspicion.

"No, I'm afraid I don't."

Chapter End Notes

So many of you seem excited to see Eri, the precious bean.

I couldn't agree more.
Ammunition factory

Chapter Summary

Izuku does some investigating

Overhaul looked unsurprised at Izuku's response, and Izuku dared to hope that his fear didn't creep its way into his facial expressions at all.

Izuku held the bullet in his palm, the regular point of contact for the activation of All For One. He could feel it just a tiny bit stronger now, that faint strand of energy... if a full quirk inside of a person might be considered a great mane of cultivated fur, this bullet would be like a single strand of hair, plucked from the greater whole and fashioned into this small item.

Something about that, seeing such a faint echo of a stolen power repurposed here, it gave Izuku chills. It was like seeing the tooth of an animal and imagining the pain and suffering of the creature it once belonged to went through in order to remove it.

What kind of power would be needed to create something like this?

Overhaul spoke suddenly, and Izuku suppressed his surprise once again, "I wouldn't expect you to be able to tell just by looking at it."

The way he worded that also made Izuku extremely uncomfortable. He took a moment, allowing himself a silent, deep breath through his nose. He doesn't know, he can't know. He's using wording like that to try and freak you out in a 'just in case' way. Don't let him get to you...

Overhaul tilted his head to the side, "You're looking a little pale."

Izuku put on an easy laugh, hoping to play it off, "Oh, I'm sorry. I had a rough night of sleep, thanks to my teammates."

Overhaul looked a little disapproving. He seemed like the kind of guy who kept his relationships with his underlings short, distant, and purely professional.

Overhaul explained, "This is part of our plan. The bullet you hold in your hand is one small example of the means by which we will achieve our end."

Izuku kept his expression one of curiosity and awe. Perhaps he could gratify Overhaul into revealing more information.

Overhaul continued, "These bullets are particularly special. With perseverance and ambition, I have created weaponry with the ability to erase someone's quirk."

Izuku wasn't quite able to keep himself contained. His eyes went wider, "Erased? As in, completely gone?"

Overhaul seemed a little pleased, "Indeed. Unfortunately, this is just a prototype. In it's current state of development, it's a little lacklustre compared to the results I wish to achieve with it soon. After hitting someone, it will only take away someone's quirk for a few hours."
Izuku pressed on, "And... eventually?"

Overhaul answered, "Eventually, however, we will be capable of manufacturing Quirk Erasing Bullets that will eliminate someone's quirk permanently."

He had a feeling that was going to be the long-term goal, but still... the power to erase quirks, gifted to these bullets by an energy that in itself felt like it originated from a quirk... Izuku could've believed the bullets effects were distilled from an element of All For One if he didn't have that quirk for himself. It only raised more questions about how these were made.

Izuku played into Overhaul's attitude, allowing him to explain his schemes, "Erasing the quirks of others, forever. Is that the goal, or only a means to it?"

Overhaul walked over to the wall, apparently contemplative. Izuku had the ability to pull explanations for his passion from within him quite quickly, but for Overhaul, it seemed to take some deliberation and effort. He furrowed his brow slightly.

Overhaul raised a hand, "Deku, have you ever read about how this world was before quirks started to emerge?"

Izuku responded hesitantly, "Only enough to know about criminal organisations and structures. Quirks are rife in todays culture, among every factor that would play an important role in stopping the League. So that's unfortunately what I have to focus on."

Overhaul nodded approvingly, "Hm. You don't seem like you're terribly fond of quirk society. I knew that much already, but..."

Overhaul turned around, marching over to Izuku, leering at him with his beaked, hardened face, "I wanted to know to what degree. Because my world, my life, revolves around ensuring its destruction, much as yours does. However, I take it all a step further. Your 'reform' isn't enough. I want to wipe the slate clean."

Izuku tried with difficulty to ignore the occasional twinges he felt throughout his body. Holding still in front of a man like this was starting to have its negative effects. For the first time Izuku had ever seen him, Overhaul's posture and language began to grow passionate.

Overhaul pressed on, "You can't just 'alter' or 'reform' a malignant growth such as this. A germ is still a germ, an illness or sickness that has spread where it shouldn't be will still be an unwanted, disgusting presence no matter how you change it. It will still be an impurity. I don't intend to compromise with a disease. I intend to cure it."

Overhaul raised a larger box of bullets.

"These are tools to restore the Shie Hassaikai to power, as much as they are to eliminate the grotesque warping quirks have created on society. By putting the yakuza back in power, we can cure the symptom of 'hero syndrome'. By using these tools to do so, we eliminate quirks, and cut the problem off at the roots."

Overhaul shot Izuku a steely, determined glare where a villainous smile should have been.

"You ask whether these are the end goal, or merely a tool. I say they are both."
Izuku was taking a breather out in the corridor. Overhaul had called the conversation quits for a while and asked Izuku to leave the lab. Apparently he didn't want him seeing any of the other details involving the projects creation. There were a lot of things no-one wanted Izuku to be able to see, apparently.

He hadn't been able to get any more information about the creation of the Quirk Erasing Bullets. The Shie Hassaikai were playing their cards close to the chest, even among potential allies.

Izuku stifled a small smile. He supposed it wasn't necessarily something he could be upset about. They were right, after all; Izuku was looking for a way to sabotage them in the future. The fact that their precautions were getting in his way wasn't exactly surprising.

*God, breaking through barriers, being withheld information. This is beginning to feel like real villainy.*

Izuku had taken a short walk around the building. By this point, a lot of the Shie Hassaikai had passed him, and if they hadn't, Izuku had toured around their rooms. Excising a couple of stray members, people so important that they wouldn't leave their rooms, Izuku had seen all of them.

And he'd surreptitiously marked every single one of them with *Search*.

This quirk was incredible. The ability to get a bead on where every single person is, at all times. If someone was coming around the corner, he would know. If they were responding to a security breach, he would know. If they were taking a damn bathroom break, he would know.

But more importantly than that, Izuku could locate those who *didn't* show up on his radar.

*Search* can only tag people you've seen. But when Izuku turned on Infrared Rays, he saw a couple of heat signatures further down the building. He could only see them through gaps in the walls, such as the ventilation system, but there were a few blips on his radar that weren't linked to any of the people he'd tagged with *Search* that day.

In other words, they were the people who had the important stuff. The stuff they didn't want Izuku to be able to see.

Izuku waited until the corridor was clear. No-one was observing him.

He bent down by the ventilation grate. Getting rid of it would normally be tricky. True, he could melt the stone foundations around the grate, but that'd leave behind an incredibly obvious sign that Izuku had been poking his nose where it didn't belong.

Thank goodness for friends.

Izuku placed a hand on the grate. His left elbow channelled a borrowed strength, pulsating with energy...

The grate was encased, rapidly shrinking into a small blue marble that Izuku snatched up with his palm.

*Thank you, Mr Compress...*

Izuku carefully squeezed into the vent. He decompressed the vent grate, then screwed it back into place behind him. Mooks rounded the corner, their shoes visible, hitting the ground at Izuku's eye-
He tapped a button on the side of his earpiece, turning off his mic feed. Firstly because it ended his radio transmissions; you never know if they might have some way of detecting those. And secondly, because turning his mic off was a signal to his allies. They could take it from here.

He turned back, shuffling slowly and silently inside the metal walls, chasing the sets of heat signatures that came from below.

Back at base, Kurogiri opened up a portal in the adjacent room. Finally. Finally, he'd turned off that damn mic. Now, Himiko was finding it far easier to breathe.

Himiko took a sip of Izuku's blood, relishing the taste of iron on her tongue, melding herself into Izuku's form, observing herself in the mirror as her yellow eyes were transformed into glistening emerald.

Himiko hyped herself up, testing out her new vocal chords, "Alright... showtime!"

Izuku's movements had to be so careful it was anxiety-inducing. If his boots tapped against the metal sides too heavily, if he put too much weight on his knees too suddenly, if he coughed amidst the choking levels of dust in these vents, he'd give himself away. With an organisation as rigorous as this, one fluctuation would be enough to cause the alarms to be sounded.

It didn't help that he had to worry about the grilles in the sides of the vents letting others see him; he had to wait until they moved out of the way to get past. He couldn't always rely on Search to be able to keep track of them. This deep underground, new faces and new foes could be lurking, people Izuku hadn't been introduced to yet. He usually sat silently and waited for them to leave, talk, or be otherwise occupied before he slunk past the prison-bar like gaps in the vents.

It was dark, claustrophobic and, ironically, airless. The dust was so extreme that Izuku was sure if he had asthma, he'd probably have died within the first 5 minutes of crawling.

Then, with Search, he saw something. Someone he'd tagged earlier.

Overhaul was making his way down towards the underbelly of the lair. Maybe it was just a coincidence, but it seemed like he might be heading towards the same heat signature he was tracking idly...

Izuku crawled with more intent. If he even felt the need to check on this area while Izuku was over for a visit, chances are it was important. The only risk was daring to be in the same room as him. He did use his quirk to threaten Dabi, true, but the exact nature of his skill was still an unknown factor.
Izuku rounded another corner. Every time he did so, it felt like he had to tense up to avoid breaking something in his spine. There was only just enough room to let someone crawl through (since they weren't ever meant to be used this way), so for obvious reasons the turns he had to make were not very kind to the human spine.

He’d found the room with the heat signature. It only had one person in it. It was hard to tell which direction they were facing. If he poked his head through the grille into this room, it'd be a huge risk. On the other hand... coming all this way had been for the specific purpose of taking a peek, after all.

Izuku slowly inched his eyes over the metal plates.

It looked like a mix between a dentist's office and a mad scientist's laboratory, with maybe just a dash of slaughterhouse thrown in for good measure. The majority of the room was dominated by a singular, very large bronze chair with all sorts of syringe-like glass cases built into it. Wires poked out of the back of it, reminding him of Sensei's chair a little bit.

Izuku put his nostalgia aside. If it had the same kind of wiring as Sensei's chair, it had to have similar medical capabilities. This was some kind of experimental facility. It's likely that-

Izuku put that thought on pause. He'd found the source of the heat signature. At first he'd thought it might be the chair itself, what with its clear power, but there was actually a very small figure seated on it, small enough to hide behind the armrests and headrests. Izuku only noticed when it started... sniffling?

Izuku focused in. Izuku could only see a pair of small legs poking out from the confines of the chair, clothed in rags and bandages. A small set of hands emerged and wrapped around the knees, pushing the face of the figure into vision as their body lurched forward.

What the... a little girl? Here?

She couldn't have been older than 6 years old, she was absolutely tiny. It didn't help that she also looked... underfed. Thin, with long white hair covering most of her features. She was shaking with nervousness, but she wasn't trying to move at all. She squeezed her legs, as if trying to steel herself. Be brave.

Izuku could tell. He often did the exact same thing.

Izuku's empathy momentarily broke his concentration on being totally hidden. The girls head slowly turned about, as if she could tell she was being watched. Izuku ducked behind the grille, hopefully before she could see him. He did take an extra second to target her with Search. He tried to thin his breath into as small a sound as he could.

A kid. He's hiding a kid. Is he trying to protect her? Is she a family member, his kid? Is this why he doesn't want me-

Again, Izuku was interrupted. The door opened, and Search revealed without Izuku needing to risk even a glance that it was Overhaul.

Overhaul walked forwards, and the girls sniffling stopped. Overhaul hadn't gotten too close, though. He wasn't comforting her. Something about this whole scene made Izuku nauseous before he even understood anything about it.

Overhaul asked, "So, have you been a good girl?"
She stuttered out in a meek voice, "Y-Yes. I didn't go anywhere."

Overhaul continued, his voice incredibly even, "Good. I'm glad you know how to behave when we have guests around."

Overhaul took a step forward, "Our guest is gone now. Our scouts spotted Deku leaving the building just a moment ago."

Izuku smirked.

Overhaul continued after the child's figure nodded, "And now he's gone, I want to make sure, since you've obeyed the rules, that he has as well. Did you see him today?"

The girl drew herself in tighter. Izuku was acutely aware there was a possibility the little kid could've caught a glimpse of him just a moment ago. He held his breath.

"N-No. I don't know how he'd have come down here."

Overhaul paused for a second. That wording she'd just used... either she was bad at lying, or, possibly, she was being very clever and subtly telling Izuku she'd noticed how he'd managed to find her. Because if she did know how he managed to get here, she probably found it just as strange as he did.

After a moment, the yakuza became convinced, "Neither can I. It's important he doesn't, you know. Do you remember why?"

The kid swallowed, "I'll... hurt him?"

Overhaul nodded slowly, "As you do all things. Your curse... would spread through him."

_Curse? What would spread through me... quirk? I take quirks... is he talking about this child's quirk?_

Izuku began to add things together, as the cold sensation in his gut began to build up more and more. _The bullet had the faint essence of a quirk. And Overhaul wanted him to avoid this kid, because... presumably she has a quirk that's powering those bullets? He must've been afraid I would take that quirk from her. If I did, that would scatter his whole plan to the winds._

Izuku began to fully indulge in his thinking, as if to satiate the unsettled feeling crawling through him. _Well... it's true that I could, but... taking a quirk from such a small child might do them a lot of harm. It's not even guaranteed I'd be able to control it. But Overhaul probably can't imagine a scenario in which I wouldn't snatch that quirk away from her._

Overhaul took another step, kneeling down, "Now that my meeting is over, I'll expect to be hearing back from the League in a few days. When I do, I'd like to show them how much further my plan has progressed since we last spoke. Do you understand, Eri?"

The kid shuddered, bringing Izuku out of his internal muttering. It seemed completely involuntary. She wasn't shuddering in the hopes of pity or mercy. She was trying to hide her fear, and she couldn't.

Izuku sat in absolute silence, waiting as his last thought trailed from his mind. _But... taking the essence of a quirk from someone? Who is clearly alive, and sitting right there? How can you possibly-"_
Overhaul placed a hand upon the child's head. And without even a scream, loud, wet, crushing sounds filled the chamber, echoing sickeningly through the vents, as the child named Eri was completely torn apart.
Secondhand tragedy

Chapter Summary

Decisions are made, as Izuku struggles to remain covert

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The compulsion to do something was nearly overwhelming. Izuku's skin crawled and itched, and his legs gently vibrated as if telling him he had to move. Either towards Overhaul, or away from him.

According to Search, he would only be moving towards Overhaul if he attempted to enter the room. Search had deactivated. This kid - Eri - had completely gone off the radar. For all intents and purposes, she was dead.

*Dead. Dead. She died right opposite me. Completely.*

He could still hear noises from within the vents that echoed far too loudly. The most disgusting squelching noises of ripping, crushed flesh. Izuku'd been more than scarred enough just hearing what was happening in the other room... but as awful as this was, there had to be some kind of information he could glean from keeping strong and observing further.

Izuku tapped in to Search, angling his perspective so that this poor kid was being mostly hidden by the back of the chair. Overhaul was emotionlessly plunging his hands into the mess he had made, having snapped very large gloves over one of his hands, the kind you'd expect to be using for dangerous chemicals. He looked mildly grossed out by this whole ordeal, but not because of any emotional attachment. It was just because of the blood, mercifully hidden from Izuku's sight as of now.

*Blood... BLOOD! That's it!* 

Izuku put two and two together. If quirks are genetic, and a product of your genetic makeup, it stands to reason biological deconstruction of someone's DNA could allow you to engineer some facsimile of their quirks effects! That's why this apparent germaphobe was bothering with something even he found unsavoury; this was it. This was how he was making the bullets. Eri's blood.

Izuku's celebration was cut short when his mind wandered into darker places. *If this was how he was making the bullets, then... exactly... how many times had he done this before? How many times had he...*

Izuku fought his urge to gag. He wiped some cold sweat from his brow quietly, then shut his eyes tightly.

Izuku had room, and time. Overhaul was busy with his work, and in full sight of Search. It's about time Izuku found out what Overhaul was made of...

Search flared to life, providing Izuku with some vague images and crude writing, a barebones
impression from Search's observations that could be used to determine the quirk of your observer. Ragdoll used to use this quirk to immediately analyse her foes, but this was the first time Izuku had tried relying on this instead of observing and learning for himself. All For One might be able to take any quirk, but you'll need to train with it like any regular quirk user in order to unlock its true potential.

Izuku couldn't glean much. Pulling things apart, and putting them back together. Twisting the ground. Every image featured a hand placed on the object. A swirl of shifting substance...

So... he changes things, shapes them with his hands. And he can put them back together again.

If Izuku wasn't worried about his breath reverberating through the vents, he'd have breathed a sigh of relief. Eri would live. He needed her to be alive, if only to continue to utilise her blood.

Foul bastard...

He nearly chastised himself for getting so immediately concerned with a civilian. She's an innocent kid and Izuku would never wish harm on her, but to drag yourself down with unnecessary concern isn't very villain-like...

Izuku looked in with Search. Overhaul had taken a syringe and was concentrating on extracting blood and DNA samples. Izuku dared not move while he was in the room. Apart from the abhorrent noises emanating from the chair, it was silent. Any bump or scrape against the walls would give Izuku away.

He couldn't do anything. He had very little chance of being able to defeat Overhaul right now. Even if he could get away with it, if he did so right now, Eri would stay... the way she currently was.

So Izuku sat there, bearing witness to the kind of thing so horrible that no human being can go through them even once.

Nothing but squelching sounds, noises that implied pain without crying.

After Izuku had gone through the motions of feeling sick, Overhaul wordlessly took the sample and left the room. He didn't bother to revive Eri before he left, assumedly to preserve the purity of the samples he had extracted.

With one final grimace of anger, Izuku began to shuffle along the vents, back up the labyrinthine systems, trying as best he could to trace the path he'd taken.

The second he dashed out of the building, he turned on his mic again, and whispered for a pick-up. After a moment or two, Kurogiri traced the signal of Izuku's headset and opened a portal nearby. Izuku jumped straight in, with a lethargic tilt to his movements caused by nausea and exhaustion. Being so tensed up and disgusted for so long was horrible.

Izuku allowed himself to fall into the portal, stumbling over his feet as he hit the floor of the League HQ, before someone caught him, holding him up with an arm on his back.

Izuku turned around to thank his saviour, only to immediately jolt in panic and be dropped onto the
floor immediately.

An exact copy of Izuku Midoriya began to laugh at him in his own voice, "Y-You scared the crap out of me! Why!?"

Izutwo responded, "You've never seen me in a disguise before. I wanted to show you how detailed they are! Good enough to fool those yakuza spies, right?"

Izuku got to his feet, carefully observing his doppelganger, "Okay, mission accomplished, Himiko. That's... deeply disturbing. It's like looking into a mirror."

Izutwo smirked, hooding his eyelids, "Aren't you vain?"

Kurogiri tapped on the barstool, bringing everyone's attention back to the subject at hand, "Speaking of the phrase 'mission accomplished', I think we should lay down the foundations of what new information we have acquired."

Izuku nodded in affirmation, "I totally agree. I think I've gained some new perspective on the Shie Hassaikai and Overhaul. But before then, uh... could Himiko please take off her disguise? It's a little unnerving."

Izutwo went rigid. Then, his cheeks began to bloat with barely contained laughter, until Izutwo was covering his mouth to stifle giggling, doubling over.

Izutwo managed to splutter out, "God! Aren't you forward!? At least join me for dinner first, why don't ya?"

Kurogiri looked at Izutwo in sheer disappointment as they laughed and a bit of Himiko's signature blush began to creep into Izutwo's cheeks.

Izuku nervously inquired, "Uh, Kurogiri? W-What's she referring to?"

Kurogiri explained, barely removing the exasperation from his voice, "Himiko's quirk creates a fluid disguise that fits over her body. Wearing clothes can make utilising certain forms more difficult, as if the person they are emulating is too thin then Himiko's clothes will create protrusions in the disguise and ruin the illusion. As such, she'll... *sigh*... be naked when her quirk is dispelled, sir."

Izuku felt the altogether familiar feeling of rising nervousness again, "T-That's not what I meant, d-dammit."

Izutwo left the room in uproarious laughter, laughter loud enough that it could be heard down the corridors. A laugh that, thankfully, changed pitch and inflection until by the time Himiko closed the door to her room, it began to sound like her own voice again.

Kurogiri sighed, "Children. Absolute children. Only in rare moments do they convince me they have any sort of maturity at all. Thankfully, those moments are adequately impressive..."

Izuku sat down, hoping to calm his nerves. He responded, "Well, what incidents specifically?"

Kurogiri made a motion to raise an eyebrow, "You might be surprised, but it seems the League is able to organise themselves quite well enough, even in your absence."
Izuku smiled, "I already knew that. They're getting along better every day."

Kurogiri waved a hand, "I also already had a strong optimism for them, but Shigaraki still surprised me while you were out."

Izuku leaned forward immediately, "Details, please."

Kurogiri chuckled, "Well, since Himiko has already embarrassed you, I shall embarrass her. She began to get rather nervous for your safety, insisting we provide support in some other way. Out of nowhere, master Shigaraki emerged and instilled confidence in your abilities. He really gelled the team together sir."

Izuku's expression was drawn off for a moment. This joyful trivia momentarily soothed his worrisome discoveries, as his eyes drifted to the staircase leading up to everyone's rooms, including Tomura Shigaraki's.

Izuku let a small, gleeful smile creep up his lips, "He really did?"

A small bell was being rung in the downstairs lounge. Izuku had returned.

Tomura rolled out of his bed, hazily trudging downstairs towards the incessant chatter of the living room, where everyone else had already accumulated.

Izuku was drawing in everyone's attention. The shifty idiot was looking uncomfortable with having so many people paying attention to him. Didn't seem like he'd be doing this if he didn't have anything majorly important to share.

Pssht. Our glorious leader.

Well, he's been forced to step up now.

Izuku broke the silence, waving a hand in the air, "Okay, thanks for all showing up!"

Tomura had to struggle to contain a groan.

Izuku continued, "We all know the Shie Hassaikai are out enemies. They threaten our hold on this world."

Spinner nodded, "Stain's ideology stands with us!"

Some members of the audience like Dabi and Himiko nodded at this one.

Izuku held up a hand again, regaining control of the flow of conversation.

At least he's driving things forward for once.

"But I've made some new discoveries about them. I think they're our enemies for entirely different reasons than we've been lead to believe."

The League began to mutter among themselves, each making spur-of-the-moment guesses as to what that statement could mean, playing detective like morons.
Izuku didn't keep them waiting for long. He reached into his pocket, and pulled out a small bullet with notches in it, holding it up for the audience to see.

Izuku pointed at it as if to highlight it further, saying, "This is a bullet."

*Yes, genius, you've pointed it out already.*

Izuku showed it off a little more, "Overhaul showed this to me in order to flaunt the strength of his schemes. Thankfully for me, he didn't ask for it back, so I didn't return it."

Mustard scoffed, "Okay, it's a bullet. I think we all expect yakuza to have bullets, Izuku. What's special about this one?"

Izuku didn't take Mustard's tone personally, rolling with it, "Well, Overhaul explained what's special about it to me in detail. It's loaded with some kind of substance that will temporarily render someone's quirk unusable."

Some of the audience chattered even more. Dabi, Mustard and Kurogiri, who were particularly attached to their quirks, began to look angrier.

Tomura looked down, noticing his hands had began flexing and stretching on their own. They still did that from time to time when Tomura got tense or stressed out. A side effect of trying to wean himself off of his neck-scratching habit. With a tiny bit of conscious effort, they became still again.

Izuku pressed on, "It's a powerful tool, right? Really useful for achieving their goals. But as it turns out, this bullet is a genuine part of their goals. A lot of their research at the moment is going in to ensuring that soon, these bullets will be able to eliminate someone's quirk, permanently."

The chatter grew louder, and the League became more rowdy. But at the same time, more invested. Tomura observed, curiously. *Hope you can keep them focused, dork.*

Izuku continued, "It gets worse. I know that none of you hold the same worthless moral values I do. You've killed people before, and will gladly do it again, to see this change in society through. Hell, our largest goal at the moment is to slay that hypocrite, All Might, right were he stands."

Izuku's voice became more gruff as he finished that statement. Tomura almost cracked a smirk at Izuku's clear anger. *About time he grew a spine.*

Izuku held up a finger, "It's how revolutionaries of the past accomplished their goals, after all. Fire and fury. But, if we want to make that change legitimate and permanent, we must have limits in some places. Overhaul doesn't. He synthesises the 'product' that goes into these bullets by repeatedly tearing apart and reforming a little girl and performing experiments on her blood and flesh."

Nearly everybody had a different reaction to this statement. Most of the brats in the audience (Dabi, Himiko, Mustard) looked particularly offended, recognising child abuse as a special kind of evil. Dabi in particular looked ready to kill somebody. Mr Compress and Kurogiri seemed much calmer. They were experienced, after all. They'd probably known of some example of this type of crime before.

Tomura knew an example of this kind of crime as well. And it was making him grit his teeth.

Izuku struck while the iron was hot, continuing his discussion to hone the anger of his audience, "He doesn't care about creating a brighter future, don't you see? He's willing to compromise any
standards to get what he wants? What kind of a future can you build from a foundation of child torture?"

Izuku's expression had become a sneer. The fact that he looked just as contemptuous as his audience formed a silent kinship, "That's because he isn't looking to create a future. He wants to regress into the past. Kurogiri's phrasing, when he told me about the yakusa clans; he spoke of them as the criminals of yesteryear, the former leaders of the Japanese crime industry. remembering that, that's when it hit me."

Kurogiri straightened up further, "Eliminating quirks... making a world without quirks would...!"

Izuku finished off Kurogiri's statement, keeping the focus on his rhetoric, "Exactly. In a world before quirks, the yakusa reigned supreme. In a world where these bullets have eliminated quirks, perhaps the yakusa would reign supreme again."

Izuku projected his voice, "This. Cannot. Stand! While we fight to push humanity into a brighter tomorrow, Overhaul would regress them into yesterday, purely for his own benefit. He is stagnation! He wants to hold us in one period of history forever, grinding progress to a halt! Overhaul doesn't need to focus on the future at all; If he has his way, the future will never arrive!"

As the League cheered, Izuku finalised his ultimatum, "Not just for the sake of our future, but for there to be any future at all, we must crush the Shie Hassaikai beneath our heels!"

Izuku finally let out the breath he'd been holding in, looking oh so very pleased with himself as some of his friends walked in to chatter incessantly in front of him. Dabi looked ready to bust some heads, Spinner returned to sharpening his sword-of-many-swords even faster than before, Mustard had immediately run off to work on his equipment, Himiko wiped off some drool from the corner of her mouth. Pretty much everyone began working on something that'd give them an edge in the upcoming missions, even though they didn't have any clear orders yet.

Tomura began to walk up the stairs back to his room, grumbling in frustration.

Izuku had let him down. Regardless of his bumbling attempts to make things right, it didn't negate the damage Izuku had done. Compared to what he'd actually done, his platitudes were worthless.

Sensei was... still gone. Tomura's sense of direction had always relied on him, and Sensei's last wish for Tomura, the instruction to 'get stronger, grow', wasn't exactly specific.

Tomura curled his hand into a fist to push the door to his room open.

It was (supposedly) true that Izuku was instructed to help Tomura do this. But even if Sensei wanted him to... it felt wrong. Without Izuku, Sensei could be here, be the one helping Tomura to get stronger personally, like how it was always meant to be. Accepting help from Izuku instead almost felt like a betrayal of Sensei's memory. Like a willing refusal to acknowledge that without him, Sensei might be...

Tomura closed the door behind him, comforted by the very dim lighting of his room for a moment, before leaning over and turning on a small lamp on his bedside table.

Why should he have to settle for a substitute? Why should Izuku get to teach me, like he's ignoring all his past mistakes? He thinks it's 'turning over a new leaf'. It's just him getting his own way.

That's... what Tomura had thought. He'd wanted to blot out Izuku. Focus on growing on his own. He'd rather sit still, listen to his memories of Sensei. Use those to grow stronger. Instead of letting that brat do it all.
But it's still true what he'd said, just then. The Shie Hassaikai had to be stopped, for the sake of the future they all wanted. And those tales of child abuse had awoken something deep within him.

Memories of a gritty alleyway...

Tomura opened his wardrobe, looking at the rows upon rows of white, grasping hands hung up on nails in the back of it's depths. He reached in, unhooking father with deft fingers. He held it up, looking into its palm, letting out a deep breath as his villain costume stared back at him.

*Okay Izuku, fine. Just this once, I'll listen to you again. You'd better not disappoint me again.*

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the slowish upload! Hurt my back the other day and wasn't supposed to get out of bed. Don't worry, fully recovered. Hope you understand!
Giran clucked his tongue, scrolling his eyes over the list Izuku had handed him. Izuku could kind of already tell Giran had decided it wasn't worth pursuing the list, but continued reading the entire thing, raising eyebrows and shaking his head dismissively, as if to really let it sink in that the requests on this piece of paper were ridiculous.

Giran questioned, pretending that he was trying as hard as he could to mask the giggle in his tone, "So... 80, huh? Is that uh, your minimum order, kid?"

Izuku frowned, trying to keep this request as serious as possible, admitting, "Well, it's not a minimum at all, of course. Just... the ideal number to aim for? Maybe it's just wishful thinking, but it'd be the level needed for guaranteed victory."

Giran smirked, his lips wobbling in barely contained laughter, "Uh, y-yeah kid, I get it... eheh... it's just, y'know, that's an awful lot of mooks to get together on short notice."

Izuku looked a little downtrodden. It had been a bit of an unrealistic request, but it was worth asking.

Izuku continued, "It's just... if we can get any kind of support, it'd be a massive help. I know there would be people willing to lend the League of Villains a hand."

Giran leaned back against the wall, flicking a finger at Izuku, pointing out, "Well sure, that's true. But I can't tell them what they'd be signing up for, unless you want me to plaster the underground with posters that advertise your extremely secret super special surprise attack on the Shie Hassaikai."

Izuku clenched a fist, "How many can we get?"

Giran reached into his pocket, pulling out a cigarette, "I don't know. Last minute recruitments usually look like death sentences for criminals with any sense. What's with the rush?"

Izuku sucked in air through his teeth, nervously, "It's, uh... about my teammates."

Giran smirked, "Ah c'mon, you don't think they're up for this kind of thing?"

Izuku finished up, "No, that's not it! I respect them all, a lot, I really do. It's just..."

His mind drew itself back, and sickening sounds echoed through his head. A mystery half-solved, revealing only a part of a titanic danger...

Izuku snapped out of it, "I... I've seen the kind of thing we're up against. I'm just wondering if we can make sure that we're not going to be putting ourselves in too much unnecessary danger."

Giran's face curled up into a sneer, "Hey hey hey, watch yourself, kid."
Izuku was taken aback, "E-Excuse me?"

"Understand who you're working with here. Villains, of the highest order. Thieves, murderers, scumbags. People with nothing to come home to, no path leading back home that they can follow. They gave it all up to be able to join the League, become villains, and live life the way they want to. There ain't a soul here that doesn't want to be."

Izuku stared down at the ground solemnly, "Still, is it really such a bad thing to be concerned about them? They're an elite team. Even putting aside the fact that they're my friends, even if we're looking at them purely from a utilitarian point of view, shouldn't I be making sure they're not in the line of fire all the time?"

Giran tilted his head up, "I think a lot of villains would consider that an insult. If they had any doubts about taking on this kind of front-line responsibility, they would never have come here."

Izuku began to feel himself burning up a bit with embarrassment.

Giran took note of Izuku's attitude, slightly shifting his tone to a lighter one, "Look, there ain't a minion alive that could do a better job than these guys anyway. Letting some jackass do the job instead would jeopardise the whole operation, and wouldn't that make things more dangerous for them in the long run?"

Izuku swallowed his pride, "I know that. I do know that. I can't try to rally pointless extra members... just to put my mind at ease."

Giran pressed on, "Exactly, kid. The more room you give these guys to work with, the better they'll do."

Izuku toed the ground, eventually letting his shoulders drop from his sides slightly. Eventually, he let out a breath, leaning against the wall next to Giran.

Izuku asked, "I guess someone with your experience learns to deal with this stuff over time. You've probably gotten used to this level of anticipation."

Giran lit up a cigarette with his gun-lighter, sticking into his jacket pocket as if holstering a gun in a cowboy movie, "Psst, me? I'm never the one making the big plans, buddy. I'm a broker. I just help the big plan makers get their shit together. They're the ones who're nervous."

Izuku looked up slightly, "Nervous?"

Giran drew in a breath, trying his best to create smoke rings, before continuing, "Oh yeah. I haven't seen a crime lord alive that didn't look just a little stressed out before a big mission. It's nothing unusual. But if you don't trust your team to pull dangerous stuff off, you're shooting yourself in the foot."

Izuku nodded, "Thanks, Giran. I guess that does help put things into perspective."

Giran chuckled, "Freaking out a bit less now, huh?"

Izuku took some deep breaths, trying to avoid the smoke Giran was creating, "Yeah. I owe it to my team to let them use their talents."

Giran reached into his pocket, "Hey wanna try one? They always take the edge off for me."

Izuku shuffled slightly away, "No thank you, Giran."
Giran leaned in, enjoying Izuku's slight discomfort, "If you're worried about the nicotine, I could get you a different substance to smoke, if you catch my-"

Izuku leaned away further, "No. Giran."

Giran leaned back, giving Izuku some space. Suddenly, before he'd finished his smoke, he dropped it, straightening up again, crushing the cigarette under his heel. His face initially looked like it had undergone an epiphany, before he returned to grinning, even more greasily than before.

"Hey, wait. I think I might've thought of something that'd really help, kid. I just remembered, I know a guy we've just GOTTA call in for this mission."

When Izuku got back to home base, it was looking like he'd stepped foot in an armoury.

Spinner had laid out all of his dozens of bladed weapons, taking them out and sharpening them one by one before tying them back into his sword-of-many-swords. He also had to occasionally wrench one out of Himiko's hands, who kept picking them up to appraise them almost compulsively. Even Twice was measuring his tape weapon, and ensuring it was sharp and plentiful.

A faint, flickering glow of blue light shone on the wall on the staircase that led to the training room, making it quite clear Dabi was hard at work. The faint heat and smell of smoke from charred training dummies only enhanced the feeling that the front room had been transformed into a forge. Very atmospheric.

Tomura and Mustard stomped up that same staircase. Tomura hand half of his hand gripped around the handle of a very large metal bucket, filled to the brim with ash and dust. When he saw Izuku, he smirked, looking down at the remains of his handiwork. Izuku flashed him an encouraging smile. It was honestly very relieving to see that Tomura was putting in some preparation work.

Mustard, however, drew Izuku to move closer. Mustard's costume had received an upgrade. His clothes were all tucked in and sewn together, trying to ensure his costume was next to airtight. The gas canister on his back that fed his mask clean oxygen, had some extra valves and filters attached to it. Izuku circled the new container, as Mustard stood to attention, clearly chuffed.

He boasted, "Not bad at all, don't you think, sir? The canister can draw in air from the atmosphere around it, filtering out any impurities and restocking my supply of oxygen!"

Izuku traced the large, flexible pipes on the canister. Two of them reached up, connecting to his gas mask. But there were two more now, as well...

Izuku put a hand on his chin, asking, "That must have been very difficult to install... why go to such lengths? Don't you already have enough air?"

Mustard laughed proudly, displaying the forearms of his costume, "It would be too superfluous to upgrade the canister for a reason like that. I needed the extra air... to power this new creation!"

Hose-like nozzles were attached to his forearms, strapped down over his new, thick gloves. Mustard aimed them at a wall nearby, squeezing his fist tightly. With a sharp hiss of compressed air, a tight stream of pink Sleep Gas shot from the nozzle, unfolding against the wall, spreading out. But the travel path of the gas was slim and accurate!
Mustard posed like a supervillain, clearly very happy with the results, "See? The hydraulics use the excess air to propel my Sleep Gas in a precise direction! With this gear, I can finally aim my quirk's powers without risking collateral damage! If I want to go all-out, I can fire my nozzles in long, drawn out strikes. But in quick bursts, my quirk is under my control!"

Izuku continued to examine Mustard's suit, knowing that making a big deal out of this would boost his spirits greatly, "You must've been working on this project for ages. This is quite the costume, Mustard!"

Mustard tapped his helmet, "The only downside is that the pipes makes my mask a bit more difficult to remove. That's actually also helpful, if some wannabe hero wants to take off my helmet and force me to inhale the gas. But it also means I can't show you how much I am beaming with joy right now! They will collapse before us!"

Mustard, even more excited than before, ran off to his room.

Finally, Izuku approached Mr Compress and Kurogiri, who were leaning over a hand-drawn map laid out over the counter.

Kurogiri hailed his arrival, "Ah, Izuku has arrived. We've been going over some potential plans of attack, with or without the element of surprise."

Izuku took a seat, bringing himself to gaze over the crudely-drawn outline of the building.

Mr Compress answered Izuku's unspoken question, "If you're wondering, Himiko managed to sketch the building. She did a little once-over of the perimeter, giving the guards plenty of time to notice her presence so they would believe you had left the building. Top notch stunt double, if I do say so myself."

Kurogiri tapped the map, "From what we can tell, sir, the top floor is made to appear like a traditional business structure. There's a hidden entrance to the catacombs you described inside, certainly, but seeing as you were not led in through the front door, it would be reasonable to assume that they have many alternative paths into the true labyrinthine structure of the Shie Hassaikai HQ."

Izuku looked over the outline. Even at a glance, the dimensions of the building didn't match the long, winding pathways he'd been led down, and he confirmed it, "Yeah... I agree. In fact, based on the amount of walking and vent-crawling I did, the underground area has to be many times larger than the building they're using as a disguise."

Mr Compress pointed out, "It'd be hard enough to find the secret way to open a puzzle box, or find the hidden switch inside an escapists cage, but if we went for a frontal assault, we'd have to scour a whole office building to find the secret entrance. It's probably some miniscule thing, easy to overlook. And, even worse, if we trigger the alarm, there's a good chance they'll be able to lock that front door, and then we'll be left with no way in unless we burrow through the floor."

Izuku asked immediately, "Is that an option we have?"

Mr Compress flexed his fingers, "If I compress large chunks of ground until we create a tunnel into the real HQ, certainly. But we'd all have to go through that tunnel entrance; bottlenecking our attackers like that is bound to end poorly."

Izuku concluded, "So... it's pretty obvious that the direct approach is definitely not ideal. At least we have the option to do so, if it came down to it... what about the 'element of surprise' you
mentioned?"

Kurogiri looked over at Izuku, matching eyes with him, "Well, this is dependant on us being absolutely certain that Overhaul did not see you. Is there any chance he could suspect that you intend to double-cross him in the immediate future?"

Izuku thought back. Overhaul is a distrustful man even to begin with. He never intended to let me look around by myself, keeping my attention only on what might convince me to join him. I'm not sure he saw me... but that child, Eri...

Izuku grit his teeth, as part of a horrifying memory entered his head. Kurogiri's expression became stern for a moment, "Izuku, sir? Is something the matter? Do you think he might have seen you?"

Izuku pushed past that terrible imagery, focusing on the part that's actually relevant. *Eri might have known I was there. If she tells Overhaul about me... he'll be on guard. He'd be engineering our downfall right now. Still... she seemed like she didn't want to tell him.*

*Izuku,* Mr Compress tapped Izuku on the shoulder, "Deku, you're muttering to yourself. What on earth is the problem?"

Izuku shot back to a straightened sitting position, "Uh, uh, sorry. Just trying to recollect my thoughts. I'm fairly certain that Overhaul doesn't know about my spying sessions."

Kurogiri and Mr Compress both seemed to release a breath they'd been holding in for too long.

Izuku leaned forward, confiding, "I know of one weakness. The child I mentioned, her name is Eri. She can't be older than six years, small, thin and silver-haired. Her quirk is the 'ingredient' by which Overhaul produces his Quirk Destroying Bullets. If we can capture her, he will likely agree to any number of terms to ensure her safety."

Kurogiri raised an eyebrow, "Threatening a child, sir?"

Izuku shook his head quickly, "No, no, not at all. But if Tomura uses his Decay quirk on Eri, she would turn to dust. Overhaul would be incapable of reassembling her, and his entire plan would be unachievable. And if he were in our position, he wouldn't hesitate. He would be unlikely to assume we're just bluffing, since the only thing keeping us from actually following through on that threat is our conscience. Something he doesn't have."

Mr Compress leaned back, "Your nobility is admirable. But there are circumstances that could go wrong. If he does call us out on our bluff, for example, what do we do? I believe Shigaraki might at that point conclude that killing her is the best way to permanently halt Overhaul's plans."

Izuku's blood ran cold for a moment. It's true that Tomura is far colder than Izuku is. He couldn't assume that everyone would see Eri in the same way...

Izuku cut that thought off immediately, placing a fist on the counter "We don't cross that line. Not
a chance. Even Tomura has to realise that if we achieve victory by those means, then we have achieved nothing. 'Child murderer' is a title we can never overcome. Our attempts to crush All Might and hero society will amount to nothing if we are branded with a moniker that heinous. We will sacrifice all our credibility."

Mr Compress put his hands up jokingly, "Of course, of course! I was merely vocalising a hypothetical scenario, good lord. I have seen many, many schemes and plans in my career as a villain, my boy. I have to utilise all of my past knowledge, and explore every possibility."

Izuku reaffirmed his statement, "It's fine, Mr Compress. But just so we're clear; under no circumstances do we actually ever harm Eri. Besides, even though Tomura is more pragmatic, I think he had more of an emotional reaction to Eri than he usually does to suffering and pain. I don't think I can explain why that might be, but still, I assure you that he won't be so cruel."

Kurogiri nodded, "Duly noted, sir. But now that we are all aware of the fact that no one has seen you, how do we exploit this 'element of surprise'? That is the key question."

Izuku examined what he knew, "Well... Eri is located deep in the HQ. Even if we can sneak in there, I don't think anyone is allowed to even know about Eri without express permission, much less visit her. Sneaking will only go so far..."

Mr Compress followed that thought up, "So, we do both, then! We sabotage them from the inside, in order to ensure our assault goes smoothly, and we get the easiest possible route in to find Eri."

Izuku leaned over slightly, "That'd be ideal. But... we don't know what the inside of the base actually looks like. This map doesn't help us all that much. We'd need to actually know what the inside of the base looks like, so we can sabotage the right areas, and invade from the right areas."

With that, the atmosphere at the table became a little solemn. They didn't have enough to work with.

Izuku sighed, "I really didn't want to do this. I guess we'll have to take Overhaul's plan after all."

Kurogiri and Mr Compress rose up again, "What plan!?"

Izuku explained shortly, "Overhaul wanted us to do something... a scheme involving us 'working together' by exchanging members. I didn't really want to accept, at all. But it's the only excuse we have to get some of our members inside their base, to map out the HQ. Just a second."

Izuku leaned back and cupped his mouth, calling over to the other League members, "Himiko! Twice! Would you mind joining us for a minute?"
Method acting

Chapter Summary

Unstable lunatics + high-stakes infiltration plan = ???

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Once her quirk is activated, it feels like she's temporarily stepped into a new form, a new personality. For as long as she wears a different face and speaks using a different tongue, walks using different legs and steals using different fingers, it's something that feels entirely removed from the name "Himiko Toga."

Himiko considered herself a pretty upfront girl. Transparent and unashamed. By remaining honest, she's able to create a clear divide between herself and her little performances of acting when she adopts someone else's identity. It makes sense, doesn't it? It's like they always say; be yourself. So Himiko always acts on instinct and embraces her own identity when she's in her own skin, to remind her of who she is, how she's a unique person separate from her ability to become other people.

So being asked to go undercover, not as a disguise, but as plain old Himiko Toga, is a bit of an upsetting proposition.

Himiko stomped the ground yet another time, threatening to leave an indentation on the solid stone floor, "Why CAN'T I just disguise as one of them? All you'd need to do is shiv a guy, take his clothes, and let me walk in!"

Izuku held his hands up slightly, hoping to calm himself down, or at least be ready if Himiko did something crazy, "Well, that would work on short notice, but we need information. Yes, you'll open the doors so that we can get inside, and hopefully that'll be pretty soon. I mean, the quicker this plan goes off, the less time we have to attract suspicion."

Just as Himiko was beginning to look reassured, Izuku's expression became a bit more forbidding, "But we need more context on their plans. Do they know what the heroes are up to? How many bullets do they have and how much more effective are they? How do we get to Eri? We need you to spend some actual level of time with the Shie Hassaikai to answer these questions, far too long for you to keep a disguise. Both because of acting issues and, uh, well, your disguises melt off eventually anyway. We need you to be out eyes and ears for a bit."

Himiko gritted her teeth, baring her fangs in the process, "I know that, jackass! But why do they have to be my eyes and my ears? Can't I just go as someone else?"

Izuku shook his head, "No, I'm sorry. Overhaul was pretty clear that you and Twice were the ones he wanted. I'm sure he has some kind of insurance in his possession to try and prevent us from lying or disguising. It's just adding on another layer of complexity that we don't need."

Himiko's pout wasn't going anywhere anytime soon. Izuku looked like he was beginning to realise how difficult it was going to be to convince her to put on a show. GOOD.
The shapeshifter kept her angry eyes firm and strong. It'd take more than a pretty face and a bit of leadership to convince Himiko to budge on this issue.

Twice was leaning forward, resting his elbows on his arms, uncharacteristically quiet. Himiko was kind of hoping she'd get some back up with which to protest Izuku's orders. And while it was true Twice wasn't turning his back on her, it wasn't very encouraging to see the self-contradicting bombastic cloning villain being so silent.

Izuku followed Himiko's eyes, turning to face Twice as well, "I completely understand that you two have some reservations, but I wouldn't ask you to do this if I wasn't absolutely certain it was the only way."

Twice motioned with both his hands, moving them at precisely the same time, like a perfectly balanced scale, "W-Well, it's a pretty terrible plan, but, y'know, it might work. If it works, it'll be glorious. It's a great plan, surely, right?"

Twice turned over to Himiko, trying to shift the responsibility of accepting the mission onto her, to which she responded, "No, no it isn't!"

Twice leered, "So, do you mean it isn't a 'pretty terrible plan' or-"

Himiko was having none of this garbage today, "I am not doing this, okay? I'm not working for those dirty mobsters, and I'm not going in without a disguise, knowing I'm going to be directly lying to people! I didn't join the League of Villains just to end up putting on a fake smile and deceiving people just because I was ordered to. Aren't we supposed to be here to live life how we want to?"

Izuku began a response, before he ran out of steam, leaning over a bit as his half-formed syllable died in his throat. Surely enough, the boss didn't have an answer to that question.

Twice stood up, tapping Himiko on the shoulder. He beckoned with his other hand, leading her out of the room.

Himiko was never going to get over the wound in the centre of Twice's head. The heavy stitches that looked like they, at one point, were solely responsible for keeping him from being split in half. She knew her wounds pretty well, enough to tell that this was caused by something pretty brutal, maybe a knife or something...

"Hey, Himiko? I'm flattered that you're staring at my awesome, sweet scar so much, but could you stop? The injury is really gross and unsettling."

Himiko's eyes fluttered, and she refocused on Twice's eyes. Seeing him without his mask was always a little surreal. It was also a sign that he was getting serious. His normally cheery smile had become a bit of a grimace, likely because every second he wasn't all nicely masked up was a second he was fighting his urge to 'split', whatever that meant.

Twice fidgeted with his fingers a bit, trying to focus back in on his sentence.

Eventually, he found his train of thought again, "So, look, whatever his plan is, whatever my differing thoughts on opinions, I think I'm gonna go through with it. That's a solid decision."
Himiko cracked a joke to lower the tension, "A solid decision? From you? You're making me nervous."

Twice's mouth rose into a smirk for roughly a split second before, just as erratically as it came, his face dropped back into seriousness, "Yeah. Pretty sure. Certain, even. I don't think any mood I could get into would make me change my mind on this one."

Himiko dropped her grin from toothy into a smaller, more empathetic smile, "If this is about Overhaul, you don't have to-"

He interrupted, moving a silencing hand with jumpy, sudden movements, "But, I do, you see? I do blame myself, you know? I let him in here, I'm the one who gave him his letter of recommendation and because of it we almost got stomped out. I-if my dumb shit had gotten Dabi into anymore trouble, I don't even know what I'd have..."

Twice leaned back, a hand slowly drifting to his head, covering up half his face.

Just as Himiko was leaning forward to offer a helping hand, Twice straightened himself up again.

Twice gestured to her, "But still, I'm doing that because I'm certain. I know what I want, no matter how I choose to view the situation. Even I understand myself well enough to wrap my head around that one. So what about you, huh? What's on your mind, regarding this whole plan?"

Himiko's eyes drifted to the side as she tried to sum up her response, but the very instant she hesitated;

Twice pointed straight at her, "See, see that's it! That's what you can't be doing. You don't know your own mind, Himiko, you're still mulling this over! This is too important to not be decided on!"

Himiko's temper flared up, "I didn't even get the chance to speak, chill out! I'm just weighing up my options."

Twice clapped his hands, "Out of time, no more waiting. Chop chop. What's you answer? I find it hard to believe you wouldn't be able to decide on this just on instinct."

Himiko briefly considered whether she could get away with adding another stitch to Twice's face, before remembering that Izuku was just in the other room.

Twice met Himiko's eyes, his usual cynicism gone, "Listen, I think that it's really important that everyone understands who they are and what they want. What's most important to you, Himiko? One free soul to another, spell it out to me. It shouldn't be hard for you to weigh up what you really care about most."

Himiko blinked a couple of times, before eventually touching a hand to her chin, "Well... I guess it depends. I came here to live a free life. But I also came here to create a world where people could live a free life. So..."

Twice nodded, "Yeah, exactly. They seem like the same thing, but they're actually pretty different. Do you just want to live freely? Or do you want to free others?"

Himiko chuckled, "This'd be an easier thing to weigh up if I was motivated by plain old revenge, like you are."

Twice grinned. On his face, it looked a little strained, like it stretched out the centre of his face a bit too much. But it was honest and earnest, both rare and sweet traits to see from Twice.
Himiko took a deep breath.

She eventually let loose her decision, deflating, "It's just... I mean... gah, this isn't fair! I shouldn't have to drag myself through something this insulting."

Twice twitched slightly, before responding, "Buuut you're going to go through with it anyway?"

Himiko groaned, "...Fiine. As fun as it would be to put my foot down and refuse to engage on anything but my terms, I don't think I could enjoy living 'free' if it meant I had to avoid confronting a guy this horrible and nasty."

Twice chuckled to himself, a bit of a wheezy tone to his laugh, as he quickly pulled on his mask again "And here I thought it was just because you loved us all so much."

Himiko picked herself out of her moping with a smile, "Hey, getting roped into dangerous infiltration missions in order to sabotage and destroy a major crime ring - that's what friends are for, right?"

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the late release and the short chapter this time, but I do have a VERY good excuse that goes beyond just being swamped in assignments.

This week, my grandfather was in hospital after suffering a heart attack. I am very glad and relieved to announce that because he is an absolute beast of a man, he pulled through and was released from hospital relatively quickly, but it greatly interrupted my work cycle, since I figured my time was ultimately better spent with, you know, my family. Any followup assessments notwithstanding, he'll be cleared within about 6 days.

The next week might be a bit hectic, since March 6th is coming up; my birthday! I hope to release something around then to commemorate that, but if not, it's safe to assume it's because I'm busy commemorating it irl. Thanks a ton!
These guys are becoming so adept at diving into the belly of the beast they're going to earn a degree in gastroenterology.

Deep breaths, deeeep breaths, c'mon. Try to relax. You're just here to sign up for some League-Yakuza exchange stuff. You're working with these guys, you're not even THINKING about the fact that-

Himiko pinched herself on the thigh with her sharp nails to reprimand herself for allowing her mind to wander too much. Intentionally not concentrating on something was proving to be far harder than she had thought.

Twice managed to answer the plague-masked guy without missing a beat. He didn't show any signs of knowing that he was under the effects of his quirk at all. Twice was a really good liar, to be honest.

Izuku had warned them about this guy. Black plague mask, goofy wide-brimmed hat. And a quirk that somehow weeded out falsehoods from people, or revealed that they weren't telling the absolute truth. Lying wouldn't work on him. So actually, no, Twice wasn't a good liar, because at that precise moment, he'd switched something off in his mind that completely changed his perspective, eliminating his need to lie.

Getting so deep into your character that you've actually managed to delude yourself? That's really dangerous territory... nice job!

The guy turned to Himiko next, whereupon she did her best to hide any rigid tension from her body. He didn't seem to look too suspicious of her, though it was a little tough to tell behind his mask.

He spoke in a calm, monotone voice, "So, you are Himiko Toga, correct?"

Himiko put on some of her regular cheeriness, giving a thumbs-up and declaring, "That's my name, don't wear it out!"

Changing your perspective... c'mon, you can do this. You want to help these yakuza, you're here on a purely diplomatic mission, it's all honest and fair and stuff...

It was as if she could feel the cogs in her head shifting to accommodate this new mindset. She wouldn't lose track of who she was... but for now, she could allow herself to get lost.

The black-masked man continued, "So, my question is fairly simple. Do you have any intention to betray or sabotage the Shie Hassaikai?"

Not at all, not at all, not at all.

Himiko responded, with a slightly dull and robotic tone, "Not at all."
Twice smirked. Only he understood that Himiko's voice was unusual for her, which was enough in itself to ease the minor headache Himiko was getting from trying to work around this black-beaked man's quirk.

The man paused for a moment, before moving the conversation along, "Very well. That's all I needed to know. Now, allow me to explain the work you will be doing here."

Himiko felt her mind begin to shake itself loose, remembering her own identity.

*I already know the kind of work I've got to do, buddy.*

---

Tomura tried to click some of his bones. Flexing his fingers, bending his knees, stretching his neck, that sort of thing. Anything to get all the little uncomfortable tensions out of his body before they began their charge.

The three of them, Izuku, Tomura and Dabi, lurked in the sewer pathways underneath the manhole right beside the entrance to the Shie Hassaikai headquarters. If Himiko or Twice uncovered any direct way to enter the building from below, Tomura would use his quirk to try and Decay a pathway through the stone to enter the building.

Mr Compress, leader of the B Team consisting of himself, Spinner and Magne, would be doing the same thing, and he'd serve a similar function of using his Compress quirk to burrow a path into the building.

Kurogiri was leading the C Team, which for now was just him and Mustard. The intention was for Kurogiri to collect coordinates and Warp Gate in to provide backup for Himiko and Twice, should the gangsters find out that their temporary members aren't as docile as they'd thought.

It was a decent way to prepare. They'd only know all the details after those two nutjobs got back into contact with them. Which meant they'd probably spend a lot of time standing around and waiting.

Tomura, irritated, half-mindedly threw out the question, "Why the hell do we have to be poised to strike like this even before we've got solid information?"

Izuku was busy attempting to keep track on the guards inside the building with Search, visibly straining to use Infrared Ray to see people through the walls. Anything he could to try and outline whether or not there was a way into the building from down here.

Izuku opened his eyes, turning to Tomura, "We've spent way too much time already just preparing for this engagement. I wouldn't put it past Overhaul to take note of our absence. He's probably already being cautious. I think if we aren't ready to attack immediately, we'll lose our last chance at having the element of surprise on our side."

Dabi nodded, "Yeah, pretty much. Basically, if Himiko and Twice return to us, Overhaul will be expecting them to relay any hidden information. But if we attack while they're still inside the base..."

Tomura relented, "Fine, fine. I understand why we have to do this. Spikes and drops. It's still boring."
Izuku wiped his forehead, looking a little warm, "Well, I suppose it's more boring for you. I'm trying to utilise All For One to gather intel. Even if they're both utility quirks, using two of them in such close conjunction with each other is pretty exhausting."

Tomura bristled instinctively, and Izuku noticed. Tomura slowly let that tenseness leave his muscles. Hearing 'All For One' as a reference to Sensei's power, and not Sensei himself... it was a little bit unsettling. As far as Tomura was concerned, he was always just called 'Sensei'. But knowing that Sensei's real name was directly adopted from a quirk, the source of his power... and that this power was now in the hands of his green-haired video-gaming punchbag brat friend... Curious, Tomura leaned back on the far wall and asked, "So... this power you've taken... how exactly does it work?"

Izuku, concentration thoroughly broken, eventually leant back against the wall he'd been glaring at, "Um... I mean, I wish I knew a bit more about it. But essentially, it lets you take quirks from others and gift them to others."

Tomura tilted his head up inquisitively, "Huh. So Sensei's power was... stolen?"

Izuku nervously responded, "No, no that's not quite true! 'Cos the quirk All For One was something he developed himself. It may allow him to take quirks from others, but the ability to do that was something special that was entirely his own, and-"

Dabi scoffed, "Settle down."

Tomura, smirking slightly, continued, "No, it's a bit fitting. Taking power from others. Strange, though. Sensei had so much more power than you do. I thought he could do anything."

Izuku agreed, "Judging from what he did during his fight with All Might, almost. I've never seen such a wide variety in power and skillset before."

Tomura tilted his head to the side, his smirk becoming a little predatory, "Well then, what about you? What powers have you got?"

Izuku smiled encouragingly, "Well, I've got a few tools to use for this mission. I've got the ability to melt and freely manipulate rock and stone, searching and heat-tracking capabilities, the ability to rob someone of their sight-"

Tomura's smile dropped, "That's not what I'm asking. The powers Sensei had. Do you have them, too?"

Izuku replied, "Well, I have Air Cannon, and the heat-tracking ability was a quirk he had called Infrared Ray. He also gave me a quirk called Skeleton Key, and..."

Izuku slowly tapped a finger to his chin, running out of steam, "And, um... I think that's it."

Tomura was a little taken aback, anger creeping in to his voice, "That's it? What? You don't have anything else?"

Izuku's expression had become a little more serious, "No, I can't manipulate any of the other quirks in All For One's system."

Tomura leaned forward, "Even up until his last moments, Sensei was using other abilities. Those tentacle things that activated other people's quirks, the black goop that teleports people. How do you not have access to them, brat?"
Izuku's face darkened, "I really don't know."

A short silence fell. Tomura straightened up, reading Izuku's expression. Not being able to access these skills was as puzzling for Izuku as it was for him.

Dabi pressed for information, "So... what do you mean by 'system'. Do you think you'll be able to use some of his powers later?"

Izuku furrowed his brow, "I did gain access to Air Cannon and Infrared Ray over time and practice. But Infrared Ray... I don't know. I feel like that quirk just sort of... came to me. I remembered All For One had it, I really needed it, and in the heat of the moment I suddenly realised where it was and how to activate it. I guess it helps that it's not a very complex quirk in it's functionality..."

Dabi deadpanned, "So essentially, you have no idea how any of this works."

Izuku chuckled dully, "I know you're joking, but you're also pretty accurate. The other quirks he had, I really can't detect them. I guess maybe since they're more technical and difficult to use, I can't use enough of All For One's power to utilise them yet? I need to build up a greater tolerance, some more energy to power my system of quirks..."

Tomura scowled, "System? Energy? The fuck are you talking about?"

Izuku responded evenly, "It's the best way I know to describe how using All For One feels. It's like I have... this internal system to power my myriad of potential abilities. A-And for now, I don't have all that much energy to work with. I'm getting better at using it, but still... even using two basic quirks at once is really pretty difficult."

Dabi grinned, "So much for 'ultimate power'. What a boss we have, huh?"

Izuku threw his arms wide in exasperation, "I don't have any information on how this quirk works, I'm working from nothing! It's not like I have anyone to teach me this stuff!"

Tomura's chest tightened up and he clicked his tongue, commenting, "Yeah. We know."

Izuku reacted to his own statement with wide eyes, "Oh, I... I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to-"

Tomura cut him off before he went off on another hyper-apologetic spiel, "Yeah, I know. You didn't mean to bring up bad shit, didn't want any of this to happen, et cetera... I'm sure he'd be giving you a riveting tutorial in using your newfound powers if he were still around."

Izuku bent his head solemnly, "No, he wouldn't. If he were still here, he'd be teaching YOU all about how this quirk works."

Tomura exhaled through his teeth, "If what you've said was all true, I guess so."

Again, their voices fell quiet.

*I'm not used to giving advice or anything... but, whatever...

After a few seconds, Tomura resumed, his voice a little thinner than before, "Still, you'll get it eventually."

Izuku looked up, a little shocked, "Huh?"

Tomura inwardly cursed his initially reedy tone, injecting a disinterested tone into his words and staring at the floor, "Well, Sensei had to work it all out by himself as well. You've already got
more of a head start than he had. So you've got to stumble upon some stupid success sooner or later."

Dabi smiled cockily, "Wow. I've never seen someone try that hard to look like they're not praising someone."

Tomura, irritated, snapped back, "I just said he'd have to work it out eventually. There are only so many times you can fuck up before you work something out, right?"

Dabi laughed slightly in his dry voice, "Really? Because it sounded like you were implying Izuku would eventually get to the same level Sensei got to."

Tomura froze stiff as a board. He actually hadn't meant to imply that. He unfurled himself a little, to look up at Izuku.

Izuku had a grateful smile on his dumb face, looking massively uplifted and touched.

Izuku's voice was also a little thinner now as he replied to Tomura's unbidden compliment, "I... really appreciate that, Tomura."

Tomura gripped the sides of his arms, forcing himself into silence.

Dabi grinned to himself, letting everyone know he was taking a walk, "Alright. 15 minutes has passed. I'll go check the surface this time."

A few minutes later, and Tomura was still internally burning himself for his misguided mistake of language.

He'd never compare anyone to Sensei. No person alive could be the person he was. Even Izuku had said as much. And now he'd made it sound like he'd made that comparison, and Izuku was standing over there looking high as a kite because of it.

Tomura grit his teeth. He couldn't just take back what he'd said. At the least, no-one would take him seriously and he'd just look like he was all embarrassed and flustered and that smug piece of shit Dabi would just laugh at him. And if Izuku did take him seriously, all he'd accomplish would be depressing him.

Tomura peered over, observing Izuku as he clamped his eyes shut, attempting to focus solely on using Infrared Ray, trying to catch even a single trace of a living being's heat hiding deep inside the concrete. Still fumbling about with basic functionality, but at least he was fumbling. At least he was trying, in his own haphazard way, to gather his skills.

It's not as if Tomura hadn't said anything falsely. Even someone as incredible as Sensei... he had to have a starting line too. Maybe there had to have been a time when he was like this, as well. It was impossible to know what he would have looked like, in those early days. A god being forged. Slowly mastering his powers, learning how to become the greatest villain of all time.

But even before then, he'd have had to be confused. Stumbling into new horizons, blinking in the sunlight, trying to make sense of his powers by attempting whatever he could. Throwing stuff at the wall to see what sticks, succeeding only by forcing himself to try again and again until he
finally figured out what worked.

I dunno… maybe.

Tomura's thoughts were interrupted by the loud, hissing sound of radio feedback from his earpiece. Dabi's voice yelled down it before Tomura could even react, "Change of plans, we need to immediately engage! We're out of time!"

Izuku, suppressing his panic so he could respond quickly, swiftly ordered down the mic, "What's changed? Why do we have to engage now? It's 8:30 AM, we've still got up to 3 hours before our mission as supposed to commence."

Dabi only needed a single sentence to answer that: "The Heroes are launching an attack on the base."
**Tightrope of calamity**

**Chapter Summary**

A new challenger has entered the ring, turning the mission into a truel for power and precious small beans.

Tomura's grin when he finally managed to crumble down that wall looked intense. His grin became more wildly wide when Dabi immediately threw fireballs at the two mooks hiding inside, as combat had finally, finally, at long last broken out and he had an opportunity to put this uppity bastard Overhaul in his place.

Izuku used his Geo-something quirk, flinging a pile of rocks from the wall behind one of them right into the back of his head. He ate dirt instantly. Dabi threw a follow-up blast at the other one, sending him flying into the wall, creating a delightfully sharp ringing sound as his head collided with the bulletproof glass behind him. He fell forward, eyes rolling back into his head and clothes blackened.

The moment the room was clear, Izuku was chatting non-stop with Dabi, creating a constant feedback of information without pause or break.

Izuku first, "Why did they decide to attack today? Why didn't we have any information, Giran would've said something!"

Dabi shrugged, going second, "How the hell should I know? The most I know is that they seemed to have some dude with glasses that I don't think is in any of your notes. He's probably outside help."

Izuku was clearly flustered, grumbling to himself, "Of course they'd bring in a 3rd party. Not like the idiots could manage this all by themselves."

Tomura let his eyes drift to his corners, observing Izuku's scowling, serious face. *What a rash assumption, Izuku. He must be really mad about this. Good stuff.*

He looked around, taking in the sights. They were standing inside what looked like some kind of laboratory. So if Izuku was right about his observations during his little vent-crawling trip, this must be one of the lower floors of the labyrinth. Makes sense. They did enter from the damn sewers.

Dabi shot his slightly panicked question next, "What about our inside members?"

Izuku tapped his earpiece, "They'll know we're engaging because you just yelled it down the mic, but they obviously can't respond. We've got to get to them, find out what they know, then move it."

Tomura scoffed, "Not like they'll know much, seeing as our plan got bumped forward by a few hours."

Izuku cut across with surprising force, "Either way, our goal is meeting up with them first and foremost."
Dabi carefully leaned over, sneaking to the doorway, casually pushing aside an unconscious and scorched guard as he went, a slight smile tugging at the stitches on his face when he registered the loud thud the guard made when he fell over.

Tomura was itching for a fight at this point. But it obviously made more sense to go the stealthy route for as long as possible. Sure, some dumbass camera would catch them eventually, but they could maybe get away with more mistakes than usual because now the Shie Hassaikai were busy with the fight against those stupid heroes. And sure, any time they spent hidden and unspotted would be a minute that Himiko and Twice still got to move around freely.

Izuku took point next to Dabi, waving a hand to call Tomura to follow them.

Suddenly, the three of them heard the loud sounds of footsteps, running down the corridor. Wordlessly, Tomura hunkered down behind the door.

They saw Overhaul, clutching a silently shaking Eri, dashing down the corridor, followed by what looked like a small black robe floating midway off the ground with an adorably small plague mask, dashing down the corridors. Overhaul nodded, and the robe swiftly shifted, expelling a large, muscular man, who equally quickly fused with the walls of the corridor as Overhaul continued to make his escape.

The three of them waited for a while, mouths agape at both the closeness of their targets and the weirdness of whatever it was that they just saw that robe-man do.

Tomura mouthed 'what the f-' to his teammates, but was cut off mid-expletive by Izuku pressing a finger to his lips.

After a few moments, Overhaul reached the far end of the passageway, removing one of his gloves and pressing his hand to the wall. With this small, innocuous action, a massive slab of brickwork and concrete sprouted from the ground, walling off the entire area.

By this point, Dabi was blinking quickly. He'd created an entire wall in a few short moments and that was already impressive enough. But more importantly, they'd seen where he'd made it.

Izuku whispered, signalling to his allies that they were moving out, "I can track where he's going with Infrared Ray. Tomura, when we find a fake wall, Decay it to dust. Dabi, when any of his minions find us, open fire."

Tomura couldn't help but grin widely at that plan. Such a simple three unit formation was going to utterly destroy Overhaul's pathetic attempt to save his hide.

All they had to do was wait. Once the wall-robe-man turned his attention elsewhere, once Overhaul's minions had engaged the heroes and couldn't focus on them; then they'd make their move.

He could hardly wait.

Sir Nighteye had yet to be wrong. Accurately predicting the future was an exact science, but despite how much that impressed Mirio, he couldn't help but feel that there had to be some aspect of his powers that left things ambiguous or up to chance.
Except the part where they managed to defeat these Yakuza scum and bring them to justice. That bit ought to stay the same.

The man, Overhaul... Mirio had been itching to bring the fight to him for quite a while now. He'd dealt with villains before. I mean, if the goal is to rescue 1,000,000 people, it's technically possible to work purely in rescue, albeit for a very long time. But Mirio wanted to do both. Rescue, battle, all of it. So his job would necessitate dealing with a lot of nasty people.

*But no amount of cases read, files pored over, documents absorbed, regarding even the worst cases of child abuse, can ever compare to seeing her right there, tearing up in fear...*

Mirio tempered his anger into determination. He couldn't let his disgust of Overhaul blind his action. But his empathy for Eri should ensure he fights even harder.

Mirio's short time for thought was cut off by an announcement. The entryway to the underground tunnels was opened!

With a harsh glare and a brave smile, Mirio ensured he was one of the first to dive into the catacombs.

---

Kurogiri's portal opened without incident and Mustard stepped out into the upper floor of the office building. As Kurogiri collected back into his human form beside him, his large eyes peered over Mustard's form. He looked a bit tense, a perfectly understandable reaction. Things had not gone exactly as planned.

They had intended to invade using the hidden entrance from the ground floor, but now those heroes seemed to be set on using that method to breach the facility. And revealing themselves in order to hinder their advance didn't seem like the right play. Allowing the heroes to weaken Overhaul's defences was far more prudent.

Mustard began pacing, attempting to tuck his arms behind his back before realising his new gas hoses wouldn't allow it. Exhaling heavily, he crept over to the window, hesitating.

Mustard inquired, "Do you think they can see us from outside?"

Kurogiri informed him, "I teleported to one of the surrounding rooftops, remember? As far as I can see, they're all rushing the building, or they're busy dealing with some squadron the Shie Hassaikai sent as a pre-emptive strike. It would be a mistake for them to send any more people to the upper floors."

Mustard cracked his knuckles through his thick chemical gloves, attempting to click his neck around before realising his bulky helmet and gas tank wouldn't allow that either. He took in a deep breath, allowing the tinny, echoing sound it made through his respiratory system to comfort him a bit.

Kurogiri was used to dealing with this kind of reaction. There used to be days when Tomura had refused to leave his room at all, days he jittered and accidentally turned to ash important items - by this point, Kurogiri considered himself quite the therapist. In this case, however, there was scarcely a reason to worry.
He asked, "Mustard, are you quite well?"

Mustard huffed, "Well I have to be, don't I? We're the smallest group out of them all. If they do send any reinforcements, we'll have to fend them off ourselves, and since mine is the only quirk that can incapacitate someone by itself, y'know... no pressure or anything, right?"

Kurogiri was pleased his mouth was covered up, or else Mustard might see the smile playing on the corners of his lips, "Hah! You're implying they haven't already sent scouts into the upper floors."

Mustard whirled around, gas hoses hissing as they came online, "WHAT!?"

Kurogiri coolly responded, "Indeed. They sent a single squadron to check the upper floors, of course. No need to worry about them. They've been dealt with already. I would only Warp Gate us in if I was certain we would not be walking into an ambush, after all."

Mustard began to catch on, clearly irritated, "Then... what aren't you telling me? What's the big surprise, huh?"

Kurogiri chuckled, but before he could respond, a knock sounded on the door. One knock, a pause, four knocks, a pause. Kurogiri leaned across to open it up.

Heavy metal boots rattled slightly against the carpeted floor as Stain dragged multiple paralyzed, bound and gagged policemen and one hero into the room.

Mustard took such a sharp intake of breath he nearly dislodged his respirator.

Kurogiri cheered, "Good to see you again, Mr Stain. Now we are a full party of three, at last."

Stain nodded, dragging the guards the rest of the way through the door, bundling them into the supply closet and slamming the door.

Stain wiped his blade clean with some paper from the table nearby, commenting, "My quirk lasts for around 3 minutes at maximum. They should be bound too tightly to move, but the filthy hero might have a quirk I'm not accounting for. Might be best to finish him off now..."

Mustard, eager to show off, held up a finger to silence that line of thought, before shoving his hose through the gap in the door.

A cloud of sleeping gas flooded the small chamber and slammed the door shut, and as coughing, choking sounds filled the room, the struggling within became muted and quiet, eventually fading into silence as they took a nice, chemically induced nap.

Stain raised an eyebrow, "That works as well. Not bad."

Just based on his pose, hands on his hips and chin tilted upwards, Kurogiri could tell he was smiling a wide, egotistical grin that now would remain on his face for days.

Stain nodded, "I'll play by Izuku's rules as long as I collaborate on his project. What are his rules regarding these filthy yakuza?"

Kurogiri waved his hand vaguely, "He's not specified. I do believe he's allowed those rules to be less of a black and white issue, and uh, more of a..."

Stain's wide grin, stretching across his face in a way all to reminiscent of young Tomura, radiated
Kurogiri turned his attention to the windows, attempting to gather if they were safe to move out yet, "Precisely."
A fine dustup

Chapter Summary

As the battle continues to rage on, the League cuts ahead of the competition, reaching their prize.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Tomura's fingers touched the stone walls, then pushed inwards as cracks formed, and dust spilled from the split concrete. After wards, he'd pull out whole chunks of rock, digging out the wall until it collapsed in on itself. It took a second or two, which worked just fine. As long as there was another wall in-between Overhaul and the three of them, he'd have no idea he was being followed so closely.

Occasionally, the sounds of struggles, impacts and yelling echoed down the corridors. The heroes were making their way after them, leaving Dabi, Tomura and Izuku sandwiched squarely between two groups of people who wanted to beat the tar out of them. But those yakuza toughs were slowing them down more than enough, ensuring Izuku's group were able to advance at a leisurely pace.

Izuku motioned forwards, "We'll need to hurry. Once the heroes reach our destroyed walls, they'll be able to follow our path. They'll suspect we might be down here."

Dabi chuckled, waving a flame in his palm to illuminate the area a bit more clearly, "Yeah, who else do they know that can cleanly turn rock into ash?"

Tomura clawed out another crack in the fake wall, pushing his hand all the way through to the other side in a frantic motion, whirling his head around to yell back, "I don't see you doing anything to help, you lanky bastard!"

Izuku looked down at the floor momentarily, "I'm sorry I can't do more to help. If I use Rock Boil, it'll spill lava all over the floor we need to traverse. As well as us, potentially."

Tomura slammed his open palm into the wall one finally time, and it's structural instability reached critical levels. As he powdered another part of the stonework, the entire wall fell, unable to support its weight.

Dabi noted, "They did put these things up in a hurry. Can't expect masterful craftsmanship, can we?"

Izuku smiled, practically able to feel the distance between them and Overhaul closing.

Overhaul kept glancing behind himself as he moved down the corridor. Every time he did, his grip
around Eri tightened slightly.

He continued to weigh up his options. His plan had already reached its final stages. This was an inopportune time for those heroes to begin barging down his doors. He always knew they'd be coming for him, of course. But he'd expected they'd be just a little bit slower. That he'd have more bullets ready for them before they attacked.

What's done is done. Nothing can change the past. Killing Eri’s minder, the useless idiot that allowed her to escape, didn't change a thing. They had still seen her, and thanks to that, Overhaul had been placed in the position of having to go through one final trial before his reign could begin.

Pulling out all the stops on this one was essential. Any resources that could be diverted to this task absolutely must be called upon.

Which is why Himiko and Twice's absence, when called into action, was particularly troublesome.

Overhaul sent out another order.

"Send any League of Villains members into battle against the heroes immediately. If they refuse, avoid the issue or otherwise hesitate, kill them. Two of their members have gone AWOL. I have reason to suspect they have already betrayed us. Whether by action, or by lack of action, remains to be seen."

The more they traversed this accursed labyrinth, the more it closed in around them. Which was indeed partially due to the feeling of claustrophobia, but also due in part to the walls literally closing in around them, shuffling themselves and outright attempting to strike them, due to the accursed villain hitching a ride inside the concrete.

Aizawa rounded the corner one more time, nearly tripping as something hit his shoe. With catlike reflexes, he turned his fall into a roll, prepping himself to kick off the wall, swivelling his head to glare at the source of the trip...

A man lay concussed on the floor, several scratch marks and stabs on his body, particularly around the facial area. One of his Achilles tendons was slashed clean through, creating a spill on the floor. Aizawa had hit his head. Granted, it would've been hard to envision that as being a threat; intentionally putting your head into your enemies boot. Still, it shouldn't have caught him like that.

Aizawa allowed his eyes to droop slightly in tiredness. This place was really starting to get to him.

He stooped to inspect the body, never taking his eyes off it in case he was awake and using some kind of quirk as a trick.

He leaned down. A napkin was laid out on top of his chest quite neatly, undisturbed. It stood as proof he hadn't moved in a while, if nothing else.

Aizawa inspected it. Writing was scrawled onto it in what looked like red sharpie. Or at least, he hoped.

"Have this one on us!"
Aizawa turned his attention away from the body for a second to glare down the corridors, instantly suspecting an ambush. There were other players in this game. The League had been seen in close proximity to the building a few days ago. Intel suspected it was part of an alliance arrangement, but maybe it was more like... scouting an opponent?

He had to find his allies. Quickly.

---

Izuku finally breathed fresh air. The tunnels had reached their exit, a trap door open to the sky, the summer sun of a lovely, clear day. In any other situation, he'd be smiling in relief.

But not today. He had people to support, and people to hurt. Deku mirrored Dabi and Tomura's fierce grins as they slunk out of the hole they'd been buried under for so long.

Himiko and Twice had done a great job of taking out some of those Yakuza toughs. Hopefully enough to make sure those heroes wouldn't be in over their heads by too much. Just enough to make sure Overhaul wouldn't have anyone on standby to call for backup.

Overhaul had got a bit of a head start on them. They had to hurry.

Izuku pressed a finger to his lips, moving close to the nearby building so they had a corner to hide behind.

Izuku poked his head out just a smidge, while Tomura peeked over his shoulder impatiently.

*Why can't it ever just go to plan?*

Hopefully it wouldn't be too much of a problem. One blonde-haired hero vs Overhaul, Deku, Dabi and Tomura?

Izuku didn't recognise this guy, either. And if he wasn't covered by Izuku's vast information stash, chances were that he was a student, someone up-and-coming. A rookie.

All of this quickly ruled him out as being a genuine threat. Izuku wouldn't normally have been worried about him at all.

If it wasn't for the fact that Overhaul and his lackeys weren't walking towards him.

They were facing each other down, the mob boss was letting him delay their escape by a few moments. He wasn't being swatted aside like a pebble by the side of the road. He was standing there proudly, with a gait that seemed so familiar to Izuku, somehow. And he was smiling.

Overhaul spoke with a menacing growl to his voice, "I remember you. You were the one this brat found, when her minder failed."

The blond responded confidently, "Yes. He wasn't the only one who failed though."

Overhaul reluctantly removed his latex gloves, flinging them onto the tarmac, "You're right. I didn't kill you then, when I should have."

He nodded, "True. Because now I'm about to cause you a lot of trouble. But that's not what I was referring to."
Overhaul raised a languid eyebrow, "You're talking about Eri, of course."

Mirio's smile disappeared. He assumed a lower stance, readying himself to charge, "I couldn't save her then, as I wanted to. I won't fail again."

Overhaul aimed an arm at the hero, "Nemoto, Sakaki. Deal with him."

Two of Overhaul's entourage left his side, charging towards the hero with reckless force. The blond readied himself, perfectly happy to let them run into him, into what Izuku assumed would probably be a beating like nothing else.

Izuku mumbled to himself, "This might... actually be much better for us than the original plan."

Tomura began to slink out from behind the building, approaching Overhaul. Izuku followed suit as Dabi strutted up from behind. They were almost testing to see how close they could get before Overhaul noticed that his escape was truly ruined.

The noise of Izuku's boots was the loudest among them. They got within about 20 feet of him before the noise got Overhaul to prick his ears up, his furious body language becoming even more pronounced.

The blond hero noticed them coming, fear shooting into his eyes. But he didn't move, suppressing his shock until Overhaul turned to lay his eyes upon the villains approaching him.

The moment Overhaul took his eyes off of the hero, he rushed forward like a freight train.

Chapter End Notes

Awfully sorry for the LONG delay! I've been receiving a decent crackdown on my work schedule recently and I had to assemble a whole portfolio of stuff in a way shorter timespan than was reasonable. In addition, I've been temporarily moving to another house, and I do mean very temporarily. Enjoy!
Superpowers

Chapter Summary

While most of the League fights to stall Overhaul's backup and the Heroes arrival, the battle on three sides begins.

The blond bolted towards his aggressors fast enough to crack the ground at his starting point, but his approach didn't halt at all when he reached Overhaul's goons, and he didn't slow down one little bit. He zipped towards Overhaul, more specifically towards Eri.

Overhaul reached out, hesitating to touch another human being with his hand, but placed a hand onto Eri's neck.

He slowed down, quickly realising that Overhaul could kill Eri at any point. Instead, he bolted right back towards Overhaul's henchmen, towards the one lugging a bottle of alcohol, launching a devastating punch in his direction.

The drunk man, Sakaki, grinned, watching as the blonde hero wobbled on his feet, missing his punch by a hair as his fist zoomed by Sakaki's head... but he kept moving.

Once he missed the punch, he jumped slightly off the ground, and cleanly...

What just happened!?

This blonde guy... he phased directly through this man!? His body passed directly through him, somersaulting through an entire human without causing them harm and without colliding, and he rolled onto the solid floor flawlessly, kicking off the ground to punch Sakaki in his back.

Wait... a phasing quick? Lack of permeability? I think I read something about this guy in the U.A forums one time... but what about that super strength?

Before Izuku could think any more on the situation, he felt the ground shifting beneath his feet.

Dabi pulled him backwards while Izuku curled his hands, looking over to Overhaul as he bent low to the ground, his free hand pressed to the tarmac. Tall, jagged spikes burst up from the place Izuku had been standing, extending towards the sky like vicious fangs.

Izuku returned fire, curled hand movements complete as he boiled the pavement beneath Overhaul's feet, moving his arms to spill lava outward in the direction Overhaul tried to dodge. As he rolled, tugging Eri along with him roughly, he tapped the ground again to send up a wall of rock, blocking off the lava.

Overhaul stood up, clutching Eri's neck tight enough to make her scrunch up her eyes. Dabi had already prepared a fireball, waiting on an opportunity to hit Overhaul without damaging Eri. Tomura looked hungry for a chance to get his hands on the yakuza. Mirio's fight rang out in the distance, and judging from the brutal slamming noises, it promised to be a short one.

Overhaul scoffed, "Your betrayal does not surprise me, Deku."
Izuku's arms twitched, energy pulsing around it as Air Cannon charged up, but Overhaul tapped a finger onto Eri's neck again.

Overhaul scowled, "Careful there. Unless you want me to remove your 'prize' from the table, permanently."

Izuku wasted no time dealing with blackmail, instead addressing Eri, "How much pain are you willing to go through to be free from this man?"

Overhaul snapped, "Don't answer."

Eri's eyes darted back and forth, realising that she was potentially giving the okay to take some collateral damage. Izuku absolutely did not want any harm to befall her, so if she could just be strong for a moment-

Eri nodded, blinking back tears.

Izuku raised an arm, "Hiding behind a child. Even that cowardly move failed you."

Overhaul barked, "Pain and death are two very different things. I'll disassemble this accursed brat into a puddle if you take one step closer!"

Izuku grinned, "With what? Your quirk? And how exactly do you plan on putting her back together again?"

Overhaul raised an eyebrow in agitation, "Again, with my quirk, you ingrate..."

Overhaul's face dropped. He realised what Izuku was getting at.

Dabi smirked, "Friendly fire doesn't matter, huh?"

Izuku nodded, "There isn't anything Overhaul can do to her that I can't fix once I rip his quirk from his battered, bloodied body."

Eri looked scared, but seemed to understand this situation. She knew Izuku had seen what Overhaul's quirk could do.

Overhaul shoved Eri onto the floor once he realised that negotiations were over for the last time, plunging his hands INTO the ground, causing waves of gravel and tarmac to come flying up in waves.

Tomura raised his hands as Dabi and Izuku pointed their arms downwards, ready to launch themselves over the debris while Tomura dusted it before it collided with him, making a beeline for Overhaul.

Overhaul grit his teeth, backing towards the area where the blond hero and his minions were battling.

As the flying street descended upon the villains, Izuku blasted the floor with all his might, kicking off into the sky.
Mustard dragged his 3rd unconscious hero to the ever increasing pile of KO'd heroes in the cupboard on the upper floor. Fighting them was fun, and usually pretty quick, since Stain could paralyze them with his incredible quirk and quick ambush tactics. One follow-up spray of Sleep Gas from himself, and they'd be out of commission.

Dragging multiple unconscious bodies up a flight of stairs, however, was decidedly unfun. Especially since Mustard already felt a little weighed down by this gas tank...

Still, Deku ordered for this area to be cleaned out. So even if it was far away from the action, such a wild decision must only have been ordered with a specific plan in mind.

Mustard dumped the restrained body onto the pile, then gave the entire bundle of heroes another spray with the gas. One of the bodies buried in the pile wriggled a bit, then went still.

Gotta. So simple.

Suddenly, footsteps. The stairwell. They weren't the sound of Kurogiri's brogues, or Stain's distinctive metal boots. They were lighter and cushioned, intentionally stealthy. But the footsteps weren't being placed discreetly. They sounded heavy. And rhythmic.

Hang on... is that skipping?

Mustard went with his gut on this one, "Himiko? Is that you?"

The messy-bunned head of Himiko Toga burst from around the corner, beaming in satisfaction, "Oh hey, Mustard! You're here as well?"

Mustard spluttered, "As well!? I've been the one keeping these stupid heroes nice and catatonic, you ungrateful-"

Himiko interrupted, "Sorry, sorry, I just didn't know you'd be HERE. Like, in this location. Anyway, do you have any desire to live to see the next day?"

Mustard took a step back from the lunatic, "Excuse me? What sort of question is that, are you threatening me?"

Himiko nodded, her smile becoming slightly less exaggerated, "Yep. My spare change of clothes is stored in the room just down the hall. Kurogiri should've brought it with him. If you don't turn around and bury your head in your coat while I go nab them, I'll gut you like a fish."

Mustard wondered if his confusion just wasn't getting through to her because of his helmet, "Spare? Why do you need a spare, did you get blood on you?"

Himiko shook her head, "Nope. We were only able to get out of the middle of Shie Hassaikai HQ by having Twice work his magic! Two copies of me, all of us using my quirk to disguise! We were able to convince the one patrol squad that found us that we were arresting Twice as a hostage. Buuut my quirk works best under certain 'conditions'. Remember?"

Mustard thought on it for a moment, remembering some of Izuku's notes...

Mustard suddenly felt grateful for his helmet, hiding his beetroot red face, "R-Right, of course! I'll get back around the corner for you."

Himiko grinned, "Thanks! You're the best! Twice is downstairs if you need him. He's keeping watch and giving me some space."
Mustard turned around, keeping his eyes glued to the floor, until he heard some muffled screaming to his right.

He aimed his hose, puffing another round of gas into the mound of supposed-to-be-unconscious heroes, until the sounds faded.

One opening, that's all he needed.

Izuku kept using his quirks in ways intended to catch Overhaul off guard. Air Cannon's projectiles manifested in the form of ripples in the air, an unformed projectile of force. Whenever Dabi or Tomura were distracting him with pyrotechnics or the threat the touch of death, Izuku would take that as an opportunity to get some hits in.

Overhaul was playing defensively, moving towards his allies. If he believed this was a doomed fight, his face wasn't showing it.

Izuku didn't let up. Even if they did take out Overhaul, they still had the blond hero to deal with. Sakaki's slurred screams indicated quite clearly that this incorporeal titan was NOT going to lose his fight.

He couldn't engage yet. Izuku knew that. If Eri died, only Overhaul (or himself, if he managed to take Overhaul's quirk) would be capable of fixing her. That's a bartering chip he absolutely could not afford to hand over to either of them.

Eri was being kept close to Overhaul, rocks shifting her ever closer to his side. She wasn't fighting her predicament except to occasionally take the opportunity to scoot away from him. A child, no older than 6, with a thorough understanding of the necessity of staying calm in a hostage situation. Something about that was deeply upsetting.

Izuku let loose a powerful blast of Air Cannon. Only to see that Dabi had a stroke of genius.

Dabi lit the ground on fire directly in front of the blast, causing the rush of wind to fan the flames to monstrous degrees. A small wave of fire rushed towards Overhaul and he had to put up a wall to stop the tongues of flame from licking at him.

Overhaul wasn't out of tricks. The streetlamp next to Izuku creaked. Boiling the rock, he placed a pillar of lava between himself and the lamp...

Just as the pillar of molten rock was affected by Cooling, becoming a solid pillar of stone, the streetlamp slammed down towards the floor, halted only by the rock structure deflecting it. Without it, the lamp would've taken off Izuku's head.

This is what it feels like... a REAL head to head battle, Heroes, Villains and more Villains. Both have quirks, both have unique move sets.

Izuku's mind was racing. Overhaul's quirk gave him unparalleled command over terrain and could instantly end a fight upon touch. Izuku had some quirks gifted to him by All For One, but only had two powers that really worked well in combat. The combo of Rock Boil, Geopush and Cooling gave him control over molten stone that he could instantly harden into solid rock, but it was a combination that required his full attention. Air Cannon was in itself powerful, but it wasn't nearly
as strong as Sensei's power. Probably because he used strength enhancing quirks in conjunction-
Izuku ducked, a piece of debris that was once a sidewalk pavement stone flying over his head.

*No internal muttering during combat.*

Izuku saw Tomura slowly slinking towards Overhaul like a panther. In a few more seconds, Izuku had the solid impression he might do something reckless.

Perhaps this could be the opportunity he needed.

Kurogiri was looking over something, a small notebook resting on his purple, smog-emitting hand. Mustard hadn't been able to really leave to take a look at it.

Himiko was trying to get him to display it to her. Twice was cheering her on.

Himiko chattered, "Come on, what's so important? Is there some part of the plan we don't know about? You'd better not have been keeping even more information from us."

Kurogiri replied, irritably, "Yes, of course. You were walking straight into enemy territory, there had to be some secrets you genuinely *could not* tell them. Miss Toga, please quit trying to look over my shoulder this instant!"

Mustard clicked his tongue. *Absolute children...*

Himiko pointed out, "Ooooh, is that Izuku's handwriting? It is, isn't it?"

Having put up with enough of her (a sentiment that Mustard honestly could not blame him for), he opened up a portal directly below her. Flying through it, she landed squarely on her back in another room with a resounding thud.

Finally quietened, the tapping of clean, polished shoes echoed up the stairs.

Kurogiri greeted the new entrant before Mustard could even see them, "Ah, Mr Compress. So glad you could join us."

Mr Compress' suit rustled as he bowed, "The pleasures all mine, my friend. So, where are you keeping those rapscallions tied up?"

Kurogiri gestured towards Mustard's room. The orange-suited man strode in, his mask... seeming somewhat different than Mustard remembered.

Mr Compress asked, "So tell me, are you using the gas to keep them restrained?"

Mustard raised his wrist-nozzle proudly. "This new gear set of mine is letting me dish out my Sleep Gas quirk cleanly. They're permanently incapacitated, as long as I keep topping them up every few minutes."

Mr Compress clapped enthusiastically, "Bravo! In that case, do me a favour and ready a very large blast."
Mustard twisted a valve on his wrist, opening up the pipes. He pointed at the mound of knocked out heroes.

Mr Compress muttered, "Ready..."

From his pocket, he withdrew a decently sized collection of blue marbles, the result of his Compression quirk, throwing them into the mound.

Mr Compress continued, "Set..."

He raised his hand.

With a click of his fingers, he yelled, "Go!"

The marbles expanded right as Mustard fired, releasing a set of maybe 8 whole heroes, who re-entered the world dazed but energetic. Perfectly preserved as they were, they had no way to react to the wall of gas approaching them.

They collapsed, choking and retching before finally spluttering into unconscious silence. The mound had nearly doubled in size.

Mr Compress pat Mustard on the back, "Good show. Keep them topped up. We'll need your assistance with another matter in just a minute."

Mustard reached down, retrieving a pile of rope.

---

Izuku relayed the idea to Dabi during a brief moment when everyone was cooling off. All he needed to do was cause a distraction. Light things up.

Maybe he wasn't planning on Dabi putting on quite this much of a display of pyrotechnics, but he looked pretty pleased with it, so Izuku let him keep going.

The fire, the air, the whole 'fanning the flames' combo continually forced Overhaul to focus his defences upon them.

Right up until Tomura saw an opening.

With inhuman speed, he darted in close, unleashing his arm in a clawing motion. Overhaul responded by whirling around, opening his hand to lash out in response.

Overhaul knew as well as anyone else did that his quirk worked faster than Tomura's. Tomura's maximum time at decaying a full person was still a couple of seconds. Overhaul could scatter someone's remains instantaneously. The only way Tomura would win that exchange is if he managed to ambush him.

Tomura's eyes widened in shock as Overhaul turned to face him with equally inhuman speed. Overhaul's arm rushed towards Tomura with the confident force of a train.

A resounding crack rang out through the sky. Izuku stood upright, aiming Mustard's smoking revolver's barrel right at Overhaul.
Faster than a charge of the Air Cannon, but Overhaul wouldn't let taking a hit stop him if it meant eliminating one of his opponents. He felt the bullet collide with his shoulder, the force of the blow punching into his side, but he pushed through it. His momentum unchanged, he righted himself and slammed his arm down into Tomura's face at full force.

Tomura was punched towards the ground, but quickly jumped up again. Only now to find Overhaul's furious face marred by complete shock.

Izuku broke the stunned silence, "You know, you never did ask me to return that sample."

Overhaul's eyes widened in a way they hadn't in years. He stepped back from Tomura, digging his fingers into his wound, his fear of filth momentarily overridden by this greater fear.

He pulled out the bullet. A strange ring, patterns inside it. Built almost like an injector. He recognised it pretty quickly.

Tomura grabbed his arm, pulling it behind his back, shoving him to the ground as the arm withered, ripping it from his body.
The Hero of this story

Chapter Summary

Despite Overhaul being taken out of commission by the prototype Quirk Destroyer Bullet, the fight is still not over.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Overhaul gagged but did not scream, unable to stop himself from limping and putting his weight on his left leg, before Tomura grabbed his left arm and began to crumble it.

The moment he started, a thunderous thump sounded from the distance, like a large object breaking the sound barrier.

Izuku looked over, to see the blond hero running at them so fast he was breaking the sound barrier. Dabi ran forward, presumably in an attempt to block them, but the hero phased through his entire body and he gunned for Izuku unimpeded.

Izuku felt a punch rocket into his gut before he could even try to dodge, sending him rocketing into the air. The wind shredded his scalp as he flew backwards, eventually somehow losing momentum and hitting the floor.

When he looked up, the man was standing over him, hands on his hips and a grin on his face. Again, something about the way he carried himself made Izuku instinctively sour.

The man spoke in the voice of a happy man being serious, "Izuku Midoriya, right?"

Izuku propped himself up on his elbow, too winded by the blow to respond. He'd been knocked back almost 3 blocks.

He continued to talk, "I'm Mirio Togata."

_Mirio... Togata? As in... as in the Big Three Mirio Togata?_

Izuku pushed himself to his feet, dusting off his trousers in a display of mock confidence.

Izuku wasn't sure how to begin a conversation with someone this antagonistic and this powerful, so he began, "I'd prefer if you just called me Deku."

Mirio chuckled, "In that case, I'm Lemillion."

A tense silence settled before Mirio continued to speak.

He raised a finger, "I may not know much about you, but I know some people who do. They wanted me to talk to you first."

Izuku scoffed, "Don't you have a job to do?"
Mirio nodded, "Exactly. This is part of my job too, you know. Neutralizing dangerous threats doesn't always have to be done by violence. That said..."

Mirio reeled back, energy crackling around his body audibly. The air felt like it was heating up as Mirio drew back his fist, slamming it into the ground behind himself.

A thunderous crack, and the ground all around Mirio split into a jagged crisscross of broken cement.

Mirio finished, a little bit more breathless, "If it comes to violence, I can put up quite a fight. So let's just try Plan A for a while, okay?"

Izuku tried to prevent himself from feeling condescended to. It's true he was in a bad situation. Testing Mirio and ending this conversation early would be unwise. His allies already had things covered.

Besides, Mirio's hand was twitching slightly. *Unstable, perhaps?*

If he took enough time, maybe Izuku could figure out how his quirk worked. Something that gave him such incredible physical prowess, yet could also make him untouchable.

Izuku stood up, scratching the side of his head where he'd been bruised from the strike.

At the same time, he surreptitiously turned his communicator on for a split second, then back off again.

Izuku replied, "Okay then. Let's... talk."

---

Dabi wasn't quite able to believe his eyes when Izuku took off like a bullet. He looked like he was damn near wrapped around that hero kid's fist before he soared like a bird, plummeting like a stone. In any other situation it would've been hilarious to watch. In this situation, it was pretty upsetting.

Overhaul's repeated screaming brought him back to reality. Dabi turned around to see Tomura tearing off Overhaul's other arm.

It was kind of hard to tell whether or not it was the pain, fear or anger that was getting him to make that much noise. It sounded like a housefire.

And it was fucking awesome.

Dabi had expected Overhaul to pass out from the pain, but sheer steely will seemed to be keeping him conscious.

Overhaul wheezed, "Ngh...my...limbs..."

Tomura came in from behind and kicked the backs of his knees, bringing him collapsing onto them.

The blue-haired menace hissed, "Stay down unless you want to lose your legs too."
Dabi spat down his earpiece, "You guys had better know what you're doing. As soon as you pick up Izuku's broadcast, triangulate his position. He's been launched back down the street and-"

Suddenly, the two villains heard a small whimpering sound. Dabi turned around.

Eri was carefully observing the action from a few paces away. She was looking at Overhaul's injuries with something akin to awe.

Overhaul weakly muttered, "Eri, you must use your quirk on me... hurry."

Dabi nonchalantly blasted the sides of Overhaul's torso. He hissed, barely suppressing another fit of screaming.

Dabi returned to Eri, "Just cauterising his injuries. Even a doctor would do that."

Eri stuttered like she was about to ask something, but decided against it halfway through.

Dabi wasn't quite sure how to deal with a scared kid. But it was a right side better than getting Tomura to deal with her.

He tried to crack a joke, "What is it? I-Is it the staples? They make me look a little scary, sure, but I'm not really-"

Eri interrupted him, "You just threw flames at him."

Dabi looked a little deflated at being put down by a child that quickly, "Er... yeah. But he's Overhaul, right? You don't want him to be beaten? Maybe suffer a little bit?"

Eri shook her head, her nerves creeping into her voice, "I just want to get out of here."

Something clicked in the back of Dabi's mind, seeing this child. *Raised as a tool, used like a weapon for someone else's glory...*

Dabi warned her, "Heroes won't get you out of here. They'll just bring you onto their side."

Eri looked up at him, apparently confused.

Dabi couldn't take interacting with this kid any longer. Her innocence was starting to make him a little uncomfortable.

Dabi concluded, hearing the heroes begin to approach from down the streets, finally catching up to the action.

He drew Eri in a little closer, despite her fear, "Just stick close, okay?"

---

The first thing that struck Mirio about Izuku is just how human he looked. Sure, he looked a bit bitter and angry, but Mirio suspected he was just being hostile as a precaution. He was a villain, after all, and Mirio was a hero. It's just kind of what you have to expect.

But he was rather short, freckles lined his face, slightly fluffy hair. Kind of cute looking, honestly. On him, hatred looked like a practiced expression, not a natural one.
And of course, the final sign that he was dealing with a relatively sane and normal human was the fact that Mirio had managed to punch him a few blocks down the street. He wasn't some godlike supervillain with mastery over the forces of evil. Not yet, at least. Looks like he was still getting used to his powers, too.

Mirio was pretty darn thankful he'd been keeping up such a good fitness routine. Relying on his own strength to fight for so long made One For All a pretty good fit for him. Thanks to that, he managed to grasp it's strength enough to control it. But only just barely. And it put so much momentum and force into his strikes that if he tried to use Permeation and One For All at the same time, his incorporeal body would go flying a massive distance, ruining his attack. His eyes blinded by his own quirk, he'd end up god knows where halfway across the battlefield, disorientated and far away from his enemies.

If Mirio gave Izuk-

Mirio chided himself for a second, nearly forgetting Deku's polite request.

If Mirio gave Deku any indication that One For All wasn't agreeing with him, a pretty nasty fight would begin.

Besides, he'd promised All Might, Todoroki, Bakugo, his teammates and mentors. He promised them he'd give Deku a chance here.

Mirio tensed himself up, feeling the burning, searing pain in his fist. Any more use of One For All in that limb might break something important.

Hopefully they could just keep to negotiations for a while. Backup would be arriving soon.

Mirio smiled, "Okay, good! I know it might sound like hackneyed dialogue, but it is genuinely true. It isn't too late for you to change."

Deku bit back, standing his ground "It's too late for me to want to. I have an ambition I'm working towards, and I'm not going to abandon it."

Mirio placed a hand to his chin. He must be talking about Stain's ideology. His creed had become very popular among modern villains recently, and he was directly associated with the League of Villains.

Mirio commented, "Let me guess. Kill All Might, reform society. Haven't you ever considered that working to change the system from the inside might be a better idea?"

Deku looked derisive, "None of us were ever 'inside' the system. We've been ignored and tossed to the curb since the very beginning. We don't belong 'inside'. That's the reason you have villains in the first place."

Mirio couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at that one. It's not as if quirkless people received targeted abuse. What makes him think this way?

Deku scowled, "We can't live full and happy lives by just backing down and accepting all this."

This wasn't going very well. Izuku sounded pretty much like he was going into an oration. Mirio didn't exactly want to have to hit him where it would hurt this badly, but Izuku's passionate defiance made him feel like it was pretty necessary.

Mirio raised a finger, "You know, we searched your room. Uh, back at your mothers house."
Deku reeled back at that one. It was some mix of fury and bile with a hint of embarrassment. He quickly responded, "My room? What do you-"

Mirio chuckled light-heartedly, "We found an awful lot of All Might merchandise, you know? Largest collection I think I've ever seen, and I'm a pretty big fan of his myself!"

Deku looked a little less angry and a little more sad. Mirio internally felt a little relieved.

Mirio pressed on, "Everyone is, to be honest. Even you seemed to understand, at one point, how much good All Might does. Tell me, why were you such a big supporter of his?"

Deku looked at the floor for a moment, dejectedly.

Mirio tried to sound a bit more empathetic, since this was clearly a sensitive subject, "He saves people with a smile. That's what your mother said, when we asked her. I know you have had some pretty serious altercations since then, but... does he really deserve any of this?"

Deku replied, evenly, "He doesn't save everyone. From ordinary citizens, to villains like Sensei... some people aren't worthy of his attention or mercy. That kind of "us or them" attitude... if that keeps going, none of this is ever going to change. We'll be outcasts forever, our pain will go unnoticed, and hero society will keep becoming more and more corrupt, sensationalised, and rooted in it's exclusionary ideals."

Mirio wouldn't let that stand unchallenged, "There are so many better ways to get that across than threats and violence. I'm sorry about what happened to All For One, I really am-"

Deku cut him off, "I'm not going to just stop. There's too much at stake for too many people for me just to give up. Besides, I can't just forgive people like All Might, Kacchan, Endeavour, and forget everything they did like nothing happened."

Mirio noticed the fog at his feet a mere moment before it was too late.

Deku flexed his fingers and the floor separating him from Mirio began to shift.

Deku finished, "Bye."

Mirio leapt forward, Permeation activated, diving towards the Warp Gate that opened beneath Deku's feet.

Chapter End Notes

This one took ages to come out, I had to write a script project for my Uni work. Another Uni project is hitting me this week btw, because apparently the universe never wants me to have a healthy sleep pattern. On the bright side, I've had plenty of time in my spare moments to formulate later chapters, and plenty of time to crack jokes about it with my friends, so I have some fuel to write some more humorous chapters in the future once this arc is concluded. Enjoy!
Minor virtues

Chapter Summary

The League makes their power play against a seemingly unstoppable opponent.

Mirio concentrated hard during his leap, jumping through the spattering of lifted rock that Deku used to block his approach.

He could feel his body losing its weight, and even the friction from the air lifted and vanished, as he curled his body tighter into as small a ball as he could.

Just as he’d fully passed through the rocks, he deactivated his quirk so he could fly through the portal. He stretched himself back into a regular length just as his feet entered the Warp Gate.

*Okie dokie, the process of actually getting through the portal wasn't too bad.*

*Which makes me think what's on the other side of the portal is.*

A cold sensation washed over him. His sense of space shifted, like the pull of gravity rotated on its axis. Before he even realised it, he'd landed, feet tapping onto the hard wood floor.

He was in the upper floor of the Shie Hassaikai HQ.

Surrounded on every side by the entire League of Villains.

Without instruction, they each roared, barrelling towards him. At least three sharp objects shot towards his head before Mirio reactively turned on his quirk.

Two of the villains overstepped slightly, the girl and lizard bumping into Stain as Mirio slipped through the floorboards, landing comfortably on the lower floor of the building.

*That's... a bit of a problem.*

All the hero forces had made their way through the underground complex and were maybe miles from the main building where Mirio and the League now was. And from the looks of things, the members who had remained behind weren’t still here.

*So, the reason Deku agreed to talk with me... he was actually waiting for my backup to get there?*

In conclusion, this building had been emptied out, the fight with Overhaul had drawn all of Mirio's allies halfway across the city, only for Izuku to fake-escape in order to lure Mirio back to the entrance, where the entire League could regroup after their tasks were done, and piledrive him.

This was a little unnerving. Mirio took a deep breath, returning his eyes to the roof.

*This is what I've been training for. Let's make it count!*
This was the best chance they were going to get to defeat Mirio before he started his own offensive campaign. Tracking down their hideout, interrupting their missions, all that could be avoided if they took him out right now.

So as Himiko reeled back in apologetic confusion after bumping into Stain, Izuku felt a pit in his stomach widen.

Before Izuku could issue an order to run downstairs, Mirio burst through the floor. No rubble, no broken floorboards. He jumped through using his quirk, impermeable. But his hand was very real when it grabbed Himiko's head.

She barely had time to shout "Izu-" before Mirio threw her head directly into the floor with a resounding crack. Like a whack-a-mole, he retreated back under the floorboards once he'd finished.

Mr Compress hurriedly rushed over, placing Himiko safely in a marble.

Mr Compress muttered, "Her head is bleeding, but nothing fatal."

That pit in Izuku's stomach widened, as did his ears. He looked at the boards beneath his feet, straining to hear any footsteps that might tell him where Mirio is going...

He heard a crackling, popping sound...

Izuku roared, "EVERYONE GET DOW-"

Mirio burst upwards, crackling with energy, going so quickly that he slammed into the ceiling. Reeling himself around with a look of pain and fury, he dived towards the floor.

Izuku felt his balance tilt harshly to one side, as his feet gave out from under him, the entire upper floor collapsing and falling down.

Izuku hit the deck hard, scrambling to his feet, tasting iron in his mouth. He heard people yelling, and punches being thrown. It didn't sound like Mirio was losing.

This isn't happening...

By the time he opened his eyes, Spinner had been punched across the room, hitting the wall and slumping over.

Stain grit his teeth, "Filthy coward!"

He moved his sword around himself with brutal precision, ensuring that even with Mirio's quirk, he wouldn't be able to land a strike without getting cut, and bleeding.

Mirio reached across, grabbing a piece of debris, a massive wooden beam.

Mirio yelled, "Fore!"

The blunt object slammed through Stain's defences. He blocked it with both swords and it didn't offset the huge weight of the strike. Stain took the impact right across the body, being swung across the room in a semicircle on top of the beam until Mirio threw it into the wall. Stain didn't move.

Izuku took the initiative. He boiled the ground below him, creating a pool of lava. He aimed a blast
of Air Cannon directly at it, intending to send a wave at Mirio.

Before he'd even finished charging his strike, Mirio had rushed halfway across the room, his grimace of determination inches away from Izuku's own face.

Izuku finally registered a fist shoving his guts in on themselves, a punch like the wrath of a titan knocking the wind and nearly all of Izuku's consciousness out of him.

*I thought we were... stronger... than before...*

He felt bile rise in his throat as he collapsed to his knees. Mirio reeled above him, pulling back for another punch.

Izuku was starting to black out, when he heard a familiar voice.

Tomura hissed, "Back off, filth."

Mirio grabbed Izuku's collar, hoisting him up. For a moment, Izuku almost thought that the hero intended to throw him at Tomura.

Izuku looked over, managing to remember how to move his eyes and focus in on objects. And he saw that he wasn't the only one gripping another person.

Tomura had both Eri and an unconscious Overhaul gripped by the neck, a single ring finger held up to prevent Decay from activating, like the pin in a grenade.

Mirio kept his voice firm, rolling his shoulders to ease the bruising his back took earlier, "We don't negotiate with villains."

Tomura retorted, "You've done hostage negotiations before. What kind of hero are you?"

Eri clenched her fists tightly as Tomura tapped his pinkie finger against her neck. Mirio finally dropped Izuku, and he landed in a heap on the floor.

Tomura grinned, "It's pretty simple. We leave, we don't kill either of these guys."

Izuku felt a pressure on his back, pushing him to his feet. Kurogiri's solid hands, beneath all that smoke, guided him to a standing point beside Tomura, where he leant heavily against the wall.

Mirio scowled at the cutthroat conditions, "What will happen to them?"

Tomura mused, "Well, we both know you don't have any backup, so you don't really have any bargaining chips. We'll leave Overhaul somewhere you can find him. Alive."

Mirio's scowl deepened, "And Eri?"

Eri's eyes darted back and forth in restrained panic.

Izuku managed to wheeze out, "We'll keep... hold of Eri..."

Mirio cut in, "Do you expect me to let you leave here with a child hostage?"

Izuku continued, "We're not giving her to you... to the heroes..."

His statement would have continued if not for the rising sickness he felt, whereupon he had to stop.
God dammit.

Eri stuttered, "I-It's fine. I'll b-be okay. I don't think they'll h-hurt me."

Mirio held her gaze for a moment. Eventually, he simply stated, "I'll get you out of there eventually, I promise."

After this, he raised his gaze onto Izuku, "As for you, Deku, I'll get you arrested eventually. First what you did to Tokoyami, now you hold a child hostage? You really have sunken low."

Izuku's battered brain didn't really register what he was saying. Wasn't Tokoyami the... shadow guy?"

Mr Compress cut in, "The other League members are injured, we have to go! Kurogiri, open the portal!"

Kurogiri questioned, "Directly to the base?"

Mr Compress whispered a set of instructions into his ear, and Kurogiri promptly opened up a Warp Gate.

Mirio finished his threat, "I'll see you brought to justice, Deku. I promise that, too."

Izuku felt a tug on his sore arm, and he allowed himself to be led into the Warp Gate.

Izuku felt the ring of metal beneath his feet, pulling his neck up. The interior of a dark warehouse greeted him, as a large thud caught his attention.

Overhaul was dropped to the floor in front of him. The yakuza groaned, waking from his trauma-induced slumber.

Izuku couldn't quite contain his grief, "We were strong enough to take out Overhaul... to give him what he deserved. But Mirio?"

Mr Compress replied, "He was an unknown factor."

Izuku snapped back, "We had a plan for unknown factors! If a powerful new opponent showed up, we were to lead them into the portal and take them on. All of us! Together!"

Izuku leaned down, "But it didn't work. Even at our strongest, we failed. He destroyed us, all by himself."

Kurogiri stood opposite Izuku on the other side of Overhaul.

Kurogiri spoke, "We defeated Overhaul, retrieved Eri, and we all got out. This mission was an unqualified success, even with that Mirio's intervention."

Mr Compress also chimed in, "He's one of the strongest heroes we've ever seen. We can't blame ourselves for being blindsided. Next time, we'll be ready."

Izuku nodded, hearing truth in those words. Even with all the injuries he'd just sustained, it
honestly could have been way worse.

Kurogiri muttered, "I don't suppose those words heal up your stomach, however. Let's finish up here so we can mend ourselves."

Eri finally piped up, "And m-me?"

Tomura groaned a bit, still holding onto her.

Izuku snapped, "Get off of her neck. We're not going to be like Overhaul."

Eri's throat was freed. Again, it was unnerving to see a child understand these situations so well. Instead of running away, she walked up to Izuku, repressing her fear.

Dreading the answer, Eri questioned, "Why? Why aren't you letting me go?"

Izuku responded, "Because if the heroes get a hold of you, they'll try to use your quirk too. It's a powerful one."

Eri's eyes shot wide, "R-Really? Even they would-"

Izuku clarified, "Not like that. Not like, um, like Overhaul did. It's just... heroes have a way of making you feel like their way of doing things is the only correct way to do things. If they take you in, they'll convince you to use your powers to help them, eventually. And all of us will suffer if that happens."

Eri shot the question directly, clenching her hands together, "So... those experiments he did..."

Izuku answered, "Will never happen to you again. I swear it."

Eri trembled a bit, before stilling herself. Nodding she stated, "Okay then. I'll... I'll stay with you guys for now. I-"

Just as she was talking, Overhaul rolled over, glaring at her.

Overhaul spat out, "U-Use Rewind on me!"

Izuku responded even in his injured state, by throwing a kick straight into his head.

Overhaul rolled onto his front. Izuku sat down on top of him, pinning him down.

Izuku felt a rush, saying, "Why do you need to rewind? Is it something about your quirk? Can't use it without your hands?"

Tomura contributed, "I saw him, in that fight. Leaning around to touch his hands to things. His quirk works like mine; hands only."

Overhaul remained defiant, "You're not getting anything from me."

Izuku rolled up his right sleeve, "Oh, I think I am."

Overhaul's eyes began to widen.

Izuku commented, "You think quirks are a disease. It seems a shame to me to just leave you lying there with a powerful quirk you can't use. Might as well 'play doctor' and cure you before we let you go."
Overhaul wriggled around, finally showing fear, "No, NO! I still need it! My work, I... D-Don't touch me!"

Izuku's palm began to glow red, "Shut up and take your medicine."

At about 5:00am the following morning, Overhaul was dropped into the police station.

The authorities were informed that a pair of fisherman had found him tied to the mast of an empty boat beside the docks, beaten badly from the battle that had taken place the previous day.

Both of his arms had been Decayed by the quirk of the villain Tomura Shigaraki, rendering Overhaul's ability to use his quirk null and void.

He seemed to be taking his defeat badly, judging by the grief-stricken state he was in upon being taken into custody.

The lot of them stepped out into the League HQ, many stumbling immediately into a chair. Only Mr Compress, Kurogiri and Eri didn't feel the need to take the weight off of their feet immediately.

It was somewhat embarrassing to have their endurance defeated by a little girl, but the circumstances probably forgave them.

Izuku explained, "We're going to have to set up the sick bay again, for most of our members. Me included, honestly. Kurogiri, can you please help Eri get a room of her own ready? She shouldn't have to be here when we decompress our beaten allies."

Eri raised an eyebrow, "My own room?"

Kurogiri placed a hand on her back, leading her down the corridor gently, "We're not animals, miss Eri. Come now, I think we have a living space that will suit you quite well."

Once she was out of sight, izuku turned to Mr Compress.

Izuku pointed, "Alright Mr Compress, let them out."

Mr Compress scattered the marbles over a wide open terrain, and then allowed them to expand and release their occupants.

Immediately the room was filled with the battered and bruised bodies of the League of Villains, all groaning and moaning to create an instant cacophony.

Himiko yelled, clutching her head, "Do you think you could've let us out BEFORE you tied up that beak-faced amputee!?"
Chapter Summary

Eri is now in the company of one apparently good person, a multitude of unknown villains, and one person who threatened to kill her. And this is actually the safest she's ever been.

Chapter Notes

Guess who's out of formal education at Uni until further notice AND has finally wrapped up all their big projects for nearly a month? This guy! Hoping that'll mean an increased speed in updates. Thank you for all the comments recently, it means the world to me, it really does. So I put in some effort to push out this chapter for you guys. Hope you like it! Cheers!

A lot of them were probably going to have mixed reactions to having a child under their roof. Half of them were still compressed and tucked in Mr Compress' pocket while Eri was being led out of the room.

But Izuku couldn't just leave her here. Looking at her now was a little bit heartbreaking.

She had a small bag full of items that Kurogiri/Giran went out and acquired for her, but she wasn't putting them to use decorating her room. She seemed more comfortable leaving them lying in her bag, where she could pick them up and move them if she needed to. If she needed to run and find somewhere else to stay.

She wasn't treating this place like her home. She was still obviously scared of being in a building full of villains. And Izuku wasn't just going to wait around and let her adjust on her own.

When Izuku was settling in, he had someone to kind of... guide him into seeing things from a different perspective.

But he's gone. So, I suppose that job falls to me now, too.

Izu coughed, alerting Eri to his presence, looking through the doorway. She spun around, rising to her feet.

Eri responded, a little apprehensive, "Hello. Uh, what are you doing h-here?"

Izu tried to still himself. There was just something about Eri's tone of voice that hurt to hear. She sounded like she was always expecting bad news. Izuku smiled, trying to calm her nerves.

"Just wanted to see how you were settling in. Are you liking your new room?"

Eri looked over the space. It was just as big as any of the other rooms the League of Villains occupants had. But apart from the bed, chair and bedside table, it was completely bare. Eventually,
she passed her judgement.

"It's good. The bed is really comfortable."

The bed was not really comfortable. But probably miles better than she was used to.

Eri asked her own question, hers cutting far deeper, "You... are you the person who was hiding in the vents?"

*She's pretty quick to get to the point. Jeez...*

Izu nodded, "That was me. I was trying to spy on Overhaul. Find out what he was keeping hidden from everyone. And, uh, that ended up being you."

Eri nodded in response, almost mimicking him, "Uh huh. I didn't tell anyone I saw you."

Izu felt pretty happy that Eri had covered for him, but she hadn't quite finished her questioning yet.

Eri curled up slightly, "So I think you're probably the one who, uh, told your... friends?"

Izu reaffirmed her, "Yes, they're my friends. Not lackeys, or henchmen, or mercenaries."

Eri looked a little relieved at the informal structure, continuing, "Yeah, so you told them to come get me, right?"

Izu nodded again, "Yes. I'm technically the leader of the League of Villains."

Eri concluded, "So you're the reason I'm here. But..."

Eri's light eyebrows curled into a frown of concentration.

"I know you said you didn't want the heroes to get me... and you promised that you wouldn't try to... u-use my blood..."

Izu shook his head immediately, "No, no. Never."

Eri pondered, "Then... what am I supposed to do?"

Izu rubbed the back of his neck nervously. It was true that exactly what they were going to do to take care of Eri wasn't exactly well thought out. They just didn't want Overhaul or the heroes to get a hold of her and use them for their own ends.

Izu replied by remembering how he was introduced to the idea of staying with the League. Those terrifying first days.

"Um... well, if it's any comfort, I joined the League from the outside, too. Villains aren't just born as Villains, after all. What happened to me is that I stuck around, taking notes and looking at how the Villains ran their operations, and learned to see things from their perspective. They didn't ask me to do anything apart from take notes. I wasn't forced to go out on combat missions or anything."

Eri wiped her forehead, "Whew."

Izu chuckled, "I was relieved to hear that, too. I wasn't really ready for battle back then, for a lot of reasons, honestly. But basically, it'll be the same for you, okay? We won't force you to do anything you don't want to do. You'll be safe here."
Eri looked around her room again, noting the emptiness, "I... might get bored here."

Izuku raised an eyebrow, "Well, the room is pretty barebones. Why don't you have a walk around the HQ?"

Eri curled inward a little bit. Izuku raised his hands in defence of his friends.

"They're not dangerous, I swear! I've promised you that you'll be safe, no harm will come to you. Really!"

Images began to flash through his mind, such as Dabi burning multiple people to death, Himiko's exsanguination crimes, Stain stabbing multiple people...

*Maybe I'm being a bit too generous. They're still probably scary to her.*

Izuku held out a hand, "What if I go with you? So you don't have to meet them all by yourself?"

After a few moments of quiet contemplation, Eri stood up. Her dirty yellow dress was pretty tattered.

Izuku noted, "We'll need to get you something better to wear than that."

Eri tilted her head, "Why?"

Izuku was taken aback, "What, d-do you like that outfit? You can keep it if you want, but..."

Eri looked down, "No, it's pretty bad. I'm just wondering why you'd want to give me new clothes."

Izuku felt a sharp pain in his heartstrings.

"We're going to take better care of you here, alright? You deserve better treatment."

Eri seemed confused, "Why? I'm not doing anything for you."

Izuku held up his hands, "We don't need to get anything out of being nice to you. We'll just do this to help you out, ok?"

Eri tilted her head again, "Really? That doesn't make sense."

*She can't even properly grasp the concept of someone doing something for her without expecting something in return...*

Izuku negotiated, "Look, how about... if that's how you think this works, how about this: I'll buy you some new clothes if you agree to tag along with me and walk around the HQ."

Eri held a finger to her chin, deciding, "Okay. I'll, uh, I'll go with you. Just please don't walk too far away from me."

Izuku gestured for her to join him, "Absolutely."

As he opened the door, Eri stood directly behind him. If he moved his legs any further backward, he'd bump into her.

"L-Let's go, then."
Izuku walked her through the corridor to the familiar sight of Kurogiri's bar on his left as he walked into the room. That bar being immediately on his left after he walked out of his room reminded him strongly of the old headquarters. Maybe Kurogiri had that in mind when he built that eccentric set piece up in the first place?

The gaseous, flaming spectre leaned onto his counter, greeting them.

"Ah, good day mister Izuku. I hope your stomach is holding up after... oh, is there someone hiding behind you?"

Izuku turned around. Eri was putting Izuku's legs between her and Kurogiri, using them like cover.

Kurogiri waved, "Good day, miss Eri. I trust you're doing well. Did you like any of the items myself and Giran picked out for you?"

Eri didn't respond, both out of nervousness relating to being questioned by the creepy-looking purple smoke man, and nervousness relating to the fact that she hadn't actually touched any of those items yet.

Izuku waved an arm to take Kurogiri's attention off of her, "She's just a bit shy. It's been a pretty rough day for all of us."

Kurogiri grumbled to himself, "I did tell you that you ought to be resting, you know."

Eri looked up at Izuku's torso. Some bandages held a pair of fractured rib bones in place, but they weren't easily visible beneath his shirt. He didn't want to worry her.

Izuku chuckled, "Well, we have a new guest, don't we? This is part of my job now."

Kurogiri relented, "Just lie down the moment you feel any tautness in your sides, sir. You can't do any part of your job if you crush your ribcage into oblivion. As for you, miss Eri, can I get you anything to drink?"

Eri peeked out from behind Izuku, before stepping out entirely to answer.

"Um... am I allowed some water?"

This kid has been through some ordeals.

Kurogiri, for his part, nodded politely, "We'll never have a shortage of that. Alternatively, we have multiple types of juice, milk, soft drinks. Also coffee or green tea. Or perhaps even hot chocolate, in moderation."

Eri was overwhelmed with options, in addition to not knowing precisely what tea or coffee was made from.

Kurogiri responded as best he could, "I'll start off by letting you try out some simple apple juice, and we'll just expand your repertoire from there."

Eri, befuddled, went along with it, "Y-Yes sir."

Izuku lifted Eri onto one of the bar counters, and Kurogiri handed her a juice carton. The second she tasted some of the apple deliciousness, she began draining the carton at a reckless pace.
While she was busy with that, Kurogiri returned his attention to Izuku.

"There is still a bit more to discuss. Overhaul's quirk. Have you attempted to use it yet? It might be the most powerful one you now have."

At Overhaul's name, Eri's eyes rolled over to stare at Izuku. Her rapid consumption of the juice didn't stop, so she didn't react in any other way.

Izuku lifted up both of his forearms, where he believed Overhaul's power was stored, concluding, "I know. But I can still feel it, added to the system of quirks I have. Even though it's strong and extremely complicated, I can still access it. I think it's something to do with the fact that I took it myself."

Kurogiri took Eri's empty carton, tossing it into a bin behind the counter, "I do hope you will begin practicing with it as soon as your body has healed."

Eri gulped the last of the apple juice before finally saying, "Thank you, sir. That stuff is really sweet, I like it. Thank you."

Kurogiri bowed slightly at the waist, "My name is Kurogiri. Just head right here if you ever need refreshment."

Eri blinked twice. Almost immediately, she asked, "Could I please have another?"

At least she was taking this one a bit slower. Izuku walked away from the counter, Eri hiding once more behind his legs. Her attempt at stealth was somewhat hampered by the noises of the straw, but as long as it made her more comfortable, it didn't really matter.

Izuku tested the water, "So, what did you think of Kurogiri?"

Eri removed the straw, "He's nice, really nice. Wasn't he the one that showed me to my room?"

Izuku nodded, and Eri nodded in acknowledgement. A short silence settled as they walked over towards the sick ward.

It was a little unnerving that even when things went far better for her than she had expected, she hadn't mustered up a smile. Not even once.

He was starting to get a little worried that this might start to become too much for her. Kurogiri is among the most sensible people Izuku knew, so it was only going to get tougher from here. Maybe it would be better to call this off after a couple more meet-ups and-

Oh god no.

Izuku's train of thought was interrupted by the sight of Himiko Goddamn Toga leaving the impromptu medical ward, clutching a bandage around her head.

Himiko had a concerning habit of always staring intently at Izuku's face, so hopefully that meant she wouldn't notice the child. Sure enough, Himiko bounded over to greet him.

"Hey Izuku! Now we've both had head injuries! I'm feeling a little disappointed you didn't come
along and bandage my head like I did for you."

Izuku felt a tad guilty, "I'm sorry. I wasn't allowed to leave the hospital bed either."

Himiko smiled sweetly, "What a shame. I would've loved to see you wearing a nurse's cap. Would've made me feel a lot better."

Because of Izuku's apparent confusion, Himiko continued leading the conversation before he could react.

Himiko pointed at him, "You know what you ought to get? A healing quirk. This sick bay stuff is super inconvenient. We're losing a lot of time just licking our wounds. Uh, not actually licking wounds, I wouldn't mind that, and neither would Stain but, uh, you know what I mean."

Izuku began to get excited at the prospects of his new powers, "W-Well, if I learn a bit better how to use Overhaul, I might be able to use that for extremely effective healing! It can rearrange bodily matter. With a proper understanding of everyone's anatomy, I can probably patch them up in the middle of battle once I get really good at it. Uh... Himiko?"

She was no longer looking at him. She was staring directly at Eri with a blank expression. Eri, for her part, stared back like a deer in headlights.

Himiko's eyes darted over to Izuku's. Then back to Eri. Then back to Izuku, who was now looking anxious. Then back to Eri.

With blinding speed, Himiko shot towards Eri and picked her up beneath her arms, holding her outward like a teddy bear. Himiko's mouth immediately split into a massive grin. The sharp teeth had Eri wearing an expression of horror.

Before Eri could start screaming, Himiko started fawning over her with an unadulterated baby voice, "Oh my god you're adorable! Izuku's taking care of this little cutie patootie, good lord, I would've tried even harder to go with Izuku's group if I knew I'd get to help YOU out you sweet little buttermuffin! Why didn't you tell me Izuku, I would've brought presents! She's so precious!"

Eri was pulled into a tight hug as Himiko became increasingly red and giggly. Izuku tried to peer at Eri's expression to see if she was alright.

Eri was starting to tear up slightly.

Izuku yelled, "H-Himiko, you're being too extreme! Put her down!"

Himiko paused, "Huh?"

Himiko held Eri at arms length again, noting that she was blinking tears down her cheeks. For the first time Izuku had ever seen, Himiko's expression curled downward into sadness and regret.

The blonde placed the child back down onto her feet, "I'm... I didn't mean to spook you, sweetie..."

After a moment or two of sniffing, Eri began to walk forward toward Himiko. Himiko backed up a little, uncertain of herself. But Eri kept stumbling forward, eventually reaching her.

She flung her arms around Himiko's leg, clumsily trying to reciprocate.

Oh... she didn't know how to respond to so much affection...
Himiko froze for a moment, before her grin returned even stronger than ever. Her hands rose to her cheeks, barely able to contain her joy.

Himiko practically screamed, "SHE LIKES ME!"

It took a good 20 minutes of conversation and snuggling to finally convince Himiko to let Eri go and walk around for a bit. It took another 5 minutes to convince Eri that Himiko was the most hyperactive member of the group, and she wouldn't have to be sent on another emotional rollercoaster again today.

However, they did both agree to leave the sick bay alone, for now. Eri being exposed to that many people at once might be a bit too much. Instead, Izuku decided to bring her to the most entertaining area of the building; the common room. The birthplace of bonding.

Izuku was only thinking about the games, movies and bean bags. He momentarily forgot to factor in that Tomura is practically a permanent resident of that room.

Sure enough, there he was, playing some kind of old school side-scrolling shooter that was taking up all of his attention. His chapped lips were twisted into a grimace, he was currently in full concentration mode, serious business.

Eri's expression went blank and still. The kind of fear you feel when you know that crying won't do any good.

Izuku swallowed air heavily. He'd wanted to commend Tomura for ensuring that they were all still able to escape when their ambush backfired. But he had also accomplished that feat by threatening to disintegrate Eri, so now clearly was not the best time.

Tomura was muttering to himself, "C'mon... come on, dammit. If I can find that laser gun, I swear to god..."

He took damage, and the game cut to the game over screen. Tomura began to release a hissing sound like air being pushed between his teeth.

Aggravated, he finally turned around to see his visitors, "What are you looking... oh."

The blue-haired, red-eyed duo were certainly something to see. Even Tomura was bothered to look a little on edge at the prospect of meeting this kid again.

Izuku kneeled down closer to Eri, "We can leave if you want."

Eri shook her head, tentatively approaching Tomura. Izuku could practically hear the timebomb ticking down, but this was the first time he'd seen Eri go out of her way to approach someone. He had to let her try.

Eri stared at him for a little. She looked slightly concerned about his lips and lightly scraped neck. It was looking slightly better than it had in the past, but it still wasn't a pretty sight.

After enough time had passed, Tomura paused the game to speak, "What do you want? You're annoying me."
Eri looked a little stung, but only stepped back one pace. Tomura sighed loudly.

He pulled at his face, explaining curtly, "If this is about grabbing your neck, it wasn't because I hate you. I just had to get everyone out of there alive. No-one died, so there's no problem. Understand?"

Eri squeezed out her words, "No, I know what a death threat is. I know what it looks like. I-if you had to, you'd have killed me without hesitation."

Tomura replied curtly, "No sh... no kidding. I have to look after my own. You're here now, so you're technically one of my own. Quit snivelling."

Eri held her arms closer to her torso, standing stiffly, "I'm not 'one of you'. I'm probably not going to be, either."

Tomura shrugged dismissively, "Whether you're an actual member or not, you live here now. Nothing I can do about that."

Eri shuddered, in spite of her efforts, "Y-You don't understand... all I've ever done is hurt people. My quirk... it's like a curse."

Tomura turned to face her, "That's not a curse. You wanna see a curse, brat?"

He whirled around, grabbing an empty ramen cup, gripping it with all fingers. Within a second, the thin packaging had been reduced to ashes.

Tomura leered, "Surprised? I decay everything I touch. Anything I ever grasp with all my fingers turns to dust. That is what a curse looks like. What does your quirk do again?"

Eri's eyes were still wide, staring at the remains of what once was a ramen cup, but replied, "It's called Rewind. I can turn someone's body back to... a previous state, I think. Even to the point of... not being there."

Tomura reacted to that with curiosity, but didn't let it distract him from his sentence, "So you can heal people, make them younger, all sorts of stuff. My quirk's made for nothing but destroying things. Don't come at me with this garbage about being 'cursed'. Your quirk is just fine."

Eri stared down at the ground for a moment, her expression unreadable. Izuku wasn't sure if he should step in. It's true that Tomura always spoke harshly and gave backhanded compliments. But it also sounded like maybe he just told Eri exactly what she needed to hear.

Eri sat down next to him. She was clearly still uneasy being around him, but after everything that had happened today, she was willing to make an effort. Izuku couldn't quite hide his joy, breaking into a smile that thankfully Tomura didn't notice.

Eri asked him, "What are you playing?"

Tomura replied snappily, "None of your business."

Eri asked him, "Does it have multiplayer?"

Tomura replied, "Yeah."

Eri asked cautiously, "Can I-"

Tomura interrupted, "No."
Izuku made sure the hall lights were off before he peeked into Eri's room. Didn't want to wake her up.

In the end, Tomura was the last straw. Trying to talk to him took up the last of her energy. She had to return back to her room for the evening.

She'd been in there for an awfully long time. Izuku just wanted to check she was okay before he went to bed himself.

He looked around. Eri was buried beneath her sheets, but a small glass lay on her bedside table. Toys had been assembled in neat rows along the wall. The clothes Kurogiri and Giran had got for her were piled up nearby the door, ready for the following days.

It wasn't much, but she'd finally unpacked some of her things.

Izuku gently shut the door. He got the feeling he'd get a good night's sleep as well.
The clowns and the giant

Chapter Summary

As conditions in the League of Villains begin to cool down, it's time to evaluate the state of the world.

Izuku opened his eyes and saw nothing but blackness. Blackness that was impossible to see through, but that he could somehow tell stretched onward infinitely in all directions.

As he lay down, wraith-like figures appeared above him, illuminated by the colours of their eyes. Faint imprints of people, whispers.

Most of them Izuku recognised by now, although he had no names for these people. But a pair of round yellow eyes stared at him apprehensively from the darkness, and Izuku could feel Search flare up from within his body. Those were the eyes of Tomoko Shiretoko, the one who owned this quirk before him. He'd seen her briefly after Sensei was done with her. He'd seen her on the news, in interviews.

The thug who had the quirk Blackout was also in the darkness, a pair of dull brown eyes. They burned with shame, staring at their conqueror. Izuku's left eye twitched. So far, he had difficulty controlling who exactly was robbed of their sight, including himself. Infrared Ray counteracted this for Izuku alone, for now.

A new set of eyes had joined the fray. More gold than yellow, thin and condescending, but twisted with bitterness. Kai Chisaki's eyes. Izuku's forearms flared with a burning sensation, and he could feel the complex Overhaul quirk within him also.

Izuku began seeing a light begin to rise up a short distance away. He sat up to get a look at it.

Another figure sat there, the blond emaciated man from Izuku's other visions. The light he held, the luminescent spark, was smaller now. Far weaker. But he was not alone.

A muscular young man in front of him. He held a spark, too. It was faint, too. But even as Izuku watched, although the changes were tiny to the point of being completely invisible to the naked eye, he could somehow tell that the spark was burning brighter. It was growing, not receding.

Suddenly, Izuku noticed that the background of these people began to shift. Eyes began to pierce the darkness, of many colours, shapes and sizes, staring down at the spark the young man cradled in his palms. Izuku had never seen these eyes before.

The emaciated man placed a hand on his apprentice's shoulder. Izuku felt a large hand land heavily on his own shoulder. The tough core of All For One began to make a sickening grinding sound.

He turned around...

Izuku's eyes snapped open with a shock. This time he was at least able to suppress his panicked yelling.
Sweating, Izuku sat up in his bed. He picked up the clock from his bedside table. 10:00am. He'd slept longer than he usually did.

He doubted he'd ever quite get used to those surreal dreams. They bordered on nightmares. He was starting to learn to prepare for them, but something about them felt prophetic and they never failed to creep Izuku out.

Izuku couldn't help but wonder if similar things ever happened to Mirio...

He shook his head, throwing off his bed covers and climbing to his feet.

Rubbing his eyes, Izuku made his way down to Kurogiri's counter. Hopefully he'd be able to nab a bit of coffee to power him through his troubled sleep.

Izuku arrived downstairs, only to find Himiko, who was holding Eri aloft in her arms again. Himiko was staring at Eri's face, while Izuku could only see her back.

Izuku observed briefly that the dungarees and yellow shirt were suiting the little girl a lot better, before Himiko observed that he'd entered the room and caught his attention.

Himiko greeted him, "Hey Izuku! Look, look at our cute little baby!"

Izuku nearly spluttered on air before responding, "O-Ours!?"

Himiko blinked twice, stiff and unmoving, before hastily resuming her enthusiastic speech with, "Of course! After all, she's all of our responsibility now, isn't she?"

Eri tried to turn around, but Himiko gently placed a hand on the top of her head, softly urging her, "No, not yet. Just a sec."

Izuku was a little concerned, "Himiko, why aren't you letting me see Eri's face?"

Himiko muttered, "Okay, okay..."

Suddenly, she turned Eri around, with a loud cry of:

"BEHOLD!"

Izuku had to double take slightly before he could believe what had happened.

Eri's face was covered in layers of gyaru-style makeup. Eyeshadow, blush, foundation, contours, lipstick, the works. It was really far too thick, like someone had used double the recommended amount. Well, in this case the 'someone' was almost certainly Himiko, judging by her wide, toothy smile of pride, as she displayed her artistic triumph.

Eri, for her part, deadpanned her expression. She added onto the display by throwing her arms wide, but either she didn't want to ruin the makeup by moving her face, or she hadn't been given a mirror yet and didn't understand that Himiko had turned her into a clown.

Izuku had no way to put this gently, "Himiko, I understand that you're excited, but maybe don't put makeup on a 6 year old. Please."
Himiko shrugged, "Hey, I'll have you know she had a lot of fun being my model, didn't you?"

Eri's neutral expression didn't shift, but she opened her mouth with an audible peeling sound, "You just picked me up and stood me on a stool. I didn't want to upset you."

Himiko clasped her hands together, "But you look so cute, I just had to! And now you look even more glamorous."

Eri stifled a small redness in her cheeks that showed even beneath the pink powder, "Well... thank you."

Izuku pinched the bridge of his nose. She'd need to have a bath now. If the pipes jammed because of the excessive beauty products, he'd never forgive that messy-bunned girl.

The leader of the League of Villains, famous criminal, plagued by prophetic visions, attempting to reform society by striking at it's very heart, and his job still involved day-care duty.

After Eri was cleaned up, Izuku's quest to introduce her to the members of the League of Villains resumed.

Izuku turned to his left and looked down to see Eri keeping pace with him. Izuku was relieved that she no longer felt the need to hide behind his legs.

He dared to ask, "So, uh, what do you think of them? The ones you've met so far?"

Eri scratched the side of her head before responding, "I think Himiko is nice. She did wake me up a bit early, though."

Izuku made a mental note to talk to her about that, before continuing, "And the others?"

Eri simply responded, "Kurogiri's nice too, and I'm really grateful for his help. But, uh, Tomura still freaks me out..."

Izuku raised an eyebrow, "Yet you still approached him yesterday."

Eri wrung her hands, "I don't know why... he still seems really scary. But I think he kind of... understands a lot more than he's okay with saying."

Izuku was surprised at her intuition, "R-Really? I wasn't expecting you to be so willing to look past his, y'know, rough attitude."

Eri tapped her forehead, "It's not that. He's still really mean, and grouchy, but still..."

Eri stopped walking, gesturing to Izuku. She pointed at the small horn poking out of her forehead.

Eri explained, "My quirk is... not good. It hurts people. It hurt people I never ever wanted to hurt. But for a little while, he kind of... made me feel better about it."

Izuku nodded solemnly, "I've given this advice before, Eri. It's not about what kind of power you have, or where it came from. The only thing that matters is how you use it."
Eri shook her head, "But I can't use it. I can't even control it, and people have suffered because of that!"

A door opened, and a monochrome head rounded the corner.

Twice began introducing himself, "I'm not sure if I can relate, but I totally 100% get what you're saying. Quirks are beautiful but dangerous things, like a white bird drifting gently across the lake that might possibly be a goose instead of a swan and if that's the case you're in major trouble because geese are vicious, let me tell you. If it's a swan, you're fine. Geese, run to the hills. Do you know they have teeth on their tongues? Yikes!"

Izuku was going to stop him when Eri placed a hand to her chin and replied, "Really? Teeth?"

Twice nodded, "Oh yeah, yeah! They might have teeth on their feet too, but I'm not sure. I was a little..." Izuku shot him a glare before he mentioned alcohol in front of a child, "...tired, uh, the night I watched that nature documentary."

Eri looked down, "I've never actually seen a goose. Or many animals at all."

Twice snapped over to look at Izuku, "Hey, is there any chance we can afford to take the day off? Head to the zoo?"

Izuku rubbed the bridge of his nose, "I'm not sure if our disguises would hold up for an entire day, Twice. And at the moment, we're a little busy trying to plan out what our next move should be now that we've plundered most of the Shie Hassaikai's resources."

Eri looked a little sheepish at the mention of the yakuza, to which Twice immediately added, "Yeah, even though we got our asses kicked, we really kicked their asses! They're gone forever now!"

Izuku had already had to deal with both Himiko and Twice this morning. They were really nice people, but taking on the double-team combo was really starting to wear him out. But when he looked down and saw Eri's face, she looked... relieved. She'd loosened up her shoulders, the faint vestiges of a smile threatening to emerge from the corners of her mouth.

Izuku looked back at his bodysuited comrade. Not only had he completely derailed an upsetting conversation, he'd managed to solidify in Eri's mind that her tormenters were finally gone. And all while being super entertaining for her.

This guy... he's surprisingly great with kids.

Twice squat down to Eri's height, smiling even beneath his mask, "Welcome to the family, little buddy. We're a bunch of deranged, colourful, arguably insane jerks, but we'll take good care of you."

Eri nodded, extending a hand to shake, "Good to meet you, Twice."

Twice slapped it upwards and then high-fived it, visibly confusing the girl, before he drew himself back up to full height.

Twice commented, "Well, even though I'm feeling super good today, I think I've gotta go lie down for a bit. That Mirio kid really did a number on my back, I feel like garbage. See you two later!"

With that, Twice went from energetic and peppy to hunched over a bit with a hand on his hip, lurching away to his bed.
Izuku looked down at Eri, smiling expectantly.

Eri looked down at the ground, reddening again, "Okay, I liked him too."

Kurogiri had been waiting in the sewer systems for nearly 15 minutes now. It had been roughly 10 minutes ago that the smell had become inexcusable. Why on earth The Sewer Rat had to be located so nearby the actual waste pipes was a mystery. Perhaps they felt the foul stench deterred investigators?

At long last, Kurogiri heard Giran round the corner.

Giran finished lighting up his cigarette, "I'd offer you one, but seeing as you're pretty much made out of smoke, I figure..."

Kurogiri repressed his irritation, "How charitable. What were the results of your attempt to establish contact."

Giran chuckled confidently. Kurogiri felt relieved. The sound of his self-satisfaction implied that he might have actually managed it.

He elaborated, "Well, the guy who fixed me up with the information, that anonymous contact, he wouldn't take us seriously at first. I mean, what with our leader looking like a newborn baby in comparison to some of his competitors. But after we sent him some of that data we got from Tokoyami's time in the dark, he figured the kid had some guts."

Kurogiri half-sighed out his next sentence, "This person would be wise not to judge by appearances. Until then, it will be up to us to ensure other criminals do not see Izuku as weak."

Giran waved his hand, "Whatever helps you sleep at night. I'm pretty sure he wouldn't be happy about this kind of shit, y'know?"

Kurogiri clenched his hands, "He will grow, in time. Stay focused. What about the contact?"

Giran took a long drag, exhaling a big ashen cloud with his announcement.

"Yeah, taken care of. I gave him some of the info in All For One's treasure box, he gave me the precise coordinates shortly after. Gigantomachia is out in the mountains."
Through the wire

Chapter Summary

A mysterious contact begins to involve themselves with the League of Villains

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tomura's face was lit up by the light of his computer screen, the rest of his room pitch black beyond a certain point.

In this case, the light cast a dim, dark green glow, as he sifted through the night-vision camera footage of the basement from long ago. The old basement.

It was exciting to see. This bird-headed brat was really losing it. The violence, the destruction... he'd been enveloped in the power of his own quirk, growing ten times his size and twenty times as deadly.

And the bigger he got, the more furious he got, scratching at the walls, crushing the floor under his weight. If the place hadn't been reinforced to handle Moonfish, he'd have destroyed the entire building.

Tomura smiled. There was something deeply satisfying at watching someone that wanted to destroy even more than he did.

He was pretty sure the doctor would appreciate this kind of stuff. Knee-deep in Nomu projects as he was, information on autonomous quirks like this were hard to come by. Quirks with their own sentience...

Tomura clenched his hand closed before he thought on it too much. The doc could do whatever he wanted with the footage.

Besides, Tomura was a little more curious about what Kurogiri was doing with the information he got from his end of the bargain.

He was certainly keeping it under wraps for now. Stupid oversized smog cloud. Always keeping things out of the reach of others "for their own good." A real roundabout way of saying he thinks they're dumb and he's better than them.

Izuku was probably poring over those juicy documents right this very second...

By this point, Eri had met almost all of the League. Spinner, Magne, Dabi, Mustard and Compress were the remaining few who haven't seen her in person yet, but the chatter of those who had met the horned tot had ensured that everyone now knew that a small child was now among them.
She was looking a lot more confident as well. Probably confident enough to actually turn up at an event.

Izuku cast his mind back to things the League had done in the past during their off days...

He only had to take a moment to realise that it'd be best not to have her accompany the League on any 'event' that takes place outside of the safety of the HQ. They were lucky enough to even have this place to house her in.

Of course, when it came down to bonding with the other members of the League, even the non-combatant Eri, there was one strategy that always seemed to work.

Izuku looked down at Eri, "So, for no particular reason, what do you think your taste in movies is?"

Eri shrugged, "I don't think I've ever eaten a movie before."

Izuku blinked twice in quick succession, unsure if Eri was completely ignorant to what movies are, or if she just pulled a reverse dad joke.

He asked, "Um, Eri, you do know what a movie is, don't you?"

Eri responded, "I know some of my minders complained that the movie theatre has a lot of really expensive food, so..."

Izuku tried to keep his composure, "No, no, movies aren't a kind of food. They're entertainment!"

Eri nodded, "Like toys?"

Izuku stopped dead in his tracks, leading Eri by the hand towards the common rooms.

"Okay, we're sorting this out right now. Come on, we're putting on a movie."

Eri stumbled forward until she matched Izuku's pace, a bit flustered, "Wait, put on? I don't need any more clothes!"

---

Kurogiri waved his hand, opening the Warp Gate. Mr Compress was here to see him off, before he embarked on this extremely dangerous task.

Compress tipped his hat, "I'm glad to see my research was of good use to you."

Kurogiri replied, "Yes. With that much intricate detail on quirks with minds of their own, Nomu research might begin to get... very interesting. It certainly got the doctor's attention."

Mr Compress pointed at him, "Don't you think our new audience member might get far more excited if our wonderful leader actually entered the fray with you?"

Kurogiri looked hesitant for a second, before pointing back at the orange coated man imposingly.

"He's by far the most presentable of all of us. He's an inspiring, young, revolutionary new face in the world of villainy. The League of Villains has become more popular than ever because we have him as a figurehead. He's also foolishly naïve and not in full control of his own powers. The more
time he has to build up his strength, the more powerful an image we will project. If the doctor sees
Izuku as he is right now... if Gigantomachia sees him as he is right now, then...

Mr Compress held up his hands defensively, "I understand. The stage has to be prepped, the
opening act has to be concluded. I still think you need more backup. Not many people even know
we've been in contact with the good doctor, you know. Obviously Tomura was an inevitability..."

Kurogiri affirmed, "Thanks to his past relationship with the doctor, yes. His PC was the best way
for us to get into contact with him, so of course Tomura knew right away."

Mr Compress raised his hands up, bemused, "Then why not ask him to come with you? You're
putting your head in the lion's mouth!"

Kurogiri looked to the side, his expression inscrutable. But Mr Compress sharpened his expression,
reading him easily.

"A little too attached to our leader, are you?"

Kurogiri glared back, his yellow eyes lighting up like wildfire, "My decisions are not based on
something as fickle or vapid as personal attachments. You know that as well as I do, Atsuhiro."

Mr Compress tapped his cane on the ground loudly, allowing a small silence to settle.

He bowed at the waist theatrically, "Alright, I get it. Regardless, I wish you the best of luck, my
foggy friend."

Kurogiri stepped up to the Warp Gate, "I'll be trusting you to be the brains of the team until I
return."

Mr Compress raised himself up again, "Someone has to be."

Eri's eyes had been glued to the screen since the opening sequence, wide as saucers. Izuku feared
that she might need to be reminded to blink.

Magne was laid out on the couch, watching her closely, "So, this is the one, huh?"

Himiko was halfway sunk into the beanbag beside her, "Do you like her?"

Magne smirked, "Hey, the more the merrier. Just don't expect me to censor myself for her sake,
y'hear?"

Himiko nudged her with her elbow, "Sure thing 'Big Sis'. We already know you probably squealed
with excitement when you heard we'd have another lil' sis to join the group."

Magne seemed to seriously consider using her quirk to send Himiko flying across the room, but
decided against it.

Tomura slunk into the room, silently taking another beanbag and opening a can of what Izuku
hoped was just soda. Thankfully, Eri was too enveloped in the movie's climactic action scene to
really pay any mind to him.
Tomura questioned, "Where'd we get a kid's film from?"

Himiko replied, "Twice. He flips between movie tastes pretty frequently, so he's got plenty of sweet, fluffy ones and grizzly, gory ones."

Tomura sipped his drink before replying, "Don't get those mixed up unless you want to scar this brat for life."

Izuku shot him a warning look before returning to the film. The films villain was just rearing its head, when-

With the ominous noise of a TV stuttering and scratching internally, the screen went black.

Eri shouted, "H-He! Why? We were..."

Izuku looked behind him, "No-one touched the remote, did they?"

Before anyone could respond, the TV switched on again, revealing a blank screen. Izuku looked up, as with a small whir, Tomura's top-mounted camera powered itself on, focusing on the small group.

A thin crackling sound popped into life through the speakers, as an old, sinister voice began to speak. It had the quality of someone extremely unsettled trying to pass themselves off as calm and collected, like someone who'd been caught in a lie.

"Hmhm... hmmmm... You don't look like much to me, boy."

Tomura nearly stood up in surprise, clenching his teeth, "Doctor?"

The voice crackled a bit, "Tomura? Aha, yes, you're focusing in. Quick bit of advice, get better software protection, idiots."

Izuku stood up, "Who are you? Answer me!"

The camera whirred again, focusing on Izuku.

The voice paused for a moment, lowering itself creepily, as if appraising him like an animal in a slaughterhouse, "Oh, there we are. Yes, I see you. Green fluffy hair, green rounded eyes, freckles. Yes... I'd recognise you anywhere..."

Izuku clenched his fists, grimacing, "You're still not answering me."

The voice chuckled to itself, "You'd be a fool to think a name constitutes an identification, 'Deku'. But if you want to call me something, my name is Daruma."

Izuku signalled to Eri to leave the room. She nodded, but only moved into the main hall, still listening intently on what was going on from behind the counter.

'Daruma' continued, "Sending her out of the room? Oh come now, there are only four of you left. That's even less! You were already looking a bit thinly spread. Where are your other precious subordinates?"

Izuku refused to be distracted, "It doesn't matter. They're close by. And I'd wager the four of us are more than a match for you."

Daruma laughed mockingly, before resuming, "Oho... oh goodness, I wouldn't be so sure about that
I'm not here to fight you. I really do think where your allies are might be the most important information to consider at the present moment."

Izuku felt a line of fear trace its way up his back, "What about them?"

Tomura growled, "Doctor, what are you-"

The voice of Daruma interrupted sharply, "Stop. You, boy, Deku. I think you might want to start taking your role as leader a bit more seriously. You're losing your grip."

Izuku held his gaze with the camera lens, "You're still not answering me."

Daruma paused before resuming, "Fine. I suggest you go down to the room past the training hall immediately. You'll see what I mean."

He didn't want to give this creepy hacker the satisfaction of following his orders. But at the same time, he couldn't just ignore an event this vital. Izuku rushed through the common room, down the stairs, taking them two at a time, until his feet landed on the hardwood training room floor. He ran across it to the storage room, pushing the door open.

He arrived just in time to see Kurogiri and Mr Compress standing beside an open Warp Gate.

Izuku, short of breath, quickly asked, "K-Kurogiri? What's going on here?"

Kurogiri suppressed his shock and placed a foot through the warp gate. Izuku pushed past Mr Compress. Compress tried to reach out and touch Izuku with his arm, but Magne had followed him down the stairs. She magnetized Mr Compress, sending him flying back into the training hall where Himiko was standing.

Izuku dashed forward as fast as he could, taking a running leap to try and get through the portal...

He slammed into Kurogiri's back, charging through the portal with him, landing on the other side. Both of them quickly rose to their feet.

Kurogiri fixed his waistcoat, dissipating the Warp Gate behind him.

"Was it Tomura who informed you?"

Izuku scowled back at him, "No. Someone named Daruma tipped me off."

Kurogiri's paused, before placing a hand to his head in frustration.

"Well, this certainly complicates matters."

Chapter End Notes

"Hehe! I am thoroughly in neglect of my duties!"

In all seriousness, I am sorry that I had such a delay in chapters. A small hiccup involving online submissions of my school-related tasks. As well as overall distractions. I got halfway done with a playthrough of Persona 5 Merciless difficulty, I had a game marathon with some friends, watched a friend play through most of
Danganronpa V3, I watched the E3 presentations, and after that I remembered "Oh shit I think I might have lost track of my upload schedule completely." Still, I hope you'll enjoy. Cheers!
Izuku took a second to survey the landscape. Bright blue skies on a cloudless day, trees and green, untamed grass and plants all around him. He could see the landscape stretched out around him. They had to be very high up. The air felt cleaner and fresher - Izuku could already tell there was less pollution out here than there was back in Hosu. In other words, Kurogiri had teleported them all the way out into the mountains, far away from HQ.

In other words, Kurogiri had to have precise coordinates and an important mission to risk being so far away from HQ.

Izuku tried to wipe some of the grass stains from his clothes, before turning to face the fog-cloaked figure.

He kept his voice low, "We're stuck out here away from the city, and the portal has already dissipated. I think this is going to go a lot smoother for both of us if you explain yourself now."

Kurogiri coughed slightly. His stance was a little closely drawn, which was about the only visual indicator you could really get from him that indicated he felt a little sheepish.

Kurogiri began, "Well, I'm here on a small mission. Establishing contact, you might say."

Izuku nodded, circling his hand, "Whatever the mission actually is, what I'm actually asking is why you didn't tell me about it. If it's about heroes, I have all the encyclopaedic information you could need. If it's about villains, I am the largest single figure to represent the League of Villains, whether that honour is deserved or not. We're a team. And more importantly, for the moment, I'm your leader."

Kurogiri took a deep breath inward, unable to fully look Izuku in the eye.

"No, mister Midoriya. I'm not sure that you are."

Izuku took a step backward, feeling his face suddenly drop, "W-What? What are you talking about?"

Kurogiri clenched his fists, "There's always that caveat, Izuku. 'Whether I deserve it or not'. Something about you not entirely deserving your title. I struggle sometimes to really convince myself that you're taking you role seriously."

Izuku felt his hands twitch with energy as All For One began to destabilize, but Izuku bit his tongue.

He scowled to hide any feelings of hurt or disappointment, "I don't understand. I've been trying to
master All For One, I've been trying to help Tomura, I've been trying to pull the team together. Even when I was powerless, I tried my absolute hardest every single day. Just because I didn't start out as a villain...

Kurogiri took a step forward, "I don't mean to underplay your efforts, but you haven't even begun to scratch the surface, Midoriya."

Izuku looked up at him, unable to disguise his shock, "...Huh?"

Kurogiri continued, "The man who held your quirk before you, Sensei. He ruled criminal empires the likes of which were never before seen. The likes of which many believe we will never see again. Since his death, we have lost contact with a large proportion of his previous associates. Even now, countless tyrants look towards the throne of villainy with insatiable hunger. Overhaul was merely one of these tyrants, defeated only by the combined efforts of our entire organisation AND an attack by heroes. So-"

Izuku interrupted, his eyes sharpening with determination, "Wait, establishing contact? You're talking about some of Sensei's old allies, aren't you?"

Kurogiri pointed at him, "No, Izuku. You are not ready. His allies have seen things the likes of which would strike terror into your nightmares."

Izuku grit his teeth, deflating. His head hung low to the ground

"I know... I know."

This was incredibly painful. Being seen as inferior, being doubted... even after gaining All For One, even after rallying the League, even after defeating Overhaul... he was so far behind coming into the world of villains that this stigma of being a whelp, an upstart... it would likely follow him no matter what he did, in the eyes of his enemies. He had so much further to go, so much higher to climb. Deep down, he knew his victories weren't enough to fill Sensei's boots yet.

"But even still... hiding these things from me will only leave me weak."

Kurogiri looked down at the ground also, clearly carrying his own sense of guilt.

"Perhaps this is true. I know little about the function of your quirk, after all. But the more time you have to master it, the better. These are unpleasant matters, ones best left to true professionals. I can deal with the darker side of our business until you are better prepared."

Izuku looked up, staring at Kurogiri. Since the very first day he'd arrived in the League, Kurogiri was always the one who was kindest to him. Perhaps he wasn't the closest, and he always kept things about himself hidden, but he was always cordial, helpful and a piercing voice of reason. Whatever else he may be, he had the League's best interests at heart.

Izuku smiled slightly, filled with nostalgia, "I never did shake off that aspect of myself, did I?"

Kurogiri raised an eyebrow, "Which aspect, sir?"

Izuku thought back to his notebooks.

"Ever since I arrived at the League, I worked here on a need-to-know basis. I wasn't truly considered a villain, just a useful asset. I watched, gathering information and growing in knowledge."
Kurogiri tried to cut in, "We never saw you as weak, truly we didn't."

Izuku pointed out, "When I tried to take part in my first combat operation, Dabi nearly beat the crap out of me to make me go home. I wasn't seen as a villain even then. I wasn't sure I wanted to be a real villain back then. I was consumed with half-formed convictions and confusion. About All Might. About Kac… Bakugo. And I never really have been truly initiated, have I?"

Kurogiri bristled, "None of us here doubt your conviction. You have more than proven your ambition to all of us."

*It took a long time to find my ambition... before then, there was always something in the way. An innocence I would not taint.*

Izuku nodded, "Yes. I found out my reason to be a villain. That doesn't automatically make me one. Not in your eyes, and not in the eyes of the other big players in the criminal world, circling us like wolves."

Izuku smiled confidently at Kurogiri, disarming him.

"It's not a bad thing to ask for the help of others, over something this important. You're right. There's more I need to learn before I can take over all our operations. So how about you teach me? To be one of those true professionals?"

Kurogiri's face flickered inscrutably. He took a few seconds, letting Izuku's words and expression sink in. Just as Izuku was beginning to get worried, he heard a small, low chuckle escaping Kurogiri's voice.

"If you're quite certain, then maybe I can. But things will only get far more dangerous. You may die."

Izuku tilted his head to the side, "That goes without saying. But you're not mentioning something important. The root of all of this."

Kurogiri raised an eyebrow in surprise, taken aback, "The root, sir?"

Izuku solemnly pressed on, "Yes. It's obvious that I wasn't ever going to really be taken seriously, because even back then I was trying to keep my hands clean. You remember, right?"

Kurogiri's voice became more hushed, "Oh. You're quite right. I suppose that really was the root, wasn't it? Your policy on not killing people."

Izuku lowered his eyes, "I've thought long and hard about that rule. About how I might have to deal with people like Overhaul in the future. My ideals, to reform society... I want them to be incontestable. Pure, in a manner of speaking. Resorting to wanton bloodshed to achieve my goals would kind of... cheapen them. If I only made my points by killing anyone who disagrees with me, I haven't really changed any hearts and minds. They're just threatened into silence."

Kurogiri folded his hands behind his back, "Sensei ruled the entirety of Japan to enforce his order. Oftentimes through terror and fear. Does that make his rule illegitimate?"

Izuku concluded, "Honestly... yes. It's the one thing I think me and Sensei really did disagree on. If I can change this 'hero society' through means others don't see as abominable, I could change things permanently. If I made a point that others could rally behind, I wouldn't need to threaten the world."
Kurogiri slightly scoffed, "So, you would dismantle your opposition, make your case to the world, and they would regulate themselves?"

Izuku replied with the utmost seriousness, "Yes. People are smarter than he gave them credit for. They can learn, and they can change. I did."

Kurogiri couldn't retort that statement. The proof that it was true was standing right in front of him, after all.

Instead, he asked the key question, "So, you know the risks. All this talk of keeping yourself clean won't deter your opponents. In their eyes, it is a fatal weakness. If it came down to the wire, and you had to kill someone in order to make your dreams a reality, would you do it?"

Izuku tried to hide his levels of discomfort, digging his heel into the ground, "It depends on what you mean by 'down to the wire' and who precisely I have to kill."

Kurogiri chastised him, "Answer with your heart, not your analytical brain. If you had to kill someone, could you do it?"

Izuku pressed his eyes shut, repressing his fear. He'd have to answer. He couldn't be left out of important missions like this again.

Kurogiri's voice warned, "Izuku, are-"

"Yes."

Kurogiri paused.

"Yes?"

Izuku scowled defiantly, "I could do it. I'm not saying I will."

Kurogiri nodded, "Then that is enough. I suppose after all I have done today, I can afford to place some of my faith in you, this time."

Izuku felt a cool, light hand hit his shoulder. He opened his eyes to see the pyre-like face of his friend.

Kurogiri's even stare met his eyes, "Come. Let's complete this mission. We've already been away from HQ too long for my taste."

Izuku repressed a shudder at finally releasing that bottled up anxiousness, before allowing himself to step forward, walking alongside Kurogiri, toward the looming treeline.

"Yes."

His voice echoed through the dark room, "Hmm?"

Kurogiri, too, questioned the little kid, "Yes?"
The scientist leaned back in his chair, petting Johnny. 

Honestly, he'd hesitated in even bothering to tune in to this conversation in the first place. But since Kurogiri had the listening device in his back pocket anyway, in case Gigantomachia threw a hissy fit and needed to be calmed down, Daruma couldn't help but be a little curious to glean some extra information on this so called 'successor'.

"I could do it. I'm not saying I will."

Yes, it was pretty obvious that Kurogiri had turned on the device just to get Izuku some brownie points. But it was true that Izuku's words were genuine, since he wasn't aware anyone was listening in.

Still, this wasn't all bad stuff.

Daruma scrawled some notes down onto the small book in front of him, muttering, "So... he isn't totally without conviction..."

Not that any of this proved he'd be able to stomach even a second in the Nomu labs. But at least he seemed more promising a candidate for evil on the team leading the Nomu, as opposed to just being turned into one.

Which made him better than most people.

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Chapter End Notes

Now I'm not one to always look up stuff about their own work, necessarily, but I decided to put in the title of my work and the series (Tale Of the Musketeer My Hero Academia) into Google out of curiosity. It was then that I discovered that someone out there actually legitimately created a TV Tropes page about my fic!

https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Fanfic/TheTaleOfTheMusketeer

Does this mean I've made it big time? Have I ascended to my peak? Will my name forever rest in the halls of artistic fame for all time?

Whoever put this page together, seriously, thank you. I took one look at the pages existence and genuinely double taked. I can't believe this exists, someone put in the time and effort to send my humble story out there to be acknowledged and seen by a wider audience, and they analyzed the work for examples of tropes to link to it. Thank you so much.
Mirio dropped the battered training dummy to the floor, where it collapsed in a heap.

He knew that they were kind of meant to be destroyed, but he'd broken so many through extensive training that he was beginning to think he was hogging them all. They had to run out of dummies some time, after all, surely.

But he had to keep getting stronger somehow. His allies were doing as much.

He looked over to his left, where Bakugo was trying to burrow his way through solid rock using repeated explosions. He'd been... a little unhappy after he heard that Izuku refused to stand down AND got away. He'd been training harder ever since, screaming about how "he was going to have to do it his goddamn self." It's still a little unnerving, seeing the amount of damage he could cause. It is honestly impressive to watch him, but it is still probably a good idea to watch him from a safe distance.

Meanwhile, Shoto was over on Mirio's right. His work with Ice was exemplary, but he'd been trying for a long time to utilise his fire as well. He always looked so conflicted about letting his left half flare up, though. He was honestly holding himself back. No matter how many times Mirio tried to help him out, his words never seemed to really hit home. Still, he was making good progress. A little fire here, a lot of ice there. Hopefully he'd manage to come to grips with his problems soon...

Mirio turned around to go grab a dummy, only to see a familiar, thin figure walking into the room.

His joyful greeting escaped his lips before he realised it, "All Might!"

The No. 1 Hero waved back at him, asking, "Mirio, Shoto, Bakugo, could you come over here for a moment?"

Bakugo launched himself through the air with one last explosion, slamming into the ground in front of All Might. Shoto just walked there.

All Might held up a small document, "I have some news that I think you boys might be interested in."

Bakugo's already naturally furrowed brow lowered into a determined glare, spitting out "Is it about Deku?"

All Might shook his head, prompting Bakugo's expression to sour slightly.

Mirio looked down thoughtfully, asking "So, I take it we're not being sent on a mission?"
All Might nodded again, raising a finger as if asking permission to actually say what he wanted to.

He continued, "We've been informed about a sighting of a member of the League of Villains, Kurogiri. Outside of their HQ. A good friend of mine from within the police made sure to pass along that information as quickly as he could."

Bakugo noted, "Makes sense someone would file a report on Kurogiri. He looks like a fucking Halloween candle. Pretty easy to pick out from a crowd."

Shoto raised an eyebrow, "Meaning the police have already had this information for a little while. Have they already sent a task force to apprehend him?"

All Might nodded a third time, "Of course. I even gave them a recommendation on who they should send, seeing as we don't know how much time we have to capture the villain. He can create Warp Gates, after all. The moment he's done with his task, he'll be able to just portal away immediately. Speed is of the essence. I ran straight over here once I was done, since I knew you'd want to know."

Mirio thought he might have an idea who All Might would recommend, smirking as he asked, "So, of course you sent someone fast, right?"

All Might smiled back slyly, "When it comes to speed, Mirio, I wouldn't know who else to ask."

The canopy of trees came and went as their trek through the mountains continued. Grass, birdsong, fresh air... it was so different from the enclosed space of the HQ or even the streets of Hosu that Izuku was feeling rejuvenated by the atmosphere alone.

Izuku, still feeling he didn't have enough information, raised a question, "So, you've mentioned that we're trying to meet someone. Exactly how am I going to recognise them?"

Kurogiri chuckled, "You'll know him when you see him, sir. Their appearance is extremely... distinctive."

The conversation he'd had with Kurogiri earlier kept bringing memories to the forefront of Izuku's mind. It's true that he'd done some things not totally befitting an 'evil overlord'. His no killing rule, defeating Muscular, taking care of Eri...

But at the same time he'd partnered with Stain, worked with Sensei, inherited All For One, and finally stomped out the Shie Hassaikai. It'd been a little bit a mixed bag thus far.

Well not any more, Izuku thought to himself. Next chance I get, I'll make sure to show my friends where I stand on-

Kurogiri threw an arm outward, pushing Izuku behind him hurriedly. He whipped his head around to look at what he was being shielded from.

A line of dust could be seen rapidly approaching them. Izuku couldn't help but be reminded of cartoon animations of incredibly fast-moving characters leaving a straight, solid line of kicked-up debris and powdered stone in their wake as they ran. Except this one was real, and he should be terrified because of it.
Izuku kneeled, placing his hands to the floor, internally wishing he'd had more time to practice how Overhaul worked.

The dust trail finally reached them, and a notably small man jumped high up, arcing into a flying kick aimed straight at Kurogiri’s head. He was even travelling through the air at a breakneck pace...

Izuku felt a spur-of-the-moment idea click in the back of his head. He activated Geopull, targeting the massive cloud of accumulated rock dust, pulling it towards them right as Kurogiri opened a Warp Gate to block the incoming attack.

The small attacker scrunched his eyes closed due to the cloud of sand and coarse dust that Izuku enveloped him in, and he couldn't see to redirect his course appropriately. Rather than land directly in front of the villains (a death sentence, to be sure), he aimed higher and flew over Kurogiri’s head, rolling to his feet a decent distance away from the pair of villains.

Izuku raised up his head to get a better look at their assailant. An old, small man in a yellow jumpsuit, with a thin beard.

%Hm... Izuku pondered, I feel like I recognise him... wait... from the raid on the old HQ!?

Izuku felt a virulent rage build up inside him. If this hero was responsible for the attack that killed Sensei, there would be hell to pay. Izuku felt the ground beneath him. He felt his arms, pushing deep into it, wishing to bend the earth to his will, right here, right now. He felt his quirks, the heat rising within them until he could feel them piercing his muscles, and he knew he could do it. Right here, right now.

Kurogiri saw expression in Izuku's steely gaze, stepping close to his side.

The old man began to threaten Kurogiri in his croaky voice, "I wasn't expecting to find a friend with you, villain-"

He paused, eyes widening in surprise once he recognised Izuku's face, as it twisted in pain from harnessing Overhaul's unstable energy. The earth cracked, rumbling and pulsing, until Overhaul's destabilising power caused it to rupture entirely.

The force of it lifted Izuku into the air, pushing him back into a standing position, as earth burst forth from the ground in a spiky, rushing mound of rock and rubble. He pressed down into it with all his strength, feeling his forearms light up with Overhaul's power, forcing an even greater reaction. Kurogiri's eyes widened. He knew as well as Izuku did that he hadn't practiced enough to have fine control over Overhaul yet.

*He’d be right to worry, Izuku thought, sneering as he did, If it weren't for a certain combination I have in mind.*

Izuku raised his hands, sending forth an uncontrollable tidal wave of debris and uplifted terrain, but right before it spilled out and crashed downward indiscriminately, Izuku threw his palm outward, utilising Geopush to direct the veritable wall of sediment, sending the rushing attack straight towards the speedster hero.

Kurogiri caught on to the tactic, running forward to use the rock wave as cover to advance.

The old man had all the time in the world to react, and he immediately dashed forwards, sidestepping the colossal wave by leaping over it.

*Big mistake.*
Kurogiri opened a Warp Gate, absorbing the entirety of the rock-wave attack, then placing the exit Gate directly beside the old heroes flying, airborne figure.

The elderly attacker wasn't able to alter his course mid-flight, and took a massive blow to his side, sending him flying into the treeline with a sickening crack. He slammed against a tree, coughing violently, before falling onto his front. With a battle-ending strike, he was sent straight to the floor during his first move. The fight was over before it had even begun.

Izuku was about to feel guilty for slamming a senior citizen with 50 pounds of rolling turf and stone, before reminding himself that this man was partially responsible for the death of his mentor. He got over it, adjusting his waistcoat to knock off some of the rock dust before approaching his downed opponent.

Izuku looked to Kurogiri, who was applauding slowly. "Not bad at all, mister Deku."

"It only worked out because of your quick response with your Warp Gate. I thought such a large, devastating attack might really complement your ability to redirect enemy or allied strikes."

Kurogiri folded his arms triumphantly, "You really did analyse my quirk after all. And applied it, too. This is why you were chosen to be the successor, Deku."

Izuku beamed cheerfully, really feeling the results of his growth in power, before wiping the smile off his face to pull the old hero to his feet. Izuku picked him up by his cape, looking him over.

"Yes, I recognise him. He was there. I believe his name was Gran Torino."

"Freeze!", a commanding, mechanically boosted voice called out from behind him.

Izuku raised his remaining hand, pulling up a small wall of rock and dirt to use as cover. As he did so, he turned around, seeing a small squadron of police officers pointing guns at the group. They were decked out; ballistic armour, pistols, rifles, the works.

Kurogiri mumbled, "I suppose it makes sense that this old bat wouldn't come to chase me down by himself..."

The officer who spoke before spoke again, his megaphone booming, "Release your hostage and come out with your hands behind your head or we will open fire!"

Izuku gripped Gran Torino's cape tightly. If the hero woke up, Izuku didn't want to lose his grip on him. The police were lying, they wouldn't start shooting while they had a hero as a hostage. That would raise far too much bad press.

Izuku hissed, "Kurogiri, do we have room to open a Warp Gate and get out of here?"

Kurogiri spat back, "I'd love to, sir, but if we are forced to retreat without even finding our target, we run the risk of losing Daruma's support! We can't-"

The officer interrupted, "You have to the count of three!"

"They're bluffing, right?"

Izuku swallowed heavily, nudging Kurogiri.

"Three!"
Izuku flexed his fingers, preparing to raise more Geopull barriers.

This was about as entertaining as it could get!

Daruma cackled in his seat, observing with interest. This Deku kid, he had more actual power to him than his little freckled face let on.

*If only I'd known about his potential earlier...* the doctor mused, enjoying greatly the dual meaning of his wording.

And now, the crime lord wannabee had put himself into a standoff with the police, an entire armed squadron facing him down. It'd be incredible, if Daruma wasn't almost certain Izuku was going to fail. Too many unknowns. Gran Torino could wake up. Izuku's energy could fail him. No matter what, there was no way the police were going to let him go.

Daruma did suppose leading Kurogiri and Deku into the mountains only to get them arrested would be a, *uh how do you say...* dick move?

But with the radar tracker lining his screen, Daruma was privy to information these two didn't have. Including the precise location of Gigantomachia. And he was closer than either of them realised. Watching.

Daruma took out a voice recorder, pressing it closely to his communication device, and pressed play.

"Two!", the officer bellowed, and the entire squadron of police officers collectively rumbled as they prepared themselves to charge, overwhelming them with sheer numbers.

Izuku placed his hand on the back of the rock barriers, preparing himself to use Air Cannon to launch them forward. His forearms were burning, he might not be able to use Overhaul as effectively anymore.

He felt drained, almost swaying. Kurogiri cursed to himself, preparing to open a Warp Gate.

Suddenly, a voice rang out, a familiar voice, layered with radio static.

Something inside of Kurogiri's back pocket emitted a voice. Sensei's voice.

It ordered, "Gigantomacia, dispatch them!"

Immediately, a thunderous crack echoed from within the treeline. Then another, not even a second later, many in quick succession.

The sound of trees breaking.

Footsteps like meteor landings, forceful enough to make the ground beneath them shake, began
hitting the floor faster and faster, picking up into a running pace, then a charge, as the sound of broken tree trunks began to get closer and closer.

The officer's gaze turned to the forest, as he stuttered out, "O-One?"

Almost taller than the trees, a shadow rose over the police force as Izuku's jaw dropped. An enormous, musclebound titan loomed over the police force, raising its arms as it charged into the fray.

Izuku mumbled, "T-That's him?"

Before Kurogiri could respond, Gigantomachia's fist rocketed into the ground, and gravity momentarily lurched to one side as the impact threw everyone over, and as half of the police squadron were launched, flailing and devastated, into the distance.

Izuku felt his feet go out from under him, his grip on Gran Torino's cape lost, as faintly, he heard crackling coming from Kurogiri's pocket again.

It sounded almost rhythmic. Like laughter.

Chapter End Notes

Did you miss me? I know I did!

Wow, what a break. Needed to clear my head, for one thing. I began to feel a bit burnt out, feeling better now, don't worry. But more importantly, I was on a break because I was on holiday IRL! I got to spend a while in London with some family friends (useful, since London accommodation for tourists will send you bankrupt in 3 days), and it was absolutely fantastic. I'm not always a fan of built-up cities, but the Camden area of London is just lovely. I could regale you with the holiday experience, but I won't. Regardless, that's one of the reasons for my lateness. Cheers!
Izuku is finally *almost* face to face with the mysterious Daruma.

Izuku awoke sharply, feeling an overwhelming choking sensation, a need to catch his breath. His eyes shot open as he inhaled lungful's of air, until finally he felt recovered, and he opened his eyes.

Izuku blinked, his eyelids exceedingly heavy. He heard a strong ringing in his ears that was fading out far slower than he would've liked. He raised himself up into a sitting position, taking a few moments to recover as his vision finally began to work properly, and his peripherals were no longer blinded by darkness.

The lighting was dim. There were walls. He was inside a building somewhere. A neat, polished building. His fingers brushed against a floor of flat, carved stone. It felt quite similar to the style of floor used for the HQ.

He turned his head to his surroundings, looking from right to left as he stretched to his feet. A large array of television monitors plastered the walls, as well as a control panel, but they were all currently turned off. There were two doors in the room, both of which were sealed with locking mechanisms comparable to submarine doors. One of them had to lead to the way out.

Still groggy, Izuku lurched over to the door, feeling a headache starting to pressure his temples as his senses came back to him. He looked through the window, seeing only darkness beyond it. There didn't appear to be a locking mechanism on the door, but surely it wouldn't be too hard to use Overhaul to destroy the door, or use Geopush to disturb the stone surrounding it...

A voice suddenly rang out over the speaker system in the corners of the room, the voice of Daruma, "Don't destroy my property. You'll be allowed out of here after I've had a chance to get a look at you, kid."

Izuku couldn't disguise his scowl. Even after all this time, he was still being toyed with. He considered just breaking the door and leaving out of spite, but decided against it after remembering Kurogiri's instructions.

*Apparently, it's important that I get him to work with us. Even if he's being condescending.*

Izuku swallowed his pride, sighing.

*Alright... fine. If I can get along with Tomura, I can get along with anyone.*

He whirled around, looking for a security camera for him to address, before noticing a light shining through the second door's window.

It was coming from a gigantic monitor within, shining white light onto a chair sitting before it, turned to face towards Izuku.

The light only illuminated half of Daruma's face. He was bald, but despite having no hair he sported an impressively full and bushy moustache. The monochrome white light made it
impossible to discern it's colour, however. Daruma's eyewear was also quite impressive. They were large, intricate-looking goggles that appeared to have multiple lenses. They reminded Izuku of a jewellers goggles. So apparently, like a jeweller, this man valued precision in their work. They wore a white lab coat, further completing his look.

"Yup", Izuku thought, "Mad scientist."

Daruma's voice boomed through the speakers, "Don't attempt to force open the doors or come near me. The security here is top-notch, I assure you. You don't want to wake it up."

Clearly this man preferred to remain far away from other people. He looked a little uncomfortable in his sitting position right now, even though Izuku was behind a door. Izuku decided it was probably best to respect Daruma's boundaries, for now.

Izuku nodded, "You don't upset me, and I won't do anything to upset you."

Daruma looked a little relieved, regaining some of his smugness again, "Yes, yes, good. So glad we understand each other. I assumed you might panic and lash out animalistically if you woke up down here all by yourself, which is why I begrudgingly elected to move my chair closer to the entrance to talk to you. Under no circumstances would I be doing this otherwise!"

Clearly this man preferred to remain VERY far away from other people.

Izuku looked around. There weren't any beds or other possible escape routes, and there was no-one else in the room besides himself. And if no-one was allowed to leave the room, then...

Izuku questioned, "Where's Kurogiri?"

Daruma raised a finger, then turned to his monitor, pressing a few keys. Izuku heard the monitors in his room whirring to life, as they turned on and began to display camera footage.

Izuku observed, his room lighting up with colours of green and brown, as he was shown footage from hidden cameras all across the woodlands. And from every single angle, something had changed compared to how Izuku remembered it being.

Trees he had passed had been snapped or uprooted. Chunks of ground had been ripped from the earth and hurled at high speeds. Massive craters left from equally massive impacts had been pounded into even solid rock. The entire landscape looked as though it had been ravaged.

Izuku muttered aloud, "Gigantomachia's handiwork..."

Daruma's voice boomed through the loudspeakers, "Precisely. That goliath was more than happy to tear the entire countryside apart, beat a mountain into submission, simply because his master ordered him to dispatch some police officers. He's truly a fine specimen, don't you think?"

The sheer destruction was immense. Izuku was inclined to agree.

He shook himself back to reality, questioning, "That's impressive, but it doesn't answer my question? Where's my... ally?"

Daruma snickered, "Well, I don't see his corpse littering this landscape anywhere, so I would assume he managed to Warp Gate away safely."

Izuku raised an eyebrow, shocked, "Without me?"
Daruma's mischievous tone intensified, "He didn't have a choice. I wanted you to be brought here, so you were. Kurogiri's not the only one with a transportation quirk, not even close."

Izuku remembered the asphyxiated feeling he had upon waking up, concerned, "It couldn't be... how do you teleport people?"

Daruma raised a hand, "Oh, I don't. Johnny does."

The portly scientist turned slightly in his chair, revealing a very small Nomu sitting in his lap. It wore a helmet with several small devices sticking out of it, and the lower half of its body seemed to be replaced by a wire of some sorts...

Daruma returned to his previous position before Izuku could get a closer look.

Daruma stared at Izuku offputtingly, "I am very proud of my creations. As was All For One. Which is why, yes, the warping technique that brought you here is indeed the same one used during that scrap between him and that bastard, All Might."

Izuku felt his expression harden even at the mention of All Might's name, which Daruma picked up on. He smiled.

"Well, you do seem to be making an effort to grow stronger. And you also seem to hate All Might. Might it be that you plan on killing him?"

Izuku returned Daruma's stare, knowing better than to answer just yet, "Why do you ask?"

Daruma growled, "Because I want to know who I've been left to work for! My dear patient dies, and now I'm saddled with you. What's your damage, kid? What drives you?"

Izuku flinched at his change in attitude. He tried to calm himself.

*I can't let myself become apologetic. I have to try getting some more information out of him.*

Izuku questioned him, "I-If you didn't fully believe in me, why did you contact Kurogiri? And lead him to an ally as powerful as Gigantomachia?"

Daruma pressed his goggles into his face as he answered, "For the record, he contacted me. I'm not known for making social calls."

Izuku reiterated, "And?"

"And," Daruma responded, "Gigantomachia isn't some braindead idiot. He was overwhelmingly loyal to our master, but he was also his own man. Not a slave, a protector. And I thought if anyone was going to judge our 'new leader', it'd be best to let him do it, because, you know..."

Izuku couldn't help but smile slightly, "Because you're not known for making social calls."

Daruma nodded, "Precisely."

Izuku looked back toward the camera footage, noting the devastated landscape, "And what was his verdict? He did rush to my defence, after all. Is he on my side or not?"

Daruma pressed a button on his keyboard, and the monitors in Izuku's room began to play sound.

He heard a distant wailing from a voice like a volcanic eruption, weeping openly, "So weak! So small! I'm sorry, master! I can't! He's not like you, not even close! I can't accept him!"

"So weak! So small! I'm sorry, master! I can't! He's not like you, not even close! I can't accept him!"
Izuku gulped heavily. Their meeting wasn't exactly ideal. The two of them had been ambushed by police and a Pro Hero, and almost forced to retreat. It wouldn't have given Gigantomachia a good first impression of them.

Daruma elaborated, "He worships All For One. Even now. He thinks so highly of him, he'd take on the entire world. If he ordered him to, Gigantomachia would fall on his sword straight away. He thinks of him as the most powerful man to ever exist. And he won't sully his legacy by following anyone who is so short of living up to his name."

Izuku felt his body growing heavier with shame. This was precisely what Kurogiri was talking about when they'd had their conversation earlier. For all his training and ambition, Izuku had been quite restrained in his actions. So much so that people like Gigantomachia would never take him seriously.

Izuku asked, "Is it all about power? Does Gigantomachia work for Sensei just because of his overwhelming strength, or because of his vision?"

Daruma scoffed, "I suppose I shouldn't expect you to already know this. All For One's empire was founded so long ago, shrouded in secrecy. The uninitiated wouldn't quite understand. But for him, power and vision were irrevocably linked concepts. One could not be achieved without the other."

Izuku's face drooped a bit, becoming slightly forlorn, "...I suppose that makes sense. You knew Sensei for longer than I did."

Daruma snapped, "Don't get all sappy now. I'm trying to explain the solution to you."

Daruma reached across the desk in front of him, withdrawing what appeared to be a VHS tape. Old technology. Old enough to be...

Izuku jolted upright, asking, "Is that what I think it is?"

Daruma's mouth was difficult to see beneath his titanic facial hair, but his amusement was clear in his voice.

"I think it's about time you saw the kind of vision All For One had for the world. What drove him. Then, maybe you'll understand why you should be willing to do the things no 'normal' person would ever do."

The VHS slid into the slot in the tape player, and the monitors on Izuku's screen began to flicker.
Ghost in the machine

Chapter Summary

After a short whirring sound finishes, the tape begins.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A plain grey room, shrouded in darkness. Nothing was shown in the background except a blank wall. No windows, furniture, anything that would give away the location of the filming.

A lone figure stood in the centre of the shot, quite far away from the camera itself. He wore a plain black suit, hands folded behind his back. He did not move as he spoke. The footage itself was eerily still. The sheer darkness of the room made the finer details of the man nigh-indiscernible. He seemed to have quite an average hairstyle, and with his facial features masked, he looked disturbingly average. You could've easily mistaken him for a salaryman, or a regular office worker.

But there was no mistaking him. Something about him radiated confidence. His presence was felt by anyone who watched the tape. He was here today to deliver a speech, and anyone who beheld this man would have felt totally compelled to listen.

After a few seconds of silence, he began speaking.

“I am a Villain. When you hear that name, what do you think? You think ‘Bad’, am I correct? This is an assumption that everyone makes immediately, it’s almost automatic. It is just so ingrained in us. ‘Villain.’ It means bad, undesirable, deviant. But the more you try to define it, to think up misnomers, the more you realise what the true definition of Villain is. If you think the direction I am taking this speech in is “Villains aren't actually evil” then you are wrong. Such shallow ways of winning your favour are not my intent. Villain holds a definition that is accurate, and honest. I will make no attempt to remove your preconceptions that the word Villain is related to evil or argue that evil is somehow good. I possess a realistic understanding of morality. Because I, a lifetime ago, once admired Heroes. For once I was just like you.

Heroes were those who wanted to do the right thing. They would be nurtured, trained to uphold the law, righteously defending the innocent. I saw the value in them, a lifetime ago. They existed even before Quirks became widespread, you know. Through stories, films and comics chronicling their adventures. I knew right away how the emergence of Quirks would lead to heroes like the ones I read about, and I welcomed the idea with open arms. I saw how heroes brought people hope, and this hope was something I believed the world needed. This hope for the future, this longing for bringing peace, joy and prosperity to all. For once I was just like you.

I keep repeating that mantra, don’t I, ‘for once I was just like you?’ It is important. Some people can forget this fact if they are not reminded. Some people believe that some other people are just born evil, with a seed of darkness in their heart, but I know the truth. I know
that villainy and evil don’t just randomly appear. No-one who is entirely happy with their life, content in themselves, sane and rational, just randomly decides to go hurting other people, for no benefit to themselves. A very simple conclusion that anyone would draw if they simply thought about it. But some people don’t think about it. They don’t want to think about where Villains come from.

Because the truth is that Villains are born from pain. Villains are people who have suffered through pain in their lives and have resolved to inflict this pain in return on others in order to better themselves, creating more Villains in the process in what I can only describe as the most horrific and ironic spiral-staircase decline in society. “Man hands on misery to man”. They abuse innocents, sacrificing those below themselves for their own gain, for their own ambition, their ambition to rise above their own pain and better themselves. And by ignoring the fact that villains are born from pain in this way, by ignoring the fact that society or a cruel individual made them this way, and how they could have been converted into villainy just as easily, the good and ordinary citizens of the world can shed all civil responsibility for them and devolve them into something less than human. This is how it was and this is how it has always been. So again, once I was just like you.

Society has been this way for thousands of years prior to today with no change. But now I am standing here before you, reaching out to you in a way no Villain has before, changing things. Why am I expecting that you will understand me now? What has changed? It is obvious what has changed. Where this whole cycle gets muddled up is in the addition of Quirks and Heroes. And I saw, importantly, how unevenly distributed they were. How unmeritocratic they were. Even in the comic books, superheroes got their powers, more often than not, by sheer chance or via a freak accident. In the blooming era of quirks, this was still true. But unlike the comics, most of those who were blessed with power were not miraculously all good people. Chaos ran rampant. It was a dog eat dog world. Fighting against those with strong quirks was useless. There was nothing anyone could do.

I was forced to realise something that day. Something that was not necessarily new information, but was a harsh fact of life that had been there all along. It was just something I never had the willingness to look at clearly and admit. The fatal flaw that this new era would usher in, that would remain true now and forever more. The simple fact that from now on, not all men would be created equal. You know that too, don’t you? Not all people in this world of ours, this society of ours, will ever stand on the same level, not all people will stand on the level they deserve, and not all people will stand on the level they aspire to. Even if they strive for it above all else. No matter how badly they want or deserve it, no matter how much they sacrifice in their pursuit, their goals will never be achieved because results trump idealism. And talent gets results better and more easily than hard work. It’s a crushing truth that not all people will ever admit to. But even if you won’t admit it aloud to me, or even to yourself, you recognise the truth in my words, deep inside of you, don’t you? You understand what I say. I know, for once I was just like you.

Quirks ensure that people are guaranteed success or mediocrity in our society from the very moment of their birth. Whether it be due to parents forcing power on their unborn child, whether it be the miraculous and spontaneous luck of developing a new quirk upon birth, whatever it be, the worth of a human can be measured right from the moment they turn 4 and their powers manifest, and from that moment their path in life is set before them. This is
not merely pessimism, it is fact, and to look away from this fact is to look away from everything on which our society is built. To pretend that the outdated ideal of “being able to do anything you can put your mind to if you just try hard enough” still holds water is to deny this fact, and to deny the reality of a superhuman world. I saw this fact and could not turn away. This fact was thrown into my face too many times for me to turn away, watching as the world turned in on itself.

And because I saw this, my perspective on what has happened in modern day has been... somewhat altered. I understand why Heroes are necessary in this grotesque new world of ours. Because this inequality in society, this yellow-brick-road to an unremarkable life, is a tremendous source of pain. And as I have discussed earlier, pain creates Villains. Heroes, who uphold this inequality, create Villains. When your right to success is determined by power rather than spirit, those who are powerful are forced to reign in those who are spirited, those who could or have become Villains, and keep them locked away to prevent them from breaking free of their chains.

Don’t misunderstand, I am not trying to create sympathy for Villains. Their actions are still evil and disregard life and law. And I am proud of it. I am proud of those who have the ambition to be the end, for them to be forced to live their lives for the benefit of others. For what is evil but that which trashes societies rules? Evil, Villainy, it has always been about rejecting morality, and attacking the common good. And when the common good is to categorically shun the ambitions of half a generation due to the circumstances of their birth, anything evil is to be commended in my eyes. In my own way, I want what is best for more people than Heroes protect on a regular basis. For once I was just like you.

In this way, I began to admire Villains more than Heroes. Heroes were people who were defending a system that values only arbitrary power, and had proven their worth only through arbitrary power. They are rewarded for nothing, and their self-satisfaction allows them to become complacent about the complete inequality of the world. Villains are those that fight for a truly brighter tomorrow against all odds. Ambition. Villains are the most ambitious human beings on earth. These are the people who deserve to rule the earth! They are those that will never allow themselves to be dragged down into a life that they aren’t satisfied with, who will not accept the path laid out before them. They will rise above all others. This is what it means to be a Villain. So, when I uncovered the power to tip the scales, the power to redistribute power, I already knew the path I would take with it.

And so, I resolved to found an organisation based on these very tenants. We have banded together, to create a brighter future for all of us, at the expense of every wicked, entitled, faceless nobody that would dare keep us down, silence us, and cast us out from the fate we so rightfully deserve. The fate we will earn through our ambition, our passion, and our power. For generations throughout the lifespan of our new, Quirk fuelled world, no one has bothered to protect those of us who were deemed to have no place, and if the rest of human history is any indication, this will continue for the rest of our lives, and for the lives of our children after us, and for our children’s children. I know you can hear me, those of you out there who hear my words and, in your heart, know them to be true. Those who don’t want this to be the end. You are not alone. For once we were just like you. And with our combined powers, with all of us uniting under the banner of Villain, flying proudly, we will throw off our restraints,
and we will ensure that no one with our potential will have to live a wasted life just like ours ever again.”

A cold wind howled in the background of the tape. The lab itself was silent. It was so quiet that you could almost hear it. The cheering that generations of scoundrels gave when they first heard these words. The riots and robberies committed after watching this. The screams of murder crying into the night, because of people who took this speech to heart. The oration that founded an empire of crime.

A few seconds later, the tape ended.

Chapter End Notes

Don't worry, your notifications are working properly. This is just a good old-fashioned double upload! Enjoy!
Izuku let the feeling sink into him. He didn't really know what to say.

The words that had been spoken to him... they felt less like the demands or assertions of a dictator, but a declaration of the truth. Everything that he'd said matched Izuku's worldview. Even before he'd became a villain, he'd have been able to watch this and understand perfectly where Sensei was coming from.

Izuku managed to splutter out, "W-Was this true? Sensei really... believed in this?"

Daruma shrugged, "Hard to say. All For One could have believed in these words with all his heart. Or, they could have been chosen carefully to manipulate others into doing his bidding."

Izuku frowned at the thought, "I feel like... what he said was too true to be manipulative. I know exactly what he was talking about."

Daruma raised an eyebrow disapprovingly, "Something doesn't have to be a lie to be manipulation. Get your head in the game, boy."

Izuku blinked twice, stopping himself before he got too hung up on the issue.

"Regardless, the important thing to note is that, regardless of what his personal beliefs were, this is a recording of the kind of narrative that inspired others to rally to his cause."

Izuku could believe that readily, "It's inspiring stuff."

Daruma smirked, "So inspiring that you truly want to believe that he means it."

The green-haired villain felt Daruma's mocking tone wash over him. It's a bit idealistic to take a speech like that at only face value, especially since it was basically encouraging others to spout idealism. He couldn't necessarily get inside people's heads. Especially not someone so enigmatic, so long-lived, who had already, well...

Izuku took a deep breath. He was dead. There wasn't any way to ask him if this was really how he felt, and be able to know for certain that he was telling the truth.

But it had made Izuku realise something.

Izuku spoke quietly, "Maybe that part doesn't matter."

Daruma paused for a second, leaning forward in bemusement, "Wait, what?"

Izuku spoke onward with a bit more confidence, "I only knew Sensei for a short while. And even to those who knew him well, I'm guessing he kept a lot of secrets and lied often."

Daruma grumbled, "Oh, if you only knew..."
Izuku raised a finger, "Look, what I'm trying to say is... whether he stood by those values in private or not, those are powerful ideals. And even now, I want to see them come to life. And I definitely stand by those values. I believe in them."

Izuku met Daruma's eyes, "So in a way, it doesn't actually matter what Sensei really thought. Because I'm in charge now, right?"

Daruma allowed a short silence to settle.

He gave Izuku just enough time to start worrying he might have crossed some kind of line, before Daruma broke into a menacing grin.

"Took you long enough."

Izuku nearly laughed in relief, "W-Well, you want to all this trouble to build me up, I had to take some kind of leadership responsibility after all that!"

Daruma hissed, "Don't get too far ahead of yourself, kid. I'm not doing this to boost your ego, I did this to figure out if you even had one. That you weren't just some power-hungry seat-warmer with no motivation on how to actually use power. Thankfully, it seems like you've got some kind of a conviction buried somewhere down there. Hopelessly naïve, sure, but..."

Izuku smiled at his pause, "But?"

Daruma took a deep breath, clearly begrudging, "But, despite your attitude, I'll honour my agreement to work with you."

Izuku grinned back, recognising his turn to be smug, "Thanks for your support. I'm looking forward to working with you."

Daruma grumbled, "Like you could even begin to grasp the complexity of the work I do."

Izuku raised an eyebrow before raising the question, "Actually, I'd like to know... what kind of work exactly is it that you do down here? I'm aware that Sensei had doctors taking care of him, so I'm assuming..."

Daruma raised a hand, "Don't touch the door. You're not getting in here to see my work first hand."

Izuku took a step back, defensively, "I already said I wouldn't."

Daruma continued, "Good. To answer your question, yes, I was All For One's personal physician. It was my job to handle his scientific affairs, and, following his first battle with that oaf All Might, tend to his injuries."

Sensei's face, torn and mangled scar tissue masking his features, flashed through Izuku's mind. *How much worse must he have looked before Daruma helped him?*

Izuku shook that aside, posing the question, "And... the scientific affairs?"

Daruma reached his hand down to pet the strange creature from before, with wires for legs, "I create Nomus. Artificial humans. Soon to be the shock troopers of your forces, ironically."

*Ironically?*

Izuku shook aside that momentary twinge of foreboding for a moment, asking, "So, you're the one who was supplying Tomura with Nomus? Shouldn't you have established contact with me sooner?"
We really could use the help of some of those great beasts. They were able to wrestle All Might to a standstill!"

Daruma waved his hand, "It's not that simple, idiot. I'm not grating free reign of my precious creations to anyone I've not examined and approved of."

_More classic mad scientists stuff. thought Izuku, being so protective of your "precious creations". It's frustrating, but it makes sense that he would cut me off from them for a while. It seems like the sort of thing he'd do._

Izuku pried, "But now that you've established I'm competent...?"

Daruma scratched his face hesitantly, "I wouldn't say I've decided you're competent. I just think it's worth taking the effort to find out if you are."

Izuku nodded, "In other words, you're giving me a chance."

Daruma leaned forward, apparently defeated, "Yes. That wouldn't be inaccurate. And that does mean..." Daruma sighed loudly, "Lending you some of my creations. Do NOT let them get damaged for nothing."

Izuku gave a short bow at the waist, "I'll take care of them. Thank you, Daruma. I won't disappoint you, and I'm sure you won't disappoint me."

Daruma raised an eyebrow, visibly pushing up one of his goggle lenses, "Was that a tone of authority I heard there for a second? Did your balls suddenly drop mid-conversation?"

Izuku chuckled slightly, "Well... not literally. I do feel a bit more liberated, though. Sensei's shadow has been looming over me for a while."

Daruma tried to hide his own curiosity with disastrous effects. He genuinely coughed out loud and pretended to look away as he asked his question, like a caricature of someone pretending they don't care.

"Speaking of Sensei's shadow... that Shigaraki kid, how is he?"

Izuku replied evenly, "I don't know if everything's back to normal, but I think he's doing okay."

Daruma scoffed, "Really now? I would've expected All For One's death to shred the brat up like tissue paper in a meat grinder. From the first moment I met that boy, he clung to All For One mentally and sometimes physically. I honestly expected to hear his name in the obituaries; along with the population of a small town that he dusted in his grief."

The scientist had finally noticed that Izuku was staring at him with wonder, and he hurried to once again appear disinterested.

Izuku tilted his head, "You know Tomura?"

A small silence settled.

Daruma quietly let his request slip out, "Keep an eye on him for me, will you?"

Before Izuku could properly respond, Daruma cut short his minute long solemn vow speech by pressing a button on his console. A rattling sound echoed throughout the building for a solid 3 seconds, and the locks on Izuku's exit door had opened up.
Daruma brought his voice back to its usual commanding tone, "I've turned off the defences. My partner in crime should be able to Warp Gate in and pick you up now. As long as that monitor of yours is intact, and your radio still accessible, I'll have ways to get in touch."

Izuku smiled brightly, "Hopefully sooner rather than later."

Daruma waved a hand dismissively, "Whenever I'm ready. Alright, get lost. I've lost too much time today talking to you. Biological perfection doesn't create itself."

Izuku pulled open the titanic metal door, and began trotting up the stone steps to the surface.

---

Izuku felt emboldened as he stepped back into the light. Kurogiri dutifully opened the Warp Gate for him, explaining the current situation.

There would be a lot of work to do. Gigantomachia roamed the hillside, unsupportive and downtrodden. Their attack on the Shie Hassaikai had attracted significant attention, and they only had to take minutes outside their base to be ambushed by officers and heroes alike. Izuku's powers were beginning to bend to his will, but he still felt like there was far more to learn about them.

But as his boot touched upon the familiar stone floor of the HQ, he knew he wouldn't let it stand in the way of his dream. Not Sensei's, but his. And as the faces of his allies swam into his vision, those who shared his belief and would fight alongside him, he had never felt so certain that his dream was achievable-

A soft thump sounded from just below Izuku's vision, and Izuku felt his legs pushed back as a heavy force tackled them. Izuku's hands instinctively spread outward, until Izuku looked down.

Eri, trembling, was holding onto his legs as if letting go of them would cause their owner to vanish again.

Izuku felt his old stutter returning to him, stunned, "U-Uh... I'm sorry. It was sudden, I know, but, uh..."

Eri shook her head, and Izuku felt tears being traced into his trousers. Izuku was shocked. He hadn't known at all that Eri had been this reliant on him. She was always so quiet, after all.

Izuku snapped out of his triumphant haze, reaching down to pick Eri up again, allowing her to rest her head on his shoulder.

He smiled softly, "I won't do that again. Promise."

Eri sniffled, recomposing herself with a practiced calmness, "The life of a villain... it's still pretty scary."

Izuku pat Eri's back, turning his gaze upon the friends surrounding him. Some of them were gawking at the scene adoringly. Some of them were smirking, smug at just how badly Izuku was caught off guard. Others still nodded in approval of how well Izuku handled the distraught child.

They were his friends.
And after he excused himself, leading Eri to bed after her long night staying up waiting for him, he measured up the distance between his wild dreams of rebuilding society, and his reality.

He tucked Eri in, and walked down the corridor to his room, his gaze examining each of the nameplates on the doors he passed by.

*Maybe, he thought, there's a middle ground to be found. Somewhere.*
Evil Is One Big Happy Family: Omake

Chapter Summary

Not to be taken seriously, these are non-canon (probably), largely referential joke scenarios based around the characters. Might do more of these from time to time, since they're a ton of fun to write.

With a thunderous slam, the bricks tumbled down atop the heads of the villains, pelting them with rubble. They looked upward, seeing the blue sky through a large, deep hole bored straight into the ground. And framed against this blue sky were the faces of legions of heroes, and the fierce smile of All Might, reeling from the punch he just delivered to the floor.

Dabi looked up, momentarily fearful, before turning back to his teammates as they prepared for their last stand.

"God, I guess they're finally going to kill us all. All right. This is younger than I thought it would be, but we are pretty big assholes."

Himiko smiled nervously, hiding the bloodied knife behind her back, her sweater lightly stained with 'tomato soup', while Izuku tapped his foot impatiently, arms crossed.

Izuku growled, "Himiko… who have you killed?"

Himiko's smile grew, somehow, even wider, "Noooo, c'mon, who do you take me for?"

Izuku allowed a short pause before responding, "Himiko Toga. The exact person who would do something like stab an innocent civilian, named", he paused for a minute to withdraw a paper file he'd written specifically to accuse her, "Kenshiki Hamaza, to death without warning."

Himiko's eyes jolted wide, "L-Let's change the subject! Who is Kenshiki, anyway? I don't know who murdered Kenshiki! And whoever did it probably only did it to protect them from this world!"

Izuku took a step forward, reaching to steal Himiko's knife away from her.

Himiko's eyes somehow jolted wider, approaching the size of dinner plates, trying desperately to hide the red stains on the knife from Izuku's prying eyes "Get away, I swear to god, I have nothing to hide, don't touch my knife, Izuku! DON'T DO IT!"

Izuku sternly responded, getting annoyed now, "Don't threaten me, Himiko. What're you going to do? Stab me?"

...
Himiko and Izuku exchanged a short glance at one another, refusing to blink.

Izuku conceded, "Okay, point taken."

Himiko responded, "Nope, you haven't taken my point quite yet. Can we keep it that way?"

Izuku dragged his hand down his face, not wanting to deal with Himiko's denial today, "Just... don't do it again, or you'll have failed me for the last time."

Himiko skipped down the corridor, "No, don't worry! I'll continue to fail you!"

Stain sat down next to Eri, who visibly shied away from him. A bit impolite perhaps, but to be fair, he didn't have a nose.

Eri managed to compose herself, asking, "So... you said you had something to tell me?"

Stain nodded, "Yes. I've been living 'off the grid' for a very long time now. And since you're going to be living with similar people, who consist of relatively green villains, I thought I'd give you some more professional advice on how to cope."

Eri nodded, visibly calmed down.

Stain continued, "So, I know you've lived with villains for a while; that foul Chisaki, yes? How much of the underworld's doings are you aware of?"

Eri pressed a hand to her chin, "Probably more than most kids? I think. I don't know any other kids."

Stain drew himself up for his speech, "Alright. Well, when you turn up to places like the Sewer Rat, or stroll around the black markets, scummy people will try to convince you to buy foul things such as drugs or cigarettes, just because you can."

Eri nodded vigorously, remembering how stressful it was to be surrounded by those substances during her imprisonment.

Stain shook his head, "No. Do you know what else you can buy at those very same places?"

The Hero Killer withdrew a wide selection of sharp weapons from his back, laying them out in front of the small child.

"Blades. Get yourself a sword, little one. A big knife is also fine, if you can't quite balance a proper weapon yet. The key is-"

Eri stood up immediately, screaming, "IZUKU!!!"

A quiet room, the silence only interrupted by the sound of pencil on paper, and a circular
squeaking sound.

Izuku hunched over his desk, pencilling in more details to his ever mounting collection of data regarding known heroes, their powers, their strengths and their weaknesses. Collating everything, down to the most minor of details. Now more than ever, it was essential that his studies on how to analyse and defeat heroes was better than ever.

And on the other side of the room, Himiko sat upside down, spinning in Izuku's empty desk chair.

On her 327th spin, she spoke, "Can I ask a dumb question?"

Izuku responded absently, "Better than anyone I know."

"Do you think that plants have feelings?"

Izuku sighed, preparing himself for a difficult evening.

Worn down, the police scrambled around the area, lights beaming, sirens blaring. Izuku and Tomura hid in the alleyway, battered and bruised. In a few seconds, they'd have to make a break for it.

Izuku clutched his prize, as Tomura practically glowered down at him.

Tomura hissed, "This is a lot of trouble to go through for some stupid, ugly plush toy."

Izuku whispered back, apologetically, "They were out of stock, raiding the storage units was the only choice, and we have to take care of the child under our care right?"

The police shouted, radios went active. They'd found some sign that the villains they were hunting were concealed nearby.

Izuku squared his shoulders, "Tomura, we're going to have to split up to split them up. Keep your mic on, and let me know what you're up to. What will our signal be if the cops find us?"

Tomura shrugged, lacing his voice with sarcasm, "How about 'Oh Shit'?"

Izuku nodded halfheartedly, "Okay, yeah, sounds good."

Mr Compress examined the bag full of confiscated loot. Mainly cigarettes and alcohol. And a surprising amount of ice cream as well.

The villain adjusted his coat exasperatedly, "Okay, so your story is NOT that you broke curfew and robbed a convenience store in order to sustain your addictive personality. Your story is that someone else pointed a gun at you while you were taking a stroll, told you to rob the store, then gave the gun to you, made you put your fingerprints on it, stuffed the gun inside your underwear, and then bolted with half of the robbery's earnings. Is that the story you're going with?"
Twice's eyes shifted from side to side multiple times, before finally answering, "Maybe?"

Izuku looked out over the faces of some of his most trusted allies; Tomura, Dabi and Himiko stood tall before him.

He resisted the urge to cough or break the ice. He was a leader, and it was about time he acted like it. Or, at least, warmed up to the idea.

Izuku began, "So, as you know, we've set up some limitations on when we can head out onto the surface and conduct any criminal activity. If they find this place, it's out to the sewer with us."

Himiko, smile unphazed, interjected, "Well, that's gross."

Izuku continued, "Point being, you're actually getting some evaluation on how you've been doing. And a certain someone-"

Izuku took a second here to glare daggers at Himiko, who looked down and fiddled with her fingers bashfully.

"Isn't really met the evaluation adequately. So, to Tomura and Dabi, I wanted to give you guys just, y'know, a tiny token of my appreciation, for listening to my first major restricting order."

Izuku stretched out his hand, encouraging the two villains to take something from his fist.

When they retract their hands, they both look confused. Himiko grabs Dabi's shoulder to take a look at what he's got, while Tomura stares at Izuku in unbridled bemusement.

Tomura raises his hand, "Is this... a sticker?"

Izuku smiles, "Not just a regular cheap plastic sticker. A bright sparkly one, with the words 'Smart Cookie' in the centre!"

Dabi allowed a short silence to settle.

He deadpanned, "This is dumb."

Himiko leaned in, "If you don't want it, can I-"

Dabi retracted his hand, causing Himiko to fall flat on her face, "No, fuck off, I earned this."

The clicking of a controller, escalating in intensity and volume. Grunting and growling sounds, slowly raising in tone and frustration. The sign of Tomura getting angry. The sign that doom was coming for anyone within a short radius of him.
Tomura wheezed, "No, no, you stupid fucking... no, COME ON, HOW THE HELL DID HE SEE ME!? PIECE OF SHIT!"

And there it went. His pristine white controller received its first of many damages, soaring across the room, through the archway, and across the neighbouring room onto Kurogiri’s bar. Tomura didn't even wait to see where it fell before clutching his head and stomping the floor, keeping his pinkie finger out of contact with his scalp due to force of habit.

Magne tried to ignore him and focus on her breakfast. Mustard stared at the stroppy spectacle with awe.

Slowly, Mustard leaned across to Magne, keeping his voice down, "Uh... is this always what happens when he loses?"

Magne chuckled, "You should've seen him during 'the Jenga incident of 9/8', buddy."

Tomura whipped around, pointing an accusatory finger and screaming, "DABI KNOCKED THE TABLE, YOU AND I BOTH KNOW THAT!"

Magne leaned back, huffing off the insult. Tomura, having failed to get under her skin, slowly sunk back into his chair and, almost unwillingly, picked up his (slightly scuffed) controller to play again.

Mustard barely managed to stutter out, "Um... are you okay? Need a whiff of Sleep Gas? Might help you calm down, y'know."

Tomura grumbled, "I could've been upstairs, where my rage wouldn't bother anyone, but nooooo, a certain mopheaded someone insisted I had to 'socialise with my teammates' and 'mature as a person'. Pure bullshit."

Magne lifted up her hand in mock secretiveness, whispering loud enough that everyone could hear her, "Y'know, you keep acting like this, your 'friends' might not want you around."

Tomura scowled at her, "Good. I'd rather be upstairs. You're not my friend, I only just about tolerate Izuku, no-one likes Dabi, and Himiko is closer to a pet."

Before Magne could rise to her feet, a pitter patter of tiny footsteps sounded their way along the stone floor, and Magne realised she wouldn't be allowed to Batista Bomb the ash-haired brat while a kid was in the room.

Ignoring the others, Eri walked right up to Tomura, asking, "Can I please have a glass of milk?"

Tomura muttered, some of his usual bite absent from his tone, "Still can't reach the cupboard, huh? Such a pain..."

Without waiting, he dropped his controller and trudged past the chair of onlookers, practically hissing at them as he went, before grabbing a glass, filling it, and adding a dash of pink powder that transforms ordinary milk into 'Strawberry Milkshake', before handing it back to her.

Eri bowed politely, letting out a, "Thank you" before walking back to her room.

Magne and Mustard stared in disbelief as Tomura sat back down at his chair. Having died while absent from his seat, he grumpily pressed the button to start again.

He'd lost a lot of progress.
The squeaky wheel

Chapter Summary

The threat of Gigantomachia still looms, but something else catches the League's attention. Or rather, forces it.

Izuku focused. He didn't want to move his hands, no gripping, no spreading of his fingers. He just wanted to concentrate his energy, the power of Overhaul, into the ground below him, without moving.

Kneeling, sleeves rolled up, Izuku clenched his entire face in furious concentration.

He heard a crunching sound. He opened his eyes to see the ground below him cracking, splitting itself apart. He could feel it; this was his doing. With his quirk, he was ripping the entire ground floor of the training grounds asunde-

Izuku yelled, "W-WOAH!", flying backwards as the floor erupted into stalagmites, the ground reshaping rapidly, breaking into massive, jagged juts of stone.

Izuku rolled to his feet, dusting off his trousers and shirt. His excitement had caused him to lose his concentration.

Izuku pointed his arm towards the misshapen stone, flexing his hand to utilise the quirks he was more familiar with, Geopush and Rock Boil. Surely enough, the stalagmites began to melt down into lava, which Izuku distributed over a nice, even area to reform the floor.

He cursed himself for his inability to contain himself. It was the reason he was invited here in the first place, but now it was becoming the reason he couldn't focus; his childlike wonder over the varying powers of quirks. **Overhaul grants power over matter at the molecular level. Destruction, reconstruction, fusions, it will all be possible! But...**

Izuku shook his hands, trying to stave off the buzzing, jittery feeling they get when they channel Overhaul for too long.

*It's an unstable quirk. It can do so much if you've put in the time to master it, to know exactly HOW to organise each and every little part of a structure or object to your liking. But the moment you drop the ball, and lose focus, things can immediately fall apart on you.*

*That kind of unstable power, the kind that can turn on you so quickly...*

Izuku stiffened his jaw, touching the ground before the floor was fully finished. Activating Overhaul, he focused on the calm, the control. The smooth, perfect order he wished to exact on the surface he was in contact with. And like watching a single ripple of water steady a pool of water, his quirk's power expanded outward and shifted the rest of the misshapen ground, until the finer details were put back into their proper place.

Rising to his feet, he looked down at the floor of the training hall. It didn't look the same as it looked before, but Izuku had flattened it out to the point that you could barely even tell he'd broken
It.

Isn't that kind of power fitting for the leader of all villains?

Izuku's face split into a massive grin. He quickly stood upright and took his hands off the ground, to avoid accidentally getting carried away and bringing doom and ruin to the room again.

But he still couldn't keep himself from smiling, even knowing that. This was something worth being excited for.

---

Tomura lay, splayed out like an emaciated starfish on top of the bean bag in the longue. Normally, he would be holding a controller, concentrating on winning, and threatening to evaporate anyone who dared interrupt him. But not today. Today, he was just staring at the ceiling.

Hm. So the Doc is back.

So far, Daruma had been all quiet on the western front, but sometime soon Tomura imagined his TV would be interrupted again by the antisocial scientist breaking into the broadband.

Tomura clicked his tongue, his expression souring. It'd been a long time since Tomura and Daruma had met up. Sure, it's not as if Tomura had tried to seek him out, but he was Sensei's personal doctor. He should've been keeping him informed. Instead of sitting in his lab and playing with his goddamn toys all day.

And then, when Daruma finally had the chance to catch up with him, or offer SOME kind of solidarity to him after the Sensei they both knew so well... passed away... who does he call to him?

Izuku. Because of course he did.

Tomura nearly started to scratch his neck, but stopped his hand midway, returning it to his side. He'd been feeling a little stronger lately.

Stronger... yeah, Izuku said something about keeping All For One "until you're strong enough". But what the fuck does that even mean? What kind of level do I have to be on? I can already shred shit to atoms with one closed fist, just press in my grip on something and watch as it deconstructs...

Before he could continue, his TV flickered to life, turning itself on, and Tomura bolted upright.

Took you long enough, goddamn it.

The image that came up on the screen was fuzzy and glitchy, and Tomura could hear the rapid tapping of keys on a keyboard, and some kind of scraping noise.

Wait. Didn't that dumb doctor have a perfectly clear image when he-

Suddenly, the image shifted, becoming a clear image of a silhouette, surrounded by eerie red light. A round central orb glared into the screen, with curved, pointed protrusions on either side of them like thick horns.

Its voice rang out, distorted into unrecognisable white noise with the sounds of human speech. It was laughing it's best evil laugh in a manner it clearly thought was intimidating.
Tomura raised an eyebrow, waiting for it to finish, while pressing the button on the side of his head to turn on his earpiece.

Izuku slugged up the stairs, panting slightly. Putting the training room back together midway through breaking it apart again wasn't easy to do on short notice.

He heard a staticky sound, like scratchy, robotic audio, that was completely drowning out the noise of his companions upstairs. Izuku rounded the corner on the staircase, seeing red light glaring ominously from the lounge. Izuku swallowed heavily. He hadn't been called up for a "combat situation", but this still looked pretty freaky.

Izuku pushed open the door, hiding his tiredness as he took position in the centre of his team. Most everyone was here, gathered around and looking at the strange, diabolic shadow glowering from within the screen. The picture was a little fuzzy, but Izuku was fairly certain that was intentional. Their image was distorted alongside their voice, so that they would be nigh impossible to identify.

The buzzing, glitchy audio sounded out, "What a sordid group we have here. You all sicken-"

The being paused for a second, leaning closer to whatever camera they were using. Izuku couldn't see their facial features, but somehow he could tell that they were leering at him aggressively.

The dark figure taunted, "Aha! Your leader has arrived. We've heard a lot about you. A lot of awful, vapid stuff. I thought you'd be taller."

Izuku suppressed his reaction, a little insecure about his height, before responding, "Well, you're not even letting us see what you look like."

The figure leaned back, grandiosely, laughing like someone trying to imitate a golden-age supervillain.

While he/she/it was posturing, Izuku leaned over to his teammates.

Izuku poked his friend on the shoulder, "Tomura, do you have any idea who this person is? Another associate of Sensei's?"

Tomura grumbled, "I don't remember any of Sensei's henchmen being this stupid-looking."

Twice shoved his face in between the two, visibly nervous even underneath his mask, "Y'know, how come our private underground network is so frickin' easy to hack?"

Tomura shoved his head back in annoyance with his palm, hissing, "We're off the grid, idiot. We can't really partner up with a security company or anything like that."

Izuku took a mental note of the fact that they needed a technician, before turning back to the screen. The horned silhouette had only just finished their evil laugh.

The figure's scrambled voice spoke again, significantly angrier, "You'd be a fool to reveal everything about yourself that instantly! Real villains are mysterious! Dangerous! Charming! Handsome! You... you're just children throwing a temper tantrum! Trying to tear down the whole world because you haven't gotten your way!"
This time, ignorantly criticizing their goals, Izuku couldn't hide his anger fully. He scowled, taking a step closer to the screen.

*They're just trying to get under your skin. You can do this.*

Izuku took a deep breath, quietly, before responding, "Did you make contact with us just to insult us?"

The figure raised a gloved hand, pointing directly at the crowd of villains gathered before it, "Not at all, false idols! I came here to challenge you, to confront you with the power of a true master of crime!"

Izuku didn't have time to respond before his teammates began voicing their own hostilities. The chatter of his allies rose into vocal retorts.

Tomura growled, "Bring it, trash."

Himiko withdrew one of her many knives, spinning it in her fingers, "I'm gonna drain your veins dry for this!"

Dabi snapped his fingers, generating a blue flame above his hand, "Sounds like you just really wanna die."

Gradually, every member of the League of Villains made their animosity known, and Izuku felt his blood warm up as he heard the numbers of people who jumped to his defence.

The silhouette, for their part, stepped back haughtily and proclaimed, "Oh, the rabid dogs are tugging at their leashes! How infantile! Very well, our challenge has been accepted. Prepare to be utterly japed!"

Izuku smirked confidently, feeling the competitive spirit in the air, "What do you mean by 'challenge' in the first place?"

The figure leaned in very close, so close that the shadows around the very sides of their face began to regain colour, revealing a flash of skin colour, "Oh, you'll soon find out, poseurs! Pack your bags, and head out to the Mustafu Central Mall tomorrow, at 1:00pm sharp! Don't be tardy!"

With that, the feed disconnected, leaving the League of Villains with a blank screen, and burning prides.

---

She bounced away from the camera, hopping down from on top of the crate she stood on, and running over to the next room, pushing her pigtails back into their proper positions.

*He* was sitting there, a hot cup of tea prepared, and she hurriedly took the seat across from *him*, grinning with excitement.

*He* smiled at her cheerfully, "You did a wonderful job, La Brava. You've truly set the stage for my grand entrance!"

She blushed, trying to hide how overjoyed she was, "Well, I don't think I would have done nearly as well without your scriptwriting."
He responded after taking a leisurely sip, "Well, we wouldn't have been able to perform that feat at all without your marvellous hacking skills. You know your way around a camera better than anyone I know, after all."

La Brava puffed out her chest and tilted her chin up in pride, "The legendary Gentle Criminal deserves the best introduction I can provide!"

He leaned forward, his serious expression giving her goosebumps for a moment, "This is an occasion befitting such effort, my dear. Gentle Criminal vs The League of Villains... this is a comparison I can't come out of looking inferior. As a showman such as myself might be tempted to say, we're going to hit the big leagues now!"

La Brava smiled encouragingly, "And I'll be with you every step of the way, my dear."
Trouble brewing

Chapter Summary

Called to action, the League and their mysterious opponents are about to enter the public eye in a way they never have before.

Izuku had finally finished his preparations.

A couple of small adjustments to his costume. He'd started to grow a tiny bit broader around the shoulders and his armoured waistcoat needed some expanding. He'd barely been able to repress an excited laugh, before Kurogiri's judgemental gaze reminded him that the "leader of all villains" celebrating having grown slightly larger in size was a bit ridiculous.

Izuku withdrew his knife as he walked down the corridor, the blade glinting in the light ominously. Yes, he had access to an entire repertoire of quirks now, and he'd come a long way since CQC was the only option he had to approach combat. But Himiko, Stain and Spinner had taught him so much about proper knifework that just carrying it made him feel a little bolder. He still trained with it whenever he had time. And if Overhaul and those Quirk-Supressing Bullets from those stupid yakuza had taught him anything, it was that relying on your quirks alone isn't a wise move.

Speaking of bullets, Izuku sheathed his knife back into its place on his vest, and withdrew Mustard's revolver. Izuku still hadn't really become used to the idea of owning a gun himself. He could turn people inside-out by laying a hand on them and *thinking* about it really hard, but for some reason the lethal image of a revolver was still miles more disturbing to him.

He opened up the cylinder as he passed through the longue, looking at the loaded bullets, and the blue ring close to the tips. While the League didn't have access to the most skilled chemists, Giran's connections were bringing in plenty of support, and Daruma's support was opening up a lot of creative opportunities for them. They came in low quantities, and the scientists were struggling to extend and duplicate their limited supply without relying on their... previous experiments, but he had about 12 Quirk-Suppressing Rounds stored inside the revolver's holster. Izuku was going up against an unknown foe, one so bold as to challenge them out in the open. Chances are that their quirk was probably something incredible.

Izuku holstered the revolver once more, having finally reached the stairway to the training room, and as he descended the steps he began to feel a distinct heat hitting his skin.

Izuku opened the door to find the training hall lit up like a forge.

Dabi had scorched a massive, smouldering crater into the floor, reinforcing the hole with slate and dirt to create a functioning fire pit. Spinner was using the heat, in conjunction with an anvil, in order to sharpen and shape his swords-

Izuku caught himself for a moment, realising that what they'd essentially done was literally creating an impromptu forge. Most of the League was down here at this point, fixing up their various weapons and costumes, gearing up for their upcoming fight. A lot of them looked genuinely furious, and that combined with the blue fire casting an ethereal light over the scene made it all look like some kind of scene of the armies of hell. The loosely organised, vandalizing,
varied-as-a-box-of-skittles, raging armies of hell.

Stain was joining in with the sharpening. Tomura, incensed, was rapidly burning through the last supplies of training dummies the League had for this week. His movements were leaner than usual, and Izuku silently noted his greatly improved, predatory fighting stance.

Himiko was over in the corner with the crafting tables, measuring the concentration of various vials of blood longingly. Mustard was there as well, doing something similar with gas canisters.

Mr Compress, as well as Kurogiri and Giran, were all in the opposite corner, with various maps spread out over a long table, discussing plans. Mr Compress in particular was gesturing widely, visibly enjoying the situation, as a born entertainer might be expected to be.

And finally, Twice and Magne, who had little they needed to do in terms of preparation, were sitting close to the roaring blue fire with Eri, attempting to teach her how to make s'mores.

He rubbed his brow exasperatedly, before approaching the scene.

His ears twitched slightly, as he collected his thoughts. He looked so peculiar that oftentimes, Toshinori found it hard to tell what he was thinking. Maybe it was simply because his thoughts raced so much faster than anyone else in the room, or maybe it was because his mouse-like features made it difficult to read his face the same way you would read a human's face.

Nezu leaned forwards, beginning the meeting at last with a resounding announcement, "Friends, we are faced with a difficult situation."

Midnight followed up quite quickly, "We know, we've seen the posters all around town."

*Poster?*

Toshinori had, in fact, not seen the posters all around town. At the time he was busy going through a checkup; his one working lung was going through a lot of hard work lately, as All Might gave training and encouragement to his students. Especially those three...

The principal raised a small fluffy hand briefly to quiet the restless members of the room, before picking up a copy of one of these posters from the ground beside him.

His throat grew dry and raw, and Toshinori hurriedly drank his glass of water to calm his nerves as he studied the poster to catch up to speed with his peers:

**Greetings, ladies and gentlemen! My name is Gentle Criminal, master thief and professional supervillain! And I am here to announce a crime, as only a man of my calibre can do!**

Many of you have seen my accomplishments online, and many of you have shown me your support. I have found great success within Hosu, and I am delighted to continue my flourishing career. However, I cannot rest! I cannot abide! I cannot stand idly back as the name of 'Villain' is disgraced any longer!

The League of Villains are an organisation that has plagued this city for too long. Children who flaunt a vengeful ideology masquerading as justice, they have found a middle ground
between tantrum and coup d'état from which they threaten all civilized society. Such petty aspirations are not worthy of the title 'Villain'. There is no finesse to them! No style! No honour! The only convictions they truly hold are their misguided desires to get back at the world by throwing out wild punches and flailing kicks indiscriminately at all who surround them. I, Gentle Criminal, shall trounce and embarrass them, and by doing so show them what it truly means to be a supervillain!

And to those ends, I require a battlefield! I shall be graciously borrowing the Mustafu Central Mall as a stadium for this grand clash. Empty the mall, evacuate all civilians by 1:00pm tomorrow, and watch with bated breath as the epic battle unfolds: Gentle Criminal VS The League of Villains!

Sincerely, Gentle Criminal and La Brava.

Toshinori nearly spat out his drink.

Snipe leaned back, apparently amused, "Wow. Quite the showman, huh?"

Nezu nodded, "He is indeed. Our researchers quickly found Gentle Criminal's presence online. He is quite extensively publicised."

Yamada shot forward, "If he's so well known, how come he's still roaming around? Is this geezer really that powerful?"

Aizwa explained, "Yes. Somewhat. He's clever with how he uses his quirk, and has been in the business of 'supervillainy' a long time. He's also passionate, as the most dangerous villains are. But that's not why we haven't arrested him yet."

Mic's voice raised by a couple of octaves, as he protested, "THEN WHA-"

Aizawa waved his hand dismissively, "He's not a big-league criminal. Despite his clear aptitude, he hasn't used his powers for anything beyond grand theft. He's a larcenist, not a destroyer. He hasn't been confirmed to have committed any fatalities at all. On one recorded occasion, he even took out a guy mugging some woman. Sent him flying right into the nearest street lamp."

Kayama tilted her head to the side in puzzlement, "Wait, how is it that a criminal with such low threat level has been so 'extensively publicised'? If he's not caused too much damage..."

Nezu pushed a few papers forward on his desk, allowing his fellows to take a glance at them, "It's because he publicises himself. Him and one extremely supportive fan that I would hazard a guess is the 'La Brava' character mentioned in the poster almost as though they were his sidekick. There are videos of his escapades, and not just simple ones taken by onlookers on their phones. High-quality ones, with production value and good editing, captured by a professional camera. They were created to entertain and grab their viewers attention. He even has a streaming channel. I quite enjoyed some of them myself. His actions reminded me of a much brighter time in the days of heroism..."

Aizawa continued, "We've obviously done as his poster instructed; a fight is going to happen within Mustafu Central Mall, whether we like it or not, so we of course got all innocents out of harms way. The only question is whether we decide to organize an engagement there ourselves. A battle between this Gentle Criminal and the League of Villains is a massive opportunity, but highly risky. Both sides will have had time to prepare countermeasures. We could engage immediately as the brawl begins, or set up an ambush in the aftermath of the fight to ensnare the victor."
Kayama was quick to make her point, "Look, this guy, he's challenging the League, right? I get that he thinks he's doing us a favour. He's giving us this information so that we won't intervene, assuming we'll just kind of let the chips fall where they may. Let the two villains duke it out and then arrest the losers. But if the League get their hands on him, this Gentle Criminal guy might not get out of there with wrists we can slap cuffs on. We have to interrupt this, for his sake as much as ours."

Snipe nodded, "I've got to agree. He's playing a dangerous game. But still, he wouldn't be dumb enough to engage such a large group without a fool proof safety net. As well as some security measures, of the harmful variety, I reckon. Our guys might be in danger if they interfere."

Toshinori leant forward on his elbows, feeling his long, bony fingers clench around his hands tightly. Sending in heroes to fight them would be akin to asking them to walk directly into a trap. And allowing innocents to die is abhor-

Izuku.

Toshinori blinked, attempting to banish the intrusive thought from his mind.

Actually, hold on. Knowing what kind of a person Izuku is...

A scowling determination. Overhaul, tied to a mast.

He finally spoke, "My assessment of the League, throughout their history, is that they avoid needless bloodshed wherever it does not grant them power."

Nezu nodded, "Interesting observation."

Toshinoru grumbled for a moment, before meeting the eyes of his comrades and continuing, "The League has come into conflict before, with far fouler men than this bombastic thief. The Shie Hassaikai. Do you remember?"

Yamada nodded, the gears in his head visibly turning, "Yeah, I get what you're saying. Kai Chisaki did come back to us in one piece. I guess that's true."

Toshinori nodded, feeling the gazes of some of his comrades becoming stonier has he concluded, "I believe that if we allow them to fight, it is highly unlikely one side will kill the other."

Shuzenji's finally spoke up, her gaze hitting home the hardest, "This belief... are you certain it is worth risking lives over it?"

Toshinori let those intrusive thoughts fill his vision for a brief moment longer.

Kan spoke up, loudly, "This old guy, he's got less defences than the Yakuza had. He's going to be torn to shreds if we don't stop this! We have to do our damn jobs here!"

Maijima made a bold declaration, "Do we even have hard evidence these posters are real? Even if they were genuinely put there by this show-off himself, who's to say it's not just a distraction?"

Ishiyami's square head nodded soundly, "Not doing anything about this, even when we've been forewarned... the thought makes me anxious. And after all, Overhaul was left unharmed due to a hostage negotiation, correct? Who's to say they will be so merciful toward someone who challenged them, and when they have made no promises?"

The same scowl, conviction, staring Toshinori down in front of his dying master...
The Symbol of Peace took a deep breath, drawing everyone's attention once more.

Gentle Criminal observed himself in the mirror, straightening out his grandiose collar and eliminating any unsightly wrinkles. If only one could do a similar thing with faces.

Still, Danjuro noted that he did very much fit the appearance of a "marvellous old gentleman". He wouldn't trade any part of his trademark image for anything these days. No need to be a sourpuss. Besides, some skilfully applied stage make-up will fix any problems that might come up.

La Brava called from down the hallway, "G-Gentle! Good news! I think they're almost done evacuating the Mall!"

Danjuro fixed his scarf, ensuring that it stood firm atop his powerful chest without entirely obscuring his neck, replying, "Well, it certainly seems like we put the fear in them. Your graphics design no doubt contributed greatly towards the stunning impact our calling card had."

She dashed into the room, careful not to disturb the small wooden box upon which Danjuro was precariously balancing so that he could get a good angle on his reflection.

Pausing only for a moment, she continued, "I think the world is really paying attention to us. I've got to admit, um, I'm a bit nervous!"

Danjuro chuckled, "That's perfectly natural, my dear. That feeling never truly goes away, no matter how many times you're captured on film. You simply learn to harness it, and use the excitement to fuel your performances. And what a performance this will be!"

La Brava laughed at his enthusiasm, but he could tell she still had her reservations. It was always a mixed feeling, seeing her worrying like this about him. On one hand, it was proof as much as ever that she cared greatly for him, and it was heartwarming. But at the same time, worries like this did, by their origin, express some level of doubt in his abilities.

Indignant but understanding, Danjuro hopped from his post atop the crate, and landed in a theatrical bowing position, raising himself to full height, displaying his costume.

He raised an eyebrow expectantly, "How do I look?"

La Brava blinked frequently and answered with firm, yet lidded, eye contact, "Like the man I love."

Danjuro felt heat begin to rise from his elbows and arms, and quickly shook himself, allowing some of the heart-shaped wisps of smoke to escape from within his coat, before reprimanding his partner, "La Brava, watch yourself! Your quirk!"

La Brava blinked twice again, before visibly snapping herself back to reality, apologising profusely, "S-Sorry! Sorry, I just kind of... uh, you look great! Is what I meant to say!"

Danjuro huffed but smiled, once again smoothing the wrinkles from his coat, "I appreciate the complement, truly. But your quirk might just be the difference between success and failure tomorrow, my dear. Your powers will be just as important as mine, I guarantee it. Your enthusiasm is incredible, but you must save your energy for the opportune moment."
Danjuro stood up and posed for his invisible crowd, hand on hips, other hand stroking his lustrous beard, head held high, legs straight and tall.

"Because when that time comes, all of Hosu will see that moment, and everyone will gain the same enthusiasm for me that you do!"

La Brava chuckled nonchalantly, "I hope not, or else chances are you'd end up dead due to dehydration."

"...What?"

"What?"
Lights, Camera, Action!

Chapter Summary

An abandoned mall, a boisterous challenger, and a very angry League of Villains. Let the show begin.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Izuku remembered that time he met Himiko in the empty car parking lot. It was honestly a pretty scary environment when not populated by people. It was just this big concrete monolith with wide open spaces stretching out into darkness until you couldn't see the other side. And standing at the entrance to the mall, it wasn't nearly as bad... but he could still sense a lingering trace of that same eerie feeling.

The other members of the League had already crawled out of the manhole, and from deep below the city the entire League had emerged. They'd arranged a special plan for this morning, setting of multiple false alarms around town. Giran had hired people to carry out minor crimes such as robbery or arson on this particular day. The nature of the crime wasn't important, what was important is that it occupied police resources and drew attention away from exactly how the League of Villains had arrived at the mall. Izuku felt more and more like a professional criminal every day.

They looked into the Hosu Grand Mall. It had the full package. Shops, cafes, connection to subway stations, you name it. It was pretty open to the public eye, which made it an unlikely target for petty crime. But although this challenge was pretty petty, in Izuku's opinion, it wasn't small-scale at all. This location had been picked precisely because it was visible. This guy really wanted all eyes to be on him. Which meant Izuku and his friends would be sharing in his oppressive spotlight.

The mall was enormous, and entering it from the ground floor was like stepping into a temple. There were 5 floors, connected by neat stairways, with balconies across each side. Bridges between the upper floors connected them, layered on top of one another so thickly that from the bottom floor, you could barely see past them to the sky above. Only the centre of the mall seemed to open up and let in a large portion of natural sunlight.

A large palm tree sat in the middle of the centre. And even though the League of Villains sat outside the front entrance, they could see all the way to it, via a straight path that led right to the centre of the mall. And, again, even from where they were outside the entrance, they could see the outline of a man standing, arms crossed, balancing nicely on top of the tree.

Dabi and Tomura glared coldly at him, while Himiko giggled gleefully. Stain nodded to the remainder of the League, before slipping off into the shadows, to do his own thing. Izuku swore he could see his brother licking his lips as he left. The anticipation was palpable, and the early sunlight felt heavy on their faces.

Izuku broke the tense silence, "I guess this is what it looks like when someone really is bold enough to commit a crime in bold daylight."
Mr Compress stroked his chin (or, rather, the chin of his mask), and craned his neck to look at the railings. He mumbled to himself, "I can't see any cameras or observers... I'd assume a man like him would desire an audience for this spectacle."

Dabi sighed, "Of course he would."

Izuku remembered the floor plan of the Grand Mall. He had walked over to the planning table first and foremost, and examined the layout. And what was important to note is that, whether you entered via the for main gates on each side of the mall, or the underground train station, all paths converge into the centre of the mall, where Gentle Criminal was waiting for them. He'd perched himself on a high point in the centre of the mall, in an area that all paths lead to. No matter how the League chose to enter the Hosu Grand Mall, all roads would lead to their challenger.

Kurogiri observed, "An impressive display of confidence. He is determined to confront us no matter what. It will be difficult to surprise him from his position."

Izuku turned on his mic, intending to tell Stain to approach via the opposite entrance to initiate a pincer attack.

However, when the headset turned on, all Izuku could hear was sharp radio static. He hurriedly turned it back off.

Izuku grumbled, "Okay, that's not good. They're employing some kind of signal jammer. Basic radio communications are offline."

Himiko leered curiously, "Do we have any options here other than just walking through the front door? That's pretty much the worst strategy. It's kind of like having no strategy."

Izuku looked up at the goading silhouette once more.

He responded, "I'm not sure any alternative strategies will evade traps set by this guy. He's luring us in here, yes. But he's doing so with such self-assurance that I think it's safe to assume he's got all his blind spots covered. And besides that..."

Izuku's fists tightened as he continued, "He thinks we're cowards. Going for a sneak attack would lend his accusations more weight. This is a challenge, and we have to face it with full force. I don't want to discount keeping some aces up our sleeve. We've already deployed Stain, after all. But I think if we try to stab him in the back before we've even encountered him face-to-face, I get the feeling that it'll turn out poorly. Because it's what he expects us to do. We've not come here just to avenge being slighted, we're here to prove him wrong."

Himiko sighed reluctantly, before replying, "So... front door, then?"

Izuku nodded. With slight complaining, the League of Villains began to march into the mall, the black outline of their opponent becoming clearer and clearer with each footfall. Izuku's boots thudded across the soil gardens, grinded slightly against the stone walkway, and finally began clicking cleanly against the polished floor of the Hosu Grand Mall.

He looked up. The man was still shadowed somewhat by the angle of the sun, but his figure was far more distinct, and what a distinct figure he was. Long, fluttering tailcoats billowed around his heels like a cape, seeming to catch the wind effortlessly. The collar was ridiculous, almost covering the sides of his face from view. A large, well-kept white moustache and beard adorned his face, making it slightly harder to read his expression. A scarf hid most of his neck from view, his trousers were puffy, white and pinstriped, and within his crossed arms, he held a walking cane.
Their eyes met, and Izuku was determined not to blink first.

Manami made sure to get a nice shot of Deku's glare, shadowed nicely by his brow, thanks to the lighting. Danjuro really did pick the best times to film. It was really considerate of him, because it made her job, getting brilliant footage, way easier. And even though Deku looked suitably fierce and evil right now, Danjuro's dramatic pose looked even better. Even though Manami had to confess her bias on that comparison.

Manami made sure to adjust her set of microphones. A few really small, difficult to notice mics had been placed all over the mall. It was a pretty time-consuming job to set them all up, and the easiest way to conduct a full-scale sound recording of the mall was to shut off any competing radio channels in the area, so a radio-wave blocker that only allowed for Manami's signal made things a lot simpler. It had the added knock-on effect of disabling any simple communication that those League punks might have on them, so it was a double whammy.

Manami aimed her camera, her headphones feeding the presently-recording dialogue into her ears.

Danjuro began, his handsome voice projecting itself across the walls, "Well, well, well. I'm almost impressed you've even shown up."

Deku's expression darkened, like a chained dog being taunted. Manami made a mental note to use that face for a thumbnail later.

One of his companions, the blueish ashen-haired one named Tomura, took a step forward, hissing, "You sure think highly of yourself, don't you? Did you think we'd run and hide from the likes of you?"

Danjuro raised an eyebrow, his mocking expression lighting up Manami's day, "Hm. I'm no longer impressed."

Magne shifted the covered item on her back into a more comfortable position, "A real tough guy, are ya?"

Danjuro waggled his finger with his free hand, opening up his body a little more in a display of increasing showmanship, "You clearly don't understand my parameters. I thought you'd come to face me personally out of a sense of honour. But I can see from your rabid expressions that that's hardly the case. The reason why you've come to face me like this..."

Danjuro twirled his cane, pointing it at his opponents with a flourish, "Is that you're vastly underestimating me!"

Manami pressed a button on the table beside her on the balcony, and at once, the speakers all around the mall began to boom, sounding out with the theme song of Gentle Criminal and La Brava, ricocheting off the walls and visibly irritating the League. Normally, Manami would just edit in the theme music, but this was one of the rare occasions she had a set piece location which actually accommodated her music! With Danjuro's taunts and the music playing, it wouldn't be long now before-

They all visibly riled up. Deky himself didn't move, but Tomura, the black bodysuited man, the heavyset woman, the lizard dude, they all began to run forward, attempting to circle and position
Danjuro, or charge him outright.

Manami couldn't suppress a sly smile.

Sure enough, they collided with the barrier. With only time for a loud yell, they bounced into the air, thrown wide by the angled boundaries, before colliding with another wall of elasticised air above their heads, which sent them barrelling into the ground. They slammed onto the floor in a crumbled heap, taking down the fog-man with them as they fell on top of him.

Danjuro laughed heartily, with an eerie, controlling calmness, "You've been hoisted by your own petard, you buffoons. I wasn't finished talking yet!"

Izuku's shocked expression as he stared at his friends, four taken down by one misstep, was a sight to behold. He was already realising what a foolish idea this was. Gentle had led him to a location he'd had nearly a whole day to work with.

Gentle hopped down from his perch atop the tree, taking the only unblocked route to the floor that wasn't covered by a trap. He landed with a bow and a menacing grin, ending his introductory speech with his final scripted line.

"You were unprepared, both for villainy and for this battle. Now you face the one, the only, Gentle Criminal!"

Chapter End Notes

We have fanart, ladies and gentlemen!

https://twitter.com/enderp_1039/status/1205742281111687169?s=20
https://twitter.com/enderp_1039/status/1198125717793337344?s=19
https://twitter.com/enderp_1039/status/1195724008978710528?s=19

Simply great stuff. Please show Enderp your support, I think they've emulated the style of the source material very well!

Sorry for the long hiatus. I've been all but blown down by my workload until current world circumstances (that may or may not involve a widespread viral infection) eliminated the majority of my obligations. And since I've been significantly freed up by those changes, I decided the best time to upload a chapter would be right now, to show some solidarity with my readers at an extremely important time. I only hope it will be substantial enough to tide you guys over until I get back to the fic in full swing.

Take care of yourselves, and stay strong! I hope to be publishing more soon!

End Notes

Thank you for reading!
I plan on posting a large number of additional chapters as time goes on, if all goes well. This is the first fic I have ever submitted so feedback and constructive criticism would be greatly appreciated!

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